

Martyrdom: W.H. McLeod and his Students

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Hew McLeod's work on martyrdom in the Sikh tradition is minimal, although an understanding of the phenomenon may be pieced together from his collected works. It may thus be seen as inevitable that his doctoral students have ventured so prolifically into this terrain, particularly evinced by their keen interest and examinations of the execution of the first martyr of the Sikh tradition, Guru Arjan (d. 1606 CE), the compiler of the *Adi Granth* and its principal contributor. This paper examines and contrasts general claims regarding Sikh martyrdom made by all three scholars and specific ones about Guru Arjan's death.

I

Let us begin with Hew McLeod's now-classic essay 'The Evolution of the Sikh Community' published in 1976.¹ It is in this article that McLeod, like any critical historian, wondered about the many historical and environmental factors which played a role in the gradual shaping of the Sikh Panth of the past and of today. His musings were in many ways interventions into the dominant Sikh narrative of the day which put forward an interpretation of Sikh history and religion which placed by far the greatest emphasis in the ongoing evolution of the Sikh community on the agency of the ten living Sikh Gurus. In this reading the Sikh Gurus were very much the architects of the history, ideology, and religion of the Sikh people and the post-Guru period of the Sikh tradition (after the death of Guru Gobind Singh in October 1708) was simply projected as a time when their followers did their utmost to embody that message and live up to its ideals.²

McLeod began problematising this beloved narrative in much the same critical way he applied to the narratives of the first Sikh Master in his initial book, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*,³ focussing in the process upon the effect on the nascent Sikh community of growing numbers after the guruship of Guru Nanak, of the large influx of members of the Jat caste into the Panth during the time of the fifth Guru, and of the sixth Guru's strategic shift of location from the Punjab plains to the Shivalik hills, home of various shakti expressions of the Hindu tradition, expressions which over time, McLeod conjectured, helped

augment the tenth Guru's understanding of himself and the larger universe, ultimately resulting in the composition of such works as the *Chandi Charitr*, *Chandi ki Var*, and the *Chaubis Avtar* all of which find their place within the Dasam Granth and, as well, in the inauguration in 1699 of the Khalsa, the famed martial order of the Sikhs. Although some of these important factors were previously mentioned or hinted at by other scholars (Indubhusan Banerjee referred to the importance of the Jat composition of the later Panth in the 1930s for example)⁴ no other historian had pondered these developments as systematically and presented them as effectively in the construction of the Sikh Panth as had McLeod. This may have been an effective presentation but it was one, let us remember, which was still largely speculative a claim from which McLeod never wavered.

McLeod's meditations on the development of this Sikh history were certainly met with skepticism, resistance, and at times vitriol as the appearance of Jagjit Singh's *The Sikh Revolution* and the various publications by the Sikh Studies group led by Jasbir Singh Mann attest.⁵ Unfortunately, little common ground was sought by more traditionally inclined scholars of Sikhism for while skeptics suggested a linear trajectory in which the Sikh Gurus alone had shaped Sikh history McLeod's not-so-tacit claim was that this process was rather a dialectical one: yes, the Sikh Gurus had shaped Sikh history but that very history had shaped and continues to shape the Sikh Gurus (or at least the image of the Gurus to later Sikhs), a point which McLeod's sustained scholarship continued to advance.

It is in this light that I would like to again turn to McLeod's essay and explore the topic at hand, namely martyrdom in the Sikh tradition with a particular emphasis on the martyrdom of Guru Arjan, a topic on which both I and Pashaura Singh as McLeod's doctoral students had earlier written. There is both here in McLeod's 'Evolution' and throughout his prolific scholarship no sustained definition of martyrdom put forward⁶ nor a contextual analysis of the type he masterfully presents in his *Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama*⁷ of those eighteenth and nineteenth-century Sikh works in which ideas of martyrdom prominently figure. This is just as well as McLeod's principal areas of focus are upon the life and teachings of Guru Nanak, the janam-sakhis, and later in his career the Khalsa Rahit. It is in discussing the latter, in particular that McLeod had chance to speak of the Panth's many martyrs although he did not really distinguish between various types of martyrdom. But it is the way he speaks of them that elicits our interest.

Although not a discourse on martyrdom itself therefore 'The Evolution of the Sikh Community' is the first place in which McLeod writes of what would become many similar references to what is considered to be the first martyrdom of the Sikh tradition, that of Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh Guru, in 1606. For Sikhs, let us be clear, this was a

supremely important and self-conscious act on the part of the fifth Sikh Master, taking to heart the teachings of the first Sikh Guru and undertaken to edify,⁸ the consequences of which are still readily felt throughout the history of the Sikh people, inspiring Sikhs throughout the world to acts of rare courage and perseverance.⁹ Such a tale of selfless sacrifice is a harrowing one, poignantly repeated in Sikh texts and devotedly narrated by Sikh kathākars and sung by Sikh musicians the world over,¹⁰ pitting evil enemies against righteous soldiers, tyrants against saints. According to it Guru Arjan was falsely implicated in the rebellion of the emperor's ambitious son Khusrau through the machinations of various personnel at the Mughal court in Lahore (the notorious Chandu Shah Khatri to be specific), imprisoned under the orders of the emperor Jahangir, and ultimately executed in horrific fashion even though he had the opportunity to escape his punishment and death through the intercession of the Muslim saint, Mian Mir. Gruesome paintings of the Guru's execution are commonplace and may be readily observed throughout Sikh museums within northern India adding a rough, evocative texture to the narrative's prominence which further underscores the Guru's physical torment.¹¹ McLeod's take on this event is brief, in the passive voice, paring away all but the most essential elements:

Gurū Arjan, the fifth Gurū...had in some manner incurred the displeasure of the Mughal authorities and in 1606 had died while in custody.¹²

Such brevity is of course reminiscent of McLeod's work on Guru Nanak, which condenses the life of the first Sikh Master into a small number of paragraphs.¹³ Here Guru Arjan's death is reduced to a single sentence. Many later scholars have understood this phrasing as a blunt critique and/or outright rejection of the more commonly held understanding noted earlier: Guru Arjan was not killed, executed, or martyred but he had simply died. As the construction of Sikh personhood is in part a product of the glorious narratives of the Sikh past, a past in which martyrology prominently figures, one can understand how McLeod's view may be construed as disrespectful.¹⁴ Why does McLeod not accept Guru Arjan's murder by the state as martyrdom? Sikh sources often tacitly ask. It is true that he references this event as a martyrdom in later books and essays, but invariably this occurs, as he himself often repeats, only when he discloses traditional interpretations.¹⁵ During the 1980s and 90s, a period of severe ethnonationalist violence within the Punjab, McLeod's critical approach was often felt to have been consciously fostered by divisive, anti-Sikh forces within the Indian government in an attempt to humiliate the members of the Panth and make them more amenable to the

demands of the Congress government. Small groups of Sikhs within the Sikh diaspora continue this stance to this day.¹⁶

Certainly McLeod's is a mild critique of the dominant wisdom. Although it incorporates the central idea of the principal, near hegemonic Sikh narrative, that is that Guru Arjan was executed by the emperor Jahangir, it does not go into any of the enthusiastic and at times shocking detail which punctuates traditional accounts, an understanding which also informs McLeod's references to Guru Tegh Bahadar's execution and that of other Sikhs traditionally understood to be martyrs. Although one may question McLeod's statement in good faith (after all, there is little doubt that the state's displeasure was incurred because Jahangir did indeed understand Guru Arjan to have blessed Khusrau's rebellion—this itself takes care of the matter of 'some manner') McLeod's reasoning for this failure is nevertheless sound, as I have shown elsewhere, insofar as there exists no contemporary source which supports the claims of the current Sikh narrative. Indeed, contemporary and near-contemporary sources most certainly exist but we do not hear of Guru Arjan's death as martyrdom, resistance, and defiance until the mid eighteenth century, nearly a century and a half after the fifth Master's demise. Furthermore, the label *śahīd* is not applied to him until well into the nineteenth.¹⁷ The reason for these absences I conjectured some years back was that there was no martyrologist to transform Guru Arjan's death into glorious martyrdom in the way that Guru Tegh Bahadar's biographer (if you will) had done in the *Bachitar Natak*.¹⁸ For some reason, to put it bluntly and in other words, Sikh authors of the seventeenth to mid eighteenth centuries did not find anything edifying or heroic in Guru Arjan's execution, viewing the fifth Sikh Master perhaps as just one other victim (albeit an exceptionally significant one) of the Mughal state against which Khalsa Sikhs were apparently pitted.¹⁹ Nor is it explicit that Guru Arjan's death was incorporated by later Sikh writers and ideologues into the type of 'violent' bhakti we discover in the tenth Guru's writings on the goddess Chandi or in his wonderfully inclusive *Jāp Sāhib* and *Akāl Ustāti*, all compositions of which prominently figure within the Dasam Granth.²⁰

II

Since the publication of McLeod's essay, and later, my articles and book on the Sikh concept and history of martyrdom the academic conferences, essays, and books dealing with Guru Arjan's death and the idea of martyrdom within Sikhism have been numerous, all more or less censuring McLeod's claims and repeating the critique of his work noted above regarding the fifth Guru.²¹ Perhaps the most important, sustained, and serious assessment of my and McLeod's analysis of contemporary sources is that of Pashaura Singh (another of McLeod's students) which

appears in his very important book on Guru Arjan.²² This, I believe, requires a prolonged comment as Pashaura Singh's discussion is a long and nuanced one incorporating at points some very original perspectives. In his chapter on Guru Arjan's martyrdom (so titled) Pashaura Singh raises some very interesting and significant points in his analysis of Guru Arjan's imprisonment and execution, particularly his study of the Mughal observance of the Mongol *törä* and *yāsā*, norms and laws respectively, as opposed to *sharī'ā*, Islamic law. Although *yāsā* and *sharī'ā* may not be mutually exclusive (and both are somewhat flexible) Pashaura has here underscored the importance of the Mughal attention to their Chingissid legacy and how such legacy was implemented in everyday Mughal courtly life and observances.²³ This focus on Mongol norms and precedents is nevertheless in my opinion somewhat exaggerated within the context of Guru Arjan's death.

With some injustice to the many points Pashaura brings to bear upon his understanding of the Guru's death let me précis his overall argument regarding *yāsā* briefly.²⁴ It runs something as follows: Jahangir's memoirs mention that he had longed looked upon the 'shop' of the Sikh Gurus with distrust. An opportunity to deal with it arrived when the fifth Guru placed a sign of fortune on the rebel Khusrau's forehead. Hearing of this the emperor ordered the Guru's imprisonment and then commanded him to be subjected to *siyāsat o yāsā* which, strictly speaking, we may translate as 'punishment in accordance with Chingissid custom and code' but which could simply mean emphatically punished or executed as Wheeler Thackston's translation of the *Jahāngīr-nāmā* indicates.²⁵ So far we follow the emperor's memoirs. Here is Pashaura's novel contribution: He claims that the *yāsā* is here the equivalent of *törä* which maintains in regard to the execution of those of royal or honoured background that blood not be spilled. Ipso facto as Guru Arjan was a spiritual figure he was tortured and killed without the shedding of his blood and thus, Professor Singh reasons, the relatively tame mention of 'torture' (*āzār*) to which the Guru was subjected that is mentioned in the Persian *Dabistān-i Mazāhib* written about 40 years after the event is likely accurate.²⁶ He also adds, to support the contention that torture was indeed applied, a contemporary apocryphal shalok in the Banno recension of the *Adi Granth* which mentions dousing the soul within burning hot sand, claiming that there may also be some truth to the more colourful narrative which states that Guru Arjan was placed upon a large griddle whilst it was heated and had hot sand poured upon him.²⁷ Finally, he states that the description elaborated in the later eighteenth century in Kesar Singh Chhibbar's *Bansāvalī-nāmā* (1776 CE) in which the Guru died after being bound and thrown into the Ravi may also be accurate.²⁸ Why did no Sikh bother to describe the Guru's suffering? Pashaura Singh speculates that the famous *vār* of Bhai Gurdas Bhalla in which Guru Arjan's death is memorialised fails to include any reference

to inflicted injuries because ‘the memory of what Bhai Gurdas actually witnessed was too painful for him to describe in words.’²⁹

Pashaura’s claim, I must state, is an important one and gives a fresh interpretation to Guru Arjan’s execution by being the first to emphasise the application of the Chingissid *tōrā* in regard to it. But it is questionable despite its novelty as it hinges in large part upon the speculation that Jahangir would have understood Guru Arjan to be either royal, honoured, or spiritual.³⁰ We do hear of Jahangir applying the principles of the *tōrā* for example to his rebellious son, Khusrau, who was brought to him with hands bound and chains on his legs in the *tōrā*-esque fashion so prescribed.³¹ The question to ask therefore is Did Jahangir understand Guru Arjan and by extension the young Sikh Panth in the way that Pashaura suggests? This seems unlikely as Guru Arjan, according to Jahangir, was not a genuine spiritual guide, but rather a pretender to the status who merely dressed the part, *dar libās-i pīrī o shaikhī* ‘in the garments of spirituality and holiness’. Guru Arjan’s teachings were, Jahangir continues, the ‘false trade’ (*dokān-i bāṭil*) of an ‘inconsequential little fellow’ (*mardak-i majhūl*) whose falseness Jahangir himself had realised when the Guru applied the *qashqah* to the seditious Khusrau’s forehead.³² It is worth noting that some of Khusrau’s other sympathisers were treated in a very harsh manner, paraded around in the skin of an ass before the captured prince’s very eyes, torture which Jahangir cheerfully describes (something he does not do regarding Guru Arjan’s execution).³³ Would the emperor therefore advise his subordinates in Lahore to take such care in carrying out Guru Arjan’s death sentence, the guru of a group which was to say the least an exceedingly marginal presence in Mughal sources,³⁴ to ensure that he was killed in what we can only assume to be a relatively respectful manner (torturous, yes, but respectful nevertheless)? In the light of the emperor’s memoirs I think this unlikely despite the use of the specific terms *siyāsāt o yāsā*. In this regard therefore I suggest that Thackston’s translation is more accurate than the one provided, for example, by Ganda Singh (‘put to death with tortures’) and embraced by later Sikhs.³⁵

There are other nuances to Pashaura’s overall argument which require similar attention. In regard to the allocation of blame for example we are also given cause to pause. In examining eighteenth-century sources dealing with Guru Arjan Pashaura notes the two narratives of Kirpal Das and Sarup Das Bhalla which are in general agreement.³⁶ In the latter we find that the emperor was actually misled by Chandu Shah into fining the Guru after which Chandu Shah paid the fine and tortured the Guru to death to exact his revenge for having his offer to marry his daughter to Guru Arjan’s son Hargobind rebuffed. As Harbans Kaur Sagu claims ‘Bhalla allocates total blame to Chandu and none to the emperor Jahangir.’³⁷ Is it possible that the Mughal state purposefully fostered this narrative to allocate blame to Chandu Shah for the Guru’s execution and

thus ensure that Jahangir was not implicated in the act? asks Pashaura Singh. A tempting reading which Pashaura supports by noting the gossip conveyed by the Portuguese Jesuit Jerome Xavier in his letter to his superiors in Lisbon.³⁸ Yet, the simple fact that the emperor himself mentioned his order to execute the Guru in his memoirs is enough to problematise this interpretation. Such memoirs after all were not meant to be privately held but distributed to princes, royalty, and other family members as gifts since these, like the famed *Mirrors* literature, were prepared to instruct and edify.³⁹ The importance of ‘book culture’ within the Mughal court, books as commodities, reflections of power, and potential gifts in which this power is conveyed is one of the Indo-Timurid court’s well known facets,⁴⁰ a point to which Pashaura refers when speaking of manuscripts of the *Adi Granth*.⁴¹ Such a sympathetic reading of contemporary sources suggests that although Pashaura Singh is very cautious in his approach to Guru Arjan’s death he ultimately remains more true to the accepted interpretation than either myself or McLeod. Important as Pashaura’s claims may be therefore these do not really go beyond McLeod’s brief sentence and thus his analysis fails to critically advance our understanding of the event of the Guru’s death. It rounds out the narrative innovatively to be sure, but forwards it little.

Before leaving Pashaura Singh’s research let us note another source to which he turns his gaze and which requires some comment, the infamous letter of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624). Pashaura’s focus on this is equally problematic. As Indu Banga has recently shown the passage in question dealing with Guru Arjan is written as a digression (a somewhat more lengthy aside than she gives it credit, mind you)⁴² in an advocacy of the glory of Sirhindi’s particular variety of Islam.⁴³ Indeed, the simple fact that Sirhindi phrases the event in the passive voice in Persian (*kuṣhtan-i kāfir-i la ĩn-i goindwāl bisyār khūb wāqi / shud*, ‘the execution of the accursed kafir of Goindwal very fortunately happened’) and thus not in the jubilant tone which either Ganda Singh or Pashaura Singh note, supports this claim.⁴⁴

Yet even Indu Banga fails to note that the emphasis on Sirhindi falls into the same precarious trap into which scholars have been falling since the late nineteenth century, namely the failure to recognise that both the Naqshbandi order’s and Sirhindi’s significance is a product of later Indian historiography, in particular that of the Naqshbandiyya silsilah itself, something to which Pashaura Singh himself points.⁴⁵ It seems to me that Jahangir, who let us recall had previously rebelled against his father; proclaimed himself emperor; gone so far as to have his father’s truly beloved court favourite, Shaikh Abu’l Fazl Allami killed; and had already ruled securely as emperor for a number of months before deciding to deal with Khusrau would not have thought twice about the support of a group and a man whom at one point in time he considered

deluded (as he so notes in his memoirs), deluded indeed for having questioned Jahangir's sovereignty.⁴⁶ Scholars of Sikh history and all those who uncritically accept the standard narrative in which Sirhindi prominently figures here seem to me to be blatantly caricaturing the Islam of the Mughal court thus confusing the flashing of Islamic credentials with the wholehearted support of the Naqshbandiyya. The two could be quite different; indeed, there were many ways of expressing 'Muslim-ness' in Mughal circles during the period of Jahangir as Jahangir himself often implies in his memoirs. There were moreover other Sufis and Sufi groups within the Mughal court whose attitudes towards non-Muslims were nowhere near as harsh as Sirhindi's, particularly the Qadriyyah order to which the already mentioned Mian Mir belonged and the Chishtiyya silsilah the reverence to which Jahangir continued after his father's death (despite what appears to be Nur Jahan's dislike of this order which, Ellison Findly speculates, may have resulted in the decline of Shaikh Salim Chishti's family within the Mughal darbar).⁴⁷ Would their support have been any less or more significant to buttress Jahangir's wish to retain the power in which he was already in full possession? Mian Mir was certainly held in high esteem by Jahangir and it seems likely that the great Sufi's opinion would have carried far more weight than Sirhindi's. Based on a survey of materials produced by other Naqshbandi centres throughout northern and southern India, moreover, it seems quite clear that the small clique of Naqshbandis with whom the emperor Jahangir was familiar was never really a significant or influential one, despite both the emperor's financial donations to it and Sirhindi's own prolific output to the contrary.⁴⁸

III

Let us now return to Hew McLeod. McLeod never really mentions the supposed influence of Ahmad Sirhindi on those who caused Guru Arjan's death in his work as once again his focus lay elsewhere, and there is only so much one scholar can do. Within it furthermore there are no systematic statements about the phenomenon that is martyrdom apart from the brief definition we find in his dictionary. From this we assume that when McLeod did choose to write about or reference the Panth's many martyrs he did so with a definition that was rather instrumental, a characterisation we can piece together cumulatively through his various books and articles. Simply put McLeod interprets ideas of martyrdom through an ostensibly Semitic lens, achieving a definition which is quite similar to those we find in Judaic, Christian, and Muslim sources:⁴⁹ 'a conceptual system of posthumous recognition and anticipated reward' a phrase I used in an earlier article underscoring in part the Sikh martyrological debt to Arabic and Islam.⁵⁰ Although he does not accord to it the type of strictly Indic definition we find in Balbinder Bhogal's

significant work on religious violence in the Sikh tradition⁵¹ we nevertheless discover that in the light of recent researches into Sikh martyrdom there is a good deal which, like a definition, McLeod implies without actually saying.

As the lives of the Sikh Gurus have been shaped by received Sikh history and memory so too has this affected the lives and the image of the Panth's glorious dead. McLeod's research does not give the type of contextual analysis we see for example in Ratan Singh Bhangu's self-conscious adoption of a martyrological strategy to achieve his own mid to late nineteenth-century goals (the unity of the Panth in the light of increasing British incursions into the Punjab put simply),⁵² but it nevertheless implies that the martyr is very much the creation of the martyrologist a point upon which many works of and on Sikh martyrdom apparently fail to elaborate thus taking at face value traditional narratives. In the mid 1990s McLeod was asked to prepare his Historical Dictionary of Sikhism, the arena in which he finally clearly defined what he meant by martyrdom. The term he defines however is actually *shahīd*, the Arabic equivalent from which we receive the Punjabi *śahīd* but it is a term he does not examine historically or contextually. For the word *śahīd* in the period of the Sikh Gurus and beyond meant in the eighteenth century many things to many people, people amongst whom the Sikhs were included. Certainly the word *śahīd* as I noted elsewhere was within the lexicon of Punjabi Sikhs since the times of Guru Nanak who uses the word in the *Adi Granth* as too does the Hindu Bhagat, Raidas.⁵³ We also discover it in the vars of Bhai Gurdas and very sparingly in eighteenth-century Sikh literature.⁵⁴ I assumed based on these early readings that it was both the term's intimate association with Islam, against which Khalsa Sikhs were apparently pitted according to contemporary literature, and to its associations with the 'enchanted' environment of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Punjab which allocated the status to people killed in any number of ways, which precluded its use in eighteenth-century Sikh literature.⁵⁵ This was more or less repeated in Professor McLeod's major study of the Khalsa *rahit-namas*, Sikhs of the Khalsa, in his attempt to demonstrate that the idea has little salience within this particular genre of Sikh literature.⁵⁶ For the most part I continue to stand by that assessment. Since the publication of my book in the year 2000, however, it has been pointed out to me that the word does appear in at least one source which I had overlooked in earlier studies, the *Pakhyān Charitr* attributed to Guru Gobind Singh and which appears in the *Dasam Granth*. For Pashaura Singh this failure throws doubt upon my assumption about the word *śahīd*.⁵⁷

Pashaura is certainly correct. There can be little doubt that the passage in question (*Charitr Pakhyān* 102:30, *Dasam Granth*, p. 948) refers to the martyr, the heroic warrior martyr who becomes so by being killed in righteous battle, as he or she came to be understood in the very

early nineteenth century under the masterful hand of Seva Singh Kaushish.⁵⁸ The passage in question deserves some scrutiny, from the tale of Raja Dasarath and Rani Kekai, the father and stepmother of the Ramayana's Ram Chandar respectively:

A bloody battle ensued in which many unparalleled heroes had resolved to die fighting. They attacked with fury directed from every direction towards the enemy. During the battle many fell as pure martyrs. Shyam alone knows the number of warriors who fell fighting.⁵⁹

The definition here seems clear, but an ambiguity persists nevertheless. What makes this claim important is that the term *śahīd* is prefaced by the word *pāk* or pure indicating of course that the author of this particular charitr felt that there were also impure examples of *śahīds* in existence. I suggest that this statement both does and does not throw my assumption into question. On the one hand, the soldiers who fell were 'pure martyrs' most likely in the sense that they died in battle and were thereby united to Akal Purakh, but on the other hand the author makes clear that there were other definitions of the *śahīd* with which he was familiar but which he does not specifically mention, impure understandings if you will which I examined in *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*.⁶⁰

All these 'impure' understandings are absent from McLeod's *Historical Dictionary* definition. He does mention that the idea of the *śahīd* and of *śahādat/śahīdī* (martyrdom) continues to play a central part in the history of the Panth and in this he is quite correct as we see the Sikh tradition of martyrdom articulated in many different genres, in prayer, calendar art, and song to name just a few.⁶¹ We also find the appearance of specific Sikh *śahīds* in such places as Singapore (Bhai Maharaj Singh), Canada (Mewa Singh), and the United Kingdom (Udham Singh), Sikhs whose deaths have been appropriated as cultural artefacts in order to articulate a particular Sikh identity within these respective countries with the hope of fostering its recognition and the position of the Sikh community there vis a vis the state,⁶² underscoring the importance of martyrdom in constructions of Sikh identity and history for Sikhs the world over.

Sikh martyrs furthermore like other Indians and even soldiers killed during the period of the British and after Partition in 1947 have played an important role in the construction of and control over sacred space with martyries established at virtually all sites onto which Sikh blood was fallen. The same holds true for those Sikhs killed during the recent period of ethnonationalist violence, including such Sikhs as, among many others, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. And, as well, martyrs figure intimately within recent studies of Indian cartography in which the

outlines of the nation, be it the Indian nation itself or the imagined entity of Khalistan, the so-called homeland of the Sikhs, have been plotted through such sacrifice.⁶³ The blood of martyrdom in these related contexts is indicative of ownership and power. Indeed, the maps of India or of the proposed Khalistan become in this context martyries unto themselves virtual representations onto which Sikhs have projected their past, present, and their future, a future we are often told which can only be achieved by further sacrifice.

Ultimately therefore we may suggest that this is perhaps the reason why both McLeod's and my statements about Guru Arjan and by extension those others of ours which refer to subsequent Sikh martyrs incur such displeasure. These are caricatured and made to appear as if these encourage Sikhs not only to deny their past but to also deny them an important place in the future of all of us.

Notes

¹ W.H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 1-19. See also pp. 37-58.

² A large number of texts project this standard narrative. For one see Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs* (Delhi: Manohar, 1985).

³ W.H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

⁴ Indubhusan Bannerjee, *The Evolution of the Khalsa I* (3rd ed., Calcutta: AMC, 1972), pp. 20-1.

⁵ Jagjit Singh, *The Sikh Revolution: A Perspective View* (New Delhi: Kendri Singh Sabha, 1984).

⁶ The key word here is sustained as in McLeod's 1995 *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* a brief definition is supplied to which we shall turn in a moment. W.H. McLeod, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism* (Landhom, MD and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995), pp. 192-93.

⁷ W.H. McLeod (ed. and trans.), *The Chaupa Singh Rahit-nama* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1987).

⁸ To this end, J.S. Grewal has recently noted that
[Through his death Guru Arjan] was effectively urging
"the claims of pluralism" as a matter of conscience

against one single central rule in culture, power, religion, civil society and political economy.

J.S. Grewal, 'Guru Arjan Dev's Life, Martyrdom and Legacy,' in Pritpal Singh Kapur and Mohinder Singh (ed.), *Guru Arjan's Contribution, Martyrdom and Legacy* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2009), p. 22. The works attributed to Guru Nanak which later Sikhs have incorporated into a rhetoric of martyrdom are many. The most significant of these is easily the first Guru's *slok vārān te vadhīk* 20, *Adi Granth*, p. 1412.

⁹ The edifying nature of Sikh martyrdom is quite obvious in the numerous Sikh martyrologies produced since the early nineteenth century. Perhaps the most significant of these deal with the martyrdom of the two youngest sons of Guru Gobind Singh, the *chhote sāhibzāde*. Louis E. Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the 'Game of Love'* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 93-4. For examples of contemporary Sikhs recalling the stories of Sikh martyrs to help them bear their own personal tribulations see the many interviews with Sikh victims of contemporary ethnonationalist violence in Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) and Balbinder Singh Bhogal, 'Text as Sword: Sikh Religious Violence Taken as Wonder,' in John. R. Hinnells and Richard King (ed.), *Religion and Violence in South Asia: Theory and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 128.

¹⁰ *Kathākar* generically refers to a narrator but within the Sikh tradition the term is somewhat more specialised in the sense that it is one who delivers a religious discourse or a homily or a lesson from Sikh history (all of which may be referred to as *kathā*). Perhaps the most significant text from which *kathākar*s draw their narratives is Santokh Singh's mid nineteenth century multi-volume masterpiece the *Gur-pratāp Sūraj Granth* commonly known as *Sūraj Prakāś*.

¹¹ See the painting titled 'Tere Bhāne vich Amrit Varasai' in *Ailbum Kendrī Sikkh Ajāibghar* (Amritsar: Central Sikh Museum, 1991), p. 17.

¹² W.H. McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community*, p. 3.

¹³ W.H. McLeod, *Gurū Nānak and the Sikh Religion*, pp. 146-7.

¹⁴ For example Brian Axel, *The Nation's Tortured Body: Violence, Representation, and the Formation of a Sikh "Diaspora"* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

¹⁵ In her critique of my work on Guru Arjan's martyrdom Professor Indu Banga states that I ignore 'McLeod's reference to Guru Arjan's death as that of a martyr.' The implication here is of course that McLeod in his later work had finally accepted that which all Sikhs claim is fact. In the original reference which she notes McLeod does state just this although he does so in the context of repeating traditional understandings. In other words, he makes no personal value judgment which is what allocating the term martyr to anyone entails. Indu Banga, 'Recent Studies on the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan: A Critique,' in Pritipal Singh Kapur and Mohinder Singh (ed.), *Guru Arjan's Contribution, Martyrdom and Legacy* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2009), pp. 162-79, esp. p. 166. McLeod mentions the fifth Guru's execution as martyrdom in W.H. McLeod, *The Sikhs: History, Religion, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 42 and within his *Sikhism* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 129 amongst others.

¹⁶ McLeod often confronted these accusations head on particularly in his autobiography and in a series of articles. See for example W.H. McLeod, 'Cries of Outrage: History Versus Tradition in the Study of the Sikh Community,' in *South Asia Research* 14 (Oct., 1994), pp. 121-35; 'Gatha Sri Adi Granth and the Controversy,' in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117:4 (Oct-Dec, 1997), pp. 702-04; 'Sikh Fundamentalism,' in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118.1 (Jan.-Mar., 1998), pp. 15-27; and finally W.H. McLeod, *Discovering the Sikhs: Autobiography of a Historian* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

¹⁷ While Guru Arjan's death is noted in both *vār* 24 of Bhai Gurdas and the *Bachitar Nātak* 5:11 the first source to hint at the Guru's death as an execution is Kirpal Das Bhalla's *Mahimā Prakāś Vārtak* circa early 1740s, an interpretation followed by virtually every Sikh narrative afterwards. Kulvinder Singh Bajwa (ed.), *Mahimā Prakāś (Vārtak)* sakhi 81 (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2004), pp. 124-5 although let us be clear even here the death is not stated to be a martyrdom. It is perhaps for this reason that Harbans Kaur Saggu does not include Kirpal Das' text into his discussion of early sources. See Harbans Kaur Saggu, 'Sri Gurū Arjan Dev jī dī Śahādat de Pañjābī Śrotān dā Viśleshan,' in Pritipal Singh Kapur and Mohinder Singh (ed.), *Guru Arjan's Contribution, Martyrdom and Legacy* (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 2009), pp. 195-218. For early narratives of this episode see Louis E. Fenech, 'Martyrdom and the Execution of Guru Arjan in Early Sikh Sources', in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121.1 (2001), pp. 20-31. It is not until the

period of the Singh Sabha that Guru Arjan's death is titled *śahīdī*. The allocation of this term to the fifth Master's death is even absent in perhaps the most important martyrological work of the gur-bilas tradition, Ratan Singh Bhangu's *Gur-panth Prakāś*. There is however the passage in Kesar Singh Chhibbar's *Bansāvalī-nāmā* (1776 CE) in which the fifth Guru claims the status of martyrdom without specifically naming it as such, appropriating terms which were more commonly used to designate the status in the eighteenth century. See Piara Singh Padam (ed.), *Bhāi Kesar Singh Chhibbar Krit Bansāvalī-nāmā Dasān Pāṭśāhīān kā* 5:132 (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1997), p. 84:

*bhāi gurdās nūn baithi samajhāī / asādā lagegā sīsu
ihu nischā hai āīā*

[Guru Arjan] sat and explained to Bhai Gurdas that his head will be offered [as a sacrifice] and that this moment has arrived as a certainty.

¹⁸ Guru Tegh Bahadar's death narrative appears first, famously, in the so-called autobiography of his son, Guru Gobind Singh, the *Bachitar Nātak*. See *Bachitar Nātak* 5:13-16, Dasam Granth, p. 54.

¹⁹ Fenech, 'Martyrdom and the Execution of Guru Arjan,' p. 31. Perhaps a partial reason for this may be the fact that Sikhs were not aware of the evidence of Jahangir's memoirs until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.

²⁰ Balbinder Singh Bhogal, 'Text as Sword: Sikh Religious Violence Taken as Wonder,' pp. 107-35 and Navdeep Mandair, 'An Approximate Difference: Proximity and Oppression in the West's Encounter with Sikhism,' in *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 5:2 (December 2009), pp. 85-101.

²¹ In the most rambling manner is Sangat Singh's essay 'McLeod and Fenech as Scholars on Sikhism and Martyrdom,' presented at an international conference of Sikh Studies held in the year 2000 which may be read at www.globalsikhstudies.net. It is quite commonplace to find my name mentioned along with McLeod's whenever a critique of my Guru Arjan martyrdom narrative is produced. Indu Banga's is the last example of this teaming. Indu Banga, 'Recent Studies on the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan: A Critique,' p. 166.

²² Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory, and Biography in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 204-43.

²³ The Central Asian dimension of Mughal military and courtly culture is explored in Richard C. Foltz, *Mughal India and Central Asia* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also Douglas E. Streusand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 1-49.

²⁴ The chapter in question tries to probe deeply into the mid sixteenth-century Punjabi environment and examine whether or not the social makeup of the Punjab and the nascent Sikh community played a role in the emperor's decision to execute Guru Arjan. Here, for example, Pashaura draws upon James Scott's well known works on the weapons used by the disenfranchised to effect change. His contextual analysis of the Punjab from the time of Amir Timur until that of Babur (the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries) is however problematic, relying upon conventional and indeed popular understandings of the history of Punjab during the Lodi and Indo-Timurid period, as Indu Banga has noted. Indu Banga, 'Recent Studies on the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan: A Critique,' pp. 175-8.

²⁵ Wheeler M. Thackston (trans.), *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1999), p. 59. In regard to Prince Khusrau, one may ask if Jahangir did indeed take his challenge to the emperor's sovereignty seriously. We note throughout the memoir that Jahangir was well aware of Khusrau's arrogance (p. 48-9) and clearly blamed him for the suicide of Shah Begam, Jahangir's beloved first wife (p. 51). The emperor may have thus taken action against his son not because of the threat he posed but rather simply to finally deal with him for having caused the death of a beloved family member.

²⁶ Kaikhusrau Isfandiyar (ed.), *Dabistān-i Mazāhib I* (Tehran: Kitāb-khanah-ī Tahuri, 1983), p. 207. In have placed the word 'torture' within inverted commas because the exact Persian word, *āzār* can refer to any type of torment. One may thus translate the passage as follows: '[Guru Arjan died] as a result of the heat of the sun, the severity of summer, and the injuries [inflicted] by the baliffs.' What these injuries were is left unsaid.

²⁷ Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, pp. 207-08, 218.

²⁸ See Piara Singh Padam (ed.), *Bhāī Kesar Singh Chhibbar Krit Bansāvalī-nāmā Dasān Pātsāhīān kā* 5:137 (Amritsar: Singh Brothers, 1997), p. 55.

²⁹ Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, p. 234. Pashaura here also elaborates upon the idea I noted in my 'Martyrdom and the Execution of Guru Arjan in Early Sikh Sources,' p. 31, n. 73 that it was likely that Bhai Gurdas said nothing about Guru Arjan's specific style of execution because one of his central concerns was likely to be the survival of the Sikh Panth. An anti-Mughal diatribe would not serve these interests well.

³⁰ Pashaura Singh spends quite some time attempting to demonstrate Jahangir's attitude towards the Guru based in part upon the speculation that Jahangir was with Akbar when he visited Guru Arjan in Goindwal in 1598. Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, p. 230. Jahangir himself does not mention ever visiting Guru Arjan at Taran Taran in his memoirs.

³¹ Thackston (trans.), *The Jahangirnama*, pp. 57-8.

³² I have taken the Persian text from Ganda Singh's *Guru Arjun's Martyrdom (Re-interpreted)* (Patiala: Guru Nanak Mission, 1969), p. 10.

³³ Thackston (trans.), *The Jahangirnama*, pp. 53-4, 59.

³⁴ The only time in which Sikhs figure in a Mughal narrative during the time of Jahangir (apart from the sole reference to Guru Arjan in the *Jahangīr-nāmāh*) is the brief description of the emperor Akbar's visit to Guru Arjan in 1598 as the former was making his way back to Agra after a lengthy stay in Lahore. This appears in the *Akbar-nāmāh* the specific portion of which has been recently translated in J.S. Grewal and Irfan Habib, *Sikh History from Persian Sources* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2001), p. 55.

³⁵ Ganda Singh, *Guru Arjun's Martyrdom*, p. 12.

³⁶ Kulvinder Singh Bajwa (ed.), *Mahimā Prakāś Vārtak* 81, pp. 124-5 and Sarup Das Bhalla, *Mahimā Prakāś* 2 volumes [ed. Gobind Singh Lamba and Khazan Singh] (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, Punjab, 1971), vol. 2, 22:2-8, pp. 410-11.

³⁷ Saggu, 'Srī Gurū Arjan Dev jī dī Śahādat' p. 203:

*bhalla jī sārā dosh chandū 'te lāunde han, bādśāh
jahāngīr 'te nahīn*

³⁸ Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, pp. 213-14, 233.

³⁹ For example, Sajida Sultana Alvi (ed. and trans.), *Advice on the Art of Governance: Mau'izah-i Jahāngīrī of Muhammad Bāqir Najm-i Šānī: An Indo-Islamic Mirror for Princes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ See the aptly titled chapter 'Mughal Exercise of Power in the Creation of Texts,' in Bonnie Wade, *Imaging Sound: An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art, and Culture in Mughal India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 1-35.

⁴¹ Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, pp. 137-41. Also see the discussion in Louis E. Fenech, *The Darbar of the Sikh Gurus: The Court of God in the World of Men* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 67-8.

⁴² Banga perceptively notes the phrase *dar īn waqt*, 'in these times' with which the point begins to underscore the passage's nature as an aside. The original letter in Persian appears in Hussain Halami bin Sa'īd Istanbuli (ed.), *Maktūbat-i Imām-i Rabbanī Hazrat Mujjadad-i Alf-i Thānī* (Karachi: Adab Manzil, 1397 H./1977 CE), pp. 307-10. Guru Arjan's reference is on p. 309.

⁴³ Indu Banga, 'Recent Studies on the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan: A Critique,' pp. 173-4.

⁴⁴ The implication I receive from this particular wording, particularly the terms *bisyār khūb* suggests that Sirhindi, well aware of his dubious standing in Mughal circles, is here attempting to curry a favour with Murtaza Khan which the former simply did not possess in Mughal circles.

⁴⁵ Yohanan Friedman, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), pp. 1-12. The interaction between Sirhindi and Jahangir and the apparent reasons for it are elaborated in Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan Empress of Mughal India* (New York, 1993), pp. 207-10.

⁴⁶ True, the following reference occurs more than a decade after the execution of Guru Arjan but is worth noting nevertheless, from Wheeler Thackston's translation of the Jahangir-amah:

During these days it was reported that a charlatan from Sirhind named Shaykh Ahmad had spread a net of deceit and deception in which he had trapped many unspiritual worshipers of externality.

Later Jahangir would free Sirhind and on the emperor's 55th birthday grant to the Shaikh 2000 rupees. Wheeler M. Thackston (trans.), *The Jahangirnama*, pp. 304, 341, 406.

⁴⁷ Sajida S. Alvi, 'Religion and the State During the Reign of Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1605-27): Nonjuristical Perspectives,' in *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989), pp. 95-119, esp. p. 109. Although a caveat should be inserted regarding Nur Jahan's attitude towards the Chishtis: this became something of a de facto Mughal policy only after she had become the power behind the throne in the late 1610s. See Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan Empress of Mughal India*, p. 211.

⁴⁸ See the introduction to Simon Digby (ed. and trans.), *Sufis and Soldiers in Awrangzeb's Deccan: Malfūzāt-i Naqshbandiyya* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 3, 8.

⁴⁹ See 'śahīd' in McLeod's *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, pp. 192-93.

⁵⁰ Best seen in W. H. McLeod, 'The Sikh Struggle in the Eighteenth Century and its Relevance for Today,' in *History of Religions* 31:4 (May 1992), pp. 344-62. The quote originally belongs to the classicist G.W. Bowersock and is used in my 'Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition,' in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1997), p. 630. Of course, when appropriated by the Sikhs the idea of martyrdom was attuned to a Sikh pitch. In particular, while martyrdom is the sure way to heaven or salvation within Islamic understandings only those who are saved can become martyrs in the Sikh tradition as martyrdom entails the abolition of *hau-mai* or self-centeredness. See my discussion in *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, pp. 63-102.

⁵¹ Bhogal's work is an intriguing take on martyrdom and violence in the Sikh tradition underscoring the love-violence relationship we discover within more traditional forms of Hindu devotion or bhakti, a point which Navdeep Mandair also explores in his 'An Approximate Difference' (p. 92-6). Here Bhogal sees a clear continuity between humanity's relationship with Akal Purakh as articulated by Guru Nanak and the

preceding Sikh Gurus, elaborating a metaphor of text (Adi Granth and Dasam Granth) as sword. In weaving this complex tapestry, however, Bhogal attributes claims to McLeod's work (and mine) which reflect misreadings of it. Neither I nor McLeod posit 'a break in Sikh tradition' with the accession of Guru Hargobind to the office of Guru. Indeed, McLeod goes to some lengths to demonstrate the tradition's continuity both theologically/ideologically and politically for lack of a better word.

⁵² For exceptions see my *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition* and Purnima Dhavan's 'Reading the Texture of History and Memory in Early-Nineteenth-Century Punjab,' in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 29:3 (2009), pp. 515-27.

⁵³ Guru Nanak, *Sirī rāg ashtapadī* 2 and Bhagat Raidas, *Rāg malār* 3:2, *Adi Granth*, pp. 53, 1293.

⁵⁴ Vir Singh (ed.), *Srī Gurū Granth Sāhib jī dī Kuñjī: Vārān Bhāī Gurdās Satīk Bhāv Prakāśanī Tīkā Samet Mukammal* 3:18:2, 8:8:3, 21:13:2, 40:8:2 (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahit Sadan, 1997), pp. 68, 131, 335, 625. The word *śahīd* appears once in the Chaupa Singh rahit-nama (in the compound term *śahīd-gañj*, 'martyr-treasury') as well as within the ghazals of Bhai Nand Lal Goya as the verb *śahīd kard*, 'to martyr.'

⁵⁵ These conjectures are summed up in my *Martyrdom in The Sikh Tradition*, pp. 8-9, 164.

⁵⁶ W.H. McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 239-40.

⁵⁷ Pashaura Singh, *Life and Work of Guru Arjan*, p. 242, n. 112. The other uses of the word *śahīd* in eighteenth-century Sikh literature are noted in my *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*. Briefly, the word appears once in the Chaupa Singh rahit-nama (line 474) as the compound term *śahīd-gañj* or 'martyr-treasury' and once within the ghazals attributed to Bhai Nand Lal Goya (7:3) who was Guru Gobind Singh's Persian poet.

⁵⁸ Garja Singh (ed.), *Śahīd-bilās (Bhāī Manī Singh) krit Sevā Singh* (Ludhiana: Punjab Sahit Academy, 1961).

⁵⁹ *Charitr Pakhyān* 102:30, *Dasam Granth*, p. 948. See also *Charitr Pakhyān* 404:167, *Dasam Granth*, p. 1371 in which we also find the terms *pāk śahīd*.

⁶⁰ See the chapter entitled 'The *Śahīd*'s Role in a Mystical Universe,' in my *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, pp. 145-70.

⁶¹ A recent study of Sikh singing and performance in which martyrological themes resonate is Michael Nijhawan's *Dhadhi Darbar: Religion, Violence, and The Performance of Sikh History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶² For Bhai Maharaj Singh's memory and its articulation by Sikhs in the cultural politics of Singapore see Van Dusenbury, 'Socializing Sikhs in Singapore: Soliciting the State's Support,' in Pashaura Singh and N.G. Barrier (eds.), *The Transmission of Sikh Heritage in the Diaspora* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996), pp. 116 ff. Mewa Singh's history and martyrdom celebration is noted in Hugh Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 129-33. The use of Udham Singh's memory is noted in my 'Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains: The Way Sikhs Remember Udham Singh "Shahid" (1899-1940),' in *Modern Asian Studies* 36:4 (2002), pp. 827-70.

⁶³ For example Brian Axel, *The Nation's Tortured Body* and Sumathi Ramaswamy, 'Maps, Mother/Goddesses, and Martyrdom in Modern India,' in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 67(3) (August 2008), pp. 819-53.