

India's Shame: The Personal Ordeal of Cynthia Mahmood

by CYNTHIA K. MAHMOOD

India's crimes of 1984 began with its assault on, and the massacres at, the Golden Temple and dozens of other gurdwaras across India in the first week of June 1984, and continued with the nationwide government-sponsored pogroms of November 1984. In many ways, the crimes still continue, not just in the cover-up and the sheltering of the criminals, but in actual outrages by the government and its minions to date. The following heart-rending story is the twentieth in our series entitled "1984 & I", which we present this year to mark the 25th anniversary of the year a nation sank to a new low in dealing with a community to which it owed so much:

In this deeply personal account, I describe for the first time how I was assaulted, beaten and raped by a gang of hired thugs or rogue police in a north central Indian state during fieldwork in 1992. A graphic narrative of this event leads into a brief meditation on the sorts of things readers would typically prefer not to know, and on our compulsion as engaged anthropologists to bring them into the conversation anyway. I conclude with the persisting hope of survivors of violence - like many of our ethnographic interlocutors in arenas of conflict - that healing is possible and that change toward justice can occur. Finally, I write of an anthropology that speaks from a spiritual, political and intellectual paradigm which recognizes that, unspoken or not, values of the heart are as central to our field as those of the mind. [Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, Senior Fellow in Peace Studies, Department of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame, U.S.A.]

"It's not an interesting subject," said my colleague, an anthropologist at a research institute in north central India. He was referring to the Sikh separatist insurgency then at its peak in the northwestern region of Punjab.

I was puzzled by his answer.

"Not interesting?" I queried.

Horrible, maybe; tabooed, maybe; frightening, maybe; all kinds of other adjectives could be applied to the uprising that claimed tens of thousands of lives in the name of a sovereign state for

the Sikhs, but "not interesting" was hardly an expected answer. Not least, from a fellow anthropologist.

"No, not at all," came the firm dismissal. "You don't want to inquire about that. It's not a point with any research potential. We should continue with tribal development. That's what you came here for, isn't it?"

You don't want to read the rest of this story. Not if you want to avoid confronting the utter disgrace of a world in which some people think they can threaten, pummel and punish scholars into studying the "right" topics. Not if you want to believe that knowledge is found in ivory towers and quiet libraries, that it comes without pain, that it is always welcome.

I had gone to this undeveloped region of India to study tribal issues, and that's what we did. My associate clearly did not want to approach the topic of Punjab, and there were, after all, so many other "interesting" things to study in this vast nation. Interesting and safe, my memory adds parenthetically.

When the tribal project was finished, I mentioned Punjab once again. It was 1992, and the newspapers were aflame with news of the northwest. In avowedly secular India, a religious minority had spawned a sovereignty movement so strong that it was seen as threatening the very unity of the nation.

This Sikh uprising inspired further separatist unrest to the north in Kashmir, among the Muslims. A heavy crackdown in both states by the central government was prompting criticism of human rights abuses from every major international watchdog organization. An observer of India could hardly deem all this "uninteresting."

"Might not one consider a study of the situation in Punjab," I prompted again, "when the tribal work is concluded?" There was nothing partisan, merely neutral, in my proposition. But my interlocutor returned my query with silence.

I could understand it, because for him as an Indian it might well be problematic to show too much interest in security-sensitive topics.

For me, it could be different. No one really grasped what was going on with the Sikhs, for example.

To say that they were "terrorists" didn't begin to unpack the massive alienation of the Sikh population from the India they had opted to join in 1947. But I remained puzzled by the overwhelmingly "bad press" the Sikh separatist movement had gotten. There appeared to be no sympathetic voices anywhere.

Something told me there must be a story behind that . . . my anthropologist's nose told me that such 100 percent agreement on a subject spelled ideology, not ground-level truth. The success of the Sikh guerrilla fighters meant that somebody supported them. That was why I brought up the subject here, far away from the actual conflict in Punjab.

That evening, as I was returning from dinner, something happened that changed my personal and professional life forever.

It was quieter than usual for this bustling, even raucous, area of the town. Twilight had fallen, shadows lengthening into darkness where alleyways twisted between buildings, but it was light enough on the major street where I walked. Thinking about the article I was working on, and feeling replete with a lovely vegetarian meal, I hummed a bit as I neared the last corner on the way home.

Suddenly I had a vague sense that something was wrong. I was walking alongside a low wall marking the boundary between the street and the city's *maidan*, the grassy parade ground from British times, when I saw a small group of men walking in my direction across the field.

There was nothing particularly wrong with that, but something clicked in my mind that they were striding a little bit too purposefully. It wasn't a typically Indian way of walking, in the dusk of a warm evening. Brushing this idea aside, I continued on my path, looking ahead.

But when the group passed behind me, one of them, to my horror, leapt forward, grabbed me around the waist, and hauled me over the wall into the *maidan*. It happened so fast, as they say, I couldn't think. It took me a moment to even realize what had happened. Before I knew it, I was being pulled across the grass, stumbling, half-running, now grabbed by a second man, deeper into the darkness of the *maidan*.

My adrenaline was shooting up, every warning I'd received about street gangs in India whipping through my mind. I fumblingly reached inside my bag when we stopped running. My hand came out with some bills and coins, probably more than these men had seen in a long time, and spilled them onto the grass.

"Take this money," I gasped. "Here, take my passport." I reached into my shirt to pull out my "secure" wallet. "American!"

A U.S. passport was worth a lot on the black market, and I fully expected my assailants to scramble for the money and passport and evaporate into the night.

These gangs did such things for money. This was India's poorest state, with roving bands of unemployed youths. Typically, they weren't serial murderers. If you weren't involved in their local caste wars and it wasn't a communal confrontation, what they wanted was money. I knew all this from books and magazines and newspapers. I ticked through the facts in my mind as I stood there, agonizingly waiting for the thugs to reach for the bills, the passport, the coins.

But to my horror, the crumpled bills I dredged out of my bag fell to the ground unheeded. One of the men grabbed my passport roughly out of my hand, held it to the light, and spat on it vehemently. For good measure, he stomped on some of the currency that now lay in the grass, grinding it down with the worn black heel of his shoe. I saw that the fellow next to him was barefoot, and one of the others wore flip-flops.

My mind now started mentally checking off these details, click-clicking, ticking, as my fear rose like a gorge in my throat.

Was this really a street gang, or what?

A hand was on my wrist. Whump! I was flat on the ground. No time to do anything, breathless from the impact of my back hitting the field.

"What do you want?" I was saying. Was I shouting, screaming or whimpering?

Or speaking serenely? My voice sounded oddly calm to my ears. The men were hugely tall from my vantage point; hulking shadows, faces swathed in cloths. Only then did I notice that all of them were carrying lathis, Indian police batons. What could that mean?

As I inhaled, the air carried the scent of rotten tangerines. Someone must have thrown fruit here on the maidan, I thought, as people occasionally did with the remnants of family picnics or workers' lunches. I almost gagged on the smell; it enveloped all of me and went straight down my throat to my stomach.

The black-shoe man kicked me in the side just as the barefoot man put his dirty foot over my nose and mouth.

Now I really will throw up, I thought. Who are these men? Are they thugs? Could they be police? I wondered as my eyes roamed wildly around, like they do in movies. For some crazy reason, I tried to look straight at the barefoot man high above my face. I tried not to let my eyes roam wildly. I concentrated on that.

"Bitch! Whore!" - and a string of curses followed. Unindividuated members of the band I couldn't distinguish were swearing and hitting my legs and lower body with their lathis. Intermittently, black-shoe man was leaning over to spit in my face, that part not covered by the other guy's foot, choking me with its pollution and filth. He pushed his accomplice's foot out of the way at one point to obtain a wider target.

"Stop! Stop!" I half sobbed, though my mind insisted I was in control. "I am an American scholar. You won't get away with this." I said it but it sounded ridiculous, asserting U.S. power from my position lying flat down in a maidan.

Before I could register this half-thought, I felt my salwar ripping. A hand was on my breast, pinching my right nipple. It hurt! Jesus, it hurt!

I saw the glint of a knife. It was held in a large dark hand down near my waist, pulling up the silky cloth of my kameez. Thank God, I thought, they are not going to kill me. They are only cutting the nala to get my pants down to rape me. I calmed my mind. If they had wanted to kill me they would have done so already, I thought. They didn't take my money, I thought. They have a different aim in mind.

So quickly does the mind change gears, it thinks of rape as "only" - they are "only" going to rape me. At least their aim is not murder.

As my salwar was pulled off and my breasts were fondled by multiple hands, I continued, disembodied, to think clearly. They want to humiliate me or scare me. I can survive. I will live through this experience and go on. My thoughts were hovering above my body, thinking themselves through rationally.

One of the men had put my hand on his penis, kneeling by my side. It was horrible, gross! A sausage-like thing. Repulsive thing. Vomit thing. Stinking bowel movement of a thing. Shouldn't I fight back? I barely formed this thought in my mind when twist! My hand snapped his organ around, a loud wail from his masked mouth! No registration of triumph though. The knife at my wrist.

Slash, slash, blood. I see the blood dripping, even in the dark. I smell my own blood over the smell of the rotten tangerines.

I cannot fight back, not against this. I should survive, only survive.

Oh! I hadn't noticed. Black-shoe man is raping me.

The stars are very bright. Odd, even with the city lights you can see the stars.

I wonder if people at home are looking at these same stars. Of course! Silly me.

It's daytime there.

My thoughts, above, focus on daytime, night time, the rotation of the earth.

There are, amazingly, many stones in the maidan, despite its grassy appearance.

The stones are getting into my hair. I'll have to wash it before the trip home. What kind of shampoo will I use? A supermarket array of shampoo brands flash through my mind. Herbal Essence. Pantene Pro-V. More Value for Your Money. A Fresh Scent.

It's a different man now. I can't feel him. He smells like garlic. Horrible.

Throw up! No, pay attention. Pay attention to when he gets up. When he gets up, jump up somehow. Jump up and run away.

My thoughts tell me to gather my strength, jump up, and run away.

I try to hold on to my thoughts of plans, but they fly away like butterflies. I try to catch them, but the fragile wings tear. They are off and away, up into the night.

Bushy eyebrows. I force myself to see, to pay attention. The man is sweating.

Mumbling curses. How can I jump up? My legs have been beaten. My side hurts. I am bleeding. Rape man pushes on. Can I stick my thumb into his eye, as I've been told Special Forces do, to kill someone? I realize somebody else is standing on my hand. The non-bleeding hand.

Blood and tangerines, semen, sweat. Inhale the solid miasma of degradation, get it past your nose and mouth, get that into your lungs, let it rip into your soul.

With a groan, he is done. Somewhere, people are clapping. I hear a motorcycle nearby. Now! I think. I don't know how but somehow I am up, running with bent knees and twisted ankles but running, toward the sound of the motorcycle. RUN! My thoughts tell me, my brain screams.

Men are laughing behind me, and their laughter feels like knives. I don't know if I am crying or screaming or if my mouth is open but utterly soundless, but I do know that I am away.

I run and stumble and run and run. It is like a dream where you can't run, but I am running. I look down and see that my legs are moving.

"Help me," I croak to motorcycle man. "Help me, help me," I plead to utter-stranger man, and fall onto the back of the motorcycle.

My thoughts are back in my brain now.

My thoughts, my brain, my body, we are one filthy, humiliated, angry whole now. I finally start to cry, weeping onto the shoulders of kind-Samaritan man, bumping over the rotting streets of the city on a sputtering moped.

You do not want to know that this has happened, of course. You do not want to envision it. You do not want to read about the stones in my hair and the smell of the rotten tangerines. You do not want to imagine a woman you know as respectable and dignified clinging, weeping, to a total stranger in a north Indian night.

Discreetly, I have admitted to a few privileged friends and colleagues that, yes, I was assaulted, but it was a long time ago, and I am alright now. Such admissions, legs held firmly together, avoid confronting the utter disgrace of a world in which some people think they can threaten, pummel, and punish scholars into studying "the right" topics. We don't want to throw that into the faces of polite academia. We want to believe we choose our research topics freely and follow our conclusions where they lead.

Those who actually try to study "the wrong" topics - the silenced, the tabooed, the dangerous topics that challenge the power holders of the world - may find out just what it takes to be a truly independent scholar. But it is important not to hide the price some scholars pay for that in the interests of conventional good manners. That way leads to a trivializing of what Scholarship - the pursuit of truth - actually is. Pursuing the truth is a highly political endeavor! It is not the way of safety, of security, of sweet dreams, and comfortable retirements. It is a jihad.

You do not want to know the nightmares I wake up trembling from, years later, the gripping, contorting, wringing headaches that plague me continuously, the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms that do not leave, despite therapy and medication and time. I don't thrust such things before you, not in regular discourse. Not too many people know about "what happened to me." After all, I don't want to be viewed as a victim, as some sort of permanent cripple. What happened impels me, though, to push forward rudely with other things people do not want to know but need to see.

Now, remember those Sikhs in Punjab? They were the people my colleague at the institute found so "uninteresting" that he dissuaded me from thinking about studying them. After I was assaulted (oh! that word covers a universe! an epoch!) I gradually came to learn that the entire episode had been set up to scare me into avoiding the topic of Punjab and the Sikh insurgency.

Why else would my assailants have refused my money, my passport? I hypothesized. Spat on me, insulted me? And yet, they didn't simply kidnap or kill me either. The more I thought about the whole thing the more I came to the conclusion that this was an attempt to scare. And in light of that theory, other things fell into place.

Slowly an explanation evolved that fit pieces into the puzzle.

The person I had met for dinner was a well-known senior scholar of Marxist orientation who had written provocative analyses of the then-current Ayodhya controversy and, in the process, boldly critiqued the Hindu majoritarian nationalism that enflamed minority passions among Sikhs, Muslims, tribals and others.

I had been warned by my colleagues and hosts not to meet this respected academic, this senior scholar, and out of deference to them I had waited until our joint project on tribal development was nearly completed before deciding that, as a free agent, I could and should go ahead and seek out a conversation with him. I did so by accepting a dinner invitation that evening, in a public place, on the way back from which I was so purposefully attacked.

When I had stumbled back to the institute that awful night, bruised and battered, my colleagues had proven unsympathetic. I was advised not to go to the police, because that could result in problems for our research project and potential future permits.

Besides, everyone knew that police were corrupt and women could face even more problems with them. The matter could even become an international incident. But these were pragmatic concerns. Stranger still was the overall mood of "we told you so" that greeted me when I explained what had just happened.

My hosts advised me to listen to their guidelines next time. If I hadn't taken time away from our current project to meet with dubious individuals concerned with "uninteresting" subjects, none of this would have happened. Instead of being comforted, I got more warnings: maybe you've learned your lesson now, maybe now you will stick with the projects approved by this institute.

I was reminded, then, of other oddities about the trip that I had brushed aside at the time: the reluctance of my all-Hindu, all-male colleagues to trust me with a map of the border-area tribal region we were investigating; the insistence that I drop my married (Muslim) name and go back to my (Germanic) maiden name; the intellectual disagreements we had over whether the tribals should be classed as Hindus or as "animists" for the Indian census.

This latter was an important political question, bearing as it does on the figures of just how extensive the "Hindu majority" in India really is, and invoking incendiary calls for *hindutva* (loosely translated, "Hindu-ness" or the "Hindu way") as a defining feature of the Indian nation. I had assessed the groups we investigated as clearly animist, whereas my colleagues uniformly classed them as Hindu. (We listed them as Hindu, with the majority, but I wrote a politely dissenting article.)

The clarion call to *hindutva* by Hindu nationalist organizations who in 1992 were just leading the march to tear down the mosque at Ayodhya on grounds that an ancient Hindu temple lay beneath, was the same call that prompted Sikhs - over on the other side of the subcontinent - to fear for their place in ostensibly secular India. Muslims in Kashmir, Nagas in the Northwest, Christians in the south, Dalits ("untouchables") everywhere; these were the non-Hindu communities becoming restive over the rise in "muscular Hinduism" (Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996; 2007).

These tensions have only increased since the time of this incident in 1992, so that by now, we see violence in all the peripheral areas of India where Hindus and non-Hindus bump up against each other in India's jostling democracy.

The Hindu right is sophisticated enough to fight one battle in its political war in the meadows of higher education. Although pogroms have occurred out in the streets against Sikhs or Muslims, the world inside the ivy-covered walls is not immune. We would do well to remind ourselves time and again that, as Salman Rushdie commented in 1984 regarding the Jonah-in-the-whale tale, there are no more whales in which to remain insulated, not for the arts nor for academia (Rushdie 1991).

In 2004, a group of slogan-chanting Hindus looted the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, where James Laine, a scholar whose book excited some controversy, had done his research. A Hindu mob nabbed and tarred the face of the Indian historical researcher he had acknowledged in the volume.

Wendy Doniger, Paul Courtright and David White have also been among those academics who have been targeted by the Hindu right because of their intellectual work on the religion. Doniger, a senior scholar of the Hindu tradition, regularly receives death threats; a letter-writing campaign tried to prevent another young scholar's tenure at Rice University.

It is probably difficult for readers without a background in India to imagine the venomous quality of these disputes over religion, which are tied to postcolonial identities and to the allocation of resources and rewards in post independence India.

The Sikhs who brandished the flag of their own homeland of "Khalistan" in 1992 were especially threatening because that was the height of the new Hindu nationalist drive to rebuild the Ram temple at Ayodhya, and coincidentally it was the peak of the armed Sikh insurgency in Punjab. At that historical moment, it seemed as if the Khalistani guerillas might even succeed in establishing a Sikh homeland, making that separatist movement the first to actually challenge the integrity of the Indian state.

The Kashmiri insurgency followed the example of the Sikhs, and India fast became a "fearful state" (Ali 1993), responding to challenges with overpowering violence. Vigilante groups and civilian posses felt emboldened to defend the Indian motherland, in Punjab and Kashmir and in the "cow belt" - the Hindu heartland where I had just been assaulted. Few were prosecuted; indeed, many were cheered on by the media.

Indeed, India sees the threats posed by centrifugal tensions as so dangerous that it is willing to risk its reputation as "the world's largest democracy" to quash any potential revolutionary movements. International human rights groups have all criticized the ubiquitous use of torture and arbitrary detention by police and security forces in India and, where separatist insurgency threatens, extrajudicial executions and disappearances as well.

But sadly, even the marketplace of ideas is now constrained by the fearful Indian government.

Although the Constitution provides for freedom of speech and expression, under the Official Secrets Act the government may prosecute anyone who publishes or communicates information that could be harmful to the state.

A press council composed of journalists, publishers, academics and politicians - which in the United States might be standing up for press and academic freedoms - in India sets a code of conduct to regulate and self-censor materials that might incite communal violence.

The government bans books considered incendiary, bans films deemed offensive to "communal sentiment," and applies restrictions to the travel and activities of visiting scholars and experts. It has to approve all forms of seminars, conference, guest lectures and collaborative research involving international scholars.

The Informational Technology Act allows the government to limit access to the Internet if such access is deemed detrimental to national security, including allowing police to search the homes and offices of Internet users. The government itself is afraid of what ideas can do, and it is not surprising that the agenda of allowing only certain kinds of ideas a place would also be carried through to government think-tanks, research institutes and universities.

Back in 1992, I was only peripherally aware of rising tensions between Hindus and other religious groups, about which I unfortunately know so much now. That is to say, I knew about communal conflict in India, but imagined that because my studies were not directly impinging on these issues, I could pursue my work on tribal development in peace. Through gang rape, beatings and broken bones, I learned differently.

The books I had read had not made me understand the systemic quality of the silencing that goes on in a place dominated by fear, where state security has become synonymous with national identity. Even small comments, small gestures, small names, small dissents, blossomed into seemingly major potential threats.

Facing the ambiguity of not knowing whom to trust, in pain, humiliation, and frustration, I got to the airport the morning after I was assaulted for the first flight to Delhi and then home to the United States. There followed months of back-and-forth negotiations of who did and said what, and about which groups were ultimately responsible.

There remained many basic ambiguities that were never resolved, ambiguities I later recognized as characteristic of the arenas of terror in which many of the people I now study (Sikhs, Muslims; Mahmood 1999) live themselves, never quite clear who is an ally and who is an enemy, perhaps doubting their own complicity in the suffering they endure. Did they bring it on themselves? (As so many say.)

It took me years after that to sort through what I should have, could have, or might have done as a victim-survivor who is also a scholar. What was not a gray area for me was whether to continue to work in this region, on those topics. I had to. Every scar, as it faded, begged me to.

Since 1992, I did turn my scholarly attention to Punjab and I did learn a great deal about the Sikhs who are so "uninteresting" that their suffering goes ignored by the entire world - those Sikhs with their wounds of torture, their disappeared relatives, their raped women, and their secretly cremated remains.

I studied the tabooed "Khalistanis" who definitely had more of a story behind them than the simple narrative of criminal-terrorist upheld by the Indian state and indeed the whole of the (non-Sikh) civilian population. Through face-to-face Ethnography - looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them (following Geertz 1984) - I learned about the history of Sikh grievances, the theology of war and peace, and the dynamics of the widespread Sikh diaspora.

I learned that Sikh militants did indeed kill and bomb and terrify - but Sikh civilians suffered and died. They were ashamed, and were scared, and their government did not protect them. The human rights abuses going on in Punjab were horrific: this in the land of Gandhi; this in "the world's largest democracy."

These things are among those that people seem not to want to know about Sikhs and about Punjab, things that we must make them know anyway, I decided. Put that raw and burning flesh right out there in coarse exhibition, legs splayed open obscenely. Make it so people can't turn away. Make somebody look. Make somebody question. Why is a generation gone from the plains of Punjab?

Anyone who loves India should know what has happened in Punjab, I reasoned, because a tiny two-percent minority like the Sikhs are the proverbial canary in the coal mine, the bellweather that can point to how the winds of Indian democracy are blowing. Are the rights of a small,

dissenting minority protected? If not there, where? When we come to the much larger minority of Muslims? When we come to the vast lowest level of the Indian pyramid, the Dalits?

It troubled me that people in India viewed Sikhs as troublemakers, that they had no sympathizers, that even progressives didn't stand up against the nightmarish abuses of rights in Punjab.

You may not want to know what happened to me - me, a mere drop in the heaving oceans, a mote in the vast eye of God - but you damn well will know what happened to Harinder Singh and Mehtab Kaur and Pritpal Singh and Jatinder Singh Kahlon and Maninderpal Kaur and the Sikhs at the Golden Temple and the others in the distant villages, and those unnamed who went up in smoke, and those named but still missing.

In pain I will put it right before you until you have to know and you have to ask why.

"Sikh Studies," a traditionally Orientalist field that has consciously steered clear of the topic of conflict in Punjab, even as tens of thousands of Sikhs perished, wants us to look at medieval religious texts while the heart of Sikhism is in flames. If we touch the fire, if then too we burn and say ouch! - then we are shunned. But then again, academia has never done well in perilous times.

Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term genocide, was thought to be crazy when he pointed to the crimes of Nazi Germany, and academics have sadly been more complicit than protesting in mass killing campaigns from Rwanda to Bosnia.

What's wrong with us? Not even in India, but internationally? In America, where we are "safe?" So few speak up. Like the tin man in the Wizard of Oz, do we simply have a deficit of heart?

You may not want to know about that young man, bound and gagged, dropped from a helicopter in Atlantic waves, or about the state that now shelters his killers. Do you want to see - or is it too "pornographic," as we say (no one living with violence considers such an argument) - the beheading of that journalist, the muffling of those children in improvised live graves? Is it not time to think more critically about our institutional discourse of "safety" and "risk assessment" and how it guides us securely away from the martyring truths that might really unseat the powerful and change the status quo? How it is part of the machine that keeps academia complicit in the silencing of abuses, the turning away from suffering?

We think of scholarship as a quietist occupation, but in this unjust world must it not be sometimes a militant one, as Scheper-Hughes so plaintively suggests (1995)? Is it not amazing that in this day and age, serious scholars get death threats, major academic bodies ignore the human pathos at their very feet, and "terrorism experts" in academia and our governments may never have crossed the path of a person enmeshed in violence?

One may choose to be an "engaged anthropologist" as an intellectual matter; there are reasons enough as the 21st century dawns. I had gone to north-central India in 1992 to study tribal

development needs as a scholar, an observer. I had no stake in any religious or political controversies.

But when others chose to use their very bodies as weapons, insulting my own at its very core, this ethnography became a very intimate matter indeed. The question is, what does one do with that deeply, literally visceral violent memory?

Use the healing of self to forget that unsought connection when my study of violence and my very being were suddenly thrown into one another on a maidan's grassy surface? Or, use that shattering intersection to begin a new journey, in which the bloody love of the other throws the anthropologist into the role of pilgrim - truth seeker - advocate, from the bones? Seek a new way to understand anthropology as a spiritual journey and a political commitment as well as a science, art, and profession?

It's past time, I think, that we talk to our students not only about safety but also about courage. We should ask them what they think it takes to be an anthropologist in this perilous world of ours - not GRE scores but character.

How will you stand up to it? How will you pursue, teach and write the truth in a world intent on masking it?

Sometimes people ask me, how can you continue to do this work, how can you continue to have hope? How can you, a teacher of peace studies, imagine that the Sikhs and Kashmiris, who have now suffered so much, will heal, will flourish, will give back to the world the spirituality and music and art and all of those things for which they were known, "before?"

How can you imagine that the Indian police and military, who have tortured and jailed and murdered, will become in the end human beings of peace and goodwill? How can you believe that militants who slaughter in the name of God or sovereignty will emerge as forgivers and reconcilers? Those who have become rapists or raped, is there hope for them, now?

I believe that a future of healing and peace is possible because I know that human beings are more resilient than we can ever imagine. I have bones that have been broken and have healed. I have wounds that have bled, have scarred over, and are barely visible now. I have memories that have haunted me but have faded, and new, better memories that have replaced them. I know that despite all my continuing personal demons, when a gentle, strong man holds me, I melt.

What other kinds of love are not possible?

What courage is not possible when the courage of people all around us wells up through drownings, beheadings, live burials, wells up again and again until we are tired of watching it on our televisions and reading it in our newspapers - and yet people still find the strength to resist, and resolve, and forge on ahead?

There are those who find peace unimaginable, so they warn of "uninteresting" topics. They send goons to scare off the inquisitive. They beat people with lathis to force them into cowardice.

But we survivor-anthropologists are not afraid. We believe in the possibilities, find all human beings "of interest," and will not turn away.

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this article to the graduate students of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, Notre Dame, who, on the eve of their first fieldwork, gave me the strength to tell this long-muted story.

Colleagues at the institute were the first to read and comment on drafts of this article: Martha Merritt, Scott Appleby, Larissa Fast, Anne Hayner and Diane King, and I thank you for your early support. Anthropologists Agustin Fuentes, Daniel Lende, Greg Downey, Eric Lindland, Jim Bellis, Debra Mac-Dougall, Lisa Mitchell, Ian Kuijt, Kalyani Menon and Patrick Gaffney provided critical feedback and encouragement to publish. Gratitude also goes to two anonymous readers at Anthropology and Humanism who provided useful suggestions.

None of the above should be held responsible for any of the contents or opinions in this piece, however, which are entirely my own.

Cynthia Mahmood did go on to become a leader in the academic study of violence and human rights in Punjab. She is the author of:

Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants (1996);

The Guru's Gift: Exploring Gender Equality with North American Sikh Women (Mahmood with Brady 2000);

A Sea of Orange: Writings on the Sikhs and India (2001b),

and many articles and book chapters on related topics.

Mahmood also speaks and testifies publicly on terrorism, rights, and resistance in democracies such as India and the United States (see Mahmood 2001a). She founded and now directs the book series on "*The Ethnography of Political Violence*" at the University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mahmood's current project is a book on state violence and historical silencing.

References Cited

Ali, S. Mahmud, 1993, *The Fearful State: People, Power and Internal War in South Asia*. London: Zed Books.

Geertz, Clifford, 1984, "Anti Anti-Relativism." *American Anthropologist* 86(2):263-278.

Hansen, Thomas Blom, 1999, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, 1996, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, ed., 2007, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mahmood, Cynthia Keppley, 1996, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

1999, *Trials by Fire: Dynamics of Terror in Punjab and Kashmir*.

In Death Squad: The Anthropology of State Terror. Jeffrey A. Sluka, ed. Pp. 79-90. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

2001a, "Myth, Terror and the Power of Ethnographic Praxis." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30(5):520-545. 2001b.

A Sea of Orange: Writings on the Sikhs and India. Philadelphia, PA: XLibris.

Mahmood, Cynthia Keppley, with **Stacy Brady**, 2000, *The Guru's Gift: Exploring Gender Equality with North American Sikh Women*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

Rushdie, Salman, 1991[1984] "Outside the Whale." *In Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism*, 1981-1991. Pp. 87-102. London: Granta.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy, 1995, "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." *Current Anthropology* 36(3):409-420.

[April 29, 2009]