Research Paper IMPACT FACTOR VALUE : 6.247 | E-ISSN NO : 2455-295X | VOLUME : 12 | ISSUE : 10 | OCTOBER 2026

# REMEMBERING AGAINST ERASURE: MEMORY AS RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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**ABSTRACT:**

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**KEYWORDS:**

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| PAPER ACCEPTED DATE: | PAPER PUBLISHED DATE: |
|---|---|
| 29th October 2026 | 30th October 2026 |
| **PAPER DOI NO:** | **PAPER DOI LINK:** |
| 10.5281/zenodo.23858739 | https://zenodo.org/records/23858739 |

## INTRODUCTION

Rarely is memory inherited passively. The act of remembering, deciding what to tell, how to tell it, and to whom develops into a conscious political activity in environments characterised by socio-economic exploitation, caste dominance, governmental violence, and epistemic marginalisation. This essay makes the case that memory serves as a kind of resistance against erasure, which includes the removal of entire methods of knowing that do not follow the textual, state-approved procedures of creating history as well as the removal of events from official records. Social groups dealing with caste discrimination, gender-based violence, ethnic atrocities, military rule, and land seizures have created a remarkably diverse repertoire of symbolic practices throughout modern India. These practices include testimonial memoirs, graphic narratives, hunger strikes, sit-ins, hashtag campaigns, and stone slabs, all of which are mobilised to preserve what established narratives would rather to be overlooked.

Two research questions serve as the framework for this paper. First, how do groups oppose erasure enforced by the government or by prevailing national narratives using memory techniques such as oral confession, ritual, corporeal protest, digital preservation, and visual storytelling? Second, what specific shapes does this opposition take when the elimination at issue is not only political but also epistemological, meaning that non-textual, informal, or non-institutional methods of understanding are excluded by the same frameworks used to record "history"? When the typical avenues of legitimation courts, archives, textbooks, and national media are blocked or hostile, these problems go beyond a straightforward dichotomy of remembering vs forgetting to investigate how memory is created, conveyed, and legitimised.

This paper purposefully does not examine the entire subcontinent or explore the Partition, the period perhaps strongly linked to memory studies of South Asia. Rather, this paper focuses on situations that, although their scope and importance, have received very little attention in memory studies scholarship: Indian graphic novels, the Shaheen Bagh sit-in in opposition to the Citizenship Amendment Act, the Ken- Betwa protests, the Chipko campaign's depicted environmental opposition, digital Dalit activism after Rohith Vemula's death, the farmers' protest in 2020–2021, the ongoing repression of Kashmiri counter-memorization, the Nellie massacre in Assam in 1983, and two Adivasi movements, namely the call for a Bhil Pradesh territory, and Pathalgadi in Jharkhand.

Although each of these incidents has its own history, they are seldom seen collectively as examples of a particular underlying occurrence, that is, memory mobilised as defence against erasure.

It is important to note that the events in question transcend a period of six decades, from the Nellie massacre in 1983 and the beginnings of the Chipko movement in the beginning of the 1970s to the present internet blackouts in Kashmir and the continuing Bhil Pradesh statehood drive. This historical range is a purposeful aspect of the argument rather than an error in the case selection procedure.

The concept of memory as resistance could potentially be written off as a historical oddity or a trend if it only emerged in one decade or under one political system. Rather, this paper argues that the phenomenon reappears in the face of caste violence, ethnic persecution, and environmental eviction in printed material, symbolic protest, and digital media. This is due to deletion that constitutes a recurrent aspect of governance rather than a singular occurrence.

Rather than being a sequential or geographical review, the work is organised into six themes. Part I uses the memoirs of Dalit women to study testimonial and literary recall. The topic of visual and graphic memory in Indian graphic novels is covered in Section II. When official archives deny access, Section III examines physical and performance-based memory, such as the tree-embrace and laying on funeral pyres, as modes of resistance that imprint themselves onto the human body.

In Section IV, we discuss digital and networked memory, where public-domain footage and hashtags challenge state interpretations in immediate form. In Section V, two large violent incidents the Nellie massacre in 1983 and the anti-Sikh carnage in 1984 are used to discuss the politics of disputed national memory. The question is raised as to why one has, if inadequately, penetrated general consciousness while the other has not. The case analysis involving oral, written information, and indigenous memory among Adivasi people in Jharkhand and the Bhil heartland are concluded in Section VI. In Section VII, a cross-case discussion directly revisits the two research topics prior to a conclusion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## MEMORY AS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

This paper begins with Maurice Halbwachs's fundamental concept that memory is a social sphere, not a private one, which people recall as members of groups, building on collectively created and long-lasting structures of memory, linguistics, custom shared points of reference.

Memory, according to this viewpoint, is consistently mediated by the present moment. It is, in Saint Augustine's terminology given by Rosoux (2004), "the present of the past", a reworking influenced as much by the demands and worries of the point of remembering as by the incident remembered. This is not a problem to be fixed, but rather a fundamental characteristic of all memory tasks, whether official or informal.

Building on Halbwachs' work, Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory, which is widely treated in Tirosh's (2016) examination of the "right to be forgotten," is helpful in organising the examples that follow. Communicative memory is unstructured, ordinary, and generationally limited: it exists in dialogue, family story-telling, and oral exchange, and it fades when the generation that carries it passes away. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is institutionalised, formalised, and communicated by what Assmann refers to as "institutional communications", writings, practices, and memorials allowing a memory to survive the lifetime of any individual bearer (Tirosh, 2016). The majority of what this paper looks at falls within these two classifications: Personal memoirs and graphic novels trying to transform interpersonal, often oral and physical, memory into long-term cultural memory, particularly since the people they represent have been forbidden access to the system's own cultural memory-making tools museum exhibits, scholarly texts, and official remembrance.

## THE ARCHIVE AND THE REPERTOIRE

This paper's primary tool for analysis is Diana Taylor's differentiation between the 'archive' and the 'repertoire'. Taylor distinguishes between the repertoire, a variety of supposedly transitory embodied activities that also retain and convey social information, and the archive, which is the common depository of formal memory in the form of records, documents, physical structures, and bones. Taylor's conceptual framework challenges what Wylam refers to as the overwhelming power of text and language in defining what constitutes knowledge in the first place by giving embodied norms serious thought as a credible carrier of social memory. This approach is especially powerful for societies whose pasts were never documented in the textual records in the first instance.

This concern is directly related to Rosa's (2024) recent use of Taylor's technique to social activism conservation. Rosa contends that the record of movements of protest is, essentially, a history of embodied activism of individuals locking their arms, demonstrating, and taking over physical spaces but she points out that this tangible dimension is seldom preserved in conventional archival collections, which prioritise allegedly long-lasting materials such as posters, banners, images, and documents over the fleeting yet emotion-driven experience of protest itself. Rosa posits that things that transit among bodies, a scarf knotted and loosened, a hand-painted poster become exclusive bearers of impact that can partly overcome the disconnect between archive and repertoire. This study applies Rosa's understanding to the Indian context, wherein scarves become stone foundations, rallies become sit-ins, and tying a head scarf becomes embracing a tree all physical practices that resist absorption into the textual archive while demanding to be preserved.

## THE RIGHT TO MEMORY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Whilst Taylor and Rosa concentrate on the how of memory dissemination, Tirosh (2016) and Huyssen (2011) explore the reasons as to why it is relevant politically. Tirosh's

discussion of Europe's right to be overlooked prompts him to suggest an opposing and potentially more critical idea: a "right to memory" which would safeguard both personal and collective abilities to form and regulate one's own account of events, versus having that narrative forgotten, twisted, or replaced by more dominant players. Tirosh points out that prevailing rights norms, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, allude to a similar right like the indigenous peoples' right to preserve, safeguard, and nurture past, present, and future incarnations of their cultures, but do not yet constitute an effective, enforceable, implemented guarantee of protection (Tirosh, 2016). This disparity between intention and enforcement reoccurs across the situations investigated in this research, from Adivasi or Tribal land rights campaigns to Kashmiri counter-memory efforts.

Huyssen builds on this link between memory and rights, suggesting that although memory and human rights discussions have developed along similar historical paths since the mid-twentieth century, they remain unusually disconnected. This separation is due to the distinct limit between the humanities and social sciences. Huyssen argues that when memory is studied without considering rights, it can become a self-serving and empty practice. On the other hand, when human rights are discussed without memory, it risks becoming overly legalistic and politically misused. In the cases examined in this paper many of which involve communities that have had limited or no access to formal legal justice, memory plays a crucial role that legal action has not yet been able to fulfil. It helps establish, in the public and historical documentation, that a wrongdoing has taken place, even when no court has officially acknowledged it.

## THE WORK OF MEMORY IN UNRESOLVED CONFLICT

Rosoux's (2004) idea of the "work of memory" (‘travail de mémoire’, inspired by Ricoeur) adds a closing, warning element to this framework. In her writing about memory in multinational conflict negotiations, Rosoux differentiates between conflict handling, where dealing with the past is often unhelpful and the main goal is to move head. In resolution, where multiple interpretations must finally be addressed and in transformation, where a real and lasting change in the correlation between the involved parties can take place. Importantly, Rosoux (2004) maintains that this work of memory cannot be forced from the outside or done too early. It needs the right political timing, the willingness of the parties involved, trustworthy individuals to support it, and, most importantly, continuous public backing. Without these, even the most genuine efforts by officials to shape memory remain unproductive and futile. Several examples discussed in this paper particularly Nellie's case show what happens when none of these conditions are satisfied, when the state actively blocks the work of memory instead of supporting it, memory becomes not a way to reach resolution, but a place where unresolved conflict continues to exist.

When combined, these five theoretical conception, Halbwachs's concept of social memory, Assmann's distinction between communication and culture, Taylor's focus on archives and repertoire, Tirosh's and Huyssen's discussion of memory rights, and Rosoux's notion of the work of memory provide this paper with a set of terms to understand testimonial literature, graphic storytelling, corporeal acts of protest, digital record-keeping, challenged national memories, and indigenous ways of remembering. These are all examples of a single idea, that is, communities transforming memory into a lasting and shareable form because no other organization or system is doing it for them.

### I) Testimonial and Literary Memory: Dalit Women's Atrocity Narrative

If, as Taylor (2003) contends, archival collections have historically been disproportionately influenced by the textual outputs of literate and dominant groups, then the rise of a significant corpus of published testimonial literature authored by Dalit, formerly enslaved-caste, and other marginalized women in postcolonial India constitutes a deliberate challenge to this imbalance. Nayar’s (2008) examination of four such texts Bama’s ‘Karukku’, Nalini Jameela’s ‘Autobiography of a Sex Worker’,

Baby Halder’s ‘A Life Less Ordinary’, and the domestic violence testimonies compiled in Rinki Bhattacharya’s ‘Behind Closed Doors’ provides a conceptual framework for discerning the specific nature of the memory work these writings undertake, highlighting that categorizing them simply as ‘autobiography’ diminishes their broader significance and function.

These pieces fall under Nayar's (2008) concept of the atrocity account, which includes firsthand or collected testimonials that deal with personal as well as collective trauma. Such accounts first testify against repressive social institutions before developing into narratives that support action and autonomy. Crucially, Nayar highlights that they are survivor accounts, rather than victim narratives, which has a big impact on how memory functions in them. According to Nayar's perspective, a survivor story turns pain into a moral principle of recognition. In contrast, a victim’s narrative ends with a focus on suffering. Reconfiguring what constitutes legitimate understanding and valid grievance is a demand made on readers and, consequently, on the public realm.

- **THE BODY AS THE SITE OF MEMORY**

Nayar (2008) claims that the use of traumatic truth in these narratives distinguishes them from more conventional narrative writing styles. Instead of depicting severe suffering as a solitary, spectacular occurrence, this method places it into the framework of daily life. For example, Bama's 'Karukku' opens with an actual metaphor that closely connects the narrative and physical aspects. As a metaphor for the book itself, she shows the 'karukku', a jagged palmyra leaf that "scratch(es) and tear(s)" the skin

of kids assigned to gather firewood. The experiences described as tearing one like karukku and letting bleed (Bama, as stated in Nayar, 2008). Her awareness of caste-based discrimination is initially embodied prior to its conceptualization as a political or historical reality; she recounts instances where upper-caste women would pour drinking water for Dalits from a height of approximately four feet to prevent physical contact, whereas her own grandmother accepted water with cupped hands.

The body is shown in Nalini Jameela's memoir as the center of hard work, unwanted attention, and a possible source of anguish starting in childhood in which she works in a clay pit in her early years and is later molested by an instructor. In a similar vein, Baby Halder, who married at the tender age of twelve, experiences severe trauma and sexual exploitation from the beginning of her marriage. In reference to Frederick Douglass's story, Nayar explains what he refers to as the "body of suffering" as the speaker's "embodied subjectivity" (Nayar, 2008). A Dalit woman, a sex worker, or a domestic worker's physical suffering is the main and most direct way for her to understand her marginalised position in a caste and gender-based social system. In this way, such memoirs carry out exactly the function Taylor attributes to the repertoire in print. They assert that lived experience is a type of insight in and of itself, one that has no place in the historical record of official Indian history, which is primarily concerned with Independence, Partition, and elite nationalistic biography.

- **FROM INDIVIDUAL TESTIMONY TO COLLECTIVE WITNESS**

Nayar (2008) delineates an additional dimension that distinguishes these texts from conventional memoirs: the presence of transgenerational trauma. The experiences of suffering documented extend beyond the confines of the narrator's individual body or lifespan. For instance, Halder recounts the ostracism faced by her sister-in-law within the family; Jameela's apprehensions regarding the safety of her young daughter Zeenat from sexual abuse significantly influence her subsequent narrative; similarly, Bama's earliest recollection of caste-based violence involves observing the maltreatment of her grandmother. In the framework of conflict transformation, this cross -generational trait serves the same purpose as official memory function, according to Rosoux (2004). It serves as an example of how a wound should be viewed as a structural situation that has persisted over time rather than as a singular historical event. As a result, Nayar argues that the process of recovering must be acknowledged as confronting a larger structural social fault rather than being viewed only as an individual psychological problem.

This section shifts from self-biography to what Nayar refers to as witnessing, emphasising an etymological relationship between witness and testimony. Bama explicitly states in an interview published by Nayar that 'Karukku' is the portrayal of a collective trauma of her community, rather than just her personal story. In a similar vein, Jameela's narrative functions less as an autobiography and more as a shared biography that represents an entire occupational and caste population in its later chapters, which devote roughly equal emphasis to her personal experiences and the life stories of other sex workers in her community. Nayar describes the particular narrator as a symbol who represents a whole community, caste, and status.

- **STAGING, PERFORMANCE, AND THE QUESTION OF INTERMEDIARIES**

Nayar emphasises the importance of the literary components that go along with these stories, including editorial prefaces, translator's comments, and forewords, which he refers to as staged. In the editorial introduction to Karukku, for example, Mini Krishnan describes the work as the end of a silence whose existence had persisted for multiple generations than one can count, while describing it as a manifesto, critical review, and autobiography (Krishnan, as stated by Nayar). For viewers who might be sceptical of testimonials from marginalised identities like Dalit women, sex workers, or domestic workers, this type of staging is essential because it helps readers understand a text that defies traditional genre definitions and gives the story credibility.

The staging process also raises a difficult issue that Nayar freely discusses. The great majority of these stories are published in print via the intermediary of writers, editors, interpreters, and publishers, who are rarely members of the communities whose painful experiences they portray. Drawing from Jacques Derrida's statement that the archive is inextricably related to the power of the archon who rules and defines it, Nayar expressly questions the role of the frequently upper-caste, upper-class middleman in aiding the subaltern's voice. Drawing from theorists like John Beverley and Geoffrey Hartman, it can be said that this mediation process is neither intrinsically innocuous nor unlawful, but rather requires what Hartman refers to as a testimonial alliance, an exemplary moral and ethical relationship between the narrator and the intermediary, rather than a purely exploitive relationship. Across the cases examined later in this study, this inherent conflict between the vital role of print transmission in allowing a testimony to become part of public memory and the concurrent risk that such transmission may reinforce the very established structures the testimony seeks to challenge occurs in a variety of ways. These include, for example, the graphic novel's portrayal of Adivasi relocation in Section II and the Nellie massacre's marginalisation in Section V by the largely upper-caste Indian media.

- **A NEW PUBLIC SPHERE**

The overarching political role of these narratives lies in the formation of a counter- public, that is, a domain for the dissemination of stories and emotions that are systematically marginalized from the rational and logical discourse that Habermas identifies as central to the traditional public sphere. Women's atrocity narratives can

only gain public recognition by first creating an alternative public sphere, a counterpublic formed through the dissemination of testimony itself, domestic experience, and bodily distress are precisely the domains that the conventional public sphere deems illegitimate or private. By raising important queries regarding her own group, Bama clarifies the political significance of this counter-public: "Are Dalits not human beings? Do they lack common sense? What are we missing?"

This rhetorical device extends the claim from the individual to the collective and eventually to the transnational level in a single discursive act by placing a clearly Indian caste-based complaint within the context of a larger international human rights movement.

Dalit women's testimonial literature embodies a dual form of resistance. By transposing these experiences into textual form, the very medium favoured by the archive and it contesting the archive's historical neglect of embodied, non-elite, feminised experiences. At the same time, its deployment of traumatic realism and corporeal expression asserts that the repertoire of lived, embodied suffering constitutes the essential basis of the literature's legitimacy, given that its authors have never possessed the guarantee of preservation for either form. Consequently, this memory resists granting exclusive primacy to either the archive or the repertoire.

## II) VISUAL AND GRAPHIC MEMORY: THE INDIAN GRAPHIC NOVEL AS COUNTER-ARCHIVE

While testimonial literary work turns embodied pain into a written story, the Indian English graphic novel does so through graphical representation. Based on what (Rathod, 2024) describe as the medium's capacity to challenge official histories, elevate marginalised voices, and promote new forms of cultural recall and understanding. This change opens up a wide range of opportunities for memory work. His analysis of two foundational works, Sarnath Banerjee's Corridor (2004), and Orijit Sen's The River of Stories (1994), offers relevant primary instances and a theoretical framework that directly influence the current study.

- **VISUAL GRAMMAR AND THE POLITICS OF THE GUTTER**

Pictures are never just symbolic, instead, they carry deeper connotative and ideological meanings. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's concept of a "visual grammar," which refers to the deliberate use of gaze, composition, hues, and frame to create a viewer's understanding of the scene. Particularly relevant is the use of Scott McCloud's concept of the "gutter": the intervening empty space between comic panels in which meaning is built through the reader's inferential interaction rather than explicit portrayal. The claim is made that exclusion and fragmentation go beyond conventional storytelling devices to become conscious actions of resistance. This perspective is consistent with Taylor's repertory and Nayar's identification of generations-long silences in Dalit testimony. In both cases, the omissions, that is, what goes stated or undrawn have the same substantive relevance as the explicit information. Furthermore, (Rathod, 2024) uses Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory to argue that graphic novels function as "sites of memory" (lieux de mémoire), especially when they reinterpret myths or reconstruct historical events. These works question mainstream historical narratives while also amplifying marginalised voices.

- **THE NARMADA VALLEY AS COUNTER-NATIONALIST CARTOGRAPHY**

Orijit Sen's 'The River of Stories', widely regarded as the first Indian graphic novel, centers on the Narmada Dam project and its effects on the tribal communities living in the Narmada valley. Rathod views Sen's work, which includes aspects of actual antidam activity, indigenous folklore, and ecological data, as a critique of progressive nationalism and the deliberate erasing of indigenous cultural identities. This critique is expressed through a visual collage that incorporates tribal art elements, documentary realism, and mythological allusions, resulting in a counterpoint narrative to official state propagation. Within the graphic novel's visual framework, the river serves as a symbol for cultural continuity, communal memory, and resistance, crossing historical and geographical barriers to highlight the human and environmental price of so-called progress. This approach exemplifies memory-as-cartography: Sen's narrative which depicts the Narmada valley not as the vacant terrain depicted in dominant development discourses, but as a landscape rich with lived histories, kinship networks, and mythologies. Such indigenous cosmological knowledge, as will be further elaborated in Sections III and VI of this study, is reasserted through embodied forms of protest and material practices.

- **URBAN FRAGMENTATION AS CULTURAL MEMORY**

Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel Corridor changes its focus away from mythology and nature and toward the shattered realities of urban India following economic liberalisation. Rathod views Banerjee's harsh, realistic pictures, combined with biting humour, as representing a nation estranged from its historical roots and growing discontented with its current state. His work's frequent visual motifs such as old books, worn posters, and the congested spaces of second-hand book markets are powerful emblems of cultural decay and isolation in the face of rapid and unequal modernisation. While scholars like as Sen and Patil work to reclaim marginalised histories, Banerjee captures a reality that is becoming increasingly impossible to recollect with precision. This emphasises the idea that memory as a kind of resistance is not only retrospective in nature, but also an immediate, present-tense endeavour aimed at avoiding the erasure of contemporary experiences before they, too, are lost to history.

## III) EMBODIED AND PERFORMATIVE MEMORY: THE BODY AS ARCHIVE

A third branch of Indian memory-resistance rejects translation completely, maintaining that the body itself must continue to be the site and tool of protest, in contrast to testimonial writing and graphic novels, which transform embodied experience into enduring literary or visual representations. The Shaheen Bagh sit-in in Delhi, the Chipko movement in the Himalayan foothills of Uttarakhand and the Ken- Betwa protests in Madya-Pradesh, India are examined in this section as examples of what Taylor refers to as the repertoire functioning at its most literal form, that is, memory recorded not on paper but via and through the body, in real time, serving as the fundamental and at times the only accessible means of resistance.

- **SHAHEEN BAGH: OCCUPYING PUBLIC MEMORY**

In Delhi, particularly in the Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood, a jointly organised and embodied protest arose between December 2019 and March 2020. The demonstrators challenged the CAA on the basis that it excluded Muslims from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan from qualifying under the Act while granting citizenship to immigrants who arrived after 1971.

Muslim women, many of whom had little political experience, spearheaded this movement by starting an open-ended sit-in against the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The corporeal and multigenerational aspects of this protest continue to be highlighted in scholarly assessments. According to one report, the sit-in was India's longest-running multigenerational protest since independence. It sparked similar protests in Delhi and other areas. In order to explain how the demonstrators used bodily occupation of public space as a way of expressing resistance towards the growing fragility of their identity as Indian citizens. Academic explanations often rely on performance theory, citing Judith Butler's principle of embodied and pluralistic performativity along with Shirin Rai's concept of repertoires of performance.

The way that the protester's bodies served as locations of counter-representation distinguishes Shaheen Bagh from a traditional demonstration, as this study examines. Instead of being presented in worldwide media as helpless or oppressed, Muslim women who donned the hijab became the outspoken and visible organisers of a widespread campaign of civil disobedience. This reversal is consistent with academic research that views this kind of distortion as a resistance to the way women from the Global South are typically portrayed in media everywhere. "Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge" (We refuse to show our papers), the demonstration's main cry, represented a physical and metaphorical denial that directly challenged the documentary-based logic that underlies archival operations. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) required citizenship to be verified via official documents. Shaheen Bagh's answer rejected the state's demand that identity be discernible only through its bureaucratic records by asserting belonging through a persistent, embodied physical presence in public domain. Mehrotra and Singh quickly converted this embodied occupancy into visual and photographic proof, as covered in Section II, demonstrating the complex interaction between performative productions and archival recordings, even when their underlying political motivations differ.

- **CHIPKO AND KEN -BETWA: ECOLOGY AS EMBODIED MEMORY**

The Chipko movement, called after the Hindi verb that means to embrace or to cling, is the oldest movements in India which stands out for its overtly gendered and environmental aspects. When forest workers approached to cut down ash trees in the Reni forest in modern-day Uttarakhand in March 1974, most of the village's males were not present at the scene. Based primarily on their cultural and spiritual ties to the forest, which was referred to as "their mother's home" in a corresponding account, the village women, under the leadership of Gaura Devi, responded by forming a human chain surrounding the trees. This strategy successfully recreated the Gandhian concept of satyagraha by direct physical involvement rather than hunger strikes or sit-ins, and the contractors later retreated. In the years that followed, the campaign expanded across the Himalayan foothills, influencing later global ecological movements like Wangari Maathai's Green Belt campaign in Kenya and helping to outlaw commercial logging in the area.

Similarly, in April 2026, women and men from tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh's Chhatarpur district lay on symbolic death pyres as part of the 'Chita Andolan' (pyre protest), near the project zone. The protestors are from the tribal communities of one of the remotest and under-developed parts of India The villagers also participated in other types of protests, such as the "Akash Andolan," which included fasting; the "Mitti Andolan," in which villagers applied soil from their villages on their bodies, and the "Jal Andolan," in which they dipped knee-deep or deep to the waist in the Ken river for hours. The demonstrators even stood in the river, wearing symbolic nooses around their necks. A stern message was sent out, stating that their life and dignity in the face of displacement are worse than death. The ₹44,605 crore Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP) redirects water from the Ken River to the Betwa River. This action drew attention to a catastrophe brewing in India's first major river-linking project in the country's central region, where several thousand tribal families are being displaced and given very low as compensation without any written assurance from the government.

This is an ongoing protest. Media platforms especially certain social media platforms have been trying to circulate the images and videos from the protest site amid selective reporting.

Both scenarios accurately depict the epistemic erasure that this paper's second research question addresses. Chipko's participants were not just preserving trees, they were declaring, in the most explicit and embodied way

imaginable, their traditional ecological knowledge regarding which species were important for fuel, fodder, water security and other ecological requirements. Whereas, the Ken protestors fighting by literally pretending to be dead bodies which they believe will be the consequence if their land rights are taken away.

The physical reality of locals, mostly women, standing between an axe and a tree and in the second case, laying on funeral pyres reveals that in both the situations the principal archive was not a document but a body. Taken in tandem, these instances show that bodily protest performs a unique type of memory-work that words or visual representation cannot accomplish It cannot be banned, confiscated, or modified in the same way that a book or archive can, specifically because it exists nowhere else, but in the perpetual, continuously reenacted presence of the body itself. This is Taylor's repertoire in its most concrete and vulnerable sense. Vulnerable because a body can be detained, forcefully fed, or scattered, but also resistant since a body's testimony does not require a publisher, institution, or permission to exist.

**IV) DIGITAL AND NETWORKED MEMORY: ARCHIVING UNDER SURVEILLANCE**

The fourth theme of this paper addresses memory in the context of its digital inception; not memory that is recounted through testimony, delineated in visual art, or inscribed on the body over time, but rather memory that is being actively created, disputed, and, at times, deliberately erased in real time on platforms that are not built for permanence or institutional authority. Three examples clearly demonstrate this phenomenon: the digital aftermath of Rohith Vemula's death and the emergence of Dalit Camera; the influence of Twitter in forming the collective memory of the 2020– 21 farmers' protest; and the Indian government's suppression of Kashmiri counter-memory through extended internet shutdowns and outright bans on books.

- **ROHITH VEMULA AND THE DIGITAL DALIT COUNTER-PUBLIC**

On January 17, 2016, Rohith Vemula, a Dalit doctorate student at the University of Hyderabad, committed suicide following a protracted period of institutional caste prejudice and expulsion from his hostel. His suicide letter surfaced online within hours and was seen in the following days as a pivotal text that changed a college disciplinary problem into a statewide campaign, "Chalo HCU," which is regarded as one of India's first digitally networked Dalit protests. In the aftermath, Dalit activists started a series of hashtag campaigns such as #DalitLivesMatter, #JaiBhim, #Hathras, and #DalitWomenFight, clearly patterned on and in conjunction with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, utilising social media to establish a Dalit counterpopular sphere. A platform for circulation, debate, and reciprocity among Dalits that traditional, upper-caste-controlled Indian media had rarely enabled.

Dalit Camera, a citizen-journalism project, theorised in scholarship as an example of digital preservation referred to as social protest, is essential to this opposition. It serves as a forum for Dalit communities to preserve and circulate caste violence, discrimination, and events that are not covered by mainstream media. Whereas Nayar's testimonial writings required upper-caste publishers and editors as middlemen to reach print, Dalit Camera acts as an effort to cut through that mediator structure entirely. Dalit Camera, a citizen-led journalism initiative often cited in academic discourse as an instance of digital social protest and cultural preservation, plays a crucial role in this resistance. It provides Dalit communities with a platform to document and share experiences of caste-based violence, discrimination, and other incidents overlooked by mainstream media. Unlike Nayar's testimonial writings, which depended on upper-caste publishers and editors as intermediaries for publication, Dalit Camera seeks to bypass such gatekeepers altogether, enabling direct, unfiltered expression.

- **THE FARMERS' PROTEST AND REAL-TIME COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

The 2020–21 farmer's protest, which opposed three agricultural reform laws, exemplifies another instance of digital memory formation this time on a broader scale and uniting a more diverse coalition. The main concerns driving the farmers' protests were the three agricultural laws implemented by the government; the Farmer's Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act. Farmers contended that these regulations would weaken the traditional farming system, destroy the minimum support price (MSP) framework, and make them susceptible to oppression by large enterprises. Studies examining the movement's use of Twitter reveal that the platform actively shaped the collective memory of the protests in real time. Hashtags, rallying slogans such as "Kisan Ekta Zindabad" ("Long Live Farmers' Unity"), and the continuous sharing of documented content functioned not only as tools for coordination but also as an evolving archival record. Significantly, the protest's leadership made a conscious effort to bring together farmers across caste divisions, uniting Sikh, Dalit, and Jat communities, by fostering what has been termed horizontal study by many scholars. In this model, youth groups, women's collectives, and digital activists disseminated legal and constitutional knowledge through decentralized village networks. As a result, the movement exemplified a form of collective memory that contrasts with the case of Vemula: rather than centering on a single traumatic incident preserved in hindsight, it reflects a dynamic, multi-caste mobilization in which memory itself was continuously shaped, challenged, and reinforced through the very digital platforms used for coordination unfolding in real time, well before any official narrative could solidify.

- **KASHMIR: COUNTER-MEMORY UNDER ERASURE**

The most intense instance of digital memory conflict in

present-day India is unfolding in Kashmir, where the state has pursued erasure through methods far more direct than mere media marginalization. After the revocation of Article 370 in August 2019 which provided the region of Jammu and Kashmir with significant political autonomy, the Indian government enforced an internet blackout in Jammu and Kashmir that lasted around 550 days, reportedly the longest such disruption ever enacted by a democracy. According to research by the Polis Project, this blackout, coupled with the banning of several academic works on Kashmir such as Hafsa Kanjwal's Colonizing Kashmir, Essar Batool and colleagues' 'Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora?' and Ather Zia's 'Resisting Disappearance', forms part of a deliberate strategy termed "Kashmir-core." This initiative, the analysis, goes beyond suppressing Kashmiri counter-narratives; it actively seeks to overwrite them with an officially endorsed version of history, propagated through aligned intellectuals and tightly controlled cultural expression. This analysis emphasizes that counter-memory in Kashmir endures through inherently intimate, bodily, and oral acts such as mothers shouting their forcibly disappeared son's name at a demonstration, a traditional song, or a poem calling for freedom practices that fundamentally require no infrastructure the state can easily dismantle or silence.

Reporting in Undark Magazine and Salon's website, frames the internet shutdowns in explicit terms of memory rights, asserting that Indian mainstream historiography has consistently overlooked Kashmiri lived realities largely because Indian nationalism leaves no room for a distinct Kashmiri identity. These shutdowns intensify the marginalization by actively obstructing Kashmiris from creating digital archives of their experiences as they unfold. This reflects Tirosh's (2016) concept of the right to memory under extreme pressure: a community not only excluded from the dominant historical record but, for prolonged stretches, stripped of the technological means to build a parallel one. Yet, as the "Kashmir-core" analysis emphasizes, this same community persists in documenting its reality through video, social media, and resilient oral and material traditions, which this paper explores in detail in Section VI. In all three cases, digital memory in contemporary India becomes both the most recent and the most fiercely debated frontier where the divide between archive and repertoire plays out. Platforms originally intended for fleeting exchanges are now being repurposed as fragile yet enduring memory systems primarily because the communities involved distrust official archives to preserve their histories, and in Kashmir's case, because the state has made it clear it will actively undermine such efforts unless challenged.

## V) STATE VIOLENCE AND CONTESTED NATIONAL MEMORY:

### TWO POGROMS, TWO FATES

Communities creating memories in the relative absence of state cooperation have been the main focus of the previous sections. This section looks at a more concerning dynamic: two similar incidents of widespread communal violence against religious minorities that happened within eight months of each other in the early 1980s and have been treated very differently in India's national memory. Huyssen's (2011) caution that memory politics can create pernicious hierarchies of suffering even among events of comparable scale and comparable state complicity is strikingly clear when comparing the 1984 anti-Sikh violence in Delhi with the 1983 Nellie massacre in Assam.

### 1984: PARTIAL MEMORY, PARTIAL JUSTICE

After Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards killed her on October 31, 1984, mobs in Delhi and other northern Indian towns slaughtered between 2,733 and more than 3,000 Sikhs in four days. There are verifiable allegations of direct engagement by organisers affiliated with the ruling party and actual police complicity in several documented situations. The first prominent judicial conviction of a perpetrator, Congress leader Sajjan Kumar, did not occur until December 2018, thirty-four years after the acts of violence. Survivors, particularly the widows who were relocated to what ironically became known as the "Widow Colony" of Tilak Vihar in West Delhi, have lived for forty years in what academic research characterises as an atmosphere of official near-impunity. 1984 has only partially become ingrained in Indian culture. Radhika Chopra's photo-essay "Disinterred Memories" and a substantial body of later textual and visual works spanning poetry, fiction, and cinema have kept the events in perpetual, if disputable, public view. Scholars Uma Chakravarti and Nandita Haksar collected survivor testimonies in 'The Delhi Riots' as early as 1987; novelists like Amitav Ghosh and Khushwant Singh wrote directly about what they saw. But this partial recall has also been limited and gendered. Cases of sexual violence during the 1984 bloodbath are still largely unidentified, according to a recent analysis in "Sikh Formations," and their deliberate silencing creates what is understood as a gendered amnesia functioning even inside a publicly remembered horror. This serves as a reminder that memory recovery is rarely complete or evenly distributed even when it does occur.

### NELLIE: MEMORICIDE

Eight months earlier, on February 18, 1983, during the anti-"foreigner" Assam Movement (1979–1985), a mob composed of Tiwa, Koch, and caste-Hindu Assamese villagers slaughtered between 2,000 and over 3,000 Bengali-origin Muslims in 14 villages in the Nellie area of Assam's Nagaon district. About six hours passed during the carnage. The state-commissioned Tiwary Commission completed its findings in May 1984, but it remained hidden for nearly 40 years before the state administration announced plans to submit it before the Assam Legislative Assembly in late 2025. More recent evaluations go further, with some experts clearly claiming that the term "massacre" minimises the incident and that it should instead be regarded as genocide. Researchers such as Makiko Kimura have written about how leaders of the antiforeigner movement propagated rumours of upcoming attacks, which acted as the immediate catalyst for the

killings.

For the intent of this study, what distinguishes Nellie's treatment in Indian public memory from 1984 is the terminology employed by scholars and journalists to describe it is not just neglect, but purposeful, institutional repression. The aftermath persisted in the shape of systematic elimination, coerced silences, intellectual deceptions, and complete denial of justice to the victims, according to a retrospective published on the 40th anniversary. The shocking conclusion was that the government and civil society were all complicit in the planned murders. A survivor featured for Subasri Krishnan's 2015 documentary "What the Fields Remember" expresses the generational impacts of this suppression: "My grandchildren still ask why their grandparents were killed for no reason." The stillness that surrounds our grief simply exacerbates it. " Coverage honouring the fortieth and forty-second anniversaries regularly characterises Nellie as, having been all but.

**READING THE COMPARISON**

The disparity in these two examples directly supports the paper's initial research topic. Both episodes featured mass deaths with likely official cooperation or responsible inactivity, occurred during Congress-led regimes, and have received scant prosecution. But while the other has largely generated silence, commission findings that has been concealed, and a body of activist and journalistic work that is centred on exposing the reality of its own forgetting, the former has made novels, films, compilations of survivor accounts, and, albeit retrospectively, at least token judicial reckoning. Rosoux's (2004) argument that the work of memory requires not just the length of time but also political will, competent supporters, and continuous popular momentum might explain this disparity. The 1984 Sikh community, which was centred in Delhi and had a large global diasporic presence, had access to exactly the socio-economic and political resources which Rosoux says are essential.

**VI) ORAL, MATERIAL, AND INDIGENOUS MEMORY: ADIVASI COUNTER-MNEMONICS**

The Pathalgadi movement in Jharkhand and the Bhil Pradesh statehood agitation, which spans four of the central and western Indian states, are two Adivasi movements that demonstrate how indigenous groups in modern India have stood up to this discrimination by claiming the ongoing credibility of material and oral tradition on their own terms rather than complying with the archive's own textual procedures, as Dalit testimonial authors primarily did. This paper returns to its second research query in its most concentrated form in the last example.

- **PATHALGADI: STONES AS COUNTER-ARCHIVE**

'Pathalgadi' is a long-standing Adivasi tradition that commemorates key events such as births, demises, boundary lines, community memory, with the installation of stone slabs. In response to the state government's efforts to change the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act (1908) and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act (1876) during the colonial period, Munda tribal people in Jharkhand's Khunti and Simdega districts reinterpreted this ancient practice as a concerted political protest. This measure was intended to facilitate the handover of tribal land to private industrial and mining enterprises, as the state government planned to change the procedure in 2017-18. The locals built stone slabs at the gates of their settlements, decorated with constitutional clauses taken from the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, and the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (Davidsdottir, 2021). These laws made it clear that non-locals, including government personnel, needed explicit authorisation to enter the community's Gram Sabha (village assembly). Pathalgadi are essentially a way to define the community's areas and inform outsiders (government authorities) that the law of the land is not applicable there. According to the movement's youth leaders, namely Balram Samad, John Junas Tiru, Shantimoy Hembrom, and Ranjit Soy, all in their twenties, it is a tribal uprising that would eventually encompass all 32,620 villages in Jharkhand. (Ecologise, 2018)

Recent research definitely places Pathalgadi in the memory studies lexicon. Pathalgadi is placed alongside similar movements as part of a persistent history of memory-based resistance. This causes and their representatives as a part of an extended evolution of Adivasi communities in Jharkhand into what has been described as "ecological warriors," using their collective, preserved, and embodied past as a tool to protect ancestral land rights against recurrent waves of state-led repression (Singh, 2024). In terms of the historical legacy of Birsa Munda, the indigenous leader who revolted against British colonial rule in the 1890s before being apprehended and executed while in custody, (Sharma, 2026) contends that the Indian state has engaged in a dual strategy of confiscation and erasure, glorifying Munda through state-funded statuary while simultaneously depoliticising the contemporary Adivasi conflicts that he stood against. In contrast to this misappropriation, a comparable analysis identifies Pathalgadi's stone slabs and the "samadhi sthals" (memorial sites) associated with the movement as counter-mnemonic procedures. This is a direct instance of what this paper's theoretical structure, in line with Taylor and Rosa, describes as the repertoire reclaiming itself against an archive that would rather sanitise a resistance leader's memory than recognise the resistance he embodied. In this view, decolonization is presented as an unfinished labour of mnemonic resistance against statist forms of history rather than as a finished historical event. This formulation could serve as a synopsis of the main points of this paper.

- **BHIL PRADESH: STATEHOOD AS MEMORY CLAIM**

While Pathalgadi emphasizes memory via tangible objects linked to particular villages, the campaign for a Bhil Pradesh homeland, functions at a wider, more overtly political level, although it relies on similar foundational aspects of shared, historically entrenched identity. The call

for a new state, aiming to create between forty-five and forty-nine districts from the adjacent tribal-majority areas across Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, was initially politically articulated by the Bharatiya Tribal Party, established in 2017. During a Bhil Tribal Conference in Banswara in July 2025, organizer Bhanwarlal Parmar expressed the movement's core grievance using clear historical and memory-based language, stating that the needs of Tribal communities have not been met even after 70 years and claiming that Tribals are the native inhabitants of India, a statement that anchors a contemporary political demand in a disputed historical narrative of former independence and ongoing marginalization since independence.

Indeed, the movement's cultural component is more directly linked to memory politics than territorial claims. According to studies and reports on the movement, Bhil activists are increasingly claiming a distinct Adivasi identification that is distinct from Hinduism. Their leaders have made it plain that they are not Hindus and have encouraged the rejection of markers associated with Hindu absorption. Rather than acknowledging Adivasi uniqueness as a distinct and legitimate epistemological heritage on its own, this claim rejects what Sections V suggests is a recurring trend in Adivasi memory politics that is, the integration of indigenous identity, philosophy, and history into a dominant national or religious discourse that presents Adivasi distinctiveness as either primitive folklore or intrinsically Hindu. This dynamic is the central problem in contemporary Adivasi politics, (Sangeeta Dasgupta, 2021). Since colonial authorities, postcolonial developmentalists, and Hindu nationalist cultural discourse have generally dictated the narratives pertaining to Adivasi history and have consistently refused Adivasi tribes the right to narrate their own past, Adivasi political assertion is entwined with a concurrent struggle over representation and memory.

**THE LIMITS OF TEXTUAL TRANSLATION**

When considered jointly, Pathalgadi and Bhil Pradesh exemplify the most striking interpretation of the second research question in this paper. In contrast to Dalit testimonial literature, which transforms physical and spoken trauma into the textual form favoured by the archive, and differing from graphic novels that translate marginalized experiences into a blend of visual and textual formats comprehensible to a literate, predominantly urban audience, Indigenous or Adivasi memory politics in both instances defies complete translation into the archive's specific terms. A stone tablet engraved with a legal reference is neither entirely performance nor solely a record. Nilsen's (2018) extended discussion of Bhil subaltern politics, referenced in recent studies about the area, also warns against interpreting current Adivasi claims as an entirely novel occurrence instead of as another segment in what he describes as "the Rebellious Century" of previous interactions between subaltern communities and the Indian and colonial authorities. Both instances affirm that indigenous communities did not wait for inclusion in the state's archive ; rather, they developed a parallel, explicitly counter-mnemonic infrastructure from customary material and oral tradition, whose legitimacy is independent of state recognition, even while its existence directly and continuously contests the state's unilateral definition of history.

**VII) CROSS-CASE DISCUSSION**

When taken as a whole, the six themes discussed above enable comparative rather than case-by-case understanding regarding both research questions.

With regard to the first research question: how societies use memory procedures to prevent erasure, examples provided in this paper reveal a series of interrelated mechanisms, distinguished principally by the medium that maintains memory's permanence. Testimonial literary works by Dalit women (Section I) and the Indian graphic novel (Section II) both transform lived and oral experiences into formats, print, and imagery that the traditional archive is inherently designed to accept, while also asserting, through their respective traumatic realism and visual works, that archival textual methods alone cannot encapsulate what they seek to safeguard. Embodied protest (Section III) entirely rejects this translation, maintaining memory in a tangible form through the persistent presence of the body: the Chipko, and the Ken-Betwa protest specifically because textual or institutional safeguards were either lacking or unreliable. Digital memory (Section IV) occupies a precarious intermediate stance: technically archival due to its storage and retrieval capabilities, yet functionally akin to the repertoire because of its dependence on ongoing, collective, often improvised documentation efforts that can, and in Kashmir's situation are actively, disabled by state authority. While Sections I to IV investigate communities that are actively shaping memory, Section V's analysis of 1984 and Nellie reveals the opposite: the success of a memory practice in becoming a lasting part of cultural memory is significantly influenced by a community's closeness to political and media authority, regardless of the inherent quality or intensity of the memory practice itself. Regarding the second research question: what occurs when erasure and silence is epistemic instead of just political, the most straightforward response appears in Section VI. Dalit testimonial writers operate, albeit with discomfort, within the established textual norms of the archive, while digital activists navigate an infrastructure that is at least ostensibly accessible to all citizens; in contrast, Adivasi communities in Jharkhand and the Bhil region face authority that has traditionally denied acknowledgment of their customary and oral forms of historical communication as valid history. Their reply: The stone slabs of Pathalgadi, along with Bhil Pradesh's demand for pre-colonial autonomy, do not wish to be included in the current archive under its conditions. Rather, they emphasize, through clearly counter-mnemonic material practices, that the archive's narrow definition of valid historical knowledge is the very issue that needs to be

challenged. This represents the most acute expression of memory-as-resistance discussed in this paper, as it challenges not only which events are recalled but also who is acknowledged as possessing the right to remember.

Another pattern worth noting across all six primary themes is the repetition of what Rosa (2024), refers to as "privileged conductors of affect": the karukku leaf, the green and white demonstration scarves of Rosa's Argentine instances and their physical equivalent in the banners and headscarves of Shaheen Bagh, the laying at funeral pyres, and the inscription stone at Munda village boundaries. In vastly diverse political environments, memory-as-resistance in modern India consistently coalesces around a modest, tangible, frequently ad-libbed object or action that, through recurrence and dissemination, attains the capacity to convey collective significance that no individual document could encapsulate on its own.

## CONCLUSION

This paper posits that memory, through a consciously broad and intentionally noncanonical selection of modern Indian examples, persistently acts as a means of opposition against erasure; political silence, in the intentional minimization of the Nellie massacre and the Kashmiri archive; epistemic erasure, in the state's longstanding denial of indigenous oral and physical traditions as valid historical comprehension; and structural erasure, in the omission of Dalit, female, and working class perspectives from the written and institutional records of official Indian history. What connects testimonial accounts, graphic novels, sit-ins, hashtag, and stone slab is not a common channel or a specific decade but a common defiance: each symbolises a community's choice to ensure its history is maintained, in any accessible form, regardless of whether the state, mainstream media, or traditional literary archive opts to preserve it initially.

In the field of memory studies, the cases analysed indicate that theoretical frameworks created in connection with well-documented twentieth-century atrocities, such as the Holocaust, Apartheid, and Latin American dictatorships, can be effectively utilised in contexts like India, which have received less attention in memory studies. However, these frameworks need to be adjusted for relevant application in such settings. Taylor's archive-repertoire distinction and Tirosh's right to memory are both essential for analysing these cases; however, the variety of media explored here; from a silenced government commission report to a stone slab referencing the Forest Rights Act, indicates that "memory as resistance" is more accurately viewed not as one practice, but as a collection of practices utilised differently based on which institutional doors are inaccessible to a specific community at a particular time. Additional studies could broaden this framework comparatively across other South Asian environments or investigate in greater detail how the digital and physical aspects recognised here, such as Dalit Camera's citizen archive and the inscribed stones of Pathalgadi, may eventually be integrated into or persist in opposing the ever- changing official archives.

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