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ARTICLE

Bhagat Singh's Corpse

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ABSTRACT
This article explores how a sense of responsibility toward the revolutionary Bhagat Singh (1907–31) is mediated by and articulated through a relationship with the martyr's written remains. It considers how efforts to reconstruct 'the real' Bhagat Singh propel a polemic around the 'proper' subject of Indian politics, one that destabilises common sense nationalist narratives and extant autobiographies of the Indian Left. These interventions must, however, grapple with the anarchic potentiality of Bhagat Singh's self-sacrifice: empiricist efforts are tempted to engage in spectral practices of conjecture and counterfactual, building a politics of inheritance around a future that never came to pass.

KEYWORDS
Archives; Bhagat Singh; communism; Indian Left; inheritance; sacrifice

I. History and Necromancy

This article is about the political investments that motivate the desire to 'know' Bhagat Singh in post-colonial India. It considers efforts to revive and reanimate the 1920s revolutionary through the medium of his material remains—those surviving essays, letters and notes attributed to his hand. The authority of text is wielded to identify the terms of an inheritance—to understand where Bhagat Singh was heading, what he *would have* done—and so such projects contest appropriation and 'incorrect' invocation, arguing that there is one 'true' legacy to follow, a proper form for the community of inheritors to take. My object is not to judge the validity of such claims, nor to assess the authenticity of the documents invoked. I am interested in the ways in which a dominant story about Bhagat Singh's life and death is pursued, presented and deployed—its form, function and effects.[1]

To identify the meaning of historical texts for a politics of inheritance, I draw on the playful problematic set by Geoff Waite in his polemical study of Nietzsche's afterlife: that is, the relationship between a figure's dead body (*corpse*) and written work (*corpus*) to a subsequent living *corps*—the self-proclaimed guardians of the dead, informed and incarnated by fidelity to the former.[2] I adopt *corps* not to name a singular body of people—there is no coherent organisation here—but to capture broadly those who seek in text the

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1. The influence of Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), will be obvious throughout. For a discussion of Bhagat Singh's politics 'outside futures', see Chris Moffat, 'Experiments in Political Truth', in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (2013), pp. 185–201.
2. Geoff Waite, *Nietzesche's Corps/e* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

'authentic' voice of the dead. There is, indeed, a peculiarly *necromantic* component to this relationship in that it seeks to overcome the interruption caused by Bhagat Singh's 1931 execution by colonial authorities—the hanging that transforms the revolutionary into *amar shaheed*, 'the immortal martyr'. The corpus is mobilised to speak *for* Bhagat Singh, inviting the martyr to defy relegation in an anti-colonial past and provide direction for a post-colonial present. Efforts to excavate and disseminate Bhagat Singh's corpus in the decades after his death are thus not simply about rescuing a saga of history from obscurity, but that they, in so doing, aim to reconfigure the terrain of the present, activating the repressed potential of Bhagat Singh as a political thinker.

The following sections trace the work of the corps since the 1960s, when the first exhortations to recover 'the real' Bhagat Singh were made. Section II interrogates these beginnings directly, situating the corps in relation to the martyr's uptake amidst a nascent Maoist insurgency in Punjab. Section III considers the rhetoric of responsibility which has carried efforts to consolidate this body of writings into the twenty-first century, up to and including the revolutionary's birth centenary in 2007, a moment detailed in Section IV. My concern throughout is the manner in which efforts to establish one 'true' story of the revolutionary's life and struggle are interrupted, first, by limitations in the corpus—its fragmented, incomplete nature—and, second, the 'fact' of the corpse: the excessive potentiality of Bhagat Singh's celebrated self-sacrifice, a death that distorts clear orders of intentionality and facilitates broad popular appeal.[3] Rather than a relationship to history as restored 'wholeness', this is a story mediated by excess and unfinished business, appealing to conviction rather than certitude. The historian's corrective gesture here meets the polemicist's conjuring: a project initiated in empiricist, Rankean terms—to rescue 'the real' Bhagat Singh from 'reactionaries, obscurantists and communalists'[4]—is tempted by the fact of young death to engage in spectral practices of conjecture and counterfactual, fashioning a form for futures lost. Responding to the focus of the issue (Vol. 39, no. 3) on 'writing revolution', I examine the Indian Left's vocal claim to the position of inheritor, an alliance that deploys the authority of text to oppose national-patriotic or Sikh visions of the martyr.[5] I consider what the promise represented by Bhagat Singh's corpse and corpus means for Indian communism in particular, arguing that the martyr's assignment to a communist *telos* manifests in distinctly 'Sorelian' terms—referring here to Georges Sorel's early twentieth century critique of Marxist 'science' in favour of tales of 'heroic sublimity', mobilising 'myths' deemed necessary to incite mass struggle.[6] Bhagat Singh is courted as an antidote to the Left's oft-lamented failure to fuse social struggle with popular nationalist sentiment in twentieth-century India,[7] a potentiality party institutions must insistently defend, drawing into their idea of legacy a future that never came to pass.

3. On the dilemma of representing sacrifice, see Alex Houen, 'Sacrificial Militancy and the Wars around Terror', in Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (eds), *Terror and the Postcolonial* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 113–40.
4. Bipan Chandra, 'Introduction', in Bhagat Singh, 'Why I Am An Atheist' (Delhi: People's Publishing House, [1979] 2007), p. 7.
5. Because this article is concerned with Bhagat Singh's political writings, I have chosen not to dwell on the revolutionary's distinct significance in Punjabi Sikh politics and culture, where the focus is less on the 'proof' of his ideation than the consonance of his actions and martyrdom with folk traditions and heroic-religious tropes. See I.D. Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom* (Delhi: Anthem, 2008). Twenty-first-century Jat Sikh alliances with the revolutionary are explored in my forthcoming monograph, *Politics and the Promise of Bhagat Singh*.
6. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (T.E. Hulme and J. Roth, trans.) (New York: Dover, [1908] 2004), p. 16.
7. Achin Vanaik, 'The Indian Left', in *New Left Review*, Vol. I, no. 159 (1986), pp. 49–70. But see also Sanjay Seth, *Marxist Theory and Nationalist Politics: The Case of Colonial India* (Delhi: Sage, 1995).

II. Parts of a Whole

Late on the evening of 23 March 1931, two police lorries containing the bodies of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru emerged unnoticed from the back of Lahore Central Jail. The vehicles travelled several miles south to the banks of the river Sutlej, where a funeral pyre was constructed and the revolutionaries—executed for 'waging war' against the king-emperor as members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA)—submerged in flame. This secretive action was taken, ostensibly, to forestall the spectacle of a mass funeral procession in Lahore and the concordant risk of rioting.[8] But the disposal of such high-profile prisoners was received by nationalist opinion to confirm government callousness—'the relatives were not informed'[9]—and has provided fertile ground for all manner of conspiracy theory.[10]

Early on 24 March, as word of this subterfuge reached Lahore, a group of mourners—among them Bhagat Singh's mother Vidyawati—travelled to the Sutlej to locate the pyre's embers near Kaiser-i-Hind bridge in Ferozepur. There, they collected ashes and a few pieces of bone.[11] Over the following weeks, these fragments were paraded and honoured, wielded by supporters as the only evidence of the corporeal reality of execution. In Lahore, beside the river Ravi, last rites were performed.[12] The remains were brought to Karachi for the April meeting of the Indian National Congress.[13] These 'charred bones and flesh', records *The Times of India*, were then transported in a silver casket to Bombay, crossing the Arabian Sea on the *SS Dayavanti* to be exhibited on a dais at the Esplanade Maidan.[14]

A public preoccupation with wounded bodies recurs in poster art depictions circulating from 1931—the revolutionaries shown decapitated, offering their heads to Bharat Mata.[15] In reality, the violence of the gallows went unseen. There would be no spectacle of the corpse on procession, like that which brought tens of thousands to the Calcutta funeral of HSRA hunger-striker Jatindranath Das in September 1929. There would be no photographs circulated of a lifeless figure surrounded by police, as was the case with Chandra Shekhar Azad following a shoot-out in Alfred Park, Allahabad.[16] We have instead an affirmation of Bhagat Singh's seamless ascent into spirit. The famous portrait of the revolutionary in a trilby hat remains uncorrupted by evidence of broken necks or the garlands of funeral ceremony. Death produces no rot, but only dust, and most of it in motion, as a fictionalised Bhagat Singh affirms to an assembled 'conference of martyrs' imagined by Punjabi newspaper *Vir Bharat* after the hanging: 'Our dust is flying not only

8. On government preparations, see Home-Political Files (hereafter Home-Pol), F.No.4/21/1931, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI).
9. *The Times of India* (24 Mar. 1931); and *The Tribune* (25 Mar. 1931).
10. The Congress initiated an enquiry into allegations that the bodies were dealt with 'in an insulting manner'. *The Tribune* (4 April 1931). Also see the sensationalist text by K.S. Kooner and G.S. Sindhra, *Some Hidden Facts: Martyrdom of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Chandigarh: Unistar, 2005).
11. *The Tribune* (25/26 Mar. 1931). Also see Jaidev Gupta's testimony in S.R. Bakshi, *Bhagat Singh: Patriot and Martyr* (Delhi: Capital, 1990), pp. 117–9.
12. *The Times of India* (25 Mar. 1931).
13. Home-Pol F.No.136/1931, and Fortnightly Reports for March, F.No.18/3/1931, NAI.
14. *The Times of India* (6/7 April 1931).
15. Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 231.
16. The image was circulated as a nationalist pamphlet. Home Pol F.No.K.W. to 159/1931, NAI.

on the banks of the Sutlej but in all corners of India, so that it might enter the eyes of those rulers who have become blind through…their power and authority'.[17]

Bhagat Singh's corpus—his body of written work—survived the execution in similarly obscured forms. The early manifestos and pamphlets of the HSRA had been secured in ink and dispersed in hard copy, but the extent of Bhagat Singh's personal writing as a prisoner between 1929 and 1931 remains contested. One account holds that, in the days before the hanging, Bhagat Singh entrusted a bundle of writings to Kumari Lajjawati, a Congress activist and secretary of the Lahore Conspiracy Case (LCC) Defence Committee. He requested that she keep the documents safe for B.K. Sinha, an HSRA comrade facing a period of imprisonment in the Andaman Islands. According to the scholar Chaman Lal, Lajjawati showed the contents of the bundle to Lala Feroze Chand, editor of the Lahore weekly, *The People*; this is why, for Lal, Bhagat Singh's essay 'Why I Am An Atheist' appeared in that publication in September 1931, near what would have been the revolutionary's twenty-fourth birthday.[18]

The fate of this bundle is otherwise unclear: a popular narrative holds that Bhagat Singh authored four full monographs in prison, only for them to be destroyed by a comrade panicked by a police raid in 1942,[19] or lost, perhaps, amidst the chaos of Partition.[20] Whether or not this fabled collection contained a comprehensive programme for the reorganisation of Indian society or was simply a fragmented assemblage of personal notes, its absence fuels a narrative of unconsecrated potential, opening space for rumination. For Chaman Lal, 'The loss of these invaluable documents must surely rank as one of the great tragedies of the period'.[21] For Bhupendra Hooja, 'No amount of literature…can fill the vacuum of these precious manuscripts'.[22]

One important document—a notebook kept by Bhagat Singh in Lahore Central Jail—was preserved and protected by the revolutionary's family. And, yet, even this was only recently introduced into the popular corpus: it was not until 1981, on the fiftieth anniversary of the execution, that Bhagat Singh's brother Kulbir Singh allowed the Nehru Memorial Library in Delhi to make a copy, and only on the condition that it would not be published.[23] This rule was broken in 1994 when Bhupendra Hooja began serialising sections in the *Indian Book Chronicle*—copied from bootleg versions of the notebook unearthed in the Gurukul Indraprastha, Faridabad, and later in a Moscow archive.[24] At the time of writing, the jail notebook has been published several times in a number of different languages, its dissemination supported by state governments, political parties and civil society organisations—a testament to the appetite for material remnants of the

17. Home-Pol F.No.13/11/1931, NAI, reproduced in Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India* (London: Hurst, 2015), pp. 239–42.
18. Copyright is attributed to Kishan Singh in *The People* (27 Mar. 1931). See Chaman Lal, 'Introduction', in Bhagat Singh, *The Jail Notebook and Other Writings* (Delhi: LeftWord, 2007), pp. 22–3.
19. Shiv Varma, 'Preface', in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur: Samajwadi Sahitya Sadan, 1996), p.16.
20. Kuldip Nayar, 'Keynote Address', in J.S. Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend* (Patiala: World Punjabi Centre, 2008), p. 17.
21. Lal, 'Introduction', p. 22.
22. Bhupendra Hooja, *Bhagat Singh—In Jail & His 'Diary'* (Jaipur: Sanghar Vidya Sabha Trust, 1994), p. 5/F.
23. Interview with Chaman Lal, Delhi, 15 Mar. 2012.
24. Hooja, *Bhagat Singh*, p. 1. The Gurukul has a storied history as a hideout for revolutionaries. The Moscow copy may owe its origins to Soviet historian Leonid Mitrokhin, who accessed Kulbir Singh's copy for his *Lenin in India* (Delhi: Panchsheel, 1981), pp. 116–25.

revolutionary, even those which, like the notebook, contain only quotations and few of Bhagat Singh's own words.[25]

The interest in consolidating the scattered limbs of Bhagat Singh's corpus into an accessible archive began in earnest in late 1960s Punjab, prompted by broader debates around the trajectory of Indian Left politics and the manner in which radical struggles might engage national and local histories. The schisms that marked the 1960s for the Communist Party of India (CPI) are well-known: the culmination of tensions following the Party's newfound electoral success and its 1957 endorsement of 'peaceful' struggle, but also subsuming the terms of a global ideological conflict between the Soviet Union and China. This came to a head during the 1962 Sino-Indian border dispute, on the question of the CPI's relationship with the National Congress—supported by the Soviets, but at war with communist China. In 1964, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) was formed in Calcutta out of the CPI Left wing, declaring the old party revisionist and guilty of collaborating with a bourgeois Congress government. The newly inaugurated CPI-M would suffer its own split in 1967 after a section led by Charu Mazumdar coordinated a peasant uprising in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari. The insurgency was swiftly suppressed by the state government, to which the CPI-M was joined in an electoral alliance. These 'Naxalite' dissidents broke from the CPI-M to form the All-India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR), inspired by Maoist strategy to pursue armed revolution. This event would reverberate across the country, notably in Andhra Pradesh, where a radical tendency was consolidated around T. Nagi Reddy, but also in Punjab, where by March 1968, dissident CPI-M members had rallied to form the Punjab Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (PCCCR) in Bhatinda.

In one of the few histories of this period, Amritsar-based scholar Paramjit Judge argues that a particular form of Naxalism developed in Punjab, distinct from other variants. This was prompted by Punjab's status as one of the most prosperous states in India—the 'green revolution' facilitating intensive capitalist penetration in agricultural life—but also because of the way in which Maoists related themselves to earlier militant movements in the state. As Judge demonstrates, not only was the PCCCR aware of possible correspondence with earlier radicals—from Bhagat Singh to Teja Singh Swatantra—they also 'took pains to establish such an understanding and connections'. The youth wing formed in 1972 took the name of Bhagat Singh's Naujawan Bharat Sabha, while Naxalite study circles focused on traditions of Sikh and Punjabi rebellion—from Ghadar to the Babbar Akalis.[26]

The new and global politics of Indian Maoism were thus mapped onto a local lament for the exclusion of radical Punjabi traditions from mainstream Congress nationalism as well as from institutional communism, which had earlier ejected from its ranks a robust Ghadar-Kirti tendency, consolidated by America-returned Sikhs in the 1920s. Not only did former Ghadarites take an active interest in the Naxalite movement, but some—Baba Bujha Singh and Baba Gurmukh Singh, in particular—became leaders within it.[27] Bhagat

25. On the radical potential of the notebook, see J. Daniel Elam's essay, 'Commonplace Anti-Colonialism: Bhagat Singh's Jail Notebook and the Politics of Reading', in this issue (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (2016), doi:10.1080/00856401.2016.1193796).
26. Paramjit Judge, *Insurrection to Agitation: The Naxalite Movement in Punjab* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1992), pp. 61, 107.
27. *Ibid*., pp. 63, 66.

Singh was celebrated as a model for this new horizon: a revolutionary spirit with a distinctly Punjabi pedigree.

The relationship of Bhagat Singh's family to this militant uptake was broadly antagonistic, if not entirely disconnected. As guardians of the revolutionary's personal letters, the family—based since 1947 in Khatkar Kalan, Jalandhar district—was in a unique position to facilitate nuanced biographies of the revolutionary. Vidyawati, as her grandson Jagmohan Singh told me in a 2012 interview, often spoke against the heroic individualism ascribed to Bhagat Singh, arguing that he could only be understood in context among his comrades.[28] One of the earliest historical biographies—as distinct from popular hagiographies and proscribed contemporary accounts, of which Jatindranath Sanyal's 1931 biography is surely the first[29]—was produced in the form of a 1968 family history by Virendra Sandhu, daughter of Bhagat Singh's brother, Kultar Singh.[30] Perhaps the most cited collection of documents was compiled by Jagmohan Singh himself, son of the martyr's sister Amar Kaur. *Bhagat Singh Ate Uhna De Saathian Diyan Likhtaan* was published in Punjabi in 1982, and then in Hindi in 1986 with support from language scholar Chaman Lal.[31]

But the family was also at the fore of a polemic regarding Bhagat Singh's relegation from mainstream histories, eager to assert his abiding relevance beyond brave patriotism or as a mere violent foil for Gandhian non-violence. In 1965, two years before events in distant Naxalbari, the family sanctioned the creation of a Yuvak Kendra (Youth Centre), to be based out of their home in Khatkar Kalan. The organisation was inaugurated with a 'Message to Indian Youth' from Vidyawati, urging them to follow her son's example and 'make a deep study of the life and experiences of the patriots'. Through the act of reading, she assured them, 'you can find out the correct path of life according to the present circumstances'.[32] The Kendra was patronised by one of the founding members of the Ghadar Party, Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, who—from 1966 until his death in 1968—wrote pamphlets for the group on Punjabi freedom fighters. The Chandigarh-based scholar Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, who belonged to the Kendra as a young man, emphasises the importance of the 1964 Ghadar Jubilee celebrations in Jalandhar—the fiftieth anniversary of the Party's founding—as prompting a sense of responsibility to this history among a younger generation.[33] Inspired by direct encounters with veterans who, in their ill-health and poverty, seemed to provide physical evidence of India's failure to honour their sacrifice, the Kendra sought to popularise this heritage. Bhagat Singh's own biography was integrated into this recuperative gesture, detached from an anti-colonial saga of overcoming and connected to a controversial history unresolved by Independence.

Waraich relates that, answering Vidyawati's call, 'a few young men undertook a campaign of disseminating the rich legacy of our Martyrs through pamphlets, leaflets, posters,

28. Interview with Jagmohan Singh, Ludhiana, 14 April 2012.
29. Republished as J.N. Sanyal (K.C. Yadav and Babar Singh, eds), *Bhagat Singh: A Biography* (Gurgaon: Hope India, 2006).
30. Virendra Sandhu, *Yugdishtra Bhagat Singh aur Unke Mritunjay Purkhe* (Delhi: Gyanpith Prakashan, 1968).
31. Jagmohan Singh (ed.), *Bhagat Singh Ate Uhna De Saathian Diyan Likhtaan* (Ludhiana: Chetna Parkashan, [1982] 2006); and Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal (eds), *Bhagat Singh aur Unke Saathiyon ke Dastavez* (Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 1986).
32. Reproduced in Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, *Bhagat Singh: The Eternal Rebel* (Delhi: Government of India, 2007), pp. 174–5.
33. Interview with Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, Chandigarh, 25 Mar. 2012; and interview with Jagmohan Singh, Ludhiana, 14 April 2012. Jagmohan was Waraich's student at Guru Nanak Dev Enjineering College in the 1960s.

exhibiting their photographs while celebrating their anniversaries in schools, colleges, villages'.[34] The effort was not limited to Ghadar or even to Punjab, but illuminated a constellation of radical and often violent figures celebrated for standing against tyranny.[35] Nor was the Kendra in Khatkar Kalan alone in its work: similar initiatives were taking place across Punjab. Chaman Lal, who grew up in Rampura Phul, recalls short life sketches from Manmathnath Gupta's 'Bharat ke Krantikari' ('Indian Revolutionaries') being serialised in the *Desh Bhagat Yaadan*, a fortnightly published by Baba Gurmukh Singh from Jalandhar's Ghadar Memorial Hall.[36] Between 1972 and 1978, funds from public subscription allowed the Kendra to build its own hall in Khatkar Kalan, an assembly space inspired—according to Jagmohan—by Vidyawati's memories of Lahore's Bradlaugh Hall.

Though the Kendra was not linked to any political party and was concerned—as Vidyawati's call demonstrates—with ideas of patriotism and recognition rather than open revolution, the reception of the group's polemic was multi-faceted. These same histories were mobilised by educated youth drawn to a new Naxalite politics in Punjab. If Ghadar's entry into 'history' was originally about recovery from neglect, the story of Bhagat Singh would soon be about *rescue*—the advocacy of a specific type of recall, grounded in historical sources, at a time of crisis. The shifting imperatives of this project are demonstrated in the story of Punjabi poet Amarjit Chandan, a fellow-traveller of the Kendra circle and an early advocate for approaching Bhagat Singh through his writings, rather than, for instance, through folk legend or song.

Chandan, whose father and grandfather had been associated with clandestine Ghadar-Kirti groups in Punjab and Nairobi, became involved with the Kendra as a student in Jalandhar, editing a special 'Shaheedi' ('Martyrdom') issue of the publication *Bharat Sewak* in 1967. He recalls in retrospect that many of the tracts circulating in Punjab at this time 'did not analyse violence for the sake of it but rather romanticised individual terrorism and human sacrifice to the extent of obsession'.[37] This heroic ideal resonated with the changing horizon of Indian revolution after Naxalbari. In 1969, the AICCCR became the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI-ML), promulgating armed revolution toward the annihilation of class enemies.

Chandan joined a splinter group of the CPI-ML in 1969 and became editor of the party organ *Lokyudh* (*People's War*). He was arrested in August 1971 taking proofs to the publisher, imprisoned in Amritsar and kept in solitary confinement for two years. Upon his release in August 1973, disillusioned by the violence of the movement and an anxious police force struggling to contain it, Chandan began to compile the writings of Bhagat Singh for publication, an initiative supported by the Yuvak Kendra. 'I compiled the letters', Amarjit told me in 2014:

> as I thought the project was long overdue and that only by collecting Bhagat Singh's writings a critical analysis of the violent anti-colonial struggle could be taken up. I just had my share of rough experience of a movement obsessed with murder and martyrdom.[38]

34. 'Acknowledgments', in Malwinderjit Singh Waraich, *Bhagat Singh: The Eternal Rebel* (Delhi: Government of India, 2007).
35. For one example, see the Kendra's history of the Kakori Conspiracy Case, printed in *The People's Path* (Sept. 1967).
36. Interview with Chaman Lal, Delhi, 15 Mar. 2012.
37. Personal correspondence with Amarjit Chandan, Jan. 2014.
38. *Ibid*.

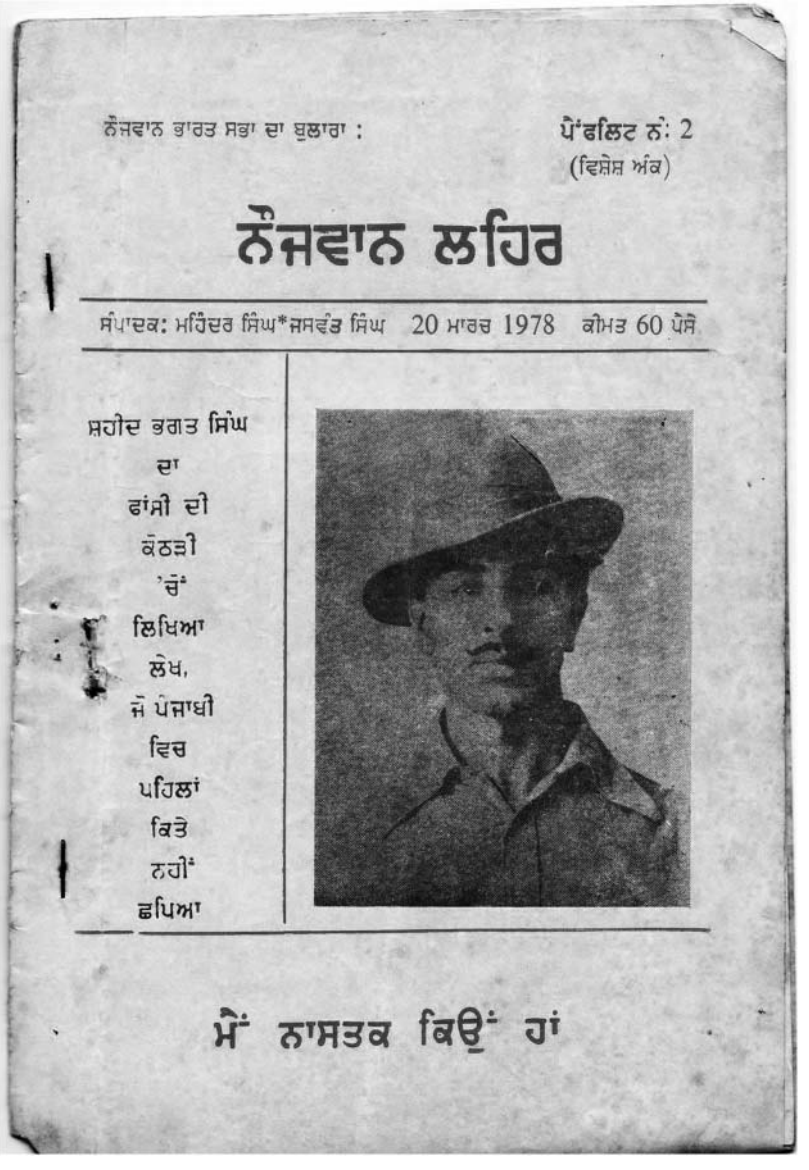

Figure 1. Cover of *Naujawan Lehar* (20 March 1978), with image of Bhagat Singh and including translation of 'Why I Am An Atheist'. Source: Reproduced by kind permission of Amarjit Chandan.

Here, the corpus is wielded to complicate romantic notions of Bhagat Singh as a gun-toting vigilante, suggesting instead the depth of thought behind the martyr's actions.

A modest 1,100 copies of Chandan's *Chithiaan: Shaheed Bhagat Singh te Saathi* (*Letters: Shaheed Bhagat Singh and Comrades*) were printed in Amritsar in 1974. Chandan had collected documents from the revolutionary's family, the National Archives of India and the Nehru Memorial Library. In 1978, he translated the 1931 essay 'Why I Am An Atheist' into Punjabi (Figure 1).[39] The original version had long been lost, the text

39. Published in *Naujawan Lehar* (20 Mar. 1978), a pamphlet series produced by the Naujawan Bharat Sabha.

surviving in an obscure Telugu translation commissioned by the famous rationalist E.V. Ramasamy ('Periyar') for his *Kudiarasu* in 1935.[40] This edition—mobilised for Periyar's struggles against religious strictures in South India—was translated back into English in 1974 by the Rationalist Society of India. Soon after Chandan's 1978 Punjabi pamphlet, the original English version from *The People* was identified in the Nehru Memorial Library collections. Chandan translated this uncorrupted version into Punjabi in 1979: Jagmohan Singh recalls some 50,000 copies were circulated over the years that followed.[41]

In the 1979 pamphlet's 'Preface', Chandan announced the formation of the 'Shahid Bhagat Singh Research Committee', an initiative that, at the time of writing, Jagmohan continues to head.[42] The vision for the Committee evidences the desire for a more complex vision of the revolutionary: at once more tactical and intellectual than the vigilante hero celebrated by Naxalite youth, but also advocating the separation of religion from politics, a potent message at a time of nascent Sikh separatist sentiment in Punjab. Indeed, while the Naxal wave was largely exhausted by 1972, it was succeeded by a longer, bloodier insurgency, which, though pursuing a very different political project, attached itself similarly to a Punjabi militant tradition as prompt for sacrificial action in the present. Sikh militancy and the call for an independent Khalistan was to find in Bhagat Singh's corpse—if not his corpus—inspiration to fight. The Research Committee adapted its activity to this new context, wielding the corpus to rescue Bhagat Singh *from* and deploy the revolutionary *against* a contemporary movement claiming his legacy.

In 1981, as Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale's influence was growing in Punjab, members of Bhagat Singh's family assembled in Ludhiana to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Lahore executions, accompanied by HSRA veterans Shiv Varma, Jaidev Kapur and Gaya Prasad. They met to discuss how to communicate the Bhagat Singh they had known to Indian youth, deciding that the Committee's efforts must be supplemented by government-supported research into original documents.[43] Their appeals to state and national bodies went unheeded—even if, the same year, Congress Home Minister Giani Zail Singh had supported the establishment of a museum and memorial to Bhagat Singh in Khatkar Kalan, part of his own attempts to reclaim Punjabi icons from Sikh critics of the Indian state. The labour of collecting the corpus was left to Jagmohan Singh, who published his Punjabi volume in 1982.

These early efforts to 'rediscover Bhagat Singh in parts', as Jagmohan puts it, were supplemented by contributions from surviving members of the HSRA. Jatindranath Sanyal's 1931 biography of Bhagat Singh was republished in 1983 to help combat what the publisher called a three-decade 'lapse' in the public's understanding of India's revolutionary tradition. In a polemical introduction, the representative for Vishwa Bharti Prakashan chastises the 'self-seekers and crafty men' who dominate national life, relegating oppositional figures and making 'pygmies' out of giants.[44] In 1986, Shiv Varma published a compendium in English, accusing Indian historians of demonstrating a 'slave mentality' in

40. Chaman Lal, 'Periyar admired Bhagat Singh', *The Hindu* (22 Aug. 2011).
41. Interview with Jagmohan Singh, Ludhiana, 14 April 2012. Bipan Chandra also published a pamphlet with the text in its original English, adding his own introduction.
42. The Committee now exists primarily online [www.shahidbhagatsingh.org, accessed Nov. 2015].
43. Interview with Jagmohan Singh, Ludhiana, 14 April 2012.
44. 'Publisher's Note', in J.N. Sanyal, *Bhagat Singh: A Biography* (Nagpur: Vishwa Bharti Prakashan, 1983).

following British propaganda and accepting the 1920s revolutionaries as 'blood-thirsty demons with no ideology':

> That Bhagat Singh was an intellectual of a high calibre is not known to many. This makes it easy for interested persons to distort the ideological side of the revolutionary movement… . To counter every such distortion therefore becomes imperative. That is why I strived to put all available writings of Bhagat Singh at one place and leave it to the reader to form his own opinion about the great martyr.[45]

Reading the corpus, in these accounts, becomes the proper way to 'know' Bhagat Singh. 'Read!' becomes the injunction that forms the corps—reading, as distinct from singing, marching, genuflecting or protesting. Indeed, the former is posited as a prerequisite for the collective experiences enabled by the latter.

III. Interventions

In spite of Varma's best intentions, the reader is rarely left alone to form an opinion about the martyr: the experience of the text is heavily mediated by the interventions and annotations of the corps. Since these early volumes, efforts to excavate 'the real' Bhagat Singh have been propelled by a robust rhetoric of responsibility—to both the past and to the future.

Fidelity to the corpus is presented, first, as a tribute to Bhagat Singh himself, who must be freed from sentimental patriotism and misappropriation, whose 'true' legacy can only be appreciated by engaging his writings. The target for such corrective gestures is not ignorance, but incorrect conjuring: the *misuse* or *abuse* of Bhagat Singh's name—invocations unrefined by attention to the revolutionary's ideas, as when, in the 1980s, Khalistani militants 'failed' to heed Bhagat Singh's written declaration of atheism. Contesting misapprehension remains the responsibility of the corps, an unceasing demand for someone like Jagmohan, who told *Frontline* magazine in 2007 that it remains 'our duty to liberate Bhagat Singh from current misinterpretations':

> Bhagat Singh cannot be frozen merely in a cheap emotional and nationalistic frame. How could a communalist propagating hatred against one another feel comfortable with his thoughts? Rather he should feel ashamed of himself in Bhagat Singh's company.[46]

This invocation of shame and, indeed, contemporaneity—that we are still 'in Bhagat Singh's company'—emphasises the weight of an inheritance, the call to protect and honour the dead.

There is an important affective dimension to this work. The reader is invited to revel in facts 'the general public do not know'[47]—specifically with regard to Bhagat Singh's intellectual pedigree. The revolutionary's scholarship is established via long lists of books read or cited—mined from library records, police data or the jail notebook itself—resulting in a curious revisionism: the appeal to evidence serves to embellish a hagiography rather than deflate it. Not only was he a courageous martyr, but he was *also* an intellectual with

45. Varma, 'Preface', in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, pp. 14, 16.
46. *Frontline* (2 Nov. 2007).
47. Varma, 'Preface', in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, p. 16.

an 'undying thirst for knowledge'.[48] To emphasise this authority, Bhagat Singh is often left to speak for himself: the corpus is not simply footnoted, but almost always reproduced in lengthy quotations and large appendices.[49]

The second form of responsibility faces the future, toward generations to come. A complete, reproducible corpus will serve future pedagogies. And if there is not (yet)[50] a physical institution housing Bhagat Singh's writings, the numerous 'collected' or 'selected' works serve a similar function—not to mention the Internet databases curated by individuals like Jagmohan Singh and Chaman Lal.[51] The consolidation of 'all authentic documents' is necessary, writes historian J.S. Grewal, to 'obviate [the] "mystification" of Bhagat Singh', so that 'scholars can concentrate on his true legacy'.[52] A clean and ordered corpus enables a more perfect necromancy, a more genuine communication with the dead. To identify what Bhagat Singh died for is to establish the struggle his inheritors must assume. Indeed, histories and biographies are often framed as didactic, as where K. C. Yadav dedicates a reprint of 'Why I Am An Atheist' to 'those who care to "know" Bhagat Singh and wish to make a world of his "dreams"!'[53]

While readers are told that India continues to suffer from the same problems of exploitation, communalism and casteism that Bhagat Singh confronted in the 1920s, the corpus is also opened to face new obstacles. For Chandan, recall, the writings allowed a nuanced critique of romanticised violence in 1970s Punjab. For veteran revolutionary Manmathnath Gupta, writing in 1977, it was the crisis of socialism after Indira Gandhi's Emergency and the 'prowl' of 'International neo-Fascist forces' that necessitated reading practice. 'I am convinced', Gupta writes, 'that Bhagat Singh, his life as well as his martyrdom, are going to be priceless assets in our fight'.[54] For S. Irfan Habib two decades later, it is the struggle of workers 'in the days of WTO and globalization', while for Jagmohan Singh in 2007, it has become the 'imperialism of corporations', a '21st century monster' for which the martyr provides 'the most clear ideas to fight'.[55]

This explicit assertion of abiding relevance—where a 1920s corpus can speak against the 1991 destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya or the phenomenon of farmer suicides[56]—foregrounds the political work sought via the corrective gesture. This is not a routine matter of historical excavation, but an interventionist act of emendation; it means to transform expectations within a political present. The aim is not to enrich an existing national pantheon, but to question the very form this pantheon takes. As Clare Hemmings

48. *Mainstream* (25 Mar. 1969).
49. This is a consistent feature across a varied historiography, from Gopal Thakur's 1953 pamphlet, 'Bhagat Singh: The Man and His Ideas' (Delhi: People's Publishing House, [1953] 1962), which appends letters and archival documents, to S. Irfan Habib's 2007 volume, *To Make the Deaf Hear* (Gurgaon: Three Essays, 2007), which counts one-third of its 218 pages as reproduced documents.
50. The ICHR passed a resolution in October 2007 to establish a 'Bhagat Singh Memorial Archive'. See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Inaugural Address', in J.S. Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend* (Patiala: World Punjabi Centre, 2008).
51. Jagmohan maintains the website http://shahidbhagatsingh.org, while Chaman Lal's blog is http://bhagatsinghstudy.blogspot.com (accessed Nov. 2015). On the politics of 'selected works', see Kama Maclean's essay, 'Revolution and Revelation, or, When is History too Soon?', in this issue (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 3 (2016), doi:10.1080/00856401.2016.1191536).
52. J.S. Grewal, 'Introduction', in J.S. Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend* (Patiala: World Punjabi Centre, 2008), p. 1.
53. Dedication in Bhagat Singh (K.C. Yadav and Babar Singh, eds), 'Why I Am An Atheist' (Gurgaon: Hope India, 2005), p. 9.
54. Manmathnath Gupta, *Bhagat Singh and His Times* (Delhi: Lipi Prakashan, 1977), p. vi.
55. *Frontline* (2 Nov. 2007).
56. After Ayodhya, communist activist Nazirul Hasan Ansari recommends Bhagat Singh's essay, 'Communal Riots and their Remedy', *Mainstream* (27 Mar. 1993). On peasant suicides, see P.K. Choudhary, 'Bhagat Singh Today', in Jose George, Manoj Kumar and Avinash Khandare (eds), *Rethinking Radicalism in Indian Society* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2009), pp. 340–5.

has demonstrated, to dispute a dominant narrative of political development in the present—against the triumphalism, for instance, of a nationalist narrative of emancipation—is to dispute not only the content of a given account, but also its proper subject.[57] If Bhagat Singh has been sidelined or sentimentalised, then to re-consider the revolutionary is a critical action, challenging the certainties attached to dominant Gandhian, nationalist or socialist stories of post-colonial becoming. In Bhagat Singh, S. Irfan Habib contends, India did not simply lose a patriotic youth, but 'an alternative framework of governance for post-independent India'.[58] For K.K. Khullar, more dramatically, Bhagat Singh 'gave his country a new charter of freedom, a new Magna Carta based on social justice and economic equality'.[59]

This interventionist tendency is particularly pronounced in the work of Chaman Lal. The language scholar, formerly of Jawaharlal Nehru University, remains a vocal presence in Indian news media, tying Bhagat Singh's writings to contemporary struggles from Narmada Bachao Andolan to new Dalit activism.[60] For Lal, imprisoned as a student Leftist during the Emergency, Bhagat Singh allows a revision of Marxism's meaning in India: the adaptation of a global political language by a forceful, indigenous voice. Hence, Lal's eagerness to compare Bhagat Singh with figures like Ché Guevara and Ho Chi Minh, who paired communist programmes with sensitivity to national histories and local cultures. This is a synthesis Lal feels the CPI and CPI-M have systematically failed to achieve—compromised, he says, by an elitist neglect of vernacular political thought. Part of his decades-long project to collect and disseminate available documents on Bhagat Singh and his contemporaries has been toward such an end. 'My basic interest was to throw Bhagat Singh into the Indian political scene', he told me in a 2012 interview. 'It should [be] an explosive kind of thing'.[61]

The archivisation process is not simply a heritage impulse, but works to reconfigure the meaning of a revolutionary inheritance—the idea that Bhagat Singh's fight must continue. This history requires action rather than genuflection. But these alternative futures are always interrupted by the corpse—by Bhagat Singh's embrace of death: 'Death in struggles of this kind is an ideal death', the revolutionary insists to Sukhdev in a prison letter.[62] This 'last scene', laments Yadav, has 'so dazzled our eyes that we do not see anything more than that'.[63]

It is this dazzling 'last scene' that transforms the revolutionary into an *amar shaheed*, a promise which captivates mainstream nationalists and Hindutva footmen, Sikh secessionists, army officers and dissatisfied youth. This is, perhaps, why B.T. Ranadive sought to distinguish Bhagat Singh's 'keen personal desire' for 'self-immolation' from the requirements of 'advanced revolutionary ideology'.[64] But death does not render the work of the corps untenable: it simply shapes the manner in which their project unfolds. This cannot

57. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, p. 5.
58. Habib, *To Make the Deaf Hear*, p. xi.
59. K.K. Khullar, *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Delhi: Hem, 1981), p. 7.
60. For the Narmada reference, see Chaman Lal, 'How Bhagat Singh Gave Us the Term Political Prisoner', *Tehelka* (22 Mar. 2011). On Dalit struggle, see Chaman Lal, 'Revolutionary Legacy of Bhagat Singh', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLII, no. 37 (15 Sept. 2007), pp. 3712–8.
61. Interview with Chaman Lal, Delhi, 15 Mar. 2012.
62. Bhagat Singh, 'Regarding Suicide' (1930), in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur: Samajwadi Sahitya Sadan, 1996), p. 96.
63. K.C. Yadav, 'Editorial Note', in J.N. Sanyal (K.C. Yadav and Babar Singh, eds), *Bhagat Singh: A Biography* (Gurgaon: Hope India, 2006), p. 13.
64. B.T. Ranadive, 'Foreword-I', in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur: Samajwadi Sahitya Sadan, 1996), p. 9.

be a relationship to history as restored 'wholeness'; rather, the corpus becomes an index agonistically wielded—activated through polemic, prompted by context.

IV. 'Let Us Discover the Future of India Together with Bhagat Singh'[65]

In an oft-cited 1972 essay, the eminent historian Bipan Chandra observes that Bhagat Singh and his comrades were 'men of ideas and ideologies' and 'cannot be studied except in motion'.[66] Chandra was responding, in part, to the challenge of a fragmented corpus—the often contradictory propositions of young men finding their way in politics—but his invocation of 'motion' was not to describe nomadic movement or anarchic inconsistency. Rather, this is motion in the context of a *journey* and so attached to the possibility of a destination. The nature of this destination has been an ongoing concern for Chandra. In an early pamphlet, Chandra focused on the revolutionary's 'furious march towards the acquisition and mastery of Marxism'.[67] In 2010, he suggested that had Bhagat Singh lived, 'he would have become a Marxist Gandhian'.[68] When I met Chandra in April 2012, his interest in process had prompted a new book project, situating Bhagat Singh as a 'terrorist in the unmaking' and 'Marxist in the making'.[69]

The assertion of a destination—a vision of Bhagat Singh's future—allows scholars to organise a fragmented corpus and overcome (temporarily, partially) the 'dazzling scene' of death. The nature of this destination is conjured with reference to the corpus, but is in no way bound to it—we cannot *know* what Bhagat Singh would have become—and so an idea of inheritance is consolidated around a future that never happened: the vision of a life *interrupted*.

The historian's desire to reconstruct 'the real' Bhagat Singh is challenged by both the event of death and the 'vacuum' produced by the missing writings. But even those writings that have been recovered remain amenable to creative misreading. This is especially so with the jail notebook, which quotes some seventy ideologically diverse authors, supporting highly selective citation. Other writings have been questioned for their authenticity, as when, in 2008, the historian V.N. Datta suggested controversially that the 'elegance' and 'lucidity' of Bhagat Singh's writing might be the result of Jawaharlal Nehru's influence and the editorial interventions of defence lawyer Asaf Ali.[70] So too have Right-wing historians like Chander Pal Singh questioned the willingness of archivists like Chaman Lal and Jagmohan Singh to endorse articles marked only by pseudonyms ('Vidrohi', 'Balwant'), attached to Bhagat Singh through his affiliation to the newspapers that published them.[71]

More interesting than these scholarly controversies is the plain disavowal of text in some Right-wing appreciations of Bhagat Singh. For the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) Kerala Yuva Morcha president V.V. Rajesh, quoted by the *Deccan Chronicle* in 2013,

65. Headline in CPI-ML monthly, *Liberation* (Oct. 2006).
66. Bipan Chandra, 'The Ideological Development of the Revolutionary Terrorists in Northern India in the 1920s', in B.R. Nanda (ed.), *Socialism in India* (Delhi: Vikas, 1972), p. 167.
67. Chandra, 'Introduction', p. 7.
68. *The Times of India* (22 Sept. 2010).
69. Interview with Bipan Chandra, Delhi, 11 April 2012.
70. See Chaman Lal's rebuke in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIV, no. 25 (20 June 2009), p. 37. See also Maclean, *A Revolutionary History*, p. 279, n. 41.
71. Chander Pal Singh, *Bhagat Singh Revisited: Historiography, Biography and Ideology of the Great Martyr* (Delhi: Originals, 2011), pp. 57–62.

'Bhagat Singh may have been a socialist or Marxist idealist. We have no problem with that. We consider him a true patriot… . This is where the national pride that Bhagat Singh always upheld becomes relevant'.[72] The content of the corpus cannot overcome the glory of the corpse. A dialogue with Khalistani activists in Anand Patwardhan's documentary *In Memory of Friends* demonstrates a similar dynamic of disavowal in 1980s Punjab. Asked how Bhagat Singh can be celebrated as Sikh when he wrote the essay 'Why I Am An Atheist', a student replies confidently: 'No, later it came out he was religious'. Patwardhan persists: then why did he write this essay? A friend interjects: 'Bhagat Singh fought against repression, and we do the same, so we're honouring him'. Pushed by Patwardhan, the student claims the essay was 'written by Congress. Those are not his words'—establishing Bhagat Singh as fellow victim to a common foe.[73]

Such instances challenge the historian's faith in the demystifying potential of 'evidence'. As Dipesh Chakrabarty cautions, 'the fact-respecting, secular historian…can bring his or her reasoning to the public, but there is no guarantee the public will bring their attention'.[74] In Bhagat Singh's case, this problem is amplified by the centrality of sacrifice to the story—the spectacle of individual action through which all reception is mediated. The identification of a *telos* becomes a way to overcome popular preoccupations with death-defying courage, positing instead the question 'What if he had lived?'

The journey metaphor serves to organise the historiography and displace the vertigo of sacrifice in at least two ways. First, it tracks a departure from 'terrorist' violence, a precondition for establishing Bhagat Singh's abiding credibility as political thinker. Rather than 'trigger-happy adventurous patriots',[75] the corpus reveals a concern with justice and humanity. Quotes are repeated like incantations, conjuring away bullets and bloodshed. Revolution, we are reminded, 'does not necessarily involve sanguinary strife, nor is there any place in it for individual vendetta. It is not the cult of the bomb and the pistol'.[76] Value is identified in Bhagat Singh's expulsion of religion from politics, in his 'hard study and painful rethinking'.[77] The centrality of violence to early HSRA actions is left behind, merely a stage in the development from romantic idealist to materialist revolutionary. To dwell on this early phase is condemned disingenuous in light of the corpus.

The second function of the journey metaphor is to posit an eventual destination. Here, Bhagat Singh is propelled beyond the event of death. The nature of his destination varies across the corps: for some it is certainly Marxist, for others anarchist.[78] For many, it is simply a more perfect patriotism, as Chander Pal Singh argues in his carefully annotated re-reading of Bhagat Singh's writings, a study originally printed in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) weekly, *The Organiser*.[79] Each reading, though highly variant, seeks legitimacy in a malleable corpus; it is thus distinct from histories reliant on testimony—

72. *Deccan Chronicle* (22 Mar. 2013).
73. *In Memory of Friends* (dir. Anand Patwardhan, 1990).
74. Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Public Life of History', in *Public Culture*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (2008), p. 144.
75. The caricature is by Habib in his *To Make the Deaf Hear*, p. xi.
76. 'Statement in the Sessions Court' (6 June 1929), in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh*, p. 69.
77. Bipan Chandra, 'Bhagat Singh and His Comrades', in Ravi Dayal (ed.), *We Fought Together for Freedom* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 148.
78. Maia Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), p. 145.
79. 'Communist Double-Speak', *The Organiser* (8 May 2011), p. 27; and *ibid*. (15 May 2011), p. 28.

as, for instance, where Bhagat Singh is said to recant his atheism and return to Sikhism before death.[80] The paragraphs below explore how the journey metaphor organises the CPI-M's courting of the corpus in particular, grounding their claim to be guardians of Bhagat Singh's legacy.

The CPI-M's turn to Bhagat Singh since the 1970s demands note because of the initial distance drawn between the HSRA and the recently-formed CPI in the 1920s, a contrast that could be bridged by interested solidarity—consider the communication between Lahore and Meerut Conspiracy Case prisoners in 1930[81]—but rigidly policed otherwise by insistence on doctrinal differentiation. In November 1930, for example, an editorial in the CPI's Bombay organ, *Workers Weekly*, dismissed Bhagat Singh and his lot as individualist, petty bourgeois and 'merely conspiratorial'. The HSRA had failed, it claimed, to secure a social basis and develop a realistic grasp of class struggle.[82] The revolutionaries are here frozen as representatives of an earlier phase, to be surpassed if the struggle is to be successful. Bhagat Singh's exclusion from the archic origins of communism in India was later buttressed by testimonies from surviving HSRA comrades, who emphasised the limited understanding of Marxism within the Lahore group. For Ajoy Ghosh, acquitted in the LCC and later general secretary of the CPI (1951–62), 'it would be an exaggeration to say that [Bhagat Singh] became a Marxist'.[83] For Shiv Varma, 'Bhagat Singh was not a Marxist in the full sense of the term'.[84]

This sense that Bhagat Singh and his comrades did not go *far enough* persists in many Left histories of the HSRA, even if the authors accept the revolutionaries as more than 'merely conspiratorial'. Bipan Chandra chastised the HSRA for failing to become more than an urban phenomenon.[85] For Bhagwan Josh, author of an expansive history of Indian communism, Bhagat Singh's strategic mistake was to confuse the colonial state in India with the czarist state in Russia.[86] P.M.S. Grewal of the CPI-M Delhi State Committee notes in a 'Critical Assessment' at the end of his otherwise celebratory 2007 biography that Bhagat Singh's 'most striking weakness' was his failure to analyse feudal landlordism and, indeed, to comprehend the integral role of women in political struggle.[87]

In spite of these qualified judgements, an outright dismissal of Bhagat Singh has been distinctly uncommon, especially following the revolutionary's apotheosis in March 1931. On the contrary, one finds prominent figures like B.T. Ranadive insisting that the Communist Party 'always appreciated' the HSRA's anti-imperialist and patriotic urge, especially in comparison to the bourgeois nationalist leadership, which 'openly condemned

80. This position is argued by Bhai Randhir Singh, a prominent Sikh leader imprisoned in Lahore Central Jail at the same time as Bhagat Singh. See his *Autobiography* (Ludhiana: Bhai Randhir Singh Publishing House, 1971).
81. The March 1929 arrest of labour leaders in the Meerut Conspiracy Case is referenced in the HSRA Assembly Bomb notice, 'To Make the Deaf Hear' (8 April 1929), in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur: Samajwadi Sahitya Sadan, 1996), p. 65. The Meerut accused held hunger strikes in solidarity with the Lahore accused. See *The Tribune* (20 Sept. 1929). See also Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, 'Meerut and a Hanging', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 33, no. 3 (2013), pp. 360–77.
82. 'Cynosure of the Petty Bourgeoisie', *Workers Weekly* (13 Nov. 1930).
83. Ajoy Ghosh, *Bhagat Singh and His Comrades* (Bombay: People's Publishing House, 1945), p. 12. But see Manmathnath Gupta's retort to the 'arrogant' Ghosh in *Bhagat Singh and His Times*, pp. 202–3.
84. Shiv Varma, 'Foreword', in Gopal Thakur, *Bhagat Singh: The Man and His Ideas* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, [1953] 1962).
85. Chandra, 'The Ideological Development of the Revolutionary Terrorists'.
86. Bhagwan Josh, 'Paradox of Armed Revolution', in J.S. Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend* (Patiala: World Punjabi Centre, 2008), pp. 64–74.
87. P.M.S. Grewal, *Liberation's Blazing Star* (Delhi: LeftWord, 2007), p. 94.

their actions and resisted any expression of sympathy'.[88] The journey metaphor—conjured from the corpus—allows Bhagat Singh to be integrated into *a* trajectory of communism in India: he is affirmed as part of a lineage via a presumption about his future. Grewal diagnoses Bhagat Singh's direction from a reading of his corpus. 'If he had lived', he would 'most certainly' have joined the Communist Party. 'Alas! This was not to be'.[89] Had Bhagat Singh not been executed, CPI-M general secretary Prakash Karat submitted in 2007, he would have 'completed the journey' and 'joined the Communist Party'.[90] The fact that HSRA members like Ghosh and Varma—not to mention Kishori Lal, B.K. Sinha and Jaidev Kapur—all joined the CPI after the LCC is taken to affirm this inevitability, notwithstanding Ghosh's antagonistic relationship to the Ghadar-Kirti tendency also claiming Bhagat Singh's name.[91]

Within the 'large galaxy' of Indian freedom fighters, writes Ashok Dhawale in a 2007 issue of the CPI-M's theoretical quarterly, 'it was Bhagat Singh and his comrades alone who were inexorably moving ideologically toward…Marxian socialism and the Communist Party'.[92] But what does this idea of imminent arrival mean for the CPI-M and its understanding of Bhagat Singh? It reflects an appreciation of Bhagat Singh as *the* transition point by which mass communism is made possible in India. The revolutionary, in his short lifetime, is adopted to mark the moment when revolutionary politics shifts from individual action to mass movement, from 'incoherent nationalism'—according to CPI-M doyen Harkishan Singh Surjeet—to 'faith in the socialist ideal'.[93] For P.C. Joshi, the CPI's first general secretary (1935–47), writing in 1969:

> Among the terrorist revolutionaries of his day Chandrashekhar Azad was the link with the past but Bhagat Singh was their link with the future—the cause and the principles of socialism, which moved them to self-critically examine their own past legacy and its limitations and patiently study the principles of scientific socialism in the search for the most effective way forward.[94]

This emphasis on *transition* and the capacity for *progress*—through study and self-criticism—is consolidated to suggest a model socialist subject, freed from dogma and uncorrupted by Party factionalism and doctrinal schisms. Bhagat Singh *still* provides a link to the future. Just as there was no corpse to rot, the corpus remains unscathed by the tumultuous career of the Indian Left: it continues as pure potentiality. Even if the LCC condemned did not become 'full-blooded Marxists', in Chandra's phrase, Bhagat Singh 'had the potential to be a Gramsci, Mao or Lenin'.[95] This promise—immortalised by death—animates the CPI-M's courting of the martyr, allowing them to claim a celebrated

88. On the complex relationship between revolutionaries and the Congress, see Maclean, *A Revolutionary History*.
89. P.M.S. Grewal, *Liberation's Blazing Star*, p. 95.
90. 'Carry Forward Bhagat Singh's Secular, Anti-Imperialist and Marxist Outlook', in *People's Democracy*, Vol. XXXI, no. 15 (15 April 2007).
91. Gurharpal Singh, *Communism in Punjab* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1994), pp. 97–100. Kirti communism is typically characterised as militant agrarian against the urban profile of the CPI.
92. Ashok Dhawale, 'Shaheed Bhagat Singh: An Immortal Revolutionary', in *The Marxist*, Vol. XXII, nos. 2–3 (April–Sept. 2006).
93. Harkishan Singh Surjeet, 'Foreword-II', in *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur: Samajwadi Sahitya Sadan, 1996), p. 11.
94. *Mainstream* (25 Mar. 1969).
95. Chandra, 'Bhagat Singh and His Comrades', p. 148; 'Bhagat Singh was Planning to Give Up Terrorism', *The Hindu* (28 April 2011).

moment of anti-colonial rebellion as part of a socialist future to come. For Joshi, again, Bhagat Singh

> never got tired of studying more himself plus learning more from others, with whom he and his party differed but without whom he realized the common cause would not be realized! We need that spirit and outlook the most today for the Indian Left to come to its own.[96]

The revolutionary is extracted from stasis as representative of an earlier phase—individualist, bourgeois, urban—and becomes, rather, the *condition for socialism's success* in India.

The journey metaphor enables a switch from a history of communism's *past* in India to a history of communism's future—Bhagat Singh becomes an asset rather than an anachronism. The revolutionary functions, more properly, as a 'myth' in Georges Sorel's sense of the term: a 'body of images' straddling the realm of historical reality and future possibility, bringing together 'the noblest, deepest and most moving sentiments' to animate struggle.[97] A heroic story is promulgated for the bonds it provokes and the fidelity it inspires, a mobilising potential distinct from the exhortations of professional politicians or the tactical conclusions of Party intellectuals.[98] In their salutation of Bhagat Singh, the CPI-M unhinge themselves from the tarnished particulars of their own history, seeking instead the evocative complex of righteous desire and zealous confidence collapsed in the revolutionary's life and work.

Though young death consecrates this extraordinary promise, it also condemns the corps to an agonistic defence of a history that cannot be validated. The necessity of ongoing polemic was demonstrated in 2007, when celebrations for Bhagat Singh's birth centenary took place across India. The sentimental patriotism suffusing the memorial events was exacerbated by the fact that 2007 was also celebrated as the 150th anniversary of the 1857 rebellion and the 60th anniversary of Indian Independence. In editorials and essays, the familiar rhetoric of rescue and redeployment was directed against simplistic appreciations, government genuflections and the muscular bravado of Hindi film depictions.[99] Affiliates of the corps courted institutional support to establish 'Bhagat Singh University Chairs', while others published Ministry-commissioned biographies.[100]

For some, the centenary demanded a defence of the corpus less as a 'canon' to be institutionalised than as a resource for the renewal of politics itself. Writing in anticipation of the centenary, CPI-M theoretician Ashok Dhawale outlined four dimensions of Bhagat Singh's thought that remained vital for the present:

> (a) uncompromising struggle against imperialism; b) unflinching resistance to communalism and caste oppression; c) unbending opposition to bourgeois-landlord rule; and d) unshakable faith in Marxism and socialism as the only alternative before society.

During the centenary year, he continued, 'it is these [four] strands that must be consciously taken to the people of India through a massive and well-organised year-long campaign by the Left, democratic and secular forces'.[101] Dhawale's idea was reiterated in

96. *Mainstream* (25 Mar. 1969).
97. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, p. 127.
98. *Ibid*., p. 16.
99. See the essays in J.S. Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend* (Patiala: World Punjabi Centre, 2008).
100. 'Bhagat Singh Chair to come up in JNU', *Deccan Herald* (30 Mar. 2008). Waraich's *Bhagat Singh: The Eternal Rebel* was funded by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
101. Dhawale, 'Shaheed Bhagat Singh: An Immortal Revolutionary', npg.

March 2007 during a major conference at the University of Mumbai, where scholars and Left activists discussed the 'resurrection of Bhagat Singh's ideology' as necessary for developing 'a suitable strategy to combat the emergent menaces posed by neo-imperialist forces'.[102] For the CPI-ML's P.K. Choudhary, speaking at the conference, 'the map of the future of today's India lies in light of his visionary thoughts'.[103] An alternative waits to be seized from the corpus.

The simultaneous promise and predicament of the corpus is here explicit. Decades spent consolidating and disseminating Bhagat Singh's writings have not been sufficient to negate his ideologically promiscuous appeal. This has something to do with the corpus itself—its fragmented and often contradictory content—but also the 'dazzling scene' of death: the excessive potentiality of Bhagat Singh's self-sacrifice. But this celebrated death also *preserves* a promise: the very *lack* of a knowable future allows the martyr to be opened consistently to new struggles. The corps' work is not made redundant by the inability to resolve, once and for all, Bhagat Singh's 'true' legacy. It forges instead a relationship with history where facts cannot be the sole arbiter of meaning, and where an idea of legacy is constituted around a future that never came to pass.

V. The Missing Body

This article is part of a larger exploration into the ways in which living communities have tried to incorporate or make meaningful Bhagat Singh's death for a politics in the present. I have been concerned with how a sense of responsibility to the revolutionary is articulated through and mediated by a relationship with his fragmented, material remains. The acceptance of certain texts as 'authentic' has propelled their citation in debates over the 'true' legacy of Bhagat Singh and disagreements over the invocation of his name. Historicisation efforts have been coloured by polemic—wherein 'the real' Bhagat Singh must be rescued from distortion; where his example prompts a reorientation of politics in the present. But I have also argued that a Rankean concern for what Bhagat Singh 'really' thought is consistently tempted by features of the corpus and the corpse to engage in spectral practices of counterfactual and conjecture: nominating a form for futures lost. Writing provides the means to bind Bhagat Singh's promiscuous ghost, offering a surrogate body and a foundation to address the demands of inheritance.

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102. Jose George, Manoj Kumar and Avinash Khandare, 'Introduction', in Jose George, Manoj Kumar and Avinash Khandare (eds), *Rethinking Radicalism in Indian Society* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2009), p. 2.
103. Choudhary, 'Bhagat Singh Today', p. 345.