

Forensic Anthropology in Investigations of Crimes Against Humanity: Global Dimensions and the Mid-19th-Century Ajnala (India) Massacre

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ABSTRACT: Heinous crimes and brutalities have decimated humanity throughout human history. In modern times, forensic anthropologists have helped to reconstruct the nature and mechanism, intent and purpose, manner, and circumstances of various inhumane instances of genocides and violent crimes. Anthropologists endeavor to bring closure and comfort to bereaved families by disseminating information about the location, exhumation, and identification of the remains of victims. The methodological armamentarium and scope of forensic anthropology have developed much beyond the realms of the traditional biological profiling casework to the scenarios of humanitarian concerns. Humanitarian forensics focuses on the excavation and identification of the remains of victims and facilitates the dignified burial of the deceased. This review article highlights and exemplifies the significant contributions of forensic anthropological expertise in revealing various crimes against humanity and human rights violations committed in the recent past as well as in some contemporary cases reported from around the globe. It includes cases such as Guatemalan, Cambodian, and Bosnian genocides, as well as other mass killings that illustrate the efficacy of anthropological evidence in reconstructing the nature, mechanism, and circumstances related to these incidences. Special emphasis is given to the Ajnala (India) skeletal remains excavated from an abandoned well — remains reportedly belonging to 282 Indian soldiers killed in 1857 whose corpses were dumped into the said disused well by sanitary workers — indicating the importance of forensic anthropology in authenticating the occurrence of events as mentioned in historical records. Analysis of different case histories reveals that forensic anthropologists have played a significant role in recovery and identification of the victims of the many war crimes, genocides, racial conflicts, and violent cruelties committed against mankind in modern history.

KEYWORDS: Ajnala (India) massacre, crimes against humanity, forensic anthropology, human rights violations, skeletal and dental remains.

INTRODUCTION

Human rights are the basic rights to which every individual is entitled universally, irrespective of gender, class, nationality, social, or economic status [208]. These rights encompass right to life, personal freedom, security, and physical integrity, among other things. Various national and international constitutions acknowledge human rights as an integral part of an individual's existence, and emphasize a governmental duty to defend them. In spite of this candid recognition and consideration, human rights are often blatantly denied, neglected, or overlooked globally on one pretext or the other. Historical records are witness to such gross violations over many centuries, disregarding the dignity and/or life of many humans. It was only after the Second World War that the necessity to safeguard and reaffirm the protection of human rights was triggered and these efforts ultimately led to the inception of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (UN) in 1948 [130]. The UN declaration aimed to promote universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, thereby ensuring humane treatment to all people on the earth. However, the real global scenario is far distant from the one envisioned in the UN declaration. Human rights violations are still

prevalent and practiced blatantly, varying only in the manner, extent, and degree of transgression.

International Intervention

Recognizing the need for some *international interventions* to provide justice to the victims and to prosecute the accused for deterrence, various international human rights watch-groups/organizations came into existence to carry out objective investigation of such cases on an urgent basis. The first permanent international court, the International Criminal Court (ICC), was established in 2002 under the "Rome Statute", which investigates crimes against humanity, war crimes, crimes of aggression, and genocide in order to prosecute the accused for these brutal crimes [85, 154]. Some organizations like the International Human Rights Council (IHRC), Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), and Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Central Identification Laboratory (DPAA CIL), etc., [5, 37, 82, 84, 87] work to coordinate various experts and resources to identify the deceased and prosecute the accused related to armed conflicts. Other organizations are



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Dr. Sehrawat is a principal research scientist in a core research project (animal sciences) funded by the Science and Engineering Research Board, Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. The project entitled “Forensic Anthropological Provenancing of Human Skeletal Remains Excavated from a Well at Ajnala (Amritsar): Bones, Teeth and Personal Artefacts as Identity Signatures” aims to identify thousands of unknown human bones, teeth, and numerous items of personal identity recovered from an abandoned well at Ajnala (Amritsar, India). These remains are being examined in their forensic anthropological, radiographic, chemical, and molecular contexts by the scientific team under his guidance and supervision.

Dr. Sehrawat also served for eight years as an anthropologist in the Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, Government Medical College and Hospital, Chandigarh, where he provided significant forensic anthropological inputs to forensic pathologists in identification of unknown human cadavers/skeletons brought by the police for biological profiling purposes. His major areas of research specializations include forensic anthropology, odontology and osteology, forensic biology, investigation of crimes against humanity, ancient DNA, and stable isotope analysis studies. Dr. Sehrawat has more than 15 years’ professional experience in biological profiling of unknown human remains. He was a principal consultant in four Social Impact Assessment studies — funded by the Chandigarh Administration and Greater Ludhiana Area Development Authority, Ludhiana (Punjab, India) — executed and completed under his guidance.

Dr. Sehrawat has published a total of 59 research papers (48 international, 11 national) and has presented his research papers in more than 45 national and international conferences/seminars/scientific meetings in England, Portugal, Spain, the United States, and Canada. He has delivered 28 keynote guest lectures at various scientific platforms such as the India Department of Science and Technology’s Innovation in Science Pursuit for Inspired Research programs. He is a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS), the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the Canadian Society of Forensic Sciences, the Spanish Association of Forensic Osteology and Odontology, the Association of Forensic Odontologists for Human Rights, and the Latin-American Society of Forensic Anthropology. He has supervised many students’ Ph.D. theses in forensic anthropology and odontology, and M.Sc./MPH dissertations in the subjects of anthropology, forensic science and health at various departments of Panjab University. Recently, he has been awarded with the “Young Progressing Career Achievement Award — 2018” by the University of Delhi (Delhi, India), in recognition for his contributions to the discipline of anthropology in India.

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