

Religion and Group Identity: Comparing Three Regional Movements in Colonial India

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The process of redefining national and ethnic identities often relies on a close relationship between cultural and linguistic traditions, political movements and religious communities. This manuscript seeks to understand how the religious aspect influenced regional identity-building under conditions of colonial rule in India. The paper draws on a project concerning itself with the political implications of regional identities during the twenties and thirties of this century. The project compares the movements of the Sikhs, the Tamil "Non-Brahmans" and the Pakhtuns.

It is intended to outline the evolution of the religious aspect in these movements through three major stages of political mobilisation: revivalism, loyalism and radicalism. The issue seems to be of particular interest in the Indian case for two reasons:

- Was there any common pattern behind the influence of religion on group identity? What were the similarities and the differences in the role of religion in the three movements?
- Was there any peculiarity in the Indian case under colonial rule as compared to the time of independence?

Group identity in colonial India

Modern political identity is no doubt a function of mobilisation. Groups of like-minded and interested activists, the famous élite, are as much involved in this process as the masses with their demands and expectations. In the early nineteenth century and prior to that, political group identity had few opportunities to manifest itself in India, except in religion, in tribal, or clan affairs. Even the famous mutiny or uprising of 1857/58 was a largely spontaneous event which then was pushed in certain directions and utilised by local political and military leaders. It is true that there was a way of ascertaining the will of local village populations through councils, the traditional *panchayat* system. The hallmark of religious, tribal, caste or clan identity, however, was structural, largely indisputable authority which did not need to be verified since it was either inherited or God-given. The very process of the transition from individual or local to group identity was one inseparable from the nationalist movement and the introduc-

tion of democratic political institutions, even if they were only partially or very minimally representative.

What was distinctive about Indian nationalism? Though it was inspired by Western concepts of territorial and political nationalism it was not identical with it. The cultural and religious factor was much stronger in India. More precisely, it was the system of intellectual and social norms within a particular religion rather than the belief in God that became the bedrock of infant nationalism. Influential Congress leaders like M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948) and, more pronounced, Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), Lala Lajpat Rai (1865-1928) and Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946) used Hindu religious rhetoric, symbols and practices to reach the broad, illiterate masses. Nationalism was wedded to religion right from the very beginning whereas in Europe nationalism had been dissociated from religion, had after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution grown out of a negation of belief and the affirmation of reason. The Indian experiment was to reconcile reason with God. As Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), a staunchly pro-British Muslim reformer, most radically speculated, God could not have given reason to man without wanting him to use it.¹ And Ramakrishna (1836-1886), when asked if God cannot be realised without giving up the world, answered:

"By living in the world you are enjoying the taste of both the pure crystallised sugar and of the molasses with all its impurities... Work with one hand and hold the Feet of the Lord with the other."²

Religion and regional identity

If all-India nationalism was moulded by religion from its inception, so was sub-nationalism, or regional politics. Communities were equated with particular sub-divisions of religious communities. All the three cases under review here bear witness to this trend in one way or the other.

The Sikh movement was a religious movement by definition. Its regional approach was diffuse when it started. It ventured to represent the whole Sikh Panth, i.e. the whole Sikh community living more or less dispersed all over India. But it soon began to realise that it could not marshal its forces effectively without some kind of a home base. The districts of the Punjab in which the Sikhs constituted a majority or at least a sizable minority were to serve as the territorial basis for their ambitions.

The Sikhs consolidated into a community of their own with clearly defined boundaries only in the course of the nineteenth century. The rule of a Sikh King over large parts of the Punjab and Pakhtun territories from 1799 to 1839 by Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) had stimulated the consolidation of the Sikhs.

After the British occupied the Punjab in 1849, their repressive policies against the Sikhs led many former adherents of the Sikh faith to give up Sikhism or to return to orthodox Hinduism. In the first 1855 census of the Punjab, Sikhs were not counted separately, except for Lahore district.³ Many considered themselves as Hindu or didn't think it was important to get registered separately from the Hindus with whom they had many things in common.⁴ The 1881 census counted 1.706 million Sikhs in the Punjab. This was 92 percent of all Sikhs in India who constituted 0.73 percent of all Indians.⁵

The Pakhtuns regarded themselves as a distinct sub-group of the Muslim *ummah*. Tribal custom had it that, as a group of tribes, they believed in a common ancestor, *Qais*, who lived at the time of the Prophet. He allegedly sought the Prophet out in Medina, embraced the faith, and was given the name of Abdur-Rashid. "Thus, Pakhtuns have no infidel past, nor do they carry in their history the blemish of defeat and forcible conversion."⁶ In this sense they constituted a religious sub-community within Islam, a distinct people of Muslim Pakhtuns or Pakhtun Muslims. The Pakhtuns were almost equally divided between the north-west frontier territories of British India and Afghanistan. This area became the focus of their regional identity. The 1891 census recorded 1,080,931 Pakhtu-speakers, which amounted to 0.41 percent of all Indians speaking Pakhtu. They lived mostly in the frontier districts of the then-Punjab and the independent frontier territories.⁷

The Tamil "non-Brahman" movement fed on two separate intellectual traditions, Tamil self-consciousness and the "non-Brahman" movement. Tamil identity was helped along by local religious reformers of the dominating Hindu creed, mainly in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. They, in turn, were inspired by Christian missionaries like Rev. Robert Caldwell (1819-1891) and G. U. Pope (1829-1907) of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, who through their studies encouraged a re-evaluation of Tamil culture and religious tradition.

The "non-Brahman" movement which started in 1916 was born in the same area. It also extended to the neighbouring Mahratta and Telugu-speaking territories. Its more prominent leaders and the political party which came to represent the "non-Brahman" cause, the "Justice Party", mainly focused on Tamil territory. The avowed object of the "non-Brahman" movement was to fight social and political discrimination of the South Indian castes below the rank of the Brahmans who occupied the highest position in the caste hierarchy. Thus, the Tamil and the "non-Brahman" concepts shared the inimical attitude towards the Brahmans and North Indian, what they called Aryan dominance of Hinduism, representing the Dravidian South of India to which Tamil culture belonged. The concept of a distinct South Indian, or Tamil Hinduism, remained the strongest intellectual reference in Tamil nationalism to this day. The 1891 census counted 15,229 million Tamil-speakers, accounting for 5.8 percent of all

Indians, living in an area, "covering the whole of Southern India up to Mysore and the Ghats on the west, and the Ceded Districts, as they are called, on the north". It is also widely disseminated throughout India by wandering labourers and domestic servants hailing from this area.⁸

Stages of mobilisation in colonial India

Though religion was a constituting factor in shaping the regional identities of the Sikhs, the Pakhtuns and the Tamils, it could never have become a potent force on its own. The justification for comparing the three movements here lies in their surprisingly analogous evolution and maturation as political movements.

All three of them, and here they shared in with the nationalist movement on the all-India level, experienced three major stages.

The first stage was usually taken by religious or cultural *awakening* and *revival* giving an unprecedented fillip to concepts and activities aimed at carving out a separate group identity. The second stage was dominated by the forces of *loyalism* which wanted to participate in the "goodies" of administrative, constitutional and economic reform under colonial rule. The third one was political *radicalism* in which the attainment of political power with the exclusion of the British was the hot issue.

The revivalist movements bore the first traces of indigenous nationalism. Religious and ethnic community élites tried to redefine themselves against the alien influences of British authority and Christianity which had so successfully challenged their traditional hold over Indian society. The spiritual ancestor of Indian nationalism, Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), wrote the polemical pamphlet "The Precepts of Jesus" in 1820 and the forebear of Muslim politics, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, joined in with the first Muslim commentary on the Bible, *Tabin al-Kalam*, in 1862. The "Indian Renaissance" and the movement for better education of Muslims followed closely on their heels.

Revivalism also led to a renewed interest in the vernacular as an authentic medium of expression and instruction. At the same time, this was a response to the domination of English print and culture. I here refer to Benedict Anderson's exposition of the influence of print capitalism on nationalist reflexes.⁹ Printing provided the vernacular languages with new avenues for dissemination of linguistic material and with the means for creating an indigenous intellectual élite. The vernaculars gained rising significance with the foundation of vernacular colleges and universities which became another hallmark of these movements.

The loyalist parties were trying to plead the cause of the community they represented with the authorities along the lines of constitutional reforms and political representation. Loyalty was the well-known characteristic of the

initial phase of Congress politics. And, when the Muslim League came into being in 1906, who could rival its loyalty before the authorities?

Radical politics pursued political goals of representation and power. While forces supporting the loyalist organisations often co-operated with the British because they owed their status to their patronage, they were now challenged by up-and-coming social classes connected with the general commercialisation of society. The new strata resorted to mass actions of pronounced militancy along with the non-co-operation movement. They positioned themselves for independence which, since the end of the First World War, was believed to be imminent in one form or another. For radical action the Congress, the League and other parties founded volunteers' corps which exemplified the political culture of radicalism at this stage. Through this period Congress and the Muslim League emerged as the major contenders for power in the whole of India. They were similar in the extent of their reach beyond a certain territorial region and their non-regional, non-ethnic concepts of legitimacy and power.

For the Congress Party and the Muslim League the stages of revival, loyalty and radicalism are fairly easy to distinguish. For the smaller regional movements it is not so easy to tell one stage from the other. Where with Congress and the Muslim movements different parties, organisations and leaders followed each other at the various stages, regional movements often had to make do with the same party, or leader dominating all stages of political mobilisation. But the concepts and characteristics of every stage were easily discernable.

What was particularly noteworthy was that for every stage there were characteristic slogans for mobilisation which were strikingly similar among the various regional movements.¹⁰ Another feature was the evolution of territorial references which were progressing through the stages in clearly defined terms.

The revived ideal

At the *reform and revival* stage, the return to a mythical Golden Age was sought. The community was perceived to be in danger of decline or dissolution. Since it was difficult for contemporaries to understand the dynamics of social change, responsibility for the fall of the community from its mythical status of eminence was laid on the downfall of religion. Their imagined or real plight was exacerbated by the status of minority within the dominating Hinduist context. Since new generations no longer followed the principles of religion of the minority but had turned to both British values and mainstream Hinduism, the restoration of religious principle was thought to be a remedy. Fighting *decay* and *degradation* was the battle cry at this stage.

In Sikhism, the first wide-spread reforming movements gained ground a few years after the British conquered Punjab. The *Nirankaris* were started by Baba Dayal (1783-1855) who was a contemporary of Ranjit Singh. His main target of criticism was the worship of images against which he re-emphasised the belief in *Nirankar* - the Formless One. The *Namdharis*, or *Kukas*, were founded by Bhai Balak Singh (1799-1862) who laid the main emphasis on a pious and simple living in contrast to the pomp of the Sikh royal court and noblemen.¹¹ In response to British dominance and Christian influences Sikh revivalism gained a new meaning with the *Singh Sabhas* from 1873 onwards. The first well-known *Sabha* meeting gathered in Amritsar to protest derogatory remarks by some Hindus on the Sikh faith and the life of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. The *Singh Sabha* movement was driven by the desire to counteract conversions to Hinduism and Christianity. The Sikh ritual was to be restored and alien religious practices to be eliminated.¹²

The south Indian "non-Brahman" movement started with the *Satyashodhak Samaj* by Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) which for the first time raised the issue of the discrimination of the castes standing below the Brahman priests.¹³ Tamil Hinduist revivalism was embodied in the concept of *Śaiva siddhanta*¹⁴ which highlighted the *Agamas*. The latter were medieval Tamil Hindu scriptures, which allegedly had been falsified by the *Aryans* and had to be restored to their original influence and meaning.¹⁵ This reforming concept focused on the worship of Shiva, one of the major incarnations of the Supreme Being in Hinduism. It was derived from the religious hymns of the medieval Tamil siddhi teachers who questioned the religious orthodoxies of their time.

In the case of the Pakhtuns, religious reform efforts were carried by local activists like the mujahidin, who set up model communities in the Buner area,¹⁶ and the Haji of Turangzai (1885-1937) who propagated independent education with an emphasis on religion. A major objective of these activists was to see Islam play its due role again which they believed would help eradicate the negative effects of British rule.

To further these aims, institutions were started for the privileged education of community members. The Sikhs founded their Khalsa College in 1893. The "Justice Party" on behalf of the mainly Tamil Vellalas actively supported Tamil-language education culminating in the foundation of Annamalai University in 1929. The Islamia College in the Frontier Province started functioning in 1913 and turned out many a number of Pakhtun activists.

At this stage, territorial references were fairly unspecific. Officially, the emphasis was on the non-territorial body of believers or adherents to the faith of this or that particular community, though the territorial connotation of the Punjab in the case of the Sikhs, of South India in the case of the "non-Brahmans", and of the Pakhtun-speaking areas in North-West India, was implied.

What was characteristic for the religious aspect of community-building at this stage was that religion was not taken at face value. In the course of the revival movements, religious concepts were reconstituted and the boundaries of the religious community redefined. In the Sikh case, the debate raged between two major traditions. One was the Tat Khalsa, embodied in the Singh Sabhas which stood for a new and more strictly defined Sikhism devoid of any references to Hinduism, rejecting the veneration of saints, idols and the services of other holy men. Reconstituting the membership of the Sikh community, they rejected caste regulations in favour of egalitarian treatment of all Sikhs. This favoured the untouchable Sikhs, commonly known as *Mazhabis*, who were forbidden to enter the inner precincts of the Golden Temple and bathe in the sacred tank.¹⁷ On the other hand, the Tat Khalsa's insistence on uniform initiatory rites excluded those Sikh groups who only partly followed Sikh customs like the *Sahajdari*, *Nirmala* or *Udasi*.¹⁸ The other one was the Sanatan tradition, linked with the holy shrines which reflected customary caste culture and peasant religious belief. It attached no stigma to the worshipping before many deities, visiting the shrine of a holy *Pir*, etc. They regarded Sikhs to be part of the Hindu community - though in a larger "ethno-territorial"¹⁹ sense and not in the narrow ritual meaning of today. The hearings of the Public Service Commission of 1913 gave ample proof of these cleavages. While the so-called Old Party, represented by Gurbaksh Singh Bedi, who combined the function of a magistrate and the position of a land-owner and a *jagirdar*, was in favour of regarding the Sikhs as part of the Hindus, the Young Party, for which the Secretary of the *Khalsa Diwan*, Sirdar Bahadur Sundar Singh stood, was anxious to press for a clear delineation.²⁰ The motive behind the demand for administrative separation of the Sikhs was social status. While the older generation was well established, the up-and coming middle classes wanted to use the device of communal representation to secure for themselves a share in the management of resources and in the administration. Since the 1860s, the Tat Khalsa tradition slowly but steadily took the upper hand over the Sanatan tradition, although the difference could not be resolved before the bloody clashes of the 1920s during the Akali movement.

For the "non-Brahman" activists of the young "Justice Party" the very definition of a "non-Brahman" community was at issue. Again, aspiring local leaders were attempting to reconstitute ritual to suit their needs. To begin with, a "non-Brahman" community as such had never existed before. There was little if any self-consciousness among its members who qualified for inclusion. Here, it was the deliberations of the Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill of 1917 which exposed the issue in full through the representations of the South-Indian Liberal Federation demanding special quotas for the "non-Brahmans". In the case of the "non-Brahmans", the Young Party was embodied in the Tamil sub-caste of the *Vellalas* who had started dominating the Justice

Party and the "non-Brahman" movement. Being second only to the Brahmans and yet belonging to the despised *Sūdra* caste group they wished to elevate their group status and replace the Brahmans in the social hierarchy, particularly in regions such as Tinnevely district, where they dominated the social structure.²¹ In South India all local castes were entered into the category of *Sūdras*, with no intermediate castes between them and the Brahmans who dominated religious authority and ritual. If the religious group was reconstituted so was ritual. Practically, the *Vellalas* aimed at replacing the Brahmans in their function as guardian and dispenser of the Hindu ritual. First they had to discredit the Brahman-led ceremonies like marriages. Self-Respect marriages took their place were Brahmans were not wanted. But in some cases *Vellala* representatives took over functions of performing religious rites clearly aiming at snatching the mantle of religious authority from the Brahmans. It, therefore, seems important to emphasise that the religious aspect was not used on its own terms but was put to specific social and political uses, and hereby undergoing significant changes itself.

In the case of the Pakhtuns, the issue was a common sense of Pakhtun identity fostered on the basis of a return to true Islamic injunctions. The Pakhtuns had to rise above tribal factionalism which they apparently could only do with reference to Islam and its traditional institutions. The latter allowed them to sink their differences and turn against the common enemy, British rule over the Pakhtuns in India.

As compared to the Sikh and the Tamil movements, the Pakhtun *mullah*, through his religious and political activism, in a way played the role of the Young Party. Religious men were regularly thrust into prominence at the head of unified resistance of the Pakhtuns throughout their checkered history. Though often of non-Pakhtun origin, they acted as their spokesmen in times of acute crisis. Stephen Rittenberg suggested that they played a more active role after the decline of the Afghan dynasty of the Durranis. Forthwith, the Pakhtun faced a Christian power, the British, which gave the mullahs and other saintly men a greater say in tribal affairs, especially in times of conflict and tension with the British. Sayyid Ahmad Barelvi had united a number of Pakhtun tribes with his Indian *mujahidin* in his fight against the Sikhs in the 1820s. The same happened during the Ambala campaign in the 1860s, during the 1897 uprisings.²²

Fazl-i Wahid, called the *Haji* of Turangzai, was one of the first to extend this leading role in resistance to new political and cultural issues. Between 1908 and 1915 and throughout the 1920s he combined his role as a intermediary for the Mohmand tribe with reforming activities. He founded *madrassas* to impart a purified Islam to Pakhtun children. His activities were continued by Abdul Ghaffar Khan (1890-1988), the coming nationalist leader of the Pakhtuns and one of the *Haji's* disciples, who, after his release from jail in 1924, founded the

Anjuman-i-Islah-ul-Afaghania, a Society for the Reform of the Afghans. It established a number of independent non-government schools, so-called *Azad* (Free) schools. They sought to offer instruction in Islam and foster Pashtu culture. Even though the *Haji's* movement and the *anjuman* were mainly restricted to the Charsadda area, they were fairly successful in promoting a new grassroots leadership of Pakhtun activists. Ghaffar Khan stood at the head of the Pakhtun nationalist movement from 1930 onwards. One of the *Haji's* disciples, or *murids*, Fazl Mahmud Makhfi, was considered the founder of Pakhtun nationalist poetry.²³ Among the other movements of the 1920s which helped redefining the Islamic content of a common Pakhtun identity was the campaign for *Hijrat* in 1920. Pakhtun peasants from several districts mainly of the Frontier Province migrated in large numbers to Afghanistan, reaching a total of roughly 30,000. They had decided to move there because India had become to them the land of infidel rule, *dar-ul-harb*, where exercising religious ritual seemed no longer free. During the *Hijrat* campaign and during the Third Afghan War in 1919, the Amir of Afghanistan was the focus of their religious fervour as the main spiritual and worldly authority for Muslim Pakhtuns. Also here, the local *mullah* was particularly active. He was often acting as a go-between for the Afghans and the tribes on British-Indian territory.²⁴

Distinguished Pakhtun administrators like the Khan of Zaida, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, (not identical with his above-mentioned namesake) represented the Old Party. They did not oppose a separate Pakhtun identity but they preferred defining it within the limits of the social system sanctioned by the British. When interviewed by the Public Service Commission in 1913, he demanded that due weight be given to the members of the local aristocracy, the Khans. At the same time he suggested that the Provincial Service be more largely recruited from the agricultural classes while "the land-owning classes should not suffer"²⁵. He defended Pakhtun special interests when he opposed the recruitment of officers from other provinces because of the lack of knowledge of the local language and customs.²⁶

The place of religion within political mobilisation then and later on continued to depend on who was regarded as the religious adversary, i.e. the *infidel*. For the Sikhs it was the British and to a lesser extent the Hindus, hence their greater inclination to join in the non-co-operation movement. For the "non-Brahmans" it was the Brahman, hence their main opposition was directed against mainstream orthodox Hinduism and the Congress which was equated with Brahman rule being on the ascent. For the Pakhtun it was the *firangi*, the fair-headed Englishman who had "emasculated" them by increasingly controlling tribal life, including its military aspects.

The established community

At the second stage of *loyalism*, it was the *Chief Khalsa Diwan* which mainly acted for Sikh political interests, while the "Justice Party" as a governing party in Madras Presidency was the very embodiment of loyalism. Reform-minded Pakhtun politicians were not organised in the 1920s. But an "Advanced Mohamadan Party" for the first time publicly demanded full constitutional reforms for the Pakhtuns at the hearings of the Simon Commission in 1928.²⁷

The catchwords which dominated this stage were *disabilities* and *deprivation*. It was communal representation which was meant to remove these disabilities, that is, to increase the share of the "non-Brahmans", the Sikhs and other minority communities in the administration, the services, and, most of all, in the new legislative assemblies which were to be elected under the Government of India Act of 1919, and later of 1935. Fired by the advances made by the Muslims in their dealings with Congress in Lucknow 1916 they demanded similar advantages for themselves. This path became sort of a model for regional and communal mobilisation.

At this stage, territorial differentiation of their geographically amorphous group references also deepened. The rough borders of a homeland for their community became recognizable. The Sikhs established a sort of community government through the Gurdwara Act of 1925. The hearings of the 1919 Joint Select Committee on communal representation in the new legislatures made it clear that the Justice Party if it looked after "non-Brahman" interests in general was specifically interested only in the Madras Presidency which it regarded as its home territory for "non-Brahman" political emancipation discarding more or less the fate of "non-Brahmans" in the Bombay Presidency. And, for Pakhtun politicians both in the administration and in the political parties of influence like the Congress and the Muslim League, the Frontier Province became the focus of their ethnic mobilisation.

The religious aspect at this stage was becoming *formalised*. This found expression in several related developments. One was the focus on formal quotas for communal representation. Loyalist groups saw one of their main objective in securing special rights for their community. This community was often, but not exclusively defined in religious terms. For the Sikhs, the Chief Khalsa Diwan was anxious to obtain guarantees for communal representation in parliament and in the services. The "non-Brahman" "Justice Party" proceeded likewise. To pursue this aim the latter was in a much more advantageous position than the Diwan since it succeeded in dominating the provincial parliament and government of Madras Presidency under the reformed constitution in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s.

Pakhtun members of the services equally demanded increased employment for natives from the Frontier Province. Since the hearings of the Bray Commit-

tee in 1922 members of the Pakhtun elite increasingly formulated their demands in a way where the special character of the Pakhtuns was linked with their Muslim religion. The Bray Committee was called upon to make recommendations whether or not the Frontier Province, created in 1900, was to be re-amalgamated with the Punjab. This demand was primarily supported by Hindu parliamentarians and members of the services. The dominant Muslim character of the Frontier Province inhabited by a majority of Pakhtuns was one of the major arguments influencing the position of the Muslim members of the committee. When the committee opposed the reamalgamation, a dissenting minority opinion was passed by the Hindu members of the committee.²⁸ Also, those who demanded full reforms for the Frontier Province in their interviews with the Simon Commission in 1928, did so with reference to the Muslim character of the Pakhtun province like the "Advanced Mohammedan Party".²⁹

Another development through which the formalised character of religion became evident was the increasing shift to institution-building deriving its legitimacy from religious authority. This was not limited to the loyalist stage but pervaded the whole period of regional activism in the 1920 and 1930s. The most prominent example of this tendency was the creation and the role of the *Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee* in the Sikh movement. It played a central role in Sikh community-building. Created as an authority for administration of the Sikh shrines in 1920 it practically served as a community government and parliament. Elections were held to its membership based on adult franchise among the Sikhs. This was more democratic than elections to the Provincial Assemblies under the 1919 Government of India Act where franchise stood at 2.8 percent in 1926.³⁰ The Pakhtun Muslims and the "non-Brahman" Tamils never created this kind of unified or centralised community institutions. But there were other institutions which derived their authority from their religious connotation. Educational institutions created in the name of the community played an important role for all three movements. These included the Khalsa College for the Sikhs, the vernacular Annamalai University for the "non-Brahman" Tamil-speakers and the Islamia College in the Frontier Province which turned out many a number of community activists during those years.

The attempted crusade

At the third stage of *political radicalism*, religion served in yet another capacity. It provided the groups bent on using pressure and force with the moral rigour and emphasis needed to induce followers to risk their own lives not for some abstract cause of an unknown nationality but for the righteousness of their faith. It was the motivation of *religious war* that came into play, the determina-

tion to defend one's faith and to conquer and defeat the infidels. This was no small factor in rousing the militants to action and ferocity in their deeds. The militant groups themselves were organised in a way where they resembled the *army of God*. They were considered volunteers in the service of the faith.

It was the *Akalis* who acted as the major spokesman of Sikh political interest, though diversity in Sikh political ranks grew visibly and internal cleavages increased significantly. The Akalis and their leader, Master Tara Singh (1885-1967), remained wedded to the idea of radical communalism, calling time and again for a religious war.³¹ The main form of Akali protest against the British and the *mahants*, the former keepers of the shrines who were aligned with the British, took the form of *jathas*. In the spirit of Sikh beliefs groups of volunteers went on a mission to confront and defy the state authorities peacefully even if it involved risking their own lives.

Tamil extremism started after the "non-Brahman" concept lost its potential for community mobilisation. This was partly due to the collaboration of the "Justice Party" with the British. Political radicalism required a new, mass-oriented philosophy. This was undertaken by Ramaswamy Naicker (1897-1973) and his Self-Respect movement in 1926. He took control of the Justice Party in 1938 and converted it to a narrower identity of Tamilism in 1944 - by renaming the party *Drawida Kazhagam*. While he emphasised the secular nature of the Self-Respect movement he increasingly used specific Hindu symbols with a Tamil and "non-Brahman" background in the Tamil movement.³² The idea of war with a religious connotation was still present, the war of the South, of the Drawidian and Tamilian races against the Aryans, the North, a militant concept serving the anti-Hindi campaign of 1938 and later Tamilian movements well after independence was achieved.³³

The volunteers who went into action for the Red Shirt movement of the Pakhtuns displayed a similar zeal in their operations. The Red Shirt volunteers of the Pakhtuns were also called the Army of God.³⁴ They founded village committees and set up a fairly rigid structure of command. Ghaffar Khan, the Red Shirt leader, displayed an ambiguous attitude towards violence. On the one hand, he alleged that his party was the only guarantee that Pakhtun participation in the nationalist movement remained non-violent. On the other hand, he was not averse to threatening the British with the perspective of a religious war to make them more accommodating. Calling on his compatriots not to fear the English, Ghaffar Khan invokes the belief in God to give them courage against the foreign rulers:

"One who fears God does not fear anybody else. We require a group of men who can work, and who are not afraid of machine guns and the British armies. I say that there will be revolution even if you join us or

not... God wants to distinguish those who obey His orders and those who are the followers of the 'Satan'.³⁵

By the end of the thirties territorial referencing reached its clearest expression yet. In the process of bargaining over the fate of their communities all three of them demanded separate homelands, the *Azad Punjab* for the Sikhs, *Drawidanadu* for the Tamils or Drawidians and *Pakhtunistan* for the Pakhtuns.

But their dreams did not come true. Between 1944 and 1947, in the hour of the approaching independence, radical regionalism which aimed at further fragmentation of both India and Pakistan was not successful. National mobilisation on the lines of the Congress and the Muslim League movements had been more effective.

Résumé: The politics of religion

The religious aspect of the regional movements underwent considerable change. It started out as an ideal and ended in conflict and bloodshed. During the 1940s the Sikh, the Pakhtun and the Tamil "non-Brahman" movements had defined for themselves variants of religious nationalism which contained little of the purity and chastity of religious ideals. Where the interests of the local religious community had at least significantly inspired and moved forward the political campaigns in their initial stages, religious belief and ethics were more and more relegated to the background when independence approached. Crude power politics had eclipsed the moral claim and ethical aims connected with the revival of religious concepts. Politics had sown the seed of greed and dissent among the faithful. At the same time, regional identity-building had not been dissociated from religion. If the religious dimension of the movements grew more muted, the hold of mythical cultural and religious concepts over politics had become much stronger. If anything, the understanding of religion had shifted. Religion, in the course of the nationalist movement and regional sub-movements, became less associated with ritual and belief and more with the ways and means to defend it, to guard it, to organise adherents and to fend off heretics. The nationalist movement and its sub-streams had not secularised the Indian polity so much as it had established and legitimised a firm linkage between politics and religion.

From this an automatic aggravation of cleavages between political identities and religion should not be assumed. Periods of rapid exacerbation usually interchanged with times of relaxation depending on social trends and the vacillating political fortunes of community leaders. In the Sikh and the Tamil case, the nexus between political conflict and religion continued to operate, while the Pakhtun movement was practically finished off with its defeat in 1947.

It was succeeded by the National Awami Party which retained some influence in the Frontier Province of Pakistan but never regained the clout and militancy of the Red Shirt movement.

When local elites were jockeying for a cosy place in the social and political set-up of the coming independent states, radical politics in the name of religion had become very intense. Yet, even with hindsight it is difficult to say whether or not a more steady and meaningful process of political participation for local and regional groups could have ensured against undue exploitation of the more sinister emotional potential of religious ideal for political ends.

The political use of religion seems to have had a certain advantage under conditions of colonial rule as compared to the present day. Religious references were ideally suited to pass for nationalism at a time when local ethnic tradition were not fully developed. And, the files of the colonial administration show that the British authorities felt constrained by the potential explosiveness of religious issues and would tolerate religious movements more easily. Religious discontent would not immediately be qualified as sedition unless proved otherwise, fearing widespread public disturbances if religious demands or rituals were interfered with. Religious discontent was considered to be difficult to control with its proponents going to any length of personal suffering to achieve their goals. The British would therefore go out of their way to accommodate religious movements, at least locally, since they saw in them an element of instability often not subject to comprehension and reasoning. As far as customs like child marriage, widow burning etc. were concerned, the British feared the social conservatism of religious movements which they did not understand and did not share.

In that sense, activists of the Sikh, Tamil and Pakhtun movements, who were inspired by religion, could at least plead to have a genuine case to argue under colonial conditions, where their demands were often aimed at social, political or economic emancipation of communities vis-a-vis the British and/or the majority community of Hindus. This air of innocence and genuineness was largely lost with independence. The selfishness of the religious politics of their leaders became more obvious and public. The legitimacy which had been accorded to a political struggle in a religious garb under conditions of colonial rule could not be upheld in the context of independent development. The manipulative aspect became much more difficult to conceal. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the religious content of regional politics of the Sikhs, the Tamils and the Pathans apparently declined or underwent considerable mutation. In the Sikh case, the Akali Party aimed at real power over the Indian state of Punjab in the 1980s more than at control over the religious allegiance of the Sikhs. The Tamil parties in the Indian state of Tamilnad, although using images of Hindu Gods in their election propaganda, concentrated on provincial issues and the rivalry of personalities throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In the

Pakhtun politics of Pakistan's Frontier Province the role of the mullah was considerably reduced. Incidents where he acted as the spokesman of the tribes became few and far between. Instead, the politics of religion continued to consolidate in the religious movements of both India and Pakistan, turning them into established political parties. In contrast to the colonial period, where legitimacy of religious politics was derived from the resistance to the British, it is now the alleged failure of the secular political system to dispense the political and social fruits of participation more justly which has bestowed a new legitimacy on the religious reference in the politics of South Asia.

Notes

- 1 Cf. D. Reetz, Enlightenment and Islam: Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Plea to Indian Muslims for Reason. In: *The Indian Historical Review*, XIV (1987/1988) 1-2, pp. 206-218.
- 2 From the Gospel of Ramakrishna, pp. 158-60, quoted in Steven Hay (ed), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Second edition, Vol 2: Modern India and Pakistan, New York 1988, pp. 66-67.
- 3 Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, Vol. II, Princeton, N.J. 1966, pp. 95 sqq.
- 4 Richard Temple, a secretary to the government of the Punjab had forecast in 1853 that "the Sikh faith and ecclesiastical polity is rapidly going". Quoted in: *Report on the Census of the Punjab, 1881*, Vol. 1, Calcutta 1883, p. 140.
- 5 Gurmit Singh, *History of Sikh Struggles*, Vol. I, Delhi 1989, App., p. 179. The 1891 census quotes the number of Sikhs as to 1.908 million, making up 0.66 percent of Indians. The changes over previous census reports are mainly attributed to variations in the definition. Cf. *Census of India 1891, General Report*, Delhi 1985 (London 1893), pp. 164, 171, 176.
- 6 F. Barth, Pathan identity and its maintenance. In: *Ibid.*; *Features of Person and Society in Swat: Collected Essays on Pathans*. Selected Essays of Frederik Barth, vol. II, London 1981, p. 105.
- 7 *Census of India 1891*, *ibid.*, pp. 136, 153.
- 8 *Census of India 1891*, pp. 136, 144.
- 9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London-New York 1991 (rev. & ext. ed.), pp. 33-36 and chapter 3, pp. 37-46.
- 10 Slogans, dominating the campaigns for shaping the group identity of the Sikhs, the "non-Brahman" Tamils, and the Pathans have been traced in: D. Reetz, *Community Concepts and Community-Building: Exploring Ethnic Political Identity in Colonial India*. In: Joachim Heidrich (ed), *Changing Identities: The transformation of Asian and African societies under colonialism*, Berlin 1994, pp. 123-148.
- 11 Harbans Singh, *The Heritage of the Sikhs*, Delhi 1994, pp. 190-202.
- 12 For a detailed exposition of the evolution of Sikh identity in the nineteenth century, including the Singh Sabha movement, cf. H. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries - Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi 1994.

- 13 Cf. Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge 1985; Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India: 1873-1930*, Bombay 1976, pp. 107 sqq.
- 14 Cf. John H. Piet, *A Logical Presentation of the Śaiva Siddhānta Philosophy*, Madras 1952, pp. 3-4142216.
- 15 The re-evaluation of Tamil religious classical texts started with the publication of a Dravidian Grammar in 1856 by Caldwell, a Christian missionary. For references, see the second revised and enlarged edition, Robert Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*, London 1875.
- 16 Cf. Lal Baha, *The Activities of the Mujahideen 1900-1936*. In: *Islamic Studies*, 18 (1979), pp. 97-168.
- 17 H. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries...*, loc. cit., p. 385.
- 18 For a thorough account of the shaping of Sikh ritual in the nineteenth century, see *ibid.*, p. 387.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 395.
- 20 Cf. United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Papers, Royal Commission on the Public Services in India: Appendix Vol X*, London 1914, Cd. 7582, pp. 71-75.
- 21 Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India. The Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism 1916-1929*, Berkeley 1969, p. 295.
- 22 Stephen Rittenberg, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Pakhtuns: The Independence Movement in India's North-West Frontier Province*, Durham, NC 1988, pp. 40-41.
- 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-71.
- 24 Akbar S. Ahmed, *Social and Economic Change in the Tribal Areas*, Karachi 1977, pp. 49-50.
- 25 United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Papers, Royal Commission on the Public Services in India: Appendix Vol X, Minutes of evidence relating to the Indian and Provincial Civil Services taken at Lahore from the 9th to the 15th April 1913, with appendices*. London 1914, Cd. 7582, p. 312.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 308.
- 27 Khan Bahadur Saaduddin Khan of the Advanced Muhammadan Party from the Frontier told the commission on 19th November 1928: "We say that we are educationally, socially, and in every respect just as good as the rest of India. Why should we be left?" *Indian Statutory Commission [I.S.C.]*, *Selections from the Memoranda and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials, (Part I)*, London 1930, p. 268.
- 28 Cf. Government of India, *Report of the North-West Frontier Enquiry Committee and Minutes of Dissent by Mr. T. Rangachariar and Mr. N. M. Samarth*, Delhi 1924 [*Frontier (Bray) Enquiry Committee 1922*].
- 29 Cf. Great Britain. *Indian Statutory Commission. Report of the Indian Statutory Commission. Selections from memoranda & oral evidence by non-officials, Pt 1, Vol. XVI*, London 1930, pp. 248-272.
- 30 *Indian Statutory Commission (I.S.C.)*, *Survey*, (London, 1930), Part III, *Working of the reformed constitution*, p. 197.
- 31 The Akalis and Master Tara Singh were particularly embittered at the enunciation of the Pakistan scheme which they feared would permanently relegate the Sikhs in their home province Punjab, which also was a Muslim majority province, to the back seat of Punjab politics. To this, he replied at the Uttar Pradesh Sikh Conference in 1940 that the Muslim League demand might mean "a declaration of civil war"; to achieve it the Muslims would have to "cross an ocean of Sikh blood." *Tribune*, 18 April, 1940.

- 32 "The Tamil Mother in the form of a goddess was depicted as mourning the incarceration of Mr Ramaswami Naicker" at the fourteenth confederation of the South Indian Liberal Federation in Madras on 28 December, 1938, when Naicker was made president of the "Justice Party" in absentia. *Madras Mail*, 29 December 1938.
- 33 A collection of Tamil poetry by Bharati Dasan, who was close to the Self-Respect movement, was published in January 1938, in the middle of the anti-Hindi campaign. There again he picked up the Tamil interpretation of the Hindu epos Ramayana. Ravana, the usually villainous demon, was depicted as the embodiment of Tamilnad, resisting the Aryan hero Rama and his northern army. This theme was propagated by C. N. Annadurai (1909-1969), a Tamil activist and future leader of the Drawida Munetra Kazhagam. Cf. Eugene Irschick, *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s*, Madras 1986, pp. 223-225.
- 34 Cf., for instance, Ghaffar Khan in his addresses at public meetings on the Frontier in 1931. P. S. Ramu (ed.), *Momentous Speeches of Badshah Khan: Khudai Khidmatgar and National Movement*, Delhi 1992, p. 24 and passim.
- 35 On November 8, 1931, at the Government Pare near Khaki. *Ibid.*, p. 41.