

VIOLENT

NATIONS: 1984's OTHERING OF SIKHS

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OUTLINE OF THEMES & BACKGROUND

One could argue history has three narrative voices – those of the oppressors, those of the oppressed, and those voices not yet colonized either by victory or loss. The latter are the existential voices of silence attuned to what remains unsaid in the sayings from above and from below that reveal the (strategic and unconscious) elisions of dominant narratives (gender, caste, class, language, violence etc.). Given these three voices, two clear narratives and the undertone of contrapuntal and hetero-lingual silence, it is myopic to read the present by merely engaging with contemporary dominant narratives of oppressor and oppressed (as heard in the current media discourse today that broadcasts "religious violence/terrorism" to be the root cause of today's troubled times). Rather, we need to embark on an "ancestry of the present" (Thapar), to uncover non-ideological readings that are neither dominated by the ruling elite, nor scripted by reactionary forces, but are open to the unsaid in both. Through such an approach, attuned to the varied constructions of hegemonic discourse, alternative readings come into view:

1. SPECTACULAR AND SLOW VIOLENCE. *Spectacular violence* (subjective, visible, direct, agent-driven, event-based) cannot be understood apart from *slow violence* (objective, invisible, indirect, structural, institutionalized, incremental, symbolic, systemic) (Zizek, Ahmed, Nixon). There is therefore the need to understand the traumatic effects of both forms of violence as part of a single process: the "shock and awe" of synchronic devastation (1984's Operation Bluestar) as being inseparable from the legacy of diachronic dehumanization manifest in the assimilating forces of Hindu-majority India (the elision of Sikh interests in the partition of Panjab, the expedient and reductive translation of Sikh demands as "communal", "separatist", and "anti-India"; oppression through continued military operations, police encounters, draconian security legislation and extrajudicial killings; conscious alienation of a whole people from their land, rivers and culture - expressed in farmer suicides, alcoholism, and drug addiction).

2. MAJORITY-MINORITY DIALECTICS. The construction of modern identities are caught within and produced by powerful political processes that result in the *marginalization of the minority* through the *nationalization of the majority* (Mufti, Chatterjee, Massad). Arguably, the European "Question of the Jew" persists as a key trope or specter of modernity such that it volleys back to the question of the colonized Other as it projects forward to minorities caught within and beyond Europe; today it manifests as the Question of the Palestinian (Massad), the Muslim (Dabashi), the Kashmiri, the Tribal (Roy), the Sikh, etc. When national unity is presupposed on the conferral of an inferior status to an entire community, then the mobilization of violent mobs are not far behind. Given this majority-minority structure, it is not hard to understand why the Indian state (no matter its claim of secular inclusion) treats Muslims, Sikhs and Maoists as anti-national terrorists, but the RSS as "misguided patriots". In such asymmetrical rhetoric of the state and its amplifiers (media and academia), it is hard not to hear an echo of the mass violence of European colonizers against indigenous populations. How to end colonial modernity's pervasive and persistent desire for genocidal extermination, violent control and "full-spectrum dominance" of the (manufactured) other?

3. INDIAN NATION AND VIOLENCE. Though Ayodhya 1992 and Gujarat 2002 reflect a violent Hindu nationalism, Delhi 1984 speaks of a violent Secular nationalism. The violent nation cannot therefore be reduced to (BJP) *communalism* as (Congress) *secularism* is equally implicated. We have to recall the legacy of violent marginalizations of Muslims and Sikhs by both the BJP(NDA) and Congress(UPA)

governments “enabled” by the base (passive/active) support of a massive Hindu majority. The nationalization of the majority into a Hindu (racial) nation is no longer possible to ignore given the recent landslide victory of the BJP-Modi government. With Modi’s victory, the Hindu “**meta-ethnicity**” (Gurharpal Singh), as the “essential component of the Indian Nation and state-building”, becomes fully visible. The alignment between the Indian secular, political and corporate power structure with the majority Hindu culture within the post-Nehru era, seems to have proven those right who long ago warned that India was not a secular but “**ethnic**” **democracy** (Smootha, Gurharpal Singh). For example, while it has been easy for “the caste consciousness and communalism of the upper castes” to “masquerade as nationalism”, the resistance of the oppressed, however, was styled as anti-national “casteism” (Simeon).

If the violence of the Indian nation cannot be located solely within the communal/religious sphere but also implicates the secular, then the “Modi phenomenon” is not merely about a person, but the gestation of a long and massive ideological movement whose drumbeat was provided by the fascist RSS. To this beat, we can add the percussive instrumentation of the secular Congress’s colonially-inherited administration with its ideologically divisive vector of a colonial modernity. And yet there is a third arm of violent dissonance: that of India’s own xenology of (Hindu-Caste) Brahmanism – whose intolerance, assimilation and violence against Dalits, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians should not be forgotten. These three aspects of the violent nation indicate the necessity of a broader picture – especially given the recent release of declassified British intelligence documents that clearly reveal Thatcher’s collusion with Indira Gandhi in 1984. That the ex-Colonial Master was asked to help decades after “Independence” reveals a disturbing continuity (i.e. extension and elaboration) of the legacy of colonial surveillance and violent control; India’s independence is secured only upon a dependence upon a global Euro-American led nation-state system.

4. GLOBAL MODERNITY AS GLOBAL COLONIALITY. The Indian nation state, as a violent nation like its Western counterparts, animates and reproduces marginalization through nationalization precisely because it shares in the project of *colonial modernity* (Mignolo), or *global modernity* (Dirlik); that is to say, given the colonial legacy of the British that divided the Indian population and the country in terms of religiously identified communities based on their geography, enumeration and production (Cohn, Appadurai), Indian nationalism has always been inseparable from a covert form of Hindu nationalism and as such makes claims to an absolute universal Hindu voice that parallels and continues the Western liberal humanist discourse – in as much as both gain their functional coherence through modes of absorption and exclusion. For example, both Hindutva and Indian secularism, as national ideologies, resonate with the project of colonialism not only in continuing to impose Western conceptual frameworks but also by re-animating (rather than inventing) specifically Hindu/Brahmanic pre-colonial hierarchical normative orders. The misinformed-to-the-malicious representations of Sikhs and their political demands, for example, within Indian and Western media and academia, reveal this hidden nexus between Indian/Hindu and Western hegemonic discourses. Why, for instance, does the Sikh (Dalit, Kashmiri, Tribal etc) voice present such a threat to Indian/Hindu nationalism? Why is it always a threat to memorialize events such as ‘84? Secular modernity seems to be in crisis: what is the nature of this predicament and its anxiety?

5. CONTINUITY OF THE COLONIAL/HISTORICAL DIFFERENCE. Given this broader (not merely national nor international but also pre-national and global) comparative context, where modernity cannot be understood as an overcoming of colonialism but actually manifests as its other face, it is hard to avoid the obdurate persistence of the *colonial/historical difference* (Dussel, Mignolo, Chakrabarty), and its *racial* (Fanon, Dabashi) and *religious* (Asad, Mandair) **hierarchy of identities**. The secular-religious-racial dialectic of modernity is here then read as a colonizing discourse (Asad, Masuzawa, Mandair, Nandy) in that the secular modern “statistically re-produces” its colonized subjects as religious, racial and backward. The slow (symbolic and systemic, linguistic and institutional) violence of inscribing difference is central to the project of modernity and its violent nations. Just as modernity cannot fully overcome colonialism, as the free man is only free provided the slave’s labor exists, so the secular cannot overcome the religious, as both are part of the same discourse (and myth) of progress internal to Europe (Asad, Ahmed, Dirlik, Masuzawa, Mandair). The legacy of the Colonial/Historical Difference within institutional forms of

nation-building and state-governance reveals an often-missed continuity of systemic and symbolic violence between colonialism and secular global capitalism (Mufti, Massad, Mignolo, Mandair, Nandy).

VIOLENT NATION: 1984's OTHERING OF SIKHS, aims to reflect on the past 30 years of violence, impunity, denial and indifference by engaging the themes outlined above, that locate 1984 not only within its Indian, Hindu, national borders, but also, simultaneously, within extra-Indian geographic, diachronic and ideological spaces. It is hoped that various panels can be organized to reflect the above themes:

1. 1984: Spectacular and Slow Violence and their Traumatic Effects
2. 1984: Majority-Minority Identity Politics
3. 1984: Hindu Nationalism and Ethnic Democracy
4. 1984: India and Colonial/Global Modernity
5. 1984: Engaging the Continuities of the Colonial/Historical Difference

BACKGROUND. (Known to most if not all invitees). 2014 marks the 30th anniversary of Indira Gandhi's Government's devastating assault and massacre of innocent Sikhs at the "Golden Temple" complex – the holiest place for Sikhs, with the promoted aim of "flushing out" so-called "Religious Terrorists" led by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. This Indian army military action, which included tanks, helicopters, armored vehicles, artillery, and chemical weapons, was called Operation Bluestar and was timed to take place on the anniversary of Guru Arjan's martyrdom in early June 1984. Over 70,000 troops were ordered to capture less than 50 men. The military assault occurred under cover of a total media blackout – thousands of innocent civilians were killed over five days.

The storming of the center of Sikh spiritual and temporal authority by Indira Gandhi's Indian Army provoked a catastrophic spiral of events that led immediately to a mutiny in Sikh units of the Indian Army, and four months later, on October 31st, the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Thereafter, thousands of innocent Sikhs were beaten and burned alive during the Anti-Sikh Pogroms on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of November. The Police stood by and watched and in some cases actively participated in the attacks. It is clear that this violence was instigated, authorized and organized by higher government officials – who have subsequently enjoyed promotion (cabinet positions) and 30 years of impunity despite repeated demands for justice. The organized anti-Sikh mobs in 1984 massacred over 8000 innocent Sikhs, 3000 in Delhi alone.

2014 therefore calls us to reflect on this thirtieth anniversary of Operation Bluestar (June 3 - 8, 1984) and the ruthless Anti-Sikh Pogroms that ensued (October 31st - November 3, 1984) and continued in further Government operations (Woodrose, Blackthunder, Night Dominance, Rakshak I & II, and Final Assault – leading to the deaths of 25,000 to 80,000 Sikhs). This conference will explore the Indian state as a violent nation, through the case of the massacre and oppression of the Sikh people.