From Pre-colonial to Colonial forms of engagement with Punjabi pasts: A study of

some *vār* texts

by

Hamad Abdullah Nazar

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submitted by   Hamad Abdullah Nazar   in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of   Master of Arts

in   History

Examining Committee:

Dr. Anne Murphy, History, University of British Columbia

Co-supervisor

Dr. Coll Thrush, History, University of British Columbia

Co-supervisor

Dr. Purnima Dhavan, History, University of Washington

Supervisory Committee Member

Abstract

In *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, which was first compiled in 1916 and narrates the historical battle between Nadir Shah of Persia and Mughal King Muhammad Shah, the time operates in a cyclically destructive form through figures like Delhi and *Kal*. Interconnectedly, this time/ past occupies an all-powerful, all agential role of a divine in the text. This time/past/divine is frequently invoked and praised as the ultimate cause during the narration of the battle. These powerful, divine oriented roles of the time/past have been shared by some other well-known *vār* texts as well; these include *vār* texts written by Gurus and Bhai Gurdas, *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār* and *Sikẖāñ dī vār*, all of which were well known in the print and cultural milieus of late nineteenth century Punjab.

Such cyclical, divine oriented renditions of the pasts shared by these pre-colonial texts were, however, gradually marginalized by colonial discipline of history writing. Under such colonial works as SM Latif's *History of the Panjab* (1889), the past was no longer a source of invoking and praising a destructive, powerful, cyclical time/ divine. Instead, it was recounted in a linearized, human-oriented form. Such a changed relationship with the past, when moving from *vār* texts to the colonial discipline of history, is not without its social consequences. The imposition of the discipline of history is deeply entwined with our colonial-modern and religio-communal identities that we are inhabiting today. With the marginalization of such pre-colonial forms as *vār* texts, the past has become a sign of anachronism, on the one hand, which has to be shed off in order to enter the modernity, and a battleground for asserting Hindu, Muslim and/or Sikh communal identities, on the other. These *vār* texts are few surviving examples of pre-colonial forms which are no longer widely available for us today, but which can help us critically analyze our contemporary, colonized, modern, religious identities.

Lay Summary

This thesis explores some of the most well-known texts of *vār*, a tradition which has historically remained prevalent in Punjab for centuries before its colonization by the British in the nineteenth century. Unlike earlier scholarships which focus more on categorizing the tradition in religious and non-religious categories, I focus on the ways these texts narrate the events of the past. Such a different way of reading these *vār* texts allows me to bring them in conversation with the colonial discipline of history writing. I argue how *vār* texts and the discipline of history are different from each other in terms of their engagements with the pasts. Interconnectedly, I also argue how the discipline of history has, over time, marginalized such pre-colonial forms as *vār* and shaped the contemporary moment that we are inhabiting in Punjab(s)

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Hamad Abdullah

Nazar.

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Transliteration Guide

1) For all transliterations, I have followed the *Annual of Urdu Studies* guide (2007), given

   below.

Vowels:

a ā e ē i ī o ō u ū ai au

Consonants:

bē	b	*dāl*	d	*ṣuād*	ṣ	*gāf*	g
pē	p	*ḍāl*	ḍ	*ẓuād*	ẓ	*lām*	l
tē	t	*ẕāl*	ẕ	*ṭōʾē*	ṭ	*mīm*	m
ṭē	ṭ	*rē*	r	*ẓōʾē*	ẓ	*nūn*	n/ñ
ṡē	ṡ	*ṛē*	ṛ	*ʿain*	ʿ	*vāʾō*	v
jīm	j	*zē*	z	*ghain*	gh	*hē*	h
čē	č	*žē*	ž	*fē*	f	*dōčash-mī hē*	ḥ
ḥē	ḥ	*sīn*	s	*qāf*	q	*yē*	y
khē	kh	*shīn*	sh	*kāf*	k	*hamza*	ʾ

2) Punjabi keywords like mirāsī, vār, Kāl and Nārad, which appear frequently in the thesis

   have been unitalicized after their first usage for ease of readability.

3) All the translations of Dasam Granth, Guru Granth Sahib and vār texts of Bhai Gurdas

   are borrowed from the website <https://www.searchgurbani.com>

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This thesis has emerged from the efforts and support of a number of people. Firstly, I am indebted to my supervisors Dr. Anne Murphy and Dr. Coll Thrush who have continued to provide me with their valuable feedback and suggestions throughout the past two years. Dr. Anne very generously and patiently helped me read some of the vār texts during our Directed Studies reading course in the Summers of 2021. In addition, her motherly care throughout this Graduate journey did not let me feel the absence of a home. Her encouragement and support kept me going. I cannot thank her enough. Dr. Coll encouraged me to not take academic forms of writing and disciplinary boundaries for granted and bring in my own creative transgressions. I am not sure how much of it comes up in the actual writing of the thesis, but it is a lesson in writing and thinking which will stay with me beyond this work. I could not have possibly asked for more supportive supervisors during these challenging time periods of the pandemic. Dr. Purnima Dhavan from University of Washington very generously agreed to be the third reader for this thesis.

I am also thankful to the History department at UBC which facilitated my Graduate studies journey well. My cohort provided useful peer-reviews and comments on my earlier draft during our MA thesis writing seminar course. The TA-ship training workshops and one year of teaching experience made me think about the value and ethics of teaching. I was awarded a generous fellowship by the department which made it easier for me to focus on my thesis work during the Summers of 2021. I also feel honored to be considered for the Orville Lloyd WILMOT Memorial Scholarship. During my initial days here at UBC, Shubham Arora and Arafat Safdar helped me settle in. Arafat has continued to be my support and guide since the time I first decided to apply for UBC back in 2019. Mahnoor Ishtiaq has been my biggest support at

every step; the old friend from one's home country whose presence brings invaluable joy of familiarity and homeliness in *dēyār-ē gher*. I have cherished every moment of Arafat and Mahnoor's company.

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For my Ami, Shahnaz Begum, and Abu, Nazar Hussain.

1) Introduction:

In the year 1892, somewhere in the village of Mangat, in Khanqah Dogran, Gujranwala, Punjab, a *mirāsī* was performing/narrating/singing about a 150 year old battle between Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah, originally fought in 1730s.[1] A colonial official named Edward Douglas Maclagan (1864-1952), who was, otherwise, roaming around in the villages to collect data for the census of Punjab, was also hearing out the mirāsī and jotting down the summary of the battle. Decades later, in 1912, when Maclagan was eventually promoted to the rank of a secretary in the provincial administration, he handed over this summary to one of his employees Hari Kishan Kaul (1869-1942) and tasked him with collecting the entire text of this performance. When Kaul went back to the same geographies, he found various parts of this performance scattered around. He, nonetheless, managed to combine two of the relatively complete versions together to compose one text of *Nādir Shāh dī vār*.

This is the story of collection and compilation of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* (as it was recounted by Kaul himself in the meeting of Punjab Historical Society in 1916), one of the rarest texts of Punjabi literature and the tradition of *vār* to have survived and be available publicly today. [2] Roughly translated as ballad, vār tradition has historically remained prevalent in Punjab for centuries. Today, however, the tradition has been limited down to only a few texts like *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, which have survived in a textual form through some strokes of luck. With the growing disavowal of Punjabi in Pakistan, these surviving, lucky texts appear out of joint with

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[1] *Mirāsī* can roughly be translated as a bard. Although it has particular historical specificites of its own which are not entirely captured by the more eurocentric term of bard.

[2] The text of Kaul's speech in the meeting of Punjab Historical Society has been published in the beginning of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* (edited by Faqeer Muhammad Faqeer, Aziz book depot, Lahore, 1997), under the title of *Hindostān tē Nādir Shāh dī vār*, 19-58.

the same cultural and literary milieus of Punjab which shaped them in the first place.[3] There is

hardly any understanding or awareness of these texts outside the limited, exclusive, scholarly

circles. I and so many other young people, students like me, who have grown up in Pakistani

Punjab, hardly come across this word "vār" in our educational and social settings.

This thesis is an attempt to come to terms with this marginalization and amnesia of the

tradition by focusing primarily on *Nādir Shāh dī vār* and also briefly engaging with some of the

other available vār texts. The disavowal of these texts by the same society which gave birth to

them is a central concern of this thesis. What historical and cultural processes have led to the

amnesia and disavowal of this tradition? How have the cultural milieus of the society changed

over time such that they can no longer accept back what they themselves gave birth to? If, as the

example of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* recounted by Kaul above indicates, these texts and their milieus

had a visible, vibrant presence at least by the end of the nineteenth century Punjab, how and why

have they moved to the margins at the start of the twenty first century? What constituted the

textual milieus of these vār which has been lost, forgotten, shed behind, no longer available for

us and what are the consequences of living with such a loss today?

The secondary scholarship on vār texts, more concerned with dividing the genre into

religious and non-religious, martial categories, does not sufficiently explore these interrelated

questions of its amnesia and disavowal. My method of engagement with vār texts, therefore,

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[3] There is an entire legacy of colonial engineering behind this disavowal and marginalization of Punjabi. Farina Mir highlights how by the time the British colonized Punjab in 1849, they deemed Punjabi as "the language of Sikhs" and "feared that adopting it as the official provincial language might promote Sikh political claims" (*The Social Space of language*, 50). Furthermore, Punjabi was also seen as a "derivative dialect", lacking an "established, standard" form and hence lacking any "merit" as "an administrative language" (50). In its stead, Urdu was imposed as the official language of the colonial government across Punjab. "Education was one critical site" where the "influence" of this colonial language policy was "felt" (53). This colonial language policy "remained in place until the end of colonial rule in 1947" (41). With the uncritical adoption of the colonial administrative and educational system after the partition, Urdu and English continue to be the official and educational languages while Punjabi continues to be marginalized in Pakistan till today.

moves away from these concerns of dividing and defining the genre and focuses instead on the value of these texts in terms of their renditions of the pasts. I would argue how in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, the time/past unfolds itself in a cyclical, divine form through figures of Delhi and *Kāl*. Such cyclical, divine oriented renditions of the pasts are shared by other well-known vār texts of its time period as well. The divine is, for example, also a central agent in the vār texts of Gurus and Bhai Gurdas. Similarly, the themes of death in *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār* and impermanence of time in *Sikḫāñ dī vār* operate along a cyclical path in ways similar to the characters of Delhi and Kāl. Such broadly shared ideas indicate how the narration of the battles in these texts is a way of remembering, invoking, praising a powerful time/past/divine and to reaffirm the justice and truth of its actions. The battlefield is a fertile social setting which heightens the awareness of a cyclical/ temporal/ powerful/ just divine among the poets/ performers/ audiences of these texts. Such an engagement with the events of the past shared by these vār texts has been marginalized over time by the colonial discipline of history writing. Such works of colonial history as SM Latif's *History of the Panjab* (1891) rendered the pasts along a linear, human oriented form, to bring them under the control of a colonial, global, statist, teleological temporality. Such new relationships with the past, as imposed through colonial history writing, engineered broader modernist and communal imaginaries in Punjab/South Asia. The ideas of following Europe as the only way to enter modernity and the strictly violent divisions among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs that we have inherited today have variously been shaped by the production of colonial knowledge under the discipline of history. Vār is one among other marginalized, non-statist, pre-colonial traditions which can help us critically analyze these identities and imaginaries today.

This thesis begins by exploring the broader question of the differences between pre-colonial and colonial forms of engagements with the past in the next section. The third section

focuses on the history of vār in Punjab and an overview of the secondary scholarship on it before elaborating upon how my methods of engagement with vār texts in this thesis differ from this secondary scholarship. The fourth section focuses on *Nādir Shāh dī vār* in detail to indicate how the figures of Delhi and *Kāl* in this vār entail a cyclically destructive, divine oriented temporality. The fifth section goes on to show how these cyclical, divine renditions of the past in *Nādir Shāh dī vār* have also been shared by some other vār texts of its time period. The sixth section highlights how such renditions of the past as shared by these vār texts are marginalized by the colonial works of history writing such as SM Latif's *History of the Panjab* (1891). The seventh and final section is an attempt to think about some of the social consequences of living with these new, colonial forms of engagement with the pasts today.

2) Pre-colonial pasts and the colonial forms of history writing:

In the preface of his multi-volume work *History of British India* (1818), the author James Mill (1773-1836) wrote about "a historicality" of "Hindu legends". Mill writes how these works of "incredible fictions" "ascribe events most extravagant and unnatural" which are not connected together in a "chronological series". Mill goes on to call these legends as "of a religious character", "absurd and extravagant", lacking any "historical character" and unable to "record the past".[4]

Mill's textual strategies and attitudes of denouncing any notions of historicality in pre-colonial India were shared by other colonial and orientalist scholars of his time period as well. For example, T.B. Macaulay (1800-1859), another prominent colonial official, wrote how "the historical information" collected from "all the books written in the Sanskrit language" is "less valuable" than "what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England".[5] Similarly, HH Wilson (1786-1860), another prominent orientalist scholar of Mill's time period, wrote how "the Hindus have never had any historical writings". Instead, he argues, "all that is known of India is to be gathered from popular poems, or the accounts of foreigners".[6] Hegel, too, wrote how "India has no history"; "What India has is not history", according to Hegel, "but fore-history".[7]

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[4] Mill, James. *The History of British India, vol. 1*. (Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1817), 144.
<https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/mill-the-history-of-british-india-vol-1>
[5] T. B. Macaulay, "Minute on education" (1835)
<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html>
[6] H.H. Wilson, *An introduction to universal history, for the use of schools* (5th edition, Calcutta, 1854), 123.
[7] Thomas R. Trautmann, "Does India have history? Does history have India", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 1 (January 2012): 193.
See this article and Ranajit Guha's *Dominance without hegemony* (Harvard University Press, 1997) 75-78 for a detailed discussion of Hegel's philosophy of history and how it was adopted by colonial and orientalist scholars/historians like Mills in India.

It was on the basis of such a commonly shared assumption about pre-colonial literatures and traditions of India as "a-historical", that these various colonial, orientalist scholars began producing knowledge about history of India; their works sought to fill in this "void" of historical consciousness in India. Mostly emerging in the early nineteenth century, these colonial works of history writing continued to inform, cite and build upon each other and slowly gained a canonical foothold in India throughout the century.

As Ranajit Guha's discussion of Hegel highlights, this colonial endeavor of history writing was also deeply entwined with the formation of a colonial state. According to Hegel, "it is the state which first supplies a content, which not only lends itself to the prose of history but actually helps produce it".[8] The "real history", according to Hegel, "presupposed the existence of the state"; "no state, no history". [9] Guha, then, goes on to trace the two phases of colonial state formation and history writing in India. The "initial, mercantilist phase" which included texts like Alexander Dow's *History of Hindustan* (1772) aimed to "educate East India Company" and equip it with a knowledge "that would help it to extract the highest possible amount of revenue from the conquered territories".[10] The second phase was dominated by concerns for legislation and improvement in India, "pioneered, appropriately enough, by the Utilitarian philosopher, James Mill".[11] A look at the preface of SM Latif's *History of the Panjab*, a text which will be engaged with in more detail later on in the thesis, also indicates how this work of colonial history writing was invested in legitimizing the rule of the colonial state. Latif writes how "corruption,

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[8] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 73
[9] Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 75
[10] Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 74
[11] Guha, *Dominance without hegemony*, 75
For a more detailed discussion of this utilitarian movement in the colonial rule, see Javed Majeed's *Ungoverned Imaginings: James Mill's The History of British India and Orientalism* (Clarendon Press, 1992)

degradation and treachery stalked openly through the land" under the rule of earlier, despotic kings before the "benevolent" British took over India and brought "justice" and "prosperity".[12]

In recent times, a number of South Asian/ postcolonial scholars and historians have critically analyzed these colonial, statist works of history and their assumptions of pre-colonial India as lacking any historical consciousness. These works effectively argue about and highlight various forms of engagements with the pasts which have historically remained prevalent in pre-colonial India but did not confirm to the logics and assumptions of the colonial discipline of history writing. The purposes they fulfilled were different from the building of a colonial state. As a result, these pre-colonial, non-statist forms were variously casted into such "ahistorical" categories as "fictional", "legend", "religious", "irrational", "incredible", "illogical" and so on. [13]

It is through these works of scholarship which highlight the necessities and methods of exploring the precolonial, non-statist forms of engagements with the pasts in India, that this thesis also explores some vār texts. In particular, this thesis borrows from Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Schulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's work *Textures of time*. Rao et al. write how in precolonial South India, history "was not in itself a genre, and no single genre was allocated to history writing".[14] It would, instead, be couched, embodied in a variety of literary genres; this

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[12] SM Latif, *History of the Panjab, From the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Time* (Calcutta Central Press Company, 1891), xi and xiii.
<https://apnaorg.com/books/english/history-latif/book.php?fldr=book>

[13] Some of these scholarships, as highlighted by Trautmann, include "Pathak 1966; Warder 1972; Thapar 1992; Wagoner 1993; Ali, ed. 1999; Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2001; Guha 2004; Mantena 2007". ("Does India have history?", 174). Also see Romila Thapar's "Historical Consciousness and Historical Traditions in Early North India" in *Thinking, recording, and writing history in the ancient world* (2013) and "History as a Way of Remembering the Past" in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought* (2014). Other notable works of this scholarship are Michael Witzel's " On Indian Historical Writing: The role of the Vamsavalis" (*Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies* 2, 1990, 1-57), Shonaleeka Kaul's ""Seeing" the Past: Text and Questions of History in the Rajatarangini" (*History and theory* 53, no. 2, May 2014) and Vinay Lal's *The History of History* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

[14] Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Schulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of time, Writing History in South India 1600-1800* (Other Press, New York, 2006), 3

"choice of genre or mode for historiographical purposes" changed frequently, over time according to a community's "preferred modes of literary production".[15]

Each of these genres would go on to add their own genre specific flavors, affectivities, causal frameworks, interpretations when narrating the events of the history. Unlike the colonial forms and discipline of history writing which would cast such works as fictional, superstitious, and hence unable to contain or narrate any historical event, these authors indicated how the genres like *katha* and *kavya* could contain a sense of history, time and/or factual narration of the past. This sense of history would consciously be invoked by a poet or a performer during their performance and be recognized as such by the audience as well.[16] To further elaborate their argument, Rao et al. go on to do a close reading, literary analysis of texts from various genres of South India, from 1600 to 1800, to highlight the textures of history emerging in them.

Their arguments, though set in a specific geography of South India, can also be extended broadly to argue how the narration of the past never constituted a genre of its own in the precolonial South Asia. The past did not exist merely to be factually narrated; its factual narration was not an end in itself. Its textures would instead be consciously employed in the fulfillment of the broader rules, logics, operations, affectivities, flavors, causal frameworks of the literary genre itself. Other scholarly works on precolonial forms highlight some examples of these genre-oriented renditions of the past.

In her work on Sanskrit texts, Romila Thapar argues how "biographies and dynastic and regional chronicles- the *caritas* and the *vamsāvalis*- articulated views on the past".[17] These

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[15] Rao et al. *Textures of time*, 3
[16] Rao et al. *Textures of time*, 253
They define history as requiring "strong notions of time" which exists in the forms of textures in the genre. These historical textures are immediately identifiable through "many subtle markers- syntactic, evidential, phono-aesthetic, silential, and so on- that clarify and define, in unmistakable ways, the author's intention".
[17] Romila Thapar, "Time as a metaphor of history: Early India", *The Krishna Bhardwaj memorial lecture*, (Oxford University Press, 1996), 35.

biographies and chronicles "evolved into genres of literature and borrowed from the courtly literary style" to legitimize the rule of the kings.[18] For example, beginning with "the origin myths" as a "preamble", the Chamba *vamsāvalis* would "legitimize founders of a dynasty by linking them with the heroes of Purānic ancestry".[19] Another example of such precolonial, genre-specific renditions of the past is *Gurbilas* texts which increasingly emerged in the eighteenth century Punjab for the narration of the life history of Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708). Anne Murphy argues about the role *Gur Sobhā* (1711), one of the most well-known texts of the genre, played in the "formation of the community".[20] Purnima Dhavan also highlights the affective appeal of these *Gurbilas* texts which brought various "disparate, heterodox" groups together in their love and devotion for Guru Gobind Singh.[21]

Moreover, such a couching of the past is not limited to the contexts of Punjab/ South Asia only. As Mark Rifkin's work on Indigenous communities of North America reminds us, the past existed outside any strictly defined genre of history in other non-Western, non-colonial societies as well. In particular, Rifkin highlights the importance of storytelling in the Indigenous narrations of the pasts. Telling stories about the past, he argues, provide "a background for Indigenous trajectories and temporalities", cultivate "sensibilities", "worldview", "modes of being-in-time".[22] "More than representing events" stories, according to Rifkin, "*do things*, like

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[18] Thapar, "Time as a metaphor of history", 36.
[19] Thapar, "Time as a metaphor of history", 37.
[20] Anne Murphy, "History in the Sikh Past", *History and Theory*, 46, no. 3, (October 2007): 357.
[21] Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 151.
For further examples of the texts across literary genres, time periods, cultures and geographical regions of South Asia within which the "literary constructions of the past" is entwined with "communitarian formations", see the collection of essays edited by Murphy, titled *Time, History and the Religious Imaginary in South Asia* (Routledge, London, 2011).
[22] Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, *Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Duke University Press, 2017), 35.

provoke action, embody sovereignty, or structure social and political institutions".[23] Within such storytellings about the pasts, therefore, time is regarded "less as a container that holds events" than as potential "process of becoming".[24] These stories about the pasts operate less as a "chronological sequence" of events as they happened than as "overlapping networks of affective connection (to persons, non-human entities, and place) that orient one's way of moving through space and time".[25] The works of these scholars across colonial contexts of South Asia and North America give us a hint of the diverse, pre-colonial, non-statist purposes and uses of the past.

Rao et al. contrast such genre-specific renditions of the past "with the emerging Western historiography of the modern period".[26] "In Western Europe", they write, "history did emerge as a relatively fixed and stable genre, even before the positivist turn of the nineteenth century".[27] This genre of history, according to them, "had clear formal features, a characteristic frame, and a relatively clear-cut method".[28] While it might be difficult to draw such neat binaries between Eastern and Western forms of engagements with the past given the diverse and complex forms of history writing in Europe, a look at the works of colonial scholars in India does indicate how they actively created such binaries through their writings.

As Christian Lee Novetzke highlights, the rise of "scientific historiography" in the early nineteenth century West, regularly attributed to Leopold van Ranke, "moved toward the process of composing rational, empirical narratives of the past".[29] When this Rankean, matter-of-fact rendition of the pasts traveled to India through colonial works of history writing, it actively

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[23] Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 46.
[24] Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 2.
[25] Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*, 46.
[26] Rao et al. *Textures of time*, 3.
[27] Rao et al. *Textures of time*, 3.
[28] Rao et al. *Textures of time*, 3.
[29] Christian Lee Novetzke, "The Subaltern Numen: Making History in the Name of God", *History of Religions* 46, no. 2 (November 2006)**:** 120.

marked itself out as different and superior to the preceding, prevalent, genre-specific, story oriented renditions of the past highlighted above. As Thapar explains, "Indian sense of time" was seen as "entirely cyclical", "tied to an infinity of recurring cycles", unable to "recognize historical change" and hence devoid of any "sense of history" within the oriental, colonial scholarships.[30] On the other hand, such colonial forms of history writing as James Mill's *History of British India* (1818) claimed to fill in this "void" by bringing a linear idea of time and history to India.

Similarly, in the preface of his work, *History of the Panjab*, SM Latif claims to follow John Gurwood's (1790-1845) idea of history writing as "the exact illustration of events as they occurred".[31] He ,then, goes on to mark his "factual" work of history out as different from "books of entertainment", "fiction", "Indian tale" which so many of his young countrymen read "for the sake of amusement and to pass the time".[32] These are some examples of how the colonial forms of history writing actively created binaries between Eastern and Western forms of engagements with the pasts. The veracity of these claims, whether there is a Western and Eastern form of engagements with the past, is beyond the scope of this thesis, but these colonial claims did marginalize various pre-colonial/ Indigenous forms of engagements with the past like vār.

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[30] Thapar,"Time as a metaphor of history", 4.
[31] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, vi.
[32] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, x.

3) The tradition of vār in Punjab

The texts of vār, analyzed in this thesis, come from a tradition which has historically remained prevalent in Punjab for centuries. Sujan Rai, a chronicler, historian, *munshī* in the reign of Aurangzeb (1618- 1707) mentioned in his book *Khulāṣāt-ut Tavārīkh* (1695) how "Ameer Khusro (1253-1325) wrote about a battle between Ghias-ud-din Tughlaq and Nasir-ud-din Tughlaq using a poetic form known as "vār" in the local language of Punjab".[33] It can, therefore, be argued that perhaps vār was known as a poetic form for rendition of battles by at least the thirteenth century in Punjab. But it was definitely a well-known genre by the time Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was writing in the late fifteenth century. Guru Nanak not only wrote 3 vār poems but also mentioned in the preface of each of these poems, the name of an earlier, pre-existing vār as a guide for composition and performance.[34] Following Guru Nanak, other Gurus also wrote vār poems in the praise of the divine which went on to constitute a significant portion of Guru Granth Sahib.[35] Alongwith Gurus, Bhai Gurdas (1551-1636), another prominent figure of this time period, also wrote over 40 vār poems.[36] These are the earliest and most well-known archives of the tradition of vār in Punjab.

Alongside, the tradition of vār also continued to prosper outside these texts of Gurus and Bhai Gurdas and adopted a diversity of the contents and forms. As Jeevan Deol's article highlights, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, vār poems were written about "allegorical battles which personified vices and virtues fight for control of the human moral universe", "the

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[33] "*Čhunančē Ameer Khusro bē zubān-e Panjāb bē ibarāt-emarghūb muqaddamāʾ jang-ē ghazi-al molk* [unreadable] *Shah Nasīruddin Khusro Khān gufte kē ān rā bē zubān-e Panjāb "vār" goʾyand".*
(Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh, Subhan Rai Batalvi, as quoted in Syed Akhtar Hussain's *Panjābī vārāñ: Tārīkh tē tajziyē*, 134)
[34] The text of these preceding vār texts that Guru Nanak named could not be found. Only their name is known today.
[35] Gurus, total of 10 in number, were the spiritual/ religious/ political leaders of Sikh community. *Guru Granth Sahib* is the collection of their writings. One of the most well-known texts to come out of early modern Punjab, *Guru Granth Sahib* was first compiled in 1604 by Guru Arjan and later by Guru Gobind Singh in 1708.
[36] See <https://www.searchgurbani.com/bhai-gurdas-vaaran/index/vaar>

exploits of pirs and avatar and popular religious figures", " the genealogies and settlement

patterns of the patron Jatt gots" and extollation of "the martial exploits of Guru Gobind Singh".[37]

Alongwith the contents, the form and metrical patterns of vār too kept changing over time.[38] A

look at the table of contents of *Prāčin vāran tē Jangnāmē* (1971) by Shamher Singh 'Ashok' and

Panjābī vārāñ (2008) by Piara Singh Padam, two of the most well-known collections of vār

texts, will further indicate the diversity of the contents and forms that the vār tradition has

historically adopted. Such diverse iterations of vār continued to have a visible presence in Punjab

at least up until the early twentieth century when Kaul was compiling *Nādir Shāh dī vār.*[39]

This short history of vār suggests the depth and breadth of the tradition in Punjab; it

spanned over centuries and was employed in various social contexts, for diverse purposes. This

historically vibrant, social presence of the tradition has, however, been compartmentalized into

certain scholarly categories today, to be accessed and read by a specific group of Punjabi

scholars only. Largely unconcerned with the absence of the tradition in today's time period, these

scholarships are, instead, more focused on dividing the genre into the categories of religious and

non-religious.[40] Within this commonly shared scholarly practice of categorizing vār tradition, the

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[37] Jeevan Deol, "'To Hell with War': Literature of political resistance in early nineteenth-century Punjab", *South Asia Research* 17, no. 2 (Autumn, 1997): 187.

[38] Deol, "To Hell with War," 187.

[39] It is, however, not clear whether the mirāsīs singing about the battle of Nadir Shah called their performance a vār or whether it was a category imposed upon these performances by Kaul himself. The term vār was nonetheless well-known by that time period. Sohan Singh Seetal (1909-1998) was one of the most well-known performers of vār during the twentieth century who composed and performed over 82 vār poems. For a complete list of Seetal's vār texts and some of the samples, see Hussain's *Punjabi vārāñ,* 248-254.

[40] Syed Akhtar Hussain's PhD. dissertation, *Panjābī vārāñ* (2005), one of the most recent works on vār poetry, provides a well-collected overview of these secondary scholarships. A look at chapter 2 of this dissertation indicates how various prominent Punjabi scholars of *vār* tradition, Shahbaz Malik, Piara Singh Padam, Faqeer Muhammad Faqeer to name a few, may disagree about the etymological meaning of the word vār, the impact of classical Sanskrit *rasa* theory on it*,* the metrical patterns of vār poetry, and how this tradition is different or similar to such parallel genres as *Jang-nāmā*, but they all seem to have a fair consensus on dividing the genre along religious and non-religious, martial lines (See Hussain's *Panjābī vārāñ,* 101- 286)

Najm Hosain Syed's *Gal Vār dī* is perhaps one of the few exceptions in this secondary literature on var tradition which moves beyond categories of religious and non-religious. My own close reading of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* in the upcoming sections has also been greatly assisted by this work.

texts written by Gurus and Bhai Gurdas are termed religious, while the remaining non-religious vār texts are termed as martial, ballad, describing the battles and praising the bravery of the warriors. The partition of Punjab into India and Pakistan in 1947 has only further strengthened this scholarly categorization of vār texts. While in Indian Punjab, the scholarship and readership of vār tradition is mostly restricted to texts written by Gurus and Bhai Gurdas,[41] in Pakistan, the scholarly works done on vār tradition mostly focus on the remaining, "non-Sikh", martial vār texts.[42]

Abetted by the nation-state borders, such a common scholarly practice of categorizing the genre mostly remains unconcerned with its social absence today. There is very little to no understanding of how colonialism and colonial knowledge productions have historically created a cultural amnesia about vār (and broadly also of other pre-colonial traditions of Punjab). In fact, it builds itself upon various colonial conceptualizations like religious and non-religious instead of critically analyzing them. Our own modern ideas of what constitutes a religion and religiosity (and what does not) can be very different from how such ideas were imagined, embodied, practiced in the precolonial time periods.[43] Such colonial informed categorizations cannot, therefore, fully encapsulate the pre-colonial iterations of vār tradition.

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[41] Rahuldeep Gill's book *Drinking From Love's Cup* (Oxford University Press, 2016) is a recent example.

[42] The, otherwise brilliant works of Faqeer Muhammad Faqeer (his introductory essays in *Vārāñ* (1999), Najm Hosain Syed (*Gal vār dī*) and Saeed Bhutta (*Dēs dīāñ vārāñ*) fall into this category. None of these scholars have seriously engaged with vār poetry written by Gurus and Bhai Gurdas in their writings on the traditions of vār. Similarly, in the syllabus of the MA program in Punjabi offered at Punjab University, Lahore, the only two vār poems included are *Nādir Shāh dī vār* and *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār*. Moreover, when I read a course on vār poetry during my undergraduate in Lahore, Pakistan, the vār texts from Guru Granth Sahib were not a part of our course outline or class discussions.

[43] Arvind Pal Mandair, for example, highlights how "prior to the encounter with European thought", there was "no exact equivalent for the term "religion", no referent that signified what "religion" signifies in European languages" in the context of India. (Mandair, *Religion and the specter of the West*, 8) It was only after this "European conceptuality" became "hegemonic" in India through colonialism that "Indians were coerced into responding to its call" and started "appropriating and internalizing this term"(8). It was the "colonizer's paternalistic demand for "true religion", based on the false assumption of an "unhindered translatability of *religio*" in Indian context, which led to the production of "monotheistic versions of Sikhism and Hinduism"(14). On the basis of these arguments, Mandair cautions us to not take the present existence and conceptualization of religion "within Indian cultural formation" as

Given all of these shortcomings of the secondary scholarship, this thesis tries to move beyond any such pre-dominant, colonially informed categorizations of vār texts into religious and non religious. It focuses instead on a more thematic study of the vār texts, which can help us critically analyze colonial knowledge productions and their legacies instead of uncritically imbibing them. The vār texts are brought together in this thesis, not because they belong to the categories of religious or non-religious but because of how they render the pasts in their own textually specific ways. As the analysis of these vār texts below will indicate, the preconceived categories and ideas of religious and non-religious often get diffused within a careful, close reading of these texts. Ideas of divine, cyclical temporality, justice, impermanence and/or death, which appear frequently in these vār texts cannot be easily categorized into categories of religious and non-religious.

Lastly, such a thematic study of the vār texts does not claim to be representative of the entire tradition itself. Given the historically diverse iterations of vār, there can be texts which do not conform to these thematic renditions of the past and hence require theoretical frameworks of their own. The form and content of vār adopted by each poet and/or their audience is in itself a matter of historical inquiry. Interconnectedly, such particular ways of rendering the past, as found in the vār texts below, can exist in some other texts outside the tradition of vār as well. The purpose here is not to find any essential and distinct features of the genre but to understand

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natural or for granted (14). Farina Mir's work helps us think more particularly about the role of religion in the geographical and cultural contexts of the vār texts being analyzed in this thesis. Mir argues how the "threshold for belonging" to the Punjabi literary formations in the late nineteenth century Punjab was "actually quite low", "more inclusive than exclusive"; belonging to it was not restricted to any particular religious group but, instead, "entailed engagement and experience: composing or performing a Punjabi text" (Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, 99). While this Punjabi literary formation will be explored in more details later on in the thesis, here it is indicative of embodying multiple religious identities. Such a complex engagement with the term and idea of religion, as warranted by arguments of Mandair and Mir, is mostly missing in the categorization of vār texts in the secondary scholarships described above.

how the past is rendered in some of its texts and how such a rendition has been marginalized by

colonial forms of history writing.[44] Any other texts outside the tradition which share similar

forms of engagements with the past only help add on to the arguments of this thesis and the

broader project of exploring the non-colonial, non- statist renditions of the past in South Asia.

Following these methodologies, the next two sections explore more specifically how the

past is rendered in each of these vār texts.

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[44] My approach here also differs from that of Jeevan Deol's in "To Hell with War:" in which he centralizes various features like Khatri caste, the importance of the hero's mother and protection of father's honor to the "later Punjabi vārs" (189).The limitations of such essentializations will come out clearly in the upcoming discussion of vār texts, none of which constitute these features.

4) Destructiveness and divinity in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*:

In *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, the figures of Delhi and Kāl embody a destructive unfolding of time. These two figures caused destruction in the past and they are following this historical pattern by waging the current battle as well. As Romila Thapar's discussion of the cyclical unfoldings of time in the Sankrit four-age model later on in the thesis will indicate more clearly, such a destruction also assumes a rebirth or recreation to keep the cycle moving. It is through such a cycle of birth and death, embodied by the figures of Delhi and Kāl, that the time progresses in the text. It is this cyclical unfolding of time which brings the past and the present together in the text.

4.1) Delhi, the city of destroyers:

In the second stanza of the text, we are told the story of a number of kings who have historically ruled the city of Delhi in the following way:

First, the Turanis made Delhi their own.

Then the Chauhans had their turn and embraced her happily.

The Ghauris took up residence for a period of time.

Pathans were the fourth group to enter this house

After them came Baburites, the Chughtais, who made their attack when their time came

Delhi smiled, lost and shed the blood of its body

You eat to your full and your sons are brought up like the goats for the butchers

You have shed the blood of millions without feeling any mercy.

Everyone is born beneath you, and destruction spreads throughout the world

You kill one and take the next one, again and again, with [your] great beauty

Delhi you have been a princess, again and again for so many times [45]

The first few lines have a tone of celebration, festivity, with an imagery of marriage, as if all of these kings are marrying Delhi. The city attracts them like a bride. But this same bride of Delhi emerges as a violent killer in the later parts of the stanza, shedding blood of the people it is married to. The city of Delhi first attracts, invites the kings before going on to destroy them and moving on to the next ones. It keeps on inviting and killing various invaders and rulers; this cycle of population and destruction, which has been operating for centuries, cannot be stopped. It has overpowered, destroyed various powerful dynasties, which despite all of their might and power could not survive and outlast it. Such a depiction of Delhi, as almost a goddess which is both benign, attractive, wish-granting on the one hand and terrifying, powerful, destructive on the other, right in the beginning of the text suggests a similar causal temporal interpretation of the upcoming battle as well. Just like his predecessors, Muhammad Shah (1702-1748), the current ruler of Delhi, too is expected to meet a similar fate of destruction.

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[45] *Āvvl dillī tūriyāñ kar apnī pāʾī*
 Pherey laʾī čōhānāñ ang khosh kar lāʾī
Pher laʾī sī gōrīāñ kōʾī muddat vsāʾī
Pher laʾī Paṯẖānāñ ān kē gẖr čōṯẖē āʾī
Pher laʾī bābrkīāñ čōghṯeyāñ, gẖat sār kaṭāʾī
Dillī hānsī hārī rut dẖrī lūhāī
Tūñ mās kẖāʾeñ raj pūtrāñ jiʾūñ bakr qasāʾī
Tūñ lakẖ lūhāʾiyāñ nēñ koẖhniyāñ mehr mōl nā āʾī
Tenūñ nīvīyāñ jamiyāñ sāriyāñ, jag pẖrī dūhāʾī
Īk mārē īk sar dẖrēñ nit husn savāʾī
Dillī tūñ shehzādīāñ, kahī hūndī āʾī
Vārāñ (compiled by Faqeer Muhammad Faqeer, Sange meel publications, 1999, Lahore), verse 2, 153/154
Dr. Purnima commented how such a start of the verse from Turanis is an inversion from the usual oral traditions of Punjabi and Urdu of the 19th century which usually start from Chauhans.
Such a characterization of Delhi is also different from how the city was read through *Shehr-ē Āshōb* genre of Urdu poetry. *Shehr-ē Āshōb* laments the loss of the cultures and traditions of Delhi as a result of foreign invasions and usually carries a nostalgic tone. See the website of Columbia University for more details about *Shehr-ē Āshōb*. In particular, it would be interesting to compare *Shehr-ē Āshōb* poetry of well-known Urdu poets Mir Taqi Mir and Mirza Rafi Sauda, written after the attack of Nadir Shah on Delhi, with *Nādir Shāh dī vār*. For a preliminary view of Mir and Sauda's *Shehr-ē Āshōb* poetry, see Carla R. Petievich's "POETRY OF THE DECLINING MUGHALS: THE "SHAHR ĀSHOB"", Journal of South Asian Literature, Vol. 25, No.1.(Winter, Spring 1990), pp. 99-110.

Later on in the text, this all too familiar character of Delhi as a bride also invites Nadir

Shah to come and marry it:

Delhi is standing waiting, "Get me married"

"I, a widow, come make me a married woman, lest I be choked to death"

If you are a master with capabilities, you come and let [me] breathe[46]

Here, we can see Delhi operating along the patterns it has historically followed. It has

become a bride to invite Nadir Shah, like it has invited other rulers before him. By attacking

Delhi, therefore, Nadir Shah is also falling into the lure of the city's character. Despite all of his

majestic power, he cannot resist or exist outside of such a cyclically destructive temporality of

Delhi.

4.2) The character of *Kāl*, the harbinger of destruction:

Similar to the characterization of Delhi, the figure of Kāl in the text also appears as the

harbinger of destruction. Kāl is a mythological figure, a goddess, which often appears along with

Nārad, another mythological figure, a god, in vār texts and in the martial *ḍholā* form of Punjabi

poetry.[47] The appearance of Kāl and Nārad is often linked with destruction in these various

texts.[48] It is with this tradition of harbingering destruction behind them that Kāl and Nārad also

appear in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*.

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[46] *Ēy dillī khṛī ōḍikdī merā karō, vevāh*
Tē menōñ raṇḍī nūñ ān sūhāg dē nāhīñ lē marīnōñ phāh
Jē tūñ ṣāḥb mēñ tofīq dā ān khūlāʾē sāh
(*Vārāñ*, verse 21, page 17)
[47] While it is difficult to define *ḍholā* given how similar it is to the neighboring genres of *mahia*, *tappa* and *boli*, it has historically engaged with themes of pain of separation, love, religion and history/ martiality in a "five line" fixed rhyming form. See Gibb Schreffler's "Western Punjabi Song Forms: Māhīā and ḍholā" for more details. <https://punjab.global.ucsb.edu/sites/default/files/sitefiles/journals/volume18/3_Mahiaanddhola.pdf>
[48] In *Čaṇḍī dī vār*, for example, one of the most revered and well-known *vār* texts, compiled in the *Dasam Granth*, Kāl dances and Nārad plays his drum in a time period when "pious age of Satjug" was passing away and "Tretajug, which was [only] half as righteous" was arriving (*Sri Dasam Granth Sahib,* 244). It was, then, within this new age that the battle between armies of the goddess *čaṇḍī* and demons was fought.
    In another vār text, *Yūdh Srī Guru Gobind Singh jē kā*, *Kāl* and *Nārad* dance and sing before the start of the battle (Piara Singh Padam, *Punjabi vārāñ, A collection of Punjabi Ballads* (Singh Brothers), 184). Similarly, in *vār*

Similar to the character of Delhi, Kāl also entails another cyclically destructive interpretation of the past which continues to impact the present. Tired of the impoverished marital life she is living with Nārad, Kāl decides to take her revenge by enticing Nadir Shah to attack on India. She appears in the court of Nadir Shah and complains about hunger at her marital home before reminiscing about how:

> The day Lachman [Lakshman] the warrior and Ram Chand attacked Lanka
>
> There was also Hanuman at the forefront who made the attack.
>
> Devils and gods killed each other, cutting down each other like the summer harvest ….
>
> Countless marrows of blood spilled on that occasion
>
> Jogis were very happy drinking from bowls of skull that day
>
> That day I also sat down and relished cooked food [49]

Kāl, here, brings forth her chrono typical character, as celebrating and/or feeding upon the destructions caused in the wake of battles. She ate to her full on the day that the famous battle between Rama and Ravana was fought[50]; in order to again fulfill her hunger, which is spurred by her poverty ridden marital, domestic life, she entices Nadir Shah to wage yet another battle. This is how the historical operations of Kāl influence the present events; Nadir Shah attacked India to fulfill her historical hunger for destruction. In ways similar to the character of Delhi, the figure of Kāl here brings another cyclical pattern of destruction which has been operating in the past and is now also causing the present events. Neither powerful king Nadir Shah, nor his wise and

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Kāhn Kāns kī, *Nārad* brings a thought to the prince Kans' mind that his yet to be born nephew, Krishn, will slay him and overtake the rule. This thought deeply disturbs Kans and becomes a central cause of the battle in the text (Padam, *Punjabi vārāñ*, 248).

In the case of *ḍholā* form, Gibb Schreffler highlights how *Kāl bulendī* "Kāl is calling..." and *nārd uṭhiā*, "Nard sprung up..." are a prominent "opening formula" shared by "many historical ḍholās" to open up a scene of the battle (Schreffler, "Western Punjabi Song Forms", 91)

[49] *Vārāñ*, verse 9, 160.

[50] The reference here is to the famous battle between Rama and Ravana recounted in the texts of *Rāmāyanā*.

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cautious minister Baqi Khan, can resist it. Here, it is pertinent to highlight a few qualifications regarding these chrono typically destructive operations of Delhi and Kāl in the text.

They both appear as the only female figures in the text which are continuously destroying and disrupting the social and political structures primarily created and dominated by men. All the past rulers of Delhi have been men. Similarly, all the actors in the current battle, from kings like Muhammad Shah and Nadir Shah to their ministers and warriors, are also all men. It is within these men-dominated political structures that the bride of Delhi repeatedly causes destruction. Similarly, in the case of Kāl, Syed argues how it is symbolic of feminine resistance which does not accept the rule of kingship.[51] She does not accept any of the given systems created by men, and is always bent on breaking them.[52] Syed goes on to highlight how, along with political systems, Kāl also subverts the interconnected institutions of home and marriage.[53] Nārad was assigned the task of controlling her but he fails. At one level, therefore, the cyclically destructive figures of Delhi and Kāl are also an embodiment of a female resistance and disruption of the political and social structures dominated by men.

Lastly, by highlighting the cyclically destructive unfolding of time in the text, this thesis does not mean to suggest any absence or lack of a linear or historically particular unfolding of time. Following Thapar's earlier cautions against casting Indian texts as entirely cyclical and hence non-linear/ahistorical, it is important to highlight how in *Nādir Shāh dī vār* the two forms of temporality coexist to explain the events of the battle. Thapar goes on to argue in her lecture/article "Time as a Metaphor" how within some of the most well-known Sanskrit texts,

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[51] "[*Kāl*] *nār dā nābar rūp vī hey… nār dā eh nābār rūp bātshāī vihār nūñ naē mandā"*
(Syed, *Gal vār dī*, 25)
[52] *"Kāl dā kam hey narrā dē juṭ nūñ p̱h̲oṛan, nār pardh̲ānī dī sārī hār būntar nūñ b̲h̲anan".*
(Syed, *Gal vār dī*, 27)
[53] *"Kāl khaṣam udhēn ē"* (Syed, *Gal vār dī*, 30)
"Sagō gaṟh̲ hastī diyāñ haddāñ taroṛan vī ohdā kārā hī hey" (Syed, *Gal vār dī*, 32)

cyclical and linear notions of time would often coexist and were not as distinct, separate and opposite as colonial knowledge productions would have us believe. In the case of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* too, such cyclically destructive operations as entailed in the characters of Delhi and Kāl coexist with a more linear, historically particular unfolding of time. Along with the characters of Delhi and Kāl, the text also narrates following parallel, historically particular details about the causes for this battle. In the fourth verse, the text refers to Sayyids and how they had already weakened the Mughal rule.[54] In the following verse, the text suggests how there were some treacherous people within the court of Muhammad Shah, like Nizam-ul-Mulk and Iranian ministers, who were conspiring against the King. The vār does suggest all of these historically particular reasons along with earlier characterization of Delhi to explain the downfall of the Mughal court.

Similarly, later on in the text, we are told following historically particular reasons about Nadir Shah's attack on India: the ministers in Delhi wrote letters to him, showing their wariness from their own King, Muhammad Shah, and inviting Nadir Shah to attack on India, a land full of invaluable riches and wealth.[55] Upon receiving these letters, Nadir Shah sent a messenger to Delhi to confirm the reports of these ministers. The Messenger reported back to Nadir Shah about the decline in the Mughal court and encouraged him to attack Delhi. These historically particular explanations coexist with how Delhi and Kāl also enticed Nadir Shah to attack India.

The events of the battle are, therefore, narrated and explained through multiple unfoldings of time in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*. The past unfolds itself along both linear and cyclical directions while narrating the causes of the battle. On the one hand, this past unfolds itself in a

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[54] Syed Hassan Ali Khan and Syed Husain Ali Khan were two powerful political figures during the early 18th century Mughal rule who eventually killed Mughal King Farrukhsiar in 1719.
[55] *Vārāñ*, Verse 16 to 21, 166 to 171.

linear, chronological, historically particular form to explain the downfall of the Mughal empire, opportunism of Nadir Shah and other details of the movements of the armies. On the other hand, it also unfolds itself in a cyclical, destructive, historically recurring form through the figures of Delhi and Kāl to explain the decline of Muhammad Shah and rise of Nadir Shah.

4.3) The centrality of the divine in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*:

The cyclically destructive unfoldings of the past/time, as entailed in the characters of Delhi and Kāl, acquire the status of a powerful, mighty, all-controlling divine in the text. Within the narration of the events, the divine is often used interchangeably with the unfolding of Past/ time. Divine, time, past, all fulfill the similar task of controlling and determining the events of the battle. Thapar's explanation of cyclical eschatology and the role time occupies in it helps explain this interchangeability of divine/ past/ time better. Thapar argues how time is sometimes projected as a "deity" within cyclical eschatology; Time could be the "creator" of "that which was and that which shall be", "the ultimate cause", "imperishable", which could also "bring about destruction", as "the string holder/ stage manager" of this universe.[56] Although set in a different textual context of Sanskrit, her arguments can nonetheless help us see the divine power and status that the time comes to occupy as a result of its cyclical unfoldings. Similarly, as the introduction of Murphy in *Time, History and the Religious imaginary* indicates, such a "religious imaginary" which "inflects and often governs history and temporality" is also broadly shared by various cultural milieus of South Asia.[57] These references give us some textual and cultural contexts about how the time/past/divine can come together to constitute an ultimate, powerful

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[56] Thapar, "Time as a metaphor", 38.

[57] *Time, History*, 3. In the introduction, Murphy defines religious as the "production of tradition through dynamic temporal interaction—an exchange between past, present, and future through which an experience of time itself is produced". Such a definition of religious "recognizes the key role of the representation of the past in the production of a religious sensibility". (4 and 5)

agential role in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*. Such a centralized role of the divine itself also suggests that all the events of the past/present are a manifestation of his justice and truth.

The first stanza of the text describes the prevalence of injustice throughout the world before ending on praying to god for safety: "O God, keep [us] in your sight, the holy, the creator, the kind". [58] Similarly, when describing the conspiracies within the court of Muhammad Shah, the text mentions how: "But the order and will of God, how can anyone not endure it?"[59] Later on when these conspirators send letters to Nadir Shah for attacking Delhi, the text again reminds us how "Whatever is written in fate is bound to happen". [60]

During their fight when Kāl threatens to take revenge by enticing Nadir Shah to attack on India, Nārad tells her how: "in the end, those works will be done, which are approved by the divine".[61] Similarly, when describing the decline of the society before the attack of Nadir Shah, the text suggests: "No one can erase the works, which have been approved by you, God".[62]At another point in the text when a group of fighters, *Saneyāsī*, are being encouraged to fight, their leader tells them how: "Whatever has been written by the creator, that will happen". [63] Lastly, right in the middle of the description of scenes from the battle, the text suggests how, "But see (it is) the will of God, who wins and who loses".[64]

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[58] *Par rabbā rakẖ nigāh vich, pāk parvardegār rehmānāñ*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 1, 153)
[59] *Par hūkm raẓā khūdā dī koʾī kīkar nā jẖalē*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 5, 155)
[60] *Jō likẖyā taqdīr sō kūjẖ vāratsī*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 16, 166)
[61] *Nārad āhūndā ōṛak hōsan gē ōh kam jehṛē rab nōñ bẖāvan*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 8, 159)
[62] *Tē rabā sē kam kīsē nā meṭanēñ jēhṛē tenūñ bẖāvan*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 23, 172)
[63] *Jō likẖyā kartārē sōʾīyō varat sī*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 37, 182)
Saneyāsī are a group of armed ascetics.
[64] *Par vekẖ raẓā khūdā dī kōn jītē kōn hārē*
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 38, 190)

Such a frequent invocation of the divine in the text to explain various important events keeps reminding its performer/ poet/ audience/ reader about the all powerful, destructive nature of this divine, as a just shaper of the events of the world. The text is, therefore, as much about the praising and invocation of a powerful, just divine, if not more, as it is about narrating the geographically and historically specific details of the battle. It is this divine oriented rendition of the past/ unfolding of time which can help explain how and why the mirāsīs were performing about the attack of Nadir Shah on the eve of the nineteenth century; this event of the past was a way for them to remember, invoke and praise an all powerful, just nature of the divine. This is one of the purposes of the past which, as the next sections will indicate, was also shared by other vār texts of this time period, but which would eventually be erased when the past was rendered under the colonial discipline of history writing.

5) Shared ideas of the past in *vār* texts of late nineteenth century Punjab:

Such cyclically destructive renditions and divine oriented engagements with the past, as explored in *Nādir Shāh dī vār* above are not restricted to this one text only. Such features have been shared variously by some other well-known vār texts of its time periods as well. Farina Mir's argument about the formation of Punjabi literary communities in the late nineteenth century Punjab, mentioned earlier in the thesis as well, helps us imagine more clearly how these vār texts could have interacted with each other. According to Mir, these Punjabi literary communities "shared practices of producing, circulating, performing, reading, and listening to Punjabi literary texts".[65] Continuing "many distinct practices of precolonial Punjabi literary culture", these Punjabi literary texts included "a number of verse genres, the most significant being the *qissa* and the *vār*".[66] Mir goes on to show the active and vibrant presence, circulation and performance of these texts in the late nineteenth century Punjab by highlighting the observations of colonial folklorists of this time period.[67]

Her arguments help us think about the broader literary, cultural and performative landscapes these vār texts were inhabiting in the late nineteenth century Punjab. The arrival of print culture and the resultant formation of Punjabi literary communities which actively produced, shared and performed pre-colonial traditions make it easier to see how these vār texts could have come together despite belonging to different time periods. In particular, I would argue how this common textual milieu of these vār texts shared similar ideas about cyclically destructive and divine oriented unfoldings of the past into the present. While it might be difficult to know if the bards performing various iterations of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* knew about and

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[65] Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language, Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (University of California Press, 2010), 97.
[66] Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, 38.
[67] Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, 101.

consciously engaged with these other vār texts, the ideas about past/time/divine explored above were nonetheless also shared by these other vār texts.

5.1) The centrality of divinity in *vār* texts of Gurus and Bhai Gurdas:

To start off with vār texts written by Gurus and Bhai Gurdas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these texts do not engage with any historical battle as such. But, they continue to explicate and eulogize the divine as an all powerful, agential entity which controls all the events of this world and actions of humans according to the principles of truth and justice.

In *Āsā kī vār*, one of the most well-known vār texts from Guru Granth Sahib, Guru Nanak mentions how:

Everyone takes a leap, but that alone happens which the Creator does.

Nothing is in the power of these beings; You created the various worlds.[68]

Creating in itself, destroying in itself

Acting in itself, and causing others to act. Upon whom do I call? [69]

Given the lack of space, it is not possible to quote all 22 vār poems of Guru Granth Sahib here but a brief look at them indicates how all of these poems echo similar ideas of the divine, as an all-powerful entity which determines human agency according to its own will. We, as humans, are seen as an embodiment of this divine will. In fact, as Mandair and Christopher Shackle highlight in their introduction of *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*, such a conceptualization of the divine will is not restricted to these vār texts only but also prevail throughout Guru Granth Sahib as well. In Guru Nanak's *Japji*, for example, the wall of a human's ego "is broken by

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[68] *Sri Guru Granth Sahib,* 469.
<https://www.searchgurbani.com/guru-granth-sahib/ang-by-ang>
[69] *Sri Guru Granth Sahib,* 475.
<https://www.searchgurbani.com/guru-granth-sahib/ang-by-ang>

orienting the self towards a divine imperative".[70] Mandair and Shackle go on to argue how in the

Sikh tradition, "a person thus liberated from the bonds of individuatedness is known as a

gurmukh (one whose existence is centered around the guru) in contradistinction from the

manmukh (one whose existence is self-centered)".[71] Whereas a *manmukh* sees their actions,

thoughts and agency as emanating from their own selves, a *gurmukh* sees them as an

embodiment of the divine will.

Bhai Gurdas continues to valorize this divine embodiment of *gurmukh* variously in his

collection of vār poems as:

In it [*gurmukhi,* the ideal way of life] one is taught to live in the will of the Lord[72]

Whatever is done by the creator of all the causes, is gratefully accepted by him

[*gurmukh*][73]

And [*gurmukh*] comes to know the creator as the root cause of all the causes. [74]

These references indicate how the all agential, just nature of the divine was already

known, prevalent and valorized through such well-known texts as Guru Granth Sahib and vār

poems of Bhai Gurdas, and through such concepts as of *gurmukhi*.[75] *Nādir Shāh dī vār* invoked

and praised similar ideas of the divine when narrating the events of the battle.

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[70] Arvind-pal Mandair and Christopher Shackle, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*. *Selections from Sikh Scriptures* (Routledge, 2005), xxviii
Japji is "a brief liturgical section" which appears in the beginning of Guru Granth Sahib that a "devout Sikh will recite or sing each day". (*Teachings of the Sikh Gurus*, xvii)
[71] Mandair and Shackle, *Teachings of the Sikh Gurus,* xxix
[72] *Bhai Gurdas vārāñ*, *vār* 9*, pauri* 3*.*
<https://www.searchgurbani.com/bhai-gurdas-vārāñ/vaar/9/pauri/3/line/1>
[73] *Bhai Gurdas vārāñ*, *vār* 18*, pauri* 21.
<https://www.searchgurbani.com/bhai-gurdas-vaaran/vaar/18/pauri/21/line/1>
[74] *Bhai Gurdas vārāñ*, *vār* 22*, pauri* 13*.*
<https://www.searchgurbani.com/bhai-gurdas-vārāñ/vaar/22/pauri/13/line/1>
[75] Such particular orientations of these vār texts and broadly of Guru Granth Sahib can be situated in the broader, medieval North Indian Bhakti criticisms of any such traditions which centralize human self, ego, *apu*. According to William Pinch, these God-oriented Bhakti traditions were critical of men who wanted to be gods, the warrior ascetic

Čaṇḍī dī vār is another well-known vār text first compiled in the *Dasam Granth* (1708).[76] The temporal orientations of this vār follow a cyclical four age model in which each age passes through a specified number of years before dissolving into the next one.[77] *Čaṇḍī dī vār* starts off with a time period of moral and political crises in the kingdom of *Īndrā*. This invites goddess *Čaṇḍī* to come down and help *Īndrā* fight against the army of devils and bring back the utopian age. But, we know, from the broader cyclical unfolding of temporality under the four ages model, that this utopian age will also not last for long and will slowly lead itself into yet another age of crisis. Such a perpetually cyclical unfolding of time needs to keep on creating and destroying each age to keep the cycle going. Such cyclical renditions of the past/ time were, therefore, already known in the textual and cultural milieus of Punjab/South Asia before getting reflected in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*. But instead of following a traditional four age model, the time flows in a cyclically destructive form through the characters of Delhi and Kāl in the text.

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groups like gosain and yogis. Pinch writes how "asceticism for gosains was not first and foremost a means to a liberated consciousness or a blissful, loving union with a distant and inscrutable God; rather it was a path to power, a way of becoming a god-man", "being worshippers, they became the worshiped". Bhakti reformers, emerging after 1400 were the most "vociferous critics" of these man-worshiping practices and approaches to religion. Pinch highlights how these "bhakti reformers were adamant in their disdain for yogis who claimed special power by virtue of their hatha yogic and/or tantric prowess. The bhakti literature is rife with examples of puffed-up yogis who are deflated and sent back packing by humble, God-loving sadhus". (*Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires,* 211).

[76] *Dasam Granth* is a text often associated with the last Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh [1666-1708] although the issue of its authorship is still contentious. See Robin Rinehart's *Debating the Dasam Granth* (2011) for more details

[77] Thapar's article, "Time as Metaphor" helps explain this division of time in four *Yugās* or ages in such well-known ancient Sanskrit texts, as the epic of *Mahabarathā* and *Vishnū Puranā* texts like *Caritas* (biographies of Kings) and *Vamsāvali* (dynastic and regional chronicles)(26 and 37). The first age Satya, is the most utopian age of all, and referred to as the age of truth. However, this utopian condition keeps on declining till nothing of it is left by the time the last age of Kaliyuga arrives. Kāliyuga is construed as the polar opposite of Satya and is a time period of all kinds of moral, dharmic declines in the society. Such a devastation of society under Kaliyuga invites an incarnation of the divine, Vishnu, himself to come down on earth and usher the society out of its Kaliyuga phase back into the utopian age of Satya. It is these temporal orientations of the ancient Sanskrit texts, claimed to have been written between 400 BCE to 900 CE, which have also been followed in *Čaṇḍī dī vār*.

5.2) The themes of death and impermanence in *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār* and *Sikhāñ dī vār*:

Two other vār texts which share similar renditions of the past/time are *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār* and *Sikhāñ dī vār* both of which also engage with the historical battles of the past. Within both of these texts, the time operates in a cyclical, thematic form.

Čaṭheyāñ dī vār narrates the battle between two local Punjabi chiefs, Maha Singh and Ghulam Muhammad Čaṭhā, fought in 1780s. Its first known reference in Mian Muhammad Baksh's *Saiful Malook* (1863) indicates how this vār was already composed and known before the end of the nineetenth century.[78] As the references below will indicate, within this text, death emerges as a prominent theme, a powerful, recurring, inevitable phenomenon, which transcends any historical particularity and continues to kill people throughout history.

When one of the men from Ghulam Muhammad čaṭhā's army, Qutub ud din, was killed, the text gives historically particular details of his killing before moving on to give following parallel explanation of his death:

> Running away from the death, there is no value in it
>
> This cruel death destroyed the whole country
>
> Firaun, who called himself God, also had to die
>
> Shaddad, who made heaven, also had to die
>
> Qaroon, who had multiplied his wealth, also had to die
>
> Suleman, who got the throne flying, also had to die

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[78] The reference to this vār in *Saiful Malook* as quoted by Deol is:
Pir Muhammad čaṭhā from mauzu Nūnavali wrote a vār about the čaṭhās
He filled a plate with poison
("To Hell with War," 178)

And where is Sikander the King who founded the country. [79]

If these powerful figures from the past could not avoid death, how can Qutub ud din be expected to evade it? He cannot exist outside this historically perpetual cycle of death in ways similar to how Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah could not resist the destructive cyclical unfolding of Delhi and Kāl. Here too, the time/past unfolds itself along a cyclically destructive theme of death to explain the events of the battle. Death, according to the reference above, killed people in the past and it is killing people in the present. It operates in cyclically destructive, human controlling ways similar to how Kāl and Delhi operated in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*.

As a result of such destructive, thematic unfoldings of time/past, it occupies the status of a powerful, just divine. At one point in the narration, the text points out how:

When God decides to kill, who can be spared

Without the protection of God, nothing can proceed.[80]

Similar to *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, here too, this time/past/divine is frequently invoked as an all controlling entity which shapes the events of the battle.

Last vār text that this thesis focuses on is *Sikḫāñ dī vār*.[81] This text narrates the battle between Sikh army and the British, fought in 1846. Deol's article highlights how, with the

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[79] *Tē maotē kōlōñ nas kē, kōʾī mōl nā chaṭā*
Tē aesē ẕālim mōt nēñ, sabh mulk khapāyā
Tē kaṭhā ōh Firōn bhī, jis rab kahāyā
Tē kaṭhā ōh Shaddād bhī, jis behesht banaya
Tē kaṭhā ōh Qārūn bhī, jis mal wadhaya
Tē kaṭhē ōh Solemān bhī jis takht ūḍāyā
Tē kithē Sikandar Batshāh jis mulk nawāyā
(*Vārāñ*, Verse 86, 95 and 96)
[80] *Par jāñ mārē rab bhī kōn hondā rākhā*
(*Vārāñ,* Verse 81 and 83, 94 and 95)
[81]The text is also alternatively titled as *Jangnāma Singhāñ tē Firangīāñ* and *Qissā Shāh Muhammad*. The text continues to be variously casted in all the three genres of *Vār*, *Jangnāma* and *Qissā*. Scholars like Deol and Priya Atwal have tried to engage with this diffusion of the text into three genres, but it still requires a detailed historical

earliest known copies of this text in the British Library dating back to the 1870s, this vār was quite popular in the print culture of late nineteenth century Punjab.[82] If earlier, it was the theme of death in *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār*, in this text it is the impermanent and mutable nature of time which operates across history and cannot be turned away by any human being. We are told right in the beginning of the text how:

Folding up the mat of the past, he [God] keeps opening it up into the future

Shah Muhammad one should always be afraid of him [God], he can make beggars out of Kings.[83]

If neither wealth, elephants, and horses remain, nor do kings and countries

Then, Shah Muhammad, the shape of the world does not remain the same and the hairs do not remain black.[84]

This world is a rest house for travelers, many people of might came here?

Shaddad Namrood Firaun who would make claims, God, where are they?

Emperors like Akbar completed their round in Delhi like hawkers.

Shah Muhammad, only the God truthful will remain, many will come and go, trumpeting the horns of falsehood.[85]

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inquiry of its own. See Deol's "To Hell with War:" and Atwal's *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* (Hurst & Company, London, 2020), 148-150

[82] Deol, "To hell with War," 203.

[83] *Ṣafāñ pičẖaliyāñ sabẖ lapēṭ lēndā agē hōr hī hōr vičẖāondāʾī*
  Shāh Mohammadā ōs tōñ sadā ḍarīyē bādshāhāñ tūñ bẖīkẖ mangāondāʾī
  (*Vārāñ,* Verse 1, page 23)

[84] *Sadā nahīñ jē dolatāñ fīl ghoṛē sadā nahīñ jē rājīyāñ dēs mīyāñ*
  (*Vārāñ,* Verse 2, page 23)

[85] *Aē jag srāñ mosāfrāñ dī aetẖē zor vālē kaʾī āgaʾē?*
  Shadād Namrōd Firʿōn jahē dʿvā bannẖ khūdā kahā gaʾē?
  Akbar badshāh jahē vich Dillī dē jī pẖerī vāng vanjārīāñ pāgaʾē?
  Shāh Mohammadā rahē gā rabb sačā vājē kūṛ dē kāʾī vajā gaʾē?

Time never remains the same and is always in a flux. Nothing lasts forever, be it people as powerful as kings. It is within these broader causal, temporal frameworks, narrated right in the beginning of the text, that the story of battle is to be narrated. The decline of Sikh kingdom as a result of this battle is framed as yet another example of such an impermanent unfolding of time/past. At the same time, the text also states how the battle was waged by Rani Chand Kaur (1802-1842) who took her revenge from the Sikh army for killing her husband Kharak Singh (1801-1840) and her son Nau Nihal Singh (1821-1840) by inviting the British army to attack on Punjab.[86] Here too, the two temporalities, one historically specific to the battle itself, and the other one of temporal impermanence coexist and go on to explain the events of the battle. This text is yet another example of a cyclical, divine oriented rendition of the past which does not, at the same time, neglect more historically particular explanations of the event.

All of these references help us see how some of the most well-known vār texts (across the religious and non-religious divides) shared and perpetuated broadly similar ideas about a just and truthful unfolding of the pasts/time. The cyclically destructive, divine oriented operations of Delhi and Kāl in *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, explored in the earlier section, resonate with the invocations of the divine in vār texts of Gurus and Bhai Gurdas, cyclical four age model of *Čaṇḍī dī vār*, the theme of death in *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār* and impermanence of time in *Sikḫāñ dī vār*.[87] For the poets/ performers and their audiences, these texts were a source of invoking, remembering, praising this all-powerful nature of time/past/divine. The battle was a fertile setting or event for heightening

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(*Vārāñ,* Verse 4, page 24)

[86] See *Vārāñ*, verses 43-47, page 34-35.
Rani Chand Kaur can also be seen as yet another female figure like Delhi and Kāl who destroys men-made political systems of her time period. Like Kāl, Kaur too seems bent on taking revenge from the society by waging a battle.
[87] Another *vār* text of this time period which frequently invokes and praises the divine but which could not be included here due to the lack of space is *Multān dī vār*/ *Muzaffar Khān dī vār*. Written by a poet named Nizam, it narrates the attack of Ranjit Singh's army on Multan in 1818. See *Multān diāñ vārāñ*, compiled by Shoukat Mughal (Saraiki Adbi board, Multan, 2004) 87-106.

these broader, moral, ethical, temporal senses. These are some of the genre-specific, storied purposes and uses of the pasts highlighted by Rao et al. and Rifkin earlier in the thesis. As the next section will indicate more clearly, such shared renditions of the past did not necessarily confirm to the logics and assumptions of the colonial, statist discipline of history writing.

Here, some parallels can be drawn with the neighboring genre of *Jangnāma* as well. According to Shahbaz Malik, one of the most well-known contemporary scholars of Punjabi, *Jangnāma* usually adopts the poetic form of "*masnavī*" to narrate the events of a battle.[88] From Pir Muhammad Kasbi (1681) to Iqbal Daim (1951), a number of Punjabi poets wrote *Jangnāma* about the famous battles.[89] According to Syed Akhtar Hussain, the topics of *Jangnāma* are similar to those of vār, and the primary difference between the two is in their poetic forms.[90] While it is difficult to fully warrant Hussain's claim given how there is no one poetic meter or form of vār, he, nonetheless, does hint towards possible overlaps and similarities between the two genres. While a detailed comparison between vār and *Jangnāma* is outside the scope of this thesis, a short reference from the *Jangnāma* of Muqbal about the battle of *Karbalā*, claimed to be written in the early eighteenth century, indicates how the divine occupies a central, all-agential role within this text as well.[91]

A look at the first verse of this *Jangnāma*, titled *Hamd Barī Tʿālā* (Praises of God), indicates an all too familiar centralization of the divine as an ultimate agent:

If the enemy severs, who can give advice [to God]

He himself severs the friends, the affairs are in the hand of the powerful[92]

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[88] Shehbaz Malik, *Jangnamā Muqbal tē Panjābī Marṡiyā* (Taj Book depot, Lahore, 1989), 62.
[89] For a comprehensive list of *Jangnamās* written in Punjabi, see Akhtar Hussain's *Panjābī vārāñ*, pg 135.
[90] Hussain, *Panjābī vārāñ*, 136.
[91] Malik, *Jangnamā Muqbal*, 70.
[92] *Jey vaḍyā vē dushmanāñ kon diyos matt*
   Āp kohāvē dostāñ ḍāḍhē dē gal hath
   (Malik, *Jangnamā Muqbal*, 89)

What is written by the pen of fate cannot be turned back

Whatever God desires continues to happen.[93]

It remains to be seen how this centralization of the divine affects the narration and rendition of

the pasts within this and other *Jangnāma* texts, and how this narration differs from colonial

forms of history writing.

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[93] *Qalam vagī dargāh dī moṛ nā sakē kō*
Jiyonkar khwāhish rabdī rehendī sōʾī ho
(Malik, *Jangnamā Muqbal*, 89)

6) Colonial form of history writing, SM latif's *History of the Panjab*:

If the exploration of vār texts in the above sections indicates their cyclical and divine oriented renditions of the past/time, how do such purposes and uses of the past change when it is narrated through the colonial discipline of history writing? In particular, I want to explore this colonial form of history writing through SM Latif's *History of the Panjab*. First published in 1891, this text has over time acquired a canonical status and has become a common reference work for various subsequent books on the history of Punjab. World cat entry shows that "40" editions of this book have already been published "between 1889 and 2020 in English".[94] It has also been translated in Urdu and is still very much running in print in Pakistan till today and continues to be uncritically adopted as a primary source of engaging with and knowing about Punjabi pasts.[95]

A look at the preface of this text indicates how it emerged from various colonial and orientalist forms of knowledge productions about pasts of India. "Numerous works of Oriental history have been consulted", writes Latif in the preface, before going on to name such well-known scholars as William Jones and HM Elliot.[96] None of the precolonial forms of engagements with the pasts, including vār, are mentioned in his preface, a dismissive attitude that Latif shares with his colonial and orientalist predecessors.[97] Within his efforts to write "the exact illustration of events as they occurred", Latif must have found all such pre-colonial forms as not historical enough, too fictional and/or mythological.[98]

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[94] <https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n83001701/>

[95] *Tareekh e Punjab*, Translated by Iftikhar Mehboob, Takhleeqat, Lahore, 1994.
<https://apnaorg.com/books/urdu/tareekh-punjab-latif/book.php?fldr=book>

[96] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, vii.
<https://apnaorg.com/books/english/history-latif/book.php?fldr=book>

[97] The only non English, non Orientalist sources he mentions are those written in Persian.

[98] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, vi.
Another interconnected practice is to read these texts of vār as works of history and mined for historically particular facts they can provide us about the pasts. This is how the introduction essays often orient us towards the vār texts; as

How does this text and the broader colonial discipline of history writing that it is

representative of, then, differ from vār texts in its narration of the pasts? A look at its chapter on

the battle between Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah indicates how this colonial text is mostly a

historically specific reporting of various political events which led Nadir Shah to attack India,

followed by details of the attack itself.[99] Some of these reports and details have been recounted

in *Nādir Shāh dī vār* as well but what is missing in Latif's text is the parallel unfolding of a

cyclical, destructive time/ past as was entailed in the operations of Delhi and Kāl. The two forms

of temporality, cyclical and linear, no longer coexist under such a colonized rendition of the past;

the only causal temporal framework left now is linear and historically particular.[100] Similarly, a

look at the other two battles between Maha Singh and Ghulam Muhammad, and between Sikhs

and the British indicates a similar rendition of the pasts/time along a linear temporality.[101] The

events of these battles are no longer explained through a parallel, thematic unfolding of death

and impermanence of time.

The effacing of such cyclical operations of time/past in Latif's text also suggests a loss of

its divine orientedness. Such a temporally linear and historically particular rendition fails to

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works of history. The problem with such a history-oriented approach is its inability to recognize the more-than-factual purposes the past fulfills in these texts. In the case of *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, for example, the introductory essays of Kaul and Faqeer Muhammad Faqeer (1900-1974), appearing in the most commonly available print of the text, are prime examples of such a way of reading (See *Nādir Shāh dī vār*, compiled by Faqeer Muhammad Faqeer, Aziz Book depot, 1997, 1-58). Both of these essays characterize Kāl and Nārad separately as mythological, ahistorical, literary devices, distinct from the more historical accounts of the battle. The creation of such binaries and categorizations between historical and ahistorical, informed by colonial sense of history writing, do not allow us to see how all of these various parts of the text come together to render and explain the events of the battle, how they reflect the coexistence of multiple causal temporalities in the text. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that none of these two introductory essays consider the characters of Delhi and Kāl as also entailing operations of temporality and past.

[99] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, 194-220.
[100] In fact, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, this is how the colonial historians legitimized their works of history, as bringing a linear history into an otherwise ahistorical, cyclical notion of time in India. See Thapar's "Time as a Metaphor of History" for a more detailed discussion.
[101] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, see 340-341 for the battle between Maha Singh and Ghulam Muhammad and 539-567 for the battle between Sikhs and the British. Here Latif might also be influenced by Persian texts of *tārikh* which also carry a fairly linear unfolding of time.

imbibe the same all-agential, divine role that the cyclical time/past would occupy in vār texts. Instead, such a temporality is only able to recognize and record the agency of human beings. Within such a linearized rendition, it is the rulers and kings now who emerge as the ultimate agents and shapers of the events of the past. Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah, who were, despite all of their power and might, humbled down in the vār because of the operations of a more powerful cyclically destructive unfolding of time, have now occupied the role of central agents in *History of the Panjab*. In the case of the other two battles too, recounted earlier through *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār* and *Sikẖāñ dī vār*, it is the rulers and warriors now who have become the sole shapers of the events, no longer restricted or guided by more-than-human, divine unfoldings of past/time in this colonial history text. The truth or justice no longer belongs to the operations of the divine, but to the actions of human beings.

A shift from these vār texts to *History of the Panjab*, therefore, not only involves a simple linearization of cyclical unfoldings. Such a shift is also accompanied by a replacement of the divine with humans as the main agents who now shape the events of the past. As Novetzke also highlights, the modern discipline and assumptions of history writing find it difficult to "incorporate a narrative of supernatural agency into historical explanation", a problem which the Subaltern Studies Collective had to contend with in particular in its efforts to write subaltern histories of India.[102] Such a linearized, divine less rendition of the past through the colonial discipline of history continues to be the dominant form of knowing and engaging with the pasts till today. The history textbooks in Pakistan read by thousands of students like me while studying

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[102] Novetzke, "The Subaltern Numen", 122.
While it might be difficult to prove such an incommensurability between history and divine, given the complex and varied forms of history writing in the West, Novetzke's argument here, nonetheless, helps us situate the lack of divine agency in Latif's text in a broader, rich debate of Subaltern studies.

in schools, colleges, and universities, may have a different content than *History of the Panjab* but they continue to adopt the same form and assumptions of a linear, divine-less past.[103]

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[103] Scholars like K.K. Aziz have criticized the content of the history textbooks taught in Pakistan (see Aziz's *The Murder of History: A Critique of History Textbooks Used in Pakistan*, Vanguard books, 1993). My arguments here extend this critique further to the form of these textbooks itself; a linear, human-oriented prose which does not recognize the agency of a cyclical, divine time.

7) Consequences of linearized, God-less pasts under colonial history writing:

So far, this thesis has tried to highlight the differences between precolonial and colonial forms of engagements with the past, by focusing on the ways past is rendered in some well-known vār texts on the one hand and *History of the Panjab* on the other. This section focuses on the various stakes involved in critically exploring these differences; what are some of the social consequences of these shifts from pre-colonial to colonial forms of engagements with the pasts? More specifically, how has the linearization of time/past and centralization of humans in the renditions of the past affected our post-colonial, post-partition moment in contemporary Punjab(s)? What are the social consequences of the fact that our ways of engagement with pasts today lack cyclical, divine orientedness, features which were common in the textual milieus of vār texts explored above? This section will explore these questions through the lens of colonial modernity and communal identities.

7.1) The global imposition of a historicist, colonial temporality:

In his book *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chkarabarty highlighted the temporal nature of colonial modernity. In order to be modern in a formerly colonized country like India, one has to embody, what Chakrabarty called, a "historicist" mode of being.[104] Under this historicist logic, the entire world is contained by one, global time. This globalized time continues to unfold itself teleologically, along a straight line, and assigns a particular location to each person, culture, society within this flow. Such a location also becomes a litmus test for modernity. Those who lag

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[104] Chakrabarty defines Historicism as:
"[Historicism] tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first as an individual and unique whole- as some kind of unity at least in potentia- and second, as something that develops over time… the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to this understanding".(*Provincializing Europe*, 236)

behind are also casted as pre-modern or not as modern as those who are spearheading this global, temporal race.

Chakrabarty traced back the prevalence of this historicist thought throughout the world back to nineteenth century colonialism when this one, global time was posited as a "measure of cultural distance that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West".[105] Europe was casted as ahead of non-Europe and, by extension, also more modern. On the other hand, non-Europe, left behind, had to be pushed forth on this track of global time if it was to catch up with Europe's modernity. It was this need of a temporal, cultural push, the White man's burden, which "enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century".[106] Europe, the site of the first occurrence of modernity, would now also usher the non-European world into it. This was one way through which the colonization of the non-west was legitimized, in the name of bringing the colonized world at par with a global time/modernity.

Such an imposition of cultural and temporal logics of historicism through colonialism, as described by Chakrabarty, is telling of a following story of modernity in the colonies: the colonized subjects are still stuck in the past of a globally shared time which is pioneered by Europe. In order to come out of their current pre-modern state and enter modernity, therefore, they have to follow in the footsteps of Europe. They have to imbibe a modernity, which has already originated earlier in Europe. In the globally imposed temporal, cultural logics of historicism, they are casted in the "waiting room", as the "not yet", the "left behinds", who have to now follow Europe to become modern.[107]

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[105] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, *Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.
[106] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 7.
[107] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 9.
The example of the Bengal renaissance, Chakrabarty went on to quote, helps elaborate upon the temporal and cultural logics of this historicist, colonial modernity. "Many times", wrote Chakrabarty, "the history of the nineteenth century "Bengal renaissance" has been written up as the story of a *repetition* of a theme popular in

It is this global time period, imposed through colonialism, and all its underlying historicist cultural and temporal logics, that Chakrabarty calls for provincializing in his book. As a part of this necessary project of provincialization, he suggests a need for taking into account such alternative understandings of temporality/past, which could not get translated, or had to be marginalized within this dominant, global, historicist unfolding of time. In particular, he highlights such subaltern sensibilities of time within which the pasts do not occupy a separate time period or become a sign of anachronism. Instead, these pasts become a part of the present itself through, for example, "taste", "practices of embodiment" or the "cultural training" senses receive "over generations".[108] The vār texts analyzed in the above sections help us think about some of these marginalized, alternative ways in which the past enters and becomes a part of the present.

Similarly, given how such historicist logics casted all the non-European, colonized parts of the world as lagging behind in a globally shared time, the issue of following Europe as the only way to enter modernity continues to haunt not only India or Bengal but also other non-western, colonized societies around the world. As Rifkin's work again helps us move beyond the context of South Asia, Indigenuous communities in North America continue to face similar pressures of a colonial modernity under settler colonialism; either to "stay anachronous" or "become

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European history: "the liberation of the mind from a *blinding bondage* to the superstitions and customs of the middle ages""(236,emphasis added). He picked up these quotations from a "relatively obscure Bengali publication" to show the "commonplace" prevalence such particular ways of reading the Bengal renaissance enjoyed in the nineteenth century Bengal (295, note 74)

Such a common production of knowledge about "Bengal Renaissance" is one example of historicist cultural and temporal logics at play; there is one, global, teleological temporality within which Europe has already experienced a Renaissance. On the other hand, Bengal is casted as a non European society still stuck in the middle ages of this global time, blinded down by superstitions and customs of the past. It has to come out of this temporal past/cultural backwardness in order to achieve liberation, to enter modernity. The only way to achieve this temporal, cultural progress is by following Europe. It has to undergo the same phenomenon of Renaissance which Europe had already experienced a few centuries earlier. Such a way of reading Bengal Renaissance follows the temporal/cultural logics of historicism, "first in Europe and then elsewhere"; Europe is seen as the harbinger of a linear, globally shared time and a colonized society like Bengal has to follow up, catch up with it temporally and culturally.

[108] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 251.

modern". Rifkin argues how such a proposition takes the non-Indigenuous, settler colonial, linear

temporality for granted, casting these Indigenous communities as "frozen" in time who need to

be brought at par with the modern time. In ways similar to Chakrabarty, Rifkin suggests to

provincialize this colonial, modern temporality instead of taking it for granted. In his own book,

he attempts to "contest the inevitability of time's singularity" by analyzing native texts "in ways

that highlight the potential for alternative experiences of time to those normalized within non-

native articulations of *the* past, *the* present, and *the* future".[109]

The exploration of the vār texts in this thesis is one such attempt of provincializing this

global, historicist temporality. The past in these vār texts influences the present through its

cyclical, divine unfolding, sometimes through figures like Delhi and Kāl, other times through

themes like death and impermanence of time. Interconnectedly, this past holds various affective

values; its recounting is a source of invoking and praising the operations of the divine itself.

Such a powerful and affective role of the past for the present cannot get recognized or be

embraced under the logics of the colonial, modern, historicist, global temporality. Instead of

being performed and embraced, as is the case in these vār texts, this past becomes a sign of

backwardness and anachronism under the historicist logic which non-western, colonized

societies around the world have to shed off in order to achieve a liberatory, modern present/

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[109] Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time*. 47
Without discounting on the historical and geographical particularities of colonialism in India and North America, thinking about such overlaps of experiences, as entailed in reading Chakrabarty and Rifkin together, can be helpful in enriching our understandings of legacies of colonialism. No one book, author, or scholarship of one discipline or geographical location can be expected to exhaust the project of provincializing European, colonial modernity on its own. Bringing together scholars from various disciplinary and geographical locations can help effectively fill in such gaps in our common political and scholarly struggles against various forms of colonialism. In the present case, Rifkin's work engages with the similar work of provincializing Europe but by focusing on the archives of the indigneuous texts, which have not been sufficiently explored in the more ethnographic and historical focus of Chakrabarty's work.

future.[110] How else can the temporality be experienced, which does not have to necessarily end up in following Europe? Vār texts analyzed in this thesis are one example.

7.2) Religio-Communal relationships with the pasts:

If the works of Chakrabarty and Rifkin help us see the value of the vār texts in terms of their operations outside the dominant temporal and cultural logics of colonial, historicist modernity, Partha Chatterjee's work helps us think about another important social context; our current religio-communal imaginaries.[111] Chatterjee highlights the relationship between the colonial form of history writing and the rise of communal identities in Bengal. More specifically, his arguments help us see how such a similar colonial humanization of pasts in the parallel contexts of nineteenth century Bengal produced various Hindu/Muslim communal imaginaries. Chatterjee writes how, in *Rajabali* (1808), "the first history of India in the Bengali language that we have in print", the writer Mrityunjay Vidyalankar explained and interpreted the battles between various kings through divine will.[112] Prithviraj's "defeat and the establishment of "Yavana rule" by Muhammad Ghuri" were, for example, read as "acts of divine will" in *Rajabali*.[113]

Half a century later, however, this "Puranic history would be abandoned in favor of rational historiography".[114] The newly English-educated Brahman scholars "would not accept with such

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[110] Such a discontentment and need for criticizing "the invention and imposition all over the world of a single, universal standard of time" has also been highlighted by Shonaleeka Kaul in her introductory essay of the recently published volume *Retelling time*, *Alternative Temporalities from Premodern South Asia* (2). The volume brings together a group of texts from diverse classical and vernacular genres in various languages of South Asia to think about "alternative conceptions and practices of time" (5).

[111] By religio-communal imaginaries, I am referring to the ways that Hindu, Muslim and other religious identities have acquired a fundamentalist, violent character in our modern, post colonial, post partition contexts of South Asia as, for example, seen in the rise of Hindutva ideology in India.

[112] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton University Press, 1993),

[113] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 81.

[114] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 81.

equanimity the dictates of a divine will".[115] Within these new writings, "popular textbook of Krishnachandra Ray" published in 1876 being the prime example, "history was no longer the play of divine will or the fight of right against wrong".[116] Having "abandoned the criteria of divine intervention", this new form of history writing offered new, human-centric explanations for the "rise and fall of kingdoms".[117] For example, the reason why a king lost the battle or a dynasty fell was not divine wrath anymore but "general decay of society and polity".[118]

As a result of this new form of history writing, Chatterjee argues, the ordinary *praja* (subject) found itself, for the first time, embroiled, involved, reflected in the narration of the pasts.[119] The narration of the fall of Prithviraj's rule, for example, was no longer an interplay between Kings and divine anymore but also became a narration of the fall of Hindus. The rise of Muhammad Ghauri was no longer an imposition of the divine will but of a Muslim rule, and consequently a sign and cause of the corruption and decadence of a Hindu society. The onus of this fall and decline was on Hindu subjects and not on divine anymore.

Such a sense of decline stirred various reformist movements like Adhi Brahmo Samaj which aimed at throwing off the yoke of corruption and decadence deemed to be caused by a Muslim rule. Chatterjee goes on to mention Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay's popular textbook "The History of India", first published in 1878, as one prominent example of such entwinements between these humanizations of the pasts and the rise of communal imaginaries in Bengal.[120] Chatterjee then goes on to analyze the role these new forms of colonial/ reformist/ communal/

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[115] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 81.
[116] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 90 and 91.
[117] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 90.
[118] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 82.
[119] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 92.
[120] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 94

nationalist forms of history writings and social imaginaries played in the "rise of Hindu extremist political rhetoric current in postcolonial India".[121]

Chatterjee's arguments, though set in Bengal, can also help think about a similar humanization and resultant communalization of the pasts in Punjab as well. A look at *History of the Panjab*'s table of content indicates a rendition of the pasts along similar communal and nationalist imaginaries. Out of the five sections the book is divided into, one is titled "The Mahomedan period" , another one is titled "The rise of the Sikhs", whereas an entry on Hindus and Buddhists appears under "The early period".[122] We will be hard pressed to find such a communalized rendition of the pasts in *Nādir Shāh dī vār* and other vār texts discussed above. Unlike *History of the Panjab, Nādir Shāh dī vār* does not caste the battle between Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah under a Mahomedan period; there is no Mahomedan period in the text. Instead, the rendition of this battle is a source for mirāsīs and their audiences to invoke and praise the operations of a cyclical divine/past/time.

Similarly, the battle between Ghulam Muhammad and Maha Singh has been casted under the section "The Rise of the Sikhs" in *History of the Panjab*. Ghulam Muhammad is called a "Mahomedan Chief" and Maha Singh as "Sukerchakia Sardar".[123] It is framed as a battle between a rising Sikh ruler and a Muslim chief.[124] *Čaṭheyāñ dī vār*, on the other hand, does not render the battle along such strictly communal lines. Instead of calling it a battle between Sikhs and Muslims, or about the rise of Sikhs, the vār tells the story of the battle to show the powerful, divine oriented, cyclical unfoldings of time/past. The battle between the Sikhs and the British

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[121] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 94
[122] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, xvii, xviii and xvii.
[123] Sukerchakia was one of the 12 *misls*, sovereign states of Sikh confederacy which rose during the eighteenth century Punjab. Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) who eventually became the most well-known and powerful rulers of the Punjab belonged to this *misl*.
[124] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, 341

army has similarly been communalized by *History of the Panjab* as about the decline and loss of

Sikh rule. What is missing in this colonial rendition of the battle is a broader causal framework

of mutable, impermanent time as seen in *Sikẖāñ dī vār* above.[125] Such differences between

History of the Panjab and three vār texts help us see a similar communalization of the past as

Chatterjee highlighted in the context of nineteenth century Bengal. [126]

Following Chatterjee's line of argumentation, we can similarly see the communalization

of the pasts through a colonial text like Latif's as one of the formative factors in the rise of

various religio-communal imaginaries in the late nineteenth/ early twentieth century Punjab

which eventually ended in a violent partition of the province along religious lines in 1947. The

new nation state borders between India and Pakistan which run through the land of Punjab

continue to divide the centuries old shared cultures, literatures, religiosities and histories of the

area along religious lines till this day.[127] Within such post-colonial, post-partition communal

contexts that we have inherited today, these vār texts are one attempt to critically analyze the

religio-communal relationships to our pasts in order to open up the ways of inhabiting multiple

religious and cultural identities in the present.[128]

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[125] Latif, *History of the Panjab*, 539-567

[126] Here, it is worthwhile to also highlight how *Čaṯẖeyāñ dī vār* and *Sikẖāñ dī vār* got embroiled with the rise of communalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Punjab. Deol highlights how out of these two texts, *Sikẖāñ dī vār* has historically remained "much more well-known" ("To Hell With War," 202). Unlike *Čaṯẖeyāñ dī vār* which was seen as "hostile to the entire Sukarchakia enterprise of power" and unwilling to "support the myth of Ranjit Singh [son of Maha Singh]", *Sikẖāñ dī vār* was perceived as a "pro-Darbar" text, popular among "Sikh circles" and seen as a nostalgic lamentation of the loss of ideal kingdom of Ranjit Singh ("To Hell With War," 205). Such a communalization of these two texts, either as anti or pro Sikh, is deeply entwined with our modern inability to recognize the powerful role cyclical, divine temporalities occupy in these two texts. Read through the sensibilities of colonial discipline of history, the reception of these texts has failed to take into account how Maha Singh, Ghulam Muhammad and/or Sikh darbar, are not as central to these texts as praising and invocation of the divine/ time/ past.

[127] For a more detailed understanding of the violence of the partition of Punjab see Virinder Kalra and Navtej Purewal's *Beyond Religion in India and Pakistan: Gender and Caste, Borders and Boundaries* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). They analyze how the sites of popular religious expressions like Shrines disrupt the legacies of this partition.

[128] See Gyan Pandey's "The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India" which discusses how history/ past became communalized in its narration through a Muslim vs. Hindu lens.

8) Conclusion: vār, a story of cultural amnesia

In 2018, I took a course on vār poetry during my undergraduate education in Lahore, Pakistan (a place not more than 100 km away from where Maclagan and Kaul found performances of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* 100 years ago). Despite growing up in Urban Punjab, this was the first time I came across the word "vār" tradition. None of my acquaintances had heard this word before either. After reading some of its texts during the course, I understood vār to be a ballad, narrating the events of the battle. But this definition did not not seem sufficient enough. The eurocentric term ballad could neither capture the ethos of vār's historical popularity nor explain its contemporary absence that I was experiencing. The end of the course also marked an end of my 4 months short journey with the tradition. Unlike other canonical pieces of literature in English and Urdu which continue to prosper outside any regular university courses, vār did not seem to have a popular interest and understanding to enjoy such an after-course life.[129] If Kaul were to come in search of a text of *Nādir Shāh dī vār* today, his job would be equally difficult, this time not because of abundance but scarcity of its presence.

It was with these concerns and necessities for redefining our ways of engagement with the vār texts, which can help us come to terms with both its historical prevalence and its contemporary disavowal, that this thesis started out with. In particular, I explored some of the surviving texts of the tradition through a more thematic lens of their engagements with the past. I argued how within these vār texts, the time/past operates in a cyclical, divine form. As a result, these texts and their renditions of the pasts were a way for their poets, performers and/or audiences to invoke, praise the operations of a powerful divine/time/past. Such purposes, uses, renditions of the past could not get translated under the logics and assumptions of colonial

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[129] Few exceptions are performances of *Sangat* (a Punjabi Street theater group located in Lahore), which mostly performs *vār* texts written by Najm Hossain Syed.

discipline of history writing or its project of state building. Under such colonial works of history as SM Latif's *History of the Panjab*, therefore, the past was no longer a source of invoking and praising a destructive, powerful, cyclical time/ divine; it was, instead, recounted in a linearized, human-oriented form, which could fit into the colonial state formation. I then attempted to think about some of the consequences of living with these new, colonized relationships with the past in the contemporary post-colonial, post-partition moment in Punjab(s). I argued how these linearized relationships with the pasts were a part of a broader, historicist, teleological global temporality, which marginalized all such pre-colonial, alternative relationships with the past as entailed in vār texts. Similarly, bringing down the truth and explanation of the events from the divine will to human actions also led to a new, religio-communal casting of the pasts in Punjab and broadly in South Asia.

Contemporary scholarship on vār, caught up with its own concerns of defining and dividing the genre into religious and non-religious, martial categories, does not feel the need to grapple with these interrelated issues and impacts of colonialism and colonial knowledge productions. The common story of vār that this scholarship would usually tell us is this: vār is ballad, narrating the battles, which was also employed by Sikh Gurus and Bhai Gurdas for religious purposes. This thesis attempted to tell a slightly different story about vār which can help us see it beyond such simple and limiting scholarly categories.

While focusing on particular themes (renditions of the pasts) as they operate in few texts of a particular genre (vār), located in a particular geography and time period (late nineteenth century Punjab), the arguments of this thesis are also situated in broader critical thinking about colonial knowledge productions, how they have historically marginalized precolonial forms and ways of knowing and being throughout the world, and the consequences of living with such

legacies today; how can we diversify, de-colonize, de-statize, de-communalize our experiences of time, past, divine.

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