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## **CHAPTER 11**

### **In Ruins: Cultural Amnesia at the Aam Khas Bagh**

**Churnjeet Mahn**

This chapter offers a case-study of a collaborative research project between the Indian conservation architectural firm, CRCI, a designer and a visual ethnographer and academics to deliver a workshop and exhibition on heritage and memory in Sirhind, Punjab. As part of a British Council/Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) project, the workshop was designed to bring academics and their research into communities. CRCI provided maps, charts and an index to the key sites they were looking at along the Grand Trunk Road to assemble a UNESCO World Heritage Site bid for the road. Our work would end with an exhibition in Sirhind, in East or Indian Punjab, to be followed by an exhibition in Delhi and then London that prominently featured the Aam Khas Bagh, a Mughal-era *serai* that the World Monument Fund had placed on an international endangered site list that year. Definitions of heritage varied across the collaborating team, largely determined by our training as well as our own cultural perspectives. Part of this chapter's larger purpose is to unpick some of the ways in which heritage is made and understood in East Punjab today.

What do we take and bring back in these types of international creative collaborations between academics, NGOs and communities, when we approach 'heritage' in such a mode? And what are the politics that these projects entail? Through a discussion of memory and amnesia, this chapter focuses on some of the key questions and problems which informed the design and preparation of the exhibition we created on Sirhind's heritage. Starting from an understanding of "heritage" in areas that have experienced conflict and trauma, we consider

what it means to work with religious sites in a region where historical tensions between religious communities were evident in the landscape. What does a heritage project look like in a post-Partition Punjabi town where most non-Sikh historical monuments have been systematically destroyed or left decaying in favour of modern gurdwara building projects? Working in a community setting, what was the purpose of our exhibition on Sirhind's history? Was it to restore Sirhind to significance? Or to conserve cultural memory? Was it a memorialisation of the area's Islamic heritage? What were the implications of what had been *forgotten* at Sirhind? Or to put it very bluntly, what are the politics of restoring the Aam Khas Bagh as an important site of cultural heritage within the cultural politics of today?

This chapter approaches these questions through recent critical discussions in memory studies, especially in contexts where people and the nation are tied together in violence, trauma or displacement. As Marianne Hirsch points out, 'The bodily, psychic, and affective impact of trauma and its aftermath, the ways in which one trauma can recall, or reactivate, the effects of another, exceed the bounds of traditional historical archives and methodologies.'<sup>1</sup> Sirhind represents a rich syncretic assemblage of diverse faiths and communities and, like much of Punjab, vernacular Punjabi has historically been a vital language for connecting communication, devotion and artistic cultures.<sup>2</sup> However, Sirhind has also been the site of historical conflicts between Sikh and Mughal forces and was one of the towns particularly affected by displacement at the time of Partition. The story of Sirhind and Partition is thus one that reaches back into the past, activating older stories of conflicts which persist, inform and seep into the present. This chapter identifies some of the implications of these historical

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory', *Poetics Today* 28:1 (2008) 103-128: 104.

<sup>2</sup> Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010).

triggers through identifying what ‘counts’ as official heritage in the contemporary landscape, and then using memory as a framework for analysing a community heritage project.

*Beyond Ruin: Sirhind and the Aam Khas Bagh*

I first met Sirhind through a text:

In the Mughal period, Sirhind was situated on the Delhi-Lahore-Kabul Highway. In between Delhi and Lahore it was the largest and most prosperous city. Its prosperity was reflected in its hundreds of monuments built during the period. The popular belief that at the heyday of the Mughal empire, the city had 360 mosques, tombs, gardens and wells appears to be well-founded. The number may not have been exact but just idiomatic, it certainly implied a large number. Despite the devastation of the city during the eighteenth century, about three dozens of these medieval monuments, in various stages of preservation, are still extant in and around Sirhind.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to correlate this description to Sirhind’s present landscape. The area is dominated by expanded gurdwara complexes. While there are numerous tombs to be found in the middle of farmland, many are being slowly undermined by local farmers with the hope that they will simply collapse, freeing the land for use. Some tombs are home to farm animals, and while a few mosques are active sites of worship (namely Rauza Sharif, which holds the shrine of Sheikh Ahmad Sirhandi), evidence of the depth of syncretic religious practices in the region has been materially and culturally eroded and overwritten in the wake of conflict. Sirhind is almost entirely eclipsed by its twin town of Fatehgarh Sahib, home to a network of gurdwaras associated with Guru Gobind Singh and his family.

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<sup>3</sup> For a summary of historical descriptions see, Subhash Parihar, ‘Historical Mosques of Sirhind’, *Islamic Studies* 43:3 (Autumn 2004) 481-510: 481.

While Sirhind was a Muslim-majority town before Partition, its evacuation and the resettlement of Sikhs from West Punjab has significantly changed its demographic. In 1710 Sirhind was largely destroyed by forces led by Banda Singh Bahadur, a disciple of the tenth Sikh Guru who died in 1708, during an agrarian uprising. By the nineteenth century, Sirhind was described by Alexander Cunningham as lying largely in ruins.<sup>4</sup> As Alexander Cunningham noted in his 1871 archaeological survey trip through the region, ‘Even to this day every Sikh, on passing through Sarhind [sic], carries away a brick which is supposed to throw in the Jumna [...] with the hope that in time this detested city will thus be utterly removed from the face of the earth.’<sup>5</sup> The 1901 Murray Handbook to India has a short entry on the area commenting on its history from the Brahman kings of Kabul. It notes that ‘the great *Sarai* of the Mogul emperors is to the S.E. of the city. It is now used as a public audience-hall by the Patiala authorities, and is called the *Amkhas*.’<sup>6</sup>

The Aam Khas Bagh is a Mughal-era *serai* complex dating back to the mid-late sixteenth century. The original purpose of the *serais* along the Delhi-Kabul Highway varied from simple accommodation for travellers to larger multi-purpose administrative centres for communication as well as encampment, with the Aam Khas Bagh being one of three locations with mixed public and royal use.<sup>7</sup> Excavations have revealed evidence of one of the

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<sup>4</sup> Subhash Parihar, *History and Architectural Remains of Sirhind: The Greatest Mughal City on the Delhi-Lahore Highway* (New Delhi: Aryan Books, 2006), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India* Vol 1. (Simla: Government of India Press, 1871), Vol 1, 208-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Murray's Handbook to India* (London: John Murray), 195b.

<sup>7</sup> Manish Chalana, "'All the world going and coming': the past and future of the Grand Trunk Road in Punjab, India" in *Cultural Landscapes of South Asia: Studies in Heritage Conservation and Management*, ed. Kapila D. Silva and Amita Sinha, 92-110 (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 92-110: 98.

earliest hammams in northern India, alongside a complex water network which provided running water throughout the gardens, culminating in a large water tank surrounded by grand residences. The *serai* is an Archaeological Survey of India protected site and has a nominal caretaker, alongside state-appointed landscapers who tend to the historical trees in amongst more recently planted flowers and grass. As the largest recreational space in Sirhind, a typical day will see walkers enjoying the gardens, lovers meeting secretly in leafy enclaves, young people moving around and exploring the complex; they climb in and over ruined buildings or play impromptu games of cricket in large disused water tanks. And, occasionally, along the fringe walls collapsing into the surrounding farmland, there are conservation architects working with local builders, artisans, international consultants, heritage experts, and government agencies to map and document the complex. Very few tourists make it to the Aam Khas Bagh now, although there have been facilities for tourists in the past, including public toilets and interpretative signs around the gardens. The toilets are now largely shut and the signage has become illegible. The Aam Khas Bagh's history and significance has receded from view as it retreats into ruins or finds itself repurposed as a pedestrian-friendly space where history and architecture is almost incidental.

Subhash Parihar has collected various narratives about the Aam Khas Bagh from chronicles, travel accounts and local anecdotes which pieces together the histories of the various buildings that make up the Aam Khas Bagh.<sup>8</sup> These sources coalesce around a series of facts, largely drawn from a few accounts left of travel in a Mughal Empire: 'Many of the sources of the history of the garden are the medieval chronicles and the accounts of contemporary European travellers. Surprisingly enough, the story that emerges from these scattered

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<sup>8</sup> Subhash Parihar, *Some Aspects of Indo-Islamic Architecture* (New Delhi: Shakti Malik, 1999) and Parihar, *History and Architectural Remains of Sirhind*.

references has a remarkable continuity.<sup>9</sup> These narratives reinforce three points: that Sirhind is historical, that during the Mughal period it was an important location, and that its monuments have been subject to destruction (the last appears in accounts from the late eighteenth century onwards).<sup>10</sup> During the period of Akbar, a smaller garden complex was present which was known as Bagh-i-Hafiz Rakhna, and was later augmented by Jahangir and Shah Jahan, both of whom took a particular interest in developing the gardens, water system and residential buildings at the *serai*. After its systematic attack in a range of conflicts around the Mughals and the Sikhs, the rulers of Patiala took over ownership of the complex and the *serai* become renamed as the Aam Khas Bagh (approximately translated as everyman's garden). More recently, the historical residential sections of the Aam Khas Bagh have been used as government offices. The detritus from this occupation is still visible. While the Aam Khas Bagh has thus had a history of reuse and repurposing, its significance with each occupation has declined, and its material components have been in slow and visible decay for two centuries.

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<sup>9</sup> Parihar, *Some Aspects of Indo-Islamic Architecture*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> For overviews of historical consciousness militancy nationalism see, for example, Hamik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India: The Case Study of the Punjab* (London: Routledge, 2011) and Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).



Fig 1. Interior of the Sheesh Mahal at the Aam Khas Bagh

An annual event does draw a crowd to the Aam Khas Bagh: the *Jor Mela* is a light and sound show which commemorates the martyrdom of the *sahibzadas*, Zowar and Fateh Singh.

However, in recent years, Rauza Sharif has closed its doors in fear of Sikh pilgrims mistaking the mosque for the tomb of Wazir Khan, who had ordered the execution of the *sahibzadas*.<sup>11</sup>

This has been compounded by the increasing visa difficulties for pilgrims travelling from Pakistan for the annual Urs, around the same time of year.<sup>12</sup> The disinvestment in Mughal-era heritage by the Government of Punjab to emphasise Sikh-associated history is part of a larger project to align Sikh interests with a Punjabi national imaginary. Critics and historians of Sikh history have pointed to the ways in which Sikh religious identity has become grounded in historical moments of conflict which have been used as the foundations for sometimes competing national imaginaries for the Indian Punjabi state, an ideological agenda which

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<sup>11</sup> Amaninder Pal, The tale of closed doors of Rauza Sharif shrine, *The Tribune*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/punjab/community/the-tale-of-closed-doors-of-rauza-sharif-shrine/176083.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Ketan Gupta, 3 day annual Urs begins at Sirhind Shrine, *Hindustan Times*, December 21, 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/3-day-annual-urs-begins-at-sirhind-shrine/story-cdHt9hglyY53U90mnkWO9K.html>.

reached its height in the 80s and 90s with the violent aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination.<sup>13</sup> Sikh political and cultural domination in the Punjab has enabled policy decisions which have neglected the complex and discontinuous religious and cultural history of the Punjab, especially in build history, in favour of Sikh sites and monuments that draw inspiration from Mughal-era architecture but are Sikh-associated.<sup>14</sup>

In her analysis of the region, CRCI's director, Gurmeet S Rai highlighted underlying principles to Sirhind's greater significance.<sup>15</sup> The Grand Trunk Road in its earlier iterations connected Afghanistan to Kolkata, linking it to the Silk Road. As one of the world's oldest highways in continuous use, the section of the road in Punjab has been an important point of access for trade, armies, as well as the development and circulation of ideas. From the interplay between Bhakti and Sufi saints between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, to the amalgamation of religious and spiritual practices across faiths, and the exchange of craft knowledge, this section of road was a vital artery for developing Punjab in its current form. The circulating diversity of faith, language and culture was tied together into the singularity of the highway, an apt metaphor for Sirhind as well as Punjab.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: 1469-1838* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) and Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> William J Glover, 'Shiny New Buildings, Rebuilding Historic Sikh Gurdwaras in Indian Punjab', *Future Anterior*, IX, 1 (Summer 2012), 32-47.

<sup>15</sup> This analysis took the form of briefings throughout our design process in 2013-14 which combined Rai's own extensive fieldwork interviewing local stakeholders, discussions with state agencies such as Punjab Tourism and national and international heritage agencies such as UNESCO.

<sup>16</sup> Critical studies of Punjab and India, especially in the context of colonialism, have proposed a series of models to capture some of the formations underpinning societal structures and individual identity. In her analysis of syncretic practices in nearby Malkerkotla, for example, Anne Bigelow borrows from Glenn Bowman's description of 'semantically multivocal' places to account for the co-presences of faiths and communities at religious sites, 'As interactive nodes between individuals, religions, genders, classes, age groups, and so on, the bodily and discursive practices and experiences at these sites are opportunities for the public performance of community and individual identities characterized by openness and inclusiveness rather than exclusivity and hostility.' Anne Bigelow,



### *Lines and Fragments of Memory*

Sar-i-hind, translated loosely as the frontier of India, finds an appropriate partner in Punjab Tourism's strapline: 'India begins here'. Sirhind represents an entry point into understanding some of the broader issues in identification faced in post-Partition communities where the significant departure of a population has left behind physical emptiness through abandoned structures as well as practices of intangible heritage, such as song or literature. Sudipta Kaviraj's formulation of 'fuzzy' communities to describe the difference between pre-Colonial and Colonial organisation of communities is useful for modelling how the underpinning principles of community are dynamic processes strategically named for personal, collective or administrative purposes: 'Rarely, if ever, would people belong to a community which would claim to represent or exhaust all the layers of complex selfhood.'<sup>17</sup> With the impact of colonialism being partially framed through a move to enumerated communities, it becomes clear how delimiting the mobility of subjects is imperative for drawing lines and distinctions that can be felt and seen. To narrow the scope of selfhood is to constrict or prohibit access to 'layers' of potential identification or to make more dense and complex forms of selfhood contradictory to the point of facing social censure or impossibility.<sup>18</sup> To put this question another way, how is it possible to create a line of Sikh history in Sirhind/Fatehgarh Sahib entirely predicated on a history of unbroken animosity when physical evidence to the contrary permeates the landscape?

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*Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 431. For a further discussion see, Karenjot Bhangoo Randhawa, *Civil Society in Malerkotla, Punjab: Fostering Resilience Through Religion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 56. See discussion in Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Modernity and Ethnicity in India' in ed. David Bennett, *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), 91-110.

<sup>18</sup> For an example of how contradictory subject-positions produce effects of 'impossibility', see, Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2005).

One of the most evocative metaphors for imagining these processes has been the palimpsest. Andreas Huyssen's modelling of Berlin as a palimpsest offers a useful metaphor for rendering the historical and spatial complexity of a city which itself has been carved, partitioned, and subject to regimes of national forgetting and remembering in the face of conflict and trauma: 'Berlin as a palimpsest implies voids, illegibilities, and erasures, but it also offers a richness of traces and memories, restorations and new constructions that will mark the city as a lived space.'<sup>19</sup> What makes Huyssen's formulation so important is not its usefulness in thinking about the co-presence between these 'voids' and 'erasures' and contemporary life, but that it draws from a rich history of writing about the palimpsest as a model for understanding the relationship between individuals, communities and histories, which itself has changed in significance over time. Jawaharlal Nehru evoked the palimpsest as a metaphor for his own realisation of the nation (here, imagined as "she"), framed as an experience at once individual, collective, transhistorical and transcendental:

It was not her wide spaces that eluded me, or even her diversity, but some depth of soul which I could not fathom, though I had occasional and tantalizing glimpses of it. She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously. All of these existed in our conscious or subconscious selves, though we may not have been aware of them, and they had gone to build up the complex and mysterious personality of India.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 84. See also Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59. For a discussion of how the palimpsest metaphor is later used to visualise layered cultures/histories in Salman Rushdie's writing (apparently inspired by Nehru), see, Anna Guttman, *The Nation of India in Contemporary Indian Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), 75-77.

Huyssen's 'lived space' in Nehru is the imaginative action of realising the nation through layered diversity. While Huyssen identifies 'erasure' as a vital aspect of how a palimpsest operates (drawing on real palimpsests which have their top layer erased to create space for another), Nehru optimistically abstracts the palimpsest into a dynamic relationship between all the layers of the national and personal text. In this context, while the ink or marking of a layer of the palimpsest may not be visible, the pressure of the impression left by those markings is felt throughout the palimpsest. Thinking of the palimpsest as a model containing pressure offers a route into understanding hegemony within the text, in other words, what is visible or accessible in the palimpsest and how are networks of associations and connections made across it? What kind of imaginative mobility is allowed, what is disallowed? This question is sidestepped by Nehru by using consciousness as a connection to the contemporary informed by the past. A clearer source of Nehru's observation, however, can be found in an earlier text.

Thomas De Quincey used the palimpsest as a metaphor for memory in 1845: 'What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? [...] Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished.'<sup>21</sup> Freud, and Derrida through a reading of Freud, turned to the mystic writing pad as figures of human consciousness, with the receptive surface layer acting in concert with the invisible traces beneath.<sup>22</sup> Moving from Huyssen back through Nehru and Freud to De Quincey offers an illustrative range of how the palimpsest has been used to figure the relationship between individual and collective and imaginaries of selfhood with psychoanalysis and nationalism

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 135-6.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

being added as ontological imperatives, guaranteeing the coherency of the palimpsest. They differ in the degree to which ‘layers’ of the palimpsest are accessible or visible to either the consciousness or the present, but they do point to the unpredictable and asynchronous forms of pressure and impression that the past can make in the present. Memory becomes an imaginative function of connection, reanimation or enlivening of a palimpsestic node. To think of a line in the palimpsest, is to draw a connection between words or points of significance which cut across other forms of connection. To think of a fragment is to isolate something in its exceptionalism or to point to the absence around it. ‘Absence’ and ‘fragments’ have been crucial in the history of Partition Studies as different kinds of sources are used to piece together meaningful and representative accounts and narratives.

The debate around cultural memory and amnesia has figured heavily in Partition Studies, especially in how individual and state-authorised versions of memory come together, pulling away from their original theorisations in Holocaust Studies to adhere more specifically to the South Asian context.<sup>23</sup> Ananya Kabir identifies ‘post-amnesia’ as the attempt to rehabilitate memories and accounts of Partition which have been suppressed or erased: ‘post-amnesia imagines the layering of national belonging, inevitable in the modern world, with affiliations deriving from pre-modern economic and cultural histories.’<sup>24</sup> As a response to Marianne Hirsch’s formulation of postmemory, this formulation emphasises the highly selective forms of linear narrativity that are constructed in the Indian context, a narrativity which, in the example in this chapter, translates into the articulation of a continuous and distinct Sikh history and identity that selectively erases and bypasses syncretic traditions or ‘fuzzy’ communities. Kabir’s layers offers another formulation for the palimpsest as a text which can

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<sup>23</sup> The move to considering oral histories has made one of the most significant impacts, see Pippa Virdee, ‘Remembering Partition: Women, Oral Histories and the Partition of 1947’, *Oral History* 41 (2), 49-62.

<sup>24</sup> Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Partition’s Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013), 49.

be selectively read when framed by national or nationalistic discourses. It serves to explain how and why sections of the palimpsest become inaccessible.

To think of a line or fragment of memory is to question the underlying logic in its form. How is linearity or a narrative sequence constructed to forge a coherent memory across time? What is the fragment a part of? The final section of this chapter will move to a specific case study, the Aam Khas Bagh, to highlight how the metaphor of the palimpsest can offer a meaningful route into challenging ‘regimes of forgetting.’

### *Palimpsestic Practice*

Heritage itself is a capacious term which in its official definitions ranges across forms of song and types of craft to buildings and monuments.<sup>25</sup> What binds these definitions is an act of safeguarding which demands historical rights and future continuity.<sup>26</sup> The right to history and the right to continuity is mutually constructed with categories of belonging and community. Sirhind offers an example of a site where the definition of heritage can change fundamentally depending on how and why a ‘community’ and its history is imagined or remembered.<sup>27</sup>

Earlier in this chapter, I stated I first met Sirhind through a text. But I must have been in

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<sup>25</sup> For some useful contemporary debates about what ‘counts’ as heritage see Yahana Ahmad, ‘The Scope and Definitions of Heritage: From Tangible to Intangible’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12:3 (2006), 292-300 and Bahar Aykan, ‘How Participatory is Participatory Heritage Management? The Politics of Safeguarding the Alevi *Semah* Ritual as Intangible Heritage’, *International Journal of Heritage Management* 20 (2013), 381-405.

<sup>26</sup> An analogue of this situation, especially in terms of visualising the displacement of a Muslim population and the consequences for build history can be seen in studies of nineteenth century Greece where the imperative for Greek nation-building was to return to ‘ancient’ history and civilization as a way of de-emphasising and erasing an Islamic past. For discussions of this see, Artemis Leontis, *Topographies of Hellenism: Mapping the Homeland* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> See GJ Ashworth and B Graham (eds), *Senses of Place: Senses of Time* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) and for a useful overview of the use of memory in heritage studies, Sara McDowell, ‘Heritage Memory and Identity’ in Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 27-54.

Sirhind many years before without realizing it, as I visited Fatehgarh Sahib gurdwara, which lies a short distance from my mother's ancestral village. When I returned to Punjab and to Sirhind, the refrain I heard again and again was, 'but have you been to the gurdwara – it is a historical place'. Heritage and the value of history was consistently re-routed away from Sirhind to Fatehgarh Sahib.

Imagining Sirhind as a palimpsest offers a reply to the systematic erasure of Mughal-era build heritage in the area along with the cultural memories and significance of the area's Muslim population. The recurring telling of *badla* [revenge] against Mughal-era monuments in the region, a story often repeated by locals while we were in the Aam Khas Bagh, is just one of the micro-examples of how historical conflicts can be stitched together into an unbroken narrative of animosity and religious segregation that deliberately effaces more complex syncretic histories or practices. Forgetting the Aam Khas Bagh in material terms begins with devaluing its material history (vandalism and disinvestment from the state), to devaluing its associational history (devaluing Mughal-era heritage), and finally devaluing its material present and future (not recognising it as an important site of local heritage). But this forgetting is always enabled by the prior narrative erasure, which in turn requires its echo in the material.

We had kind co-operation from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, which had selected a group of thirty students (who were from across India) interested in working on a heritage exhibition. This had been initiated as part of CRCI's initial planning: for them it was integral to involve local organisations and young people in exploring ideas of heritage. In this sense, the project was informed by Kabir's discussion of post-amnesia: without the

emotional, cultural, and community investment in Aam Khas Bagh from the inhabitants of Sirhind, a way of bypassing this erasure was to find different trajectories or sights into the past from young people who were not connected to Sirhind through their identity, and did not themselves carry personalised histories of the impact of Partition in the area.

The project was organised in three parts. One group was tasked with finding connective themes across Sirhind's history for a short film they would produce, another group was to explore Sirhind through a range of interviews and the third was assigned to work on developing temporary interpretive signage across the Aam Khas Bagh for a one day exhibition showcasing the film and interviews.<sup>28</sup> Everyone received an introductory briefing on Sirhind's history which emphasised the site's historical significance as a site along the Grand Trunk Road, and the range of cultural influences still evident there in the built environment. Through this facilitation, the film group also workshopped ideas around water. One of the most serious environmental risks in Sirhind is the quality of the ground water, which has elevated levels of arsenic. Alongside the issues of the dropping water table, water was a theme that the group felt could connect the present with the past. While the Aam Khas Bagh's hammam, fountains and water system, offered the group a plethora of footage, beyond the site they filmed the historic Mughal-era bridge along the Grand Trunk Road, one of only three bridges of the period still surviving in East Punjab.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Simran Chopra and Ioanna Mannoussaki-Adamapoulou assisted in facilitating the workshops and delivering the event in Sirhind, Delhi and London.

<sup>29</sup> Part of CRCI's work involved obtaining protective status for the bridge from the Government of Punjab which was eventually awarded in 2016.



Fig 2 Still from film showing Mughal-era bridge

There was no narration in the film, and only ambient noise from each location was included. Short segments from a range of sites were brought together and arranged in a triptych to disrupt a singular perspective. In Rauza Sharif and Fatehgarh Sahib, the group spent time filming pilgrims and worshippers using water before prayer. Another segment of the film emphasised the volume of worshippers moving through Fatehgarh Sahib contrasted with a relatively quiet and empty Rauza Sharif.<sup>30</sup> Alongside this the grand temple of Fatehgarh Sahib was filmed in contrast to abandoned tombs in the farmland surrounding Sirhind. The metaphor of water in its flow worked alongside the divided perspective of the triptych which itself refused to chart sites in a strict chronology, a singular perspective, or with an authorising narrative. The overall effect of the film was to make visible some of those impressions and traces from Sirhind's past and how they persist into the present. Their recognition and placement in the sequence of a film that did not articulate the story of Sikh-Muslim historical conflict, was a way of using the silence of buildings, sites and monuments

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<sup>30</sup> This is not representative of the entire year when there are pilgrims who visit in organised tours, although these are infrequent.



as a route into a less present or less visible history through the materiality of those places, even when they are partially in ruin or abandoned.

The group collecting interviews identified between twelve people to interview according to religion (in which case they chose representatives from Fatehgarh Sahib and Rauza Sharif), social role (caretakers at the Aam Khas Bagh, shop keepers and local ‘important’ figures), and gender.<sup>31</sup> No participants were questioned about their faith although, given the demographics of the area, the majority were presumed to be lay or practising Sikhs.<sup>32</sup> All the chosen subjects had lived in Sirhind all their lives, and the students had a particular interest in those who had experienced Partition or were old enough to remember its immediate aftermath. The group could only find one such woman to participate in the interview at a farm on the outskirts of Sirhind. And while there is a significant Hindu population in the region, the group decided to foreground the Sikh-Muslim axis to highlight one kind of diversity in Sirhind’s history as particularly emblematic of the area, a decision which itself de-emphasised other kinds of potential connection across gender or language. Due to constrictions of time and resources, the students only had a day of training before designing and conducting interviews. The results demonstrate the difficulty in deviating too far from received histories of the area. In the market place, *badla* [revenge] and the *sahibzadas* [or sons of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh] were a recurring topic, with consistent physical redirection to Fatehgarh Sahib as the site for authoritative information. At Rauza Sharif, a story of peaceful coexistence was consistently emphasised and discussions of Partition or

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<sup>31</sup> While oral histories have been significant in Partition Studies, the purpose here is not to produce a comprehensive alternative view of Sirhind’s history but to expose students to alternative trajectories in authorising accounts of the past. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was led and recorded by a student.

<sup>32</sup> While Sikhs are in the majority in Sirhind, making up approximately half of the population, there is a significant Hindu population (46%), with just under 3% of the population registering as Muslim according to the 2011 Indian Census [<http://www.census2011.co.in/data/town/800185-sirhind-fatehgarh-sahib-punjab.html>].

Sikh-Muslim conflict were summarily dismissed as historical events with no more relevance. Personal memories and anecdotes followed a familiar route of peaceful co-existence with neighbours prior to Partition. The woman, who had experienced Partition, that the group interviewed deviated from their expectations by identifying strongly as a Sikh while acknowledging the spiritual importance of a dilapidated Mughal-era mausoleum lying next to her farm. No interviews explicitly discussed Partition or alluded to any communal violence. These recordings were curated into the community exhibition through two routes: the groups used the interviews to write short descriptions of Sirhind's history for descriptive panels and some audio extracts were used on the day of the exhibition through an interactive panel that offered textual historical descriptions of Sirhind alongside audio recordings of local memories and accounts.

The final group focussed on designing the day-long exhibition through organising publicity and designing a route through the Aam Khas Bagh that was designed to incorporate elements of Sirhind's larger history through the use of interpretative signage, descriptive panels and the interviews. When the day of the exhibition arrived, we were unsure how many people would actually come to see this experimental pop-up exhibition, but we ended up having over four hundred visitors pass through the site, the vast majority of whom came for the exhibition. Collecting comments at the end, the students were continually praised for taking an interest in the history of Sirhind. When students chatted with visitors, they agreed that the Aam Khas Bagh was a historical building that had value, particularly as a potential site for weddings or for visiting as a site of leisure.

After the conclusion of the event, a smaller group of students were able to attend a conference for heritage professionals in Chandigarh to present their work. Beyond this, parts of the exhibition travelled to the UnBox Festival in Delhi (2013) and following that, to the Alchemy Festival at the Southbank Centre (London) later that year. We can, therefore, end our story here, with the positive results of historical rehabilitation and the re-placing of the Aam Khas Bagh in Sirhind's landscape as a site of accrued memory and significance attached to the broader Islamic past and heritage of the area. The success of the exhibition lay in reconnecting Sirhind's population to the people and communities which had lived in the same space, around the same buildings, in the past, thereby identifying new lines of connection through the layers of the palimpsest. As a discussion between an academic, artistic practitioner, designers, architects and conservation experts, this had been our larger aim, motivated by our own cultural research and practice.

### *Conclusion*

'Community' approaches to heritage, especially involving local communities in heritage management, is itself a new kind of orthodoxy in heritage, with community involvement being a mandatory factor in many government or international heritage plans.<sup>33</sup> Yet, this commitment in itself points to a crucial contradiction in heritage management. As Bahar Aykan suggests, 'Prioritizing national perspectives and interests on heritage, UNESCO projects may well serve to the exclusion of alternative interpretations of heritage, especially that of the marginalized groups'<sup>34</sup> In a discussion of participation in community heritage that

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<sup>33</sup> See Steve Watson and Emma Waterton, 'Heritage and Community Engagement' *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16:1-2 (2010), 1-3, who speculate whether 'the cosiness of some accounts of engagement actually mask abiding and inequitable imbalances between professionals and communities in relation to the control of resources and narratives' 2.

<sup>34</sup> Bahar Aykan, 383. See also Yahaya Ahmed on the specific politics around UNESCO and ICOMOS's role in communities and heritage management.

offers a summary critique of ‘community’ in practices of heritage management, Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith use Nancy Fraser’s work on social justice to interrogate hierarchies of visibility and representation in heritage narratives.<sup>35</sup>

Not only are many people overlooked as authorities capable of adjudicating their own sense of heritage, so too is their lack of access to necessary resources. They are, in effect, subordinated and impeded because they do not hold the title ‘heritage expert’, as well as lacking the resources assumed necessary to participate in heritage projects (Western schooling, economic means, etc.), and also potentially ‘lacking’ a particular vision or understanding of heritage and the accepted values that underpin this vision (universality, national and aesthetic values, etc.).<sup>36</sup>

Our presence in Sirhind represented a temporary intervention in co-ordination with an agency working in heritage and conservation. I arrived in Sirhind ready to use the palimpsest as a metaphor to imagine alternative connected histories and carried with me the status of an international education. Working with a conservation architect, I was also representing the interests of conservation – ultimately community participation in heritage in this context was a tool to guarantee the future of the Aam Khas Bagh in the face of neglect and disinvestment from the state. In Sirhind, other organisations with competing interests and political alignments positioned themselves as the best caretakers of Sirhind’s history. While undertaking the exhibition was an illuminating experience for the students who participated in the process, and the community exhibition at the Aam Khas Bagh allowed the site to exist in a different relief for a day, it is all too easy to neatly package a moment of community co-operation and the rehabilitation of the past as a success, without full appreciation of the broader picture.

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<sup>35</sup> Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith, ‘The Recognition and Misrecognition of Community Heritage’ *International Journal of Heritage Management* 16:1-2 (2010), 4-15.

<sup>36</sup> Waterton and Smith, 10.

The process of staging this exhibition brought together a series of complex hierarchies. Firstly, there are the global politics of heritage management and the danger of communities living in the vicinity of neglected historical sites being *informed* and *educated* on their own environment outside a framework of peace-building and reconciliation. Secondly, there is the persistent power of erasure. While we may have delivered a process designed to trigger different kinds of imaginative connection to the past, connections which questioned and critiqued dominant narratives of heritage in the area, this work becomes inert without an afterlife of continued creative engagement in the area and at the site (something that is impossible without state funding and permission). In the end, the exhibition experienced no resistance, and in an area so impacted by a history of religious conflict and the legacy of Partition, mention of 1947 itself was absent, seemingly irrelevant to the task at hand. This does not, however, mean it was not present. The power of amnesia acted to dislodge and displace Mughal-era heritage as a vital part of local heritage, and the persistence of this unwillingness to rehabilitate imaginatively this heritage speaks to the ongoing power of amnesia to act as a kind of no-man's land running through Partitioned Punjab. What speaks most audibly, in this, is that which is not said.

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