

Book Reviews

Hardip Singh Syan, *Sikh Militancy in the Seventeenth Century: Religious Violence in Mughal and Early Modern India* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013). 320pp. Hardback \$110.00.

Hardip Syan's *Sikh Militancy in the Seventeenth Century* is a welcome addition to the recent cluster of new academic books on Sikh history, ethics, and literary culture. Syan attempts an ambitious analysis of how an intellectual history of Early Modern Punjab, focused on debates about religiously sanctioned violence, can shed light both on "how the Sikh literati justified and criticised the adoption of violence in Sikh thought, and how the Sikh community responded to these developments in Sikhism" (1). Syan also rightly notes the necessity of a rigorous study of the seventeenth-century Sikh communities as critical to understanding how modern Sikh identity evolved. The execution of the Fifth Sikh Guru, Arjan Dev, in Mughal custody in 1605 set in motion a chain of events, that are often seen as leading directly to the creation of a warrior community by the Tenth Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh, at the end of the seventeenth century. Today, Guru Arjan's execution is seen in established historiography as the beginning of state persecution of Sikhs, and the growing militarization of the Sikh community. But as Syan's work demonstrates, this was not an inevitable development (213). While there are occasional problems with the limitations imposed by Syan's sources and the analytical framework of the book, *Sikh Militancy in the Seventeenth Century* is an important scholarly intervention in a contentious field, and one which will stimulate further debate.

The most important contribution of this book is to present the diversity of Sikh voices addressing issues of ethical conduct, state power, and violence during this contentious period. As Syan notes, the execution of the Fifth Guru began a period in which multiple claimants to the Guru's authority emerged. While this had happened in the previous century as well, the stakes were much higher by the seventeenth century, as a waxing Mughal economy and the masterful stewardship of community resources by Guru Arjan greatly expanded the resource base of the Guru's court. Syan's examination of the writings and political interaction of these rival lineages, descendants of Guru Arjan's nephew Miharvan, with the Mughal State is the most detailed scholarly work on this subject so far. The activities of these groups, their copious manuscript production, and the significance of their physical possession of the important Sikh shrine, the Harmandir, have received comparatively little attention by scholars of Sikhs as they are often seen to lie outside the tradition (49).

Syan's attentive reading of the ways in which Miharvan, his descendants,

and supporters presented themselves in text as well as lifestyle offers a persuasive case for understanding why both the Mughal court, as well as the “orthodox” line of Sikh Gurus, could not afford to ignore them. Miharvan and his descendants portrayed their lineage as embodying a metaphysical sovereignty with powerful spiritual powers with a latent possibility of violence, even if such violence is not physical, or exercised in the temporal world. By contrast, Guru Hargobind, Guru Arjan’s son, is presented by the writers of his court as a powerful householder king, whose spiritual leadership of the community did not preclude military intervention in worldly affairs. Syan argues in the three chapters at the core of the book (2-4) these different framings of the Guru’s role in sanctioning or directing violence engaged very different audiences in Mughal Punjab. The two dominant castes within the Sikh community—the Khatri caste, composed largely of bureaucrats and merchants, as well as Jats, a peasant caste—were undergoing rapid upward social mobility and both castes had martial traditions. Their growing mobilization by Sikh Gurus, but particularly of rural Jats by Guru Hargobind’s lineage, Syan suggests, led the Mughal state responded to view this as a threat to their own political authority in Punjab.

Syan’s strategy rests on deploying binaries that help to illustrate the contrastive ideologies of his sources. Beginning with the “Householder versus Renunciant” of Guru Nanak’s works in the first chapter, Syan argues that in early Sikh texts both householders and ascetics possess a capability for violence, even if the violence of the ascetic is supernatural, thus, in Syan’s words “Militancy had always existed in the immortality of the Guru and his divine presence. The issue is what type of militancy is it” (23)? And further, “early Sikh society did not *shift* from peace to militancy; they changed the type of religious violence they practiced” (24). This allows Syan to then juxtapose the ideological positions of the householder asceticism of Miharvan’s lineage versus the householder-sovereign of Hargobind’s lineage in later chapters. These binaries, however, do little justice to the nuances Syan does offer readers through translations and quotes from texts. The contrastive binaries also fail to fully explore the forms of non-physical violence which Syan identifies but never explores in full, in contrast to the more fine-grained reading of sovereignty and militancy in texts associated with the courts of Guru Hargobind’s descendants. Are supernatural violence and “militancy” similar? Does their deployment require similar ethical and social controls?

There are other signs of a hurried transition from dissertation to book. Many relevant studies, including those of Farina Mir (2010) and Allison Busch (2011), among others, are not engaged in their final form but as unpublished dissertations. Occasional uses of terms that careful editing should have eliminated, such as “medieval” for the seventeenth century, and “gentrification” for the process by which Guru Hargobind’s court came to resemble that of rural zamindars are puzzling. The scarcity of sources for the period also forces Syan to rely on many later works. Six manuscripts in collections in the UK and printed primary sources are at the core of his source base. Despite these issues, Syan has created an impor-

tant work that should spark new inquiries that other scholars in the field undertake. More extensive work in the archives in South Asia will likely demonstrate the value of the questions Syan poses in his work to scholars of Sikhism and of the Mughal Empire.

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Alan Filewod, *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011). 364 pp. Paperback \$31.95.

In early 2016 on the Canadian drama (CANDRAMA) listserv, a senior professor inquired as to when the first Canadian theatre and literature courses were created, where they were taught, and what they comprised. The questions received immediate responses; emails were sent by Canadian theatre historians, staking their claim for the first courses taught. In doing so, these historians were performing their knowledge of the discipline for each other (and myself), while describing when this canon was formed, what it contained, and their role in its formation. In the aftermath of these listserv responses, it became clear to me that when Canadian theatre (and scholarship) ‘started’ and what it contained is still an important topic for many theatre scholars in Canada. While I made my way through Filewod’s *Committing Theatre*, the stakes of his contributions seemed higher in light of the recent CANDRAMA listserv performance.

Committing Theatre is the newest iteration of Filewod’s work on political theatre in Canada, and Canadian theatre historiography more broadly. Indeed, two years prior to its publication, Filewod’s 2009 edited collection, *Theatre Histories: Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* was a compilation of essays that addressed explicitly the history of Canadian theatre history scholarship. *Committing Theatre* then, is an exhaustive expansion of Filewod’s previous scholarship, which engaged with theatre historiography in Canada. But what does Filewod really have to say that he did not already say in *Theatre Histories* and elsewhere? Well, not much really. Despite this, Filewod does provide substantial evidence for his argument and demonstrates his ability to critically examine political performances that exist outside of “what the British activist scholar and director Baz Kershaw has defined as the disciplinary regime of the ‘theatre estate’” (5). In the process, Filewod also argues for the efficacy of non-traditional radical performance practices over theatre in more traditional theatrical spaces that have limited and self-volunteered audiences.

In early Canadian theatre history scholarship, narratives of the birth of a ‘native’ Canadian theatre began after the Massey commission in the late 1950s and comprised a traditional historiographical method. Indeed, in the first chapter of the book, Filewod states that,