Introduction
The Work of the Dead

Against Archaeology

There is an old joke concerning the famous Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh that sets the stage nicely for the discussions to follow. 'Every Indian wants Bhagat Singh to be reborn', it goes, 'but only in a neighbour's house!' Recited with a laugh, the observation is clearly self-deprecating. It concedes that, while the popular desire for an uncompromising politics of conviction might endure in India today, this path cannot be for everyone; few are willing to accept the sacrifice and suffering now synonymous with Bhagat Singh's name. Indeed, the messianic tenor of the saying – that a dissident youth, hanged by the colonial state in 1931, should return to fight again – transmits a furtive disavowal of the individual responsibility the martyr is so celebrated for affirming: his willingness to confront injustice, to never stand idly by, to never compromise one's ideals, even in the face of death.

But the saying also reveals a reluctance to confine these heroic tendencies to the revolutionary's historical context: that is, to his specific location amid a swell in militant activity in colonial North India during the 1920s, following the collapse of M. K. Gandhi's first 'non-cooperation' movement in 1922 and falling significantly under the world shadow cast by the new Soviet experiment in Russia after 1917.[1] Born in 1907, Bhagat Singh's name was made on India's anti-colonial stage, and yet the quality of his example is seen to exceed this particular struggle. Narratives of national liberation have not exhausted his potential, nor is he confined easily to a single revolutionary horizon. He is invited instead to return, to be 'reborn', appealed to for guidance and inspiration to contest all manner of postcolonial predicaments: government corruption, religious chauvinism, neo-imperialist incursions, environmental degradation; the list goes on, and in this appeal the living are forced to account for themselves, for their own actions or lack thereof. It is this desire for the revenant – for the dead man who returns – that concerns the chapters to follow: the enduring political potential of a twenty-three-year-old

[1] For an appreciation of this context, see S. A. Dange, *Gandhi vs. Lenin* (Bombay, 1921).

hanged in Lahore in the early twentieth century, and the work of his spectre in modern Indian politics.

This book is concerned with the problem of *afterlives* – their meaning for a politics and the challenges they pose for the writing of history. Its story unfolds on the terrain of colonial and postcolonial South Asia, but it aims to carve a place for the unquiet dead in the history of political thought more generally – to interrogate what the demands of inheritance might mean for politics in a given present. 'Inheritance' is understood here not as a logic of succession but as an untimely interference – a sense of responsibility to that which is not present, whose corporeal existence has been extinguished. How do the living negotiate a debt to the dead? How does this experience condition their horizons of expectation? Rather than approaching 'afterlives' simply as the wilful conjuring of the dead by the living, to serve a politics in the present, this book takes seriously the force of the dead as entities to whom something is *owed* – who might themselves conjure politics, calling the living to account.

Attention to the force of inheritance provides a window into the power and promise of anti-colonial histories in a postcolonial world. Ann Laura Stoler's recent caution concerning the prefix 'post' and its function in the term 'postcolonial' has facilitated a conversation about what she calls 'imperial durabilities' in the present – those pervasive 'effects' of empire that were not contained by formal independence or decolonization, but which continue to animate global hierarchies in the present, from the dumping of toxic waste in African countries to ongoing processes of dispossession and resource extraction in the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere.[2] But thinking about the specific complex of concepts and horizons that characterize an anti-colonial politics, the independence moment remains an important location of material and psychic investment. As a temporal benchmark, it provides a convenient reference point for the postcolonial lament regarding the collapse of anti-colonial utopias and the compromises or corruptions of post-independence states.[3] It spurs an injunction to recognize the 'unfinished business' of struggle, parsed evocatively in the Indian communist slogan *yih azaadi jhooti hai*, 'this freedom is a lie'. Across the formerly colonized world, radical figures from the past – from James Connolly to Dedan Kimathi to Stephen Biko[4] – weigh upon the present as reminders of paths not taken, of potential unfulfilled, even as 'official' historians and state authorities labour to absorb these radical pasts into a consensus national pantheon. In the figure of the martyred revolutionary,

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC, 2016), ix, 9.
[3] David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, 1999).
[4] See *Interventions* 10:1 (2008) issue entitled 'Under Which Flag? Revisiting James Connolly'; Evan Mwangi, 'The Incomplete Rebellion: Mau Mau Movement in Twenty-First Century Kenyan Popular Culture', *Africa Today* 57:2 (2010), 86–113; and Shannen L Hill, *Biko's Ghost: the Iconography of Black Consciousness* (Minneapolis, 2015).

the question of a responsibility to the dead is entangled with the urge to continue a struggle caught 'halfway', to achieve a freedom not yet won or still to be perfected.

Bhagat Singh has been a favourite topic for hagiographers, propagandists and polemicists in postcolonial India. Responding to the many myths and legends attached to his name, academic historians have set out to uncover who this famous rebel 'really' was, what he 'really' fought and died for.[5] This is perhaps unsurprising: the founding historicist presumption that the past is separate from the present promotes a principled distrust of the revenant and a preference for the corpse, immobile and amenable to excavation. The fact that Bhagat Singh is frequently invoked across contradictory ideological projects in contemporary South Asia – from the Hindu right to the Maoist left, Sikh separatists in Punjab to secular rationalists in Tamil Nadu, the army in India to pacifists in Pakistan – lends this call to reconstruct the 'real' figure an additional sense of urgency, especially among those eager to position themselves as 'true' inheritors of the revolutionary's legacy. Historians in the twenty-first century must be careful, according to Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, the former chairman of the Indian Council of Historical Research, to keep Bhagat Singh safe from 'vulgar hands'.[6] The fact that the man is celebrated not simply for his courage in the face of death but also for his political actions – the shooting of a police officer in Lahore in 1928 and the bombing of the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi in 1929 – means that he is hardly an anodyne figure, available equally to romantic appraisals of anti-state violence as to solemn appeals for patriotic service.

The objective of this book is not to present another account of the 'real' Bhagat Singh nor to judge the validity of existing claims over others. It aims instead to open Bhagat Singh out into his afterlives, providing a language with which to comprehend his widespread popular appeal and continuing potential as interlocutor and instigator in modern Indian politics. An observation made by Gandhi, the most prominent nationalist leader at the time of the revolutionary's execution in 1931, invites critical attention: 'there has never been within the living memory so much romance round any life as had surrounded that of Bhagat Singh.'[7] Though the Mahatma would soon be lamenting the appearance of a 'Bhagat Singh cult' among young Indian nationalists,[8] his

[5] This compulsion is interrogated directly in Chapter 4, but for recent examples, see J. S. Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend* (Patiala, 2008); Jose George, Manoj Kumar and Avinash Khandare (eds.), *Rethinking Radicalism in Indian Society: Bhagat Singh and Beyond* (Jaipur, 2009); Chaman Lal, *Understanding Bhagat Singh* (Delhi, 2013).

[6] Sabyasachi Bhattarcharya, 'Inaugural Address', in Grewal (ed.), *Bhagat Singh and His Legend*, 13–15 (13).

[7] *The Tribune*, 26 March 1931.

[8] *Young India*, 30 July 1931, and reproduced in Vol. XLVII, 232, of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [hereafter *CWMG*], XC Volumes (Ahmedabad, 1958–1984).

admission that the revolutionary's potency had been constituted importantly by the nature of his reception remains instructive. This book begins by accepting the absence of a single, fully discernible figure and moves instead to trace the fleeting work of phantasmal forms – exploring the *promise* the revolutionary represents, rather than attempting to excavate the particularity of a political programme. By taking seriously rather than rejecting as 'incorrect' the myriad and often surprising appearances of the revenant revolutionary on the terrain of the present, the book draws a series of connections between the afterlives of violence, contemporary formations of dissent, and the public life of history in postcolonial South Asia. What is it about Bhagat Singh that compels such active fascination, across the political spectrum? How might his disruptive, spectral presence be integrated usefully into the study of Indian politics and political thought? What is to be made of India's revolutionary inheritance?

Endings That Are Not Over

Rather than a Rankean concern to uncover the past 'the way it really was', this book's sensitivity to the spectral betrays a Nietzschean prejudice, wherein 'only something which has no history can be defined'.[9] Reading Nietzsche's dictum, the philosopher Raymond Geuss reflects that, instead of definitions, one can only pursue 'an "analysis" of the contingent synthesis of "meaning" [an object of inquiry] represents'.[10] But this work does not set out simply to map the contested, interpretive life of Bhagat Singh as a popular figure: this is not a history of reception or of the distortions of memory in any straightforward sense.[11] Rather than contests over 'meaning', we are interested in a desire for 'presence' – and here I follow Eelco Runia's provocative vision for a philosophy of history that is concerned less with problems of 'representation' than in the vertiginous urge for *communion* with the past and its effects in the present.[12] The chapters to follow are animated by the possibility that the anti-colonial dead remain effective and indeed *demanding* interlocutors for the living. Such an agenda does not require the reader to accept that ghosts or revenants actually 'exist'; rather, it builds on new sociologies of haunting and

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson and translated by Carol Diethe (Cambridge, 2007 [1887]), 53.
[10] Raymond Geuss, *Morality, Culture and History: Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1999), 13.
[11] For an exemplary reception history, see Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (Chicago, 2008). See also Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982); and Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (eds.), *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford, 2006).
[12] Eelco Runia, 'Presence', *History and Theory* 45 (2006), 1–29.

philosophical critiques of historicist time to consider how the emancipated present of modernity may not be as self-sufficient as it strives to be, and how living communities can experience this present through an active sense of responsibility to the dead.[13] Bhagat Singh appears not as an object to be 'appropriated' or 'used' by the living but as an entity to whom something is *owed*, even if the nature of this debt is interpreted variously: as the protection or reinforcement of the community he is thought to have died for, perhaps, or the perpetuation of a revolution that has yet to reach its end.

Rather than some stable icon or usable metaphor, the martyr appears exceptional in modern Indian politics precisely because the 'actual' conditions of his life are so immersed in and enveloped by a sense of possibility.[14] His potential is invested in the brave pursuit of a future-to-come, rather than in any concrete measure of worldly success. While other anti-colonial figures are certainly appropriated and ceremoniously invoked, few appear so ideologically unbound; while many are revered and saluted, it is Bhagat Singh who is invited to return. The martyred revolutionary is not, in this sense, honoured as a founding father – he cannot be equated to a Gandhi, a Nehru or even a B. R. Ambedkar, figures who also have vivid afterlives in contemporary India but whose prominence is connected to (or at least coloured by) their participation in projects of foundation, in the establishment of institutions. The celebrated nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose is often compared to Bhagat Singh due to his militancy and heroic death (in an aeroplane crash, in Japanese-ruled Formosa in 1945), but he too carries the weight of a long career on the public stage – a connection to the structures and compromises of mainstream nationalist projects. This is a burden the Lahore martyr does not have to bear, due in part to his youth but also the clandestine nature of his life and struggle.[15] In contrast to founding fathers, Bhagat Singh's vitality is construed horizontally: as a ghostly comrade in a fight that *continues*, cajoling the living to recognize the lingering 'something-to-be-done' in the present. Thus his ambivalent relationship to normative institutions and his amenability

[13] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, 1997). On spectrality and politics in general, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* translated by Peggy Kamuf (London, 2006 [1994]).

[14] To the extent that this book deals with the long-term implications of violence in politics, a critical influence has been Shahid Amin's work on the anti-police 'riot' in Chauri Chaura at the height of Gandhian mobilizations in 1922. But if Amin's focus is this event's transformation into a metaphor for the problem of peasant indiscipline in modern India, delineating its work for an elite nationalist 'master' narrative, my starting observation is the inability of such a narrative to fully incorporate or contain Bhagat Singh. See Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Berkeley, 1995).

[15] On the challenge of uncovering 'clandestine histories', see Kama Maclean, *A Revolutionary History of Interwar India: Violence, Image, Voice and Text* (London, 2015), especially chapter 1.

to a politics of critique – the exhilaration of a departure, rather than the certainty of a destination.

Foregrounding the interruptive potential of the anti-colonial dead within a democratic postcolonial polity, this book positions the question of inheritance as crucial for understanding the nature of the political argument in modern Indian history. It responds to debates concerning the shape of and agenda for an emergent 'Indian intellectual history',[16] and yet, as will be clear by now, a genealogy of ideas or concepts is not this work's primary concern. I am interested instead in the resonant significance of a certain 'way of being' in politics, and the manner in which one's experience of a political present can be inflected by instances of repetition, recurrence and return. In this sense, my argument affirms Dipesh Chakrabarty's insistence that any discussion of the political subject in modern India must coincide with a radical critique of the nature of historical time.[17] But whereas Chakrabarty's interest in the untimely is primarily via the persistence of *non*-historicist orders of temporality – the enchanted worlds of gods and spirit – my concern is with what is clearly a *malady* of historicism, something that is supposed to be 'past' but continues to make itself known: 'endings that are not over', in Avery Gordon's provocative phrase.[18] If Bhagat Singh continues to place a demand on the present – if the living affirm a sense of responsibility to his life, death and legacy – what does this mean for a politics? What modes of action might the revolutionary legitimate in the present? What possible futures does he aid in imagining?

To grasp the form and effects of this spectral weight upon the living, fieldwork for this book combined research in official and informal archives with visits to memorial sites – of which there are hundreds to Bhagat Singh in India – as well as participation in commemoration rituals, dissident political protests and new pedagogical experiments, primarily in Delhi, across Indian Punjab and in Lahore, Pakistan. Between 2011 and 2013, and across several subsequent short trips, I met with an array of activists, politicians, student organizations, artists, scholars and street performers – all as a means to

[16] Shruti Kapila (ed.), *An Intellectual History for India* (Cambridge, 2010); Ritu Birla and Faisal Devji (eds.), 'Itineraries of Self-Rule: Essays on the Centenary of Gandhi's Hind Swaraj', Special Issue of *Public Culture* 23:2 (2011); C. A. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2011); Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (London, 2012); Shruti Kapila and Faisal Devji (eds.), *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India* (Cambridge, 2013); and Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (London, 2010).

[17] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008 [2000]), 15.

[18] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 139.

understand the multiple ways Bhagat Singh is invited to 'speak' in the present, helping to constitute or challenge contemporary political vocabularies.[19]

As a result of this work I have been interested to link methods in the history of political thought with recent calls for an anthropology of history, and more particularly for 'ethnographies of historicity' – close studies of the variant ways individuals and communities imagine their lives in relation to pasts, presents and futures.[20] The South Asian context has long been a catalyst for research at the intersection of anthropology and history, with Bernard Cohn's work in particular credited with inaugurating a 'historical turn' in the field of anthropology more generally.[21] Cohn's intention was to shift the discipline's concern from synchronic study to the diachronic effects of power relationships and processes of knowledge production, in India and elsewhere. But as Charles Stewart and Stephan Palmié have suggested, anthropology took this historical turn without interrogating the category of 'history' itself. The two scholars draw directly on Chakrabarty's diagnosis of historicism's limits – the imaginaries its emphasis on linear temporality and empirical verification can and cannot capture – to justify a call for new ethnographies of 'past-making' in all its variant forms.[22] This book stitches Stewart and Palmié's methodological prescriptions for thinking about time and the place of the past directly to questions of politics and political thought in modern India. In this sense it departs again from Cohn's influential work, which sought in the study of 'culture' the grounds for a historical anthropology, allowing a rethinking of the classical categories of ethnography in India – caste, region, village and so on.[23] My focus is on the scene of a political dispute, the form of an argument, allowing me to approach directly the conditions of postcolonial democracy and new visions of revolutionary possibility as they relate to South Asian pasts. Before explicating my specific approach to the study of political thought in the

[19] For a reflection on this process, see Chris Moffat, 'Afterlives', *Comparative Studies in Society and History Online Blog* (30 January 2018), online at www.cssh.lsa.umich.edu/2018/01/30/887 [last accessed 15 May 2018].

[20] See especially Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart, 'Ethnographies of Historicity', *History and Anthropology* 16:3 (2005), 261–274; and Charles Stewart, 'Historicity and Anthropology', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 45 (2016), 79–94.

[21] Bernard S. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi, 2003 [1987]); see also Brian Keith Axel (ed.), *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham, 2002). Another landmark text in this vein would be Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley, 1982).

[22] See Stephan Palmié and Charles Stewart, 'For an Anthropology of History', *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6:1 (2016), 207–236, as well as the other articles in this *Hau* special issue.

[23] Cohn, *An Anthropologist among the Historians*, 73: 'Historical anthropology then will be the delineation of cultures, the location of these in historical time through the study of events which affect and transform structures, and the explanation of the consequences of these transformations.' But see also John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, 1992).

later section on 'Anarchy and Politics', the following section situates this agenda in relation to recent writing on Indian revolutionary politics.

Bhagat Singh as a Problem in the History of Indian Nationalism

The last decade has seen a surge in new academic studies of Bhagat Singh, both in India and abroad. This growing concern to update or replace old hagiographies may be thought of in relation to two events: the first calendrical – the 2007 birth centenary of the revolutionary, widely celebrated across India, and the second cinematic – the release of a number of popular films about the martyr in quick succession, from 2002's *Legend of Bhagat Singh* to the 2006 blockbuster *Rang de Basanti*, with two more in between.[24]

There is much to be said about this timing, and especially Bollywood's exaltation of Bhagat Singh as a muscular, confident patriot at the height of India's early twenty-first-century economic boom; such issues will be addressed directly in Part II of this book. It was not, however, the contextual specificity of popular recall which prompted the attention of scholars at these moments, but the dissonance such events laid bare: the gap between Bhagat Singh's tremendous popularity as a figure – both in his own time and today – and his near-complete absence from official and authoritative histories of India's anti-colonial struggle. In 2007, the anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney observed that Bhagat Singh's 'huge popularity' remains 'one of the puzzles of twentieth-century Indian history that academics don't seem to have engaged with'.[25]

Conventional histories of the freedom movement tend to cohere around a party-centric narrative, privileging the work of the Indian National Congress as the central arbiter of India's march toward sovereign nationhood.[26] This path

[24] *The Legend of Bhagat Singh*, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi (Tips Films, 2002); *23 March 1931: Shaheed*, directed by Guddu Dhanoa (Vijayta Films, 2002); *Shaheed-e-Azam*, directed by Sukumar Nair (Eros, 2002); and *Rang de Basanti*, directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra (UTV Motion Pictures, 2006). Two other films – one associated with Ramanand Sagar and the other with Tarun Wadhwa – were announced in the early 2000s but never released. For an assessment of this moment, see Sudhanva Deshpande, 'A Tale of Two Bhagat Singhs', *Frontline* magazine, 2 August 2002.

[25] Christopher Pinney, 'The Body and the Bomb: Technologies of Modernity in Colonial India', in Richard Davis (ed.), *Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India* (New Delhi, 2007), 60. See also his *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London, 2004).

[26] A tendency diagnosed, for instance, in Kama Maclean and J. Daniel Elam, 'Who Is a Revolutionary?', *Postcolonial Studies* 16:2 (2013), 113–123. Problematising such a narrative has been central to the Subaltern Studies project in Indian historiography. See Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford, 1988), and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago, 2002), especially chapter 1: 'A Small History of Subaltern Studies'.

to independence, guided by Gandhi under the banner of non-violence, leaves little room for alternative paths, let alone the so-called votaries of violence: those bomb-throwers and political assassins periodically distracting public attention since 1897, at least, when the Maharashtrian Chapekar brothers shot dead the colonial administrator W. C. Rand in Poona.[27] The designation of Bhagat Singh as a 'terrorist' – by colonial authorities but also by sections of the nationalist press[28] – has facilitated the martyr's relegation to a footnote in most general histories: a representative of Gandhi's encounter with the 'cult of the bomb', a patriot perhaps, but ultimately misguided.[29] As Kama Maclean notes, the distinction between 'violent revolutionaries' and a 'non-violent' Congress was sharpened after Bhagat Singh's execution in 1931 – a result of Gandhi's attempts to instil discipline within the nationalist party – to the extent that historians have often missed the 'porous politics' that existed between these two anti-colonial constituencies.[30]

In some polemical biographies released around Bhagat Singh's birth centenary, the figure's relegation from the dominant narrative of India's anti-colonial struggle was construed in conspiratorial terms: as a purposeful degradation, a concerted attempt to silence a people's hero whose revolutionary ideas still pose a threat to the ruling classes of an independent state.[31] For others, it appeared less controversially as an inevitable – if lamentable – response to the failure of the revolutionary project in India: an understandable outcome of this impassioned but ultimately ill-fated movement.[32] But some of the more interesting responses have taken this dissonance between official text and popular appreciations to demonstrate the limits of conventional history-writing in South Asia: primarily, its inability to capture the diverse set of imaginaries constituting 'the national' in India, its prioritization of certain

[27] Rand was Plague Commissioner in Poona at a time when repressive measures were being deployed by the colonial government to contain disease. See Peter Heehs, *The Bomb in Bengal: The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India, 1900–1910* (New Delhi, 2004 [1993]).

[28] Bhagat Singh would contest this label in his and B. K. Dutt's 'Statement in the [Delhi] Sessions Court' (6 June 1929), in Shiv Varma (ed.), *Selected Writings of Shaheed Bhagat Singh* (Kanpur, 1996), hereafter *SWSBS*. This critique was itself circulated in the press: see *The Times of India* (7 June 1929), 11.

[29] The 'cult of the bomb' was Gandhi's name for the revolutionary movement in the 1920s. See *Young India*, 2 January 1930. On Bhagat Singh's relegation in mainstream histories, see the indignant overview in V. N. Datta, *Gandhi and Bhagat Singh* (New Delhi, 2008).

[30] Maclean, *A Revolutionary History*, 127.

[31] See, especially, P. M. S. Grewal, *Bhagat Singh: Liberation's Blazing Star* (New Delhi, 2007), and the Marxist historian K. N. Pannikar's article 'Celebrating Bhagat Singh', published in the fortnightly *Frontline* (Chennai), 2 November 2007, 4–12.

[32] See A. G. Noorani, *The Trial of Bhagat Singh: Politics of Justice* (New Delhi, 2008 [1996]), for a cautious approach to the idealism of Bhagat Singh and his comrades. An analysis of the revolutionary's limitations was central to Bipan Chandra's early essay, 'The Ideological Development of the Revolutionary Terrorists in Northern India in the 1920s', in B. R. Nanda (ed.), *Socialism in India* (Delhi, 1972), 163–189.

types of sources over others, and its ambition to provide narrative closure despite relying on a limited and unreliable colonial archive. The historian Ishwar Dayal Gaur argues, for instance, that Bhagat Singh's popularity can only be understood if read alongside the celebration of non-conformist heroes in Punjabi folk and cultural traditions, noting his resonance with certain religious tropes of sacrifice and commitment.[33] Literary figurations of 'the revolutionary' in twentieth-century Indian writing have, similarly, begun to attract attention as canvases upon which issues around violence and dissident moralities could be negotiated with nuance, and not least because two of Bhagat Singh's close associates in the revolutionary movement – Yasphal and Agyeya – would later become major figures in the world of Hindi literature.[34]

In his wide-ranging intervention, Christopher Pinney cites the dissonance between official and popular narratives of the independence movement as part of his call for a 'new historiographic practice': an approach grounded in the study of visual representations and so better equipped to grasp the 'affective intensities of the popular' in modern India.[35] From this vantage the widespread circulation of Bhagat Singh's image on posters and calendar art in India appears crucial. For Pinney,

> Official history has diverged so fundamentally from the popular narrative that it has left us few tools with which to understand a figure such as Bhagat Singh. His pictures are ... the greatest resource we have and can give us some insight into the ways in which hugely significant visual traces can endure in the gaps between official forms of knowledge.[36]

One of the features this emphasis on visual sources allows Pinney to demonstrate is, indeed, 'the prominence of revolutionary terrorism in the popular imagination' – Bhagat Singh is posited as one emblem of the 'popular messianism that drove much of the nationalist struggle' in India.[37] A similar sensitivity to Bhagat Singh's recurrent presence in nationalist poster art leads the cultural historian Sumathi Ramaswamy to conclude that it is with the revolutionary's hanging in 1931 that 'martyrdom for the nation becomes a

[33] Ishwar Dayal Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom: A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh* (Delhi, 2008).

[34] Both of these figures were members of Bhagat Singh's Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Yashpal and Bhagat Singh had been students in Lahore together, a period explored in Chapter 1 of this book. On 'the revolutionary' in Indian literature, see Nikhil Govind, *Between Love and Freedom: The Revolutionary in the Hindi Novel* (London, 2014), and Alex Ticknell, *Terrorism, Insurgency and Indian-English Literature, 1830–1947* (London, 2012).

[35] Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 144, 203.

[36] Ibid., 117.

[37] Ibid., 8, 203. Bhagat Singh is joined here by other dissidents executed by the colonial state: the Bengali Khudiram Bose, hanged for the Muzzaffarpur bomb 'outrage' in 1908, central among them. See also Christopher Pinney, 'The Tiger's Nature, but Not the Tiger: Bal Gangadhar Tilak as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's Counter-Guru', *Public Culture* 23:2 (2011), 395–416.