

A Powerful Armor & A Piercing Lance

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For once, I was utterly confused!

Many historians say that in 1915, the Ottoman Empire was responsible for the death of a million Armenians in an organized campaign of genocide. But there are important voices, admittedly just a few, that deny any such happenings or mass killings ever occurred. Most recently, last month at a Barnes & Noble bookstore when Margaret Ajemian Ahnert, read from her book “The Knock on the Door” about her mother’s survival during those days, some people in the audience heckled her, holding up signs that proclaimed, “It Never Happened.” This history is less than a hundred years old. Could records be so difficult to interpret? Could memory become degraded so quickly?

Then I am reminded of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany’s efforts to eliminate the Jews. I can understand disagreements over the fine points and details of exactly what was done to whom and under what circumstances, but the basic facts and the larger framework is established beyond doubt. Yet, only a few months ago, the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, opened a conference in Teheran, whose sole focus was denial of the Holocaust as a historical event. And the history of the Holocaust is young – barely 60 years old.

The glaring distortions that emerge from such attempts to rewrite history become obvious from ironic twists — like the fact that mentioning the Armenian genocide in Turkey is a crime, but denying it would be illegal in France. Denying the Holocaust would be unacceptable in Israel; in Iran insisting that it occurred would be equally unacceptable.

Then my mind goes to a most recent gathering that I attended just days ago. It was a largely Indian group with only a sprinkling of Sikhs. The focus was to take note of the events of June 1984, and rejoice in the fact that India and Indians were moving forward. Yes, we are moving ahead, as we should.

(For the uninitiated, I summarize the events here. Between June 2 and 5, 1984, a massive force of the Indian army invaded the Golden Temple at Amritsar, wreaking untold havoc on the premises and killing untold numbers of pilgrims. Five months later, in precisely orchestrated attacks on Sikh homes and businesses, thousands were killed in several cities across India. Much of Punjab was sealed off from the outside world, and for the next decade, thousands of young Sikh men disappeared. Ten judicial commissions and investigative reports later, there is no accounting of the dead and justice still awaits.)

One way to move forward would be to remember what happened, so as not to repeat history. By nurturing and preserving the history in our cultural memory, we would honor it so that our goal would become, “Never Again.”

The alternative would be to bury the painful and the unpleasant by denying it ever happened, and that is precisely what many speakers, even some Sikhs, attempted to do at this conference that I attended.

Speaker after speaker insisted that the damage to the Golden Temple was minimal, there were only scattered, random killings of Sikhs, and no fake encounters or extra-judicial killings ever occurred. To be fair, a few speakers did present evidence against such a rosy view, but the prevailing, most powerful, voices dismissed such claims as sporadic events of no consequence. Claims of organized mayhem against the Sikhs were clearly unfounded, they argued, because such brutality would never occur in a civilized society like India. So these alleged atrocities never happened.

I heard this Kafkaesque reasoning and I thought my head would spin. It is like the claim

that President Bush or his aides might make that our army never brutalizes prisoners in Iraq.

I know that "History has cunning passages and contrived corridors... And deceives us by vanities," as T.S. Eliot reminds us, but the events of 1984 happened only 23 years ago. That is not even one generation ago. The evidence is still available; it is degraded some, but not entirely. Oral history can still be preserved. And already we have deniers of this history. If we fail to preserve history, 50 or a hundred years from now deniers of history will be seen as reputable scholars.

Then I remind myself that mind is the most powerful organ of the human body. It is both a shield and a weapon. Perhaps the deniers of history are trying to protect themselves from it. Denial then can become both a powerful armor, as well as a sharp lance, when offense serves as the best defense.

Affirming painful history can be cataclysmic and shattering to one's sense of self. It is more comforting sometimes to tell a lie than to confess a painful truth. Self-preservation and self-protection are universal human needs. The harsher the truth, the greater the need to lie.

Most religions revere the Truth. Hinduism tells us that truth is ever triumphant. "Ye shall know the Truth and Truth shall make you free," promises the Bible. Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, too, reminds us that "Truth is the panacea of all ills," and that "Truth is high but higher still is truthful living." Truth is God and is eternal, according to Sikhi. This sentiment lives through the daily greeting of the Sikhs, "Sat Sri Akaal."

The other side of the coin shows the quiet desperation of our lives. T.S. Eliot reminds us that, "Between the conception and the reality, falls the shadow. It is eloquently captured by the celebrated Modern Greek poet C.P. Cavafy:

"With words, countenance and manners,
I shall make an excellent suit of armor
None will know where my wounds are, my vulnerable parts,
Under all the lies that will cover me."

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