

“The Shaping of Sikhs as a Model Minority: Continuity and Change”

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**The Shaping of Sikhs as a ‘Model Minority’: Continuity and Change**” submitted by **Kamalpreet Kaur** bearing **Registration Number 19SPHL04** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of **Master of Philosophy in Political Science** is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Glossary

Akāl Purakh – the Timeless One; frequently used in *Gurbani* for God.

Akāl Takht – Takht translates to ‘throne’. *Akal Takht* stands next to Harmandar Sahib in Amritsar and is symbolic of the temporal authority vested in the community.

Akhaṇḍ Kīrthani Jathā – is a collective group of Sikhs that strictly follows the sacred text and engages in frequent recitals of *kīrtan*.

Amrit – nectar of immortality; a drink used in the initiation ceremony of Khalsa, consists of water and sugar stirred with a double-edged iron sword.

Amritdhāri – a Sikh initiated into the Khalsa fold after the ceremony of *amrit sanskāra* and who bears the five outward symbols on their body.

Bāṇā – attire or appearance of the Khalsa initiate.

Bāṇi – Utterances or compositions of the Gurus and Bhagats recorded in the *Adi Granth*.

Begumpurā – literally translated to an abode without anxiety or a city of joys; a Sikh vision of an ideal state.

Bharatbhūmī – geographical land of Bharat or India.

Damdami Taksāl – a religious seminary that was headed by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. The seminary is believed to have been established by the great Sikh martyr Baba Deep Singh in the eighteenth century.

Darbār – a royal court with an audience.

Dharma yuddha morchā – translates to battle for righteousness; this was the label under which most activities against the central government were organised by the Akali Dal in the 1980s.

Gātrā – a piece of cloth tied to the *kīrpān* that allows it to be suspended near the waist.

Ghallughārā – can be roughly translated to holocaust or genocide; in Sikh history, there have been two significant *ghallugharās*, in the first or small *ghallughārā*, Diwan Lakhpat Rai massacred more than 10,000 Sikhs after his brother was killed in an encounter with a Sikh *misl* in 1746. In the second *ghallughārā*, it is believed that Ahmad Shah Abdali butchered around 25,000 Sikhs, including women and children.

Granth – literal translation of the term is book; used to designate Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhs.

Gurbāni – utterances of the Gurus recorded in Guru Granth Sahib.

Gurmūkh – one who is facing the Eternal guru or one who is perfectly integrated with the *Hukam*.

Gurumūkhi – the term's literal meaning is from the mouth of God; the script in which the Punjabi language is written.

Hukam – the divine command of the Lord; according to Sikh theology, the principle of *hukam* governs the order of the entire universe.

Hukamṇāmā – letter of instructions/ commands; in the modern period, the *Akāl Takht* controlled by Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandhak Committee issues *hukamnamās* that supposedly carry the full authority of the panth and disobedience of the same attracts severe penalties.

Janeu – a sacred thread worn by upper-caste Hindu men.

Janmasākhī – hagiographical work depicting the life of Guru Nanak, circulated initially in oral forms.

Jathedār – head of a religious seminary.

Kacchi Bāni – fake or spurious compositions or utterances attributed to the Gurus.

Kāfilā – a convoy of people.

Kaumi jazbā – nationalistic sentiments, emotions, passions.

Khālsā – Khalsa has its etymological roots in the Arabic word *khālīṣ*, or the Persian word *khālīṣah*, meaning the pure one. The term is used for the Sikh order instituted by Guru Gobind Singh.

Khaṇḍe dī pāhul – baptismal ceremony or rite of initiation of the Khalsa.

Kharku – a valiant or brave man; alternatively used for Sikh militants.

Kīrpān – a small sword or dagger carried by Amritdhari Sikhs.

Kukā – the word's literal meaning is shrieking; it is an alternative name used for the Sikh sect Namdhari.

Laṅgar – a form of community kitchen run in *gurudwaras*, where the congregation sits in a *paṅgat* (orderly line) on the floor and eats together.

Māyā – illusory world.

Mīrī / Pīrī – The two swords donned by Guru Hargobind Singh, *miri* representing the temporal and *piri* representing his spiritual authority over Sikhs.

Misl' – Sikh warrior bands of the eighteenth century.

Muṇḍā – a young boy.

Nām Simran – recitation and remembrance of the One True Name.

Naqshbandi – an order for Sufism; they held considerable influence over Mughal emperor Jahangir and his reign.

Narkdhāri – literally translates to those who have opted for hell; the term was commonly used as a euphemism for Nirankaris by Bhindranwale.

Saṁt Nirāṅkāris – a heterodox sect of Sikhism that believes in living Gurus and performs certain ceremonies considered offensive by more orthodox groups.

Nirguṇa – without form, physical attribute, or qualities.

Nishān Sāhib – a saffron-coloured, triangular Sikh flag hoisted outside most Gurudwaras.

Pañj Piyāre – the beloved five; the first five to be initiated into Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh.

Pāṇth – in a literal sense, the word means path or way, traditionally used to designate the followers of a particular teacher or doctrine of a distinctive range. Here, it will be used as a synonym for the Sikh community.

Subā – province or a state.

Rastā roko – a mode of civil disobedience where a group blocks a road, highway or a path to express discontent with those in authority.

Saṅgat – congregation, more commonly used for an assembly of believers.

Saṁt Sipāhī – can be translated as saint soldier; the concept encapsulates the qualities in an ideal Sikh.

Saṇyāsi – an ascetic, a mendicant; those who renounce a worldly living to pursue matters of spiritual concerns.

Shahādat – the term designates martyrdom or the act of becoming a martyr.

Surme – heroic or brave warriors of the Panth.

Tat Khalsā – a reformist Sikh sect of the early twentieth century.

Qāshqā – a saffron mark on the forehead considered to be lucky.

Wakhri qaum – distinctive nationality.

Vār – a heroic ode of several stanzas.

Vāheguru – a phrase used to praise God, where Vah means Wondrous, and guru is used for the Lord.

Varnāshrama dharma – a hereditary form of hierarchical structure that seeks to order the society into *varnās*, where people perform duties or *dharma*, which is allocated to them by birth.

Yasā Siyāsat – Mongol oral tribal law used by Genghis Khan.

Zakariyā Khān – He was the governor of Lahore under the Mughal reign and was involved in the persecution of Sikhs in the early half of the eighteenth century.

Zindā Shahīd – living martyrs, a title conferred on those who have made immense sacrifices for the *panth*'s cause.

Introduction

The thesis aims at analysing the existing strands in the discourse of Sikhs as ‘model minorities’ in India. This has been done by first extracting the framework as it operates in the west, more particularly the Asian-American’s experience in the U.S. The underpinning outline can assist us in looking at the construct’s applicability to the discursive projections of Sikhs as an ideal community in India. Several special attributes, features, and traits make a group a ‘model community’ in the eyes of their political, social, and cultural counterparts. These idealized traits help in the wider process of social assimilation and also aid in the achievement of varied political and strategic goals for relevant ethnic constituents. A preliminary analysis of these desirable traits raises questions about their affinity to extant stereotypes, which will be examined in this thesis.

The underlying tensions, contradictions, and how the construct finds sustenance will be explored in this thesis by looking at the Sikhs’ assertions in two moments, the Punjabi Suba and that of Khalistan. The Sikh community’s identitarian assertions can be analysed by drawing out the assumptions that embody the model minority trope in the Asian American illustration. The many attributions to Sikhs of being a martial race, having extreme patriotic sensibilities and an enterprising nature is done along the same discursive lines. Sikhs, due to the presence of visible markers of faith on their body, find it hard to disappear in the majority more easily. Furthermore, as will be argued, these symbols become a site of both assimilations along with later isolation. The recognition bequeathed to them is done while acknowledging these manifest outward differences—for instance, the widely circulated image of a turban ordaining Sikh in the army or, more recently, the Sikh community extending help to others in the pandemic through *langars* (community meals) and *seva* (concept of selfless service). To better understand the model minority notion, it is appropriate to briefly sketch out some elementary components that form the nucleus of the construct.

Situating the Model Minority Construct

The notion of ‘model minorities’ was most explicitly articulated in the American context, and Asian Americans remain the most identifiable bearers of the trope. The Asian Americans are often hailed as exemplary of hard work, the protagonists of American ‘success stories’ and the living embodiment of the ‘American dream’. They are seen as a model repository of what unwavering, consistent industriousness can achieve in the United States. Through this discourse, the racial and ethnic differences of Asian Americans have been dissolved, diluted and overcome in the political and social spheres. At the same time, a new identity is reconstituted and assembled for assimilation with the American culture. The blending in was a project undertaken by both the communities; one accepted the other, the other made itself acceptable. Ellen D. Wu has identified certain attributes characterising the Asian Americans as a model group. First and foremost, their identity as definitively non-black and definitively non-white is central to their projection as an ideal minority. Moreover, the group is perceived to be well acclimatised, upwardly mobile, and before everything else,

politically non-threatening.¹ The model minority notion relies heavily upon the narrative that Confucian collectivist and familial, cultural values have been one of the fueling factors underpinning the success of Asian communities in the U.S.

The emphasis of these stereotypes is on Asians embracing closely knitted family ties in contrast to individualist aspiration. This led to cultivating in them punctilious ‘obedience for law and authority’. Alongside, it was argued that a healthy amount of respect for the elderly, as well as strict supervision that parents exercise over children’s academic and social life, were the reasons behind fewer cases of juvenile delinquency. The number of divorces in these communities, too, is far lesser than other racial groups. Thus, the community has been able to produce/reproduce ‘morally good’, ‘law-abiding subject citizens’, who have scanty aberrations with policing systems. Hence it was asserted that the Confucian value system was responsible for assembling a group of hard-working people, who with unwavering allegiance, contribute to the nation-state’s well-being by producing doctors, engineers, and lawyers. At the same time, the construct remains hotly contested and has been ‘demystified’ on several occasions without necessarily resulting in its uproot.

There are a plethora of questions that need answering—what was the historical context of this spectacular success? How did this transformation come about? When juxtapositioned with other minorities, how come Asian Americans have successfully ‘outstripped’ racial inequalities? Are the Asian Americans actually as affluent and socially well adjusted? How does a community dissolve its experiences of racial and ethnic subjugation and participate in the project of becoming a model citizen? Most of the scholarly work in the field explore the discourses surrounding the community’s transcending of the racial barriers of the earlier American exclusionary politico-juridical setup to the later periods of being appropriated through the manufactured narrative of being a ‘model minority’. This transition from the threatening *yellow peril* looming over the west to becoming ‘admirable racial partners’ in the expansionist project undertaken by America in the twenty-first century is under marked by complex racial relations.² These explorations can help in discerning the features of the model minority discourse and how it becomes more apparent in certain moments. Furthermore, an attempt will be made to look at how the modern nation-state aspiring for assimilation of visible racial differences deployed the trope.

In 1941, the U.S. naval base in Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, was attacked through aerial bombing by Japanese forces. The attack took America by surprise, and very swiftly, around 120,000 Americans of Japanese origin were put in hastily built ‘relocation camps’. The American administration expressed its suspicion of those who were suddenly remodelled as ‘enemy aliens’. All the Japanese within hundred miles perimeter of the west coast were bundled from their homes and incarcerated.³ Similarly, the Chinese had been deterred long before from becoming naturalised citizens by enacting certain legal stipulations. Before the 1950s, as illustrated above, Asian Americans were viewed as ‘unassimilable aliens unfit for membership of the nation’.⁴ However, they were reclaimed a few decades later when the great American project of liberalism manifested itself in political spaces.

¹ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

² Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril became the Model Minority*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³ Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*, 5.

⁴ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 2.

According to scholars, the radical restructuring of the racial order was warranted due to both internal and external reasons. Liberal political philosophy was one of the core tenets of America's professed ideals, of which *racial* liberalism became a pronounced facet in the post-second world war period. The growing belief was that 'racial diversity could be most ably managed through the assimilation and integration of nonwhites'.⁵ The other reason, or the external consideration, was also intertwined with this same racial liberal assimilatory ideology. For the U.S., it was imperative, due to its geopolitical ambitions during Cold war settings, to gain global legitimacy as the leader of the free world. This would require Americans to first reorient their own democratic setup by giving adequate representation to racial categories other than the whites. The Japanese-Chinese diaspora, also keen on professing their Americanness, took an active role in this project. They were able to acquire positions as diplomats in various states in the Asian Pacific region; in return U.S. was able to bolster its own foreign relations.

In addition, during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the focus of public debates centred on the gap between the imagination of a liberal egalitarian American regime and the actual racial citizenship crisis unfolding on the ground. It became an immediate context for the facilitation and reinforcement of the model minority stereotype. The Asians were seen as the calm racial partners of the dominant majority group with negligible involvement in any anti-war protest. All the uprisings during that period were characterised by shrill anarchic overtones and threatening overt aggression directed against the U.S.'s foreign policy and state machinery. The small colonies of Asians throughout the country, at this time, appeared to be the lonely islands of a deep, peaceful slumber. Ellen D. Wu writes:

Champions of racial liberalism—including many ethnic Japanese and Chinese themselves—pushed the notion that Asians might be something other than indelibly and menacingly alien, and that they deserved to be included in the national polity as bonafide citizens—a giant conceptual leap from the unanimity of previous decades. Liberals of all races invested racial reform with grave urgency: the failure of the nation to live in accordance with its professed democratic ideals endangered the country's aspirations to world leadership.⁶

According to the discourse surrounding these model groups, the Asians are seen as a thriving community that has capitalised on the extension of equal citizenship rights without relying on the rhetoric produced by social justice activism of other repressed minorities. Liberal idea of the universality of the citizen-subject in the public sphere is reiterated in such a narrative. However, what was remarkable was the endemic obliviousness to the differentiated and intersectional forms of oppression that the groups who do not conform to the homogeneous body-politic at large had to encounter. This universality at this moment sought to ignore the underlying social, economic, cultural differences prevalent amongst the populace at large. Due to the presence of numerous minorities such as Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, the voices of these communities often ended up being fragmented and scattered along the political spectrum, somehow empowering the already privileged groups to retain their dominance in the 'political public'.

⁵ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 4.

⁶ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 4.

Iris Marion Young writes: “The inclusion and participation of everyone in social and political institutions therefore sometimes requires the articulation of special rights that attend to group differences in order to undermine oppression and disadvantage”.⁷ But according to the understanding quite widespread in the west, the model-minorities, such as the Asians, have been able to become social equals despite the absence of a large corpus of special rights. These communities were able to overcome their differences and assimilate well within the dominant culture. The absorption, albeit successful, becomes the serving nodal point in the ideological apparatus of the nation-state. For the scholars studying the trope, the state uses a contradictory set of symbolism and rhetoric for the employment of model minorities in defence of the imagination of national culture. The differences of the Asian-Americans are first magnified in the public eyes; then, a narrative is built about how a victorious triumph of these differences takes place due to the extension of legal and political equality. For the critical scholars, however, in a single stroke, the inbuilt disadvantages of racism are obliterated, and the Asian-Americans are construed as having achieved the same levels of opportunities as the white Americans. The first clear articulation of the model minority concept is traced to an article by sociologist William Petterson in the *New York Times*. This article, published in 1966, was being written at the time when the civil-rights movement and racial tensions were at an all-time high in the U.S. The questions posed by Petterson, situated in a particular narrative, are the perfect illustration of what is being discussed so far:

The history of the United States, it is sometimes forgotten, is the history of the diverse groups that make up our population, and thus of their frequent discord and usual eventual cooperation. Each new nationality that arrived from Europe was typically met with such hostility as, for example, the anti-German riots in the Middle West a century ago, the American Protective Association to fight the Irish, the national-quota laws to keep out Italian, Poles, and Jews. Yet, in one generation or two, each white minority took advantage of the public schools, the free labor market and America’s political democracy; it climbed out of the slums, took on better-paying occupations and acquired social respect and dignity. This is not true (or, at best, less true) of such non-whites as Negroes, Indians, Mexicans, Chinese and Filipinos. The reason usually given for the difference is that color prejudice is so great in this country that a person who carries this visible stigma has little or no possibility of rising. There is obviously a good deal of truth in the theory, and the Japanese case is of general interest precisely because it constitutes the outstanding exception.

*What made the Japanese Americans different? What gave them the strength to thrive on adversity?*⁸ [emphasis added]

Later we see an expansion of this exception to include almost all Asian Americans, specifically the Chinese diaspora. The ‘model’ as an attribute of these minority groups is not just an imposition by the modern state; the project of a model minority can be

⁷ Iris Marion Young, “Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,” *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (January 1989): 251.

⁸ William Petterson, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1966, <https://www.nytimes.com/1966/01/09/archives/success-story-japaneseamerican-style-success-story-japaneseamerican.html>.

actively sustained if the minority recognises itself as a ‘model’ too. An active affirmation on the part of the minority community of such stereotypes is equally pertinent. Through constant efforts on the part of the community to transform itself into successful entrepreneurs, portraying themselves as model citizens, performing acts that contribute to the projection of such an image and through internalisation of these stereotypes, the state’s argument was further cemented in place.⁹ On the other hand, the critique of ‘universality’ as a discourse ‘masking the systemic disadvantages’ is neutralised through the unceasing manufacturing of the model-minority image and category. The state hails model minorities as success stories. Key ingredients in the making of ‘success’ are ‘industrious labour’, ‘harmony’ and ‘accommodation’, proper ‘obedience’ and ‘assimilation to the dominant culture’, finally, ‘reverence to family and education’. For Victor Bascara, however, this notion of success is ‘culturally neutral’, ‘individuating’, ‘colourblind’, and is likely to represent the agent with a context, history or an attribute that can rouse passions and, more importantly, *inspire*.¹⁰

This attitude also culminates in making the model group itself vulnerable to continuous racialised stereotypes resulting in non-extension or non-formulation of affirmative action on the part of the state to ameliorate the racial disadvantages inbuilt in the system. The community is allowed to succeed to a certain extent, but the success is never absolute in the economic, political and social spheres. Disguised forms of prejudiced systemic racialisation mitigate it. According to the documented and recorded lived experiences of the Asian Americans in various professional sectors, the Asian identity is never overlooked; this often ends up being an impediment in their journey of accession to the topmost leadership positions—a ‘glass-ceiling’ one might argue. They are often portrayed as being ‘too successful’ and ‘over-represented’ in medicine, law and other technical professions, thus, leading to unfavourable outcomes for the community members.¹¹ According to Ellen Wu’s arguments, the trope of non-blackness has not guaranteed full access to freedom and dignity because it operates in a close paradigm of non-whiteness.

The stereotype of a good minority is in sharp contradiction to assumptions associated with the purportedly bad minority. The African Americans are represented, implicitly through this discourse, as lacking respect for authority or law. This is alluded to as the reason for their constant run-ins with the policing system. The trope embraces arguments that seek to shift the blame on the African American community. Such as, the blacks have failed to overcome the years of systemic and legalised dehumanisation, oppression and racism at the hands of whites because of the absence of a strong and tight familial value system, resulting in the production of juvenile delinquents. Consequently, they are stereotyped as being frequently engaged in drug peddling or having skirmishes with the law. The most glaring problem for this narrative is their supposed disrespect for the national symbols (by kneeling during the national anthem as a mode of protest) and their constant contribution to civil unrest (for instance, the Black Lives Matter movement). Gordon Pon has argued that the binaries employed here push a very paradoxical and confusing claim. It simultaneously acknowledges the

⁹ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 5.

¹⁰ Victor Bascara, *Model Minority Imperialism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1.

¹¹ An Interview between Justice Goodwin Liu and Dr. Sandra L.

Wong <https://thepractice.law.harvard.edu/article/diagnosing-the-issue/>

circulation of racism in public space but downplays the actual effects on the material and social lives of the ethnic and racial minorities.¹²

Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz has argued that bodies are social products—body acts as a surface on which active social inscription occurs. In this project of social inscription, the bodies of marginalised group members become empty placeholders for vivid attributes signifying their social presence. For instance, ‘blacks, slaves, immigrants, indigenous peoples’. These placeholders then “function as the working body for white citizens”, leaving them ‘free to create values, morality, knowledge’.¹³ However, this act of inscribing bodies and marking bodies as different is not an isolated imposition from the outside, for these bodies are not empty canvases. The production of these attributes is done through exchanges, dialogue, and interchange between these two groups. Henceforth, what we witness is the dominant groups’ discursive production of Asian American bodies to represent the category of model-minority. While simultaneously, the inscribed identity is consensually reproduced by these minorities through their daily racial interactions with the whites and the non-whites.

Asian American experience as a model minority and the cultural critique offered by scholars has opened up interpretive possibilities of a space hitherto invisibilised. The model minority imagery has brought to focus the constitutive power of even seemingly innocuous stereotypes. The assimilation of difference into a uniform national culture is likely to ‘devalue and disintegrate the minority culture’.¹⁴ Instead, in the idea of model minorities, we attend to a reworked relationship, where racial differences and particularities are retained, and certain aspects are appropriated, projected, and ‘praised’ to further the identity claims of both the minority and what the majority sees in the minority. The circulation of the model minority stereotypes reinforces by bringing into sharper focus the race relations in the U.S., specifically the way Asian Americans configure in interrelations of the white and black community. The stereotypes act by creating a disciplinary regime that, through the magnification of the model minority’s putative ‘capacity to inspire’, seeks to regulate the economic, social, political demands of other minorities. Through the projection that a community is ‘worthy of emulation’, the state apparatus is able to recruit the group to serve its own ideological needs.

Asia and the Asian identity is apart from being definitively non-black and definitively non-white, also definitively non-homogeneous. The model-minority assumptions can be reductive. Descriptions rendering Asian groups as well-adjusted often are based on the premise of a cultural singularity of Asians. All ethnic, racial, gender, religious identities have underlying intrinsic diversities. It will be a gross misrepresentation to state that no such differences exist, especially when speaking of a continent as heterogeneous as Asia. For the scholars of Asian descent, the manifold experiences can’t be clubbed together, neither can any uniform image be projected for the sake of the trope. A study by Pew Research Center has shown that the imagined success of Asian Americans as a monolithic group is far from the truth; the income disparities amongst Asians is the highest in comparison to any other ethnic and racial minority in the U.S. The top ten per cent of the Asians earned 10.7 times as much as the lowest ten

¹² Gordon Pon, “Importing the Asian Model Minority discourse into Canada: Implications for Social Work and Education,” *Canadian Social Work Review* 17, no. 2 (2000): 281.

¹³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 22.

¹⁴ Gurpreet Mahajan, “Contextualizing Minority Rights,” in *Minority Identities and the Nation-State*, ed. by D. L. Sheth and G. Mahajan, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59-72.

per cent population.¹⁵ The overt economic divide is primarily due to the language skills—more precisely, lack of English language proficiency for a large corpus of subgroups such as Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian natives arriving in the U.S. as mainly refugee populations. Coupled with it, workers from China and India having skill-based visas also reinforce the already widening education gap amongst the non-uniform Asian American community. Some scholars have pointed towards the guarded procedure of selective immigration.¹⁶ The controlled immigration restricts inflow to academically most brilliant or economically and politically well-connected individuals. These immigration laws are designed to act as gateways for those who can or cannot cross the borders legally. People with valuable technical and scientific skills and others with high educational qualifications are selected to remain and work, thereby contributing to the development of economic infrastructure and growth of the U.S. as soft power.¹⁷ This phenomenon has been dubbed as a ‘*brain drain*’ in the native countries. The entire process of a selective influx of the migrants, where power structures designate whether a person is competent enough to enter or possesses technical skills that can be employed in the services of the productive neoliberal economy, can also be highlighted as some of the reasons behind the spectacular success of these communities in America and Canada.

The Asian Americans over the last seven decades have been widely perceived as maintaining civil harmony with the whites and not disturbing the ‘represented spectacle’ that the U.S. ‘is a unified multicultural land of opportunities’. Nonetheless, as demonstrated by the pandemic, this does not imply that the model minority trope and its general acceptance by the American populace at large have any quality of permanence to it. In the west, during the peak of Covid in 2020, we witnessed many racial attacks on Asian groups, where their visible difference from the majority, in addition to their countries of origin, became synonyms of narrative representing them as ‘physical carriers of the virus’. These underlying tensions, contradictions, and how the construct finds sustenance will be explored in this thesis by looking at the Sikhs’ case, a minority group in India. The Sikh community’s identitarian assertions can be analysed by comparing them with the above etched out assumptions that embody the model minority trope in the Asian American illustration. The many attributions to Sikhs of being a martial race, having extreme patriotic sensibilities and an enterprising nature is done along the same discursive lines. Sikhs, due to the presence of visible markers of faith on their body, find it hard to disappear in the majority more easily. Furthermore, as will be argued, these symbols become a site of both assimilations along with later isolation. The recognition bequeathed to them is done while acknowledging these manifest outward differences—for instance, the widely circulated image of a turban ordaining Sikh in the army or, more recently, the Sikh community extending help to others in the pandemic through *langars* (community meals) and *seva* (concept of selfless service). But same as Japanese Americans who found it difficult to ‘completely disappear in the whiteness’, Sikhs too are unable to dissolve these outward differences. Another notable analogical feature in the discursive construction of both these communities as ‘idealised’ groups is the juxtaposing of Sikhs with other minority communities in India, specifically Muslims. This will become evident when more arguments are advanced in the thesis.

¹⁵ “Income Inequality in the U.S. Is Rising Most Rapidly Among Asians,” Pew Research Center, accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org>.

¹⁶ See, Wu, *The Color of Success*, 251. & Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*, 215.

¹⁷ Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*, 8.

While tracking analogous tensions and contradictions in the way the model minority discourse has played out with the Sikhs, there are several fundamental differences between the socio-political and cultural location of Sikhs and Asian Americans that cannot be overlooked. At the outset, it is crucial to delineate these glaring divergences. Sikhs in India are not migrants from another land; their social and geographic location, as will become apparent, is indispensable to their projections as a model minority. In contrast, Asian American experiences in the west are depicted through the frame of an immigrant. Second, the racial/cultural/political interventions in minority identity discourses of America differ substantially from how minority identities have been historically shaped in India. For instance, colonial ethnography played a very influential role in shaping the ‘martial race’ trope that somehow moulded the identity claims of Sikhs as well as their projections of being a ‘model community’ in independent India. The absence of a colonial encounter in the Asian-American case is simply one of the empirical differences between them and Sikhs as a minority group.

Methodology

The thesis build upon forms of political thinking typical or characteristic of political elites; despite the possibility that these utterances or writings may on the face appear to be ‘inferior thought products’, they remain, as Michael Freeden points out, ‘functional forms of political thought’. The main focus of the work is on the discourses, in written and spoken form, of some prominent Sikh and nationalist leaders at two significant moments in independent Indian history—the Punjabi Suba movement and Khalistan militancy. For understanding what occurred during Punjabi Suba, speeches of Master Tara Singh and Fateh Singh have been selected. Themes that appear in their interactions with other nationalist leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and C. Rajgopalchari are analysed to make sense of the model minority trope. The final chapter sets out to examine the political sermons delivered by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale from 1982-1984; at this time, Khalistan insurgency was still in its nascent stage. This particular moment helps to locate the unravelling or undoing of the model minority image. As some scholars have expounded, the language of the discourse perhaps will give the impression of being ‘rustic’, ‘folksy’, or a set of ‘unrefined’ ramblings. However, the usefulness of the enterprise is situated in the fact that it equips us with an ‘immediate’ understanding of this type of political thought. On the other hand, in order to avoid misinterpreting or misrepresenting the immediate meanings, these utterances will be supplemented with an exercise in historical exegesis.

The model minority phenomenon revolved around the negotiation and construction of both ‘political identities’ in addition to ‘political visions’ central to the concrete ‘life-world’ of Sikhs. For Michael Freeden:

[T]hinking about politics relates importantly to the political thinking *actually* taking place within political entities: the thinking produced by human beings in their political capacity as decision-makers, option-rankers, dissent and conflict regulators, support mobilizers, and vision creators; and the thinking consumed by them in that capacity.¹⁸
[emphasis added]

¹⁸ Michael Freeden, “What Should the ‘Political’ in Political Theory Explore?,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 115.

Understanding this form of political thinking, or more precisely how agents embedded within power structures think, can facilitate us in reassessing the importance of how such thinking shapes or is reflected in the activities these agents undertake. ‘Model minority’ as a negotiatory construal at the site of interaction between state and the Sikh community could help make sense of some of the actions of these elites. This mode of inquiry draws upon the hermeneutic method of understanding that significantly differs from a causal analysis. What is being studied is not a phenomenon accessible to us externally through sensory perception but requires one to explore the inner world of shared meanings, references and values. Hermeneutic understanding, for Gurpreet Mahajan, is ‘a way of recovering the meaning of the utterances and performances of the historical agent’.¹⁹ These intersubjective meanings are recovered through analysing utterances, words, symbols, signs or any forms of external expressions employed in these conversations by the agents. This linguistic exegesis or recovery is complemented with another exercise—historical reconstruction of the life-world of the speaker/writer. Following Mahajan’s contention that ‘the meaning recovered through systematic exegesis is one that the contemporaries of the agent would have retrieved from the expression’ as well, this work attempts the same.²⁰ This process summons one to arrive at an understanding shared by the addressees/audiences/contemporaries, subsequently leading to a ‘recovery of the original meaning of the text’. In addition, it need not necessarily be confused with contemplating the ‘interiority of intention’ or recovering the author’s intended meaning.

To reconstruct this meaning, it was necessary to continuously move, backwards and forward, from ‘part to whole’, from ‘words to sentences’, from ‘sentences to the discourse’ of that time. Engaging in this mobility allows for ‘coherence’ and ‘concurrence’ of meaning to emerge.²¹ Reconstruction of the ‘life-world’ of Sikhs, as expounded in these elites’ pronouncements, is done by relying upon material available in both English and Punjabi language. Also, it is significant to note that in focusing on meaning, we depart from relying solely on the ‘critique of ideology’ based interpretations which uncover the biases inherent in the speeches from a class or caste standpoint; these are noted, but the meaning is not reduced to this level.

Though it is apparent that the notion of model minority resonates within Indian discourses about Sikhs, there has been no sustained attention to the dynamics of this notion at various political moments. The specificity of the model minority discourse and its limitation to particular groups, such as Sikhs in India, mandates further analysis. Some of the possible questions that can be chosen to inquire into the model minority notion are: What presuppositions go into the construction of Sikhs as a model minority? What are the different components discernible in discourses of the key national actors as well as Sikh discourses that constitute a model minority? Do these traits remain the same, or do they change at different political moments? Is it possible for a model minority to morph into a militant minority and back? In this thesis, we have chosen two moments to probe these questions – the Punjabi Suba movement and the Khalistan militancy in Punjab. It will be worth considering how the idea of a model community/model soldier/model minority gains hold and how it transforms and

¹⁹ Gurpreet Mahajan, “Hermeneutic Understanding,” in *Explanation and Understanding in Human Sciences*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50.

²⁰ Mahajan, *Hermeneutic Understanding*, 58.

²¹ Mahajan, *Hermeneutic Understanding*, 56-57.

evolves throughout various Sikhs demands—first for a linguistic state and later for an independent state.

Chapter One — Loyal and Enterprising Sword-Arm: Historical Evolution of Familiar Tropes

In the 1980s, India witnessed one of its worst political crises since the partition period. A violent secessionist movement was going on in Punjab, and somehow, the Sikh militants had come to occupy the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar. The government responded by sending in armed troops, which in turn caused severe damage to the revered sacred site of *Akal Takht*; as a result, the then Prime Minister of the country, Indira Gandhi, was brutally assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. The assassination's immediate fallout was that many innocent and defenceless Sikhs were butchered in broad daylight for several days by Congress supported Hindu mobs in Delhi and elsewhere. This led to the unfolding of frenzied and extreme cycles of violence and bloodshed in the country. It appeared as if the Sikh-Hindu relationship could not be any worse. Dipankar Gupta, analysing the ethnic situation in the period, remarked:

A Sikh today, for most non-Sikhs, is a hot headed, murderous wrecker of the Indian nation-state. A decade ago a Sikh was seen as reliable sword-arm of Hinduism, as a trustworthy bulwark against Pakistani intrusion, and as eternally robust in his every deportment.²²

For the majority community and the nation-state, the ethnic imagination of Sikhs as a minority religious community had undergone a radical shift. If there was a prevalence of the notion that Sikhs were a 'model minority' in earlier times, then the catastrophic political events that unfurled in the 1980s had wholly ruptured that image. This brought to attention a number of non-problematized assumptions about minority identities in India. One such puzzle for social-scientists was why a socially and economically well-assimilated group chose the path of recalcitrance? However, this question limited the social inquiry to the period of Khalistan militancy without exploring further an implicit affirmation of the 'model minority trope' as embedded in the popular discourses. It was assumed that before the tragedy struck, the Sikhs remained a 'well-assimilated group', loyal citizens/protectors of the nation-state, and also were noted to share an intimate bond with the majority community. This viewpoint was reiterated in the works and speeches of several intellectual and political elites without paying closer attention to the underlying theme. To begin with, the projections of the model minority are prevalent in India, especially with regard to the Sikh minority. However, the discourse has remained either completely neglected or occupies a marginal position in scholarly literature.

The focus of this and subsequent chapters will be on the Sikh community's projection as a minority in India in both national and regional elite's discourses. Some of the questions that will be examined here to better grasp the idea of 'model minority' are: What components and themes constitute this construct? What are the doctrinal and historical sources for this discourse? How do different elements forming model minority notion evolve through different historical moments—such as the

²² Dipankar Gupta, "Ethnic Imagos and their Correlative Space: An Essay on Some Aspects of Sikh identity and Perceptions in Contemporary Punjab," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 26, no. 2 (1992): 227.

colonial encounter or the nationalist movement? What was the Sikh response to these presuppositions?

Although stereotypes partly constitute model minorities, a model minority is not a stereotype in itself, i.e., it is not prematurely fixed and instead is a flexible category. The dynamic nature of the 'model minority' category has often presented various compelling puzzles about shifts, changes, and continuities in political narratives. It is important to note, at the onset, four points underlying the model minority construct as manifest in relevant discourses of the Sikh community and others. First, in the national imagination, not every minority is perceived as a 'model worthy of emulation' because generally, an understanding of 'model' is derived after pitting it against another minority group. For this, it would be insightful to see how the Sikh identity was juxtaposed to other minorities in the Indian context, especially concerning Muslim identity just after the partition of India in 1947. The conceptual framework of 'model minority' can help dissect the dissimilar but interdependent relationships of different minorities (Sikhs and Muslims) with the Indian nation-state in a given time, especially the partition period. Second, numerous presuppositions go into building the imaginative construct of Sikhs as a model minority. Having said this, model minority as a category is not the objectification of community identity and has to permit enough dynamism and shifting to operate. The construct is open to revisions, additions, and deletions and the reason for these changes are primarily rooted in the practical interactions of the minority ethnicities with their dominant counterpart. It is highly possible that one of the attributes is emphasised at the cost of others in such a situation. Third, ethnic identities and the attached stereotypes defy constancy by oscillating from one point to another within the same time frame. This can be illustrated by analysing the Sikh representatives' interactions with the nation-state during the Punjabi Suba moment. In the same interval when they were perceived as a 'difficult minority' for constantly making demands on the state, they were also appreciated for their willingness to lend the nationalist leaders support in their war efforts against China and Pakistan. Fourth, a model minority might not be perceived as a 'model worthy of emulation' throughout; neither is it necessary that at a given moment, even if the community is being hailed as a model, all its constituents will be recognised as such. This stance can be substantiated by looking at the perceptions of the general public and the national leaders during the Khalistan militancy when Sikhs were no longer considered an ideal minority community. In contrast, throughout the green revolution phase—which was just a few years before the secessionist movement—the construct was vigorously asserted, and Punjab was claimed to be the indispensable 'breadbasket of India'. More interestingly, even during the violent episode of the 1980s, a majority of Sikhs remained critical of the militants' actions and continued endorsing the model minority trope.

The first section delineates briefly, by means of a historical introduction, the essential identity constituents of Sikh ethnicity—martyrdom, valour, heroic sacrifice, steadfastness, bravery—the material appropriated later for labelling the Sikhs as a 'model community'. The second section looks at how these attributes and concepts that shape the ethnic identity of Sikhs became the base material on which the martial race discourse found its propeller. The martial race discourse as experienced even in contemporary times is a remnant of the more comprehensive ethnographical project undertaken by the colonial empire to situate and categorise various communities in the oriental landscape. Sikhs, whose masculinity and martiality became objectified in

the shape of 'loyal British subjects', continue to hold and experience the same set of stereotypical values and ideals as definitions of self. These ideas have become ingrained and almost naturalised in the collective psyche of both the community and the nation. The third section seeks to trace the active glorification of Sikhs as a 'sword arm' of the majority community in the Hindutva-nationalist discourse and nationalist historiography.

Distinctiveness, Martyrdom, and Martiality in Sikh Tradition

This section will focus on three critical events in the development of Sikh *panth*. These three interconnected occurrences are deeply enmeshed in the collective consciousness of Sikhs and are significant for introducing basic themes engraved upon the current Sikh identity. The Sikh identity, like any other identity, has taken time to evolve and grow and continues to do so. Historical roots of the modern Sikh conventions are usually traced to the interventions of successive Gurus in their own social/political settings; these motifs reach us through the expansive interpretations and enunciative works produced by later-day didactic scholars. Some contemporary scholars maintain that the constituents and various aspects of Sikh identity were 'flexible' during the early phase of identity formation. Thereafter, with the passage of time and the repeated circulation of specific images, narratives, idioms, signs, and icons within the community, a more rigid definition of self emerged. The first phase in the Sikh identity formation was the permeation of the idea that Guru Nanak's theological precepts represent a distinctive and unique path, i.e., a separate religion, and it could not be epistemically subsumed within any other spiritual fold. The second most crucial moment was the execution of Guru Arjan by Emperor Jahangir and the subsequent conceptualisation of the *miri-piri* tradition by his son Guru Hargobind. The third significant event for the identity crystallisation process was the creation of the Khalsa order by Guru Gobind Singh.

At the outset, it is useful to point out that it is fairly impossible to pinpoint any specific or unambiguous location in the spatial-temporal dimension when the modern Sikh tradition/culture can be categorically claimed to have originated. However, numerous attempts at producing an obvious account of such origin usually trace the history of Sikh identity to the first Guru - Guru Nanak Dev.²³ The vagueness has been attempted to be obliterated over the last few centuries and instead replaced with a more definite account emphasising the distinctness of Sikhism from other religious

²³ Here, the Sikh identity is seen as open to historical interventions, as identities are constituted and formed through complex social processes. To examine how a 'normative definition of self' acquires prominence, it is essential to look at the social settings in which certain theological and philosophical ideas gain much wider currency. In contrast, there is no dispute around the idea that Guru Nanak Dev was the founder of Sikhism and the ideas enshrined within Guru Granth Sahib represent the essence of the Sikh theology. In this context, the 'novel convention' of choosing the successor to *Guruship* can illuminate why Guru Nanak has come to be considered as the founder of Sikh religion. Raja Mringendra Singh has briefly outlined the ceremony, he writes: "After selecting his successor, Guru [Nanak] commanded Baba Buddha to perform benediction with a saffron mark on the forehead [of his successor]. A part of the ceremony was that Guru Nanak himself humbly bowed at the feet of the second Guru clearly signifying that the sacrament transferring his Guruship in both sacramental form and divine spirit to his successor was complete. This was the convention which endured up to anointing the last guru, Guru Granth Sahib. This unparalleled act of paying homage to his appointee is unique and is not known to have taken place ever before." Raja Mringendra Singh, "A critique on Dr. W.H. McLeod's works," (Paper contributed to Advanced Studies in Sikhism Conference, ed. Jasbir Singh Mann and Harbans Singh Saron, Los Angeles, December 1988): 328.

traditions in India. Louis Fenech, writing about the evolution of the Sikh community, has mentioned the community's aversion, till date, to such ambivalence. He writes:

Few Sikhs today would mention [the] Indic texts and ideologies in the same breath as the Sikh tradition, let alone trace elements of their tradition to this chronological and ideological point, despite the fact that the Indic mythology that sustains so many of these early Indic texts permeates the Sikh sacred canon, the Guru Granth Sahib, and the secondary canon, the Dasam Granth (Rinehart 2011), and adds delicate nuance and substance to the sacred symbolic universe of the Sikhs of today and of their past ancestors. How far must one ultimately go in order to find this beginning? This question in many ways makes the search both profoundly problematic and quixotic.²⁴

The community has been somewhat successful in their strenuous efforts at producing a coherent and homogenised image of who can be called a Sikh by displacing a number of 'deviant definitions'. Some of these elements used in portraying Sikhism as a singular set of a neat package are "a founder - Guru Nanak, a scripture - the Guru Granth Sahib, places to worship known as - Gurudwaras, and the requirement to show one's allegiance physically - by not cutting one's hair, for example".²⁵ Nonetheless, the historiography of Sikhs, with diverse scholarly viewpoints, does not agree with any single authoritative definition of being a Sikh. Any assumption about the presence of a neat homogeneous category that envelops or represents all the community members is considered a fallacious claim. Harjot Singh Oberoi has attempted to delineate several crucial constituents of Sikh identity as they emerged during the time of *Guruship*:

The initial Guru period, following the death of Nanak, provided significant axes of identity to the embryonic Sikh Panth: allegiance to the person of Guru Nanak and his nine successors; identification with their teachings (bani); the foundation of congregations (sangats); the setting up of elaborate pilgrim centres at places like Goindwal and Amritsar; the convention of a communal meal (langar); and the compilation by Guru Arjan of an anthology, commonly known as the Adi Granth, which ultimately acquired the status of a major sacred text of the Panth.²⁶

Oberoi also points towards a very significant distinction between the symbolic identity markers as enunciated by the Gurus and their *essentialisation* during the later phases, through constant negotiations and contestations between different groups.²⁷ In the later stage, particular ideologies asserted themselves as the dominant ones and

²⁴ Louis Fenech, "The Evolution of Sikh Community," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, ed. Pashaura Singh and Louis E. Fenech, (Oxford: OUP, 2014), 2.

²⁵ Eleanor Nisbett, *Sikhism: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: OUP, 2005).

²⁶ Harjot Singh Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 49.

²⁷ Harjot S. Oberoi in his work 'The Construction of Religious Boundaries' has traced the evolution of the modern day dominant Khalsa-Singh identity amongst Sikhs by locating the Singh Sabha movements as being the epicenter of it all. He looks at the contestations between the Sanatani Sikhs and the Tat Khalsa Sikhs to assume hegemony, in which the latter emerged victorious. It was in this period that the community came to be ascribed with a more monolithic, ethnocentric self-representation.

displaced the existing heterogeneous and plural forms of traditions. For him, the earlier non-sedimented emblems and conventions were merely 'denotative' in nature, and it is in the twentieth century that the Sikhs and their practices came to acquire a 'connotative' or secondary meaning.²⁸

However, here the examination of such origins will stick to a less controversial and more commonly acceptable inception point of the Sikh faith in the Indian subcontinent - the distinctive teachings of Guru Nanak. The nascent Sikh religion shared the specific temporality in which it emerged and developed with *Bhakti*, *Sant*, *Nath*, and *Sufi* traditions in Northern India. McLeod has argued that Sikhism was a part of the broader Sant tradition, and hence, Guru Nanak can be called a Sant. Although both *Bhakti* and *Sant* traditions were contemporaries, McLeod has distinguished between them to explain his categorising of Guru Nanak in the latter tradition. These two traditions shared in the belief that 'efficacy of personal devotion' was the surest 'means to securing deliverance from the cycle of transmigration'; but there were various divergences between them on the other significant issues of 'incarnations, idol worship, sacred scriptures, temples, or pilgrimages'.²⁹ The *Sants* perceived such actions as 'worthless exterior acts of piety' and, in contrast, perceived devotion as more of an interiority based discipline; in their worldview, any form of external custom and practice was spurned as incorrect or unnecessary and condemned for being superficial.

On the other hand, Pashaura Singh and J.S. Grewal have refuted the claim that has squarely located Sikhism under the Sant tradition; they insist that McLeod has emphasised 'on similarities of ideas' without taking into account the 'differences in the system'. Further, Singh maintains that Guru Nanak differed from his contemporary poet-saints because of his radically different understanding of certain concepts, including his perspective on women, asceticism, and the idea of organised religion.³⁰ Even if one chooses to agree or disagree with the classification of Guru Nanak as a Sant, no one can dispute that his spiritual insights were revolutionary. Much of the knowledge about Guru Nanak is recovered from the *janamsakhi* (birth narratives) literature, even though they were recorded much after his death in 1539.³¹ The content of the inscriptions is anecdotal in nature as any other hagiographic text but still are considered by historians as an essential resource in the study of Sikh tradition. Notwithstanding the latter-day hagiographical inscriptions, it was the oral folk tales about Baba Nanak's grand spiritual aura, which had started circulating during his life period itself, that had attracted several followers into the fold of a newly emerging *panth*.

Guru Nanak's presence was an influential spiritual intervention in his time. He used his *bani* (inspired utterances), centred on expounding positive ethical principles, for displacing the older cemented dogma to bring people closer to the interior devotion of God. Pashaura Singh contends that the reason his spiritual message had survived and was disseminated further was because of the 'superior nature of his compositions, both aesthetically and philosophically' when compared to the spiritual messages of some of the other poet-saints and holy-men in the same period.³² As opposed to the

²⁸ Harjot S. Oberoi, "From Punjab to Khalistan: Territoriality and Metacommentary," *Pacific Affairs* 60, no.1 (1987): 32.

²⁹ W.H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?: The Problem of Sikh Identity*, (Delhi: OUP, 1989), 7.

³⁰ Pashaura Singh, "Revisiting the Evolution of Sikh Community," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 17, no. 1 (2010): 54.

³¹ Pashaura Singh, "An Overview of Sikh history," *Oxford Handbook*, 21.

³² Pashaura Singh, "Revisiting the Evolution of Sikh Community," 53.

popular understanding that Sikhism is the synthesis of monotheistic Islamic teachings and *nirguna* elements (devotion to a God without form, physical attribute, or qualities) of some Hindu traditions, the Sikh scholarship has often presented Guru Nanak's teachings as more of criticism to the conventional beliefs held by Muslims and Hindus than a subscription to these traditions. The confusion in these commonsensical accounts has been explained away as such:

By defining the 'true Hindu' and the 'true Muslim' as opposed to the false believer who continue to follow the conventional forms, he [Guru Nanak] was in fact offering his own path of inner religiosity based upon ethical values to the followers of both religions. The universality of his teachings involved drawing upon a wide range of available linguistic resources. Guru Nanak rightly understood that his audiences would comprehend his message more clearly if put into the language of their own religious heritage.³³

In the above statement by Pashaura Singh, Guru Nanak is seen as attempting to reach his audiences by making use of the concepts already familiar to them. For doing this, Nanak spoke in the vernacular that already possessed meaning for his listeners and followers. In another strand of historical scholarship, the role of Guru Nanak in his socio-political time is outlined as merely that of a social reformer.³⁴ This interpretation is not without flaws and is contested on the grounds of being reductive. This form of thinking limits Guru Nanak's actions to his immediate social, historical, and political context and mistakes his own transformative experiences as a product of external exigencies alone. However, both these approaches, one proclaiming Sikhism as a synthesis between Islam and Hinduism and the other designating Sikhs as a reformist sect within the Hindu fold, are criticised for understating the *uniqueness* of Baba Nanak's teachings, theology, philosophy, and message.

On the other side of the spectrum from these rationalist historians – attempting to find meaning behind every action, continuity, change and explaining it through contingent factors – is the camp that completely eschews the importance of the discursive/interactional context in which the Sikh identity has evolved. The traditional scholarship operates on the assumption that the Sikh identity emerges in a 'vacuum', where it remains 'uncontaminated' by external influences, and throughout has possessed an 'unchanging essence'.³⁵ It holds some truth as the experience of a religious man differs from a non-religious man in the sense that a religious framework emphasizes the timeless content of some immutable truths. However, these two sides represent extreme methods of studying the history of Sikh identity. Instead, what is required is a more balanced view – one which can combine both the traditional forms of understanding and blend it with rational interpretations of literary sources to develop more sophisticated insights into the gradual formation of Sikh cultural identity.³⁶ Having said this, it is still crucial to mention that for the Sikh community, the authenticity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness of the Sikh tradition is a vital aspect of their own self-understanding and self-definition; affirmation of this distinctiveness

³³ Pashaura Singh, "An Overview of Sikh history," *Oxford Handbook*, 52.

³⁴ See, Indubhushan Banerjee, *Evolution of Khalsa*, (Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1972).

³⁵ Harpreet Singh, "Western Writers on the Sikhs," *Oxford Handbook*, 206.

³⁶ Indu Banga, "J.S. Grewal on Sikh History, Historiography and Recent Debates," *Journal of Punjab Studies* 20, no. 1 (2013), 301-326.

is a recurrent theme in the larger Sikh identity discourse and cannot be disregarded as merely a later day interpolation.

Scholars of Sikh studies have major disagreements over the argument of whether or not the community underwent a deep ontological transformation from the period of Guru Nanak till the period of Guru Gobind Singh. This transformation can be spelt as follow – under Guru Nanak, the community was treading along a non-violent spiritual path rooted in a socially reformatory lens. Conversely, the discursive orientation of the community shifted from its predominantly metaphysical concerns, shaped in a specific social-cultural realm, towards an acceptance of violent methods for dealing with the coercive political threat posed by the Mughal empire. This view, expressed in some oriental scholarship, is a contested concept. A number of traditional historians have argued that the Sikh tradition retained a uniform essence throughout the period the community was under Guruship. To state it differently, for them, the Sikh philosophy has never undergone any major structural change, and there was an ideological continuity from the first till the last guru. This historical understanding about a ‘shift’ in the religious community, from its earlier pacifist orientation to later incorporation of a more militant tradition, has been discarded by scholars on the ground that Guru Nanak never significantly dwells on any distinctions between the spiritual life and empirical life and rejects any attempt at creating such dichotomies.

The context of this assertion will become more clear when one tries to look at the events surrounding the martyrdom of Guru Arjan Dev; this event is seen as a significant point where the alleged rupture in the Sikh doctrine takes place. Nevertheless, before we proceed with an account of the later interventions, it only fits to briefly mention the methodological debate that had ensued within the field of Sikh studies in the 1970s and 1980s.³⁷ One of the subjects at centre of the controversy was the diversity in scholarly interpretations of Guru Arjan’s martyrdom. McLeod had come under some rigorous criticism for his remarks concerning Guru Arjan. He was sceptical of the traditional accounts and popular narratives surrounding the torturous sufferings imposed on Guru Arjan by Jahangir. In addition to this, he maintained that the fifth Guru was not considered a martyr in the early Sikh literature and assumed that position through a later interpretation (of heroic ballads) by didactic and religious scholars.³⁸ McLeod, however, was not alone in his position and found reinforcement for his analysis in the works of Harjot Oberoi and Louis Fenech.

³⁷ The debate on methodology is not peculiar to Sikh studies, it is a contestable arena in the larger discipline of religious studies. Usually the debate centers on the question of ‘how to study a living religious tradition?’, with critical and traditionalist scholars offering strikingly different answers and emphases. The critical turn in part can be attributed to the wider epistemic changes in European history brought by “Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, the economic, social, political, literary, industrial, technological and scientific revolutions”. The transformation of the epistemic scene was most discernibly visible in biblical studies; people no longer understood the ‘language, imagery, thought forms’ of religious tradition as the Church understood them. But the critical method itself has come under duress in the last few decades. The problems with critical scholarship can be summed up by a quote from Noel Q King’s essay: “For them Scriptures and Traditions are specimens. In their own estimation they approach them with impartial objectivity, they are not concerned with what effect their work has on public ethics or on religious bodies, no more than scientists hold themselves responsible for military or commercial use of their research. It is truth as they see it, for truth’s sake, the uncovering of knowledge for its own sake, which may incidentally lead to the uncovering, as they see it, of other people’s unknowingness, blindness, ignorance or chicanery”. Noel Q. King, “Capax Imperii? Scripture, Tradition and European-Style Critical Method”, in *Advanced Studies in Sikhism*, 8.

³⁸ See, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, ed. W.H. McLeod and L. E. Fenech, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 39-40, s.v. “Arjan’s Death.” All these criticisms have been responded to by McLeod in his autobiography - *Discovering the Sikhs: Autobiography of a Historian*. Also see, Louis E. Fenech’s *Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition*,

On the contrary, J.S. Grewal argued against this position by claiming that the nature of martyrdom was ‘integral’ to Sikh tradition and objected to the claims presenting such attributes as merely an ‘invention’ of later period.³⁹ To support his assertion, Louis Fenech has contended that an analysis of ‘contemporary and near contemporary sources’, mentioning Guru Arjan’s demise, does not appropriately ‘substantiate the claims of Sikh tradition’. He alleges that most native scholars “extrapolate far too much from these texts, filling in the numerous gaps in the narrative these sources supply with popular understandings forged in later centuries”.⁴⁰ He also raised doubts whether martyrdom as an evocative, normative concept was etched on the early seventeenth-century Sikh consciousness, as it did afterwards. Grewal has disputed these assertions by claiming that Fenech’s explanation was based “on an unwarranted use of a few Sikh sources of the pre-colonial period”. Whereas, his examination incorporated an entire range of Sikh literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, thus sustaining his coherent emphasis on the fundamental nature of martyrdom tradition in Sikh panth.⁴¹

Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru, had to undergo severe torture and then execution at the hands of emperor Jahangir in 1606. Historians argue that the execution was a result of the tremendous social and political clout that Guru Arjan Dev had come to assume in the Punjab region. At the same time, the more immediate reason has been traced to the Guru bestowing *qashqa* (a saffron mark on the forehead considered to be lucky) upon the rebellious Prince Khusrau. Jahangir is said to have interpreted the act as a symbolic defiance of his authority; he saw Guru Arjan openly siding with his obstinate son attempting to overthrow him.⁴²

Pashaura Singh has located several other factors that acted as a catalyst along with the primary stimulus identified above. First was the reaction of the Naqshbandi order’s members,⁴³ who were not particularly impressed with Akbar’s policy of religious pluralism; they later pledged support to Jahangir at the time of his accession to the Mughal throne in exchange for putting an end to the prevailing state of heterodoxy. They were also involved in giving theological directions to the new emperor, one of which was their resentment against Guru Arjan. Second, many Muslims had become influenced by the liberal ideas of Gurus and had started converting to Sikhism, which irked the emperor and the Naqshbandi sect. Third, there was an increment of rural Jats in the social constituency making up the Sikh Panth; besides, they were known for their cultural tradition of defying authority. This was observed with suspicion by the Mughal authorities. Fourth, the emperor was exceedingly uneasy with the growing popularity of the Sikh religious movement. His memoirs explicitly note this aversion

S.S. Sodhi’s essay, “Pathology of Pseudo-Sikh Researchers with Linear, Myopic, Left Brain, and Mystified Western Realities,” in *Planned attacks of Aad Sri Guru Granth Sahib: Academics of Blaspemy* ed. Bachittar Singh Giani.

³⁹ Indu Banga, “J.S. Grewal on Sikh History,” 318.

⁴⁰ Louis Fenech, “Martyrdom and Execution of Guru Arjan in Early Sikh Sources,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 1. (March 2001): 21. Also see, Louis Fenech, “Martyrdom and Sikh Tradition,” *Journal of American Oriental Study* 117, no. 4 (December 1997): 627.

⁴¹ Indu Banga, “J.S. Grewal,” 318. Also see, J.S. Grewal, *Recent Debates in Sikh Studies: An Assessment*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2011).

⁴² As noted in *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, (New York: Freer Gallery of Art with Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.

⁴³ Other Sufi orders in Indian subcontinent stayed aloof from the affairs of state, as they believed that the matters of spiritual purity would become contaminated through political entanglements. Whereas in contrast, Pashaura Singh highlights the priority given to the role of state by Naqshbandi order of Sufism in establishing their version of Islam. Pashaura Singh, “Understanding the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan,” *Journal of Punjab Studies* 12, no. 1 (2005): 41.

and his intentions of closing the “shop of falsehood” (*in doka*), which “they [the Sikh Gurus] had kept warm for three to four generations” (*seh chahar pasht...garam midashtand*).⁴⁴

According to popular renditions of the brutal saga in the Sikh community, after Guru Arjan was arrested and imprisoned in Lahore on orders from Jahangir, he was asked to either convert to Islam or add passages praising Prophet Muhammad in the *Adi Granth*. On his refusal to accept any of these requests to apostatise, he was tormented by being made to sit in the scorching heat of summer inside a ‘large vessel of boiling water’. From the cauldron, he was then shifted on a ‘hot iron plate where burning sand was poured on his head and body’. Throughout this period, the Guru was immersed in the recitation of hymns. His attention was purely focused on remembrance of the divine name; latter-day scholars interpreted this as a steadfast and brave response to the atrocities of Mughal regime.⁴⁵ After five days of this constant agony, his blistered body was bound and thrown away in the fast-flowing currents of the Ravi river.⁴⁶

The painful memory is engraved in Sikh consciousness permanently and is often evoked to be vicariously relived for the cause of the *panth*. Through the repeated narration of this traditional heroic tale from a young age, transmitted in both oral and visual forms, the Sikh psyche becomes intricately imbued with the martyr’s virtues. Some of them, also noted in the *bani*, are selfless service, sacrifice, courage, defiance, resistance to unjust rule, fearlessness in the face of tyranny, truth, patience, surrender of the self to divine name, and self-respect. In the Sikh martyrology tradition, these ideals are seen as being embodied in the martyr’s body; the martyr lives his life upholding these ideals and dies for the sake of preserving these virtues. Another intriguing aspect of the tradition is the concept of *zinda shahid* (living martyrs). The literal discourse subscribes to the idea that all Sikh martyrs are liberated from the cycle of existence, yet also emphasises that only the liberated (but still alive) can become ‘true’ martyrs. This philosophy is in contradiction to some other traditions where the *act* of courting martyrdom is the one that is redeeming in nature, whereas here, only the redeemed possess the capability of becoming a martyr.⁴⁷

Pashaura Singh has recently shed light on the Mongol law known as *yasa siyasat* (punishment under law), which figures in an extract from Jahangir’s biography appertaining to Guru Arjan’s execution.⁴⁸ After a meticulous probing of the sources, Singh has come to the understanding that the imagery of harsh physical torture present in the popular depictions might not be ‘off the mark’. For doing this, he has

⁴⁴ As noted in Louis E. Fenech, “Martyrdom and Sikh Tradition,” 629. & Pashaura Singh, “Martyrdom of Guru Arjan,” 51.

⁴⁵ Louis E. Fenech, “Martyrdom and Execution of Guru Arjan in Early Sikh Sources,” 23.

⁴⁶ The reconstruction of this account is done by relying on both historical works as well as pamphlets circulated within the community. As opposed to the more scholarly works, most of the local narratives focus on the prominent role of one ‘arrogant’ and ‘infamous miscreant’ Chandu Shah in the persecution of Guru Arjan. Chandu Shah was a revenue official to the Mughal Nawab of Lahore. He wanted to avenge the humiliation inflicted by the Guru upon him, when the latter refused to accept the marriage alliance between Chandu’s daughter and his own son. However, Chandu himself was ‘chastised’ for his ‘wicked deeds’ when the martyred Guru’s son and successor Guru Hargobind had him arrested and put to death. See, Kulmohan Singh, *Shahadat Naama - Brief Account of Sikh Martyrs*, (Delhi: Dharam Parchar Committee, Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee), 11. & Lakshman Singh, *Sikh Martyrs*, (Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 1923), 41-44.

⁴⁷ The inverse of the same, i.e., only the martyrs can be liberated is not true for the Sikh tradition as all the pious *gur-mukh* (one who is facing the Eternal guru or one who is perfectly integrated with the *Hukam*) are seen as potential martyrs. Martyrdom and liberation, both are seen as ‘gifts from the *Akal Purakh*’. Louis Fenech, “Theology and Personnel,” in *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2000), 69.

⁴⁸ As noted in *Jahangirnama*, ed. Wheeler Thackston, 59.

examined the Mongol tribal cultural practices followed by the Mughal authorities. He says that under the *yasa* (of warlord Genghis Khan), the blood of any royal or otherwise honoured person was not to be spilt. Instead, other means of torture were inflicted that did not require any shedding of blood. Singh concludes that the punishments inflicted on the Guru, who was considered a religious preacher even by Jahangir, conformed to the *yasa* as it prevented the spillage of his blood.⁴⁹

Interestingly, after reading Pashaura Singh's arguments, McLeod changed his earlier stance and accepted that the Guru was indeed cruelly tortured under the Mughal regime.⁵⁰ Guru Arjan was already undertaking the consolidation of the community during his lifetime; he compiled the hymns, a process already initiated by previous Gurus, and completed the manuscript of the *granth*. The urgency of the task was also dictated by the fact that rival claimants and sects were circulating a number of spurious texts. It became imperative to distinguish the authentic utterances of the Gurus (*gurbani*) from the fake compositions (*kacchi bani*).⁵¹ The presence of 'dissenters' and 'slanderers' within the *panth* reinforced the community's loyalty to the Gurus. The in-group conflict paved the path for further consolidating and demarcating the shared Sikh identity. The fifth Guru constructed the Harmandir temple and promoted the development of Amritsar city, making the town, centre of his activities. As Wilfred Cantwell has put it, Guru Arjan performed the role of a 'formalizer', 'systematizer', and 'organizer' for the Sikh religious movement. He also remarks that "a religio-sociological transformation, one that began with Nanak the universalist, was congealed by Arjun the separatist".⁵² The fifth Guru also formally declared the Sikh's distinctiveness from Hindus and Muslims with respect to the performance of sacred acts; this is evident in the following *sabad* (divine word):

My Gosai and Allah is the One.
 I left both Hindu and Muslim in their fight.
 I do not go to Hajj at Ka'ba nor Puja at Tirath.
 I serve the One and no other.
 I neither perform Puja nor Namaz.
 I salute the formless One in my heart.
 I am neither Hindu nor Muslim.
 My body and being belongs to Allah and Ram.

—Guru Granth Sahib, 1136

The moment of his execution became an essential impetus in furthering the crystallisation project already initiated under his *Guruship*. It marks a significant departure from the initial fuzzy boundaries and self-understandings, which were a blend of Indic traditions and contemporaneous religious symbols, into a more

⁴⁹ Pashaura Singh, "Understanding the Martyrdom of Guru Arjan," 31, 54.

⁵⁰ Pashaura Singh, "Revisiting Evolution of the Sikh Community," 58.

⁵¹ Arvind Pal Mandair, *Sikhism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 43.

⁵² Wilfred C. Smith, "Religious Communities in Mughul India," in *On Understanding Islam*, (New York, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), 180. Cantwell has disputed the claim that Baba Nanak was the 'founder' of Sikhism. He has compared traditional historian and orthodox Sikh's claim by comparing it with the contention of other groups such as Christianity and rejected the idea of Jesus Christ and Nanak as the founders of distinct religious communities. However, his claims can not be corroborated due to availability of contradictory evidence. Guru Nanak had tried to establish a community based upon the ethical principles he had been propagating, his *Begumpura* (abode without anxiety or city of joys), in the form of the Kartarpur village, point towards his capacity to organise and institutionalise.

organised structure possessing shrill echoes of distinctiveness. However, according to prevalent tradition, the indistinct boundaries never implied that a defined centre or nucleus was absent. The crystallisation of Sikhism took place in a historical period where the Islamic Mughal rule in India was at its political peak.⁵³ The movements for consolidating the Mughal empire and the development of Sikh religious identity, categorically intertwined in two significant moments – the execution of Guru Arjan by Jahangir and the execution of Guru Tegh Bahadur by Aurangzeb. The close proximity of the two religious traditions (Sikhism and Islam) and the empire simultaneously shaped and concretised the religious boundaries and social identities of those involved. A number of popular cultural understandings about the communal ‘other’ currently find sustenance by relying on the events from this period.

The martyrdom of Guru Arjan led to the formal installation of his son Guru Hargobind as the sixth Guru, who in a spectacular way started donning a warrior’s dress and carried two swords around his waist, symbolising his temporal (*miri*) and spiritual (*piri*) authority. This act was not a completely new and radical conceptualisation and was perceived, by the native scholars, as reinvented symbolism embodying the already existing philosophy. The philosophy of Sikh faith was different from some of its Indic peers in the sense that it did not share in the rigorous opposite compartmentalisation of the two concepts, spiritual-religious/socio-political, as maintained by the ascetic traditions.⁵⁴ Through this intervention of Guru Hargobind, the secular and sacred aspects acting in a delineated intimacy and harmony in Sikh philosophy were seen as becoming manifest in a physical form. McLeod has looked at the ‘newly assumed temporal authority - *miri*’ of Guru Hargobind as wielding, for him, an authority far more expansive than his predecessors.⁵⁵

Guru Hargobind consolidated the community and started raising small bands of armed Sikhs for defence against any further Mughal hostility. Bhai Gurdas, who was Guru Arjan’s scribe, explained the sixth Guru’s intention to arm the Sikhs using the following metaphor in his *Vaars* (ballads) – ‘to grow safely an orchard needs the protective hedge of the thorny kikar trees’.⁵⁶ Alternatively, contemporary Sikh scholars have contended that apart from the challenge presented by immediate Mughal pressures, the militant turn also had to do with the growing influx of rural Jat peasants in the Sikh fold.⁵⁷ The cultural patterns and habits of Jats, who had a proclivity for bearing arms, is seen as one of the pivotal influences in the community adopting masculine martial norms. For Fenech, in addition to these factors, the

⁵³ Wilfred C. Smith, “Religious Communities in Mughul India,” 182.

⁵⁴ Arvinder Singh has discussed the stark contrast of the Sikh religious tradition with the other philosophical teachings of some renunciate orders dominant in social space such as those of Adi Shanakra and Buddha; ‘the contingent worldly affairs as *mithya*’ in Advaita Vedanta philosophy and Buddha’s understanding of the ‘world as composed of never ending sufferings’ were seen as quite divergent to the *miri-piri* ideals as evolved in Sikhism. See, Arvinder Singh, “Sikhism: Fusion of Socio-Spiritual Concern,” *International Journal of Social Sciences* 1, no. 4 (December 2012): 44-47

⁵⁵ McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?*, 24.

⁵⁶ Bhai Gurdas, *Vaars* 26: Pauri 25.

⁵⁷ McLeod, *The Evolution of the Sikh community*, (New Delhi: OUP, 1975), 11-12. Also see, Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, (New York: OUP, 2011). Purnima Dhavan has endorsed the theory that the peasant warrior was an emerging class in South Asia, who participated in a vast “military labour market” during the Mughal regime. The transformation into an armed class meant increased material prospects as well as upward social mobility; the militant turn would not seem out of place if one also looks at the history of Rajputs and Maratha community in the same period.

Mughal courtly culture where it was a standard practice to ‘serve the emperor in martial capacities’ could be another influence.⁵⁸

This ‘transfiguration’ set off the imagery, which in later years became the dominant identifier of Sikhs—the *Sant-Sipahi* or the Saint-Soldier.⁵⁹ This image corresponds to the characteristics of a true Gursikh. He is an embodiment of both piousness and spiritual devotion to the Gurus and the Granth Sahib. He is willing to sacrifice the tempting mirage created by *maya* (illusory world) while attempting to transcend his social egotism through *nam simran* (recitation and remembrance of the One True Name). At the same time, he is also ready to fight for the cause of righteousness and defend the *panth* (religious community) courageously, and if need be, oblate the mortal self. Sant-Sipahi emerged as the most recognisable element of the community in the later phases due to the successful intervention of the Gurus in promoting this image. The symbol of saint-soldier came to resemble the ‘ideal form of living’ in the Sikh imagination. This symbolic form was further cemented in Sikh memory through the exegetical interpretation of heroic tradition offered by various religious scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It led to the formal etching of a desire to strive for the norm of *Sant-Sipahi* in the Sikh psyche.

The period of the Guruship of the *Dasvein Patshah* (Tenth Guru) was marked by the most central event to have taken place in the history of the Sikh identity formation—the creation of the sovereign order of Khalsa. Khalsa has its etymological roots in the Arabic word *khālīṣ*, or the Persian word *khālīṣah*, meaning the pure one. Louis E. Fenech has succinctly explained the momentous creation of Khalsa as registered in the collective imagination of Sikhs in the early period:

The Khalsa in certain texts not only inherited the spiritual mantle or ‘robe’ (*jamā*) of the Guru but was even metaphysically equated with him, forming the basis of what would become the doctrine of Guru Panth, the mystical presence of the divine within the community of the Khalsa.⁶⁰

In nearly all popular accounts recalling the origins of initiation rites to the Khalsa order, the story usually unfolds in the setting of a congregation assembled on Baisakhi day in 1699. Once the devout Sikhs had gathered in Anandpur on the orders of the Tenth Guru, the Guru proclaimed, “Is there a loyal Sikh here who will give the Guru the gift of his own head?”⁶¹ The request made no sense to the crowd, and they were utterly shocked upon hearing it. The Guru repeated his demand three more times; a volunteer finally came forward. He went along with the Guru, only for the Guru to reappear alone after some time carrying a sword dipped in a crimson fluid. The Guru repeats his call four more times, and every time new volunteers, from different castes offer their heads. The Guru created the dramatic scene as a test of his followers; he sought to examine the congregation’s courage, faith, commitment, love, devotion, endurance, and loyalty.⁶² Thereupon, it is revealed to the unsettled crowd that the

⁵⁸ Louis Fenech, “Evolution of the Sikh Community,” 13.

⁵⁹ The image of *Sant-sipahi* marks the experience of most Sikhs in contemporary times. It is one of the most popular public image of Sikh; especially the kirpan wielding Khalsa Sikhs.

⁶⁰ Louis Fenech, “The Khalsa and the Rahit,” *Oxford Handbook*, 2.

⁶¹ Koer Singh, *Gurbilas Dasvein Patshahi* as noted in Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows became Hawks*, 5.

⁶² Nikki Gurinder Kaur, “Mythic Inheritance and the Historic Drink of Khalsa,” in *Sikhism and History*, ed. Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier, (New Delhi: OUP, 2004), 64-66.

blood belonged to goats and the Five Beloved (*panj piyare*) emerge outside, standing alongside the Guru. They become the first disciples to be initiated in the Khalsa order. The Guru performs the baptismal ceremony (*khande di pahul*) by ritually preparing the *amrit* or nectar of immortality; he asks the initiates to drink from the same iron vessel. Later, the *panj piyare* initiate the Tenth Guru into the Khalsa; even today, the same rites are recreated as a part of the initiation ceremony.

Nikki Gurinder Kaur has contended that Guru Gobind Singh modelled his historic Khalsa initiation ceremony on Guru Nanak's rites of passage. By showing the similar archetypal patterns in both rites, she has disputed the prevalent notion of understanding the transformation of Sikhs into militant Khalsa as a rupture from a previous 'pacifistic fraternity'. For her, the mythic narrative involving Nanak is creatively choreographed by the last Guru into a ritual with 'fixed' and 'enduring' meaning for the present. According to the primal myth, Nanak, who had gone to take a bath, disappeared in river Bein for three days. Here, after being ushered in the divine presence, he received a cup of *amrit*. He attained a 'sapiential experience of the transcendent One' after drinking the immortality nectar.⁶³ The sacred *amrit* assumes the character of a blend of history and myth. In Nikki G. Kaur's account, Guru Gobind administers the *amrit* to his followers and brings about a radical transformation in his community, the same transformation that Nanak had experienced two hundred years ago.

The radical creation of Khalsa itself has been attributed to multiple reasons by historians — for the abolition of caste system within Sikhs, to espouse and affirm the loyalty of the *panth* towards the Guru, for the destruction of the *masand* system (intermediaries, who were agents of the Gurus but had become corrupt over time), to bestow upon the followers a distinctive martial identity, to aggregate and unite the community against looming existential threats posed by the Mughal rule. The formation of Khalsa mandated the Sikhs to carry on their bodies at all times weapon(s), usually a *kirpān* (small dagger), and unshorn *kes* (hair). These external embellishments were a symbolic manifestation or extension of the philosophy that had evolved over the long militant course of Sikh history. The five K's, *kes* (unshorn hair), *karā* (iron ring on the wrist), *kañghā* (comb), *kirpān* (a small sword), and *kachhahirā* (breeches that ended just above the knees) became the dominant aesthetics of the Khalsa Sikhs over the next two hundred years.⁶⁴ The striking outward appearance and emblems on the Sikh body made them conspicuous to anyone in need of help.⁶⁵ However, this conspicuousness became a site of new contestation in the modern nation-states. The mental image of kirpan (here a signifier of religious allowance for bearing arms) has time and again found itself occupying an uneasy location in the global terrain. This theme mandates further discussion and will be considered in the final chapter while discussing the representation of *bana* or the appearance of a *Gursikh*.

⁶³ Nikki Gurinder Kaur, "Mythic inheritance and the historic drink of Khalsa," 61.

⁶⁴ Translations from Historical Dictionary of Sikhism.

⁶⁵ The same logic also governs the hoisting of *Nishan Sahib* (triangular Sikh flags) in most Gurudwaras. These triangular flags are visible from far away and because of this the Gurudwaras have in the past become shelter for people fleeing persecution. The Sikhs in Afghanistan recently came together to live communally in these sacred spaces. In another interpretation, Louis Fenech has linked the flying of *Nishan Sahib* with Indo-Timurid courtly protocols; where flags and other such standards were deployed to advertise the royal presence. Louis Fenech, "Evolution of Sikh community," 9.

Sikhs as Model Martial Race during Colonial period

The brief historical introduction to the formation and evolution of the discourse on the martial proclivities associated with the Sikh community now leads us to how the essential ethnic constituents that took several centuries to develop interacted with the modern institutions introduced by the colonial empire. As already acknowledged by several post-colonial scholars, the native ethnic identities often experienced revision, modification, and accommodation under the modern state apparatuses introduced to fulfil the purpose of the empire. This section attempts to focus on the role that the colonial army played in the making/unmaking of several aspects associated with Sikh martial discourse. There is a wide prevalence of the idea that it was the oriental knowledge system that gave an initial 'shape or form' to the colonial subject's abstract identities or inscribed onto their bodies hitherto unassembled markers. In other words, the Sikh community's associations with militant proclivities were sealed in this paradigm. On the other hand, some scholars have contested and dispelled the core argument of the martial race theory. However, for our purposes, before dismissing the colonial trope of martial race, it is relevant to examine the Sikh's entanglement with such objectification and the impact it had on the model minority projections as they surfaced and took shape in the imperial discourses.

Before the 1857 sepoy mutiny, the recruitment process was heavily skewed toward upper castes, but the social composition underwent dramatic changes in the post-rebellion period. According to David Omissi, Gavin Rand, and Kim A. Wagner, there were two major reasons for this transformation; the rebellion exposed some communities to be 'untrustworthy' and only a few to be 'loyal' in the eyes of the British empire.⁶⁶ These loyal communities - the Nepalese Gurkhas, the Pathans from Northwest frontier, and the Sikhs of Punjab - were the ones who provided effective assistance in the brutal suppression of the revolt. Supplemented by the immediate reason, which mandated the need for dependable social groups for crushing any threatening uprisings looming large on the empire, the other primary concern for the colonial power was the advances being made by the Russian empire in the Central Asian region. In 1881, Lord Roberts, who was then Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army, argued:

It is no use our trying to persuade ourselves that the whole of the Indian army is capable of meeting an enemy from Central Asia or Europe; they are not, and nothing will ever make them. It is not a question of efficiency, but of courage and physique; in these two essential qualities the sepoys of lower India are wanting. No amount of instruction will make up for these shortcomings.⁶⁷

As it materialized after the 1857 revolt, the construct of 'model martial race' found elevated encouragement and sustenance in the colonial knowledge system. Colonial techniques of governmentality were deeply permeated with the presuppositions of

⁶⁶ David Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army 1860-1940*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1994). Also see, Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, "Recruiting the 'Martial Races': Identities and Military Service in Colonial India," *Patterns of Prejudice* 46, no. 3-4 (2012).

⁶⁷ Frederick Sleigh Roberts, Correspondence with England while Commander-in-Chief in Madras, 1881-1885, vol.2 (Simla: Government Central Printing Office 1890), 25-26. Cited in Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, "Recruiting the Martial Races," 234.

ethnology. All native communities, including Sikhs, were seen as knowable epistemic objects by the colonial empire. The production of knowledge by the colonial machinery to satisfy their own practical needs led to a crisp objectification of the identities of these communities. The occident translated these groups into a form and category explicitly recognisable for their easy reference. Thus, it was within the *limited* epistemological boundaries that the colonial state comprehended the indigenous.

In 1874, short ethnographic surveys were ordered to be conducted by the then Commander-in-Chief Napier so that handbooks and manuals could be prepared and issued to the imperial army.⁶⁸ These reference books consisted of detailed historical records and thick descriptive accounts of the unique characteristic features of each indigenous group. The colonial administrative apparatus made a considerable amount of material investment by producing literature enumerating Sikhs, Gurkhas, and Pathans as martial races. These communities were represented in the military discourse as inherently in natural possession of courage, bravery, valour, strength, and fighting skills. The colonial imagination was saturated with images that usually drew upon the orientalist fascination with these groups' martial tendencies.

Moreover, most of the recruitment policies of the imperial army had their genesis in these very racial assumptions of the British Raj. The imperial army relied heavily on this ethnographic reportage for enlistment purposes. The recruitment process was based on enumerative records of censuses, district gazetteers, and survey reports. Besides, these documents were often prepared by relying on various indigenous socio-political and cultural institutions as well as native literature. The empire circulated ethnographic manuals and handbooks amongst the British officials. These handbooks gave a sense of psychological comfort to the colonial master about 'knowing the natives'. This perceived sense of security was a pertinent fuel for many young officers arriving from Britain in the distant land of alien (read inferior) customs, traditions, and practices. Also, the imperial masters were able to develop a more informed understanding of the multitudinous native sects, castes, and communities inhabiting the empire; this knowledge aided them in expanding their control over the locals.

Another noteworthy point, as argued by Said, is: "[i]n a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on th[e] flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand".⁶⁹ This 'positional superiority' was maintained in several colonial accounts. George MacMunn, writing about Sikhs in his monograph 'The Martial Races of India', reinforced the imperial stereotype that the Sikh sepoys were generally 'slow-witted' albeit 'loyal group' who possessed a 'dogged courage' and 'flocked to their [British] standard'.⁷⁰ This particular trait was seen as a positive one; the British officials could better command their soldiers if there were a lack of any criticism for their authority.

The Britisher, in contrast to the natives, was portrayed as a natural logician, intelligent, critical, and rational. The native sepoy from the martial race was perceived as superstitious, slow, requiring constant management, having an uncritical disposition, and a good follower but unworthy of becoming a leader. The image of the British personnel was always crafted as one who possesses a superior mental

⁶⁸ Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, "Recruiting the Martial Races," 242.

⁶⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 7.

⁷⁰ George MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India*, (London: Sampson Low, 1933), 139.

disposition compared to the projected representation of these local martial races — in turn, always maintaining an ‘upper hand’. These attributes, or stereotypes, were often compiled in extensive transcripts, catalogued systematically to enlighten the reader about ‘model soldiers’, ‘model men’, and model or proper forms of masculinity. The knowledge produced through such positive stereotypes (which were also quite humiliating) thus assisted the domination project of the colonial armed forces.

On the other hand, we have to be cautious while making any sweeping claims that the martial communities were mere passive carriers of this projected imagery. The projection of ideals, which the colonial state apparatus considered as a model, was not a blatant imposition. It could be seen as being readily acceptable to the communities on whom they were projected. The two groups shared a mutually beneficial alliance, one feeding in the consciousness of the other ideas of racial superiority over the rest of the natives and the other in return furthering the project of colonial expansion and exploitation. Often the assertion of self takes place by construing and emphasising the differences with the other. The Self-Other binary opens up the potential for communities to redefine their identities. As can be seen, image projections are unrealised impulses that the human being is likely to project on others; hence, these attributes can be both positive and negative. In the case of martial race stereotypes—‘warlike instincts’ and ‘raw, aggressive masculinity’ were attributes that the British desired as much in themselves. In a sense, the colonial ethnographical state rescued some of these communities from the negative stereotypes associated with the barbaric, primitive ‘other’ by projecting on them the ideals dominating their own self-representations. These martial races also became the shadow repository of any negative attributes the English soldiers wanted to purge from their psyche. These included labelling the Sikhs as possessing ‘weaker mental faculties’, the Gurkhas as being ‘kicked in the head by a mule’, the Pathan’s ‘thick-headedness’, and their overall general lack of intelligence.⁷¹

The colonial military forces also played a critical role in the displacement of other contesting identity claims amongst Sikhs by mostly enlisting the community members who visibly adhered to the Khalsa-Singh identity. Richard Fox mentions how the Sikhs who were recruited had to undergo Baptism to enlist; the imperial army promoted orthodoxy, and orthodoxy was, in fact, rewarded.⁷² Barstow, writing in the Sikh handbook, mentions the ‘rightly directed’ imperial army policy of ‘maintain[ing] the Sikh faith in its pristine purity’. For him, falling from orthodoxy detracted from the ‘fighting value of a Sikh soldier’ and adversely affected his ‘whole attitude to the British power’.⁷³ Any Sikh following plural form of traditions, customs, beliefs, and practices was looked down at; such intermixing was frowned upon. *Keshdhari* identity and carrying of *kirpan* on the bodies of soldiers also served the purpose of promoting their distinctiveness from Hindus. The colonial policy of creating ‘pure’ class regiments would have proved to be a further shot in the arm for *Tat Khalsa* reformers, who at the time were zealously advocating for a more consistent and

⁷¹ David Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, 25-28. The heading under which Omissi writes this section is “Perfect Soldiers, Perfect Men, Perfect Subjects”, this points toward the formation of an understanding within the empire that certain groups are both model and loyal; ‘loyalty’ that is valued and associated with Sikhs even in the post-colonial India.

⁷² Richard Fox, *Lions of Punjab: Culture in the Making*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 142.

⁷³ A.E. Barstow, *Handbooks for the Indian Army: Sikhs*, (Calcutta: Government of India, 1928), 21.

dominant identity among Sikhs. By further sharpening the identities, the imperial army was making Sikh sepoys more reliable in case Hindu civil rebellion broke out.⁷⁴

Interestingly, Bernard Cohn has contended that the colonial empire was responsible for making the turban an indispensable element in the self-identity of Sikhs. He maintains that the turban, as an essential identifier, was not highly pronounced in any Sikh religious scriptures, and scholars of Sikh history have barely touched upon its evolution. He writes:

[The] current significance of the distinctive turban of the Sikhs was constructed out of the colonial context, in which British rulers sought to objectify qualities they thought appropriate to the roles that various groups in India were to play. The Britishers sought to maintain the conditions that, they believed, produced the warrior qualities of the Sikh religion.⁷⁵

Cohn's claims are exaggerated in the sense that the history of turbans, specifically Indic-styled turbans adorned by the Gurus, chronicles a period way before the colonial rule in India. Although they did give a modern-day triangular shape and form to the turbans witnessed today, the attribution to the British empire of turbans' imposition will be, academically speaking, inaccurate.

Besides, the Sikh martial tendencies were not born or constructed out of thin air; neither was it just a bunch of lies and myths woven by the imperial rule to further its agenda. The cultural past of Sikhs played a significant role in the origination of such a racial system of knowledge/recruitment; in this system, a whole corpus of material was selectively picked upon from the Sikh ethnic constitution.⁷⁶ The presence of a peasant-warrior tradition within Sikhs, independent of the colonial encounter, amplified the martial race rhetoric.⁷⁷ Edward Said writes that: "Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment."⁷⁸ The 'heroic bravery' and 'martial race' stereotype associated with Sikhs stretches into the past and beyond the nineteenth-century colonial encounter.

Nevertheless, the colonial army had a substantial role in fostering a particular homogeneous identity amongst Sikhs. The Britishers were well aware of this and took pride in having given a distinctive identity to Sikhs, distinguishing them from the cohabiting Muslims and Hindus, and preserving their status as a third *panth*. This idea also served as a feedback loop in their ideological assumptions and self-allotted role

⁷⁴ David Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, 96.

⁷⁵ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 107-110. Interestingly, Sikhs had to face numerous battles and hurdles in Britain over the legality of wearing turbans in public spaces such as schools. This dispute was settled only as recently as 1983.

⁷⁶ Dipankar Gupta has tried to define ethnic constitution as being materially different from ethnic imagos. The latter is according to him usually identities that emerge in moments of tension; the self-ideas evoked in temporary periods of crisis are effective in social mobilising but rely on impoverished materiality from the past. Ethnic constitutions however are build tissue by tissue, often extracting densely from the rich history but have poor ability to mobilise the communities, the ethnic constitution is delineated by him as being 'ethnic identities in times of peace'. Gupta, *Ethnic Imagos and their Correlative Space*, 224-227.

⁷⁷ David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 24. Omissi also points towards the fact that it was not always the case that a community's self-perception and self-image was recognised by the colonial empire. There existed an hierarchical imbalance of power between the ruled and the ruler, the images circulated by the Raj had a higher potential of influencing the native's attitude towards the stereotyped group, more so than the self-image of the group themselves.

⁷⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 6.

of the 'white man's burden', seeking the liberation of the intellectually less agile orient. George MacMunn, praised the army for reviving and returning the Sikhs to their roots, he said:

[A]s the value of the Sikh as the simple, faithful soldier, has lain in his adherence to the simple tenets and hardy life of his forebears, no non-baptized Sikh is admitted into a regiment of the Indian army. So careful are regiments in this matter, and so much are regiments the home of the old martial and simple Sikh principles, that it has been said, not without some shadow of truth, that it is the British officer who has kept Sikhism up to its old standard.⁷⁹

Notwithstanding the prevalent oriental understandings and suppositions, the Sikh identity can not be insisted to have been 'fixed' during this period in the same language in which fixing of identities (manufacturing) is understood in contemporary scholarship. Neither can Sikh ethnicity be considered entirely fluid, as a basic consensus on various essential traits of the religious tradition had already been reached. Moreover, these elements had penetrated and embedded themselves in the community's psyche. The Sikh identity did, however, undergo various sorts of tweaking by the colonial institutions. The colonial power brought about a certain 'fixity' by codifying the martial predisposition of ethnicities like Gurkhas, Sikhs, and Pathans.

Additionally, there is another simple fact, too plain, that it might be overlooked in any analysis of the model/martial trope. The concept of loyalty and bravery can not suffice to concede why the natives enlisted in the colonial army. The imperial power and their ideological trope of martial race can solely help follow and clarify the recruitment strategy of the colonial army. Equally critical is that the Sikhs sepoys, like the Gurkhas, Pathans, and Marathas, enlisted voluntarily. To better grasp it, we have to see the economic and material benefits offered in return of their military service. The army-soldier relation was a mutually beneficial one; if no remuneration was offered, it is uncertain if any of the natives would have enlisted merely for the sake of glory associated with the martial race trope. The 'model soldiers' construct brought with the ideal projections several other tangible rewards in the form of 'regular and reliable pay', 'land grants', and 'pensions'.

Omissi, while exploring the network of incentive structure, insists that the Indian army exhibited 'mercenary' characteristics; usually, it was the unproductive agrarian occupations that materially attracted rural peasants to military life. Even the 'Handbook on Sikhs' mentioned the relationship between land prosperity and district recruitments. The less fertile and highly fragmented landholding regions of Punjab produced more recruits than considerably prosperous, well-irrigated, and fertile land areas; these material benefits supplemented the income of peasant soldiers. In fact, the imperial policy of recruiting was tilted towards selections from regions of lower subsistence.⁸⁰ It is safe to assume that the self-image of being a martial race might have assisted the Sikhs in choosing the imperial army as alternative employment wherever the agrarian economy was failing them. This system of reciprocal obligation deepened an already existing association with the masculine martial trope.

⁷⁹ George F. MacMunn, *The Armies of India*, (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911), 134-135.

⁸⁰ David Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, 47-52.

Punjab region became essential to the security of Raj in India and abroad; the Punjabi troops went from comprising just over twenty percent in 1862 to almost around half the total troops in 1941. Stephen Cohen has called this phenomenon the 'Punjabization of the Indian army'.⁸¹ The empire took various administrative measures to contain any disaffection and keep the sepoys loyal to the empire. These included the development of cantonment areas which led to urban growth, settlement of land rights, the welfare of military families, preferential treatment to relatives and ex-soldiers in government appointments. Adding to this, Mazumder has shown that the "military expenditure was the largest component of the colonial budget, and regimental pay was its highest segment".⁸²

Several Indian troops were stationed in Europe during the first world war, where many native sepoys lost their lives battling alongside the British army. The colonial masters recognised the same, and when constitutional reforms were conceded in 1919, the Sikhs were rewarded for their 'loyal military service'.⁸³ While extending separate electorate to Sikhs, the Montagu-Chelmsford report stated:

Any general extension of the communal system, however, would only encourage still further demands, and would in our deliberate opinion be fatal to that development of representation upon a national basis in which alone a system of responsible government can possibly be rooted. At the same time we feel that there is one community from whom it is inexpedient to withhold the concession. The Sikhs in the Punjab are a distinct and important people: they supply a gallant and valuable element to the Indian army; but they are everywhere in a minority, and experience has shown that they go virtually unrepresented. To the Sikhs, therefore, and to them alone, we propose to extend the system already adopted in the case of the Muhammadans. For the representation of other minorities we should prefer nomination.⁸⁴

However, Sikhs were not all too happy with the proposed reforms. They were hoping for a 'substantial representation' of their 'political status', given their 'military achievements' and 'sacrifices for the King-Emperor'.⁸⁵ Sikhs did not always remain loyal to the colonial armed forces; the model soldiers became recalcitrant during the agrarian crisis of the early twentieth century and were influenced by Akali's anti-British and pro-nationalist sentiments in the region. A significant point of friction emerged as soon as 1914 when some Ghadarites tried to violently overthrow the colonial empire in India by evoking a sepoy mutiny. The British had given impetus to producing a unitary image of Sikhs; now, the same image was actively deployed for mobilisation purposes against them in rural Punjab. The empire was well aware by now of its complex and substantial dependence on the same subjects they sought to subjugate; the model communities, too, in the process, became suspect. 'Handbook on Sikhs' uses this instance to teach the officials of the suspicion that should always mark their approach to model soldiers, especially when heavily recruited from a single area. As Ghadr was primarily a rebellion caused by the emigrants, Barstow

⁸¹ Stephen Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation*, (New Delhi: OUP, 1990), 44.

⁸² Rajit K. Mazumder, *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 3.

⁸³ David Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, 97.

⁸⁴ Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms, 1919.

⁸⁵ David Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, 97.

mentions the correlation between the tracts supplying the greatest number to the Sikh regiments in the Indian army and the same area furnishing the greatest emigrants to other countries. In his opinion, these emigrants who had relatives in the army had the 'highest capacity for mischief' upon their return'.⁸⁶ Agitation was viewed chiefly from the lens of weakened 'Sikh loyalty' in the army. However, even under this political threat, the 'assistance rendered by the better classes of Sikhs' and 'those loyal members of the society who stoutly rallied behind law and order' was hailed as 'praiseworthy'.⁸⁷ The calls for open agitation or 'revolution' were suppressed through police arrests, raids, restrictions, and internment in Jails. The 'trials of Ghadr conspiracy case', where many were awarded death sentence, some were transported for life, and others were imprisoned, was also used to subdue the initial zeal coercively. As can be seen, the model community became recalcitrant and sought to defy the imposed ideals, a particular instance that repeats itself in independent India. However, despite the 'suspect loyalty', some components within the community always remain admirable and are appropriated for furthering the model minority project. The image 'worthy of emulation' is never entirely abandoned.

Three crucial considerations for analysing the model minority discourse emerge in this account. First, the imagination of 'martial race' or 'model soldiers' was made possible by the presence of 'disloyal' groups. Second, the image of model community advanced several tangible rewards to the ethnicities so recognised, as was seen with the extension of patronage rights by the colonial army. Also, the martial race trope was successful only when it was mutually beneficial to both counterparts. Finally, the representation of idealness was not uniformly sustained and fluctuated according to changing contexts.

The current Sikh identity as both a minority in a multicultural nation and an influential ethnic partner to dominant ethnoreligious group draws heavily from the image deployed in earlier times—a loyal subject of the colonial empire. These ideas continue to unfold and evolve throughout the interactional relationship between the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims in contemporary times. As will be discussed below, the elements that are appropriated in colonial discourses are also appropriated in nationalist discourses.

Sikhs in Hindu Nationalist Discourses

The nation-state in India has claimed the Sikhs to be a repository of all the model nationalist attributes. In popular discourses, Sikhs are represented as patriotic and loyal. In addition, nationalist leaders like Nehru and Rajagopalachari admired and emphasised the 'entrepreneurial nature' of the community. Meanwhile, in Hindutva nationalist literature, Sikhs are viewed as sharing in the larger cultural ethos and roots of Indic civilisation. During colonial and post-colonial times, the Sikhs have witnessed higher recruitment in armed forces due to the prevalent trope highlighting their masculine/martial proclivities.⁸⁸ The period of the Green Revolution also added

⁸⁶ Ghadr movement was partly Hindu and Muslim but mainly a Sikh revolutionary movement that started soon after the end of first world war on the west coast of U.S. and Canada. It began with the publishing of a newspaper advocating for violent overthrow of British rule from India. Several activists were arrested and later hanged when they returned to India, forcing others to take exile in different countries. A.E. Barstow, *Handbook on Sikhs*, 33.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁸ These numbers have to be seen in the context of the proportion of Sikhs with respect to the total population and the percentage of those who are recruited and subsequently martyred when compared to other

to the existing stereotypes; the Punjabi Sikhs were praised for their hard work and assistance in making India self-reliant in the food sector. As a result, Punjab came to be recognised as the ‘breadbasket of India’.

There is also the prevalence of other tropes within the Sikh consciousness that are equally valued by the Hindu-nationalists—sacrifice, valour, martyrdom, bravery; virtues that are then sought to be extrapolated and inscribed on the collective consciousness of all citizenry. The idea of *shahadat* for *panth*’s sake in the Sikh culture has been reinterpreted and revised to acquire a new meaning of martyrdom for the cause of the Indian nation-state. It becomes more evident with the repeated usage of the rhetoric that a large number of martyred soldiers, who died defending the nation against Chinese and Pakistani aggression, belong to the Sikh community.⁸⁹ The same image was actively deployed through the partition period. The Kuka movement, the Ghadar party’s formation to liberate India, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Guru Ka Bagh Morcha, the Akali’s arrest and trial, Bhagat Singh’s legacy, Sikh’s participation in Subash Chandra Bose’ Indian National Army, all incidents were evoked to possess new meanings in the newly emerging discourse. All the Sikh patriots who were arrested or hanged by colonial powers were recovered in popular narrations as those who sacrificed or attained martyrdom for national freedom’s cause.

A particular section of the dominant community has gone further and claimed that the Sikhs are not a minority; instead, they are a part of the Hindu fold or have roots in the shared Indic civilisation. In the Hindu nationalist descriptions, the emphasis ranges from commonality and shared experience of geography, race, blood, culture, ancestors, language to a mutual history of oppression, persecution, sufferings, torture, and tyranny. V.D. Savarkar, in his ‘Essentials of Hindutva’, puts forward his categorical position on Sikhs. In his attempt to define ‘Who is a Hindu?’, he very forcefully advocates that Sikhs and various other groups are excluded from Hinduism due to the parochial nature of its existing definition. For him, the Sikh attempt to declare themselves a distinctive community is primarily driven by political considerations and the prevalence of a common confusion where Hinduism is directly conflated with *Sanatanadharma*. He cautions the Sikhs not to let this attempt turn into an ‘untenable and suicidal plea of being non-Hindus’. Also, he warns them that if in future an alien power seeks to exterminate the Hindu civilisation by ‘raising a sword’ as has happened in the past, Sikhs would be persecuted along with them.⁹⁰

For Savarkar, the Sikhs belong to the Sindhusthan as the *Bharatbhum*i is their *pitribhu* (fatherland) and *punyabhu* (holy-land). He traces the deep ancestral and cultural association the Sikhs have with the land of Saptsindhu; in his narrative, Sikhs are the direct descendants of ancient Sindhus. He hails the symbolically rich geographical region of Punjab as home to the river Saraswati before her image was

communities. Indian Government does not release data pertaining to religious or ethnic origins of army personnel. However, according to observers the Punjabi (Sikh and non-Sikh) soldiers continued to account for over 10-15 percent of all ranks in Indian army in contrast to their 2.45 percent share in the total national population in 1981. Even though after independence, recruitment to a ‘pure’ one class regiment was discouraged, Sikhs and Gurkhas remained the only communities to have infantry regiments drawn exclusively from their own pool. Indian army has a Sikh Regiment, where recruits are mostly drawn from high-caste *Jat* Sikhs, and also a Sikh Light Infantry which draws exclusively from *mazhabi* or lower caste Sikhs. See, Apurba Kundu, “The Indian Armed Forces ‘Sikh and Non-Sikh Officers’ Opinions of Operation Blue Star,” *Pacific Affairs* 67, no. 1 (1994): 48.

⁸⁹ Twenty Indian soldiers were martyred on 15 July 2020 in the Indo-China clash that took place in Galwan valley. One fifth of the martyred soldiers were Sikhs. The same rhetoric was floated again in popular discourse.

⁹⁰ V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, (Bombay: Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1969), 48.

deified as the Goddess of learning and art in the worldview of Hindus. The sacred language, Sanskrit, is viewed by Savarkar as the ‘mother’ of Punjabi and Gurumukhi. For him, this association of Punjabi to its parental language continues to persist as it is still in infancy.⁹¹

It is essential to point out that a significant theological difference between Sikhism and Hinduism exists, a point too fundamental to be glossed over in these attempts at subsuming. Something even Savarkar is consciously aware of. There exists a negation of the caste system in the founding principles of Sikhism; Guru Nanak wanted to work towards establishing a more egalitarian social order. As discussed by Gandhi and Ambedkar, the *varnashrama dharma* is the basic constitutive premise on which Hinduism is built. *Varnashrama dharma* is a hereditary form of hierarchical structure that seeks to order the society into *varnas*, where people perform duties or *dharma*, which is allocated to them by birth. Gandhi sought to re-imagine this system, and Ambedkar aspired to annihilate it. Savarkar was a vocal critic of this form of arrangement governing social conduct and duties. According to him, caste was a hindrance in the natural association of Hindus as one nation. He writes:

The Sanyasis, the Aryasamajis, the Sikhs and many others do not recognise the system of the four castes and yet are they foreigners ? God forbid ! They are ours by blood, by race, by country, by God. ‘Its name is Bharat and the people are Bharati’ is a definition ten times better because truer than that we, Hindus, are all one and a nation, because chiefly of our common blood — ‘Bharati Santati’.⁹²

Through this account, Savarkar attempts to racially weave the Sikh fate to Hindus. He maintains that notwithstanding the ‘rejection of Hindu customs and beliefs in their progressive zealousness, as mere superstitions’, Sikhs cannot refute that their forefathers had Hindu blood running in their veins.⁹³ His emphases on common blood, race, and ancestry continue with his assertion that the ‘Gurus were children of Hindus’. Not only this, he declares that the Gurus were born and bred in Hindusthan, making the Sikh future inevitably tied to the land. Thus, it can be regarded as an undeniable attempt at appropriation. However, this attempt at appropriation is nuanced in recognising the distinctions that permeate the Sikh and Hindu political theology. Savarkar insists that the test for determining Hindutva can not be theological by nature. He was also willing to permit Sikhs the freedom to reject the ‘superstitions in *Sanatanadharma*’ and even the ‘binding authority’ of the infallible Vedas.⁹⁴ In the end, he concedes that the Sikhs be categorised as a separate religion if it is indispensable for their communal growth. Nevertheless, racially and culturally, in his perspective, they remain one national unit, that of Hindus.

The Indic/non-Indic binary is pervasive in Hindutva thought; it acts in both exclusive and inclusive manners. It excludes Christians and Muslims from being valid members of Hindusthan but simultaneously secularises Hindu identity to subsume other Indic religions — Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs within its fold. This binary plays a significant role in the creation of model minorities and in disciplining the not so model minorities. By invoking the shared history of oppression, Savarkar

⁹¹ Ibid., 46-47.

⁹² Ibid., 7.

⁹³ Ibid., 39.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 47.

continuously reminds the Sikhs of their loyalties to their fatherland and holyland, Hindustan. According to him, if any community in India could be labelled as Hindu ‘beyond cavil or criticism’, it was the Sikhs; he considered them the ‘autochthonous dwellers of the Saptasindhu land’.⁹⁵ This naturalised bond and unity to both land and people of India made the Sikhs an important political community in his thought. However, the Sikhs were not merely crucial on their own account; Savarkar assessed their importance by contrasting them with other minorities. While writing about communal representation, he said, “our Sikh brotherhood is certainly not a less important community than the Mohammedans—in fact to us Hindus they are more important than any non-Hindu community in India”.⁹⁶ In this rendition of cultural unity, racial ties, blood links, and geographical reverence, the non-Indic was the perpetual other. Muslims were perceived as cruel rulers from the past whose fate was now reduced to a minority; Sikhs, because of their ‘past contributions’, were given the status of ‘rightful copartnership’ in the emerging Hindu nationalist narrative. The two communities were counterposed, and the joint civilisational roots of one immediately made its difference acceptable.

The innocuous and dependable character of Sikhs is further strengthened by the myth of being the ‘sword arm of Hinduism’. In Golwalkar’s work, Sikh tradition is reduced to the status of being a sect, whose ‘purpose’ of coming into existence was ‘to contain the spread of Islam in Punjab’.⁹⁷ He continues by stating: “[O]n recognising the need of the times, Guru Govind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, armed his disciples and turned them into a band of national heroes”.⁹⁸ Thus, the Sikh martyrs are instantly acclaimed as acting to preserve Hindus’ national interests and integrity. For Golwalkar, Sikhs or the ‘unconquerable Hindu heroes’ exhibiting ‘warlike’ characteristics were historically significant to the overthrow of ‘Moslem domination’. Hence, he was considerably unsettled with Akali Dal’s agitation for a separate Punjabi province. Even more distressing for him was the constant justification of the demand in the name of Pakistan; he was annoyed with the comparisons floating in the political arena. It was perceived by him as a misfortune that the Sikh leaders were “treat[ing] their great sect on par with the avowed destroyers of our *desh* and *dharam*”.⁹⁹ He castigated the Akalis who were willing to accept the “help of those very hostile forces from whose aggression [they were] born to protect the society”.¹⁰⁰ The Sikh Khalsa identity, as appropriated by Golwalkar, was cherished as ‘virtuous’, ‘valourous’, ‘brave’, and had an obligation to possess ‘undiluted loyalty’ towards the protection of Hindu society. However, the trope of *mere* ‘defender and protector’ could not permanently register itself in Sikh consciousness; they abhorred the efforts of Hindu nationalists to subdue their distinctive identity as that of a branch alone. Although there remain partial disagreements, the interface, where both communities meet, affirms the Sikh self-identification with a set of virtues equally valued by the counterparts.

The aphorism of sword-arm has been reinforced using a particular instance from history when Guru Tegh Bahadur was martyred in Delhi. As the oral descriptions go, he was executed by Aurangzeb while defending the rights of Kashmiri Brahmins to

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁹⁷ M.S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 1996), 103.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p 105.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

wear sacred thread (*janehu*) and the sacred mark (*tilak*). This version is the dominant narrative and is also the origin point of many other constructed stories. The Sikh martial tradition is comprehended in these narratives as a tool to liberate Hindustan from the 'oppressive' Mughal regime's clutches and help their fellow brethren from persecution by the Islamic invaders. A historian, writing in the 1970s, interprets the Guru's sacrifice in nationalist terms; he maintains that Guru's intentionality was to court martyrdom for the 'nation'.¹⁰¹ The same account also reiterates that the Khalsa army created by Guru Gobind, post the sacrifice of his father, was inspired by the values of 'patriotism and nationalism'; the 'downtrodden people living under servility' were 'turned into doughty warriors' following Guru's guidance.¹⁰²

However, other renditions of the same episode exist. The current anti-caste rendition has consciously made Brahmins/Hindus irrelevant to the act of martyrdom performed by him. The re-interpretation, which has started to assert itself as an alternative, attempts to describe the event by claiming that Guru Tegh Bahadur was defending the 'rights of a minority' to practise their faith without fear. It is easy to notice the subtle shifts in portrayals depending on who is engaged in the act of narration. From the 'nation' being integral, the 'minority rights' emerge as the centre of attention. It is probably a conscious effort of Sikhs to reconcile the history of their tradition with their current minority position inside the modern national-state paradigm.

Two currents are operating in Hindu nationalist discourses; one is the unifying element in the form of Muslim other, represented in most writings as the common civilisational enemy. The other is absorbing of the Sikh community as the warrior class. However, it is essential to note that divergences exist within these Hindutva discourses. If Jan Sangha (now BJP) and RSS focused on depicting the Muslim and Christians as the outsider, then Arya Samaj, due to regional political animosity, was hostile to Sikhs. Nevertheless, Arya Samaj shapes the ideological understanding of Punjabi Hindus alone and can barely be said to have any influence outside Punjab. More significantly, the anti-Sikh bias of Aryas did not permeate or influence the political coalitions between Akalis and Jan Sangha, and later BJP.

On the other hand, it would be misleading to say that Hindu self-representation in these recitals is always that of an entity being protected. In its pursuit to push away the 'effeteness' of such depictions, the new militant Hindutva has also brought attention to another parallel narrative. It centres around the image of armed RSS men rescuing Sikhs from Muslim mobs during partition violence; in a sense, advancing and modifying the self-image, from being protected to becoming the masculine militant hero.¹⁰³

Some modern-day scholars have tried to present Sikh history from the outlook of Hindu nationalism. Their version of history can help us locate the historical Sikh figures, qualities, and events discursively glorified and venerated by the majority community. Most of these narratives are saturated with an embedded motif of 'sword arm' while also focusing on illustrating the Sikh Guru's teachings as a reformist intervention in Hinduism. Gokul Chand Narang, who was writing in the first decade

¹⁰¹ Hari Ram Gupta, *History of Sikhs: The Sikh Gurus 1469-1708*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1973), 210.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁰³ Also see, Manik Chandra Vajpayee & Sridhar Paradkar, *Partition-Days: The Fiery Saga of RSS*, (New Delhi: Suruchi Prakashan), 2002.

of the twentieth century, uses the metaphor of 'the sword' to explain the glory of Khalsa. He notes that the sword was "undoubtedly, forged by Govind, but the steel had been provided by Nanak, who had obtained it, as it were, by smelting the Hindu ore".¹⁰⁴ This theme also finds a place in Savarkar's text, for whom just tying a 'Kachchha and Kripan' around a 'lamb' does not 'make a lion of it'; it was the 'race' which produced the 'Guru and his band of martyrs and warriors' that possessed the capacity to be 'moulded' in such form.¹⁰⁵

Banda Singh and Maharaja Ranjit Singh were both exalted by Narang for returning the 'Hindu glory' to the nation. Under the command of Banda Singh, the peasant warriors fought against Mughal rule in Punjab; this band slew many intermediaries involved in oppressively extracting land revenues. They were able to carry out various successful and fiercely violent campaigns to annihilate the Mughal despotic hold over rural areas. In Narang's account, Banda Singh punished those 'Moslems who were bigoted' in nature and engaged in 'cow slaughter'. He writes in a footnote that for Hindus, Banda was regarded as the 'scourge of Muhammadans sent by God to punish them for their crimes'.¹⁰⁶ He also ascribed a motive to Banda's military expeditions, and it was to help the 'oppressed Hindus'; this, according to Narang, won him the 'sympathies of the whole Hindu race'. But, for Narang, Banda's most vital contribution was in waking Hindus' subjugated conscience and invoking in them the spirit, enthusiasm, and vigour that 'they could still fight and conquer'.¹⁰⁷ Another prominent figure, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, is celebrated and lauded for similar reasons. Narang writes:

Maharaja Ranjit Singh was the beau ideal of Sikh chivalry. In him the Sikh power was at its zenith. Not only the Sikhs but the whole Hindu nation felt that in him the Sun of Hindu glory had once more risen in the political horizon of India. They showered upon him their heartiest blessings. They looked upon him as their liberator and their protector, one who after, centuries of barbarous attacks from the North, hurled back the invaders and raiders to their mountain lairs. They bestowed their unstinted love and affection on him and revered him as a God-sent guardian of their hearths and homes and upholder of their national honour.¹⁰⁸

Hari Ram Gupta, who likewise wrote on Sikh history, evinced admiration for the trans-Satlej Sikhs. He commended the Sikh resistance to numerous Afghan invasions, plunders, and loot in the eighteenth century and also eulogised their contribution in shifting the wave of 'foreign aggression' after 'eight hundred years' by 'erecting a bulwark of defence' for securing the northwest frontier region.¹⁰⁹ In this reading of past events, Sikhs' 'sustained enterprise in the face of difficulty' was interpreted to mean performance of 'national duty' for 'our country'.¹¹⁰ All these historical writings are temporally located in a period where we witnessed an upsurge of various streams

¹⁰⁴ Gokul Chand Narang, *Transformation of Sikhism*, 2nd ed, (Lahore: New Books Society Publishers, 1945), 25.

¹⁰⁵ V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Gokul Narang, *Transformation*, 179.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 311.

¹⁰⁹ Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs: Evolution of Sikh Confederacies*, (Calcutta: S.N. Sarkar, 1944), 272.

¹¹⁰ Indu Banga, "J.S. Grewal on Sikh History," 308.

of local histories, which were more or less, produced and rewritten for assimilation into the master narrative of nationalist history.

Despite the differences, the Hindutva project claims the Sikhs as their kind, in turn producing a mega-homogeneous Hindu category. On the other hand, the ‘difference’ lies at the core of the model minority trope; only when a community is distinct can it be projected as being ideal. Otherwise, it will be valorising one’s own self. We see the project of appropriation reaching its logical limits in such a discourse; the differences are accommodated rather than fused with the majority. The Sikh fear of being absorbed or subsumed within the majority community is also more efficiently addressed when the state recognises the differences by deploying such a trope.

Affirming a Non-Secessionist Autonomy

Sikh politics had from the times of Gurus—specifically under Guru Gobind Singh’s spiritual and temporal authority—constantly espoused the case of a third *panth*, the Khalsa *panth*, a religion different from Hinduism and Islam. The identity assertions of the *panth* gradually evolved to visualise the sovereign Khalsa *quam*, a nationality distinct from the other nationalities of the region.¹¹¹ The Sikh community had by the early twentieth century established itself as a different ethnicity and religion but not necessarily decided to express those differences in terms of a separate state and territory. For Harjot Oberoi, the Sikh nationality did not articulate itself in terms of territoriality before the moment of partition; the idea of a distinct Punjab state emerged and took a permanent place in the language and discourses deployed by the community, only in the 1940s.¹¹² The centrality that territory came to occupy in Sikh self-imagination has to be contextualised as a Sikh response to the formation of Pakistan—a distinct nation-state for the representation of the Muslim community. A particular faction of the community leaders favoured the creation of Sikhistan (or Khalistan), separate from both Hindustan and Pakistan. The Sikh leaders feared that if they decided to stay with any of the two newly carved nations, they were bound to a perpetual position of a minority. A more populist proposal was to carve a new state with a Sikh majority population.

Nonetheless, through the efforts of the nationalist Sikhs who were inspired by the ongoing national movement, the scheme for creating an ‘Azad Punjab’ was thwarted. They did this by organising and engaging in various Hindu-Sikh Milaap Conferences. As a result, the two communities decided to become allies in preserving the Punjab region from the ‘communal affronts’ of the Muslim League.¹¹³ The integration of Sikh dominated regions of Punjab with India also had other reasons apart from the nationalist Sikh’s crusade. These were primarily practical considerations wedded to a historical context. In the past, Sikh Gurus had valiantly defied the domination of Islamic rulers; they had constantly spurned efforts of the Mughal to coerce-fully proselytise the Sikhs. In a meeting that Lord Mountbatten held with Master Tara Singh, Kartar Singh and Baldev Singh just before partition, the Sikh leaders were quite ardent ‘that the Sikhs would fight to the last man if put under Muslim

¹¹¹ J.S. Grewal, *Lectures on Religion, Sikh Identity and Politics in the Punjab*, 345.

¹¹² Harjot Oberoi, “Punjab to Khalistan,” 37.

¹¹³ Tanweer Fazal, *Nation-State and Minority Rights in India: Comparative Perspective on Muslim and Sikh Identity*, (London: Routledge, 2014), 121.

domination'.¹¹⁴ The state of Pakistan was carved out to give territorial expression to Muslim nationalism; from the founding moment, Pakistan, in Sikhs imagination, belonged solely to the Muslims. The other reason for Sikh's disagreement with the two-nation theory was that any division resulting in the creation of India and Pakistan was bound to leave Sikhs disillusioned since they were dispersed all over in the area of Punjab. The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee's white paper published in the aftermath of the 1984 event mentions this dilemma:

The Sikhs felt that the demand of Pakistan was going to be very unfair, rather suicidal, to them as it would endanger everything they valued; their holy places, their political interests, their lands and their heritage. In fact, their very identity as a distinct community was at stake.¹¹⁵

In contrast to Pakistan, the ideological inclinations of the Indian nationalists were represented as being embedded in a democratic outlook. Moreover, Congress was slanted towards creating a structure in which residual powers were reposed in the federating units as specified in the Objective Resolution passed by the Constituent Assembly in 1946.¹¹⁶ These explicit promises of a federal polity, also made by the Nehru Committee Report, were expected to give Sikhs a greater chance at preserving their identity and socio-cultural ways of living. The assurances by national leaders made Sikhs confident that they too could experience political sovereignty in the Indian state of Punjab. Their demands during partition included promotion of Punjabi language, some measure of cultural autonomy in the Indian union, political representation and social recognition for Sikhs, and protection to be offered to the distinctive Sikh identity.¹¹⁷ The 'loyalty' of Sikhs was sealed as an empirical reality at the time of partition when it was decided that the whole community would stay with the Indian state. This memory becomes a notable fixture in the more extensive narrative blaming Muslim nationalism as the cause of partition and its violent aftermath.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the symbolic and traditional significance of attributes such as martyrdom, heroism, and bravery for Sikhs and moved towards its later appropriation under the colonial regime. The colonial empire subsumed the identity of Sikhs by declaring them as 'martial races'. The enterprise was conducted by assimilating these notions from within the Sikh life-world. Interestingly, the same constructs continue to influence the relationship of Sikhs with the Indian nation-state and the Hindus. In the

¹¹⁴ J.S Grewal, *The Sikhs of Punjab*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 178. Master Tara Singh, who later also became the president of Shiromani Akali Dal, was significant in guiding Sikhs during the course of partition.

¹¹⁵ G.S. Dhillon, *Truth about Punjab: SGPC White Paper*, (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, 1996), 60.

¹¹⁶ The objective resolution mentions that the territories which will come to constitute the Union of India "[s]hall possess and retain the status of autonomous Units, together with residuary powers, and exercise all powers and functions of government and administration, save and except such powers and functions as are vested in or assigned to the Union, or as are inherent or implied in the Union or resulting therefrom." In *India's Charter of Freedom: Containing the Objectives Resolution passed by the Constituent Assembly of India on January 22, 1947 and the two speeches thereon of Jawaharlal Nehru*, (New Delhi: GOI, 1947).

¹¹⁷ A. S. Mandair, *Guide for the Perplexed*, 98.

popular narratives and even nationalist historiography accounts, there was a sustained emphasis on the ‘sword-arm’ trope, where Sikhs were imagined as ‘defenders’ and ‘protectors’ of *Bharat* against the past oppressors, thus evincing admiration. As shown, the projection of idealness is not the result of mere infliction and can be seen as an internalised set of norms improvised upon by both groups. This projection is coterminous with the nation-state’s project of making an ideal minority whose differences can be easily assimilated. The schematic construction and projection of symbols, discourses, and images by the ethnic majority and the model group are simultaneously undertaken by the two. However, as happened during colonial times, the subversion of such identities is possible and does take place. The Ghadr movement was one such attempt at subversion. The fluidity of the construct gives us an entry point into understanding the complicated and nuanced manner in which negotiations, compromises, and defiance of model minority image occur in later stages.

Chapter Two — Punjabi Suba: Chiselling of the ‘Model’ for Gaining Recognition

Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.¹¹⁸

The focus of the chapter is Punjabi Suba movement, which took place in the east Punjab region soon after partition, the leading contenders for a reorganised Punjab being Sikhs. When Sant Fateh Singh met Jawaharlal Nehru in 1961 to discuss the reorganisation, he asked him, “Do you suspect that if Pakistan or China creates some trouble, we would join them. Do you believe the fact?”¹¹⁹ He raised the question on account of Nehru’s refusal to concede the demand for Punjabi Suba. Nehru continuously reiterated his stand that Punjabi Suba was a ‘communal demand’, a demand that was likely to be an economic blunder and whose formation in proximity to Pakistan was bound to raise security concerns.

The rhetoric of ‘suspicion’, ‘unity’, ‘recognition’, and ‘common history’ permeated a number of conversations between the Sikh leaders claiming to represent Punjabi Suba and the people at the helm of national affairs. The motif of a suspect community marked the interactions of many assertive political communities with the modern Indian nation-state; specifically during the agitation period for constituting linguistic provinces. This theme of suspicion was further exacerbated when the Punjabi Suba event is placed in its historical context—the violent aftermath of partition. Partition had induced within the newly formed Indian nation and its leadership grave anxiety over the question of unity. The newly formed state had before it the task of forging unity and work towards crafting and promoting national identity; this had to be achieved through careful management of diversity and eliminating any fissiparous tendencies. In an attempt to do so, the national leadership often conflated and mistook demands for recognition as demands against unity. Distrust caused due to this resulted in a confrontation between *politics of recognition* and *politics of unification*.

Furthermore, the non-recognition of any legal difference from the Hindu identity at the time of colonial rule made the Sikhs anxious about getting absorbed within its fold.¹²⁰ The Sikhs cultivated a unique identity, which was forcefully advocated and

¹¹⁸ Charles Taylor, “Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann and Charles Taylor, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

¹¹⁹ Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee. *Synopsis of the Nehru-Fateh Singh talks on the issue of the formation of a Punjabi-speaking State*, (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, 1961), 28.

¹²⁰ On 5th August 1903, the lordships of the Privy Council in the case of *Rani Bhagwan Kaur v. Bose and others*, declared that a Sikh for the purposes of the application of Hindu law, was a Hindu. The wider term of Hindus, wherever it was used in any enactments, encompassed within itself the Sikhs as a community. For proving the same, the Judges relied on a number of absences and gaps within the ‘language of law’ which failed to explicitly mention Sikhs as a distinctive category. For instance, in the Indian Succession Act of 1865, which laid down the rules of inheritance and was based on the English law, it was mentioned that the law will not be applied to Hindus, Muhammadan, Buddhists or any race, sect or tribe that the colonial government seeks to exempt. The Sikhs were not in the exempted category and they, quite obviously, were not governed in matters of inheritance and succession by the English law. The Judges, henceforth, deduced that the Sikhs were lumped together in the category of Hindus by the legislators. The General Report on the Census of India, 1891, also affirmed that a Sikh is “generally called a Hindu in common parlance”. A passing reference was made to another judgment in 1830 (in this case the problem of classifying Sikhs cropped up for the very first time) where the Judge bypassed the dilemma by considering the Sikhs as a “sect of the Hindoos, of whom they were a dissenting branch”. On the

became apparent towards the end of the nineteenth century. Often through dynamic social processes, the community leaders selected, standardised, and transmitted components that gained the status of an indispensable symbol later on. It was required that the identity thus produced be given recognition by the other. During the Punjabi Suba moment, the ‘others’ in this dialogical relation were the imperial rulers, Punjabi Hindus and the Indian nation-state. Sikhs had gradually started associating their self-hood with Punjabi and subsequently during the partition period with Punjab. It became essential for them that this identification be affirmed through recognition by the other. However, the call for recognition of distinctiveness became less apparent in Sikh minority discourses when they were pushing forth political demands. In such moments there was an active assertion and revoking of a common shared cultural past. Differences were momentarily forgotten but never completely obliterated from memory.

Alongside the themes mentioned above, this chapter will seek to look at the discourses produced at the point of encounter between state/community(s); these discourses produce images that act as constituents of the identity markers for communities. It probes the speeches of nationalist leaders and Sikh leaders while paying close attention to recurring images and tropes. It explores the varying emphases and attendant slippages in the discursive struggles with non-recognition and misrecognition on the part of select Sikh leaders. Their attempts to simultaneously highlight their loyalty for the fledgling ‘nation-state’ and forge a unique identity are analysed from the standpoint of the dialectics of recognition articulated by Charles Taylor. The first section will look at the genealogy of Punjabi linguistic consciousness. The second section will briefly examine the responses to the demand for linguistic provinces during the colonial period and sustenance of the ‘model minority trope’ in the Nehru Report. The third section will analyse the role of partition violence in constituting community identities. Alongside, this section will briefly explain the political context in which the demand for Punjabi Suba emerges. The final section seeks to locate the appropriation of model minority trope, as it intertwines with ‘suspect loyalty’, emerging in political speeches of Master Tara Singh, Sant Fateh Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru and C. Rajagopalachari and the governmental reports on linguistic reorganisation.

Shaping of a Linguistic Consciousness

Before colonial adventurism in India, the official court language of the Mughal empire was Persian. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century, colonial India witnessed a growing gulf of linguistic differentiation between Hindi and Urdu. During this period, Hindi and Urdu languages became ‘subjectively meaningful and politically useful’ to Hindus and Muslims. This differentiation will help better articulate how religious identities became embroiled with linguistic identities in north India and gave impetus to Punjabi language in becoming a significant symbolic element in the constitution of the Sikh ethnic identity. Religious groups effectively constituted themselves as political constituencies through the constant interventions and imperatives offered by imperial rule. Enumeration practices, gazetteers, linguistic

contrary, we witness that the colonial army desired to differentiate between Hindus and Sikhs, and keep the latter in its ‘pristine purity’ to preserve its martiality. It is interesting to note that the ambiguity of classifying Sikhs as mere ‘dissenters’ or a ‘distinctive religion’ still finds no definite answer in judgments passed after 1947.

survey reports played a decisive role in shaping linguistic identities and their subsequent appropriation by religious organisations.

The divergence between the two languages, Urdu in Persian script and Hindi in Devanagari script, became deeply entrenched in the consciousness of these communities. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, these two religious groups were petitioning the imperial rulers to officially recognise their respective language for the purposes of administration and education in United Province; for this to happen, they mobilised the members of one's own community against the other. While forwarding their appeals to the rulers, the leaders from the two religious communities routinely relied on the statistical records pertaining to their languages and communities in census reports and documents compiled by British officials.¹²¹ It culminated in the production of two mutually antagonistic socio-linguistic binaries of Hindi-Hindu/Urdu-Muslim. The objective proximity of the two languages, with similar grammar and lexical rules, could not offer itself to alter the course of the growing dispute. In 1881, colonisers decided to replace Urdu in Persian script with Hindi in Kaithi script in Bihar; soon after that, various analogous demands started pouring in from other places.¹²²

In Punjab, Urdu was able to sustain its unceasing dominance up until partition in 1947. During this stage, Hindu organisations sought to assemble endorsements from fellow community members for the official displacement of Urdu. However, all these mobilisation strategies were ineffectual in producing any concrete results, unlike what unfolded in Bihar and United Provinces, where the colonial power acceded to the Hindu demand. Instead of supplanting Urdu, the movement became a three-way conflict between Hindi-Urdu-Punjabi. After the bifurcation of Punjab in 1947, Urdu vacated the epistemic space, and the three-way combat was reduced to a two-way contest.

In addition, the territorial imagination of Punjab was not infused strongly within the Sikh consciousness before the 1940s, 'Punjab as homeland' entered the Sikh's vocabulary of self-definition as a mirror response to territorial expression of Pakistan extended by Muslims. There were murmurs, and the demand for a separate *Sikhistan* or *Khalistan* was floated in hushed tones before the partition period. However, it never was pushed vigorously. Discourses through which 'regions are produced' can help understand how the linguistic and territorial consciousness was able to acquire the status of intrinsic and permanent symbols in the Sikh ethnic constitution. It is a helpful starting point for an exercise in understanding the intertwining of religious and linguistic expressions of identities, as it occurred in colonial north India.

Bernard Cohn, in a monograph, has provided a very coherent account of the prerequisites and conditions which give birth to regionalism. For Cohn, regionalism and nationalism in India, as we know since the late nineteenth century, developed in parallel to each other; preconditions for both can be found in the colonial rule. The

¹²¹ Asha Sarangi, "Enumeration and the Linguistic Identity Formation in Colonial North India," *Studies in History* 25, no. 197 (2009): 223.

¹²² Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, (London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 287. Muslim organisations and Muslim elites were against this kind of recognition being offered to Hindi at the expense of Urdu. According to Paul Brass this had more to do with sustaining their privileged position through the means of preserving Urdu. On the other hand, the supporters of Hindi language believed that Urdu was derivative of a 'foreign tongue'. For them, giving Urdu an official recognition meant that it was to become the means of imparting education in schools. This could have serious repercussions in the form of Hindi, 'an ancient, well known, commonly spoken, revered language', being displaced as the more commonly spoken vernacular.

first prerequisite is that the region should have its own symbol pool, consisting of religious, literary, political-historical symbols. By using the local language, various symbols can be employed to heighten the consciousness of community members and produce a collective self-identity. The second prerequisite is the ‘selection, standardisation, and transmission’ of these symbols. For instance, the regional languages were standardized and circulated via school textbooks to be made accessible to every educated Indian. The final condition is the establishment of a regional elite(s) who preserve, refine, and promote what is valued by society.¹²³ Sikh elites repeatedly, too, used religious vocabulary and symbols to further regional demands; language was one of those symbols selected and then honed as a specific regional demand. The process of selection, standardization, and dissemination of certain symbols chosen from a symbol pool helped give the symbols a much denser and thicker meaning than the one they possessed before they were recruited. This denser meaning then was used to heighten the Sikh consciousness and association with Punjab/Punjabi. Cohn has argued that “the formation of and elevation of a relatively coherent view and articulation of one strand out of the symbol pool, religious, cultural, literary, or historical, does not just happen, but is the result of complex forces”.¹²⁴ For him, regions are not fixed, enduring things; the same can be said about the discourses producing the regions as well. Although the elites retain an overall emphasis on the permanence of the said symbols across time, the discourse shifts, changes, and transforms.

Moreover, any socio-spatiality is *brought into being* as a homeland for a group of individuals speaking the same tongue when the group starts associating that cultural geography with a sense of loyalty and belonging.¹²⁵ Loyalty to this particular space can be roused through the presence of oral histories, and ancestral narratives passed down in the vernacular tongue. Through this passing down, the space becomes saturated with the emotional memory of belonging. While discussing the emotive relationship that indigenous groups share with their homeland, Amanda Kearney refers to Merleau-Ponty.¹²⁶ Ponty wrote, perception “occurs not in the head but in front of the subject and it brings the perceiving subject as well as the perceived object into being”; in this way, the indigenous people, “as the perceptual subject, and homeland as the perceptual object powerfully bring each other into being”. Sikhs, while referring to eastern Punjab as a space embodying a cultural past, were also being relationally constituted by that space. The location of sacred sites, the community’s memories, and lived experiences of the geography became essential to the narrative of being a Punjabi. The ‘space’ itself transformed in the imagination of the locals as a ‘homeland’. In this instance, both location and community identities morphed and became an ‘embodiment’ when an interconnected emotional bond to the space was established. Furthermore, a time-depth to this memory of occupying that *space as a homeland* readily became available to the Sikhs when various unilingual groups were agitating for ‘recognition’ in post-colonial India.

¹²³ Bernard Cohn, “Regions Subjective and Objective: Their Relation to the Study of Modern Indian History and Society,” in *An Anthropologist among the Historians and Other Essays*, (Delhi: OUP, 1987), 120-130.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹²⁵ The understanding of the concept of Homeland is derived from a reading of Amanda Kearney, “Homeland Emotion: An Emotional Geography of Heritage and Homeland,” in *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 15, no. 2-3 (2009), 209-222.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 213.

To phrase it differently, in the case of Sikhs, the symbolic identification with the ‘land of five rivers’ was initially intensified in the presence of other religious and linguistic groups placing similar demands for ‘recognition’ on the political elites. Sara Ahmed expands on the notion of recognition; for her, the act of recognition is not merely constitutive of those who are recognised in this exchange, but the subject recognising the other is also constituted in the moment of recognising. The subject is not simply differentiating self from the other but learns how to differentiate between various others.¹²⁷ This becomes more apparent when one analyses the dialogue taking place between Hindus, Sikhs and the nation-state during the Punjabi Suba moment. The recognising of Urdu/Punjabi as the other in pre-partition Punjab constituted the Hindu self by bringing it closer to Hindi. When the census operations were going on in Punjab in 1951, Hindus furnished ‘false information’ about the mother tongue column. For the Sikhs, Hindus betrayed their ‘mother tongue’ Punjabi. This perceived ‘betrayal’ was an act of constituting one’s own subjectivity by recognising the language Punjabi as the ‘mother tongue of Sikhs’. After recognising this, the Hindus were able to imbibe Hindi with their self-definition more successfully. In this particular instance, recognition of the Sikh/Muslim community with Punjabi/Urdu by the Hindus, in a sense, constituted their own self-identity while also constituting the other.

Regional elites, census enumerative practices, survey reports, political contestations with the ‘other’, cultural geography of the space, invention of ‘mother-tongue’ all promoted the increased association of Sikhs with the Punjabi language and Punjab throughout the colonial times. In addition, a more contemporary push for the intensified Sikh/Punjab/Punjabi association came in the 1950s and 1960s. The insistence on creating a separate state for Punjabi speakers garnered momentum when the Indian state successfully acknowledged the claim to a linguistic province in other regions and demarcated Andhra Pradesh, Kerela, Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. However, before proceeding with an account of the Sikh campaign for Punjabi Suba, it is equally vital to contextualise the struggle by placing it in the evolution of demands for linguistic provinces and changing state response to such sub-national expressions.

Evolution of the Idea of Linguistic Provinces during the Colonial Period

When the Simon Commission arrived in India in 1928, it had no representative of Indian descent. The commission aimed to look into the existing constitutional parameters and suggest reforms, but with no colonial subjects present, the commission’s composition became a wild source of controversy. The ‘rule of colonial difference’ was prevalent in such an arrangement. Racial differences between the ruler and the ruled implicitly created a regime where one was believed to understand the dynamics of responsible and democratic government; the other was perceived as still being governed by ascriptive laws. The latter, or the native, was categorised as incompetent for self-rule.¹²⁸ In response to this, the Indian nationalists collaborated to

¹²⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Recognising Strangers,” in *Strange Encounters Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 24.

¹²⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 16.

present the Nehru Committee Report in 1928. It was an attempt at writing a constitutional memoir of the ruled, produced by the ruled.

With the dreams of democracy and self-governance still not in immediate reach, the document made an extensive case even for the sub-national groups of India. The text redefined the contours of nation and nationalism in a richer sense—encompassing even those who routinely were clubbed together as ‘non-secular’, ‘provincial’, ‘regional’, ‘parochial’ and hence ‘disruptive’ to the national imagination of unity. This redefinition, however, had its own limits; the inclusion was premeditated by several expectations of the Congress from minority communities. The text overturned Congress’s previous commitments to separate electorates and Muslim legislative weighting. The nationalist elite was willing to recognise the sub-ethnic nationalisms but not necessarily concede power in the political space to those who did not share their nationalist outlook.¹²⁹ The demand for separate electorates by Muslim League was seen as an unwanted deviation in the path of the ongoing anti-colonial struggle.

These different positions of Congress, if fleshed out, can help in accounting for how the Sikh demand for Punjabi Suba was able to vault over the initial resistance from nationalist leaders in order to become acceptable in the later period. Even though nothing much is mentioned about reassembling Punjab in the Nehru committee report of 1928, the report talked briefly about Sikhs:

It must be said to their credit that they have shown an admirable spirit of self-sacrifice by their decision to give up these communal advantages in the general interest of the country. Throughout the communal controversies that have raged round the question of representation in the legislature during recent years they have taken their stand on joint electorates with no reservation for any community. They could if they had insisted on any special advantage, have caused endless difficulties in the adoption of a uniform rule of representation. They fully realised this and voluntarily gave up all their claims with the sole object, we are assured of preventing an impasse. We appreciate this spirit and congratulate them on their patriotic resolve.¹³⁰

The ‘Sikh sacrifice’ was applauded in this context by pitting it against the Muslim demand for political representation in the form of separate electorates. The document itself was named ‘The Nehru Report: An Anti-Separatist Manifesto’, clearly reflecting the Congress posturing against Muslim separatism. Here, the Sikh community and their not asking for any privileges made their voluntary resolve an act of admirable quality. They were seen as deserving praise in the nationalist narrative. Sikhs were hailed as ‘patriotic’ for not being obstructive and understanding the difficulties the nationalists were likely to encounter in forging a uniform position before the empire. They were also extolled as a ‘model’ worthy of emulation by other groups. For Congress, at the moment, the more urgent subject was their demand for a responsible government. In contrast, ‘separate electorates’ were seen as an ‘obstacle’ in forging a communal unity required for installing a popularly elected government.¹³¹ Muslims

¹²⁹ Amar Sohal, “Ideas of Parity: Muslims, Sikhs and the 1946 Cabinet Mission Plan,” *Journal of South Asian Studies* 40, no. 4 (2017): 707.

¹³⁰ All Parties Conference India, Nehru Committee, *The Nehru Report : an Anti-Separatist Manifesto*, (New Delhi: Michiko & Panjathan, 1975), 56-57.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 38-44.

did not accept this report, and Jinnah soon gave his 'Fourteen Points', which shaped the future course of politics for the Muslim league.

The document acknowledged the principle of language as the basis for carving new provinces. The linguistic homogeneity of a regional space was seen as a catalyst force for deepening democratic impulses. The imposition of an alien language was bound to make politics a vocation of the elite. At the same time, vernacularization was believed to decenter the political and introduce newer actors who could speak the tongue comprehensible to ordinary people.¹³² 'Language' was meant to radically alter the political sphere through the proliferation of the local and regional into spaces marked as accessible only to the national. Nehru report floated the possibility of such an idea. Indigenous languages played an essential role in expanding democracy in India, and creating provinces based on language aided the process.¹³³

In this context, some inconsistent and anomalous concessions merit closer attention. The 1928 report discussed the formation of Sind as a provincial unit. The case for Punjabi Suba was almost identical to the case for Sind province.¹³⁴ Sind was a region with a high concentration of Muslims; critics dubbed the carving of a Sind province as a move that would conclude in devising a 'communal province'. Even then, the Committee members argued that not acceding to the majority's demands in that region would be committing 'violence against the principles of self-determination', something which manoeuvred the nationalist resistance to alien rule. The report further states that the larger concept of nationalism should not be permitted to 'swallow the communitarian urges for cultural autonomy'; in fact, the two tendencies were not seen in mutual antagonism. In contrast to critics' arguments, the report said: "[W]ithout the fullest cultural autonomy, and communalism in its better aspect is culture, it will be difficult to create a harmonious nation."¹³⁵

Thus, for the Sikhs, it was perplexing when nationalists refused to concede Punjabi Suba demand despite having agreed to Muslim majority Sind province in the past. For them, the 'communal homeland' argument was refuted and countered by the same nationalists who later rallied behind it. On the other hand, as discussed in the next section, the shift in nationalists' attitudes can be explained through the experiences inflicted by the 'fluid moment' of partition and Independence, which aggravated the sense of urgency to unite the country and fend off any divergences.

¹³² For Sheldon Pollock, Vernacularization is "a process of change by which the universalistic orders, formations, and practices of the preceding millennium were supplemented and gradually replaced by localized forms". Sheldon Pollock, "India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity 1000-1500," *Daedalus* 127, no. 3 (1998): 41.

¹³³ However, it became an actuality in Indian democratic practice only during the 1970s when the political arena witnessed a proliferation of the 'unrefined, unpolished' local colloquial(s). Sudipta Kaviraj maintains that modernist elites, inspired by European ideals inculcated in them through western education, dominated the institutional arena of politics before the 1970s. During this period, the participation of the poor and marginalised was low, and their expectation from a democratically elected government quite limited. Nevertheless, through the explosion of the vernacular, politics gradually became local. See, Kaviraj Sudipta, "A State of Contradictions: The Post-colonial State in India," in *The Imaginary Institutions of India: Politics and Ideas*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 226.

¹³⁴ The only difference was that Sindh was composed of 74 percent Muslim population and was conjoined to Bombay, whereas the population of Sikhs in undivided Punjab was that of a minority. It is after the division of the region into Hindi and Punjabi speaking areas that Sikhs became the majority community in the area.

¹³⁵ *Nehru report: an Anti-Separatist Manifesto*, 34.

Partition, Displacement and the Calibration of Collective Memory

Sikh leaders had categorically opposed the mutilation of Punjab before 1947. They were inimical to the idea that entire Punjab was to be subjected to Muslim or Hindu rule. In the discursive representation of the community via its leaders, it had become clear to the governmental agencies and Congress by the early 1940s that Sikhs as a minority could never support the cause for independent Pakistan. Their diffused presence and sacred bond to the land of Punjab made them uneasy with the accompanying uncertainty of Pakistan. Sikh representatives opposed and denounced both the Cripps mission and later the Wavell plan on the same grounds. They wanted Punjab to remain an 'integral' part of a united India. In 1942, 'Azad Punjab' was conceived in response to the Muslim league's insistence; it was believed that this demand would 'cripple' the 'Pakistan scheme'. However, Indu Banga and J.S. Grewal have argued that the leaders did not consider an independent Sikh nation as their first preference; this was 'conditional' on the creation of Pakistan. Master Tara Singh and other Akali leaders who met the Cabinet Mission in March 1946 were asked about their views on the 'transfer of power'. Tara Singh said he stood for a 'coalition of all communities' in a united India, but if India were divided, the Sikhs would prefer an independent state with the right to federate.¹³⁶ By the mid-1940s, it was dawning on the Sikhs that the Congress was likely to accede to the Muslim League's demand; they were instinctively worried about being numerically vulnerable in two of these new states.¹³⁷

At the same time, several Sikhs disagreed with the claim of an autonomous state, as was reflected in the Sikh-Hindu Milaap conferences held in 1944. In the protagonists' words, these conferences were organised to 'checkmate the designs' that wanted to 'create a gulf between two highly cultured communities' and foster alliances in the 'politics of self-preservation' against the 'Muslim raj' in Punjab.¹³⁸ These proceedings aimed to alienate the Muslims by portraying them as 'aggressively overzealous' for power. To put it differently, the Sikhs and Hindus wanted to present a joint front against those they perceived and later labelled as obstructive forces stamping upon the 'country's progress'. Raja Narendra Nath's speech, a Hindu elite inaugurating the conference, was later summarised as follows:

[I]t was useless and wrong to say that the Sikhs and the Hindus were separate and had no common interests. The principles of the Sikh religion were the same as those of the Hindu religion, and that the Sikhs were not only the protector of the Hindus but were also the protector of the country's interest. Their heroic actions in the present war for the defence of their motherland had won admiration of one and all. There was inherent oneness when one saw the cultural or the historical background. Those who said the two communities were separate did not exhibit any sense. He advised the Sikhs to separate religion from politics.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, "Pakistan, Khalistan and Partition," in *Partition in Retrospect*, ed. by Amrik Singh, (New Delhi: Anamkia Publishers with National Institute of Punjab Studies, 2000), 170.

¹³⁷ The Sikhs at this stage felt that the Congress was busy appeasing Muslims at the cost of Sikhs. The same can be discerned in the statement of Santokh Singh, who was the leader of opposition in Punjab Assembly, he said: 'No one, not even ten Gandhis had a right to barter away Sikhs.' See, J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, "Partition".

¹³⁸ *The Indian Annual Register*, "Sikh-Hindu Milaap Conference," vol. 1, (January-July 1944): 195-198.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Notwithstanding the fears of Sikhs, on the eve of Indian independence from the British, the subcontinent was sundered asunder into two nation-states, India and Pakistan. The eventual partition period became permanently etched in the memory of both national body politics. This moment spawned days of unimaginable violence, with various agencies putting numbers of those killed from somewhere between one million to two million. Further, more than fourteen million people were uprooted from their homes overnight and had to take refuge in their 'new homeland(s)'. According to Urvashi Butalia, "never before or since, in human history, has there been such a mass exodus of people" in such a short time.¹⁴⁰ As a result of abject poverty, millions had no recourse but to cross over on foot to the other side; these people moved in massive human columns known as *kafila*. One of the longest convoys, made up of about 4,00,000 people, took eight days to cross any given spot completely.¹⁴¹

In the moment of partition, Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims were all partners in misery and violence. Sikhs and Hindus collectively shared the loss on this side of the freshly carved border. At the same time, similar sufferings were heaped on the Muslims who migrated to Pakistan. These displaced people had collectively endured *becoming estranged* to a place that was once called home, a habitat whose familiarity was unfamiliarised through acts of killing, looting, plundering, and rape. The refugees coming from the west were resettled on the land left behind by Muslims moving to the east; the same was done for those entering Pakistan.

The tumultuous events that unfolded post creation of India and Pakistan severely changed the demographic pattern of what was commonly referred to as east Punjab. Through the movement and exchange of populations across borders, the Sikhs found themselves concentrated on a compact piece of land, between the rivers Ravi and Ghaggar. This was a relatively new position for the Sikhs as a political community. Before partition, the community was diffused throughout the undivided Punjab territory. Muslims and Hindus constituted the political majority in the pre-partition period, whereas Sikhs constituted merely 14.9 per cent of the total population.¹⁴² Paul Brass has contended that the scattered social location of Sikhs essentially meant that the demands they placed on the state could only be couched in terms of 'political representation' and could not be phrased as a claim for 'separate territorial domination'.¹⁴³ In other words, the Sikhs being a numerically small minority could only act as a 'decisive swing force in the communal political balance between larger Muslim and Hindu communities', but not necessarily as an independent political force.¹⁴⁴ However, this composition underwent a drastic transition during partition when the influx of migrants from west Punjab transformed Sikhs into a minority of 'considerable numbers'. They were now a preponderant majority community in six districts of east Punjab and had a very significant position in five other districts.¹⁴⁵ This newfound geographical concentration of the community helped to spearhead the urge to constitute the Sikhs into a new political unit where they too could experience a 'glow of freedom', thus, resulting in the demand for Punjabi Suba.

¹⁴⁰ Urvashi Butalia, *On the Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998), 76.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁴² Census of India, 1941.

¹⁴³ Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics*, 319.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 320.

Another critical political fallout of the partition was that the state became more 'wary' and started to 'suspect' all the politically assertive groups as 'disruptive' to the incipient nation-making project. Gyanendra Pandey has written on how the state from this point onwards started handling the question of minorities—Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians—'in the light of the *lessons* of Partition'. Apprehension of the state for minorities was quite visible during the linguistic demands that started surfacing soon after independence. To quote Nehru:

The partition of India, resulting in the formation of Pakistan, did grievous injury to this country. That injury was obvious enough in many ways and it upset the whole structure of the state and of our economy in a hundred ways. Both in India and in Pakistan these grievous consequences followed and it is only slowly that we are recovering from these deep wounds to the body, mind and spirit of India. This partition had led us to become wary of anything that tends to separate and divide. It is also true there can be no real comparison between this partition and the linguistic regrouping of India. But it is also true that in the existing fluid state in India, even small things in themselves may lead to evil consequences and let loose forces which do injury to the unity in India[.]¹⁴⁶

It is noteworthy that Nehru repeatedly used the tropes of 'injury', 'grievous injury', 'wounds' to the body politic in his references to partition. Though an ardent advocate of 'unity in diversity', his ambivalence regarding linguistic provinces is all too palpable in the allusion to small forces having 'evil consequences'. His standpoint is that of a nationalist; being the first Prime Minister, he wanted to steer the state through a 'fluid' moment, which turned out to be flooded with displaced and rancorous people. This nationalist position put the burden on the Sikh leaders to assert and prove that their demand for a separate state (a subnational unit) would not adversely impact nation-building. On more than one occasion, the consequence of this was consolidation and concentration of power in the centre's hands. Any disagreement(s) that arose in the Constituent Assembly or the years following was reductively described by the Congress party to imply mere -isms—provincialism, regionalism, casteism, communalism, linguism. For Granville Austin, these -isms were readily interpreted and clubbed together as 'communalism', whose remedy was believed to be a dose of 'secularism'.¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, the citizen's standpoint who suffered through violent displacement and had to rebuild her life faded into the background. The national leadership experienced the loss differently, less personally and more symbolically.

For Gyanendra Pandey, this historic event of violent dismemberment produced in its wake 'new subjects and new subject positions'. The subject produced here did possess a historical consciousness, which the word 'new' might not explicitly connote. Instead, the 'newness' was actually embedded in the encounter of the madness unravelling everywhere. Many community members recounted how the violence was

¹⁴⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, "Formation of New Provinces," in *Essential writings of Nehru*, vol. 2, ed. S. Gopal and Uma Iyengar, (New Delhi: OUP, 2003), 86.

¹⁴⁷ Granville Austin, *Working a Democratic Constitution*, (New Delhi: OUP, 1999), 149.

unprecedented in scale to whatever they had ever witnessed. The encounter had parasitically attached and transformed the displaced people for the rest of their lives. In addition to the traumatic ordeal of partition becoming an 'indelible national memory', it transformed the ordinary person's perception of the other.

The production of 'new subject positions' alludes to the emergence of revised socio-political alignments and commitments of the community members to the 'other'. Sikhs and Hindus who became victims of quotidian violence occurring on that side of the border were purging the Muslims at this side of the border. Through their own personalised accounts, the two communities used the tropes of 'collective sufferings' and 'resistance' to paint each other as an ally against Muslims. This simultaneously encouraged thinking of a homogeneous category of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.

Pandey refers to the entire episode of partition as a 'moment of rupture', a 'violent founding' of two new nations. This moment of rupture produced social identities and added new markers to existing identities; more substantially, it transformed the social relations amongst these groups by hardening the unsettled boundaries that separated them. Pandey maintains that the process of partition redefined the three communities as "butchers, or as devious others; as untrustworthy and anti-national; but perhaps most fundamentally, as Sikhs and Muslims and Hindus alone".¹⁴⁸ Experience of violence thus became integral to the constitution of the community identities, which were later enlisted for political purposes in the post-colonial period.¹⁴⁹

The memory or recollection of the partition did not belong to any singular individual anymore; whenever one looked back, it was one looking back at us/we. Even more so, the collective memory asserts itself not as a past deed that is done but as something that flows into the present. The communities (us and we) helped these dislocated families gain a 'sense of familiarity' in a strange new place. These localised narratives represented the partition event in terms of the 'undying heroic valour' of the community in the face of everything. Through the detailed repetition of such tales, the ethnic communities constituted, commemorated and consolidated themselves. The bifurcation of the territory did not take into consideration communities other than Hindus and Muslims, but this did not mean that the event's reverberations were restricted to these communities alone. Many scholars have traced the Sikh political subjectivity in independent India as being entrenched in partition memories. Pandey has articulated it as follows:

The 'Sikh problem' arose in 1947 and has remained a major factor in Indian politics ever since. Their homeland, Punjab, split down the middle, with a large part of their property and pilgrim-sites left in West Pakistan, the Sikhs as a political community have never been allowed to forget what they suffered at Partition. This is summed up in the commonly encountered statement that while the Hindus got their Hindustan and the Muslims got their Pakistan, the Sikhs were like orphans, left with nothing.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

¹⁴⁹ Violence marks and permeates our memory of partition. The memories of violence produced and reproduced communities, something Gyanendra Pandey calls the boundaries of these communities. Through violence the communities negotiated their own identity as well as recognised the other, an other with whom they shared by means of violence a dialectical relation. The refugees arriving in Delhi, Punjab and Bengal changed the demography of these regions, numerous social and political changes were introduced through the massive upsurge caused by partition.

¹⁵⁰ Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 27.

However, the affinities forged between Sikhs and Hindus during the partition moment were soon transformed during the Punjabi Suba period. In the next phase, Arya Samaj and Punjabi Hindus viewed every move of Akali leaders with tremendous distrust. The altered partition landscape furnished conditions that were fertile enough to conceive new political discourses, images, and imaginations; most of them were then retained on a more permanent basis and had, over the years, abundantly seeped into our local vocabulary. The Punjabi Suba movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the Khalistani movement of the 1970s and 1980s both were shaped considerably from the sentiments given birth to at the time of partition.

Contextualising Demand for Punjabi Suba

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed an upsurge in ethnic unrest in various regions of India. In this period, the Indian nation-state was coming together as a federation, and a new unity was being evolved and projected onto all the sub-nationalities. This projection was successfully replicated in provinces that were usually microcosmic representations of the larger national majority groups (Uttar Pradesh).¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, this projected unity was not bereft of potential threats or challenges—the Dravidian movement with deep undertones of secessionism was unfolding in the South; there was discontent in the Northeast, which was expressed in the form of insurrectionist politics; the Indian nation-state was enduring aggression from the neighbouring countries - China and Pakistan; the Kashmir issue was becoming embroiled in deeper controversy and was attracting negative international attention. Against this backdrop, the Sikhs pushed forth the demand for creating a separate linguistic state based on the Punjabi language. Hence, Punjabi Suba shared a temporal space with all these regional expressions that sought to challenge the centripetal impulses of the nation. Their claim for recognition was immediately dubbed as having sinister intentions bound to result in real adverse consequences.

These movements were generally pitted against the idea of a homogeneous whole, a united India that does not recognise ethnic, cultural, linguistic *differences*. The difference was sought to be consciously excluded for a new memory of the nation to emerge. The embryonic stage of nation-making can often gloss over the eccentricities of their constituent units to cement the ‘unity’ project. As witnessed in the past, difference(s) have been a source of anxiety in the nascent stage of modern nation-states. It is something that requires an immediate modification or a rupture, where the original distinctive form has to be disassembled and made amenable to absorption in the nationalist framework via the incessant project of unity. Most of these differences were suspected of mushrooming into fissiparous tendencies or at least carry the possibility to germinate as one.

A report by the Emotional Integration of People Committee will aid in discerning better the fear paramount within the nationalist circles in the 1960s.¹⁵² This fear was

¹⁵¹ Louise Tillin, “United in Diversity? Asymmetry in Indian Federalism,” *Publius :The Journal of Federalism* 37, no.1 (November 2006): 48.

¹⁵² The committee came into existence after the recommendation by a conference of state education ministers in 1960. The attendees prescribed formation of a national integration committee to look into the various forces that sought to challenge the national unity and also ways to bring about an integration through the means of education.

about the *balkanisation* of Indian territory and the emergence or re-emergence of the forces that could disrupt unity. The report produced by the committee insists that -

The shame and degradation, moral and material, of foreign rule and the sacrifices which had to be made to achieve freedom, have made a profound impression on the minds of the people and there is a deep and universal desire not to tolerate anything that might bring back the dark ages of servitude. But it is also true that with the achievement of Independence, the forces that divided the people, the so-called centrifugal forces, are re-asserting themselves, imperceptibly perhaps, but insidiously and persistently. Sailing under false colors, they confuse the public mind. They have to be recognised for what they really are and ruthlessly attacked; what is more important, the causes which give them sustenance and the stores of energy which they hold captive have to be removed and re-oriented.¹⁵³

It is telling that the Committee was named—‘emotional integration’ assuming that the territorial integration had been achieved through a mixture of consent and force. The above observations are suffused with emotional rhetoric and moral resolve characteristic of the elites of newly independent India. It may be noted that the report calls for ‘recognising centrifugal forces for what they really are’ and ‘ruthlessly attacking them’, both of which would prove to be not so straightforward. As we will see, the temptation to classify all movements for autonomy or greater share in resources by specific groups as ‘centrifugal and fissiparous’ was high. Moreover, the report tended to romanticise the role played by the national liberation movement in bringing together or creating this universal desire for freedom. According to this discourse, once the foreign yoke had been lifted, the differentiating tendencies manifested themselves again in public life. However, such an account represents cohesiveness in all the political actions during the colonial period as directed against the empire, which might not be entirely accurate. It has been argued by subaltern scholars that these actions, sometimes reinforcing and at other times contesting the nationalist leadership, existed in the political realm simultaneously.

One such parallel can be found in the Sikh experience. Although, on the one hand, the martial race discourse shaped Sikh identity, on the other, the Akalis collaborated with Congress in their activities against colonial rule. A number of Sikhs were part of the imperial army and fought the British battles on their behalf; for this, they received patronage rights. At the same time, Ghadarites sought to uproot the empire violently. It has been argued that the regional forces’ commitment to the urges of national unification was probably not as strong as the Congress at the time of independence.

The vast legitimacy of initial years, which Congress enjoyed due to the leadership it provided to the anti-colonial front, had gradually started to recede. In contrast, the unity project had not reached its logical conclusion, spawning the need for a committee on integration. Also, there was an increment in the number of regional elites during this period, which meant that democratic ideals were penetrating the Indian soil and registering themselves on the consciousness of locals. However, it was a process taking place simultaneously with the waning traditional influence of Congress. Nationalists perceived these forces as a growing threat of disruption,

¹⁵³ Government of India, *Report of the Committee on Emotional Integration*, (New Delhi: Ministry of Education GOI, 1962), 4.

directly in conflict with the processes of national integration. The nation-state, here, is acknowledging that it was the presence of an 'other' that produced the conditions of its own origin and desirability in the first place. This gap was very soon occupied by the regional elites/communities/groups.

On the other hand, not always were the centrifugal forces and their politics a threat to the process of national unity. The Committee on Emotional Integration appreciated those non-Hindi regions who accepted Hindi as a national language to their own disadvantage.¹⁵⁴ These groups were seen as acting in tandem with the national project. M.S.S Pandian has called this mode of nationalist intervention the 'strategy of attunement'; where the 'nation form tries to attune the recalcitrant identities to the singular subject position that it valorises'.¹⁵⁵ A very similar strategy of attuning takes place during the Punjabi Suba movement and the reinforcements for this 'strategy of attunement' came from the Sikh leaders.

Tara Singh - Rhetoric of Trust and Commonality

Various linguistic or religious communities were seeking recognition in independent India through the mechanisms of boundary redrawing processes. Partition had set the general mood within which 'politics of recognition' asserted itself. To have a geographical territory coincide with a particular language or religion meant carving out a homogeneous political unit. The unit could thus, as a whole, participate in the democratic federal setup of the new constitution. By contrast, Nehru constantly emphasised the need to think globally; all this was influenced partly by his trips abroad. He felt India had to learn a lot from the west. According to him, the national borders were becoming redundant in the west, but people were still 'passionately' debating about 'internal borders in India'.¹⁵⁶ One such passionate debate took place to form Punjabi province, which Nehru chided as an evocation of primordial urges. The leading contender in the initial years was Master Tara Singh, who, according to Nehru, was a staunch 'communalist'.

Nehru was quite apprehensive of Master Tara Singh, given that since the time of partition, Master had made several speeches which Nehru saw as utterly irresponsible.¹⁵⁷ Moreover, the content of these speeches was often suffused with communal overtures, pushing forth proposals furthering the Sikh interests in the independent Indian polity.¹⁵⁸ Though Master was known for his political realism and pragmatism, his views were often quite contradictory to the government's officially

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵⁵ M.S.S. Pandian, "Nation Impossible," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 10 (March 2009): 67.

¹⁵⁶ Nehru, "States and the Nation," in *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches: March 1953 – August 1957*, 196.

¹⁵⁷ Nehru, "Letter to Gopichand Bhargava," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: April 1948-June 1948*, 45.

¹⁵⁸ It is essential to clarify the differences between 'communalism' and 'communitarianism' as these two terms would be used throughout and perhaps will give the impression of being one and the same thing. Communalism in the Indian context, and more specifically in the way used by Nehru, implies the politicization of religious identities. It is often imbued with negative connotations; wherever an assertion of 'communalism as an ideology' is made, it reflects an implicit fear of such ideological adherents taking up state power. This form of definition proposes the existence of 'communals' in a contradiction to secular impulses; infact, secularism is perceived to be on the target of such groups. Some more of this assumptions have been noted by Bipan Chandra in his work. See, Bipan Chandra, "Communalism and the State: Some Issues in India," *Social Scientist* 18, no. 8 & 9 (August 1990). On the other hand, communitarianism proposes a more expansive theory, that includes but is not limited to religious identities. The emphasis of communitarians is on shared values and culture within which an individual is situated and derives his/her identity from. There might be an overlapping of the idea with facets identified as 'communal' but it is not immediately reducible to it.

endorsed position. Tara Singh constantly conveyed that a war with Pakistan was inevitable, and with some urgency, suggested that the Indian state should pour in its effort to counter it. For Master, the displacement of millions had left in its wake new problems; the influx of refugees and various other exchanges had yet to be finalised, and the possibility of war could not be ruled out. He also believed that if Nehru had sufficient proof that Pakistan created trouble in Kashmir (in 1948), then he should open a front near Lahore.¹⁵⁹

It is interesting to note that Master Tara Singh was not actively endorsing the demand for Sikh Suba during this period. Usually, the rhetoric he deployed was one of 'preserving the Sikh entity and strengthening of the *Panth*'. However, he was uneasy with Hindu dominance in the freshly divided Punjab, which according to him, was mere supplanting of earlier Muslim dominance. In a presidential address he delivered at the Second Annual Sikh Students Federation Conference, he articulated his appeal to Hindus in east Punjab as follows:

Patriots, I appeal to you in the name of the nation, that with the elimination of the Sikhs, the nation will be dead. If you are true patriots, it is your duty to allow the Sikhs to have consciousness and respect. The efforts to eliminate the entity of the Sikhs in the name of the creation of a nation is a great mistake on your part. We, Sikhs, are proud of one thing and that is self respect. If we lose our separate entity, where do we look to for our self-respect. If our entity is eliminated, then you will be finishing your own self-respecting military wing, which will come very much in the way of the creation of a nation. It depends on you to think over this and not to be led by extraneous considerations. Be practical men, and don't go by theories. Don't destroy your national Army. Pray, don't destroy it.¹⁶⁰

Patriot, as commonly understood, is a term that encompasses a feeling of love for one's country. During the time of partition, this element was mutually indispensable to the self-image of both the Sikh and Hindu communities. Master was furthering the cause of Sikhs through appealing to this shared value. He was couching his monologue in the language of 'politics of recognition' by explicitly asking for recognising the military wing's bravery and honouring the self-respect of Sikhs. The martial race and sword-arm tropes were rife in such arguments. At the same time, it was an attempt at deriding the secularised nationhood narratives forwarded by the political premiers of that period. He juxtaposed it with his own imagination of the Indian nation-state, one where he saw the Sikh community at the forefront of national defence and where they were valued as 'brave but distinctive partners' of the Hindu community. However, for Nehru, Sikh leaderships' demands stemmed from an unwarranted fear and the source of such anxiety amongst minorities was perceived by

¹⁵⁹ J.S. Grewal, *Master Tara Singh in Indian History: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Politics of Sikh Identity*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2017), 431. Many politicians interpreted this as Master's attempt at provoking a war with Pakistan. In some accounts, it was contended that Master wanted to regain the Sikh sacred shrines on the Pakistani side and reconquer territories with considerable Sikh population lost by India subsequently after partition.

¹⁶⁰ Ajit Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba: The Story of the Struggle*, (Delhi: U.C. Kapur & Sons, 1970), 160-164. This appeal was directed against the Arya Samajis who were leading the movement of *Shudhi* and *Sanghathan*, aimed at revivalism of Hinduism in east Punjab. Through a consciously curated narrative, the organisation pushed forth the idea that the *Khalsa* was established by Guru Gobind Singh for the protection of Hindu society against Islamic aggression, and now that the partition had finally dispelled the Muslim threat, there was no specific need for *Khalsa* and the Sikhs should return to the Hindu fold.

him as more imagined than real. The genesis of such trepidation had no material basis for the nationalist leaders. Nehru was far more worried about the resemblance that the Sikh's insistence bore to the Muslim League's demand before independence. In a letter to Baldev Singh, the Defence Minister of recently liberated India, Nehru reiterates his dismay. He states:

I know fully well that there is great deal of Sikh feeling behind some of these demands. I would very much like to do something to convince the Sikhs their fears are groundless. Indeed I do not myself see why a progressive and enterprising community like the Sikh should be afraid of the future. But in any event it would be doing an ill turn to the Sikhs to treat them as the Muslim League wanted the Muslims to be treated before the partition. What I have been specially distressed [about] is the strange familiarity between the present demands of some of the Sikh leaders and the old Muslim League demands. That is a bad omen. Can we not learn from bitter experience?¹⁶¹

One year after the partition, the content of minority safeguards was still under consideration. The Constituent Assembly was yet to settle on the rights to be conceded to various religious groups in India. Sikh representatives, endorsing and hoping for the inclusion of several political safeguards in the Constitutional text, presented their 'Charter of Demands'. It pivoted around the claims of reserving seats in the state legislature of Punjab and Parliament and setting aside a certain proportion of posts in the army.¹⁶² Nonetheless, these demands were interpreted as 'communally surcharged' by both Nehru and the Arya Samaj Press in Punjab. Nehru believed the Akali leaders were 'amazingly irresponsible' for desiring to both contest and cooperate with the government to 'gain manifold advantages'.¹⁶³ The Arya Samaj controlled press interpreted the 'Charter of Demands' as analogous to Jinnah's fourteen points. They prophesied that the outline of this document was following a parallel course in history and was a step towards the insidious inception of 'Sikhistan'.¹⁶⁴ The repressed suspicions of the state started making an appearance in local rhetoric, which was reflected when the Hindutva organisations dubbed the demand for Punjabi Suba as *rashtravirodhi*.

When the Advisory Committee appointed a Sub-Committee to look into the dilemma these Sikh demands presented, the assembled members conceded that the Sikhs had undergone 'tragic sufferings' both before and after the partition. However, they 'were a highly educated and virile community gifted with a most remarkable spirit of enterprise' and 'did not suffer from any of the handicaps faced by the other minorities'.¹⁶⁵ Hence, they were seen as not requiring any special 'political and legal

¹⁶¹ Nehru, "Letter to Baldev Singh," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: October 1948-December 1948*, 125-126.

¹⁶² Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 167. & Grewal, *Master Tara Singh in Indian History*, 415.

¹⁶³ Nehru, "Letter to Gopichand Bhargava," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: April 1948-June 1948*, 53-54.

¹⁶⁴ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 167.

¹⁶⁵ Grewal, *Master Tara Singh in Indian History*, 415. The 'Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities and Tribal and Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas' to the Constituent Assembly appointed the Sub-Committee on 24 February, 1948. The committee appointed the following members—Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Dr. Ambedkar, and K.M. Munshi, with Sardar Patel as chairman. They were to look into minority problems affecting Punjab and Bengal.

protections in the form of separate electorate and weightage'. Accordingly, the same was not conceded to Sikhs.

Clearly, this vision that Sikhs are virile, enterprising, patriotic, capable of making sacrifices shaped the larger discourse of the 'model minority', where the Sikhs were contrasted to the Muslim minority explicitly. Some of these tropes were appropriated by the Sikh leaders themselves. What is noteworthy here is that the Sikhs were demanding recognition by asking for some political safeguards, not secession. Additionally, as evident in the model minority discourse appearing in the west, the trope has frequently been used to dismiss the political-economic demands of the 'more prosperous communities'. These communities and groups are often presented as not requiring state support to flourish, and the same shapes various policy approaches towards them.

The suspicion of a 'possible betrayal' was, from the beginning, braided with the motif of a model community, as would become obvious through further analysis of the speeches and reports of nationalist leaders and government commissions. The idea of suspicion was extrapolated to the Sikh case from the experience of Indian nationalists with the Muslim League. The entire approach of state and eminent state leaders from thereon was one of caution. Nehru, at all stages, was seen affirming the model minority trope, which was simultaneously constitutive of Sikh self-description. The geostrategic spatial location of east Punjab between Kashmir and the rest of India also made Nehru quite sceptical of accepting the plea for the formation of a Sikh province immediately post-independence. He admitted that any such entanglement that led to this form of dismemberment was likely to evoke deep passions and, consequently, could result in severe repercussions for the Kashmir situation. In one of his letters to the governor of East Punjab, he commented that 'Sikhs unfortunately are not popular with the Muslims at present. If there is a belt between Kashmir and the rest of India composed of Sikhs, this will lead to a cutting off of Kashmir from India',¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, the non-inclusion of any political safeguards in the Constitution led to an unsettling feeling of perturbation amongst Sikhs. Some Akali legislators led by Master Tara Singh started contemplating the possibility of forming a province of their own, as Sikh demands presented in the charter were not accepted.¹⁶⁷ Instead, the very idea of establishing a Punjabi Suba was met with utter abhorrence by Hindu organisations and nationalist leaders. Master was quite upset about the narrative that had become immensely recurrent in that period and cast a glance of suspicion on the Sikhs due to their proximity to Pakistan. Writing for Spokesman in 1951, he inverted the narrative by selectively retrieving a historical memory personal to both Hindus and Sikhs. Master contended that throughout the political subjugation of the subcontinent by the Mughals, not a single Sikh corroborated with the oppressive regime against the Hindus. Whereas he alleged that 'thousands of Hindus' betrayed the Sikhs. In his narration, they had joined the Mughals 'against the Sikhs on many

¹⁶⁶ Nehru, "Letter to C.M. Trivedi," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: October 1948-December 1948*, 127. Although by 1960's, Master Tara Singh modified his stand with regard to Kashmir, he proclaimed that the only solution to this problem is to have a plebiscite, he said that Kashmir belongs neither to India nor to Pakistan but to Kashmiris. This could be seen as his pursuit of producing wider solidarities across religious minority groups in India, and positing it as a challenge to what he saw as deficient secular ethos of Congress regime. Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, *Why do the Akalis want a Punjabi Suba?: An Exposition of their stand*, (New Delhi: Sanyunkta Punjab Samrakshana Samiti), 10.

¹⁶⁷ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 198.

occasions'.¹⁶⁸ By evoking a deep sense of indignation towards the betrayal of the hyperbolic 'thousands of Hindus', he very carefully weaved the past and present as contemporaneous and, in doing so, crystallised the loyalty of the Sikhs as Indian subjects. In such a narrative, Pakistan became the equivalent of Mughal rule, and it was insisted that against both, the Sikh community led an austere campaign. Also, in this selective rendering, Hindus such as 'Chandu Shah of Lahore' and 'Gangu Kaul - the cook' who aligned with Mughals, and were culpable in the brutal execution of Guru Arjan Dev and the young sons of Guru Gobind Singh, were invoked as representations of the entire Hindu community. Representations of the self and the other from the past were conjoined with the present moment of agitation in order to deflect the gaze of suspicion from the self to the other. Other's deception in the past became proof of one's own loyalty in the present. Even so, the invocation of this memory was not at the forefront of the community's consciousness in all moments; we see that such a feeling of indignation about 'past betrayals' was not manifest throughout Sikh orations during Punjabi Suba moment.

In an address delivered by Master, where he articulated Sikh demands of Punjabi province before a *Panthic* congregation, references were made to the two communities being like 'two branches of the same tree, very much depending on each other'.¹⁶⁹ In another one of Master's speeches, this theme is more explicitly discernible, with him asking the Punjabi Hindus to 'trust' the Sikhs and support their demand for Punjabi Suba. He says:

I again come to the point and appeal to the Hindu brethren in the name of common culture and religious heritage, in the name of our common forefathers, in the name of the catholicity of the Hindus, and in the name of the great Gurus, Tegh Bahadur and Gobind Singh, and in the name of the minor sons of Guru Gobind Singh, and innumerable martyred ones who were done to death in their effort to protect Hinduism and Hindu culture, and to give the country freedom from the tyrants at that time. Will you hear me? But if you go on insisting that we be kept in bondage, you cannot, by any twisting of words, make us or anybody else believe that you trust us.¹⁷⁰

Here, his emphasis was on the common or collectively owned Indic roots and heritage of Hindus and Sikhs—the shared cultural ethos and understandings, norms and values embedded and extracted from a conjoint history. This was further suffused with the imagery of one community 'protecting' the other from a tyrannical outsider; the image of a protector here was analogous to the metaphor of sword-arm rife in Hindu nationalist discourse about Sikhs. In the memory world of Sikhs and Hindus, the intruder or the tyrannical 'other' was the Muslim invader. Through such exposition, Sikh martyrs were no longer the martyrs whose sacrifice was to be celebrated just by the Sikhs; their martyrdom transcended religious boundaries and was shared with the Hindus.¹⁷¹ In this process, the intruder was implicitly represented

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶⁹ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 215.

¹⁷⁰ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 261.

¹⁷¹ The more common-sensical understanding of a Sikh martyr is one who sacrifices his/her life for the protection of *dharam*. Louis Fenech in his book *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition* has argued that before twentieth century the Sikh and Muslim saints/martyrs' shrines were seen as a site of veneration by all religious groups in Punjab. Most of the people belonging to peasantry class visited these shrines for pragmatic purposes, the

as diabolical for attempting an erasure of the indigenous religions and was silently excluded for not belonging to the imagination of a common civilisation.

Dar Commission and the Fear of Sub-National Assertions

Regional politics' clamouring for reconstitution of the territories by asking for a recognition of the vernacular(s) within the national was endorsed even by the local cadres of the Congress party. They, too, insisted on reorganisation. All these demands were making the project of uniting India, on an abstract principle of the modern nation-state, increasingly complex. In 1948, the Constituent Assembly appointed a commission to inquire and give its recommendations on the issue of demarcation of provinces based on language. The commission, now popularly known as the Dar commission, gave several recommendations, all of which were aligned with the larger rhetoric employed by the national statesmen at that time. One of the most crucial suggestions of the report was to assemble a lexical priority system; the 'principle of administrative convenience' was to be considered before the 'principle of homogeneity of language' while creating new provincial units. At some places, it was voiced that the 'oneness of language' should not be the sole factor when demands for the formation of new provinces are being considered and should be supplemented by other circumstances. Committee members were also quite hesitant about linguistic provinces for another reason. They believed that the new provinces were likely to produce fresh minority problems in the areas which would be so demarcated. Conjoined to all this was the threat to a nation in its 'infancy' from sub-national or regional movements. Dar Commission stated:

An autonomous linguistic province, in other words, means an autonomous linguistic State and an autonomous linguistic State means, in the words of one of its exponents, that its territories are inviolate. And if in a linguistic province the majority language group comes to regard the territory of the entire province as exclusively its own, the time cannot be far distant when it will come to regard the minorities living in that province and people living outside it as not their own. And once that stage is reached, it will only be a question of time for that sub-nation to consider itself a full nation.¹⁷²

The bureaucratic state and its associated paraphernalia as it expanded in the colonial period were inherited with minor tweaks. The imperial logic of creating provinces keeping in mind administrative or political convenience, was to sustain their burgeoning power and dominance in the colony. The same logic was passed down and applied by the independent Indian state. By giving primacy to bureaucratic principles over linguistic assertions, the state was stifling down sub-national expressions. According to the Dar report, the passions espoused by the sub-national/regional movements were alluded to as being inspired by 'primordial and pre-modern sentiments, urges, and emotions'. Moreover, the Commission also apprehends that minorities within linguistic provinces would be aggrieved, and ensuing linguistic parochialism would inflame fissiparous passions. Two forms of

warrior-martyrs were shared by all. These shrines and miracle saints were seen as having intercession, curative and preventative powers. Louis Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, 12-23, 154-159.

¹⁷² Constituent Assembly of India, *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission*, 28.

nationalism(s) were competing and articulating themselves in the discursive space offered by the modern state, one which was inspired by civic or high culture of the man educated in the west; the other was an ethnic or low culture of the man with primordial urges.¹⁷³ Indian nationalism, which took form during the colonial period, was referred to as standing at crossroads with the ‘centuries-old India of narrow loyalties, petty jealousies and ignorant prejudices’.¹⁷⁴ While writing a letter to his chief ministers in 1956, Nehru was mulling over the passions that usually accompanied with pomp any discussion on the reorganisation of states; he wrote:

Those passions were not against an external enemy or some internal evil. They were against each other and the whole fabric that millions had built up by their labour through generations of effort seemed to crack up. Was this some temporary phase, an aberration of the moment, or was there something deeper to it, I do not know. I have tried to believe that this was a relic of the narrow regionalism and parochialism which had been our failing in the past and which were having a final spurt before this ghost was laid. For the moment the ghost is there and we live a somewhat haunted existence.¹⁷⁵

Indian nationalism had resisted the colonial ruler’s ‘high culture’ by waging war for national liberation and ultimately supplanted the alien ‘high culture’ with their own. They did not replace it with what Ernst Gellner calls ‘old, local low culture’ but with a reinvented category of the ‘local high culture’ (read literate). This unseating of the strange, alien cultural codes took place along with the simultaneous reinvention of the new cultural categories. The new high culture often reiterated its ties with the older, lower forms to acquire legitimacy but, on the whole, remained revivalist.¹⁷⁶ The nationalists retained their ‘links with the earlier folk styles and dialects’ and at the same time desired to replace the older loyalties, urges, emotions, and sentiments with modern abstract civic ones. Through the insurrection of linguistic and religious ethnic expression in post-colonial India, the binary of civic/ethnic nationalism became more visible. Inherent scorn that the high culture has for the lower forms of nationalism was now readily apparent in the state’s exposition. Dar commission mentioned:

The existing Indian provinces are administrative units of British imperialism. They came into existence in a somewhat haphazard way, and were not designed to work democratic institutions; they are certainly susceptible of more scientific and rational planning. But they have taken root and are now living vital organisms and have served the

¹⁷³ Ernest Gellner, *Nation and Nationalism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 50. Ernest Gellner acutely points out to array of nationalism(s) which confront the modern state, he has very stirringly equated them with the analogy of ‘Wild and Garden Culture’. Culture growing out of *wilderness* is spontaneous, it reproduces itself ‘without any conscious design, supervision and surveillance’; whereas the one that he visualises as the *garden* or *cultivated culture* possesses complexity and richness, and is sustained by literacy and specialized personnel, without whose care it will perish. The intricately placed high cultures all perform tasks in modernity that are far more complicated and in the process desire a state of their own, these cultures compete for available state spaces and in-turn end up constituting an imagination of nation that is hegemonic, while also authoritatively displacing others. Wilderness grows on its own, sometimes it is transformed into cultivated forms but it usually remains on the periphery of the modern state like an uncultivated, undesired weed.

¹⁷⁴ Constituent Assembly of India, *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission*, 32.

¹⁷⁵ Nehru, *Essential Writings of Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. 2, ed. S. Gopal and Uma Iyengar, (New Delhi: OUP, 2003), 167.

¹⁷⁶ Ernest Gellner, *Nation and Nationalism*, 57.

useful purpose of bringing together people, who might otherwise have remained separated. And though they may be somewhat disadvantageous in working modern democracy, they are not bad instruments for submerging a sub-national consciousness and moulding a nation.¹⁷⁷

Dar commission was on edge about all the sub-national tendencies. The report articulated its fear of nascent nationalism being submerged as a consequence of the emotional response generated by these primordial urges.¹⁷⁸ This basic premise set the tone of the recommendations offered by the Dar commission. However, with the death of Potti Sriramulu in 1952 and regional impulses still pulsating wildly, the government was forced to reconsider some of its earlier decisions, as was evident with the concessions granted by the States reorganization commission.¹⁷⁹

Mother Tongue and the Betrayal of the ‘Common Mother’

By this time, it had become a regular occurrence in Punjab that the local speakers disowned their native mother tongue during census operations as a patriotic gesture of attachment to their respective religious community identities. The language controversy that produced Urdu/Hindi binary during the colonial period and later resulted in a threefold contest between Urdu/Hindi/Punjabi in Punjab flowed uninterrupted in the post-colonial period. Punjabi language was ‘disowned’ by the Hindus in the region during census enumerations of 1951. The pressure was exerted from both sides on the ordinary populace to declare their mother tongue as Hindi/Punjabi; this resulted in further communal disharmony in the region. Nehru taking cognizance that the returns of language column were highly tampered with, announced that ‘any census given in the Punjab and in Pepsu on the language and script questions will not be considered to have any value’.¹⁸⁰ Sikhs, however, were visibly aggrieved; for them, the Hindus had malevolently betrayed their mother tongue. In a memorandum submitted by Chief Khalsa Diwan, they narrated their disappointment by proclaiming:

When the elder brother, the Hindu Community tried to throttle the mother (Punjabi), the younger brother (the Sikhs) had to come to her rescue. It is their patriotism for the State and its mother-tongue Punjabi that they have made supreme sacrifices to get for it the status that it deserves. The part played by the community who disowned their mother tongue is treachery for the State as well as for the language that they learned with their mother’s milk.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Constituent Assembly of India, *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission*, 29.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷⁹ Potti Sriramulu is known today for his passionate advocacy of Telugu language and for creation of a separate state for the Telugu-speaking people. He was a Gandhian and had contributed immensely to the cause of freedom struggle and upliftment of Dalit people previously. In 1952, he began a fast-unto-death, for securing separate statehood for Telugu people. Unfortunately, the government did not relent to his public demand and he starved himself to death in the protest.

¹⁸⁰ Nehru, “Letter to Udham Singh Nagoke,” in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: March 1951- June 1951*, 294.

¹⁸¹ Veekay Weekly: The Complete Case of Punjabi Suba, *Chief Khalsa Diwan’s memorandum to Parliamentary Consultative Committee on Punjabi Suba Demand*, 19-20.

The motif used in this and many other narratives is the falling apart of two brothers, one refusing to recognise his own mother, the other trying to protect and dignify her existence. Regardless of the embittered relations, the rhetorical device here was of a crack appearing within a family, and at-risk was the loss of a common mother (tongue). For Arvind Mandair, the concept of mother-tongue and its accompanying retrieval of a singular religious identity developed in the state of active colonial intervention; the native, before this, was living a heterolingual experience. The heterolingual speaker, according to Mandair, conversed smoothly in all the languages available; it was a melange of mother-tongues, “where multiple mother-tongues encounter each other, losing one mother, finding another”.¹⁸² He argues that the mother tongue of the native is invented as a mirror image corresponding to the monolingualism of the English other.¹⁸³ It also activated the progressive sanitisation of Urdu and Hindi from external pathogenic influences to acquire a sharper resemblance to Persian and Sanskrit. Mandair further describes this process as ‘the paradox’, where “the idea of the unity of one’s own had to be invented in order to break with what was actually one’s own, the heterolingual”.

The affirmation of one’s otherness took place through the Anglo-vernacular schools, where English and Hindi were proximal to each other, and both were imparted to the student. Pedagogical mechanisms introduced the foreignness of other languages and induced into subjects the consciousness of their own mother-tongue. In addition, it gave rise to a conflict over who should control the pedagogical institutions, as seen in the Hindi-Punjabi dispute. The primary concern of this dispute was about the medium of instruction in primary schools. It is in the formative years that children recognise the familiar by being introduced to the unfamiliar. This was done by supplanting an alien in the known territory, which in turn, induced affection and loyalty for what was one’s own. The Hindi-Hindu paradigm that was complementary to the Punjabi-Sikh paradigm was a mirror response to the monolingual-monotheism of the colonial project; the act of disowning the mother-tongue has to be contextualised as such. Despite being an invention, the common mother espoused a sense of loyalty amongst the Sikhs. Whereas, for the Hindus who spoke Punjabi at home and denounced it publicly, the unity of Hindi-Hindu had produced a feeling of aversion towards their spoken tongue. In this strife, Punjabi too no longer remained isolated from attempts at cleansing. The previous *Lahnda* (a dialect of Punjabi spoken in Western Punjab) and *Hindostani* influences were erased from memory, and the act of erasure itself was forgotten. The Punjabi language was written in Persian/Urdu script during the colonial times but was now vigorously de-linked from other scripts. Punjabi in the Gurumukhi script came to be identified as constitutive to the Sikh ethnic consciousness.¹⁸⁴

States Reorganization Commission and Regional Formula

As the Hindus composed a majority in Punjab, the ‘repudiation of their mother-tongue’ had other effects. The Indian Government appointed the States

¹⁸² Arvind Mandair, “Interdictions: Language, Religion & the (dis)Orders of Indian Identity,” in *Social Identities* 13, no. 3 (2007): 343. doi: 10.1080/13504630701363978

¹⁸³ Ibid., 352.

¹⁸⁴ It is interesting because the Sikh scriptures are themselves composed in a language that preceded the attempt at cleansing. *Adi Granth* (sacred book of Sikhs) is composed not merely in Punjabi but is infused with Hindi, Marathi, Persian and Arabic words. Grierson mentions how the *Janam Sakhi* (life of Nanak) is written in *Lahnda* and not Punjabi. Although, Gurumukhi is the script which is used for recording the hymns in most of these scriptures.

Reorganization Commission (henceforth SRC) on twenty-second December 1953; the commission's primary objective was to give recommendations to the state about reorganising provincial units and look into demands raised by multiple lingual groups. The members of the commission explicitly repudiated the demand of the Sikh homeland or the Punjabi Suba. The report argued that "the demand for a Punjabi-speaking State was strongly opposed by large sections of people speaking the Punjabi language and residing in the areas proposed to be constituted into a Punjabi-speaking State".¹⁸⁵ The claim of a smaller province, where the majority populace spoke Punjabi, was also dismissed because, for the commission, Hindi and Punjabi languages were akin to each other; where Punjabi's 'superstructure was a dialect of western Hindi'. After citing the linguistic/spatial proximity of the two, the report referred to the entire debacle of the vernacular in the region as not a 'real' language problem.¹⁸⁶ While declining to accept the demand for the formation of a Sikh homeland, the SRC made a reference to the 'enterprising spirit' of Sikhs. It was a comment which kept reappearing throughout and occupied a permanent part in the state rhetoric against Punjabi Suba. The report classified the Sikhs as a numerically small community composed of 'enterprising and vigorous people', whose 'creative energy needed greater opportunities than those possibly offered by a smaller unit'.¹⁸⁷

The report, coupled with this, further argued that the Punjabi speaking area faces 'no economic or political exploitation' from the Hindi speaking region.¹⁸⁸ It also articulated that the Sikh desire to be reconstituted as a separate province was merely based on imagined sources of discontent. Through the endorsement of this document, the PEPSU state was also integrated with the Punjab region. While discussing the integration, the commission in passing referred to the 'dangerous desire' for 'linguistic/communal homelands'.¹⁸⁹ According to the report, the concept of 'homeland' would promote counter-loyalties and never allow full integration in the 'area of domicile'. In addition, the doctrine was perceived to be a deterrent to 'national unity'.¹⁹⁰ The overall disposition of the SRC report towards the concept of the 'homeland' was marked with pure revulsion. In contrast to SRC's opinion, the Sikh community continued to perceive Punjab and Punjabi as integral of self and the non-recognition of linguistic province as an authentic debacle. A pamphlet distributed during the Punjabi Suba agitation poignantly articulates the interconnectedness constitutive of Punjab and Punjabi. It states:

Punjabi literature, Geets and folklore express the longings, joys and sorrows which the Punjabis have experienced through the centuries. Punjabi is the essential part of the very being of the Punjabis. Without it, they will be cut off from their past. Without Punjabi, Punjab will be anything but Punjab.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganization Commission*, (Delhi: GOI, 1955), 141.

¹⁸⁶ Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganization Commission*, 141. G.A. Grierson was an oriental linguist and surveyed British territories of India to produce an account documenting the various spoken languages of India; his 'Linguistic Survey of India' features in the SRC report as well. According to Grierson, the Punjabi language had 'tonal features', a 'phonetic system', and a store of words not found in Hindi. For him, the pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of the two languages was sufficiently distinctive to classify Punjabi as a separate language. See, Brass, 288.

¹⁸⁷ Government of India, *Report of the States reorganization Commission*, 155.

¹⁸⁸ Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganization Commission*, 146.

¹⁸⁹ Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganization Commission*, 148.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁹¹ "Language Policy of All-India Radio" by Shri Ravi Shankar Shukla quoted in SGPC, *Punjabi Suba Demand*, 1.

Nehru, too, acknowledged the importance of Punjabi folk songs in Punjabi culture in a speech he delivered when the SRC report was tabled in Parliament.¹⁹² Nevertheless, he, too, held an aversion to the concept of 'communal homelands'. They were, for him, a direct threat to the secular ethos of Indian polity.

On the other hand, Sikh representatives were not pleased with the report presented by the SRC. Akali leaders rejected the report; Master Tara Singh went a step further and denounced it as a 'decree of Sikh annihilation'.¹⁹³ Instead of accepting the demand for the formulation of the Punjabi Suba, the commission merged PEPSU in the wider region to ensure geographical contiguity and simultaneously dismantle whatever conceived notions of a communal homeland existed amongst Sikhs. A *Panthic* convention decided that it was pertinent that a deputation meets the Congress High Command to press for Punjabi Suba; some round of talks were held between Master Tara Singh and Sikh representatives with Nehru. Meanwhile, Congress declared that they would conduct their annual session in Amritsar, in response to which, the Akalis decided to conduct their own conference there.¹⁹⁴ A massive procession of Sikhs marched to display their intensely passionate longing for Punjabi Suba. Michael Brecher, who wrote Nehru's biography, was present to witness this phase of the struggle. According to him, Nehru was sympathetic to the Sikh fears but was under considerable influence from 'communal Congressmen from Punjab region' to not concede the same.¹⁹⁵

After this procession, a regional formula was developed and offered to the Sikh delegation as a settlement. Notwithstanding this, many Akalis opposed the offer for being short of their demand for Punjabi Suba. Regional Formula provided for the devolution of powers in the Hindi and Punjabi-speaking areas. The idea was to give equal legislative powers to a bilingual region without actually creating a new state. Punjab was to be divided into the Hindi and Punjabi regions, and the official language of each region was to be their respective regional language. Both areas were supposed to have their regional committees who could express in the form of a report or recommendation their views on several specified matters and operate under a joint legislative assembly.¹⁹⁶ Master Tara Singh had his hesitations about the regional formula. Regardless of his inhibitions, he insisted that this formula could be a breakthrough in the deteriorating relations between the two communities. Most of the problems were attributable to pervasive 'mutual suspicion and mistrust', and by expressing their trust in the government, there was a hope that the trust would be reciprocated. He anticipated that the elimination of common mistrust could pave the way for the formation of Punjabi Suba.¹⁹⁷ Akali leaders accepted the compromise by agreeing to work in close proximity with Congress and merged with it to contest the 1957 elections in the Punjab legislature.¹⁹⁸ Much to their dismay, the formula failed to live up to their expectations. The regional committees had no actual legislative or law-making powers and thus were doomed from the start; in the end, they satisfied no

¹⁹² Jawaharlal Nehru, "Coexistence at Home," in *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches: March 1953-August 1957*, vol. 3, (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting GOI, 1970), 181.

¹⁹³ Ajit Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 17.

¹⁹⁴ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 257-263. & Grewal, *Master Tara Singh*, 501-502.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Brecher, *Nehru: A Political Biography*, (New York: OUP, 1959), 485-487.

¹⁹⁶ Government of India, *Parliamentary Committee on the Demand for Punjabi Suba Report*, (New Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 18 March 1966).

¹⁹⁷ Grewal, *Master Tara Singh*, 502.

¹⁹⁸ Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, 321.

one.¹⁹⁹ The failure to implement it in letter and spirit became the propeller of the Punjabi Suba *morcha* being relaunched in May 1960.

Two Epic Fasts

The movement witnessed two epic fasts—first by Sant Fateh Singh and then by Master Tara Singh. Sant Fateh Singh, a lieutenant and trusted ally of Master, had acquired prominence in Akali politics by the end of the 1950s. These spectacular fasts, in part, were influenced by the linguistic state activist Potti Sriramulu's dramatic, fifty-eight days long, fatal fast. 'Fasting unto death' became a popular method to protest against the injustices during the colonial era. Gandhi is often hailed as one of the central figures in familiarising hunger strikes in the anti-colonial discourse of the twentieth century.²⁰⁰

Thousands of Sikh protesters were arrested and detained during the second phase; one of them was Master himself. Once Master was detained, Sant Fateh Singh was promoted to lead the movement. Sant decided to go on a 'fast unto death' to register his protest against the detention of several Sikhs on fake charges. His fast began in December 1960 and ended in twenty-two days; this he did on the advice of Master Tara Singh, who was by now released from detention. Although the government had not conceded much on the Punjabi Suba demand, Master's instruction was primarily aimed at saving the life of Fateh Singh.²⁰¹ The second was Master's own fast which started in August 1961 and ended in October, after nearly forty-five days. Several Sikhs in the position of power deplored these fasts as an 'anti-Sikh move'. In a joint statement released to the press, twenty members of state legislature described fasting-unto-death as a measure in variance with the practice of democracy and opposed to the basic tenets of the Sikh faith. Sikhism does not promote fasts of ritualistic and spiritual nature; however, these were political fasts as was known to everyone.

According to Amanda Machin, the hunger-striking bodies of activists are proactively engaged in politics simultaneously 'by the body' and 'on the body'. The bodies are displayed in the public realm as political instruments and political actors. Machin has further argued that this individual sacrifice constructs and reproduces a collective identification to strengthen a 'political us'. The fasts initiated by Fateh Singh and Tara Singh, besides popularising the Punjabi Suba agitation for the outside spectators, also helped in galvanizing support for the cause within the community. The body of the hunger striker became a site for the collective appropriation of the movement. When the two fasts could not achieve the desired results and were broken prematurely, it was not received well within the community. Both leaders were subjected to punishments in the traditional Sikh way. Khushwant Singh had speculated that Tara Singh saved his life when he gave up the self-imposed ordeal of fast-unto-death but 'killed his political career'.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Government of India, *Parliamentary Committee on the Demand for Punjabi Suba*, 18 March 1966.

²⁰⁰ Tim Pratt and James Vernon, "Appeal from this fiery bed ...: The Colonial Politics of Gandhi's Fasts and their Metropolitan Reception," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 92-114

²⁰¹ Grewal, *Master Tara Singh*, 568-569.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 582.

Diverging opinions, Nationalist Leaders and Punjabi Suba

This brief interlude, in particular, will focus on the ‘model-minority trope’ as it surfaced in the writings of C. Rajagopalachari, as well as Nehru’s general contempt for communal politics. During the fast, Master had recommended C. Rajagopalachari, Ajoy Ghosh, and Ashok Mehta for arbitration between Sikh and nationalist leaders. C. Rajagopalachari was against the general reorganization of Indian provinces according to the principle of linguism. However, once the principle was accepted, he argued that it was unjust to deny it in one particular case. He disagreed with what he called were fallacious distinctions being drawn between linguistic and communal claims. For him, any linguistic claim was inherently communal; besides, the binding element of a group, whether language or religion, were not markedly dissimilar. He also called out the nationalist thought pitted against the term ‘communal’; he thought that ‘the name communal [was] enough to justify the condemnation of it’. In the opinion of Rajagopalachari, it was a failure on the part of political leaders in ‘understanding of the human mind and its ways’. In line with his views, he maintained that language and religion could both be sources of good and mischief. He forwarded his contentions against the Nehruvian logic in which the creation of Maharashtra was hailed as ‘non-communal’ and Punjabi Suba was reiterated to be a communal homeland.²⁰³

When Master decided to subject himself to fast-unto-death, Rajagopalachari advised him to convert his fast into a prayerful fast that ‘may turn men from suspicion and injustice to trust and justice’.²⁰⁴ He also recommended that Master should pray for effecting a change of heart in the Hindu mind, so they see his just and good intentions.²⁰⁵ Tara Singh, however, did not take his advice. As the leaders’ fasts were performative in nature, whose purpose was to engage an audience while directing their gaze towards the asymmetrical treatment meted out to the Punjabi language.²⁰⁶ Rajagopalachari was sympathetic to the demands of Sikhs, as can be discerned through his comment:

And may the Sikh community, who gallantly stood by the nation in the freedom struggle, hold their souls in patience. Their present energy and success in peaceful, industrial endeavour have equaled their past patriotic sacrifices, and they are in every respect an example to the rest of the people of India. Let the Hindus not forget the Sikhs are as devout worshipers of Hari as any Hindu devotee. It is stupid for either Hindus or Sikhs to look upon one another as belonging to different creeds. The Sikhs are a denomination of the great Hindu community, whom the Hindus should be proud to acknowledge as brother in faith.²⁰⁷

His statements pragmatically followed the stereotypical notions prevalent in the larger discourse surrounding Sikhs as a model minority in India. He was downplaying the differences between Sikhs and Hindus, not in order to deny them their identity, but as an appeal to Hindus to recognise the commonalities with Sikhs and not perceive a

²⁰³ C. Rajagopalachari, “Punjabi Suba Claim,” in *Swarajya*, (29 October 1960).

²⁰⁴ C. Rajagopalachari, “The Punjabi Issue,” in *Swarajya*, (15 July 1961).

²⁰⁵ C. Rajagopalachari, “Tara Singh’s Fast,” in *Swarajya*, (26 August 1961).

²⁰⁶ See, Amanda Machin, “Hunger Power: The Embodied Protest of the Political Hunger Strike,” in *Interface* 13, no. 1 (May 2016): 157-180.

²⁰⁷ C. Rajagopalachari, “Punjabi Suba Claim,” in *Swarajya*, (29 October 1960).

Sikh-majority state as a threat.²⁰⁸ He believed that border states becoming secessionist was an unfounded premise. Rather than repressing the Sikh community, he argued, they should be made content to make them an effective part of national defence.²⁰⁹ Rajagopalachari was affirming a narrative employed by the Sikh community leaders as well, where the similarities were magnified and valorised. The common values that the minority shared with the majority community were idealised both descriptively and symbolically. As will be seen below, the affirmation of the themes of 'sharedness' and 'commonality' was further pronounced in Sant Fateh Singh's speeches and writings.

In contrast to Rajagopalachari, Nehru had faith in the idea that individuals could transcend their immediate context for the sake of forging general goodwill.²¹⁰ However, for this general goodwill to arrive, the individual will first have to be violently uprooted from their social context. The individual's social context was referred to as a product of 'primordial, primitive and narrow urges'. Many secular nationalists saw these urges at that time as artificial. For Nehru, the social/communitarian identity emerged through the process of othering, with some being included and others being excluded from the matrix. On the other hand, communitarian thought argues that this exclusion and inclusion happens due to the proximity of geographical cultures and not always is the result of animosity towards the 'other'. These identities are moreover a cultivated result of the love for familiar. Nehru was of the opinion that people need to break off these communal ties to move towards universal love and respect for shared humanity. The aspiration for such a universal love, undercutting communitarian loyalties, required quite an abstraction. This form of abstraction pits the love for one's own community against love for the whole of humanity, which might not always be accurate.

Nehru stated: "[N]o Indian should think of himself as a Hindu, a Muslim or of any religious entity so far as politics is concerned. It is only in this way that the country can make progress".²¹¹ The sanitisation of politics from any religious, religion-borne identity was the core of his secularist philosophy. His ideas sat at an uncomfortable distance from the *Miri-Piri* philosophy enshrined within Sikhism and reflected in the Akali politics. In Punjab politics, the categories of religion and politics were not seen as antagonistic but instead as mutually constituting each other. Nehru derided such forms of politics wherever they emerged in India; for him, anything that usually lay outside the zone of secularism was to be expelled. Many nationalists were opposed to 'communitarian urges' seeking political recognition; the case of Sikhs asking for Punjabi Suba was interpreted as the political manifestation of parochial, religious identities.

Meanwhile, in modernity, politics is essentially one of the dominant categories using which self-expression happens. Nehru was against the communitarian groups explicitly participating or expressing themselves through the mode of politics. He demarcated between the spiritual manifestations of religions, which he appreciated, but was unwilling to concede any space to religion organising and articulating itself

²⁰⁸ Vasanthi Srinivasan, *Gandhi's Conscience Keeper: C. Rajagopalachari and Indian Politics*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), 151-152.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Nehru, "Appeal to Goodwill," in *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches: March 1953 -August 1957*, 186.

²¹¹ Nehru, "End communal politics: Address to Jamat-ul-Ulema-e-Hind, National Herald," in *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru: April 1948-June 1948*, ed. S. Gopal, vol. 6, no. 2 (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund), 49.

through the language of politics. His cautious approach to religion can be seen from this exposition:

Very different is the method of religion. Concerned as it is principally with the regions beyond the reach of objective inquiry, it relies on emotion and intuition. And then it applies this method to everything in life, even to those things which are capable of intellectual inquiry and observation: Organised religion, allying itself to theology and often more concerned with its vested interests, than with things of the spirit, encourages a temper which is the very opposite to that of science. It produces narrowness and intolerance, credulity and superstition, emotionalism and irrationalism. It tends to close and limit the mind of man, and to produce a temper of a dependent, unfree person.²¹²

Nehru and most liberal politicians of the post-independence period had high expectations from an ordinary person engaging in politics. It is challenging to purge an individual of their values, ideals and moral worldview, which is often a derivative of their social identities. For Michael Sandel, this form of liberal philosophy denies the ‘unencumbered or detached self the possibility of membership in any community bound by moral ties antecedent to choice’.²¹³ Nehru saw such moral ties as primordial forces from the past that had to be restrained from reappearing. Religious identities are constitutive in nature; they are a source from which many Indians derive their self-hood. Nehru was quite ambitious in hoping that these constitutive elements could be dismissed entirely from the political arena and instead replaced with a purely scientific outlook. These constitutive ideals are bound to influence what an individual expects from a state and shapes their obligation to perform duties.²¹⁴

Conversely, this account might foreshadow some of the present context’s realities, hence requiring a note of caution. Many a time, these constitutive identities can become a source for oppressing the identity of the other or can foster a hatred that might even result in genocidal violence, as is evident in multiple recorded cultural histories. The universal form of love appears to be the solution for such parochial emotions. However, before such love is anticipated as remedial dose, no one can be asked to denounce the love of their own community.

This debate kept on resurfacing during the Punjabi Suba agitation in various forms. There were several puzzles that the Sikh leadership encountered during the agitation. Some of them were — What does it mean to *be a secularist* and also *be a Sikh*? What does it mean when one says *one is a communitarian* but is *not communal*? Moreover, if it was even possible to be purely communitarian without being communal? Where do the boundaries overlap, and how to make more sense of these boundaries if such boundaries exist? Lastly, how can all these paradoxical sensibilities be reconciled within the nationhood narrative? As we will see, most of these contradictions were resolved by keeping the secular self ahead of all the other primary constitutive

²¹² Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, 6th ed., (Delhi: OUP, 1994), 513.

²¹³ Michael Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” *Political Theory* 12, no.1 (February 1984): 87.

²¹⁴ The stream of secular-liberal ideas espoused by Nehru require further probing. Can an individual really separate his ethnic, linguistic, religious, caste identity when he walks in to cast his vote? Who will they be? What will define their expectations from the state? Can being an Indian operate in isolation from all these other identity expectations and roles? It seems fairly impossible in the moment to believe that such an individual exists, but even the existence of a detached self like this would be quite remarkably antithetical to the process of politics in itself.

attachments. Only when one's loyalty to the national, and not the sub-national, was proven beyond doubt, the Sikhs were granted their own province.

Sant Fateh Singh - Purging the 'Communal' Insinuations

Sant held several rounds of talks with Nehru in 1961 after breaking his fast, and his approach was significantly different from Master. For him, any discussion on Punjabi Suba had to be wholly severed from the concept of Sikh homeland, which he knew very well, evoked and induced an emotional response. He also maintained that the demand for the reorganization of Punjab was of a linguistic character and was within the terrain of permissible discourses in Indian polity. He couched his support for Suba in an immaculate vocabulary of democratic and secular terms. This secularisation of the demand was an act of prudence; he rejected any claims which presented Punjabi Suba as a camouflaged pursuit of a Sikh homeland.

As maintained by Sant, the slight increase in the percentage of Sikhs in Punjab was an unintended consequence of linguistic restructuring. The reorganization was not, as he claimed, aimed at changing the composition of any particular community. On the contrary, he consciously manoeuvred the movement, so it lost any resemblance to the pre-independence Muslim demand for Pakistan. The idea of a communal or religious homeland was pure absurdity for him, and he rejected it. He was well aware that it did not suit the secular narrative of the state, laced with an entrenched suspicion of religious (read communal) identities being mobilized in the political arena.

While writing about Sant, Paul Brass mentions that his consistent emphasis on the linguistic aspect of the demand made the government willing to negotiate with him, but this did not mean that he completely negated the religious attributes of the demand. Instead, now Sant claimed that by not adhering to the recognised linguistic principle in Punjab, the state was discriminating against the Sikh community precisely because their religious identity was intertwined with the faith of the Punjabi language.²¹⁵ Brass has also outlined the ambiguity with which linguistic identities interacted with religious identities in the political space in the context of re-organisation. Brass maintains that the ambiguity was in the coexistence of religious and linguistic consciousness in Sikh identity. At one point, we saw this coexistence as unambiguously articulated and celebrated in the discourse perpetuated by the political agents (Tara Singh) claiming to represent Sikhs. However, in the next phase, we saw political imperatives, making it a requirement that they disassociate the two.

For the Sikh community, the Suba became essential, the axis around which they harboured their efforts in the 'politics of recognition'. Thus, the state's refusal to acquiesce to their demand became commensurate with the non-recognition of their contributions to the nationalist movement. About this, Sarhadi has written:

Sant Fateh Singh had given this demand a twist in an attempt to make it look secular in character, to give the Central leadership an opportunity to concede it and, at the same time to canvass non-Sikh opinion in its favour, but there was no illusion in anybody's mind, that the Sikhs had begun to consider this demand a panacea for their inferior status[.]²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Paul Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*.

²¹⁶ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 410.

Even then, Nehru remained insistent on his refusal to bifurcate Punjab. When Sant met him in 1961, Nehru said that he was aware of Punjab suffering a great deal due to partition. However, in his view, the Punjabis were a lot of hard-working people and had made a remarkable amount of success; they had recovered much quicker than the Bengalis through the ‘dint of their labour’.²¹⁷ Nehru was worried about the rise in sub-national movements and creating a fresh set of minority problems as the dismemberment of Punjab was going to reduce the status of Hindus to a minority in the region. Additionally, he was against forming a smaller state on account of them holding back the economic and industrial progress. Nehru believed that conceding the Punjabi Suba would have raised sentimental and psychological barriers against Sikhs everywhere else.

Sant contested Nehru by asserting that he was discarding the apprehensions of a linguistic minority by conflating it with communal percentages. He appealed to him to follow the universal principle based on which other states had been reorganized.²¹⁸ It appeared as if there was no uniformity in the rules that governed the relations between the state and its ethnic-racial subunits, often instigating in the hearts of provincial representatives a belief that they were being treated differently. The backdrop to this conversation was a sense of mistrust. Nehru was upset with Master, who had conversed with Muslim leaders and the British officials during partition about dissecting India further to create an autonomous, separate Sikh State. There was another contentious point—the proximity of Punjab to the Pakistani border. Sant Fateh Singh was quite disappointed that the Sikh community had to live under the ceaseless shadow of suspicion; in despair, he asked Nehru directly if he believed that Sikhs would join China and Pakistan if the two create some trouble.²¹⁹ On the whole, nothing conclusive came out of these talks.

In the middle of 1962, in a conference, Sant announced that he had fundamental and unresolvable differences with Master. He disagreed with Master’s emphasis on the communal aspect of the demand. Also, he reiterated that Suba was a purely linguistic question, which could not fall into place in the absence of ‘Hindu-Sikh unity’.²²⁰ Press owned by Arya Samajis and Hindus in Punjab were more vocally responsive to Fateh Singh’s position. He was able to displace the control of Master and his faction from SGPC and came to be recognised as the most crucial community leader. In the same year, as Chinese forces got into an aggressive dispute with India over borders, the Akalis suspended all their agitational activities to support Indian defence efforts.²²¹ It is important to note here that the secularisation of the demand was accepted by many as the most logical step; the move was considered prudent enough to evoke a positive response. By retaining the rhetoric of Sikh homeland alive in his speeches, Master committed political suicide, especially in a context where even an inch of inclination towards religious identities becoming political was viewed with scepticism. Post this displacement, Sant became the authentic, official spokesperson for Sikh concerns. After Nehru’s demise, he held talks with Shastri in

²¹⁷ SGPC, *Nehru-Fateh Singh Talks*, 2. The partition event divided Bengal into two nations as well, whereas East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, West Bengal remained with India.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

²¹⁹ SGPC, *Nehru-Fateh Singh talks*, 28.

²²⁰ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 386.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 384-390.

1965. The conversation revealed some interesting insights into the Sikh anxieties; Sant told the Premier:

You have shattered those Sikh traditions which even the Britishers during their regime took special care to preserve and promote. Soldiers are being encouraged to shave off their beards and sacred kesha (hair), and it is unmistakably clear that Sikh spirit among the defence forces is being crushed out. The Britishers, under the guidance of Akali Kaur Singh maintained the Sikh way of life in the army whereby morale and heroism of the Sikh soldiers remained the highest. But the present trends are detrimental to the Sikh religion. I emphasize that the Sikh are true patriots. If you protect their religion, they can protect the country... If the soldiers' are true to their religion and traditions they will give greater proof of their valour.²²²

There, of course, was a nostalgic reminiscence of the British Raj, almost verging on veneration in these conversations, given that the empire played an influential role in constituting the Sikh self's identification with the martial race discourse. Such ideas of serving the colonial state marked a shift from the earlier martial engagements focused on serving the *panth* and *dharam* alone. The Sikh subjectivity was reinvented, many new elements produced in the wake of the rise of the modern state became a primary part of their identification. In return for the nation's protection, the community members were asking the state to intervene by upholding the essential markers of Sikhism. Sant's appeal was for the new Indian state to extend the privileges assured by imperial rulers in the form of mutual preservation. Religious symbols, markers, and images constitutive of the Sikh subjectivity became synonymous with the national expression; this happened through the vicarious ideas of sacrifice, heroism and martyrdom. It was an act through which something that was ethnic was extrapolated to become national. Underlying this form of an appeal was the yearning for recognition, which was, according to community leaders, absent in that dialogical context. The appeal for recognition became explicitly apparent when Sant asked for instituting memorials for Sikh martyrs who sacrificed their lives during the nationalist struggle. He said to Shastri:

You have raised a splendid monument in memory of Lala Lajpat Rai at his birth place, village Dhudike. I had been there the other day. But no one has ever thought of raising a memorial to a Sikh martyr of the same village who was hanged for the cause of national freedom... Baba Khark Singh, S. Bhagat Singh, S. Udham Singh, S. Kartar Singh Sarabha, the martyrs of Guru Ka Bagh and many other Sikhs laid down their lives at the altar of India's Independence. None of the great Sikh patriots of the 'Kama Gata Maru' ship and Revolutionary Babas have received any recognition by way of memorials.²²³

It is discernible here that the community was seeking recognition for the sacrifices they made for the nation. The incessant project of nation-making and its accompanying anxieties were unfolding at both the local and the national level, each

²²² Veekay Weekly, *Dialogue on Punjabi Suba*, trans. Arjan Singh Budhiraja, 31.

²²³ Ibid., 32.

simultaneously seeking and ceding recognition. Moreover, this recognition had to come through the conventional ways of constructing memorials; this can be interpreted as an attempt at resisting erasure by embalming a martyr's memories. The people, events, martyrs continued to be a part of the local oral traditions and narratives. However, it became essential now that the nation-state recognise these informal memories and grant dignity to these communities by commemorating their services through erecting monuments, memorials, archives, museums.²²⁴ In the same conversation, Sant lamented discrimination in observing nation holidays for the Sikh Gurus. He said:

You observe holidays in memory of the less known patriots. But no holidays are granted in honour of the Gurus. Sri Guru Arjan Dev ji laid down his life for dharma. Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur, the Saviour of Mother India, sacrificed his precious life for the protection of the Hindu religion and its symbols. His martyrdom should be celebrated by the Indian Government, as also by all the Indians. His splendid sacrifice, which saved the country, the Hindu religion and its culture, is being ignored. Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the greatest of all the patriots who sacrificed his entire family and his own life for the sake of the nation and the Dharma. Not to observe a holiday in his honour is nothing short of naked discrimination.²²⁵

In Sant's contention, the cultural memory of Sikh Gurus should be publically celebrated. Here remembering, commemorating, and celebrating were seen as virtuous acts, whereas forgetting, ignoring, and neglecting their sacrifices a national failure. Even more striking was the reference to 'Mother-India'; in an active state of retrieval from the past archives of collective memory, Sant must have found the image of Mother-India most suitable for his exposition. The mass-produced representations of Mother-India or 'Bharat Mata' had surfaced as a popular embodiment of national territory in the late nineteenth century. Bharat Mata had become a visible and tangible symbolic representation of Indian nationalism; it was central to the imagination that sought to resist the colonial power. The different appropriations and interpretations of Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom at different points in Sikh history usually reflected the changing contexts in which Sikh leaders were asking for concessions or politically entangled. The Guru's martyrdom at the altar while protecting the geographical figure of Bharat Mata was an attempt at the weaving of essentially Hindu mythic and symbolic forms into Sikh traditional narratives. This weaving makes the patriotic theme, also characteristic of the rest of the conversation, more pronounced. The nationalist leaders and the Sikh representatives had experienced the rise and fall of British rule together. The moment of Indian liberation was a turning point in the course of both their history. Thus, the events of 'Kama Gatu Mara', 'Guru Ka Bagh', 'Jallianwala Bagh', the martyrdom of Sikh Gurus and Indian territory's cartographic emblem all were significant elements in arguing a more nationalist position of self.

Sant's political stance is also asserted in a collection of poems, essays, and speeches titled 'Charbi de Deive' (Lamps Lit by Fat). The work's title is derived from a speech he delivered on Diwali, and it interprets to mean the 'earthen lamps in which

²²⁴ See, Ashis Nandy, "Memory Work," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16, no.4 (2016): 598-606.

²²⁵ Veekay Weekly, *Dialogue on Punjabi Suba*, trans. Arjan Singh Budhiraja, 33.

human fat is used instead of oil'.²²⁶ In the same address, he states that: 'Nations are made not by burning oil but fat'.²²⁷ For him, 'human fat' is an allegorical depiction of the human sacrifices, blood, sufferings in which the seeds of a 'nation' germinate or are possibly conceived. Moreover, he extols the blood of Sikh martyrs that died protecting the *panth* and nation. In the sixth essay, he also appeals to his 'Hindu brethren of Punjab' to withdraw their opposition to the Gurmukhi script. He tried to allay the Hindu fears that learning of Gurumukhi could potentially lead several men to join the Sikh faith. Instead, he argued that the Sikh scripture itself contains numerous compositions of Hindu *bhagats* and Hindu lore. In his opinion, the Sikhs and Hindus were inseparable brothers.²²⁸ He maintains that Sikhs are not *firku* (communal) but are equally ardent supporters of amicable relations between Sikhs and Hindus.

Creation of the Punjab State

Sant Fateh Singh was asked to postpone his second fast by Gulzarilal Nanda, on behalf of the Prime Minister, during the Pakistan aggression at the Indian border in 1965, and he obliged the request.²²⁹ In response to the deference of the fast, President S. Radhakrishnan was noted to have remarked that Sant would be 'satisfied with the eventual solution of the [Punjabi Suba] problem'.²³⁰ Sikhs contributed sincerely to the war effort; a large number of Sikh soldiers were deployed against the oncoming incursions from Pakistan. Some other war narratives have also recorded the 'bravery, heroism and sacrifices' of the Sikh soldiers deployed in these locations.²³¹ Even more fascinating were the accounts of the valorous spirit of the Sikh peasantry. The farmers residing in border areas actively offered assistance to the Jawans defending the motherland. One such account by a war reporter notes the infectious enthusiasm of the civilian villagers. The reporter mentions that the peasants turned out in masses to do their bit for the country; the villagers took up whatever weapons they had—arms, bailchas (shovel), lathis (sticks) and joined the Army in stalking Pakistani paratroopers. They also cut down their crops of maize and sugarcane to expel the hiding paratroopers. In his narrative, girls flung chappatis, gur (jaggery) and parched grams on the crossing army vehicles, while young boys carried stocks of cigarettes for the Jawans. Several stalls also sprung up in the area, which offered free food and drinks to the soldiers moving along. According to the reporter, there was nothing the villagers were unwilling to do for these Army men. The entire rural site, where this interaction took place, was beaming with saturated sentiments of loyalty and love for the nation.²³² Khushwant Singh also presents a portrayal of the community's support extended in various ways to strengthen the Indian position. He writes:

The Akalis did not exploit the situation but declared their unqualified support to the government. Once again Sikh soldiers crossed swords with the Pakistanis, and Sikh peasantry rallied to the support of their fighting forces, carrying food and help to the battlefield. Amongst the

²²⁶ Grewal, *Master Tara Singh*, 600.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., 599-600.

²²⁹ Ibid., 606.

²³⁰ Sarhadi, *Punjabi Suba*, 413-414.

²³¹ Some of these war chronicles can be found in Rachna Bisht Rawat's book *1965: Stories from the Second Indo-Pak War*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2015).

²³² D.R. Mandekar, *Twenty Two Fateful Days*, (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966), 144.

many officers who distinguished themselves in the 22-day war the most outstanding was Lt. General Harbaksh Singh to whom went the credit of halting the Pakistani tank offensive into Indian territory. Of all the states of the Indian Union, Punjab's contribution in aid of defence was the highest; of all the districts of India the top contributions came from Ganganagar in Rajasthan, largely populated by Sikh farmers. Insinuations of Sikh disloyalty so assiduously spread by anti-Sikh elements were thus silenced.²³³

In a memorandum presented to the Parliamentary Consultative Committee on Punjabi Suba in 1966, some community leaders endorsed the idea that Sikh sacrifice 'in 1962 against China and recently in defending their mother-land against Pakistani aggression' should have dispelled the 'suspicion and distrust' of the majority. They further stated that: 'suspicion about their faithfulness to the country was the greatest slur on the Sikhs, for a Sikh has never been anything but a patriot'.²³⁴ Another document published by SGPC in the same period also echoed similar views. The Sikh community was documented as always at the 'forefront' of 'defence of the country'. Moreover, the role of 'martyred and wounded Sikh Jawans' and the contributions of the Sikh peasantry in 'liquidating the Pakistani paratroopers' was praised and declared as something to be proud of.²³⁵

Military service has often been seen as a sure-shot way of authenticating one's unswerving allegiance to the nation. The public usually is never critical of a person's credentials of being faithful to the nation if they have served in the military. This was a recourse opted for by the Japanese American organisations in America. They were working to provide citizenship rights for the internees detained after the Pearl Harbor incident. To ensure their gradual reintegration back into society, they asked the Japanese-Americans to join the military.²³⁶ The attempt was successful as the suspicions about the Japanese community were gradually replaced with the trope of the model minority in the U.S.

The difference in the case of Sikhs is that they already had a long history of rendering such services; in the colonial period, they increasingly came to be identified with the martial race category. The entanglement of the Sikh community with values of war, heroism, bravery, sacrifice, valour was not an oriental fantasy of the imperial alone as this engagement preceded the colonial rule. Although, the selective picking of certain symbols, motifs, ideas from the Sikh's own pool of ethnic constitution and their subsequent codification did take place under the British Raj. The martial tradition, embedded in the community's self-representation, became a bridge between the exclusive paradigm in which modern nation-states operate and the minority's claim to recognition.

After the cease-fire between Pakistan and India was declared, the Union Home Minister announced that a 'cooperative solution' to the Punjabi Suba proposal should

²³³ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: 1839-2004*, vol. 2, (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012). 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195673098.001.0001

²³⁴ Veekay Weekly, *Chief Khalsa Diwan's memorandum to Parliamentary Consultative Committee on Punjabi Suba Demand*, 17.

²³⁵ SGPC, *Punjabi Suba Demand*, 19. Interestingly, the document extensively quotes from Gokul Chand Narang's 'Transformation of Sikhism' while making a case that the Sikhs regarded 'Hindus in Punjab and India as flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood'.

²³⁶ Wu, *Color of Success*, 80.

be found at the earliest.²³⁷ A Parliamentary Consultative Committee with Sardar Hukam Singh was constituted to look into the matter, and soon after that, Punjabi Suba demand was conceded. Punjab was reorganized, and a new state of Haryana with a Hindu majority was formed. The state of Punjab now had a fifty-six per cent Sikh population; some of the territories were transferred to Himachal Pradesh. Even though the Sikhs were a thin majority in the reassembled territory, they were able to secure political recognition for the Punjabi language, albeit after a prolonged struggle of two decades. It is vital to clarify that the demand was not solely conceded because of the Sikh assistance to war efforts, as has been argued by M.J. Akbar in his account.²³⁸ Multiple social, political, cultural, and economic considerations went into the sanctioning of what was referred to as centrifugal regional impulse in Punjabi Suba demand by the bureaucratic logic of the nation-state.

Democracy/State - Punjabi Suba or Centralization of Power?

Some kind of a dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization. That unity was not conceived as something imposed from outside. It was something deeper, and within its fold the widest tolerance of belief and custom was practiced and every variety acknowledged and even encouraged.²³⁹

In independent India, there was little dispute about the desirability of democracy as an institution; democracy was thought to be a panacea to all the ills inflicted on the society by the pre-modern order and colonial politics. Democracy, state, and the rule of law together are the constitutive elements of the modern political order.²⁴⁰ The coupled reading of democracy and state will help develop a theoretical backdrop and better insight into the Sikh demand for a separate province; a demand stacked against the modern nation-state and its tendencies to further the logic of unity.

The manner, form, and context in which ‘state as an institution’ was introduced during the colonial period in India, sustained with an analogous structure after independence. Colonial states enjoyed a wide range of all-encompassing powers. The totalitarian impulse of the coercive apparatus (bureaucracy, army, and police together) facilitated political and other juridical proceedings to function smoothly in service of the empire. The colonial past left an indelible mark, almost a strain of authoritarianism, in the operation of the state. Despite congress identifying the state’s coercive apparatus as a powerful tool of domination by the colonisers, the same was left, for the most part, unchanged in the post-colonial period.²⁴¹ The nationalists inherited the streak of centralised power during independence in toto. The same set of institutions then became vital to the project of uniting independent India.

²³⁷ Grewal, *Master Tara Singh*, 607.

²³⁸ M.J. Akbar, *India: The Siege Within*, (Delhi: Penguin Books, 1985), 163.

²³⁹ Nehru, *Discovery of India*, 3.

²⁴⁰ Fukuyama, “States and Democracy,” *Democratization* 21, no. 7 (2014): 1327.

Rule of law is not under consideration in this chapter and will figure in the Khalistani period. However, in Punjabi Suba agitation, we do witness at some intervals the suspension of rule of law; such as in the case where protesters were arrested in masses for chanting of banned slogans in 1955 and Master Tara Singh’s detention. The utterance of political slogans was considered as criminal and the slogan of ‘Punjabi Suba Zindabad’ was compared by press to be a synonym of the slogan raised by Jinnah before partition. Nonetheless, the suspension was much more large scale during the period of Khalistan militancy.

²⁴¹ Kaviraj, “A State of Contradictions: Post-colonial State in India,” 222.

At the same time, these coercive networks were not the only matrix which the majority party inherited. As we see, the struggle for freedom against imperial rule had sown the seeds for democratic revolution. The democratic setup later materialised at the ‘stroke of midnight’ with an expansion of the universal adult franchise to all Indians. As a result, the lineage of democracy was deeply entangled with any future political journey an independent India was bound to undertake. Anyhow, the embeddedness of democracy does not discount the possibility of authoritarian tendencies revealing themselves in moments of desperation of the young nation. Pratap B. Mehta believes that the democratic intervention has largely been successful in India. However, the success coexists with what he calls the ‘specter of authoritarianism’ towards particular groups. He also maintains that secessionist movements aimed at state subversion are often a frustrated response to the state acting in an authoritarian style instead of a democratic manner.²⁴²

Complete institutional control became a means for furthering the logic of unity of the political body. The conception of ‘body politic in unison’ was challenged and confronted by the diverse constituents making up this superimposed unity on several junctures. Some confrontations yielded results that strengthened the coercive mechanisms available to the state, whereas in other cases, power was devolved to make the ‘unity’ work in a more democratic fashion. In particular instances, however, the rationale for expanding the bureaucratic networks was provided for by the logic of democracy. The hopes and expectations placed by the underdeveloped strata on the Indian polity to work for their welfare had increased in the post-colonial period. The politics of redistribution and development required state agencies to expand massively in size.

Additionally, the building of basic infrastructure mandated a wider proliferation of these bureaucratic institutions. Kaviraj maintains that two paradoxical tendencies were strengthened simultaneously in independent India—the logic of bureaucracy and the logic of democracy.²⁴³ The two shared close affinities and intertwined while invigorating each other; nevertheless, the two were seen in direct conflict on several other occasions. It is in the framework of this ambiguous relationship shared by the two tendencies that the Sikh community’s assertion for more autonomy occurs.

In 1960, Selig S. Harrison wrote his book titled - *India: The most dangerous decades*. Indeed the period was classified by high levels of uncertainty; India was experimenting with democracy without having any modern age antecedents. The unfamiliarity and simultaneous unfolding of democracy in a post-colonial non-western setting were being observed with anticipation and scrutiny by many. In his work, Harrison sought to analytically lay out an account of all the propensities that could potentially disrupt this experiment—regionalism, linguism, communism, communalism. The political problem with the experiment is, as he puts it, the presence of “deep-seated centrifugal forces on the one hand, and the quite contradictory urge for unified national power”. He insisted that these centrifugal

²⁴² Pratap B. Mehta, “State and Democracy in India,” *Polish Sociological Review* 178, (2012): 206. Mehta writes: “The specter of authoritarianism in India is not associated with the suspension of the electoral process or military takeovers, but with the possibility that certain political movements will define a conception of India that will be exclusionary, and therefore authoritarian in relation to certain groups. While this tendency has a presence in Indian politics, it has not garnered sufficient power to dislodge India’s democratic credentials.”

²⁴³ Kaviraj, “A State of Contradictions: Post-colonial State in India,” 230.

forces “will act and interact too convulsively to leave India’s present constitution undisturbed”.²⁴⁴

On the other hand, dealing with these propensities was likely to require a greater concentration of power in the centre’s hands, leaving little room for participatory democracy to strengthen its roots in Indian soil. The possible result of which could have been the centralized state flirting with authoritarian political impulses. In the absence of such adventurous flirtations, Harrison declared, divisive forces would wield their influence and manifest themselves by causing balkanization of the young nation. However, these logic(s) have been able to sustain and balance each other despite the earlier glance of despair and doom cast by these scholars.²⁴⁵ It is to be noted that survival was made possible not through the extreme centralization of power or turning to authoritarianism in one’s anxiety but by evolving proper methods and channels to divest and devolve power to the communities gradually.

In hindsight, the Punjabi Suba demand may also be seen in terms of ‘politics of recognition’ rather than solely from the standpoint of the fragile unity of the Indian nation-state. Embedded in what was seen as ‘communal’ was a communitarian impulse to secure the culture and values of the Sikhs vis-a-vis majority Hindu assertions. Paradoxically, the same virtues that were partly foisted upon the Sikhs, to project them as a model minority, such as hard work, enterprise, and virility, would constitute their uniqueness and call for distinctive recognition. Another contentious point is the constant emphasis they place on their distinctiveness from the majority community; an appeal to recognise this difference lies at the centre of their claims to authenticity.²⁴⁶

It has been recognised recently that modern freedom cannot be actualized in the abstract but rather must be appropriated from within life worlds shaped by diverse languages and cultures. For Taylor, the identity formation process in the modern period is *dialogical* in nature; the self constitutes its identity through a discursive engagement with the significant other(s). Identities are not the sole product of inward monologue. The self is defined through participation in a dialogue, or sometimes a struggle against, the way a significant other perceives us. Moreover, Taylor contends that the modern condition has made ‘failure of recognition’ possible. In earlier times, the socially derived identities, based on social categories/hierarchies, had inbuilt mechanisms to ensure general recognition. This recognition was taken for granted. Modern-day identities, with their emphasis on an ‘original’, ‘personal’ and ‘inwardly

²⁴⁴ Selig Harrison, *India: The Most Dangerous Decades*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1960), 5.

²⁴⁵ Here, the reference is being made to logic of unity and logic of democratization, and not authoritarianism.

²⁴⁶ For Taylor, this notion of authenticity, developed in the eighteenth century. There was a rise in the idea that humans beings were endowed with a moral sense of differentiating between right and wrong. Morality was anchored by our feelings and had a voice within. This inner voice was important because it told us how to act rightly. But soon the moral accent was displaced and being in touch with our feelings took on a crucial moral significance of its own in the formation of true and full human beings. This was a massive subjective turn in modern culture, a new form of inwardness was discovered as a source of self; the recovery of this inner depth was considered as being essential to becoming a full authentic being. In the case of a Sikh self, the subjectivity remains attached to their theistic ideas about God, being authentic has linkages to acting on the *Hukam* of the divine. Taylor also mentioned Herder’s notion of originality. Herder put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human, this conception of originality he then applied at two levels - at the individual level and at the level of the ‘culture bearing people’ or *Volk*. Like an individual, a *Volk* should be true to itself. This original way of being cannot be socially derived but must be inwardly generated. So the Sikhs can’t be derivative of anyone else, they have to find their own path. But this identity depends on the dialogical relation self shares with the other, where the other gives recognition to this inwardly generated authentic identity.

derived self', do not enjoy this recognition *a priori*. Recognition takes place through an exchange, and therefore, attempts at garnering recognition can fail.²⁴⁷

In Sikh minority discourses, we witness the unfolding of a dialectical interplay between two modes of politics, what Taylor has called the 'politics of dignity' and the 'politics of difference'. Whereas 'politics of dignity' focus on equalising rights and entitlements by recognising the universal dignity of all citizens, 'politics of difference' reiterates recognition for the unique/particular (inwardly generated) identity of an individual or group.²⁴⁸ In the Punjabi Suba agitation, both modes assert themselves in various moments.

The Sikh representatives couched their demand for recognition of the Punjabi language in terms of 'politics of difference'. For them, if the principle of linguistic reorganisation had been recognised, then it should naturally be universally extended. Insistence was still on the recognition of particular, but the recognition of that particularity was actually being demanded from an already generalized recognition of linguistic-subnational units. In this instance, Congress was perceived as being discriminatory against the Punjabi-speaking people by not conceding the demand. For Taylor, the 'politics of difference' requires us to recognise the distinctiveness of identities to avoid the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity—assimilation.²⁴⁹ This assimilation with the Hindu/Hindi self was seen as a violation of the carefully curated Sikh association with the territory of Punjab and the Punjabi language.

Conclusion

The model minority trope, as it emerges in the Punjabi Suba moment, had a colonial precedent in the form of martial race discourse. However, the trope was suffused with the rhetoric of suspicion in newly partitioned India. This 'suspicion' appears in various conversations between the Sikh leadership and nationalist statesman. The motif of 'suspicion and loyalty' was closely interlinked with the two contradictory assertions, one of 'unity' and another of 'recognition'. In independent India, the state's anxiety over unity was heightened as several factions were competing and challenging the hegemonic project of the nation-state in its incipient stage and partly due to the Muslim separatist politics in the pre-partition period. When the suspicion was lifted off during the Indo-Pakistan and Indo-China wars, we witness the affirmation of the loyalty of a minority—resulting in the 'recognition' of Sikh's claim to a separate Punjabi Suba. The theme of brotherhood, sharing of a common historical and cultural past, acts as an anchorage. This narrative, in particular, was juxtaposed with the experience of other minorities to sustain one's claim of being a good minority, a trustworthy partner, and a loyal patriot.

Nonetheless, this loyalty was under severe test when the Sikhs partaking in Khalistan militancy no longer affirmed the valorised position. The minority consciousness was cemented further; while, recalcitrance to upholding the trope of being an 'ideal enterprising community' was justified by pitting it against the claim of being treated like a '*gulam*' in the face of the rising authoritarian rule of Indira Gandhi. The next chapter will look at the militancy period of the 1980s, as it surfaced in Punjab with an assertion of being a 'distinct nation' in itself.

²⁴⁷ Talor, "Politics of Recognition," 35.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 37-43.

²⁴⁹ Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," 38.

Chapter Three — Khalistan and Radical Assertion: Sundering of the ‘Model’

Countrymen, the minorities have placed their trust in you and you should not commit the folly of betraying your trustees, otherwise, the consequences shall be extremely terrible since the minorities are an explosive power, which if it explodes, shall blow away the entire structure of the whole nation. The history of Europe presents ample and horrifying testimony of this.²⁵⁰

Ambedkar’s statement from the constituent assembly debates was used as the opening remark to a chapter titled ‘Post-Partition Scenario: Monumental Betrayal of the Sikhs’ in a book published by Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee after the militant uprising had been crushed in Punjab. The statement is framed in the form of hyperbole, and some pertinent analytical questions can be formulated from the same—How does this explosive power detonate? What causes such an eruption? Why does this eruption happen at a particular moment and not in others? Do the minorities also perceive themselves to be an explosive dynamite? How does the moment of militant assertion expose the fragility of the ‘model minority’ construct? How do the same tropes used to construct a model minority get modulated for constructing a militant minority? The symbolic presence of Ambedkar’s metaphor and its subsequent semantic appropriation by a minority community, which in the late 1980s was considered ‘defiant’ and ‘recalcitrant’, is a testimony that the Sikhs had indeed exploded. The explosion ignited in 1984 directly threatened the state apparatus and the post-colonial project of ‘national unity’. It also reinforced the state’s attempt to centralise the monopoly over violence through repressive mechanisms. At the epicentre of it were those who, by weaving or reconstructing a religious worldview, had appropriated the use of violence as a legitimate means to accomplish their goal. These contestatory voices, often while evoking an awareness of continuity with the past, were in many senses bringing in newer, more diffused discursive elements, symbols, idioms, images that were previously unexplored or remained underemphasised. This form of political expression and imagination, however, was actively put down and resisted by the ‘legitimate owners’ of violence.

This chapter, in particular, intends to look at the ‘newness’ of the narrative front opened up by the Sikh militants as it was articulated in Bhindranwale’s speeches from the dais of Golden Temple. The first section will briefly look at the symbol of territory that occupied such centrality in the rhetorical production of the Sikh cultural and political identities. The theme of homeland, explored in the previous chapter, serves as a precursor to the spatial re-imagination of Punjab as Khalistan by radicals demanding territorial sovereignty. The second section will locate the socio-economic background of the Sikh resistance. Several academic readings of the movement have sought to demystify the ‘success story’ of Green Revolution and have pinned it as one of the terrains that can further our understanding of the secessionist revolt. This socio-economic frame of reference and ‘relative deprivation’ theories are coupled

²⁵⁰ B.R. Ambedkar’s speech in Constituent Assembly on 25 November, 1957, quoted in G.S. Dhillon, *Truth about Punjab: SGPC White Paper*, (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, 1996), 74-75.

with another body of work, the political aspect of the Punjab crisis, to help us with a more exhaustive version of the entire setting against which the militants rose to power. This school of thought, articulated by Paul Brass, has stressed the primacy of centralising tendencies manifest in the national government and the post-Nehruvian leadership of Indira Gandhi as having alienated the Sikh community. This premise will be probed by looking at the Anandpur Sahib Resolution, disseminated as the manifesto of Sikh demands.

The third section, which forms the crux of the chapter, will present an in-depth analytical account of Bhindranwale's speeches delivered from 1982 to 1984. Various themes and tropes pertaining to 'model minority', as they appear in his religious sermons, will be dissected and interpreted to make sense of the contrasting and oscillating 'minority' and 'nationalist' claims put forth by the extremists. Together, all these meant that the tenuous nature of the model minority construct gets exposed, compelling a reconfiguration of this idea. The final section will delve into the existing academic disagreements and contentions surrounding the label 'fundamentalism' or 'fundamentalist'. This will let us situate Khalistani militancy within the larger context of religious revivalism that unfolded in the last three decades of twentieth-century across much of the globe.

Khalistan as a Separate Territorial Homeland

Khalistan reflected an ethnonationalist imagination, an idea hemming around which unfolded a secessionist movement in Punjab during the mid-1980s and continued till the early 1990s. The primary demand of the campaign was for a separate territory where the distinct national identity of Sikhs will find its full articulation. The term Khalistan's literal translation is 'the land of the pure/*khalis*'; it was coined by Dr V.S. Bhatti in 1940. He envisaged Khalistan as a separate Sikh state in response to the Muslim league's Lahore resolution.²⁵¹ Although the idea was conceived in the presence of the Muslim 'other' and the demand for Pakistan, its successful germination took over four decades and picked its pace only after the jolting military demolition of *Akal Takht* (temporal seat in Sikhism) in the Golden temple in 1984. In the interim period, the form of the idea underwent various changes. From the initial imagination of Khalistan as a theocratic state, it was later conceptualised as a state promoting values of toleration and coexistence.²⁵² As one Khalistan proponent later conveyed, the 'ideal state' of Khalistan was envisioned as a 'just', 'prosperous', 'equality' centred place for the 'people of the lord', where all would enjoy the 'right to worship as they please'.²⁵³

The idea of a 'sovereign homeland–Khalistan' evoked (and continues to evoke) substantial support amongst diaspora Sikhs, a few splinter groups and networks here and there. The global reinforcement gave the militant movement a tinge of transnational character.²⁵⁴ Even though Khalistani resistance had no territorial

²⁵¹ Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 51-53.

²⁵² Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, 53. The shift in the position can also be attributed to the fact that Sikhs were to be a little more than half of the population of the imagined Khalistan territory. For a peaceful existence of the freed nation, the differences of other communities had to be pragmatically co-opted. The collaboration of minorities in Punjab was indispensable to the new state-making project.

²⁵³ Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 150.

²⁵⁴ Cynthia Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 162.

restrictions with regard to who was supporting or funding the militant groups, the violent armed insurgency remained largely concentrated in the Punjab region. The militancy and counterinsurgency by the Indian state culminated in a lot of arrests, disappearances, murders, torture, bloodshed and deaths. Many people were memorialised as ‘martyrs for a cause’ on both sides.²⁵⁵

For Harjot Singh Oberoi, the Sikh identification of Punjab as a homeland is a cultural construct of very recent origins. Oberoi has argued that ‘Punjab’ was not central to the cultural and political identity of the Sikh community in its embryonic stage; in this phase, the category of Sikhs was still ‘flexible, problematic, and substantially empty’.²⁵⁶ The conventions developed during the Guru period were yet to be saturated with signs, icons, images, and narratives. This meaning-attribution process happened after the line of human gurus ended in 1708. The heterogeneous Sikh community required distinctive symbols to survive in an inhospitable socio-political surrounding. This was accomplished through interventions by a generation of Sikhs, and a continuous interpretive process of consolidation, personification, objectification of the rich cultural heritage left behind by the Gurus, especially the tenth master. In subsequent developments, various metacommentaries were produced by the didactic leaders and community members to evoke and keep alive the Sikh religious consciousness. These commentaries focused upon narrating tales of the brave lives led by the gurus. It usually included spirited accounts of valiantly fought battles, sagas of martyrs who were brutally killed, the collective sufferings and historical persecutions endured by the Gurus and their Sikhs in order to survive.

Notwithstanding this, Oberoi has pointed out that these accounts are marked by a noticeable absence of any explicit linkage of Punjab to the Sikh consciousness.²⁵⁷ Even during the Singh Sabha period of the early twentieth century, when a much coherent, homogeneous Sikh ethno-political identity was being forged, the ‘land of five rivers’ though of importance, was not seen as an eminent part of the Sikh collective identity.²⁵⁸ The increased identification of Sikhs with Punjab territory happened towards the end of colonial rule in India when possible dismemberment of Punjab was emerging as a tangible political outcome. However, the territoriality of east Punjab was sealed to the Sikh fate, particularly during the Punjabi Suba movement. Despite the political discourse of the ethnolinguistic movement reiterating solely the linguistic associations of Punjab with Sikhs, the place increasingly came to be identified in common vernaculars as a signifier for the Sikh homeland. Consequently, Oberoi remarks, “after more than four centuries of the Sikh movement, a new symbol had been added to the evolving inventory of Sikh ethnicity: Punjab, the land of the Sikhs”.²⁵⁹

It is essential at this point to differentiate between some of the other regional movements in India from Khalistani militancy. Regionalism can be defined as a

²⁵⁵ According to the official data procured recently by an RTI activist in total 11,694 civilians, 1,784 security personnel, and 8,094 terrorists died from 1980-2000 in Punjab militancy.

²⁵⁶ Harjot S. Oberoi, “From Punjab to Khalistan: Territoriality and Metacommentary,” *Pacific Affairs* 60, no.1 (1987): 32-34. For Oberoi in this stage of substantive emptiness, the label Sikh had come to be used as a reference for a particular section of the population, but this group did not yet possess a ‘connotation’ or a ‘corpus of identical secondary meanings’.

²⁵⁷ Harjot Oberoi, *Punjab to Khalistan*, 35.

²⁵⁸ Harjot Oberoi, *Punjab to Khalistan*, 36.

²⁵⁹ Harjot Oberoi, *Punjab to Khalistan*, 40.

process in which inhabitants of a region develop a sense of belonging to a community through their sharing in a similar culture, literature, and history. To put it in other words, this sense of unity among the people is produced and reproduced as a consequence of them speaking and recognising a common language, partaking in resembling cultural traits and patterned behaviour, and having analogous relationships to the past as the others.²⁶⁰ In contrast to this, Sikh consciousness of being a distinctive community existed prior to their heightened symbolic identification with a specific territorial region, i.e. Punjab. Many Sikhs firmly believe that the territory of Punjab belongs to the Sikh *qaum*. It aided in augmenting the self-identity and self-definition of community members. The place with its deep affective orientations gradually registered itself in the Sikh psyche, thus, making it easier for militants to imagine the ‘sovereign state’ of Khalistan as finding its most meaningful expression in this territory.

Oberoi has looked at the metacommentaries composed by the community to find an answer for the transformation and morphing of territoriality as a Sikh symbol; metacommentaries are usually a part of larger discourse unfurling at that time.²⁶¹ According to Clifford Geertz, metacommentary is ‘a story they [people] tell themselves about themselves’.²⁶² In the story that was being narrated in this particular moment, territory, by becoming an indispensable symbol, was pulling apart the model minority notion. Tensions beneath the construct of a ‘model community’ or assertions of being an ‘admirable social partner’ were gradually displaced by the claims of a separate territorial homeland. These tensions were to explode in the coming years, thus constituting a subversion of the said ‘idealness’.

This chapter, as already mentioned, will focus upon the political discourse of regional and national elites central to the Sikh ethnoterritorial secessionist movement. The dialogue, happening at this moment, heavily relied upon and also saturated, in its wake, the various icons, narratives, motifs, images from the Sikh inventory of symbols. Their recruitment often introduced a new layer of meanings to these symbols, in addition to what they already possessed. Before we proceed with an account of the militant’s world of religious meanings and references as articulated by Bhindranwale, it is suited for our purposes to ground the political, social and economic frames through which scholars have attempted to understand the cause of frictions that overwhelmed much of Center and Punjab after the 1970s.

Political-economy of Green revolution

[P]unjab is not one of our poor States. It is one of our more prosperous States and part of the problem has arisen out of its prosperity. Long ago - we have friends from Andhra Pradesh here - there was a movement for Telengana. I had not been Prime Minister for long before. I sent for those people and asked them, ‘Why they were agitating?’ They replied, ‘The state is so stable; we have to do

²⁶⁰ Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102-104.

²⁶¹ Sainapati's *Sri Gur Sobha* (1711), Sukha Singh's *Gurbilas Dasvin Patsahi* (1797), Koer Singh's *Gurbilas Patsahi* 10, and Sohan's *Gurbilas Chhevin Patsahi*, are some of the metacommentaries that Oberoi mentions. Most of these works were produced by the Sikhs in the heroic age, after the Guruship was invested in the Khalsa (community).

²⁶² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 412-53. This reference is excerpted from Oberoi, *Punjab to Khalistan*, 27.

something.’ It seems a ridiculous reply, but such was the situation then. Such problems are not arising where there is real hardship.²⁶³

Indira Gandhi’s assertion that the secessionist problem in Punjab could be linked to the state’s prosperity was indeed a perceptive observation. However, her incisiveness fell short when she claimed that the people of the state faced no hardships; in contrast to her statement, the inverse was the agrarian reality of Punjab. This contradiction was probably not evidently visible, as it was masked quite well by the prevailing narrative reiterating Punjab as a ‘success story’ of the Green Revolution. Nevertheless, the success was obscuring from vision the underlying distortions. On a closer, thorough examination of the rural political economy, the fragmented nature of the social body, a product of the uneven transformation of social base, emerges in the picture.²⁶⁴ It has to be kept in mind that a large number of rural farmers in Punjab are Sikhs, whereas the majority of the urbanite population consists of Hindus; the two overlapping social cleavages of religion and location exist in tandem. Once the resentment was set in motion, the centralising measures of the Indian state further accentuated the alienation of the rural peasants. Another note of caution is that these are merely two external dimensions for understanding the militant movement in Punjab; they are neither exclusive factors nor provide a complete account of why it happened the way it did. The economic shifts and changes happening in the rural region of Punjab are by no means exhaustive in explaining the rise of extremism. Instead, an empirical account of the flux can offer us an insight into the socio-economic background of extremists who actively participated in the insurgency against the Indian nation-state. One more reason for selecting these frameworks is to better grasp the ‘model minorities as economic success stories’ thesis. The success stories reproduced and circulated by media and government reports might not always represent the whole truth; the cracked and fragile nature of the model minority trope may become more apparent through micro-analysis. By putting forth the agrarian success stories in popular discourses, it was observed that the Sikh leader’s contention of discrimination, at various junctures, was swept under the rug.

The Green Revolution in India is traced to the introduction of HYV seeds in the mid-1960s for increasing agricultural productivity; the result of the technological innovation was spectacular. However, the potential of these seeds could be realised only through the application of chemical fertilizers, controlled irrigation, and the use of agricultural implements/tools such as tractors and grain processing machinery. It was primarily a technical solution to the agrarian problems pervasive in the developing world.²⁶⁵ The principal aim behind the export of HYVs by America was to counter the possible influence of communist camp on starving countries in South-East and South Asia—it was believed that increasing agricultural productivity could thwart the oncoming ‘red revolution’ from surging in these regions. On the other hand, for India, the main concern was to attain self-sufficiency in food grains by enhancing national food security. Other policy imperatives also required a reduced dependence on external, specifically American food aid.²⁶⁶ To feed the starving

²⁶³ Indira Gandhi, “Punjab and National Unity,” in *Selected Speeches and Writings of Indira Gandhi*, (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1986), 79.

²⁶⁴ Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, 49.

²⁶⁵ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India: The case of the Punjab*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 127-128.

²⁶⁶ Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, 49.

population, the state had to find proper methods for alleviating famines and major droughts that struck India in the mid-1960s.

When the seed variety was initiated in India, it was first introduced in Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh. These parts already had irrigation systems in place required to cultivate the variety. Consequentially, the production of wheat and rice increased manifold, making India self-sufficient in the food department. Punjab immediately took the lead by becoming one of the highest contributors of grains to the central pool, thus earning the nickname of ‘food basket of the country’.²⁶⁷ During the unfolding of Green Revolution, Punjab became the most affluent state, with its per capita income excelling all other states in India. Even the rural income was well ahead of the national average.²⁶⁸ The state’s prosperity and its higher living standards were also reflected through other socio-economic indicators. On the other hand, as several studies have already argued, these aggregate factors do not represent the whole ‘differentiated’ truths of various social strata and instead presents us with a more uniform picture—unable to encapsulate the veiled socio-economic reality.

Jugdep Chima has argued that despite the aggregate economic measures pointing towards Punjab being the wealthiest state at the time of this productivity boom, a more disaggregated economic analysis exposed the ‘unintended effects’ or ‘distortions’ of the Green Revolution and its contrary effects on the political economy of the rural landscape.²⁶⁹ Another scholar, Harnik Deol, while analysing the impact of Green Revolution technologies on the prevailing agrarian social structure, has shown that the new technology was unfavourable for the use of lower strata of the population. New inputs like the fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides, mechanical tools, required to cultivate the HYV seeds, resulted in a shift in the distribution of operated land favouring the larger landowners.²⁷⁰ These technological inputs were far more capital intensive in comparison to the previous variety of seeds, which, although were less productive, were substantially more disease resistant.²⁷¹ The input cost to make agriculture profitable soared. Along with this, the marginal farmers found themselves competing for infrastructural credit and irrigation facilities with more prosperous and politically well-connected farmers.²⁷² The demand for agricultural labour in Punjab increased throughout this period, and this was compensated by the migration of cheap labour from other regions. Thus, the fallout of the in-migration process was reflected in the reduced power of a local agricultural labourer to negotiate for higher wages. Also, the increased mechanization made the traditional skills of barbers, potters, shoemakers, weavers, and water carriers redundant; the number of people employed in traditional occupations slowly declined.²⁷³ Deol has made another interesting observation in his study, he says:

[E]xternal dependence implies that the atomized and fragmented local cultivator, the individual productive unit, will become a part of a larger

²⁶⁷ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 129.

²⁶⁸ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 131. Also see, Jugdep Chima, “The Political Economy of Sikh Separatism: Ethnic Identity, Federalism and the Distortions of Post-Independence Agrarian Development in Punjab-India,” in *The Political Economy of Conflict in South Asia*, ed. by Matthew Webb and Albert Wijeweera, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 37-38.

²⁶⁹ Jugdep Chima, *The Political Economy of Sikh Separatism*, 37-38.

²⁷⁰ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 140.

²⁷¹ Jugdep Chima, *The Political Economy of Sikh Separatism*, 40.

²⁷² Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 144.

²⁷³ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 136.

system of production and exchange. This tends to withdraw much of the decision making autonomy from the former, and subjects it to national and international networks. So far, transformation to a market-oriented agriculture has increased external dependence. Thus, the green revolution has made farmers heavily dependent on conditions over which they have no control.²⁷⁴

Punjab, as a region, has historically had a weak industrial sector, and the post-colonial conditions only aggravated those conditions. Partition of India in 1947 led to Pakistan inheriting the core industrial sector of the Punjab region. Furthermore, subsequent wars between the two countries provided little incentive for industrial investment in Punjab—a sensitive border state. Post the reassembling of Punjab in 1966, the industrial complex around Delhi went to Haryana and mineral and forest resources to Himachal Pradesh.²⁷⁵ As already mentioned, the famine and drought situation was severe in the mid-1960s, therefore compelling the state agencies to shift their policy focus away from large scale industrial development towards agriculture and food security.²⁷⁶ The lack of industrialization was more sharply perceptible in agrarian states like Punjab; through an uneven allocation of development funds, the state was deliberately groomed to be the ‘bread-basket of India’.²⁷⁷ Coinciding with the years of an agrarian productivity boom, Punjab witnessed an overall slump in industrial production. The national share of Punjab in industrial production fell from 4.1 percent in 1965-1966 to only 2.8 percent in 1977-1978.²⁷⁸

Another scholar has argued that the increased modernisation of agriculture had liberated many children from farm labour. By the year 1974, almost 80 percent of Punjab’s primary school-age children were in school, and this was second only to Kerala. Literacy had increased in the span of two decades (1961-1981) from 27 percent to 41 percent. It was projected to hit the 50 percent mark by the mid-1980s; the number of college graduates was also on an ascendance.²⁷⁹ At the same time, the rate of unemployment in Punjab was abnormally high in the case of freshly emerging educated class. Except for the students with medical and engineering degrees, people with graduation and post-graduation degrees in sciences, arts, and commerce, along with engineering diploma holders, all had a high unemployment rate. Some of these categories were performing abysmally poor when compared to their national counterparts. Similarly, when the situation of unemployment was juxtaposed to other sections of the labour force, the figures were quite chronic.²⁸⁰ For Gill, ‘no conceivable rate and pattern of growth’ could have changed the unravelling picture of ‘bleak’ future employment prospects for graduates in Punjab.²⁸¹ As Telford has pointed out, the liberation from farm labour and consequent entry into higher education, unfortunately, did not translate into economic gains for the first

²⁷⁴ Harnik Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India*, 145.

²⁷⁵ Hamish Telford, “The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy,” *Asian Survey* 32, no. 11 (November 1992): 979-980.

²⁷⁶ Jugdep Chima, *The Political Economy of Sikh Separatism*, 36-37.

²⁷⁷ Shinder Purewal, *Sikh Ethnonationalism and the Political Economy of Punjab*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 87.

²⁷⁸ Shinder Purewal, *Sikh Ethnonationalism*, 82.

²⁷⁹ Hamish Telford, *The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy*, 979.

²⁸⁰ K.S. Gill, “Employment and Unemployment in Punjab,” in *Employment Policy in a Developing Country*, vol. 2, ed. Austin Robinson et.al., (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), 576.

²⁸¹ K.S. Gill, *Employment and Unemployment in Punjab*, 576.

generation, educated, rural Sikh youth. The primary reason for it was the distorted nature of Punjab's economy. This was reflected by the retarded rate of industrial progress in keeping pace with the higher growth in educated, unemployed people in the countryside.²⁸² A weakened urban industrial sector failed to absorb the displaced or underemployed marginal peasants, those involved with traditional occupations, and the educated unemployed youth. The uneven and contorted impact of Green Revolution on the agrarian economy, combined with the slackening industrialization process, produced an 'expanding population of frustrated and potentially alienated' Sikh cultivators and youth in Punjab's countryside.²⁸³ All these issues remained unaddressed and, in myriad ways, contributed to the disruption of the 'model minority image'. Massive changes introduced in the social structure of the rural economy can give us the platform through which we can analytically delineate the profile of Sikh militants who responded to the call of religious resurgence by Bhindranwale. This will be perused further in a separate section.

Anandpur Sahib Resolution

In continuation of the above discussion, many political commentators have foregrounded the Punjab crisis in the centralization impulse manifest in Indira Gandhi's political rule. For making better sense of the arguments, it is useful to bring in Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR) and the controversy that engulfed the text. A white paper published by SGPC in 1996 draws up a cogent analogy of Punjab's 'economic despoliation' by availing a few lines from Machiavelli's Prince. The reasons for citing Machiavelli become quite apparent when one goes through the publication. The 'free city' or 'principality' living under its own laws in Machiavellian work is explicitly appropriated to suggest Maharaja Ranjit Singh's reign in the nineteenth century. In contrast, Punjab of contemporary times was assessed to be a mere tributary to the Indian state. This assessment was followed by a detailed analysis of terms regulating the centre-state relationship in India; here, the posturing of the Constitution was interpreted as skewed in favour of centre over its constituent units.

Moreover, in the content that follows, the structure of such a relationship is represented as thoroughly unjust and exploitative to Punjab. These very issues became the central rallying point in the ASR that the working committee of Akali Dal adopted in 1973. Despite no widespread or 'mass communal excitement' around the document in nascent years, no one can overlook the significance of ASR while seeking to detail the initial precipitate of Punjab militancy. It received broad support from various factions competing to establish their dominance over Punjab politics in later phases.²⁸⁴ For the purpose of this chapter, it is essential to notify that the content of this document was endorsed and also consistently made an appearance in Bhindranwale's speeches. In fact, the religious vocabulary and the 'cultural memory of persecution', emphatically pronounced in the political sermons, transformed the centre-state relations into a matter of discrimination against the *panth*; something that the rural

²⁸² Hamish Telford, *The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy*, 980.

²⁸³ Jugdep Chima, *The Political Economy of Sikh Separatism*, 42.

²⁸⁴ According to recent news reports, Akali Dal has again revived the document in wake of the 2022 Punjab assembly elections.

<https://thewire.in/politics/punjab-sad-goes-back-to-anandpur-sahib-resolution-ahead-of-2022-assembly-polls>.

listeners more readily understood and acted towards.²⁸⁵ The resolution argued for a less centralized structure with greater regional autonomy through ‘dramatic devolution of power’ to the federal units.

According to Telford, ASR was first conceived after the ‘resounding defeat’ of Akalis at the hand of Congress in the 1972 state assembly elections.²⁸⁶ A more temperate approach of Akali politics was unable to translate the Sikh majority in the Punjab region into an electoral victory, with the party having to rely on external coalition partners. The lower-caste, urbanites and non-Jat Sikhs usually chose their delegates from the Congress and other local parties. Hence, it was argued that rather than positioning Akalis as a well-balanced umbrella party seeking to represent all communities, they should return to their root constituency, bringing back the more Sikh-centric politics. The contrary pulls of a majoritarian form of democracy as manifest in much of Indian politics culminated in the production of ASR. To sustain influence in national politics, there was a need to appease a wide section of society. Still, it was also seen by Akalis as indispensable to reinforce ideological commitments to Sikh identity so as not to alienate their core base.

There were various interpretations of the resolution; to some, the resolution had sown the ‘seeds of a separatist ideology’, was a ‘secessionist document’, and was ‘potent with mischief’. At the same time, others argued that the resolution was simply a demand for more autonomy along with the actualisation of ‘real and meaningful federal principles’. It was an all-encompassing document with demands ranging from implementing abstract socialistic and moral principles in the realm of economics, politics, and society, stemming from secularised theological precepts, to outlining specific pursuits engendering rights of the marginalised sections (Dalits and minorities). To quote an instance of a specifically Sikh related stipulation—there was an insistence on “ensur[ing] that *kirpan* is accepted as an integral part of the uniform of Sikhs in the Army”.²⁸⁷

In the words of Akali Dal, they identified themselves as the ‘very embodiment of the hopes and aspirations of the Sikhs’ and thus justified their ‘full entitlement’ to the community’s representation.²⁸⁸ Three political issues, considered to possess utmost significance, were authored as the original demands. First was settling territorial disputes with neighbouring states; secondly, making Chandigarh the capital of Punjab, as it was initially intended; and finally, revisiting the inter-state water-sharing agreement, which in the eyes of Akali Dal was an illegal apportionment of Punjab water by non-riparian states. These were moderate claims within the framework of the Constitution, and to a large extent, reflections from the unfinished project of territorial demarcation. At the same time, the passing years had unleashed repressed centralization tendencies inherent in the Constitution in one of the most distressing manners.²⁸⁹ During the emergency period, Akali Dal was at the forefront of courting

²⁸⁵ Joyce Pettigrew, “In Search of a New Kingdom of Lahore,” *Pacific Affairs* 60, no. 1 (1987): 20.

²⁸⁶ Hamish Telford, *The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy*, 971

²⁸⁷ All India Akali Conference. *Anandpur Sahib Resolution*. Ludhiana: Shiromani Akali Dal, 1978.

https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/states/punjab/document/papers/anantpur_sahib_resolution.htm.

²⁸⁸ Anandpur Sahib Resolution, 1978.

²⁸⁹ Paul Brass writing about Indian politics, commented upon the increased interlinking and interdependence of center-state politics after 1967 accompanied with a gradual decline in state’s political autonomy. He argues further that in order to maintain power Indira Gandhi resorted to ‘centralization of power, nationalization of issues and increasing intervention in state politics’. These measures included distribution of patronage to district politicians bypassing the state government, direct selection of party candidates to contest elections as well as the chief minister, ruthless application of President’s rule in non-compliant states. This led to an undercutting of

arrests, with several thousand in jails and a bunch of leaders detained under security laws. In the regional discourse of Punjab, the very structure of Indian polity, with a strong centre, was intensely criticised and denounced as detrimental to the growth of federating units. Akalis offered a sustained protest against Indira Gandhi's rule in Punjab and later joined the mainstream anti-Congress coalition government formed in 1977. The recalcitrant attitude of the regional party did not go down well with Mrs Gandhi, known to reward personal loyalty.

In their respective works, Paul Brass and Dipankar Gupta have both pointed towards the shift in party politics of Congress from its earlier posture under Nehru. Usually, the more 'moderate' factions were empowered so as to counter the extreme sections of any regional political party or representatives. This arrangement was practised throughout much of the Punjabi Suba movement. Nehru continuously engaged in conversations with those he presumed to be non-communal/secular Akali leaders, such as Fateh Singh. By juxtaposing these groups against the radicals, an attempt was made to confront them through lending 'source credibility' to bearable factions. As pointed out by several political commentators, the diffused character of the document was supposed to give the Akalis a leverage point in their negotiations with the centre.²⁹⁰ It was believed that the centre would accept at least a few of the demands put forth through this document. Thus, enabling the more moderate voices to regain control over a situation where the radicals were gaining the upper hand. Indira Gandhi's refusal to concede anything substantial to the Sikh leaders only served to prove in their eyes the accusation of widespread discrimination against the community. Between 1981 to 1982, Akali Dal and Indira Gandhi approached a semblance of agreement over these crucial demands on three different occasions. In all three instances, the leaders had to return empty-handed to Punjab.²⁹¹ Procrastination and prolongation of talks made the Akali's footing with respect to Bhindranwale weaker. In a scenario where nothing meaningful was conceded, the Sikh leaders would take a 'recourse to agitational politics' every time there was a breakdown in arbitrations.²⁹² Even after having reached a compromise, the Prime Minister chose to walk herself out at the last moment in 1982.²⁹³ As a matter of fact, Indira Gandhi, in one of her speeches afterwards, identified ASR as the document where all the 'seeds of the trouble lay'.²⁹⁴ On the contrary, Sant Longowal (Akali Dal's president) had continuously reiterated that the document's purpose was not for the Sikhs to get 'away from India in any manner'; to assuage Congress's feelings, he even assuredly confessed that 'undoubtedly the Sikhs had the same nationality as any other Indian'.²⁹⁵ With increasing centralization, another impulse of the model minority notion was brought forth. A community has to be perceived by the state and the dominant partners as 'passive', 'submissive' and 'non-resistant' to be considered 'ideal'. Furthermore, such submissiveness has to be continuously affirmed through actions, words or language; otherwise, their differences become difficult for accommodating by the majority. What was emerging for nationalist leaders was a

autonomous state leadership and strong local party organization. Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), 172-173.

²⁹⁰ Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, 202.

²⁹¹ Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1985), 82-83.

²⁹² Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, 204.

²⁹³ Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, 203. Also see, Dipankar Gupta, "The Communalising of Punjab: 1980-1985," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 28 (July 13, 1985): 1188.

²⁹⁴ Indira Gandhi, *Punjab and National Unity*, 85.

²⁹⁵ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, 53.

militant rhetoric, no longer suitable to the assertions of a construed idealness of the said community. However, as depicted in Longowal's speeches, several Sikhs were still pursuing to negate the negative labels and aspiring to retain the trope of 'modelness'. As will be seen later in the chapter, this line of thought worked in tandem with militant assertions of different groups.

For many, the crusade for Khalistan was the remaking of the unfinished project of Punjabi Suba, and probably this impression is not entirely off the mark. The capital city of Chandigarh was to be transferred to Punjab according to an initial award of 1970. This award, nonetheless, was never implemented. Although at later stages, Indira Gandhi interceded on behalf of the adjacent states by linking the subject of the capital city with the transference of Fazilka and Abohar to Haryana. Both these regions have a preponderant Hindu majority, and Fazilka is incidentally also a cotton-rich district. These areas are not contiguous to Haryana, so it was recommended that a 'furlong wide strip of territory or a corridor' across the Punjab-Rajasthan border be ceded to the neighbouring state.²⁹⁶ This would require handing over several Punjabi speaking villages to Haryana; the matter continued to be mired in controversy as the Akalis failed to disentangle these two contentious points even after assuming power in the form of a coalition government with the Janata Party in late 1970s. Finally, Brass contends that the response of Indira Gandhi was governed by a political outlook in the 'narrowest sense of the term'. She repeatedly claimed that the supposed delay was to prevent a possible eruption of protest in Haryana in case Chandigarh was turned over to Punjab without them being adequately compensated with territory and money. Water was essential for irrigation, and some argued that the territorial dispute's settlement in favour of Haryana was intended to make it a riparian state. Dipankar Gupta has argued that:

It is not as if the past heavily burdened the present in 1980, but rather it is the manner in which the Centre reacted to the Akali demands, which were initially secular that mnemonically revived tradition as an ideological rationale for activism. If, however, we fail to take note of this and argue instead that Sikh religious consciousness was from the beginning the motivating factor then we would be making a superficial use of history, and in objective terms' blaming the victims.²⁹⁷

If Punjabi Suba was a demand of communal nature secularised in later phases, then the Khalistan moment was a secular demand communalised in later periods. In the 1980s, one does witness a shift in Sikh politics; with the repeated use of lore, myth, and history, there was increased use of religious vocabulary and metaphor, comparably more extensive than in the 1960s. In fact, Master Tara Singh and Fateh Singh rarely had to rely upon enlivening the Sikh militant traditions; if they were mentioned, it was done so in passing. According to Juergensmeyer, even the 'perfectly legitimate concerns' or secular issues, which did not require religious sources to acquire 'respectability', were sequentially 'sacralised' to gain an aura of legitimacy it did not possess earlier. In contrast to the secular issues, he continues, 'there was one demand that desperately needed all the legitimation that it could get';

²⁹⁶ G.S. Dhillon, *Truth about Punjab: SGPC White Paper*, (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee, 1996), 176.

²⁹⁷ Dipankar Gupta, *The Communalising of Punjab*, 1188.

the claim to a separate nation of Khalistan.²⁹⁸ However, as noted by Dipankar Gupta, Khalistan erupts much later on the scene; the regional movement finding an expression in ASR was construed out of ‘purely secular and economic issues’ first. As opposed to this, the linguistic reorganization movements were an embodiment of ‘cultural-political manifestations’ that neither threatened the centre’s power nor the claims of any other communities in the region, thus were more easily digestible.²⁹⁹

Bhindranwale’s ‘Awakening’ of the Sikh ‘Nation’

For making sense of the militant discourses, this section, in particular, will focus upon the speeches of Bhindranwale from 1982-1984. Through looking closely at the militant worldview as constructed in Bhindranwale’s sermons, we would be able to recognise the model minority trope’s undoing. As he was known to his supporters, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was the *jathedar* (leader or head) of a religious seminary, Damdami Taksal. Damdama school of Sikh learning, also called the ‘moving university’ by one of Jarnail Singh’s boyhood companion, is believed to have been established by the great Sikh martyr Baba Deep Singh in the eighteenth century.³⁰⁰ Just as the institution he was affiliated to, Bhindranwale too preached orthodox Sikh tenets. He wanted to purge the religious community from the various modern social evils he discerned had come to inflict it. His constant emphasis on orthopraxy was a means to engender a uniform Sikh doctrine, ritual, and practice among the congregation that listened to his sermons. In his own rendition, he aimed to steer and persuade the community to stand united under the saffron *Nishaan Sahib* while ‘openly and resolutely’ supporting the *panth* and coalescing them under the canopy of Guru Granth Sahib.³⁰¹ He often stated that his ‘mission’ was to administer *amrit* and get more people to wear the *kirpan* and *gaatra*. Bhindranwale castigated the ‘easy living’ and ‘easy drinking’ habits of Sikhs in the countryside, and on numerous occasions, chided the young men with unshorn hair and clipped beards.³⁰² While doing so, he will routinely quip, ‘if the son does not resemble his father, then you know the term used for him’.³⁰³ He maintained that Khalsa’s ideal image and character needs to mirror the last Guru—Guru Gobind Singh—the spiritual father of the entire community. For Veena Das, the kinship metaphors used in Sikh militant discourse sought to ‘create a sense of community’ by centring the ‘ties between men’ as the ‘defining ties of the community’.³⁰⁴ This style of thought gave primacy to promoting resemblance of Sikh *munda*’s (lit. boys) appearances to the ‘spiritual father’; in turn, also embodying the individual’s relationship to the large collectivity.

²⁹⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Logic of Religious Violence: The Case of the Punjab,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 22, no. 1 (1988): 76.

²⁹⁹ Dipankar Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity in a Comparative Perspective*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59-60.

³⁰⁰ Baba Dip Singh is a celebrated legendary martyr in Sikh tradition. He is believed to have fought against the Afghans desecrating Harmandir Sahib in 1757. In many pious Sikh homes, one is likely to find the image of Baba Dip Singh holding his severed head in one hand and a sword in the other, while marching ahead to defend the sanctity of Golden Temple. See, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, ed. W.H. McLeod and L. E. Fenech, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 102, s.v. “Dip Singh.”

³⁰¹ Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice: Speeches and Conversations of Sant Jarnail Singh Khalsa Bhindranwale*, trans. Ranbir Singh Sandhu, (Ohio: Sikh Educational & Religious Foundation, 1999), 75.

³⁰² Mark Juergensmeyer, *The Logic of Religious Violence: The Case of the Punjab*, 68.

³⁰³ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 191.

³⁰⁴ Veena Das, “Time, Self, and Community: Features of the Sikh Militant Discourse,” in *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, (New Delhi: OUP), 127.

However, the moment that thrust Bhindranwale into public gaze and led to his ascendancy in Punjab politics was the clash between his followers and Sant Nirankaris on the day of Baisakhi, 13 April 1978.³⁰⁵ Sant Nirankaris are considered a 'heterodox' and 'heretical' sect by many Sikhs as they believe in a 'living guru', sharply in contrast to orthodox Sikh beliefs.³⁰⁶ There had been tensions simmering between the dissident sect and Sikhs since the 1950s, considering the Nirankaris continuous engagement in activities that orthodox groups perceived as an affront to Sikh religious tenets and sensibilities. The Sant Nirankaris had adopted several Sikh rituals and symbols but modified them, causing an uproar amongst traditionalists. This included additions to the closed scripture of Guru Granth Sahib, replacing the concept of *Panj Pyare* with *Sat Pyare* (Seven Beloved), baptizing through the ceremony of *charan amrit* (baptismal nectar consisting of water used to wash the feet of Nirankari Guru) instead of *Khande di Pahul*.³⁰⁷

Nirankaris had decided to hold a convention in the holy city of Amritsar on Baisakhi. On the other side, the occasion is remembered and celebrated as the founding day of Khalsa by orthodox groups, making them extremely upset about the whole affair. Two hundred members from Damdami Taksal and Akhand Kirthani Jatha decided to assemble and march in a procession to 'protest against the Nirankari heresy'.³⁰⁸ Soon, a clash broke out between the two groups, in which the 'living guru'—Gurbachan Singh's bodyguards opened fire. The violent encounter resulted in the deaths of thirteen orthodox Sikhs and two Nirankaris. Reacting to the Sikh resentment and outpour over the incident, the Akal Takht *jathedar*, along with SGPC, issued a *hukamnama* (religious edict) asking the Sikhs to sever any social ties with Nirankaris.³⁰⁹ Sikh extremists interpreted the ambiguous wording of the edict to be a justification for using violence against the 'enemies of *dharma* and Sikhism', i.e. Nirankaris.³¹⁰ From this point onward, the radical extremists and militants were able to assert considerable influence in Punjab politics while deftly moulding the tenor of Sikh political discourse.

Those Nirankaris arrested for the murders were released soon since the court saw them as acting in self-defence. However, this did not go down well with certain factions of the Sikhs. As one member from Damdami Taksal later put it, 'the Indian

³⁰⁵ Interestingly, some political commentators have highlighted the role that Congress played in cultivating Bhindranwale as a political rival of Akali Dal in order to split the Sikh vote in Punjab. With their moderate voices being countered by the radical narrative offered by Bhindranwale leading to political division of rural peasantry, it was more than likely that the Congress would poll the most votes. Kuldeep Nayar has pointed towards the presence of Bhindranwale on the same dais as Indira Gandhi during the 1980 Lok Sabha election campaign in Gurdaspur. However, as pointed out by Paul Brass the goals of Bhindranwale and Congress despite having 'coincided temporarily' were 'ultimately incompatible'. For what we witness later on is a verbal and violent confrontation between the two. Kuldeep Nayar and Khushwant Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab: Operation Bluestar & After*, (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1984), 36-37. Also see, Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, 192.

³⁰⁶ Sant Nirankari sect is different from the original Nirankaris. The original sect had conceptualised Sikhism in a more mystical manner (*nirankar* means the formless one). It was founded by Baba Dyal Das as a reformist offshoot, where he put emphasis on the teachings of Guru Granth and assailed the rites and observances, which he thought, were perverting Sikh life. For Cynthia Mahmood, "the followers of that Nirankari sect coexist peacefully with mainstream Sikh tradition". See, *The Encyclopedia of Sikhism*, vol. 3, ed. Harbans Singh, (Patiala: Punjabi University, 2013), 234-235. Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 78.

³⁰⁷ Jugdep S. Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India: Political Leadership and Ethnonationalist Movements*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), 41-42.

³⁰⁸ Cynthia Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 78-79.

³⁰⁹ Jugdep Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, 43-44.

³¹⁰ Jugdep Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, 43-44.

courts had not lived up to the promise of justice'.³¹¹ This perceived sense of discrimination incited a serious turn toward violence as a means to secure justice for the community. In 1980, two militants assassinated Gurbachan Singh; Bhindranwale, who was implicated in the murder charges, was later acquitted. In his speeches, he usually referenced the sect as *narkdharis* (those who have opted for hell) and despised their unorthodox methods, which he considered was committing blasphemy. He extolled those who had killed Gurbachan Singh and applauded them for having 'uplift[ed] the soiled honor and the lowered mustache of the Sikh Nation'. Their act of violence was admired for having 'infused a fresh breath of life into the Sikh Nation'.³¹² While heaping praises on the killers, he compared them to Bhai Sukha Singh and Bhai Mehtab Singh, who had in 1740 beheaded Massa Ranghar for desecrating Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple).³¹³ Like his preceding *jathedars*, Jarnail Singh attempted to negate the polysemous interpretations of Sikh scriptures and, through his exegetical skills, cultivated a more masculine, martial portrayal of Sikhs. The heterogeneous and differentiating traditions were not recognised as valid forms of Sikhism. Furthermore, the deviant others were seen as a threat to the unity of Sikh religion, and this deviance from established norms, beliefs, and practices was abhorred.

The cycle of a decade long violence and carnage had just begun. Soon after, in 1981, Lala Jagat Narain, who was the proprietor of the *Hind Samachar* group, was killed in broad daylight. Narain was close to the Hindu organisations working in Punjab, and in 1951 had urged Hindus to return Hindi, instead of Punjabi, as their mother-tongue in the census column.³¹⁴ Simultaneously he was a vocal critic of Bhindranwale and Akali Dal's politics and had also given a critical testimony before the Judges in Gurbachan Singh's assassination case. At this time, Bhindranwale was giving a sermon in *Chando Kalon* Gurudwara, located in Haryana. As was anticipated, he was incriminated in Lala's murder, and a warrant was issued, but he had left the place before the police could arrest him. The villagers reported that the Punjab police were enraged about Sant's leaving when they arrived on the site; in rage, they committed acts of arson by setting ablaze the vans belonging to Damdami Taksal present on the premises.³¹⁵ As a result, several copies of Guru Granth Sahib and Bhindranwale's sermons were burnt in the incident. Jarnail Singh ceremoniously recounted this episode in most of his 'diatribes' against the government. This moment, for him, was the 'awakening' of the 'Sikh *kaum*'.

If the [Sikh] Nation is awake today it is because of the martyrdom of Siri Guru Granth Sahib. September 14 marks the awakening of this Nation. Guru Sahib offered himself to the fire. If the books had not been set on fire, if the volumes had not been set on fire, I am prepared

³¹¹ Cynthia Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 60.

³¹² Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 13-14.

³¹³ Massa Ranghar was put in charge of Amritsar by Zakariya Khan, who was the Mughal governor of Lahore. According to historical accounts, he used the precincts of the sacred complex for amusement by inviting dancing girls and freely consuming tobacco and alcohol. Mahtab Singh and Sukha Singh killed him to avenge the sacrilege of the temple. This was first of the many onslaughts on Harmandir Sahib; which was desecrated three more times after this by Ahmad Shah Abdali. However, everytime Sikhs pushed back the invader and were successful in regaining control. See, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, ed. W.H. McLeod and L. E. Fenech, 202, s.v. "Massa Ranghar."

³¹⁴ Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, 46.

³¹⁵ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, 71.

to say with confidence that we could not have achieved such an awakening.³¹⁶

On his part, the repetitive recital of the sacrilege incident was meant to jostle the *qaum* out of its slumber; if their conscience had not already been stirred, it needed to now. After the demise of the last Guru, the Sikh community has increasingly come to revere, associate, and accept the sacred Guru Granth Sahib as the 'literal embodiment of the eternal Gurus'. To understand the intense emotions of 'grieving' that might have overwhelmed the community after the desecration episode, one must know about the great respect and authority commanded by the sacred text in the Sikh tradition. As McLeod has stated, the community's profound devotion to Adi Granth can be judged by 'witnessing the manner in which a Sikh enters the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib in a Gurudwara' and 'observing how homage is paid to it by bowing down and touching the floor with the forehead' or by merely 'watch[ing] the Guru Granth Sahib being installed or put to bed'.³¹⁷

Further to counter the '*Mahasha*' (Arya Samaj) press claims that Sikhs were communal, Bhindranwale would regularly remind the assembly that the sacred scripture of Sikhs is an inclusive text. In his traditional rambling style, he exhorted before a group: "Who was Jaidev? Wasn't he a Hindu from amongst you? He was a Brahmin. Jaidev is sitting here in Guru Granth Sahib. If a son of a Sikh has made obeisance here, he has done so at the feet of Jaidev the Brahmin". However, Jaidev was not alone, as 'Beni, the potter who made pottery', 'Pipa, who sat on a throne and ruled', 'Dhanna who used the plow', 'Namdev who supported himself by washing people's clothes', even the mythical character 'Ganika who gave up prostitution and adopted the Guru's way' are all embraced and encompassed within the scripture.³¹⁸ Subsequently, after the Chando Kalan incident, Bhindranwale offered himself to the police outside *Mehta Chowk* Gurudwara in the presence of a spectacular crowd of supporters. While courting arrest, a clash between agitated Sikhs and Police broke out, resulting in the death of 18 protestors. As Jugdep Chima put it, 'the Sikh cause got another dosing of martyrs' blood' at the site.³¹⁹ Through the personal intervention of Congress Union Minister Zail Singh, Bhindranwale was released from police custody. His release in the background of heightened extremist violence (including an incident of plane hijack) reflected the 'meteoric rise' of his reputation in Punjab's political and religious circles.

In August 1982, Akali Dal launched a *dharma yudha morcha* (battle or campaign for righteousness) against the government to implement the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Sant Longowal, the president of Akali Dal, was made the 'dictator' of the morcha, and he was joined by Bhindranwale in leading the agitation. The village masses would address both of them as *sant* (holy man), but the two were diametrically opposite of each other in temperaments.³²⁰ As a scholar later described, one was 'meek and dignified', the other was 'haughty and violent'.³²¹

³¹⁶ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 274.

³¹⁷ W.H. McLeod, "Sikh Fundamentalism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 1 (January-March, 1998): 23.

³¹⁸ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 6 and 409.

³¹⁹ Jugdep Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, 64.

³²⁰ T.N. Madan has defined *sant* as "the seeker of truth and salvation who devotes himself individually as well as in the company of fellow seekers to acts of piety, notably the remembrance of God through the repetition of his name (*namsimran*) and the singing of hymns (*kirtan*). The original usage of around the fifteenth century was gradually transformed so that by the nineteenth century it became the designation of religious teachers who

The religious tradition provided the ideological framework for the struggle and was apparent in all the speeches made from the dais of Harmandir Sahib. Appealing to the Singhs who had gathered to hear his address in a college, Bhindranwale said: ‘adopt the worldly Constitution where mundane affairs are concerned, but if you wish to protect the Faith we shall have to accept the Constitution [Guru Granth Sahib] in the presence of which we are sitting at this time’.³²² He knew that an ordinary rural cultivator was preoccupied with quotidian aspects of life; for mobilising and instilling a revolutionary spirit in them, it was essential to interlace the temporal affairs to a cosmic impulse. For this, he relocated the ultimate source of authority for political actions to the scripture. His ‘rambling folksy sermons’, as Juergensmeyer pronounced them, were captivating the imagination of men and women in the countryside. He would often launch into homilies entrenched with tropes of martyrdom and sacrifice with which past Sikh militant discourses were ripe. These attributes possessed profound meaning for anyone choosing violent methods in the struggle for Sikh pursuits. However, many were puzzled about the explosive popularity of a radical narrative that fanatically revived and activated the Sikh tradition and history. At this point, one might raise the question—what was the Sikh ‘nation’ waking up from, and where was it headed? In Bhindranwale’s own words, this awakening was to an awareness that the Sikh community was a ‘*gulam*’ (slave) in the country. According to him, there were numerous unmistakable ‘signs of slavery’ present in every encounter of Sikhs with the government. Some of these perceived signifiers were attempted to be intimately linked with the vivid memory of Punjabi Suba agitation:

Let anyone sitting in this entire congregation tell me if in India, since India’s freedom [from British rule], to speak the Hindi language, to get a Hindi speaking state, to get a train named after a place of worship, to get a city declared holy for Hindus, to wear the janeoo - the Hindu religious symbol - around his waist, even one Hindu has had to go to jail even for an hour. They have got everything sitting at home. But if you want to speak Punjabi, you want to get a Punjabi-speaking state, fifty-seven thousand of you have to go to jail...If you want to get a train named after Harmandar Sahib, if you want to get holy city status for Amritsar, if you want to wear the kirpaan in a gaatra on your person...you fill the jails with over one hundred thousand, have close to two hundred of you martyred, and even then be called communal-minded, extremists, and separatists! Why are we blamed like this? We are living the life of slaves.³²³

The ‘psychology of persecution’ manifest in all religiopolitical rhetorics of that period had another interesting attribute; as pointed out by Veena Das, through the intricate use of ‘local knowledge’, ‘individual misery’ was transformed into ‘the misfortunes of the community’.³²⁴ For instance, in one particular descriptive rendering of police brutalities and illegalities against the Sikh community,

gave spiritual discourses and provided scriptural commentary and exegesis”. T. N. Madan, “The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition,” in *Fundamentalism Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 597.

³²¹ Nayar & Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab*, 30.

³²² Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 13.

³²³ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 92-93

³²⁴ Veena Das, *Time, Self, and Community: Features of the Sikh Militant Discourse*, 131.

Bhindranwale speaks of a Lehar Singh, an ‘*amritdhari* Singh’ from ‘Jattanwali’, whose beard was forcibly shaved off by the police for participating in the *rasta-roko* campaign.³²⁵ In this discursive reconstruction, the symbolic dishonouring of a Sikh man’s *kes* (hair, one of the five sacred religious symbols) was perceived to mean abasement of the entire Sikh collectivity or *panth*. A sense of familiarity was created by conveying intimate information about the victims, such as the age of the person killed, his village’s name, and how he was murdered. In most of his narrations, he enumerated the gory details of police torture. These torments and inflictions that were recounted had a recurring pattern—‘flesh was torn off with pliers’, ‘nails from hands and feet were extracted, with salt poured over wounds’, ‘eyes were eviscerated’, ‘bodies shot at point-blank range’. Through relaying this information and archiving it for the *panthic* consciousness, every death was being vicariously (re)lived by the community members present in his audience.

His speeches constantly grapple with the theme of being discriminated in the way government treats Hindus and Sikhs; moreover, he kept contending about the preferential treatment being meted out to Hindus. In contrast, Sikhs, for him, were treated as second class citizens in the realm of politics, economics, and application of the law. He also viewed the secular nationalist framework as being malevolently placed in disfavour of Sikhs while retaining a tilt towards the Hindu community. The solutions proposed to counter the slavery imposed by the Indian government were often radical and bloody; primarily derivative of the history of Sikh religious persecution and resultant counter-violence. Although Bhindranwale chose to distance himself from the demand of Khalistan (possibly as a politically expedient move), he was firmly set against this perceived slavery, injustices, and discrimination. His generic response on the question of a separate state was that ‘we do not oppose Khalistan nor do we support it, we are quiet on the subject’ but ‘we wish to live in Hindostan as equal citizens, not as slaves’.³²⁶ In this rhetoric, blindspots of being identified as a minority community were sought to be advanced. In other words, Bhindranwale was actively reworking the presuppositions of a model community by positing the claim that being a minority should not be tantamount to being ‘slaves of the majority’. This undoing of the previous assumptions was, in a sense modifying the model minority rhetoric.

As delineated by Harjot Oberoi, in conformity with their history, the “Sikhs have opted to deal with major social crises – state oppression, economic upheavals, colonialism, collapse of semiotic categories – by invoking the millenarian paradigm”, and this is precisely what unfolded.³²⁷ Under the aegis of depicting that a cosmic struggle was playing out on the social plane, the leadership wanted to fulfil the ‘millennial aspirations’ of social change (or perhaps a revolution). This included removing the yoke of ‘slavery’, acquiring political autonomy, improving economic conditions, and regaining the ‘lost’ sense of self-respect and honour.

Bhindranwale would narrate incidents from the past when the Guru’s warriors or *sant-sipahis* avenged the wrongdoings of tyrannical despots and oppressors. Apparently, by situating the immediate *dharma-yudha* in the grand narrative of a cosmic war, ‘where good was pitted against evil’, he successfully generated an

³²⁵ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 100-101.

³²⁶ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 202.

³²⁷ Harjot Oberoi, “Sikh fundamentalism: Translating History into Theory,” in *Indian Political Thought: A Reader*, ed. Aakash Singh and Silika Mohapatra, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 156.

extra-legal sanctioning for violence. Another scholar, Tambiah, notes—“Bhindranwale seems to have both enlivened and energized the charged imagery of the two swords and more deeply inscribed it on the very bodies of his followers”.³²⁸ While vocally endorsing the ‘beheadings’ of those who had ‘insulted’ the sacred scripture, ‘dishonoured women and girls’, or killed the *Singhs*, Bhindranwale would fervently appeal to some of his radical followers in the audience not to be ‘lax in punishing these persons’, and if they fail to get ‘hold of [the evildoer] at the site, he should be looked for, sought out, and then put on the train [of death]’.³²⁹ By engaging in this discourse, the militants triumphed in interweaving the meta-morality of religion with the retributive killings of past and present; it helped them supersede the regular monopoly over violence exercised by secular authorities. The sovereign’s ‘right to kill’ was bypassed by conceptualising the miri-piri doctrine, which was now posited in an acute contradiction with the Indian government’s right to use violence. Anandpur Sahib Resolution no longer remained an economic grievance that could be resolved with the grant of territory, water and Chandigarh. The perceived injustices and discrimination had one popular cure, to acquire political power in the form of Khalistan.

There has been substantial empirical documentation of the social background of militants who took up violence as a response to the Punjab crisis. Bhindranwale was closely associated with Amrik Singh, who was the son of the previous Jathedar of *Damdami Taksal* and had revitalized the All India Sikh Student Federation (AISSF, a student body sponsored by Akali Dal in initial years). Through Amrik Singh, Bhindranwale too held considerable sway over the organization and its members. It was a body primarily composed of young students in colleges and schools who usually belonged to the countryside. However, there are several factors essential to keep in mind while looking at the social bases of these recruits. First, not all of them were associated with Bhindranwale or were fully committed to the cause of Khalistan or were even orthoprax. Various extremist groups were operating in the region with a heterogeneous set of ideological assertions to choose from. Second, economic or class-based rationales for comprehending the militants’ motives, although crucial, are not sufficient as it does not account for any fuller appreciation of the vast socio-economic ranges from which these men were usually enlisted. That being said, quite a few of the academic works have a familiar exposition running across them. More often than not, these men had joined the radical associations after the counter-insurgency (in the form of ruthless police excesses) started targeting the youth from rural areas.³³⁰ With having nowhere else to go in an exceptional situation, many chose to side with the radical insurgents. Another probable motive, as identified in some studies, was the romance, excitement, and brave adventure put on offer by the impending revolution.³³¹ As one militant later explained, “In our tradition, we believe that Guru Nanak told Babar [a Mughal emperor] that he was a tyrant, right to his face”.³³² Perhaps, it is safe to assert that an admixture of tradition and romance both shaped the desire to partake in the ongoing cosmic war.

³²⁸ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia*, (California: University of California Press, 1996), 142.

³²⁹ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 62.

³³⁰ Joyce Pettigrew, *In Search of a New Kingdom of Lahore*, 11.

³³¹ H.S. Puri, P.S. Judge & J.S. Shekhon, *Terrorism in Punjab: Understanding the Reality at the Most Basic Level*, (New Delhi: Har-anand Publications, 1999), 184-185.

³³² Cynthia Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 96.

The text of Anandpur Sahib Resolution specifies one of its purpose as “the preservation among the Sikhs of a consciousness of an independent *Panthic* identity and carving out a territory [*desh*] and era [*kal*] wherein the national sentiments [*kaumi jazba*] and nationhood [*kaumiyat*] of the Sikh *panth* may find the fullest embodiment and expression”.³³³ As would become evident from further analysis, there was a conspicuous verbalization of ‘Sikh nation’ in Bhindranwale’s sermons. The idea that Sikhs were a ‘distinctive nation’ was not new; from colonial times onward, Sikh cultural leaders (*Tat Khalsa* reformers) had asserted theological and political separateness of Sikhs from the Hindus. For expressing those contrasts, the term Sikh nation or *qaum* was frequently used and circulated. However, this discourse remained alienated from a territorial linkage of the Sikh nationality to the land of Punjab.³³⁴ Even when the concept of ‘homeland’ occupied centrality during the Punjabi Suba campaign, Sikh nationalism was never seriously visualised in antinomy with Indian nationalism. Nonetheless, there was a clear epistemic shift in vocalising the Sikh identity in the 1980s. From asking ‘recognition’ for a numerically small minority in the 1960s, there was now a pronounced enactment of a ‘distinctive nationality’ (*wakhri qaum*) in discursive arenas. The idea remains imprinted as a permanent category in Sikh self-descriptions to date.

Bhindranwale admonished those who were ‘overwhelmed’ of their minority subject position and reminded the gatherings of a glorious past, where even when the Sikhs were ‘outnumbered’, their ‘high spirits’ remained undeterred in various battles against Mughals.³³⁵ The rhetoric of these times closely attended to the persisting legal and cultural ambiguities enveloping the Sikh religion and Hindu identity. The Indian Constitution, vernacular newspaper, magazine reports, and Hindu nationalist literature were all simultaneously attacked for denying the separateness of Sikh religious and national identity. At centre of the controversy was Article 25, which was seen as a legal knot seeking to subsume Sikhs within the nebulous, all-encompassing category of Hindus. In a symbolic protest, towards the end of February 1984, some senior Akali leaders—Badal, Tohra, and Barnala publically tore and burned copies of Article 25 of the Indian Constitution. At the same time, Bhindranwale was using a circular

³³³ These translations are excerpted from Giorgio Shani’s work. It is the one of the closest translations to the Punjabi version of Anandpur Sahib Resolution. Some other works, like of Khushwant Singh and Kuldeep Singh Nayar, do not reflect or include the translation of the term *qaum* or *qaumiyat*. *Qaum*, (or *kaum*, an alternative spelling) is an Urdu word having overtones of ‘nationhood’ or ‘national consciousness’. However, the semantic range of the term exceeds that of its English counterpart ‘nation’ or ‘nationalism’, hence has to be contextualised according to the reference in which it is being used. The term was hollowed out by Akali Dal, which insisted on numerous occasions that ‘Sikhs are a nation but India is their country’. On the other hand, the term was interlinked with aspiration for ‘sovereignty’ in the more militant discourses. Even the term(s) *deshkhaal* are not mentioned separately, as spelled out by Shani, but as a conjoint word; again, reflecting an expansive notion than captured by ‘country’ and ‘era’. Giorgio Shani, *Sikh Nationalism and Identity in a Global Age*, 164.

³³⁴ As Pettigrew has argued, unlike Judaism, Sikh theology does not posit any links between ‘land, territory and people’; hence, making it difficult to sustain special claims to territory as based on any religious premise. In her interpretation of the term *panth* as a ‘collective body of those believing in Sikh faith’, Pettigrew points towards the notional absence of the idea of Sikhs as a spatially bounded entity. For her, the two theological concepts of *panth* and *miri-piri* asserted contrary pulls. As she explained, the Sikh identity and tradition is not merely an echo of resistance to unjust orders for ‘establish[ing] the rule of law and guard the faith’, as understood by the *miri-piri* concept, but it is also shaped by ‘patterns of accommodation and assimilation’. The concept of *panth* displays the ‘Sikh historical experience of coexistence with other communities’. She attributed the stronger pull of *miri-piri* in the specific temporal period of 1980s to Hindu nationalist revival of 1970s. Joyce Pettigrew, *In Search of a New Kingdom of Lahore*, 6-7.

³³⁵ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 43.

argument for contesting the illusive appropriations and relinquishing of Hindu/Sikh community boundaries by the press. He argued:

If the Sikhs are extremists, you should accept that the Sikhs are a separate nation. If Sikhs are a part of Hindus, then you should write Hindus as extremists. When they want to abuse us or use foul language towards us, it is exclusively towards people with turbans, but when we ask for our rights, we are told: 'you are part of us', they say: 'you are born out of us'.³³⁶

In one of his conversations with some eminent personalities of national importance, he again emphasised the distinctiveness of the Sikh nation. On being repeatedly asked his views on Khalistan, he once retorted, 'how can a nation which has sacrificed so much for the freedom of the country want it fragmented?'. At the same time, also adding a stipulation that 'Centre should tell us if it wants to keep the turbaned people with it or not'.³³⁷ Militant discourses of the 1980s quite constantly attempted to challenge and re-imagine nationalist history. In Bhindranwale's diatribes, attention was steered towards the deliberate exclusion of Sikh contributions in nation-making, and the most targeted figure was that of 'father of the nation'. Never shy of hyperbole, he exhorted:

Did India achieve freedom through the spinning wheel of the hypocrite whom greedy men call 'Father of the Nation'? It was Bhagat Singh who was hanged. It was Udham Singh who went to kill O'Dwyer. Was freedom obtained through putting some shot into the side [of the oppressors] or through the wooden strips of the spinning wheel? If a strip of wood is blown at the Khem border by a cannonball, they [run away and] do not stop short of Delhi. Those with *kachheras*, *beards*, and *kirpans* in their *gaatras*, those who have 'Singh' in their names and were prepared to sacrifice their lives are killed there [at the border] and the 'father of the nation' is Gandhi?³³⁸

In another instance, through caricaturing a historical incident, Bhindranwale attempted to prove that even the 'flag of Hindostan' was symbolically illustrative of 'Sikh distinctiveness'.³³⁹ In this concocted story, transmitted quite liberally in militant circles, Baba Kharak Singh (a freedom fighter and a Sikh representative) was the protagonist. The incident was sketched out as follows: Baba Kharak Singh was asked by Motilal, Patel and Gandhi (the 'cap wearers') to lead a march with the newly created tricolour where white was on the top, green in the middle, and saffron was placed last. On the opposing side were the British troops with machine guns pointed towards them. These political luminaries were trying to trick the Sikh leader into facing the bullets, if fired, on his chest, but cleverly responding to the request of the national figureheads, Baba said: 'I am ready [to lead] but let the flag decide. Whose color is at the top should be in front, those whose color is in the middle should be in the middle, and those whose color is at the bottom should be the last'. The leaders, embarrassed now, decided to reshuffle the colours by placing saffron at the top.

³³⁶ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 113.

³³⁷ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 112.

³³⁸ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 353.

³³⁹ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 153.

Provocatively summarising the narrative, Bhindranwale remarked, “If bullets in the chest have to be risked, Sikhs are a separate nation and the color is placed at the top but if it is a matter of sitting on chairs, the nation with the saffron flag is below, and the white color is on top. This is a dance of communalism”.³⁴⁰

Discursive reimagination of this kind envisaged the nationalist symbol by reconstituting the normative relationship of Sikhs with the national flag. Within this cognitive frame, the ‘visual icon and semiotic message’ correspondent of abstract nationhood rhetoric (traditional of Nehruvian secularism) was imbued with newer meanings to represent the distinctive nationality of Sikhs.³⁴¹ During the flag debate in the Constituent Assembly, several members elaborated upon the saffron colour in the ‘decommunalised flag’ as emblematising ‘courage’, ‘sacrifice’, and even ‘renunciatory’ traditions of India.³⁴² Although not stated in absolute terms, the *Kesari* colour resonated with Sikh and Hindu nationalist imagery; moreover, both communities invested the official site of national symbol with their own specific set of understandings. Another theme explicitly discernible in these speeches was the reappearance of ‘victimhood’ memory (almost as a flashback from the past) as closely attendant to nationhood claims. Bhindranwale, in his address to a congregation, says:

It is very difficult to erase the word *Khalsa*. Mir Mannu died trying to exterminate the *Khalsa*, Zakariya died trying to finish the *Khalsa* off. Lakhpat and Jaspal Rai died trying to accomplish this. Jehangir, Shah Jehan and Aurangzeb died trying to destroy the *Khalsa*. Who are you that you will eliminate the *Khalsa*? I appeal to the sons of Sikhs. If in any Hindu college, in any Hindu school, any Hindu library, the name of some of the incarnations [they believe in] is written, you should respect it. Don’t throw stones at anyone, don’t use your pen against anyone. However, if in any college, school or library of the Sikhs or at other religious place there is anything written about the True Gurus or about the Sikh faith; and someone intoxicated with power or with power of leaders of the Government, wishes to destroy the Sikh principles, the Sikh symbols, the words of the Sikh faith, let him do so remembering that this Sikh Nation is one that knows how to say *Vaheguru* while being broken on the wheel; it is the Nation that can hold out against Zakariya for twenty-two days after having the scalp removed; it is the Nation that, having its head and body sawn through,

³⁴⁰ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 133 & 152.

³⁴¹ In 1921, Gandhi designed a flag composed of white, green and red colours; red signifying the ‘Hindu colour’, green signifying the ‘Muslim colour’ and white symbolising peace and toleration of ‘other religions’. Soon he was smothered with requests from other communities to include their colour. In his attempt to reason with Sikhs in particular, he wrote in *Young India*: “To ask for special prominence is tantamount to a refusal to merge in the two numerically great communities...It is a dangerous thing to emphasize our differences or distinctions”. Despite the initial versions of the flag and its colours being representative of the various religious communities in India, the final flag adopted on 22 July 1947 by the constituent assembly was strictly delinked from any communal overtures. Srirupa Roy has pointed towards the internal contradictions marking the early nationalist efforts to ‘sacralize the flag’. This dilemma of Indian nationalism was “how to proclaim national unity without erasing subnational diversities of religion, language, region, or caste”.

See, Srirupa Roy, “A Symbol of Freedom: The Indian Flag and the Transformations of Nationalism 1906-2002,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 3 (August, 2006): 503-506. In her article she has traced the journey of the national flag through different moments in history. In her own words, she is not looking at how this symbol was received by the masses, but focuses on charting the shifting politics and practices of symbolization and the meaning-making associated with the flag over time.

³⁴² *Constituent Assembly of India Debates*, vol. 4, July 22, 1947.

knows how to sit on Aurangzeb's neck and drive him out of Delhi. So, my Hindu brothers, I love you, we welcome you. Then, intoxicated by power, you say things like: 'the name Guru Nanak College cannot be used', 'the name Guru Nanak Khalsa College cannot be used'.³⁴³

The history Bhindranwale evoked here was the subjection of Sikhs to various persecution attempts since the seventeenth century. According to Fenech, the community is well acquainted with these archetypical tales as the 'psychology of persecution' is engendered and reinforced through '*Ardas*', '*katha*' and 'Punjabi folklore' routinely. In addition, Fenech contends that it is the second act of the narrative—the eventual triumph over the oppressors—that makes the theme of persecution so memorable in Sikh history.³⁴⁴ Deriving from traditional sources of a heroic past, Darshan Tatla introduced the term *ghallughara* to understand how ordinary Sikhs made sense of violence after the army invasion of Harmandir Sahib. *Ghallughara* has been translated to 'holocaust' or 'genocide' in English. Tatla has asserted the restricted usage of the term to two episodes in the past—the 'first which occurred in 1746 is called *Chhota Ghallughara* [Small Holocaust] and the second in 1762 known as *Vadda Ghallughara*, [Great Holocaust]'.³⁴⁵ In the first or small *ghallughara*, Diwan Lakhpat Rai massacred more than 10,000 Sikhs after his brother was killed in an encounter with a Sikh *misl* in 1746. In the second *ghallughara*, Ahmad Shah Abdali butchered 25,000-30,000 Sikhs, including women and children. The third *ghallughara* for Tatla was when the Indian army invaded the Golden Temple in 1984.

Notwithstanding the newer density added to the term after the 'third *ghallughara*', the conceptual vocabulary of *ghallughara* stretched further in the recent past and was not summoned only in the aftermath of the 1984 event. It was also prevalent in the early 1980s militant discourses engaged in pronouncing the distinctive nationality of Sikhs. The genocidal rampage in Delhi and elsewhere legitimised the desire to constitute oneself as a separate legal sovereign state of *Khalistan*, but the memory and trauma of 'victimhood' shaped the nationhood narrative much before.³⁴⁶ For Anderson, these exemplary 'suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts' are special kinds of death structuring the 'nation's biography'. Through this argument, he posits that national histories are written against ordinary deaths or the 'secular mortality rates'.³⁴⁷ In any case, the cultural representation of suffering appropriated by Bhindranwale was employed to stitch together a national identity. The excerpts from past martyrdom were evident in previous speeches of Fateh Singh and Tara Singh, too. All of them were engaged in memorializing and inscribing the 'national' on the bodies of martyrs and, therefore, on the community.

At the same time, it is essential to point out that the entire period stood out not because of a surging nationalistic consciousness but due to the presence of a recognizable overpowering desire to shed the minority status. In one instance,

³⁴³ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 25.

³⁴⁴ Louis Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition*, 64.

³⁴⁵ Darshan Singh Tatla, "The Third Ghallughara: On the Sikh Dilemma Since 1984," *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, (2015): 7, doi : 10.1080/17448727.2015.1087681

³⁴⁶ The term 'victim' has implied notions of passivity embedded in it, but this sort of victimhood trauma in community narratives was never about inactivity but about active resistance as agency was recovered in the second part of these prototypical tale.

³⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 205-206.

Bhindranwale specified to the assembly of men before him that there were twenty-two states in Hindostan, and most of them had Hindu majorities; he urged that by staying peaceful, the diminishing majority of Sikhs in Punjab will be further reduced.³⁴⁸ Hence, under threat was not a vulnerable, non-agential or powerless minority group but a nation being reconstituted and reimagined through everyday discourses. On another occasion, while reminding Sikhs of their slavery in India, Bhindranwale reprimanded them for their supposed 'minority complex'. In his rustic style of speaking, he reassures his rural audiences: "But don't consider yourself a minority. We are not losers. A loser is a man whose Father is weak...Our Father says, 'When I make my single Sikh fight against 125,000 enemies, only then do I deserve to be called Gobind'. What a great promise was that!".³⁴⁹ Here, being a minority was alluded to as being equivalent to holding a despicable, weak position. Mainstream nationalist history writing involves giving the nation a tangible 'glorious past'; in contrast, militants in Punjab were giving the glorious past a nation.

Rewriting the magnificent memoir of a nation required letting go of the inhibitions presented by the psyche of a minority community. Mamdani writing in a completely different context, says: "Political community and political identity are historical. Neither permanent nor natural, the boundaries of community and identity are imagined in specific historical circumstances and can be re-imagined as circumstances change".³⁵⁰ This probably explains the effortless shifts, oscillation and tensions apparent in the rewritten claims of being a 'minority community' and the pronouncements of a '*wakhri qaum*'. The fluctuating rhetoric of Sikh leadership frames the question of majority-minority in non-essentialist terms. Their attempt at belonging to the broader nationalistic history at one juncture is counterposed by their claims of being a distinct minority contesting the meta-narrative that seeks to subsume their own nationhood claims. The counterposing of this sort reflects on the frailty undermarking the 'model minority' notion. As sociologist Surinder Jodhka has argued, minority positions are usually marked by a high level of 'fluidity' and 'historicity' and Bhindranwale's example illustrates this well.

Two Images: Good Sikh, Bad Sikh

There was also the appearance of a thematic crack in the form of conceptualising model Sikhs and model minorities in this period. The image and characteristics of the two were presented to be in sharp contrast. To do this, multiple loyalties had to be dissected for a more coherent loyalty for the *panth* or Indian nation to materialize. If the model minority trope has to be successful, it should align with the self-image of the minority community. It is also crucial that the group recognised as 'model' has internalised and affirms, through its everyday performances and utterances, such a categorisation. The trope cannot be desirably activated if it is not being reproduced by the community and state together at their site of interaction. The 1980s was one such moment when both the nation-state and a significant portion of the Sikh community stopped contributing to the construct assembled over the years. There was a visible dissonance between the image of a good Sikh and a good minority. In this period, the tale of betrayal, mistrust, and suspicion of the other became standard rhetoric.

³⁴⁸ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 333.

³⁴⁹ T.N. Madan, *The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition*, 600.

³⁵⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 33.

This narrative of betrayals witnesses two traitors—the one who is ‘disloyal’ to the cause, the *panth*. The others who were ‘disloyal’ to the nation but were earlier loyal to it—the army men, the soldiers. The trope of ‘model’ Sikhs was not abandoned entirely; instead, we have two categorically different images of ideal Sikhs. This assertion will become apparent when some of the discourses of political elite from this period will be examined. While recounting the Sikh history ingrained with tropes of martyrdom, bravery, loyalty, and masculine martiality, Bhindranwale generated a straightforward binary between those he considered good Sikhs and those who had fallen from the grace of *panth* in his eyes. The distinctions between moderate and militant Sikhs were highly prominent in nationalist leaders’ orations as well. This section will seek to unpack how these visualisations differed.

In Bhindranwale’s belief system, the outward markers of Sikh identity (also called *bana*) were crucial to being a good Sikh. The personal appearance of Khalsa Sikhs, specifically the *kirpan* wielding bodies, ordained with distinctive turbans and free-flowing beards were essential to his preaching and his conceptualisation of a ‘model’ Sikh. The five sacred symbols, specifically *kes* and *kirpan*, were seen as spiritual sources of courage: ‘When thirty thousand of your [women] were being taken away, these turbaned ones used to rescue them. The scissors and the razor are symbols of doubt and communalism; the *kirpan* symbolises unity’.³⁵¹ The brave act of ‘rescuing women’ who belonged to other communities (from the ‘clutches’ of Ahmad Shah Abdali) was thematically interlinked with these religious extensions present on the body of a Sikh. At the same time, this was counterposed with the ‘cowardice’ of those dishonouring Sikh girls, presumably associated with the insignia of ‘scissors and razor’. He further claims that the enemies of the *panth* are uneasy with a devout Sikh’s appearance. In the same way, even within the community, there were apostates or *patit* Sikhs who had trimmed their hair or shaved their beard after the *amritsanchar* ceremony. In a cognitive framework that valued orthopraxy, these people, too, were seen as ‘enemies’ of the *panth*.³⁵²

While seeking to draw an expose of the definition of ‘extremists’, one that the central government was employing at the time, he asserted that it explicitly targets and eliminates the *amritdhari* Sikhs. The image of a militant, or *kharku*, came to be defined as intertwined and inseparable from the appearance of an initiated orthodox Sikh. The two were conflated, not only in Bhindranwale’s utterances but also in the police excesses committed in the form of ‘fake encounters’. These staged encounters escalated dramatically in the summer of 1982 when primarily *amritdhari* Singhs were tortured and later eliminated by Punjab police because of suspicion.³⁵³ However, the Punjab Chief Minister, Darbara Singh, who had decided to confront militancy with an ‘iron-fist’ and ordered those ‘encounters’, himself conformed to the outward symbols of Sikhism.³⁵⁴ In her conversation with Sikh militants, Cynthia Mahmood pointed out how members of the Sikh community in the police themselves inflicted the atrocities and custodial tortures against those arrested. Therefore, as was made clear by one separatist, later on, the semblance and fidelity to *bana* alone is not sufficient:

³⁵¹ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 419.

³⁵² T.N. Madan, *The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition*, 600.

³⁵³ Jugdep Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, 69.

³⁵⁴ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi’s Last Battle*, 112. Darbara Singh admitted to the journalists about giving permission to law enforcement agencies, he is quoted as saying: ‘Encounters did take place, and they [militants] were killed. I told my police officers—You kill the killers and I will take responsibility’.

They may be Sikh in their appearance, but we never consider those people Sikhs. A Sikh is he who listens to the Guru's command, and Guru's command is to speak against injustice. Anybody who complies with an oppressive regime is never a Sikh.³⁵⁵

This curation of a true/false (Sikh) binary was crucial; after all, several Sikhs in the government did not partake in militancy and remained 'loyal' to the Indian nation-state, thus 'betraying' the *panth*. The deflection in allegiance from the *Darbar Sahib* (Golden Temple) to the 'Delhi *darbar*' (euphemism for Central government) was contradicted with the exemplar behaviour of guerilla fighters, also called *surme* (heroic fighters).³⁵⁶ According to Pettigrew, the latter were seen as 'steadfast and loyal to the faith even when it mean[t] relinquishing valuable government service and life itself'.³⁵⁷ Bhindranwale conceived this severance from loyalty as a crack in the unity of Sikhs:

No Hindu can do intelligence gathering on us. It is the misfortune of us Sikhs. If intelligence has to be gathered about us, it is done by Sikhs with beards and *kirpans*, under disguise, and it is the fellow with the *kirpan* who comes to open fire at Harmandar Sahib. The sons of Sikhs in the police and the military should think about it some time.³⁵⁸

Urging these people, he remarks, 'like true men, become Guru's Sikhs, give up the hassle there and come over to this side'. On the other hand, as Dipankar Gupta has made clear, the rural Sikhs did not take an unwavering approach to all arms-bearing extremists. Even within the militias, there was a 'moral' demarcation of those who were involved in assassinating 'political targets' and those who slayed 'innocent people for purely mercenary reasons'.³⁵⁹ The latter were not recognised as the Guru's true Sikh. The brutal murders of 'unarmed innocent people' were not religiously sanctioned and fell out of the confines within which the cosmic war was transpiring.

Bhindranwale would pronounce from the stage, "we must not loot shops, burn shops, dishonour daughters and sisters, and kill hawkers. If someone being a Sikh kills anybody, he is not fit to be called a Sikh". In addition to the previous comment, he immediately clarifies: "However, if being a Sikh someone does not get justice, he is not a Sikh either".³⁶⁰ Moreover, he insistently kept on asking Sikhs to keep weapons on their body at all times: "Why don't you bear arms? Why don't you carry weapons? Why do you become eunuchs and sleep upon going out?".³⁶¹ By way of militarizing the *panth*, newer definitions of a proper form of masculinity were displacing the 'accommodative' and 'passive' masculine characteristics of Akali politics. In one congregation, he makes the assembled men shout a sacred verse uttered by Guru Tegh Bahadur: 'Without sacrifice, it will not survive; the Faith will

³⁵⁵ Interview of a militant recorded by Cynthia Mahmood. Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 149.

³⁵⁶ Joyce Pettigrew, "Betrayal and Nation-Building among Sikhs," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 29, no. 1 (1991): 28, doi: 10.1080/14662049108447600

³⁵⁷ Joyce Pettigrew, "Martyrdom and Guerilla Organisation in Punjab," *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 30, no. 3 (1992): 389.

³⁵⁸ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 94-95.

³⁵⁹ Dipankar Gupta, "Ethnic imagos and their correlative space: An essay on some aspects of Sikh identity and perceptions in contemporary Punjab," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 26, no. 2 (1992): 232.

³⁶⁰ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 360.

³⁶¹ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 78.

not survive without the sacrifice of our lives'.³⁶² Furthermore, it was contended that only 'courageous Sikhs' could make these sacrifices, and courage was closely associated with 'reading *gurbani*' (the sacred hymns of the Sikh scriptures): 'Only the *bani*-reader can suffer torture and be capable of feats of strength'.³⁶³ This was another pivotal element Bhindranwale had introduced in the Sikh politics; in variance with the earlier peace trailing agitations, he presented the community as composed of combatants, willing to take heroic and courageous 'offensive' actions whenever the situation arises. During this period, we witness an upsurge in the 'martial' rhetoric. The element was no longer crucial for the model minority trope alone, but without the presence of this component, the Sikh identity itself was viewed as diminished.

Throughout the negotiations between Akali Dal and Congress, any 'surrender' to the oppressive government (*zalim hukumat*) short of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was seen as a sign of 'weakness' and 'feebleness'. As he would continuously remind the assembly:

[If] the Akali leaders try to compromise on the Anandpur Sahib resolution I am not going to forgive them. I will be your watchdog but I tell you as watchdog that you will have to force the Akalis!...But don't think that as in the past, leaders can settle everything in Delhi or by taking a glass of juice on their own [reference to Master Tara Singh abandoning his fast unto death in 1961]. This time they can't give up by taking a glass of juice. Either the full implementation of the Anandpur Sahib resolution or their heads.³⁶⁴

Despite his volatile sermons, he still toed the Akali line by asking those gathered to 'maintain peace' as ordered by Longowal—the 'dictator' of the agitation. Although by early 1984, it was becoming evident that there could be a possible armed action against militants and radicals inside the temple complex. To that end, conspicuous anxiety was visible in Bhindranwale's overtures, who now tirelessly charged the crowd to react explosively in case the Government enters the boundary of Harmandir Sahib and 'destroys its sanctity'. For escaping arrest, he had taken sanctuary in the *Akal Takht*, which he had simultaneously started fortifying and militarizing. With palpable tension in the air, he asked the crowd:

Let me appeal most strongly to the entire Sikh congregation - to all of you who live in villages, towns and in the entire country - that when you learn that they have entered the boundary of the complex and attacked then it will be your responsibility everywhere to kill every critic of the Guru and every enemy of the Sikh Nation. At that time there should be no hesitation on your part.³⁶⁵

Operation Bluestar and Military Desertions

In June 1984, Indira Gandhi decided to act aggressively 'to defend the unity and integrity of motherland' by authorising the military's 'aid to the civil power' for

³⁶² Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 370.

³⁶³ Pettigrew, *In Search of a New Kingdom of Lahore*, 5.

³⁶⁴ Pettigrew, *In Search of a New Kingdom of Lahore*, 12.

³⁶⁵ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 72.

containing political unrest in Punjab. As illustrated in many instances of politics in the Northeast, Indian armed forces have been regularly called in to impede ensuing domestic ‘chaos’ and establish ‘order’. Army invasion came in the backdrop of fractured negotiations of the Central government with the Akali Dal. The Golden Temple, one of the most venerated and sacred sites for the Sikh religion, transformed overnight into a bloody battleground for Indian army troops and Sikh militants. The loss, both symbolic and structural, was colossal. The structure of *Akal Takht*, which faced the Harmandir Sahib (nucleus of spiritual piety), was a spatial reconstruction of temporal authority in the Sikh religion. Unfortunately, the heavy shelling and excessive armed actions had caused grotesque damage to the now-demolished building. The Golden Temple library was set on fire, numerous invaluable manuscripts, including copies of the Granth Sahib handwritten by some Gurus, were destroyed.³⁶⁶

Even more outrageous to the Sikh sentiments was the occasion on which this violent confrontation unfolded—the historically and culturally meaningful day of Guru Arjan’s martyrdom. Many religionists had come for pilgrimage on the momentous day of remembrance but were caught in cross-fire and died. Truckloads of dead bodies were ferried from the temple complex to the crematorium. The number of casualties differs in various accounts; however, the unofficial reports put the death toll between two to three thousand (including a heavy fatality for the Indian army). Inadvertently, the Indian government’s armed intervention had converted and ossified Bhindranwale and his supporters, in popular cultural memory, as ‘heroes’ and ‘martyrs’, who bravely sacrificed their lives defending the sanctity of the Golden temple from the brutal assault of the military. Several Sikhs, who had retired from top echelons of the army, were joined by other officers in their criticism of the ill-planned execution of ‘Operation Bluestar’. At the same time, there was a widespread opinion that there should not be an ‘overrepresentation’ of any specific community that could quickly mutate grievances (against the government) into mutinies.

Given the fact that Punjab had been virtually cut off from the rest of the world due to a media black-out, there were various unbounded rumours in circulation. When the Sikh soldiers were made aware of the army’s attack on Golden Temple, they were outraged, and as many as fifteen hundred deserted their regiments. Their ‘mutiny’ was the second most distressing event in independent India’s military history; the first incident, remotely comparable in magnitude, was the deflating loss of the armed forces to China in 1962. According to Stephen Cohen, the first incident led to ‘major rebuilding efforts’ by purging the incompetencies and ‘serious internal military problems’. On the other hand, the second episode, so severe in intensity, shook the ‘integrity’ and ‘corporate spirit’ fundamental to any defence troop’s success.³⁶⁷ Sikhs in the military are essentially divided into two separate regiments—one is the Sikh regiment, consisting of Jat Sikhs, and the other is Sikh light infantry, comprised of Mazhabi and Ramdasiya Sikhs. Sikhs are also present in high numbers in other ‘mixed’ infantry regiments. All Sikh units throughout the country were immediately placed under ‘constant surveillance’ of non-Sikh units.³⁶⁸ Before proceeding with an analytical account of Sikh desertions, it is indispensable to look at the already broiling tensions prevalent among retired Sikh soldiers.

³⁶⁶ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi’s Last Battle*, 186.

³⁶⁷ Stephen P. Cohen, “The Military and Indian Democracy,” *India’s Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations*, ed. Atul Kohli, (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 132.

³⁶⁸ Sanjoy Hazarika, “Indian Commander is killed as Sikhs desert the Army,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/06/11/world/india-commander-is-killed-as-sikhs-desert-the-army.html>.

A retired Major General, Shahbeg Singh, accompanied Bhindranwale in fortifying the *Akal Takht*. In the past, he was hailed as a 'national hero' for having trained the Mukti Bahini (an underground force) that was influential in the liberation struggle for East Pakistan and was also an 'expert in insurgency warfare'.³⁶⁹ The intriguing part is the turn of events that attended his 'deflection' and 'shift in allegiance' to Bhindranwale camp over the Indian army's side. Just a day before he was about to retire, he was stripped of his rank and dismissed from service over several corruption charges and subsequently denied his pension. This was done without proper court-martial procedure, thus forcing him to take redressal from civilian courts. He contested these charges and was successful in his appeal as the court lifted these allegations and cleared his name. Another instance that further underpinned the 'biased nature' of the Indian administration in his psyche was the Asian Games held in 1982.

Morcha dictator, Longowal, had publicly announced the intentions of registering a 'peaceful demonstration' in Delhi during the Asian Games after the discussion with Indira Gandhi's regime had again come to a halt. The government was understandably frantic about the disruption, presumably going to be generated by the protest, which could also possibly threaten the momentum of celebrating the 'greatest sporting event' India had ever witnessed.³⁷⁰ Orders were released to thoroughly check and cease any member of the agitating group from reaching Delhi. Haryana acts as a buffer state en route to Punjab and Delhi. Almost all the buses, trains, and cars arriving from Punjab were paused and searched on their way over. Those with turbans were, in particular, the centre of suspicion, and Hindus, in contrast, were allowed to cross over without any frisking. Several senior, retired Sikh army officials were baffled over the 'disrespectful' and 'harassing' encounter. Even after showing their identity cards, they were subjected to intense scrutiny; the 'indignities' accelerated the active dissent in retired ranks. One of those travelling was Shahbeg Singh; he later revealed that the 'humiliation' foisted during Asiad acted as a direct impetus in his decision to become an accomplice of Bhindranwale.³⁷¹ Later in the year, Akali Dal organised a gathering of Sikh veterans in the Golden Temple, where at least five thousand ex-servicemen were present. Day after day, it was becoming noticeable that the retired Sikhs were deeply disturbed at the government handling of Punjab 'situation'. Moreover, the discharged personnel was interlocked in enmeshed networks with the serving Sikh cadre; therefore, making it easier for them to assert their influence on the serving men.

At that tumultuous time, Shahbeg Singh was just one illustration of an 'alienated' military man experiencing estrangement from the nationalistic feeling ordinarily associated with the army. The desertions reflected a more profound schism that had come to grip the serving Sikhs. Furthermore, the secular Indian army promotes re-sacralization of the bonds between the Sikh community and the nation by reinforcing the symbolic religious worldview of Sikhs in armed forces. After the desertions, multiple 'loyal' retired servicemen wrote to the President asking him to take a 'sagacious' and 'lenient' view of the situation. They explained to him the intimate details through which the cosmological predispositions of soldiers are weaved carefully to inculcate the sense of unswerving devotion towards the nation:

³⁶⁹ Apurba Kundu, "The Indian Armed Forces' Sikh and Non-Sikh Officers' Opinions of Operation Blue Star," *Pacific Affairs* 67, no. 1 (1994): 60.

³⁷⁰ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, 89-91.

³⁷¹ Nayar & Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab*, 66.

The Sikh soldier draws inspiration from the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh and the Khalsa Army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Before being inducted into the Army as a trained soldier, he takes the oath of allegiance at a ceremonial parade by physically touching with both hands the *Guru Granth Sahib* which is displayed on parade for this purpose. Thereafter he is led to the Regimental War Memorial (which embodies the ‘Chakra’ and ‘Khanda’—the coat-arms of the Khalsa) and ceremonially repeats and adopts as his own the vow taken by Guru Gobind Singh at the time of taking up the sword of righteousness against Moghul oppression...The war cry of the Sikh soldier—Bole so nihaal...Sat Sri Akal!—is a legacy from the Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh. The ‘chakra’ of the Khalsa coat-of-arms is part of the Regimental badge and adorns the turban of the Sikh soldier in his ceremonial dress. Though the Constitution and Government of our Country are strictly secular, yet nobody can deny that we are a deeply religious nation. A Regimental Mandir, Masjid, Gurdwara or Church is a must for all major units of the Indian Army. In the case of a Sikh battalion, the regimental Gurudwara is built by the Jawans by ‘kar seva’ and prayers and ‘kirtan’ are held regularly in it. All Gurupurbs are celebrated by the men with great religious devotion. The *Guru Granth Sahib* accompanies the battalion into the battle-field.³⁷²

The Sikh soldier is loyal both to the nation and his religion, but his loyalty is espoused and intertwined with the nation using a religious framework already available to him; in short, his patriotism and commitment are not bereft or sheltered from his beliefs, faith, and practices. Another noteworthy aspect was the equally compelling appropriation by Bhindranwale as well as the Sikh regiment of a powerful religious motto—‘With determination; I will be triumphant’ (*Nischay Kar Apni Jeet Karon*). Bhindranwale had also proposed to the ‘serving’ military men that if they considered themselves ‘sons of Sikhs’, they should swiftly abandon positions in case Harmandar Sahib is attacked, besides proclaiming: ‘let your self-respect guide you’.³⁷³ There was an evident juxtapositioning of contradictory influences and impulses.

It was argued later that the ‘extreme emotional stress’ caused by the ‘conflict’ between two hitherto non-paradoxical elements (nation and religion) being suddenly rendered paradoxical in each other’s presence must have been pulling apart the soldiers, thus producing dissent. On the other hand, not everyone chose to be recalcitrant. Sikh veterans beseeching the President referred to themselves as ‘old, loyal and tried soldiers of the country’ who ‘shared in the pain and sorrow of nation’ at the regrettable, agonising course of events. Plenty of them remained outspoken critics of Bhindranwale and militants in Punjab. Nevertheless, they underlined the abnormal circumstances that preceded the desertions in an attempt to get relief for the ‘mutineers’ so as to again reinstate the severed ‘oath of allegiance’. In addition, the ‘tested and tried’ ranks went on to argue: ‘Steeped as the Sikh Jawans are in the deepest reverence for their holy ‘*Takhts*’, they appear to have left their lines not as an act of ‘desertion’ but as an expression of their anguish, horror and outrage at the

³⁷² Annexure G, Nayar & Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab*, 167.

³⁷³ Bhindranwale, *Struggle for Justice*, 188.

sacrilege of their holiest shrine'.³⁷⁴ This line of thought wanted to present the entire episode as not a subversive act of treason but a momentary lapse of judgement.³⁷⁵

Besides, there were other Sikhs in the military that had emerged in the community discourses as betrayers of the *panth* by choosing to command 'Operation Bluestar'. Out of the three people designated with 'wiping out' the extremists from the complex, two were Sikhs—Lt. Gen. Ranjit Singh Dyal and Major Gen. Kuldip Singh Brar. Brar had been involved in anti-insurgency operations in the Northeast before, and Dyal was credited with capturing the strategic *Haji Pir* pass during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. In another reported incident, after the curfew had been relaxed in Amritsar on sixth June, some Jawans were seen kicking about eleven suspected 'terrorists' who were kneeling and crawling on the road. Among these officers was a Sikh, whose face was described as "contorted in anger when he lashed out at his fellow men who he thought were traitors".³⁷⁶

On the other hand, the SGPC threatened to 'excommunicate the Sikh president of India', who had 'ordered Indian army action against extremists inside Golden Temple'. Hence, pointing us towards the very complex paradigm in which we have to read betrayals and those responding to the call for prioritising their multiple loyalties. Operation Bluestar and the ensuing military desertions dealt a severe blow to the notion of 'model minority'. The forced entry into a sacred space was perceived as inappropriate and shrivelled the space in which earlier 'idealness' of the minority group was being co-constituted. The binaries between 'good soldier'/'bad soldier', 'good Sikh'/'bad Sikh' were soldered and exposed by the events of this period. The constant talks of betrayals, suspicions, and loyalty make explicit the fragility of the system in which political identities are not viewed as historical but rather as culturally fixed and sacrosanct. The 'good' and 'bad' evolved to become susceptible to differentiated interpretations. A motley of experiences for the different community members were all operating and juxtaposed on a similar political plane. Each group member was placed in one of the categories of either being a 'suspect' or 'trustworthy partner' in the two irreconcilable streams of nation-building processes. The trusted members, who were self-policing their ethnic compatriots, later provided the momentum for reintegration with the model minority trope. The categories were highly flimsy, dynamic, fluid, where interchangeability was permitted. However, it is necessary to specify that once an individual member was determined legally to be a suspect, then the reversal of their subject position was almost impossible to achieve.

Indira Gandhi's Assassination and Deepening of 'Suspicion'

Indira Gandhi, soon after the demolition of *Akal Takht*, had given orders for its rebuilding. It was her attempt at 'bridging the chasms' that had been created between the two communities, and 'reinforcing the friendship' that had broken during the

³⁷⁴ Annexure G, Nayar & Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab*, 169.

³⁷⁵ This view was also shared by the controversial army commander who planned Operation Bluestar. General Sunderji (the third non-Sikh commander), commenting upon Sikh soldiers' desertion, said that "it was basically command failure coupled with this was the enormous emotional psychological pressure which our Sikh troops [mostly raw recruits] were under at that point of time, something which no other class of troops had been through". However, not everybody shared these views—A.S. Vaidya, chief of the army staff in his broadcast to the nation on 1 July 1984 warned of severe punishment for all deserters. See, Darshan Tatla, *The Third Ghallughara*, 21.

³⁷⁶ Tully and Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle*, 202.

military operation.³⁷⁷ In her speech before the parliament, justifying the army action in Amritsar, she carefully evoked the model-minority paradigm (courage, self-reliance) while denouncing the meanings militants were deriving from their traditions. She stated:

Courage is a word which is much misused. But it would be very wrong for a community to think that it is courageous to sit in a shelter and to come to kill innocent people. That is not my idea of courage and I don't think it should be anybody's idea of courage. What was happening before? People were going on motorcycles and sometimes killing people against whom they had a grouse. They were newspaper people who had written against them. But they were also killing innocent people, sometimes a milkman or a shopkeeper. This is not courage. To project it now as courage is not keeping up to the high traditions of the Sikh community. We have held them in high regard for their qualities. We know that the burden of partition fell mostly on them and on Bengal, But the Sikhs managed it well. My Bengali friends will excuse me, I hope. The people of Punjab proceeded in a much more self-reliant manner. They built up Punjab and helped to build the country. That is why we admire them.³⁷⁸

This was the same line as verbalized by Nehru and Shastri a couple of years ago. The recurrent trope was also used to articulate the thematic crack between model Sikhs and the extremists. In a beseeching manner, she reminded the Sikhs: "In the long and glorious age of national Independence, Punjab and the Sikhs made a shining contribution. Let not a minuscule minority among the Sikhs be allowed to trample under foot civilized norms for which Sikhism is well known, and to tarnish the image of a brave and patriotic community".³⁷⁹ Unfortunately, her appeals and pursuit of mending severed relations at the last moment yielded no significant outcome as a devastating calamity was just around the corner.

While defining the Sikh *dharam*, Kahn Singh, a twentieth-century Sikh scholar, made a 'succinct list' of 'essential articles of faith'. One of them was "to accept the corporate community (*panth*) as Guru and serve it with loyal devotion".³⁸⁰ And yet, Bhindranwale's adoption of this notion did not produce any compelling reverberations for many Sikhs. Instead, a lot of them viewed the ongoing militancy and even the claims to constitute Khalistan with hesitation. However, all this underwent a dramatic change overnight. Indira Gandhi was assassinated on 31st October 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards. Thereafter, Delhi plunged deep into a spiral of catastrophic violence. After a spree of destruction that engulfed much of North India, so much as the Mazhabi Sikhs, who were not traditional supporters of Akalis, aligned themselves with the party. Like the post-partition period, the ethnic violence had reconstituted the Sikh community by elevating their sense of identification with the binary of 'we/us' and 'them'. As Dipankar Gupta pointed out, during the 'November massacre', 'the normal divisions between the Sikhs, such as between Jats, Mazhabis, urban Khatri

³⁷⁷ Indira Gandhi, *Punjab and National Unity*, 96.

³⁷⁸ Indira Gandhi, *Punjab and National Unity*, 85.

³⁷⁹ Indira Gandhi, "Restoring Normalcy in Punjab," in *Selected Speeches and Writings of Indira Gandhi*, (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1986), 77.

³⁸⁰ W.H. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh?: The Problem of Sikh Identity*, (Delhi: OUP, 1989), 2-3.

and Aroras, shaded off into a single identity because in the making of communalism subtlety is positively shunned'.³⁸¹ The state-sponsored indiscriminate xenophobic murders were able to absolve the community identity of any differentiations that existed before the moment. There were several reported incidents of migrations; about 50,000 Sikhs left other places to settle in Punjab, and multiple Hindus were moving out from the Punjab countryside to lodge elsewhere. Acknowledging the problem, Chief Minister Surjit Singh Barnala stated that the migration process was likely to assume 'alarming proportions if steps were not taken to ensure a sense of safety and security to members of the minority community throughout the country'. He also added that 'each migrant to Punjab add[ed] to the existing social tension in the State'.³⁸² Rajni Kothari describes the general aura of disdain for Sikhs throughout, as follows:

[T]he Sikhs were more like enemies than friends, that they were the cause of national disintegration, that they were responsible for large scale murders of Hindus in Punjab (actually more Sikhs were killed by the extremists than Hindus), that they were an aggressive and violent people, loyal to Bhindranwale and other extremists, on the whole out to undermine Indian unity. All this got reinforced by wild rumours and press censorship.³⁸³

A 1986 interview of several Sikhs residing in states other than Punjab reveals telling instances in which the Khalistan militancy had detrimentally impacted their lives and relationships with other communities. Lamenting over the doubts cast on Sikh's fidelity to the nation, Lt. Colonel P.S. Cheema said: "I spent my entire life in the army and my son, an air force pilot, died in the service of the nation. What more proof of patriotism can I give? It upsets us Sikhs that despite being Indian, we are not being regarded as Indian'. Saran Singh, former Bihar chief secretary, echoed Cheema's views: 'Everyone looks on a turbaned man with a degree of suspicion...I am a Sikh and only a Sikh. But in the rest, I am an Indian first and last. Why should I be doubted? I refuse to prove my patriotism'".³⁸⁴ As a matter of fact, it was true, the violent insurgency in Punjab had produced 'palpable hostility' and an injured reputation for Sikhs everywhere else. However, the most severe repercussion came in the form of anti-Sikh riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi.

Justice Ranganathan Misra Commission, set up to inquire into the allegations of 'organised crime' in Delhi, Kanpur, Bokaro and Chas over the Prime Minister's death, reiterated the details chronicled in various other non-governmental reports. The attacks on Sikhs were one-sided where non-Sikhs damaged, looted, and burnt the properties/Gurudwaras while killing thousands.³⁸⁵ In the ensuing debate on whether the purge was 'sporadic', 'spontaneous' or 'carefully planned', 'orchestrated' and 'perpetrated methodically', a number of facts were uncovered. In some localities of Delhi, police officials touring in vans were heard announcing through loudspeakers the arrival of trains full of Hindu dead bodies, whereas, in other places, they informed

³⁸¹ Dipankar Gupta, *The Communalising of Punjab: 1980-1985*, 1185.

³⁸² Statement of Surjit Singh Barnala, in *Spokesman Weekly*, September 22, 1986, 5.

³⁸³ Rajni Kothari, "The How and Why of It All," in *Voices from a Scarred City*, ed. Smitu Kothari & Harsh Sethi, (Delhi: Lokayan), 15-16 quoted in Stanley Tambiah, *Levelling Crowds*, 108.

³⁸⁴ Raminder Singh, "With Increasing Terrorism, Pall of Suspicion Engulfs Sikh Community Living Outside Punjab," *India Today*, September 15, 1986.

³⁸⁵ *Report of Justice Ranganath Misra Commission of Inquiry*, vols. 1 and 2, (New Delhi: S.N., 1986), 28.

the residents not to consume water as Sikhs were indicted of having poisoned the water tanks.³⁸⁶ Both rumours instigated the crowds that had emerged post-assassination to cause further rummage. In other neighbourhoods, Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses were diverted from their usual routes and were seen carrying armed mobs of rioters, criminals and arsonists to their desired destination.³⁸⁷ Alongside all this, the national broadcaster Doordarshan was held responsible for airing an event at Teen Murti Bhavan, where the gathered mourners were heard shouting '*Khoon ka badla khoon*' (blood for blood!). Trilokpuri, Sultanpuri, and Mongolpuri, where a large amount of violence was concentrated, are resettlement colonies at the fringes of Delhi. Some of these allotments were made by Indira Gandhi herself, and she enjoyed immense popularity in the region. Because of the political patronage, Sikhs in the area were also known to be traditional supporters of Congress. After the riots, they were left bewildered and stunned, one even asking why they were attacked despite having voted for 'Indiraji'?³⁸⁸

On the other hand, Stanley Tambiah reconstructing a 'tale of the affidavits' has elucidated a crucial point. The number of affidavits filed by non-Sikhs against Sikhs was at least three or fourfold of those filed on behalf of Sikhs. It was true even in areas where a high number of Sikhs were slaughtered or their houses burnt. Tambiah, in this connection, writes:

This suggests a determination on the part of non-Sikhs, through organizational representations, to resist being cast as culpable aggressors, to reduce the blame attachable to them, and, indeed, to turn the tables and even represent the victims as the aggressors. It is disturbing to think that dominant majorities can carry on such campaigns of vilification against vulnerable minorities and seek to erase the record and deny the nature of their collective violence.³⁸⁹

While recounting the violence, Khushwant Singh, a former member of Parliament and a vocal critic of the Sikh separatist insurgency, stated: "for the first time I understood what words like pogrom, holocaust and genocide really meant. I was no longer a member of an over-privileged community but of one which was the object of dire hate".³⁹⁰ As already discerned, the affluence of model-minority, i.e., Sikhs, was more an undifferentiated projection than reality. Khushwant Singh, through his links, was able to take refuge in the Swedish embassy in Delhi, but thousands of innocent Sikhs were butchered in Delhi streets for no reason other than being Sikhs. In the 1980s, the commonly disseminated idiom was heavily loaded with phrases such as '*deshdrohi*' (anti-national), 'deserters', 'betrayers', 'untrustworthy', 'disloyal', 'seditionists', 'separatists', and 'secessionists'. Once having celebratory anti-colonial manifestations, *deshdrohi* and *rajdrohi* were now used as a designation for the 'enemies of the nation' in newly produced localised narratives.³⁹¹ The particular events brought forth the tensions evident in the secular thesis of 'toleration'.

In this context, Mahmood Mamdani has tried to dissect the 'regime of toleration', where minorities and their ethnic differences are tolerated in return for their 'political

³⁸⁶ PUCL-PUDR, *Who are the Guilty?*, (Delhi: PUCL-PUDR, 1984), 2-3.

³⁸⁷ PUCL-PUDR, *Who are the Guilty?*, 3. Also see, *Ranganath Misra Report*, 42.

³⁸⁸ PUCL-PUDR, *Who are the Guilty?*, 19.

³⁸⁹ Stanley Tambiah, *Levelling Crowds*, 137.

³⁹⁰ Cynthia Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 139.

³⁹¹ Anushka Singh, *Sedition in Liberal Democracies*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2018), 218.

loyalty to the nation'. He argues that "the [minorities] were tolerated to the extent that they were seen by the national majority as non-threatening".³⁹² For him, two key concepts of the modern states developed during the signing of the peace treaty in Westphalia: "religious toleration at home and the reciprocal guarantee of sovereignty abroad".³⁹³ In other words, a minority culture was tolerated if it was willing to show subordination or total subservience and did not owe any rival allegiances. This inherent 'suspicion' of minorities is weaved into the matrix of toleration thesis, which interlocks the minority's fidelity to the sovereignty of the nation-state, in part requiring them to forego their own sovereignty by accepting the minority status.³⁹⁴

Indira Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, both had at different occasions, reminded the 'communal' Sikhs in Punjab of the repercussions for their actions on Sikhs living outside. Sikh leaders and their demand for a homeland, first as a cultural, then as a sovereign unit, were countered with surreptitious 'threats'. Finally, when the system of compliance and loyalty broke down during the militancy period, Sikhs elsewhere became prime targets of purging. Even if they did not directly participate in the secessionist movement, the sincerity of their loyalty was profoundly stained. The epistemic category of 'loyal' or 'disloyal subject' is an essential framework through which nation-states interact with the ethnic minority in question; for the category to function, both actors must be affirmed and reproduced in this dialectic relationship. However, as was clearly perceptible in the general mood of the popular discourse, Sikhs, as one of the partners, had defied their role. A minority, once descriptively seen as the 'sword-arm' of the majority community, had become 'recalcitrant' and 'disloyal'. When the sovereign became overburdened with tolerating an assertive religious minority, as evident in the events of 1984, the rupture produced a disloyal subject whose difference became 'intolerable'.

Beyond 'Fundamentalist' Rhetoric

By now, there is at least some clarity on the social, economic and political underpinnings of extremist chaos that engulfed the 1980s' Punjab. However, one unresolved issue still remains. We have so far navigated the articulation of religious idiom as it appears in Bhindranwale's sermons. Indeed violence requires something to hinge on to; in this case, it was religion. But another theme that constantly came into

³⁹² Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 6.

³⁹³ The current notions of liberal toleration, closely integrated into political modernity and secularism, can be traced to the premise offered by English philosopher John Locke. In his 'Letter on Toleration', he makes a liberal argument for defending the rights of Christian denominations or dissenters whose practices significantly differed from those officially endorsed by the state. First, he limited the magistrate's jurisdiction to civil concerns alone; by no means the (secular) office should pursue the business of salvation. Second, he argued that the magistrate had no obligation to tolerate that church, whose sympathies or faithfulness was for another Prince. In England, the Catholics will be tolerated by the Protestant majority once they renounce their allegiance to the Pope. Mamdani, *Neither Settler nor Native*, 6. Also see, John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, trans. William Popple, (Pennsylvania State University, 1998).

³⁹⁴ Ashis Nandy has argued that the Indian public culture has its own notions of toleration. Here one does not have space for the other; instead, we witness an open, blurred definition of the self, which allows accommodation of others, including those with whom the self is in conflict. However, this accommodation often falls short in reference to those distinctive or assertive minorities, with visible differences from the Hindu majority. See, Ashis Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 13, no. 177 (1988).

visibility and was repeatedly grappled by scholars was—why was religion or, more specifically, Sikh religion, in this case, making an appearance on the global stage now?³⁹⁵ This line of inquiry was contextually rooted in the religious revivalist movements of the last three decades of the twentieth century. These movements were referred to as religious fundamentalism(s) or, to state simply, were perceived as a return of religion to ‘protest’ modernity. The religious fundamentalists of the non-west were usually represented as being intrinsically and savagely violent. The word seems to enclose within itself other analytical categories, phenomena, and lexicons such as conservatism, traditionalists, fanatics, radicals, extremists, therefore making it even more complicated to unpack what being a fundamentalist precisely was. Wide semantic appropriations of the term ‘fundamentalism’ employed by academicians, journalists, and the state can be explored for making sense of this last puzzle.

The 1980s’ militant discourse examined in this chapter reflects modernity’s contradictory and ambivalent influences on Sikh identity. The idea of an ethnoterritorial nationality, along with the political jargon emphasising minority rights, entered the Sikh rhetoric more profusely after the Green Revolution. Nonetheless, this moment also instigated the community to deal with the social and economic flux introduced by modernity through stirring religious expressions that represented a quality of eternity and perpetuity. The language on offer portrayed an urgent need to uphold traditional values if not a direct return to pre-modern roots of existing. Sikh resistance to the state was depicted in journalistic and government publications using the terms ‘fundamentalism’ or ‘terrorism’. It is well known that terrorism and its associated connotations for religious movements developed an unparalleled (loaded) valency after 9/11; these tainted notions were missing from much of the state ideological propositions during Punjab militancy.³⁹⁶ So this section will briefly outline the contestations surrounding deployment of the term ‘fundamentalist’ for Sikh extremist movement.

If one traces the cultural roots of the term, then fundamentalism arose as a self-referential descriptive category in the 1920s, as adopted by some of the Protestant circles who rallied behind a series of pamphlets—‘The Fundamentals’. These groups promised to do a ‘battle royale’ to defend it.³⁹⁷ The central doctrine of fundamentalism, as strictly identified in the scholarly literature of the west, was the believer’s faith in the ‘inerrancy of the scripture’; in its more original usage, the ‘inerrancy or absolute literalism of the bible’. In comparison, T.N. Madan has presented a much more expansive definition encapsulating the phenomenon of fundamentalism in Sikh militant activism. For him, a “fundamentalist” person is

³⁹⁵ The question of resurgence has been dealt in a more serious and methodic manner in the five colossal volumes on Fundamentalism edited by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. The project, initiated in 1987, was funded by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and runs into some 3400 pages. The project has to be situated both within the wider framework of policy sciences and foreign policy of the U.S, as well as an attempt of academicians to revisit the self declared victory of modernity and scientific outlook as conferred by the secularization thesis at the beginning of the century. One of the criticism of the project was that despite including arguments of some scholars sympathetic to these movements, it had no voices from those identified as practitioners of fundamentalism itself; so what we find instead is a reading of how fundamentalism figured in the modernist academic imaginary.

³⁹⁶ It is not to suggest that the word ‘Sikh terrorist’ was missing from state exposition. It was being used extensively in Indira Gandhi’s speeches, and state reports like in the governmental White Paper. However, the more ‘intrinsic’, ‘obvious’ meanings the term bears now were not properly assimilated in this moment.

³⁹⁷ Susan Harding, “Representing Fundamentalism: The Problem of the Repugnant Cultural Other,” *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 378.

engaged in a selective retrieval from his own religious traditions, certain notions carrying high symbolic significance, the objective of which is to ‘mobilise their coreligionists for action’. The goal could be to pursue their communities’ religious, economic or political well-being while pitting it against other groups.³⁹⁸ While building upon the contemporary governmental and public judgements, he declares Bhindranwale and his associates as fundamentalists.

However, the second part of his delineation (that attempts to narrow his definition) falls into trouble with the more restricted academic usage. Madan proposes further that “[t]he fundamentalist is very much a creature of his situation rather than a pure traditionalist, and fundamentalism is not pristine orthodoxy. Orthodoxy would in fact discourage fundamentalism”.³⁹⁹ Instead, he argues that Bhindranwale’s sermons would be correctly indexed as enunciating orthopraxy as opposed to orthodoxy. Madan speaks of the need for developing a multi-causal analysis to comprehend a phenomenon as complex as religious fundamentalism in the Punjab crisis. Curiously, the presuppositions about applicability of the category ‘fundamentalism’, in this case, remains uncritically assumed or insufficiently probed. Madan speaks of situational mutability and its role in constituting a subject as a fundamentalist.

Nonetheless, he traces the fundamentalist moment to almost all significant Sikh attempts at religious revivalism or reformations in the colonial period. According to Madan, the issue of ‘return to fundamentals’ had gained increased salience in second half of the nineteenth century, or more precisely after the demise of Ranjit Singh’s rule.⁴⁰⁰ One pivotal event in Sikh history was the Gurdwara agitation or the *morchā chābīān* (keys campaign) of the 1920s. To put it briefly, this agitation was the Sikh reformists attempt at establishing control over *gurdwaras*, which at this point were under the authority of *mahants* or temple custodians belonging to the *Udasi* sect. British rulers didn’t want to lose their indirect domination over the shrines through the *mahants*. With non-violence gaining increasing political salience, the approach of the Akalis, who came into existence to oversee the eviction of these hereditary custodians from *gurudwaras*, was decided to adhere to the preponderant framework of non-violence.

In one particular tragic episode, the Akalis’ *shaheedi jatha* (congregation going to court martyrdom) went to take possession of the Nanakana Sahib Gurudwara; however, the mercenaries of the *mahant* ruthlessly shot, most of who arrived inside the premises, dead. Gandhi commended their methods of non-violence and passive resistance and even portrayed the ‘selfless sacrifice’ of the martyrs as an ‘act of national bravery’.⁴⁰¹ In his speech a few days later at the site, Gandhi urged the Akalis: “Your kirpans must therefore remain scrupulously sheathed and the hatchets buried. If you and I will prove worthy of the martyrs, we will learn the lesson of humility and suffering from them; and you will dedicate all your matchless bravery to

³⁹⁸ T.N. Madan, *The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition*, 596.

³⁹⁹ He also substantiates on this point further: “Understandably, therefore, it is not so much to the canon or scripture that Sikh fundamentalists turn for authority as to the tradition about what particular gurus or martyrs did. The emphasis is upon action and the expected fruits of action, and these fruits are this-worldly—economic and political. Piety or conformity to codes of behaviour is seen as valuable in instrumental terms. For the orthodox, who do not think of belief and practice in dualistic terms, piety is its own reward. If action is motivated by the desired fruits, it is propelled by its situational logic.” Madan, *The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition*, 596 & 618.

⁴⁰⁰ T.N. Madan, *The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition*, 602.

⁴⁰¹ Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: November 15, 1920 - April 5, 1921*, vol. 22, (New Delhi: Publication Division of Government of India, 1999), 382.

the service of the country and her redemption”.⁴⁰² While summarising his re-reading of the incident, T.N. Madan writes it off as a moment where fundamentalism and nationalism ultimately transformed into collaborators.

Suppose the interventions of Singh Sabha in the Sikh life-world(s) of the colonial period can be regarded as ‘fundamentalism’; in that case, it reveals certain conceptual uncertainties that require further clarifications. Can religious ‘revivalism’, ‘reformation’, ‘nativism’, ‘orthodoxy’, ‘orthopraxy’, or even ‘invention of Great Traditions’ (as manifest in the Singh Sabha movement) be all clubbed together under the theoretical category of ‘fundamentalism’? Madan has contended in his argument: “[E]arly in the twentieth [century], Sikh fundamentalism had its character fixed not as a return to fundamentals—an original doctrine—but as a bending of traditional elements to contemporary uses”.⁴⁰³ With that, all these phraseologies are allowed to coincide; it is not taken into account that fundamentalism was an unusual reaction to modernity, whereas Singh Sabha’s response was to reconstruct and reproduce a monolith Sikh identity, more or less, along the lines of modernity. Another problem with this sort of conceptual non-specificity was the failure to acknowledge the novelty of what had transpired in the 1980s’ violent militant activism in Punjab. In Madan’s own words, Akali Dal has pursued fundamentalism since its onset and under both Sant Fateh Singh and Master Tara Singh. Even if one concurs that there were essentially only superficial differences, the fact still remains that the extremist politics of the 1980s was not entirely analogous to the 1960s or the 1920s. Earlier periods were, if not opposed, then hesitant to make use of violence as a ‘fundamental principle’ (or did not imitate the past methods as the only ‘righteous path’ available). The mapping of historical, political, religious, cultural and even economic factors onto a singular descriptive register is likely to make the concept itself lack any precise (negative) meaning intended initially.

McLeod presents us with a much tightly knit and tethered definition; this was in keeping with the more meticulously and carefully drawn scholarly expositions on Christian and Islamic fundamentalism(s). Here, Fundamentalism was seen as containing a central doctrine and several related subordinate ideas. The primary commitment was to the notion of ‘inerrancy of Bible’. Even though the concept cannot be translated with all its immediate meaning to frame the Sikh experience, in theory, the existence of such notion can be argued.⁴⁰⁴

For McLeod then, several sects of Sikhs can be looked upon as falling inside the strictly delineated assumptions about fundamentalists. These groups include the Namdharis (also called Kukas) and the followers of Bhai Randhir Singh (now known as Kirthani Jatha, involved in the Nirankari-Sikh clash of 1978). Namdharis, recognised for their rigid and austere adherence to the code of conduct mentioned in

⁴⁰² However, on the very next day in his letter, Gandhi asks his “Sikh friends to shape their future conduct in accordance with the need of the nation”. Although he considered the act itself as courageous, the morality of the act—taking possession by a show of force—was questionable for him. This reduced the status of the Akalis as mere ‘trespassers’, ‘whom the party in possession was entitled in law to use sufficient force to repel’. He added to his argument: “even though no violence is contemplated or intended..in a well-ordered society, no individual, except under a process of law, is permitted to dispossess by a show of force or any undue pressure”. Despite his moral reservations, Gandhi maintained that “History will still call the immolation an act of martyrdom worthy of high praise”. He concluded by appealing the Sikhs to suspend their movement or postpone it until *swaraj* is achieved. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, vol. 22, 383-387.

⁴⁰³ T.N. Madan, *The Double-edged Sword: Fundamentalism and the Sikh Religious Tradition*, 606.

⁴⁰⁴ McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 16.

their Rehatnama, hold some beliefs considered unorthodox by the mainstream.⁴⁰⁵ Applying his restricted usage, McLeod has classified the Kukas as ‘plainly fundamentalists’ for they are literal believers in the words of their Guru. Same is the case with Randhir Singh’s congregation, where the sacred scripture is treated as ‘absolutely inviolate’, and the meaning imparted is perceived as perfectly clear, accurate, and indisputable; thus, meriting the allocation of ‘fundamentalists’.⁴⁰⁶

Simultaneously, McLeod states the possibility of bridging the gap between his and Madan’s treatment of the subject; this point of convergence becomes palpable in the figure of Bhindranwale. Jarnail Singh’s career and his seminary seem to fit both the loose usage and the stricter phrasing of the phenomenon.⁴⁰⁷ Although McLeod remains cautious of applying his interpretation to the broader spectrum of groups intensely engaged in a battle for Khalistan, he adds that these combatants could be classified as fundamentalists if one follows a more generic, wide-ranging exposition (like that of Madan).⁴⁰⁸ He insists that his own application of the concept remains focused on ‘religious’, whereas the other more extensive paradigms are ‘political’.

Contrary to McLeod’s position, Harjot Oberoi, keenly aware of the contested nature of the conceptual vocabulary, insists on defending his usage of the linguistic expression—‘Sikh Fundamentalism’. For doing this, he furnishes three reasons. First was his emphasis on the presence of a lexicon in Punjabi—*mulvad*— that ‘exactly corresponds’ with its English counterpart fundamentalism. Second was his insistence that these Sikh militants (and even scholars) had ‘no patience for hermeneutic or critical readings of Sikh scriptures’. His last argument for holding this rendition true is that the resistance movement amongst Sikhs ‘amply manifests many tendencies like millenarianism, a prophetic vision, puritanism, and antipluralism’, trends Oberoi associates with fundamentalism.⁴⁰⁹

It is only relevant now to touch upon McLeod’s engagement and disagreements with Oberoi briefly. Oberoi professes that the word *mulvad* (*mūl* meaning ‘root’ or

⁴⁰⁵ These include reverence and piety for *Dasam Granth* (a scripture enveloped in controversy over authorship) similar to the *Adi Granth*; as well as the presence of a continuing line of personal Gurus, believed to have been conferred succession by the last Guru. In marriage ceremonies, the couple circumambulate around the *havan*, a practice different from broader Sikh beliefs. The sect was involved in their opposition to British rule in India, but was brutally suppressed. On the origins of the sect, McLeod writes that during the reign of Ranjit Singh, some Sikhs had started to believe that the ‘Panth was being led astray by the pride which accompanied his military triumphs’. One of these Sikhs, Balak Singh, considered the eleventh Guru by the movement, insisted on a simple way of living (by wearing homespun white clothing) while practicing rigorous *nam-simran*. The sect practices strict vegetarianism and profusely advocated for cow-protection. See, *Historical Dictionary of Sikhism*, ed. W.H. McLeod and L. E. Fenech, 3rd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 219, s.v. “Namdhari.” Also see, McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 16.

⁴⁰⁶ McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 19.

⁴⁰⁷ In one of her conversations with a militant from the same academy as Bhindranwale—Damdami Taksal, Cynthia Mahmood was informed of an incident relevant to the above discussion. According to the interlocutor, Sant Jarnail Singh had a lot of respect for the *gurubani* and the Guru. He narrates an episode where Bhindranwale was sleeping on the floor in the seminary when suddenly a prayer book fell near his feet. As soon as he woke up and saw the book lying there, he started crying and blaming himself for the unintentional incident. As reported by his colleague, Bhindranwale was deeply disturbed about it and refused to eat or sleep while others tried to console him. To this, he adds, “Jarnail Singh was in such pain that he read the whole of the Guru Granth Sahib as an apology”, he continues and says: “You only love gurubani like that when you know it has provided you so much. There are some people who respect it for nothing, it’s just a gesture. Just because of tradition they bow before it. [For] Sant Jarnail Singh ji it was not tradition. He was the living image of gurubani. If you wanted to see some Sikh out of the Guru Granth Sahib, Sant Jarnail Singh ji was the one”. Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 57.

⁴⁰⁸ McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 25.

⁴⁰⁹ Harjot Oberoi, *Sikh fundamentalism: Translating History into Theory*, 149-150.

‘source’) is of recent coinage and was invented by journalists, essayists, politicians to comprehend and accommodate the radical religious movements unfolding in India. Henceforth, McLeod deems fit to illustrate the constitution of *mulvad* as an attempt to hold western imparted meanings without representing anything original. McLeod also discounts the third reason by disputing whether ‘millenarianism’ and ‘puritanism’ are indeed fundamental to fundamentalism; instead, he proposes the possible envisaging of the concept in the absence of any of the following. The second reason, however, did conform to his own observations and categorisation; this was the literalism of scriptures. McLeod discerns a parallel theme in Christian literalism and Sikh’s reverential attitude towards Adi Granth, where the Granth does not merely contain the word of the Gurus but is a personification of the Guru itself. On the other hand, this form of religious piety cannot become a measure for the concept of fundamentalist ideology since, in a way, most Sikhs pay respect to the scripture in this style. So every one of them, with few exceptions, would be classified as such. Later in his argument, McLeod contends a need for shifting away from the Book to spell out the differences between a ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ Sikh, and towards the present diversity in meanings available to various people.⁴¹⁰

The sacred scripture is indeed the Guru, but it conveys its message in different ways to different people, communicating with some on one level of perception and with others on a different level. It is foolish to imagine that the scripture will speak at the same level and degree of understanding to the ordinary villager as opposed to the person who has devoted many years to meditation. Clearly it will speak in different ways, the one to a person requiring a simple meaning and the other to someone of deep perception. All people will derive a message from the Guru Granth Sahib, but not all receive the same one. The range is indeed infinite as people differ in their perception and their diversity. Non-Sikhs are certainly encouraged to consult the scripture, but the Guru’s message for a person of Western background will be distinctively different from that of a Punjabi Sikh.⁴¹¹

Regardless, he remains attentive to the problem that is likely to surface in such a reading—‘Is this differential interpretation the meaning which these “fundamentalists” attach to their scripture?’—and if not, then what is the meaning they attribute or derive from the scripture? McLeod, unable to answer it himself, writes:

The question is one which assumes a Western attitude and understanding, a question which we are not really entitled to put because it involves the transference of a western mode of thinking to people who think in ways which are distinctively different. Why should a Sikh be required to answer the question of whether or not his scripture is verbally inerrant? The question carries him away into a world which attributes literal meanings to all words, a world which he has never entered.⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 22-24.

⁴¹¹ McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 23.

⁴¹² McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 24.

In McLeod's understanding, most of Bhindranwale's followers were not strict practitioners or orthodox, and those who were fundamentalists remained away from the public gaze.⁴¹³ Despite the overlap in militancy and fundamentalism, these conceptual categories didn't necessarily coincide. Whereas several fundamentalists were sympathetic towards the militant demands, they remained away from actually participating in the movement. In comparison, many militants could not be boxed as either being strictly orthoprax or unassailably orthodox, as became apparent in later years. Though more nuanced than those offered by loose journalistic style, these scholarly interpretations still end up incorporating and emboldening the modern stereotypes associated with fundamentalists. These highly charged images, widely broadcast in media throughout much of the 1980s, usually empowered the typification of a Sikh's figure, where he was represented as a 'gun-wielding', 'hot-headed', 'rural', 'irrational', 'backward', 'dogmatic', 'murderous', 'horror-inducing terrorist'. While recounting his conversation with a Punjab resident, Mark Jurgensmeyer alluded to an unsettling fear accompanying the state's discursive act of labelling someone as a fundamentalist. He alleges that this fear, referred to in his work as 'fundaphobia', was often 'indiscriminate towards its targets'.⁴¹⁴ Another scholar, Susan Harding, looking at liberal history's discursive representation of those called fundamentalists in the US, makes an interesting observation: "[T]he word and all persons and things called 'fundamentalist' are riddled with pejorative connotations, while those who interrogated the literal Bible...carry off the prestigious associations—educated, scientific, rational, progressive, urbane, tolerant, in a word, modern".⁴¹⁵ One instance of the direct result of a hegemonic 'narrative encapsulation' of this kind can be located in Cynthia Mahmood's ethnographic interviews. She writes:

Amritdhari Sikhs were particular targets of surveillance; the Indian army newsletter suggested after Operation Blue Star that "any knowledge of the Amritdharis who are dangerous people pledged to commit murders, arson and act [sic] of terrorism should immediately be brought to the notice of the authorities. These people might appear harmless from the outside, but they are basically committed to terrorism." This blanket condemnation of all orthodox Sikhs as terrorists went a long way toward alienating even those who otherwise may have remained, if not committed to India, at least unwilling to applaud the use of violence against it.⁴¹⁶

In a separate article published in the Fundamentalist series, Oberoi has posited the Hegelian paradigm of modernity to reflect upon what he calls 'Indic fundamentalisms'. This Hegelian notion of modernity emphasises 'individuality', the 'right to criticism', 'autonomy of individual action' and lastly 'philosophy of reflection,' i.e., the subject's ability to know themselves independent of any religious explanations. For Oberoi, as someone keenly interested in developing a crosscultural category to compare religious nationalism and revivalist movements, 'scriptural

⁴¹³ McLeod, *Sikh Fundamentalism*, 27

⁴¹⁴ Mark Jurgensmeyer, "Antifundamentalism," in *Fundamentalism Comprehended*, vol. 5, ed. Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 353.

⁴¹⁵ Susan Harding, *Representing Fundamentalism*, 377.

⁴¹⁶ Cynthia Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*, 98. The quote she mentions can be found in the report published by Citizens for Democracy, *Report to the Nation: Opression in Punjab*, (Bombay: Hind Mazdoor Kisan Panchayat Publications, 1985), 29. The following statement published in 'Army Gazette, Baat Cheet Special No. 153' was later retracted in 1990.

inerrancy' can not become the sole basis of knowing fundamentalists. He argues that this would narrow down the field of study as it is broadly confined to religions emphasising a revealed text; for instance, it would be challenging to situate Buddhism in such a frame of reference.⁴¹⁷ While being mindful of drawing criticism for using 'modernity as a heuristic device to evaluate Indic fundamentalism', when already rich cultural and normative resources exist within these traditions to perform such an activity, he defends it by underpinning it on the need for intellectual consistency. Another western derivation characteristic of these discourses was 'nationalism', and its recurrent application to religious movements in scholarly work was one of the reasons Oberoi felt justified in making a case for establishing a coherent dialogue between modernity and fundamentalists in his own work.⁴¹⁸ Despite his careful reading of western individualism and its application to Indic religiosities, it comes across as unforgiving to the non-western notions of communities, such as the overarching conception of *panth* in Sikhism.

Some of the criticisms for Oberoi can perhaps be located in Susan Harding's work on fundamentalism. The central premise of Harding's argument was to examine the uncritically conjectured opposition between 'modern' and 'fundamentalist', a totalizing notion of 'us' and 'them'; where fundamentalism was posited, defined, articulated and constituted in its opposition to the modern paradigm. She saw this as the hegemonic 'modern discursive production' of fundamentalists. The fundamentalist 'way of looking at things', or 'their own voice' was erased and reinscribed within the modern metanarrative circulated via 'news'. Accordingly, Harding, in order to arrive at better political choices and strategies, has recommended inverting the 'apotheosis of the modern gaze', its power to constitute the 'other', 'its authorial point of view', 'its knowing voice', 'its teleological privilege' and 'its right to exist without explanation'.⁴¹⁹ Her appeal was to develop a nuanced, partial, complicated and local reading of these movements.

Even in the case of Punjab militancy, the fact that no response from those bracketed as Sikh fundamentalists about their perception of modernity came forth has only shrouded their reaction to modernity further in mystery. It is impossible to make out what precisely the relationship of modernism to fundamentalism was. Part of the problem also arises because scholars speak of fundamentalism in a singular monolithic sense of the term; if anything, the Sikh or Christian or Islamic or Hindu fundamentalists are nothing alike, neither the social constituency of those who would make it up nor how they have responded, accommodated and appropriated modernity. On the other hand, Juergensmeyer has proposed that instead of adopting the terminologies—fundamentalism and anti-modernism (due to the lack of preciseness and descriptiveness, inbuilt pejorative connotations, and the inability to view them as credible political actors), religious nationalism could be used as a viable substitute.⁴²⁰ This term is not without its own set of problems since not every politicised religious revivalist movement aims to create a nation-state. Nevertheless, it is far more suitable for our purpose of studying Sikh militancy, more so when compared with the lexical category of 'fundamentalism'.

⁴¹⁷ Harjot Oberoi, "Mapping Indic Fundamentalism through Nationalism and Modernity," in *Fundamentalism Comprehended*, vol. 5, ed. Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 96.

⁴¹⁸ Harjot Oberoi, *Mapping Indic Fundamentalism*, 102.

⁴¹⁹ Susan Harding, *Representing Fundamentalism*, 390.

⁴²⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, "Why Religious Nationalists are not Fundamentalists," *Religion* 23, (1993): 85-92.

Healing Wounds: Conclusion

In a reminiscent fashion, some militants reassembled themselves in the Harmandir Sahib towards the closing of the turbulent decade. These men, lacking a coherent ideological framework, didn't possess the same credibility as their predecessors. On 30 April 1986, the Indian army repossessed control of the holy shrine without causing damage to the structure. Many extremists, relatively young, 'tamely surrendered' on national television and then hungrily swallowed the bananas handed to them.⁴²¹ The vicariously lived martyrdom of earlier militancy was replaced with a feeling of revulsion, shame and disgrace. As one respondent later said:

I have never agreed with the terrorists. I believe they are bullies who suffer from all kinds of illusions. But they arrogated to themselves the right to speak on our behalf, and what is worse, the Hindus are convinced that they represent us, and we are thus pushed against the wall. That is why the cowardly surrender by the terrorists bothers me: I hate to be shamed in the eyes of the others'.⁴²²

For a guerilla insurgency to be successful, it requires the support of the civilian population. Although the Punjab militancy had sharpened the boundaries of us/them, it also had quickly lost its steam due to the volatile and ruthless nature of the killings. There was also an increased fractionalization of active extremist groups, making negotiations with the government (and between themselves) exceedingly impossible. By 1992, one of the bloodiest years in insurgency history, the Indian security forces had eliminated a series of high profile militant chiefs and slain many others. The total death toll for civilians was recorded as 1,266; for security personnel, it was 252, with 2,111 dead militants and an additional arrests of 3,629.⁴²³ With a shrinking support base and vicious state repression, the aggressively fought Khalistan movement had reached its climax. Atul Kohli has proposed that a typical 'self-determination movement' follows an inverse 'U' shape. He has subsequently sought to apply this model to Khalistan militancy in Punjab.⁴²⁴

As resistive zealotry gave way to exhaustion, there was a plea for restoring normalcy from both sides. Spokesman Weekly reported that more than 900 soldiers were to be rehabilitated within the army, and a comparably equal number were to be sent to reformatories and later considered for retention in other units.⁴²⁵ This was during the period when the Rajiv-Longowal accord was signed, hence potentially opening a 'window for resolution' to the ongoing conflict. Unfortunately, the government's reluctance to implement the agreement in full, combined with militant's assassination of Longowal, as well as Haryana and Akali leaders opposition,

⁴²¹ Dipankar Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity*, 84.

⁴²² Personal Interview in Dipankar Gupta, *The Context of Ethnicity: Sikh Identity*, 84.

⁴²³ Jugdep Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, 230.

⁴²⁴ Atul Kohli, "Can Democracies Accommodate Ethnic Nationalism? Rise and Decline of Self-Determination Movements in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 2 (May, 1997): 326. In his study, Kohli has also argued that ethnic and regional groups would be more likely to ask for the status of self-determination when compared to classes or economic groups. The probable reason is that these groups more "readily perceive themselves as 'total societies', that is, as social groups with a sufficiently complex division of labor to sustain ambitions of territorial sovereignty". Hence, the arguments of some political economists who framed the entire Punjab crisis from the lens of class-conflict would not necessarily hold true.

⁴²⁵ *Spokesman Weekly*, August 24, 1985.

concluded in the failure of the accord. Khushwant Singh, despite being agonised by the 1984 tragedy, later expressed his hope for the Sikh community's future in India, 'with a Sikh Prime Minister and a Sikh army chief staff, the shadow of 1984 can now truly be forgotten'.⁴²⁶ If anything, the moderates of both sides were engaging in a reassessment of the 'model minority' construct and carefully retaining some components while modifying others, in the process, re-assembling the terms of the discourse that had completely broken down at one point. It is difficult to ascertain or even argue if the moment can be entirely forgotten since the bitter aftertaste continues to manifest itself in political discourses now and then. However, a sense of normalcy has returned. With the political, social, economic, and human costs of engaging in another battle too high, it is safe to assert the unlikeliness of a return to guerilla warfare of the 1980s anytime soon.

⁴²⁶ Tatla, *The Third Ghallugara*, 9.

Conclusion

In the Central Sikh Museum, located on the western entrance of Golden Temple, hangs portraits of some high-profile men. Several celebrated war veterans and martyrs, some of whom fought against Pakistan in the 1965 and 1971 wars, such as Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh and Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Arora along with late Air Force Marshal Arjan Singh, share the space on the wall with militants killed during the army action in 1984. Those convicted for Indira Gandhi's assassination, Beant Singh, Satwant Singh and Kehar Singh, also find a place here. Beneath all these pictures is inscribed the word—*shaheed*. When the portraits of the war heroes were being displayed, SGPC released a communique stating: "Their portraits are being installed to recognise the contribution they made to secure the unity and integrity of the country".⁴²⁷ All '*qaumi shaheeds*' (martyrs of the community), as one caretaker later called them, were seen as gallant and brave in their actions. If some of them were involved in protecting 'Kashmir and Punjab' from going to Pakistan, others had defended the sanctity of the most sacred site for the Sikhs through their courage. On being asked about these contradictions, the former president of SGPC, Kirpal Singh Badungar, clarified to the journalists: "Episode of 1984 cannot be compared with the wars of 1965 and 1971. Sikh Gurus were not in war with Mughal emperors from the first day. Guru Hargobind Sahib and Guru Gobind Singh asked Sikhs to fight with Mughals after they started committing atrocities on public".⁴²⁸ This juxtaposition is crucial and again points towards the inbuilt fluidity and tensions apparent in the model minority construct.

All the attributes, such as 'bravery', 'heroic courage', 'valour', 'entrepreneurial nature', were conspicuously present in assertions of Sikh elites, nationalist leaders as well as the majority community. However, the presence of these identity markers was appropriated by different political actors for quite diverse purposes in varying moments. In the second moment under examination, the nationalist leaders label several Sikhs as 'traitors', 'terrorists' and 'violent secessionists', thus producing a rupture in the model minority image. The sundering of the 'model' trope is also significantly underscored in Sikh militant discourses. According to the memorials constructed by the Sikh organisations, it appears as if the martyrs of both war and militancy are acclaimed martyrs of the *panth*, and there remains no longer any dissonance or paradoxes to resolve. The fact that such contradictions underlying the model-minority notion can be resolved will become more apparent through reading some contemporary instances in which this resolution has been attempted.

Pashaura Singh, on one occasion, refers to the intimate connection between history and memory, where both are witnessed to be as much about 'repression and suppression' as they are about 'creation and recollection'.⁴²⁹ For him, memory is pivotal to tradition, where an 'active enlivening of the present' happens 'through links with the past'. Traditions shared by collectivities emphasise 'group memories', where these groups discursively transfer the collective memories to successive generations.

⁴²⁷ Nitin Chaudhary, "A Blue bit of History," *The Hindu*, March 03, 2017,

<https://www.thehindu.com/society/history-and-culture/a-blue-bit-of-history/article17401983.ece>.

⁴²⁸ Kamaldeep Singh Brar, "In a first, Portraits of Sikh War Heroes put up at Golden Temple Museum," *The Indian Express*, November 1, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/in-a-first-portraits-of-sikh-war-heroes-put-up-at-golden-temple-museum-4916324/>.

⁴²⁹ Pashaura Singh, "An Overview of Sikh History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, 2.

This allows possibilities of various versions of the same story to appear. However, what is crucial to our argument is Singh's emphasis that as 'group interests' change, so do the narratives that reflect them.⁴³⁰ To illustrate this better, we can look into the narratives recorded by Tanweer Fazal of Sikhs residing in Delhi after two decades had elapsed since the carnage of 1984. His ethnographic interviews with the community members are enlightening for understanding how new narratives have since surfaced and continue to shape the discourse on Sikh minority consciousness. The Sikhs of Delhi remember the incident as a 'momentary loss' of trust between the two communities, a transient phase from which the two sides have successfully recovered. The circumstances that gave rise to the exceptional situation have now been effectively mitigated, and new vows of solidarity reinstated. However, a successful recovery need not be a successful obliteration of the memories of betrayal by the other. Sikhs are constantly aware of their status as a minority, that too a small one. There is no certainty that the community will not become a victim of another campaign of genocide in the future, an attack in which the majority will have total impunity to purge. The only assurance for Sikhs dispersed outside of Punjab is to mould their behaviour to fit the social description of being a model minority. A large number of community constituents are sympathetic with those martyred or brutally murdered in the 1984 event. However, this sympathy is highly measured and tightly balanced by them so as not to fall in the same camp as those categorised as anti-nationals/Khalistanis. Fazal writes:

In the dominant nationalist discourse, Sikhs are integral to the idea of the nation, appearing as the militant arm of the motherland. Popular descriptions related to Sikh participation in militant anti-colonialism, their substantial presence in the army and their opposition to the formation of Pakistan only serve to reinforce this loyalist imagery. In the Sikh self description loyalty is a virtue and the very signifier of Sikh identity.⁴³¹

Tanweer Fazal further comments that it is 'remarkable' how Sikhs, in the post-militancy period, have 'revived the *panthic* identity' to further their claims of being a minority. In contrast, during the rise of Sikh militant nationalism, the positing of *qaum* (or nationhood claims) had 'subsumed' *panth* to emerge as the central paradigm for articulating their political consciousness.⁴³² The Sikhs constantly evoked and produced a historical memory in both moments of 'heightened self-awareness' and also periods of dormancy. This constructed memory's functional role was to retrieve an 'immutable essence' from the community's past. But it was the memory invoked and weaved in the periods of active resistance that had the most power to socially mobilise the community members.

During both the agitation for Punjabi province based on linguistic principle and the Khalistani movement with overtly secessionist tones, this unchangeable essence becomes and remains central to the discourse of the model minorities. The attributes of this immutable essence are not used by the community alone, in times of crisis or otherwise. These attributes are convened for the nation-state's assimilationist project of producing model minorities as well. Sikhs are not perceived as immediately threatening to the majority community and the State in India; a vast corpus of literary

⁴³⁰ Pashaura Singh, "An Overview of Sikh History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies*, 2.

⁴³¹ Tanweer Fazal, *Nation-State and Minority Identity*, 180

⁴³² Tanweer Fazal, *Nation-State and Minority Identity*, 191.

evidence and narratives picked from history go into building the assumption that Sikhs are a 'reliable' and 'trustworthy minority'.

Even in moments where the model group might exhibit characteristics no longer worthy of praise or when the group's loyalty is under suspicion, there will remain several noteworthy instances of redemption, which become nodal points for assimilation in the post-crisis period. One of them was the letter written by Sikh veterans to the President. Tanweer Fazal, while analysing the interviews of riot victims, writes:

Has the Khalistan movement blemished this popular representation of Sikhs, their fidelity and patriotism? Do Sikhs suffer from stigmatization which minority cultures usually bears? The fieldwork data do not suggest so. For most Sikhs, stigmatization or suspicions regarding their loyalty was a transient phase - the period of the Khalistan movement. It does not acquire centrality in the constitution of the Sikh identity. Thus the Sikh identity, unlike other minority groups, lives more or less in harmony with the 'normal' or the nationalist framework.⁴³³

The category of a 'recalcitrant minority', historically claimed to be a model group, does not become perfectly defiant even in moments of heightened self-awareness; the model features continue to replicate and exist on the same plane as the obstinate ones. Many Sikhs in the regions outside of Punjab anticipated the fall-outs of Indira Gandhi's assassination and condoned her killers. Furthermore, the Khalistan movement, led by militants in the post-1984 period, for creating a sovereign state had no widespread support amongst the Sikh community itself. All these circumstances later bore witness in the renewed attempt at reclaiming the Sikhs as an essential ethnic partner of the majority community. The recovery of the 'patriotic Sikh' who had become obstinate was successful; the Sikh nationalistic identity assertions were dismissed as being deluded by fictional narratives circulated by a few unpatriotic members. In the model minority project, Sikhs remained loyal and brave citizen-subjects; the entire Khalistan movement was understood as a momentary lapse of trust. The blame was shifted by scapegoating some misdirected youth. Normalcy was restored through both the discursive techniques and explicit violent bullying by the nation-state.

Sikh 'minority nationalism' and Hindu nationalist discourses attempting to 'subsume' Sikh identity, both sit at an uncomfortable distance from the model minority trope. Although, in contemporary times, the Sikhs share a much more amicable relationship with the Indian nation-state and dominant Hindu community; a few components are still engaged in behaviour deemed as 'unfit and unworthy' for the mainstream decorum, especially some diaspora Sikh organisations actively pursuing the Khalistani separatist line of thought. In a 2019 incident, a pro-secessionist group, 'Sikhs for Justice', was seen engaging in a theatrical protest by burning the national flag on Republic day in Washington. For other Sikh groups at home and abroad, the action was a direct disregard to the cultural symbol and sensibilities of the Indian nation-state. Another group, 'Sikhs of America Inc.', released an immediate statement 'condemning and denouncing' the act while also hailing that 'Sikhs are a

⁴³³ Tanweer Fazal, *Nation-State and Minority Identity*, 180.

peace-loving and harmony enhancing community'.⁴³⁴ The Sikh community back at home also wanted to dissociate itself from the 'irresponsible actions' which reflected poorly on the community.

In another recent event that unfolded in the national capital on Republic Day, the patriotic sentiment was again offended when some protesting Sikh farmers unfurled the symbolic Nishan Sahib on top of the Red Fort. With the pitting of a religious flag on the ramparts of an iconic and nationally important monument, the entire credibility of farmer's protest came under state surveillance and public suspicion; a movement with heavy involvement of Sikh peasantry. The act was widely disapproved by the public and political factions alike. Various farm groups instantly released statements censuring the action and distancing themselves from the 'misled, restless, and overzealous youth'. Many Sikh farmers perceived this as 'infiltration of anti-social elements in their peaceful protests'. According to some scholars, any inconsistencies in adhering to social discipline and protocol of the national culture, expected by the state apparatus of its body politic, threaten the minority community's well-being.⁴³⁵ In this case, the 'deviant action' was interpreted to mean loss of public face for peaceful protests and the unmaking of the model minority trope sustained carefully throughout the agitation. The media's attempt at discursively linking the protest to the past record of militancy was also shunned by the community.

In addition, despite the primary emphasis of the work on martial bearing on Sikh identity, another noteworthy aspect of the community – *Seva* or selfless service has become highlighted in the recent pandemic time. According to Dipankar Gupta, the pandemic changed the popular image of Sikhs worldwide, but more so in India. Central to this transformation was the notion of service performed for the others, in the form of *langar* (community kitchen) or extending help to save the troubled patients.⁴³⁶ Even though charity is not something particular to Sikhs alone, for Gupta, what is unique, and makes the entire act remarkable, is the routinisation of *seva* as a ritual or an essential precept of Sikhism. This service, performed by the laity in the absence of any religious virtuosos, becomes a consistent devotional practice where the ordinary serve the ordinary instead of performing specific 'deliberated heroic acts'. The idea of 'selfless service', along with all the features and traits identified in the thesis, become part and parcel of the ever-evolving symbol pool from which model-minority construct appropriates and assembles its own assertions and presuppositions.

⁴³⁴ Sidhant Sibal, Sikh, "Hindu groups condemn planned burning of tricolour by pro-Khalistan group in US," *Wion*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/sikh-hindu-groups-condemn-planned-burning-of-tricolour-by-pro-khalistan-group-193006>.

⁴³⁵ Ellen D. Wu looks at the way the older Japanese diaspora (Nisei) repeatedly criticized the deviant Japanese youth (Yogore) for fraternizing and taking up the demeanour of the racial minorities like Blacks and Mexicans. The acts of imitating Blacks and Mexicans made the conscious attempts at integration in American culture difficult. For acquiring social equality and acceptance from the white middle class, it was indispensable that they act as a model community. The same happens with Sikhs in the period after the Khalistan movement; there was a need to win back the lost trust, for which there was an attempt at self-censuring of community's militant factions. There was also a verbal repression of members who were professing anti-Indian ideology. This was a process which unfolded simultaneously with the state led violent confrontation with the armed Sikhs. Wu, *The Color of Success*, 30.

⁴³⁶ Dipankar Gupta, "Sikhs are Different, Routinisation of 'Sewa' Primes them to Help Others, The Pandemic demonstrated this," *The Times of India*, June 11, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/toi-edit-page/sikhs-are-different-routinisation-of-sewa-primes-them-to-help-others-the-pandemic-demonstrated-this/>

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