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# *Symbols, Community and Contest: Jhatka and Tobacco*

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## *in the Politics of Sikh Identity*

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### **Abstract**

*Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the process of community-centric awakening was producing the politics of religious identity, mobilisations, and mutual cultural contests between different communities. Punjab being a province that was inhabited mostly by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs witnessed an identity based triangular contest between these religious communities where the political leadership of each community picked up cultural symbols to mobilise, organise, and consolidate their respective constituencies. While presenting an account of the symbolic manoeuvrings around jhatka and tobacco in the politics of Sikh identity during the colonial and post-colonial contexts respectively, this article examines the role of symbols in community-centric discourses wherein cultural differences are transformed into cultural discord or antagonism. Here, it is argued that the meanings communicated and deciphered through such symbols need to be comprehended by locating their articulations in the field of inter-community power relations.*

**Keywords:** politics of Sikh identity; inter-community power; community-centric discourse; *jhatka*; tobacco

### **Introduction: Situating symbols in the struggle for cultural power**

Analysis of symbols has a significant role in the study of political movements. Besides providing access to the objectives and sources of inspiration in a mobilisation, their tangibility makes it possible to apprehend the otherwise evasive aspects like spatio-temporal adjustments in the discourses of identity, intentionality of ideologues and leaders, and the strategies of exclusion and inclusion in the creation of socio-cultural identity profiles.

Symbolic resources have been accorded a central position in the ‘ethno-symbolic approach’ propounded by Anthony D. Smith. This methodology treats symbols as a part of the repertoire of cultural elements—like myths, legends and memories—that compose the *longue durée* core of a cultural unit (*ethnie*) by maintaining the common-consciousness or sense of continuity through time, and by defining and “sharpening its social boundaries with outsiders”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, following Smith’s approach, Harnik Deol has traced the roots of

<sup>1</sup>A. D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (New York, 2009), p. 25.

Sikh separatist movements of the twentieth century in the cultural distinction of Sikh community as manifested in its symbolic repertoire.<sup>2</sup> But although there is no doubt that the functions of cultural symbols, particularly when considering social boundary maintenance, are relevant to the study of political mobilisations around religious identities, it is also important to avoid the cultural determinism that Deol's analysis commits while conflating cultural distinction of the Sikhs with Sikh separatism.

Contrary to the ethno-symbolic framework, the instrumentalist approach views cultural content as a tool in the hands of community elites or leaders who manipulate it to mobilise the masses for material gain. One can identify two levels at which culture is located in this theoretical model that has evolved in Indian academia for about half a century since the publication of Paul Brass's *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*.<sup>3</sup> 'Objective' cultural differences characterise the first stage wherein, prior to community consciousness (which is seen as a product of political process), cultural identities are not politically viable, and culture functions only as a reservoir of symbolic resources. From here cultural differences and their signifiers are picked and deployed in political mobilisations to conceal the politico-economic interests of the elite. Subscribing to this approach, scholars such as Brass and Anand Yang have successfully demonstrated that cultural symbols and identities assume new meanings at the hands of political elites, and the extent to which these meanings are deployed in political ideologies and mobilisations is divorced from their original semantics in the first stage of their 'apolitical' cultural existence.<sup>4</sup>

The case study of *jhatka* and tobacco as symbols in the politics of Sikh identity presented in this article delineates the novelty of the meanings of these symbols that were mobilised by Sikh leaders in specific political contexts. However, following Francis Robinson's critique of the Brass model, the theoretical framework adopted here maintains that the instrumentalist approach overlooks the cultural constraints within which the community elites have to carry out their politics.<sup>5</sup> Even if Brass does recognise 'objective' differences at the first level of cultural existence, his emphasis on the novelty of meanings and consciousness tends to underplay the implications of these cultural differences for the nature of pre-mobilised cultural consciousness and modes of identification. This consciousness is not a metaphysical essence that originates and remains diffused in the body of a group, but is a product of socio-cultural processes that take place across a relatively longer temporal setting and result in more durable fixtures than those associated with the domain of political struggles. In this respect, Barth's thesis on ethnic boundaries throws light on how, in the domain of pre-mobilised everyday practices, ethnic groups 'consciously' maintain and manage the ethnic boundaries between each other through their cultural rites, rituals, customs and other mundane activities.<sup>6</sup> It follows that even if attributed with vagueness in terms of direction and liminality in terms of practice,

<sup>2</sup>H. Deol, *Religion and Nationalism in India: The Case of the Punjab* (London, 2000).

<sup>3</sup>P. R. Brass, *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* (London, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>A. Yang, 'Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the Anti-Cow Killing Riot of 1893', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 4 (1980), pp. 576–596.

<sup>5</sup>Francis Robinson, 'Nation Formation: The Brass Thesis and Muslim separatism', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 15 (1977), pp. 215–230; the same lacunae in the Brass's model has been pointed out by C. Jaffrelot in *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implementation, and Mobilisation* (New Delhi, 1996), p. 80.

<sup>6</sup>F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Boston, 1969), pp. 9–38.

identity consciousness and the process of ‘othering’ do exist on the level of pre-mobilised cultural existence.

However, the influence of an instrumentalist approach is apparent in some recent studies that differ from it in focusing more on the evolution, anatomy and presumed effects of religious ideologies rather than elite interests. The recent works of Chetan Bhatt, Badri Narayan and Thomas Blom Hansen on Hindutva ideology fall into this category that presents a scenario of the “struggle between ideologies”.<sup>7</sup> In their publications, a religious ideology (specifically that of Hindu nationalism) is seen as the point of origin for specific strategies, semantic formations and intentions of ideologues; whereas the origin of such ideologies themselves are located in the structural conditions of colonial India, such as the social mobility of elites, an amalgamation of intellectual currents, and colonial governmentality, all of which are separated from, or extraneous to, the referents of ideological assertions.

Works subscribing to an ideology-centric approach explore the instrumentality of symbols in mobilising the masses around a religious ideology. Just like the ethno-symbolic and instrumentalist approach, they maintain a strict analytical separation between the domains of culture and politics, where the role of culture is relegated to that of an objectively present inventory of resources whose assumedly inherent appeal is exploited by ideologues. Accordingly, this literature describes the relationship between ideology and its constituency only in terms of the shared symbolic content which is selected from the cultural repertoire of a collective and not in terms of the possibility of shared aspirations and motivations within it.<sup>8</sup> So, this approach is at a loss in deliberating upon the point of intersection between the world of elites, or ideologues who articulate ideologies, and that of masses who are the targets for ideological mobilisation.

On the other hand, anthropological works like Sandra Freitag’s study on the construction of supra-local identities in colonial Uttar Pradesh and Raminder Kaur’s study of the Ganapati festival in the colonial and post-colonial Maharashtra have sought to bridge the gap between elites and the masses by exploring the role of symbolism in public ceremonies and collectively performed actions in engendering shared rationalities in the public arena.<sup>9</sup> While Kaur’s work differs from Freitag’s in highlighting that the discursive space availed by public ceremonials can be instrumentalised for multiple strategic ends, both of these studies offer useful insights about how collective activities in public spaces mediate in overcoming internal differences and facilitating social cohesion within a religious community.

But in absence of the understanding of inter-community relations, both Kaur and Freitag overlook that the internal cohesion rendered by participation in collective ritualistic performances is not always inwardly-oriented and very often it also has bearings upon the relationship to the ‘other’ identity, against which such public ceremonials are deployed, and in

<sup>7</sup>C. Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 179–185; B. Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (New Delhi, 2009); T. B. Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (New Jersey, 1999), pp. 60–89.

<sup>8</sup>In this respect, Narayan’s work is a bit different for it does recognise such aspirations while examining the political strategies of lower caste groups. But while accounting the symbolic manipulations of the Hindutva forces, his analysis glosses over the possibility of any such socio-cultural aspirations behind Hindutva’s ideological objectives.

<sup>9</sup>S. B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley, 1989); R. Kaur, *Performative Politics and the Cultures of Hinduism: Public Uses of Religion in Western India* (Delhi, 2003).

relation to which such symbolic performances are encoded with the messages of challenges, insults, threats, responses, etc. Thus, in this approach, the examination of the production of community consciousness or solidarity within one identity (in isolation from its relation to the ‘other’ identities) leaves the question unattended: why is it that the amplification of community consciousness in one community gets directed against, or comes into conflict, with another community?

This interdependence and relational nature of identity-based assertions is acknowledged in Peter Van der Veer’s analysis of the discourses that emerged over the Ayodhya Temple Mosque controversy in post-independence North India.<sup>10</sup> His observation that the site of mosque/temple symbolises the senses of collective glory, threat, domination or decline among Hindu and Muslim communities, implies that these religious communities are pitched in a sort of competition or power struggle wherein the stakes of relative strength or decay of one are dependant and articulated in relation to the ‘other’.<sup>11</sup> This study is crucial in highlighting that in sectarian mobilisations, symbols function as sites of, and not causes for, contestations. However, religion as an analytical category does not serve well in locating the source of this contest. Veer, Kaur (while discussing the case of the use of Ganapati festival by ‘Hindu communalists’) and Freitag in their respective studies seem to imply indirectly that religiosity, which gets accentuated through the symbolic manoeuvrings and performances, creates the potential for sectarian clashes between different religious communities.

But it needs to be conceded that religion does not necessarily implicate people in power struggles, as amplification of religiosity among the members of one community does not provide an explanation for the growth of discord/antagonism between different religious communities. Hence, religion or religiosity cannot be the source of shared perceptions of collective domination and subordination which, in my opinion, is required to be situated in that “subterranean cultural power struggle” that has been theorised by Bhagwan Josh and Shashi Joshi in their *Struggle for Hegemony*.<sup>12</sup> In their exploration of the dynamics of a long term interaction between different ‘cultural enclosures’, especially Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, Josh and Joshi have proposed that these cultural boundaries (or fault lines) configure a strategic space or a relational field that is permeated by, what these authors call, “cultural power”.<sup>13</sup> Using the Gramscian concept of hegemony in their analysis of the relations and interactions between the cultural enclosures (that are formed along ethnic boundaries), Josh and Joshi maintain that the sum total of the cultural power relations manifests a state of ‘cultural hegemony’ of a dominant cultural enclosure in a society, which implies that:

The overarching societal order is permeated by a particular cultural system or the shared symbols of a cultural enclosure. The religious, racial, linguistic, or ethnic features are only part or aspects of this cultural system—which imbues the societal order with the temper of its own personality.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup>P. van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (California, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 7–10.

<sup>12</sup>B. Josh and S. Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India 1920–47, Volume III: Culture, Community and Power* (New Delhi, 1994).

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 17–19.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31.

Thus, cultural hegemony or the equilibrium of cultural power relations determines and ossifies in a variety of indices like the parameters of possible and acceptable community behaviour in public life, the proximity of a community to the State's power structure, and the resonation of an enclosure's symbolic content in the State's rhetoric and official symbolism.

While the quest for cultural power is undertaken and led by the elites who are also involved in the struggle for the legitimacy of their leadership within the community, the impression of promised collective empowerment is something that is shared across class, caste and other socio-economic stratifications within the cultural enclosure. In simpler words, this empowerment denotes that 'irrational' pride which one takes in seeing a member of his/her community in the office of power, or in having a public building named after a heroic figure from one's community, or in the predominance of one's cultural symbols and vocabulary in the nomenclature used by a government.<sup>15</sup>

This theory of cultural power helps in explaining that it is not only the politico-strategic or material interests of elites that are at stake in the political mobilisations of a cultural identity. Besides incremental gains for leadership, there is something deeper in the form of the promise of collective empowerment (in the context of cultural power relations) which drives the participation of the masses in such movements and binds them with the leaders. Similarly, it makes it possible for the leaders to mobilise the masses belonging to a cultural group by transcending the social, economic, sectarian, and other kinds of differences and hierarchies within the group. The goal of this cultural empowerment is a shared motivation that complies with the calculus of value rationality and prompts the ideational dimensions of loss, victory, and sacrifice in the collective actions and responses to the calls of leaders by the masses.<sup>16</sup>

However, the struggle for cultural power does not necessarily entail a conflict or strife in a multicultural society, as there can be more than one (very often conflicting) strategy to formulate the complexion of cultural empowerment and associate it to specific politico-economic demands. Similarly, governments and rulers who represent the cultural hegemony of a group can resort to different ways of maintaining the dominance of the enclosure that they belong to. Sometimes, they adopt the strategy of power-sharing and inclusion of the interests from the other side of cultural fault lines to ground their power in the consent of the 'other', that is the essence of hegemony in a stricter Gramscian sense. On the other hand, sometimes they follow the strategy of coercion and exclusion to assert the state of cultural relations.<sup>17</sup> So, abiding by the choices and exigencies borne in the field of practical politics, elites might choose between the discourses of contestation and accommodation vis-à-vis other communities; but in all instances, an effective politics in the name

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>16</sup> Developing on the Weberian distinction between instrumental and value rationality, Ashutosh Varshney opines that motivations in ethnic and nationalistic politics can be understood better by recognising that passions and aspirations in such movements are driven by value rationality wherein "some spheres or goals of life are considered so valuable that they would not normally be up for sale or compromise, however costly the pursuit of their realization might be". A. Varshney, 'Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality', *Perspectives on Politics* 1, 1 (2003), pp. 85–99.

<sup>17</sup> Josh and Joshi have characterised these two strategies as Akbar and Aurangzeb paradigms of cultural hegemony. See *Struggle for Hegemony*, pp. 87–100.

of community presupposes the appeal to the aspiration of cultural empowerment of the cultural enclosure which it claims to represent.<sup>18</sup>

As far as the issue of the role of symbols goes, the function of their deployment in specific contexts is not limited to the construction of a locus of identification for the group. Very often they are deployed by the leaders to appeal to the pre-mobilised cultural consciousness emanating in the field of power relations between communities where they function like codes, carrying the messages of challenges, insults, attacks, and ripostes intended and perceived by the masses; sometimes even without the help of leaders and ideologues.

Accordingly, in the light of the theory of cultural power, the following analysis of *jhatka* and tobacco in Sikh politics differentiates two planes of political contexts. At one plane, the context is the story of a uniform and homogenous profile of Sikh identity which evolved under the shadow of colonial institutions, discourses and political arenas that had their beginnings in the late nineteenth-century Punjab. On the other hand, there is also the context of cultural power relations whose breaking point, namely the establishment of a Sikh State in Punjab, predated the colonial era.<sup>19</sup> Both, the short-term political processes and the long-term cultural power relations intersect each other to delimit the possibilities of utterances and actions in the politics of Sikh identity.

### The context of Sikh identity politics in colonial Punjab

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the ascendancy of Sikh power with the establishment of a sovereign Sikh kingdom under Maharaja Ranjit Singh which effected, what historian Rishi Singh calls, a qualitative shift of hegemony from Muslims to non-Muslim elites in pre-colonial Punjab.<sup>20</sup> During his reign, the redistribution of resources like wealth and offices led to the creation of a Sikh and Hindu landed aristocracy that enjoyed a favourable position in his State called *sarkār-i-khālsā* (the government of Khalsa).

But, rather than reserving the membership of the ruling elite exclusively for non-Muslims (Hindus and Sikhs), Ranjit Singh consolidated his rule by issuing land grants to some sections of Muslim rural gentry, including them in his nobility and army, and donating generously to different Sufi shrines and Muslim saints in Punjab.<sup>21</sup> Such measures and policies aimed at constituting a class of loyal Muslim elites and integrating them into his ruling apparatus have to be read not as evidence of his, or his State's, secular outlook, but as an attempt

<sup>18</sup>The constraint that cultural internality imposes on the possibilities of effective politics in the name of a community gets reflected in Dhulipala's account of the idea of Pakistan in late colonial India. It describes how this idea was both propagated and resisted by different sections of Muslim *ulama* through contrasting articulations of the vocabulary and aspirations of shared empowerment which were rooted in the common Muslim cultural internality. On the other hand, the Muslim mass-contact programme of the Congress party failed miserably in keeping the Muslim masses away from the idea of Pakistan primarily because it appealed from the vantage point of a culturally neutral discourse of secularism. V. Dhulipala, *Creating a New Medina: State Power, Islam, and the Quest for Pakistan in Late Colonial North India* (Delhi, 2015), pp. 49–119, pp. 279–313.

<sup>19</sup>David Gilmartin seems to allude towards this distinction when, in relation to the Muslim community in colonial India, he identifies two discourses of the Muslim community, one that was rooted in colonial sociology and the other in the self-perception of Muslims. D. Gilmartin, 'A Magnificent Gift: Muslim Nationalism and the Election Process in Colonial Punjab', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, 3 (July 1998), pp. 415–436.

<sup>20</sup>R. Singh, *State Formation and the Establishment of Non-Muslim Hegemony: Post Mughal 19th Century Punjab 1780–1839* (New Delhi, 2015).

<sup>21</sup>For an instance of the characterisation of Ranjit Singh's reign as secular, see M. Kaur, *The Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh: Historians' Observations* (Chandigarh, 2007), pp. ix–xv.

to transform the dominance of Sikh cultural enclosure into an instance of hegemony (in the stricter Gramscian sense). But processes of accommodation and power-sharing with elements of the 'other' enclosure do not negate the existence of the struggle for cultural power; but only manifest a strategy to provide stability to one's position of power by minimising the possibilities of resistance against it. However, in spite of this inclusive strategy with regard to Muslim elites, the cultural power of the Sikh enclosure had been given a public display in various symbolic measures adopted by his government, such as banning the *azan* in the city of Amritsar, prohibiting cow-slaughter in Punjab and turning the Badshahi mosque of Lahore into a stable and arsenal store.<sup>22</sup>

This equilibrium of cultural hegemony assisted by Ranjit Singh's State and the consequent hegemonic position of the Sikh elites was disrupted with the annexation of Punjab by the East India Company. No particular religious community, including Sikhs, however, was subjected to discrimination or dispossession by the Company. Large agrarian tracts of eastern Punjab continued to be owned mainly by Sikh landlords; moreover, by virtue of racial profiling and the identification of Jat Sikhs as martial races, a large section of the Sikh peasantry was employed in the British India Army in disproportionately high numbers.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, the economic wellbeing of a major section of the Sikh community in colonial Punjab did not prove sufficient to substitute the loss of their privileged position within community relations. In comparison with their status of being a dominant community and erstwhile rulers of Punjab in the recent past, there transpired in the colonial present the sense of a relative decline among the remnants of Ranjit Singh's gentry and newly emerging urban middle class belonging to the Sikh community. This sense of a downfall was instrumental in fuelling those movements and intellectual currents which, operating in consonance with the categories and discourses of colonial knowledge production, rendered a standardised and homogenised identity profile of the Sikh community that was suitable for participation in the colonial public sphere and political arena.<sup>24</sup>

The colonial State, its structures of governance, classificatory categories, discourses of knowledge and associated public sphere played a significant role, not in originating community-based assertions but, in designating new avenues and determining new modalities in which the previous struggles for power across cultural fault lines were to be carried out during the colonial times.<sup>25</sup> By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, battlefields ceased to be the terrain where elites of different sections of society, mounted on horsebacks, would settle their communities' claims to power. These claims were now increasingly negotiated in the newly established representative institutions of governance, such as local bodies

<sup>22</sup>For policies of Ranjit Singh's rule that symbolised the non-Muslim counter-hegemony in Punjab, see T. Hasan, *Colonialism and the Call to Jihad in British India* (New Delhi, 2015), pp. 35–6; M. Athar Ali, 'Mughal Empire and its Successors', in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol. V, (eds.) C. Adle and I. Habib (Paris, 2003), p. 319.

<sup>23</sup>M. Condos, *The Insecurity State: Punjab and the Making of Colonial Power in British India* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 67–102.

<sup>24</sup>H. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 207–216.

<sup>25</sup>For a detailed discussion on the changes brought by the intervention of colonial State in the modes of conceiving religious identities in colonial India, see Hansen, *The Saffron Wave*, pp. 29–39.

and legislative councils which were characterised by separate electorates and the reservation of seats for religious communities. As the successive constitutional reforms in 1919 and 1935 broadened the scope of these representative institutions – by enlarging provincial legislative councils, investing them with partial autonomy, and extending their fiscal and administrative functions – the presence and participation in these semi-democratic avenues increasingly became one of the limited ways through which the native elites could project the proximity of their respective communities to State power. This fundamental change, where political arithmetic replaced armed struggle as the mode of claiming cultural power, proved detrimental to the communities with weaker numerical strength.<sup>26</sup>

Sikhs constituted only about 14 per cent of the total population of colonial Punjab, but the number of seats reserved for them in the Punjab legislature represented c.19 per cent in the constitutional reforms of 1919 and 1935.<sup>27</sup> Clearly, the representation of Sikhs in the legislature was proportionately higher than their population; still, it was too little to have accorded them any decisive role in the provincial government, which was in stark contrast to their status in the body politic of pre-colonial Punjab.<sup>28</sup> Rather it was Muslim rural gentry who proved to be the biggest beneficiary of the introduction of elected bodies and a gradual devolution of power to the provincial level in the 1920s and 30s. Thanks to the patronage extended by Ranjit Singh and the British colonial State, big Muslim landlord families had owned large agrarian estates, particularly in Western Punjab, and were well entrenched in rural Punjabi society.<sup>29</sup> This class of traditional rural notables received the lion's share in the constitutional reforms of 1919 and 1935 wherein a majority of the seats in the provincial legislature were reserved for the rural electorates.<sup>30</sup> In the system of a property-based limited franchise, this class, organised under the banner of the Unionist party, emerged as a strong political force that dominated the representative institutions of the government and politics of the province for two successive decades.

By the late 1920s, the partial devolution of State power into the hands of Indians and the promise of more constitutional reforms added a new life to community-based assertions. In debates and discussions around the Simon Commission Report, Nehru Report and Round Table Conferences, different sections of community elites sought to ensure the maximum possible share of their respective communities in State power by squabbling over provisions such as the reservation of seats in the legislatures, re-demarcation of provincial boundaries, and constitutional safeguards such as separate electorates, weightage, etc.<sup>31</sup> Despite their

<sup>26</sup>For the importance of numbers in modern politics and its impact on the communitarian perceptions in Indian politics, see S. Kaviraj, 'Religion, Politics and Modernity', in *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*, (eds.) U. Baxi and B. Parekh (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 295–316.

<sup>27</sup>B. R. Nayar, *Minority Politics in the Punjab* (Princeton, 1966), p. 78.

<sup>28</sup>The perception of decline among the Sikh elites in Punjab can be compared to the observation of a similar perception prevalent among the Muslim elites of the United Provinces in the late nineteenth century. In both cases, the decline was more relative than absolute. For the case of Muslim elites in United Province, see F. Robinson, 'Nation formation: The Brass Thesis and Muslim Separatism', *Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 15, 3 (1977), pp. 215–230.

<sup>29</sup>Gilmartin, 'A Magnificent Gift'.

<sup>30</sup>A. Jalal and A. Seal, 'Alternative to Partition: Muslim Politics between the Wars', *Modern Asian Studies* 15, 3 (1981), pp. 415–454.

<sup>31</sup>For more on the constitutional demands made on behalf of the Sikh community during such debates, see N. Nair, 'Partition and Minority Rights in Punjabi Hindu Debates, 1920–47', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, 2 (2011), pp. 61–69.



mutual differences on various issues, all the major voices representing the Sikh interests in such debates were unanimous over the demand for the reservation of one-third quota of seats in the administrative bodies and public offices of Punjab.<sup>32</sup>

But it needs to be stressed here that it was not the introduction or widening of representative institutions of governance that caused competing community-centric assertions; rather, it was the struggle for cultural power that turned representation in the State apparatus into a site for negotiating power relations between communities by providing avenues for projecting the elevation in societal status of the collective 'self' of different communities. However, there is no one strategy or discourse of a community. The relative subject positions of actors and voices in the field of politics, in a given time and space, provide for the existence of a multiplicity of strategic choices competing and contending to formulate the community interests and validate a number of ideological and programmatic lines in the name of that identity.

In contrast to the Punjab Muslim League's insistence upon the separation of Muslim interests vis-à-vis those of 'other' communities, Unionist leadership had traditionally maintained that the Muslim interests could only be achieved in the Punjab through a cross-community alliance and co-operation with the landed elites of non-Muslim communities.<sup>33</sup> This multiplicity of strategies deployed in the pursuit of community interests was also apparent in the politics of Sikh identity. The section of Sikh gentry, which organised itself as the Khalsa Nationalist party (K.N.P.) in 1936, sought to pursue Sikh interests while staying loyal to the British and allying with the Unionists in Punjab.<sup>34</sup> Under the leadership of Sunder Singh, Majithia K.N.P. won 13 seats in the 1937 Punjab Assembly elections and joined the Unionist ministry.

On the other hand, the Akali Dal, which had originated from the Gurudwara Reform Movement (1920–25) and had a strong social base comprised of the Sikh peasantry, opposed the Muslim majority Unionist ministry. Contrary to the K.N.P.'s rationale of working within the government to serve the *panth* (community), the Akali Dal espoused the discourse of cultural contestation in which it characterised the Unionist Ministry as an instance of Muslim dominance that imperilled the existence of non-Muslim culture in Punjab.<sup>35</sup> In such a contestatory discourse, the cultural existence of the community came to be conceived in terms of the binary of domination and subjection, and 'self' depicted to be situated in a warlike situation against an enemy 'other'.

In the world of representational politics and political alignments, however, debates in legislatures carried out in the vocabulary of minority rights was but one avenue where leaders made community-centric assertions to negotiate the societal status of the collective 'self' of their respective communities. This performance was also increasingly being carried out in

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>For Fazl-i-Hussain's preoccupation with the upliftment of the Muslim community and the ideological differences which he had with the Muslim League in pursuing Muslim interests, see I. H. Malik, 'Localism and Trans-Regionalism in Punjab: Inception of Muslim Modernism in Sir Fazl-i-Husain', *Journal of Pakistan Vision* 10, 2 (2009), pp. 22–49.

<sup>34</sup>G. S. Reki, *Sir Sunder Singh Majithia and his Relevance in Sikh Politics* (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 117–123.

<sup>35</sup>For the nature of Akali Dal's accusations against the Unionist ministry, see H. S. Dard, *Panth: Dharam te Rajniti* [Community: Religion and Politics] (Jalandhar, 1949); and D. Singh, *The Valiant Fighter: A Biographical Study of Master Tara Singh* (Lahore, 1942), pp. 122–137.

the theatre of rioting masses who actively joined their leaders in settling the claims of cultural power vis-à-vis the 'other'. Replicating the general experience of other provincial governments that came into power after the elections of 1937, the frequency and scale of sectarian riots grew in the Punjab. Controversies around religious symbols and spaces occasioned many sectarian conflicts.<sup>36</sup> Along with the issue of music-before-mosques, the Shahid Ganj mosque dispute, and cow slaughter; *jhatka* was one of those main issues which triggered such sectarian conflicts in the various districts of Punjab.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, the following section presents an account of how the practice of *jhatka*, lying on the cultural fault line between Muslim and non-Muslim enclosures, was articulated by Akalis in their contestatory discourse as a symbol carrying the Sikh community's cultural assertion vis-à-vis the Muslim majority Unionist Ministry.

### *Jhatka as a symbol of cultural contest*

*Jhatka* literally means a jerk or stroke, but here it refers to the method of slaughtering an animal or bird with one stroke, as opposed to the Muslim practice of *halāl*. In the *rahitnāmā* (Sikh code of conduct manual) literature written in the eighteenth century, Sikhs are prescribed to consume the meat obtained through *jhatka* only.<sup>38</sup> However, since at least the first decade of the twentieth century, the practice of *jhatka* has been the subject of a prolonged debate among Sikh theologians. Starting from Randhir Singh of Panch Khalsa Diwan, a number of Sikh religious scholars have opined that the Sikh scriptures, particularly the Adi Granth, direct believers to abstain from consuming meat irrespective of the method of slaughter. Such scholars contend that the practice of *jhatka* is antithetical to the virtues of *dayā* (compassion) and *sarbat dā bhalā* (blessings for every living being) that lie at the core of the Sikh belief system.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, theologians like Giani Niranjan Singh Saral and more recently Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afgana have argued in favour of the consumption of *jhatka* meat and have characterised opinions in favour of vegetarianism as an infiltration of Vaishnavite or Brahmanic elements into the Sikh religion.<sup>40</sup>

Such inconclusiveness of debates and multiplicity of interpretations in the domain of theology do not go well with the modes of the constitution of modern identity profiles. Hence, when the Singh Sabha Movement of the late nineteenth century relied on the *rahitnāmās* as a source of authority to reconfigure Sikhism as a homogenous community with uniform practices and well-defined boundaries, *jhatka* came to be endorsed as a normative Sikh practice.<sup>41</sup> Besides propagating such standardised practices within the community, Singh Sabha reformers also made sustained efforts to acquire official recognition of such markers of cultural

<sup>36</sup>For an account of major sectarian riots between 1937 to 1939 in different parts of north India, see B. R. Ambedkar, *Pakistan or the Partition of India* (Bombay, 1945), pp. 172–175.

<sup>37</sup>A. H. S. María and I. M. García, 'Communalism in the British Punjab During 1937 to 1939: Focus on Religion and Language', *Al-Hikmat* 35 (2015), pp. 1–21.

<sup>38</sup>For an example, see K. Singh (translator), *Rattan Singh Bhangoo: Sri Guru Panth Prakash : Vol. 2* (Chandigarh, 2006), p. 87.

<sup>39</sup>R. Singh, *Jhatkā Mās Prath āi Tat Gurmat Nirṇay* (Amritsar, 1973). For more recent reproductions of Singh's views, see J. S. Talwara, *Tau Kyu Murgī Māre* (Amritsar, 1999); J. P. Sangat Singh, *Sikh Dharam aur Mās Śarāb* (Amritsar, 2008).

<sup>40</sup>N. S. Saral, *Jhatkā Prakāshī* (Amritsar, 1966), pp. 8–10; *Gurbaksh Singh Kala Afgana, Mās Mās Kar Mūrakh Jhaḡe* (Amritsar, 1996), pp. 33–42.

<sup>41</sup>Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, pp. 350–351.

differences in the form of community rights. Referring to one such attempt in a letter to the Viceroy Lord Hardinge, dated 28 August 1911, Lieutenant Governor Sir Louis Dane discussed the growing demand from Sikh reformist elements to allow *jhatka* meat in the boarding houses of schools and colleges of the Punjab. According to Sir Dane, this demand was of recent origin, and he expressed his reservations against it by pointing out that:

*Jhatka* meat is the meat of sheep or goat killed by being beheaded. Mohammedans cannot eat it, as it has not been killed in the name of God and they regard it as impure... I am afraid that much of the present agitation for *Jhatka* is *pour embêter les* Muslims, and in the Punjab where Mohammedans form 53 per cent of the population, this is a dangerous game.<sup>42</sup>

It certainly proved to be a “dangerous game”; the apprehension of Sir Dane was borne out in various incidents in later years when objections among Muslims to *jhatka* helped to produce sectarian tensions in Punjab. In one case, the discovery of a few Sikhs performing *jhatka* behind the northern wall of Badshahi Mosque in Lahore on 23 August 1935 left the Muslim community enraged; but the immediate arrival of police and the initiation of a police inquiry prevented untoward aggression.<sup>43</sup> After a few days, a potentially violent Muslim crowd of hundreds of armed people gathered after three goat heads, slaughtered through *jhatka*, were found near a Muslim locality in Gujranwala on 2 September. Again, the situation was brought under control by the executive machinery.<sup>44</sup>

Incidents of this kind demonstrate that the norms and standards of permissible public conduct, which are the realised forms of the equilibrium of cultural power relations in a society, are not the concerns of community elites alone. In fact, such norms and standards inform the level of everyday life practices, and are actively followed, guarded or resisted by the masses as embodiments of the power claims of their respective collective ‘self’ vis-à-vis those of the ‘other’, as attested by the following incident, after which *jhatka* emerged as one of the most contentious issues in Punjab politics:<sup>45</sup>

In a small village, Jandiala Sher Khan about 60 kilometres northwest of Lahore with a population of about 3000 Muslims, the Muslim *zamindar* of the village, Ghulam Hussain Khokhar, let out some of his land near his well to a Sikh tenant, Bagga Singh, at the start of Kharif season in 1937. Bagga Singh occupied a hut near the huts of his Muslim fellow tenants adjoining the well outside the main settlement of the village.

On 2 August, in order to prepare a special dish for his visiting son in law, Bagga Singh killed a hen by *jhatka* method near a well adjacent to his hut. His Muslim neighbours resented the *jhatka* which they alleged was done openly and refused to let him draw water from the well. The landlord also reprimanded him and turned him out of the village. Bagga Singh consequently shifted to Chak Gurdaspur, predominantly a Sikh village two miles south-west of Jandiala Sher Khan, where it became a much talked about incident.

<sup>42</sup>K. Singh (ed.), *Hardinge Papers Related to Punjab* (Patiala, 2002), p. 83.

<sup>43</sup>‘Muslims Excited over Animal Slaughter’, *Times of India*, 24 August 1935.

<sup>44</sup>‘Communal Tension in Lahore’, *Times of India*, 3 September 1935.

<sup>45</sup>The account of the incident has been summarised from a report in the Subject Files, File no. 109 (1937), Sunder Singh Majithia Collection, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi. Another account of the Jandiala Sher Khan events with minor differences are published in a biography of Kartar Singh Jhabbar by N. Singh, *Akālī Morche ate Jhabbar* (Patiala, 1959)

Bagga Singh shared his plight with a local Akali leader Kartar Singh Jhabbar whom he met at the Sheikhpura lorry stand. Jhabbar took a keen interest in the matter and intimated senior Akali leaders about the incident.

Meanwhile, there was mounting agitation to vindicate the position of the Sikhs. Jhabbar drafted a poster issued in the name of Khara Sauda Bar, a local organisation affiliated to Akali Party, which called upon the Sikhs of neighbouring villages to contribute generously for the provisions for a *jhatka diwān* and *langar* [community kitchen] and donate at least two goats from every village for that purpose. It also declared that the *diwān* [congregation] would take out a procession through the village which would be attended by prominent Sikh leaders like Master Tara Singh, and Baba Kharak Singh.

In the meantime, Ahmad Khan Khokhar, the *lambardar* [village headman entrusted with revenue collection duties under the Mahalwari settlement] of Jandiala Sher Khan and uncle of Ghulam Hussain Khokhar stated in the presence of the District Commissioner that the residents of the village were not to be blamed and that if the interference of Ghulam Hussain at the well had offended the Sikhs, he would willingly offer them a goat which they could slaughter by *jhatka* and enjoy the feast at his expense. A day was accordingly fixed for this purpose, on which Ahmed Khan appeared at the well with a goat, but no Sikh turned up.<sup>46</sup>

By this time the news of Jandiala Sher Khan had spread throughout almost all of Punjab, and Sri Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee leaders started to come to the village from cities like Amritsar and Lahore.<sup>47</sup> Akali leader Bhai Kartar Singh from Amritsar made it clear that S.G.P.C. would consider giving up the idea of holding *diwān*, only if the Muslims of the village would ensure that they would not raise objections to *jhatka* and also abstain from cow slaughter.<sup>48</sup> Reportedly, Hindus of the village also co-operated with the Akali leaders in organising the *diwān*.

Veteran Akali leader Baba Kharak Singh and the M. L. A.s of the ruling coalition, Sardar Jagjit Singh Mann, Sardar Bahadur Buta Singh, and Raja Ghazanfar Ali had also arrived by the eve of the scheduled day for *jhatka diwān*. On 28th August, the first day of the *diwān*, a procession followed the main road outside the village and was attended by about 8000 Sikhs armed with swords, and *lathis* [sticks] who shouted the slogan of '*jhatka āzād*' [freedom to *jhatka*]. The Muslims were conspicuously agitated by the procession and about two thousand of them had gathered at the opposite end of the village.

The procession terminated peacefully and the *diwān* commenced thereafter. After about half an hour, while the proceedings of the *diwān* were happening, a man announced the news that Muslims had killed a Sikh in the village. This caused an uproar in the crowd. Sardar Jagjit Singh Mann pleaded that everyone should remain peaceful since the news was not yet confirmed. Mann then hurried to the Deputy Commissioner to inform him of the latest development in the *diwān*. The Deputy Commissioner arrived at the *diwān* and appealed to the leaders to keep calm and control the assemblage. On this, Baba Kharak Singh replied that the *diwān* would remain absolutely peaceful but if it was found that a Sikh had been killed by Muslims, he would, in turn, see

<sup>46</sup>According to Narain Singh, Bagga Singh along with some other Sikhs had appeared before the District Commissioner on the agreed date (26 August 1937) but neither Ghulam Hussain nor any of his nominees turned up. Singh, *Akālī Morche ate Jhabbar*, p. 248.

<sup>47</sup>The Sri Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.) is a body of Sikh representatives elected by the Sikh electorate, instituted by the Sikh Gurudwara Act (1922), and entrusted with the control and management of Sikh shrines and gurudwaras (places of Sikh worship) in India. Since its inception, the S. G. P. C. has been a stronghold of the Akali Dal and its various factions.

<sup>48</sup>The additional condition regarding cow slaughter, which was considered as a sacrilege by both Hindus and Sikhs, conveys that the Akali leadership was now interested in raising the episode of Jandiala Sher Khan to renegotiate cultural power on behalf of the non-Muslim enclosure in Punjab. For the cow protection movement in Punjab, see J. R. McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 305–306.

that ten Muslims would be killed for him. After getting confirmation of the murder, the Sikhs who were near the *langar* rushed towards the other end of the village where Muslims had gathered. Thus, a clash ensued, leaving three Muslims and one Sikh dead on the spot. Two men, one Sikh and one Hindu, succumbed to their injuries in the local hospital.

This story presents a quintessential example of the making of what is described as a ‘communal riot’ in Indian academia. Just like Tolstoy’s proverbial spark that burnt the house, the issue of the practice of *jhatka*, while originating in a remote village of Punjab, gave birth to a major political controversy. Contrary to the views of scholars such as Ashis Nandy and Mushirul Hasan who maintain that the domain of day-to-day interactions between the masses always results in inter-community harmony, events at Jandiala Sher Khan demonstrate that this domain also carries the potentialities of discord or conflict, which can very often be exploited, and not always manufactured, by the community elites.<sup>49</sup> The balance of power relations across cultural fault lines is mirrored in these ground rules that define the limits of legitimate public behaviour of the masses belonging to different communities. This reality provides a logical explanation as to why, in the first place, the practice of *jhatka* by Bagga Singh in a predominantly Muslim village with a Muslim *zamindar* was seen by the Muslim tenants of the village as an act of transgression.

At the same time, the attention and ideological manipulation of community leaders was needed for the projection of this local incident as an assault to the collective ‘self’ of Sikh identity. After news of the Jandiala Sher Khan incident had spread across the Punjab, Akali Dal leaders took interest in it and articulated the practice of *jhatka* as a symbol encapsulating the cultural assertion of the Sikh community whose public and ceremonial display was carried out in the form of a procession and *diwān*. The organisation of *jhatka diwān* and the procession represent an instance of a colonial “public arena” which Sandra Freitag, in her study of the origins of communalism in colonial North India, identifies as those spaces where the “politicised religious identities” were constructed.<sup>50</sup> But Freitag’s analysis of such public ceremonies fails to appreciate that, more than the appeal to religiosity, it was cultural contestation that was embedded in such collective actions. Open *jhatka* of as many as fifty goats symbolised a counter assertion or a riposte on behalf of the wider Sikh community. Had it been merely an issue of religious freedom or rights, then it would have been settled once the Muslim *zamindar* had agreed to allow *jhatka* in his village. Instead, having been elevated as a site of cultural struggle, it was no longer a matter of religious sensibilities but a bid to challenge perceived Muslim hegemony in the cultural power relations in Punjabi society by contesting the limits of public behaviour.

Subsequently, *jhatka* became the *cause célèbre* for those who claimed to champion the interests of the Sikh community and it informed the course of their prospective strategies. Master Tara Singh wrote a letter to Sikander Hayat Khan on 10 September 1937 in this regard. In his letter, Singh accused the premier of pursuing the goal of establishing “Muslim

<sup>49</sup>For such a portrayal of benign, apolitical and harmonious everyday life, see M. Hasan’s chapter, ‘Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom: Pre-History of Communalism’, in his *Moderate or Militant: Images of India’s Muslims* (New Delhi, 2008); Ashis Nandy, ‘The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance’, in *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia*, (ed.) V. Das (Delhi, 1990) pp. 69–93.

<sup>50</sup>S. Freitag, ‘Sacred Symbol as Mobilizing Ideology: The North Indian Search for a “Hindu” Community’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22, 4 (1980), pp. 597–625.

domination” in the Punjab; according to him, it had been precisely the emboldening of spirits of Muslims in the province under Unionist rule that had caused the incident of Jandiala Sher Khan.<sup>51</sup> The issue of *jhatka* was also raised in the Punjab Legislative Council as part of ongoing discussions regarding minority rights. In this direction, Akali member Pratap Singh moved a bill there in December 1938, which, after a prolonged discussion, could not be passed in the legislature.<sup>52</sup> The well-established Sikh demand for the provision of *jhatka* meat in government institutions, which had been reiterated in this bill, remained unfulfilled until June 1942 when it was conceded by Sikander Hayat Khan in a pact signed with the Akali leader Baldev Singh. But their pact was signed in the shadow of the Second World War when colonial officials were desperate to ensure more cooperation in the war efforts from Sikh peasantry. Officials such as Penderal Moon and Major Short insisted that Sikander Hayat Khan arrive at a rapprochement with the Akali Dal so that the Dal and its supporters would be prevented from joining the Congress’s call for non-cooperation in the war efforts.<sup>53</sup> Sikander also required Akali support to save his ministry from the increasing attempts of Congress to win over twenty Unionist legislators in the Punjab Assembly needed to form a Congress-led ministry in the province. Driven by these imperatives, Sikander decided to offer concessions to the Sikh community to create a possible basis on which the Akalis could join his Unionist government.<sup>54</sup> The terms of these concessions were decided by Sikander and Baldev Singh and made public in the form of an agreement on 15 June 1942. According to the very first provision of this agreement, the Unionist Premier conceded that the facilities of *jhatka* meat would be now made available in government institutions where separate kitchens for Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs existed.<sup>55</sup>

Even though the importance of the issue of *jhatka* receded in Punjab politics after the Sikander–Baldev pact, this agreement did not prove effective in putting to rest the contestatory discourse of Sikh identity that had appropriated *jhatka* as a symbol. Increasingly throughout the 1940s, the Unionist ministry’s alleged discriminatory policies were replaced as the chief target by the prospects of a Muslim-dominated nation-State. This became a powerful stimulant for heightened Sikh identity politics led by Akali leaders who framed the idea of Pakistan as a resumption of Mughal times, marking a “possible return to an unhappy past when Sikhs were persecuted and Muslims the persecutors”.<sup>56</sup> And following Independence, this discourse of Sikh identity and the corresponding strategy of transforming cultural consciousness and the shared urge for collective empowerment into an ideology of contestation re-surfaced at many junctures in the politics of post-colonial Indian Punjab. We see this happening when certain sections of Sikh leadership articulated Sikh claims to cultural power in the reconfigured post-1947 context of community relations, by selecting and manoeuvring a new set of symbols against a new ‘other’.

<sup>51</sup>Singh, *The Valiant Fighter*, pp. 171–4.

<sup>52</sup>V. Grover, *Political Thinkers of Modern India: Volume 28: Master Tara Singh* (New Delhi, 1993), p. 72.

<sup>53</sup>S. Oren, ‘The Sikhs, Congress, and the Unionists in British Punjab, 1937–1945’, *Modern Asian Studies* 8, 3 (1974), pp. 397–418.

<sup>54</sup>C. Chatterjee, *The Sikh Minority and the Partition of the Punjab 1920–1947* (Oxford, 2019), pp.108–110.

<sup>55</sup>L. Carter (ed.), *Punjab Politics: 1940–1943: Strains of War, Governors’ Fortnightly Reports and Other Key Documents* (New Delhi, 2005), p. 417.

<sup>56</sup>T. Y. Tan and G. Kudaisya (eds.), *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia* (London, 2000), p. 213.

### Re-contextualising the Sikh militancy of the 1980s

With the creation of Pakistan at Independence and the consequent bifurcation of colonial Punjab into two separate territorial divisions, the field of cultural power changed drastically. The large scale emigration of its Muslim population made the spectre of a Muslim majority into a thing of the past in the Indian Punjab where, according to the 1951 Census, Hindus and Sikhs constituted 62.3 per cent and 35 per cent of the total population respectively.<sup>57</sup> Under these new conditions, leaders and ideologues claiming to represent Hindu and Sikh identities jostled to redefine the cultural complexion of the Indian Punjab; and the spectre of Hindu interests replaced that of Muslim interests as the main constitutive 'other' within the politics of Sikh identity.

During the first two decades after 1947, the Akali Dal led a strong movement for a linguistic State by appropriating the Punjabi language (written in Gurmukhi script) into the articulation of Sikh interests. Similarly, Arya Samaj organisations, Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (R.S.S) and Bhartiya Jan Sangh (B.J.S.) championed the cause of Hindi in their bid to represent local Hindu interests.<sup>58</sup> However, the potential of the Punjabi language as a symbol for mobilising Sikh identity exhausted itself with the re-drawing of the Indian Punjab's boundaries in 1966–7. With yet another provincial reorganisation, Punjab politics entered a new phase, as for the first time Sikhs constituted a numerical majority in a state unit. As per the census of 1971, Sikhs were now 60.37 per cent while Hindus constituted 37.57 per cent of the total population of the albeit smaller Punjab. The majority of the Sikh population was settled in rural areas, where they formed 69.37 per cent of the total population.<sup>59</sup>

This new Punjab witnessed the reinvigoration of Sikh identity politics about ten years after the reorganisation when political deadlock between the Akali leadership and the Indian federal government resulted from demands made by the former in the 1973 Anandpur Sahib Resolution. The contestatory discourse of Sikh identity, as articulated by a section of Sikh leadership who resurrected the idea of a sovereign Sikh State, and the corresponding increase in sectarian polarisation along religious lines, posed one of the most formidable internal threats to the Indian nation-State. This idea of a separate nation-State for the Sikh community was not new, however. It had emerged in the late colonial period when certain sections of Sikh intelligentsia had proposed it in response to the Muslim League's demand for Pakistan (a sovereign nation-State for Muslims) to be carved out in the Muslim majority provinces, including the Punjab. With labels such as Sikhistan, Sikh State, Sikh Homeland, and Khalistan, it had been articulated by a section of the Sikh intelligentsia responding to notions of Muslim and Hindu nationhood.<sup>60</sup> However, it was not able to attract much support from the Akali leadership until very late in the day, and so remained out of currency as far as the politics of Sikh identity were concerned during the first three decades of post-

<sup>57</sup>G. S. Gosal, 'Religious Composition of Punjab's Population Changes: 1951–61', *Economic and Political Weekly* 17, 4 (1965), pp. 119–124.

<sup>58</sup>Nayar, *Minority Politics in the Punjab*, pp. 11–56.

<sup>59</sup>Figures of the distribution of religious communities in the rural and urban areas of Punjab have been taken from P. Kumar et al., *Punjab Crisis: Context and Trends* (Chandigarh, 1984), p. 51.

<sup>60</sup>For more on the ideas of Sikh nationhood articulated in late colonial Punjab, see T. Fazal, *Nation-State and Minority Rights in India: Comparative Perspectives on Muslim and Sikh identities* (Oxford, 2015) pp. 169–186.

independence Indian Punjab.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, the resurfacing of this idea and the contestatory discourse of Sikh identity in post-1967 Punjab, where there was no evident threat of any 'other' community's majoritarian dominance, might appear quite ironic.

This key phase in the Indian Punjab's politics has attracted scholarly attention. Building on Vandana Shiva's study of the undesired ramifications of the Green Revolution, Shinder Purewal has argued that it was the concentration of land resources in the hands of a newly emerging capitalist farmer class that coincided with the intermediary Jat-Sikh caste in rural Punjab, and the corresponding increasing disparities in the rural income levels coupled with landlessness, that led to the rise in Sikh militancy.<sup>62</sup> Vandana Shiva and Shinder Purewal both maintain that the growing aspirations of this rich farmer class, who came to acquire a prominent position within Akali ranks in the 1970s, combined with the grievances of a poor and dispossessed Sikh peasantry to constitute the socio-economic basis of Sikh militancy. On the other hand, political scientists including Paul Brass, Paul Wallace and Pritam Singh, regard weaknesses in the federal structure of independent India, particularly the drive towards the centralisation of power under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, as responsible for increasing the rift between the Akali leadership and the central government, culminating in a sense of frustration and the growth of militant attitudes among a section of Sikh leaders.<sup>63</sup>

But by focusing primarily on the structural conditions that developed in post-colonial India and the Punjab, these approaches all tend to gloss over an important feature of Sikh militancy; that it emerged from the competition that existed within the *panthic* politics; and that the militants not only threatened the hegemony of the Indian nation-State, but also jeopardised the legitimacy of Akali claims to be the *panth's* spokesmen. Situating the shifting construction of identity in the longer term context of Sikh elites' struggle for the cultural power in the Punjab would seem more helpful when examining the roots of Sikh militancy and appreciating the irony that the militant discourse of Sikh identity and the demand for a sovereign Sikh State gained unprecedented momentum and assumed the form of a politically potent movement not when the Sikhs were a weak minority in Punjab, but when they had come to form a dominant numerical majority there.

From the perspective of community power relations, this reorganisation had brought a qualitative change in Sikh access to the Indian State's power structure. Now Sikh legislators, belonging to different political parties, began to constitute a majority in the religious composition of the Punjab legislature.<sup>64</sup> Since reorganisation, the office of the chief minister has invariably fallen into the hands of a Sikh legislator. The Punjabi language, which had been appropriated by Akalis as a symbol of Sikh identity during the 1950s and 60s, was declared

<sup>61</sup>I. Banga, 'Sikhs and the Prospects of Pakistan', in *History and Ideology: the Khalsa over 300 years*, (eds.) J. S. Grewal and I. Banga (New Delhi, 1999), pp. 190–199.

<sup>62</sup>V. Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (London, 1991); S. Purewal, *Sikh Ethnonationalism and the Political Economy of Punjab* (New Delhi, 2000).

<sup>63</sup>P. Singh, *Federalism, Nationalism and Development: India and the Punjab Economy* (Oxford, 2007); P. R. Brass, 'The Punjab Crisis and the Unity of India', in *India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations*, (ed.) A. Kohli (Princeton, 1988), pp. 169–213; P. Wallace, 'Religious and Ethnic Politics: Political Mobilization in the Punjab', in *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Vol. 2*, (eds.) F. R. Frankel and M. S. A. Rao (Delhi, 1990), pp. 416–481.

<sup>64</sup>P. R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, Table no. 7.3, 7.4, pp. 360–362; For a more general account of the religious composition of Punjab Vidhan Sabha since 1967, see A. K. Gupta, *Emerging Pattern of Political Leadership, A Case Study of Punjab* (New Delhi, 1991), pp. 81–83.



the official language of the new Punjab in the very first year following reorganisation.<sup>65</sup> Even when the Congress came into power in 1972 under the leadership of Giani Zail Singh, and despite the fact that it had hitherto distanced itself from appealing to religious sensibilities, it resorted to the rhetoric and symbolism intended to appeal to the Sikh enclosure and made efforts to project itself as a better champion of Sikh interests than the Akalis.<sup>66</sup> All these developments indicate the hegemonic position of the Sikh community in community relations of post-1967 Punjab.

For the first time in the history of modern Punjab, the predicament for the Akalis was not how to achieve a lead in the cultural power relations, but how to exercise it. This new imperative made an impact on the nature of Akali politics, which, after securing this dominant position for the *panth*, shifted their focus towards winning the consent of a sizeable Hindu minority and other voters who did not subscribe to a politics based on religious identity.<sup>67</sup> To a certain extent, this change in Akali focus had similarities with that of Unionist politics in colonial Punjab, for, while being the representative of the dominant community, it now sought to enhance its legitimacy to govern in a multi-cultural society by incorporating cross-community interests and aspirations in its ideological programme. This strategy manifested in the Akali Dal's adoption of the afore-mentioned Anandpur Sahib Resolution in 1973, which contained a mix of social, economic, and political demands together with the appeal to the collective empowerment of the Sikh community embedded in the ambiguous promise of *bolbālā* (hegemony) of the Sikhs in Punjab, albeit subjected to various interpretations.<sup>68</sup>

Along with this ambiguous promise – which was officially explained by Akali leadership in 1978 in terms of decentralising power and strengthening the federal structure of India – the Resolution's socio-economic and political demands aimed at portraying the Akali Dal as a more socialist, democratic, farmer-friendly, less corrupt, even more 'secular' alternative to the Congress.<sup>69</sup> Thus, after achieving the Punjabi Suba, the Akali Dal became more committed towards striking a balance between the invocation of Sikh interests and winning over the trust of non-Sikh minorities by projecting a culturally-neutral profile of the Dal.

For leaders engaged in the politics of Sikh identity, this situation represented that stage, as described by Foucault, when a force, after emerging victorious against its rivals, reverts against itself and witnesses the strengthening of splintering forces from within.<sup>70</sup> Once the Sikh internality had acquired a hegemonic position in the Punjab's cultural power relations, fissures within it became more prominent. Such cracks surfaced very publicly when thirteen Sikhs were killed in a clash with members of the 'heretical' Nirankari sect in the city of

<sup>65</sup>Punjab Official Language Act, 1967, available at <http://14.139.60.153/bitstream/123456789/4402/1/The%20Punjab%20Official%20Language%20Act%2C%201967%20%28act%205%20of%201967%29.pdf> (accessed 16 April 2020).

<sup>66</sup>K. Singh, *A History of the Sikh: Vol. II: 1839–1988* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 327–8.

<sup>67</sup>A. Kumar, 'Electoral Politics in Punjab: Study of Akali Dal', *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, 14/15 (2004), pp. 1515–1520.

<sup>68</sup>Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, pp. 337–344.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, Appendix 6, pp. 471–477.

<sup>70</sup>The implications of such a hegemonic position can be gathered from Foucault's observations about the nature of power struggle. See D. F. Bouchard (editor and translator), *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (New York, 1977), p. 149.

Amritsar on 13 April 1978.<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, this apparently small incident contributed in a big way to the growth of militancy in the Punjab, standing out as a turning point that once again brought the contestatory discourse of Sikh identity to the centre stage of Punjab politics.

The vernacular Punjabi press and English-language periodicals such as *Sikh Review* and *Spokesman Weekly* were inundated with reports, articles and letters to their editors that decried the death of these thirteen Sikhs in the city of Amritsar (all the more unacceptable since they occurred when a *panthic* party was in power) as a challenge to the collective honour of the *panth* and demanded a suitable retribution.<sup>72</sup> Sections of Sikh orthodoxy, youth organisations and intelligentsia were left simmering with the discontent that eventually resulted in the establishment of militant organisations such as Dal Khalsa and Babbar Khalsa.<sup>73</sup> Militant voices, particularly Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale of Damdami Taksal, severely criticised the Akali government, preoccupied with diffusing tension and maintaining law and order, for not keeping up with the expectations of the community.<sup>74</sup>

Spearheading the discontent, Bhinderanwale pressed the Akali Dal to avenge the deaths of their fellow Sikhs, and by doing so posed a serious threat to the legitimacy of its claim to be the champion of the *panth*.<sup>75</sup> From this point until Bhinderanwale's own death in 1984, Sikh identity politics in Punjab proved to be a story of how Bhinderanwale and the contestatory discourse of Sikh identity gradually came to occupy the right to articulate and voice Sikh interests by wresting the rhetoric, demands and even platforms of *panthic* politics from the Akalis.<sup>76</sup> Unlike the Akali Dal's incorporationist strategy, such forces sought forcefully to carve out an overt and exclusive Sikh domination of the Punjab, which formed the essence of the idea of Khalistan in the 1980s. The militant pursuit of this programmatic line and the concomitant exclusivist interpretation of the cultural power claim (or *bolbālā*) of Sikh enclosure crystallised into a secessionist movement that brought these forces in conflict with composite Indian nationalism and hence challenged the authority of the Indian State. But in a

<sup>71</sup>For an account of the clash, see S. K. Singh, *The Massacre Sikhs! - A Report by Sikh Parliament S.G.P.C.* (Amritsar, 1978).

<sup>72</sup>The immediate shock and indignation in the Sikh community can be gathered from the content in publications like *Baisakhi 1978 dā Khūmi Sākā* (The Bloody Incident of Baisakhi 1978), the special edition of Gurmukhi magazine *Soora* (Amritsar, 1978); and *Singh Sabha Patrika* (Amritsar, 1978). For such sentiments in English-language periodicals claiming to voice Sikh opinion, see 'Second Biggest Massacre of Sikhs in the Century', *The Sikh Review*, 24 April 1978, and 'American Sikhs Express Solidarity with the Panth over Massacre', *The Spokesman Weekly*, 15 May 1978.

<sup>73</sup>The All-India Sikh Students' Federation (A. I. S. S. F.) was established in 1943 as a student wing of the Akali Dal but it emerged as a crucial ally of Bhinderanwale after the Amritsar clash of 1978. For an account of the establishment of militant organisations in the wake of this confrontation, see J. S. Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India: Political Leadership and Ethnonationalist Movements* (New Delhi, 2009), pp. 47–48.

<sup>74</sup>Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale was the head of Damdami Taksal which is an institution of Sikh orthodoxy with its headquarters situated in Amritsar. See Harjot Oberoi, 'Sikh Fundamentalism: Translating History into Theory', in *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance*, (eds.) M. E. Mary and R. S. Appleby (Chicago, 1993), pp. 256–285.

<sup>75</sup>It was a characteristic feature of Bhinderanwale's public statements to question the *panthic* commitment of the Akalis. For instance, in a public gathering held for paying homage to the deceased Sikhs, he addressed the Akali leaders and exhorted, "...you asked for time to give us justice and we shall wait. Please take care that the time is not wasted". Afterwards, facing the crowd he continued: "... if the leaders show any weakness and we do not get any justice, I shall be the first one to offer myself at the sacrifice". See 'Thousands Pay Homage', *The Tribune*, 23 April 1978.

<sup>76</sup>S. Jacob and M. Tully, *Amritsar: Last Battle of Mrs. Gandhi* (London, 1985), pp. 65–114.

society with multiple cultural collectivities, such assertions emanating from one cultural enclosure can stimulate the strengthening of similar confrontational tendencies in the ‘other’. Thus, parallel to the rise of Sikh militancy, the 1980s witnessed the escalation of the voices and public activities of both new and old organisations that claimed to represent the Hindus of the Punjab. In the name of defending Hindu interests from the onslaught of Sikh militancy, these organisations intensified their articulation of a militant Hindu profile.<sup>77</sup>

In this context, what we find is that these ‘complementary’ currents of Hindu and Sikh militancy both came to ascribe huge cultural value to tobacco, and in effect this everyday commodity became a symbol of the wider negotiation of cultural power taking place in the Punjab. Indeed, tobacco’s articulation as a symbol within the discourses of Hindu and Sikh militancy alike provides a lens to explore how the aggressive contest for cultural power resulted in an unprecedented degree of sectarian polarisation along religious lines in post-colonial Punjab, an outcome that led the renowned journalist Kuldip Nayar to comment that “Punjab’s Tragedy is that there are no Punjabis anymore in Punjab; only Sikhs and Hindus”.<sup>78</sup>

### ‘Hindu’ tobacco in the discourse of Sikh militancy

The issue of tobacco consumption is related to the obligatory conduct endorsed in Sikh theology which recognises its use as one of the four *kurahits*. But unlike *jhatka*, there is no theological debate or difference of opinion among scholars of Sikhism over tobacco. Many *sākhis* (hagiographies of the Sikh gurus) and texts written during the lifetime of Guru Gobind Singh attest that Sikh Gurus forbade its consumption and even its cultivation.<sup>79</sup> Sardar Kapur Singh, in his *Pāṛāśarpraśna*, offers an explanation of this proscription in accordance with Sikh metaphysics, namely that since the integration of an individual self with the universal self is a goal of Sikhism, one needs to make ingress into the supra-sensuous realm of the human mind. Citing instances from various religious and ascetic traditions, Kapur Singh claims that there is a physiological base for such inward experiences: inhaling tobacco disrupts the physiological base and causes obstacles to inward experience.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, in theological discourse the consumption of tobacco is represented as a vice that obstructs the achievement of communion with God. Based on this, tobacco came to be used to construct a new Sikh identity profile in the 1980s, this time defined against the ‘otherness’ of the Hindu identity. But more than the religious signification attributed to tobacco consumption, its role as one of the rare everyday practices that mark the cultural boundary between the Punjab’s Hindus and Sikhs made it an ideal choice for militant Sikh organisations. Its existence as a signifier that rested on this cultural boundary is demonstrated in the following letter to the editor of *The Tribune* by one J.S. Sawhney from Chandigarh:

<sup>77</sup>For growth of militant assertions of Hindu identity, see P. Kumar, ‘Communalisation of Hindus in Punjab’, *Secular Democracy* 15, IX (1982), pp. 53–58.

<sup>78</sup>K. Nayar and K. Singh, *Tragedy of Punjab: Operation Bluestar and After* (New Delhi, 1984), p. 7.

<sup>79</sup>For the detailed accounts of such legends and *rahitnāmā* injunctions, see the web pages and blogs devoted to the discussion of the issue of tobacco in Sikhism, e.g. ‘Do Not Smoke’, [https://www.Sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Do\\_Not\\_Smoke](https://www.Sikhiwiki.org/index.php/Do_Not_Smoke) (accessed 30 August 2019); and <https://www.Sikhs.org/art9.html> (accessed 29 January 2020).

<sup>80</sup>P. Singh and M. Kaur (eds.), *Pāṛāśarpraśn: The Baisakhi of Guru Gobind Singh by Kapur Singh* (Amritsar, 2001), pp. 82–96.

I know many Sikhs (I am no exception) do not purchase eatables like vegetables and sweets from a shopkeeper who holds a lighted cigarette in his hands. Some refuse to dine at a restaurant owned by a Hindu because they feel the food prepared there by the smokers is polluted and impure. There is no basis to believe that a ban on smoking will divide Hindus and Sikhs of Amritsar permanently.<sup>81</sup>

Here, the description given by the author of the letter furnishes another instance of the point stated above that the domain of everyday life does not always occasion inter-community harmony.<sup>82</sup> It confirms that because of the presence of cultural fault lines, the domain of everyday life interactions contains the potential for breeding inter-community tensions; and it is these fault lines that are worked upon and charged by the leaders of communities to turn cultural differences into cultural discord. This letter's description of mundane, ordinary behaviour highlighted the potentiality for violence in everyday life in a place such as Amritsar. Sale and consumption of tobacco were prevalent in the city before 1981 but its use became a means of creating polarisation only when it was subjected to ideological articulation by certain militant organisations. Along with reigniting the idea of a separate Sikh State (Khalistan), militant organisations like Dal Khalsa, the National Council of Khalistan and the All-India Sikh Students' Federation (A.I.S.S.F.) jointly demanded the official status of 'holy-city' for Amritsar in the summer of 1981.<sup>83</sup> To this end, these organisations began agitating against the sale and consumption of tobacco in the city,<sup>84</sup> and issued a threat to more than 400 cigarette shop owners of old Amritsar either to stop their businesses or to leave the city by 15 May.<sup>85</sup>

The campaign was carried out in the name of the holiness of Amritsar, a status that was arguably already acknowledged by its Sikh and even Hindu inhabitants. But more than protecting the sanctity of Amritsar, this demand symbolised a bid on the part of above mentioned organisations to claim cultural dominance over the city; and as such, it suddenly became a rallying point for the assertion of Sikh dominance (formalised in the slogan of 'Khalistan'). Slogans such as 'We are not the citizens of India' and 'We are the citizens of Khalistan' were chanted in the anti-tobacco procession carried out by these organisations on 24 May.<sup>86</sup> Local organisations claiming to protect Hindu interests, such as the Kendriya Arya Samaj and the Punjab Hindu Sangathan, recognised and in effect accepted the challenge to negotiate cultural power. Thus, these organisations reacted strongly against the demand for the sale of tobacco to be banned.<sup>87</sup> Though tobacco is nowhere prescribed in Hinduism, once it was used by a section of Sikh leadership to define their community's

<sup>81</sup>Letter to the Editor, *The Tribune*, 4 June 1981.

<sup>82</sup>See fn. 49.

<sup>83</sup>There is no provision of the status of holy-city in the constitution of India; however, according to these organisations cities like Haridwar, Varanasi and Kurukshetra, which have religious importance in Hinduism, were officially recognised as 'holy-cities' as the government authorities had prohibited the sale and consumption of meat and liquor to maintain the religious sanctity of these cities. For more on the anti-tobacco campaign, see Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, pp. 59–61.

<sup>84</sup>'Agitation on Amritsar', *Times of India*, 3 June 1981.

<sup>85</sup>'Amritsar, City of the Golden Temple, Limp Back to Normalcy after Fracas over Tobacco Ban', *India Today*, 15 July 1981.

<sup>86</sup>'Khalistan March in Amritsar', *The Tribune*, 25 May 1981.

<sup>87</sup>'Continued Tensions', *Spokesman Weekly* 30, 41, 8 June 1981.

cultural identity, the freedom to consume and sell it in Amritsar was quickly defended as a Hindu interest by Hindu ideologues there. According to an *India Today* report:

Local Arya Samaj called out a counter procession on May 29 which brought 10,000 sword-brandishing Hindus into the streets. It was the first time that Amritsar Hindus had marched with swords and just in case spectators did not get the point they also carried lighted cigarettes on sticks and shouted ‘*bidi-cigarette piyenge shaan se jiyenge*’ (we’ll smoke cigarettes and live with pride).<sup>88</sup>

Clearly the issue at stake in this protest was not limited to the issue of tobacco alone. But its ban symbolised the challenge of Sikh dominance and perceived threats to Hindu collective *shān* (pride), and so protesters marching on 29 May reportedly raised slogans like *Hindi Hindu Hindustan nahin banega khalistan* (‘Here is Hindi, Hindu and Hindustan and there shall never be formed a Khalistan’).<sup>89</sup>

Shiromani Akali Dal, the party with the most powerful claim for representing Sikhs in the political arena, was plunged into a dilemma over this issue. Its leadership, constrained by the scruples of electoral politics and in an alliance with the B. J. S. in the Punjab legislature, could not come out openly in support of the proposed ban. At the same time, it could not afford to oppose the ban either, for this would have allowed its members to be labelled as traitors of the *panth*. The Akali leadership thus adopted a midway course; while supporting the call for the ban, it tried to check the aggressive attitude of the militant organisations.<sup>90</sup> Akali president Harchand Singh Longowal made an appeal to the militants to remain peaceful at all cost and cautioned their leaders including Bhinderanwale not to be provoked by the 29 May procession. He also urged the participants in the Sikh procession that was organised for the following day (30 May) to peacefully chant hymns from Guru Granth Sahib rather than political slogans.<sup>91</sup> This appeal, however, went unnoticed, and the procession of 30 May ended in sporadic incidents of stone-pelting, looting and stabbing.<sup>92</sup>

In this way, the issue of tobacco provided the first occasion on which both the politics of the idea of Khalistan and its condemnation were communicated to the masses through ground level agitation. Militant assertions and counter assertions by Hindu and Sikh organisations alike and the resulting sectarian polarisation soon became the chief features of Punjab politics in which the trope of tobacco continued to feature. Bhinderanwale, who can be regarded as the figurehead of Sikh militancy, for one, would refer to tobacco quite frequently in his public speeches from the Golden Temple. Indeed, it was typical of Bhinderanwale to describe the details of the torture meted by the police on Sikh prisoners, in the following manner:

He (one Jasbir Singh of Chupkiti) was forcibly laid down on the floor and a Hindu policeman sat on his chest. The policeman smoked hand-rolled cigarettes while sitting on his chest. He spat and

<sup>88</sup> Amritsar, City of the Golden Temple, Limps Back to Normalcy after Fracas over Tobacco Ban’, *India Today*, 15 July 1981 (slogan translated by the author).

<sup>89</sup> ‘Continued Tensions’, *Spokesman Weekly* 30, 41, 8 June 1981.

<sup>90</sup> Amritsar’s Tobacco War’, *The Tribune*, 29 May 1981.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Longowal’s Appeal’, *The Tribune*, 31 May 1981.

<sup>92</sup> Amritsar, City of the Golden Temple, Limps Back to Normalcy after Fracas over Tobacco Ban’, *India Today*, 15 July 1981.

dropped tobacco in Jasbir Singh's mouth. There has been no punishment for the police officer.<sup>93</sup>

In the same vein, highlighting the discrimination against Sikhs at the hands of Indian State officials, he once claimed that

No Government official has forced cow's bones into the mouth of a son of a Hindu, tobacco has been sprinkled and cigarettes forced and tobacco spat into the mouths of only Sikh young men.<sup>94</sup>

Such rhetoric delivered in Bhinderanwale's rustic Punjabi proved to have a lasting impact on his Sikh audiences who were made to feel ashamed for being at the receiving end and bearing the injustice of the (Hindu-dominated) Indian State authorities. With this kind of detailed account of the torture of a Sikh at the hands of a Hindu policeman, Bhinderanwale was attempting to underscore the defilement of Sikh-selfhood as embodied in the bodies of such victims. Here, we can observe a certain semantic slippage taking place, exemplifying an instance of Barthesian myth.<sup>95</sup> In the first order of signification (i.e. the discourse of the-ology) tobacco is a forbidden substance whose consumption is believed to prevent believers from achieving communion with God. This level of meaning is suppressed in Bhinderanwale's exhortations where tobacco signifies an instrument of injury to the Sikh collective 'self'. However, the case of symbolic constructions around tobacco also demonstrates that appending an additional order of meanings to a cultural sign is not limited to only one level of meaning. There can be multiple levels on which such an act of 'mythologising' can be carried out. Take, for example, the account furnished by Khushwant Singh about the experience shared with him by a Sikh businessman in Amritsar after Bhinderanwale was killed in the Indian Army's Operation Bluestar in June 1984.<sup>96</sup> As the man confided to Singh:

We were passing through Hall bazaar when a shopkeeper tossed a packet of cigarettes over our heads to a friend on the other side of the bazaar and shouted, "here's the latest brand of cigarettes 'Bhinderanwale Mark'".<sup>97</sup>

Through this small but highly textured joke, the Hindu shopkeeper expressed his ecstasy over, what seemed to be, the defeat of militant Sikh dominance as personified in the figure of Bhinderanwale. Here the audacity of smoking cigarettes in Amritsar, and moreover a brand fictitiously named after Bhinderanwale, carried a counter-assertion from the Hindu side. As this incident made clear, the hidden meanings that cultural symbols carry could elude the rational gaze of contemporary journalist and historian, but they prove very effective in mobilising the 'irrational' masses who do apprehend the hidden meanings of such ideologically charged symbols, sometimes even to the extent of improvising their own usages of the acquired meanings.

<sup>93</sup>Speech delivered on 11 May 1983, in R. S. Sandhu (translator), *Struggle for Justice: Speeches and Conversations of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhinderanwale* (Ohio, 2000), p. 107.

<sup>94</sup>Speech delivered in the Golden Temple on 23 May 1983, *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>95</sup>A. Lavers (translator), *Roland Barthes: Mythologies* (New York, 1972), pp. 110–115.

<sup>96</sup>Operation Bluestar was a military operation of the Indian Army which was carried out from 1–8 June 1984 under the command of Major General K. S. Brar with the objective of killing or arresting Bhinderanwale and his followers who were taking refuge and building fortifications in Amritsar's Golden Temple. For the detailed first-hand account of the operation, see K. S. Brar, *Operation Bluestar: The True Story* (New Delhi, 1993).

<sup>97</sup>Singh and Nayar, *Tragedy of Punjab*, p. 19.

## Conclusion

Consumption of tobacco and the practice of *jhatka* belong to two opposite strands within the Sikh code of conduct (*rahit-maryādā*); while the latter is proscribed (*rahit*), the former is a proscribed practice (*kurahit*). Moreover, unlike the issue of *jhatka*, there is no difference of opinion among Sikh scholars over tobacco's impermissibility in Sikhism. Despite these differences, the developments discussed above provide useful insight into the processes that go into the making of a sectarian ideology oriented towards effecting polarisation along religious lines.

In both instances, the use of these symbols in Sikh identity politics cannot be regarded as an invention. Nothing new was being invented, for discussion of both *jhatka* and tobacco had existed in theology and had also played a part in the dynamics of boundary maintenance in everyday life. But, had religion been providing the ground for community mobilisations, then the symbols mustered in the name of Sikh identity in twentieth-century Punjab politics would have been exclusively, or at least primarily, concerned the five Ks, the central symbols of orthodox Sikh identity.<sup>98</sup> What we find instead is that the symbols used for political mobilisation are very often picked from, what Anthony Smith calls, a 'symbolic repertoire' or the cultural content of a group whose limits are demarcated by its historical experiences, not just in terms of its sacred texts but also with respect to the ideas and practices that operate upon cultural boundaries.<sup>99</sup>

However, such derivations from the 'cultural content' cannot be regarded as simply an act of borrowing or copying from an original text since the modality of such signifiers, along with the meaning that they conventionally hold, are very different in religious discourses. For example, in religious discourse, *jhatka* and tobacco denote recommended (good) conduct and forbidden (bad) conduct respectively. Morality borne out of religious discourses brings about classificatory schema that render intra-community, intra-personal and even universal distinctions or identities. In the case of Sikhism, such distinctions consist of *gurmukh* (oriented towards guru) vs. *manmukh* (oriented towards oneself) and *gursikh* (believer) vs. *patit* (renegade).<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, identities or distinctions constructed in the political discourse of Sikh identity are those of a social 'self' against an 'enemy-other'. Unlike religious discourse, which expounds on the relationship between humankind and God, and tends to be inward-looking (while carrying universal messages), the field of politics is always relational in a different way, involving two (or more) 'this-worldly' socio-cultural collectivities caught up in relations of power. Contrary to the ethical connotations or metaphysical validations present within theological discourses, symbols manoeuvred in ideological assertions signify collective empowerment or disempowerment in relation to the 'other'.

<sup>98</sup>The five Ks of Sikhism include *keś* (unshorn hair), *kanghā* (comb), *kaṛā* (metallic bangle), *kacherā* (soldier shorts), and *kirpān* (ceremonial sword). These core symbols of the religion comprise only one part of the whole spectrum of the 'symbolic content' of Sikh identity politics, which also includes symbols drawn from the history of Sikh State formations and the Punjabi language (written in the Gurumukhi script), see Chima, *The Sikh Separatist Insurgency in India*, p. 27.

<sup>99</sup>Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism*, pp. 23–26.

<sup>100</sup>For a detailed exposition on the categories of *gurmukh* and *manmukh* in Sikhism, see B. S. Bhogal, 'Gur-Sikh dharam', in *Routledge History of World Philosophies: History of Indian Philosophy*, (ed.) P. Bilimoria (New York, 2018), pp. 487–495.

Certainly, it is important to acknowledge the agency of community leaders in selecting and articulating cultural content, accentuating the degree of their importance or sacredness for the community, and defining new identity profiles in accordance with the specificities of political contexts. On the same note, rather than being a direct corollary of religious differences between communities, sectarian contestations or adjustments are strategic choices adopted by a section of community leadership. Different stands taken by the K.N.P.'s Jagjit Singh Mann and Akali leader Baba Kharak Singh during *jhatka diwān* at Jandiala Sher Khan, and, similarly, the contrasting attitudes of Akali leadership and militant organisations in the 1981 anti-tobacco movement, demonstrate that being a part of a cultural enclosure or community does not warrant any single strategy to be formulated and voiced in the name of the collective interests of that identity.

But, at the same time, simply exposing the plasticity or constructed nature of symbols and identity profiles falls short of addressing key questions, such as, in the case of developments discussed here, why was it that Muslims of Jandiala Sher Khan village objected to the performance of *jhatka* by Bagga Singh? Why was it not merely the religious right to practice *jhatka* but rather the freedom to practice it *openly* that the Akali leaders asserted in the late 1930s? And more surprisingly, notwithstanding the fact that consumption of tobacco is nowhere prescribed in Hindu religion, why did organisations claiming to represent Hindu interests fiercely resist the call for banning tobacco in Amritsar and campaigned instead for its sale and consumption in the city?

To furnish a plausible response to such questions, it is crucial to recognise the relations of power that permeate apparent cultural boundaries. The context of cultural power relations mediates and facilitates the interaction between what is given in the scriptures and what is enunciated by leaders in day-to-day politics. Ideological assertions of community leaders need to be situated in this field of cultural internalities created by cultural differences, spaces where they, whether intending to effect either accommodation or polarisation, have to appeal to the sense of the shared empowerment of their respective enclosures. It is precisely in this field of power relations where symbols are articulated and manoeuvred to negotiate cultural power; and where we find the perspectives that make it possible to interpret what is 'sacred' to one as 'sacrilegious' to the other, what is 'freedom' for one as 'servitude' for the other, and what is 'empowerment' to one as 'subjugation' for the other.

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