

THE WIDOW COLONY

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This is less a film review and more a lament on neglected history and justice denied. Sach Productions – aptly named for in the Indic languages Sach means Truth - presents a disturbing but sharp focus on “a city within a city of the world’s largest democracy.”

Tilak Vihar is now is now a “Widow Colony” in the capital city of India, New Delhi and has been so for the past 22 years. **It was an enclave of reasonably well to do middle-class Sikhs until three days of killings (October 31 to November 2, 1984) transformed it into a colony of widows and orphans. – Please make appropriate correction... [These families actually came from various areas...as in the para below. Their homes were ruined so they were settled in Tilak Vihar. Prior to the event, they didn’t live in Tilak Vihar]**

This documentary focuses on Tilak Vihar, and draws upon similar events in Trilokpuri, Kalyanpuri, Sultanpuri and Mongolpuri, three other Sikh enclaves in greater Delhi. The backdrop to this film needs to be understood.

The story really starts in June 1984. Indira Gandhi, the Indian Primes Minister then, decided to launch a full scale army attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar and 40 other gurdwaras (Sikh houses of worship) across the state of Punjab. The reason ostensibly was to flush out terrorists hidden within the Golden Temple. The results should have been obvious to anyone with an ounce of common sense. The attack brought India to verge of fragmentation, and on October 31st, just four months later, Indira Gandhi was assassinated.

What followed was even more horrendous. In India’s capital city, New Delhi, within hours of the assassination, hordes of people arrived in trucks. They were armed and carried incendiary materials and devices, along with lists of Sikh owned houses and businesses. The killing spree lasted about 3 days and subsided just as suddenly as it had exploded. Thousands of Sikhs were dead, some burnt alive with tires around their necks, their women raped or maimed and killed.

The police were nowhere to be found. The army was not called to enforce order. How could mobs of people get guns and kerosene in India, where both are severely regulated? Where did they get so many trucks? Who gave them lists of which buildings were owned by Sikhs?

Rajiv Gandhi, the son of Indira Gandhi, was immediately installed as the new prime minister of the country. On his mind was revenge for his mother’s assassination by two Sikhs, not that a government exists to protect its citizens. In his television address, he quickly pointed the finger so as to judge all twenty million Sikhs guilty. Leaders of his political party were seen activity encouraging and leading mobs on their killing rampage.

Then Rajiv signed an accord with Sikh leaders promising an honest enquiry, compensation to victims and justice, according to the law of the land. During the past 20 years, there have been over 11 inquiry commissions; the reports have been buried with no action. (Some of the notable commissions have been Mishra, Thakur, Jain-Bannerjee and the Nanavati Commission.)

Harpreet Kaur and Manmeet Singh, the makers of this film, tell the story in a deliberately understated manner. It consists only of interviews with many people. Kuldip Nayar, a distinguished non-Sikh journalist and writer recalls how Indira Gandhi consulted him prior to the attack and he advised her against it. He also notes the government inspired propaganda on air and on television, which were entirely government owned and controlled, and that fueled the killings. Even the Vatican took critical note of this misstep by the Indian government. Context to the massacre is further provided by several experts: Rajinder Sachar, former Chief Justice of Delhi; Harvinder Singh Phoolka, human rights attorney; and Jaskaran Kaur, a US based, Harvard trained human rights lawyer and director of ENSAAF. A longish interview with Patwant Singh, another noted writer and journalist, who was a star witness in the latest inquiry commission (Nanavati Report) that completed its work only in 2005, placed matters in perspective. He enumerated the government's failings and the collusion of its political operatives in the killings of Sikhs.

The bulk of this historical documentary consists of interviews with survivors of the three days of outrage. Women speak of being gang raped and humiliated by being left naked in public places, in spite of the fact that in the Indian cultural milieu public reference to sexual matters is unheard of, and public nudity is most embarrassing. They openly and directly accuse political leaders, such as H.K.L. Bhagat, Jagdish Tytler and Sajjan Kumar, who should rightly be facing a hangman's noose and not be enjoying ministerial high-level positions in the government.

Some scenes were indeed hauntingly memorable, making them even more horrifying by their low key portrayal. For instance, a large hank of partially burnt hair, evidently hacked off the head of a Sikh, lying coiled on the ground amidst the devastation. In a family of 12, seven were killed.

One powerfully emotional moment: One sobbing widow tells the interviewer she did not want describe her suffering once again unless the interviewer could do something to help her. An equally dramatic but ironic moment when one woman tells the interviewer how she was so saddened by the killing of Indira Gandhi that she refused to cook for her family that day, only to see her whole family wiped out the next day by the raging mobs.

One witness (Darshan Kaur) was offered Rupees 25,00,000 (about \$50000) to withdraw her accusation and change her testimony. When she refused she was physically assaulted. The government first offered a compensation of Rupees 10,000 (about \$200.00), then it was upped first to Rupees 20,000, and then to Rupees 3, 50,000 (about \$7,000), but nothing has yet been paid. It is astonishing that over 3000 Sikhs were killed within 48 hours in Delhi alone and 20 years later only five people have been found guilty.

The colony was left with 4000 killed, 1300 widows and over 4000 orphans. It was not a riot, but was more a pogrom and attempted genocide.

The film's argument that the Indian government not only collaborated with the perpetrators of the massacre, but has continuously refused to acknowledge it is indeed true. This charge would have earned greater credibility had it been buttressed by interviews with interviews with government spokesmen, and with some background information on the political considerations that led up to those days.

The survivors talk about the need for closure, moving forward and the redemptive power of forgiveness. But forgiveness requires facing guilt and atonement as prerequisites and they seem to be missing.

Widespread unemployment along with drug and alcohol abuse are becoming rampant in these colonies of the dispossessed.

Parenthetically, we add that India, particularly Hindu society, has never treated its widows well, regardless of their age as vividly portrayed in the film "Water," in which widows as young as 8 are banished from the families and communities, becoming voiceless and stigmatized. In these killings in 1984, Sikh women were marked for life and herded into India's "Unsettled Settlements" with only each other to rely on.

It is a bitter tale that needs telling. Harpreet Kaur is the writer and narrator. She has captured the surreal reality of those who live in the memories of 1984 in dramatic black and white. There was no better way than to let the victims' voices be heard. Harpreet does so. She tells the tale in a very quiet, low key and matter of fact manner such that the viewer cannot escape the poignant reality.

By its silence, its dilatory and delaying tactics, the political leadership of India only encourages the repetition of such atrocities; an example is the Godhra massacre of Muslims by Hindu mobs that occurred a decade later, in 2002. Considering the huge population of India, the number of victims is relatively small. In contrast the numbers in Rwanda were astronomical, the killings in Darfur and the Holocaust lasted several years, and the American struggle for civil rights went on even longer, but all of them share a deeply disturbing similarity in that governmental institutions colluded in the targeting of a specific community. History tells us pogroms against perceived enemies of the state would continue to recur until the state acknowledges them in a transparent manner, and addresses the victim's rights justice and reparation.

[Yes, the numbers a smaller when you compare to the holocaust, but lets not forget the killings in Punjab. Statistics are as high as 250,000 killed from early 80s to early 90s. That is about 10% of Sikh adherents.]

The Widows Colony preserves a small segment of modern Indian history extremely well. This film is oral history with dramatization or fictionalization. It is an excellent case study of the way "democratic institutions" break down following a perceived internal

“national” emergency. What I found lacking was some footage of the actual events – of the burnings and killings. Some of this material is available like the BBC footage, some has even been published, primarily in the Indian journal *Manushi* by its editor Madhu Kishwar. But the expense and the difficulty of procuring such archival material might have been prohibitive, or legally complicated because of limits on usage.

The *Widow Colony* has been screened in several cities across the United States and Canada. A tribute to its powerful message is that its screening in New York, several viewers asked how they could help.

The Widow Colony received a well deserved award for the best documentary at the 2005 South Asian Film Festival.

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