Yamini Agarwal
Urban Marginalisation,
Exclusion and Education:
The Widows’ Colony in Delhi
Abstract: This paper examines the many exclusions and marginalities experienced in urban neighbourhoods which are formed as a result of communal violence. It draws on an ethnographic study of Tilak Vihar, also known as the Colony of Widows, where the survivors of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence were resettled. By examining their life histories, the paper explores how women survivors have been caught up in a vicious circle of poverty and lack of educational and occupational opportunities due to their location in a highly stigmatized and gendered space. This has affected the education of their children, as reflected in limited school choices and poverty forcing young people to drop out of schools to fend for their families. The paper also looks into the role of community groups in Tilak Vihar, which have become the main source of support for families given the retreat of the state from this space. The paper underscores the everyday violence that survivors experience due to their gender and spatial location.

Keywords: Urban marginalization, education and exclusion, violence and education, Sikhs, minority education

Yamini Agarwal has a Ph.D. in the sociology of education from Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her doctoral thesis explored the role of minority schools in propagating the notion of an ‘ideal’ religious identity and shaping students’ opinions and aspirations. Her areas of interest are minority education, conflict and education, urban education, and marginality. Yamini works with the Max Weber Stiftung India Branch Office, where she is associated with the project on Education and the Urban. She also teaches sociology and social work as a guest lecturer in Delhi.
Introduction

Communal violence has marked urban landscapes in India, leading to segregated neighbourhoods in many metropolises. Scholars have drawn attention to violence between Hindus and Muslims which spatially divided the two communities. Segregated spaces in cities like Ahmedabad, Mumbai, and New Delhi are occupied mainly by Muslims who were pushed involuntarily to these neighbourhoods by decades of socio-political marginalization. As these spaces came to be identified with the religious identity of their residents, they faced state neglect and a lack of infrastructural development over the years.1 Due to their various distinct characteristics, these spaces came to be identified as ghettos, pointing not only to the religious affiliation of those living there, but also to the various stigmas and lack of development common to them.

Such neighbourhoods are usually enclosed spaces where people of a common religion or ethnicity choose to stay; however, their transformation into ghettos is a systemic process led by the state and other agencies, which neglect these spaces. Hence, as Jaffrelot et al. point out in the case of Juhapura in Ahmedabad, these spaces are not only ‘insulated from the rest of the city’, but ‘do not benefit from the same kind of attention from the state as other parts of the city’.2 They also lack state-run schools, colleges, technical institutions, healthcare amenities, and other basic facilities like sanitation and water, leading the community to take initiatives to develop the same.3

These characteristics – specifically in the case of Juhapura, whose population has swelled over five decades because of intermittent communal violence and discrimination against Muslims – shape these urban neighbourhoods into ghettos. Besides religious identity, however, other characteristics such as gender can also spatially stigmatize a neighbourhood in the aftermath of violence, and hence socially segregate it.

This paper explores one such colony in New Delhi called Tilak Vihar. The context of this West Delhi neighbourhood is distinct from those studied elsewhere, which were mainly created in the aftermath of Hindu–Muslim communal violence. Tilak Vihar is a Sikh

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3 Ibid.
neighbourhood of nearly 1,000 families headed by widows whose husbands were killed in the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi. It needs to be mentioned from the outset that Tilak Vihar is not a ‘self-segregated’ space like similar neighbourhoods. Tilak Vihar was demarcated by the state in order to ‘rehabilitate’ women who lost their husbands and were displaced in the violence (emphasis my own). This bounded space then came to be characterized by the gendered identity of the women living here, who are widows and single women – both identities that are seen as either tragic or deviant.

Since then, despite the world-class status that Delhi has gone on to acquire and the marked development of nearby neighbourhoods, Tilak Vihar remains a picture of neglect and dilapidation. As neighbourhoods play a key role in access to opportunities, families in Tilak Vihar remain deprived of basic education and healthcare.

The paper begins by explaining the context of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence and – through interviews with survivors and members of organizations working in the colony – the making of Tilak Vihar, along with the characteristics that make it a unique space. This is followed by the educational and occupational journeys of the children of the survivors who were settled here, in order to understand their long-drawn, everyday struggles and the challenges posed by being a part of this neighbourhood. The role of non-governmental community organizations in the area is also described. The final section reflects on the lack of opportunities available to residents of Tilak Vihar, who are already marginalized due to their identity.

1. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots

Despite happening more than thirty-five years ago, the 1984 anti-Sikh violence continues to dominate the minds of Sikhs – especially because the state has failed to give justice to the survivors. Despite the passage of time, the violence ‘endures in memory as a source of intense anguish and loss’ for the Sikh community. On 31 October 1984, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was shot dead by her two Sikh bodyguards. Violence was then directed at the Sikh community, which came to be branded as ‘traitors’. Scholars have observed that the various conflicts of the years leading up to 1984 in the Punjab – the demand

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for a separate state on linguistic grounds, religious fundamentalism, Operation Bluestar, and the rise and fall of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale – fuelled violence against Sikhs.⁷

Various reports, commissions, and individual accounts have presented the facts of the violence and tried to capture the nature of the killings. While there is no official death toll, it is estimated that more than 3,000 Sikh men and boys lost their lives during the three days of violence in the capital.⁸ On October 31 1984, sporadic assaults on Sikhs were reported, and the killings began on 1 November.⁹ Studies have noted the organized and brutal manner in which the killings were carried out.¹⁰ There were no ‘boundaries of rationality’ as Sikh males were ‘administered death in a particular, stylized way; they were caught by the crowd, had their skulls cracked before being burnt’.¹¹

By the morning of 1 November, armed men were active in middle-class and resettlement colonies alike. These included the middle and business-class colonies where Sikhs lived, such as Tilak Nagar, Punjabi Bagh, Model Town, New Friends Colony, Hauz Khas, and Vasant Vihar, among others.¹² However, the worst affected areas were the resettlement or jhuggi-jhopri colonies across Delhi, which were mainly home to low-caste, working-class Sikhs. These included Trilokpuri, Sultanpuri, Shadara, Nand Nagri, Nangloi,¹³ and other neighbourhoods in the east and north of Delhi. Besides killings of Sikhs, hundreds of gurdwaras were set on fire and damaged while shops owned by Sikhs, large and small alike, were looted and burnt indiscriminately.¹⁴

Women were also subjected to violence, mainly in the form of sexual assault. Incidents of rape went mostly unreported, despite their allegedly large numbers, due to the resulting social stigma.¹⁵ By 4 November, the Army had been called in to the capital to bring to an end to the violence. It is important to mention here that the main survivors of the

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⁹ Ibid.


carnage were Sikh women and their children. The role of the state and the police in supporting the violence has been made public in the reports of many commissions. While studies have been able to establish the immediate suffering of the survivors, little is known about their struggles to reconstruct their lives, which have been documented by few scholars. The survivors from the working classes within the Sikh community, who were later resettled by the government in Tilak Vihar, remain a ‘hidden’ community both spatially and socially. This, as argued below, is due to the very nature of the neighbourhood as a ‘widows’ colony’.

2. Data and methodology

An ethnographic study of Tilak Vihar was carried out over a period of three months and included observation and interviews with survivors and various NGO members. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven survivors (six women and one man) of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in order to map their life histories, especially after the 1984 violence, as well as the challenges they faced in raising their families. Five of the seven participants were residents of Tilak Vihar while the remaining two resided in wealthier neighbourhoods of Delhi, (Patel Nagar and Jahangirpuri). These two were included only to examine if the trajectories of their lives post-violence could offer a contrast with those who lived in Tilak Vihar. From these accounts of the education and occupations of the children of survivors, I show that the neighbourhood plays a key role in access to opportunities for better life chances. The stigma attached to Tilak Vihar, its inhabitants’ identities as survivors of 1984 and residents of this neighbourhood, and the complex socio-political goals of the larger Sikh community hinder the development of both the neighbourhood and the people living there.

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18 The interviews were carried out in Punjabi and Hindi and translated in English for further analysis. The names of all participants have been changed to protect their identity. Their present ages are mentioned along with their names.

3. Tilak Vihar: The site of the study

Tilak Vihar lies about four kilometres away from the main market of Tilak Nagar in West Delhi. The colony falls under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). Before the violence, the then Delhi government built the colony to house its Class IV government employees.20 The neighbourhood is made up of three-storey buildings containing one-BHK homes. Around three to four months after the carnage, nearly 1,000 widows were moved to Tilak Vihar with their families, as many had lost their homes and livelihoods.21

The colony was renamed as the ‘Tilak Vihar Widows’ Rehabilitation Colony’ and houses were allocated to women whose husbands had been killed.22 Families whose male members had been injured were allocated housing in a different block in the neighbourhood. This pattern had changed by the time of my fieldwork, however, with many families having moved homes within the colony itself.

By the time the women and their families moved to Tilak Vihar, the larger neighbourhood of Tilak Nagar (of which Tilak Vihar is a part) was already dominated by upper middle (mostly business families) and middle-class Sikhs.23 By the end of 2019, Tilak Nagar was a bustling neighbourhood with markets, malls, and a metro station. It was well-connected with other parts of the city. Many upper middle-class Sikh families, politicians, and businessmen resided in and around the neighbourhood. The crowded roads of Tilak Nagar lead to Tilak Vihar through narrow, isolated lanes.

During interviews, members of many relief organizations recalled that the resettlement was carried out by the government in the face of pressure from members of different Sikh groups, politicians, and other civil society members. It was a kind of face-saving exercise by the government, as one member of an NGO working in the colony argued. The remaining families were relocated to areas within Delhi, such as Garhi, Shahdara,

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20 The information is based on interviews with members of Sikh organizations actively involved in relief work in Tilak Vihar.
21 Ibid.
22 The government took several steps to compensate and rehabilitate the victims, appointing the GS Dhillon Committee to carry these out. The panel recommended Rs 10,000 for death, Rs 1,000 for injury and Rs 5,000 for damage to dwellings. Around Rs 152 million were given in compensation and 1,932 families were allotted plots in Tilak Vihar and other places in Delhi. Several other commissions were appointed later to investigate the riot. See PUCL & PUDR, 1985.
23 The larger neighbourhoods surrounding Tilak Vihar are mainly dominated by Sikhs. It remains unclear whether Tilak Vihar was chosen for the Sikh survivors of the 1984 violence on this basis.
Jahangirpuri and other parts of east Delhi. Back in 1984, these were all working-class colonies with poor infrastructure, dilapidated roads, and negligible schools.

The creation of Tilak Vihar was the response of the state to unprecedented violence against a community that had never previously been subjected to communal violence in India. Ironically, no other Indian government has responded to such violence by marking a rehabilitation space for survivors. Hence, Muslim survivors of violence in Gujarat and Mumbai were forced to live together in a common space by long-standing structural and political discrimination. However, after the 1984 violence, it was the then government which segregated the women in Tilak Vihar, leading to the creation of the ‘colony of widows’. It is important to note that men who were grievously injured or maimed in the violence were also resettled in another block of the same colony, yet even so, it went on to acquire its identity as the colony of the widows.

Tilak Vihar is unlike ghettoized spaces seen in other urban areas. In urban sociology, ghettos are generally understood as involuntary spaces where people of certain races or ethnicities are pushed to live together. This could be because of many state-sponsored processes and exclusions that force people with an identifiable characteristic (race or religion) to share a space. These are spaces of extreme stigmatization. The systemic deprivation of development by state or private forces means that ghettos lack infrastructure and facilities otherwise common in cities, and this spatial exclusion results in the further closure of opportunities from people in ghettos, thereby curtailing their chances of social mobility.

However, a space formed in the aftermath of communal violence is a complex one and needs to be unpacked to study the distinct exclusions that it produces. Some of the

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24 Gayer et al., “Muslims of the Indian City”.
26 It was Max Weber who drew attention to social closure in his discussion of the concept of class. Weber used the term closure in the context of opportunities and their monopolization by certain groups who enjoy more opportunities in society based on their race, language, social origin, religion, or education. Murphy terms the social closure theory of Weber as a theory of ‘power and domination’ which can be used to explain stratification in society. For more on social closure, see Weber (1922) and Murphy (1988).
28 The category of social exclusion – formerly understood only in terms of poverty – is also useful. The combination of physical environment and closure from opportunities leaves ghetto residents in a vicious cycle of capability deprivation, lack of social and economic opportunities, and political isolation. These closures can be combined under social exclusion to encompass the many deprivations suffered by a given population. For more on social exclusion, see Amartya Sen, “Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny,” Social
characteristics of such neighbourhoods have been identified by Gayer et al., including their involuntary nature and their domination by minority populations. These characteristics are what shape neighbourhoods into ghettos and mark the closure of their residents from various socio-economic opportunities. Gayer et al. use these characteristics as ‘analytical tools’ to examine Juhapura, a Muslim-dominated locality in Ahmedabad, as mentioned above. Some of the same characteristics are also seen in Tilak Vihar, even though the neighbourhood holds a significantly different meaning for the Sikh community.

Gayer et al. note that such spaces are ‘defined by the absence of public facilities’. In Tilak Vihar, many such facilities are seen to be lacking. There is no proper drainage or sewage system and no water or electricity service. The houses are in a dilapidated condition. Illegal construction is rampant, as families have extended their original one-BHK houses to accommodate additional members. Infrastructure is poor; the roads and by-lanes narrow, unclean, and ill-maintained. The lack of these facilities and missing state is keenly felt in the colony even though their overt presence is symbolized by a police station located by the entrance to the neighbourhood.

Ghettos do not benefit from state attention in the same way as other parts of the city. Nowhere is this more evident than in Tilak Vihar. Behind Delhi’s world-class reputation, the colony has faced neglect by the state while surrounding areas have been intensely developed by the public and private sectors alike.

A ghetto is also ‘insulated’ from the rest of the city. In the context of Juhapura, Jaffrelot et al. point out that this insulation does not arise from walls being built to divide ghettos, but from the lack of city bus services. Hence, residents rely on private modes of transportation, which are expensive. In Tilak Vihar too, there are no state-run bus services and one must walk or use other means to get to the main road in order to access any form of transportation. It is important to note here that ghettos are always located on the margins of a city, where their presence is likely to go unnoticed. Tilak Vihar is similarly a hidden colony, locked between other bustling West Delhi neighbourhoods.
Scholars have also underscored the lack of formal schools and the prevalence of community-run schools in such neighbourhoods.\(^\text{34}\) At the time of my study, there was only one private, low-fee, unrecognized school within the colony, compared to a total of twenty-four schools listed in Tilak Nagar – of which four were private, offering education up to secondary level. Seven senior secondary schools were mentioned – four aided and three unaided. There were also thirteen MCD schools in Tilak Nagar – nine of them primary, aided schools and three primary, unaided schools. One was listed as a nursery school under the jurisdiction of the MCD.\(^\text{35}\) Sikhs also started a well-known chain of private unaided schools in a block of Tilak Vihar in 1995. Its main aim is to cater to the families of survivors and provide them with free, ‘private’ education, but many residents claim this purpose is not being met.

Tilak Vihar has also acquired certain characteristics of its own. Many social problems and crimes are reported here. Drug usage is common and domestic abuse is reported by a number of residents, indicating that many families are dysfunctional. Unemployment is rampant and residents are mainly employed in low-paid, unskilled jobs. Chief occupations are auto rickshaw and bus drivers, small kiosk owners, and lower-level government employees. Many widows work as domestic helps in the wealthy homes of Tilak Nagar in order to sustain their growing families. Other widows, who were given government jobs after the violence as compensation, have retired on meagre pensions.

Many ‘identities’ resonate with neighbourhoods of these kinds beyond that of ‘victim’. In Juhapura, this is emphasized with reference to the religious identity of its nearly 300,000 residents, leading to it being commonly identified as ‘Little Pakistan’.\(^\text{36}\) Tilak Vihar is better known as the ‘widows’ colony’, deepening its spatial stigma. Religious identity takes a backseat to this gendered identity. Another common moniker is the ‘prostitutes’ colony’, in reference to the single women here who did not remarry and are thus seen as deviant. During the fieldwork, I was asked by one of the participants to leave by early evening as it was a ‘notorious colony, unsafe for females after dark’.

It is ironic that many of the women who did remarry became victims of domestic abuse, which has been documented in detail by scholars\(^\text{37}\) and was also mentioned to me by some of the participants in the study (see below). Residents also revealed that their children

\(^{34}\) Ibid, 79.
\(^{35}\) www.edudel.nic.in, accessed on June 20, 2020.
\(^{36}\) Jaffrelot et al., "Facing Ghettoisation in ‘Riot City,’" 70.
\(^{37}\) The experiences of women widowed in the 1984 riots are documented in detail in Chakravarti & Haskar (1987); Chakravarti (1994) and Das (1990).
and grandchildren were addicted to drugs; they said the colony was the ‘worst place to live’ as crime was common and children were susceptible to joining the company of the wayward. This highlights the character that the space has developed over the years and the everyday violence its residents have suffered as a result.\(^{38}\)

It has been reported that, over the years, those who managed to gather some money left the colony and settled in nearby areas to avoid being identified as residents of Tilak Vihar. Due to the ‘bad name’ associated with the colony, residents have also complained that jobs are hard to find as the very name ‘dissuaded potential employers’.\(^{39}\) A number of ‘outsiders’ moved to the colony – mainly those looking for cheaper accommodation than is available in Tilak Nagar and around. Land prices, which shot up significantly in neighbouring colonies, remained stagnant in Tilak Vihar, indicating the lack of development over the years. Residents blamed the state, arguing that the different political parties viewed them only as vote banks, and pointing to the promises and subsequent failures of successive central and state governments to better their conditions and deliver adequate infrastructure and employment.

Due to the many stigmas and taboos attached to the colony, women residents have developed a ‘sense of victimhood’ and ‘identity consciousness’ and a belief that living here invites a ‘future of crisis’.\(^{40}\) Many wished to leave, but could not due to lack of money. In this sense, there is an awareness that the future must be negotiated within this space as a battle against stigma and multiple vulnerabilities as well as the absence of the state – but one fought alongside people who shared the same history, collective scars, and trauma. It is in Tilak Vihar that memories of the violence have been kept alive, while others with more social and economic capital moved on and recovered their losses.\(^{41}\)

\(^{38}\) Even when not occurring currently, if violence becomes omnipresent and is experienced through individuals, institutions, state, so much so that it feels ‘normal’, it can be referred to as everyday violence. Everyday violence makes uncertainty and risks part of the daily context. For more on everyday violence, see Veena Das, Life and Words: Violence and Descent into the Ordinary (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

\(^{39}\) Arif, “Impossible Cosmopolises,” 117.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.

\(^{41}\) For more on a ‘new’ community identity that emerges in neighbourhoods that come up in the aftermath of communal violence, see Arif, “Impossible Cosmopolises,” 101-30.
4. Marginalization and Exclusion in Education

An important indicator of the long-drawn impact of violence on its survivors is found in their education, which may be impacted due to trauma and loss of home and livelihood. Previous research has found that school-going victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots suffered a break in their education.42 As they lost their fathers and were left with mothers who either went to work or were traumatized by the violence, many young Sikh girls were forced to drop out of school and look after their younger siblings. Others were pushed into early marriages, which were seen as a way to secure their futures. Most of these girls were married to illiterate or semi-literate unemployed men. Instead of futures secured, many came back to Tilak Vihar with their husbands to live with their mothers and continue to fend for their growing families.

While many adolescent boys lost their lives, those who settled with their families in Tilak Vihar dropped out of school.43 Survivors who settled elsewhere in Delhi and had some economic support were able to return to school and complete their education.

Given the several constraints of the neighbourhood, along with the limited educational opportunities it provides, I present below the education and occupational choices of the seventeen children of five survivors from Tilak Vihar. From interviews with them, I show that Tilak Vihar offered only a few options for schooling and none for higher education. Drop-outs were common. Gender, class, and their identity as victims of 1984 intersected with the education of children of survivors. Later on, I will contrast these with choices and journeys made by the four children of two survivors who lived in other neighbourhoods of Delhi.

There were a total of twenty-one children between the seven survivors’ families – thirteen male and eight female.44 Five male children were aged 6–14 (see Table A). In the 15–18 age group, there were one male child and three females. Seven males and five females were aged 19 years and above. The oldest of the male children was 24 years old while the youngest was 9. The oldest among the females was 27 and the youngest 16. All of the children had been enrolled in school, but at the time of the interviews, six children were in school and eight had dropped out. Seven completed senior secondary and were pursuing graduation via correspondence.

43 Ibid.
44 Details of all the survivors’ children are mentioned here.
Table A: Children of the survivors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group#</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling (at the time of fieldwork)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper primary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior secondary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage of drop-out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to U. Primary</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior secondary*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.Com</td>
<td>2**</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correspondence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# The age groups have been divided according to schooling stages.
* All participants’ children who completed senior secondary went on to pursue graduation.
** These two also pursued a year-long Diploma in Tourism and Ticketing from a private institute in Delhi.

Women survivors in Tilak Vihar were keen to educate their children, recalling times when they were forced to abandon their own schooling. Having lived through ‘the consequences of illiteracy and economic vulnerability’ (Anmol Kaur, 47 years), they wanted
their children to be able to access continuous and quality education. Women reflected on education as enabling and specifically securing their daughters’ futures against uncertainty: ‘I am again searching for a job. I have always lived in uncertainty. My mother regrets forcing me to drop out of school in 1985 to get married. I felt if my daughters could have a good education, they would not have to run from pillar to post struggling to make ends meet like I am doing even now’ (Parmeet Kaur, 46 years). Daughters’ education was also linked to the idea of status and better marriages.

‘I was uneducated so I was married to an uneducated man. Look at my life now. I tell her about my life, my struggles. I try to encourage her to study, work hard and stand on her own feet. At least she should have a good marriage.’ (Chaman Kaur, 49 years)

Despite these aspirations, women in Tilak Vihar had limited means and choices to get their children admitted to schools. As mentioned above, there was only one senior secondary government school near the colony that students could walk to. This was the preferred option for survivor families who lived on limited means and one income. Anmol Kaur mentioned that while her daughters studied at this government school, they won scholarships from a Sikh NGO each year: ‘It lessened my burden towards their books, stationery and other needs.’ Gurpreet Kaur (49 years) mentioned that access to government schools was easier given the financial constraints on the families. Thanks to the government school, ‘I have some hope that my youngest son will be able to complete his education. I know that education from a private school is considered more worthy these days. But for us, this school is the only hope.’

Due to their own lack of education and stable employment, and with husbands who were either unemployed or addicts, mothers in Tilak Vihar are in charge of their children’s education. As they either work or do not have networks to help them plan and choose schools for their children, most women choose the most accessible option in the colony – the nearest

45 Before liberalization and the entry of market forces into education in the early 1990s, government and government-aided schools were the preferred option even for the middle classes. A shift of preference was seen after the 1990s towards private, unaided schools which were perceived to be of ‘better quality’ and provide English language skills. Preference for these schools cuts across social classes today and has created a hierarchy of institutions, with parents from the working and lower classes choosing low-fee schools over government institutions. Where parents have to make a choice between schools for sons and daughters, resources are often mobilized to admit sons to private, unaided schools and daughters to government schools. See Pauline Lipman, “Chapter 2: Education Policy, Race and Neoliberal Urbanism,” Counterpoints 316 (2008): 45-66; Vimala Ramachandran, Gender and Social Equity in Primary Education: Hierarchies of Access (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004).
government school. Admission here is easier compared to low-fee private or unaided private schools around the area, for which the survivors I interviewed said they had neither the time nor finances. ‘I used to leave for work early in the morning and taking leave was not an option. One day, I just went a little later to work and got my eldest daughter admitted to this government school. I did the same for my second daughter and for the youngest, my older one helped in the process in the same school’ (Anmol Kaur).

As shown in Table B, sixteen out of the twenty-one children were admitted to the government school in Tilak Vihar from primary level. Five children – all male – were enrolled in unaided co-educational schools from primary level. Four of the five were the two sons each of Samar Singh and Gurleen Kaur (54 years) who were not residents of Tilak Vihar. The remaining child (the younger son of Navdeep Kaur, living in Tilak Vihar) was 9 years old at the time of the study. He had been admitted to the Sikh-managed unaided school in Tilak Vihar after getting a fee waiver. Navdeep Kaur (47 years) stated that she chose the school only because of the fee concession.

**Table B: Schools enrolled in by stage/level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Primary (1–5)</th>
<th>Middle (6–8)</th>
<th>Secondary (9–10)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private**</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift from govt./private to Sikh-managed (private)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary Data

* Includes children studying or who studied at government schools

** Includes children studying or who studied at private schools

The establishment of a Sikh-managed private school in Tilak Vihar, purportedly to support local families, opened doors to better educational prospects. Over time, several families shifted their children to the school, which offered fee waivers only to those whose families had suffered in the violence. Seven sons of the participating survivors from Tilak Vihar were subsequently moved to this school. However, the fee waiver did not cover other school expenses (such as stationery and uniform), for which many relied on additional aid from NGOs working in the neighbourhood. Participants underscored that admission to this school was not easy for them. They had to clear many administrative hurdles to secure
admission even though the school had been opened specifically to address the educational needs of those living in Tilak Vihar and claimed to offer them free education. Navdeep Kaur said she had to wait four years for her son to be accepted, which he spent studying at the government school in the colony.

Due to economic vulnerability, the experience of violence, and living in a neighbourhood that offered limited educational choices, most families came up with alternative strategies for their sons’ and daughters’ schooling. All eight daughters among the interviewed families in Tilak Vihar were admitted to government schools (See Table B). Where resources were available, families preferred to send only boys to private schools. For instance, Navdeep Kaur and Parmeet Kaur sent their daughters to the government school in the colony while their sons attended private schools. Participants reasoned that they did not have the money ‘to educate all children in private schools’, and further, that ‘the daughter eventually has to marry’ (Parmeet Kaur). Navdeep Kaur reasoned that ‘sons need the discipline of a private school while girls can study anywhere’:

‘When we were sending her to school, we did not have the money for a private one. I thought, she is a girl, she can go to a government school. *Ladke padhte kahan hain sarkari school mein, ladkiyan toh kahin bhi padh jati hain* (boys do not study at government school, while girls can study anywhere).’

Despite losing their parents to the riots, Samar Singh and Gurleen Kaur, who did not live in Tilak Vihar, were able to make a substantial socio-economic recovery in the following years. Their strategies and aspirations for their children were in stark contrast to those of the families in Tilak Vihar. Both Samar Singh and Gurleen Kaur chose private, English-medium schools for their children from primary level, influenced by their sound finances. Gurleen Kaur said, ‘We never considered sending our sons to government schools. There were problems sometimes in meeting all expenditures but education in private schools is good for children’s futures.’

Samar Singh (46 years), who lost both his parents and dropped out of school in 1987 due to depression, reflected, ‘The education which I could not get, I want for my children. The comforts I lost, I want them to have at any cost. I tell them they must study because *mujhe bahot pachtawa hai ki main padh nahi paya* (I regret that I did not).’ Singh ran a business which he started in late 1990s with the help of his maternal uncle. After dropping

46 Gurleen Kaur was employed as a manager in a government-run hospital in Delhi.
out of school, Singh lived in the Punjab for nearly a decade and later completed senior secondary through open schooling.

Both parents also planned for their children’s educational futures continuously. Samar Singh recalled, ‘My sons were going to a private school but were bullied there because of their turbans. My son’s classmates would untie his turban and tease him for his long hair. He told us he would cut his hair so we shifted both of them to a Sikh-managed private school, even though it is 10 km away from our home.’ This school did not offer them a fee concession, but the parents still chose it to ensure their sons were not bullied and to enable them to learn Punjabi and the history of the Sikh religion, which the school offered.

This section shows the limited choices and complex negotiations that women in Tilak Vihar have to make for the education of their children. Despite aspirations, their location in the neighbourhood and their poverty intersect with the choices they end up making for their children. For them, the government school was generally the preferred choice, especially for older and female children. They were also averse to sending their children to faraway schools, which would mean extra expenditure. Only after they were offered a fee concession did they take their children out of the government school and send them to the Sikh-managed school.

5. Supporting families, dropping out of schools

Hurried marriages post-violence did not offer stability and security to female participants in the study (all aged below 18 years at that time). Those who remained in Tilak Vihar (five out of six participants) pointed to several challenges in their marital lives. Their husbands were either drug addicts or unemployed. The participants were the sole earners in their households and also relied on financial support from extended families or NGOs. ‘His illiteracy only added to our woes. We never had a permanent income. And when there is no education, one goes from one job to another. That is what my husband did and the whole family suffered’ (Chaman Kaur). Fathers were absent from their children’s lives and it was the mothers who took on the role of the head of the family. In this scenario, irrespective of their aspirations for their children, the survivors did not consider enrolling them in higher education and, as we will see below, pulled them out of school at a vulnerable stage.

Eight children had discontinued their education by the time of the study. Of these, one dropped out while she was in Class VIII, and the remaining seven stopped after
completing secondary education (See Table A). The three daughters of the study participants had either married after completing secondary school or quit to help look after their younger siblings. In the case of the five sons who had dropped out, the mothers cited lack of financial support and their husbands’ addiction to alcohol and drugs as reasons. Chaman Kaur pointed to her inability to pay the school fee: ‘I was so embarrassed that I could not pay Rs 400. My husband did not help. Finally, I stopped sending my older son to school. I told him to do whatever job possible. I was earning ever since the riots happened. I could not support the family all by myself anymore.’ Parmeet Kaur, who was widowed soon after her marriage in 1985, said she required additional help to sustain her family. All five of her children quit school after Class X or earlier and took low-skilled, low-income jobs to help her.

The nature of the work carried out by the children who left school reveals their vulnerability even in the job market. All were in low-income, contractual jobs and thus at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, with none of the benefits of regular, salaried employment. Three males drove rented cars as cabs and one was a helper at a private office. The women said their children had to change jobs once every two years since they were not permanent contracts. In most cases, it was the older drop-out children who were most vulnerable in their families. Once they achieved some stability after starting to work, the younger siblings had the opportunity to complete school and even pursue higher education. All the children who were pursing higher education (seven in total) were correspondence students. Their mothers cited lack of money for regular college, which was seen as a ‘waste of time and money’ (Anmol Kaur). The women preferred their children to take a part-time job or any other work while continuing their education. The families in Tilak Vihar thus experience dysfunction not only due to the experience of violence, but also their subsequent spatial exclusion, stigma, and poverty, which left them with little chance of social and economic recovery.

6. Community organizations in Tilak Vihar

Efforts to develop spaces like Tilak Vihar and provide services to their residents often come from within the community. The role played by Sikh non-governmental organizations in this colony is a telling comment on the marginalization, exclusion, and official neglect of

47 For more on the weaker labour-market position of those living in low-income, minority-dominated neighbourhoods, see Mary Pattilli, “Extending the boundaries and Definition of the Ghetto,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26:6 (2010): 1046-57. See also Wacquant, “Urban Outcasts”.
48 Jaffrelot et al., “Facing Ghettotisation in ‘Riot City,”’ 70.
families in Tilak Vihar. However, these organizations also play a key role in keeping ‘community identity’ and a ‘sense of victimhood’ alive among survivors. Their many activities have kept the identity of the colony as the neighbourhood of widows of 1984 intact.

The organizations focused upon here are the Nishkam Sikh Welfare Council (NSWC), the Sikh Forum, and the Nagrik Ekta Manch (NEM). These were the sole source of aid and assistance to survivors in the immediate aftermath of the violence. The formation of the Nishkam Trust began in June 1984, five months before the riots, to help Sikhs engaged in menial jobs. Established by a group of Sikhs, the Trust was in the process of being registered when the violence broke out. The Sikh Forum was formed by some well-known civil society members immediately after the violence. It was registered in 1985 and was headquartered in South Delhi, in a space provided by one of its members. The NEM was formed spontaneously by concerned civil society members from all walks of life who wanted to assist the survivors. It was an umbrella group comprising politicians, bureaucrats, NGO workers, journalists, teachers, and students.

The Forum and the volunteers of the NEM were most actively involved in looking after the welfare of the survivors. They collected funds from private sources, provided young children with books, and started classes for them. One member of the NEM said that volunteers were asked to engage specifically with children in camps and address their educational concerns as they were left without schools after the violence.

When the women were moved to Tilak Vihar, it was mainly the Nishkam Trust that provided assistance to them. It raised funds from Sikhs across India and the diaspora, as one member recalled. Unemployment was also an enormous problem in the new colony. One member recalled that the state had to be pressured to give jobs to the widowed women, who had become the heads of their families after the deaths of their husbands. They were eventually offered Class IV government jobs.

49 See Mander, “Conflict and Suffering”; Arif, “Impossible Cosmopolises”.
50 The data are based on interviews with members of the management of the Nishkam Trust.
51 Data based on interview with a member of The Sikh Forum. Its founding members were Captain Amrinder Singh, Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Arora, Wing Commander R.S. Chatwal, journalist Kuldip Nayyar, and lawyer H.S. Phoolka, among others.
53 Data based on interviews with former members of the NEM. These included IAS officer Ashok Jaitley; Saheli director Lalita Ramdas; Poonam Mutreja of Sruthi, which promoted rural handicrafts; Ravi Chopra from the Centre for Science and Environment; Sumanta Banerjee, a freelance journalist; and other well-known civil society members such as Ajay Mahajan, Alok Mukhopadhyay, Sandeep Narang, Jaya Jaitley, and Ravi Nayyar.
It is important to note here that the state employed only women who had been widowed. But there were a large number of families – settled in B Block of the Colony – in which men had been grievously injured and forced to leave their occupations. Women in these families were provided temporary employment by the Nishkam Trust, such as sewing jobs, for which they were paid Rs 10–40 per day. Widows who could not work were given pensions of Rs 400 per month by the DSGMC.54

All three organizations helped to enrol children in schools – mainly state-run ones close to the colony. They were also given assistance to continue their education. The Forum and Nishkam Trust provided students with uniforms, stationery, books, and so on. This support was given in the form of quarterly or half-quarterly scholarships of Rs 50. As one member of the Sikh Forum recalled, students were given scholarships to keep them in schools. ‘Some donors sent their money specifically for education and we feared that children would drop out after the violence. Some had already left school to fend for their families. Others were traumatized. Those who stayed did so because of this money and continued their education as it lessened the burden on their mothers.’

Members recalled that several students were refused admission to government schools as they had lost official documents, such as their birth certificates. To address these concerns, the NEM started temporary afternoon classes for out-of-school children. In 1992, the Nishkam Trust opened a computer centre in the colony to provide technical education to the children in the surviving families and improve their employability.55

An independent survey carried out by the Forum in 2010 revealed telling details about the struggles of the survivors and their children between 1990 and 2000. The survey included nearly 900 children assisted by the Forum after 1985, and found that most children had dropped out of schools by the early 1990s. Girls were married ‘as young as 15–16 years because their mothers were scared for their safety’, the Forum member reported. Boys dropped out mainly because of rampant drug abuse in the colony, lack of male parenting, and the trauma of witnessing the killings of family members. ‘The boys used to be alone as their mothers worked immediately after the violence. A number of them became wayward or started abusing drugs. A lot of families lost their boys due to this.’

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54 This scheme was discontinued in 1999.
55 Data on the number of students taking these classes were not shared.
Despite the efforts of these organizations, it appears that the ‘rehabilitation’ of the survivors did not take place due to the state’s neglect and to lack of co-ordination between the different organizations. This failure made room for newer community organizations. In 2006, a few residents formed the All India Sikh Riot Victim Action Committee (AISRVAC). Its only goal was to pressure the DSGMC, which ran the private school in Tilak Vihar, to admit children from the colony as per its promise of free education. One member claimed that no child from Tilak Vihar had been admitted to this school since 2009, and that no other school had been established in the colony.

Another organization called Seva ‘84 was formed in 2012 and headquartered in the United Kingdom, where its funds were mainly raised. Its website stated that its main aim was to ‘reduce poverty and improve standards of living in the Widows’ Colony’, adding, ‘Poverty has, therefore, not only been inflicted on these widows but also on future generations, and as such the cycle of suffering continues. Many have been left in vulnerable states, leading to suicidal tendencies, prostitution and drug and alcohol addiction.’

I met two volunteers from the organization who conducted health and educational surveys respectively. One said that anyone who asked for monetary or medical help during these surveys received aid after ‘proper verification of claims’.

References to community identity, and more significantly, to residents’ identities as ‘survivors of 1984 violence’ and ‘widows of 1984’, were prominent within Seva ‘84. Donations were actively sought by emphasizing the identity of the women as ‘widows of 1984’. It also used images of Tilak Vihar and residents’ living conditions to raise funds.

Seva ‘84 funded healthcare and education programmes in the colony – two basic urban amenities that families here had only minimal access to. It covered the medical care costs of several families and financed the education of others. At the same time, it drew heavily on Sikh traditions and sought to ‘educate the youth in gurmat sangeet, the history of Sikhism and Sikhi, to prevent children from drifting away from their faith’. The organization strove to keep Sikh identity alive within the community in Tilak Vihar through its many programmes.

For many of these organizations and for the community itself, Tilak Vihar represented the violence its residents had suffered and was a space of memory and loss. It also served to bind Sikhs across the world together as the remnant of an act of collective violence against the community and a reminder of the need to uphold the Sikh identity. These

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were the complex motives that guided the organizations’ work, which were not necessarily in tune with the welfare of those in Tilak Vihar. The larger idea was to propagate Sikh identity and mobilize the community by keeping the memory of the violence alive. However, it only appeared to deepen the survivors’ identities as ‘widows of 1984’, which many were trying hard to overcome. The families were caught in a vicious circle in which their collective identity served to stigmatize them in society at large, but at the same time their spatial location gave them access to the services of various organizations which they otherwise would not have had.

**Conclusion**

More than three decades after the 1984 anti-Sikh violence, Tilak Vihar remains a hidden neighbourhood surrounded by colonies that have benefitted from the development of Delhi. My attempt in this paper was to show that Tilak Vihar – which was created by the state to rehabilitate survivors – has suffered neglect in the long run, leading to many exclusions that affect survivors to this day. While neighbouring areas benefited from urban development and the establishment of schools, Tilak Vihar was left out of the planning discourse of various governments. This also led to negligible school provision in the colony, with survivors forced to depend on community groups. In contrast to the growing prosperity of the neighbourhoods surrounding Tilak Vihar, the people here are unable to access similar opportunities.

This paper emphasizes the need to identify specific vulnerabilities produced by spaces like Tilak Vihar. A simplistic understanding of ghettos may not be useful here. While Tilak Vihar has taken on some of the characteristics of a ghetto as defined by Gayer et al., in the long run, it remains a unique space due to the gender of the survivors and the nature of the criminality associated with it. Unlike the religious identity of neighbourhoods like Juhapura, Tilak Vihar is primarily defined by its gendered identity (as a place of families headed by single widowed women, and also as a prostitutes’ colony), which manifests itself in an array of exclusions that the families here suffer.

The term Widows’ Colony, initially meant to point to violence against Sikh men and boys, is now a clear gendered identification of the neighbourhood. The gross inequalities and neglect experienced by families here have emerged from this gendered identity and kept

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the colony isolated from development. Despite their urban locations, such neighbourhoods are sites of multiple exclusions and a long-drawn struggle for survival. The women in Tilak Vihar have experienced a double blow, in the sense that both justice and the hope of better lives continue to elude them. Ironically, this is also a place where women find a sense of community and relate to each other through a shared history. It binds them together, even though they want to leave for better prospects.

More than 35 years after the 1984 riots, it is important to look at the everyday violence that families in Tilak Vihar experience. The daily task of survival is itself challenging, and fraught with many negotiations and dependencies on external forces. Yet we must also acknowledge the persistence and resilience of the women who have struggled against hierarchical and forced inequalities to seek a future in this besieged space. Das equates this ‘making of the everyday inhabitable’ with the ‘making of the self’, and this needs to be recognized by researchers who wish to understand violence and its impact on survivors.58

Uninterrupted, high-quality education remains a challenge in Tilak Vihar and is dependent on community forces which are guided by religious and political interests. In spaces where the state is absent, non-state actors like NGOs take over the provision of education. Few employment options are available, with residents forced to take low-class and temporary jobs. Hence, these neighbourhoods ‘produce young population that is economically fragile and equally deprived of readily marketable skills in the core of the new economy’.59 In a neo-liberal economy, where education is key to social mobility, the lack of educational opportunities within such spaces needs further attention.

It may be asked why Tilak Vihar has not shared the exponential growth experienced in similar spaces elsewhere in the country. This is probably due to the complexities of gender and class in this neighbourhood. Ironically, while the community provides its own services in Tilak Vihar, Sikhs from better-off classes have refrained from moving here even though the place holds meaning for the community. This is unlike the case of Juhapura, where even upper middle-class Muslims moved in search of safety after the 2002 riots.60

The perception of Tilak Vihar as a minority-dominated, low-income colony, its stagnant land prices, the lack of state intervention and infrastructural development, and its

large population of widowed women all contributed to its ghettoization. Its abandonment by
the Sikh community, which has become global and made social and political strides in many
different countries, has severely compromised the chances of growth for the colony and its
inhabitants. It only currently represents the attack on the community and the loss and trauma
it suffered, even though the lives of the residents are caught up in the politics of the space.
In this scenario, it is unlikely that things will change for the better. When discussing
neighbourhoods that come into being after violence, it is important to keep in mind the
religious minority context along with the class and gender continuum.

Spaces like Tilak Vihar keep survivors of communal violence in a vicious circle of
opportunity closure and poverty. With the current trend towards greater political
conservatism, religious and racial violence, and rising urban inequalities, we need to take
into account the exclusionary ‘violence’ suffered by those living in this and similar
neighbourhoods. Glossing over urbanization and infrastructural development means
ignoring not only the lives of their inhabitants, but also the role of the state in socially and
economically polarizing society.

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