

The Widow Colony (Sach Productions, 2005)
Review
By Jaskaran Kaur, Ensaaf

Harpreet Kaur's documentary, *The Widow Colony*, provides a vivid account of the devastating impact of the November 1984 pogroms of thousands of Sikhs in India. She skillfully takes us through the streets of the massacres, delves into survivor, eyewitness, and expert accounts, and demonstrates the trauma impacting the lives of the survivors today. Her documentary is another piece that establishes that the November 1984 pogroms are not an issue of the past, to be relegated to history books and annual commemorations. Instead, the government continues to violate the survivors' rights to truth, justice, and reparations. The government's failure to redress these violations has prevented the survivors from rebuilding their lives. They continue to be haunted and shaped by the inhumane violence of November 1984.

Kaur's documentary demonstrates the different facets of the state machinery used to organize the violence and shield and reward the perpetrators. Through eyewitness accounts, Kaur reconstructs the massacres, from the distribution of voter lists to identify Sikh residences and businesses, to the role of police and senior politicians in leading death squads and killing Sikhs, to the failure of the government to prosecute the perpetrators. Survivors and experts also raise unanswered questions, such as the identity of the silent organizers of the carnage.

The survivors continue to demand justice, despite the government's promotion of the forgive and forget policy. Kaur shows us the plight of the widows' children, many facing a future of unemployment and stigma for being raised by single mothers. Compared to their stark accounts of violence and struggle over the past 22 years, the government's efforts at thoughtless compensation affront them. They demand prosecutions, the truth, and proper rehabilitation, not empty apologies and promises.

Kaur's documentary provides a window into stifled parts of India's history. While the world courts and imports India's culture and products, it must also confront India's legacy of systematic human rights abuse and impunity. Until the survivors' rights are vindicated and the culture of impunity is uprooted, India's rhetorical commitment to human rights, pluralism, and democracy will continue to contrast its violent reality.