

Modern Asian Studies

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ASS>

Additional services for *Modern Asian Studies*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



In Search of the Collective Self: How Ethnic Group Concepts were Cast through Conflict in Colonial India

Dietrich Reetz

Modern Asian Studies / Volume 31 / Issue 02 / May 1997, pp 285 - 315

DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X00014311, Published online: 28 November 2008

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0026749X00014311

How to cite this article:

Dietrich Reetz (1997). In Search of the Collective Self: How Ethnic Group Concepts were Cast through Conflict in Colonial India. *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, pp 285-315 doi:10.1017/S0026749X00014311

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

In Search of the Collective Self: How Ethnic Group Concepts were Cast through Conflict in Colonial India

DIETRICH REETZ

Centre for Modern Oriental Studies, Berlin

When the concept of Western nationalism travelled to India in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century it was carried by British officialdom and an increasingly mobile and articulate Indian élite that was educated in English and in the tradition of British society. Not only did it inspire the all-India nationalist movement, but it encouraged regional politics as well, mainly in ethnic and religious terms. Most of today's ethnic and religious movements in South Asia could be traced back to their antecedents before independence. Looking closer at the three major regional movements of pre-independence India, the Pathans, the Sikhs and the Tamils, one finds a striking similarity in patterns of mobilization, conflict and concept irrespective of their association with the national movement (Red Shirt movement of the Pathans, Sikh movement of the Akalis) or independent existence in opposition to Congress (non-Brahmin/Tamil movement).

This similarity would amount to a perplexing paradox inasmuch as it contradicts the allegedly essentialist character of ethnic concepts while in the cases under review essentialist notions about the uniqueness of their community appear to rank fairly low amongst the priorities of ethnic politicians. The present paper seeks to trace the formation of political group concepts of three major groups, the Pathans, the Sikhs and the Tamils, during the first half of this century. It sets out to examine the way in which general notions and concerns of mainly social and economic status were connected with the local cultural idiom in order to shape a group concept for ethnic or religious mobilization of regional populations. It is argued here

An outline version of this paper was delivered at the symposium on 'Changing Identities—The Self and the Other in Colonial Societies of Asia and Africa', at the Centre for Modern Oriental Studies in Berlin, on 21–22 October 1993.

that one finds both similar slogans and a fairly unique way of combining them into a political philosophy. It is assumed that without reliance on regional culture socioeconomic slogans would not have caught on with the local people. Processes of change within the regional culture alone did not suffice to reach the critical mass of political explosiveness. The fusion of the two was brought about by the mechanics of mobilization and the concomitant intensification of communication among the regional political élite and the population. The stimulus for the increase of the communication derived from either an upsurge in economic activity or the desperation to overcome an unbearable social or economic situation.¹

The Nationalist Model

When the Pathans, the Sikhs and the south Indian Tamils developed sub-nationalisms of their own they often emulated the all-India nationalist movement since it was so successful with its campaigns of civil disobedience.

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 Gandhi (1869–1948) himself 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

¹ The paper is part of a larger study on 'Ethnic and Religious Identities in Colonial India: A Comparative Analysis' which concerns itself with the profile of ethnic and religious movements under colonial rule concentrating on the Pathans, the Sikhs and the Tamils. For a discussion of theoretical issues involved in the project, see D. Reetz, 'Ethnic and religious identities in colonial India: a conceptual debate', *Contemporary South Asia*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1993), pp. 109–22.

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.² And Ramakrishna (1836–1886), when asked if God cannot be realized without giving up the world, answered: ‘. . . By living in the world you are enjoying the taste of both the pure crystallized sugar and of the molasses with all its impurities. . . . Work with one hand and hold the Feet of the Lord with the other’.³

Modern political identity is no doubt a function of mobilization. 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 utilized 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 had not to be ascertained 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 introduction of democratic political institutions, even if they were only partially or very minimally representative.

If all-India nationalism was moulded by religion from its inception, so was sub-nationalism, or ethnic politics. In that respect ethnic nationalism was even further apart from the Western model than Indian nationalism. It was much closer to traditional structures like caste, clan, tribe or religious community. In the cases under review here, ethnolinguistic identities could not be separated from religious aspects. Ethnic groups like the Pathans or the Tamils were equated with particular sub-divisions of religious communities. The Pathans were known as a Muslim people. The descent of their tribes from

² Cf. D. Reetz, ‘Enlightenment and Islam: Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s Plea to Indian Muslims for Reason’, *The Indian Historical Review*, New Delhi, vol. XIV, nos. 1–2 (July 1987 and Jan. 1988), pp. 206–18.

³ From the *Gospel of Ramakrishna*, pp. 158–60, quoted in Steven Hay (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Second edn., vol. 2: Modern India and Pakistan (New York, 1988), pp. 66–7.

the Prophet and his times was always an important element in the group mythology of the Pathans.⁴ Rejecting traditional Brahmanical supremacy, Tamil religious reformers developed an egalitarian variant of Hinduism shifting emphasis to the worship of Shiva, one of the major incarnations of the Supreme Being in Hinduism, and the medieval Tamil *siddhi* teachers who questioned religious orthodoxies. Their religious hymns gave rise to the philosophical system of *Śaiva siddhanta* which acquired the status of indigenous revivalism.⁵ In the Sikh case, the nexus between identity-building and religion was obvious and followed the opposite pattern with a religious community going ethnic.

Fragmentation was another mark of distinction from the Western mould, both of the all-India and the regional variants. Where the social fabric betrayed a multitude of religious, caste, or tribal divisions it looked like a patchwork of multiple loyalties. Larger groups could be constructed in different ways with similar legitimacy out of the same material, the *jatis*, the basic units of Indian society. It was rather the rule than the exception that extra-regional movements like those of the lower-caste Non-Brahmins, the depressed classes, or religious orders of the Muslim *Naqshband* kind, were overlapping with linguistic movements of the Telugu, Tamils, Mahrattas, Sindhis etc., criss-crossing the political geography of India.

Stages of Mobilization

At the same time, ethnic and all-India nationalisms were modern concepts. They could hardly be regarded as a simple continuation of a well-worn pattern of society. Their appearance on the political stage involved drastic changes of conventional structures. The process of change through which social and cultural movements went to become nationalist was surprisingly similar for both the whole of India and its regional and ethnic components.

⁴ 'The putative ancestor, *Qais*, lived at the time of the Prophet. He sought the Prophet out in Medina, embraced the faith, and was given the name of Abdur-Rashid. Thus Pathans have no infidel past, nor do they carry in their history the blemish of defeat and forcible conversion'. [Meaning: unlike others whose ancestors converted to Islam.—D.R.] F. Barth, 'Pathan identity and its maintenance', in F. Barth, *Features of Person and Society in Swat: Collected Essays on Pathans*, Selected Essays of Frederik Barth, vol. II (London, 1981), p. 105.

⁵ Cf. John H. Piet, *A Logical Presentation of the Śaiva Siddhānta Philosophy*, (India Research Series, VIII) (Madras, 1952), pp. 3-4ff.

The shaping of political group concepts started with a drive for religious or cultural *awakening* and *revival*. Those movements bore the first traces of indigenous nationalism. Religious and ethnic community élites tried to redefine themselves against the alien influence 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 the 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. Printing provided the vernacular languages with new avenues for the dissemination of linguistic material and with the means for creating an indigenous intellectual élite. I here refer to Benedict Anderson's exposition of the influence of print capitalism on nationalist reflexes.⁶ The vernaculars gained rising significance with the foundation of vernacular colleges and universities which became another hallmark of these movements.

At the second stage, *loyalist parties* emerged who were trying to plead the cause of the community they represented with the authorities on the lines of constitutional reforms and political representation. From the history of Congress, loyalism is the known hallmark of its initial phase. And, when the Muslim League came into being in 1906, who could rival its loyalism towards the authorities?

The third stage was characterized by a *radicalization* of the pursuit of political goals of representation and power. While forces supporting the loyalist organizations 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 commercialization of society. The new strata resorted to mass actions of a pronounced militancy along with the civil disobedience movement or following its suit. They positioned themselves for independence which since the end of the First World War was believed to be imminent in one form or the other. The Congress under Gandhi and Nehru and the Muslim League of the thirties and forties stand as obvious examples for this phase on the all-India stage.

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London–New York, 1991 rev. & ext. edn), pp. 33–6 and chapter 3, pp. 37–46.

Interestingly, the Pathans, the Sikhs and the Non-Brahmins or Tamils, all fostered and propagated *notions of community* which passed through similar stages.⁷ Goals and symbols were tied into concepts. They picked up prevailing trends and topped them with group interests of those leading the movements. At the same time, their movements showed significant variations. The clear sequence of time, leadership and organization at different stages which was so typical of the all-India movements was blurred and sometimes reversed at the regional level. Be it for the lack or scarcity of leadership, structures and mobilization in the region, the fact is that, unlike at the centre, ethnopolitical activists and organizations from the regions rather themselves passed through the different stages mentioned above, displaying diverse attitudes at different times.

Community of Belief

At the stage of *revivalism* religious reform groups counted on non-territorial and rather vague groups of adherents and believers. All Sikhs were members of the *Khalsa*, the Sikh community, living necessarily dispersed all over India with a higher density only in the Punjab. The reform efforts of the Non-Brahmin organizations were likewise directed at all Hindus who were not Brahmins, *i.e.* members of the highest caste in Hinduism, irrespective of their place of residence, but with an emphasis on south India. The initial reform efforts amongst the Pathans were aimed at tribal loyalties. References to tribal allegiances were usually non-residential and extended also to their migration routes and their temporary Afghan homes although territories inhabited by a certain tribe became more meaningful during the period in question.

For the minority communities, revivalism started around the middle of the nineteenth century. In the course of the 'Indian Renaissance' emphasis in the public discourse reverted back to indi-

⁷ The political movements of the Pathans, the Sikhs and the Non-Brahmins, and later the Tamils, will not be discussed in detail here. For a review of their history before independence see Stephen A. Rittenberg, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Pakhtuns: The Independence Movement in India's North-West Frontier Province*, (Durham, NC, 1988); Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, 2 vols (Princeton, 1963-66); J. S. Grewal, *The Sikhs of the Punjab* (The New Cambridge History of India, 11.3) (Cambridge, 1990); Eugene Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India* (Berkeley, 1969); K. Nambi Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism, 1905-1944* (Madurai, 1980).

genous values of ethnicity and religion as a means to assert oneself against British colonial dominance in politics and culture. British administration increasingly appeared to base itself on community, religion and ethnicity as it aimed to tackle the phenomenon of the astounding variety of 'Indian races'. At this stage the perceived state of *decay* and *degradation* of the community constituted an important element of the emerging community ethos. They felt left behind in the race for education. They had allegedly degenerated in their social customs, had started betraying their religion or their traditional belief system. They, therefore, had to return to the Golden Age of their community or religion, had to free their belief system or religion from the corrupting influences of the British, the Christians and/or the Hindus.

The *Sikhs* started to perceive these challenges very strongly after the annexation of Punjab by the British in 1849. For them, the rallying cry was that Sikhs were not Hindus, embodied in one of the more famous pamphlets of the time by Bhai Kahn Singh, *Ham Hindu Nahin* (We are not Hindus). Sikh activists accused their co-religionists that some 'had fallen from their old ideals given them by the Gurus'.⁸ They were anxious not to fall *back* in to Hinduism to which they were still tied by invisible threads of affinity in tradition, ritual and values. For the reforming Sikh party, it was particularly the *Mahants*, the traditional keepers of the Sikh temples, who symbolized the corruption and degradation of Sikh religiousness and ritual.⁹ Christian and Hindu influences seemed to threaten the maintenance of the Sikh community as a social organism and a political constituency. A growing number of conversions to Christianity of Sikhs from the lower social strata and of a few aristocratic families sounded a warning signal to Sikh orthodoxy. British administrators in the early 1850s had concluded that 'Sikhism' was on the decline since the number of Sikhs seemed to be on the decrease. Their census return of 1.2 million Sikhs in 1868 caused much controversy. It had followed a rather narrow definition of Sikhism keeping the number of its adherents

⁸ Cf. the evidence of Sirdar Bahadur Sundar Singh, Secretary of the Chief Khalsa Diwan and a member of the Legislative Council of Punjab Province, before the Public Service Commission in 1913. United Kingdom, Parliamentary Papers, *Royal Commission on the Public Services in India*: Appendix vol. X (London, 1914), Cd. 7582, pp. 71-5; here: p. 75.

⁹ For an interesting summary of opposing arguments, see D. Petrie, *Developments in Sikh Politics (1900-1911)*, Report, Chief Khalsa Diwan (Amritsar, 1911), originally compiled for the Criminal Intelligence Department of the British administration.

fairly low.¹⁰ The emergence of the *Brahmo Samaj* and *Arya Samaj*, powerful Hindu reformist and revivalist movements, put them through another trial. It was, therefore, considered high time when in 1873 with landed money support an organization called *Singh Sabha* (society or chamber of Sikhs) was formed in Amritsar.¹¹ Under the guidance of the Maharaja of Faridkot and Baba Khem Singh Bedi, it focused on the education of their co-religionists. While Bedi was quite comfortable, portraying Sikhs as a reformist element within greater Hinduism, another organization, the Lahore Singh Sabha, championed the more aggressive assertion of Sikh separateness and attacked popular customs, such as respect for caste and Hindu influence in ceremonies and shrines.¹² Here was the Sikh variant of the all-India trend to restore the 'pure faith' and the 'true teaching' of religion. In addition to defending Sikhism against Arya Samaj attacks, the Singh Sabhas built schools and a separate College for the Sikh community, the Khalsa College. They opened orphanages, established archives and historical societies and produced a flood of polemical and scholarly literature on Sikh tradition. By 1900, almost a hundred Singh Sabhas or related societies were scattered across the Punjab. Mainstream and majority revivalism was augmented by the increasing spread of the revivalist sects of the *Nirankaris* and the *Namdharis*, with the latter taking a violent turn in the Kuka rebellion of 1868.

While Sikh reformist groups were fighting against the degradation of their customs and ritual, degradation seemed to have a different meaning for the *Non-Brahmin* and the Self-Respect campaigns that foreshadowed Tamil activism. On the surface, arguments were solely aimed at social issues of status and participation that is vertical integration of non-Brahmins. Such was the appellation for all Hindus ranking lower than the Brahmans, constituting the highest caste in Hinduism, from which traditionally the priests had come. But beneath this argumentation, the thrust of the movement was also cultural on the basis of negative affirmation. It was intended to reject the influence of high-caste Hindus and their ritual, to shake off their control over the whole body of Hindus. In the most narrow sense, it

¹⁰ Quoted in J. S. Grewal, 'Legacies of the Sikh Past for the Twentieth Century', in J. T. O'Connell *et al.* (eds), *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Delhi, 1990), pp. 25-6.

¹¹ Cf. Gobinder Singh, *Religion and Politics in the Punjab* (Delhi, 1986), pp. 57ff.

¹² N. Gerald Barrier, 'Sikh Politics in British Punjab prior to the Gurdwara Reform Movement', in O'Connell *et al.* (eds.), *Sikh History and Religion*, pp. 170-2.

meant to ascertain a separate group identity for south Indian Śūdras, the lowest of the four major caste designations in Hinduism who felt particularly oppressed by the Brahmans in south India. Their élite leaders could advance only by partly dissociating themselves from Hindu stratification. For this purpose they had to prove their unique and independent status in society. This could be achieved much more easily by emphasizing their local and regional south Indian identity over their ranking in the general Hindu system. The issue of social status and participation thus turned into an effort of cultural affirmation as a separate group on a horizontal level.

The credo of a movement of all non-Brahmins was formulated in Maharashtra as early as 1873 by Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890) and his *Satyashodhak Samaj*. He proclaimed the need to save the 'lower castes from the hypocritical Brahmans and their opportunistic scriptures'.¹³ His major book published in the same year was ominously titled *Gulamgiri*, or 'Slavery'.¹⁴ The activists of the self-respect movement led by E. V. Ramaswami Naicker believed that self-respect should come before self-rule. They wanted to increase their self-esteem and make the non-Brahmins realize that they could achieve everything in life without the Brahmans. It was the prevalent practices of Hinduism and the Brahmans who were supposed to be degraded. To remove the stigma of unworthiness from the non-Brahmins they wanted to give them a new sense of worth, the worth of their own tradition. Here, the juxtaposition of the south Indian Dravidian languages and cultures to the north Indian seat of the Aryan civilization came in handy. Although the southern Hindus were part of the same centuries-old evolution of the Indian civilization and of Hinduism they were proclaimed the direct heirs to the indigenous Dravidian peoples who had allegedly been conquered by the north Indian Aryans.

But for the common south Indian and anti-north Indian denominator, ethnic references at this stage of revivalism were fairly unspecific. The non-Brahmin movement penetrated the Marathi, Tamil and Telugu linguistic regions in the south of India. But early on, a separate Tamil strand of arguments started to appear increasingly overlapping with non-Brahmin self-definition. The Tamil identity

¹³ Quoted in Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Delhi, 1983), p. 57.

¹⁴ Cf. Rosaline O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge South Asian Studies, 30) (Cambridge, 1985); Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India: 1873–1930* (Bombay, 1976), pp. 107ff.

concept was still rather amorphous and strongly inspired by religious tradition since most of the literary treasures in the Tamil language were religious scriptures. Christian missionaries like Rev. Robert Caldwell (1819–1891) and G. U. Pope (1829–1907) of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, encouraged a re-evaluation of the Tamil language, which, they contended, did not derive from Sanskrit but preceded its arrival in south India.¹⁵ They helped to revive interest in the Tamil religious classics like *The Twelve Tirumurai* and *The Fourteen Maykanta Śāstras* or *The Fourteen Books which Teach the Divine Truth* and its related religious system of *Śaiva Siddhānta*.¹⁶ Here, the argument of degradation resurfaced when the Brahmans and their mythical north Indian Aryan ancestors were accused of having hijacked Hinduism for their own ambitions. The defenders of the Śaiva Siddhānta system regarded the Śaiva scriptures, the Tamil *Āgamas*, superior to the Sanskrit *Vēdas*. If the *Vēdas* were understood to be the basic scriptures of Hinduism the *Āgamas* would form some kind of commentary. It was claimed that the *Āgamas* had been falsified by the Aryans in order ‘to reconcile the *Vēdas* and the *Āgamas* and, in so doing, to give the palm to the former’.¹⁷ Shiva had to be freed from the ‘Aryan limitation’¹⁸ as the destroyer. The *Āgamas* had to be purged of the Aryan falsifications, and the Tamil social hierarchy had to be released from captivity of the caste system. Henceforth two strands of revivalism took their course: the *Śaiva Siddhānta Sabhas* refining a sort of indigenous south Indian Hinduism, and the *Tamil Sangams* reclaiming and popularizing the Tamil cultural and literary heritage.

The connotation of being Tamil shifted according to the interests of the prime activists behind the movement. It was kept deliberately wide when embedded within the non-Brahmin concept in order to maximize political support. But when it came to the benefits of the movements it was the members of the Tamil sub-Caste of Vellalas who had come to dominate the Madras-based Justice Party and who were to gain most from its drive for emancipation. Being second only to the Brahmans and yet belonging to the despised Śūdra caste

¹⁵ Started with the publication of Caldwell’s *Dravidian Grammar* in 1856. 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 See for instance G. U. Pope (trans. and ed.), *The Tiruvācagam* (Oxford, 1900).

¹⁷ M. S. Purnalingam Pillai, *Tamil Literature*, p. 254, quoted in Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India*, p. 294.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

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.¹⁹ The Vellalas were called upon to remember 'their nationality'²⁰ a term used here to describe their indigenous group identity. This increasingly narrow interpretation of Tamil identity excluded other prospective supporters of a democratized Tamil movement like the untouchables. With passing time, the movement gradually reverted back to caste Hindu groups, straining also relations with other Tamil-speaking groups like the Muslims.

Fighting degradation and decay was no less meaningful for the *Pathans*. In their case, the argument was put to still further uses. Neither was it preservation of the community and its ritual—as in the Sikh case—since nobody could be converted to or from being a Pathan. Nor was it entirely social participation or integration as with the non-Brahmins, although there was an element of competition in their relations with local Hindus and Punjabis. Their competition, however, was restricted since there was an even stronger element of partition of labour and social functions between them, with the Hindus mainly sticking to commerce and finance and the Pathans, were they settled, holding fast to agriculture and related trades.

When Pathan politicians were talking about decay and degradation they meant something different. They were discussing two things, decay of mores or manners and socioeconomic degradation of the Pathans. The argument was used to mobilize a sense of common fate and belonging to the same community. Differing and dissenting tribes were addressed on the basis of their pride in a common tradition and the mythical past and greatness of the Pathans with which their contemporary status was not commensurate by far. Hurt pride over their long-time neglect was meant to spring them into common action.

On the moral issue, the Pathan movement under Ghaffar Khan tried to rectify the image of the Pathan who even among the Indian political and religious élites was perceived as being savage and uncivilized. Hostage-taking and violent tribal warfare had instilled fear in many Indian hearts, in particular in those of the Hindu families who lived in or near the Frontier and who, with their considerable wealth were a favourite and easy target of Pathan trans-frontier raids from

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²⁰ Sundaram Pillai (1855–97), historian of Tamil literature, quoted in *ibid.*

the formally independent belt of tribal territories beyond the settled districts of the Frontier Province.

Ghaffar Khan tried to retrieve core values from the ethical system of the Pathans, the *Pakhtunwali*, which allegedly had been forgotten and abandoned, particularly when resorting to violence in abductions and reprisals. He recalled:

Among us prevailed family feuds, intrigues, enmities, evil customs, quarrels and riots. Whatever the Pakhtuns earned was spent on harmful customs and practices and on litigations . . . We wanted to infuse among the Pakhtuns the spirit and consciousness for the service of our community and country in the name of God. We were wanting in that spirit. The Pakhtuns believed in violence and that too not against aliens but their own brethren. The near and dear ones were the victims of violence. The intrigues and dissensions tore them asunder. Another great drawback was the spirit of vengeance and lack of character and good habits among them.²¹

The real degradation, however, concerned the social conditions of the Pathan tribes which were among the worst in India. Ghaffar Khan, the leader of the Pathans, exclaimed in 1931: 'Whose condition is worse today? Whose children are dying naked today? These are the children of the Pakhtun. Think, at least something, about this degraded state of yours'.²² Part and parcel of the low social status of the Pathans was their subordination to the colonial master, the British. In the Shinkiri village on 7 November 1931, Ghaffar Khan argued:

I say it is our country therefore the 'Maliki' (ownership, rule) will be that of the Pakhtun. The sovereignty will be that of the Pakhtun, no other nation has the right to come and rule over the country of the Pakhtun. This is my object and we want that the treasures of our country should be used for the Pakhtun, the Firangi should not use it for making rivalry. We will satisfactorily feed our children and construct schools and hospitals. It is because of getting this country for the Pakhtuns that we have girded up our loins. If we do not get the country, we will lie down in the graves.²³

An important plank of Ghaffar Khan's revivalism were his efforts to raise ethnolinguistic awareness. Right from his visit to the Afghan King Amanullah in 1920 through the thirties he called on his fellow tribesmen to cherish the use of their national language. Pakhtu, or

²¹ Quoted in D. G. Tendulkar, *Faith is a Battle* (Bombay, 1967), p. 59.

²² Ghaffar Khan at a Red Shirt meeting at Khairmaidan on 6 Nov. 1931. Quoted in P. S. Ramu, *Momentous Speeches of Badshah Khan*, p. 26.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Pashto.²⁴ In 1928, he started the first political journal in Pashto, the *Pakhtun*. Repeatedly he called upon tribal leaders on the Indian and the Afghan side to remember their common Pakhtun heritage: 'We are all one and that we have been divided into parts is also to weaken us and has been done by the Firangi.'²⁵

Here, one has to note that his use of the term Pakhtun or Pathan remained deliberately ambiguous, subject to political opportunity and shifting objectives. He referred to the common interests of all Pathans in both Afghanistan and India, between which they were almost evenly divided, when he wanted to lend additional weight to his argument about the venerable Pathan tradition. Yet his political objectives which were rooted in the settled districts of the Frontier Province always remained confined to Pathan political emancipation within British India—and later in Pakistan. He also addressed his slogans to different social strata in the course of his campaign. He first approached the broad peasant and tribal masses when he attacked the conservative groups of the big Khans and the professional classes like the pleaders and the vakils;²⁶ but in 1947 he sought to consolidate and broaden the appeal of his organization and started using the term Pakhtun²⁷ in a wider political connotation, including all inhabitants of the Frontier province, irrespective of their social and ethnic status,²⁸ paving the way for a new political nationalism, less ethnic and essentialist in content, which could serve as an embryonic nationalist ideology for a potential Pathan state.

²⁴ Tendulkar, *Faith is a Battle*, p. 33.

²⁵ Ghaffar Khan at a meeting on 6 Nov. 1931, quoted in Ramu, *Momentous Speeches of Badshah Khan*, p. 22.

²⁶ 'We do earn a living but it becomes the food of the Britishers, it becomes the food of the Tahsildars, the subinspectors and the appeal writers'. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 34; 'We have very big Jagirdars among us. Question them as to whether they have ever made the Firangi inclined to do good to our nation. Have the Jagirdars and Khans done any service to your nation. There is none who might have made a *gutta* (benefit) for the nation'. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁷ The usage of the term is confusing, particularly for the outsider. It is often used interchanging with the term *Pathan*. At the time, *Pakhtun* was more often used to describe ethnic and linguistic attributes and the commonness of all the tribes in both Afghanistan and India while *Pathan* is the eastern tribesman living mainly in India and the independent territories.

²⁸ 'All those who belong to the N.-W.F.P., whether rich or poor, Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, are Pakhtoons'. *Hindustan Times*, 9-7-1947; 'By Pakhtun I mean everyone, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh or Christian, whether rich or poor, Pir, Khan or ordinary layman'. *Tribune*, 9-7-1947, quoted in Erland Jansson, *India, Pakistan or Pakhtunistan? The Nationalist Movement in the North-West Frontier Province, 1937-1947* (Studia Historica Upsaliensia; 119) (Uppsala, 1981), p. 219.

Community of Need

In the times of *loyalism* the emerging ethnic and religious parties shifted the focal point of reference to issues of social status and political participation. *Disabilities* and *deprivation* became important catchwords of the day in order to evoke solidarity with demands for special communal representation in the various elected bodies and in the civil services. Under these conditions, communities increasingly identified with political units, the provinces, as potential shells for ethnic nationalism. Before the Government of India Acts of 1919, and more so of 1935, the provinces of British India rarely corresponded to ethnic and religious settlement areas. Therefore, the search for a home territory at this stage was aimed more at political solidarity than at identity. The *Chief Khalsa Diwan* contributed significantly to the codification and harmonization of religious and political demands made on behalf of the *Sikh* community. After the Census of 1901, which had returned a rather low number of adherents to the Sikh faith in the Punjab (8.49 per cent), it negotiated with the British administration the redefinition of census criteria for Sikhism so that sects on the fringe like the lower-caste and *sahajdari* Sikhs could also be included in the community.²⁹ The recognition of a separate group identity assumed a critical importance for the Sikhs during the hearings of the Public Service Commission of 1913. While the representative of the Diwan, Sundar Singh Majithia, contended that Sikhs were separate from Hindus and deserved an employment quota of their own, Gurbakhsh Singh Bedi argued to the contrary that Hindus and Sikhs were inseparable and should be treated that way for the purposes of recruitment and other civil service arrangements.³⁰

Later, the Diwan thrived on the question of securing extra-proportional communal representation in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. The Muslims had been assured a quota of 50 per cent of the seats in the Punjab under separate Muslim electorates through the 1916 Lucknow *Compact*, as the agreement between the Congress

²⁹ Barrier, 'Sikh Politics in British Punjab', p. 182.

³⁰ Sundar Singh claimed beliefs were primary and outward appearances less important. For his evidence, see United Kingdom, Parliamentary Papers, *Royal Commission on the Public Services in India*: Appendix vol. X, p. 71-5. Gurbakhsh Singh Bedi who represented the established section of the Sikh élite held the opinion that the emphasis on the separateness of Sikhs from Hindus is only 20-25 years old. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-7.

and the Muslim League was called then. The Sikhs regarded the Muslim majority a statutory domination which it was apprehended would 'terrorise' the other communities. In order to offset this threat, the Sikhs who constituted 11.92 per cent of the population of British Punjab and the States in 1911,³¹ demanded a share of one-third of the seats in the Punjab Legislature. The tremendous war effort and the large tax contribution of Sikh farmers and landholders were quoted in justification of the extra-proportional claim.³² When in the wake of the constitution of 1935 the first party-based elections approached, differentiation amongst Sikh political groups rapidly increased. The Akalis took to a more extremist position which favoured complete independence from Britain leading them into an alliance with Congress. The Chief Khalsa Diwan found it necessary and promising to form its own party for the elections of 1937, the *Khalsa Nationalist Party*. As a confidential government report aptly observed, the party had been formed 'with the object of getting back the influence which the Sikhs of the leading families in the province have lost' to the extremist faction of the Akalis.³³ In the 1937 elections, the loyalists succeeded. Out of the 33 Sikh seats they captured 18 and joined hands with the Muslim government of the Unionist Party under Sikander Hayat Khan which gained the absolute majority.³⁴

The *non-Brahmin* movement was by definition a movement for the removal of disabilities. One of its first activities by its founding father, C. Natesa Mudaliar, was the foundation of a hostel for non-Brahmin students in Madras to relieve their plight as they could not get access to other student accommodation due to caste restrictions. After it had been in office for two Council periods, the Justice Party

³¹ Government of India, *Census of India, 1911, Punjab* (Lahore, 1912), vol. XIV, part 1, Subsidiary table 'General distribution of the population by religion', p. 193.

³² See, for instance, Great Britain, Parliamentary Papers, *Joint Select Committee on the Government of India Bill* (London, 1919), Cmd. 203, vol. 2: Minutes of Evidence, Evidence by Sardar Thaker Singh, p. 2726. For a thorough account of the representation demand and the exchange of respective arguments, see Memorandum on Sikh representation submitted by the Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar, and the following interview in Indian Statutory Commission (I.S.C.), *Selections from the Memorandum and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials* (Part 1), (London, 1930), pp. 135ff.

³³ Emmerson to Linlithgow, 19 Oct. 1936, Linlithgow Papers, NMML, in K. L. Tuteja, *Sikh Politics 1920-1940* (Kurukushetra, 1984), p. 176.

³⁴ Of the 175 seats, the Muslim Unionist Party got 96, Congress 18 (of which 5 were Sikh seats), the Muslim League got only 2. Of the Sikh seats, the Khalsa National Party secured 18, the Akalis 10, and the Congress 5. The rest were Independents. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

was accused of running a 'jobocracy', to which Ramaswami Mudaliar replied in an interesting twist: 'Yes, I am proud to be a job-hunter, only I hunt for jobs not for myself or my relations, . . . but I ask openly and demand that jobs should be available to the hundreds of young men fully trained and equipped, who are now forced to remain idle, because they have not the fortuitous aids of other communities'.³⁵ Here again, it was the Public Service Commission of 1913 which threw up the issue in its full dimension. Shares in civil service appointments, in literacy and university graduates were heavily weighted against the non-Brahmins.³⁶ By 1926, this situation had drastically changed. Non-Brahmins had entered all spheres of public life and had in fact been dominating the politics of Madras Presidency for seven years.³⁷

Communal representation in Parliament was considered to be one of the major remedies against their disadvantaged position. Yet here, as in the case of the reservation of jobs in the administration, heated arguments were exchanged over the advisability of reserving jobs and parliamentary seats for the majority which the non-Brahmins themselves claimed to represent. With the Brahmans making up 1.31 million in 1911,³⁸ all other groups were lumped together so that the non-Brahmin manifesto of 1916 and non-Brahmin leaders

³⁵ *Hindu*, weekly edition, 1 Jan. 1925, quoted in Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India*, p. 263.

³⁶ For details see United Kingdom, Parliamentary Papers, *Royal Commission on the Public Services*, Appendix vol. II, 'Minutes of Evidence . . . taken in Madras from the 8th to the 17th of January, 1913', Cd. 7293 (London, 1914), pp. 103-4; for a more general discussion of non-Brahmin representation see Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism*, pp. 35-40.

³⁷ The figures of comparative increase of general literacy and literacy in English released in the 1931 census for Madras Presidency proved convincingly that the non-Brahmin groups had made considerable advances. With general literacy of all ages in Madras Presidency standing at 9.26 per cent. In 1931, general literacy of non-Brahmin caste Hindus varied between 7 and 40 per cent, which was a twofold increase over 1901. During the same period, their English literacy had increased up to ten times:

General and English Language Literacy (First and Second Sub-column) For Selected Non-Brahmin Groups Calculated on Population Aged 7 Years and Over

	Boya	Kallan	Maravan	Nayar	Sengundar	Telaga	Vanniyar	Yadava								
1931	1.7	0.12	11.6	0.49	10.3	0.37	37.7	4.67	19.4	0.95	8.6	1.12	7.9	0.39	8.5	0.71
1901	0.4	0.005	5.3	0.06	5.4	0.02	24.4	0.76	7	0.06	3.8	0.44	3.3	0.01	3.1	0.03

Government of India. *Census of India, 1931, Madras*, vol. XIV, part I, Report, Subsidiary table V. Literacy by communities (Madras, 1932), pp. 281-2.

³⁸ India. Government of India. *Census of India, 1911, Madras*, vol. XII, part II (Madras, 1912), Table XIII, part I, 'Caste, tribe, race or nationality', p. 112.

boasted of the support of 40-odd million non-Brahmins.³⁹ During the hearings of the 1919 Joint Select Committee of the British Parliament on the arrangements for constitutional reform of the same year non-Brahmin leaders succeeded in convincing the committee members of the deep-seated prejudice and bias against non-Brahmins and, more important, of the ability of the Brahmans, who practically held the monopoly of education and local administrative power, to manipulate the democratic process that was to be gradually introduced, since people depending on them economically or spiritually would not dare to vote against them. When the Brahman and non-Brahmin representatives could not agree over the share of communal representation for the non-Brahmins in the Legislative Council, the arbitrator, Lord Meston, decided in March 1920 they would be granted 28 reserved seats out of 63 which meant that in every constituency there would be one general seat, for which no caste or other qualifications applied, and one reserved for the non-Brahmins.⁴⁰ However, significant communal reservation did not protect the Justice Party against electoral defeat in 1926 and 1937 when other parties and most notably Congress managed to court the non-Brahmin votes more successfully.

The reasons for the decline of the movement lay in the narrow approach by the leaders of the Justice Party. The cultural selectiveness of the non-Brahmin and Tamil concept mentioned in the preceding section was mirrored in the selective campaign for jobs and quotas which made it obvious that the real interests of the non-Brahmin leaders lay only with few caste groups, like the Mudaliars (Tamil Vellalas), the Naidus (Balijas), and the Reddys (Kapu, mainly from Telugu areas). The famous Non-Brahmin manifesto of 20 December 1916 which started the movement made a particular reference to these groups. Reading the manifesto carefully, one finds that from the very outset of the movement its chief aim was to provide these up-and-coming social groups with jobs and political power, to advance their status in the social hierarchy.⁴¹

³⁹ *Hindu*, 20 Dec. 1916.

⁴⁰ Irschick, *Politics and Social Conflict in South India*, p. 165.

⁴¹ The non-Brahmin manifesto stated that '... Though rather late in the field, the non-Brahmin communities have begun to move. They now represent various stages of progress. Some of them such as the Chetty, the Komati, the Mudaliar, the Naidu, and the Nayar, have been making rapid progress; and even the least advanced, like those who are ahead of them, are manfully exerting themselves to come up to the standards of the new times ... In a variety of ways in different walks of life non-Brahmins will now be found unostentatiously and yet effectively

In the Frontier Province the feeling to be cut off from employment in the civil service and from political opportunities spread much more slowly among the local *Pathan* élite than among the Sikhs and the non-Brahmins. The vulnerable and war-prone Frontier province which had only come into existence in 1901 was carefully shielded off from the spoiling influences of constitutional reform in which a large number of British and local administrators could see no reason at all. The new Frontier province, however, held out the promise of more government money and jobs for the sons of the very landlords who otherwise resisted the tide of change. In 1922, the hearings of the Bray Committee made it clear that there existed a loyalist group of Khans which favoured constitutional reform for the Frontier. The Committee report concluded:

The Pathan of the districts is now keenly alive to the issues before us; and if mistrust of the Pathan is to override the Pathan's self-determination for self-development in a separate province, the danger of his turning westwards may become real.⁴²

That the local Pathan élite started feeling deprived of the spoils of a wider participation in the administration of their lands was an important prelude to the Red Shirt movement by Ghaffar Khan from 1929 onwards. It ensured that his movement met with much more sympathy than could otherwise have been envisaged.

But the vision of change by which the reform-minded Khans were possessed was rather hazy. When pressed as to their readiness to accept the principle of election they insisted on nominated representation with special consideration for the Khans. K. B. Abdul Ghafur Khan was a case in point here. For most of them it was more a matter of tribal pride than of political principle. They wanted reforms because the neighbouring Punjabis had them as well and they certainly didn't want to be considered lower.⁴³ When the Pathans pressed for reforms some were rather unsure what exactly the reforms would entail: 'If Reform is a good thing, as all of them say it is a good thing, then it should be increased . . . And if it is a

contributing to the moral and material progress of this Presidency. But they and their brethren have so far been groping helplessly in the background, because of the subtle and manifold ways in which political power and official influences are often exercised by the Brahmin caste'. *Hindu*, 20 Dec. 1916.

⁴² *Report of the North-West Frontier Enquiry Committee and Minutes of Dissent by Mr. T. Rangachariar and Mr. N. M. Samarth* (Delhi, 1924), p. 17.

⁴³ Cf. *Report and Evidence of the North-West Frontier Enquiry Committee*.

good thing why should we be deprived of it?'⁴⁴ But the British failed to recognize the spirit of the time in the Frontier. When they extended the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms of 1919 to the province in 1932 they gave too little too late. With preparations for a new constitution after the findings of the Simon Commission in full swing, Pathan pride was deeply hurt at this minimalist concession. Only the 1935 Government of India Act treated the Frontier Province on a par with the other provinces of British India.

Since the Pathans were not a minority or a disadvantaged group in any other aspect, the reservation of seats as in the cases of the Sikhs and the Non-Brahmins was not a burning issue. Out of 50 seats which the Frontier legislature was to have, under the all-India scheme of communal representation 33 were rural Muslim seats. It further included three urban Muslim constituencies, nine general, *i.e.* mostly Hindu, three Sikh and two landholders' seats.⁴⁵

Though the Pathans did not argue over quotas in the legislature—they had rather graciously accepted that the minorities like the Sikhs, Hindus and the landholders were well overrepresented—public service employment became an important issue in the political debate. The very fact of the extension of the 1919 reforms to the province in 1932 had opened new job avenues to the aspiring local élite which were tremendously enhanced by the provincial autonomy introduced in 1937.

One has to remember, however, that only few people in British India could hope to become provincial ministers or legislators. It was basically the English-speaking élite that stood to benefit from these constitutional movements. In 1931, literacy in English stood at roughly 1.22 per cent, which was a fairly select club (that still totalled up some 3.6 million people).⁴⁶ Right through the twenties and thirties voters who participated in the political process were likewise thinly spread. The provincial franchise of the population constituted 2.8 per cent in 1926.⁴⁷ This was indicative of the narrow social

⁴⁴ See evidence to the Simon Commission in November 1928: I.S.C., *Selections*, (Part I), p. 269.

⁴⁵ Jansson, *India, Pakistan or Pakhtunistan?*, p. 54.

⁴⁶ Government of India, *Census of India, 1931* (Bangalore, 1932), vol. 1. India, part II 'Imperial Tables', pp. 424–5, calculated on the population aged 5 years and over.

⁴⁷ I.S.C., *Survey* (London, 1930), part III, Working of the reformed constitution, p. 197.

base political movements had at the time. Yet it was a necessary stage since for the first time it opened politics to participation by the millions.

Community of Deed

In spite of all the achievements of the constitutionalists which were embodied in the Government of India Act of 1935 and the ensuing selectors, ethnic politicians and the masses were not satisfied. Those who advocated radical change on the political scene now associated themselves with demands for full independence (instead of dominion status) and social reform aimed not at the small circle of the 'chattering classes' but at wider, mostly peasant masses. With the advent of *radicalism* politicians could rely on a much more diversified political network. Provincial administrators had been functioning more independently by then. For the 1937 elections, the 1932 Lothian Franchise Committee increased the provincial franchise to between 5 and 17 per cent. That was still not very representative of India's toiling millions. But it multiplied the electorate to 36 millions posing in itself a complex technical problem how to arrange elections under the conditions of India.⁴⁸ Political leaders made the present condition of the common masses their central topic to enhance their attraction. It was at this stage that for the first time ethnic and ethno-religious movements gained a real mass following. The Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab was said to have 80,000 members, according to British intelligence estimates.⁴⁹ Similar numerical estimates were given for the Red Shirts. The Self-Respect movement probably did not exceed several hundred, but its off-spring, the anti-Hindustani movement, attracted crowds of 40 to 50 thousand people at the height of the campaign.

⁴⁸ Franchise (Lothian) Committee 1932, in *Indian Annual Register 1932, vol. 1* (Delhi, 1990 Repr.), pp. 437-71, here: p. 455. The proportion of adult males enfranchised was 43.4 and of adult females 10.5 million people.

⁴⁹ Cf. secret government memo on Akali Dal in Papers of Sir Evan Jenkins, Governor of the Punjab, Record of disturbances and constitutional affairs, confidential letters, interview notes etc., Mar.-Aug. 1947. India Office Library and Records R/3/1/176, file pages 75-80. Kerr doubts that the mass participation was really massive. Mohinder Singh (*The Akali Movement* (Delhi, 1978), pp. 100-1, table note) gives the number of 25,000 which even if doubled would amount to only 1.6 per cent of the Sikhs in the Punjab (3,110,060) in 1921. Ian J. Kerr, 'Fox and the Lions: The Akali Movement Revisited' in O'Connell *et al.* (eds.), *Sikh History and Religion*, p. 222, footnote 46.

The perceived state of *bondage* and *slavery* became a major plank in their efforts to mobilize broader sections of people who led a miserable life. The *Pathan* leader Ghaffar Khan couched his political demands in these words. When Stewart Pears, Chief Commissioner of the Frontier Province, received Ghaffar Khan for an interview on 30 July 1931, he was surprised that Ghaffar Khan took so little note of the constitutional reforms. The Frontier establishment had formed the opinion that the lack of participation of the emerging new Pathan élite in the governance of the province where the introduction of reforms had been considerably delayed was the chief cause of dissatisfaction. They had hoped that the extension of the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms of 1919 would buy the Pathans off from the road of resistance and violence. Recording his impressions from the interview Spears could not conceal his contempt for Ghaffar Khan whom he considered a trouble maker, not a devout Muslim. Ghaffar Khan’s harping on the present ‘state of slavery’ of the Afghan race Spears regarded as the reflection of a strong inferiority complex.⁵⁰ In the following years, the perceived state of slavery remained a recurrent theme with Ghaffar Khan’s public pronouncements. In 1934, he argued in a speech at Lyall Library in Aligarh: ‘The cause for this ruin of ours is that we have become slaves. Slavery is a curse. . . . In slavery no religions can be protected. A slave has no religion’.⁵¹

The events that occurred between 1930 and 1933 were almost a Pathan rebellion. Coinciding with the beginning of the Congress-led civil disobedience campaign on 30 April 1930, which the Red Shirts had joined, the Pathans fiercely resisted attempts by the British to control political life in the province under a mainly security-related pretext. As allies of Congress the Red Shirts who ruled the province after the 1937 elections faced a similar dilemma of choice like the Sikhs. The Congress alliance could not protect them from the ascent of the conservative Muslim League in the course of its aggressive Pakistan campaign. The nearer independence drew the clearer it became that freedom from slavery for the Pathan movement of the Red Shirts didn’t just mean freedom for India, but also emancipation of their community.

It was the related theme of *suffering* which was raised by the *Akali jathas*, volunteers for the *Sikh* movement, who courted arrest for the

⁵⁰ Quoted in Tendulkar, *Faith is a Battle*, p. 110.

⁵¹ Ramu, *Momentous Speeches of Badshah Khan*, p. 224.

sake of their community. Writing to Mahatma Gandhi about the essentials of their movement on 20 April 1924, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee explained its method of non-violent resistance:

This method has been adopted with the conviction that it will lead to success by moving the callous heart of the oppressor by presenting to him the sight of suffering inflicted by him and that by cheerfully enduring this suffering strength will be evoked in us and the public will be convinced of the depth of our feeling and the sincerity of our cause. This suffering may take the form of imprisonment, fines, beating or death.⁵²

The ritual of suffering remained a concomitant of the Sikh movement ever since. The temple movement had established the Akalis as a new and radical political body whose leader Master Tara Singh (1885–1967)⁵³ was determined and willing to use its influence with the Sikh masses for permanently steering the course of Sikh politics into more stormy waters. The Akalis were convinced that ‘by their selfless and continued service and sacrifice they have established an undisputable claim to represent the Sikh cause’.⁵⁴ Their temporary alliance with Congress from 1936 onwards showed the pitfalls of such policy. Though the Akalis supported the quest for complete independence, Congress as a national party had a different agenda. Congress would and could not pay heed to communal interests such as the Sikh identity concept of the Akalis required. They openly clashed over the war effort and recruitment where the Congress policy of disengagement was at odds with Sikh political interests. Army service was the social basis for the existence of many a Sikh family. Gandhi was outraged and wrote to Master Tara Singh quite pointedly on 16 August 1940:

As I have told you, in my opinion you have nothing in common with Congress nor the Congress with you. You believe in the rule of sword; the Congress does not. You have all the time ‘my community’ in mind. The Congress has no community but the whole nation. Your civil disobedience is purely a branch of violence.⁵⁵

⁵² Ganda Singh (ed.), *Some Confidential Papers of the Akali Movement* (Amritsar, 1965), p. 66.

⁵³ He was the president of the temple administration committee SGPC from 1936 till 1944, and he also remained the president of the Shiromani Akali Dal for most of this period. Except for a short period in 1944, he remained the most prominent Akali leader of the time.

⁵⁴ Akali Party Manifesto in *The Tribune*, 20 June 1936.

⁵⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXXII (Delhi, 1978), pp. 395.

This episode clearly revealed the fallacies of regional community building in the course of the nationalist movement. The rift widened further with the looming designs of partition. The Akalis accused the Congress of appeasing the Muslim League when it declined to resist the Pakistan scheme by force. They feared that under the Pakistan scheme or any other communal solution that was based on the Muslim majority in the province of Punjab Muslim rule over the province would be perpetuated reducing the Sikhs in their major home place to a position of obedience. When the Muslim League appeared to be unwilling to give the Sikhs comprehensive guarantees, the Akalis decided to resist the inclusion of their main settlement areas into Pakistan tooth and nail. As a last remedy, the partition of the Punjab (along with Bengal) was effected in order to secure the non-Muslim areas for India. At this stage the Akalis again were in fair command of the Sikh masses who were ready to join them in opposing the original partition scheme. Though the Akalis remained with Congress for some time after independence was achieved, they again parted ways when the Akalis felt in need of a communal solution for the Indian Punjab as well, which rekindled the fire of hatred and terror.

The Justice Party found it difficult to approach broader sections of society. It was electoral failure in 1926 and later in 1937 that prompted some soul searching on the part of the *non-Brahmin* leaders. Without adequate mass support and radical slogans of some severity they could not hope to justify their claim of representing a whole community. The well-known non-Brahmin politician E.V.R. Naicker who had been with Congress represented the type of leader needed to gain a real mass following. Capturing the leadership of the Justice Party he acted from outside. With his Self-Respect movement that gained momentum after 1926 he created a political base of his own. His language was straight and kept in simple Tamil. Like other radical politicians of the time he reflected on the deplorable state of the masses whose plight he wanted to alleviate. The theme of *degradation* and *bondage* also resounded from him. In 1931, in the preamble to the party constitution he recalled the efforts of his party to rouse 'the attention of the mass people to the enormity of their superstitious habits, customs, and practices of their religion and caste, and of their degraded economic conditions of life', and he decried 'that the various political, social and religious bodies and institutions are ever more determined to hold the masses in social, religious and economic bondage and degradation, through their

political organization all over the country'.⁵⁶ Ramaswamy Naicker experimented with various approaches ranging from anti-Brahmanical Hinduism to atheism and socialism.

When in 1937 the Congress-led government under C. Rajagopalachari decided to introduce compulsory teaching of Hindi as a political symbol of the nationalist unity of India it provided Naicker with a long-sought-after cause for political agitation. The Justice Party had been routed in the 1937 provincial elections and was left with only 17 seats out of 215 in the lower house of the Provincial Legislative Assembly while Congress took 159 seats.⁵⁷ After the government began its Hindi programme in 125 selected secondary schools in June 1938, the agitators started picketing these. Part of the agitation did create a public disturbance, particularly when women joined in the campaign in November 1938. Some of the better-attended meetings pulled crowds of 50,000 people showing a real mass concern for the aims of the anti-Hindustani movement, if only a temporary one. The agitation also tried to raise bands of volunteers, the famous *jathas*, but the right response from the public was somewhat wanting. The picketing for the larger part of the campaign remained confined to two places, the residence of the Chief Minister and of the Madras Hindi Theological High School. And the number of prisoners in the whole course of the agitation went only little over 1,000. The agitation died down in 1939 and became irrelevant when the Congress ministry stepped down in October of the same year.

Since the non-Brahmin movement remained somewhat elitist and the Tamil movement, when it became massive, relegated social issues to the background they could not get a durable hold on the masses at the time. Ethnic slogans alone, without sufficient linkage with genuine social concerns, did not succeed in creating a viable political instrument instantly. But the concept of anti-Aryan, anti-Hindustani Tamilism which was shaped in the course of the movement lived on. In 1944 the Justice Party changed its name to Dravidian League (*Dravidar Kazhagam*). The new party and its various offsprings, the *Dravidar Munetra Kazhagam* and *Anna-Dravidar Munetra Kazhagam*, were still to play their most important role in Tamil nationalism and Indian politics after independence was achieved.

At the stage of radicalism, it was not only the moral emphasis which had become more stringent with its call to break free from the

⁵⁶ Quoted from Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism*, p. 269.

⁵⁷ Madras Mail, 23, 27 Feb. 1937, in *Ibid.*, p. 184.

deplorable state of bondage. Emergent ethnic and religious political movements more than ever aimed at the very mundane occupation of the seat of power in the autonomous provinces and made the clearest reference as yet to political territories that were envisaged permanently to house their sub-nationalisms. The slogans of *Dravidanad* or *Dravidistan* as a home for the Dravidian Tamils, of *Azad Punjab* for the Sikhs and *Pakhtunistan* for the Pathans were coined and developed into political concepts. There was strong doubt about the internal coherence and the moral genuineness of these demands since they were moved so late in the course of their movements and well in sight of the approaching independence. The Pakistan movement had sent the message to all other minority or underclass movements that it was impossible to secure their status short of the demand of political independence. These slogans were, therefore, raised more out of expediency and confusion in connection with the process of partition of British-India than in reflection of substantial demands for independence and related concepts from within their own communities.

When the Muslim League clarified its demand for the merger of Muslim majority areas into separate states with the Lahore resolution of 23 March 1940, the Akalis and other *Sikh* political parties reacted strongly against the scheme. After the mission to India by Sir Stafford Cripps in 1942 which proposed a loose federation of states with the right to secede, the Sikhs felt bypassed and the Akalis returned to the demand of a reconstituted Punjab in which the Sikhs would comprise twenty per cent of the population and the Muslims and Hindus forty per cent each. This new province they called *Azad* (Free) Punjab. Here, the Sikhs felt, would they be free from domination by the major communities since they neatly balanced each other.⁵⁸ Feeling besieged by the mounting influence of the Muslims the Akalis tried to negotiate a settlement with Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, who, however, was not in the mood for concessions. Under the pressure of the advancing events the Sikh demand considered independence as an option though membership in the Indian Union remained the preferred alternative.⁵⁹ The demand for

⁵⁸ For details see Indu Banga, 'The Sikh Crisis of Sikh Politics (1940-1947)', in O'Connell *et al.* (eds), *Sikh History and Religion*, pp. 233-55; Christine Effenberg, *The Political Status of the Sikhs* (New Delhi, Archives Publishers, 1989), pp. 117ff.

⁵⁹ Cf. the documents of the All Parties Sikh Conference and the Shiromani Akali Dal under Tara Singh where the demand for *Azad Punjab* was raised but not pressed when it came to resolutions. *Indian Annual Register 1944*, vol. II, pp. 210 ff.

a Sikh state, therefore, was more of an angry reaction but it continued a line of Sikh proposals which had focused on the redistribution of borders and territories of the Punjab province in order to give the Sikhs more clout over the provincial affairs. The Sikhs could finally claim a certain measure of success as their campaign was to a large extent responsible for the partition of Punjab and the way it was effected, securing all major districts in which Sikhs constituted a sizable minority, for India. After independence the campaign was soon forgotten. But it re-emerged in the shape of the demand for a *Punjabi Subha*, or Punjabi-speaking province and later for *Khalistan*. The latter was to reach sinister prominence during the extremist campaign of the 1980s in India.

Similarly, the demand for *Pakhtunistan* was the brainchild of the campaign for the separation of an independent Pakistan.⁶⁰ When the suggestion was made to amalgamate the Muslim majority provinces of the Frontier, Baluchistan, Sind, Punjab and Bengal into the new Pakistan state it was contested by Congress on the grounds that it would not do justice to the non-Muslim districts of the provinces of Bengal and Punjab. After this objection was removed by the partition of these provinces into Muslim and non-Muslim districts the Pakistan scheme seemed certain to succeed. Now the fate of the Frontier province, the only Congress-ruled Muslim majority province, turned precarious. After the British had arranged for the partition of Punjab and Bengal to precede the question of the Frontier and their partition had been approved by their legislatures, the Frontier province remained geographically trapped in the north-western corner of the country completely surrounded by Muslim-League territory. The amalgamation of the Frontier province with Pakistan was but a foregone conclusion. Technically, the referendum which was called for this purpose was a coup d'état, removing an elected provincial government from office, the Congress-led ministry of Dr Khan Sahib, the brother of Ghaffar Khan. The disturbances and unrest unleashed by the street politics of the Muslim League which became increasingly confident of victory in its Pakistan campaign offered a welcome pretext for the referendum. When the Red Shirts suggested putting three alternatives on the ballot, namely joining Pakistan, India or creating an independent Pakhtunistan, this was rejected by the British as it would 'confuse the people'. By that time communal polariza-

⁶⁰ For a review of the issue, see Jansson, *India, Pakistan or Pakhtunistan?*, ch. 'Pakhtunistan', pp. 206–15.

tion of the provincial political scene had advanced too far to allow for a sober political judgement. The Red Shirts boycotted the referendum of 7 July 1947 which predictably resulted in a 99 per cent endorsement of the link with Pakistan matching 50.5 per cent of eligible voters which still was a solid majority.⁶¹ The amorphous nature of the concept of Pakhtunistan continued to haunt Pathan politics on both sides of the Afghan–Pakistan border long after independence was achieved. Sometimes it was interpreted as incorporating all Pakhtun/Pathan areas into Afghanistan, on other occasions into Pakistan, sometimes it foresaw their consolidation into an independent Pathan state and in its minimalist version it simply implied the renaming of the Pakistan Frontier province into Pakhtunistan.

Although the formation of a *Tamil*-speaking province had been demanded occasionally since 1926 it only returned to the forefront with the Hindi controversy. In 1938 Naicker talked of a ‘Tamil Nad for Tamilians’ campaign.⁶² The motive probably was disillusion with the Congress victory which was still supposed to be dominated by Brahmans. In Salem in October 1938, Naicker declared: ‘if the Congress permitted the exploitation of Tamils by Brahmans and Northern Indians, the best way to preserve the liberty of Tamils was to agitate for separation from the rest of India and the proposed All-India Federation, just as Ceylon and Burma had chosen to stand aloof from India’.⁶³ The Pakistan scheme which was announced by the Muslim League in 1940 added a new dimension to the demand for *Dravidanad*. Naicker tried to secure the support for his demand in exchange for siding with the Muslim League. Jinnah’s agreement turned out to be mere lip service; he probably never mentioned the demand for *Dravidanad* in his constitutional talks with Congress and the Muslim League. But the cooperation between the Justice Party and the Muslim League was significantly strengthened, particularly at the provincial level. The *Dravidar Kazhagam* continued to agitate for a separate Dravidian state well after independence till 1963 when the Indian Constitution was amended to make a demand for secession a criminal offence.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ian Talbot, *Provincial Politics and the Pakistan Movement* (Karachi, 1990), p. 27.

⁶² Cf. Naicker’s Presidential address at the 14th Session of the Justice Party Conference which elected him President of the Party in absentia, in *Indian Annual Register 1938*, vol. II, p. 380.

⁶³ *Madras Mail*, 19 Oct. 1938, in Arooran, *Tamil Renaissance and Dravidian Nationalism*, p. 238.

⁶⁴ For details, see *ibid.*, Chapter 9 ‘The Demand for Dravidanad, 1940–44’, pp. 233–51.

Claims and Realities: The Obstinate Balance of Independence

By 1947 group identity building had advanced a long way. Their leaders, however, did not receive the final blessing of the masses for their separate schemes of partial independence. All-India forces had been equally successful in shaping public opinion and identity perceptions.

Independence which had created the two sovereign states of India and Pakistan through a painful partition process did not fulfil the expectations of its major regional movements. The freedom of the nation states they did not consider their own freedom. All three movements were defeated if only temporarily through the independence and its related factors. The Pakistan movement was probably the single most important political factor which had contributed to their dilemma since it had induced and incited a deadly and mutually exclusive competition for power and political representation. But beneath that there were several long-term factors at work which had strengthened regional élites and brought up the basically democratic demand for the emancipation of regional traditions and cultures. The failure to accommodate them more fully during the preparation of the Government of India Act of 1935 and during the transfer of power to the independent governments did cost the body politic of both India and Pakistan dearly. The movements were paralysed temporarily but within years could be seen fighting back, causing an excruciating process of administrative and political adjustment to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of their societies.

Where ethnic group concepts were both similar and unique it was the dynamics of mass politics which was probably best suited to explain this phenomenon. Mass politics at a regional level required the medium of local or regional culture, the 'ethnicist' element, in order to make itself understood and to tap the reservoir of the non- or less-educated masses well versed in the local idioms of cultural communication, but less so in the discourse of issue-oriented politics. At the same time, mass politics required the inclusion of ever wider strata of society which inevitably would embrace a much larger share of socially disadvantaged groups of people. That, in turn, would increase the weight of social concerns in the formulation of the group ethos of a particular ethnic movement. Therefore, the most promising strategy for aspiring ethnic politicians to initiate a big movement was to express the wider social concerns in the local or regional cultural idiom, which was exactly what they did in the cases of the

TABLE 1

A rough approximation of general, ethnic and territorial slogans used by leaders of the Pathan, Sikh and non-Brahmin/Tamil movements to build ethnic or ethnoreligious political concepts at different stages of conflict and mobilization between 1900 and independence.

	Pathan			Sikh			Non-Brahmin/Tamil		
	catchword	ethnic slogan	territory	catchword	ethnic slogan	territory	catchword	ethnic slogan	territory
revivalism	degradation	improve moral and ethnic standards on basis of Pakhtunwali and linguistic Pathan awareness; Frontier college	tribal settlements & migration routes	degradation, corruption	restore Sikh ritual and community; regain control over Khalsa college	Sikh Panth (non-territorial all-India community)	degradation corruption	remove corruption of Hinduism by (north Indian) Brahmins; Tamil university lands	home area of non-Brahmins in south India/Drawidian lands
loyalism	deprivation	not getting behind other provinces with reforms, particularly neighbouring Punjab	Frontier province	deprivation	quota for communal representation in elected bodies and services	Punjab province	deprivation	quota for communal representation in elected bodies and services	Madras province
radicalism	bondage/slavery	Pakhtun must rule his country; restore Pathan pride, end subordination to the British, oppose their political and social laws (child marriage act)	Pakhtunistan	suffering/sacrifice	secure survival of Sikhs against domination, by British, Muslim or Hindus	Azad Punjab	degradation/bondage	mobilise non-Brahmin/Tamil masses to remedy their subordinate position in their own land against rule of Aryans and Brahmins	Drawidanad/Tamil Nad

Pathans, the Sikhs and the Tamils, Table 1 gives a rough approximation of general, ethnic and territorial arguments used during the period under review and discussed in this paper. Though such generalization is always open to debate or misinterpretation it is hoped that it will sufficiently show the analogy of the movements and the unique way in which general concepts were treated by them.

The programmes and arguments formulated for ethnic politics of the time have all resurfaced time and again ever since. They have been repetitive to the extent that it seems justified to say that their core arguments were finalized concomitant with the nationalist movement. They resolutely ascended from the ambiguous to the definite. They gradually became more territorial and power-oriented. At the same time moral rigour increased tremendously, taking strength mainly from religious injunctions and the perceived need to return purity and morality to the belief system.

All the three movements under review banked on the moral example of their leader, on the personal sacrifice of their activists. The theme of *sacrifice* was obviously influenced by the ethics of Gandhi who repeatedly argued that Indians had to purify their souls and to make sacrifice. Here the topic of *moral improvement* was attached which resurfaced in the Sikh, Pathan and Non-Brahmin movements—a value obviously common to the whole Indian civilization irrespective of religions or caste membership.

Possibly it was this linkage between morality and territorial power which tells the Indian nation or sub-nation concept from the Western model. In the Indian context religion and morality would and could not be distilled from national identity. I see two major reasons for that:

First: The need to reassert oneself against the real and perceived continued domination by the West which did not recede or diminish. The domination took different forms and shapes, sometimes expressing itself in values and sometimes in economic relations. Whether this feeling was implanted or nourished by the colonial agent it was based on real inequality which persists even today. The morality–power connection may have been thought of as a partial remedy for that.

Second, and may be even more important: Where European nations for the reaffirmation of their identity can allow themselves to fall back on ethnic histories, constructed or real, ethnic histories in India were yet to emerge at the time of the foundation of Indian nationalism and its sub-nationalisms. It was this new sequence of historical

events which returned the searching looks of Indian leaders time and again to religious and moral traditions. And it was this changed sequence of intellectual history which turned religious and moral tradition into a major part of the new ethnic histories which have been shaped since the last century.

At least during the 1920s and 1930s it was *moral ethnicity* that we encountered as the favourite community concept.

Contemporary developments in ethnic politics of the subcontinent confirm that the reorientation of community concepts to modernist economic development needs in a way was a passing one. The re-emergence of moral rigour in today's sub-nationalisms of South Asia is not new or surprising. If it is often attributed to disappointment with modern capitalism and political liberalism it can be equally explained through its formative roots in the period under review.