

# Sites of Counter-Memory: The Refusal to Forget and the Nationalist Struggle in Colonial Delhi

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This article examines the nationalist movement in colonial Delhi in order to investigate the ways in which memory and forgetting are mobilized as political resources. As the capital of the Raj between 1911-47 New and Old Delhi had intense significance, both practically and symbolically. To rouse the population of Old Delhi it was necessary for nationalists to point out the hypocrisy of a “liberal” empire that was suffused with illiberal practices and moments of extreme violence. As such, remembering these violent events, and refusing to forget them, was a key component of the nationalist struggle. These are not always the types of events that have been emblazoned within nationalist historiographies; they are local and not necessarily long-term in their impact. The police shooting at the *Gurdwara* (Sikh temple) Sisganj in 1930 will be used here to examine the different nationalist techniques used to defend the memories of this attack.

Before examining the shooting, this article will investigate different aspects of the trans-disciplinary work on memory and forgetting. This will frame a theoretically informed methodology for this investigation, a summary of works on Indian memory and, finally, a contextualization in the urban memories of Old Delhi. The theoretical approach deployed in this article can be summarized as follows:

- That colonialism had a way of legitimating itself, and of archiving, that was complicit with a historicist approach to the past.
- That the “native” experience of being objectified in such historicist narratives can be thought of as “mourning,” or, the letting-go of the past.
- That nationalist groups attempted to invoke a form of melancholia, refusing to forget painful memories of subjugation.
- That melancholia can be made manifest over certain events, and in certain places, that shall be referred to as sites of counter-memory.

Sites of counter-memory mark times and places in which people have refused to forget. They can rebut the memory schema of a dominant class, caste, race, or nation, providing an alternative form of remembering and identity. As such, these sites are normative in that they have a contemporary effect. But the effectivity of such places need not be immediately curtailed. A historical geography of alternative identities and futures can expose the fragility of what can appear as historically stable contemporary social formations. It is with an eye to the tensions between Hindus and Sikhs in Delhi since the riots of 1984 that this article examines the anti-colonial unity between the communities in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

## Memory Spaces and Fights Against Forgetting

### *Melancholia and the Insurrection of Subjected Knowledges*

“If you like, we can give the name ‘genealogy’ to this coupling together of scholarly erudition and local *memories*, which allows us to constitute a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics.”<sup>2</sup>

“To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.”<sup>3</sup>

Michel Foucault placed great emphasis on the importance of local critiques and forms of understanding in arguing against a dependence on total histories and global theories.<sup>4</sup> Historicism represents one such mode of thinking that, especially since the mid-nineteenth century, has attempted to explain social and cultural phenomena as being historically determined. As such, historicism encrypts and forecloses the meaning of historical and contemporary events within a singular point of view (that of the victor). Such methods of history making were deployed in the colonial context to mark imperialistic expansion as Progress and Enlightenment rather than exploitation or suppression.<sup>5</sup>

Against this simultaneous disciplining of people, territory, and the archive, Foucault recommended the “insurrection of subjected knowledges.”<sup>6</sup> These knowledges are of two types. First, the scholarly knowledge of historical contents that highlights the confrontations and struggles that functional and formal histories attempt to mask. The second form is that of disqualified knowledge, from sources previously deemed naïve, insufficiently conceptual, or non-erudite. A critique should spring from, and reveal the existence of, this “historical knowledge of struggles... the memory of combats, the very memory that had until then been confined to the margins.”<sup>7</sup> In examining Delhi, this article attempts to revive a

scholarly knowledge of a nationalist movement that has been overshadowed by the larger movements in cities such as Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. In examining places of contested meaning, this work attempts to combine the “raw memory of fights”<sup>8</sup> with a regional historical geography of struggle. But what form did these memories take, and how should we access them?

David Eng and David Kazanjian have interpreted Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” as a rallying call to maintain an active and open relationship with history through hopefully invoking the remains of the past.<sup>9</sup> Freud described mourning as the productive draining of libido from a lost person, thing, or idea, accepting it as dead, while melancholia was the negative inability to let go of loss.<sup>10</sup> However, Eng and Kazanjian suggested that melancholia be thought of as a political and creative inability to accept the past as fixed and complete, continually making the past alive in the present. In this sense, Benjamin can be seen to advocate a melancholic relationship with the past, rather than a hopeless mourning. As such, melancholia as used here is more a general and critical approach to the past than a specific, death-fixated emotional attachment. Against a historicist perspective, standing here for what Foucault called totalizing theories, Benjamin advocated seizing an elusive history, or subjected knowledge, that “... generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future.”<sup>11</sup>

The nature of such sites of memory has been explored from a range of geographical perspectives. While memory is about representations, significations, and psychology, it is also a process that is embodied, materially manifest, and structured or provoked by framing mechanisms that are locally embedded. For instance, a great deal of work has examined the mnemonic significance of memorials and statues.<sup>12</sup> These can act as memory props, forcing recollection of certain people and events, and not of others. While often posed as tools of nation building, statues and monuments have also been used to contemplate the tragic and seemingly incomprehensible loss of the Holocaust.<sup>13</sup> However, material setting can also influence recollection in a variety of other ways. Street naming creates a pervasive and persistent system of recall,<sup>14</sup> while the very landscape itself can suggest certain memories over others.<sup>15</sup>

It is at these levels that spaces of memory have been investigated in their more emotional, yearning manifestations. Alison Blunt has written of Anglo-Indian nostalgia for a homeland that never materially existed, but which felt like it was actually remembered after years of colonial acculturation.<sup>16</sup> There have also been explorations of haunting, as socially and culturally mediated phenomena.<sup>17</sup> Karen Till has written of the voids and palimpsests of Berlin, in which so many regimes were emplaced and displaced in the twentieth century, each leaving their own material traces that provoke intense recollections, but also the desire to repress or forget.<sup>18</sup>

In all of these examples, the commemoration of certain interpretations of the past must necessarily block out and work to forget certain

viewpoints and experiences. It is in searching out the struggles over forgetting that this article deploys the term “sites of counter-memory.”<sup>19</sup> This phrase combines the work of Foucault with French historian Pierre Nora. Nora coined the phrase *lieux de mémoire* (sites, places, or realms of memory) to represent the ways people came to identify with the nation.<sup>20</sup> These could be material sites, such as monuments or battlefields; symbolic, such as idols or flags; or functional, such as histories or institutions. While these sites purported to refer to memory, they were in fact substitutes for memory in an age of history in which people no longer lived their traditions un-reflexively, and thus had to erect sites to embody and maintain the past. Nora’s work is haunted by a heavy nostalgia for pre-modern communities of “real” memory and a nation that can cohere its entire people around some central principles. These concepts do not take account of the ways people challenge these *lieux*, or the survival of memories beyond the spaces of the nation.

Michel Foucault drew attention to these local spaces of resilience in his emphasis on counter-memories.<sup>21</sup> These were personal recollections that refused a dominant logic and emphasis, focusing on the non-elite, the bodily, and the short-term. Combining Nora’s and Foucault’s work allows us to seek out the sites in which dominant processes of ordering and memory formation were challenged, mobilizing a counter-historical narrative—in this case that of nationalism—to forge a site of counter-memory, whether it be material, functional, or symbolic.

Colonial historical interpretations, whether academic, legalistic, or official, discredited certain interpretations and disqualified many “local memories.” A genealogy of “moments of danger” and “sites of memory” must open up and engage the varying interpretations of past events. However, it is incredibly difficult to recover the memories and statements of the oppressed, the local, and the disqualified, mediated as this recovery often is by the colonial archive. After addressing how this research was carried out, a brief survey of work on Indian memory will suggest how other scholars have tackled this dilemma.

### *Situating the Indian Archive*

This research was carried out during trips to Delhi in 2001 and 2003. As a white, western, male, middle-class researcher, I was undeniably alien to the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim subjects of different classes and castes who were the object of my study. This is not an attempt to ethnographically integrate myself within the worldview of these groups, or to empathize with the perspective of their struggle, challenging and worthwhile as these studies are. Instead, this research is an analysis of tactics, in which aspects of identity are mobilized for political means. With adequate contextualization of these identities, I attempt to chart the emergence of struggles and communities while acknowledging my position as an exter-

nal researcher. This is a position limited, but also enabled, by theoretical frameworks that contain both historical narratives and the urge to enrich these narratives with subjected knowledges.

However, the access to these knowledges is highly problematic. Within the context of later troubles in Delhi during the Quit India movement of 1942, Partition in 1947-48, the "Emergency" of 1975-77, and the Hindu-Sikh riots of 1984, the events in question here appear to have been overshadowed in the memories of those people I interviewed while in Delhi. However, memories are suspended in both mental and institutional archives.

This case study is informed by data collected from local newspapers stored in Delhi and Cambridge, from local and national colonial archives, and from independent reports. These sources include official archives that inadvertently maintained subjected knowledges within their files, while propagating a colonial, historicist narrative of liberal rule and justified discipline. Alternatively, nationalist archives placed great emphasis on local scholarly knowledge and different sources of information, although they too were historicist in their bonding of data to a nationalist narrative. Eruptions of memory must be suspended between perspectives gleaned from these differently aligned sources, situated within previous works on Indian memory and, finally, within the historical and geographical context of twentieth century colonial Delhi.

### *Memories of India*

Indian historiography is saturated with memory accounts. These range from colonial autobiographies, biographies and memoirs,<sup>22</sup> and similar nationalist accounts<sup>23</sup> to anthologies that document the memories of a particular place.<sup>24</sup> However, recent Indian scholarship has radicalized these more European and American approaches to memory. Notably, the Subaltern Studies Group revolutionized the role of memory in historical research. Founded in the early 1980s, the group objected to interpretations of the nationalist movement that focused on the elite class rather than the common people.<sup>25</sup> Attempts were made to grant local struggles autonomy from the colonial or nationalist interpretations that locked these events into teleological narratives, which inevitably lead to either colonial subjection or independence. The mid-1980s saw a shift away from a Gramscian mode of Marxist analysis to a post-structuralist emphasis on textuality and discourse.

As part of this latter shift, the emphasis came to lie on "fragments of the nation," those groups excluded from the emergent, male, middle-class, upper caste, and urban elite. Throughout these studies, emphasis had been laid on liberating subjects from both colonial modernity and the colonial archive. Evidence of the subaltern comes from re-readings of colonial texts, oral histories, dispersed moments, hidden memories, and subaltern languages, all of which the colonial governmental machine attempted to for-

get or subsume. Many of the authors involved in the Subaltern project have also dissected the events around the Partition of India in 1947, in which the role of memory and forgetting have been made even more explicit.

The Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan, both East and West, inscribed tragedy into the founding moments of these nations. Suvir Kaul has argued that this tragedy was *mourned* through the conduit of martyrdom, in which the painful memories of the murder, rape, and abduction of family members were laid to rest within the “nation.”<sup>26</sup> For nations, as countless examples testify, are founded in blood (not soil).

To claim the right of enunciation, the state attempts to organize both ethical statements and a professional class that speaks for the victims, without giving them voice. This is the “code of pacification” that Ranajit Guha challenged in his Subaltern Studies project.<sup>27</sup> This saw primary accounts of events processed into secondary reports and memoirs that influenced the tertiary discourses of historians. Regarding this process, Veena Das has argued, “In the memory of an event as it is organized and consecrated by the state, only the voice of the expert becomes embodied, acquiring in time a kind of permanence and hiding from view the manner in which the event may have been experienced by the victim herself.”<sup>28</sup>

Central to this task is the status of pain as a medium of memory. Das argues that pain has often been seen as the means by which society establishes ownership over individuals. Examples include Emile Durkheim’s study of rituals of pain as coming-of-age ceremonies in “primitive societies” and Friedrich Nietzsche’s writings on the territorialization of the body through the threat of pain in societal-individual contracts.<sup>29</sup> The physical harm caused during the violence of Partition inscribed the spatial partition of the subcontinent onto individual bodies and established anatomical markers of geopolitical “Otherness.” As Gyanendra Pandey has argued, violence and the community construct each other; violence is constitutive of the subject.<sup>30</sup>

This was part of a broader twentieth century trend that politicized the interpretation of violence, leading to state-backed accounts of events that erased local interpretations. However, Paul Brass has shown that “caste” or “communal” riots are actually open to multiple interpretations and are ambiguous in origin.<sup>31</sup> However, while the state may enforce its interpretation, not all memories of pain can be forgotten and not all knowledge of events can be subjugated.

As an alternative to state claims on suffering, Das acknowledged that pain has also been interpreted as a medium through which a historical wrong done to a person can be represented. This can be done through describing symptoms or “...at other times the form of a memory inscribed on a body.”<sup>32</sup> Alternative memories can keep an event alive, whether for an individual, a family, or in the public sphere. Instead of mourning the past, it can be *melancholically* invoked.

Urvashi Butalia has contributed to this invocation through collecting the oral histories of Partition that, against state narratives, represent the “other side of silence.”<sup>33</sup> These memories are not just the “underside” of history, “(i)n many senses, they *are* the history of the event.”<sup>34</sup> While such memories are by no means unmediated or complete, their mediation and censoring speaks as much of Partition as the object of direct discussion.

Kaul has argued that rather than considering the events of Partition as the nation writ small, there is much to learn about citizenship, the state, and mobilization by studying the local history of Partition events.<sup>35</sup> It is here that conflicts between a narrating state and resistant memories will take place. Das showed that vast energy has been invested in directing the process of mourning, in which men stressed their valour in defending the community while women mourned their lost domestic bliss.<sup>36</sup> Parita Mukta has shown that this was part of a much older tradition. In the nineteenth century, the reforming Indian middle classes were encouraged to see “uncontrolled” and “violent” forms of female, public mourning as markers of primitiveness.<sup>37</sup> The domestication of female grief not only enforced the emergent male patriarchy and embedded high-caste dictates on mourning, but also increased the power of the government, which sought to establish direct control over community justice, vendettas, and lines of inheritance. However, the state was not the only party to realize the wider significance and politics of mourning. While melancholia has been used in this article as a relationship to the past, as a reaction to death it presented a powerful focus for the broader melancholic potential of the colonial encounter.

We are realizing now the resilience of memory to the state-structured accounts of Partition. Brass has shown with regards to “communal” violence that “People with personal knowledge at the sites of occurrences of violence, lacking knowledge of the appropriate scientific categories in which to place them or refusing to accept the contextualizations of them imposed by outsiders, continue to generate their own interpretations.”<sup>38</sup> Anti-colonial nationalists also contested these sites of violence. The physical violence of military defeat, in the past, was replayed every day in colonial society through the epistemic and administrative violence of the government. However, the physical loss of an individual body to state violence presented two options to anti-colonial nationalists. First, to mourn the death and accept its passing or, second, to melancholically commemorate the death and its site of passing as a condensation and re-presentation of the colonial past. Sites of counter-memory stressed the presentness of the past and drew together the anatomical and the social body. This marshaling of local memory against the state-backed machinery of forgetting fitted into a long tradition of resistance in the subcontinent.

### *India and Delhi's Mnemonic Landscapes*

The East India Company had been “resisted” in South Asia ever since its first tentative trading in the early seventeenth century. More organized



forms of violent resistance took place in Calcutta in the 1750s and accompanied the territorial acquisitions that accelerated over the next century. The “Mutiny” of 1857 marked the widest-spread form of violent resistance, although its severe repression, and the subsequent organization of the Indian government, curtailed mass-organized uprisings in the future. In 1885, the Indian National Congress, an elite constitutional lobbying body that would eventually widen its activities and radicalize its claims, was formed. Under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Congress organized the 1919 mass protests against the Rowlatt Bill, which was followed by the Non-Cooperation movement of 1920-22.

These two movements allowed Gandhi to test his non-violent protest techniques of *satyagraha* (“truth force,” non-violent resistance) and *ahimsa* (“love for all,” action based on refusal to do harm). These techniques refused to allow Indians to be drawn into a binary that depicted them as reactionary and violent, and teased out the contradictions of a liberal colonialism that was based on violence and exploitation. The collapse of the Non-Cooperation movement following violence against the authorities was followed by a period of constructive work. This consisted of the uplift of the poor, women, and the “untouchable” sub-caste, and the encouragement of Hindu-Muslim unity. The latter of these was to weaken substantially following the failure of the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-32, which had taken a more active stance in challenging colonial laws. Following a period of governmental cooperation in the late 1930s, Congress resigned in protest at the beginning of World War II in 1939 and launched the largest rising since the mutiny in the form of the Quit India protests of 1942. Further tensions between Hindu and Muslim representatives anticipated independence in 1947 and the partition of the subcontinent into India and East and West Pakistan.

Unlike Calcutta, with its strong colonial influence and reforming middle classes, Delhi was an imperial city of tradition and custom. Independent of British rule until 1803 and only systematically reorganized along colonial lines after the “Mutiny” of 1857, Delhi remained under the Muslim influence of the Mughal Emperors who had ruled there, in name, until the mid-nineteenth century. The transfer of the capital from Calcutta to the planned city of New Delhi in 1911 increased the policing of the old city while simultaneously increasing pressure on Delhi to make an anti-colonial statement. While the city did not have a large intellectual middle class or militant working class, it did have a proud imperial, urban tradition and the dense streets of *Shahjahanabad* (the Mughal walled city) set the perfect stage for intricate public-political theatrics.<sup>39</sup> The Emperor made annual processions around the city, including more regular processions to the mosque and festivals outside the city walls. In terms of individual relationships to the urban landscape, these traditions combined with annual religious processions that ingrained in people a way of moving about and relating to the city. Celebrations took place at all scales,



from the home to the community to the bazaar to the larger streets to the larger gardens or buildings.

Old Delhi was a monumentalized and memorialized landscape, but this text was open to multiple readings, despite British attempts to have colonial authority writ large over the older, illegible urban script.<sup>40</sup> Delhi's monuments, what Young defined as *material* mnemonic tools, included the palace at the heart of the city that was the emblem of Mughal glory and, thus, was appropriated and used by the British as the base for their military might and renamed "The Fort."<sup>41</sup> Another monument was the Jama Masjid, India's largest mosque that, like much of the city, only just survived demolition after the "Mutiny."<sup>42</sup> The mosque remained unaltered, despite suggestions after the "Mutiny" that the name of a Christian saint be inscribed onto each of the compartments of the marble floor.<sup>43</sup> The destruction wrought by the British combined an urge for vengeance with a desire to erase the urban remnants of a glorious Mughal past. A 500-yard (457m) military *glacis* of cleared land around The Fort and city walls destroyed many of the city's finest *havelis* (mansions) leaving a gaping hole at the heart of the city. A Town Hall, Clock Tower, and museum on Chandni Chowk—the central thoroughfare of Old Delhi—attempted to imprint the ideals of European civil society in the heart of the city.

However, a constellation of memorial, *non-material* sites of memory spanned the city. While cohering around physical spaces, these sites depended on place-bound memories, not the actual material forms themselves. For example, in 1675, Emperor Aurangzeb had ordered the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Sikh leader, for religious dissidence. This spot became a shrine for the Sikh population, although the *Gurdwara* (Sikh temple) Sisganj was later built near this spot. In 1739, Nadir Shah's army invaded from the northwest and ordered one of Delhi's largest-ever massacres. The gate near Dariba from which Nadir Shah issued the order became known in local memory as *Khuni Darwaza* (Gateway of Blood).<sup>44</sup> This name would also be given to the gateway of the Purana Qila Fort outside the city where the Emperor's two sons were killed by the British after the Mutiny in 1857.

These non-material sites were particularly suitable for sustaining counter-memories. There were, of course, other types of counter-memory sites. Colonial sites of memory were contested, for example. The statue of Queen Victoria on Delhi's main street, Chandni Chowk, was often defaced,<sup>45</sup> as was the statue of George V in New Delhi.<sup>46</sup> The symbolic rituals of the state were undermined, whether by the attempted assassination of the Viceroy in 1912<sup>47</sup> or the black-flagging of the Prince of Wales in 1922.<sup>48</sup> Alternatively, the nationalists established their own sites of memory. Gandhi and Nehru wrote texts that served as functional sites of nationalist memory and recollection,<sup>49</sup> while the Congress office on Chandni Chowk<sup>50</sup> and M.A. Ansari's house<sup>51</sup> served as material monuments to anti-colonialism.

However, non-material sites of counter-memory also included those in which colonial backed processes of forgetting were challenged. Here local memories were charged against “official” evidence that vindicated the government’s perspective. For example, on December 23, 1912 Viceroy Hardinge made his ceremonial entrance into Old Delhi down Chandni Chowk, marking the government’s transfer to its new capital. In between the Town Hall and The Fort a bomb was thrown from an overlooking building, severely injuring the Viceroy. Aware of the potential for this building to be memorialized in the nationalist mythology, leaving a “stigma” on the landscape, the deputy commissioner demanded the building be demolished to express local disgust, although the viceroy blocked this move.<sup>52</sup>

Five years later, during the 1919 Rowlatt disturbances, the police opened fire outside the Town Hall. There was sustained criticism of the firing in the local press that aimed to brand these painful memories onto the site. The Hindustani newspaper named the Town Hall as the place where “...the blood of innocent children was shed, and into which their corpses were dragged like the carcasses of dogs. The floor of this building is still stained with the blood of martyrs.”<sup>53</sup> Local lawyer Mohammed Asaf Ali suggested that the area around the Clock Tower “be named the *Khuni Chauraha* (Square of Blood) in memory of the Delhi martyrs, just as the *Khuni Darwaza* (Gate of Blood) was so called in order to remind the people of the mutiny.”<sup>54</sup> The title would irrevocably link the sites of the Rowlatt disturbances with memories of Delhi’s terrible history of massacre by foreign invaders, linking the Town Hall with Lal Darwaza and Dariba in 1919, 1857, and 1739, respectively. The violence of 1919 was, however, overshadowed by the violence of the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930.

## The Gurdwara Sisganj Firing Incident of May 6, 1930

### *The “Event”*

While there can be no incontrovertible account of the “facts” of the event at hand, different accounts of the incident do agree on one version, which will be recounted before the interpretation of the event is covered. The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 was launched on April 5, provoking protests that included the symbolic act of creating salt from seawater that was illegal under British law, picketing colonial institutions, instigating processions throughout the city, and disobeying police laws and declarations. In the month following Gandhi’s inauguration of the movement, Delhi was regularly brought to a standstill by mass participation.<sup>55</sup> When news of Gandhi’s arrest reached Delhi on May 5, 1930 a *hartal* (strike) was organized and people gathered around Chandni Chowk in the center of the city where news of meetings and a *hartal* the next day was propagated.<sup>56</sup> On May 6, an estimated 100,000 people toured the city under Congress leadership. A smaller group of volunteers picketed

the *Cutcherry* (law courts) during which women formed a cordon around the courts to prevent lawyers going to work.<sup>57</sup> A European police officer claimed to have been attacked in his car outside the courts and injured several members of the crowd through “rapid accelerating and reversing.”<sup>58</sup> In response to news of such attacks, police reinforcements were dispatched at noon, which resulted in several *lathi* (baton) charges and the aggressive dispersal of the crowds.

At 4:00 p.m. five police lorries (trucks) were returning to the *Kotwali* (police headquarters) located on Chandni Chowk, directly bordering the Gurdwara Sisganj (Figure 1).<sup>59</sup> On approaching the *Kotwali*, the lorries came under a hail of stones thrown from a local cinema and, especially, the Gurdwara. The fifth lorry became stranded in the square causing Senior Superintendent of Police Jeffreys to lead a force out of the *Kotwali* to rescue the trapped policemen. This rescue squad itself became trapped, in response to which the order was given to open fire from the *Kotwali* on the crowd in the street and at the Gurdwara itself. While the interpretation of this event was ferociously contested, the mutually accepted end result was that four local people were killed and 190 were injured. No policemen died and only eighteen required hospital treatment.

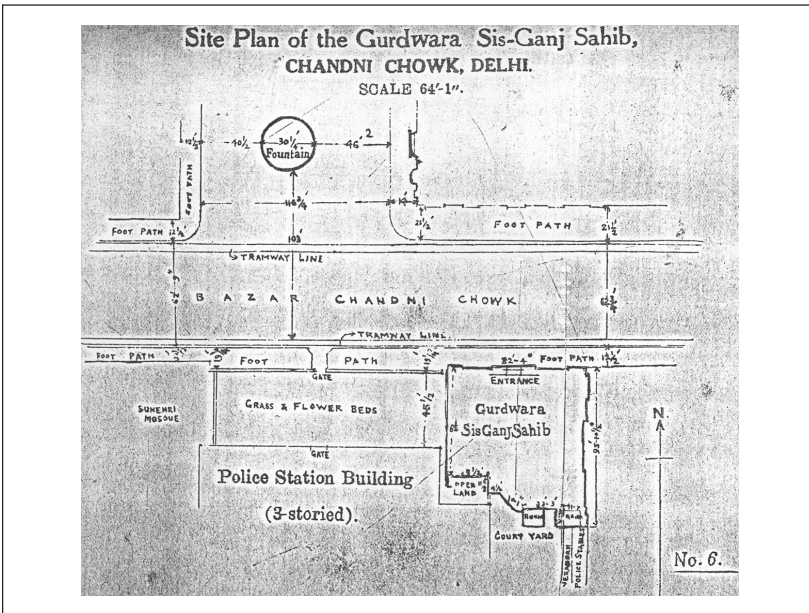


Figure 1. Map of the Police Station (*Kotwali*) and the Gurdwara Sisganj.

### Censoring Memory

As with 1919, an official inquiry was held by the government. It was convened in the Town Hall on Chandni Chowk and was a private inves-

tigation chaired by local magistrate Abdul Samad. The aim was to curtail the mourning of the dead and to close the debate on the meaning of what had passed, remembering certain details and forgetting others. However, this process of censorship was challenged by the Gurdwara Sis-Ganj Firing Committee, which was established on May 15. This committee's proceedings were public and were carried out behind the Town Hall in Queen's Gardens. People were encouraged to come and tell their stories about May 6; over 1,000 people did so in the following week.<sup>60</sup>

The official report of the government's inquiry was submitted on May 26 and the Gurdwara Committee agreed with the portrayal of preceding events, as already outlined in this article. However, the counter-report excelled at deconstructing many of the implicit binaries within the language of the official account. While accepting that the crowd was agitated, it stressed that the majority of the thousands of people remained non-violent. The inherent violence implied in the chief commissioner's depiction of the crowd as "swarming" and a "mob," and thus teleologically destined to violence, was challenged with the assertion that, given the total hartal, many people were "sightseers" or concerned about arrested friends who had been taken to the Kotwali. Having debunked the image of the irrational crowd, the rationality of the police was challenged. The Gurdwara Report stressed that the police had been overworked for a month, that they were tired, and thus wanted any opportunity, "real or imaginary, to wreak vengeance upon the crowd which had no doubt annoyed them a good deal and to 'make an impression.'"<sup>61</sup>

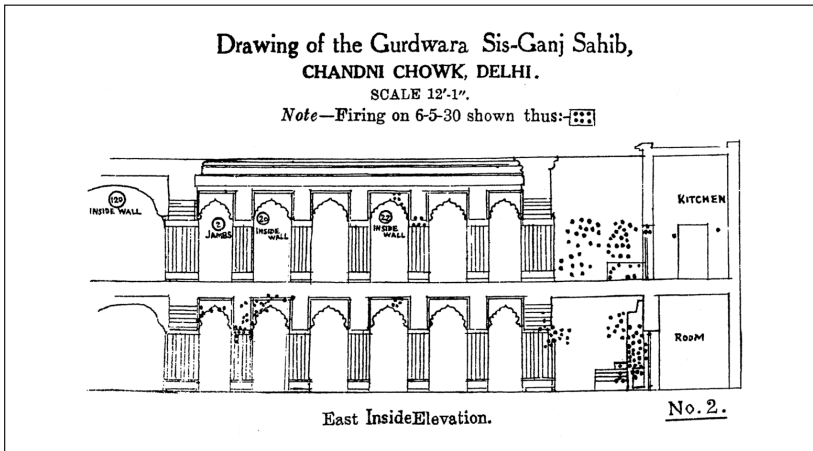
This impression making took the form of a fifteen-to-twenty minute firing session, which left 685 bullet marks on the Gurdwara alone. Having agreed roughly on the line of events up until this point, the two reports diverged in their conclusions. The Magistrate and Gurdwara Committee concluded respectively:

"Taking into consideration the above circumstances, I came to the conclusion that the firing at the Sisganj Gurdwara and the fountain was inevitable and had there been a slight hesitation on the part of the police in the firing, the Senior Superintendent and his party including those in the lorry who had no fire-arms would have undoubtedly lost their lives... In the end I am unable to withhold myself from expressing that the manly spirit shown by Mr. Jeffreys in saving his men is creditable."<sup>62</sup>

"Now, considering the duration, the number of marks on the walls, and the way the Police fired into the Gurdwara, we have no hesitation in saying that the firing was **indiscriminate, vindictive, and excessive.**"<sup>63</sup>

The Gurdwara Report then presented the evidence for its counter-claims. The firing was claimed to be "indiscriminate" because bullet marks

were found where nobody could possibly have been standing. Three diagrams of the Gurdwara (Figure 2) were presented showing that the upper arches and the dome of the Gurdwara has been hit. Human bodies had been similarly victimized; a 14-year-old boy was allegedly hit in the intestines while another was shot through the arm. Second, the firing was claimed to be “vindictive” because no distinction between the innocent and the guilty was made. Photographs were included to show that old and young became victims alike.



**Figure 2.** One of three diagrams illustrating bullet marks on the Gurdwara exterior.

Third, the firing was deemed “excessive” because of its fifteen-to-twenty minute duration. The superintendent had claimed that bricks continued to be thrown during this time, thus justifying the shooting, at which the committee could not withhold its incredulity:

“It is inconceivable that in a place which was quite exposed to the firing of the Police from three directions anyone but a lunatic could have had the temerity and the foolhardiness to throw a brickbat and come forward against men who had rifles or revolvers in their hands and who were actually firing at the time.”<sup>64</sup>

Finally, it was claimed that the Gurdwara was “violated” not only from without, but also from within. A diagram was provided showing that bullet marks had been found on sacred points within the temple (Figure 3), while the oral testimonies collected at Queen’s Gardens were included in an appendix.

The appendix was forty-five pages long and contained forty-four statements. This evidence did serve an official and evidential function; it confirmed that there was little evidence of stone throwing near the kotwali





Gurdwara. Further statements stressed that it was the religious site *itself* that had been insulted. Shots were seen hitting the *Nishan Sahib* (the Sikh religious standard), while images of Guru Gobind Singh Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh Ji were pierced by bullets. This lead Bhai Beant Singh to claim that: "As a Sikh it gave me severe mental shock to see the Gurdwara being desecrated by Police by bringing their shoes into the *Smadh* (shrine) of Guru Tegh Bahadur and firing on the Gurdwara." As such, the statements tethered the shooting both *down*, onto individual bodies, but also *up*, onto the wider Sikh faith itself. As S. Wasakha Singh stated: "We felt that it was a great insult to the Gurdwara and thereby to the Sikh religion; and, not only did we alone feel it, but as the Gurdwara belonged to the *Panth* (faith), therefore, every Sikh felt this insult."

It must be stressed that the Gurdwara report cannot be assumed to be the "true" account, but marks a refusal to forget certain perspectives and elements of experience. The report was written in a formal style and presented like government reports, assuming the archival techniques by which the government had previously attempted to dictate the transition of the shooting into history. However, the memorialization process was not only local and contested in the written word, it had wider and enduring consequences in the lived world.

## *Habitus*

While sites of counter-memory mark dramatic confrontations with dominant historical narratives, they must also draw on existing memories and intuitions to be a success, and have some effect in order to be remembered and useful. These memory-structures are captured in Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus." This describes those place-specific systems of durable dispositions that predispose people to organize practices and representations in certain ways.<sup>66</sup> Chandni Chowk was a space that mediated the narrative and institutions of nationalism with local action, encouraging people to congregate and participate in a fashion forged throughout people's lives in both political and religious meetings and processions. People instinctively flocked to this thoroughfare and provided the human resources for political protests. The Gurdwara Committee also drew on a tradition of challenging government censorship, from the newspaper outcries following the 1919 Rowlatt disturbances shootings<sup>67</sup> to the report by the Bar Association of Lawyers following the police action before the Gurdwara shootings. The report was issued on May 12 and claimed that the police force was "unwarranted and unjustifiable," that the assaults were "illegal and indefensible" and that the attacks on women and children were "reprehensible and cowardly."<sup>68</sup>

The police were aware of the potential of the Gurdwara shootings to spark the atmosphere that centered on Chandni Chowk. While habitus is generally stable, it is open to experiences that can reinforce or modify



practice.<sup>69</sup> A funeral procession on the following day for one of those killed in the shooting was banned using Criminal Procedure Code 144, which prohibited public meetings of more than ten people. The chief commissioner stated in his message to the home secretary on May 8 that “From past experience in Delhi the dangerous results of such processions are only too well known.”<sup>70</sup>

Regardless, the shooting did prove to have consequences outside the immediate locality and period. On May 12 Geoffrey de Montmorency, the governor of the Punjab, became aware of a plan to memorialize the incident across India. Every Gurdwara was to recite a prayer repeating the Gurdwara committee’s conclusions and asking the guru for the destruction of the British nation and its government in India, although no evidence of these requests has been found.<sup>71</sup>

However, work continued to craft the Gurdwara as a national site of counter-memory. On February 26, 1931 Gandhi himself spoke in the Gurdwara, making a speech that was reproduced in the nationalist all-India periodical “Young India” on March 5. He spoke of his “painful interest” in the details of the police firing, which had been reiterated for the audience by the previous speaker. Stressing his grief and resentment at the transgression of the sacred precincts of the Gurdwara, Gandhi also linked this local event into the national movement, stressing that “we are today fighting not for one Gurdwara but for the bigger Gurdwara, which is the common sacred possession of us all, namely, *purna swaraj* (complete independence).”<sup>72</sup>

Complementing these efforts to craft the Gurdwara into an emblem of the Indian nation itself, it also became a site of commemoration to instigate and inspire future local nationalist movements. Attempts were made to mark May 6 in 1932, while as late as May 6, 1939, the Sisganj Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee petitioned the chief commissioner demanding recognition of their account of the Sisganj site, not that of the government.<sup>73</sup> Twelve years after the incident, the Gurdwara shootings were mobilized again in the run up to the Quit India protests of 1942.<sup>74</sup> Congress was responsible for organizing these commemorations, mobilizing the site across the religious community.

It is at this point that the Gurdwara must lose its place as the sole object of study and come to be placed within the earlier-described mnemonic landscape of Old Delhi. The long-standing commemoration of the Gurdwara site attests to its elevation into the constellatory network of anti-colonial sites within the walled city. The Gurdwara functioned as a site of counter-memory not just in terms of discourse and the archive, but in terms of a local and distinctly spatial construction of memory against forgetting. Popular demonstration in Delhi relied upon *hartals* (strikes) and processions through the city. These would start at the *mohalla* (walled community) scale, encouraging people out of their homes.<sup>75</sup> Processions would then usually move towards Chandni Chowk, touring the main bazaars before terminating in a meeting ground, usually Queen’s Gardens

behind the Town Hall. Throughout these processions, speeches would be made by prominent local nationalist politicians that further enthused the crowd, stressed the purpose of the protest, and encouraged others to join in. The talks drew upon local memories—of Delhi's proud Mughal heritage; of the post-Mutiny massacres; of the Rowlatt disturbances and the non-cooperation movement; of Gandhi's comments. The Gurdwara provided a key site for these speeches, a dominating physical monument to the Sikh faith that was re-signified into a site of counter-memory against colonial violence. This was a site commemorated by Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus who, until the mid-1930s, were more unified against the British than they were divided against each other. As such, the Gurdwara functioned both discursively and performatively, not as a site of mourning, but as a place to melancholically revoke a colonial-historicist appraisal that cast the shooting as "inevitable" and "manly."

However, the Gurdwara incident also served to "problematize" the government's technologies of rule, both in terms of techniques of discipline on the streets and the means of crafting memories of state violence.<sup>76</sup> The review of incidents such as those in Delhi led to the fortification of government powers that allowed the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1932 to be crushed so much more effectively. The local authorities also learned their lessons. On March 12, 1932, the police accidentally stormed *Hauzwali Masjid*, a small mosque, having mistaken it for a house.<sup>77</sup> Within twelve days, the police had issued an inquiry report complete with dozens of statements from locals claiming that anyone not familiar with the locality would not have known that the building housed a mosque. Having adopted techniques similar to that of the Gurdwara Committee, the situation appeared to have been defused. Despite their need for local sites of inspiration and a meeting of 3,000 people at the Jama Masjid on March 26 that carried a resolution of protest against the Hauzwali incident, plans to mark April 1 as "Mosque Day" came to nothing.

### Conclusion: Effective Historical Geographies

In arguing for an effective history, Foucault urged us to examine discontinuity and moments of the "reversal of forces."<sup>78</sup> As a local history of struggles, this article has sought to highlight a site of counter-memory that could form a small part of a wider effective historical geography of anti-colonialism in Delhi. Drawing on Nietzsche, Foucault outlined three means of relating to history (antiquarian, monumental, and effective), only the latter of which was recommended. While this research has been local and historical, it has aimed to resist the antiquarian trait of recording communal continuity by charting the emergence of political perspectives and identities.<sup>79</sup> Second, while focusing on a particular site, it has avoided the monumental urge to present this place as a key moment in a heroic struggle through stressing the small motivations and chance encounters behind this place of contestation.

Instead, this account has attempted to be what Nietzsche referred to as “critical,” and Foucault as “effective.” That is, an attempt to highlight the discontinuities of the past through stressing places in which history has been foregrounded, assessed, and then condemned.<sup>80</sup> This forgetting of history through, ironically, the melancholic refusal to forget certain memories, can generate new identities rather than preserve old ones.

Sites of counter-memory attempted to be normative in the past, crafting new social relations and challenging the passage of resilient events into conformist history. But could accounts of these sites be normative and effective in the present? Various authors have argued that they should be. Within the context of the “nuclearization” of India and Pakistan, Kaul has stressed that people have not forgotten Partition, but that they have selectively memorialized it in line with authorized histories.<sup>81</sup> Yet this does not confine Partition to the past. Memories of dismemberment, the desire for revenge, and “atavistic religious fundamentalists” lodge memories of 1947 firmly in the present.<sup>82</sup>

Delhi has witnessed the return of these memories more than most. The Hindu-Sikh riots of 1984 led many to comment that “This is like Partition again.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly, Emma Tarlo has provided an exemplary recollection of memories from the “Emergency” in Delhi during 1975-77, in which the state assumed authoritarian powers to re-house and forcibly sterilize the urban poor.<sup>84</sup> These riots and re-housings can be understood only in the context of a Delhi vastly reshaped by mass migration during 1947-48.<sup>85</sup> Such events impress upon us, in Butalia’s words, that particular explorations of the past are required by experiences of the present.<sup>86</sup>

These events depend on a form of history-making that assumes a stable subject—the over-populating slum dweller; the militant and separatist Sikh; the cunning and treacherous Hindu; the impure and polluting Muslim.<sup>87</sup> To deconstruct these identities in the present, one must deploy the evidence from the past that contradicts these essentialist and violently nationalist notions. The Gurdwara incident recalls a time when Hindus and Sikhs were united against the British. While not without internal tensions, these were groups with shared origins and beliefs. Das has shown that Sikh (and no doubt Hindu) identity narratives rely on systematic “forgetting” in which a cloud of amnesia obscures the common pasts of Sikhs and Hindus.<sup>88</sup> Studies of counter-memory can bring to light the attempts in the past to refute a dominant narrative while also highlighting events that contradict current attempts to craft identities of the present, and memories of the past.

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## Notes

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