2020

1984 and Film: Trauma and the Evolution of the Punjabi Sikh Identity

Hayley Dawn Segall
Oberlin College

1984 and Film: Trauma and the Evolution of the Punjabi Sikh Identity

Hayley Segall

Capstone Essay
Dr. Emilia Bachrach
Department of Religion, Oberlin College
April 12, 2020

Abstract: This capstone analyzes Punjabi Sikh identity to expand scholarly discourse on trauma and identity formation. After providing background on Sikh roots in Punjab, this piece relates Sikh trauma from 1984 to a contemporary collective identity. In June 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Bluestar; troops stormed the sacred Golden Temple to capture a perceived militant, Jarnail Bhindranwale. Because hundreds of civilians died in the crossfire, Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. In retaliation, Hindu nationalists slaughtered thousands of Sikhs in the Delhi Riots. The effects of violence against Sikhs in Operation Bluestar and the Delhi riots reflect both a continued marginalization of the Punjabi Sikh community and a unique emergent collective identity. Instead of further deviating from foundational Sikh tenets, Punjabi Sikhs have begun to reclaim autonomy in defining their identity in the public sphere by confronting their collective trauma through films such as *Punjab 1984* (2014).

Key Words: Punjab, Sikhism, Trauma, Identity, Operation Bluestar, the Delhi Riots, Film, *Punjab 1984*

Acknowledgements

I want to thank and acknowledge the many people who helped shape this capstone. To my professors and advisors-- thank you for your wisdom, thoughtful feedback, and for pushing me to reflect on my own positionality in this work. To my friends and peers-- thank you for sharing your stories and inspiring me with your continued passion for all that you write and create. Most importantly, I must acknowledge the countless Punjabi Sikhs whose identities and livelihoods were and continue to be affected by senseless violence. May this work shed light on a deep necessity to challenge our assumptions about identity and encourage more space for voices from these marginalized communities to safely and openly share their stories, in whatever capacity that they choose to do so.

Table of Contents

Introduction

June 3, 1984, former Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, permitted troops to storm the most sacred Sikh site in the world, the Golden Temple.[1] The military attack, known as Operation Bluestar, aimed to capture a perceived Sikh radical militant, Jarnail Bhindranwale.[2] Yet, it was the Sikh civilian devotees, trapped inside the Golden Temple complex at the time, who suffered the most from this infamously bloody mission. This deadly confrontation in Amritsar, a holy city in Punjab, compelled Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards to retaliate by assassinating the Prime Minister on October 31, 1984.[3] For this singular act of violence, nationalist Hindu mobs countered with attacks on a grandiose scale, burning, stabbing, and gorily murdering thousands of Sikhs in and around the city of Delhi. This pogrom, known as the Delhi Riots, sent shock waves through the Sikh community across the globe and exposed the true vulnerability of Sikhs in the Indian public sphere.[4] Yet, instead of elevating the voices of a non-violent Punjabi Sikh majority, public discourse often overly popularizes a generalize image of the Sikh community as militant terrorists whose sole mission is to avenge the deaths of their own people through violence.[5] Much of this initial misconception that paints Punjabi Sikhs as complacent or complicit in violence may be rooted in another myth in which some scholars mistakenly conflate Punjabi Sikhs' relative silence in the post-1984 period with a failure to cultivate a collective identity.[6]

[1] *1984: A Sikh Story*, directed by Jonathan Mayo and presented by Sonial Deol, (2010; UK: BBC, 2014), YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ. ~18:00-22:00.
[2] For more information on Jarnail Bhindranwale, see the following source:
Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, Editor, *Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, (Richmond, UK: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 352-354.
[3] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo. 33:20-47:00.
[4] This capstone focuses on the Sikh experience and trauma of 1984. This is not to discount the loss and tragedy experienced by other communities, and throughout this capstone, resources for broader conversation will be footnoted.
[5] I would like to thank Professor Cindy Chapman for elevating this concept as essential in my introduction.
[6] An analysis of scholarly claims that speak to a failure in collective identity will be discussed in Section 4 of this capstone.

The imposition of faith–based violence, the violation of sacred spaces, and the seeming misrepresentation of collective values and identity begs numerous questions about socio-political dynamics and identity formation for Sikhs in Punjab: what does the trauma of 1984 mean for the Punjabi Sikh identity? This capstone theorizes that the effects of violence against Sikhs in Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots during 1984 reflect both a continued marginalization of the Punjabi Sikh community and a unique emergent collective identity. Instead of further deviating from foundational Sikh tenets, Punjabi Sikhs have begun to reclaim autonomy in defining their identity in the public sphere by confronting their collective trauma through films such as *Punjab 1984* (2014). While there are other means of identity formation, film provides a unique and undervalued lens for understanding cultural and less-explicit forms of collective identity and community resilience. In order to best understand the impact of 1984's trauma on the contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity, this capstone will first unpack the origins and meaning of place and belonging for Sikhs in Punjab. Then, by delving into the political climate and influences of the mid-to-late 1900s, one can name relevant trauma theories and apply them to survivors' accounts of 1984. Finally, this capstone will explore the contemporary manifestations of Punjabi Sikh identity by analyzing the emergence of the Punjabi Sikh film industry alongside the content of film that explicitly confronts the violence of 1984.

Addressing the Writer's Positionality

The content of this capstone explicitly names the traumas and vulnerabilities of a marginalized community of color. As a non-Sikh, white voice from outside the region of South Asia, I write with an active consciousness about the outsider status that I hold within this field of study. In order to mitigate the obstacles and unintended biases that stem from my outsider

identity, I draw from numerous primary sources and secondary sources from authors of color who self-identify with the Indian sub-continent. While this capstone would ideally use a bibliography drawn almost entirely from voices of the region, unfortunately, there is not yet a full canon that encapsulates this discourse. I hope that this capstone challenges Western assumptions about trauma and identity formation while raising broader awareness about the need to diversify our current academic discourse to include insider voices of the regions and communities discussed.

Section 1 Importance of Place and Belonging: Origins of Sikh Identity in Punjab

Sect 1.1 Introduction:

Punjab is a critical state for the Sikh community and has been for centuries due to its inextricable ties to Sikh religious, linguistic and cultural memory. The region functions as both a theoretical place of belonging and a physical space to memorialize the marginalization and trauma of the Sikh community. However, to assess the inherent importance of the word and place, "Punjab," one must consider the changing borders and composition of the region.

During the birth of the Sikh faith in the 15th century, Punjab reached from present-day Delhi in the south-east of the Indian subcontinent to the borders of modern-day Afghanistan in the north-west. Punjab's eastern border by the Himalayas reached up to the river Jamuna and its western border stopped at the river Indus.[7] This large territory included a vast array of peoples. Therefore, while the region of Punjab is now claimed largely by the Sikh community, one must acknowledge that the region housed a multitude of much older and larger religious/cultural communities, particularly of Hindu and Muslim background, throughout Sikh formation and

[7] Gurharpal Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case-Study of Punjab* (New York: MacMillan Press LTD, 2000), 79.

evolution. These multi-faith roots become significant in understanding the conflict that arises when multiple communities base parts of their collective identity on commonly claimed spaces. The historical roots and origins of Sikhism in the "original" Punjab fundamentally relate to the changing sense of space, belonging and identity in the 20th-century Punjab.

Sect 1.2 The Birth of Sikhism and attachment to place:

Punjab functions as the birthplace of the Sikh name, scripture, and language, thus giving deep significance to a regional context in the formation and understanding of Punjabi Sikh collective identity. The sociopolitical, historical and religious ties to the physical region relate to essential elements of the Punjabi Sikh identity: Oneness in faith, equality of person, and poetic worship in practice. The first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak, was born on April 15th, 1469, in Talwandi, a small Punjabi village in current-day Pakistan.[8] As the legend goes, the then-herdsman Nanak disappeared for three days while bathing in a river near his home, and when he returned, revealed that he had been in communion with the "Supreme Being."[9] Guru Nanak, after a day of silent meditation, proclaimed what is now one of the most quintessential phrases in the Sikh faith: "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim."[10] From Nanak's first utterings, Sikh identity has existed between two historically opposing (or at least perceived opposing) communities.[11] Sikhs did not articulate a desire to dominate other faiths, and in fact, the foundation of their faith implies a

[8] Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," in *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 17.
[9] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 17.
[10] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 17.
[11] More info on communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, please see the following resources:
A.C. Bayly, "The Pre-History of 'Communalism': Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860," *Modern Asian Studies* 19, no. 2 (1985): 177-203.
Christophe Jaffrelot, *Religion, Caste, and Politics in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
Raheel Dhattiwala, *Keeping the Peace: Spatial Differences in Hindu-Muslim Violence in Gujarat in 2002* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
Zoya Khaliq Hasan, "Communalism and Communal Violence in India," *Social Scientist* 10, no. 2 (1982): 25-39.

belief in the dissolution of identity boundaries, in favor of an indiscriminate perspective of one humanity. Yet, their unique religious values and newness to the region put Sikh devotees in an uphill battle for legitimacy in the public sphere. The contrast between foundational dissolution of boundaries and the battle for legitimacy becomes increasingly important, complicated, and difficult to reconcile with each historical moment of faith-based violence against the Sikh community, and particularly when understanding the violence of 1984.

Another foundational characteristic to articulate about Sikhism is that at its earliest formation, the faith and community relied on inclusive, peaceful methods of expression and identity formation. Some of these methods include language, religious scripture and community spaces of worship. In sharp contrast to the existing religious identities in Punjab, Sikhism rejected the established social hierarchies. Guru Nanak spoke against the traditional caste system and the elitism of Sanskrit; instead, he favored indigenous languages of the region.[12] This rejection of elitist language would inspire the transcription of Sikh holy texts to be in Gurumukhi script, a language invented by the second Guru.[13] The Gurumukhi script has evolved into modern-day Punjabi, thus laying the foundation for the linguistic attachment that the Sikh community has to the physical region of Punjab.[14] The second Guru, Guru Angad, codified the concept of accessible/regional language, along with the multitude of beliefs and traditions that make up the Sikh faith. He began to compile a vast collection of devotional poetry in the forests of Amritsar, Punjab in the early-to-mid 16th century.[15] The Guru's compilations would evolve into *the* sacred Sikh scripture, and, eventually, the eternal Guru of the Sikh community: The *Adi*

[12] Surinder S. Jodhka, "Sikhs in Contemporary Times: Religious Identities and Discourses of Development," *Sikh Formations* 5, no.1 (June 2009): 10.
[13] Jodhka, "Sikhs in Contemporary Times,"10.
[14] Jodhka, "Sikhs in Contemporary Times,"10.
[15] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 22.

Granth (commonly known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*).[16] The physical spot of the text's creation is now marked by the shrine Ramsar in Amritsar to commemorate the holy history and nature of the space.[17] In other words, while Punjab generally is the birthplace of the Sikh idea, Amritsar became the specific holy ground in which Divine values and scriptures that guide the Punjabi Sikh identity began.

The importance of Amritsar as a holy Punjabi city further solidified through the construction of the Harimandir, later known as the Golden Temple, in 1577.[18] The completion of the Golden Temple in 1601 established a physical space to both embody Sikh tradition and facilitate the evolution of identity. The Golden Temple, until the present moment, is the most sacred space for Sikhs globally, mainly because it houses the *Guru Granth Sahib* in its inner sanctuary, and has since 1604.[19] The Golden Temple complex offers a private physical space for individualized meditative prayer, collective communal devotion, and identity-based protection. Anyone, including non-Sikhs, is welcome to enter a gurdwara, so while holy spaces like the Golden Temple are sacred and private in primary function, their boundaries, as representative of the Guru's primary utterings, are not strictly defined. In addition to holding holy services, the Golden Temple also serves as a space for the formation and evolution of the Sikh secular identity. The construction of the Akal Takht or the "Throne of the timeless One" in the Temple's complex functions as a temporal authority for secular affairs.[20] The private spaces within the

[16] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 22.
In 1708, the 9th *Guru* named the Guru Granth as the 10th and eternal successor (27).
[17] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 22.
[18] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 23.
[19] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 24.
[20] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 25.
According to eye-witness accounts, this is where Bhindranwale barricaded himself and fired gunshots from during Operation Bluestar; see *1984: A Sikh Story* (19:00-21:00).

Temple, as a larger holy sphere, set a historical-religious framework for targeted violence against the Sikh community throughout its existence.

The building of the Golden Temple and compilation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* coincided with the rising popularity of Sikhism in the region of Punjab; while these actions reflected a peaceful framework, the imposition of violence and fear by outsiders dramatically affected the peaceful tone foundational to Sikhism. As Mughal rulers felt increasingly threatened by the growing Sikh community, they lashed out against Sikh leadership; Emperor Jahangir executed Guru Arjan in 1606.[21] Guru Arjan's execution was an attempt to dismember the strength of the Sikh identity, but the actual effect was simply a change in Sikh identity: "[Guru Arjan's] martyrdom marked the beginnings of the transformation of Sikhism from pacifist reformers to the militant Khalsa."[22] Guru Arjan's death symbolizes the first significant time that the Sikh community experienced unprovoked, faith-based violence in the public sphere. Up until that moment, the roots of Sikh identity rested in equality, Oneness, and poetic worship. Yet, when outsiders imposed violence on the community as a means of disempowerment, Sikh identity began to reshape into a mold influenced by the trauma of exclusion and violence. The Sikh community reacted to the trauma of attacks on religious leadership by institutionalizing a religiously sponsored military structure to protect and defend the Sikh community. They first raised a small army and then built a fortress, the Iron Fort, to protect Amritsar in 1609.[23] The literal barrier constructed to protect a perceived holy and threatened public space highlights the true significance of the region within the context of Sikhism's scriptural roots. These barriers also signify the physical measures that Sikhs have historically felt the need to take to create a

[21] Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*,80.
[22] Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*, 80.
[23] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 25.

sense of safety in public spaces. Yet, these physical and symbolic barriers that the Sikh community was forced to erect are counter-intuitive to the founding principles uttered by Guru Nanak; thus, beyond the trauma of physical violence and marginalization of the Sikh community, much of Sikh trauma must also come from the coercion by outsiders to adapt and change founding principles of the Sikh faith through imposition of fear and violence. The institutionalization of Sikh militarism evolved throughout the 17th century and culminated in the sacred *Order of the Pure,* or the *Khalsa*, in 1699.[24] The importance of militarism and protection, as related to continued acts of outsider violence, is codified in the *Guru Granth Sahib* under the section of *Ardas*.

The *Ardas* prayer is an 18th-century addition that may be read by any person capable of reading the *Guru Granth Sahib* as the congregation joins in at intervals; the prayer is read standing, potentially to parallel the sense of strength and autonomy that the *Ardas* strives to assert.[25] The text vividly, and at times graphically, acknowledges and martyrizes violence imposed on Sikh devotees for merely practicing their faith:

> "The Sikh men and women who gave their heads for their religion,//Whose limbs were cut off one by one,//Who were scalped, broken on the wheel, and sawn in pieces,//Who sacrificed their lives to serve the gurudwaras,//Their faith triumphed."[26]

These lines speak to the historical trauma of physical violence imposed on Sikh people in the public multi-faith sphere. The text also connects social discrimination against Sikhs to traumatic acts of violence against them. Not only are community members physically harmed, but their

[24] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 25.
For more information on the Khalsa please see the following source
Hew McLeod, "The Five Ks of the Khalsa Sikhs," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 128, no. 2 (2008): 325-31, www.jstor.org/stable/25608364.
[25] Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, trans. "Verses of the Sikh Gurus: Ardas." In *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 131.
[26] Singh, trans. "Verses of the Sikh Gurus: Ardas," 133-34.

duty in the private sphere to serve a Divine cause, by practicing their faith in the gurdwara[27], is subsequently also damaged. Beyond the literal significance of the text, the *Ardas* exists within the *Guru Granth Sahib*, which, for the last 400 years, has rested in the ultimate gurdwara, the Golden Temple.[28] The inclusion of this prayer in the most sacred text of the Sikh faith that is housed in a holy space in Amritsar highlights an awareness by the innovators of Sikh tradition of the role that trauma plays in the evolving Sikh identity.

Sect. 1.3 Sikhs in Partition and the Evolving Punjabi State:

It is impossible to effectively speak to identity and violence in contemporary India without recognizing the widespread destruction and fatalities resulting from the 1947 Partition. Violence against and marginalization of Sikh people in Punjab are consistent throughout the existence of the community. In the centuries following Sikh institutionalization, trauma from the times of the mortal Gurus remained fundamental to the collective Sikh identity. However, the 20th century, and 1984 specifically, became major turning points in the understanding of traumatic memory and how this memory forges contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity. The Partition of modern-day India, Pakistan, and, eventually, Bangladesh resulted in a diaspora that forced approximately 8.6 million people to abandon their homes and left more than 300,000 people dead.[29] The region of Punjab was, quite literally, split down the middle, to form states within modern-day India and Pakistan, which represents another instance of outside parties forcing Sikhs to transgress their foundational principle of dissolute boundaries. Prior to Partition, Sikhs were the smallest of the three major religious communities in Punjab (at only 13%), but when Punjab divided, almost all of the Hindu and Sikh populations moved from the western

[27] Gurudwara and gurdwara are both accepted spellings and are often used interchangeably.
[28] Singh, "From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth," 24.
[29] Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*, 89.

Pakistani side to the eastern Indian side.[30] The ethnic cleansing of Partition and shift in demographics of the region created a new socio-political context. Since its birth, the Sikh community has been subject to the dominating powers of Muslims and Hindus who possessed some claim over the region. Yet, as the physical borders shifted and Hindus began to identify with a more Hindu-nationalist identity, Sikhs were finally able to claim tangible socio-political roots in Punjab that previously only existed through religious symbolism.[31] Still, one must acknowledge the consistent narrative of a Muslim-majority Pakistan and a Hindu-majority India that consistently oppresses their Sikh communities, leading to an even deeper attachment within the Sikh community to the region of Punjab.[32]

One of the main reasons that Sikhs have been able to become a dominant demographic in Punjab is that, in the aftermath of Partition, Punjabi Hindu nationalists rallied for Punjabi Hindus to speak Hindi (rather than Punjabi). The grounds for these efforts were to create a Hindu nationalist identity: "In an atmosphere of communal polarization and divisions, the Hindu Punjabi elite chose to identify itself with the new nation-state of India, foregrounding its nationalist identity with the regional and cultural moorings of Punjab." [33] The shift of demographics in Punjab sanctified the Punjabi language and territory in a new way for Sikhs; they reclaimed this newly found space by advocating for the *Punjabi Suba*, an official Punjabi-speaking province.[34] After much resistance from the government, for fear of giving power and

[30] Jodhka, "Sikhs in Contemporary Times," 3.
[31] For resources on the Partition of 1947, see the following:
Anindya Raychaudhuri, *Narrating South Asian partition: Oral History, Literature, Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
Churnjeet Mahn and Anne Murphy, editors. *Partition and the Practice of Memory* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018).
Pippa Virdee, *From the Ashes of 1947: Reimagining Punjab* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: the making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
[32] I would like to thank Professor Emilia Bachrach for highlighting this necessary and thoughtful point.
[33]Jodhka, "Sikhs in Contemporary Times," 3.
[34] Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*, 90.

autonomy to a Sikh state, the Punjab Reorganization Act (1966) came into effect in 1966; Sikhs 'earned' this right through their demonstrated loyalty and "patriotism" during the Indo-Pakistan war.[35] One might also draw a parallel between the necessity for Sikhs to "earn" their right to place roots in a specific place and the battle to establish legitimacy of faith in comparison to older Hindu and Muslim peers. Perhaps this is one of the first real moments of success in which the Sikh community experienced recognition as a formal identity worthy of space and autonomy despite other forms of continued marginalization. The redrawing of Punjab's borders excluded Hindi-speaking territories, thus allowing for the Sikh population to become a majority in the state. While in 1931, Sikhs were 13% of the general Punjab population, by 1971, Sikhs made up 60%.[36]

Sect 1.4 Conclusion:

By the latter half of the 20th century, leading up to 1984, the Sikh community made enormous strides in attaining legitimization of their identity within Punjab. They were able to become the majority population in the area where their faith was founded, codified, and institutionalized. The Sikh community achieved the ability to live in a public sphere where their most intimate and private spheres, the Golden Temple and the scriptures that it protects, were built and maintained. Despite these successes, memories of marginalization persisted within the undertones of Sikh identity in tangible and symbolic ways: the walls of the Temple, the lines of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the collective memory of persecution, and the rise of militaristic voices that invoked the language of *Ardas*. The events that would occur in 1984 would harken back to

[35] Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*, 91.
[36] Jodhka, "Sikhs in Contemporary Times," 3.

the trauma of perceived unprovoked attack on sacred Sikh land and identity, thus creating the context for the most influential turning point in contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity.[37]

Section 2 Punjabi Political Sphere and Khalistan: Buildup to and aftermath of 1984

Section 2.1 Introduction:

The 20th century was a period of dramatic change and challenge for the newfound states of India and Pakistan as they navigated the end of a colonial era and the beginning of statehood as independent polities. As previously discussed, Punjab was dramatically affected demographically, religiously, politically and socially by the Partition of 1947. Yet, the years after Partition proved to be continuously challenging as the region struggled to redefine its cultural and political identity. The newfound majority of Punjabi Sikhs sought leadership and unity; many found that voice in Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a fundamentalist Punjabi Sikh preacher.

In order to have any well-rounded and ethically informed conversation about contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity formation, one must directly acknowledge the messy ideological atmosphere that gave rise to a figure like Bhindranwale: "Dissatisfaction with economic, social, and political conditions found a voice in the late 1970's in a charismatic Sikh preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who was able to articulate these grievances as discrimination against Sikhs and the intentional undermining of Sikh identity."[38] Yet, Bhindranwale's rise was, in large part, a product of political parties' attempt to manipulate vulnerable Punjabi Sikh communities. This section will provide preliminary background

[37] While Section 1 seeks to provide information on Sikhism and Sikh identity as a whole, the discussion of identity formation in relationship to 1984 in the rest of this capstone focuses specifically on Punjabi Sikh identity (rather than making hyper-generalizations that include diasporic Sikh communities).

[38] Virginia Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era: Structural Change and New Political Compulsions," *Asian Survey* XLIX, No. 6, (November/December 2009), 980.

regarding the ideological influences on 1984 by naming and unpacking pertinent political parties and actors, the rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the call to a sovereign Sikh state, Khalistan.

Section 2.2 Defining Political Parties and Actors:

The political and religious atmosphere of Punjabi Sikh communities and the broader state of Punjab are inextricably connected and deeply complex. For Western readers like myself, it can be difficult to fully grasp the political structure of the contemporary Indian democracy, because it does not entirely reflect a traditional U.S. two-party or European parliamentary system. Instead, the subcontinent has its own unique and deeply complex system that is reflective of its ancient roots and drastically changing borders. For the purpose of this capstone, one must name and define the main political actors that influenced the buildup to and aftermath of Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots. Within the state of Punjab, the main two relevant political parties at the time were the Congress Party and the Akali Dal. The Congress Party represented much of the central Indian government, and during the 1970s and early 80s was led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, a controversial and central figure in the confrontations of 1984.[39] The opposing group within Punjab was the Akali Dal, a Sikh group that advocated for Punjabi autonomy, which Congress feared would equate to a Sikh-led succession.[40]

Even within the Sikh community, ideological and religious groups have struggled to find correct balances of control over Sikh secular and religious matters. The political party, the Akali Dal, was born in the 1920s at the same time as another Sikh ideological group call the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), an elected "religious parliament of the Sikhs."[41] The

[39] Pritam Singh, "Class, Nation and Religion: Changing Nature of Akali Dal Politics in Punjab, India," *Commonwealth & Comparative* Politics 51, No.1, (2014) 61-62.
[40] Singh, "Class, Nation and Religion," 61-62.
[41] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 988.

simultaneous rise of these organizations reflected some Punjabi Sikhs' desire to shift control of Sikh *gurdwaras,* Sikh houses of worship, away from private parties and non-Akali figures and into the hands of the Punjabi Sikh community.[42] Five of the gurdwaras that the Akali Dal and SGPC controlled are given the special status of *Takhts,* because of their association with five separate Gurus. [43] Takhts function as a physical space within a holy, often private space, to centralize and articulate spiritual and temporal instruction.[44] The most important Takht to the Sikh community is the Akal Takht, which is housed in the Golden Temple.[45] Originally the Akal Takht was used as a platform for the sixth Guru to hold court to demonstrate temporal and spiritual power, but over time, and as Sikhs migrated across Punjab and beyond, the Akal Takht became a designated space for Sikhs to meet and unify.[46] The Akal Takht's function and flexibility meshes secular and religious identity for Punjabi Sikhs; these broader functions imply that private and holy spaces for Sikhs, even within sites as sacred as the Golden Temple, can serve a public purpose to unify a broader ethnic Sikh community. Thus, whoever controls this space within the Temple complex, supposedly assumes a major role of authority in the Punjabi Sikh identity. When Bhindranwale and the central Indian government went to battle in this physical space during Operation Bluestar, they represented forces of opposition, battling for authority over contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity. Bhindranwale and his followers represented the militaristic departure of Khalsa religious identity, as expressed in *Ardas,* while the Indian state embodied an ideological nationalism of Congress Party actors who represented the

[42] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 988.
[43] Translates to "thrones."
[44] "Five Takhats of Sikhism," https://www.goldentempleamritsar.org/top-religions-of-the-world/sikhism/five-takhts/.
[45] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 988-9.
[46] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 988-9.

historical oppressor from which the Khalsa arose, all of which depart from the initial utterings of the Guru.

Section 2.3 The Rise of Bhindranwale:

Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his fundamentalist ideals play a major role in the traumas of Punjabi Sikhs and in the way outsiders impose labels of identity on the Punjabi Sikh community. Bhindranwale was born in Punjab during the Partition of 1947 and was raised within a Taksal, a Sikh seminary; by age 30, he became head of that Taksal.[47] Bhindranwale embodied the Sikh Punjabi struggle in the post-Partition world. As the Green Revolution rapidly industrialized the agricultural and economic landscape of Punjab and young people sought employment and a unified identity, Bhindranwale turned to Sikh orthodox revivalism,[48] teaching the "correct" path of devotion.[49]

Bhindranwale preached apocalyptic-style sermons about the fate of Sikhism; he saw the future of Sikhism at risk because of an internal lack of orthopraxy and external discrimination

[47] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, dir.

[48] This term refers to Sikhs who have undergone *Amrit Sanskar* (a process similar to baptism). Sikhs who have undergone this religious ritual follow the 5 Ks more rigidly than some other Sikh communities, particularly through the observance of Kesh (uncut hair), meaning devotees who do not cut their hair, wear turbans, etc. (Sikh Society of Minnesota).

For more information about *Amrit Sanskar* and the traditional symbols and diasporic issues of Sikhism please see the following:
"The 5 K's," *The Sikh Society of Minnesota*, https://religionsmn.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/sikhgurdwara/sikhsocietymn/sikhismbackground/sikhks.
Bhupinder Singh, "The Five Symbols of Sikhism," *Sikh Formation* 10, no. 1 (2014): 105-172.
Dipankar Gupta, "The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective," (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[49] For more information on the Green Revolution and its effect on the Punjabi Sikh community see:
Shinder Purewal, *Sikh Ethnonationalism and the Political Economy of Punjab*, (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
Murray J Leaf, *Song of Hope: The Green Revolution in a Panjab Village*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984).
Hamish Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 11 (November 1992): 975.

and manipulation of the community by outsiders.[50] Internally, he preached that followers needed to practice Khalsa rituals, as opposed to other sects of Sikhism such as the rituals of the Nirankaris; he also blamed the well-to-do Akali leaders; externally, he found fault in Hindus who were "trying to enslave" the Sikh community.[51] In 1978, a violent confrontation between the orthodox Punjabi Sikhs and the Nirankaris, a sect of Sikhism, left 16 dead, which "skillfully fused the internal and external threats of which he spoke."[52]

After the 1978 incident, along with continued violence between Punjabi Sikh and Hindu communities in the early 1980's, Bhindranwale's "Back to Sikh Basics" campaign collected a massive following. He drew on sources outside of electoral channels for political power that proved to be more effective than either ideological party's strategies to cultivate support amongst Sikhs in the region: "he drew on his personal charisma, the Dam Dami Taksal (a 'mint' or Sikh seminary), and the coterminous creation of new institutions that supported him."[53] Bhindranwale became the living embodiment of the divine and a representative of the private sphere and holy prayer within the public sphere of Punjab. Devotees in Amritsar began to leave offerings at his feet instead of at the Golden Temple, implying that Bhindranwale was appropriating a divine image, which is supposedly reserved for the eternal Guru Granth Sahib.[54] The continued growth in his following prompted attention from the Congress Party, who saw Bhindranwale as a mechanism for Sikh control.[55] Congress perceived Bhindranwale as key to convert Sikhs away the Akali Dal party and thus offered the radical religious leader power in exchange for public alliance with the party: "...what congress was telling him was 'you come along with us and we'll

[50] Hamish Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 11 (November 1992): 975.
[51] Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," 975.
[52] Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," 975.
[53] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 985.
[54] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, ~16:50.
[55] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, ~10:25.

make you the rulers of Punjab, in effect really."[56] The central government, controlled by Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party would help facilitate the dissemination of Bhindranwale's message through financial support and by criminal protection; for example, in 1982, Bhindranwale was implicated on two counts of murder of prominent public figures, but was protected by the central government.[57] However, Bhindranwale would not remain loyal to one party, despite being quietly assisted by the central government in the very public acquittal of murder charges.

Bhindranwale, who likely understood and embraced the power of his position, manipulated political actors of Punjab who sought his allegiance as an "in" with the Punjabi Sikh community. In 1982, Bhindranwale demonstrated his lack of loyalty to the Congress Party when he led a movement against the central government's policies, which earned him backing from the Akali Dal.[58] Some scholars argue that "Bhindranwale had three sponsors in succession: Congress, parts of the Akali Dal, and then Pakistan," which supposedly promised military support in a "showdown with Indian forces over establishing Khalistan."[59] This "showdown" would manifest a year after Bhindranwale transferred his headquarters to the Akal Takht in the Golden Temple complex in 1983. As previously mentioned, occupation and ownership of the Akal Takht directly relates to both the religious associations of the sixth guru and the temporal authority housed in a space within a larger complex of worship. Bhindranwale's assertion of authority by occupying the Akal Takht, which at this point was deemed a Sikh community space within Punjab, appeared too threatening in the eyes of his former allies within the central government; Indian troops attempted to remove this threat by force from the Golden Temple

[56] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, ~10:54.
[57] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 985.
[58] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 985.
[59] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 985.

complex on June 1, 1984. While Bhindranwale died in this confrontation known as Operation Bluestar, his leadership, established following and subsequent infamy played a major role in exposing Sikh vulnerabilities and explains a large part of the inaccurate representation of Punjabi Sikh identity as militaristic or functionally non-existent.

Section 2.4 The Call to Khalistan:

While one must gain an understanding of the definition of Khalistan and the role it has played for the Sikh community globally, this exclusive approach is insufficient in understanding the modern Punjabi Sikh identity.[60] Contrary to popular discourse, the rise in the concept of "Khalistan", or a sovereign Sikh homeland, gained little traction in the public sphere until the aftermath of violence in 1984. At the height of Punjabi Sikh militant violence in the mid-1980s, members tended to be young, unemployed Jat,[61] Sikh men who acted out a show of masculinity or necessity for money; a study found that only 5% of members explicitly joined militant groups to fight for Khalistan.[62] The manifesto of the movement, *The Declaration Document of Khalistan*, wasn't even published until April 29, 1986. This document proposed a necessity for a sovereign Sikh state and gave a "secular shape to the distinct value system and historical tradition of the Sikhs in light of the growing mobilisation of Hindu revivalism within the Indian

[60] Much of the decrease in militant activity and public discourse about Khalistan was a direct result of harsh state policing under Punjab Director-General of Police K.P.S. Gill. His leadership and government interference in splintering militant groups throughout Punjab led to exhaustion amongst the rural population with violence under militancy. In reality, the majority of movements for a sovereign Khalistan have been created and sustained by diasporic Sikhs within Western states such as the UK, Canada and the United States.
See Tatla for more information on this.

[61] "Jat" refers to a rural caste within the region of Punjab that includes both Sikhs and Hindus. While the religious tenets of Sikhism reject the boundaries of caste systems, the social construction of caste is deeply ingrained into the culture of the region and has a complex relationship with the Sikh community.

For more information about Jat Sikhs and Sikhs' relationship to the caste system in Punjab please see the following resources:
Ravinder Kaur, "Jat Sikhs: A Question of Identity," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1986).
Ronki Ram, "Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 40 (October 2007): 4066-4074.

[62] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 990.

state."[63] The popularity of a campaign for Khalistan was short lived within Punjab and largely manifested in acts of violence committed by factionalized militant groups.[64] The 1986 campaign never came to fruition, and over the next two decades, steadily lost popularity within the region of Punjab, despite a period of active Sikh militaristic action in the public sphere. [65]

Section 2.5 Conclusion:

While this capstone aims to highlight non-ideological influences in the formation of a newfound contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity, the presence and importance of political history and tension in the region is irrefutable. In the period between Partition and the violence of 1984, formal political actors in Punjab and the emerging authority of Jarnail Bhindranwale served as major factors in the violence of Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots. Yet, as Section Four will further unpack, political actors and campaigns will not be the contemporary source of successful individual and collective Punjabi Sikh identity. Still, in order to gain a holistic understanding of the many layers of trauma that the Punjabi Sikh community experiences, one must have a basic grasp of the political movements that contributed to the dramatic violence of 1984.

The Congress Party's failed attempt to take control of Bhindranwale and the overall Punjabi Sikh community in tandem with the Akali Dal's lack of success in unifying, advocating for, and protecting the Punjabi Sikh community highlights the unstable relationship that Punjabi Sikhs have with ideological systems of power and identity formation. While militant groups may have experienced a surge in popularity under the façade of a movement for "Khalistan" after the

[63] Joyce Pettigrew, "The State and Local Groupings in the Sikh Rural Areas, Post-1984," in *Punjabi Identity Continuity and Change*, ed. Gurharpal Singh and Ian Talbot (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996) 139.
[64] Shinder Singh Thandi, "Counterinsurgency and Political Violence in Punjab 1980-94*,"* in *Punjabi Identity Continuity and Change*, ed. Gurharpal Singh and Ian Talbot (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996) 130.
[65] Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era," 976.

violence of 1984, the precipitous drop in popularity demonstrates that long-term Punjabi Sikh identity relies on a less ideologically-driven understanding of their historical trauma.

Section 3. Trauma Theories and 1984

Sect 3.1 Introduction:

Punjab's regional and ideological importance to Sikhs is deeply tied to the religious and social evolution of the Sikh community. Yet, the region, as previously established, is not uniquely Sikh. The diversity of faiths and cultural communities in Punjab, and North India as a whole, plays a major role in the communal tension and violence that occurred during 1984. Still, the Sikh faith and community is unique because of its small size and newness to the region. Sikh religious texts reflect a memory of violence and brutality at the hands of larger powers.[66] Thus, contemporary violations of Sikhs' safety in Punjab is all the more damaging and influential to their collective identity. The consequences and manifestations of these traumas on contemporary identity will be discussed in relation to film in Sections Four and Five of this capstone. The following section aims to expand the understanding of trauma beyond its colloquial usage in order to express the palpable influence that repeated, specific types of violence has on Punjabi Sikh identity. This expansion starts by putting psychological theories of trauma in conversation with eye-witness accounts of 1984. By applying trauma theories to eye-witness accounts of Operation Bluestar and the subsequent Delhi Riots, one may gain a more concrete image of the significant ways that trauma has shaped the contemporary collective Sikh identity in Punjab.

[66] As referenced in the previous section concerning *Ardas*:
Singh, "Verses of the Sikh Gurus: Ardas," 131-135.

Sect 3.2 Trauma Theories:

In order to apply psychological aspects of trauma to the investigation of Punjabi Sikh identity, one must first name the theories that influence contemporary research and scholarship regarding identity formation. Dr. Judith Herman articulates psychological approaches to trauma and the process of healing in her book, *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman defines psychological trauma as "an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force."[67] The concept of helplessness is critical to the analysis of victims' accounts of violence in 1984 by giving a psychological foundation to understand the language and nature of survivors' memories.[68]

Despite the apparent absence of extended scholarship on trauma and Sikhs in relation to 1984, there is a breadth of applicable work that focuses on psychological trauma in South Asia.[69] Dr. Kumar Ravi Priya conducted research on the effects of trauma on child victims of the 2002 Gujarat Riots. His approach utilizes an ecological framework: the "systematic understanding of the impact of the socio-historical context on the suffering and healing of a child who has survived a disaster," which is consistent with the "socialist constructionist ontology that posits that human experiences are socio-historically constructed."[70] In other words, Priya argues that

[67] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (USA: Basic Books, 1992), 33.
[68] Note the Western-centric roots of Herman's work. Non-Western scholars have pointed to cultural differences that problematize the use of a Western-centric framework in analyzing an Eastern community. More information can be found in the following piece:
Kumar Ravi Priya, "On the Social Constructionist Approach to Traumatized Selves in Post-Disaster Settings: State-Induced Violence in Nandigram, India," *Cult Med Psychiatry* 39, no.3 (2015): 429.
[69] Some examples of other scholar's work include:
Mira Debs, "Using Cultural Trauma: Gandhi's Assassination, Partition and Secular Nationalism in Post-Independence India," *Nations & Nationalism* 19, no. 4 (2013): 635-53; Michael, Nijhawan, "Sikhism, Traumatic Repetition, and the Question of Aesthetic Sovereignty," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 23, no. 2 (2011): 128-42; Rayees Mohammad Bhat and B. Rangaiah, "Exposure to Armed Conflict and Prevalence of Posttraumatic Symptoms Among Young Adults in Kashmir, India," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 24, no. 7 (2014): 740-752.
[70] Kumar Ravi Priya, "Trauma Reactions, Suffering, and Healing among Riot-Affected Internally Displaced Children of Gujarat, India: A Qualitative Inquiry," *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, no. 9 (2012): 190.

while Western trauma tends to be rooted in individual experience and even a sense of egoism, South Asian communities experience trauma in a more collective way. External influences such as historical context, religious values, and community relationships thus play a central role in the way South Asians interact with their memories and healing process after traumatic experiences. While Priya studied children in Gujarat, his emphasis on the importance of place, community, and values is transferable to the broader study of Sikhs in 1984, particularly through Sikhs' relationship to public and private spaces in Punjab.

Sect 3.3 Applying Trauma Theory to 1984- Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots:

Operation Bluestar catalyzed extended ethnic violence in Punjab and Northern India throughout 1984. The motivations and intentions of the actors involved in Operation Bluestar, including the Indian central government and Bhindranwale's followers, while significant, are of separate importance to the trauma of mainstream Sikh memory and identity. Sikh survivors, most of whom had nothing to do with perpetrating violence, appear to recall their trauma as a personal and unprovoked attack on their faith and community. The victim reports within the 2010 documentary, *1984: A Sikh Story*, highlight the sentiment of helplessness and perceived violation of body and space.[71]

The first set of relevant interviews occur in a group setting within the complex of the Golden Temple. The large group of interviewees surrounds Sonia Deol, the British Sikh narrator, while sitting in a circle on the ground. All of the men's faces appear older, with white long beards and turbans wrapped around their heads, symbolizing their religious or cultural piety. One might note that despite the tragedies that occurred during Operation Bluestar, these Sikh men continue kesh, or practicing in the most orthodox form, by refraining from cutting their hair and

[71] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo.

continuing to wear turbans. The men returned to the site of their trauma, the Golden Temple, wearing symbols of the faith that led to their trauma. Their continued piety might be construed as an act of continued spiritual belief or ideological resistance, but it also highlights the multifaceted nature of their trauma; they return, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the site's associated trauma.

One man recounted the loss of his wife: "My wife's head was blown off by a grenade whilst feeding our two-year-old child."[72] Beyond the expected human reaction of visceral horror to this violence, there is an underlying theme that makes the nature of this account even more impactful: the vulnerability and helplessness of the victims. The man's specification that his wife was feeding the toddler implies that the attack was unprovoked and unexpected. The focus on the helpless nature of victims harkens back to Herman's theory of psychological trauma as an "affliction of the powerless."[73] Because the mother was addressing her child's most basic need, food, her gruesome death also alludes to an immanent suffering of a helpless child, reliant on their mother for sustenance.

Beyond the psycho-biological aspects of this memory, the man's account of his experience reveals trauma associated with violation of spiritual space and practice. The mother and child were unable to protect themselves as they participated in a relationship that is viewed as sacred in traditions across the globe, including Sikhism. Gurus often evoked images of a nursing child to analogize a human connection to Divine Reality.[74] Therefore, the violation of body, in a religious sense, is a violation of a Sikh devotee's direct relationship to the Divine, and

[72] Unidentified man 2, *1984: A Sikh Story* (2010; UK: BBC, 2014), YouTube, ~23:20-27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ.
[73] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.
[74] Nikky Guninder Kaur Singh, "One Reality Is," in *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995): 4.

to their overall identity as a Sikh. Section Five will utilize similar images and analogies of severed mother-child relationships to express collective trauma and identity formation through the rise of Punjabi Sikh film.

The magnitude of loss expressed in the man's account is emphasized by the public yet private nature of the deaths: "...his mother, my wife, this man's daughter and another man from Amritsar all four of them died on the spot."[75] The integrity of a private space for religious worship was, in many ways, violated and altered, by replacing memories of unity and worship with memories of loss and violence. This is not to say that all forms of Sikh worship are exclusively private, however, the Golden Temple was designed as a protected space for Sikh worship. Still, Sikhs chose to welcome outsiders into sacred spaces as well, which is, again, reflective of the core utterings of Guru Nanak. Yet, through the way this man frames his community's losses, by gesturing to the people related to the deceased, he also implies a bond through trauma. This response reflects Priya's ecological framework by pointing to the nuanced, collective relationship that South Asian (in this case Sikh) communities have with trauma. This interview suggests that contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity is rooted in spiritual practice and shared trauma of violence against body and space. Thus, by analyzing recent Punjabi Sikh films that address 1984's trauma and relationship to Punjabi Sikh audiences' reactions to such content, film may gain new importance as a form of experiencing collective identity through the ecological framework.

Elements of helplessness and trauma in Punjabi Sikh identity extend beyond the confines of the Golden Temple and across the subcontinent, in part, due to the violence that erupted in the months following Operation Bluestar. After Indira Gandhi's assassination on October 31, 1984,

[75] Unidentified man 2, *1984: A Sikh Story*, ~23:29-37.

Hindu mobs massacred Sikh communities in and around the northern city of Delhi (the Delhi Riots).[76] While this capstone focuses on events within Punjab, events that occur outside of Punjab continue to deeply affect matters within the state. In the documentary, Deol also interviews Mohinder Kaur, a Punjabi Sikh widow. On November 1, 1984, Kaur and her husband, Gurmej Singh, traveled by train with their baby from Amritsar to Mumbai to start a new life.[77] Kaur explains that when the train stopped outside Delhi, a mob surrounded them, surged into the carriage, and hit Singh on the head with an iron rod. An important note is that Kaur previously specified that her husband was wearing a turban. She seems to link the level of violence towards her husband with the outward symbol of his faith affiliation. Kaur recalls that the mob shouted: "'The Sikhs have killed our Mother [Mrs. Gandhi]! Blood for Blood!'"[78] This recollection implies an awareness of why her family was being targeted: her husband wore a turban and therefore her family was Sikh and somehow deserving of punishment. Her trauma is rooted partially in her understanding of her own cultural and social context. First, while this act of violence happened outside of Punjab, the couple and their newborn were traveling from Amritsar, the same sacred city where the victims of the Golden Temple died. By attacking Sikhs whose identity and roots were based in the sacred site where Sikhism (at least partially) originated and institutionalized, the perpetrators of violence attacked individuals, a collective faith community, and a historical community. Second, in the public sphere of a train car and railway station, the turban led Kaur's family to danger. However, the men interviewed in the Golden Temple, who were attacked for their faith in a private Sikh space, continue to wear their turbans despite the violence inflicted upon them. Their persistence in wearing the turban and returning to an attacked religious space also

[76] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, ~36:48-47:42.
[77] *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, 37:00-10.
[78] Mohinder Kaur, *1984: A Sikh Story* (2010; UK: BBC, 2014), YouTube, 38:15-18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ.

reflects the scripture in *Ardas* that both martyrizes those who have suffered for religious expression and instructs survivors/descendants on how to use traumatic memory to unify and solidify the Sikh identity:

> "The Sikh men and women who gave their heads for their religion,//Whose limbs were cut off one by one,//Who were scalped, broken on the wheel, and sawn in pieces,//Who sacrificed their lives to serve the gurudwaras,//Their faith triumphed."[79]

Kaur then explains that while she tried to hide her husband's dying body between seats of the car, the mob came back, stole all of their belongings and dragged her husband's body away. She recalls the events as tears run down her cheeks: "I lay on top of him pleading that I won't let go of him. He was taken away and I saw him being burned. He was burning."[80] Kaur's emotional recount 25 years after her husband's death shows the lasting rawness of trauma tied to the memory of her helpless attempt to save her husband. She emphasizes that she wanted to hide his body with her own. His death is intimate to her; the notion of strangers "dragging" his body away from his family and then being burned publicly both violates the right to intimate moments and makes public spaces appear unsafe. Similar to the group of men mourning their loved ones in the Golden Temple, Kaur was targeted, not because of her actions, but because of her identity. Yet, unlike the victims of Operation Bluestar, Kaur's experience represents Punjabi Sikhs who suffered from the visibility of their religious identity in public spaces. Kaur's experience implies that Sikhs may not feel safe within *and* outside of Punjab, as long as their religious identity is visible in some way. While faith may be fundamental to Punjabi Sikh identity in many positive ways, the trauma associated with their faith plays a significant role as well.

[79] Singh, *Verses of the Sikh Gurus: Ardas*, 133-34.
[80] Kaur, *1984: A Sikh Story*, Mayo, ~39:12-26.

Sect 3.4 Conclusion:

Punjabi Sikh survivors' accounts of violence in 1984 reveal the concrete ways that trauma influences collective memory and identity. Through the substance and delivery of their accounts, interviewees communicated a sense of helplessness in protecting their loved ones and an awareness of the dangers that their Sikh identity (and visible symbols of that identity) poses. While these recollections of trauma could be reduced to solely a result of individual physical violence, the ecological framework highlights a complex range of factors that influence the substance and manifestations of trauma. By utilizing a wider diversity of psychological frameworks, one is able to appreciate the nuances of Punjabi Sikh collective trauma that exist in physical/biological, historical and religious contexts. Scripture in the *Guru Granth Sahib* clearly highlights trauma as a historical aspect of Sikhism, but one must also acknowledge that the trauma from the violence against Sikhs in 1984 was unique to any previous instance of Sikh marginalization. 1984 is a distinct moment unique to all other forms of historic marginalization of Punjabi Sikhs because of the intentionality behind perpetrators' actions. 1984 was different from the instances recorded in the *Guru Granth Sahib*, because, unlike the period during the compilation of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, Sikhs in 1984 had an indisputable physical presence and some codified socio-political claim over their sacred region of Punjab. Further, 1984's trauma, unlike the violence of Partition, is almost entirely unique to the Sikh community: their land and their people were the primary victims of these tragedies. The violence of 1984 highlighted the distinct and vulnerable identity that Punjabi Sikhs hold in India and proved that Sikhs are unable to enjoy a standard of safety or comfort in the public and private sphere. This realization left the community with no choice but to re-evaluate a daunting yet fundamental question: what does it truly mean to be Sikh in Punjab *now*?

Section 4 Chosen Trauma and the Contemporary Punjabi Sikh Identity

Sect 4.1 Introduction:

In the decades following Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots, academic and lay discourse surrounding the civilian experience of 1984 was limited.[81] According to some scholars, the apparent lack of formalized discourse within the Sikh community is emblematic of a failure to create a collective or nationalistic identity within the region.[82] Yet, the conflation of public silence with a lack of collective identity is a drastic oversimplification and misconception of how traumatized minority communities formulate identity in continuously oppressive environments. Because they exist in a space where identity is deeply rooted in religious origins, but their safety cannot be guaranteed, Punjabi Sikhs have been forced to find alternative outlets for identity reflection and formation. By exploring the rise of the Punjabi Sikh voices through recent film, outsiders of the Sikh community can more easily understand the unique evolution of the Punjabi Sikh identity. While their identity has, in fact, been steadfastly growing in the private sphere, it is only recently blossoming back into the public sphere.

Sect 4.2 Chosen Traumas:

One of the main arguments against the effectiveness of a collective contemporary Sikh identity is rooted in the psychological concept of "chosen traumas." The term, as defined by Dr. Catrina Kinnvall elaborates on previous scholarship related to trauma theory, such as Herman's

[81] Scholars such as Kinnvall state that civilian, mainstream Sikhs did not have a retaliatory reaction or successful nationalist movement in the moments after 1984. Yet, in the aftermath, came the rise of some extremist "terrorist" Sikh groups that led to the broad strokes of Sikhism as generally fundamentalist. This capstone focuses on the experience and identities of the mainstream Sikh civilian population, not the extremist offshoots.
Catarina Kinnvall, "Nationalism, religion and the search for chosen traumas: Comparing Sikh and Hindu identity constructions," *Sage: Ethnicities* 2, no.1 (2002): 97.

[82] This is the conclusion of Catrina Kinnvall's article that will be addressed in this section.
Kinnvall, "Nationalism, religion and the search for chosen traumas," 79-106.
One must acknowledge that other forms of expression about 1984 exist, but mostly in diasporic communities. Other forms of expression include things like tattoos and physical memorabilia.

theory of psychological trauma: "A chosen trauma describes the mental recollection of a calamity that once befell a group's ancestors, and includes information, fantasized expectations, intense feelings and defenses against unacceptable thought."[83] A chosen trauma is thus a method of understanding and interpreting new traumas by using "rage and humiliation associated with victimization" as a means of validating new trauma.[84] The concept of chosen traumas gives further clarification and ideological legitimacy to the interviewee's accounts and interpretations of the violence in 1984 by giving a more specialized psychological approach to a socio-religious dynamic.[85] While Kinnvall's theoretical work may be invaluable to the analysis of the role that 1984 played in shaping Punjabi Sikh identity, her ultimate conclusion that the Sikh community, unlike the Hindu community, was unsuccessful in creating a chosen trauma, is misguided and a bit counterintuitive to the theory's definition.[86] This disagreement may stem partly from the fact that Kinnvall wrote her piece in 2002. She argues that the Sikh community has not demonstrated a fusion between nationalist and religious concerns to construct a collective identity.[87] Yet, the evolution of contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity has only recently expanded from private, in-group discourse into the public sphere. Kinvall's theory of chosen trauma also seems to rely on in-group definitions of and reflections on traumatic experiences, rather than analysis by outsiders of that community. Therefore, when applying the theory of chosen trauma to recent examples and academic scholarship that more directly articulate Punjabi Sikh perspectives, Kinnvall's conclusion appears premature.[88]

[83] Catarina Kinnvall, "Nationalism, religion and the search for chosen traumas: Comparing Sikh and Hindu identity constructions," *Sage: Ethnicities* 2, no. 1 (2002): 86.
[84] Kinnvall, "Nationalism, religion and the search for chosen traumas," 86.
[85] See Section 3.3
[86] Kinnvall, "Nationalism, religion and the search for chosen traumas," 80.
[87] Kinnvall, "Nationalism, religion and the search for chosen traumas," 80.
[88] My claims about Punjabi Sikh identity formation and critiques of outsiders are backed by evidence of voices in the region, however I must acknowledge that I hold the same identity as an outsider to those whom I am critiquing.

Sect 4.3 Applying Chosen Trauma to Film:

Kinnvall struggled to find concrete evidence of a successful collective or nationalist identity within the Sikh community. Yet, her lack of evidence was not indicative of an absence in collective identity, but rather suggests that Punjabi Sikhs have followed an alternative path towards forming a successful collective identity and view their "rage and humiliation" in a different way. The rise of Punjabi Sikh film industry within the last five to 10 years and newer scholarship commenting on the significance of this rise supports the notion that Sikh identity is rooted in a nationalist, collective space directly related to the chosen trauma of 1984. Kumool Abbi's *Sikh Middle Class, Panjabi Cinema and The Politics of Memory* emphasizes that Punjabi Sikhs reclaim their identity by participating in and consuming film and media that confronts the traumas of 1984.[89] Abbi's analysis of multiple Punjabi Sikh films suggests that both religious and nationalist identity are pervasive in the Punjabi Sikh community. She states that, "With the seats of Sikh temporal power, the Akal Takht and SGPC, [play] a role in even the release and reception of these films…" meaning, that these Sikh ideological powers do hold an element of authority in how films are portrayed and released and cultivate a particular political environment in which audiences understand the content of film. Yet, Abbi goes on to complicate the sources of authority in understanding traumatic memory: "…it is within an atmosphere of awakened consciousness in self identity, as well as increased political contestation by the Sikh middle class, that memory and the recreation of history as one's own esthetics has taken place."[90] In other words, the ideological and secularized aspects of the Sikh community in Punjab, from an

[89] Kumool Abbi, "Sikh middle class, Panjabi cinema and the politics of memory," *Sikh Formations: Religion Culture, Theory* 14, no.1 (2018): 91-108.
[90] Abbi, "Sikh middle class, Panjabi cinema and the politics of memory," 91.

autonomous internalized outlet, play a significant role in the way information about the Sikh religious experience is sculpted, disseminated, and experienced.

One of the most explicit examples of an alternative manifestation of identity rooted in trauma is the production and success of the 2014 film, *Punjab 1984*.[91] The drama, which is the case-study within this capstone, recreates the aftermath of the Delhi Riots, primarily from the Sikh perspective: "[the film] is all about family relationships in the backdrop of terrorism, police brutality and communal riots."[92] This film, produced by and starring a Punjabi Sikh cast, is the first film addressing 1984 to win the title of Best Punjabi Film at the 62nd National Awards in India.[93] One of the producers, Gunbir Singh Sidhu, articulated the complexity of discussing Punjabi Sikh identity in public spaces: "'We made *Punjab 1984*, and it was a box-office success…But, yes, it was a one-off, an exception. Even we weren't expecting the kind of response we got… But can such films be made on a regular basis? I don't think so, not yet.'"[94] Sidhu's hesitation to affirm the sustainability of discourse surrounding the trauma of 1984 reflects the betrayal that victims of 1984 felt in the aftermath of their trauma. At the time of the attacks, Punjabi Sikhs were experiencing what seemed like, at least to some, a high-point in their communal identity and autonomy. After experiencing oppression for centuries they finally had a majority community in a sacred region; they had a faith, a space, and a language to give external credibility to their identity. Yet, the violence of 1984 destroyed any sense of legitimacy or empowerment that Punjabi Sikhs finally built. They were unable to protect themselves within and outside of their claimed spaces, privately and publicly.

[91] Abbi, "Sikh middle class, Panjabi cinema and the politics of memory," 94.
[92] IP Singh, "Film on 1984 wins National Award," Times of India, 24 March 2015, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ludhiana/Film-on-1984-wins-National-Award/articleshow/46683373.cms.
[93] Singh, "Film on 1984 wins National Award."
[94] Manik Sharma, "Jatt Like That: How Diljit Dosanjh helmed the rise of Punjabi comedy," The Caravan, 1 August 2019, https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/diljit-dosanjh-helmed-rise-punjabi-comedy.

The production of *Punjab 1984*, over 30 years after 1984, implies that trauma associated with the events were ingrained into the memory of Punjabi Sikhs and affected the way that the community chose to rebuild their identity. While the trauma from Guru Arjan's assassination in 1606 transformed Sikh rhetoric from pacifist to militaristic defensiveness, the trauma of 1984 transformed the ways that Punjabi Sikhs experience and share their collective identity.[95] The newness of the topic within the film industry and the lack of confidence that a well-respected Punjabi Sikh producer has in the ability for this discourse to truly enter the public sphere is significant; Punjabi Sikhs have chosen the trauma of 1984 to better understand the fragility of their identity in the public sphere, and the possibility for that fragility to transfer into private/holy spaces. That being said, fragility is not synonymous with an absence in collective identity. The very presence of this film implies that the trauma of 1984 transcends generations. Young artists, such as those involved in the production of *Punjab 1984*, are actively deciding to catalyze public discourse about their ancestral trauma; the substance of this discourse comes directly from the private discourse of the communities in which these artists were born and raised.

With the rise and success of Punjabi Sikh films addressing the topic of Sikh trauma, comes the tangential rise of Punjabi Sikh celebrities. Diljit Dosanjh, the star of *Punjab 1984*, is the first sardar (male Sikh devotee) to publicly embrace his faith identity: "Diljit Dosanjh has emerged as the first sardar to have carved a space for himself in films on the national state, without having to give up his Sikh identity."[96] His rise to fame over the last decade or so embodies how 1984 serves as the chosen trauma for the Punjabi Sikh community. Dosanjh maintains confidence in his Punjabi Sikh identity, despite his awareness of hostility towards his positionality. In a 2016 interview, Dosanjh responded to all the questions asked of him in a

[95] See notes 20 and 21.
[96] Sharma, "Jatt Like That."

mixture of Punjabi and English, even though the interviewer spoke in Hindi.[97] While this act might seem superficial, when one considers the long-term, deep roots of Sikhism in the region of Punjab, the choice to speak Punjabi is culturally and nationalistically significant.

Beyond the identification with the Punjabi language, Dosanjh explicitly commented on the importance of maintaining his piety: "People used to tell me, 'Since you wear a turban, there's no way you can work in Bollywood films. There will never be a role for you.' So I also believed that Bollywood would never have a role for me ... but anything can happen if god wants it to happen."[98] Dosanjh prioritizes his relationships in the private sphere over his reputation in the public sphere. Similar to the survivors interviewed in *1984: A Sikh Story*, Dosanjh wears his turban, thus choosing to approach his ancestral trauma by actively embracing visible signs of faith identity. His rhetoric regarding identity reflects the socio-religious values of survivors coping with a shared trauma.

In the same way that Sidhu expressed reluctance in the public's ability to embrace more content dealing with the Sikh experience in 1984, Dosanjh vocally resists external pressures on his faith; this implies that the public's inhospitable reaction to Punjabi Sikh identity is a reason for the limited representation of the Punjabi Sikh identity in the public sphere. Therefore, scholarship surrounding chosen identity for Sikhs in India suggests that they have failed to successfully utilize the trauma of 1984 to create a sense of collective identity. Yet, outsiders to the community, including Westerners such as myself, may simply be lagging in their engagement with alternative manifestations of the rapidly evolving Punjabi Sikh identity.

[97] Sharma, "Jatt Like That."
[98] Sharma, "Jatt Like That."

Sect 4.4 Conclusion:

While the trauma of 1984 was once a tool to silence Punjabi Sikhs in public spaces for fear of safety, its memory is now the foundation for a new identity. *Punjab 1984*'s widespread acclaim and the rising popularity of Diljit Dosanjh reflects the newness of Punjabi Sikh identity in the public sphere. Yet, the notion of this identity as entirely "new" is misleading; the identity itself is a result of long-term evolution. It seems that, from 1984's destruction, Punjabi Sikhs picked up the pieces of their loss and trauma from the public sphere and used those pieces to create a stronger sense of collective identity in the private sphere. By focusing on building confidence and legitimacy from within, the Punjabi Sikh perspective is less reliant on external affirmation for legitimacy of their identity. Thus, Kinnvall's chosen trauma is present in the Punjabi Sikh community: 1984 is the chosen trauma unique to the Punjabi Sikh experience. Recent scholarship, such as Abbi's, highlights the importance of perspective in assessing the success of a community's identity formation by demonstrating how Punjabi Sikh audiences received films made by and about their community. Yet, the ways in which chosen trauma is received by outsiders seems less defined; is a chosen trauma unsuccessful if outsiders fail to realize the effectiveness of said trauma in shaping collective identity? The rising popularity in Punjabi Sikh film and actors over the last several years implies that that answer to this question is no. Similar to the act of devout Sikhs returning to the Golden Temple and continuing to pray after Operation Bluestar, the Punjabi Sikh contribution to and participation in shared public entertainment demonstrates a sense of strong collective identity. Academics must prioritize the autonomous actions of the insider community, rather than elevating skepticism from outsider perspectives in assessing chosen trauma and collective identity. So the question, in reality is not

if a strong collective identity exists among Punjabi Sikhs, but what that collective identity actually looks like.

Section 5 Punjab 1984: the role of film in expressing Punjabi Sikh identity

Section 5.1 Introduction:

An analysis of Punjabi Sikh figures in the production and distribution of film that portrays the trauma of 1984 is fundamental to understanding 1984 as the chosen trauma of the Punjabi Sikh community. Yet, the intention of the filmmakers and actors is only part of what makes the film industry such a new and insightful expression of individual and collective identity. Unfortunately, due to the sensitivity of subjects that implicate the Indian central government and widespread censorship in India, many influential films applicable for this capstone are inaccessible.[99] Still, *Punjab 1984*, highlights how the trauma from violence in 1984

[99] Due to availability of material and concision of argument within this capstone, this section only unpacks *Punjab 1984*. However, the Sikh Punjabi is a blossoming and influential field that influences collective identity through both direct confrontations of 1984 and violence against Sikhs as well as indirectly through modern comedies, cartoons, and romance films. Below please find a list of films that speak to the contemporary understanding of Punjabi Sikh identity from the Punjabi Sikh perspective:

Dharam Yudh Morcha (2016)- a drama that confronts the violence of 1984 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5951704/
Viewers may find the film here http://singhstation.net/2017/01/dharam-yudh-morcha-full-hd-movie/

Chauthi Kooth (The Fourth Direction) (2015) a drama based on short films and stories from the early 2000s. Portrays the violence of 1984 and the continued riots amongst Sikhs and Hindus. This film was unavailable to watch by any accessible means.
Film information https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4636068/
News coverage/film review https://www.hindustantimes.com/movie-reviews/chauthi-koot-review-a-subtle-film-with-long-lasting-impression/story-j0cEAh1TqlJe56VIqiUARL.html

Moolnivasi Shudra to Khalsa (2018) is an unreleased drama that portrays the struggles and violence of the caste system in India as it relates to the Sikh community. The film supposedly offered the solution to caste disparity through the Sikh Khalsa Panth. The Central Board of Film Certification denied certification in March 2019.
Official certification denial https://mib.gov.in/sites/default/files/Moolniwasi%20Shudra%20to%20Khalsa.pdf
Trailer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bIWKnNJ9HQ
New coverage in Punjabi https://www.bbc.com/punjabi/india-46458550

Super Singh (2017)- an action/comedy starring Diljit Dosanjh, the actor who plays Shivjeet in *Punjab* 1984. Dosanjh. through this film, becomes the first Punjabi superhero, propelling him both as Punjabi and Punjabi Sikh.
Film information https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5891348/

is remembered and understood by the contemporary mainstream Punjabi Sikh community. Punjabi Sikh audiences' reflections imply that *Punjab 1984* provides a unique entertainment space where a fictional piece reflects very real and traumatic historical events that have shaped the Punjabi Sikh identity: "'eh film saadebaare hai' (that the film is about us), it was sadda farz (our duty) as Sikhs to watch it. The act of simply going and watching a film was an act of affiliation and assertion of an identity 'assin taan dekhna hi si' (we had to watch it anyway), no matter what, as a kind of ritual obligation that had to be fulfilled."[100] By watching *Punjab 1984*, audiences participate in a ritual-like act of connecting to their faith and community and thus validate a sense of truth in the ways that the film defines their contemporary collective identity. The film does actively engage with the short-lived, but important presence of violent Sikh militancy in the mid-to-late 1980's. Yet, *Punjab 1984*'s broader contribution, and the focus of this capstone, lies in its elevation of deep-seated and evolved characteristics of Punjabi Sikh identity that have only recently translated from the private sphere into a more public sphere in mainstream film. *Punjab 1984* conveys foundational elements of the contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity through Satwant Kaur's symbolic function as the ideal devotee and mother, the expression of psychological trauma through general maternal relationships, and violation of the Sikh body and physical symbols of piety.

Section 5.2 Satwant as the ideal Punjabi Sikh devotee:

Satwant Kaur, one of the protagonists in *Punjab 1984*, represents the internalized depth of trauma within the Punjabi Sikh community and expectations of a desired Punjabi Sikh devotee. Satwant's journey across Punjab to find her son, Shivjeet, who was initially falsely

More info on Dosanjh and the film https://www.republicworld.com/entertainment-news/others/diljit-dosanjh-here-are-top-5-punjabi-films-of-the-actor-and-singer.html

[100] Abbi, "Sikh middle class, Panjabi cinema and the politics of memory," 105-6.

accused of terrorist activity in the years following 1984, and the tragic loss she faces along the way, are emblematic of many Punjabi Sikh women's experiences with the violence and aftermath of 1984.[101] While Shivjeet does turn to militancy for a period of time as a means of revenge for the loss of his father in Operation Bluestar, Satwant maintains her sense of peaceful compassion and piety, which, in the end, outlives Shivjeet's coping mechanism of violence. Satwant's continued maternal compassion across religious and class boundaries and perseverance of religious piety demonstrate the long-term influences and expressions of the Punjabi Sikh identity. A repeated quote throughout the film stems from the words of her son, Shivjeet: "All of God's creations pale in comparison to my mother."[102] This statement, from a Sikh man who observes Kesh, is repeated by Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike throughout the film; it demonstrates the deep symbolism of Satwant's character as an ideal, almost metaphorically divine figure who embodies the holy maternal nature and compassion of the true Punjabi Sikh identity.[103] Yet, Satwant, despite her praised determination to find her son, maintains an attitude of humbleness, modesty, and internalized expression of struggle, thus further reflecting the historically private expression of the Punjabi Sikh identity in the public sphere. While the portrayal of Satwant's character may be reflective of gendered norms and deemed "un-feminist" from a Western perspective, one must consider that, in a period where Satwant is the only

[101] For more information on Sikh militancy in the 1980s please see the following sources:
Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, "Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants," (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).
Kirpal Dhillon, "Identity and Survival: Sikh Militancy in India 1978-1993," (UK: Penguin Books, 2006).
Virginia Van Dyke, "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India, and the Post-Militancy Era: Structural Change and New Political Compulsions," *Asian Survey* 49, no. 6 (2009): 975-97.
Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (2015) After 1984? Violence, Politics and Survivor Memories, Sikh Formations, 11:3, 267-270.
[102] *Punjab 1984*, directed by Anurag Singh (2014; Amritsar and Punjab, India, Lahore, Pakistan and Canada: White Hill Studios) Netflix, ~16:35.
[103] Kesh (the practice of uncut hair) refers to one of the most important of the holy 5 K's. Many Sikhs who practice Kesh have undergone the process of *Amrit Sanskar* (similar to baptism). See note 45 more information.

present representative of her devout family, her actions take on symbolic meaning beyond her gender. By looking past divisive labels of identity and continuing compassion and piety throughout moments of trauma and pain, Satwant reflects a contemporary embodiment of the foundational utterings of the Guru Nanak.

When Satwant demonstrates kindness and continued piety in times of struggle, she reflects both a secular image of an admirable human being and a religious embodiment of a devout Sikh practitioner. Prior to the erection of boundaries by the Punjabi Sikh community as a consequence of continued religious violence and persecution against them, the primary Sikh tenet rested on the first utterances of the founder Guru Nanak: "there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim."[104] Yet, with each instance of historical religious persecution and discrimination, the Sikh community was forced to alter this foundational belief to accommodate the residual trauma. Still, in the film, Satwant, who faces some of the most tragic forms of loss and trauma through the murder of her husband in the Golden Temple, the disappearance of her only child, and the loss of her land and autonomy in the wake of both men's absence from the home, she maintains determination and unconditional, indiscriminate compassion for all she encounters. In a country where Sikhs hold a very small percentage and minimal political and social representation, there appears to be little media and literature that positions mainstream Punjabi Sikhs as separate from the vocal, but minority militant population. Kumool Abbi's piece reported that audience reactions to *Punjab 1984* demonstrated the deep significance of the film in publicly expressing an internally evolving identity: "For the audience, films which depict the 'Sikh' point of view were 'very much required' as for them 'saadi gal' our point of view gets lost in the sea of Hindi and other films… Moreover this is 'saadihaqiqat, (facts which tell the truth).'"[105]

[104] See Section 1.2
[105] Abbi, "Sikh middle class, Panjabi cinema and the politics of memory," 106.

The idealization of Satwant's character throughout the film, and the film's positive reception from Punjabi Sikh audiences as a means of communicating "truth" indicates the Punjabi Sikh perspective of 1984 as a historical event and implies that Satwant may represent the favored Punjabi Sikh devotee over the militaristic persona of her son.

Section 5.3 Satwant as the Indiscriminate Mother:

Satwant's identity as a Punjabi Sikh woman and her deep connection with her son is communicated through the act of prayer, caretaking and feeding. Yet, her maternal care is not limited to her own son, or even her Punjabi Sikh peers. Throughout her painful journey to find her son, Satwant demonstrates an attempt to regain control and overcome her trauma, which is exemplified by her consistency in feedings others' sons, when she cannot feed her own. Within the first ten minutes of the film, Satwant is shown attending her local gurdwara where she does puja (worship) in front of an open copy of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. After these ritualized acts of devotion, she proceeds to feed a hungry child, whose cut hair indicated that he did not keep Kesh and likely had not undergone *Amrit Sanskar* (baptism), unlike Satwant and her male relatives.[106] This act of kindness occurred outside of the village police station; viewers learn that Satwant waited outside the police station every day for an entire year since the disappearance of her son. Throughout the film, despite her trauma and determination to find her last biological family member, Satwant takes the time to feed every hungry child-like figure she encounters in the film, without expectations of recognition or reciprocity. Thus, Satwant demonstrates a genuine understanding of the pure foundational principles to value all human lives and embodies the divine metaphor of the sacredness in a mother-child relationship that Gurus evoked in Sikh scripture.

[106] *Punjab 1984*, Singh, ~9:39.

In addition to caring for children (who are arguably unable to care for themselves), Satwant also expresses care for anyone who takes on a child-like role. She expresses a deep connection to Shivjeet's Hindu childhood friend, Bittu, by feeding him throughout the film and addressing him as a symbolic son.[107] She even takes the time to offer food to a police officer who confesses his complicity in the disappearance of her son. When he asks why she would offer to feed him despite the sins he committed, she responds with words that parallel the utterances of the Guru: "I don't know who is good and who is bad. All I know is that everyone feels hungry and needs to be fed… Maybe, if I feed somebody's hungry son, then someone, somewhere will also feed my hungry son."[108] Her dismissal of good and bad echoes the Gurus dissolution of religious labels in determining an individual's worth. Satwant's demonstration of indiscriminate love for all the children she encounters alludes to both the compassion expected of a Sikh devotee and the psychological trauma of loss from 1984.

Satwant plays a larger symbolic role as an indiscriminate mother and feeder of all sons in her mission to find her own son and maintain any sense of identity that she had prior to her tragedies. Satwant becomes emblematic of the Punjabi Sikh struggle to regain a sense of identity and autonomy in a period of loss and uncertainty; the mainstream community was seemingly left with the choices of verbalized radicalism through militancy or internal, discreet cultural rebuilding through the emphasis on Sikh values rooted in family and collective identity. In many ways, Satwant's idealism in both pious practice and maternal compassion elevates her to a mortal embodiment of the divine connection Gurus articulated as parallel between a mother and child and the devotee and divine. Yet, despite her admirable qualities, Satwant, in contrast to characters who did not reflect the ideals she embodied, is ultimately unable to protect her son

[107] *Punjab 1984,* Singh.
[108] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~1:12:00.

from a violent death. While Satwant's actions reflect the exemplary devotee and mother prompt an expectation of reward, she is met with the same loss as those who broke the tenets of the ideal Sikh identity. The tension between the viewer's expectation and hope for Satwant and the reality of her world are not reflective of an internal criticism of her actions, but rather highlight an internal awareness of Punjabi Sikh vulnerability in the public sphere regardless of their chosen identity.

Section 5.4 Scenes of Explicit Violence That Symbolize Changing Spaces:

As articulated in Section Three of this capstone, helplessness and ecological influences on the communal experience are key factors in the ingrained psychological trauma of the Punjabi Sikh community.[109] The maternal imagery through the act (or inaction) of protecting one's child described in Section Three's analysis of *1984: A Sikh Story,* directly parallels the depiction of motherhood and feeding in *Punjab 1984.*[110] As noted, the source of trauma exists through both the hindrance of the biological necessity/dependency of the child in a mother-child relationship and the disturbance of the divine relationship as metaphorically articulated through the mother-child dynamic in Sikh scripture.[111] Similar to the direct witness account in *1984: A Sikh Story,* the opening scene of *Punjab 1984* depicts a mother trapped inside the Golden Temple complex sobbing as she begs for help: "Someone come rescue me...please do something for my son...I had come to pray for the wellbeing of my son."[112] The initial image of a helpless mother unable to meet the needs of her child reflects the same psychological expression of the trauma exemplified through the witness accounts in the documentary, *1984: A Sikh Story;* both devout women appeared to follow all the roles of a proper devotee and mother within a supposed private and

[109] See Section 3.2 and 3.3
[110] See Section 3.3
[111] Singh, "One Reality Is," 4.
[112] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~1:30-40.

holy sphere, yet failed to meet the needs of their inherently helpless children. The violence imposed on devout women and caring mothers within a space of historical piety and Sikh safety is indicative of two factors of the contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity. First, Punjabi Sikhs recognize the fragility and controversy of their identity in the public sphere, and, in this setting, it is subject to the will of discriminatory powers. Second, this dynamic implies a change and reshaping of the Golden Temple as a private sphere. Because Operation Bluestar took place within the confines of the Golden Temple complex, the space morphed into a new type of public sphere separate from its historically private intention. The Golden Temple took on a role of a private sphere where public acts of violent political confrontation now have precedent and even implications of permissibility.

Section 5.5 Home, Belonging and the Danger of the Public Sphere:

Through the violence of Operation Bluestar, the Delhi Riots and the subsequent communal violence in Punjab, boundaries of public and private spaces and the Punjabi Sikh right to safety and integrity of faith in those spaces have been dramatically altered. *Punjab 1984* explicitly confronts and reframes this dynamic by addressing belonging and safety in the private home, the Golden Temple, and the public sphere of Punjab. From the moment Satwant and Shivjeet enter the film together, their home is depicted as a safe-haven of sorts: food is made and eaten, sleep happens without fear, and tears and heartache are comfortably expressed. All explicit actions of violence and pain within the film happen when characters leave the safety of the home and enter more public spheres. Throughout the film, Shivjeet and his friends' language reflects an ultimate longing to return to the safety of home; yet, they also express an awareness that attempting a journey home would likely lead to death or serious injury. The friction between an individual's yearning for the safety of a cherished home and the reality of the new danger and

inaccessibility of that home parallels the tension between the Punjabi Sikh community and its complex relationship with the Golden Temple and region of Punjab due to trauma from 1984. Therefore, as a thoughtful viewer, one of the most heartbreaking and symbolic scenes of the film is the last few minutes: Shivjeet finally returns to his village and sees his mother's doorway from a distance. In this moment, he smiles, which is a noticeable change in expression from the somber gaze he maintained for the prior two hours of the film. The young man, with blood covering his face and parts of his red turban, repeatedly chants aloud as he approaches his home, "whosoever praises the Lord," as the dark mood of the film appears to briefly lighten.[113] Satwant opens the door to their home and welcomes her son in a long embrace in the threshold of the doorway. He shares his most childlike statement since the beginning of the film: "Mother, I am hungry."[114] This statement represents his return from a brief and dark involvement in militancy back to the state of childlike dependency and human longingness for safety and belonging. Yet, just as his foot hovers over the threshold of the doorway, a moment away from the safety of his home, he is shot in the back by his neighbor, a man who, based on scriptural expectations of Sikh community, should have been a source of trust and protection. The viewer is shown a birds-eye perspective of the scene, where Shivjeet's body lays less than a foot outside of his home; he dies in his pious mother's arms.[115] Shivjeet's death is marked by his killer calling him a "terrorist," the same label his innocent father was given by the Indian government when he was shot in the crossfire of Operation Bluestar.[116] While Shivjeet, unlike his father, did resort to violence for a period of his life before realizing the wrong in his ways and returning home, the carelessness in labeling devout Punjabi Sikhs as "terrorists" indicates the lack of autonomy that the community

[113] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~2:31:00.
[114] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~2:32:55.
[115] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~2:34:00.
[116] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~2:33:00.

has had in controlling their own narrative and identity in the public sphere, and an attempt to regain this autonomy by exposing their truth in film. The contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity, therefore, is expressed in the film as rooted in a mindset that they are always at risk, and can never allow themselves to be fully vulnerable in the public sphere, for fear that they will be betrayed, shot from behind, and labeled an enemy within their own supposed place of belonging, both metaphorically and literally. Thus, the film gives outsiders insight into the existing, yet fiercely protected Punjabi Sikh identity, aware of its fragility in the larger public sphere.

Section 5.6 The Turban, the Head, and the Sikh Body:

Despite the film's indication that Punjabi Sikhs are aware of their positionality and have adopted their vulnerability in the public sphere as part of their contemporary identity, the film also portrays devout characters who continue to wear visible signs of piety throughout the film. The presence and perseverance of public expressions of faith in *Punjab 1984*, such as the practice of kesh (uncut hair and turbans), reflects a reality of strength and resilience in identity and community in the moments during and after 1984. In the film, all of the characters maintain and even find deep, positive connections to their shared identity as Punjabi Sikhs through physical signs of piety despite horrific levels of violence directed at these very symbols. Shivjeet's turban and head are at the focus of multiple plot motifs throughout the film and give greater insight into the perspective of piety and community in the contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity.

While one could readily unpack a multitude of moments involving bodily harm within *Punjab 1984* as a means of understanding the contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity, some of the most impactful moments are those of violence against Shivjeet. Shivjeet represents an antihero in this film who exemplifies one of the most extreme, and not condoned, forms of loyalty to the

Punjabi Sikh community. One of Shivjeet's most poignant moments in the film is when the corrupt policeman, Inspector Rana, frames Shivjeet for terrorist activity, prior to Shivjeet's radicalism, in order to abuse and torture him.[117] The scene depicts Shivjeet chained to the ground, with his turban removed, exposing his uncut hair. Rana looks down at Shivjeet from a chair, indicating an attempt to intimidate, show dominance over, and instill fear in the innocent Sikh man forced to expose himself in an unholy manner. Yet, contrary to what the viewer might expect, Shivjeet verbally fights back against his abuser; Shivjeet "wins" the challenge by refusing to audibly scream when Rana tortures his body with a paddle.[118] Shivjeet's refusal to vocalize his pain reflects the historic and continued value within the Sikh community to internalize trauma and pain as a means of protecting themselves from further harm and vulnerability in the public sphere, which is now elevated through its expression in films like *Punjab 1984*.

After Shivjeet escapes this abuse, he is never depicted with an exposed head again. Even when he is violently attacked, shot at, and bloodied, his turban stays on; in the final moments of his life, his turban remains.[119] As the antihero of the story, Shivjeet's adamant and vocal loyalty to his most physical symbol of piety demonstrates that the insider's contemporary perspective of Punjabi Sikh trauma is not viewed solely from a victimized lens. The juxtaposition between violence against identity and resilience of the targeted identity in the film parallels the first-hand accounts of Operation Bluestar by the Punjabi Sikh men in turbans who returned to the Golden Temple, where they continued to pray despite their trauma. Punjabi Sikh filmmakers' choice to create a character like Shivjeet, whose fictional physical identity and resilience parallels real-

[117] *Punjab 1984*, Singh, ~1:00:00.
[118] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~1:02:00.
[119] *Punjab 1984,* Singh, ~2:33:00.

world people and accounts of similar events, is significant; it indicates that contemporary Punjabi Sikhs desire for outsiders to view them as internally strong, unshakeable in faith, and deeply loyal to their community despite the violence and discrimination that they continue to face.

Section 5.7 Conclusion:

Punjab 1984 may not properly represent the entire Punjabi Sikh perspective or experience, and one cannot use a singular film to reduce a collective identity into a few statements or adjectives. Yet, the cinematic choices in *Punjab 1984* put in conversation with the audience's reception and eye-witness accounts shed light on many aspects of the contemporary, mainstream Punjabi Sikh collective identity. The tangible, real-world parallels between the film and eye-witness accounts explain much of the Punjabi Sikh audience's reception to the film's emotional content. Abbi's study alludes to the necessity that viewers feel to maintain the memory of 1984 as a means of understand and coping with the trans-generational trauma that has led them to a space of self-understanding: "'this injustice [Operation Bluestar and the riots] was difficult to forget' though 'we carry on with our everyday work but sometimes, when we are alone and reflective, the memory of grave injustice will come back to us like a nassoor (an unhealed wound)' something which could not be dismissed as a 'bad dream' but a bitter truth which 'dictated our present responses.'"[120] Perhaps understanding 1984 as a "nassor" or "unhealed wound" best summarizes the context of Punjabi Sikh identity in its rebirth and re-shaping in the aftermath of 1984. As indicated through the elevation of Satwant as both an ideal devotee and mother, the parallels of maternal and devotional relationships, and the abuse of the Punjabi Sikh body and symbols of piety, outsiders gain a unique insight into the contemporary Punjabi Sikh collective identity. Despite a history of short-lived militancy, Punjabi Sikhs,

[120] Abbi, "Sikh middle class, Panjabi cinema and the politics of memory," 105.

through this film, demonstrate a collective identity rooted in resilient piety, internal strength, and outward peacefulness and compassion. Rather than returning to the "purity" of the Khalsa that Bhindranwale championed, a fundamentalism that catalyzed Operation Bluestar to begin with, *Punjab 1984* implies that contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity relies on deep-rooted relationships with family and community that gives importance to the history of violence that their identity has been subjected to. By engaging directly with the abuse of the Golden Temple and bodies of innocent devotees within the region of Punjab as a whole, the film implies that Punjabi Sikhs recognize and embrace their fragility and controversy in the public sphere as a characteristic of their identity. As indicated in Abbi's study, the film does not just give outsiders insight into the internal understanding of Punjabi Sikh identity, but in and of itself functions as a method of teaching, perpetuating and participating in a collective identity rooted in the chosen trauma of 1984. Thus, the Punjabi Sikh collective identity is one that actively confronts and accepts its positionality in a hostile public sphere, which explains the community's retrieval into the private sphere to rebuild internally before re-entering the public sphere through film.

Conclusion

This capstone sought to catalyze intentional, more explicit discourse about the role that 1984 plays in the evolution of contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity. From a deeper understanding of Sikh religious and historical ties to Punjab, one can see the tension between Sikh success in establishing roots in a holy public sphere and the deeply ingrained memories of violence and marginalization associated with the same spaces. By defining the political climate and actors involved in the build up to and aftermath of Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots, one can better grasp the complex and multi-tiered relationship that politics and representation have in the

evolution and vulnerability of the Punjabi Sikh identity. With these historical and political origins in mind, psychological concepts regarding trauma, including psychological trauma and the ecological framework, allow a more nuanced analysis of Punjabi Sikh identity rooted in the violence of 1984's Operation Bluestar and the Delhi Riots. The nature of the violence in 1984 was unique to any prior violence because the attack specifically targeted the Sikh community, within and outside of the private sphere. Faced with no other choice, the Punjabi Sikh community was forced to re-evaluate how to form and maintain a successful collective identity. By approaching the eye-witness accounts of 1984, one can draw parallels to the contemporary manifestations of Punjabi Sikh identity in the rise of the Punjabi Sikh film industry. Through the production and consumption of Punjabi Sikh films, outsiders can more easily understand that Punjabi Sikh identity has been growing in the private sphere and has only recently become apparent in the public sphere. Finally, by analyzing *Punjab 1984* as a case study of identity expression through film, outsiders gain a deeper understanding of the many characteristics that comprise the contemporary Punjabi Sikh identity such as self-awareness of positionality, resilience, and a continued and revitalized attachment to the foundational roots and expression of the Sikh faith.

Much of the existing academic discourse either concludes that Punjabi Sikhs lack a successful collective identity rooted in chosen trauma or excludes Punjabi Sikhs from the conversation entirely. Yet, these assumptions and exclusions fail to consider the unique process of identity formation for perpetually marginalized groups such as the Punjabi Sikh community. The new and continuously evolving collective identity explored through film in this capstone proves that the violence against Sikhs in Operation Bluestar and the Delhi riots during 1984 has shaped the contemporary understanding of mainstream Punjabi Sikh identity. This identity is

most apparent within the region of Punjab, where Sikhs have begun to reclaim autonomy over their narrative in the public sphere by confronting collective trauma through film such as *Punjab 1984*. In order to be more inclusive of and effective in discussing the evolution of Punjabi Sikh identity and countless other minority collective identities in South Asia, scholars must continue to push the boundaries of existing psychological frameworks to more deeply consider the religious and historical context of perpetually marginalized groups.

Works Cited

Abbi, Kumool. "Sikh Middle Class, Panjabi Cinema and the Politics of Memory." *Sikh Formations: Religion Culture, Theory* 14, no.1 (2018): 91-108.

Brass, Paul. "The Punjab Crisis and the Unity of India" in *India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations*, edited by Atul Kohli, 169-213. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

"Five Takhats of Sikhism." https://www.goldentempleamritsar.org/top-religions-of-the-world/sikhism/five-takhts/.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 2015.

Jodhka, Surinder S. "Sikhs in Contemporary Times: Religious Identities and Discourses of Development." *Sikh Formations* 5, no.1 (June 2009): 1-22.

Kaur, Mohinder. *1984: A Sikh Story*. Interviewed by Sonia Deol. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ (37:00-40:18).

Kinnvall, Catarina. ""Nationalism, Religion and the Search for Chosen Traumas: Comparing Sikh and Hindu Identity Constructions." *Sage: Ethnicities* 2 (2002): 79-106.

Mayo, Jonathan, dir. Sonia Deol, presenter. *1984: A Sikh Story*. 2010; UK: BBC, 2014. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ.

Pettigrew, Joyce. "The State and Local Groupings in the Sikh Rural Areas, Post-1984." In *Punjabi Identity Continuity and Change*, edited by Gurharpal Singh and Ian Talbot, 139-158. New Delhi: Manohar, 1996.

Priya, Kumar, Ravi. “Trauma Reactions, Suffering, and Healing among Riot-Affected Internally Displaced Children of Gujarat, India: A Qualitative Inquiry.” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 9 (2019): 189–209.

Sharma, Manik. “Jatt Like That: How Diljit Dosanjh helmed the rise of Punjabi comedy.” *The Caravan*. 1 August 2019. https://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/diljit-dosanjh-helmed-rise-punjabi-comedy.

Singh, Anurag, dir. *Punjab 1984*. 2014; Amritsar and Punjab, India, Lahore, Pakistan and Canada: White Hill Studios. Netflix.

Singh, Gurharpal. *Ethnic Conflict in India: A Case-Study of Punjab*. New York: MacMillan Press LTD, 2000.

Singh, IP. “Film on 1984 Wins National Award.” Times of India. 24 March 2015. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ludhiana/Film-on-1984-wins-National-Award/articleshow/46683373.cms.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, trans. “Verses of the Sikh Gurus: *Ardas*.” In *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. 131-135.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. “From Guru Nanak to the Guru Granth.” In *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. 17-30.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur. “One Reality Is.” In *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. 1-15.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, trans. “Verses of the Sikh Gurus: *Ardas*.” In *The Name of My Beloved: Verses of the Sikh Gurus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. 131-135.

Singh, Pritam, "Class, Nation and Religion: Changing Nature of Akali Dal Politics in Punjab, India." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 51, no.1 (2014): 61-62.

Talbot, Ian. "Partition, Memory and Trauma: Voices of Punjabi Refugee Migrants in Lahore and Amritsar." *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture* 2, no. 1. (June 2006): 3-16.

Telford, Hamish. "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy." *Asian Survey* 32, no. 11 (November 1992): 969-987.

Thandi, Shinder Singh. "Counterinsurgency and Political Violence in Punjab 1980-94." In *Punjabi Identity Continuity and Change,* edited by Gurharpal Singh and Ian Talbot, 159-185. New Delhi: Manohar, 1996.

Unidentified Sikh Man 1. *1984: A Sikh Story.* Interviewed by Sonial Deol. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ. (23:08- 23:18).

Unidentified Sikh Man 2. *1984: A Sikh Story.* Interviewed by Sonial Deol. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTol8j0piQQ. (23:18-24:20).

Van Dyke, Virginia. "The Khalistan Movement in Punjab, India and the Post-Militancy Era: Structural Change and New Political Compulsions." *Asian Survey* 49, no. 6. (November/December 2009): 975-997.

Walker, Neetika. "Punjab 1984 records highest ever opening in Punjabi cinema," Hindustantimes." Hindustantimes. 28 June 2014. https://www.hindustantimes.com/regional-movies/punjab-1984-records-highest-ever-opening-in-punjabi-cinema/story-U3yJu4l6y4L3g2JKhlwu1N.html.

I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment: Hayley Segall