# WRITING THE BONES

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I am an anthropologist. We anthropologists deal in bones, at least that is what the general public usually thinks of us: the excavators of pots and bones, the documentors of the past. But my kind of bones are of a different variety; dust has not had time to accumulate on them, loved ones have not yet turned the images of their deceased to distant memories. The grief is fresh.

The moment I decided to become involved in human rights is clear in my memory. I was sitting in a room with a group of Sikh women and men, taping their narratives of terror and resistance for my book on the Punjab conflict.[1] I had been invited to lecture at a human rights forum to be held in Calgary, and I was discussing with the Sikhs whether this was or was not an appropriate role for me as a scholar. A product of late twentieth century academia, I knew all the ins and outs of professional ethics,"protection of human subjects," and so on. (We have all become, if nothing else, good talkers.) In the midst of elaborate discussion, the Sikh gentleman next to me, who had been silent up to this time, took my hand and placed it on his blue-jeaned thigh. I was shocked to realize that my hand was actually resting directly *on his bone*, that his upper leg was grotesquely devoid of muscle and flesh. He was literally *skin and bone*, this concealed by the bagginess of trendy denims. I saw the folded-up wheelchair in the corner of the room at the same time as I noticed this man's eyes, welling up with tears which fell, then, down over his cheeks and into his black-as-ink Sikh beard, full and proud. He did not say a word, just sat and looked silently, straight ahead, my hand, immovable, on his thigh.

"The Roller" is the particular contribution of the Indian police and security agencies to the global technology of torture. A heavy log is placed on the upper legs of a person, and is rolled up and down the legs while officers weight the ends by standing on them. The effect of "the roller" is excruciating pain, which comes, in most cases, without leaving any permanent medical evidence. In this case, those purveying the agony of the roller went too far; the individual's muscles were crushed and irreparably torn. I later learned that the police officer responsible for this Sikh's crippling was, in fact, known; people called him "The Roller" as a nickname, so enamored was he of this characteristically Indian technique.

What can one say of an ethnographic moment such as this one? Words fail. In this case, our conversation was cut short. We sat in silence, then moved on to other topics. I understood that I *would* speak on human rights, and I believe that everyone around me understood that also. Some things just cut right through all manner of academic hesitations and contortions, and having one' s hand right on the *bone* of another human being is one of them. I spoke at that Calgary symposium, and have continued to speak and to write and to testify since then.

I believe in what Ruth Behar calls a "vulnerable" anthropology, one which does not exclude human-to-human responses and attachments but celebrates them. The vulnerability here refers to the anthropologist, by the way, not to her "informants" (old term) or "interlocutors" (new term), who have always been somewhat vulnerable in the context of the power relations that classically framed anthropological research. Making *ourselves* vulnerable to those we learn from is another thing; it really is "anthropology that breaks your heart," as Behar subtitles her essay on this posture.[2]

Though this is now considered to be part of a newly-empowered feminism in anthropology, women have long written about their involvement in cultural studies in deeply personal terms. Edith Turner dared to write of her fieldwork among the Ndembu with Victor Turner in the 1950s: "I would like to call [this] advocacy anthropology in the female style, that is, speaking on behalf of a culture as a lover or a mother."[3] Laughable in the science-oriented culture of academic anthropology in the 1950s, writing as a lover/mother has become, if not exactly respectable, a part of the anthropological scene that will not go away. Many of us, trained by that 1950s generation to keep our distance from our interlocutors scrupulously, have now had to relearn the basics of tears, warm embraces, outbursts of anger, and shared confidences that mark human relations everywhere. A Sikh stranger, with a single eloquent gesture, reminded me that the anthropologist I was playing at being was not really *who I was.* I am not a person who can ignore the fact that people with crushed leg muscles are sitting next to me, and that I am in a position to help them.

When we write ethnography in these circumstances, we are vulnerable as authors in a way that more "neutral" scholars are not. Open to the Other, we take him into ourselves, we live, eat, breathe Sikhs with bony thighs and shiny wheelchairs. When we write, this writing comes very easily—spills out, gushes out—because it is coming from within ourselves. A longtime student of Zen, I am familiar with the notion of "writing down the bones," the practice of so absorbing a subject that it is embedded in one's very skeleton, then simply expressing it outward.[4] Many people know about Zen archery, but as far as I know nobody has imagined a Zen ethnography. But that is what I do, now with some existential sort of confidence; I write bones, my own and those of the Sikhs, irrevocably entangled, turning to dust in tandem in this unique brief moment they and I share on this planet earth.

## The Story of Khalra and Dhillon

Jaswant Singh Khalra was a Sikh who rose to a leadership position in the Akali Dal, the main political party representing this religious minority in India. The Sikhs, about two percent of the total Indian population, are largely congregated in the state of Punjab in the northwest, the heartland of the Sikh faith. The "Singh" in Jaswant Singh Khalra's name appears in every male Sikh name; it means "lion" and was a title bestowed upon the Sikhs by their tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. Jaswant Singh Khalra kept the five signs of the Sikh: the unshorn hair bound up into a turban, a comb symbolizing purity, a steel bangle, a special sort of undershorts, and an omnipresent dagger or sword. The Sikh community, begun with its first Guru in 1469, is committed to principles of monotheism, equality, truth, and compassion.

In 1947 when the Indian subcontinent was partitioned by the departing British, most of the Sikh population ended up on the Indian side. In the over fifty years since Independence, this distinctive minority has had several key moments when its interests clashed with those of the central government. In the 1960s, a movement for the protection of the Punjabi language resulted in the creation of a Punjab state where, for the first time, Sikhs wound up as an electoral majority. In the next decade, this new state faced serious issues regarding economic matters such as the distribution of river waters (critical for the irrigation on which this "breadbasket of India" depends) and hydroelectric power (critical for Punjab's underdeveloped industrial sector). It also faced the remaining political question of a capital city—Chandigarh, oddly, being designated as the shared capital of Punjab and the neighboring Hindu-majority state of Haryana. There was also the continuing undercurrent of religious grievance, of the sense that the Sikhs were the target of discrimination in the Indian polity and of the fear that Sikhism as a separate religious identity would fade as Sikhs were absorbed into a wider Hindu-Indian identity. By the early 1980s, these issues came to a head in the formation of an armed Sikh separatist movement which sought to form an independent nation of Khalistan, a Sikh homeland analogous to Pakistan (created out of British India in 1947 as a homeland for the Muslims). The crackdown against this insurgency was drastic; human rights abuses skyrocketed; thousands upon thousands of Punjabi Sikhs were detained, tortured, raped, and executed without trial.

The Akali Dal political party developed a Human Rights Wing as troubles between the Sikhs and the Indian government escalated during the 1980s. Jaswant Singh Khalra became the Chairman of this unit, assisted by its General Secretary, another turbaned Sikh named Jaspal Singh Dhillon. Reports reached the Human Rights Wing of the Akali Dal that Sikhs throughout Punjab were disappearing without a trace. Government officials claimed that they fled abroad to join the insurgents fighting for an independent Sikh state of Khalistan, but they were declared by many of their relatives to have been innocent and uninvolved civilians. In 1994—after about ten years of full-scale insurgency and counterinsurgency—Khalra and Dhillon embarked on a quest to discover and document what had happened to the disappeared Sikhs. The end result of this investigation was that Khalra himself disappeared (and was later discovered to have been tortured and killed) and that Dhillon was taken into police custody on charges of conspiracy to aid militants in a planned jail break. Khalra's widow now pushes on for justice in the memory of her husband, while Dhillon remains in jail today. Other human rights workers have taken up the cause of finding out what happened to the missing Sikhs. The numbers of missing appear to be, minimally, in the thousands—possibly in the tens of thousands.

Although unidentified bodies had been found in Punjab's fields with regularity over the past ten years of political turmoil, and although Sikh bodies with hands tied behind their backs with their turbans were frequently fished out of canals—not only in Punjab but in nearby downstream states as well—Khalra and Dhillon focused on their investigation of cremation grounds. Their suspicion was that most of the missing persons had been executed without trial by police and security forces and that most of the bodies may have been secretly disposed of through mass cremations. So they began their investigation by examining records of three major crematoria: Durgiana Mandir, Patti, and Tarn Taran. In these three alone, records showed that police cremated three thousand bodies as unidentified and unclaimed during the ten-year period of 1984–1994. It is generally believed that there are a total of fifty such cremation grounds used by police across Punjab.

The Khalra-Dhillon team found that the largest number of cremations took place at Durgiana Mandir in Amritsar. Although officials at the cremation ground refused to allow the investigators access to their own records, they directed Khalra and Dhillon to the Amritsar Registry of Births and Deaths. This municipal registry cited two thousand cremations by police during the ten-year period. Looking closely at 1992—the first year of Chief Minister Beant Singh's government, and its commitment to a crackdown against militancy—Khalra and Dhillon found that 300 bodies were burned by police at Durgiana Mandir in that single year.

At Patti, cremation grounds records made available from 1991 to 1994 showed that during that time 538 bodies coming from ten different police stations were burned. At this crematorium, Khalra and Dhillon had a chance to talk with officials directly involved in the disposal of bodies. They reported that:

> Officials at the cremation grounds informed us that on some days only two bodies were brought by police while on other days even ten bodies were brought together. Although firewood was purchased for the cremation of one or two bodies, on many occasions several bodies were cremated together. Another official, who got posted to the Patti cremation ground about seven months back, informed us that the bodies brought back by the police were never cremated on the built up concrete platform but were cremated in the ditches and neglected portions of the grounds. As more than one body was cremated with the firewood sufficient only for one body,

> the limbs would mostly remain half burnt or charred. This official on assuming charge of the cremation ground gathered a large number of limbs and after sealing them in a bag dumped them in the Rajasthan feeder [canal] close by.[5]

A prominent citizen of Patti whose land adjoins the cremation ground told the investigators that stray dogs would often carry half-burnt limbs to his fields. He would periodically gather these together and cremate them himself.

Receipt books showing the allocation of firewood at Tarn Taran note that 700 unidentified/unclaimed bodies were brought by police during the ten-year period of 1984–1994. Tarn Taran was a hotbed of militant activity, and "encounters" with police and security forces were a near-daily occurrence. Newspapers showed graphic photos of slain "terrorists" (some of whom were indeed militants and others of whom were innocent civilians), and the numbers of "terrorists" killed went up as cash bounties were offered to police. The road to promotion and advancement among Punjab's police was indeed through the slaughter of "terrorists."[6]

Though few people questioned how police could at the same time identify someone as a "terrorist" and then cremate him as "unidentified/unclaimed," a few individuals did investigate further. Mr. Baldev Singh, whose son, Pragat Singh, was reported as having been killed in an "encounter," testified that he went to the hospital where his son's post-mortem examination was to be carried out. An employee at the hospital told him that the police had already taken his son's body for cremation, whereupon Baldev Singh rushed to the cremation ground. He noted:

> The pyre had already been lit. Pragat's head was burning, but the rest of the body had not yet caught fire. I removed the logs from the pyre. The body was indeed my son's. There were many bullet marks on his body under his left shoulder. The police were burning him as an unidentified person, whose body no one had come to claim. There was nothing I could do.[7]

In 1995, the Human Rights Wing of the Akali Dal filed Writ Petition No. 900 in Punjab and Harayana High Court to request an inquiry into the possibility of mass illegal cremations in Punjab. However, the High Court dismissed the petition on grounds that it was too vague, and that the petitioner had no standing in the matter. Following this, a human rights group known as the Committee for Information and Initiative on Punjab moved the Supreme Court of India under Article 32 of the Constitution to demand a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into the matter. It alleged that persons had been cremated as unidentified and unclaimed, not because their identities were not known or knowable, and not because there were none to claim them, but by virtue of a systematic policy of extrajudicial execution and a program for the secret disposal of corpses.

While the petition before the Supreme Court was still at the preliminary stage of hearing, uniformed constables of the Punjab Police abducted Jaswant Singh

Khalra from outside his house on September 6, 1995. According to affidavits sworn by Khalra's colleagues and acquaintances, among them some of the most prominent citizens of Punjab (including a former High Court judge and the head of the foremost religious organization of the Sikhs), Khalra had been receiving threats from the Senior Superintendent of Police of Tarn Taran, Ajit Singh Sandhu. They testified that Khalra had been told to stop the investigation into the matter of illegal cremations and that he had been warned explicitly that "we can make one more body disappear, too." Khalra's wife petitioned the Supreme Court for a writ of habeas corpus, and the Court then instructed the CBI to investigate not only Khalra's abduction, but also the larger issue of illegal cremations.

The CBI eventually held police officials of Tarn Taran responsible for Khalra's abduction. It submitted a report on illegal cremations to the Supreme Court in December of 1996, which the Court opted to keep secret. The Supreme Court observed however that "the report discloses flagrant violation of human rights on a mass scale," and it ordered India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to look into the matter further. The NHRC is, however, a body with a limited mandate: it cannot investigate wrongdoings by security forces, it is unable to investigate cases more than one year old, and it can only make recommendations, not policy. A complicated legal dispute arose over whether the NHRC could actually carry out the mission assigned it by the Supreme Court. As the process of investigation and exposure appeared to be stalled, independent human rights groups took up the challenge of continuing Khalra's work. Khalra himself was at that point considered "disappeared," presumed dead. His associate Jaspal Singh Dhillon pushed on.

On November 9, 1997, the Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Punjab came into existence as a coalition of various human rights organizations and individuals working on the Punjab issue. It sought to: a) develop a voluntary mechanism to collect and collate information on disappeared people from all over the state of Punjab and to ensure that the matter of police abductions leading to extrajudicial executions and illegal cremations proceeds meaningfully and culminates in a just and satisfactory final order; b) evolve a workable system of state accountability and build up the pressure of public opinion to counter the government's bid for immunity; c) lobby for India to change its domestic laws in conformity with the United Nations instruments on torture, enforced disappearance, accountability, compensation to victims of abuse of power, and other related matters; and d) initiate a debate on vital issues of state power and its distribution and to work for a shared consensus on these matters with communities and organizations all over India. Ram Narayan Kumar, a Hindu-origin human rights activist who had previously worked with victims of the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster, was selected as Convenor of the Committee, and the first meeting was held in honor of the disappeared Jaswant Singh Khalra and conducted by retired Supreme Court Justice Kuldip Singh.

## Table 1
## Brief Chronology of Events

1978–1983 — heightening tensions between Sikhs and Government of India; beginnings of Sikh militancy

1984 — Indian Army action against the Golden Temple Complex; anti-Sikh pogroms following the assassination of Indira Gandhi

1986 — independent Sikh state of Khalistan declared by separatists

1987 —"war without quarter" begun as President's Rule imposed in Punjab

1988 — 59th Amendment to the Indian Constitution enables abrogation of prohibition against arbitrary violation of right to life and extends President's Rule

1989–92 — increasing rights violations in Punjab as conflict escalates; Punjab declared a "Disturbed Area"

1992 — Beant Singh administration elected as rural Sikhs boycott polls; declared intention of eradicating Sikh militancy

1993–95 — cremation grounds investigation led by Jaswant Singh Khalra reveals mass illegal cremations

1995 — Writ Petition to Punjab and Haryana High Court to inquire into cremations dismissed; Chief Minister Beant Singh assassinated by militants; Jaswant Singh Khalra "disappeared"; Supreme Court orders investigation

1996 — National Human Rights Commission considers issues surrounding its inquiry into disappearances and cremations

1997 — National Human Rights Commission stalled in its efforts; Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Punjab established to conduct independent inquiry; Peoples' Commission founded to evaluate findings

1997–98 — attempts to interfere with work of Committee for Coordination on Disappearances; calls for impunity for human rights offenders; work of Peoples' Commission challenged at High Court

1999 — National Human Rights Commission instructed to restrict investigation to three cremation grounds; mobilization to support independent effort toward fuller accountability internationally

From the Committee for Coordination on Disappearances arose the notion of a Peoples' Commission, modeled on the "truth commissions" that were proceeding in Guatemala and South Africa, which would examine complaints of illegal abductions, custodial torture, enforced disappearance, summary execution, and illegal cremation. Three retired justices formed this Peoples' Commission: Justice D.S. Tewatia, formerly Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, Justice H. Suresh, formerly of the Bombay High Court, and Justice Jaspal Singh, formerly of the Delhi High Court. The Commission's initial aims were to hear evidence and to give findings on the following: a) whether from 1979 to 1997 the agencies of the State carried out and tolerated, directly or indirectly, any atrocities and thereby committed violation of human rights as guaranteed under the Constitution of India and international covenants; b) whether agencies or individual agents of the State have *prima facie* committed any offense under the law of the land or international law; and c) to further suggest the remedies available to the victims of atrocities including entitlement to compensation from the State and its agencies.

An incident report form was drawn up after consultation with various international models, and fieldworkers of the Committee for Coordination on Disappearances began to collect evidence of specific cases. Substantial public support for the work of the Committee for Coordination and for the Peoples' Commission began to develop, and claims of abuse began to accumulate rapidly. People came from far and wide to attend meetings of the Peoples' Commission; some of them could not even understand English, the language in which the proceedings took place. Lobbyists overseas began to bring the situation in Punjab to the attention of diaspora Sikhs as well as to various Western governments. But in India, problems arose.

On May 24, 1997, newspapers reported that Ajit Singh Sandhu, the former police superintendent from Tarn Taran who had been charged with the abduction of Jaswant Singh Khalra, committed suicide by throwing himself in front of a train. K.P.S. Gill, the former Director General of Police for Punjab, under whose watch many of the most significant human rights abuses ocurred, castigated human rights groups for their "ingratitude" toward "heroes" like Ajit Singh Sandhu, who had saved India from disintegration, but who, instead of being valorized, were facing the humiliation of being charged with crimes. A vast media campaign identified the human rights groups with separatist militants, and many individuals associated with the Committee for Coordination and the Peoples' Commission found themselves harassed, threatened, and outcast by former friends. Even the liberal human rights community in the rest of India looked askance at those working in Punjab, whose ultimate sympathies with the Indian nation were beginning to be perceived as suspect. The fact that a police officer under Sandhu's command came forward as an eyewitness to Khalra's seizure, torture, and murder did little to quell the mood of intolerance for human rights activists. Khalra's widow, Paramjit Kaur Khalra, was threatened, detained, and charged with attempting to bribe a witness.[8]

On July 18, 1998, three members of the Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Punjab came out of India for the first time to speak about human rights efforts at a symposium at Columbia University. These were Ram Narayan Kumar (Convenor), Amar Singh Chahal (from Lawyers for Human

Rights), and Inderjit Singh Jaijee (from the Movement Against State Repression). Along with these three, I spoke at the symposium, and so did Mary Pike, a New York City attorney representing Sikhs in the U.S., and Ami Laws, who had recently done a study of torture in Punjab for Physicians for Human Rights. Just days after the seminar, word was received that Jaspal Singh Dhillon, the associate of Jaswant Singh Khalra who had taken over the investigation after his disappearance, had been picked up by police and thrown in jail. It was alleged that he and several others had conspired to smuggle cellular telephones and explosives into Burail jail in Chandigarh in an attempt to aid imprisoned Sikh militants in escaping. As of this writing (April 1999), Dhillon remains in detention. His colleagues believe that this episode was staged in order to further destabilize the human rights community and to thwart continuing efforts to document the atrocities that took place in Punjab.

The National Human Rights Commission has been given a limited mandate to investigate the original cremations exposed by Jaswant Singh Khalra at the Durgiana Mandir, Patti, and Tarn Taran cremation grounds. Believing this to be but the tip of the iceberg, the Committee for Coordination is pursuing its broader mandate to investigate all abuses across the whole of Punjab, and intends to present evidence to the Peoples' Commission as planned. It remains to be seen whether this will be possible. Justice Jaspal Singh of the Peoples' Commission spoke with me in New York recently, reporting that he is facing ongoing threats because of his work and that the other justices are experiencing the same. He told a gathering of some six thousand Sikhs celebrating the 300th anniversary of the Sikh siblinghood that the Peoples' Commission would, nonetheless, push on with determination and in the interests of truth and of healing. Meanwhile every member of the Committee for Coordination suffers frequent harassment and threats, some of them quite serious in nature. It is only international attention, such as that provided in this forum, that can offer some meager protection for these workers as they move ahead.[9]

## Disappearances, Cremations, and the Absence of Bones

The United Nations Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances states in Article 7 that *no circumstances whatsoever may be used to justify enforced disappearances*. This is some of the strongest and most unequivocal language in any of the United Nations documents. It is not surprising, given international support for the clearest possible condemnation of "disappearance" as a tactic of state security, that India is less than enthusiastic about attempts to uncover what appear to be enforced disappearances on a massive scale in the state of Punjab.

The United Nations Declaration further lays out, in Article 13(3), that steps must be taken to ensure that those involved in the investigation into disappearances must be protected against "ill treatment, intimidation or reprisal." Article 13(5) states that anyone engaging in such ill treatment, intimidation, or reprisal must be punished, and article 16(1) states that any official being investigated for involvement in disappearances must be suspended from duties during the investigation. Obviously, there have been no punishments or suspensions in Punjab. Far from being suspended from duties, police personnel accused of involvement in disappearances have, in fact, been promoted. One of the most notorious cases of this occurred when K.P.S. Gill, Director General of Police for Punjab during the height of the atrocities, went on to receive the honor of being appointed President of the Indian Hockey Federation (under which guise he visited the United States for the Atlanta Olympics, over the protests of many expatriate Sikhs). Gill is now a member of India's National Security Council.

The right to life of citizens, which the State must protect in all circumstances against all arbitrary violations, is also at the heart of India's Constitution. Derogation from this right is impermissible under Article 21 and Amendment 44 of that Constitution; it is a guarantee which according to India's own Constitution may not be abrogated even in a state of emergency. But in 1988, as the Sikh insurgency in Punjab became more intractable, the Indian Parliament passed a 59th Amendment which enabled the suspension of Article 21 on grounds of "internal disturbance." Punjab was then declared a "Disturbed Area" under the Disturbed Areas Act of 1991. This astonishing move, though unheralded in the international press, meant that India was legally suspending protection of the right to life against arbitrary violation in one of its key states. That this was also a state in which the overwhelming majority of India's Sikhs live made the move all the more inflammatory, even if it was not well publicized. As atrocities escalated, accusations of genocide started finding their way into the rhetoric of Sikh and other human rights activists.

In the minds of many Sikhs, the impression that the crackdown was taking place not against insurgent separatists, but against the entire Sikh population, was established in the earliest days of the conflict. The founding event was the Indian Army's storming of the Golden Temple Complex in Amritsar in 1984. The holiest site in the holiest city of the Sikhs, many of its buildings were reduced to rubble in the attempt to rout out the band of militants who had taken refuge there. The key problem was that the scale of the assault was disproportionate to the actual threat that the band of militants posed to the Indian state. There were about two hundred armed insurgents at the Complex on that day, but the army responded with some 70,000 troops who used, among other things, tanks and CS gas in the attack on the Complex. There was a complete news blackout and total curfew in Punjab at the time and, significantly, the attack took place on a Sikh holy day when as many as 10,000 innocent Sikh pilgrims were worshipping at the Golden Temple.

We now know that many hundreds, probably thousands, of the pilgrims were slaughtered in the crossfire at the Golden Temple Complex along with some thirty-five militants. Bodies bloated in the sacred pool that surrounds the Golden Temple; the water in the drains ran red. The entire front was blown off the Akal Takht , the second most important building after the Golden Temple itself, and the Sikh Reference Library burned to the ground. This last fact had a particular significance to many Sikhs, who perceived that the Indian government was trying to destroy their heritage with the aim of erasing their identity as a people. The Indian government alleged that it was the embattled militants who set fire to the Library. Milan Kundera's comment on cultural destruction resonates with this community:

> The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long that nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was . . . . The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.[10]

After Operation Blue Star, as the June 1984 attack was code-named, Sikhs immediately set about "remembering" what had happened. Paintings of the shattered dome of the Akal Takht, the bullet-pocked facade of the Golden Temple, and the torn and broken bodies littering the sacred pavement appeared on walls. Eulogies to the "martyrs" who died in the assault made the rounds of village bards and started being recorded on smuggled cassette tapes. Six months later, a few Sikhs used the inspiration from these quickly-enshrined memories as motivation to assassinate Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, whom they held ultimately responsible for the assault. After the assassination, more memories: some 3,000 Sikhs, probably more, were massacred in the streets and alleys of Delhi by what were first described as "enraged Hindu mobs" and then, later, were discovered to have been hired squads led by police officers and members of the powerful Congress party.

During the next ten years, a pattern of arbitrary detention, torture, custodial rape, and extrajudicial execution became established in Punjab. International human rights groups were not allowed to visit this troubled state, and control over the media meant that people in other parts of India had little idea of what was going on in Punjab other than that "terrorism" was posing a major security problem. The population of India has consistently shown that it is, in fact, unwilling to protest abuses of rights when national security is perceived to be at stake, as it was in this sensitive border state housing an assertive non-Hindu minority (the only other state without a Hindu majority is Kashmir, where a separatist insurgency and abusive counterinsurgency also flourish). Renascent Hindu nationalism has drawn in a substantial proportion of the citizenry, who see a tough stance toward minorities as key to the consolidation and survival of the Indian/Hindu nation.

Table 2
Ten Human Rights Sources on Punjab

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| 1998 | Amnesty International, *A Mockery of Justice: The Case Concerning the "Disappearance" of Human Rights Defender Jaswant Singh Khalra* |
| 1996 | Amnesty International, *Harjit Singh: The Continuing Pursuit of Justice* |
| 1995 | Human Rights Watch, *Encounter in Philibit: Summary Executions of Sikhs* |
| 1995 | Amnesty International, *Punjab Police: Beyond the Bounds of Law* |
| 1994 | Amnesty International, *The Terrorism and Disruptive Activities Act: The Lack of "Scrupulous Care"* |
| 1994 | Human Rights Watch, *Arms and Abuses in Indian Punjab and Kashmir* |
| 1994 | Human Rights Watch/Physicians for Human Rights, *Dead Silence: The Legacy of Abuses in Punjab* |
| 1993 | Amnesty International, *"An Unnatural Fate": Disappearances and Impunity in Punjab and Kashmir* |
| 1991 | Asia Watch, *Punjab in Crisis: Human Rights in India* |
| 1991 | Amnesty International, *Human Rights Violations in Punjab: Use and Abuse of the Law* |

After the incendiary events of 1984, the Indian government turned all efforts toward the rebuilding of the Golden Temple Complex. The attempt was to "rehabilitate" Sikh militants and to restore "peace and normalcy." This involved, though, a purposeful forgetting of what fifteen to twenty years of violence has done to the people of Punjab. The human rights workers attempting to document this history are accused of being "anti-national" since they do not participate in this great white-washing, but rather subvert it at every turn. Not for India the refusal of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to reclaim their children's battered bodies, so that closure could be achieved and the past safely buried. Those attempting to keep the wounds fresh are treacherous. Foreigners, who point out that in other countries revelation of the truth is seen as a first step toward healing and reconciliation, are ignored. History is rewritten by a new crop of scholars, well-funded and appropriately celebrated, who reflect not the agony of minorities, but national victory, as the central phenomenon of late twentieth-century Punjab.

Since cremation rather than burial is the traditional mortuary rite of both Sikhs and Hindus, there are few forensic remains in Punjab for medical examiners to consider as evidence of the "decade of disappearance." The disappeared have floated away as ash on Punjab's rivers or been carried skyward as smoke into Punjab's scorching heavens. The few bits of evidence we have shock and repel us: a photo of a heap of partially-burned bodies, eerily reminiscent of the Holocaust, preserved by the Committee for Coordination; another grainy polaroid print of a wild dog tearing at the charcoal remains of a human leg. We have the testimony of neighbors of crematoria who remember, horrifically, *the smell*. But the smell might be of the legitimately cremated, hence less atrocious: who can say for sure at this point how many bodies there were, at which cremation grounds they were burned and, most importantly, who was responsible? There are no bones left, no evidence that DNA tests can unravel and relatives can mourn over. In the absence of bones, all people have is memory.

The Indus River, of which Punjab's five rivers are tributaries, was one of the great cradles of ancient civilization. "Is that the same Indus where . . . ?" informed archaeology students ask me. Yes, it is the same Indus. Yes, this is the same immense peninsula where the Buddha lived, where Jainism was born, where Mahatma Gandhi, our favorite apostle of nonviolence, is celebrated as a national hero. India has been a cradle of democracy in a region where dictatorships have flourished. Its stature as a fulcrum of spirituality of the most diverse and complex sort is undisputed. And yet, India is a place where innocent people die, where canals are clogged with bodies and crematoria sweep away nameless ashes, where human rights workers disappear or are thrown in jail. It is both a cradle and a grave.

As an anthropologist, I have become an advocate for the human rights of the Sikhs, though not a partisan of the separatist movement for Khalistan. Most of the people with whom I interact, save those of obviously political motivations, understand and accept this delineation. More importantly, I use my ethnographic knowledge of the Punjab conflict to develop a critique of India as a whole, whose overarching image of harmony and pacifism interferes with every attempt to document and make public the atrocities committed in its name. This type of activism in anthropology remains controversial, though accorded legitimate status in the American Anthropological Association's new code of ethics.[11] I, with others, am still working out how to celebrate local cultures while insisting on a minimum standard of universal rights and how not to use our discipline's bulwark of hands-off description as an excuse for moral cowardice where rights abuses occur.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes insists that anthropologists are not only "spectators" accountable to science but also "witnesses" accountable to history. She writes that:

> Anthropologists who are privileged to witness human events close up and over time, who are privy to community secrets that are generally hidden from the view of outsiders or from historical scrutiny until much later—after the collective graves have been discovered and the body counts made—have . . . an ethical obligation to identify the ills in the spirit of solidarity.[12]

Agreeing with Scheper-Hughes, some of us write about atrocities because we cannot bear the fact that the suffering of people we have come to love should go unwitnessed, cremated, forgotten. And this is not just a matter of professional responsibility; it is a matter of our very identities as human beings, who define themselves through their relationships with others, as Martin Buber suggests.[13] For anthropologists, our Alters are sometimes dauntingly exotic, but our venerable field method of on-the-ground, human-to-human ethnography makes them as intimate to us as our own families. It is not a joke about being workaholic, but an accurate comment on what ethnography is, when someone says that we live, eat, and breathe the people we study. They in fact become part of the essence of ourselves. That is why there is a certain loneliness to the business of anthropology—how many of our acquaintances here know enough about the people of Pongo-Pongo to really understand?—and a certain "overabsorption" in our topics. For some of us, the people we have so taken to heart are facing dislocation, death, and eradication from the annals of human history. So we write bones, shuddering, in the tremulous hope that the bones we write will last longer than the bones of our friends who have disappeared, traceless.[14]

This inaugural issue of *Human Rights Review* marks a critical confluence among academicians of various stripes, lawyers, doctors, policy makers, artists, poets, and global and indigenous activists, who for too long have been artificially separated by institutional arrangements and intellectual histories. The conjoining of scholarship and activism in the sphere of human rights offers a radical challenge to established patterns of interaction in the human rights arena, hopefully one which will educate and empower us all as we seek to make the twenty-first century more humane than the twentieth has been. Let us commit ourselves to making this new millenium the one that sees the eradication of all forms of abuse to the lives and dignity of persons.

## Notes

1. Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).
2. Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
3. Edith Turner, *The Spirit and the Drum: A Memoir of Africa* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).
4. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1996).
5. Horrifying visual images of these cremations were provided in the documentary film about the Khalra-Dhillon investigation, "Disappearances in Punjab," produced by Ram Narayan Kumar and Lorenz Skerjanz.
6. Joyce Pettigrew, *The Sikhs of the Punjab: Unheard Voices of State and Guerilla Violence* (London: Zed Books, 1995).
7. Affidavit of Mr. Baldev Singh, filed at the Supreme Court of India, 27 September, 1995.
8. For further details see Amnesty International's 1998 report, *A Mockery of Justice: The Case Concerning the "Disappearance" of Human Rights Defender Jaswant Singh Khalra Severely Undermined.*

9. I am indebted for some of this material to Dr. Jasdev Singh Rai of the Sikh Human Rights Group, London.
10. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996).
11. *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association, Anthropology Newsletter* (June 1998).
12. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." *Current Anthropology 36:3 (1995).*
13. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
14. I would like to gratefully acknowledge and respectfully salute Ram Narayan Kumar and his colleagues, who soldier on in the struggle for rights in Punjab, hearts and bones exposed. Without their work I would not have the honor of being a small part of the Punjab human rights effort. The Committee for Coordination on Disappearances in Punjab can be reached at 742, Sector 8, Chandigarh (tel. 544920) or 56 Todarmal Road, New Delhi (tel. 3714531); email disapear@nda.usnl.net.in.