

Martyr as Bridegroom: Contextualising the Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh

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Bhagat Singh has earned a niche not only in the narratives of history but also in the folklore of Punjab in which he is epitomized as a martyr-bridegroom or virgin-martyr. His revolutionary zeal and non-conformism, in different genre of Punjabi poetry amply reflect the heroic and chivalric traditions peculiar to Punjab. The vernacular image of Bhagat Singh underlines the fact that the historical figure when raised to the status of a hero, soon he/she is imagined in the light of the literary images rooted in the centuries old folk culture. The author explores the literary perception of Bhagat Singh as represented in the Punjab poetry.

Martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, whom we address with numerous tags such as ‘patriot’, ‘quasi-revolutionary’, ‘revolutionary terrorist’, ‘socialist’, ‘communist’, had remarkable impact on the literary and cultural life of the Punjab; and the impact has not yet tailed off. The present paper brings a literary understanding to the historical figure of Bhagat Singh. In popular Punjabi literature, he figures prominently not as a martyr of conventional variety but as a martyr-bridegroom.

I

In popular Punjabi literature Bhagat Singh figures prominently not as a martyr of conventional variety but as a martyr-bridegroom or virgin-martyr. He is perceived to have inherited the long-standing Punjab tradition of sacrifice and martyrdom. His participation in India’s struggle for freedom against British imperialism gets culturalized when he is narrated and sung as a *shaheed* (martyr). His revolutionary militancy and non-conformism, as described in the popular Punjabi verses, are not simply of patriotic-nationalist-leftist variety, but are also projected as rooted in the Punjab heroic and chivalric traditions. The vernacular image of Bhagat Singh underlines the idea that when a historian discovers a popular hero, he/she cannot afford to overlook the long standing cultural traditions and their significance. A historian is supposed to explore those conditions which form the grounds in which folk lyrical discourses (i.e. folk songs) are created. Bhagat Singh, the virgin-martyr, survives in the cultural cosmology of the Punjab.

It is the peculiar characteristic of a folk society that it fulfils its aspirations and dreams with the help of its own constructed image of a hero, or in other words, a person achieves the status of a hero and survives in the popular cultural

space only when he/she appeals to the ethos of the people. Thus a people's hero is born in socio-cultural space and survives in the popular memory. This peculiar phenomenon does not agree with the proposition that heroes are constructed from 'above' and then through the dominant ideology they descend down on the people's space. 'A hero, despite his personal bravery', Buddha Prakash writes in his *Evolution of Heroic Tradition in Ancient Panjab*, 'acts within a framework of ideas and values which are the products of social and cultural perspectives.'¹ Thus when an individual illustrates through his/her action the historically evolved Punjabi ethos of non-conformism, non-sectarianism and counter-hegemony, he/she receives the rank of a hero. He/she strikes the imagination or vision of singers, story-tellers, painters and artists, and hence the tales and images of a hero begin to circulate. In the course of circulation, his/her life and deed are assimilated into historically evolved ethos of a society and popular traditions. A historian tends to be short-sighted when he tries hard to explain the popular hero in terms of 'sectarian' characteristics or casts him/her in a typical dye of a particular community, caste and sect. Bhagat Singh still survives in the historic *ghori*, a Punjabi marriage-folksong which was sung on his first martyrdom anniversary (23 March 1932) and in other popular genres of Punjabi poetry such as *qissa* (poetic-narrative) and popular Punjabi folksongs such as *marhi* (tomb), *boli* (folk catch-song) and *tappey* (folk couplets) etc. These are the constructs of those Punjabis whom the colonial and post colonial ethnography has characterized as the 'Hindus', 'Muslims' and 'Sikhs'. These folk representations testify that the general people of India during the struggle against British imperialism were not passive and dormant participants. They were an active social force who responded enthusiastically and culturally to their martyrs, their struggles and their martyrdoms. A study of the 'literature from below' about Bhagat Singh underlines the communal harmony and prevalence of the kinship relationship among the people in general. The popular genres in which the people spoke about and sung their martyrs indicate truly the preservation and promotion of cultural forms from 'below' in the colonial milieu - an aspect which has not been adequately studied so far as the history of the Indian National Movement is concerned.

The *party* or *official* or *nationalist* image of Bhagat Singh cannot be squared with the *people's* image of their martyr/hero. Social activists have not yet been able to read and understand Bhagat Singh in the vernacular traditions, culture, language, literature and history, exactly as they have not been able so far to practice sufism, Sikhism and bhakti as a social and revolutionary praxis for the transformation of a society. As a result, historical and legendary or *vernacular* heroes are gradually disappearing or are appearing in the sectarian/communitarian forms and shapes.

II

Notwithstanding the fact that the agenda of class-revolution has been relegated to the background, discourse of communism has drifted onto the question of communalism and communitarianism and the fervour of nationalism ignited by

the anti-colonial struggle has frozen to annual rituals and celebrations, Bhagat Singh still survives in theatre, celluloid and print media, particularly in Punjabi poetry and play. Logos and stickers of this virgin martyr can be frequently seen on the rear of the 'Punjabi' vehicles, both private and public. In the midst of a round-about of East Punjab cities and towns, statues of Bhagat Singh and his two comrades, Sukhdev and Rajguru, stand aloft. The slogan, *Inqalab zindabad* (long live the revolution), whenever it reverberates from a social and political camp of any variety, instantly invokes the militant image of Bhagat Singh. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, a poster projecting Bhagat Singh with turban on his head and a pistol in his hand and positioning him behind a tree has become ubiquitous perhaps to offset the aura of fundamentalist militancy/terrorism in Punjab.

The eternal image of Bhagat Singh, as narrated above, obliges one to ponder a question: whether he survives as a 'leftist' revolutionary or he lives on the non-conformist Punjabi vernacular space. In this context the following three Punjabi verses on Bhagat Singh call for special attention:

(a) 'Come, comrade Bhagat Singh, / Visit once again this land of Punjab, / And once again invoke the spectacle of nooses being kissed. / Bless this cursed Punjab with a tear like a scarlet hot iron' (Harinder Singh Mehboob).²

(b) 'In the dreams Bhagat Singh jolts me and asks: / Whither are you drifting away? / What kind of revolution you are about to bring about? / You have been bewitched by glamorous market / Now you should peep into the lanes cursed with darkness. / Has the glamour eaten up your dawn, or / The 'market' has devoured your desires and longings?' (Satpal Bhikhi).³

(c) 'From the shores of Sutlej a voice echoes: / 'My younger brothers, / The dream, which I had sown in your thoughts, / and then proceeded to tread the path of martyrdom, / Still hangs in the corners of your dry eyes. / I have come to awake you from your sleep. / My brothers, be aware of a difference between / To live a life and to pass a life' (Ravinder Bhattal).⁴

In the cultural space of the Punjab, Bhagat Singh facilitates an 'interaction' among the Punjabis, despite the borders and the boundaries the colonial politics has bequeathed to them. Thus the exploration and the elucidation of the symbiosis of Punjab culture and the martyr (Bhagat Singh) is meaningful to the extent that it underscores the syncretic cultural way the Hindu, the Sikh and the Muslim *Punjabis* recognize each other and maintain their common cultural space. Bhagat Singh's martyrdom begot the motif of 'wedding with death' in the literary culture of the Punjab. The virgin-martyr provided the Punjab poets with a 'style' i.e. composing a marriage-song of a martyr, called *ghori* in the Punjabi vernacular. Bhagat Singh was a trend setter in the realm of service,

suffering and sacrifice. His image, as constructed in the Punjabi literature, is a form of literary resistance to the imperialist hegemony, as hinted above. If Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi created the cultural symbols of resistance like 'swaraj', 'swadeshi', 'charkha' (spinning wheel) and 'ram raj' against imperialism, Bhagat Singh personified and practiced the culture of virgin or bridegroom-martyr in the Colonial Punjab, despite the fact that the discourse of this kind of martyrdom is yet to be incorporated in the craft of history writing. Partha Mitter informs us that during the colonial period, 'the greatest sacrifice to the mother was for men to remain celibate until the land was rid of the foreign rulers. This was the underlying idea behind the secret revolutionary societies in early 20th century Bengal...'⁵ Bhagat Singh's execution invoked the imagination of the Punjabi people. They became inventive and visionary. Their songs render the 'execution-accessories' like noose, gallows and black hood more perceptible. The execution of Bhagat Singh turned into a marriage ritual and he became a bridegroom-martyr in the social and cultural history of the Punjab.

While writing about Bhagat Singh as a virgin or bridegroom martyr I have contextualized the *ghori* in the perspective of historical events and personalities and also the ethos and history of the Punjabi society and its culture.

III

Unlike most other societies, Punjabi society celebrates a variety of deaths and accords to some of them the status of martyrdom. Irrespective of class, caste, community and creed affiliations, a person who defies social, political and religious hegemonies and dominations and in the process lays down his/her life is eulogized and revered in the literary and cultural domain of the Punjab. Poets and bards sing his/her chivalry and characterize the rebel with an epithet of lover and martyr (*ashiq* and *shaheed*). Five centuries ago Guru Nanak (A.D.1469-1539) baptized this Punjabi chivalric and rebellious act as a 'game of love'. He pronounced unequivocally:

If you want to play the game of love approach me with your head
on the palm of your hand. Place your feet on this path and give
your head without regard to the opinion of others.

The said game obliterated a distinction between a lover and a martyr (*ashiq* and a *shaheed*).⁶ Nanak, a protagonist of *prem-bhakti* (for that matter the Punjab sufis also), widened the concept of martyrdom which is conventionally associated with a narrow perception of religion and religiosity. The discourse of martyrdom prevalent in Punjabi literature and culture, therefore, illustrates a social praxis which counters the hegemonic and dominant institutions.

The 'frontier consciousness' of the people of the 'frontier' land of the Five Rivers (i.e. the Punjab) may be invoked to explain the theme of Punjabi resistance, rebelliousness and revolution. It is observed that the 'frontier' location helped in breaking 'the festering stagnation' and smashing 'the

shackling conservatism', in releasing the people to 'new beginnings and fresh ventures', in weeding out 'parochialisms', in fostering 'common cooperation outlook', in 'promoting an exchange of ideas' resulting in the growth of new patterns of thought, in releasing 'new styles in arts and literatures and new vogues in manners and behaviour'. The result was 'an enrichment of science and civilization, the cultivation of cosmopolitan values, the development of a resilient and utilitarian outlook, the growth of an experimental and pragmatic tendency and, above all, the strengthening of the spirit of adjustment and accommodation'. History blessed the Punjab with the spirit of socio-cultural assimilation or fusion. The land of the Five Rivers 'became the seedbed of new ideas, values and morals, which brought about tremendous revolutions within the whole fabric of Indian culture. Side by side, it also became the kaleidoscope of peoples, customs and behaviours, whose perpetual contacts, shiftings and alterations, blurred the contours of its cultural identity or historical individuality. The only way for the people of the Punjab to work out new and new adjustments in thought and action has been through coercion or consent, conquest or conciliation. Rigidity and intransigence are foreign to the Punjabis and fatal to their growth and progress.'⁷

This phenomenon of cultural open-endedness and fusion in the Punjab may help us to appreciate the 'game of love' as illustrated by the synthesis of a lover and a martyr into a single identity of non-conformist. About fifty years ago in 1956 Amrita Pritam, the celebrated Punjabi poetess⁸, versified this non-conformism. She versified the identity of a Punjabi lover and a martyr. In her poem *Punjab Da Waris*, she pronounces that those who belong to the caste of love wear out a couch of pricks. Love and devotion permeate their veins and limbs. They sing the Deepak *raga*, and twist their life-span into a wick, and burn themselves like a lamp. Amrita rehabilitates the social identity of a Punjabi lover/martyr in a 'specific' caste', distinct from the one, founded by the Brahmanical elite class. Members of this specific caste, as Punjab folk legends of *ashiq* and *shaheed* reveal, transcended and defied the systems and structures laid by the patriarchs. These non-conformist lovers/martyrs constituted their own small and distinct group which had *its own* endogamy, hereditary membership, genealogy and a specific life style marked by the traditions of non-conformism, self-suffering and sacrifice. It is these historically evolved traditions/systems of attitudes which ensure cohesion in this 'caste' of rebels and their followers in Punjabi society and history.

Of course, it is difficult to locate the said caste of lovers and martyrs in the time and space of 'conventional' history. The history of this caste has an 'empty' time and 'abstract' space. Its members no longer remain associated with their respective family/community/national genealogies which history has conferred on them. In this connection it may be argued that an individual becomes *ashiq* and *shaheed* only when he/she does not conform to the established norms and hence delinks himself or herself from his/her own 'genealogical' roots which involve 'time' and 'space'. By doing so he or she leaves his/her conventional space and joins the space of those who are like him/her; and this space in contrast to the space of history is an 'abstract' space.

In other words, its space is 'anthropological' which prominently exists in culture and literature than in 'history'. What I wish to submit is that for understanding the socio-cultural ethos of the Punjab society in the context of our present exercise of conceptualizing the folk representation of Bhagat Singh as a martyr, one needs to know that 'history organizes its data in relation to conscious expression of social life, while anthropology proceeds by examining its unconscious foundations.'⁹

The motif of martyr and martyrdom or of love/devotion (*ishq*) and lover/devotee (*ashiq*) has both ample space and respectable status in the Punjabi society and its history, culture, art and literature. Thus a martyr and a lover are not cut off from a cultural environment which includes fairs, festivals, mausoleums, bards and ballads. It is the cultural environment which presents the lovers and martyrs in the public as heroes. As far their genealogy is concerned, these heroes are different from what they have been or are portrayed in history and historiography of conventional variety. Therefore, it is premised that art and 'history' are two different registers of dialogue. However, both need to be in constant dialogue with each other. It is in this sense of dialogism that literature is being looked upon as a rich source-material that can enrich the craft of writing history.

In one of the folk documentations of Bhagat Singh i.e. the *Qissa Bhagat Singh*¹⁰, a martyr is considered a phoenix, a magic bird that lives for several hundreds years before burning itself and then being born again from its ashes.¹¹ Thus, a martyr is perceived in popular literature as liberated from the worldly circle of birth-death-rebirth (i.e. time and space). He/she is one who survives as an independent force in history and appears/reappears boldly of his/her own to defy the exploiters and the wicked.

IV

In the realm of Punjab history and literature, other than the folk, a number of texts of martyrs and martyrdoms with multiple voices - communitarian and nationalist exist. Nevertheless, poets of the Punjabi soil trace the historical continuity/genealogy of non-conformism when they characterize Bhagat Singh as an ideological crusader like Baba Farid, Baba Nanak, Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah who spoke against the religious, political and social patriarchal high handedness of their respective times from the twelfth century to the eighteenth century. For instance, Sadhu Bining versifies Bhagat Singh from this perspective. For him Bhagat Singh personifies the entire Punjabi poetry. He is a *saloka* of Farid, *bani* of Guru Nanak, *kafi* of Bulleh Shah and *qissa* of Waris Shah.¹² If one is acquainted with these genres of Punjabi poetry and its ideological nuances, one can easily understand the non-conformist heritage inherited and enriched by Bhagat Singh. Thus a reading of the verses of Baba Farid (A.D.1173-1265), Guru Nanak (A.D.1469-1539) and Bulleh Shah (A.D. 1680-1758) - the three most important landmarks of Punjab history and culture - may help us to contextualize the revolutionary and rebellious character of Bhagat Singh and the literary texture woven around him. The contextualization

under reference also alludes to the historically evolved Punjabi cultural milieu of non-conformism and non-sectarianism. The three ‘medieval’ rebels - Farid, Nanak and Bulleh Shah - are as fresh and as *contemporary* in the Punjabi society, its literature, its culture and its memory as Bhagat Singh is. The Punjabi poets, who versify Bhagat Singh, create a counter-memory as a source for resistance to communitarianism. Their verses indirectly serve as critique of the oppressing *rationalities* of the communitarian discourse that makes inroads in the discipline of social sciences, particularly history.

As non-conformist (i) Baba Farid, a ‘Muslim’ sufi, is a significant factor to disassociate the ‘fanatic sword’ from the advent of Islam in the Punjab, (ii) Baba Nanak, a ‘Sikh’ guru is significant to counter the communitarian historiography, and (iii) Bulleh Shah, a ‘Muslim’ poet, is also significant to silence the voice of the dominant cliché that the eighteenth century was a century of ‘Sikh-Muslim’/religious conflict. Thus if the rebellious verses of Baba Farid, Baba Nanak and Bulleh Shah and other medieval poets are a part and parcel of our Punjab literary and cultural heritage, the ‘modern’ slogan of *Inqalab Zindabad* is the revolutionary legacy that has been bequeathed to us by Bhagat Singh.

The problem, I am sharing here, suggests one thing very clearly: the political/state boundaries are different from the boundaries of cultural heritage and legacies.

V

The folk genre of *ghori*, in which the execution of Bhagat Singh is narrated, was also adopted by the ‘Sikh’ gurus in constructing their *bani*. It is this folk genre of *ghori* which enlists Bhagat Singh in the history of the Punjabi martyr-bridegrooms, the others being the four sons or *sahibzadas* of Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1707), the tenth guru of the Sikhs.

The *ghori* of Bhagat Singh was sung in Lahore by a poet named Tair in 1932, just after a year of Bahgat Singh’s martyrdom. But it became a popular (folk) song and inspired many other Punjabi poets to write such *ghoris* on him. The popularity of the *ghori* of Bhagat Singh may be attributed to two reasons. First, it contains the motif of marriage and martyr - a motif which historically and culturally appeals to the people of the Punjab. Secondly, *ghori* is a popular genre of folk song which is sung in the Punjab on the occasion of the marriage of a boy. Generally, the people of the Punjab glorify and narrate martyrs, martyrdoms and chivalric exploits in the genre of *var* (ballad) and *jangnamah* (poetical chronicles of war). Shah Muhammad’s *Jangnamah Hind Punjab*, composed in 1846, *Chathian Di Var* (Lay of the Chathas) versified by Pir Mohammad c.1849, Najabat’s *Nadir Shah Di Var* (The Lay of Nadir Shah) and other such accounts vouch for the prevalence of this literary phenomenon in the Punjab. But the Punjabis pay a tribute to their virgin martyrs through the folk songs which are otherwise culturally prescribed to be sung on the occasion of a marriage.

The glorification of Bhagat Singh’s martyrdom communicated through *ghori* suggests the emanation or rise of those cultural dynamics of the Punjab in the

social domain when the marriageable age of a revolutionary/rebel/warrior coincides with his death/martyrdom. It is this coincidence, nay a syncretism, which obliterates the difference between a bridegroom and a martyr; both merge together and construct a new social category of martyr-bridegroom or the virgin martyr, a rare and specific category in the history of cultural sociology of the Punjab. The syncretism of marriage and martyrdom is a state of being liminal or liminality which refers to being between two statuses (of a bridegroom and of a martyr). Thus *ghori*, a folk poetic genre, has a two-pronged cultural significance (in the context of marriage and martyrdom) on the social space of the Punjab.

Perhaps a life full of hazards and adventurism of the people of the 'frontier' region must have played a historic role to trivialize death or 'celebrate' it with fervour, honour and dignity. Puran Singh (A.D.1881-1931), the celebrated modern poet of the Punjab, versified this kind of Punjabi ethos:

These carefree, happy-go-lucky Punjabis/ crack jokes with death/
and are least scared of it! / Only love can enslave them, / and they
can offer their lives for it. /But [they] rise up with cudgels, when
challenged and defied.

The following *ghori* was sung by a poet, named Tair on 23 March 1932 when about one lakh people gathered in Lahore to celebrate the first martyrdom anniversary of Bhagat Singh. The text of the *ghori* in its English version is given below:

Come on sisters /Let us sing together the songs of marriage, the
ghorian, /The wedding procession, *janjh*, has got ready. /Sardar
Bhagat Singh, the patriot is about to repair /To marry Death, the
maiden. /For solemn bath /Bhagat Singh, you have turned gallows
into wicker-basket, *khara* /And, like a bridegroom, you have seated
cross-legged on it. / Have bath with a pitcher brimful of tears /And
put on a solemn red thread, *mohli*, dyed in blood. /Fashioning the
hood of execution into a crown /Bhagat Singh, you have sported a
frilled chaplet. /O bridegroom, / With a sword of patience /You
have slashed the jand-tree of tyranny. / Flanked by your best-men,
the *sarbalahs*, Rajguru and Sukhdev /You have mounted at the
centre of the gallows. /Sisters are to take solemn money /For
holding the bridle of your wedding-mare, the *vagh pharai*
ceremony /And you owe your sisters that token-amount. /Hari
Krishan is your brother-in-law, the *sandu* /You together have
arrived at your in-laws' house for marriage. /O bridegroom, /Thirty
five crores people /Join your wedding procession / Many are
mounted /Many are on foot. /Attired in the black /The wedding
procession has proceeded /'Tair' is too ready for the same.¹³

The *ghori*, describes Bhagat Singh, who is to be hanged, as a bridegroom. To eulogize his chivalry and execution, the ceremonies of marriage are invoked as

metaphors. Bhagat Singh, whom the imperialist court adjudged a convict and hence condemned to death sentence, is characterized as a bridegroom, a solemn figure in the Punjab cultural matrix. He is visualized as the celebrated one who is going to wed with the girl, named Death. The death penalty and its masters are defied and belittled. The *ghori* transfigures the hard wooden gallows into a solemn bathing square basket (made of reeds) i.e. the *khara*. It is used by the 'bridegroom', Bhagat Singh for taking a ceremonial bath before mounting a 'mare' that would carry him to his 'bride's house'. The terrifying and imposing grandeur of the imperial gallows is reduced to the level of a bathing square basket. On the second level, the gallows, the symbol of the termination of life, is a 'mare' of Bhagat Singh. It would launch a new phase in his life as it would carry him (the bridegroom) to the girl (Death) with whom he is betrothed. A black hood of execution, meant for the condemned, has been metamorphosed into a crown and chaplet of Bhagat Singh, the bridegroom-martyr. This amazing change, a linguist turn which the *ghori* of Bhagat Singh makes, undermined the domination and hegemony of the British crown and penalty of death.

Besides being a 'folk' emplotment of Bhagat Singh's struggle against British imperialism, the *ghori* is also a source of Punjabi identity and pride as personified by Bhagat Singh and illuminated by his militant revolutionary praxis. On the Punjabi space and soil the *ghori* culturalizes Bahgat Singh who was a revolutionary patriot of a national and international stature. Simultaneously, it (*ghori*) nationalizes the vernacular tribute given to a martyr.

VI

The image of Bhagat Singh as a martyr-bridegroom reminds or resuscitates the legend of Salar Masud, the Ghazi Mian who achieved martyrdom in the eleventh century (A.D.1033) on the same day of his marriage. The motif of death-bridegroom or marriage-martyrdom relationship also appears in the twelfth-thirteenth century in the poetry of Baba Shaikh Farid and in the fifteenth-sixteenth century in that of Baba Nanak and also in the ballads written and sung in the twentieth century in memory of the sons of Guru Gobind Singh and of Haqiqat Rai. Farid, the first Punjab poet, states:

The day a maid is engaged /her marriage day is fixed. /The angel
of death, / the ears had heard, /comes and shows his face. /He takes
the helpless life, /cracking the bones. /Make life understand: /the
fixed time can't go away. /Death, the groom, will come and take
/life, his bride, away in marriage.

However it is to be noted that the relationship between death and life as groom and bride in the medieval poetry of Baba Shaikh Farid get reversed in the *ghori* of Bhagat Singh. In this *ghori*, constructed and sung in the revolutionary ambience of confrontation with British imperialism, death is transformed into a bride and life into a bridegroom. The name of the girl to be wedded with Bhagat

Singh is Death. Here in the *ghori*, it is Death, the bride, who is waiting for the bridegroom, Bhagat Singh.

After the gap of about two hundred and fifty years when Baba Farid constructed the above mentioned *dhoa*, it was Baba Nanak who also uses the metaphors of bridegroom, bride and marriage procession (*janj*) in his *babarvani* to narrate the invasion of Babur (the founder of the Mughal empire in India):

Bringing a crowd of sins as his bridal procession,
Like a bridegroom Babar [Babur] has hastened from Kabul,
To seize by force his bride, O Lalo,
The wealth of Hindustan.

But the question that arises here is: Why in the poetry of Baba Farid and Baba Nanak death or invader is addressed as a bridegroom, life as bride and the army of the invader as *barat /janj*? The answer may be sought in history.

Chengiz Khan in the thirteenth century and Babur in the sixteenth century were the known invaders who were the authors of death and life. Their ruthless killings forced the sensitive poetic minds like that of Baba Farid and Baba Nanak to perceive invaders and death as bridegrooms who take away life (bride). The relationship between invader, death and bridegroom refer to the socio-cultural image of a medieval patriarch, a dominating and hegemonic being.

But the motif of the relationship between marriage and martyrdom prevalent in the *ghori* of Bhagat Singh brings us more close to the legend of Salar Masud Ghazi. On the day of his marriage he got martyrdom (in A.D. 1033) at Bahraich in north-eastern Uttar Pradesh, bordering Nepal while protecting the cows; and after the gap of nine hundred years (in A.D.1931) Bhagat Singh embraced martyrdom while protecting his motherland. Cow and motherland are significant and sacred for the perpetuation of physical life and social identity. At the level of signifier, both are inseparably linked with the socio-cultural domain of the people. Both the martyrs were virgin. Salar Masud was nineteen years old and Bhagat Singh was of twenty three years at the time of their martyrdoms; and both are remembered in the genre of a marriage song i.e. *ghori*.

That the folk wish to see their virgin-martyrs as immortal bridegrooms is not only testified by the *ghori* of Bhagat Singh and other martyrs but also, for instance, by the symbolic performance of the wedding of Salar Masud with Johra or Zohra Bibi which is celebrated each year 'in a grand manner in the *dargah* with a million pilgrims as wedding guests, among them many newly-wed couples who come for the blessings of the saint. It is performed at the *mela* in the month of Jeth (May/June).'¹⁴ The non-sectarian devotion shown by people to the virgin-martyrs can be tread in the following narration about the martyr Salar Masud Ghazi: 'The famous shrine of Ghazi Miyan or Salar Masud Ghazi in eastern Uttar Pradesh, remembered both by Hindus and Muslims as Bale Miyan...has been a centre of popular pilgrimages since the fourteenth century... Several graves in modern Uttar Pradesh, associated with Ghazi Miyan, are worshipped both by Hindus and Muslims. At Bahraich, Hindus

mendicants and Muslims Qalandars, together with their followers, dance and sing around a long bamboo pole wrapped in coloured rags with horse-hair tied on its top. Sikandar Lodi reportedly tried in vain to stop these un-Islamic practices. Later, Muslim and Hindu puritanical and revivalist movements failed to undermine their popularity.¹⁵

Thus the *ghori* of Bhagat Singh and symbolic performance of the marriage of Salar Masud suggest that they (martyrs) are not 'dead'. They remain the protagonists of communal harmony and protectors of the oppressed and the down-trodden. They survive in their ideology, views and commitments. The motif of marriage and martyrdom, as treasured in the marriage songs about Bhagat Singh and Salar Masud Ghazi, may be further illustrated with reference to the martyrdoms of Ajit Singh (1686-1704), Jujhar Singh (1690-1704), Zorawar Singh (1696-1704) and Fateh Singh (1699-1704), the four virgin martyrs and sons (*sahibzadas*) of Guru Gobind Singh.

Since the martyred sons of the Guru are virgins, they are not simply remembered as war-heroes in people's literature, as shown usually in historical narrations. For the people the martyred sons are bridegroom-martyrs. In the *Jangnamah Chamkour Sahib* (war-narrative of Chamkor) Bhai Sohan Singh Ghukewalia (b.1879), the balladeer, narrates the martyrdoms of Ajit Singh and Jujhar Singh in the marriage-martyrdom context.¹⁶ In *Ajit Singh Di Var* (The Ballad of Ajit Singh) composed by Bachan Singh Bachan, Ajit Singh is portrayed as a warrior as well as a bridegroom. Similarly, Sohan Singh Sittal, the celebrated composer of ballads, in one of his ballads narrates Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh, the two younger sons of Guru Gobind Singh, as the bridegrooms when they were being taken away for bricking up in the fort wall. The martyrdom of the Guru's sons was not only the concern of the non-Muslim Punjabis. As the Muslims participated in the revolt spearheaded by Banda, similarly, they pay their tribute to the martyrs. Mirza Muhammad Abdul Gani narrated the martyrdom of the two elder sons of the Guru in his *Johir Teg* written in Urdu. But it was Hakim Alah Yar Khan Jogi who first versified in Urdu the incident of Sirhind in 1913 under the title of *Shaheedan vafa* and that of Chamkour in 1915 under the title of *Ganj Shaheedañ*. Piayra Singh Padam has transliterated the texts of the said works in the Punjabi vernacular (Gurmukhi).¹⁷

The marriage oriented verses written on the martyrs extend, widen and accelerate the range, scope and speed by which the martyrdoms of the virgins are communicated and narrated. Marriage and martyrdom get fused together in a single whole and cannot be re-situated in separate categories. In other words, both, the marriage and the martyrdom, blend and merge to become indistinguishable either from marriage or from martyrdom. Both constitute a single but strong motif in the history of Punjab culture and literature. The common point in the lives of Bhagat Singh, Salar Masud and the four sons of Guru Gobind is the symbiosis of marriage and martyrdom. The fusion as exemplified by them makes them unique martyrs in the popular literature and history. Salar Masud is revered and remembered as saint or Ghazi Dullah (Ghazi means a warrior who fights for the faith and Dullah means bridegroom),

the four sons of Guru Gobind Singh as the 'Babas' and Bhagat Singh as 'Shaheed-i-Azam'.

Notes

¹ Buddha Prakash, *Evolution of Heroic Tradition in Ancient Panjab*, Patiala, Panjabi University, 1971, p. 149.

²For the Gurmukhi version see Dharampal Singal and Baldev Singh Baddan, eds., *Shaheed-E-Azam Bhagat Singh Kaav* (A collection of poems on Bhagat Singh), National Book Trust Delhi, India, 2005, p.112.

³ *ibid.* p. 53.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 336.

⁵ Partha Mitter, 'Mechanical reproduction and the world of the colonial artist', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Volume 36, number 3, September-December 2002, p. 17.

⁶ The Punjab love legends like *Heer-Ranjha*, *Sassi-Punnun*, *Sohni Mahiwal* and others told in the genre of *qissa* illustrate the obliteration under reference.

⁷ Buddha Prakash *Glimpses of Ancient Panjab*, Patiala, Panjabi University, 1983, pp. 4-5.

⁸Amrita Pritam was born on 31st August 1919 in Gujranwala west Punjab, Pakistan. She passed away on 31st October 2005 in Delhi. She started writing verses in her early teen under the patronage of her father Giani Kartar Singh Hitkari, a poet of considerable weight and scholarship. Amrita's popular poem is *I Ask Waris Shah Today* which she wrote in the wake of the partition (1947) riots and bloodshed. Waris was the prominent *qissa-kar* (poet-narrator) of the eighteenth century Punjab who wrote the *qissa* of Hir, a legendary Punjaban girl.

⁹Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans., Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Qissa Bhagat Singh*, Yuvak Kendra, Jullundar, 1968, p. 97.

¹¹'For the sake of people, a martyr has to sacrifice himself. / His invaluable drop of blood will / not go waste. / It is said that from his ashes a new offshoot will sprout / This offshoot will be a blaze, and will burn the wicked to ashes', *ibid.*

¹² *Saloka*, *bani*, and *kafi* are the genres of devotional poetry; and *qissa* is the poetic-narrative of love-legend. For the Gurmukhi version see Sadhu Bining, 'Bhagat Singh' in Dharampal Singal and Baldev Singh Baddan, eds., *Shaheed-E-Azam Bhagat Singh Kaav*, p. 55.

¹³For the Gurmukhi version see Dharampal Singal and Baldev Singh Baddan, eds., *Shaheed-E-Azam Bhagat Singh Kaav*, p.112.

¹⁴ Kerrin Grafing Schwerin, 'The Cow-Saving Muslim Saint: Elite and Folk Representation of a Tomb Cult in Oudh, in Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy, eds., *Living Together Separately: Cultural India in History and Politics*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 172-193.

¹⁵ Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200-1800*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2004. pp. 157-58.

¹⁶ Bhai Sohan Singh Ghukewalia, *Jangnamah Chamkour Sahib* (in Gurmukhi) /*Ballad of Chamkour Sahib*, Amritsar, Bhai Charar Singh Jiwan Singh, n.d.

¹⁷ Piyara Singh Padam, *Char Sahibzadey* (in Gurmukhi) /*Four Sons of Guru Gobind Singh*, Patiala, Kala Mandir Lower Mall, fourth edition, 1988.

Punjabi (Shahmukhi) Version of *Ghori* of Bhagat Singh.

گھوڑی شہید بھگت سنگھ

(یہ گھوڑی 23 مارچ 1932ء کو بھگت سنگھ، راج گورو اور سکھ یوگی بہلی بری کے قتل پر لاہور میں ایک لوک شاعر (طار) نے ننگے پر کھڑے ہو کر گائی تھی۔ شہیدوں کی بری سنانے پر حکومت نے عمل پابندی مان کر دی تھی۔ لیکن پابندی کے باوجود بری کی تقریبات میں تقریباً ایک لاکھ افراد شریک ہوئے تھے۔

آؤ نی بھینو آؤ رل گاو بیے گھوڑیاں
 چن تے ہوئی اے تیار، وے ہاں
 موت کڑی نوں پرناون چلیا
 دیش بھگت سردار وے ہاں
 پھانسی دے تنخنے والا کھارا بنا کے
 بیٹھا توں پونکڑی مار وے ہاں
 ہتھیواں دے پانی بھر نہاوو گھڑولی
 پھانسی دی ٹوپی والا کھارا بنا کے
 سہرا توں بدھا جھانجھار وے ہاں
 چنڈی تے وڈھی، لاڑے زور ظلم دی
 صبر دی مار، تلوار وے ہاں
 راجگورو تے سکھ دیو سر باہلے
 چڑھیا تے توں ہی وچکار وے ہاں
 واگ پھرائی تھیوں بھیناں نے لینی
 بھیناں دا رکھیا ادھار وے ہاں
 ہری کرشن تیرا بنیا وے ساڈھو
 ڈھکے تے تسمیں اکو وار وے ہاں
 مٹیٹی کروڑ تیرے جانجی وے لاڈیا
 پیدل تے کئی اسوار وے ہاں
 کالیاں پوشاکاں پاکے چن جو ٹر پی
 طار وی ہویا اے تیار وے ہاں