

THE POLITICIZATION OF RELIGION IN PUNJAB: 1849 - 1991

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Disastrous though its consequences may have been in recent years, religious and ethnic polarization is clearly in no sense unique to the Punjab. Similar processes of division and confrontation are an only too manifest in many other parts of the sub-continent, just as they are in almost every corner of the globe — North and South, East and West, Capitalist and "Socialist", developed and under-developed. Wherever one chooses to look, religious and ethnic polarization is one of the most salient — and perhaps simply *the* most salient — sources of social and political instability in the contemporary world.

One such processes of polarization are in full flow, they invariably lead — as is manifestly the case in contemporary Punjab — to the articulation of ever more extreme charges and counter-charges. Thus while minority groups begin make ever more serious charges of malfeasance against the locally-dominant majority, with the result that greater social and political autonomy, or better still complete Independence, soon come to be perceived as the only viable remedy for their grievances, majorities tend to become equally vigorously committed to the opposite position: that not only are minority grievances wholly without foundation, but their very articulation amounts to a traitorous assault on national unity. As polarization develops, every move by either side to protect or advance its interests is therefore perceived as deeply threatening by the other. Thus both invariably find ample scope to develop arguments to the effect that righteousness lies wholly on their side, and that the others therefore deserve everything thrown at them.

Partition — pulling the two sides apart, and erecting a clear barrier between the contending parties — often appears to be the only viable solution to such conflicts. Yet far from resolving the problem of polarisation, such a solution often does little more than redouble its intensity albeit on a slightly different plane. Formal social and geographical partition may be used to resolve one set of contradictions, but rarely, if ever, does it bring the process of ethnic division and polarization to a halt. Like a decapitated hydra, further — and often yet fiercer — processes of polarization only too often spring up within each of the resultant sub-divisions. And so the process continues.

Polarization and Partition in Punjab

Thus despite having gone through its own traumatic process of Partition in 1947, which pitted the Muslims on the one hand against the Hindus and Sikhs on the other, and which led to a bloody civil war during the course of which several hundred thousand people lost their lives, while as many as ten million more were forced to abandon their ancestral homes, Punjab's troubles didn't stop there. While Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs had indeed been close allies in opposition to the Muslims in 1947, tensions between them swiftly mounted during the post-partition period, and have continued to escalate ever since.

So it was that despite a further administrative partition in 1966, which separated off the nominally Hindi-speaking (but clearly Hindu-dominated) State of Haryana to the south and east, from a now heavily truncated (but Sikh-majority) remnant hard up against the Pakistani border to the north and west, and despite the new Punjab's growing wealth — for it was, and is, one of the success stories of the Green Revolution, such that its population has a markedly higher living standard than that found anywhere else in India — the Punjabi social order is still

rent with tension, and no less so between sections of its own population than between Punjabis as a whole and the central administration in Delhi.

Centre/Periphery Tensions in the Indian Union

At the all-India level, the Punjabis are not alone in feeling irked by the severity of the administrative, financial and political constrictions which centralised rule from Delhi imposes upon them. Although nominally a union or federation which devolves considerable power on regional state governments, both Pandit Nehru and Sardar Patel – the very architects of India's post-Independence administrative structures – made sure that decisive power was ultimately concentrated in the central government in Delhi. They felt that this was the only way in which the stability of a country so massively diverse as India could be achieved.

With hindsight, it is now clear that the policy of centralisation which Nehru and Patel pursued with such vigour (though it must also be noted that it was one to which their British had been equally vigorously committed) has had exactly the opposite effect from that intended, and nowhere more so than in terms of its impact on those regions which are peripheral to India's Hindi-speaking and politically dominant heartland.

So it was that ever since 1947 Punjabis have – in common with members of many other groups right round the non-Hindi-speaking periphery – chafed against the lack of regional autonomy allowed them by India's highly centralised administrative system. As they see it (and there is considerable justice in their arguments) central government policies have always heavily favoured the central Hindi-speaking areas, with the result that the more peripheral areas – from Kashmir to Tamilnad, and from Assam to Kerala – have been set systematically at a disadvantage.

Many of those arguments have centred around issues of language and religion, for since 1947 the authorities in Delhi have very overtly sought to give a privileged status both to the Hindi language, and more recently to their version of Hinduism as well, to the growing alarm of Punjabi-speaking Sikhs. But in addition to these essentially cultural matters, Punjabis in general and Sikhs in particular have also long also long felt that their *material* interests have been equally seriously overlooked. Their complaints include the diminishing rate of recruitment of Punjabis into the central services, and most particularly the Army; the failure to establish any large-scale state-financed industrial and infrastructural projects within Punjab; low procurement prices for wheat and rice, especially in contrast to steady inflation in the price of essential agricultural inputs such as diesel and fertiliser; inequities in inter-state irrigation water distribution policies; and finally lack of progress on a whole series of border disputes with Punjab's neighbour Haryana, and not least with respect to their shared administrative capital, Chandigarh.

All these complaints had some substance, and had some response come from the other side and in an Indian context that means the central government – all were eminently negotiable. But that was not to be: Punjabi grievances have, for the most part, simply been left to fester. That was bad enough. However all these contradictions have been hugely exacerbated by the rise of, and even more so because of the overwhelmingly disastrous character of the circumstances of the fall of, a charismatic Sikh preacher named Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Besides opening up a whole series of internal contradictions within the Punjabi social order, his death and its consequences have sewn these together with a further series of contradictions between Punjab and Delhi – and beyond that between an emergent Punjabi nationalism the powerfully chauvinistic currents of Hindu nationalism was has also proved immensely popular right across the Hindi-speaking heartland of central north India. Every development in this process seems to have led on to ever more disastrous consequences.

The Rise and Fall of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale

As Mark Tully in particular has shown, Bhindranwale's rise from obscurity was greatly facilitated by Indira Gandhi herself, as well as by Gyani Zail Singh, the Sikh politician and former Chief Minister of the Punjab who was by then serving as President of India. Their motivations were clear enough. Mrs. Gandhi was playing her usual game of making friends with all her enemies' enemies, and thus reinforcing her ability to keep potentially errant state governments very firmly in check; meanwhile Zail Singh, though isolated from office in the Punjab as a result of his occupancy of the Presidential Palace in New Delhi, was equally determined to keep a finger in the pie, not least in order to cause as much embarrassment as possible to his own long-standing rivals amongst Punjab's established political leadership. So although their motivations may have differed somewhat, both seem to have concluded that Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was their man.

Although he was clearly blessed with a great deal of personal charisma, Jarnail Singh the fifth son in a family of Jat Sikh small peasant farmers from the village of Bhindran, which lies ?? miles south east of Amritsar was but one Sikh revivalist preacher amongst many, although perhaps of slightly greater eminence than many thanks to his succession to the leadership of the Damdama Taksal (a shrine-cum-seminary) at the relatively early age of ?? in 197?. The core theme of Bhindranwale's teaching was hardly exceptional, involving, as it did, a thoroughgoing insistence that Sikhs must return to the behavioral rules of the *khalsa*, as laid down by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 if they wished to avoid the ever-present danger of sliding back into Hinduism once again a position which he shared with many other preachers of Sikh revivalism.

Yet in doing so, Bhindranwale was no urban sophisticate. Explicitly rural in both his behaviour and diction, his arguments also very directly represented the sensitivities and the interests of Punjab's smaller peasant farmers, and most especially so in the context of the benefits and pains of the success of the green revolution. As result Jarnail Singh was vigorously critical of Punjab's established political elite, whom he accused of selfishly overlooking the interests of small but good-hearted and honest peasants in the more remote rural areas. While this charge certainly had some substance especially in the light of the unequal social and economic impact of the Green Revolution what really gave his criticisms force was Bhindranwale's insistence that the elite (most of whose members were Sikh, though not all were Jats) were morally corrupt, so much so that they had sold out to the faithless and money-grubbing Brahmins of Delhi.

In facilitating the rise of Bhindranwale whom they presumably saw as little more than a populist rabble rouser with a capacity to embarrass an elite group which they too, though for different reasons, wanted to put on the spot both Indira Gandhi and Zail Singh clearly made a grave mistake, above all because they grossly underestimated the potential popular appeal of Jarnail Singh's anti-Hindu, anti-Brahmin, anti-shopkeeper, and anti-Hindu-chauvinist rhetoric to large sections of Sikh society.

But despite Bhindranwale's undoubted popularity, it should never be forgotten that neither he, nor even more so his followers were in any way reluctant to reinforce their demands for the construction of a new moral order down the barrels of their guns. On the ideological front they justified the use of force on the grounds that Guru Gobind Singh had taught that Sikhs should act as *sant sipahi*, as saint-soldiers prepared to take vigorous action which could be military if necessary in support of righteousness. Meanwhile at a more practical level they were able to carry their weapons with great confidence, secure in the knowledge that the police would be restrained as a result of instructions issued by the President of India himself

from taking action against them. A reign of terror was soon unleashed, which the regular administrative agencies of the government of Punjab from the police onwards were powerless to contain.

Once securely holed up within the sacred precincts of the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Bhindranwale began to organise what amounted to an alternative system of justice of his own. Villagers could petition him freely, and offenders were summoned on pain of death to answer for their misdeeds. Bhindranwale's judgements were instant, and summary; and while the outcome often did, when things went well, represent popular moral assumptions, there was also endless scope to justify all manner of mayhem including the assassination of the second in command of the Punjab Police on the steps of the Golden Temple itself on the grounds that it must necessarily have represented the just will of the new saviour of Sikhism.

Embarrassing the Punjab Government was, of course, the original object of the exercise, but by early 1984 it was obvious that Frankenstein was out of control, and that the monster whose emergence Indira Gandhi and Gyani Zail Singh had so blithely facilitated would have to be brought back under control. At long last the Government of India steeled itself to act: but so bungled were its efforts that it precipitated a dramatic worsening of the situation, and powerfully reinforced the incipient tensions between the Sikhs on the one hand and the Hindus on the other.

Operation Bluestar and its Consequences

Clearly envisaging the prospects of a physical challenge to their position from the central government, by the summer of 1984 Bhindranwale and his men had begun to concentrate themselves in fortified positions in and around the Akal Takht, the second most sacred Sikh shrine after the Har Mandir Sahib itself, and both of which are contained within the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. At this point it is also worth noting that in the period immediately before the Indian Army began to take action against him, Bhindranwale's occupation of the shrine, together with his adamant refusal to countenance any kind of argument with or opposition to his perspective usually on the grounds that anyone who disagreed with his position was *ipso facto* a sellout to the other side most certainly did not find favour with *all* Sikhs. Quite the contrary: very many, and especially those with a strong commitment to the more spiritual dimensions of the Gurus' teachings, regarded these developments with horror. However the bungling ineptitude with which the Indian Army carried out Operation Bluestar their codename for the assault on the Temple to take out Bhindranwale changed all that.

Bhindranwale's men had been guided in their fortification of the Temple complex by Major-General (retired) Shubeg Singh, an expert in guerilla warfare, and as a result they were able to put up a far stiffer resistance than had been expected. Within minutes of the opening assault, perhaps as many as a hundred soldiers had lost their lives in a murderously constructed killing field just inside the entrance to the parikrama; command and control collapsed, and the usually well disciplined Indian army simply ran amok. Their first step was to dispose of a comparatively easy target the hundreds, perhaps thousands of pilgrims whose only offense was to have been trapped inside the temple complex when the Bluestar curfew was imposed, and who had taken shelter in the Dharamshalas at the far end of the compound from the Akal Takht. An unknown number died. Only then did they seriously attend to eliminating Bhindranwale and his two hundred or so armed followers. It was over 48 hours before they were all dead, and before then a number of light tanks had been driven onto the sacred parikrama, from where they shelled the Akal Takht itself, virtually demolishing it.

No-one can doubt the need to have brought Bhindranwale's activities to an end, but what can most certainly be questioned is the *manner* in which it was done: so, for example, while a straightforward siege would have lasted much longer, there would at least have been a good chance that Bhindranwale's surrender could have been secured without causing serious damage to the sacred structure of the temple itself. Many Sikhs would have been relieved at such an outcome. Bluestar had the very opposite effect, however. So extensive was the damage that all Sikhs were both horrified and outraged by what they inevitably viewed as an act of sacrilege, while Bhindranwale now safely dead was instantly transformed into a *shaheed*, a martyr who could, by definition, do no wrong.

In the immediate aftermath of Bluestar there was at least a chance that the Sikh's deeply hurt feelings might have been assuaged if the authorities in Delhi had at least recognised that Sikh feelings *were* hurt, and if some attempt had at least been made to apologise for the Army's disastrous tactics, and even more so their loss of command and control, during the course of Operation Bluestar. However the Government of India chose, instead, to pursue the very opposite course. Largely in response to Hindu chauvinist pressures emanating from the so-called "cow belt" India's Hindi-speaking heartland to the east and south of Delhi every possible effort was made to rubbish the Sikhs' concerns. So it was that Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the Sikhs' latest *shaheed*, was regularly described as a Pakistani agent who had been hell-bent on destroying the unity of India by force, while scurrilous stories about his personal life, and which suggested amongst other things that he and his followers were drug addicts and sexual perverts, were much peddled in the media.

Few Sikhs were greatly surprised, therefore, when two of Indira Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards chose to take revenge by turning their guns on their mistress less than six months later.

But worse was, of course, to follow. In what was clearly a well-co-ordinated pogrom organised by local Congress Party bigwigs, squads of Hindu *goondas* were trucked into Delhi's relatively prosperous Sikh settlements, and encouraged to do their worst; and for forty-eight hours the police stood by doubtless following official orders and did nothing.

As chaos reigned, most members of Delhi's Sikh population which is several hundred thousand strong took ignominious shelter in the houses of their Hindu neighbours. Much property was looted as they did so, but they did at least escape with their lives, for in total some two thousand Sikhs most of whom, ironically enough, were not Punjabis at all, but members of the relatively impoverished Sindhi Sikh community were slaughtered by the mob. Worse still the Government took no action to investigate just who was responsible for organising the pogrom, or to bring any charges whatsoever against any of those who had committed such blatant acts of murder, looting and arson on the streets of the Capital itself. But if the mob was allowed to escape scott free, it is only too clear that the authorities' inaction very accurately reflected the weight of public opinion. Throughout northern India the great majority of Hindus of all kinds and classes simply took it for granted that the Sikhs needed to be "taught a lesson"; and that if they had failed to take it aboard, the same punishment would have to be meted out all over again.

While she was alive, Indira Gandhi had often sought to take advantage of popular currents of chauvinistic Hindu nationalism. After her death those small currents swiftly became a torrent. A huge wave of chauvinism which blamed the sub-Continent's non-Hindu population Moslem no less than Sikh for all of India's many ills swept across the land. This led, amongst other things, to the re-election of a Congress Government with an unprecedented majority under the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi's son, Rajiv.

But whatever the circumstances of his victory, in its immediate aftermath Rajiv behaved in a far more magnanimous way than his mother would ever have dared to: thus one of his first acts as Prime Minister was to visit Amritsar, where he at least made partial amends for the

sacrilegious atrocities of Bluestar. Even more impressively, Rajiv moved swiftly to strike a deal with Sant Harcharan Singh Langowal which, by giving Chandigarh wholly to Punjab and by re-opening the issue of irrigation water distribution, as well as by promising the restoration of due legal processes with respect both to the treatment of Sikh "mutineers" in the Army and to the victims of the Delhi riots, and finally with a promise a full-scale independent inquiry into the causes of those riots, went a very long way towards assuaging Sikh demands.

The Rise of the Impossibilists

But there were saboteurs about. Although Langowal had a long track-record of supporting calls for greater autonomy both for the Sikhs and for the Punjab, with the result that he was much respected as a politico/religious leader, he had always been a vigorous opponent of Bhindranwale's militant chauvinism. So it was that although all the indications were that the great majority of Sikhs were relieved and pleased at the concessions that Langowal had extracted from Rajiv in their accord, within days of signing it Langowal was himself assassinated as a sell-out. Bhindranwale's impossibilist followers were showing their hand once again.

In gaining a perspective on the real extent of Sikh support for extremist positions — such as the establishment of a wholly independent Khalistan, the assassination of Sant Harcharan Singh Langowal, let alone for the multitude of even bloodier atrocities that have taken place in the years that followed — always was, and almost certainly still is, restricted to a minority hardliners. Had the authorities in Delhi been prepared to make good their promises to Langowal, let alone the deals they subsequently seemed to be about to strike with a whole secession of democratically elected, but inevitably increasingly assertive, representatives of Sikh interests, the extremists would soon have had the ground cut right away from beneath their feet. But unfortunately the authorities did the very opposite, and have found, one excuse after another to renege on their agreements. Predictably enough, the consequences have been quite disastrous. To the Sikhs, such behaviour simply provided further confirmation of their growing paranoia about the mindless hostility of the central government in Delhi — and by extension of Hindus in general — towards them; meanwhile every broken promise increased the scale of the concessions required to tempt them into entering the next round of negotiations. But from the Hindu point of view the Sikhs' apparent "intransigence", together with the ever larger concessions to their interests that they inevitably demanded, increased the prospect that the Hindus in their turn also reject all such deals, most usually on the grounds that the concessions made in the previous round were — whether reneged upon or not — were already far too large. Since Hindu/Sikh polarisation was given an additional vicious twist at almost every stage in this process, so sectarian divisions have grown steadily wider and deeper right across northern India.

In Punjab itself the security situation has deteriorated most alarmingly: in an ever-increasing spiral of violence, the death toll — arising either from "terrorist" assaults, or from "police encounters" of one kind or another — has now risen beyond 3,000 a year. The broad pattern of this deterioration is easy enough to identify. Having pulled the plug on processes of democratic representation in Punjab, the authorities have also pushed normal administrative and judicial procedures into abeyance as they have sought to suppress terrorism by force.

But in doing so they have lost out on all fronts: violence continues unabated, while the Government has contrived to lose all semblance of credibility, most especially in the countryside. It is here that most "terrorists" have their base, and here, too, that the Police and the Army have sought to use every available means, foul no less than fair, to track them down. Villagers therefore find themselves in a most unenviable position. In an ideal world they would

much prefer to avoid harassment by *Goondas* (bandits) altogether, if faced with the stark choice between submitting to the demands of Police *Goondas* or to those made by their own local *Goondas*, most villagers would much prefer to do a deal with the latter. Local lads can at least be regarded as "our boys"; and if the worst comes to the worst, their deaths can be legitimated by identifying them as martyrs for the sacred cause of local autonomy Khalistan.

But if the Punjabi countryside has consequently become a hotbed of "Sikh militancy" from which the Hindu population – most of whom made their living as shopkeepers – has largely fled in fear, Punjab's towns, which in any case have always been dominated by Hindu merchants, have increasingly looked like Hindu islands set in a Sikh sea. Not that population transfer offers any kind of solution. For Sikh peasants, the villages remain as dangerous as ever; and although the towns may well be a great deal safer than the villages, as far as Punjabi Hindus are concerned they are very far from secure. As hit and run attacks – directed at least as much at persons as at property – grow ever more frequent, Punjabi Hindus are becoming ever more vocal in their demands for more and better protection, or in other words for ever more vigorous police and para-military intervention to contain Sikh "terrorism". And to the extent that the authorities respond to their pleas for the application of yet more violence – as needs they must, given the immense weight of popular political pressure to "save Hinduism" emanating from the Hindi-speaking areas further down the Gangetic plains – the ever-deteriorating process of religious and ethnic polarisation between Punjabi Sikhs on the one hand, and Punjabi Hindus on the other is given yet another vicious twist.

The Wider Context: the Roots and Logic of Differentiation

Nor is any resolution of these problems anywhere in sight. Both sides have now grown so mistrustful of the other that there is now no obvious in which the contradictions between them can be bridged, at least in the short term. So rather than dwelling on the intractability of current problems, my aim here is to stand back a little from the immediate issues, in order to ask some more searching questions about the nature and dynamics of processes of religious and ethnic polarization, and also to place current developments in a wider historical and analytical context.

As was noted at the outset, traumatic forms of religious and ethnic polarization are in no way unique to the Punjab: on the contrary it is becoming increasingly clear that virtually all the most explosive social and political contradictions in the contemporary world rest on precisely parallel sets of contradictions. Hence it follows that any conclusions which we might reach about the dynamics of polarisation in Punjab may well prove illuminating in a wide variety of other contexts; and by the same token lessons learned elsewhere are likely to equally useful with respect to the Punjab.

How, then, are we to understand the roots, and the dynamics, of current contradictions?

One view – much canvassed by those who are actively involved in such processes of polarisation – is that all this is an inevitable consequence of innate and immutable differences between the two sides. Sikhs and Hindus, Moslems and Sikhs, Buddhists and Tamils and so on and so forth differ so comprehensively – so the protagonists argue – that they are like oil and water. They cannot and will not mix. Hence, they insist, the only permanent way in which ethnic tensions can be resolved is through a wholesale separation of the two parties, where each gains control of its own self-governing territory, which encloses, in turn, a religiously and ethnically homogeneous – and therefore presumably harmonious – population. Yet however reasonable such a proposition may seem to its protagonists, it is not hard to see why attempts to implement such a solution so often achieves nothing of the sort.

Non-homogeneity and the Dialectics of Polarisation

In the first place it is worth remembering that non-homogeneity is far from unusual. On the contrary, human society is irredeemably plural, with the result that with the possible exception of the very smallest of islands, all population aggregates contain a great deal of social, cultural, linguistic and religious variation. But contrary to the assumptions of naive nationalists, such disjunctions are rarely congruent with one other, nor do they have clearly marked boundaries in spatial terms. Instead they invariably overlap, and it is precisely their social, economic and geographical inter-penetration of these diversities which causes so much difficulty once ethnic polarization begins. Once again, it is easy to see why.

To be in a minority is always a risky business: one's own interests are in constant danger of being overlooked, not least because the priorities of the wider social order within which one is encapsulated, as well as the values in terms of which it is structured will almost certainly have been constructed in such a way as to reflect the assumptions and thus to advance the interests of the dominant majority, whoever they happen to be. When communities subsist in isolation, such disjunctions are, however, of relatively little account; but the more they are drawn into each others' orbits, the more they compete with one another, and the more, above all, that interests begin to be expressed and negotiated in collective terms within these much wider arenas, the more concerned smaller socio-cultural groups will tend to grow about the potentially hegemonic impact of majority priorities on both their material interests and their distinctive religious and cultural values. And the more threatening such hegemony becomes, the more likely it is that minorities will begin to regard ethnic organisation as their most urgent priority: in these circumstances more and more of everyone's efforts are likely to be directed towards establishing a more secure and autonomous social, political and cultural arena and in the extreme case, into towards the creation of an independent, territorially delimited state within which they could expect to express their own genius much more freely in their own terms.

To some observers and especially to those who have not themselves suffered from the tribulations of exclusionism the enthusiastic single-mindedness with which members of many minority groups press forward such demands often seems as parochial as it is paranoid. But those who make such judgements whether they do so from a liberal or from a Marxist perspective would do well to remember that minority fears about suffocating impact of majority hegemony may in fact be well grounded, and most especially so when those whom they confront have themselves been infected by the virus of nationalism.

The utilisation of religious and cultural symbols as a means of reinforcing social and political solidarity is, of course, by no means restricted to minority groups. On the contrary large and dominant groups have exploited the mobilising potentialities of ethnicity just vigorously, and just as frequently as anyone else: nationalism is no more than ethnicity dressed up in more ideologically respectable clothes. Thus despite having the advantages of the weight of numbers very firmly on their side, majority groups have proved no less prone to attacks of paranoid anxiety about the security and autonomy of their cultural traditions than have beleaguered minorities. So it is that apparently secure majority groups in all parts of the world have regularly identified their own local minorities be they Jews, Gypsies, Basques, "coloured immigrants", Muslims, Sikhs or "untouchables" and many others as an enemy within whose very presence threatens (or so it is alleged) the homogeneity and integrity of the established social and cultural order.

Thus the circle is complete. Once majorities begin to identify their own ways not just as a mark of normality, but as the *necessary* grounding for all legitimate activities, and in all probability as the very essence of civilisation itself, local minorities will by definition feel

increasingly exposed. More likely than not they will find themselves under ever more intense pressure to convert, to assimilate, and more generally to adopt a policy of cultural submission with no guarantee, in view of their heritage, that they will even meet full social acceptance having done so; yet if they fail to conform they may well be told to get lost, and to get the hell out of it. But if majorities regularly overlook the extent to which their demands conform to the rules of Catch 22, the minorities are only too well aware of it. Nor is that all. While exposure to such hypocrisy powerfully reinforces minority fears about the intransigent character of majority hegemony, any attempt which they make to complain about being so treated, or to resist the hegemony to which they are subjected, is just as inevitably perceived from a majority perspective as yet further evidence of the minorities' fickleness, deviousness, disloyalty and ingratitude, and hence as justification for the application of yet more hegemonic pressure.

The dialectics are clear enough: in circumstances such as these both sides will set about building ever more elaborate boundaries around itself the better to contain the perceived threat emanating from the other; and they will do so in such a way that their rivals' every move will appear to justify a yet more fevered bout of boundary construction on their own part. Few would disagree that mutual exclusionism of this kind is the principal driving force behind all contemporary processes of ethnic polarisation.

Partition as a non-Solution

Yet although polarisation is centrally about the sharpening up of boundaries, it should not be supposed that the location of these boundaries is in any way straightforward, whatever the protagonists may say: on the contrary it is precisely because of intense confusion and thus dispute about the location of such boundaries that processes of ethnic polarisation become so ridden with irresolvable contradictions. There are a number of dimensions to such confusions.

In the first place, many of the allegedly absolute social and cultural disjunctions upon which demands for partition are founded usually turn out, on closer examination, to be much less deep-rooted, and much less sharply drawn than the more enthusiastic protagonists of separation suggest. What one much more usually discovers, instead and most especially so during the early stages of polarization is a cultural continuum, in which the extremes are indeed sharply differentiated, but where there is a great deal of fuzziness at the centre of the scale. Here we find people who combine within themselves all sorts of supposedly wholly contradictory characteristics, such as Muslims who routinely consult Brahmin priests, Hindus who set great store by the mystical power of *Pirs*, and Sikh families who have long brought up at least one of their sons as Hindus.

Such cultural continua are of course an anathema to committed polarisers, for they mess up the neat boundaries which their conceptual sets demand. But if such boundaries do not exist, they can easily enough be created, and so it is that "confusions" of this kind are invariably the first target of the reform movements which accompany every polarization. These put immense pressure on all those in the centre of the scale, insisting often very competitively that they throw in their lot much more firmly with either one side of the other, by conforming much more closely to the new orthodoxies which such reform movements invariably seek to establish.

But if the fuzziness of cultural continua can be resolved by the process of ethnic boundary construction so reminding us that clear-cut ethnic differentiation is anything but innate the resolution of spatial fuzziness invariably proves far harder. In such circumstances geographical boundaries always a subject of intense dispute, not only because both sides will always stake claims to the largest possible territory, but also because wherever such boundaries are finally

drawn, many people are bound to find themselves trapped on the "wrong" side of the new border. Fears for the safety of one's compatriots exposed to the tender mercies of the other side invariably adds yet more fuel to the fire: every move by the one side to secure its own interests and territorial integrity will seem maliciously threatening to the other.

As polarization becomes increasing severe so territorial partition will begin to be perceived, despite its large costs – and as Punjab's experience shows, those can be very large indeed – as the only solution. But although physical partition may indeed resolve the immediate problem, in no way does it resolve the issue of ethnic polarization *per se*: on the contrary the hydra invariably returns, and in a yet more poisonous form. The reasons are clear enough. Far from being a unitary phenomenon, ethnicity is intrinsically segmentary. Thus every division can be expected to contain a further set of sub-divisions of like kind within itself, each of which are potential sources of just as vigorous, and just as irresolvable, processes of polarization as those at the next step up. So it is that partition of the sub-Continent has in no way halted processes of polarization. Instead well-educated Sri Lankans have watched their island's nascent prosperity disappear into a morass of ethnic conflict; and while Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan in the midst of a bloody civil war, both sides are still rent with ethnic tension: in the former both Biharis and Hindus eke out a precarious existence, while in the latter what amounts to another civil war has broken out between the Sindhis and Muhajirs, though tensions between both of these and the Pathans and Punjabis are not much less severe. Nor are these contradictions confined solely to the periphery, for within India itself tensions between Hindus and the remaining Muslims of U.P., let alone the parallel contradictions in almost every other region, pose a similar threat to its prosperity and stability of India of the world's largest democracy.

Likewise a further partition of Punjab itself is most unlikely to provide a solution to the problem of ethnic polarization, for in the (surely unlikely) event of the emergence of an independent Khalistan, there is every reason to suppose that it, too, would be rent by similar divisions. Despite the best efforts of the ideologues of Sikh unity, the plain fact is that there are no fewer contradictions, and therefore no less of a potential for polarization, between the major Sikh castes – such as the Jats, Khatri, Ramgarhias, Ravidasias and so forth – than between any of the other groups which we have considered here.

All this evidence drives us in the direction of two fairly obvious conclusions. Firstly that all contemporary societies – and no less so in the sub-Continent than anywhere else – are intrinsically pluriform: that is they contain within themselves a multitude of religious and cultural disjunctions, any and all of which are potential sources of ethnic polarization and conflict. Secondly, it is equally clear that contrary to the presuppositions of the vast majority of social theorists, the parochial chauvinisms and false consciousnesses whose collapse they so confidently expected in the face of a tide of progress and modernization have done nothing of the sort: everywhere one chooses to look ethnic contradictions are growing more, not less, salient. Far from being a "tribalistic" hangover from a "traditional" world, it is becoming increasingly manifest that ethnic polarization is a quintessentially *modern* phenomenon. How is this to be explained?

The Pathological Consequences of Democracy

If the twentieth century has been marked by the explosive growth of ethnic polarisation, so to, it is worth remembering, it has also witnessed the emergence of an almost universal acknowledgement that democracy is the only sound basis for political organisation. Could the two be linked?

In the wake of the collapse of all the world's great Empires, democracy now has few serious rivals as a means of organising and governing large scale political units, and of

legitimizing and constraining the activities of those who exercise of State power. Yet as innumerable contemporary conflicts dramatically emphasise, the application of straightforwardly majoritarian principles such that majority support for any given measure is regarded as a sufficient test of its legitimacy - contains a potentially disastrous flaw when the population concerned is ethnically polarized.

When applied in a society which is full of conflicting interests, but where those interests both shift and cross-cut one another in complex ways, majoritarian democracy works well. But once ethnic polarisation starts to intensify, all differences of opinion, perspective and interest begin to be perceived as being congruent with one another, and thus are ever more inexorably articulated in ethnic terms. In such circumstances majoritarian democracy soon breaks down as a vehicle for the promotion of social justice, at least as far as any minority group is concerned. No matter how loudly, coherently and eloquently they articulate their distinctive interests and concerns, they will never, by definition, secure sufficient votes to win any argument. Yet any protest they might make about the injustice and untenability of being condemned to the position of an eternal loser often brings yet greater calumny. In such situations majority groups regularly - if hypocritically - present themselves as the guardians of both progress and justice; having used the canons of democracy to institutionalise the supremacy of their own interests, they then turn them on the minority, insisting that having lost the "democratic" argument they should put up and shut up, and stop causing further trouble.

If applied in this way - as it so often is in all parts of the contemporary world - democracy is only too obvious a recipe for social tension, rather than a remedy for social injustice.

Changing Understandings of the Origins of "Innate" Difference

A further dimension of the modernity of current processes of polarization is the radical changes that have taken place in conventional understandings of the groundings of the categorical differences which give rise to these disjunctions. A hundred years ago, the Indian social order was of course disjointed by a fault line which was clearly no less unjust, and indeed a great deal more provocative, than those which can be witnessed today: that between the sub-Continent's British (or more precisely its *English*) rulers and their indigenous subjects. But in keeping with the spirit of the times, the colonizers conceptualized and justified this disjunction - and so the imposition of their Raj - on biological grounds. Europeans in general, and Anglo-Saxons in particular, were held to be racially superior to their non-European subjects. Not only was this theory used to justify the construction of an Imperial edifice, but also to argue that however much Indians might seek to educate and "civilize" themselves, they would never have the capacity fully to catch up with their white masters and mentors.

Today, of course, such visions of biologically innate difference have been largely discredited, thanks both to the findings of biological science, and to the genocidal excesses perpetrated by the Nazis in the name of this theory. Nevertheless innatism itself has by no means disappeared: as biological determinism has become unfashionable, it has simply been recast. They have been replaced instead by a multitude of (mostly inchoate) theories about the innate character of cultural, ethnic and religious differences of all kinds; a characteristic result of this way of thinking is the view - which is, as far as I can see so widespread as to be taken for granted in almost all quarters, and no less so in contemporary Britain than in the sub-Continent - that individuals can only possess a single "identity". And that "identity" is invariably perceived as being just as fixed, unitary and immutable phenomenon as their biological heritage.

The Mobilizing Potentialities of Innatism

If cultural innatism of this kind is widespread, it is also easy to see why such a mode of thinking should be so attractive to those involved in processes of ethnic polarization, and most especially so when representative democracy is the name of the game. In the first place innatism directly facilitates collective organisation, for it allows interests groups of all kinds whether in a majority *or* a minority to construct clearly defined boundaries around themselves on the grounds that "we" are manifestly and quite unequivocally different from "they". Secondly it facilitates the development of social pressure on all those contained within those boundaries to the effect that they have a moral and yet more powerfully and persuasively still, a *sacred* obligation to close ranks in mutual support, the better to advance their collective interests.

It is also worth noting that while such mobilization is invariably directed towards protecting and advancing the group's material interests whatever they happen to be collective action of this kind is equally invariably competitive in character: hence ethnic aggregation is almost always a response defensive from an insiders point of view, but aggressive from without to parallel processes of mobilization amongst a rival group or groups.

But while it is easy enough to see why innatist assumptions - whether they be biologically or culturally grounded should be so attractive to those who are actively involved in the dialectics of ethnic polarization, it is quite clear that if we are ever to gain an understanding of the way in which the endless spirals of distrust which polarization engenders might be unwound, the closest possible attention must be paid to two basic questions:

- (a) Is it the case that the differences between those involved in such processes of polarization are *actually* as innate as they are commonly believed to be?

and (b) is it the case those differences, even where they have long historical roots, have *always* had such vigorously divisive consequences as they self-evidently do at present?

Given a little historical investigation, such questions can most usually be answered empirically and more often than not produce results which stand in sharp contrast to the popular historiographies assiduously developed by the protagonists of polarisation. The differences here are clearly crucial, and not just with respect to the issue of historical truth. What is ultimately at stake is the question of whether ethnic polarisation is innate and immutable, or whether to the contrary it is a politically generated, and therefore re-negotiable, process.

As far as Punjab is concerned, two crucial questions are worth asking. First, did ethnic polarisation in anything like its contemporary form ante-date the imposition of the British Raj? And secondly, if it did not, what was it about the Raj, and/or about Punjabi reactions to it that fomented the growth of such polarization?

Religion and Society in pre-British Punjab

The religious disjunctions around which Punjab's current patterns of polarization have been precipitated are certainly of very long standing, for they are the product of nearly a thousand years of social and political ferment, whose roots can in many ways be traced back to Mahmud of Ghazni's successful invasion of the province early in the eleventh century. Incorporated, from then on, a whole series of North Indian Muslim Empires, Punjab's ruling elite was Muslim too, at least until Maharajah Ranjit Singh seized control of Lahore in 1800, in the wake of the chaos produced by yet another marauding Afghan army. Sikh rule did not last for

long, however. Although the British were exceedingly wary about taking on the Punjabis as long as the Maharajah was alive, they moved swiftly towards incorporating it into their Raj as soon as he was dead. Even so they faced a tough job; it took ten years to subdue resistance, when the remnants of Ranjit Singh's still-powerful army was defeated at the battle of Chillianwala in 1849.

Punjab's contemporary religious mosaic is also best understood against the background of these political developments. Right at the outset, prior to Mahmud of Ghazni's invasion, the whole of Punjab's population was nominally Hindu, although popular belief and practice was also heavily influenced by Tantric Buddhism, most especially in the more westerly parts of the region. Much had changed, however, by the time of the imposition of British rule. In the west, the great majority of the population, especially in the rural areas, had converted to Islam; there was a significant degree of commitment to Sikhism in the central areas, and only in the far eastern and southern areas was the rural population still overwhelmingly Hindu.

The Growth of Islam

How had this come about? That north India's ruling Muslim elite – most of whose members claimed Central Asian descent – imposed themselves by force on the local population is clear enough. But did the imposition of Muslim rule extend to forced conversion? Despite the widespread popularity, especially amongst Hindu and European commentators, of the view that the Islamic tradition is both rigidly authoritarian and profoundly intolerant, such that its followers will always seek to gain further recruits by force, there is no evidence that the ancestors of the vast majority of contemporary Punjabi Muslims were converted to Islam in this way, nor even that they did so in an effort to curry favour with the ruling elite. On the contrary conversion was the outcome of a much gentler process, pressed forward by the proselytizing efforts of innumerable sufi *pirs*. These saintly apostles of Islam – whose shrines are still honoured to this day – for the most part presented themselves as mystically inspired miracle-workers with powers akin to those of Hindu Yogis; indeed their *mazars* have not infrequently been constructed right on top of the remains of Buddhist *stupas*. In these circumstances not only did Islamic practice in rural areas tend to differ sharply from that of the urban elite, but the very process of becoming Muslim was often drawn out over several generations: indeed if reasonably comprehensive conformity to the requirements of the *shari'a* is taken as the test, then many of Punjab's Muslims only became fully Islamic in their behaviour under the influence of the reform movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

If currently popular historiographies of the development of commitment to Islam in rural Punjab require substantial revision in the light of a close and careful scrutiny of the historical evidence, the same is even more true with respect to Sikhism, not least because the two most commonly made generalisations about its origins and growth – that Nanak's teachings were a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam, and that the faith developed as a defensive response to the encroachments of Islamic proselytization – both fail to stand up to historical scrutiny.

The Development of Sikhism

Although born a Hindu, Nanak himself would undoubtedly have been familiar with Islamic theology, for his family's hereditary employment was as junior administrators directly responsible to the ruling Muslim elite. However his teaching was in no way the reconciliation of Hindu and Islamic theology that many recent commentators – from Khushwant Singh onwards – have suggested. As McLeod has shown, Nanak's teachings fall squarely into the *nirguna sampradaya* or Sant tradition of Northern India. To be sure he was one of the most

articulate and effective exponents of this position, but what Nanak brought together was two of the most significant strands in fourteenth century Hindu religiosity in North India – *Nath yoga* on the one hand, and *Nirguna Bhakti* on the other; specifically Islamic concepts are only minimally represented in his teaching. Nor is there any sign that Nanak saw himself as the founder of a distinct and coherently organised social group, and still less of an independent religion. Besides identifying himself solely as a religious teacher, his emphasis on the *interior* nature of true spiritual practice led him explicitly to debunk the value of all overt ritual and social activities. As he saw it, such physical activities were only to be valued as aids to an internal process of spiritual enlightenment.

Yet however noble and inspiring Nanak's position may have been in spiritual terms, it was not one which offered his successors – keen as they were to perpetuate his teachings – a secure foundation for the construction of a stable, secure, and well-organised religious community within which to do so. Hence their very success in establishing such a community inevitably involved a certain amount of deviation from the pure simplicity of Nanak's original teachings: his immediate successors established *tirath* (pilgrimage centres), first at Goindwal and later at Amritsar, set up an administrative system for the collections of offerings. As their following and so the Sikhs' collective wealth – grew steadily in size, so the Gurus, as leaders of the new *sampradaya*, began assume an increasingly significant position in local politics, as was made directly manifest in the deliberately ambiguous title *Sacha Padshah* – Emperor of Truth, but equally *True Emperor* – which the Gurus adopted.

The Politicization of the Sikh Guruship

This transformation of the status of the Guru was to have momentous consequences for the development of Sikhism. For the followers of a mystical/sectarian movement – whether in the Hindu or the Muslim tradition – to gradually surround their leader with the trappings of royalty was certainly not an unusual development, nor was the tendency of such leaders to become embroiled in local politics, for the very scale of their following made them forces to be reckoned with. But that also made the movement extremely vulnerable to the twists and turns of Imperial politics.

Very much in keeping with his own policy of syncretism, it was the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1543-1605) who presented the fourth Guru, Ram Das (1534-1581), with the land on which the town and temple of Amritsar was subsequently constructed by his immediate successor, Arjun Dev (1563-1606). Had Akbar been succeeded by his equally liberal minded grandson Khusrau, who had been heavily influenced by Mian Mir – a leading Sufi teacher of Lahore, and a close associate of Arjun Dev – the course of Punjabi, and indeed Indian, history might have been very different. But that was not to be. In the aftermath of Khusrau's unsuccessful attempt to evict his much more narrow-minded uncle Jehangir from the throne in Agra, all his friends and associates – including Guru Arjun Dev – were bloodily eliminated.

Just why was Arjun executed? While latter-day Sikh historiographers now routinely represent the fifth Guru as Sikhism's first martyr to Islamic fundamentalism, there seems to be little substance to their case. The better view is that – he and his community were not so much a threat to Islam, but rather to that faction of the Muslim elite which had just gained control of the Imperial *gaddi*. His elimination was a function of Imperial politics, not of religious polarization.

Nevertheless his death profoundly transformed the nascent Sikh community; if successive Gurus had been gaining ever greater secular power, then the saintly Arjun's successor Hargobind (1595-1644) adopted an explicitly military style of leadership, for in addition to being very fond of hunting, he also kept a small standing army of his own, leading Mohsin Fani to report that:

The Guru had eight hundred horses in his stables, three hundred troopers on horseback, and sixty men with firearms were always at his service (Quoted in Khushwant Singh, Vol 1 p.64)

That the Sikh Gurus still attracted widespread support amongst the non-Muslim peasantry of central Punjab is clear enough, for without it Hargobind would have been quite unable to equip himself in this way. But at the same time his position as leader of a private Army led to him becoming even more deeply enmeshed in regional politics than any of his predecessors, sometimes in alliance with, but much more usually in opposition to, the Mughal authorities. So severe did these conflicts become that Hargobind was forced to shift his headquarters away from Amritsar which was dangerously exposed to assault since it lay hardly 30 miles from the centre of Mughal power in Lahore to the greater security of a new fortress of Kiratpur, tucked away in the Himalayan foothills to the north of Punjab.

Throughout the seventeenth century, successive Mughal Emperors and Sikh Gurus played a game of cat and mouse, offering later commentators to present the development of Sikhism during this period which culminated in Guru Gobind Singh's creation of the explicitly militant *khalsa* as being driven forward primarily in response to Muslim oppression. Yet however popular such an interpretation may now be, it involves a major sleight of hand, for once again conflict with the Mughals should not be mistaken for religious polarization. So, for example, the "Sikh Armies" of this period invariably included Muslim Pathans, and while Guru Gobind Singh fought almost as many battles with the Hindu Hill Rajas as he did with local Mughal administrators, by the time of his death in 1708 he was leading his forces in support of a Mughal campaign subdue opponents of Imperial rule in Central India.

With Gobind Singh's death the hereditary Guruship which had hitherto provided the central physical focus for corporate Sikh unity came to an end. And although Nanak's teaching quite clearly continued to inspire large numbers Punjabis, it would be quite wrong to conclude that that commitment alone was a sufficient basis for coherent and coordinated social and political action. Given the wide variety of potential interpretations of what it meant to be a Sikh which ranged from a continued commitment to Nanak's internally-orientated mysticism right through to further elaborations of Gobind Singh's thoroughly externalised militarism eighteenth century Sikhism consisted of a large number of often- contradictory strands. In no way did the Sikhs of this period form a coherent and unified community.

While all of these strands have undoubtedly contributed to what we now know as Sikhism, popular Sikh historiography has put much more emphasis on some of them than others. As a result little is currently known about the more mystical and spiritually oriented strands of eighteenth century Sikhism, not least because small-scale, charismatically led, and largely rurally-based sectarian movements tend to leave few very substantial historical traces. Rather more information is available, however, about those who were primarily inspired by Gobind Singh's reinterpretation of Nanak's teachings, and who used them to justify a wide range of explicitly military activities. Those who followed this path eventually formed themselves into a number of guerilla bands or *misl*. In stark contrast to Nanak's mystical quietism, *misl* members were primarily warriors. But little, if any, of their energy was directed towards defending the collective interests of the Sikh community indeed no such entity existed. Rather the primary concern of each *misl* was to maximise its control of territory, tribute and loot; inter-*misl* competition was intense, the more so as Mughal authority steadily waned.

Ranjit Singh and the Kingdom of Lahore

During the first forty years of the nineteenth century, however, these quarrels were transformed by the immense political and strategic successes of Ranjit Singh (1780-1839).

Ably supported by his mother-in-law, the young leader of the Sukherchakia *misl* took control of Lahore in the summer of 1799 as the last of the Afghan invasions of Punjab, led by Shah Zaman, finally petered out. Various *misdar* had temporarily occupied Lahore before, but Ranjit Singh was different, for he aimed to stay permanently. In a series of daring military campaigns, which were also accompanied by a series of carefully thought out strategic alliances for the other *misdar* by no means welcomed his growing pre-eminence. Ranjit Singh gradually consolidate his hold not just over the city, but over the greater part of the Punjab, so much so that in 1801 he assumed the formal title of Maharajah. This was a very radical development, for it had been many centuries since Punjab had had a politically autonomous ruler of its own.

Yet what sort of entity was it that Ranjit Singh had constructed? To many latter day Sikh nationalists, it goes without saying that this was a *Sikh* kingdom. Nominally, at least, there is much to support such a view. Not only was Ranjit Singh himself very consciously a Sikh, but many of the formal symbols of his rulership were explicitly Sikh in character. Thus the coins struck to celebrate his rule bore Nanak's name, while his government was formally known as *Sarkar Khalsaji*. However in other respects the Sikh veneer was very thin. Even at the outset, the majority of the population over which he exercised his rule was composed of Muslims, and his kingdom expanded ever further to the north and west, the Muslim predominance increased. Nor did he carry all the *misdars* with him: the Sikh chieftains of the Malwa the region to the South of the river Sutlej allied themselves with the British in order to avoid subjecting themselves to Ranjit Singh's suzerainty. And even within the kingdom Sikhs only predominated in military affairs: virtually all the Maharajah's other ministers and senior administrators were either Muslims or Hindus.

While sheer statecraft may well account for Ranjit's strong commitment towards the even-handed treatment of all his subjects' religions, it is also worth noting that logic of his claim to the status of Maharajah also stood in sharp contradiction to the powerfully underlined egalitarianism of Sikh ideology. As leader of the Sukherchakia *misl*, Ranjit Singh could, and did, claim to be no more than *primus inter pares* at least amongst his fellow *misdars*. But no claimant to the title of Maharajah of Punjab could brook such comparison. Hence it should come as no surprise that despite all the rhetoric of the *khalsa sarkar*, Ranjit Singh also employed the classic legitimising strategies of interloping aspirants to royal status in Hindu India, paying vast sums to Brahmins to persuade them to perform elaborate rituals which only *kshatriyas* and Kings were permitted to patronised. Hence, amongst other things, Ranjit Singh was sent off into the next life in exactly the manner that any Hindu Raja would expect: under the supervision of the *raj purohit*, his eldest son lit the funeral pyre at an auspicious moment, sending four *ranis* and seven concubines to death alongside their royal master.

What emerges from all this is that the forty years during which Ranjit Singh ruled Punjab were indeed one of the most glorious periods in its history. The royal court in Lahore was wealthy and sophisticated, and besides bringing political stability to the whole region, the very power of the state which he established kept the British at bay for several decades. Yet despite the fact that this was nominally a Sikh kingdom, Ranjit Singh's reign was *not* a period during which itself Sikhism was revitalised, nor one where any of the strands of which the Sikh tradition was made up attracted substantial numbers of new recruits. Indeed all the evidence suggests that the very opposite took place.

Thus although the British authorities were later to develop something of a soft spot for the Sikhs, their initial assessment was that the whole movement was on the point of collapse. Writing in the immediate aftermath of British conquest, Sir Richard Temple reported that

The Sikh faith and ecclesiastical polity is rapidly going where the Sikh political ascendancy has already gone. Of the two elements in the old Khalsa, namely, the followers of Nanak and the followers of Guru Govind, the former will hold their ground and the latter will lose it. The Sikhs of Nanak, a comparatively small body of peaceful habits and old family, will perhaps cling to the faith of their fathers; but the Sikhs of Govind, who are of more recent origins, and who embraced the faith as a religion of warfare and conquest, no longer regard the Khalsa now that prestige has departed from it. These men joined in thousands, and they now depart in equal numbers. They rejoin the ranks of Hinduism whence they originally came, and they bring up their children as Hindus. The sacred tank at Amritsar is less thronged than formerly, and the attendance at the annual festival is diminishing yearly. The initiatory ceremony for adult persons is now rarely performed. (Quoted in Ibbetson 1884:140)

Nor was this just a jaundiced British view. Principal Teja Singh, the noted Sikh historian, presents a similar account of the parlous state of Sikhism during this period, arguing that most Sikhs if Sikhs they were had become virtually indistinguishable from Hindus. As he puts it, Sikhism ... became a mere fashion of temple and beard ... but in all other ways the Sikhs showed no life in them. They worshipped the same old gods, indulged in the same old religious practices from which their Gurus had worked so hard to extricate them. Their baptism and five symbols became a mere anomaly. They were Hindus then, and it would have astonished them if anyone had suggested that they were not. (Teja Singh 1944:118-19)

Yet although Sikhism was as we shall see in a moment to undergo an immense revival during the course of a century of British rule, just what accounts for its almost terminal decline during the preceding period? Between them, Temple and Teja Singh provide most of the answers. Firstly, it is clear that the *khalsa* strand of Sikhism around which the *misl*s were constructed, and which Ranjit Singh also used (at least when not operating in a *kshatriya* mode) as a source of legitimacy for his royal authority was only one amongst many, and that it was one which was primarily used by, and attractive to, a militarily oriented peasant-guerilla rural elite. But once a small section of that elite had institutionalised itself in a position of power and privilege, the militant egalitarianism of the *khalsa* ceased to be attractive: the more they were drawn towards *kshatriya*-style hierarchy, the more their commitment to Sikhism fell apart. However the other more rural and less militant strands of Sikhism here best understood as a commitment to the memory of Nanak's teachings remained very much alive. Thus in the early days of British rule the Sikhs most certainly did not form a distinct, clearly bounded and self-conscious community: rather they were then one of Hinduism's many revisionist sects. It was only as a result of the polarising processes set in train by the imposition of British rule that the Sikhs routinely began to perceive themselves as members of a coherent and socially autonomous ethnic group, and as followers of a distinct and a wholly independent religious tradition of their own.

Hinduism in pre-British Punjab

Although Hinduism is best regarded as Punjab's "native" religion, for it is the substratum out of which conversion to other traditions and most notably to Islam and Sikhism has gradually taken place, a more positive identification of just what Hinduism *is*, rather than what it is not, is perhaps even more problematic in Punjab than it is elsewhere in the sub-Continent. While Punjab was almost certainly the birthplace of Hinduism more than two millennia ago, in more

recent times it has not been a centre of institutional orthodoxy: Punjab has no major temples, no major pilgrimage centres, and no major centres of religious scholarship. Nor do Punjabi Brahmins enjoy a particularly exalted position. In the absence of royal sponsors who usually have a direct interest in supporting, and if necessary creating, a group of superior Brahmins who would in turn confirm their own superior regal status Punjabi Brahmins have had to rely on the Jat peasantry as their principal source of patronage. However the Jats have shown little interest given their strongly egalitarian tendencies in seeking out priestly favours to confirm their success in games of mutual status competition. In consequence they have tended to regard Brahmins as mere "reciters of mantras", and hence as little more than a superior kind of *kammi*.

Given the relative eclipse of the Brahmins, as well as the tendency of the Jat peasantry to commit themselves to Sikhism wherever they had not converted to Islam, it is the region's two main trading castes, the Banias and Khattris, who have long tended to be Punjabi Hinduism's most powerful agenda-setters. In religious terms they have always tended to favour the more devotional and Vaishnavite forms of Hinduism, and at least in the pre-British period, appear to have been little interested in political mobilization of any kind.

What, then, can we conclude from this review of the process of religious diversification in pre-British Punjab? That Punjab's various religious traditions not only played a prominent role in community life, but also in a wide variety of processes of status competition and consolidation is obvious enough. What they emphatically did not do, however, was to provide an ethnic base for large-scale political movements. Thus in sharp contrast to developments in more recent times, and to the politically motivated historiographies still being produced by the protagonists of current disputes, religious and ethnic polarization was not a salient feature if, indeed, it was a feature at all of pre-British Punjabi politics. We are therefore left with a puzzle: just why was it that British rule precipitated such cataclysmic religious and ethnic polarization, the like of which Punjab had never seen before?

The Religious and Cultural Implications of British Rule

There are good reasons for suggesting that the social and psychological impact of the imposition of British rule was a good deal more intense in Punjab than elsewhere in India. Firstly the Raj did not come in dribs and drabs, and as the outcome of the imposition of an ever-growing degree of hegemony over indigenous rulers. Rather it was the result of direct, overt, and bloodily contested conquest. Secondly the British arrived in the region in a very self-confident mood, so although the "Punjab School" were strongly committed to brisk, straightforward and easily accessible administrative procedures, they were also great "improvers". In some respects this was greatly to the province's benefit, for it led them to put a great deal of effort into revitalising, and then into massively extending, the canal irrigation system, so laying down the basis for the Punjab's future prosperity. But late Victorian muscular Christians that they were, Punjab's new rulers were also great social improvers, strongly committed to the removal of such "evils" as *sati* and child-marriage, and indeed of the "irrational" and "superstitious" features that they felt were so prominent in virtually every aspect of Indian life. They had no qualms, in other words, about proclaiming the absolute superiority of their own ways, and the equally absolute inferiority of those of their subjects. Finally, as if to add insult to injury, Punjab's new rulers had no hesitation in indicating that the social gulf between themselves and their subjects was not only wide, but quite uncrossable. If Englishmen participated in an Indian world their wives and children having been left safely back in the Cantonment it was very explicitly on a paternalistic basis; however there was no way in which Indians, "blacks", might, or even might try, to participate in anything as the

Sahibs' equals. Education to anything beyond the very basic level was seen as "spoiling" the "sturdy rustic vigour" of the "true Punjabi"; it was most certainly not perceived as a means of achieving social, and still less of racial, equality.

How, then, did the Punjabis react to this massive assault on their sensibilities? Outright physical opposition was one option, of course, and the Punjabis were certainly no sluggards in that direction: a decade passed between the death of Maharajah Singh before which the British had not dared to cross the River Sutlej and the final defeat of the remnants of his army, by now much weakened by internecine conflicts between rival claimants to his throne, at the battle of Chillianwala in 1849. And had it not been for the fact memories of that defeat in which soldiers of the Bengal Army had played such an important role in ensuring British victory still loomed so large in Punjabi consciousness, Punjab, too, might have risen in support of the 1857 mutiny. If Punjab had risen then, the British would undoubtedly have had extreme difficulty in regaining control of northern India.

But before we leave the mutiny to concentrate on Punjabi developments, it is worth pausing for a moment to explore the ethnic dimensions of those events. While the immediate aim of the mutineers was certainly restore the Mughal Emperor to his throne, it would be quite erroneous to presume that this was a specifically *Muslim* uprising: not only did the immediate precipitating cause of the rebellion the belief that the army's new cartridge cases were smeared with both pigs *and* cows fat, making them equally polluting for Muslims and Hindus alike cross the religious divide, but so too, did the mutineers legitimising slogans. For them the whole aim of the rebellion was to restore both *din* and *dharm*, in order to free themselves from what was explicitly perceived as the morally destructive consequences of the hated *feringhee's* alien rule. If there was polarisation here it was between the British and their Indian subjects; while the former sought to justify and to legitimize their rule by reference to such ideas as "civilization" and "Christian standards", the latter were no less active in generating a rival moral position with which to resist the resurgent Raj. Although the mutiny was eventually bloodily repressed, the rebels' interweaving of Hindu and Muslim concepts and symbols points not just to an absence of tension, but rather to a highly successful process of inter-religious cooperation.

Once they had consolidated their control over Punjab, the British managed to escape any parallel inter-communal challenge to their authority: even in 1857, support for the mutineers was patchy, and largely confined to the cis-Sutlej region, parts of which had been directly subject to British rule since the early years of the century. Nevertheless the contradictions which gave rise to the events of 1857 were as active in Punjab as they were anywhere else, and religion offered just as a potent source of inspiration for rebellion.

Just as in all other Imperial structures, British rule in India ultimately rested on the use of force, though this was also exercised as sparingly as possible. But in extreme circumstances namely the emergence of a collective challenge the very existence of the Raj the British had no compunction about revealing that an iron hand was indeed concealed within the velvet glove. The punishment prescribed in such circumstances was deliberately designed to be terrifying: once the vestige of a trial had been conducted, each mutineer was tied to the mouth of a cannon and then quite literally blown to bits.

Such summary "justice" was routinely prescribed throughout the rebellious parts of the North West Provinces in the aftermath of the events of 1857, but in Punjab only one resistance movement seems to have been deemed sufficiently alarming as to require such exemplary state terror to contain it the Kuka movement. Taking advantage of widespread disaffection amongst the peasantry, its charismatic leader, Guru Ram Singh, attracted as substantial number of followers as he argued that the proper response to the imposition of British rule

was to reconstruct the ideal of Guru Gobind Singh's militant *khalsa*. Ram Singh modelled his own behaviour on that of his illustrious predecessor of whom some said he was a reincarnation. Very soon he was moving around rural Punjab in explicitly regal style: on his visit to Amritsar for Dusshera in 1867, he was accompanied by nearly 3,500 followers. However it was not so much Ram Singh's success as a Sikh revivalist which worried the authorities, but rather that his preaching had an explicit political edge. Not only did he urge his followers to avoid all contact with the British and their institutions – from Post Offices to Taxes – but his movement appeared to provide the institutional framework for the construction of an alternative social and political order.

However unlike the rebels of 1857, the Kukas made no attempt to unite Punjabis of all religious persuasions. For Ram Singh the restoration of *dharma* was closely associated with giving high esteem to the cow: hence it was not direct confrontations with the British themselves, but rather a series of assaults by Kukas on cow-slaughtering Muslim butchers many of whom may have been supplying British soldiers with meat – which finally provided the authorities with the excuse for which they had been looking to subject the Kuka movement to exemplary suppression.

The Growth of the Arya Samaj

Although the movement was clearly viewed as serious enough to warrant the ultimate sanction, the Kukas proved to be the last of Punjab's rebellions to be organised on a wholly traditionalist basis. Because all subsequent resistance movements were a product of much closer contact with the British Raj and its institutions, they were also much more comprehensively influenced by them. Nowhere was this more manifest than with respect to the Arya Samaj, the Hindu reformist movement which was to have such a dramatic impact on subsequent political developments that almost every other ethno-political movement in Punjab has, to this day, to be understood in relationship to it. Any exploration of the dialectics of religious polarization in Punjab must therefore be conducted against the backdrop of a clear understanding of the particular concatenation of interests, concerns and strategic objectives represented by the Arya Samaj.

In Punjab even more so than elsewhere in India, the growth the Samaj was a direct consequence of exposure to Western-style education. Once they had gained firm control of Punjab, the British authorities were keen to sponsor the establishment of a network schools and colleges throughout the province, primarily in order to train a cadre of clerks and junior administrators. It took a little time for Punjabi students to work their way right through the new system, but one of the principal reasons why Swami Dayananda was so enthusiastically received during his visit to Punjab in the summer of 1877 was that its first graduates had just then begun to emerge. This rising generation of newly-educated Punjabis were to have an immense impact on the politics of the province. Apart from a few Brahmins, the great majority of these pioneers belonged to one or other of the Hindu (and Sikh) trading castes; not only do most of them seem to have become enthusiastic Samajis, but many also persuaded many other members of their families – almost all of which were well-connected and extremely socially influential – to do likewise. As founders and organisers of the Arya Samaj in the Punjab, this small group of graduates soon became a core component of the region's urban elite, and were to remain so for many years to come.

The principal reasons why the first generation of western-educated Punjabi Hindus should have become such ardent nationalists are not hard to discern. Firstly Punjab was still newly conquered, so the memory of freedom from alien hegemony was still very much alive; secondly the pioneers of exposure to Western education inevitably face the contradictions of

that experience in their rawest possible form – lacking precedents of any kind, the adoption of more or less extreme positions is only to be expected; finally their teachers – the great majority of whom were missionaries – were not only very active proselytizers of intellectual and cultural Westernisation, but of Christianity too. The rising generation of educated young Punjabis thus found themselves faced by a full-blooded assault on virtually every aspect of their social, religious and cultural traditions.

No-where was that assault more uncompromising than in the sphere of religion, where the tactics used by the missionaries in their efforts to attract converts were quite unprecedented. It was not that the Punjabis were unused to proselytization: wandering teachers in search of devotees – be they Pirs, Sants, Bhagats, Gurus, or Yogis – were very much part of their experience. However although such indigenous religious activists were often critical of each others' teaching – if only to establish the uniqueness of their own position – proving their rivals to be wrong was in no way central to their teaching. Insofar as they actively sought devotees for it was part of the game to appear to be wholly disinterested in doing so – it was primarily by means of their saintliness and asceticism, reinforced by the magical powers which were held to accrue there from, which attracted devotees to such teachers. The missionaries could not have been more different: not only was the version of Christianity which they espoused thoroughly utilitarian and wholly un-mystical in character, but they also sought to achieve conversion by what they saw as rational persuasion.

Christianity was, of course, a crucial component of the whole Imperial exercise in late nineteenth century. Never was the Raj more self-confident about the progressive character of its mission, nor its officials – both civil and military – more certain of their moral and cultural superiority. And it was through the Church – and specifically through the Church of England – that these claims were ultimately expressed and legitimated. And although the style and objectives of most missionaries generally differed strikingly from those of the much more establishment-orientated Chaplains in the Cantonments, that very association ensured that they had the freedom to proselytize as vigorously as they chose.

Hence it was not only students who were subjected to a constant barrage of arguments to the effect that India's manifest economic, technological and political weakness was an inevitable consequence of the moral and ethical inferiority of its civilization: missionary evangelists took every available opportunity to put the same basic arguments in public, although they often expressed them in much cruder terms. This was the hey-day of the tract and pamphlet, which mission presses produced in vast quantities; it was also the hey-day of soap-box oratory, when keen young missionaries leapt to the challenge of standing on a street corner in Anarkali – Lahore's, and thus Punjab's, most famous bazaar – to preach the truth of Jesus Christ. Since they operated from a position of immense confidence, neither the tract-writers nor the soap-box orators felt they needed concede anything at all to their opponents. Abuse was the order of the day, so if Hindus were slagged off as mindless idolaters, Muslims were mocked as dupes of a false and licentious prophet.

Since the Arya Samaj developed primarily as a defensive response to missionary pressure, the new movement modelled itself closely on the missionaries organisational styles. The Aryas gave high priority to publishing their own tracts, and to appointing their own full-time preachers, the better to counter the new threat. As far as their teachings were concerned, the Aryas responded to the challenge by identifying virtually all the practices of which the missionaries were most critical – *sati*, the ban on widow-remarriage, the elevated status of hereditary Brahmins, and above all ritual practices involving physical images of deities – as irrelevant and unjustifiable accretions. Having established, at least to their own satisfaction, that Hinduism was just as textually-based, and just as much committed to ethical monotheism as was Christianity, they then set out to show not only that its roots were more ancient than

those of Christianity, but also that it was much more compatible with and perhaps even the precursor of modern science.

In ideological terms arguments of this kind provided the Aryas with an opportunity to turn the tables on the missionaries, and to build a vision of India and its civilization which wholly undermined the claims to legitimacy developed by the Raj. It also provided them with a practical organisational base from which to begin to challenge the physical hegemony of the Raj: one of the first actions of the Arya Samaj branches which were soon established in virtually every small town in Punjab was to start collecting money to establish educational institutions of their own. Very soon a network of Dayanada Anglo-Vedic schools and colleges, operating in direct competition with those established by the Government and by the missionaries, sprang up right across the province: the education which was a prerequisite for entry into the Punjab's now burgeoning professional elite could now be achieved without wholesale exposure to Christian modes of thought.

That did not mean, however, that all Hindus were equally enthusiastic about the Arya Samaj's reinterpretation of their religion. On the contrary many were outraged by their new interpretations, partly because of their willingness to dismiss often on the basis of very dubious scholarship so many established Hindu beliefs and practices, and partly because of the uncompromisingly blunt way in which those dismissals were framed. Hence the growth of the Samaj also led to the establishment of a whole series of Sanatanist traditionalist movements, whose principal aim was to ensure that Hinduism was not undermined from within by the Arya Samaj's militant young modernisers.

While the rise of the Samaj and the growing influence of its spokesmen and institutions caused a good deal of dissention amongst the ranks of Punjabi Hindus, those same developments appeared to be a great deal more alarming to local Sikhs and Muslims. The consequences of their reactions to what members of both those communities came ever more explicitly to identify as a Hindu "threat" were to prove yet more far-reaching still.

The Roots of Sikh Revivalism

As we saw earlier, Sikhism was very much in decline when the British extended their Raj to the Punjab, and but for the effects of that intervention, its decline might well have continued. Three very different sets of factors appear to have precipitated that reversal. Firstly Gobind Singh's ideal of a militant *khalsa* constituted a very effective vehicle as Guru Ram Singh's revolt showed for the articulation of wholesale, if communally specific, resistance to the Raj and its institutions. Secondly and in sharply paradoxical contrast the British Indian Army's recruitment policy contributed very directly to a sharp resurgence in conformity at least to the external behavioural conventions of the Khalsa. Presumably because they were impressed by the exotic physical appearance of bearded and turbaned Sikhs, the British decided that such men would make particularly loyal soldiers. Hence a number of elite Punjabi Regiments required all new recruits to adopt the regalia of the Khalsa before they could be accepted. But it was reaction to Arya Samaji propaganda which proved to be by far the biggest boost to Sikh distinctiveness.

At the very outset a number of leading Sikhs were ardent supporters of the Samaj, above all because it appeared to be such an effective bastion against the missionaries' proselytizing efforts. That did not last for long, however. Once the movement matured, the Sikhs, too, found that their traditions and their scriptures were being dismissed as illegitimate excrescences by Arya Samaji ideologues. Nanak's teachings were dismissed as worthless too, on the grounds that someone who knew no Sanskrit and who taught in Punjabi could not possibly have anything of philosophical significance to say. But although these criticisms in

many ways paralleled the Samajis' equally scathing attacks on conventional Brahminical rituals, they had very different implications. Rather than being a matter of theological dispute within a single religious community, most Sikhs regarded such criticisms as part of a hegemonic attempt to obliterate their very existence.

Prompted by these fears, members of the Sikh elite also began to organise themselves on their own account, forming a rival chain of Singh Sabhas to defend themselves against the encroaching force of Arya Samaji criticism. However unlike the Sanatan Dharmis whose principal aim was simply to preserve the status quo against Samaji criticism the Singh Sabhas had much more active task to undertake if they were to establish a clear and categorical boundary between themselves and the Hindus, as now seemed necessary to keep those criticisms at bay. In doing so they very soon adopted an actively reformist role, which was at least as comprehensively revisionist in religious terms as was that of the Arya Samaj with respect to orthodox Hinduism.

The easiest way of establishing a clear boundary between themselves and the Hindus was, of course, to press all Sikhs to follow Guru Gobind Singh's injunctions and to adopt the external symbols of the beard and turban. But although the Singh Sabhas set about restoring the rules of the Khalsa with a will, they soon found that much more was required before they could incontrovertibly establish their distinctiveness. Domestic rituals, in particular, were a weak point, not least because all Sikhs including the most devout still routinely employed Brahmins to conduct all their domestic rites of passage. For many, this was the most telling indication that Sikhs were still "really" Hindus.

To refute that charge the Singh Sabhas led by the more radical Lahori group began to develop a whole series of counter arguments. Besides insisting that Nanak's religious inspiration was wholly independent of the Hindu tradition, they argued that Nanak's lack of Sanskrit was in no sense a matter for regret. In sharp contrast to the Arya Samaji approach, they actively celebrated the Gurus' use of the Punjabi language, and the use of the Gurmukhi script as a vehicle for their transmission, regarding both as highly positive markers of their distinctiveness. A neat but crucial contrast emerges here. If the Arya Samaj offered a means of articulating a sense of Indian nationalism in the face of Imperial exclusionism, then the Sikhs, finding that the Samaj's vision of India directly threatened their own autonomy, began to articulate a rival sense of Punjabi nationalism. The seeds of contemporary ethnic polarisation had been sown.

Even so, there was much more to be done before the argument that the Sikhs were not Hindus really became credible. Perhaps most importantly of all, they needed to disengage themselves from what they now came to perceive as their debilitating reliance on Brahmin *purohits*. Hence the period between 1890 and 1910 was marked by an immense amount of ritual inventiveness, as Singh Sabhas right across the Punjab began to create new, and distinctively Sikh rituals with which to cope with the major life-crises of birth, marriage and death. Since ancientness is invariably regarded as a crucial mark of legitimacy, contemporary Sikhs find the suggestion that many if not all of their "traditional" ritual practices are a late nineteenth century invention deeply scandalous: but as Oberoi has shown in some detail with respect to marriage, that is precisely what they are.

However the Sikhs were not alone in being heavily involved in the "invention of tradition" during this period: though they legitimated their creativity with a great deal of (largely specious) Sanskritic scholarship, the Arya Samajis were doing just the same. Their principal defence against the missionaries' identification of Hinduism as essentially idolatrous was therefore to elevate the fire-sacrifice, *hawan*, to pride of place, dismissing all other ritual practices as irrelevant accretions. The Sikh reformers followed closely in the Samajis' footsteps, but in way that enabled them to claim that they were even better "ethical

monotheists" (the missionaries' criteria of religious respectability) than their rivals. Rather than the sacred fire, they made the Guru Granth Sahib itself the focus of all their ritual activities, and instead of becoming involved in tortuous redefinitions of the Brahmin's role, held that any Sikh familiar with the contents of the Granth Sahib could act as ritual officiant.

In the first instance these new rituals were only used by a small section of the urban elite: they only began to be widely used in peasant families towards the end of the nineteen thirties. Nevertheless their introduction was viewed with alarm both by the Arya Samaj, and even more so by Sanatanist Brahmins: the former saw such a move as an irrelevant and unnecessary diversion from their vision of unity, and the latter as a threat both to their income and their privileges. Confirming the Sikh reformers' worst fears about the dangers of Hindu hegemony, the leaders of both groups vigorously opposed the use of the new rituals.

While the emergent contradictions between different groups of reformist can ultimately be traced back to the impact of British rule, a further ironic consequence of that very Raj was that it was now the British and their institutions who were destined to be the final arbiters of the dispute itself. The question was simple, though crucial: were marriages conducted according to the new rites legitimate in law, such that they would guarantee the transmission of property rights? Court rulings indicated that legislative change was required to ensure this, and in the very process of organising large-scale protests which were needed to persuade the British to do this, the Singh Sabhas considerably enhanced their authority as the collective voice of Sikh interests. Meanwhile the fact that these changes were pushed through in the teeth of widespread Hindu opposition strongly reinforced the argument that the Sabhas were a vital means of protecting those interests from the dangers of Hindu hegemony.

If the mass protests which eventually led to the passage of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909 were the first stage in the process in the collective politicization of the Sikhs, then it was the much larger movements – and much more violent confrontations – led by the Akali Dal, and which culminated in the passage of the Sikh Gurdwaras Act in 1925, which set the seal on these developments, finally completing the move towards the construction of a wholly separate social, political and religious identity which the Singh Sabhas had begun over forty years before. This time round the issue at stake could not hardly have been more crucial: nothing less than control of the Sikhs' own historic Gurdwaras.

Just as in most local Hindu shrines, the guardians of all Punjab's most important Sikh Gurdwaras were ascetic *mahants*. Though their behaviour, appearance and status was closely akin to that of Hindu *sannyasis*, they were members of the *udasi* sect, which, though it traces its origin to Guru Nanak's own son, Sri Chand, differs from the long-established Sikh mainstream by demanding that its members should remain celibate. Moreover the *mahants* had prospered under British rule: the land-holdings attached to most of the Gurdwaras had increased in value, Sikh revivalism, and the growing prosperity of rural Punjab had increased the scale of pilgrim donations, while the property-based legal system introduced by the British had turned *mahants* into virtual owners of all their temple's assets.

Although *mahants*' role in the Gurdwaras had never before been a cause for concern, in the face of growing support for the neo-orthodox Tat Khalsa wing of the Singh Sabhas which took its cues almost entirely from Guru Gobind Singh such that all alternative interpretations of Nanak's teachings were regarded as misguided sell-outs to Hinduism, their controlling position in the nascent community's most sacred shrines was becoming more and more untenable. Although the *mahants* found themselves under mounting pressure from the reformers either to conform to neo-orthodox expectations or to abandon their offices, none were willing lightly to abandon their positions of wealth, power and privilege, nor to change the theological positions to which they had long been committed. Conflict was inevitable, and most especially so when it became evident that this was an issue around which large scale

mobilisation of the peasant masses rather than just a narrow section of the urban elite could take place.

The scale of the popular response to the Akali Dal's call for "the expulsion of corrupt *mahants*" and "the restoration of the Gurdwaras to the Sikh community" during the early 1920s, together with the *mahants* anguished appeals to the authorities for protection faced the British with a major dilemma. Their immediate instinct powerfully reinforced by Vice-regal instructions from Delhi was to suppress all disturbances which threatened public order, and to protect the *mahants*' property rights, as indeed vocal sections of urban Hindu opinion, led by the Arya Samaj, were also urging them to do. However the popularity of the cause which was now seen as offering a challenge to both British *and* Hindu hegemony not least amongst the Sikhs who now provided such a significant proportion of recruits into both the Army and the Police made local officials painfully aware of how dangerously provocative it was to follow a policy of unmitigated oppression. But in the end the British cracked before the Sikhs: after 400 people had been killed, and more than 30,000 arrested, control of all the historic Gurdwaras was handed over to an elected Sikh body, the Shromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee in 1925.

(A Hasty) Conclusion

The protests that led to that change constituted by far the most substantial challenge to the authority of the British Raj that the Punjab had yet witnessed, for they involved a far larger number of people than did the Kuka revolt half a century earlier. If the British did not resort to execution by cannon this time round, it was not so much because the rebellion was less threatening, but rather because it would have by then have been impolitic to resort to such a self-evidently savage means of repression. But it was not just the British who had changed: so, too, had the character of nationalist resistance.

To be effective, any nationalist resistance movement must generate a powerful sense of moral solidarity amongst its members: and as in political groups of all kinds, the greater that sense of solidarity, the more powerfully equipped it will be to achieve its goals, whatever they happen to be. But in India as in most other culturally and religiously plural societies that very drive for national unity has proved, paradoxically enough, to be an exceedingly potent recipe for national disunity.

In a further paradox, the very earliest movements of resistance such as the rebellion of 1857, and to a much less certain extent the subsequent Kuka revolt in Punjab managed to avoid being gripped by the disjunctions which have subsequently proved so intractable: instead they succeeded in bridging those potential divisions by pitching their appeal for moral solidarity around a perception of their common difference from their immoral and alien *feringhee* overlords. But as the Raj matured, so too did the character of nationalist movements which it precipitated; and the more sophisticated those movements grew, the more remote the possibility of such inter-religious and inter-sectarian cooperation became. Indeed as far as unity and social harmony are concerned, nationalism, democracy and even Independence itself appear to have brought decidedly double-edged benefits: almost as much has been lost as has been gained. Why?

As nationalist movements matured, so the utility of inverse definitions (we are not *feringhees*) began to decline in significance. Most particularly amongst the elite whose members encountered the force of Imperial cultural hegemony much more directly than any other section of the population a great deal of thought and effort went into the construction of a more positive vision of themselves with which to resist the denigration so explicitly manifest in missionary discourse, but which was equally intrinsic to the whole Imperial

enterprise. While the explicit celebration of an alternative religious and cultural tradition clearly offered by far the best defense against the corrosive impact of such hegemony, such "traditionalism" was clearly nothing like so "traditional" as its proponents suggested. Established ways of doing things invariably require substantial readjustment, if not comprehensive reinvention, if they are to serve the purposes their users require of them in the new conditions where they are to be deployed.

There are two dimensions of this process of cultural reinvention which are absolutely crucial. Firstly it allows new ideas, and most particularly ideas which have in fact been directly borrowed from their oppressors, to be seamlessly and unthreateningly integrated into the new corpus on the grounds that they are actually of ancient origin. Secondly it facilitates the construction sense of corporate unity and common purpose, and indeed the very idea of nationhood, a phenomenon which most usually did not ante-date the emergence of the nationalist movement itself. The Arya Samaj is, of course, a classic exemplar of both these processes.

Yet however successful this strategy may have been in generating a sense of unity and common purpose amongst Punjab's Hindu elite, and indeed amongst Punjabi and ultimately amongst all North Indian Hindus, it carried a sting in the tail. Like virtually all other nationalist movements world-wide, the one set of issues which the Arya Samaj quite signally failed to address was the implications of diversity. Given that the Samajis' newly constructed nationalism was firmly grounded in the ideological assumptions of upper-caste Hinduism, its moral appeal declined sharply amongst those who were not firmly located in the mainstream of Hindu orthodoxy, and positively alienated those like the Muslims who self-evidently stood right outside it. Similarly their determination to identify a *single* basis of acceptable behaviour, and to reform all alternatives out of existence on the grounds that they weakened national unity, was bound to create a major disjunction between those who felt at ease with the new construction, and those who regarded what was on offer as containing almost as much potential for oppressive hegemony as did the British Raj itself.

This paper has sought to highlight the extent to which the Sikhs' reactions to this perceived threat closely paralleled the Arya Samaj's reactions to the Raj itself. They, too, have systematically reinterpreted past history to establish a new orthodoxy, which they have subsequently used to transform themselves into a very active socio-political group whose boundaries are clearly marked, and where those contained within those boundaries feel a powerful sense of mutual obligation towards one another. And although the origins of the dialectics of Arya/Sikh polarisation have to be traced back to the colonial context, Independence has in no way lessened the vigour of that process: though the arena within which mutual polarisation is being worked out has now extended to cover the whole of North India, the gulf between the two sides is now wider than ever before.

But before moving on to consider these wider issues, some more specific points about these processes of ethno-genesis are worth noting. Firstly the Arya Samajis were not alone dividing what they sought to unite: given more space, closer attention could have been paid to the vigorous divisions between the neo-orthodox *khalsadhari* Sikhs, and the more traditionalist *sahajadharis*, whom the *khalsadharis* succeeded in labelling as "slow-adopters", even though their interpretation of Sikhism was far closer to Nanak's original teachings than was that of their rivals; and in similar vein we might also have explored the vigorous responses of a range of other sects notably the Nirankaris and the Radhasoahamis to contemporary neo-orthodoxy. The second gap in the discussion presented here yawns yet wider still, for the Muslims (and indeed the untouchables) were no less active than were the Sikhs in organising neo-orthodox reform movements with which to respond to the perceived threat of Arya Samaji (and Sikh) hegemony. Paradoxically enough it was Ghulam Ahmed Mirza, whose

sectarian followers, the Ahmadiyyas, were seriously scapegoated during the early years of Pakistan's Independence in the name of Islamic unity, who was the principal spokesman for the Muslim camp in late nineteenth century Lahore. The principal reason for the later upset was that in vigorously defending Islam against Christian criticism, and even more scurrilous attacks from the Arya Samaj, whose pamphlet *Ranglila Rasool* caused great offense, Ghulam Ahmed declared himself not only to be the Mahdi, but a latter day incarnation of Jesus Christ. While much respected as a champion of Islam in his day, this reformed version of Islam proved too much for most Punjabi Muslims: so powerful were the schisms it precipitated that far from providing a vehicle for unity, hostility to the Ahmadiyyas is now one of the very few issues over which Punjabi Muslims find it at all easy to unite.

Much more work still remains to be done to explore the role of a wide variety of other reform movements in facilitating the process of ethno-genesis amongst Punjabi Muslims, and to set these developments in the context of the dialectics of inter-communal rivalry although what is clear is that the Muslims were much slower, and much less successful than were either the Sikhs or the Hindus in developing a clearly articulated sense of communal solidarity in the pre-Independence period, or indeed after it.

In exploring the development and direction this sense of communal solidarity whether amongst Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims, or amongst their various internal schismatic sub-divisions it is also worth remembering that however important religious ideas may be as a vehicle for that sense of solidarity, an examination of those ideas alone will never be a sufficient basis for understanding the developing process of polarisation. Conflicting class interests as, for example between the urban merchants who have formed the core of the Arya Samaj and its latter day successors, and the Jat peasantry who have been the driving force behind the growth of Sikh neo-orthodoxy throughout this century invariably provide a better clue to the intense vigour of the politics of polarization.

A brief word is also in order about the extent of British responsibility for these developments. While nationalist historians, especially in India, have often blamed the British for India's partition, this view must surely be regarded as too narrow, and indeed dangerously short-sighted now that India has been independent for nearly half a century. That the British exploited, and to some extent exacerbated, inter-communal tensions the better to play the game of divide and rule is clear. However it would be quite wrong to suggest that they deliberately created those divisions, other than in the sense of having established conditions which demanded the creation of a sense of nationalism if only to throw off foreign hegemony within a territory whose population was so religiously and culturally diverse, and which also contained so many potential regional and class contradictions, that it offered ample scope for the eruption ethnic polarization.

A further point worth mentioning here if only because I have so far found no space to present any empirical evidence on the subject is the role of representational democracy in exacerbating these contradictions. The more the British began to allow Indians to take part in local decision making at first only at the level of the municipality, but later on extending to many aspects of provincial administration the more it became apparent that the units of contention and debate, and even more so of electoral competition for seats on those bodies, was organised in religious and ethnic terms. The process was self-generating, and followed the same logic as in any other ethnically divided society: the moment that any one sect, caste, community or religious group appeared to be over-represented, those who felt themselves excluded as someone always did would promptly begin to organise and agitate on a rival basis in an effort to redress the perceived imbalance.

The approach of Independence yet further exacerbated these tensions, through a complex series of knock-on effects. Although the Unionist Party, which dominated the Punjab

Legislative Assembly in the immediate pre-Independence, had managed to contain these tensions through a careful set of cross-ethnic alliances between those with common agricultural interests, the coalition swiftly crumbled in the face of the prospect of the creation of a territorial Pakistan. Not that Punjabi Muslims thought much of the idea: rather it was the Muslims of U.P. who, because they were fearful of being condemned to be a permanent (electoral) minority, were the principal enthusiasts for constitutional arrangements whose object was to ensure this could never happen. But once the institutionalisation of Muslim majority control in Punjab began to look likely, Punjabi Sikh and Hindu fears that they would be subjected to a similar majoritarian squeeze led to the collapse of the fragile coalition; and as impoverished Muslim peasants began to vent their murderous anger against the Sikh and Hindu money-lenders who had for so long exploited them in the far north-west, while the far more prosperous Sikh peasantry of the canal colonies in the South planned armed resistance against any attempt to turn their region over to Pakistan, so everyone began to take revenge against everyone else in an endlessly escalating cycle of tit for tat killings. Partition became inevitable, although as we saw earlier, it has solved very little: though their loci have shifted somewhat, similar processes of polarization, whose implications are still just as destructive, remain vigorously alive in both India and Pakistan.

Epilogue

Although Punjab and indeed North India as a whole is currently caught up in a particularly vigorous cycle of ethnic polarization, it is clearly not alone in its experience of the disastrously destructive consequences of these developments. Similar processes of racial and ethnic polarization have now erupted or failing that lie close beneath the surface right around the globe. For many observers, the vigour, and the universality of these developments has been wholly unexpected. Across the whole range of social-science perspectives, from the liberal-individualists on the one hand to the Marxists on the other, one of the few things upon which everyone could agree was that ethnic solidarity was a phenomenon of declining significance. Whether labelled parochial irrationality or false consciousness, it was perceived as a thing of the past, and as a traditional phenomenon which was bound to die.

Anthropologists may be better equipped than many to cope with the opposite view, that ethnic polarization is a quintessentially *modern* phenomenon. Thanks to the pioneering work of Barth and Cohen, we can start from a position which takes it for granted that ethnic boundaries are constructed, that they are a product of inter-cultural contact and not non-contact, and that an insistence on the traditional invariably marks the presence of rapid social change rather than its absence. On this basis we are also well equipped to show that ethnicity gains its mobilising power from its capacity to facilitate the construction of clearly marked boundaries, together with a powerful sense of moral solidarity, amongst those with common material interests of one kind or another.

But ethnic contradictions are now becoming so serious that it is incumbent upon us to move out of our small-scale ghettos. To be sure we may fumble at first in larger scale arenas (witness this paper in its current condition!), but there is a job to be done. I believe we should do it. But in addition to our perspective on the dialectics of polarization, anthropologists are also well placed to set those processes in comparative context, and to highlight the commonalities which underlie innumerable local specificities.

Finally if we are to be the champions of the modernity and hence the inescapability of ethnic polarization, it also behoves us to address the question of how its worst consequences might be mitigated. Wishing it away as a thing of the past is clearly no help; nor is its reduction to something else; less helpful still is the expectation that increases in wealth, in

education, in communication and so forth will necessarily eliminate it. Until we can envisage a world which is proudly aware of its own plurality, yet which gives systematic recognition to the legitimacy of minority interests, we may all find ourselves in the midst of ethnic maelstroms as destructive as that in the Punjab.

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