Meaning-making of historical episodes by the Punjabi-Sikh youth in Vancouver

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which the youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community in Vancouver, Canada relate to three historical episodes associated with the community, namely, ‘Events of 1984’ (The Indian Army’s 1984 attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, as well as, the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, India), ‘Events of 1985’ (The Air India bombings) and the Komagata Maru episode of 1914.

Exploring the youth narratives and non-narratives on these violent episodes intrinsically connected with the Sikh diasporic community in Canada, provides for an analysis of the meaning-making processes that the youth engage with to make sense of these episodes. By emphasizing on how the youth remember, what they remember (and what they forget), I draw attention to linkages between these processes of recall and the present day realities of the youth. By juxtaposing the dominant narratives on the episodes with the youth narratives, the research also explores the relationship of these ‘grand’ narratives with the personal narratives of the youth, the space and reception of the contending forms of remembrances of these violent histories, and its effect on present day politics.
Preface

This thesis, including the design, analysis, and presentation of research materials, is the original work of the author. It was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board, certificate number H13-01726.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The research carried out in this thesis provides for a critical interrogation of hegemonic and non-hegemonic constructions of three specific episodes – the treatment of the passengers of the Komagata Maru in 1914, Operation Bluestar in 1984, and the Air India Bombings in 1985 – using narratives of the youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community in Vancouver, Canada. The Komagata Maru carried 376 British subjects from India, who were denied entry into Canada and forced to return to British India. The attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar (India) occurred in 1984 in the wake of the controversial movement for Khalistan. The third and the last of the episodes being looked at in the thesis is the 1985 bombing of Air India Flight 182 - an event which claimed the lives of almost 300 Canadian citizens, most of South Asian origin, who were traveling from Canada to India. The use of the word ‘episode’ and events over ‘incident’ or ‘event’ when describing the events is deliberate. The thesis looks at these episodes not just as specific chapters in history but a series of actions and consequences that followed, many of which have taken shape over decades.

1.1 Significance of the research

This research, on the narratives of youth, is significant because the Sikh community in Canada is tied in an intimate way with all three episodes. All three have played formative roles in the debate about Punjabi-Sikh identity today and the place of the community within the Indian and Canadian contexts. Secondly, popular discussions, both official and non-official, around each of these episodes are replete with exclusions, obliterations, strategic remembrance and forgetting. Documenting and analyzing the responses of the youth on these episodes, therefore, allows for the possibility of examining the dominant narratives and providing scope for capturing the discourses that exists on these episodes today. Lastly, the three episodes do not rest only in the past but are intrinsically connected to our present. Generally we see events that have happened in
the past to rest in the past or of little relevance to our present. But the past is constituted in our present in multiple ways. It is present in the constitution of our collective and individual identity, the structures that are in place in societies and in our interactions with these structures. These past(s) also exists in multiplicities. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have put claims of objectivity, authority, as well as, universality to question in the past few decades (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003). The analysis of memory has appeared to offer a way of engaging with knowledge of the past as inevitably partial, subjective, and local. The core issue for this thesis is to examine the variations in youth responses and associations (and non-associations) with these three pivotal historical events and the factors playing an important role in the formation of these narratives. The interpretive records of the youth on the three episodes in the following chapters bear the imprints of local narratives, cultural assumptions, discursive formations, knowledge production, as well as, practices and social contexts of recall and commemoration.

I use youth as a marker for the study; the opinions of youth are often overlooked, dismissed as invaluable, invalid or immature. Yet youth often have nuanced understandings of issues, particularly because they may have not yet been normalized by the systems in place in the society and the order that seeps into adult life. Further, understanding and analyzing the narratives of youth helps in theorizing the nature and politics of knowledge production and circulation that exists on these historical episodes.

1.2 Personal motivation

Every narrative on historical events (and in general) is exclusionary in nature. I have for some time now been fascinated with the impact of dominant narratives of history on our understanding of nations, societies and our own identities. I still remember my first encounters with narrative history as a new, excited undergraduate student at the University of Delhi in India. In the very first political science class on Indian nationalism, a Professor who I eventually grew very fond of
stated words that sounded strange at the time but have stayed with me even years later. “This whole year,” she said, “we are going to unlearn everything taught to you over the past few years of your high school education.” From here on, she continued to tell us, would begin our reengagement and relearning of Indian histories and politics.

“The nation is always a contingent result of many contesting narratives” (Menon, personal communication, 2007); she reiterated this time and again over the next three years of my undergraduate program. It is this reengagement with political systems, history(s) and the narratives used in describing the history(s) over the course of the years, which enabled me to think critically, unpack and unlearn the linear historical accounts of the past. It is within this context that my interest in analyzing the dominant and non-dominant narratives on episodes of the Komagata Maru, Operation Blue-Star and the Air India bombing, lies. Concepts of race, apart from memory, trauma and history form some of the major intersections of this research.

Growing up in Delhi and coming from a privileged caste, class, Hindu family background, I had never personally been subjected to racism in India, where institutionalized racism exists and has been on the rise, particularly seen in cases of everyday racism in the society. My experiences with racism coincided with my first trip to developed countries, Canada and the USA, two years ago. Racial identity is not the same everywhere. In these white majority countries being brown meant something different than it did in a largely brown society of India. Over the two years of my stay in North America I grappled to settle into distinctly different ways of living, met a bunch of wonderful people and created some cherished memories. Amidst all the excitement of moving to a new continent and starting a different phase in life, also however lay the struggles of dealing with other new experiences of being seen as a “brown person” accompanied by its various baggage(s) and meanings. At the border this often meant being questioned rigorously on my reasons for travel, financial status, marital status etc. In everyday experiences it meant on various occasions dealing with more subtle forms of racism. It meant on occasions being projected as “the Indian woman” accompanied with stereotypes on values of self and family, being verbally harassed and being mocked, enduring poor customer service based on my ethnicity etc. I
struggled to understand and deal with a number of labels that were thrust on to me. The biggest challenge for me however lay in being able to detect the covert forms of racism in the things being said or done in the first few months after my move. Fanon says, “Racism is not a static phenomenon, but is constantly renewed and transformed” (1970 p.41). Indeed so, even the ways in which racism works in India is very different at times from the ways that one might experience it in Vancouver, or North America at large. So while I knew what was problematic about the things being said and done in India in many cases, and being able to immediately catch the racist element in the language, tone or actions, in Vancouver it took me time and the much needed support of allies to recognize the often brief, micro-aggressive and innocuous forms of racism.

My experiences of dealing with racism in North America in various forms resonated with a number of experiences of the youth participating in the research. In some cases, the mutual sharing of these experiences led to a building of trust, where after, the interviewees were more at ease sharing information about them and their lives with me. In yet other cases, it led to creation of a valuable space to discuss racism in the Canadian society, within South Asian communities and its prevalence in academic settings.

The conversations with youth provided for an exploration of the various ways in which different subsections of youth within the community identify with Sikh history(s) and culture, their sense of belonging within the Sikh community, and in the Canadian context at large. However, given my interest in the construction of history in relation to the present and in keeping with the scope of an MA thesis, I have chosen to limit my analysis to the narratives of the youth on the three historical episodes, namely, Komagata Maru, Operation Blue Star and the Air India bombings.
1.3 Research questions

The research questions that form the basis of this thesis are:

i. In what ways do the youth associate or disassociate with the episodes of Komagata Maru, Operation Bluestar and the Air India bombings?

ii. What is the relationship between ‘grand’ narratives and the personal narratives of youth on these episodes?

iii. In what ways are the narratives of youth on the episodes connected to their present context? That is, how are contemporary events inflected in the memory of the episodes?

iv. In what ways do the broader political and social environment(s) impact the meaning-making processes of the youth on these three episodes?

1.4 Chapter outline

The thesis is structured around four chapters. The first chapter lays out the conceptual and methodological design of the research. I provide a comprehensive discussion of the main concepts that are used throughout - concepts of memory politics, racism and diasporic identity - as well as the methodology adopted to conduct this research, a qualitative mixed methods approach.
The three chapters that follow form the main analytical core of the thesis. Chapter two discusses the narratives of youth on the events of 1984 after laying down the historical context lying behind the episode, and discussing the dominant narratives that exist on it today. I attempt to represent ways in which the youth participating in this research remember the ‘history of 1984’, the inequality in the space and reception of the contending forms of remembrance of this violent history, as well as the commemorative practices associated with 1984 in Vancouver.

The third chapter of the thesis is on the Air India bombings of 1985. The chapter looks at the nature of remembrance and silences of the youth on the Air India episode. In the existence of largely silences on the episode of the Air India bombings, the chapter predominantly attempts to contextualize the environment within which these silences exist.

The final analytical chapter of the thesis is on the episode of the Komagata Maru. While the historical context of the chapter lies in the early 20th century, given the current activities in the city on the occasion of its centennial, I have deliberately put the chapter on Komagata Maru towards the end of the thesis. This strategy enables the thesis to end in the current political and social context of the youth. It also drives home the point that the past, even as old as 100 years, is relevant in the present, in more ways than one. Given the time frame within which research on this topic was conducted, the chapter aimed to capture the actively changing narratives and the multiplicity in the narratives of the youth on the episode of the Komagata Maru. The narratives of the youth on Komagata Maru prior to the commemoration events in the city were largely comprised of silences. The aim during the onset of the research was to compare and contrast these silences of the youth prior to the Commemoration event with the narratives of the youth (who may have heard or attended any of the commemoration events after). However, given my lack of empirical data on youth responses on the Komagata Maru during and post the commemoration events, I attempt to address the reason(s) for the silences of the youth (participating in this research) on the Komagata Maru prior to the commemoration events and comparing it with their silences that existed on the Air India bombings episode.
The chapter then analyses and interprets these narratives within the broad theme of knowledge - be it knowledge production, knowledge transfer or epistemic changes in the narrative(s) of Komagata Maru. A significant section of the chapter also looks at the official and multiple counter-narratives on recalling the Komagata Maru episode, along with a personal take on how to approach the Komagata Maru episode.

1.5 Research assumptions

Before moving on to the next chapter, it is important to explicitly state some of the basic premises upon which the thesis is based. This study is premised on certain key points that I take as axiomatic. One, that the circulation, the production, consumption and dissemination of knowledge(s) are never equal. There are some narratives and understandings of the themes explored in this thesis that are more dominant and take precedence over others. Although these themes can be explored from different lines of inquiry; race, racialization and memory politics are the concepts that I chose for the purpose of the thesis analysis. Secondly, long-standing racialized practices are incorporated into all of our political, social and economic structures. Lastly, racialized outcomes do not necessarily require racist actors. Focusing on individual instances of racism in isolation can make us miss the broader picture of racism entrenched in systems, and the discrimination that gets perpetuated through these systems. In other words, looking at racism as individual instances diverts our attention from the structural changes that are required in order to achieve racial justice. Lastly, although this research is critical of government actions (and inactions) in relation to the three episodes being looked at, this is not to say that government efforts have no positive impact on the Punjabi-Sikh communities in India and Canada.
Chapter 2: Conceptual and methodological chapter

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the conceptual, methodological as well as the theoretical aspects that guided and framed the development of this study of the diasporic Sikh youth in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia. Specifically the study examines the different forms of associations that the Punjabi-Sikh youth participating in the research have with certain aspects of history namely- the events of 1984, the events of 1985 and the Komagata Maru incident using the concepts of memory, race and diasporic identity.

2.1 Conceptual formations of the study

2.1.1 Memory

The concept of memory is used to understand and analyze the narratives of the youth on specific aspects of history(s). The following chapters offer an insight into diverse, complex and often contradictory workings of the memory(s) of the youth on three specific historical events (namely, the events of 1984, the events of 1985 and the Komagata Maru incident). These chapters further explore the relation between individual and social memory as well as past and the present.

Remembering and forgetting are two equal aspects of memory and meaning-making processes. Remembering everything is as central to memory as forgetting everything. What we remember and how we chose to remember decides how we recreate stories of the past or how we interpret the past (Papadakis 1993). By analyzing youth narratives I will look at the ways in which their different understandings and engagement with history challenge the dominant history(s) that preserve and challenge order and also in what ways does it merge with such discourses of history(s) (since it is not a one-way process, a dominant history can also affect what people remember and forget). The examination of the various levels at which debates of the past take
place (by analyzing youth narratives, and dominant official and counter-official histories on the given events) can reveal how different views of the past are articulated and indicate how these may often be in competition with one another (Zembylas & Karahasan 2006). This study relies upon the understanding of collective memory originally developed by Maurice Halbwachs. Memory, Halbwachs claims, cannot emerge in isolation, that is, from within a strictly subjective understanding of the past. "A person remembers only by situating himself (herself) within the viewpoint of one or several groups and one or several currents of collective thought." (1992, Pg. 24) For Halbwachs, memory is a social phenomenon, something shared collectively, and not the exclusive or private possession of an individual subject. I will look at these interlinkages between individual and collective memory in order to map out broad collective patterns in the narratives of the youth on aspects of history dealt with in the thesis.

None of the events covered in the study however have been witnessed by the youth participating in it. ‘Prosthetic memory’ therefore forms an important aspect of this study. Hamilton describes prosthetic memory as a “mediated access to a past that individuals have not themselves experienced creating ‘memories’ that transcend space and time” (2003, Pg. 139). A significant role in this process is played by new digital technologies, which have a significant impact on remembering (ibid, Huyssen 2000). All three episodes are not only temporally but also in some ways spatially separated from the youth participating in the study – given that a lot of the politics related to the events, in varying degrees, are translocal and transnational in nature. Increasing obsession with past both personally and at a public level has taken place through a number of platforms like political debates on events, an increasing tendency to mark anniversaries of historical events, an increase in the development of sites such as memorials, museums, TV, films and the internet, has changed the relationship between the past and the present. For youth today the past is readily accessible, and they are making sense of it in relation to their present contexts.

Through this line of thought, Adami suggests that collective memory represents the past in relation to the needs of the present or its restructuring and organizing being influenced by the will of some social groups, usually dominant ones (Adami 2008). The shaping of the past
through present politics and through dominant social groups reveals the political nature of such acts. Schmitz further adds that collective memory and collective identity is part of “a crisis of the self-assessment of the present in which history increasingly becomes instrumentalised in order to stabilize group identity” (Schmitz 2004 Pg. 5). While collective memory represents the past, it is also in a state of constant contestation and negotiation. The struggles between dominant approaches to engage with the past leaves, Blok argues, many of the other counter-memories, as only temporary in nature (1992). Blok’s argument suggests the role of power in what kinds of engagement with history prevail. Although discursive power is unquestionably a factor in the process of memory formation and the establishment of dominance of one narrative over the others, its links to Blok’s argument on the temporariness of non-dominant discourses is unclear. I analyze the existence of non-dominant counter-memories of the youth on the three episodes in the thesis to examine the weight in this argument.

Memory is as much shaped by social interaction as also by silences and forgetting. What the youth recall is constructed not only by what is remembered as what is forgotten. While the thesis is based on the spoken words of the youth on the historical events, their silences, forgetting and apprehensions to speak on certain aspects of them also form a significant aspect of the thesis. Looking at silence and forgetting also helps in understanding the dynamics of ‘silencing’. Social markers of an individual or community such as belonging to a minority community, religion or makers or race etc., are intrinsically connected with silencing.

2.1.2 Race

Race is another major concept that is used extensively in the thesis. The use of this concept has been a process and not a pre-chosen concept to use in the thesis. A process that I engaged with during a prolonged period of fieldwork, thinking about the narratives of the youth, their hesitations to speak about some of the issues and reading literature on the same and related topics during this period (the works of Thobani, Razack, Amber Dean and Sarah Ahmed appealed the
most to me on many of the related issues). Any given research project can be approached from various lines of inquiry, but using the concept of race seemed the most fitting for me.

The Punjabi-Sikh community is considered as a visible minority group in Canada, and thus characterized as “persons other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-white in color or non-Caucasian in race” (Statscan 2012). I use the term race to denote a relation of power that creates hierarchical or ‘unequal’ relations of force between people, places, populations, and objects by virtue of fabricated differences, which may be biological, phenotypical, cultural, aesthetic, or historical (see Goldberg 2001, Hesse 2007, Mawani 2009 and Stoler 1995 for similar formulations of race). Following from this definition of race, I use the term ‘racism’ to refer to specific configurations of race that create the conditions for its perpetuation and most sociologists that stress how racial difference is socially constructed typically make the object of racisms (i.e. ‘skin color, the ‘body’ or occasionally ‘culture’) their point of origin (Hesse 2004), a habit that occludes the relations of power and force that (re)create its specific conditions of emergence. In using this definition of race, I situate my thesis in the literature that critically appropriates Michel Foucault’s writings to theorize connections between power and race.

Power is not simply a set of political institutions, nor is it equivalent to a substance that can be possessed by a group of people; rather, as he explains in ‘The History of Sexuality: Volume I’, power should be understood as the multiplicity of force relations essential in the sphere in which they operate. I situate race in the multiple relations of force that constitute a given field or realm of social relations. Insofar as power is also irreducible to its usual guise as a negative force that limits or represses specific political opportunities (Foucault 2003), my thesis tracks the generative force of race across divergent historical contexts and episodes. I highlight its capacity and role in producing different subject positions, geographies of inclusion and exclusion, and relations of vulnerability to narratives. In academic and vernacular contexts, race and racism are analytical and evaluative categories insofar as they are used to describe and denounce relations of power and inequality (Gilroy 2000, Goldberg 2009, Razack 2002). This research aims to
critique and disengage habituated ways of thinking racially about history, specifically the three historical episodes being looked at for the purpose of the thesis.

2.1.3 Diaspora

In order to comprehend the notion of diaspora as used in this study, it is critical to explore the socio-historical origins of the term. The concept of diaspora was often associated with dispersion of people across countries as a result of a historical trauma. The term diaspora was first used to describe the Jewish experiences of expulsion and history of exile. However, over time the term diaspora however has expanded beyond its traditional and negative usage of describing “forcible dispersion” (Cohen 1996). Today, the term is used to refer to any form of migration that leads to dispersal of people across countries from their original place of generational settlement to new places. This concept, along with the movement suggests the existence of a wide and varied network of culture, common ancestry, locality etc. In this vein it is common to refer the participants of this study as part of the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in Canada. Even the contemporary scholarship on diasporas however is preoccupied with notions of national political representation, and has not entirely displaced prior conceptualizations of diaspora as a unidirectional process, failing to accommodate the diverse, multifaceted manifestations of diasporic politics and practice in the contemporary moment. Although transnational conceptualizations are important, the analytical framework of diasporas used in this study, however, challenges a sustained preoccupation with diasporic origins and ‘homelands’. This has been done by disrupting the essentialist privileging of blood ancestry as well as nation-states as the formative substances of diasporas (Gopinath 2005; Puar 2005). Such ideas although are often at the centre of the conceptualization of "diaspora" by members of the community (e.g. the preoccupation with the idea of the "nation" among some Sikh youth). Since so many members of diaspora communities are racialized in the dominant discourse, "diaspora" itself is also largely racialized.
Rather than only looking at the diasporic linkages present in the study from a transnational perspective that puts too much emphasis on borders and nations, I will also adopt a ‘translocal’ approach (Appadurai 2003, Conradson and McKay 2007, Brickell and Datta 2011b) to my analysis in the study. Using the concept of translocalism additionally to transnational networks to describe the phenomena involving mobility, migration, circulation, and spatial interconnectedness (Appadurai 2003) will enable me to have a more nuanced understanding of youths narratives on origins and belongings which often transcended the national. The self-descriptor of ‘Punjabi’, ‘Sikh’ or ‘Punjabi-Sikh’, ‘Canadian-Punjabi’, ‘Canadian-Sikh’ or ‘Sikh-Vancouverite’ were used by the youth in the study in most cases (See Figure 1 below). This privileging of identifiers like ‘Punjabi’, ‘Sikh’, ‘Punjabi-Sikh’ or Canadian-Punjabi as different and above Canadian-Indian not only speaks volumes about the particular sense of belonging and community association(s) imagined by the youth but also the existing tension between the contesting and intersecting senses of belonging.

Figure 1: Identity(s) chart

Vertovec (1999) proposes a valuable framework for examining these various forms of diasporic linkages. For the purpose of this research five specific categories have been utilized from the framework offered by him to study diasporas, namely, analyzing diasporas as a social form, as a type of consciousness, as a mode of cultural production, as a site of political engagement and as a reconstruction of ‘place’ or ‘locality’. The utilization of this framework has assisted in
providing for a detailed examination of the diversity of youth identities and the differences in the perceptions of the youth about Sikh history(s).

- Diaspora as a social form spanning borders is represented by the three-fold relation between the globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, the territorial context within which such groups reside and the ‘homeland’ contexts where they or their forbearers once came from. There exists a range of dense and highly active networks amongst the Punjabi-Sikh translocal youth sustained by a range of modes of social organizations, mobility and communications. New age technologies, lie at the heart of such linkages. They not only aid in transforming various social, cultural and political relationships but also creating new ones (Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

- The Punjabi-Sikh Diasporic youth as a type of consciousness – The identities of youth participating in the study are also marked by dual or multiple identifications that comprise of ever-changing representations. These “malleable identities” are provided for, in some ways, by the youth’s connections with ‘elsewhere’ (Hall 1990). This solidarity with ‘there’ however, was not limited to a single space or a modern understanding of the nation. Therefore the second way this study will look at the diasporic links is, as a type of consciousness. In the age of modern technology, the youth identity is held together or re-created in the mind to an extent, through its cultural artifacts and multiple shared imaginations (Vertovec 1999). In the following chapters I elaborate on this point by looking at youth narratives on the Komagata Maru, anti-Sikh pogroms in Delhi and Punjab, Operation Blue Star, the Air India Disaster of 1985 and the significance of these incidents for the youth participating in the research.

- Diasporic links as a mode of cultural reproduction: The increasingly globalizing media and other modes of communication also provide a significant channel for the flow of cultural phenomena and transformation of identity (Vertovec 1999). Such was also the case for the youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community in Vancouver participating in the
research. Films and music formed some of the most conspicuous spaces for the flow of these processes for the youth participating in the research. These processes provide for the production of ‘new ethnicities’ amongst the youth, whose primary socialization has taken place in these cross-cultural fields (Vertovec 1999). The ‘Microelectronic transnationalism’ (Spivak 1989) characterized by online electronic boards and Internet provided for the multiple and complex ways in which the media was consumed by the translocal youth in the research.

• There exist unique dialectics of global and local questions, which do not fit into the framework of national politics and provide for analyzing diasporic linkages: as a site of political engagement. These political activities are not simply extensions to the nationalist and counter-nationalist debates but involve numerous puzzling new forms of links between “diasporic nationalisms, delocalized political communications and revitalized political commitments at both ends of the diasporic process” (Appadurai, 1995, Pg. 196). The nature of Sikh diasporic youth politics today is quite contested as well as varied in nature. Technology provides for a global public space for political engagements and plays a huge role in the mobilization, activism, publicity and dissemination of information. These threads will be further explored in the following chapters around the events of 1984 and demands for a homeland of Khalistan, where a considerable amount of political activity is undertaken through diasporic networks.

• The category of diasporic links as reconstruction of ‘place’ or locality as used by Vertovec has been used in the study to talk about the transfer, re-grounding, renewing and meaning making of events and practices anchored in different geographical and historical points of origin.

Using these categories for research has helped in analyzing and highlighting the intense connections that exist between national or local territories in the lives of the youth in the study.
There are multiple ties and interactions that links these youth across the borders of nation-states as well. Incorporating Vertovec’s (1999) framework in this study has also be useful in demonstrating how sections of youth within the Punjabi-Sikh community have fostered or otherwise cultivated political and social connections that appeal to the ‘roots’ or the ‘homeland’ in their translocal narratives of who they are.

“Diaspora is as much created by past and ephemeral events, as it is dependent on future and as yet unknown circumstances” (Dlamini, Anucha, Yan 2010, Pg. 407). As such, it also becomes critical to explore how youth learn to navigate this environment in ways that either create distance and disconnection from or engagement with and a reconnection to the ‘imagined homeland’ (which refers to different things for different people) I believe that by coupling these processes of the translocal and transnational diaspora(s) with processes of identity construction and negotiation it would be possible to present a useful framework for understanding the nature of discourses that circulate around Sikh history amongst the youth.

There is a large literature that offers different definitions of identity within migrant communities; in this study, however, I have focused on the definition provided in the works of Stuart Hall (1990, 1996). Like the concept diaspora, identity is a multidimensional term that embodies complex and fluid processes within any given historical period. Hall defines identity as fragmented, discursive, and contextual, stating that identities “are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming, rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (1996, Pg. 4). I use this definition to understand the resources Punjabi-Sikh youth use to ‘become' engaged transnational or translocal citizens, as well as how these resources interact with their understanding of past events associated with the Sikh community. A key point here is that identities are always in a process of being constructed, they need to be understood as being produced in specific historical and institutional contexts and sites. There are multiple layers of cultural identities available to the Sikh youth through communities and schools, which adds on to their social identities of race,
caste and gender. Sikh youth are consistently constructing new ways of being ‘Canadian-Sikh’, ‘Sikh’ etc.

In defining who they are, youth articulate multiple ways that point to how they see themselves and how they believe others outside their community see them. Their identities are not just and how they believe others see them. Their identities are *subjecting but are also subjected* to their nature of the connection they see between ‘elsewhere’ and ‘here’. The connection with ‘here’ is Vancouver, BC (or in some cases Greater Vancouver) while ‘elsewhere’ (which for many youth was Punjab). The meaning of Punjab by the youth however is varied. The sense drawn of Punjab is in constant transition through time and across space. Their national rootedness, be it with the idea of India or Punjab is first rooted in their memory. Their understanding of national is based on memories, where not only time is ‘out of joint’ but even the space (Derrida 1994). It is these memories, its interlinkages with the history(s) and stories they have come to engage that will be looked at and made evident through youth narratives in the following chapters.

### 2.2 Methodology adopted for the study

This study uses a mixed methods approach to conduct a qualitative analysis of the views, belief systems and attitudes of the Punjabi-Sikh youth from the Greater Vancouver region. The selection of methodologies used in this thesis has been informed by the preference for particular forms of analysis; that of a standard qualitative analysis allied with a research framework used by Kovach in her research with indigenous communities – that of using storytelling and ethics as a method which is not only followed while conducting fieldwork but continues to be equally important and emphasized on during the writing of the study (Kovach 2009). It was grappling with the complexities of attempting to align my philosophical standpoints, data-gathering choices, as well as my analytical strategy, that led me towards adopting a mixed methods approach for my research. Using ethics and story-telling as a method provided for people’s
narratives to be a means of primary knowledge seeking, of situating self within a culture(s), as well as, the needs of the community (Kovach 2009).

2.2.1 Story telling as a method

Story telling as a method has been utilized in this study a) using youth narratives as means of primary knowledge seeking, and b) by giving space for youth narratives in the text of the following chapters. This in turn has helped conceptualize the development of thought forms and patterns that emerged in the study. Stories according to Smith (1999) do not ‘simply tell’ a story. They serve multiple purposes. They are often ways of passing down beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the stories down further. Stories also have the potential to call into question the popular visions of a nation. Visions of western nations being land of equal opportunities for all, ethnic communities living in the west being gender equal, etc. They also provide space for stories of empowerment, stories of resilience, stories of change.

The stories used in this study are also the telling and re-telling of ideas, experiences, observances that have in some cases been passed on from one generation to the next. This especially holds true when speaking of social norms and practices followed by families or anecdotes passed on from one’s experiences with events like pogroms of 1984 and the attack of the Harmandir Sahib in 1984.\(^1\) The telling of the stories and discussions around it also activated a reflective process for the participants, which often brought a reconstruction of their narratives on certain issues during the interviews or in follow-up conversations. This was particularly true for their opinions on the episode of Komagata Maru. Using story telling as a research tool for this study I believe

\(^1\) The Harmandir Sahib also known informally as the “Golden Temple” is a holy place of worship of the Sikhs. The holiest text of Sikhism, ‘the Guru Granth Sahib’ is present inside this gurdwara. The Indian Army stormed into the Harmandir Sahib to put a stop to Dharam Yudh Morcha. This was called operation ‘Blue Star’ and was undertaken on 3\(^{rd}\) June 1984.
has been very useful in representing the diversity in identities of the youth from the community, as well as, in presenting the multiple understandings of these historical episodes by the youth.

2.2.2 Ethics as a method

The aim of using ethics as a method was to bring closer two paradigms in operation: that of the researched and the academic research. It was pondering over seven important questions posed by Linda Smith (1999) namely - whose research is it? Who owns it? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? - that helped me operationalize ethics as a research method. For example it is reflection over these questions that subsequently changed my approach towards the study from a standard methods approach to a mixed methods approach incorporating ethics and story-telling as important aspects of the research design and by making the research more inductive than deductive. It is against this setting that I will examine youth identities within the Punjabi-Sikh community in Greater Vancouver, British Columbia.

What I hope to do through the research: Research always exists within a system of power (Smith 1999). I hope my research ‘talks back to’ or ‘talks up to’ power (Smith 1999). The research process had been kept open-ended, utilizing an inductive framework to a great extent for interviews and meetings with community members. All of the interviews used in the thesis have significant stories to tell, stories of people, their cultures and their histories. The data collection process was built on a respectful relationship of reciprocity by sharing my own stories with the interviewees. This invoked a set of shared understandings and histories, especially with youth who were recent immigrants. Most importantly, the reciprocity led to trust building between the

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²The events of 1984 have been looked at in the research because it formed a substantial part of interviews with the youth while the inclusion of Komagata Maru as an event has been deductive in nature due to the significance in terms of its 100 year mark this year and the number of events being organized around it in Vancouver. The case of Air India incident has been picked up however to set the context of a number of issues that were of concern to many of the youth participating in the research.
researcher and the interviewees. I hope to represent these diverse, insightful stories, which were told with a lot of faith and trust in a just and respectful way in the thesis. In the following pages I have attempted to write my research findings in a variety of creative, critical but also functional ways. As a researcher, it is not only getting the story(ies) right and telling the story(ies) well that I wish to achieve through my analysis but also fairly disseminating the information generated. To disseminate the final results of the study I will adopt diverse and culturally appropriate ways and to ensure the research reaches people who have helped make it, in a language and way that can be easily understood by them.

2.3 Empirical details

For the purpose of this thesis Punjabi-Sikh youth have been defined as those who self-identify as ‘Sikhs’ or ‘Punjabi-Sikhs’, whose familial roots can be traced to present day Punjab, India and are between the ages of 18 and 30. From here on Punjabi-Sikh youth will be used interchangeably with the word ‘youth’.

There were a total of 24 interviews and one focus group discussion carried out for the research. Twenty of these interviews were semi-structured in nature and conducted with youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community in Greater Vancouver. Ten participants of these interviews were male youth while the other ten were female participants. The remaining four interviews conducted were with older members from the community associated with diverse institutions like PICS (a resettlement organization working with the Punjabi-Sikh community in Vancouver), the Department of Asian Studies at UBC, Khalsa School (Surrey) and the Khalsa Diwan Society. These set of interviews were fully structured where the participants were asked about crucial issues they felt the youth from the community are grappling with today, along with questions related to youth’s engagement with history. The focus group discussion was conducted with eleven members from the Sikh Students Association at UBC, where the discussion was around the theme of Sikh history(s) and its relevance for youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community
today’. Apart from conducting interviews, participant-observations were carried out at a number of religious and cultural events organized within the community.

Although interviews and focus group discussion form a major source of the research, the study also relies on secondary sources of data like official government reports, apologies, statements etc. This has been particularly useful in providing a broader context to silences and hesitations in the youth narratives. Linking of the silences of the youth to the larger context even though through the use of secondary data is to some extend speculative, as such approaches can often be and the inferences made therefore can be/are debatable.

2.3.1 Interviews

Interviewees were recruited through the ‘snowball sampling’ method. The semi-structured nature of interviews with the youth was an important means to bring to the surface issues important to the youth from the community. It helped in enabling the youth from the community to reclaim and tell their own stories in their own ways, and to give testimony to their individual struggles as well as their understandings of collective histories. Embedded in these stories were different ways of knowing, deep metaphors and motivational drivers that stir the taking up of different identities in varying contexts as well as drivers that inspire the praxis of continuity and change amongst the youth. Attention was paid to keep the nature of the participants in the interviews diverse to capture the diversity in opinions and identities of people from the community. The youth interviewed were from various sections of the community – from being new immigrants to those whose families have been in Canada for almost a century, from Baptized Sikhs to non-believers, from youth who were first generation immigrants to those who have lived all their life in Canada. The array of interviews collected is also diverse in terms of other beliefs held and
their experiences. New immigrants in this study refer to youth born and brought up in India, and who came to Canada in the past five years (based on the official Canadian definition of a new immigrant).

All interviews except two were conducted face to face with a conversation-style interview format. Questions posed to the youth participants in the interviews were open ended in nature. Three languages – namely, Punjabi, Hindi and/or English were used during these interviews based on the interviewee’s preference. The transcripts of the interviews have been written in the language they were conducted in. Nine out of the twenty interviewees were born in Canada, the remaining eleven were born in Punjab, India.

The interviews were conducted at various public locations in Greater Vancouver and the length of these interviews varied from between 50 to 90 minutes. The participants were informed of the research objectives and they were assured of privacy, which was a very important issue to some of them. They were informed that they could abstain from answering any question if they wished to do so. Pseudonyms with serial numbers are used to maintain privacy. The citation of the interviewees in the following chapters is carried out through a series of codes including pseudonyms, for the purpose of upholding privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees. Pseudonyms used were those preferred by the interviewees. A list of 30 randomly generated Sikh-identified names was given to the participants and they were asked to give any five preferences for names. Three people who did not chose a pseudonym got a name assigned randomly.

Apart from confidentiality, the pseudonym also reflects the gender of the youth participant. This is necessary because many of the names used in this thesis are unisex names in nature, so a name would not necessarily indicate the gender of the participant. All the male and female

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3 The socio-economic background of the youth, affiliations with Sikh-identified organizations, place of residence in Vancouver, family unit and time elapsed since immigration form the five variables which depending on the specificities brought about variations in the responses of youth on the episodes of 1914, 1984 and 1985.
interviewees have also been allocated with their own individual identification number from 1-10 respectively. Therefore, Harjot (F, 4) for example would refer to the fourth female interviewee who belongs to the second generation of immigrants.

After the first set of preliminary discussions and interviews with the youth, it was clear that the most productive framework for looking at the differences in the youth identities and the differences in their perceptions of Sikh histories would be through six specific variables. These in some sense were the drivers, which inform the youth identities and their perceptions of Sikh history. Gender, socio-economic background of the youth, affiliations with Sikh-identified organizations, place of residence in Vancouver, family unit and time elapsed since immigration form the six variables which depending on the specificities bring about variations in responses on identity issues and the associations with Sikh historical aspects of the youth interviewed. The youth narratives used in the following chapters will therefore also indicate the age, occupation, gender, approximate number of years spent in Canada and place of residence.

The analysis and conclusions in the following chapters are based on the methods and nature of data collection stated in this chapter. Secondly, the concepts and ethical standpoints discussed form the basic framework of the chapters on the three episodes being looked at in the thesis. All the discussions and analysis of the youth narratives on these events reflect the use of concepts of race, diaspora and memory along with the ethical standpoints made explicit here.
Chapter 3: ‘The events of 1984’ and the Punjabi-Sikh youth in Vancouver

There are few dates in the Sikh consciousness that evoke a more spontaneous and automatic recall of events gone-by than 1984 (Tatla 1991). The ‘events of 1984’ for many youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community of Vancouver participating in the research evoke Operation Blue-star and the anti-Sikh pogroms, events of great significance in their understanding of the historical past. This case study of Punjabi-Sikh youth in Vancouver provides an opportunity to examine the dominant narratives on the events of the 1980s and focus on the splinters and the gaps in the dominant discourses around the violence. Doing so would enable us to capture the present day compositions around this highly politicized and emotive issue and in turn provide for new ways of understanding community trauma.

The 1980s in India is seen as "a decade when the dead became mere numbers in newspapers, to be binned after they were read." (Grewal 2004, 1). A decade when the “Center turned its back on the state of Punjab” and relatively obscure name, Khalistan, "seeped into the common vocabulary" which not only influenced the political, social and academic discourse of the time but also labeled the Sikhs as a rogue community (ibid). The anti-Sikh pogroms and Operation Bluestar inflicted large-scale violence against the Sikh community. The year of 1984 and the decade that followed is conceived to be unusually destructive for the Sikhs in not just the terms of the scale of violence but also the suddenness with which the violence was unleashed throughout Punjab, India and spread beyond Indian shores (Singh and Kalra 2009). However, as Singh and Kalra note, “quite unexpectedly, a strange kind of normalcy seemed to have returned: as if by magic, it was business as usual" (2009, 115). Despite this seeming return to normalcy following the demise of Sikh ethnonationalism in the late 1990s, one of the key issues that continues to trouble many Sikhs till today is attempting to represent the traumatic events of the foregoing thirty years through the work of memorialization. Representing those years today remains a challenge when ordinary acts of remembering and forgetting seem to have been constantly slipping out of the grasp of people from the Punjabi-Sikh community.
This chapter, then, attempts to represent ways in which the youth participating in this research remember the ‘history of 1984’, the inequality in the space and reception of the contending forms of remembrance of this violent history as well as the commemorative practices associated with 1984 in Vancouver. By providing an overview of selected opinions and representations of this violent past by the youth from the Sikh diasporic community in Vancouver, I draw attention to the ways in which the youth remember (and forget) the violence of 1984. Studying the ways in which Sikh youth (participating in the research) relate to these events today and redefine their own sense of identity a whole generation after the event(s) gives space to not only to analyze but also to challenge the homogeneous framings of Sikh diaspora around this particular past, seeing the primary role attributed to trauma in the narration of past wounds (ibid).

My research shows the presence of discursive elements in the youth accounts of remembrance and forgetting of this past. These accounts on the one hand assert an attachment to the wounds and the nationalist/separatist sentiments that have long been part of representations of 1984 in some ways and, on the other hand, some also point to aspects of narratives that deviate considerably from these dominant discourses around the events of 1984.

3.1 Historical overview

Twenty-nine years have elapsed since the targeted violence of the Sikhs in two separate, but related episodes in June and October–November 1984. Operation 'Blue Star' was the code name for the Indian army’s June occupation of the holiest of all Sikh shrines, the Golden Temple under the direction of Indira Gandhi, killing at least 4932 innocent Sikh pilgrims and the controversial Sikh leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, as well as his followers (Tatla 1999). The operation was a result of ongoing tensions in Punjab. Most Sikhs consider the forced entry of the army in the Gurudwara (Sikh place of worship) as an act of ‘deliberate desecration’ (Das 2007, 109). There was an understanding among both Sikhs and non-Sikhs that Operation Blue Star was ‘bound to have a sequel in the form of a calamitous national event’ (ibid, 110). The anti-Sikh pogroms
following the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is the second episode under consideration in the thesis. The pogroms were characterized by violence against Sikhs in Delhi and other parts of North India on the evening of 31 October 1984 lasting for five days. More than 3000 Sikhs died in this violence aided and abetted by prominent leaders of the Congress Party (Grewal 2007, Tatla 1999, Nandy 1995). The episodes that took place in 1984 and the years that followed led to more than 6000 Sikhs being killed (Tatla 1999). The extent and impact of the horror were not officially acknowledged until much later. Even so, the Indian state’s official stand on the June 1984 attack on the Darbar Sahib was justified by it as a political strategy to deal with tensions in Punjab and the October–November massacre of Sikhs was merely dismissed as a ‘riot’ (Das 2007).

It is the late 1970s that saw a Sikh revival for autonomy after 1947. This revival in the 1980s focused on the Anadpur Sahib resolution, which called for self-determination of the Sikhs in a federal system, where the powers of the centre would be limited to foreign relations, defence, currency and general communication. The siege of the Golden Temple by the Indian troops aimed to ‘nip in the bud this perceived revolution in the making’ by the Indian government (Mahmoud 2014, Pg. 574). The encroachment by the Indian army on what was the holiest site for Sikhs, destroying of the Akal Takht which represented the political authority and autonomy of the Sikh community, was viewed as an attack on the Sikh honor by Sikhs the world over (Mahmood 2014, Chopra 2010).

Dominant collective memories around the anti-Sikh violence of 1984 today are mostly dichotomous. The official state memories of 1984 are full of omissions on the attacks on Sikhs and several human rights violations that were committed against the Sikhs in the 1980s. Official documents on 1984 often associate the beginning of the Khalistan episode with an armed militancy in the 1980s. This stands in contrast to the works by a number of scholars who see the rise in militancy as part of later phases of Sikh assertion for rights. The dominant counter-mobilizations (non-official in nature) that developed in the aftermath of 1984 on the other hand mostly focused on the demands for a separate state of ‘Khalistan’ (DevGAN 2013).
3.2 Hegemonic memories and institutionalized forms of commemorations

“Accounts of remembrances vacillate over a range of oppositions: martyrs/desecrations, personal loss/collective hurt, unique ceremonials versus familiar rituals. Passing time and political hierarchies were critical in constituting memory, and commemorations became sites of politics and power” (Blair 2004, Pg. 10).

Immediately following Operation Blue Star, in order to reduce the damage caused to its image, the Indian government engaged in swift efforts to ‘clean up’ and ‘wipe out’ all signs of a military battle within the premises of the Golden Temple (Chopra 2010). This effort was accompanied by administrative bans on any forms of processions being carried out including collective mourning of the events of 1984 (ibid, Madan 1998). The reopening of the golden temple was also followed by similar problems of remembering and commemorating Operation Bluestar. Since then to the present however the temple complex has memorialized the event in a number of tones and styles be it through the museum within the complex or the ritual performances observed every year on the 6th of June (Ghallughar Diwas) etc. This ritual performance, however, is not free of controversies. The loss that took place in 1984 is remembered through the performative presence of Sikh males who wear ‘kesari pug’ (saffron turbans) and white clothes for instance at the Ghallughar divas. These, symbolize the politics of protest and color of mourning respectively. The collective presence of men in this attire on the Ghallughar Divas represents ‘the unity of the male body’ (Chopra 2010, Pg. 131). Ritual commemorations like the Ghallughar Divas are therefore sites of resistance, power and counter memory. Commemorative events often give the impression of a resolved or reconciled past, however, this need not always be the case. Despite the assumption, commemoration events are sites of deeply contested forms of remembrance and forgetting. The opening of the memorial at Golden temple in April 2013, dedicated to those who lost their lives in the state aggression of 1984 is very recent example of that. The memorial, a response to the long time demands made to commemorate the “sacrifice” of Bhindranwale and “other marytrs” (who died fighting the army during Operation Bluestar) has been the center of controversy over the past few years.
These events surrounding the Golden Temple, as well as in Delhi, continue to impact Sikhs even today. The way these events are recast, memories of the specifics, spaces to remember and related issues play an important role in politics in India as well as the diaspora (Barrier 2006). The counter-state mobilizations post-1984 have been influenced in significant ways by the diaspora and represent much more than the demand for a separate state of Khalistan in the 1980s (Madan 1998, Tatla 1999, Axel 2001). Forgetting and moving on, in the case of traumatic events like Blue Star and the related anti-Sikh pogroms can be hard in the absence of justice or even a mere acknowledgement of the horrific crimes by the state (in this case the Indian state) (Axel 2001). This is especially true for those who have directly or indirectly been affected by the events. There exist large silences on these issues today. However, silence on the issues need not necessarily symbolize forgetting.

3.3 Silences as a narrative of 1984

The manner in which this trauma and the memory of the trauma of the 1980s are processed can lead to various responses, silence being one of the most dominant responses for a large section of the Sikh population (Das 2007). Mr. Singh, a regular at the Gurudwara Dashmesh Darbar in Surrey, believes it is best to not bring up such issues and to move on. As our conversation continued, he hesitantly told me about some of his experiences about residing in Delhi during the 1980s. He came to Canada in the ‘90s where he and his family (wife and two children) have been living ever since. His children, he revealed, have no knowledge about his experiences of living in Delhi as a turbaned Sikh during the turbulent ‘80s. "There is no good that can come out of it, it’s best to move on", he repeats, "best to not let your children’s and your future be affected by your past."

A gap of nearly thirty years, witnessing the reality of the 1980s firsthand amongst other things stood between Mr. Singh and the next interviewee.
Nineteen-year-old Jasween (F, 3), a young female from Abbotsford who recently started a University degree in Vancouver shares her experience of trying to know more about the events of 1984 from her father, after a weekend visit to the Gurudwara.

“(Hmm)…Actually I don’t know much about this issue. I know they were violent events against the Sikhs but that’s as much as I know (…) I remember once asking my dad about it when I was seventeen because I noticed some pictures in the Gurudwara but he was very vague about it. He didn’t tell me much (just some general information). He says it’s better if you don’t know. But I know some of our family was affected by this, but I don’t know what or how (…) I didn’t bother digging more into it either, because he was pretty particular (or maybe disinterested) about not saying anything.”

While silence can be seen as a means to recovery and healing, of moving on with one’s life or in some cases an instrument used by victims to protect their children from their violent pasts, these silences can also be interpreted in other ways. The public sphere in India today as mentioned above largely remains silent on the 1984 pogroms, on violence done to and by the people. Similarly most narratives on Operation Blue Star are replete with omissions. Scarce literature exists on the events of 1984 and where the community finds itself today in relation to the episode that took place three decades ago. Silence need not always be a product of choice. These silences on the events of 1984, I argue, are also affected by the space and agency available to individuals directly and indirectly affected by them.

3.3.1 Reasons for silence

Parallel to ‘spaces of safety’ deemed necessary by therapists to recall and re-articulate victims’ memory of state terror and violence, the Sikhs have been unable to create any ‘spaces of safety’ (Verma 2011, Pg. 46). Up until now the militants and government alike have suppressed the voices of many from the community on the 1980s. Some who tried to seek justice from
governmental agencies, petitioned to various human rights commissions or appealed to diasporic Sikh organizations have also either regretted this action or felt fearful in publishing their accounts (ibid). In such an environment gripped by silences, “enforced by the federal state, and later abetted by the Akali Dal 'who spearheaded the community into the tragedy, it seems unlikely that the ‘emergence of a national community, which can provide for its subjects the paradoxical safety of public acknowledgement, is a possibility for Sikhs.” (Tatla 2006, Pg. 81). In the absence of other voices, the vacuum is being increasingly filled by voices of hardliners and those in the diaspora.

These silences or ‘non-narratives’ of violence suppressed by dominant actors and narratives on the 1980s are often unsayable within the forms of everyday life. The violations that were inflicted on the Sikh community in India in 1984 are seen as being part of ‘abnormal times’, “inflicted by not humans but by beasts or machines” (Das 2007, Pg. 295). Categorizing these events as ‘abnormal’ make them stand in contrast to the violations that can be scripted in everyday life and thereby relegates the history and experiences of 1984 anti-Sikh violence to oblivion. Several individuals’ muted voices and dangerous trajectories only remind others to remain silent. The production of these silences in the Sikh community in India is impacted by the existence of the Sikh community as (a religious minority) within the framework of weak secular state institutions. There are few other equally important factors, apart from being an ethnic minority that resonate these silences in the Canadian context. For the Punjabi-Sikh diaspora in Canada, silence on events around 1984 is linked to the fear of being viewed as a supporter of the movement of Khalistan, and/or the Air India bombings of 1985. Apprehension in voicing opinions on the events of 1984 in the diaspora community is thus also coupled with attempts to be non-confrontationist in fear of being labeled or targeted as ‘trouble makers’. As Sara Ahmed (2004b) explains, since 9/11, due to an increased politics of fear in North America, the word terrorist sticks to the bodies of people of Middle Eastern, Arab, and South Asian descent. Despite the numerous reasons for silences to exist on issues of 1984, many of the youth participating in the research were particularly vocal about them.

Most of the youth conversations around 1984 started without any probing on my part about it.
While the events that took place in the 1980s and its aftermath are traumatic, it is the justice denied on the crimes of 1984 committed against Sikhs that appealed to a number of the youth as a cause to fight for (Fieldwork transcripts).

3.4 Narratives of youth on 1984

Largely most of the youth who engaged in talking about the politics of the 1980s did so from a victim perspective. While all of them wanted to speak about the violence inflicted by the state, none but one spoke about the violence inflicted by the members of the Sikh community during this time. At the same time, even while engaging with the events of 1984 from a victim perspective, the youth narratives did so in differing ways. There is a desire amongst the youth to make meaning of this moment and to personalize it, own it and engage in reinterpretation of its significance (Arora and Nijhawan 2013). This ‘mnemohistory’ - past as it is remembered – then is not so much as seeing history as one thing after the other, but what Arthur Lovejoy (as cited in Assmann 2008, Olick 2008, Pg. 9) calls a process of cultural transmission, “an active process of meaning making through time”, “an ongoing work of reconstructive imagination” rather than a series of objective stages. As transnational and translocal social agents embedded in multiple spaces and times, that is, by coming to terms with past memories of 1984 and steering them towards present and future collective identity, the Sikh diasporic youth actors are forming and developing in various spaces today more critically informed, heterogeneous fissures than prevailing narratives (Devgan 2013; Thesis fieldwork research).

Familial experiences, space for dialogue about the episodes that took place in 1984 within family units, the generation of the immigrant family to which the youth belongs, and access to information about the events of 1984 on the internet are some of the key factors that influence the opinions of the youth on the politics of 1984 and its aftermath. Operation Bluestar and the anti-Sikh pogroms today are remembered in various ways by weave the past and present politics together.
3.4.1 Significance of 1984 for the Punjabi-Sikh youth

Despite being far away from the ‘homeland’ and not being affected directly by events during the 1980s, the Punjabi-Sikh youth in the study were all aware of, identified with and/or had strong emotions about the history of the period. The question that arises then is: why are the events of 1984 of substantial importance to the diasporic youth here in Vancouver?

Twenty-year-old Ramanjeet (F, 1), part of the Sikh Students Association in a university in Vancouver states:

“I feel like what happened in 1984 is still not a closed topic. Social justice has never been provided for on the issue. The government of India still exploits people and the situation in India in different ways. These exploitations go unnoticed and unheard (...) We as today’s generation have to do something about it. It’s part of our history, we need to take in to providing our ancestors justice.”

(Ramanjeet (F, 1) 20 year-old, part of Sikh Student’s association in the University in Vancouver. Born and brought up in Surrey)

Youth is a period often associated with being driven for causes, standing-up and associating with issues, and a desire to engage with something greater than oneself (Constanza-Chock 2012). For some Sikh youth in Vancouver, such involvement can be seen in the demand for justice around issues of 1984.

Mr. Hundal, who teaches Punjabi in the Asian Studies Department at the University of British Columbia, sheds more light on this:

“What happens in that case is, some of the young people have never been back. They
were born in India and came to Canada at a young age or go back rarely. Yet others are born here. So, when they look back to the whole time period of 1978 to 1993 which includes the whole state-sponsored violence against the Sikh community and the movement of Khalistan, they are physically very disconnected from the environment in India and do not have the whole picture of political developments taking place. There are people who are presenting to them only some facts. While grievances of 1984 riots are very real, where after so many years no one has been punished, the Sikh community is one of the many minority communities in India which are oppressed today and are dealing with problems. The youth here are unaware of that.”

Mr Hundal’s statements in many ways form a critique of the youth discourse on justice. He brings to the fore issues of the Sikhs not being the only minorities suffering at the hands of the Indian nation state. There are many other minorities or disenfranchised people who suffer at the hands of the Indian state. The youth he states are being misinformed about genuine grievances around the issues of the 1980s. He attributes this misinformation of youth on the events of 1984 and its linkages to the present to being physically disconnected from Punjab and tapping into populated knowledge sources on the events of 1984. Being physically removed from Punjab, India, the youth in BC find the liberty to be more vocal about the issues since the repercussions to bear for doing so are far less than if they were in India. The episode of 1984 is widely available for consumption through a predominantly victim perspective through representations on the Internet (Axel 2005). The selective representation of information on 1984 is filtered through discourses of martyrdom and social justice. The internet makes these counter-narratives widely assessable to the youth who are physically very removed from India, playing an important role in the significance of the ‘80s in the lives of the youth today.

3.4.1.1 Engaging with victimhood discourse through the internet

The information revolution has contributed towards reducing the distance of the youth today
from the history of the 1980s. They are using the Internet to inform themselves about the events of 1984 and have greater understanding of their histories.

As a young university student, who is often active within a predominantly youth-based Sikh-identified non-religious organization in Vancouver, states:

“I found (out) about my Sikh history by researching myself. Within my family, ’84 in general wasn’t much talked about when I was growing up, we (she and her brother) didn’t know any stories of 84. When we grew older we did our own research and learned a lot right. I didn’t even bother asking my parents anything because I thought they probably didn't even know. There is so much readily available online from various Sikh organizations.”

(21 years old, Gurleen (F, 2), student in a university in Vancouver, living in Surrey)

Axel states that, at the time of his writing in 2005, there were more than six hundred websites dealing in some way or the other with Khalistan or the events of 1984. The popularity and the number of these sites have been on the increase since the late 1990s (2005). Many of these websites focus on presenting the human rights violations against the civil population in Punjab by the Indian government, articulating a discourse of victimhood and discrediting the democracy and secularism of India (Sokol 2007). These selective memories of the 1980s remember the violence that was inflicted by the state and the majority community but forgets the role of Sikhs in the perpetuation of violence in the build up to the events of 1984. Constructing the past through this lens of victimhood makes legitimate the demands made through a nationalist discourse.

There is a vast amount of information and knowledge production through these discourses available on the internet. The lack of any public discussions around Sikh history(s) of the 1980s and the 1990s in the public realm in India makes these sites a very popular and singular source of knowledge (on Sikh history(s) of this period) for the youth. “These internet sites and groups
attempt to produce and disseminate knowledge about the Khalistani struggles through a variety of means. Websites circulate images of corpses of Sikh men alongside testimonies of torture survivors and updates on present conflicts; chatrooms and email list serves provide opportunities for debate regarding the utility of violent or non-violent tactics” (Axel 2005, Pg. 128). Channeled through specific sources of knowledge production, the information given by a number of these internet sources provide for specific narrative(s) on events that took place in the past and its relevance in India today. Many youth from the Punjabi-Sikh community in Vancouver relying on such sources for information are for instance, unable to decouple protests in Punjab today from issues that rocked the community in the 1980s. Indeed, a few youth taking part in the research also referred a few of these sites in lieu of answering questions on where they learn what is happening in India from.

3.4.1.2 Role of the internet in the collapse of temporality

Nations are made-up of remembered events argues Das, however they are made up of particular relationships between people and things rather than time itself. The communal violence faced by the Sikh community in the 1980s reshaped not only the memories of the events of 1984 and occluded actual experiences for the youth but also shape their understanding of present politics in India. Filtered through internet sources dedicated to 1984, current situations in Punjab, such as the protests by farmers or protests by students against problems of drug addiction, are seen in the same continuum as the 1984 government oppression of the Sikhs, by some youth. The views of twenty-one-year-old, Harjot (F, 4) part of the Sikh Students Association in a university in Vancouver, provides more clarity on this issue:

“I feel like a lot of youth here don’t know what is happening there and think it’s (1984) an issue of the past (1984) and that things are better today (…) We have a Sikh Prime Minister. (…) but I think he is just a puppet. Right now there are people from our community in jail, who are rotting in jail, just for being Sikhs. I would love for this to be in the past, but I don’t think that’s the case. Even with the rampant drug problem with
youth in Punjab, or the distribution of water to Punjab, I believe there is a deliberate hand of the government in this.”

Harjot (F, 4) student in a university in Vancouver, part of the Sikh Student’s association in the university, living in Surrey)

3.4.1.3 Martyr discourse through the internet

The ICT (Information and Communication Technology) revolution has also led to an increase in ‘massacre art’ which is available online. Sikhs and others are able to ‘witness’ the ‘martyrdom’ of the shaheed (martyred) in the Punjab (Mahmood 1997). As pointed out by Brian Axel, images of men, valorized as shaheed, circulate widely on the Internet along with particular historical narratives of the Sikh qaum (community). These images and narratives, according to Axel, ‘interarticulate’ with those that have circulated through other means, like, pamphlets, books, and audio files of Bhindranwale’s speeches, form a central part of an emergent archive of Sikh struggles (2001, 2002). The ‘shaheed’ here are those whom “terror does not silence” (Mahmood 1997, Pg. 24). Through pictures found on the Internet, the youth are able to ‘witness’ the destruction of the Golden Temple complex. By heavily damaging the Akal Takht (the temporal site of power within the Sikh tradition) the Indian state sought to destroy the Sikh ‘nation’ and also Sikh aspirations to sovereignty (Tatla 1999). Therefore, by ‘witnessing’ the atrocities committed by the India State and the martyring of the Sikh ‘nation’, the narratives used along with the pictures provide a break to the homogenizing narratives of the Indian nation-state.

Although there is a break in the dominating state narratives of 1984 through discourses of ‘massacre art’, the events of 1984 are taken over by another dominating, all-encompassing counter-narrative of victimhood. Through this discourse of victimhood, it is only the violence inflicted against the members of Sikh community that is taken into account. The martyr discourse, the related massacre discourses while emphasizing on the pain, hurt and violence
inflicted on the “Sikh body” by the dominant communities (like hindus) and the state, leave out the violence inflicted by the “Sikh self” (Axel 2005).

Ramanjeet (F, 1) who speaks about these images during the interview states:

“You can see all that the state has done to our community. It’s high time that those responsible pay for what they have done (...) I may have not been born then or might not even know what Punjab looked like, but this is about justice for crimes committed. The beaten and battered Sikhs, the destroyed homes, the Golden temple (...) It’s all there, I don’t understand how justice could not be given (...) I want to help my people there. They don’t have any rights there, they can’t do much. These days I don’t do much (...) but even a small thing like signing petitions can go a long way. You are making a difference.”

(Ramanjeet (F, 1), Female, 20-year-old, born and brought up in Surrey)

3.4.1.4 Social justice

New information technologies have also come to play an important role in the inclusion of the diaspora in movements around demands for social justice for events that took place in 1984 and demands for the release of people in jails in India in relation to the 1980s. There are active movements such as Azadi in the diaspora run by the youth demanding for the state to provide justice by prosecuting those involved in the 1984 pogroms as well as declaring the episode as a genocide rather than a mere ‘riot’. The youth especially are able to partake in such movements online or use the information provided online to contact and collaborate with human rights organizations (Gunawardena 2000). This has also been evident through the interviews carried out with the youth in Vancouver, as can be seen in the narratives of Ramanjeet (F, 1).
3.4.1.5 Inherited memories

Conversations with family, friends and acquaintances also provide space for inheriting memories of the events of 1984 by the youth. Some youth stated their families provided space for both collective as well as individual reflection and understanding of their displacement, the history of violence, and their situation today. Many youth identified survivors, who were indirectly or directly affected by the events of 1980s and 1990s, as sources for inherited memories. These direct associations with family and acquaintances, who have stories to tell about the experience of 1980s in India, also make this part of Sikh history more significant and relevant for the youth today. However, oral testimony as a narrative thought is subject to the same forms and controls as more popularly acknowledged narratives. It is, as Bakhtin points out, “dialogic and never finished”, Baktin 1981 (as cited in Chamberlain, M. & Leydesdorff 2004, Pg. 230).

Memories of India post-1984 can evoke different reactions from families in the diaspora. The interviewees who had conversations about and received insight into some of the personal experiences of family and acquaintances in India during the 1980s were confronted with different forms of memory and narratives of this period of history from each other. The following narratives by two young immigrants who rely on the oral stories of the events of 1984 makes this clear:

21-year-old Aman (M, 1) from Burnaby states:

“The events of 1984 and Khalistan are stuff that I heard from my Grandpa’s cousin in detail for the first time. He is really into the whole Khalistan movement, so from him and his kids basically. I grew up hearing things that happened in India, especially how Sikhs were treated in Punjab in the 1980s and he is a very credible source. He is old and has lived through things, so that’s where I got most of my information. Then I later also saw a lot of movies on the issue like ‘Saada Hakh’ and ‘Hawaaian’ which gave me a better visual understanding of everything he and his kids would tell me about.”
Somewhat standing in contrast to this are the oral stories passed on to a 21-year-old immigrant, who moved to Canada four years ago. His sources of oral knowledge include his father and relatives who presently reside in Punjab.

“I know a lot of my information about 1984 from my dad, some relatives who are still in India and also some from the internet (...) but you have to be careful on the internet coz there is a lot of propaganda material out there (...) I come from a farming family, my Masad (Uncle) and I would spend a lot of time in the fields together before I came here, and he would often tell me a lot of stories about conditions in the 80s in the region and how people felt. Here I feel you can talk more openly about 1984 than in India today but in my experience the understanding of 1984 of my people here (his age) is different from my understanding of the same.”

(Dalbir (M, 3), 21-year-old, living in Surrey)

Inherited knowledge from family members influenced the narratives of yet others, like Ramanjeet, Jasmira and Aman:

“I talk to my parents (...) where their families were when this was happening and also my summer school teacher who had a lot of stories of 1984. He was tortured and stuff, and a boy who he considered as his son was tortured at the time too (...) to the point of insanity. So hearing his stories and doing my own research on it, I just don’t identify with being Indian at all. I identify with being Punjabi but NOT an Indian.”

(Ramanjeet (F, 1), Female, 20-year-old, born and brought up in Surrey)

“I feel 1984 is still very much relevant in various ways. The response of the state to ‘Saada haq’, there was no censorship enforced by the National film board but the state film board did – that speaks volumes for itself, in regard to state relations with Punjabi-
Sikhs is. Specifically around 1984, it is very clear who were the propagators and if they are given a clean chit, it speaks accolades for itself. From every angle – social, political, cultural – there is a clear agenda to do whatever the state can to weaken the community. (...) In the 18-20 age group in Punjab, 70 to 80 percent of men in that age group were addicted to drugs. If you look at what is called the ‘cancer belt of Punjab’ it’s directly because of state authorized industrialization allowed there. From what angle can anyone question if the state involvement”

(Jasmira (F, 6), 30-year-old female, affiliated with a Sikh-identified non-religious organization, brought up and living in Surrey)

“and do something about it. Very few are really still in demand of Khalistan. Most people here, I was told only got fired up about Khalistan post the operation ‘Blue Star’ and the riots. I am not anti-khalistan. I understand what happened and I understand why they demanded a State but I think if it happened it had to happen then. Now they should stop, we shouldn’t loose any more lives based on that .”

(Aman (M, 1), 21-year-old male, born in Vancouver, presently living in Burnaby)

The existing state narrative on the events of 1984 rests heavily on calling the pogroms of 1984 as mere “riots” and Operation Blue Star as a successful control of “anti-state agents” and “terrorists”. On the other end of the spectrum of this dominant discourse is the separatist pro-Khalistani memory of 1984. While the dominant state narrative relies upon a narrative of a terrorist threat, the Khalistani narrative relies upon a narrative of victimhood and response. The manner in which trauma and the memory of 1984 are processed can however lead to various responses. While the above-mentioned narratives are influenced to a great extent by the discourses on victimhood, there are also narratives and opinions voiced by the youth, which are not completely gripped by totalizing tendencies and discourses on 1984. These narratives show more fluidity in the thoughts and engagement in meaning making of these pasts.
3.4.2 Fluid realms of negotiations of youth narratives

The narratives of youth looked at in the previous pages mostly chose to memorialize an event they never witnessed and to re-inscribe it in ways that interrupt the narratives of the Indian nation-state. Central to these narratives was however the discourse of ‘victimhood’ that selectively uses memory. Edkins (2003) refers to this selective remembrance and forgetting as a ‘struggle over memory’.

In the following pages, I will attempt to capture the fluid realm of negotiations by youth and changing positions in relation to the violence of 1984—at various times serving as sufferers of the loss of loved ones, as carriers of hate or as participants in social movements or counter-cultural expressions. Many of these diverge from the dominant discourses of 1984. Categorized below are four broad ways in which the youth responded to the violent memories of 1984. These reveal the complex ways in which memories of ‘84 are being articulated, mediated, and transmitted in specific locations, contexts, and by specific kinds of social actors into cultural production and political activism.

3.4.2.1 The dream of Khalistan

The dominant separatist narrative associated with the events of 1984 legitimizes the creation of an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, by highlighting the repressive state policies of ‘torture and genocide’ employed by the Indian state in Punjab. This nationalist/separatist narrative, as mentioned in the previous pages, is heavily mediated through graphic images of tortured political prisoners and an obliterated Akal Takht online, in an attempt to unite Sikhs living in distant places from Punjab by dominant khalistani narratives and instilling a sense of Sikh ‘nationhood’ in these diasporic sections of the community (Shani 2010). Youth narratives in the previous pages reinscribed the event of 1984, in a Khalistani nationalist narrative that interrupts the
homogenizing narrative of the Indian nation-state. They chose to do so because ‘they consider their nation, the Khalsa or Sikh qaum, to be at war with the ‘pseudo-secular’ Indian state’ (Ibid). However, these narratives engaged with ‘forms of remembering’ through the selective memory of the nationalist discourse, which ‘remembers’ the violence which the ‘Other’ inflicted upon the ‘Self’ but ‘forgets’ the complicity of the ‘Self’ in the events leading up to 1984. The memorialization of the events by these youth also took on the martyr discourse, which reproduces stories of glory and heroism or oppression and victimhood, through a linear time and narrative.

The concept of Miri Piri (spiritual and temporal power) is crucial to understanding some of the youth narratives that were sympathetic to nationalist, victim narratives on 1984. Two swords symbolize Miri Piri, portrayed as two crossed swords. In popular readings the sword on the right represents the willingness to fight for a just cause, whereas the sword on the left represents truth.

Ramanjeet (F, 1)’s interview exemplified how the concept of miri piri took root in her narratives of 1984.

“If you think about it, we wouldn’t be a people still if we would have not picked up arms. Right back to the time we were living in jungles and like fighting and stuff. The Buddhist people who were attacked and they did not pick up arms; we saw how that ended right. I feel defending yourself is justified when you are being so blatantly attacked. It’s never the first resort. It’s from Babaji’s time, you try to talk to people but if that doesn’t happen you have to pick up arms (...) We [the Khalsa] are here to protect what Sikhism stands for; (...) you can’t let other people exploit you. I can therefore see why Sant Bhindrawale picked up arms in 1984, I wasn’t there then and need not necessarily agree with doing that but there is so much information today about the kind of oppression being faced by our people from the state (...) Why then is it so wrong to demand a separate state. I don’t think the demand is still there but if it was there, I understand it. (...) But right now I think there needs to be justice for all the crimes that were committed against the Sikhs and as of today, this battle needs to be fought through the legal civil systems”
Ramanjeet (F, 1) situates herself and her Sikh youth community, on the one hand, as virtuous pious citizens, and on the other, capable of engaging in battle for the defense of dharma or righteousness and morality if need be. The memory of 1984, however, can limit but also at the same time make possible the articulation of a post-nationalist Sikh discourse. Adip (F, 5) in a discussion on the Khalistani politics during the interview emphasized:

“Wrongs were done on both sides, more on the government end of course and innocent people died but it needs to be let go now (…) honestly the way I see kids here talking about ’84 they just keep looking at those 2-3 points. (…) People need to move on with their lives. I feel things are better today (…) I know people are hurt and scared but you need to move on (…) I am from Punjab… lived there all my life. I don’t think kids here understand completely what the issue is. It is exaggerated”

(Adip (F, 5), 27-year-old female, living in Vancouver)

The desire of the youth to be part of something greater than themselves (Verma 2008), the process of conceptualizing a site for local youth practice as embedded within national and global forces (Appadurai 1996) also suggested a narrative for Khalistan that wasn’t necessarily geographic or temporal but rather, more social and political, a ‘space’ bound up with questions of power and materiality rather than being necessarily attached to a ‘place’.

Half way through the interview, on a conversation on Khalistan, Ramanjeet (F, 1) states:

“A lot of people view Khalistan as this over-religious issue that does not need to happen. We are very careful of not using the word Khalistan in the vigil that happens every year in front of the Vancouver Library. (…) I know Khalistan is a very political movement but
for me it’s not so much about the material geography as the ideas to live by. I feel that Khalistan is all about the latter and it needs to happen regardless of whether we get a state or not and beyond that I feel that Khalistan is a state of mind. In today’s time when the world is excessively connected it is so easy to have a strong network of people, virtual or otherwise around you and THAT for me is Khalistan (...) and one day I hope that is what Khalistan would stand for - It would be something positive, away from all the negative energy of the 1980s.”

The youth today are reinterpreting Khalistan in more ways than one and are associating and disassociating with nationalist and state narratives on Khalistan in different ways. It has been argued that the inability of the Khalistani movement to bring about a Sikh sovereign state should not be looked at as a failure of community ties but rather a transformation in the “national Sikh identity, under conditions of globalization” (Shani 2014, Pg. 275). Today, by some of the youth, the Sikh identity is being “deterritorialized and reterritorialized simultaneously” (Shani 2008, Pg. 165).

3.4.2.2 1984 online networks and identity issues

This engagement of the youth with memory and trauma of 1984 through non-dominant, divergent and often fluid narratives is aided by the various opportunities for conversations and network formation offered by the cyber world. The engagement(s) of the youth with ‘1984’ in cyberspace went beyond the events of 1984 and reflected conversations about what it means to be a Sikh living within both the diaspora and within nations outside of India “that continue to engage in racist nativist politics with shifting targets of ‘Otherness’” (Verma 2008, Pg. 13). The conversations of trauma and victimhood served as the outlet for the youth to heal and reclaim fragments of their identity by using cyber space to voice thoughts and express a revolt, of sorts, to barriers they experience within their own lives of not belonging. Hence, the establishment of this network through the medium of internet provides, paradoxically, a sense of belonging for the
youth. Following excerpts from a few interviews with an Amritdhari (baptized) Sikhs makes this clear:

“Sometimes I can see people from other communities look at me differently, especially staring at my pagh (turban). I can understand curiosity because let’s face it; there aren’t many women you see wearing a pagh (...) I would be totally ok with answering questions. But when kids start giggling or small kids point to my pagh that’s when it makes me really sad and makes me feel really weird (...) (ummm) and you can tell it’s not just the kids. I don’t know how to put it, but you know, you can tell. I feel better when I can talk to my cousins who live in US about it. They have a worse time there I feel and it’s good to have each other.”

(Jasmira (F, 6), 18 year old, turbaned youth, University student, living in Metro Vancouver)

As compared to the exclusionary tendencies that Jasmira (F, 6) felt and experienced from outside the community, the exclusionary tendencies Ramanjeet (F, 1) spoke about were those from non-baptized kids within the community. He states:

“(…) I felt excluded from kids not from other communities but my own community. With others you can answer questions of why you are on this path now and what it means for you but with kids from my own community, it’s difficult to do that. They draw assumptions and that space for conversations isn’t there (...) I feel that pressure I guess, being a minority section in a minority group - I feel I have to be more actively nice to people than the average person has to be, coz I feel I become the image of everyone like me. I had support of other amritdhari kids like me, but we were few. (...) It felt great to discover other Amritdhari kids facing the same issues everyday. So many sites, so many discussions. (...) It made me feel stronger and suddenly, what I think mattered at a large(r) level.”

4 Note: Not all Amritdhari females wear turbans
(Ramanjeet (F, 1) 20-year-old, university student, raised and still living in Surrey)

There are multiple levels of exclusions that are at play in the two narratives being looked at above. Both Ramanjeet (F, 1) and Jasmira (F, 6) talk of in-group and out-group exclusions felt by them being part of a minority – women wearing turbans, within a minority community itself. The exclusions that Jasmira (F, 6) talks of in the quote are faced by her for being a female wearing a turban. While it is common for men to wear a turban to cover their hair and head, this is not the case for Amritdhari women. The gaze that Jasmira (F, 6) encounters in public sphere is that of unfamiliarity and sometimes racism. The sites on 1984 and Khalistan she frequents offered her a space to connect and engage with other turbaned women feeling or facing the same kinds of exclusions. Exclusions faced by Ramanjeet (F, 1) on the other hand, are in-group in nature. Being a turbaned woman within the community, Ramanjeet (F, 1) struggled to battle labels and stereotypes like being conservative, “goody two shoes”, “not fun”, “family oriented” etc. (based on interview transcript) from non-baptized youth and children in the community. The engagement with youth on 1984 forums provided an opportunity for Ramanjeet (F, 1) to “discover her sense of identity” (based on interview transcript) but also meet other like-minded women.

The medium of the Internet proved vital in this re-imagination of identity, as can be seen from the associations drawn with the politics of 1980s by Jasmeera and Ramanjeet. The association that they made with 1984 in some form could be seen as a divergence from dominant official and counter-official narratives.

3.4.2.3 The fight for “justice”

Historical violence committed against Sikhs has also become a central theme of Sikh youth political claims for social justice in the diasporic context, especially when it comes to violence
associated with the events of 1984 (Verma 2008). A number of reasons can be accounted for this development. Today there exist a number of sites, web-links and videos dedicated to demands of social justice to be brought to the events of 1984. This along with many of the visceral images described by survivors of the Operation Blue Star violence to the youth interviewed - such as bodies floating in the holy water of the Darbar Sahib and other pictures of Operation Blue Star in a number of Gurudwaras in Vancouver – play a role in this development. Interviewees mentioning these images expressed being more aware of issues they were often only vaguely aware of before, and feeling compelled to become actively involved in a justice and reconciliation campaign demanding that the Indian government (in some cases also the Canadian government) acknowledge the 1984 events as a genocide against Sikhs. Such demands were in the case of few youth also tuned into broader social justice struggles in an emerging grassroots movement, while maintaining local ties to Vancouver specific engagements and narratives.

“All of us should be against injustice, shouldn’t we? I fight for social justice because be it any community, justice should be provided if wrongs have been committed in the past. I have also equally taken part in ‘Idle No More’, I also try and keep myself informed about other movements in India and participate in activism through signing petitions occasionally. Injustice is injustice, and it needs to be challenged.”

(Amit (M, 4), University student, lives in Vancouver)

These specific practices and orientations of some Sikh youth can be linked with the broader pursuits of self-formation felt during this phase of life and the carving of creating translocal solidarities and subjectivities among them.

The concept of miri piri, where piri is understood to represent the willingness to fight for a just cause is also evoked again by some of the youth interviewed. Participating in demands for social justice for the crimes committed against the Sikhs in the 1980s were seen as trying to live a life encompassed by both miri and piri by them. The following comment by 19 years old, Hardeep (M, 5) sheds more light on the same:

“When I grew a little older I researched on my own about 1984 and became more
passionate about it. But I feel actively fighting for the wrongs committed against us and to help people who are oppressed came from Guru Gobind Singh Ji’s example. I think of how Guru Gobind Singh ji was in battles and stuff and I personally use that as a way to apply now and fight for justice.”

(Hardeep (M, 5), 19-year-old, university student, living in Surrey)

Participation in movements of social justice or Sikh youth organizations was often for the youth an opportunity for finding the means and expressions to shape out new engagements in diasporic subjectivities, but it also largely represented discovering old struggles through the dominant articulation of nationalist sentiments. These articulations by the youth again only looked at one side of the violence - that inflicted on the Sikhs. In some cases, this formed the justification for the militant phase in the 1980s for these youth. This is not to say that other definitions of “justice” did not exist in the youth narratives, but remained fewer. The narrative of Chandan, a 21-year-old male is an example of these slightly different understandings of violence and justice held.

“I think the massacres of Sikhs was an awful thing to do. Why should everyone pay for some people from the community killing the Prime Minister. But if you ask me if it was fair for the government to enter the Gurudwara with tanks, to tackle the terrorists hiding inside, I don’t know. Maybe! I mean on the one hand there are those terrorists inside with weapons and it’s not the whole community that wanted Khalistan but on the other hand, you know, there were innocent people killed inside and a sacred place was destroyed.”

(Chandan (M, 2), 21-year-old Male, professional, living in Surrey)

3.4.2.4 Cultural and artistic production of 1984

“Memorials and museums represent public statements about what the past has been, and
The meanings conveyed by public memorials are not simply fixed upon the stones from which they are built. Rather, they are arrived at through the different and often contradictory personal and political investments that individuals and parties have in remembering at these sites. Murphy notes Gurdwaras is a crucial location for portraying ‘a victim art’ narration of the events of 1984. A number of Gurdwaras in Vancouver use trauma and victimhood as key means of depicting ‘the history of 1984’ as well. The portrayal of important figures associated with this aspect of history, as ‘martyrs’, is also crucial to this. Pictures of ‘martyrs’ from the 1984 attack on the golden temple complex are common fare at Vaisakhi parades and other related public exhibitions in Vancouver, as well (2005).

Murphy states museum and other related forms of temporary exhibitions, have become a primary articulation point for Sikh public representation. She further adds, “the institutionality of the museum and its ability therefore to take its place (in literal as well as figurative terms) within the public sphere offers a considerable weightiness to the invocations of representation located there” (2009, Pg. 120). The youth interviewed, in varied ways and extents, engaged with these cultural forms of Sikh representation of history. A number of youth spoke about the role played by the victim-art narrative of the gurdwaras and the parades in their knowledge formation of the events of 1984.

Museum art and other forms of cultural production of this victim-centered memorabilia art also provide spaces for counter-state narratives of the events of 1984 to emerge. By engaging in these discourses of victimhood, the youth, as Shani has noted, have the potential to reject the assimilationist projects of the nation-state and the engagement with nationalist narratives often intended with these forms of cultural productions (2010). The imagery of Bhindranwale, for
instance, formed one such case. This however stands in contrast to the space Bhindranwale in various forms – as ‘savior’, as a ‘sant’, a ‘terrorist etc., has found on the internet (Chopra 2010). Using the image of Bhindranwale as a means to reclaim the history of 1984 resonated with a number of youth participating in the research.

In Vancouver, recent activities depicting the presence of Bhindranwale imagery in youth memorabilia and cultural items have been observed. A group of B.C. Sikh students who wore T-shirts with Bhindranwale’s imagery to school sparked controversy. It rasied a debate within the community, and also left some wondering why a group of youths would reference a divisive movement dating from before they were born, through their actions. This controversy raised concern for many including officials, even through oversees, like Manmohan Singh, India’s Sikh Prime Minister (Bolan 2008).

However, there seems to be hardly any agreement on what the T-shirt represents. Verma notes that some believe it’s a cause of concern that some within the community in Vancouver elevate Bhindranwale and others, like those thought to be responsible for the Air India bombings of 1985, to the status of martyrs. Others within the community shrug the incident off as ‘youthful rebellion’. Yet others distinguish between the sporting of controversial Bhindranwale T-shirt by youth in High School from the Vaisakhi incidents elevating the image of those accused in the Air India bombings of 1985 to that of martyrs (2011). The latter was the opinion held by one such 28-year-old female, raised in Vancouver, who believes the youth today don’t understand what Bhindranwale support means.

“I can relate to this. I have grown up in Vancouver, and I have seen this happen with people I grew up with. It was a fad, to be supporting someone who was controversial. It was also in some cases rebelling against your parents and still being in the acceptable realm…hmm…you know what I mean. Like, you are rebellious but in a safe way, because someone in your family or extended family would be sympathetic or if not at least uncertain about their stance on Bhindranwale, so they would just ignore your support for
this. Pretend as if it’s not happening. And you get to be rebellious. Friends then had no idea about what Bhindranwale was, it was just maybe seeing pictures of him, being termed as a Sant or you know even the cool radical who rebelled image. But you could tell it was a phase. None of those friends care about Bhindrawale today or at least I think so.”

(Noor (F, 7), 28-year-old, professional, raised and still living in Vancouver)

Contrary to this stands the view of a 21 year old, who owns and in her words, ‘flaunts with pride’ her Bhindranwale t-shirt. A story told by her about her discussion over her t-shirt with a man on a skytrain route in Vancouver makes clear her engagement and interpretation of Bhindranwale and the events of 1984.

“(…) I was going back to Surrey and was in the skytrain and this one man got really agitated at the fact that I was wearing a Sant Bhindranwale ji’s t-shirt. He was like take that shirt off. My instant reaction was fear but also I was really annoyed. Why does my wearing a t-shirt have to mean one thing or another? I hate this and this is not the first time that something like this happened. I mean it was the first time with a stranger, but even people you know lash out without knowing what you think. I don’t support the idea of having Khalistan today (…) I mean, hmm, who am I. I am not there in Punjab, never been either. If people there want it, sure then I might support it. But Sant ji for me is someone who died protecting the religion. Khalistan was a controversial issue then I know, but we all know how the state was then towards our community, and I don’t think it’s wrong to pick up arms to defend oneself. (…) He was killed when he was defending us … our community and that is what guruji said, Khalsa means the protectors. I respect that.”

(Harjot (F, 4), 21-year-old, University student, affiliated with a Sikh-identified organization, lives in Surrey)
Harjot (F, 4) here evokes the concept of a ‘Sant-Sipahi’ (saint-soldier) in her raising Bhindranwale to the position of a Sant. As mentioned in the previous pages, by recalling only the violence inflicted on the Sikh community provides space to justify the picking up of arms and raising of Bhindranwale to the status of a martyr. Sikhism as a religious tradition generally accepts the legitimacy of violent resistance in the face of insults to or repression of the faith. The Khalsa (the baptized Sikhs) provide this protection. The tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh stated, "When all other means have failed, it is justified to take to the hilt of the sword" (Singh 2013).

The Sikh ideal of the saint-soldier is an individual who has "the wisdom of a saint, the courage of a soldier." Through the past four centuries, Sikhs have had many occasions to put this ideal into practice, creating a long line of martyrs who are now venerated alongside the ten gurus (McLeod 1985). Some within the community today consider Bhindranwale amongst one of them. It is during his service at the Golden Temple between 1982 and 1984 that he first came to be represented as a charismatic sant (Chopra 2010). An embodiment of “chardi kala – the blossoming spirit – and piri – the spiritual way”, Bhindrawale gained more popularity than many political members of even the Akali Dal party (ibid, Pg. 140). It is in Bhindranwale’s promotion of Baba Deep Singh’s slogan of “fight and destroy the enemies of religion”, as well as, the parallel drawn between Bhindranwale and Baba Deep Singh - who died defending the Golden Temple in the 18th century against the Afghans – that Bhindranwale is seen as epitomizing a martyr’s spirit (ibid, Pg. 140, Fenech 2005).

This trend of viewing Bhindrawala as a martyr is evident in the narratives of a number of youth. A fad, a playful rebellion or not, time will tell but the popularity of the Bhindrawala cultural memorabilia has been on a rise (Singh and Purewal 2013, Verma 2011, Chopra 2010, Von Stietencronv 2001).

3.5 Conclusion

Narratives articulated by the Sikh youth interviewees which have been referred to here are
multiple and sometimes contradictory. All these narratives do not fit together neatly and reveal a single vision of trauma, or its resolution. In this, they reveal the political present, ‘a tension between remembrance and reconciliation’ (Murphy 2009). Remembrance, Murphy argues, for many Sikhs takes place in relation to a series of traumas, even when a rather triumphalist tale about Sikh sovereignty and/or minority success is invoked. Reconciliation narratives on the other hand attempt for a process of healing through remembrance. The concept of reconciliation offers an opportunity for working through and questioning of absolute truths. Remembrance in Sikh terms must be counterbalanced by recognition, which can allow for reconciliation (Murphy 2009). However, in the absence of such recognition from the Indian state, global organizations and/or other communities in India, remembrance through reconciliation seems far ahead in the future, if at all possible.

My research suggests some level of personal scrutiny and uncertain engagement in identity politics for Sikh youth in Vancouver. Some youth engaged with issues of the ‘80s through non-dominant discourses available on the same. As could be seen in the narratives of the youth above, there are contradictions and tensions within such engagements. There is a continuous interest in reinterpreting this history for youth, the narratives such then are not fixed or static. Each category above has youth engaging in meaning-making processes of the events and history of 1984. A few times this engagement of the youth with 1984 reflected a departure from the intended way of recalling and reconciliation. These few pluralities in the narratives of the diasporic youth need to be acknowledged in a non-tokenistic manner. Doing so provides space for accounting the positionality and modes of belonging of the youth, which emerge from within the hegemonic power structures, and associated historical representation of the 1980s violence.

Having said that, predominantly however the youth engaged with issues around 1984 through victim discourses. Although many youth spoke of genuine issues concerns on issues that rocked the community in the 80s, they chiefly did so from a victim perspective which provided for a selective narration of the events of the 80s aided by the discourse of massacres and martyrdom.
Chapter 4: Frameworks used to remember and memorialize the ‘Air India bombing’ of 1985 and its effects on the narratives of Sikh youth

Compared to the “events of 1984” very few youth voluntarily and openly spoke about the Air India Bombing or the ‘events of 1985’. Both these events took place in a decade that none of the participants have a direct recollection or memory of. Yet, while based on direct and indirect sources (like information on the internet and oral narratives of family members and acquaintances) many youth were strongly opinionated about the events of 1984 and less articulate about the events of 1985. Arguably, this could be to a large extent based on the difference in the nature of the two episodes. This chapter will briefly look at the differences in the remembrance of the events of 1984 as compared to the events of 1985 by the youth, followed by the ways in which the Canadian government chooses to remember and memorialize the latter, its impact on the Canadian security environment as well as the lived experiences of the youth who participated in the research. It is important to look at the government responses on the Air India bombings because even while the youth were apprehensive to speak about the Air India bombings – their silences were very much related to the lens adopted to remember the Air India bombing in the post 9/11 world. Their fears of being misrepresented as “Sikhs supporting violence”, experiences of being racially profiled, standing out and being excluded are also intrinsically connected to the use of intensified measures of securing Canada (through increasing border security and terrorist profiling). It is the remembering of the Air India bombings in a post 9/11 world through the lens of the ‘war on terror’ that justified the urgent need for these intensified measures. The responses of the Canadian government on the Air India bombing therefore impact not only the silences of the youth but also their everyday realities. The youth are impacted by the existing counter-terrorist measures in Canada and at large, that detrimentally affect racialized immigrants and refugees.

5 See chapter two for details.
6 I use ‘The events of 1985’ interchangeably with the term ‘Air India bombing’ from here on.
4.1 Historical overview

This year marks the 29th year anniversary of the Air India bombing. On June 23rd, 1985, an explosion at the Narita airport in Tokyo set into motion a chain of incidents that would soon be known as the Air India bombing of 1985. The explosion at the airport in Tokyo killed two baggage handlers transferring luggage from a Canadian-Pacific airlines flight to an Air India flight whose destination was Bangkok. The bomb in the checked-in luggage was presumably meant to explode on board the Air India flight to Bangkok. This airport explosion was followed by another explosion less than an hour later planted on Air India flight 182 originating from Toronto headed to Delhi via Montreal-London. The bomb on Air India 182 exploded mid-air over the Atlantic Ocean near the coast of Ireland, killing all 329 passengers and crew. 280 passengers on board were Canadian citizens, most of Indian origin. These two explosions, carried out by suitcase bombs, were part of two separate yet related events. The bombs were checked in with luggage from flights that left Vancouver the previous day.

Motivation for the blasts: Three men were accused for instigating these twin blasts of 1985. All three of them were allegedly connected to a radical movement for an independent Sikh state, in India. After a prolonged criminal investigation led by the Royal Canadian Mountain Police (RCMP), one man – Inderjit Singh Reyat – from British Columbia was convicted in 2003 of manslaughter and a charge of aiding in the construction of a bomb. The other two were acquitted in 2005 based on a ‘lack of evidence’. 

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7 For more details on movement for Khalistan check Chapter two.
8 Based on observations, wiretaps, searches and arrests of persons believed to be participants, the bombing was determined to be the joint project of at least two Sikh terrorist groups with extensive membership in Canada, the United States, England and India. Their anger had been sparked by the June 1984 assault on golden temple by the Government of India (Hauka D J 2006).
9 Inderjit Singh Reyat was sentenced to five years in jail. In 2006 with the launch of an investigation for the first time in the ‘aftermath’ of 1985 bombing, Reyat was denied a parole hearing and charged with perjury on his testimony at the Air India trial. Reyat was found guilty for perjury at the Air India trial and sentenced to nine years in prison.
10 The Royal Canadian Mounted police (RCMP) investigation on the Air India bombings was plagued with problems like destroyed evidence, murdered witnesses and overlooking CSIS threat warnings resulting in only one conviction (Roach 2011).
4.2 Youth narratives: Air India bombings

Three out of twenty youth were unaware of the *Air India Bombing*, three while aware were hesitant or unwilling to speak about these events in any way; the remaining participants of the research spoke at varying lengths about it.\(^\text{11}\) Most youth, who spoke about the *events of 1985* spoke of them in relation to the Khalistan movement, racial profiling, the perceived exclusion of the community in public spaces, media representation(s) of the community and the general image of the community in Canada today. It is important to note that only certain aspects of the Air India bombings were brought up by the youth in their narratives. These narratives were largely comprised by recreating 1985 through a victim perspective. This shall be discussed further when looking at the narratives of the youth on 1985.

Many descriptors could be used for the Air India incident, including presumably the most popular one, namely, ‘terrorism’. However, for the purpose of this study I chose to use the term ‘bombings’ instead of ‘terrorism’ to describe these events. My apprehension with using the term ‘terrorism’ stems from the way popular government discourses often use ‘terrorism’ and its derivatives to selectively depict those who resort to force in opposing governmental policies and also often leave untouched the factors motivating recourse to this type of violence. This framing of the attacks are also based on the assumption of violence being the prerogative of the state. The language of terror in turn today has come to foster very specific kinds of attitudes and environment in the society (Kapitan 2003).\(^\text{12}\) I often refer to the Air India bombings as ‘Events of 1985’. This has been done to emphasize that the thesis does not just look at the two instances of bombing in 1985 but also a whole series of events, reactions, social and political and security changes that followed. As such, the events of 1985 involve also a series of equally important developments that followed the Air India bombings, such as government responses to the

\(^{11}\) It is important to note that many youth speaking about the Air India bombing and its consequences requested to not be recorded when making certain comments.

\(^{12}\) Read Kapitan. T. 2003 for further details.
bombings, its impact on victims’ families, changes in the security environment and its consequences on the lived experiences of Sikh youth in Vancouver participating in the study. Using the term ‘bombings’ and ‘events of 1985’ when talking about the Air India episode rather than ‘terrorism’ is more reflective of these broader issues.

4.2.1 Difference in the frames of remembrance of ‘the events of 1984 and 1985’ for the youth

As discussed in the previous pages there are a number of reasons for the pattern wherein youth are more vocal about 1984 than 1985, but one of the most important is the difference in the nature and the perceptions held around these two events. Firstly, while both were traumatic, with the events of 1984 the Sikh community often perceives itself to a greater extent as the victim rather than the perpetrator of the crime(s). Secondly, justice for the horrific crimes of 1984 still remains denied and this appealed to a number of youth participating in the research as a ‘cause to fight for’. Partaking in movements around the occurrences of 1984 in various degrees offered them an attempt to have a deeper engagement with the community’s history and to make a contribution towards “helping in the betterment of the lives of other members of the community living ‘elsewhere’” (Fieldwork interview transcripts). The Air India bombing however, does not offer such engagements. The bombings were carried out in the name of a Sikh cause. Although the perpetuators were from the Sikh community, so were some of the victims who lost their lives in the Air India bombings. Rather than being viewed as victims, the Sikh community in Canada is in some ways perceived as the perpetrator of the attack/crime. The memory of the Air India bombings therefore is more volatile and unpredictable site for the youth than the events of 1984.

13 It is important to note that even while the youth were more vocal about the events of 1984, there existed a lot of fluidity, flexibility and heterogeneity in the youth narratives on it.
14 Based on interviews conducted with the youth for the study.
However, some of the youth who did speak of the Air India bombings spoke of it only from a victim perspective. On being asked about what Aman (M, 1) thought about the bombings, he said:

“Well, I don’t know. Of course the bombings is bad but I don’t think the ‘Sikh community’ did it or had anything to do with it (...) I mean, nothing has been proved. You know how the Indian government treated the Sikhs during those days. Maybe it was the Indian government’s conspiracy you know, to further demonize the Sikhs. (...) The Khalistan movement support was the strongest here right. So may be (...) they (the Indian government) did it (the bombings) to make it unpopular (the movement) or to create trouble for the Sikh community here also, just like they did in India. Doesn’t that also make sense?”

While Aman (M, 1) here engages with Air India 1985 through this narrative, he engages with the bombings from a perspective that makes the Sikh community in Canada as much a victim as the Sikh community in India when speaking of the events of 1984. This is characteristic of all the instances of recognition of the bombings per se among participants: the bombings were recognized only through a victim perspective and any role of members of the Sikh community as perpetuators was ignored or overridden by marking those involved in the attacks as “mentally-ill”. This is visible in the description of Ramanjeet (F, 1):

“I don’t know if the bombing was done in relation to Khalistan. (...) I think it was just mentally ill, crazy guys who just happened to be from the Sikh community who did this. (...) I don’t think it was a Khalistani agenda to do this”

Various social observers have noted that ethnic and national groups suppress memories that dishonor their ingroup (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997; Hein & Selden, 2000; Novick, 1999). Ramanjeet (F, 1) here tries to engage with a victim perspective on the Air India bombing by distancing those involved in the bombing as aberrations that could be found in any community. This stands parallel to how the 1984 pogroms and operation Blustar are often treated as
aberrations, or part of “abnormal” times by the Indian government and the dominant social groups in India. By doing so, it becomes easier to relegate the events of 1984 as distant from the otherwise “normal” progress of a secular and democratic India. By categorizing the Air India bombings in a similar manner Ramanjeet (F, 1) distances herself from viewing the Sikh community as being associated with the perpetration of the bombings. The victim perspective in both the narratives also distances the “Khalistan movement” from playing a role in the bombing.

None of the other interviewees recalled the Air India bombing in which the Sikh community members were the aggressors. Their silences however were situated within other forms of victimization. These forms of victimization include those that racialized communities and refugees are increasingly prone to in today’s securitized world and have become a part of their everyday realities - victimizations in form of racial profiling, exclusions, being viewed as the “other” and standing out.

The lack of narratives around the Air India bombings from most youth in my research led me to investigate secondary sources like the Air India government reports, court hearing transcripts, inquiry reports, etc., to reconstruct this past and analyze the context and environment wherein this fear and apprehension to discuss the Air India bombings amongst the youth interviewed is situated. Looking at secondary sources on the Air India bombings that both pre-date and post-date 9/11, apart from laying the context of the silences and apprehensions of youth to discuss the events of 1985, also enables us to interrogating the silences and erasures in Canadian public memory around this issue.

4.3 Frames of remembrance of the events of 1985 adopted by the Canadian government

For the Canadian state today the Air India Bombing of 1985 stands as ‘its worst terrorist attack’. The Canadian government recognizes the horrific events that took place in 1985 as ‘a national
tragedy’ and the loss as a ‘Canadian loss’, however this wasn’t always the case. For the Canadian
government, the Air India Bombings started out as a ‘foreign’ matter rather than a ‘Canadian’
one and it wasn’t until the late 1990s that this perception changed. To quote Roach, the
Canadian government “was slow to learn lessons from the horrors of the Air India bombings”
(2011, Pg. 61).

It was twenty-one years after the attack when the government of Canada in 2006 finally launched
an inquiry into the Air India bombing and its aftermath.\textsuperscript{15} The inquiry was launched after the
failure of the court case. Not only was the inquiry set late but also it was in 2007 that public
memorials commemorating those who died in the Air India bombings were unveiled in
Vancouver and Toronto (Government of Canada 2007).\textsuperscript{16} The question that then arises is – why
was there an extremely late response in setting up an inquiry for the Air India bombing or in
unveiling the Public memorials? While it was hard for the youth to speak about the Air India
bombings of 1985, why is it hard for the Canadian Government to remember the Air India
bombings of 1985?

To understand the responses of the Canadian government towards the Air India bombing, I
believe it is important to briefly discuss the Air India inquiry (officially called ‘The Commission
of Inquiry into the Investigation of the Bombing of Air India Flight 182’) set up by the Canadian
government to investigate the attack and the historical circumstances from which it emerged.
Bob Rae (the Independent Advisor to the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency
Preparedness) was called upon to assess whether outstanding questions still remained after the
trial of the convicts and to produce a public report of the situation; he was in favour of an

\textsuperscript{15} The Governor General in Council 2006 appointed the former Supreme Court Justice John Mayor to conduct a
commission of inquiry. His report was completed and released on 17 June 2010. It concluded that a "cascading
series of errors" by the Government of Canada, RCMP, and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) had
allowed the terrorist attack to take place (CBC News (17 June 2010). "Air India case marred by 'inexcusable'
errors")

\textsuperscript{16}http://pm.gc.ca/eng/node/21691
inquiry. On May 1, 2006 Prime Minister Harper announced a public inquiry into the bombing of Air India 182, and appointed Justice John C. Major, a retired judge, to act as the Commissioner of the inquiry on the recommendation of the Governor General in Council. The inquiry apart from answering “key questions about the worst mass murder in Canadian history” (including how well witness protection is provided in terrorist cases, if Canada needed to upgrade its aviation security; and if issues of cooperation between the RCMP, CSIS, and other law enforcement agencies had been resolved) was also expected to provide a forum wherein families of the victims could testify on the impact of the bombing (Government of Canada 2007).

Faillier an Associate Professor at the University of Winnipeg who researched extensively on the politics of public memory surrounding the events of 1985 argues that the inquiry brought about a strategic form of state remembering, which insisted on ‘harnessing of objective truths’ to frame the inquiry as a neutral and empirical investigation - a bureaucratic procedure. The inquiry “did not constitute an admission of wrongdoing on the part of the state”. She further argues that it is this strategic form of state remembering which insists on “the harnessing of ‘objective truths’ to ‘ensure that an incident like the Air India bombing will never happen again’” that overlooked racialized histories in the inquiry report (2009, Pg. 6). The report blatantly overlooked the voices of the victims' families that claimed the Canadian government treated them as second-class citizens and the bombings as a foreign issue. The voices of the victims’ families speaking of marginalization, being overlooked by the Canadian government and feeling unheard were made available in the RACE report by Razack, as well as, the inquiry commission report (Families Remember) by the inquiry commissioner John Major.

17 “What we need to know more about is how Canada assessed the threat, how its intelligence and police forces managed the investigation and how its airport safety regulations did or did not work. Twenty years later, these questions are still worth asking” Bob Rae (CBC news 2006) (http://www.cbc.ca/toronto/news/pdf/lessons_to_be_learned.pdf)
18 Harper’s announcement came as a response to the demands made by the relatives of the victims who were particularly angered when two suspects on trial for the bombing – Malik and Bagri – were acquitted in 2005.
19 Sherene H Razack, a professor from the University of Toronto commissioned by the lawyer for victims’ families to write a report on the role of racism in the context of the Air India Bombing (The Race Report). In the report she discusses the role of systemic racism played in the pre and post-bombing responses of Canadian officials. However, this report was strongly critiqued during the inquiry and was never included with the official documents posted on the Commission’s official webpage.
The Canadian government avoided any admission of wrongdoings or addressing the concerns voiced by the victim families in the report during and after the inquiries. This overlooking of the racialized memories of 1985 by the Canadian government suggests a deliberate forgetting and silencing on part of the state. It is a forgetting of its treatment of the bombings as a “foreign” affair based on the perception that racialized Canadians of South Asian communities are foreigners rather than Canadian. This relative invisibility accorded to racialized histories in official discourses though is set against a striking proliferation of discussions and texts about the Air India bombing by writers, activists, journalists, filmmakers, and (in some cases) politicians apart from the reports mentioned above. To understand the responses of the Canadian Government towards the Air India bombings in a nuanced manner, the responses have been broken down into – 1) *Frames of remembrance on Air India before the late 1990s* and 2) *Frames of remembrance adopted post 9/11* (including the adoption of the war on terror lens after 9/11 to view the Air India Bombing).

### 4.3.1 Frames of remembrance of Air India before the late 1990s

The decade and a half immediately following the Air India bombing was one where the bombing, as Maya Seshia argues, “was widely perceived as a ‘foreign tragedy’, involving ‘foreign’ victims and ‘foreign’ suspects” (2012). The victims and the victims’ families as a result were positioned as ‘internal foreigners’ (ibid). These victims and their family while possessing Canadian citizenship and residing within Canadian borders were marked as outsiders (Abu-Laban and Dhamoon 2009). The bombing therefore was seen as not being closely related to Canada, and the Canadian public. Victims’ families’ perceptions documented in the interim report released in 2007 supports this analysis by Seshia.

The overwhelming despair of victims' families’ loss was compounded by a sense that Canada treated them like second-class citizens, said inquiry commissioner John Major’s report, titled
‘The Families Remember’ (2007). Dr. Bal Gupta, whose wife died aboard Air India flight 182, reports that

“There was no emotional, psychological, physical or administrative help or grief counseling or guidance from any government agency” (Gupta quoted in Government of Canada 2007, Pg. 101).

Many of the families stated not having received any type of counseling to cope with this tragedy and a lack of any form of administrative guidance from any government agency. Such inaction, according to Rama Bhardwaj, who lost a relative in the attack, “was unthinkable cold treatment” (quoted in Government of Canada 2007, Pg. 105).

Satrajpal (Fred) Rai, who lost his cousin on Air India flight 182, stated in the report:

“(…) Actually, I’m very, very upset and disgusted, to be honest with you. I thought at the least somebody would call, send a letter. It’s almost like we never existed. I’m a Canadian citizen” (quoted in Government of Canada 2007, Pg. 105).

Renee Saklikar, who lost her aunt and uncle, adds:

“My family has put its heart and soul into raising us to view the world as Canadians and yet when we look at the series of failures in relation to this tragedy I think we might ask, well, have we truly been accepted as Canadians?” (quoted in Government of Canada 2007, Pg. 104).

It is this treatment towards the Air India Bombing of the Canadian Government that made Vijay Khachru’s brother denounce his Canadian citizenship and Canadian passport (Vijay Khachru and his brother lost their mother in the Air India bombing) (Government of Canada 2007).
The quotes mentioned above illustrate the alienation and frustration articulated by many other victim families in the Government of Canada (2007) report. Razack, commissioned by the lawyer for victims’ families to write a report on the role of racism in the context of the Air India Bombing (The Race Report) suggested ‘Structural Racism’\(^{20}\) as having played a significant role in government’s response post the bombing. Razack argues that a preliminary analysis of the response to crucial warnings of threat by the Government of India to Canada,\(^{21}\) parliamentary discussions and in general the government’s responses from 1985 to 1990 show that the loss of Indo-Canadian lives were not taken seriously. For Jiwani, racialized Canadians are often conflated with their perceived immigrant, ethnic and cultural statuses as well as, more often than not, perceived to be foreigners rather than Canadians (2006). From 1985 to the 1990s the government utterances about the Air India Bombings, for example, emphasized their cross border ethnic community ties rather than their national belonging. This is vividly illustrated by Brian Mulroney’s (the then Canadian Prime-Minister) immediate reaction to the bombing, in which he “called Mr. Gandhi [the then prime minister of India] to extend condolences and offer help” for India’s loss (Globe and Mail, July 9, 1985). The tragedy for Canada, as a nation, remained ‘theirs’ rather than ‘ours’. Commenting on the discursive construction of the bombings as a “foreign” problem involving “foreign” people, Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee write:

“\textit{The initial reaction of too many Canadians, especially of government officials, was that the Air India bombing was an Indian post-colonial tragedy in which newly independent peoples try to redraw provincial boundaries. It was a tragedy affecting only Hindus and Sikhs}” (1987, Pg.174)

\(^{20}\)Structural Racism for Keleher and Lawrence (2004) refers to the “normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity, primarily characterized by white supremacy – the preferential treatment, privilege and power for white people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other racially oppressed people.” Also see a report on Structural racism titled ‘Race, Power and Policy – Dismantling Structural Racism’ for more details. http://www.strategicpractice.org/system/files/race_power_policy_workbook.pdf

Remarking on the dominant national imagining of the Air India, the former British Columbian premier and Liberal Member of Parliament Ujjal Dosanjh states: “Canadians, and particularly Canadian politicians and public leaders, felt these were brown guys fighting over something happening 15,000 miles away” (quoted in Brethour, the Globe and Mail, June 25, 2010).

As Sherene Razack has speculated, “The disappearance of the Air India bombings from public memory too had something to do with the bombings being seen an act of violence largely against Brown people, and an act intended to intimidate a Brown state, India” (2002). The failure of the Canadian government to understand the conflicts as linked to the diasporic homeland and its inability to anticipate and prevent the bombings is seen as an index of failure of multiculturalism by filmmakers like Sturla Gunnarson as well (See Air India 182 by Sturla Gunnarson).

The responses of critics towards the Government of Canada’s handling of the Air India Bombing not only registers its attitude towards racialized minorities, the nation’s forgetting, but also the process of erasure whereby framings of Air India Bombing as an ‘act of international terror’ provided space for Canada to disassociate itself from the events and those in Canada involved in it.

4.3.2 Frames of remembrance of the Air India bombing after 9/11

The Canadian Government’s frames of reference for the Air India incident, however, have seen a change since the late 1990s. Since then, the episode since has been repeatedly described as “Canada’s 9/11”, “the single worst act of terrorism in Canadian history” or “the worst encounter with terrorism Canada has experienced” (MacQueen and Geddes 2007; Government of Canada 2010). A speech by Stephen Harper (present Canadian Prime Minister) in 2011 reflects this change.
“On June 23rd, 1985, Canadians experienced the worst terrorist attack in our history when a bomb on Air India flight 182 killed all 329 passengers and crew members aboard, most of them Canadians.” Prime Minister Harper in 2011 (pm.gc.ca 2011).

Portrayed as a ‘foreign’ problem in the past, the Air India Bombing in the past two decades has more recently been memorialized as an act of terror directly affecting Canada. The events of 9/11, the continuous activism on part of victims’ families, as well as the persistent efforts of a few scholars, activists and government officials are partially responsible for this change in the lens used by the Canadian government in viewing the tragedy. This change in narratives and reframing of the Air India incident as “Canadian” though has not, “challenged Canada’s race-neutral inclusive” multicultural stance as is evident from the official report on the Air India Bombings (2012). Although the official report on the inquiry (titled Air India Flight 182: A Canadian tragedy) is significant for attesting to the treatment of the Air India incident as a foreign tragedy and its acknowledgement that the families “were poorly treated by their Government”, in many other ways this report can be read as an extension of the inquiry and apology itself. The biggest problem with the report lay in its active denial of links between the nation’s failure to respond in a timely fashion to the crisis and its exclusionary attitude towards non-white Canadians. The Commission report stated that the commission found the term ‘racism’ not to be helpful for purposes of understanding the Government response. ‘Racism’ it stated, “carries with it so many connotations of bigotry and intolerance that even the most careful definition that purports to focus on effects rather than on intent ends up generating a great deal more heat than light.” (Commission report 2010, Pg. 21)

While the report claims to be an attempt to map the trauma onto the public record, to memorialize it, the report encourages a kind of forgetting of what actually happened, despite its extensive nature. The reconstitution of the Air India incident as ‘a Canadian Tragedy’ on ‘Canadian Citizens’ it could be said, under this backdrop, remains mostly symbolic rather than substantive.
The apology from PM Harper to the South Asian community(s) came out in the same year as the report. Following 9/11, the phrase “terrorism is an enemy with a thousand faces” was popularized in reference to the Al-Qaeda network to warn of terrorists within the context of multicultural cosmopolitanism, raising fears that unrestricted transnational migration will breed “evil among us,” or “home-grown terrorists” (Noble 2008, Pg. 24). Recalling this phrase in his apology on the twenty fifth-anniversary occasion of the Air India Bombings, Harper retroactively framed the Air India bombings through a war-on-terror lens. In doing so, he appropriated the memories of 9/11 and the Air India bombings toward a securitized vision of the present and future. This vision again creates distinctions between “insider” and “outsider”, “us” and “them”, thus blatantly overlooking and silencing the racialized voices on ‘Events of 1985’. This apology by Harper was a continuing thread in the exclusionary attitude towards non-white Canadians immigrants, creating and reinforcing the distinctions between perceptions of “good immigrants” and “bad immigrants” discussed further in the following pages.

The report, the apology, and the overall redefinition and reframing of the Air India bombing by the Canadian government in the past two decades seem to close off the possibility of remembering anything that might actually alter the relationship between the state and its racialized subjects. While acknowledging Canada’s mishandling of the Air India bombing, the report, the apology and the reframing of the bombing present the Air India bombing as an isolated case rather than part of a larger problem in Canada. By making bureaucratic changes (where the investigation and prosecution lasted almost 20 years), the state appears to be “doing something” about the Air India bombing without actually addressing the underlying problems of racism and exclusion that were addressed by Razack in the race report.

### 4.4 Using the lens of ‘war on terror’

The recognition of the Air India bombings as a Canadian tragedy, at the surface, seems to finally provide justice to victims of the bombings and their families after almost a decade and a half
since the tragedy. However, the lens adopted by the government to view this incident as a ‘Canadian’ one only further victimizes racialized citizens.22

Remembering the Air India Bombings in a post 9/11 world through the lens of terrorism bred on Canadian soil and committed against Canadian citizens justified the urgent need for intensified measures of security such as terrorist profiling and an increase in border security. This frenzy of securing Canada in the early 2000s resulted in twenty new legislations that included the public safety act and the anti-terrorism act (otherwise also known as bill C-36). This bill was “largely based on racialized assumptions and stereotypes” (Pg. 44) and was crucial in establishing boundaries between “us” and “them” (Henry and Tator 2006).

Being able to recognize the difference between “good immigrants” and “dangerous internal foreigners” through the lens of war on terror, Failler suggests, allows for protection against any similar harm such as the Air India Bombing (Failler 2009). These responses (including putting in place more systems of border control and strictly monitoring immigration) of the Harper government however overlook the racialized exclusions that the victims’ families voiced in their statements on the Air India bombings. The securitization further excluded racialized communities like the Sikh community (Pratt 2005). This framing also collapsed Sikhs into the category “terrorist” in the post-9/11 context of intensified hostility toward Muslims (and radicalized ‘others’ who resemble Muslims (Verma 2006, Pg. 90). These systemic inequalities in the security frameworks and the colorblind lens adopted by the Canadian Government, it could be argued, besides alienating victims of 1985 bombing and their families previously, erases the reconstitution of the Air India Bombing as a “Canadian terrorist attack” on “Canadian citizens” (Seshia 2012, Thobani 2012, Razak 2007).

22 As mentioned earlier in the chapter, majority of victims of the Air India bombings were racialized citizens mostly of South Asian origin.
4.5 Memory within silence and memory through silences of the youth

I believe that it is these frameworks adopted for understanding the Air India bombings by the Canadian Government, as well as the social and security environment accompanying this understanding (discussed above) that contribute to the environment that encourages silences and apprehensions among youth in discussing the event(s) of 1985. The fear of being misrepresented or labeled as, “a Sikh supporting Violence”, “dangerous internal foreigners”23 or being thought to support such elements, especially in a post 9/11 world, contributed to the hesitation of many of the youth being interviewed for the study in sharing their opinions on the events of 1985.

4.5.1 Fears of being labeled as a supporter of violence

The media has a big hand in creating an image of some racialized communities as ‘troublesome’ and/or ‘dangerous’. It is through such representations in the media, Smith argues, that the effects of racial profiling have been significantly heightened (Smith 2006). The media has always been more than just a disseminator of information. It plays a crucial role in shaping people’s perceptions on many issues, including people’s perceptions of racialized communities. The media also informs the perceptions and identity formation of members of the racialized community in question (Chan and Chunn 2014). The media portrayals of racialized people in Canada often contribute significantly to sustaining the stereotypes applied to ethnic and racialized minorities through reductive or distorted portrayals (Dauvergne and Brennan 2008, Mahtani and Mountz 2002, Sandler 1994).

Concerns about this dynamic were voiced by the youth in their interviews. There is a lop-sided representation for instance of stories relating to the Sikh community. News in the mainstream

23 Interview transcripts
media associated with the Sikh community is often on the lines of ‘violence and the Sikh community’, conflating violent incidents within the community with Sikh culture (Puar 2006, Mahtani and Mountz 2002, Fleras and Kunz 2001, Walton-Roberts 1998). These have had significant repercussions for the youth. A number of such incidents and their portrayal in the media were brought up by the youth during the interviews.24

“(…) you know of course there is the fear of being labeled ‘differently’ based on the perceptions they have of our community (...) you know through media reports, that is why I don’t want to speak on it (Air India Bombings). I mean, no offense, but it’s annoying. I am very vary of the way my opinions are going to be represented usually”

(Jasmira (F, 6), 30-year-old female, affiliated with a Sikh-identified non-religious organization, brought up and living in Surrey)

Some youth who did speak about the events and its relevance today in a post 9/11 world, did so (as mentioned before) amidst numerous justifications of their “Canadianesss” and appreciation of the Canadian society. The fear of being labeled as a “trouble maker” or “supporter of violence” is where the constant vocal expression of the Canadian society lay within conversations of profiling. For instance – here:

“I think after 9/11 people just have such random ideas about ‘brown’ people (...) you have been here for a year-and-a-half now? You know right, what I am talking of? Haven’t you felt it already? I bet you have gotten questions on how much ‘freedom’ you have within ‘your’ families? It doesn’t even have to be about specific ethnic communities (...) I bet you have got questions on is the South Asian community violent? Are Sikhs violent? I mean, I really like Canada, I feel Canadian, not Indian for sure. I appreciate the freedoms that my country (Canada) gives, but yes all this exists too. It’s (perceptions) all related. Be brown, wear a turban, have a beard and you will most likely be violent

24 Incidents like the violent attacks against three South Asian women by their male South Asian husbands: Manjit Panghal and Navreet Kaur Waraich were allegedly killed by their husbands; Gurjeet Kaur Ghuman was shot in the face by her husband (See Bolan 2006a, 2006b, 2006c for further details).
and a terrorist in someone’s head (...) I am not saying everyone (does this) but we all always get these opinions don’t we. (...) they are coming from somewhere”

(Harry (M, 10) 21-year-old student at UBC)

4.5.2 Standing out through physical markers

‘Turban’, ‘beard’, ‘gaze’ of ‘others’ were some of the key terms used repeatedly by the youth on different occasions while speaking about the events of 1985 or experiences of living in a post 9/11 world, as can be seen from the narratives above. A study conducted by Khalema and Wannas-Johnes in Edmonton, following 9/11 further reinforces the references to racial profiling made by the youth. The study states, “Reports of insults hurled at Arabs, Sikhs, Muslims, and other people of colour ‘who could be mistaken as being from the Middle East’ as they walked on the streets, restaurants, and other public spaces were rampant.” (Khalema and Wannas-Johnes 2003, Pg. 27). The media, according to this study, formed one of the most important knowledge sources for reinforcing negative stereotypes against racialized people. Despite opinions often voiced by scholars, activists, and government officials about the multicultural and inclusive nature of the Canadian society, racial profiling remains a reality experienced by many. The youth through their stories and experiences offered a glimpse of the unease felt by them (or/and someone close to them) at the borders or in their everyday lives in general.

25 According to a Statistics Canada 2011 report, hate crime motivated by race or ethnicity accounted for about half (52%) of police-reported hate crime incidents in 2011, followed by those motivated by religion. The number of hate crimes motivated by religion saw the largest increase (increase by 55 per cent in 2011). Data based on last available report from Statistics Canada.

26 A question that is often posed around such narratives on racial profiling is the, ‘difference between one’s perception and the reality’. I argue that perception is part of the reality – the lived reality of the youth. Secondly, perception does not affect just one side but is part of both sides of the encounter. For example, it is not just a young person’s fear of the authorities that may be based on the perceived behavior and image of law enforcement authority, but the authority’s opinion of the Sikh youth may as well be based on popular notions of what to expect from a Sikh youth.
Aman (M, 1) could be found dwelling on instances of turban profiling at borders and city spaces during a follow-up interview:

“I never feel the difference or like you said ‘the gaze’ so much when I am here but when I travel (...) You don’t see a lot of exclusion or the gaze here (in Vancouver). When I travelled to Edmonton umm yup there too (...) It could be my turban, maybe beard or that I am really well built but I have in some ways gotten used to it by now and in some ways it still bothers me every time (hmmm). I don’t know (...) I don’t know what exactly it is that makes it feel ‘different’. Maybe I am just thinking so (...) when I am in these cities, it’s just the way people look at me a lot of times also (...)

(Aman (M, 1), twenty years old, third generation immigrant living in Burnaby)

The recent instances of hate crime against Sikhs that were highlighted in the media such as the attack on “a turbaned” Columbia professor, shooting at Oak Creek (Wisconsin) where a white supremacist gunned down six American-Sikhs and wounded five others, a Brampton Sikh elementary school being vandalized by racist graffiti in 2012 and vandals scrawling “terrorist” over Vaisakhi Parade posters in Surrey, B.C., etc., have also had significant impacts on some of the youth interviewed. It is important to note that the attack on the Sikh professor at Columbia university in many news articles was stated as an attack on “a turbaned” professor, thereby conflating all turban wearers under one umbrella. According to Puar, these incidents are evidence of how, under the dominant gaze since 9/11, the significance of a Sikh wearing a turban has indiscriminately shifted from a marker of religious, cultural or regional specificity to accrue monolithic status as a symbol of terrorist masculinity and “a threat to national security”.

“Reading turbans through affect” like Puar does, helps in analyzing the potential impact of these racialized representations in an era of “turban profiling” (2008, Pg. 47, 58). Such instances of hypervisibility of the “terrorized body” (Thobani 2012, Pg. 203), has reinvigorated fears especially among some of these younger generation Sikhs participating in the research.
Many people around the world wear turbans including a number of people from the Sikh community. Apart from being of religious significance, since 9/11 turbans have taken on new meaning. Sikhs with turbans have become a superficial and accessible proxy for the actual perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, like many other people of color wearing turbans. As a result, turbaned Sikhs have been victims of racial violence where the meaning of the turban has taken on a new significance from a sacred piece of attire for Sikhs to a target for discriminatory conduct and an object of marginalization. The turban apart from being a complicated and ambivalent signifier of a racialized and religious community also represents terrorist masculinity (Puar and Rai 2008).

Navjot (M, 8), a recent turbaned immigrant to Canada asserted that he had been fearful sometimes when crossing borders because of stories he had heard, films he had seen ‘targeting people who were Muslims or looked like Muslims’. He in a follow-up interview revealed having started trimming his beard in order to ‘not look too militant or similar to an image of a militant’ (Navjot (M, 8), Twenty Two year old, First generation immigrant, living in Vancouver)

The turban in such scenarios for many is just a turban - a symbol of violent regressive culture, patriarchy and oppression of women of the East (Gohil and Sindhu 2007). The youth participating in the research articulated a variety of views on the ‘meaning’ of the hair and turban in a post 9/11 world. A number of reasons were stated by the youth for having retained their

27 The importance that Sikhs place on the hair and turban can be attributed to the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh. Generations of Sikhs learn that on Vaisakhi 1699, Guru Gobind Singh instructed his first initiates to adopt the ‘Five Ks’, the five outward signs required of a Khalsa Sikh, so called because the Punjabi name for each item begins with the letter ‘K’ (Nesbitt, Sikhism): Kesh (uncut hair), Kangha (comb), Kirpan (sword), Kachh (cotton breeches), Kara (steel or iron bangle). Although the significance of the hair for a Sikh is clear, the situation with the turban is slightly more complex. Singh and Tatla note that, although the turban is not one of the five Ks, it has become an inextricable part of Sikh identity. They explain that the turban is now ‘synonymous with Sikhs and because of this association the turban has become the premier symbol of communal identity

28 While this discussion focuses on Sikhs, it is important to remember that the post-9/11 backlash impacted not only Sikhs, but Muslims and all those perceived to be Muslim, including Arabs and South Asians.

29 Three out of ten male youth participating in this research were males wearing the turban with full/trimmed beard; another four out of the remaining six male youth got a haircut/shaved their beard off in the past five years. Two out of the ten female youth participants were turban wearing Sikh women, another four women were women who did
head hair ranging from raised to do so, family pressure, hair as a gift from the divine – religious significance of hair, etc. ‘Fitting in’, ‘not standing out’, ‘conscious of others thinking of them as backward’ were some of the most prominent descriptions used by the youth for describing why these days youth from the community cut their hair (facial/head hair). A few noted that the perception of being turbaned has also changed significantly as a result of the events of 9/11 and that they therefore felt even more conscious of their uncut hair. Removing physical markers like long hair, the turban, and head scarves were seen important for a few of the youth interviewed, to ‘fit in with other peers’ or to ‘move away from the backwardness associated with Sikh culture’.

Ramanjeet (F, 1) who has uncut hair and wears a head scarf states her want and perceived need to be exceptionally nice to people from other cultures to set a good example of Sikhs they encounter.

“Sometimes people come to me and ask me about why I have such long hair or why I keep it tied (others from outside the Punjabi-Sikh community) People know very little of Sikhism I think and I fear people from our community can be seen as just as bad people or people who are aggressive and violent (...) also the kind of news that sometimes goes around about our community (in the media) portrays it very negatively. Therefore I think I should set up a good example to others of who and what a Sikh is.”

Ramanjeet (F, 1) here while in general speaking about the community being viewed as violent is in particular also making reference to Sikh culture as often blamed as a source of patriarchal and sexist violence against Sikh women. This is the case, even while violence against women is not just unique to the Sikh community and exists as a structural problem across many communities not wear turbans but had uncut hair, while the remaining three of the four Sikh women had their hair cut in the past five years.
and nations. Hate crime on the other hand is often deemed free of any cultural or racialized discourse.  

4.5.3 Culture conflations

Crimes committed by white people are often deemed free of culture; such is however not the case when representing crimes committed by racialized immigrants. Through their studies on media Henry and Tator (2002), Murray (2002), and Mahtani (2001) also reiterate that the Canadian media negatively presents racialized communities through a system of images, explanations, wordings used etc., in which culture especially in the context of racialized immigrants is hyper visible. These reinforce negative stereotypes of the ‘other’ as ‘troublesome and dangerous’. It is precisely these differing representations of culture that Ramanjeet (F, 1) hopes to concur with her setting of a good example by being good and nice to ‘others’. Dhamoon states that while culture is treated as the explanation of societal relations in some cases, in others it is depoliticized and it has often come to be used as a fully coherent entity to distinguish between ‘them’ and ‘us’ (2009).

Ramanjeet (F, 1) enumerates another instance of this conflation of culture with violence as experienced by her

“I read about this poem on Air India bombings in school for English class and the poem was fine but the Prof. was giving this horrible speech about it that the Sikhs did it. But I was like you cannot paint the entire community like that!! Being the only person from South Asian origin, I felt compelled but also scared to say something. I wasn’t defending the situation but I was like you cannot paint the entire community like that.” She

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30 Personal communication: White people have culture but in the case of racialized people culture has them - Jenny Francis.
continued narrating about the additional turmoil she faced upon reaching home and
telling her parents about the incident and instead of getting her expected comments that
would ease her, to be told not do anything about it and to just focus on her studies. “I feel
like they said that to protect me, but that was the first time I felt ‘different’ in a big way.”
She said disappointedly.

The direct and indirect witnessing of ‘a culture’ being conflated with ‘violence’ is what makes
Ramanjeet (F, 1) attempt to exemplify a “good Sikh immigrant”. Puar and Rai (2004) add that a
“good immigrant” is distinct from the “bad immigrant” in his or her identification with the nation
and positions of national unity, and in his or her demonstration of exceptionality with respect to
educational excellence, earning capacity and upward class mobility (Puar and Rai 2004: 77).
Through the lens of this understanding, Ramanjeet (F, 1)’s parents could be seen as giving their
daughter advice on being a “good immigrant” by not doing anything about the issue and focusing
on studies instead.

This fear of being labeled as a “bad immigrant” and therefore being seen as the ‘other’, the
excluded, was also evident in the narratives around Khalistan and the Air India bombing used by
some youth participating in the research. This fear of being seen as the “other”, the “bad
immigrant” was also coupled with the context within which some youth heard about the Air
India bombings for the first time. Adip (F, 5) recalls the first time she heard about the Air India
Bombing:

“It was when I got married and right before I moved here, that my parents were giving
me instructions on what to do and how to behave when I would be on my own in the
airport and then on flights and how to do, you know, all the paper work. That’s when they
told me, ‘tareeke se pesh aana’ (talk properly), ‘siddha jawaab dena’ (answer them in a
non-controversial way when being asked something)”. On asking her further about who
“they” referred to she stated, “you know officials, people working at the airport (...) I
was told exactly what to do. Some of it was because I was travelling alone for the first
time you know, but some was also fear ‘ki kuchh gadbad na hojaaye’ (that what if something goes wrong).” She continued further along in the conversation, “during this talk is when I heard of the Air India bombing for the first time and that someone from our community did that. But also, you know, ‘yeh sab beth ke samjhaana’ (making me sit down and talk to me about all of this) was more than that. That incident was just mentioned, but yeah that people can sometimes question ‘us’ more. (…) So many stories you hear after all the attacks that happened in 2001 as well. So I got very nervous, while coming here, you know being my first time”

(Adip (F, 5) 27 year old female, professional, 1st generation immigrant, lives in Vancouver)

The interlinkages between the lens of the ‘war on terror’ to understand the Air India bombings by the Canadian government post 9/11, as well as the fear of the security environment in place, is evident in the narrative of Adip (F, 5).

4.6 Conclusion

Members of the South Asian Canadian community (including Sikhs) have struggled to have the Air India bombing recognized as a Canadian event. This struggle seemed to have finally been won in 2010 with the recognition of the tragedy by the Canadian Government as a “Canadian tragedy” and the launching of the Kanishka Project in memory of the Air India Bombings. At the launch of the project, Prime Minister Stephen Harper admitted that Canada had for a long time failed to recognize the bombing as a Canadian event, and, in a gesture of redress, said: “Worst of all, this state of denial continued for some time. But, over the years, the truth finally

31 Quote from interview conducted for Master’s thesis research. (Quote bilingual- Hindi and English)
32 On June 23, 2011, the Canadian government launched what has been called The Kanishka Project in memory of the Air India bombing. The project was meant to fund such initiatives as conferences, publications and major research projects – that will help Canada build the knowledge base needed to effectively counter terrorism.
did come out, and we faced the harsh reality. This atrocity was conceived in Canada, and its victims were mostly citizens of Canada. It was a national tragedy – our national tragedy – and one that required our national response.” (PM Marks the Air India Anniversary).

The national response however includes a number of counter terrorism efforts, which Razack argues, often effect racialized immigrants detrimentally (2012). The counter terrorism initiatives undertaken, changes being brought about to the citizenship act (currently in debate through proposed changes in Bill C-24), the racial profiling often inherent in such security measures, have the potential to undo the successful struggles of the South Asian communities against racist policies of the past.

Apprehensions among Sikh youth to talk about contentious issues like Khalistan and the Air India bombing, the conflation of some cultures and communities (like the Sikh community) with violence in public platforms and perceptions, growing fear among some Sikh youth of being seen as different and standing out through their physical markers may be an indication of the struggles lying ahead for racialized communities. Although government attempts at reconciliation are important there is a need to learn from the past errors, without which reconciliatory measures will be hollow. There is a necessity to incorporate lessons from the past wrongs (the Chinese Head Tax, the Japanese Internment, the Komagata Maru incident, The Air India bombing, etc.) and see their continued connections to the present day, in order to take measures to build an inclusive society.
Chapter 5: The Komagata Maru and memory-making

This chapter will look at the meanings, associations (and disassociations) that the youth participating in the research draw out of the Komagata Maru episode, as well as, the role of the recent centennial commemoration events in the meaning-making process.

May 2014 marks the centenary of the Komagata Maru episode. It was on May 23rd 1914 that, "a ship named ‘Komagata Maru’ entered Burrard Inlet, carrying 376 passengers, looking forward to starting their lives in Canada"(Girn 2014). This hope of a new start for most of the passengers on board the Komagata Maru was short lived, since the ship was detained in Burrard inlet for over two months, and was then turned away to India. Since 1914, the Komagata Maru episode has acquired many meanings for various people especially in relation to issues of immigration, race and identity (Johnston 2014, Kazimi 2011, Ward 2002, Pollock 1978). These meanings and associations that people draw with the Komagata Maru are varied in nature. The fieldwork conducted for the thesis had taken place before the events commemorating the centenary of the Komagata Maru incident kick-started in 2014, while the thesis itself was written amidst a number of events being organized in Vancouver. The timing of the research, therefore, turned out to be very significant, for it provided an opportunity to see the impact of these events on the youth that I spoke with. Most youth participating in the research were unaware of the Komagata Maru episode or did not see it as being of any relevance today during the first round of interviews. However, the three youth I conducted follow-up interviews with later had different opinions than articulated by them in the first set of interviews. This change in narratives for the three youth in question was triggered by attending some of the commemoration events. In spite of months of fieldwork and the subsequent attending of commemoration events, I did not manage to record any extended reflections on the episode of Komagata Maru by the youth participating in the research, however. However, the silences found within the youth narratives on Komagata Maru before the commemorative events kick-started in Vancouver are also significant. I will look at these silences and associations the youth derive out of the episode, by first setting it up in its historical context.
5.1 Historical overview of the Komagata Maru

It was Gurdit Singh, a Sikh entrepreneur who charted the Japanese-owned ship ‘Komagata Maru’ from Hong Kong to carry 376 passengers to Vancouver, Canada. They consisted of 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslim and 12 Hindus, all men except two married women and five children (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2000). On its arrival from a two-month journey in the sea, the ship was detained, anchored half-a-mile away from the shore, in Burrard inlet. Canadian officials detained the ship and its passengers for over two months in their attempt to prevent South Asians from entering Canada. This was in keeping with efforts to prevent people of colour from entering Canada. Two major tactics were adopted by the Canadian government to keep out Indians in 1914. First, all Asian immigrants were required to possess not less than $200. Secondly, they were expected to have a continuous passage (also known as, the Continuous Journey Act) from their home country to Canada (Kazimi 2011, Singh 2004, Schultz 1982). The passengers on board the Komagata Maru believed they had a right to settle anywhere within the British Empire, being British subjects themselves.

For Indians to reach Canada by continuous passage however was impossible at the time, as no steamship charters existed directly between Calcutta and Vancouver. Also, for fear of reprisal from the Canadian government, no shipping lines would sell tickets to Indians who wanted to leave from Hong Kong. From 1908 to 1914, with the implementation of this act only a few dozen South Asians could manage to enter Canada as compared to nearly 2600 in 1907 (Johnston 2014, Minhas 1994). It was around this time that Gurdit Singh had chartered the Komagata Maru, expecting to challenge the continuous passage laws in the court upon arrival. He hoped for a positive response based on the previous case of Rex vs. Thirty-Nine Hindus.

On its arrival in Canada, the passengers of the Komagata Maru were, however, never allowed to disembark. Conservative MP H. H. Stevens worked along with immigration officer Malcolm R. J. Reid, to keep passengers offshore, so they could not invoke Canadian law to protect the rights of passengers. On July 23rd, 1914, two months from the day of her arrival, the Komagata Maru
was made to leave Vancouver’s shores for India. Nonetheless, the tragedy of the Komagata Maru did not end with its departure. Upon its arrival in India at Budge Budge (north of Calcutta), the Komagata Maru passengers were ordered by British officials to head directly to Punjab. Twenty-two (including a British soldier) were killed in what the government and Indian nationalist thought was a riot and the revolutionaries thought of as a massacre. Many passengers were also arrested under suspicion of seditious activity (Johnston 2014, Kazimi 2011).

5.2 Remembering the Komagata Maru episode today

5.2.1 Narratives on Komagata Maru by youth participating in the research

For fifteen of the twenty interviewees, the words Komagata Maru did not strike any chord. It is not just remembering however, but even silences and forgetting that can be overt political tools. Forgetting plays an important role in this ongoing dynamics of remembering the Komagata Maru episode. Social memory and shared knowledge(s) are made up as much of things that are “untold, or left implicit, as from what is recorded” (Carsten 1995, Pg. 334). The silences of the youth speak of the marginalization of a significant episode in Canadian history, politics, the educational system and society. Silences were also characteristic of the narratives of youth around the Air India bombings of 1985. But in the case of silences on the issue of the Air India bombings, most youth were aware of the episode but hesitant to speak about it.

The absent narratives or the silent narratives in the case of the Air India bombings were characterized by two different yet linked ‘perpetuator’ and ‘victim’ discourses and their implicit meaning(s), understanding(s) and awareness of the issue. The silence of the youth was in part an effect of members of the Sikh community being associated with the Air India bombings. There was predominantly silence on this aspect of the Air India bombings where the Sikhs were the perpetuators. The other part of the unwillingness of the youth to organize their meaning-making of the events of 1985 in a narrative structure, indicated its relation to being ‘silenced’. It depicted
the impact of the actual, real-time lived experiences and contexts on these silences. The silences of the youth were linked with stigma and racial profiling that has been associated with the Sikh community in relation to the Air India attack and living in a post 9/11 world.

There exists a value in the silences of the youth even in case of the Komagata Maru episode. Unawareness about the episode for 15 out of the 20 interviewees suggests that Komagata Maru is an under-remembered issue. Representations through different forms and mediums, and the nature of these representations are essential attributes to remembering an episode. Textbooks form an essential medium in remembering for the youth. However, most youth when asked if they remember being taught about the Komagata Maru during high school history lessons, said no. This is also evident through the statements of Romit (M, 9), Noor (F, 7), and Pahi (F, 9) who don’t remember learning about the Komagata Maru or this chapter in history, in their high school Canadian history lessons. There is silence, or very little discussion about the Komagata Maru in the formal educational systems today (Gibson 2014, Dei 2005, Brandes & Orlowski 2004). According to Naveen Girn, the Project Manager for ‘the Komagata Maru 1914-2014: Generations, Geographies and Echoes Project’, there are large silences that exist in the telling of the stories of the Komagata Maru (Klassen, 2014). Schools, libraries and university archives don’t have many South Asian stories in them (ibid).

Secondly, it could be suggested that the silences of the youth on the Komagata Maru episode, on a related note, could lie in the episode being represented as closed, resolved, an ‘event in the past’ and therefore seen as less significant today. On August 3rd 2008, Stephen Harper gave an apology at the annual Punjabi festival in Surrey for the ‘Komagata Maru event’, which suggested a similar closing of the “past”.
5.3 Official narratives

5.3.1 The apology

“This May” he said “the Government of Canada secured passage of the unanimous motion in the House of Commons recognizing the Komagata Maru tragedy and apologizing to those who were directly affected. Today, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I am officially conveying as Prime Minister, that apology. Now friends, many Canadians have worked long and hard to secure recognition for this historic event. I’d like to thank from this community, the Professor Mohan Singh Foundation, the Khalsa Diwan Society, the Komagata Maru Descendents Association, and Community Leader, Tarlok Sablok, for their persistent and passionate dedication to this issue over the years.” (PM apology transcript, Somani 2012)

Many people, especially members of South Asian Canadian Community, rejected this apology by Harper. They demanded for an apology in Parliament, as was done in the case of the apologies given for the Chinese head-tax and forced residential schooling for members of the First Nations. The announcement made by the Minister of Multiculturalism, Jason Kenney, according to Somani, revealed some anxiety on the part of the state in repeating the apology. He declared, “[t] he apology has been given, and it won’t be repeated”. This statement—“the apology has been given”—affects closure upon the past. Even in Harper’s apology itself, Somani states, "it is impossible to discern at what point he actually issues the apology. Instead of being permitted to reflect upon Harper’s apology, the spectators are briskly ushered into a relieved post-apology period during which Harper conveys his appreciation to the people who demanded the apology, suggesting again an attempt to close off the past." Harper’s apology also works to reinscribe a linear narrative of national progress in which past wrongs are demarcated from the newly imagined multicultural present. The fact that the apology for the Komagata Maru case, unlike other official apologies, has not been made available on the Government of
Canada’s official website and thus it could be argued it suggests a deliberate forgetting and moving over the episode” (Somani 2012, Pg. 14).

5.3.2 **Unveiling of the stamp**

More recently, on the occasion of the centenary of the Komagata Maru episode, the government of Canada released Komagata Maru commemorative stamps. The release of the stamps in itself was a symbolic gesture. However, they also raised two important issues. One issue for Mr. Sadhu Binning, a writer from the South Asian community in Vancouver, was represented in the limit of the stamp supply, in terms of the number, as well as, its restriction to domestic circulation. These for Mr. Binning were not keeping in power with the usual commemorative practices which involve releasing a stamp. Another important issue the Komagata Maru stamp raises is that of the image on the stamp itself. The stamp (as can be seen in the picture below) has only images of Sikh men. This imagery does not indicate the presence of other non-Sikh people, women and children on the ship. The image as such then is only representative of one community. This correlates to a misrepresentation of not only the people on board but also broader questions of identity. The people on board the Komagata Maru did not identity themselves as Sikh when they came here, but instead identified themselves as Indian and many as British soldiers. (Personal communication: Sadhu Binning).
The limit on the circulation of the Komagata Maru stamps, could be in some ways seen as an attempt to shut off the issue into the past in a rushed manner. In the lack of any explanation from the government on the circulation, it remains hard to determine the reasons behind the limited circulation of the stamps. Also, the imagery of the stamp points towards the perception held by the government of the Komagata Maru as predominantly being a Sikh episode. The government's attempt to close of the Komagata Maru episode as a "tragedy" resting in the past, through its apology, limited circulation of the stamps; can also be seen in parallel to its reaction on the Air India bombings.

5.4 Juxtaposing episode of 1914 with 1985

Portraying the Komagata Maru episode as a “dark chapter in Canadian history” marked with this clear distinction from present times could also be suggestive of the silences of the youth on the
episode. Marked as only a historical incident that took place 100-years ago, the Komagata Maru may seem removed from the ongoing present of the youth.

The episode of 1914 and events of 1985 have more in common than just the silences of the youth participating in the research. While silences of the youth in case of 1914 were largely dictated by being unaware of the episode - unlike the situation for the events of 1985, wherein the silences were situated within awareness of the issue – both the episodes are underpinned with racism and connection(s) to present Canadian contexts. Failing to remember the two episodes in relation to each other and viewing them as isolated instances, therefore makes it is easier to veil the racism that underpins not just the past but even present policies and official structures. Remembering the two episodes in juxtaposition may help in refracting and reframing the memories of the two to challenge the appearance of Canada being a haven for racial diversity (Dean 2012). Crucial to this is precisely what is remembered and what is forgotten. The official understandings of both the Air India bombings of 1985 and the Komagata Maru emphasize the historical aspect of these episodes without drawing connections between these past racial injustices and their continuity in inflecting and shaping the present Canadian context. The silence over the connections of historical wrongs with the present can be seen as an attempt to write out such wrongs from the dominant official version of the nation’s present. Today however, migrants are similarly often kept in legal limbo, as in the case of Komagata Maru. Despite the attempts of the government to cast off the episode of Komagata Maru as firmly resting in the past, there are many incidents in Canadian present that point towards the continuities into the present. Although the Canadian state is known for having more lenient immigration and security policies than its counter parts, there are cases of immigrant detention, racial profiling, tuning back of immigrants, which are far from being uncommon in the Canadian present. One such recent example is the detention of 380 out of 492 Sri Lankan Tamil asylum seekers who reached the shores of British Columbia in August 2010.33

By separating opportunities for remembering in relation, and in this case, expressing regret for the Komagata Maru and Air India bombings as separate instances, state actors can more successfully and strategically maintain an image of Canada as “not racist”. Linking the two suggests a pattern of racist treatment of South Asians in Canada, one that is structural as well as symbolic. In his speech at the 2007 unveiling of the new Air India memorial in Toronto, Harper stated, Canada “has long served as a model of a prosperous, peaceful, pluralistic society” (Harper 2007). The speech overlooks the various episodes of institutional racism associated with Canada. Also, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the official report on the Air India bombings rejects the use of ‘racism’ in the report and actively denies the existence of links between the nation’s failure to respond in a timely fashion to the crisis and its exclusionary attitude towards non-white Canadians. Remembering the episodes in isolation like this however undermines the significance of the episodes in the present day. Analyzing the events of 1985 in relation to the Komagata Maru, on the other hand, invokes a distinctly different kind of remembering than the official remembrance of the episodes. Through a relational understanding, the Komagata Maru episode is more likely to be understood as enmeshed with racial injustice in the more recent past of the Air India episode and the present.

While the apology by Harper may play an important role in attempting to close-off the episode, it also offers minority constituents the opportunity to insert themselves into the process of history, to force the nation to remember what it might prefer to forget, and in so doing, contribute to a very different kind of nation: less cohesive, perhaps, but also less brutal, and less indifferent to the aspirations of its minorities. The struggle between the state and the activists’ demands for an apology is ultimately a struggle about how the nation might be imagined. Whereas the activists seem to be asking for a more inclusive nation, one that remembers events like the Komagata Maru case, the state seems to be saying, “forgive and forget.”
5.5 Commemoration events and Komagata Maru (counter-narratives)

The Komagata Maru episode through this relational approach can serve as a platform to explore the past as very much relevant to our present, and create awareness of other ways of viewing the Komagata Maru episode- specifically as part of a historical continuum. While dominant narratives of coopted reconciliation aim to situate the Komagata Maru as “a chapter in history”, they face resistance through these counter-narratives linking the Komagata Maru to the present and future of the Canadian nation. The Komagata Maru centennial amongst the aforementioned official forms of remembering the episode also provided for alternative transcommunity conceptualizations of redress and reconciliation. Such counter-narratives and strategies demonstrate that the dominant narratives on reconciliation are not totalizing. These narratives provide for connecting the historical aspects of Komagata Maru to the present by encapsulating negative aspects overlooked by the official narratives on Komagata Maru.

In May 2014, UBC's Departments of Theatre and Film and Asian Studies partnered with Rangmanch Punjabi Theatre (Surrey) and Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology to produce a play production developed out of three existing plays about the incident: "The Komagata Maru Incident" by Sharon Pollock (1976; in English), "The Komagata Maru" by Ajmer Rode (published in 1984 but performed in 1979; in Punjabi) and "Samuñdarī sher nāl takkar" or "Conflict with the Sea Lion," co-authored by Sukhwant Hundal and Sadhu Binning (1989; in Punjabi) (Murphy 2014). The production (composed of sections of the three, developed into a single production with overarching narrative by UBC Professor Anne Murphy) depicted how memory produces the present, and how the past creates possibilities for creative engagement with the present and future (ibid). The play spoke across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and within a changing Canadian imaginary. It also aimed to represent the missing narratives of women and children on board the Komagata Maru, by incorporating space for such marginalized voices in the play.
The Musqueam dinner gala, was another such event, emphasizing the present day, cross-community relevance of the Komagata Maru. The Musqueam dinner gala commemoration event built on a politics of solidarity. The hosting of the dinner at the Musquem community centre in Vancouver and welcoming of the South Asian community (amongst members of other Asian communities) by the Musqueam community members was symbolic in nature. It was symbolic of a possible alternative course of this history had the Indigenous communities still been in power and control of the lands in 1914. As Elder Larry Grant from the Musqueam community explained during the event, “If the boat (Komagata Maru) had come the other way through Indian Arm we would have welcomed the boat as the first peoples…” (ibid). Musqueam Councilor Wade Grant, through his opening speech for the event advocated for a politics of solidarity, “Our (Indigenous) people can feel your pain because we have faced racism since Canada and this land is still illegally occupied... We can learn a little more about who you are, and you can learn more about who we are” (ibid).

From the living generations of the Komagata Maru passengers, to distinctive film screenings, from rare artifacts, musical and theatrical performances this centenary provided a platform for many vibrant, creative, and forceful artists, academics, activists (and various combinations of these three) events (Girn 2014). Some events organized to mark the centenary of the Komagata Maru in Vancouver included Ali Kazimi’s documentary (A continuous journey) screening and talk, plays, art exhibitions, discussion panels on apologies for the Komagata Maru, and a cruise event providing an experiential value by cruising to the spot where the Komagata Maru once stood.

All these events highlighted unique aspects of the Komagata Maru and attempted to trouble the official understanding of Komagata Maru as a “dark chapter” in the “Canadian past”. The commemoration events on these lines show a vivid story of Komagata Maru’s resistance, cross-community ties, and a story that is still living and relevant to Canada today and its future. The episode is through these lenses seen as not a story that has attained closure and the sufferings as not yet mere memories to be recalled. These counter-narratives by addressing issues of inclusion,
exclusion and political participation of diasporic Asian communities, indigenous communities and other communities of colour in Canada force us to see and remember the Canadian nation differently. Kazimi (2011) for instance also argues the necessity of remembering the nation as a series of ongoing and interconnected exclusions.

5.6 Komagata Maru as part of ongoing exclusions

Although Canada has changed in the 100 years since the Komagata Maru incident the Canadian immigration policy today, for instance, is racialized in new but familiar ways and tones. Race and immigration are two interlinked themes that run through the Komagata Maru episode but equally touches on the shared experiences of immigrants and refugees in Canada, not only from the past but even today. Dalbir (M, 3), who moved to Canada four years ago, saw this past resonating in the present. He shares the story of struggles that his family had to undergo to get to Canada from Punjab. Dalbir (M, 3) belongs to a small village in Punjab. While his father was a teacher, his family also had a family business in agriculture. He spent many days helping his uncle in the fields, when he was in India.

“My father wanted us to move here for a better future (...) you know education and maybe get more money. But there were many years in between wanting to come here and actually being able to come here. I saw my family struggling. I think if we had more money, it would not have been so difficult for us to be able to get to Canada. They (Governments) put so many restrictions to move around, to go out.” “You remember,” he continued, “the poem we read on Komagata Maru in class (the Punjabi class at UBC), they were also not allowed to enter, and they needed so much money for everyone (...) In some way(s) I feel it is still the same like back then, don’t you think? (...) Of course, money is not the only reason but it is definitely one of the most important ones; I have seen it!”

(Dalbir (M, 3), 21-year-old, living in Surrey, moved to Canada four years ago)
It was in 1967 that the preference-based immigration system was changed and replaced by a neutral points threshold that redrafted the social geography of Canadian cities (Ley and Germain 2000). From the 1970s onwards, the country became more multicultural and multiracial. While on the one side there is no colour bar - the countries of East Asia, and South Asia are the largest producers of Canada’s immigrant population. On the other hand, there has been increasing concern of a racialized underclass, located mainly in metropolitan areas (Hiebert, Schuurman and Smith 2007). Discrimination, non-recognition of foreign credentials and language barriers are some of the reasons for this economic decline (Guo 2009, Reitz 2007, DeVoretz & Pivnenko 2005). Moreover, after the events of September 11, 2001 immigrant selection is increasingly security-obsessed, and Canada has revisited its security policies. It has tightened up its screening of immigrant as well as refugee claims (Kruege, Mulder, & Korenic (2004). Departing from broader, liberal ideas of "human security" — such as freedom from danger, deprivation, fear and want — states today (including Canada) are once again advancing more traditional, realist-inspired, "national security" preoccupations (ibid).

"In 2010, the Canadian government also passed the Preventing Human Smugglers From Abusing Canada’s Immigration System Act, drastically changing Canadian asylum system and establishing the practice of indefinite detentions of migrants. In 2013, almost 10,000 people have been put in administrative detention while the state considers their case. The average length of their stay is 25 days, but some are detained for years. As of November 8 of 2013, 585 people who had unsuccessfully applied for refugee status, or who did not have documentation, were being held in Canadian immigrant cells. Sixty of them had been languishing for more than a year in Canada, a country that is one of the few western states to impose indefinite detentions on migrants. Today’s migrants are often barred because they are considered potential terrorists. The passengers of the Komagata Maru were also opportunistically deemed seditious because many of them were supporters of the militantly pro-independence Ghadar party" (Tseghay 2014)

The commemoration events based on the above-mentioned narrative(s) would be seen as a political act - events highlighting the discriminations and prejudices existing in the past, but as
much in the present. The potential parallels between the Komagata Maru incident and the contemporary scene are many, and many are obvious. Sedition, the Ghadar movement, imperial nationality, etc., readily (if imperfectly) link up with contemporary discourses around national security, ‘home grown’ terrorism, multiculturalism, legal pluralism, transnational citizenship, etc. Many of the Komagata Maru commemoration events (mentioned above) by doing that offered an opportunity to create awareness about the broader relevance of Komagata Maru for youth. These events formed an alternate source of knowledge generation and circulation about the Komagata Maru episode that the youth can tap into. While not much empirical data has been collected on the success of the events in being able to do so, the three follow-up interviews conducted show promising signs.

The interview with Jasmira (F, 6) during the commemoration event for instance captures well the negotiation between Komagata Maru being a historical episode or an issue as relevant in the present.

“Yeah. I mean I didn’t even know about this event till a few months back and then I thought it was about our history (...) I mean like our community history, you know and like we were just talking about it, it’s more than what we thought. It’s about a wider history. Like, you know other Asian communities were also treated badly ‘till then. They had to all struggle for their rights.”

(Jasmira (F, 6), 18-year-old, University student, living in Metro Vancouver)

The narrative of Jasmira helps us understand the conflicts and contradictions experienced by people caught in the middle of polarizing events.
5.7 Conclusion

Silences and narrow understandings of the Komagata Maru episode characterize the narratives of the youth participating in the research, narratives that relegate the episode to the past, as distant history and of little relevance to today’s context. These silences and forms of remembering speak volumes about the dominant discourses that exist on the Komagata Maru today. Attempts at memorialization and commemoration are, therefore, important in creating counter-narratives - to link the history of the past with the present, of the “here” with "there" and of “theirs” with “ours” (Girn 2014). In other words, it is important to link with other aspects of exploitation, racism, and exclusion that link unjust experiences and practices to present day injustices in Canada. Looking at Komagata Maru history in this way addresses larger questions of how we understand government and its policies, and how we remember the past. While May 23, 1914 is still remembered today, how we remember it should be just as important as why we do.

The commemorations that are going on in the city presently about the Komagata Maru and its removal from the Vancouver harbour, should not only be seen as a celebratory marker of a racist past to a multicultural present. The commemoration events should be also a reminder of its relation to the present issues of immigration policies in Canada (Bhandar 2014). The government’s conception of nation-formation based on an active foreclosure and forgetting of the past echoes Ernest Renan’s classic 1882 essay, “What is a Nation?” Renan argues that nations come into existence by an act of forgetfulness, or by an active erasure of the past. Although a lack of data does not allow us to draw definitive conclusions on the silences of the youth, there are possible explanations for the silences that are worth thinking about. Can the way the dominant official narratives representing the Komagata Maru have an influence on the silences of the youth on the issue? Do the lack of discussions on race in school impact the silences? Did the centennial commemoration events manage to generate awareness about a broader significance of the Komagata Maru? Although there is a lack of data on the impact of commemoration events on awareness building among the youth, the three follow-up interviews show a promising sign.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The research study was conducted on the narratives of youth on three specific historical episodes – Komagata Maru, Events of 1984 and Air-India bombings. Twenty-five in-depth interviews, three follow-up interviews, one focus group discussion and a number of informal conversations with youth form the basis of the study. The main questions that the thesis aimed to answer included ways in which youth participating in the research associate and disassociate with the three episodes, the relationship of their narratives with the grand narratives on the episodes, as well as, the political and social environment within which the narratives of the youth are based.

The Komagata Maru episode, and the events of 1984 and 1985, all constitute moments of rupture which reflect a crack in the democratic secular institutions of the state. They provide a point for inquiry about the unsettling memories and reconstruction of the past and give an opportunity to bring out forgotten and subjugated narratives. The desire to access the past dominates most of the studies on rupture moments (Das 1995). It helps establish a thread of continuity in the otherwise seemingly isolated moments characterized by collective tragedy, horror and victimization. For instance, what enables us to discuss the three events of varying social, spatial and political imports is the rupture that they caused in the dominant narratives, both official and non-official.

Speaking about violence, trauma and profiling perceived, experienced or caused is never easy. Especially when the entity in question can be seen as the perpetuator of a trauma – this is true for the Indian government for avoiding addressing issues on the events of 1984, the hesitation of the Canadian government to address the Komgata Maru and the issues of 1985 in a more holistic manner, as well as, the Punjabi-Sikh youth to remember the events 1984 and 1985 in a holistic manner. But since the past is constructed through the process of narrations and social mediations, there is a need for all parties to remember and remember responsibly. Remembering about the
past is intrinsically connected to one’s present and to the silences, as much as, the spoken word. The dangers of overly didactic approaches of remembering by any party therefore, will invariably have an effect on the present as much as the past.

6.1 Official memory and its relation with youth narratives

The official narratives on all three events today reflect a form of ‘amnesia by state agencies’, which show that all that cannot fit into the nations’ representation of its image and “history of progress” narrative of these events are silenced or forgotten (Tarlo 2003). This is evident in the case of the silences of the Indian state on events of 1984, and its lack of redress or justice on the atrocities committed against the Sikhs in the 1980s, the silences of the Canadian state on the grievances, the nature of dissatisfaction voiced by the predominantly South Asian victims’ families of the Air India bombings, as well as, its silences on the connection of the Komagata Maru episode to various incidents in the present.

The official narratives on these episodes actively deny their continuing relevance. There exists, however, a few clear differences between the responses of the Canadian government on 1914 and 1985, as compared to the responses of the Indian government on events of 1984. The Indian government barely engaged in issues of the 1984 pogroms and operation Blue Star. The then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, apologized about the violence committed against Sikhs in the 1980s as recently as 2010. Also justice for the violence committed against the Sikhs remains denied, where the perpetrators of the crime remain unpunished. The Canadian government on the other hand, despite failing to make any connections to the past injustices with the present has made more efforts for redress on issues of Komagata Maru and the Air India bombings. The Canadian state has provided funding over the years for the commemoration of the Komagata Maru, and even though late, the Canadian government had set up commissions and inquiries into the Air India bombings. This stands in contrast to the Indian government’s response on events of 1984.
All the government actions in the context of the three events however were done without addressing the underlying problems of racism, exclusion and the continuity of the episodes into the present. The official commemorations through such measures created a legitimate memory of the episodes based on a clear distinction between the past and the present. For instance, the Canadian government’s apology on the Komagata Maru and its framing of it as an “incident” gives the episode a pretense of being a part of only the history of Canada, a “dark” chapter and that since Canada has come a long way from. This framing does not allow for exploring instances of similar relations existing between racialized people and the government today. It creates a lop-sided representation of Canadian society, by only looking at stories of success and progress in its diversity.

It could be argued that it is this underrepresentation of the Komagata Maru episode, and it being relegated to an issue of the far past in official memories that plays an important role in the large silences of the youth that existed on the Komagata Maru episode. This official narrative, which influences the knowledge circulation on the episode, in the same vein also contributed towards undermining the significance of the episode for the few youth who remembered it. The opinions of the same youth who thought of Komagata Maru being an historical incident stood in contrast to their opinions on it after having engaged with a few centennial commemoration events taking place in the city (see page 118). These commemoration events provided for sites of knowledge generation that stood in contrast to the official narratives. In the absence of sufficient empirical data however the impact of the commemoration events on the opinions on Komagata Maru held by the youth is hard to prove. Although the narratives’ of three follow-up interviewees who attended some of the commemoration events, hints towards attempts to broader and deeper engagements with relevance of the Komagata Maru.

The official narratives of the Canadian government on the Air India Bombings also had a huge impact on the narratives (and non-narratives) of the youth. The Canadian government’s apology along with the redefinition and reframing of the Air India bombing in the past two decades has failed to remember any of the grievances of the victims’ families of being treated as “second –
class citizens” or of being treated as a “foreigners” in the country they consider their own (see page 82). In failing to do so, and further racializing the immigration and security policies through the lens of a ‘war on terror’, the state has failed to alter its relationship with its racialized subjects. Thus, there exists a double edge to the way(s) in which the state treats the racialized communities as outsiders. Firstly, prior to 1991, through its response to the Air India bombings, the Canadian government excluded the victim and the victims’ families as outsider and the attack as a “foreign issue”. In the wake of its acknowledgment of the tragedy as a Canadian one, the drafting of stricter immigration and border control protocols, impacted the racialized citizens the most and added another layer of exclusion. This discomfort with the gaze, crossing borders and profiling (inherent in such exclusions) is spoken about at great lengths by some of the interviewees (see interview narratives of Adip, Navjot, Aman and Harry).

A large interest of the youth in being vocal about the issues of 1984 lies in the absence of any actions taken on behalf of the Indian government to provide redress and reprisals in relation to the violence of the 1980s. In the absence of any public discussions on the violence inflicted and suffered by the Sikh community in India, the counter-state narratives provided by the dominant pro-Khalistani groups remain predominant. There is a need for the Indian Government to address the issues of the 1980s, for silence need not necessarily represent forgetting and in the absence of any kind of other discussions, the pro-Khalistani discourses remain dominant.

6.2 Counter-official memories and its relation with youth narratives

The counter narratives of Komagata Maru, Air India Bombings and the episode of 1984 speak to the silences and the gaps in the official understanding(s) of the episodes. The counter-narratives on the Komagata Maru and Air India episode both challenge racism(s) and exclusion(s) inherent in the official memories of the episodes. Both these episodes lie at the intersections of immigration and security. The dominant counter narratives emphasize and challenge the state silencing and forgetting of the racialized histories by aiming to create awareness about the deeper
and broader connections of the episode to the present and across communities.

Khalistani narratives dominate the counter-narratives on the politics of 1984. These Khalistani narratives are predominately based on the discourse of victimhood. While such narratives speak vocally about the pain and violence inflicted on the Sikh community and the holy site (Golden Temple), they forget the violence inflicted by members of the Sikh community on others. This selective representation of information on 1984 is filtered through images of martyrs and victim art. In the lack of discussions in the public sphere about the events of the ‘80s, the vacuum has been taken over by the Khalistani narratives. The counter-state mobilizations after 1984 have been influenced in significant ways by the diaspora and represent much more than the demand for a separate state of Khalistan in the 1980s (Madan 1998, Tatla 1999, Axel 2001). Operation Blue Star and the anti-Sikh pogroms today are remembered in various ways through the victim discourse by weaving the past and present politics together (see pg. 50). The Internet has made these counter-narratives widely accessible to the diasporic youth who rely on secondary sources for their understanding of issues of 1984. Most of the youth interviewed were extremely vocal and opinioned on the events of the 1980s. Their narratives on Khalistan, violence inflicted on the community and state oppression of the community were voiced from a discourse of victimhood, wherein Khalistan was seen as a response against the atrocities committed by the state (see page 54). The 1980s violence was seen as only inflicted by the state on the Sikh community. Based on this understanding some narratives of the youth justified the role of Bhindranwale as a savior along those lines (see pg. 68).

Some youth narratives represented the continuity of the same kinds of oppression by the state into the present. Although the grievances of 1984 are very real, most youth viewing the issues of 1984 through the lens of these dominant counter-narratives are unable to decouple issues of 1984 from those that are gripping Punjab today. Spatially being removed from Punjab interlinked with a temporal collapse in the understanding of 1984 for many youth born or raised here, also explains in some ways their vociferous engagement with this politics. Engagement with the politics of 1984 while being in Canada has far lesser repercussions for the youth than doing so
while in India. The factor of physical proximity to the centre of the politics, also speculatively explains the apprehensions, unwillingness of the youth to talk about the events of 1985 and the large silences that surrounded the most of the youth narratives on the same.

The few narratives that did exist on 1985 however, were also narratives based on the discourse of victimhood. The youth wanted to avoid speaking about the episode of 1985 for the fear of being labeled as a troublemaker, or being seen as a justifier of violence. Some youth however ‘troubled and shifted’ the role assigned to community as the perpetuator to that of a victim by recreating the past of 1985 through the discourse of victimhood (see page 76). Social observers like Hein and Selden (2000), and Novick (1999) see this as a means to suppress or override memories that dishonor the community.

Youth narratives on the actual reconstruction of the events of 1984 and 1985 were heavily premised only on suffering, which I argue, does not provide a meaningful outlet of the past. There needs to be a more interactive acknowledgement of these traumatic histories rather than just a scripted idea of community victimhood. Narratives of the youth based on any dominant discourse on the events of 1984 raises issues of totalizing tendencies. While there is recognition of some forms of violence in these narratives, they also at the same time represent the silencing of other forms of violence.

6.3 Narratives of the youth providing fissures in totalizing narratives

The meaning making of the youth on the three episodes in varying degrees also provided for a divergence from the dominant discourses on them. Looking at these differentiated associations and engagements of the youth with the episodes create new ways of understanding the issues. My research suggests some level of personal scrutiny and uncertain engagement in identity
politics for Sikh youth in Vancouver. Predominantly the youth engaged with issues around 1984 through victim discourses. However, this is not to say that some youth don’t engage with issues of the ‘80s through non-dominant discourses available on the same. As could be seen in the narratives of the youth in the chapter on 1984 the engagement of some youth with the politics of the 1980s did reflect a departure from the dominant ways of recalling and reconciliation. This departure lay in the engaging with Khalistan as a ‘space’ rather than a ‘place’ (see page 57), engaging with 1984 network groups as primarily a space to meet other youth, likeminded people and reclaim and heal fragments of their identity impacted by exclusions and sometimes a crisis of their identity etc (see page 60).

The non-narratives of the youth on the events of 1985 are also equally valuable. The narratives of silences, and the discomfort of the youth speak and challenge the dominant narratives of the events of 1985 being a resolved chapter. It challenges the official apologies of the Canadian government on excluding the racialized citizens in various forms. The discomfort of the gaze, with crossing of borders, racial profiling, that are made evident in the youth narratives in the chapter on Air Indian bombings are proof of the unaltered relationship between the Canadian state and racialized people. The youth narratives through their silences and narratives on exclusions, in other words, challenge this relegation of exclusions created by the official responses on the bombings to a story in the past. Silences were dominant in the narratives of the youth, even on the episode of the Komagata Maru. This exposed the underrepresentation of the episode in Canadian society today and the politics of its meaning-making.

Acknowledging this plurality in narratives of the diasporic youth in a non-tokenistic manner provides space for accounting the positionality and modes of belonging of the youth, which emerge from within the hegemonic power structure, and associated historical representation of all three episodes. It also provides a means to remember the events of 1984 and 1985, apart from the episode of 1914, more responsibly. It enables us to move towards a more holistic understanding of the episodes and their relation to our present.
Lastly, this thesis has analyzed and theorized the engagement of the youth with three different (yet connected) episodes, and the relation of their meaning-making process with dominant narratives.

6.4 The way ahead

Being a master’s thesis, the research has been limited in its scope. The thesis however has attempted to ask important questions about racialized memories, the ethics of remembering historical episodes and its impact on the present day realities of youth. Many of the questions looked at in the thesis can be taken forward and looked at in greater detail by drawing broader linkages with not just sections within the community but also across communities.
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