

Article

“I Get Peace:” Gender and Religious Life in a Delhi Gurdwara

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Abstract: In October and November of 1984, after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, approximately 3500 Sikh men were killed in Delhi, India. Many of the survivors—Sikh widows and their kin—were relocated thereafter to the “Widow Colony”, also known as Tilak Vihar, within the boundary of Tilak Nagar in West Delhi, as a means of rehabilitation and compensation. Within this colony lies the Shaheedganj Gurdwara, frequented by widows and their families. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, I explore the intersections between violence, widowhood, and gendered religious practice in this place of worship. Memories of violence and experiences of widowhood inform and intersect with embodied religious practices in this place. I argue that the gurdwara is primarily a female place; although male-administered, it is a place that, through women’s practices, becomes a gendered counterpublic, allowing women a place to socialize and heal in an area where there is little public space for women to gather. The gurdwara has been re-appropriated away from formal religious practice by these widows, functioning as a place that enables the subversive exchange of local knowledges and viewpoints and a repository of shared experiences that reifies and reclaims gendered loss.

Keywords: counterpublic; embodiment; ethnography; gender; prayer; Sikhism; violence; widowhood

1. A Day in the Life of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara

The Shaheedganj Gurdwara lies just off the main road of Tilak Vihar, the neighbourhood in Delhi also known as the “Widow Colony”. From 2012 to 2014, I lived in Delhi to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in this colony—a designated slum area in Tilak Vihar, Tilak Nagar, which was used to relocate many Sikh widows and their families after the 1984 anti-Sikh massacre.¹ No one I spoke to in this neighbourhood could remember the exact date the gurdwara was built, although most say that it was erected in the early to mid-1990s to serve the colony and thus was named “Shaheedganj” (translation: home of the martyrs) in memory of those who were killed during the 1984 violence. The gurdwara is run by a committee of Labana² Sikhs, although the congregation, which is roughly 80% widows, daughters, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren of the colony, is comprised of a mix of Labana and Punjabi Sikhs.³

¹ This paper arises out of PhD fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2014 that focused on past experiences and current legacies of violence, gender, memory, space, affect, and religious practice among Sikh widows in this colony.

² Labana Sikhs in this community are lower-caste Sikhs from various parts of Rajasthan, whereas Punjabi Sikhs in the colony have family roots in the state of Punjab and come from several different castes. Many Punjabi Sikhs in the colony differentiate themselves from Labana Sikhs, as the latter are traditionally involved in labour-heavy professions. Language also differentiates the groups; most Labana women converse among themselves in various Rajasthani languages and dialects, whereas Punjabi Sikhs will converse mainly in Punjabi and Hindi. Both groups of women will use Hindi when conversing with one another. The male administrators of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara conduct services in Punjabi.

³ Punjabi and Rajasthani Labana Sikh women have formed casual friendships crossing these barriers, yet they have remarked that each group is happy sticking to its own. Although beyond the scope of this paper, caste differences in the colony are

The gurdwara shares its right wall with a large NGO along the main street of the colony. It is a concrete and brick structure, with the left wall of the gurdwara slightly crumbling and facing a small empty lot that is overrun with weeds, garbage, and mud. Directly across from the gurdwara are some flats and a small convenience store (a single, street-facing counter) run by an elderly woman selling sundries. Further down the road, lies another neighbourhood block where mostly Dalit families live. Indoors there are a number of blue signs advertising messages related to the gurdwara. Similar to most other gurdwaras, one must cover one's head and take off one's shoes and wash both hands and feet, although the small pool of water reserved for dipping one's feet is generally dry here.

It is in this gurdwara that many of the Sikh families in the Widow Colony congregate. On any given day, the congregation is comprised of roughly 80% women and 20% men. As I will discuss, the importance of the gurdwara to the Sikh tradition and community-building cannot be overstated. This is especially true for women in the colony. The gurdwara functions not only as a physical place for prayer but also a gathering space and, as I will argue, a gendered counterpublic. Its very presence exists as a memorial to the 1984 violence, yet it also holds memory palaces within it—a room filled with photographs and another room with a lamp lit around the clock. Women who attend and perform prayers in the gurdwara obtain peace from doing so, and, as such, the gurdwara provides a place of healing through social forms of religious practice that other private areas (flats) and public areas in the colony do not. Thus, there is a tension between the gurdwara as a healing place and the colony as a place that engenders continual forms of structural violence, and these places are constituted by this tension. Forms of memory tethered to particular spaces are constitutive of experiences of locality, connecting places where memory is produced with past and contemporary landscapes (cf. [Gordillo 2004](#)). The material forms of remembrance in the gurdwara and the embodied remembering that takes place there in this way connects the violence of the past with the contemporary landscape of the colony.

The word gurdwara literally means “door to the guru” in Punjabi. The distinguishing feature of a gurdwara is the presence of the holy text of the Sikhs, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS); in this way, a room inside one's home, or a temporary space for an event such as a wedding, can be viewed as a gurdwara ([Cole 2004](#)). In contemporary usage, it is used to denote a space wherever the SGGS is placed as well as where Sikhs gather to worship and discuss community happenings and world events. The establishment of gurdwaras also aids in commemorating the historical landscape of Sikh communities, including important objects and historical sites related to the Gurus ([Murphy 2012](#), p. 189). Gurdwaras are “every sense community centres as much as they are places of worship” ([Mandair 2013](#), p. 117). The importance of pairing the spiritual and temporal realms of life within a gurdwara is underscored by the emphasis Sikhism puts on both *miri* and *piri*, or the temporal and spiritual components of Sikh life.⁴

In theory, if not completely in practice,⁵ all are welcome in a gurdwara regardless of religious denomination or affiliation if they cover their heads, are not under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, take off their shoes, and wash their hands. Visitors to the gurdwara are encouraged to have *langar*, or a communal meal, operated by the congregation's donations, charity, and *sewa*, or acts of service ([Lee and Nadeau 2011](#)). Gurdwaras often run under management committees, who oversee the daily program; special events, *langar*; upkeep of the building; appoint *raagis* (those who musically perform scripture from the SGGS), and perform other administrative tasks. Although, in theory, women can

apparent. Interactions between the Sikh (both Labana and Punjabi) families and Dalit families past the colony are limited and, at times, are fraught with tension.

⁴ Gurdwaras have also been used as centres of resistance and social justice. For example, in 20th-century North America, some gurdwaras on the West coast were used by an anticolonial movement known as the Ghadar Party ([Sohi 2014](#)). Within diasporic communities, centres of worship for immigrants can provide valuable spaces for the assertion and preservation of identity ([Hirvi 2010](#); [Gallo 2012](#)).

⁵ In recent years, some caretakers of a gurdwara in the UK have not allowed the elderly or disabled to sit with the main congregation ([Daily News and Analysis 2015](#); [Express and Star 2015](#)).

take on roles of *granthi*,⁶ this is rare in practice. Sikh women, for example, are currently prohibited from performing scripture or *granthi* duties at Harimandir Sahib, the seat of spiritual and temporal authority located in Amritsar, Punjab. Aside from volunteer service, the management of gurdwaras and services performed are mostly administered by men.⁷ In Tilak Vihar, the management committee and the caretakers of this gurdwara are all male.

During fieldwork, I had been attending prayer at the gurdwara, particularly the morning program which starts at around six o'clock in the morning and ends at around half past eight.⁸ Anywhere between twenty and forty members of the community are present during the reciting of the morning prayers,⁹ with a larger presence on the weekends.

When the women in the colony pass through the metal gates of the gurdwara, painted a creamy yellow, and ascend the white and grey marble steps, slightly yellowed by time and covered by green matting, they arrive at a landing. Immediately towards the right of the landing is a small room, roughly ten feet by fifteen feet, housing photographs of men who were killed during the 1984 violence in Delhi. The rows of portraits, in the form of headshots, are individually framed and spaced so that the edges are touching. Directly in front of the stairs lies the main hall, housing the SGGS. Like all gurdwaras, activity is centred around the holy text, placed gently in the centre of the room in the early mornings, usually by the *granthi* Bhai Chetan Singh*¹⁰—in a ceremony known as *prakash karna*. The SGGS is generally laid out on cloth on a small raised platform under a canopy. The canopy and cloth surrounding the scriptures are often made of colourful silk with embroidered gold thread. The area is often decorated with steel *kirpans*¹¹ and *khandas*^{12,13} and festooned with vases of colourful artificial flowers. Women in the colony sit on the right-hand side and men to the left, which I found slightly unusual, as women generally sit on the left-hand side (away from the *raagis*) in the gurdwaras to which I am accustomed in North America. A passageway in the middle is left open for worshippers to walk up to the SGGS. A small room at the back of the main hall houses an oil lamp, lit around the clock, memorializing the victims who were killed in 1984. Beside this room is another small room with another copy of the SGGS, and the farthest chamber to the right is the Guru's resting place, which contains a canopied bed where the main copy of the SGGS is laid to rest every evening after evening prayers, in a ceremony known as *sukhasan*. A small kitchen lies to the right of the central hall for making *parshaad*, a semolina halva made of wheat, flour, butter, and sugar, and there are a few rooms beyond it that the volunteers, or *sevadars*, use. A cavernous hall in the basement serves *langar* and meals during special events and also serves as a practice room for children learning Sikh hymns some evenings.

Prayers in the gurdwara begin in the morning by the male caretakers and Bhai Chetan Singh. Women comprise the majority of the congregation at any given time, and there is a marked difference in the way the women navigate the space in the gurdwara from the men. Women, for example, stop to

⁶ Although *granthis* are often translated to "priest" in English, the Catholic concept of priesthood does not apply here. *Granthis* are often married, have families and children, and often live close by to the gurdwara they serve. Thinking of *granthis* more as "leaders", "religious specialists", or "textual specialists" would be more accurate description of their role.

⁷ This has been contested in recent years. Women have made a concerted effort to challenge the unwritten ban on women in Harimandir Sahib (Nibber 2011).

⁸ It was difficult for me to attend the evening program throughout the year due to safety concerns.

⁹ These are the *Japji Sahib*, *kirtan*, *ardas*, and a *hukam*.

¹⁰ In the interests of anonymity all names in this paper are pseudonyms, which are denoted by an asterisk (*) the first time the name is mentioned, unless otherwise indicated. I have also used the Sikh names Kaur and Singh throughout for interlocutors older than I out of respect.

¹¹ A *kirpan* is a small dagger or sword worn by initiated Sikhs, which carries both defensive and symbolic functions.

¹² The *khandas* is comprised of a central circle (one interpretation sees the circle as symbolizing unity and the oneness of the Divine) surrounded by two swords (symbolizing spiritual and temporal authority).

¹³ Both the *kirpan* and *khandas* are insignias of the Khalsa, or the collective body of Sikhs, particularly initiated Sikhs.

matha thek,¹⁴ or bow and touch their foreheads to the ground as a sign of reverence for the scripture, in more spots in the gurdwara than men do, while men are much more likely to do *chaur seva*.¹⁵

The women begin filtering into the gurdwara in the early morning for morning prayer. During the winter, they are wrapped in heavy shawls and wear toe socks with their rubber sandals. Like in other gurdwaras, the women sit cross-legged on the floor, with some elderly women who have mobility and joint problems sitting on a bench in the back. One elderly woman I had mentally dubbed “Cane Auntie” given the three-tipped cane she waved around with great gusto, preferred to sit along the side of the centre of the room and watch worshippers come and go. Bhai Chetan Singh recites the morning prayer (*Japji Sahib*) followed by *ardas*, a standardized form of prayer or petition to God. After the *ardas*, which takes place while standing, the women sit down, and a *hukam*, a reading from the scripture meant to guide the congregation and chosen at random, is read for the day. One of the younger caretakers hands out the blessed offering of *parshaad*, which is a welcome treat especially on a cold day. In warmer weather, wool, or heavier cotton Punjabi suits are replaced with breezy muslin or cotton. From about March onwards, the ceiling fans overhead are turned on, and the side doors are flung open to keep the room as cool as possible. Although there are coolers, they are not used regularly. A few of the women wear white, or lighter colours, keeping in line with their widow status and colours generally worn by older women in Punjab, although most do not. They take off their sandals at the entrance (there is no designated shoe area here, though they are common at many other gurdwaras) and wash their hands at the porcelain sink to the right.

After ascending the marble steps, the women come inside to *matha thek* by getting on their hands and knees and swiftly bowing their heads until they touch the floor in front of the scripture. After rising, the women circumambulate from the left, going clockwise. Many stop, standing, with hands folded, to bow their heads briefly at the *chaur* and then again behind the SGGS, at the *granthi*’s back, who is reading the holy text. Then, the women generally walk to the back of the room and bow to the cabins housing an oil lamp and the room where the SGGS is kept in repose at night. They turn back to the front of the room, stopping at the large, lightbox-type photograph of the Harimandir Sahib. Many touch this image and then touch their eyes, back and forth in rapid succession, as if receiving a blessing from it, before finally wiping their face with their hands. They then move to sit down, greeting women with “*Sat Sri Akal*”, a common Sikh greeting, on their way to sit.¹⁶ I have noticed that usually the congregation leaves a half-circle of space from the SGGS in order to keep somewhat of a reverent distance. While most of the women sit in the middle, some of the more elderly women sit at the back bench or near the sides to rest their backs and legs. It is usually younger children who sit closer to the front, while any toddlers accompanying their mothers or grandmothers usually run around the room, repeatedly shushed by whoever has accompanied them. Many children and youth drop by the gurdwara on the way to school or college, their heavy backpacks shifting as they *matha thek*. During the program, women are more likely to greet each other, sigh, and utter words during prayer, such as “*Waheguru!*”¹⁷ or “*Waheguru, the True King, have mercy on us!*” their voices rippling one after another. After evening prayer, the scripture is ceremonially moved into its chamber for the night.

After the morning prayer and conversations, some of the women step into the memorial room on their way out, stopping to touch the photographs of their loved ones they have lost. The women leave the gurdwara; some go off to work and others back home to do their domestic work. Afternoons in the gurdwara are usually quiet. There is little foot traffic other than the late risers who did not make the morning prayers. The scripture is covered with a sheet, and the fans are turned off, except for perhaps one circling overhead, as one of the caretakers rests or sleeps below it, supine and somewhat oblivious

¹⁴ To *matha thek* is to also acknowledge the wisdom of the SGGS (Lee and Nadeau 2011).

¹⁵ *Chaur seva* is a form of *seva* in which one waves a fly whisk made out of yak hair (a *chaur*) over the scripture, as a sign of dedication and respect.

¹⁶ The greeting roughly translates to the following: “Eternal is the timeless Lord”.

¹⁷ *Waheguru* means “God is great” and is also used as a term for God.

to any visitors. Traffic begins to increase again in the early evening, when the congregation flows in for evening prayers. Some of the women come to both morning and evening prayers; others come only in the morning or only in the evening. It seems that there are more children and younger women (daughters and daughters-in-law of the widows) in the evening. Communal meals are usually only reserved for special events and functions, such as the *akhand paath*¹⁸, held in commemoration of 1984. After the closing of prayer, the women again linger to converse before heading home—shorter this time, as it is getting late and gets dark early in the winters.

2. Gurdwara as Gendered Counterpublic

In the particular spatiotemporal juncture of contemporary Tilak Vihar, the Shaheedganj Gurdwara is much more than a religious or congregational centre. In the way that gurdwaras have functioned, in some ways, as memorial sites in Sikh tradition (cf. Murphy 2012), so too does Shaheedganj Gurdwara. It was built to serve the widows of the massacre and their families and continues to commemorate the violence through its very existence and the forms of commemorative practice and prayer that take place within it. It is a place of worship and a community centre, but it is also, in whole and in parts, a memorial in a wide variety of ways.¹⁹ In addition, the gurdwara provides a space for women to socialize with one another.

The Shaheedganj Gurdwaras remains a place administered and intensely patrolled by men. Not only are all of the caretakers men, but the hymn-singers are too, other than the youth *kirtan* group, which performs during special events. Men conduct all the daily prayers and the *parkash* and *sukhasan* ceremonies, open and close the front gates and the gates to the memorial room, make the *parshaad*, and handle the donations. The elderly volunteer caretaker²⁰ particularly polices the space, telling women where to sit, shooing people over, and disciplining unruly children. Yet, the congregation at any given time is mostly women; in fact, women often enter the men's side, due to their numbers, with a few men scattered against the far side, near the wall, on any given day. After the morning prayer is over, the women often linger behind, gossiping about the neighbourhood goings-on, at the back and sides of the main hall.

Structural relations of gender and power are both preserved and destabilized in part through interactions in social situations. If we understand everyday linguistic interactions as forms of resistance, we hear practices that are more contradictory, ambiguous, and diverse, ranging from subversion to outright rejection to acceptance and reconstruction of prevailing cultural definitions of gender (Gal 1991, p. 178). We see this in the social interactions between women in the colony. They speak of events in the community: of marriages, of illness, of death. One morning, for example, I observed two women speaking in their Rajasthani dialect about a death that had occurred in the neighbourhood. From what I could understand, it seemed that a man had come down with a severe viral illness—either dengue or typhoid—and after five days of medicine, his “veins exploded”, and he had to have surgery. Upon getting up from this conversation, one of the women uttered in Punjabi, in long, emphatic syllables, “Waheguru, the True King, have mercy on us” and the other woman heaved a heavy sigh in agreement. These conversations often last more than half an hour, to the annoyance of the all-male gurdwara establishment, and the women are often admonished strongly by the elderly caretaker, who would say things like, “Have you come here to pray or gossip! You should take God's name!”

These structural relations of power between the male caretakers and the widows often resulted in tense interactions. One particular instance of this took place one winter morning in December 2013. I had arrived at the gurdwara from a family friend's home at which I stayed from time to time which was close-by. It was bone-chillingly cold that day, and fog rolled heavily across the early morning

¹⁸ A three-day prayer service in which the SGGS is read in its entirety.

¹⁹ In my PhD dissertation, I devote one chapter to forms of memorialization among the Sikh diaspora and how the Widow Colony, its inhabitants and the gurdwara intersect with these forms.

²⁰ Known as the *sevadaar*.

streets. *Parshaad* was handed out as usual after the close of prayer, and the women huddled into themselves, in their sweaters and shawls, shivering and grateful for the warm blessing. The women sat in silence eating their *parshaad*, basking in satisfaction after the morning prayer, evident in their happy faces and the quiet in the air. Suddenly a voice rang out in the corner in Punjabi: “THERE ARE MOUSE DROPPINGS IN THIS PARSHAAD!” One of the women in the congregation had discovered mouse excrement in the holy offering. I blanched. I had already eaten the offering. What followed was a rising tide of emotion, anger, and shouting. All of the women began to chime in and berate the male caretakers for the lack of sanitation.

From my observations of how women’s bodies mimic and respond to one another in the gurdwara, it seems that they exist in an emotive relationship to each another, on which I will further elaborate below. The gurdwara allows them a physical, communal space—so severely lacking in this colony—to share their life histories, social events, emotions, joy, and pain—their *dukh-sukh*, as the saying in Punjabi goes. If we follow Fraser’s critique of the public sphere (Fraser 1990), the permeable space of the gurdwara can, in a way, be seen as a subaltern (and, in this case, highly gendered) counterpublic, working as a feminist critique to Habermas’s notion of the public sphere as an inclusive space that preserves social interaction and disregards status (Habermas 1989) and how this sphere organizes discourse. Fraser describes these “subaltern counterpublics” as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990, p. 23). The public sphere is in fact comprised of a number of significant exclusions, which has historically discriminated against women and lower castes and classes, holding hegemonic and patriarchal tendencies. The women of Tilak Vihar have little access to this public sphere, having little public recourse to address their grievances surrounding the violence of the event and the everyday structural violence of poverty.

The gendered counterpublic of the gurdwara also provides a space that is somewhat (though by no means completely) removed from the stigmas and restrictions placed upon Sikh widows. These include a loss of social status, expectations of limited mobility and visibility in public, structural poverty, ostracization, and expectations of celibacy and life-long mourning. Many of the oppressions widows in North India face are also common for Sikh widows. Widowhood in North India has been described as “social death”, arising from a widow’s lowered status following the loss of her husband, and exclusion as a functional member of the family unit (Chakravarti 1995). Prescriptive Brahmanical texts generally outline two models of widowhood: the widow-turned-ascetic who remains celibate and in the home or one who commits *sati*, or widow immolation, in devotion to her husband, thereby avoiding widowhood altogether.²¹ The gurdwara then, although policed by men who position women as widows and mourners, provides an alternative public or a counterpublic formed in part by women as a public space to discuss pertinent issues in their lives.

3. Harnoor Kaur*

The lived experiences and religious practices of Harnoor Kaur, whose husband was killed in 1984 and who lives on her own in the colony, illuminate the importance of the gurdwara in the daily lives of the widows in the neighbourhood. The gurdwara provides for Harnoor Kaur a legitimate public space. I first met Harnoor Kaur on a Sunday afternoon. It was the last day of the 1984 memorial *akhand paath* being held at the Shaheedganj Gurdwara in Tilak Vihar. Harnoor Kaur, whose family hails from Amritsar and Rawalpindi, was eighteen when she was married, and she moved to Delhi in 1973. Her husband worked as a machine manager for the printing division of a national Indian newspaper and ran a part-time cycle spare parts shop at home. They had four children—two daughters and two sons.

²¹ Given the paucity of data specific to Sikh women and Sikh widowhood in particular, we have to extrapolate from the larger cultural milieu in which most Sikhs in India live. Malhotra has pointed out the difficulties of “culling out a Sikh identity as separate and distinct from a Hindu identity” in early 20th-century Punjab (Malhotra 2012, p. 169).

I first interviewed Harnoor Kaur, who was fifty-six at the time of our interviews, in the autumn of 2013. It had taken me some time to introduce myself to women in the colony and create a sense of rapport, yet even after being in the field for almost a year at that point, I was anxious about interviewing her. My nervousness rose the higher I climbed the narrow, steep steps to get to her flat. She greeted me warmly. We sat in her small front room. Harnoor Kaur discussed with me the details of her experiences during the 1984 massacre, including the killing of her husband.²² In a low voice, she described how she and others in her neighbourhood were called out of their homes by the military and taken to relief camps. “I didn’t even have a scarf on my head, no slippers on my feet”, Harnoor Kaur said, pointing out that she was not in a respectable physical state to be out of the home as a woman. The stigma attached to widowhood led Harnoor Kaur’s family to disown her.²³ Eventually, Harnoor Kaur was rehabilitated into the Widow Colony.

Patterns of structural violence have continued throughout Harnoor Kaur’s life. One of her daughters died from an unspecified illness at the age of two while being raised in her maternal home.²⁴ Her oldest son, Jaspreet*, about thirty-eight at the time of our interviews, lives in the UK and is married with one daughter. Her daughter, Amrita*, was born in 1978, is married, and lives in Delhi. The death of her youngest son Balbir*, in April of 2010 in Shadarpur village, Rajpur, was a focus of our conversations. Balbir had suffered from addiction and substance use throughout his life. He married a Sikh woman, Jinder*, and had two daughters. Balbir’s relationship with his wife and her family were characterized by violence. Balbir went missing in 2010 and his corpse was eventually found in a river a couple of weeks later. Harnoor Kaur outlined that his death was caused by her daughter-in-law Jinder’s family.

Harnoor Kaur’s telling of her son’s death is rife with gendered statements about her daughter-in-law that are exemplary of the gendered restrictions placed on women, especially widows, by society at large, by women, and by widows themselves. Throughout our conversations, in keeping with the undeniable importance given to sons in Punjabi culture, she continued to put her son Balbir up on a pedestal—painting him in a positive light and downplaying the negative effects of his drug use. For her, Balbir was still an outstanding son because he was a religious man and had often gone to Hemkunt Sahib, a popular historical pilgrimage site. Although it did not seem that there had been a criminal court case regarding his death, she blamed her daughter-in-law’s family intensely for it. Throughout our conversations, her discussions of her daughter-in-law at times followed the pattern Das has argued about mother and daughter-in-law relationships: a subtle hostility (Das 1976). At other times it was more overtly hostile. For example, Jinder’s demands for material goods and other services from her mother-in-law (“I want to get my eyebrows done, I want sandals”)—seemed more grievous to Harnoor Kaur than Balbir asking for money to support his drug habit. “Now tell me—what does she need all that for? She didn’t care that he did drugs”, she said. “There was something fishy there. I think ... Whenever there’s a newlywed couple there’s going to be arguments, you have to endure it as a wife.” Harnoor Kaur clearly believed that Jinder had failed as a dutiful daughter-in-law, as she was not able to tolerate her husband’s substance abuse, nor their fighting. Of Balbir’s death, she said that Jinder “didn’t even come and touch the flowers. She didn’t come to the last rites either, she didn’t *matha thek*, she didn’t ask for forgiveness.” Jinder had failed in her ultimate final duty as a widow: to ensure that funeral rites were paid proper attention to help ferry Balbir’s soul to the afterlife. Perhaps Harnoor Kaur was particularly bitter about this point, as she did not have the opportunity to do the same with her husband after the 1984 massacre. Jinder neither came close to Balbir’s corpse nor attended the cremation. Harnoor Kaur felt that her daughter-in-law had transgressed her role within

²² These details are violent and traumatic. In order to do justice to Harnoor Kaur’s experiences I have not included these details here due to the constrictions of word limits.

²³ Harnoor Kaur mentioned this disowning with a shrug, saying “Who would keep you?”

²⁴ In India, “other mothering”, or the practice of women rearing children not biologically related to them, is common, especially in situations where the biological parents are unable to care for the child financially (cf. O’Reilly 2010).

the family power dynamics (“She used to rule like a queen here”) and that she continued to be too brash and mobile: “She still hasn’t learned. Whenever she wants, she puts on her sandals and heads out to the bazaar, her relatives, wherever.” These restrictions surrounding the mobility of women were all too common and underscored the importance of the gurdwara. Such conversations allowed me to understand, in a more nuanced manner, how gendered kinship structures interact with particular forms of ongoing violence and how the gurdwara can provide a legitimate space for widowed bodies.

Harnoor Kaur and Religious Practice

Every morning, Harnoor Kaur would wake up around four or five o’clock in the morning and begin her day with *naam-simran*, or the continuous, meditative recitation of God’s name, before taking a bath. She told me that she went to the gurdwara twice a day, for morning (six o’clock) and evening (seven o’clock) prayers, because, in her words “What am I going to do sitting at home?” This statement is particularly important, as Harnoor Kaur frames the activity as being the sole alternative to staying at home in the evenings. After returning from work in the evening, she would make a vegetable dish and then would make two *rotis* (unleavened bread) when she came back after evening prayer, which she attended for about an hour. “After 8:00 [PM], I lock my door and don’t let anyone come in”, she says. “No sister or brother, no relative. I have stopped everyone.” Harnoor Kaur would then eat dinner and watch one and a half to two hours of television before going to bed. When I asked her how she feels and what she gains from going to the gurdwara, she replied:

My heart ... I get peace ... like when I do *simran*²⁵ in the morning for an hour or the five prayers.²⁶ And it takes me one hour. And I sit, I don’t have any interruptions, just God ... It becomes a habit. When someone stops me in the street, I say I have to go back [home]. Nor do I go to any friend’s house. I don’t go to anyone’s house.

KA: Here, you don’t have any friends?

HK: No, I don’t like going to anyone’s house.

KA: Your own house is fine.

Harnoor Kaur nodded in agreement. She told me how her sister in Chandigarh would call her and urge her to attend the religious ceremonies they would hold, offering to buy her travel fare as well. Harnoor Kaur would tell her, “My heart doesn’t feel like it.”

Throughout our conversations, it was evident that Harnoor Kaur did not think it was appropriate for women to be out socializing frequently (as described above, she would often complain to me that her daughter-in-law, Jinder, who herself was a widow, would often dress up and go out). The gurdwara, as a legitimate space for socializing then, serves as a homing point in the complex interplay of the places in Harnoor Kaur’s life. She walks to the gurdwara from her flat twice a day, for the morning and evening programmes. In the evenings, she walks home after prayers are finished. The spatial configurations in the colony and the social restrictions on widowhood work against women in that there are few places for women to socialize other than the cramped, narrow, open-air hallways of the colony flats, and to be outside on one’s own seemed inappropriate to her. Whereas the space of the colony and Delhi at large pose restrictions on the bodies of all women, the gurdwara provides a legitimate space for her gendered, widowed body to be, a body that, given the stigmas and restrictions associated with widowhood, has no business being out and about the city. She seemed embarrassed to tell me that she enjoyed going to the gurdwara to participate in religious activity and socialize. Her question, “[Otherwise] what am I going to do sitting at home now?” implied that it was an action

²⁵ A short-form of *naam-simran*, discussed in the previous paragraph.

²⁶ The five prayers include the following: *Japji Sahib*, *Jaap Sahib*, *Shabad Hazarey*, *Rehras Sahib*, and *Anand Sahib*.

she was resigned to do, rather than an active choice. She also did not think it appropriate to visit her sisters-in-law, as her parents are deceased, and thus, she had no business being there. She stressed that, even when stopped by an acquaintance on the street, she refused to visit anyone and preferred to isolate herself in her own home other than her two daily visits to the gurdwara or going to work as a lab assistant at a school.

"If someone invites me ten times, I'll go once. Some people, just immediately—get ready and go (*tyaar hokey chaliyaan jandiyaan*), not me." Harnoor Kaur here is emphasizing what it means to be a "good" widow in Delhi, to be a woman who is widowed by tragedy. This is a woman who leaves the house out of necessity (prayer and work) but rarely ventures out into social spaces—and even then, only after great insistence by her friends or family. *Tyaar hokey*, or having gotten ready, implies not only getting dressed, but also the specific way in which a woman might get dressed, by putting on nice clothes, jewellery, and perhaps makeup, which are generally the purview of young women of marriageable age and married women, not widows. In her view, Harnoor Kaur, is not like these women—she knows what society expects of her as a widow and strives to prove that she meets, and perhaps even exceeds, these guidelines. The gurdwara then, functions as a legitimate outlet for her physical presence as a widow and her socializing—indeed, it was in the gurdwara where I first met Harnoor Kaur.

One day, Harnoor Kaur and I were discussing how she began to attend the gurdwara regularly. She told me that, after 1984, she stopped going to pray although she was staying at a refugee camp within a gurdwara. She again stopped going to the gurdwara in the colony after one of her adult sons died and only began visiting again when women in the neighbourhood came to her:

KA: So, there were some ladies in this area who didn't do prayers, because they were very angry at what happened to them.

HK: Yes, yes, that is what I told you, no?

KA: Yes.

HK: I never used to do it. I never went to the gurdwara or did anything [after 1984], then God brought me a little closer to him. I came here [to Tilak Vihar] then started going. Then, after [my son's] death occurred, I didn't go to the temple for six months.

KA: So, you had the same feeling?

HK: Yes.

KA: Like, "Why is this happening?"

HK: Two or three ladies from the gurdwara came and visited me and said, "You should come. Why don't you come to the gurdwara?" Women who knew me. It had been a while. Surjit's²⁷ mother also said, "You should go to the gurdwara" Then, I started going. I never sit at the front in the gurdwara.

Harnoor Kaur discussed that she likes to sit at the back because she thinks that it is a humble action to sit far away from the SGGS. She also enjoys the vantage point it provides her in terms of people-watching and socializing.

HK: [I can see] those who come and go, they care a lot; they give a lot of respect to me; everyone knows me. You say hello to them. Then, it makes you feel good, that we are sitting in God's home. We only go to beg from God, to beg. What else do we go for?

²⁷ Surjit is the pseudonym of the young woman in the neighbourhood who I hired as a research assistant.

KA: So, you sit at the back, meaning everyone meets you.

HK: Yes, those who have been separated [from their loved ones], you see them all.

We can see from Harnoor Kaur's discussion how the gurdwara acts as a gendered counterpublic in that it provides a space for widows to socialize; it is also a healing place where she "feels good" and peaceful. Indeed, throughout our conversations, Harnoor Kaur stressed that she did not feel comfortable making friends with anyone unless she was in the gurdwara. Although administered by men, it is mostly populated by women and their prayers, discussions, and connections with one another and, therefore, remains a women's space. Issues that normally disproportionately affect women in patriarchal societal structures, such as nurturing and caring for the young, the elderly, and the ill, are not often included in the public sphere. Yet, the gurdwara space provides a backdrop to bring private issues into the public sphere.

4. Gender and Religious Practice

The examination of Sikh women's religious practices and their embodiment of mourning can contribute to the discourse of gendered embodiment in manifold ways. First, it reemphasizes the idea that gender is performative (Butler 1990) and embodied, and that gendered performativities in the global South may be vastly different from Western, liberal, secular notions of embodiment (Mahmood 2005; Ong 1988). In the context of the colony, Sikh widows' affective and embodied behaviours are deeply tied to their statuses and experiences as widows and their religiosity. Sikh women's emotional and outwardly expressive performances of mourning and grief during funeral rites and after a death illustrate this point, as does the very prohibition of such bodily practices by the current Sikh *Rehat Maryada*, or Code of Conduct, which instructs mourners to "not grieve or raise a hue and cry or indulge in breast-beating" (Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee n.d.).

While much of the work on gender and Sikhism by feminist scholars has focused on scriptural analysis via exegetical methodologies or development-based discussions of Sikh women's health and well-being in Punjab, I am interested here in researching the intersections between embodied experiences of affective, performative religious practice, belief, and gendered space-making in order to interrogate binary notions of freedom and agency (i.e., free or unfree, agentive or passive subjects) pertaining to religious women in India. Popular representations and performances of Sikh identity tend to be strongly masculinized, with little, or cursory, treatment of women's experiences. In scholarly literature, however, some attention has been paid to Sikh women's (Bhachu 1991; Jakobsh 2003; Mahmood 2000; Singh 2000) and men's (Axel 2001; Gell 1996; Mandair 2005) gendered Sikh bodies and selves.

Popular explanations and discursive constructions of women's places and roles within Sikhism are overwhelmingly absorbed in a discourse that posits gender differences based on biological sex and reproduction and argues that women are closer to nature than men or that women are endowed with feminine characteristics while men are not (a perspective that has been criticized by authors like Jakobsh (2003) and Ortner (1972)).²⁸ For example, many online articles²⁹ discussing the egalitarian position of women in Sikhism quote the following line by Guru Nanak in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib:

From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at

²⁸ Ortner's concern here is to show why "woman might tend to be assumed, over and over, in the most diverse sorts of world-views, and in cultures of every degree of complexity, to be closer to nature than men" (Ortner 1972, p. 24).

²⁹ See, for example, http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Equality_of_women (accessed on 1 October 2016).

all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman (Guru Nanak, Raag Aasaa Mehal 1, p. 473, in [Khalsa 2000](#)).

The above issues arose during a conversation with Harnek Singh* (a board member from the local NGO Nishkam serving the Widow Colony) as well when discussing women's positions within Sikhism.

HS: [Speaking in Punjabi] Women have gotten more than equality. The traditions of this place [are too restrictive]; for example, someone's pregnant and she shouldn't do this or that to avoid miscarriage. God would say, what are you talking about? God said, kings, saints, everyone, it was women that gave birth to them, right? How can you disrespect them? Look—at the time [of the Gurus], it was in fashion for women to have to prove their innocence by going into the fire [*sati*]. And then it was en vogue for women to cover their foreheads in the presence of men. But [Sri Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru] forbade it. When the Khalsa was initiated, he did something really wonderful. He asked *Maa-ji* [Mata Gujri Kaur, his wife], how will you contribute to this? She said, my service is this [makes circling motion with arm, as in mixing water]. She put *pathaasas* [a hardened mixture of sugar] in the water. Sweetness. Everywhere.³⁰ Then, they [women] fought in wars. It's in Sikh history. So, the character of the woman in Sikh religion is always [high] ... And I think, if this is in books, it should be in practice also.

Harnek Singh also refers to this line in Gurbani of women as those who birth kings, using it to support gender equality for Sikh women. There has been little critique of the discursive underpinnings of this line in popular discourse—which, in part, ascribes a woman's power and worth based on her ostensibly natural reproductive capacity and relationships to men (see [Jakobsh 2003](#), pp. 24–25).³¹ In Harnek Singh's view, however, this assertion was powerful given the prevailing practices of *sati* (widow immolation) and *purdah*³² (gender segregation) at the time. Within Sikh studies, many feminist scholars have debated Sikh scripture, including its exegesis, imagery, content, and emancipatory potential.³³

Debates on feminist interpretations within Sikh scripture notwithstanding, the patriarchy of Sikhism has tangible effects on women's autonomy and gender relations in both private and public domains. Negative qualities and *maya*, or the illusory nature of the universe, are associated with women, and the lineage of the Gurus was composed of males of high-caste Khatri status. In the Sikh perception of marital relations and motherhood, traditional feminine qualities are valorised; women are still positioned as invisible in the labour force and have little say in the number and spacing of children, and the skewed sex ratio in Punjab is well known ([Mohan 2006](#)). Sikhism's misogynistic tendencies (rather than its emancipatory potential) have influenced male perceptions and images of women and attitudes towards sex, gender, and codes of conduct in domestic and public spaces ([Mand 2005](#)).³⁴ However, Singh finds feminist potential in historical Sikh practice: women were no longer segregated; did not observe *purdah*, could participate in the affairs of their religious community;

³⁰ Harnek Singh is referring to the Sikh baptism ceremony, known as *amrit*.

³¹ In a conversation with a relative, who is a leader in the Vancouver Sikh youth community, he remarked that he believed this line was powerful and ground-breaking in the historical context from which it arose, given the historical status of women in India. Like Harnek Singh, he too discussed the problem of *sati* at the time of the Gurus. In feminist Sikh circles, I have encountered much resistance when questioning the suppositions underpinning this line of text.

³² *Purdah* is a system concealing women from men, which can include gender-segregated spaces or the covering of women's bodies.

³³ Singh posits that the Gurus strategically adopted a female voice and bridal imagery to express love for the divine, and thus, scripture prizes a woman's bodily activities and longing ([Singh 2000, 2005](#)). Yet, perhaps such usage reifies the definition of "feminine" and "masculine", essentializing these ostensibly innate characteristics of gender. [Jakobsh \(2003\)](#) argues that to move from a grammatically feminine form of speech (such as the bridal symbol) to a theological argument intent on discovering the intention of the scripture as Singh does is more of an interpretation of scripture rather than a reflection of the actual content of the scripture as written by the Gurus.

³⁴ The Sikh Code of Conduct for Funeral Ceremonies, for example, includes gendered language.

served, ate, and cooked with men in communal meals; and were celebrated as important partners in spiritual growth (Singh 2000). Yet, although “herstory” and the historical inclusion of women are fundamental to addressing inadequacies of historical knowledge, they do not always confront the historical articulation of gendered hierarchies. As such, Sikh feminisms can fail to provide a full account of the workings of gender in Sikh everyday practice (Jakobsh 2003; Murphy 2009). It is also critical to note that debates about scripture and scripture itself can be far-removed from the lives of Sikh widows in the colony, such as women who cannot read nor write, which I will discuss below. First, however, I turn my attention to Sikh women’s religiosity as performed in prayer.

Healing through Performing Prayer

One understanding of prayer is that it is a spiritual conversation with a higher power and a movement towards divinity (Tiele 2016). As a central phenomenon of religious life, it serves diverse functions. Prayer is multidimensional: it is textual, it is oral, it is an embodied act yet transcends the body, it is repetitive and ritualistic, and it is social in that it is never free from social influence, even when performed individually.³⁵

The social aspect of prayer is exemplified in the *ardas*. The *ardas*, arising from the Persian word *arazdashat* (Cole 2004), is a common petitionary prayer of remembrance that is recited at the end of prayer programs in gurdwaras and Sikh homes transnationally, before or after undertaking tasks that are deemed significant, and at the end of a prayer service. The act of *ardas* works against the idea of prayer as solely an oral action, as it involves movements of the body. *Ardas* is an oral prayer, in that it involves ritual locutions spoken aloud, yet it is also embodied, as it takes certain postures (bowing and touching the ground with one’s forehead in front of the SGGS before rising to stand and recite the prayer with hands folded and then moving again to *matha thek*, before sitting down once it is over). During the *ardas*, one stands, hands folded at the chest or in front of the solar plexus; perhaps one closes their eyes and slightly rocks back and forth. *Ardas*, which is recited morning and evening in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara and at special events is one form of remembrance that takes on a particular double meaning in the colony. The *ardas* is a prayer that emphasizes sacrifice and martyrdom, which makes it even more pertinent in the colony, where such discourses often circulate. As a recitative form of prayer, it enables healing and forms of memory-making to occur for women, while involving the body.

Discussions of prayer-as-text are critical to understanding forms of Sikh prayer, yet these debates are far removed from some women, particularly Labana women who do not speak Punjabi fluently or read scripture. In such cases, it is the space of the gurdwara and the emotive experience of it that provide benefit. Jhansi Kaur*, for example, told me that she does not know how to read scripture, but she goes to the gurdwara because she likes to see other women there and she gets “peace by going”. She then said, “God gives peace through gurdwaras. Like, when someone dies, we pray, and we get such peace in that; we get peace by listening in the gurdwara.” Amar Kaur*, as well, said the following:

The ladies are uneducated, they don’t do prayers, like me; I am uneducated. Maybe if you’re an educated lady. . . like my daughter-in-law is one, she goes there and does prayers with the prayer book and takes it to the gurdwara and reads. And like my grandson, he takes the prayer book and reads there. Those who are educated will sit, read; the prayer books are

³⁵ Prayers can include forms such as food offerings (Banerji 2006), dances and sacrifices (Scott 1994), and bodily actions (Henkel 2005). Prayer can incorporate “certain body postures and orientations, ritual actions and objects, designated architectural structures or physical environments, particular times of the day or calendar dates, specified moods, attitudes, or intentions” (Gill 2005, p. 7369). A number of authors have analyzed how forms of prayer can enable healing (Csordas 2002; Luhrmann 2013; Tomlinson 2004; Zhang 2016) and help women cope with grief and trauma. Religious healing, as an “elaborate and persuasive cultural performance” (Csordas 2002, p. 2) can bring about a change in the phenomenological conditions under which one experiences suffering and hardship. In order for healing to take place, however, a subject must be predisposed towards it and believe that the healing is working (Csordas 2002).

lying there to use. Some do read, but someone like me will pay her respects and sit and just listen and wait for the [end] and then leave.

KA: So, maybe some ladies, have they memorized it, like *Japji Sahib*?

AK: Yes, yes, some do some don't. Those who listen daily, they may have memorized [it], those who don't know how to read any prayers and who go daily may memorize them.

In such instances, it is the gurdwara as a counterpublic and the emotions and relationships within that bring about positive effects for the worshipper. Jhansi Kaur finds going to the gurdwara to be a helpful experience, even though she cannot recite prayers, because she finds it a positive social space to be in, and the affective power of listening to other women's prayers brings her inner peace. Amar Kaur also enjoys sitting and listening to the prayer while still others will participate in yet another embodied form of prayer, recitation by memory. Harnoor Kaur mentioned to me that she has memorized various prayers but that reading prayers from a book was a different experience. She said that praying was not difficult because it had "become a habit". However, for some elderly women with mobility issues, such as Kirat Kaur*, going to the gurdwara is a difficult task. Instead of visiting Shaheedganj, which was a twice-daily activity for her for many years, she now listens to prayers via the live television feeds from Bangla Sahib Gurdwara in Delhi and Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, Punjab.

In the colony, women tend to sit in the same spots when visiting the gurdwara and perform repetitive movements, as discussed earlier—bowing, circumambulating, or touching the photograph of the Harimandir Sahib. Repetitive too are their performances of rituals, whether reciting certain prayers, singing along to devotional music, or rocking slightly while listening to others in the congregation pray. The religious practices of women as habitus (cf. Bourdieu 1977) become habitual and repetitive through ritual and prayer.³⁶ Bodily actions and habits, especially within the domain of religious practice, are not anchored in a specific body. Rather, these elements of the body are in affective relationships with other bodies (cf. Ahmed 2004; Das 2007), as we see in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara. This understanding complicates the view of the body as a "bounded system" (cf. Douglas 2002).

Sikh women's mourning and religious practices in the Shaheedganj Gurdwara allow us a richer understanding and complication of ritual as cultural elaborations of codes consisting of distancing one from spontaneous expressions of emotion (cf. Tambiah 1979). Although the prayers have a repetitive quality, they do not fall along these lines of elaboration, and there is room for exhibiting intentional rather than conventional behaviour. While ritual can help validate Sikh women's common behaviour during times of grief (for example, wailing, beating of the chest, loud crying, and getting "out of control" during funerals (Das 1996)), these behaviours complicate the Durkheimian (cf. Durkheim 1915) notion that ritual can help control experience. Thus, I would like to suggest that prayer in this context does not control traumatic experiences of the past; rather, the practices offer room for exploring grief in an embodied manner. In the days after the massacre, many women were numbed and silent due to shock and perhaps being denied an opportunity to mourn, as the bodies of the dead were missing, and they could not perform last rites. Perhaps it is this denied opportunity that has lent itself to how grief has become embodied in everyday life and prayer. Sikh women's experiences with prayer rituals also unsettle the notion that ritual can simply provide a tool for understanding the world (cf. Douglas 2002); indeed, their experiences show that rituals can provide a place where loss and grief perhaps cannot be made sense of but are only enacted through raw bodily affects. At times, I would see this unfold in front of me, when women rocked back and forth with intensity during prayer, uttered words to God under their breath, or, during our interviews, began to cry, their voices quivering and varying in intensity.

³⁶ Habitus is a set of practices that point towards how we habituate ourselves to ways of being; it is our bodily socialization and deeply orientating bodily actions, a learned process of our physical being (cf. Bourdieu 1977).

Returning to the *ardas*, then, we can view the prayer as a social ritual that aids women in remembering their loss and healing from their trauma, one where women participate wholeheartedly. Given the centrality of the *ardas* in Sikh prayer, many of the women have memorized it, and so, those women who would normally only listen to other parts of prayers will loudly chant along with the *ardas*. It allows a performative, ritual social space for a communal utterance of memory, healing, and the reinforcement of historical narratives of violence. In addition to the *ardas*, the act of continuously reciting the name of the Guru, or *naam simran*, brings about a certain inner peace for some women in the colony, alleviating, at least temporarily, the pain associated with loss.

Forms of healing through prayer take place in the gendered counterpublic of the gurdwara. It is the gurdwara that provides a space for healing, where women's bodies are linked to one another. This relationship between women and the gurdwara underscores the importance of this place as one that engenders healing. For instance, when interviewing Amar Kaur, she discussed how she stopped going to the gurdwara for a while when faced with the death of a loved one and several other hardships. She stated that, after her son broke his leg, she herself sustained injuries, and her daughter-in-law broke her foot, she became superstitious about these negative events and began to attend prayers again. Growing up in a village, she found it easier to attend the Shaheedganj Gurdwara in the evenings because it was not possible to travel at night in her home village due to safety reasons. I asked her what she received internally by going to the gurdwara. She replied, "I feel like my heart receives peace. If I don't go then I feel like I have lost something, I don't feel right. When I go to the gurdwara, I feel at peace."

Harnoor Kaur too, echoed the positive benefits that praying in the gurdwara bring for her. During one interview, while her two granddaughters played around us, Harnoor Kaur outlined her complicated relationship with God and prayer. When I asked her how often she thinks about God, she replied:

HK: I remember God daily. I stay with God twenty-four hours a day, I keep God with me, because you know God right? God is with us in the times of pain and happiness. God is truly a part of us at all times. This is why, if we let God lead us, then God will keep us on the right path, keep us from bad people, bad talk, and eliminate enemies.

Harnoor Kaur further emphasized that God punishes everyone—those who commit crimes and those who do not—and gives pain so that we remember God more. She stated that punishments were also given out once one died ("We will get it in the next life"). Harnoor Kaur's emphasis on having to "endure" and "pay the repercussions" reflects her belief in karma.³⁷ When I asked Harnoor Kaur what she received from doing prayers, she replied, "*sukh shanti*" (a happy peace). I continued this line of questioning, asking her what kind of peace. She replied, "I remember 100 things from home. I remember the past, I remember what I have endured, by doing prayers."

HK: Like, if I said to you today I am not going to the Gurdwara, then that entire day will go badly.

KA: You, what do they say ... You get a blessing.

HK: Yes, I get *shakti* [power, strength, or energy].³⁸

KA: When you pay your respects [at the gurdwara]?

HK: Actually, I have kept [prayer books] at home too, so when my heart feels like it, I start doing prayers [at home].

³⁷ When I asked her what she thought about souls, she said, "You don't have a soul, it leaves your body in minutes, it's just us who don't know where it flies away and where it doesn't. Our body stays here. No one looks ahead or back."

³⁸ It is interesting to note that *shakti* has feminine connotations. In Hinduism, *shakti* denotes divine feminine power.

5. Conclusions

We can see how, through the social space of the gurdwara and the forms of prayer within it, women cope with the continuing confrontation of loss and trauma in their everyday lives. We see too how women have utilized the male-ruled space of the Shaheedganj Gurdwara for their own purposes and turned it into a sort of gendered counterpublic. These employments of place, prayer, ritual, and forms of embodiment have allowed collective forms of memory-making that enable women to remember the past in ways facilitating healing. The Shaheedganj Gurdwara, then, helps women heal from their grieving as it provides a social space for affective prayer—prayer that is performed and shared with other women who have gone through similar hardships and traumas. The relationship between prayer as a performative social ritual, belief, and trauma allows us to better understand how women in Tilak Vihar continue to cope with long-term grief. While women's belief in God provides an explanatory ground for the happenings in their lives and allows them to situate their life experiences and loss as karma, the gurdwara operates as a space for women. Performative prayers, in the form of ritual, form as a bridge between place and belief. Based on my conversations with women and observations of their practice in the gurdwara, we see how religious places such as Shaheedganj Gurdwara bring women together, how belief allows women to feel closer to God, and how social, religious rituals bridge places and belief. These intersections between gender and religious practice are further enmeshed with the lived experiences of Sikh widowhood.

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