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Gurharpal Singh and Giorgio Shani

RETHINKING SIKH NATIONALISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

This article seeks to draw attention to some of the core issues which beset the study of Sikh nationalism as a coherent phenomenon in an increasingly globalized and socially fragmented world. First, it highlights the importance of revisiting the debate about the community's religious boundaries, arguing that in contrast to the new conventional wisdom informed by poststructuralism, Sikh identity has exhibited a remarkable degree of continuity from the establishment of the Khalsa in comparison with other South Asian religio-political communities. The second key issue highlighted is the role of the Sikh diaspora in the development of Sikh nationalism and statehood. It critically examines the extent to which diaspora may be regarded as an instrument of 'long-distance' nationalism. Third, it argues that the existing literature on Sikh nationalism is remarkably community-centric and needs to engage with theories of nationalism. Finally, while acknowledging the cleavages which fragment the Sikh nation, it concludes that Sikh nationalism has been remarkably cohesive.

Although it is more than 30 years since Operation Blue Star, and much has happened since, our understanding of Sikh nationalism continues to remain poorly developed. The violence which led to the events of 1984 abated after almost a decade with a return to 'normalcy' symbolized by three Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)–Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state governments since 1997. Nationally, Manmohan Singh, the first Sikh Prime Minister, governed for a decade under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA); and in May 2014, the UPA was replaced by the first national majority BJP government led by Narendra Modi. Within the Sikh diaspora, the central issue of Sikh identity and homeland have given way, especially post 9/11, to more pressing matters about host land politics and security, with efforts to differentiate the community's interests from the broader securitization of Muslim minorities in the West. These major political developments also need to be placed alongside the significant departures in the understanding of Sikhs themselves. In many ways, the study of the Sikh diaspora has pioneered diaspora studies and the research into long-distance nationalism: the subject has genuinely become a sub-field within diaspora and transnational studies with ever-increasing attraction for new researchers. Similarly, for scholars working on religious boundaries, the Sikhs continue to provide a seminal case study of the self-conscious construction of religious boundaries and the interrogation of the translatability of religion as a concept. This research located in critical studies has raised fundamental questions about the limitations of conventional analysis in trying to frame Sikh politics around such concepts as

nationalism, religion, diaspora, and statehood. At the same time, more conventional analysis has provided new insights into state and nation-building in India's peripheral regions since 1947 and the problems that the Sikh case study poses for international relations in post-9/11 world in which Westphalian system has been torn asunder.

In this brief paper, which is part of a collaborative project on Sikh nationalism, we want to draw attention to some core issues that still beset a more rounded understanding of the subject. However, before we do so, we want to briefly note two events in the past year that have major bearing on what we are going to say, namely the enduring appeal of nationalism. The first is the referendum held in Scotland in September 2014 on independence which the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) lost. The second is a national memorial service held in St Martin-in Fields on 8 June 2015 to commemorate the contribution of the Sikh regiment at the battle of Gallipoli during the First World War.

In September 2014, the government of the UK held a referendum in Scotland on independence. The referendum was requested by the governing SNP and restricted to the Scottish electorate. The 'Yes' campaign led by the SNP galvanized the electorate with its agenda of an independent Scotland within the European Union, offering a vision of self-governing statehood that would chime with the collectivist vision of Scottish national identity and would be counter to the politics of austerity advocated by both the Conservative and Labour parties. More importantly, the campaign was predicated on the premise that Scotland was, above all, an English 'internal colony', which if unleashed, could, given its natural resources and entrepreneurial potential, emulate the Scandinavian polities with which it had much in common. For a while, it seemed that the SNP had won the argument, as the Westminster establishment panicked, throwing resource and promises of further devolution to shore up the 'No' campaign with its slogan of 'Better Together'. In the event, the referendum produced a 53.3 per cent to 44.7 per cent victory for the 'No' campaign, but its immediate legacy was to fire the embers of Scottish nationalisms and effectively decimate the Labour Party, making the SNP the de facto party of government in Scotland and of Scottish representation in Westminster, winning 56 of the 59 seats in the May 2015 national elections.

What should we make of this outcome? Apart from the fact that referenda for independence in developed democracies are difficult to win, a la Quebec, the similarities between Scottish and Sikh nationalisms, as Joyce Pettigrew pointed out in her seminal study of *Robber Noblemen: the Political System of Sikh Jats*, are too uncanny. After the Act of Union (1707) and the Jacobite rebellion (1745), Scotland's 'integration' into the UK included the break-up of the clan system, a systematic programme for improving internal communications for more effective control, and the beginnings of internal colonialism in which the accommodation of the Scottish landed elites was mitigated by the opportunities opened up to the peasantry by the empire, including mass recruitment into the armed forces. Today, Scottish nationalism is not only a reaction against Thatcherism and the politics of austerity, but its collectivist, egalitarian spirit is best articulated by the SNP, which has displaced the Labour Party and offers an alternative vision within the European Union. Nationalism, as the Late Elie Kedourie used to argue, may well be a pernicious and hollow ideology, but in an increasingly globalized and socially fragment world, it and religion, or a combination of the two, offer a few forms of collective resistance against global processes. Indeed, for Europe's minor nationalities, the Scottish referendum was emblematic of what alternative futures could be.

The second event centred on the commemoration of anniversaries marking the outbreak of the First World War. In recognition of the contribution to the war effort by the communities from the Empire, the British state has made extensive efforts to ensure that the commemorations are inclusive as possible. The national memorial service in honour of the Sikh Regiment's contribution at the battle of Gallipoli in 2015 was held at the iconic church St Martins-in-the fields, on the edge of Trafalgar Square, London. The service was attended by the senior officers of the British armed forces, a significant representation of the establishment and Sikh groups in Britain. Conspicuously absent were any representatives of Sikh organizations – political, religious or military – from Punjab. Although the service celebrated the Anglo–Sikh relationship in a language saturated with the clichés from the raj, the event was notable for two reasons. First, it was striking for how well the British remembered their past. The contemporary narrative of British values is not simply a counter to contemporary challenges facing the British state but is firmly based in acts of remembrance that are thoroughly institutionalized. As the residual legatee of the Empire, the British state could not be but otherwise. Second, in contrast for Sikhs, without a sympathetic state to nurture and remember their past, such remembrance were actually acts of forgetting, for they had largely forgotten what a self-conscious national community would normally be expected to remember. Paradoxically, as an ethno-nationalist community with rich historical, religious, cultural and military symbols, expressions of such remembrances sit uncomfortably with pragmatic negotiations of the community's politics, both in India and abroad. At the same time, these symbols are a permanent reminder that Sikh leaders – and, indeed, scholars of Sikh studies – ignore the force of Sikh nationalism at their own peril, however much they would like to wish it away or render it as a misguided ideological pursuit.

Thus, given that Sikh nationalism is unlikely to die a natural death, or simply wither away as Marxist, constructivist and post-structuralists have argued, and has an enduring appeal under different circumstances, what is necessary to develop a more fuller and rounded understanding of the subject?

First, we need to revisit the debate about the community's religious boundaries. Since the publication of Harjot Oberoi's *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (1994), the idea of a core Sikh identity preceding the Singh Sabha period has become problematic. The new conventional wisdom seems to be that before the late nineteenth century, the community's religious boundaries were fluid, flexible, and indeterminate. It was the colonial encounter and the Singh Sabhas, which marked out the features of modern Sikh identity. So pervasive is this reading now that some argue that there were no 'Singhs' before the Singh Sabhas but only a form of *sikhi* (Handa 2015). While the colonial state facilitated the emergence of a modern Sikh identity through the introduction of modern scientific techniques of classification and enumeration which transformed the political landscape of South Asia and continue to shape its politics today, the Sikhs constituted a cohesive religio-political community from the time of Guru Gobind onwards. The introduction of the Censuses in particular may have transformed previously 'fuzzy' into 'enumerated' communities (Kaviraj 2010), but Sikh identity was *embodied* in the five external symbols of the faith. Therefore, Sikh identity exhibited a remarkable degree of continuity from the establishment of the *Khalsa* in comparison with other South Asian religio-political communities.

Arvind Mandair in *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (2010) has also cast doubt on the intellectual misframing of the Singh Sabha project that has locked the Sikhism into intellectual trap of a Western conception of ‘religion’, thereby denuding of its spiritual and political essence. Taking his cue from Derrida’s insight into the untranslatability of the Judaeo-Christian concept of *religio*, Mandair convincingly shows how the spectre of colonialism, and the ‘ontotheological matrix’ upon which it and Western conceptions of liberal, secular modernity are founded, continues to ‘haunt’ subjectivity in South Asia and the Diaspora today. Whereas others have focused on the ‘nation’ as the main trope through which ‘Sikh’ identity has been constructed and articulated (Axel 2001; Shani 2007), Mandair examines the concept of ‘religion’, which, he argues, may have been alien to the cultural traditions of South Asia but exists as if it had been an indigenous concept all along (Mandair 2010, 434).

Does this mean therefore that the entire Sikh religious tradition can be considered a colonial construction, a by-product of the regime of indological translation by colonial elites and their ‘native informants’? Scholars such as Richard Fox (1985) and, more recently, Tony Ballantyne (1999) have come close to arguing that the very notion of a distinct ‘Sikh’ identity itself is an Orientalist construction. These seemingly ‘post-colonial’ accounts, however, reproduce the hegemony of the Orientalist discourse, which they appear to be critiquing. As Peter van der Veer has pointed out, this is in itself an ‘Orientalist fallacy that denies Indians agency in constructing their society and simplifies the intricate interplay of Western and Indian discourses’ (van der Veer 1994, 21). Rather, modern Sikh identity arose as a result of a dialectical relationship between pre-existing religio-political traditions centred on the *Khalsa* and the colonial state (Shani 2007, 17–40). The logic and articulation of Sikh identity itself may have been altered in the colonial period as Mandair notes – but Sikhism itself cannot be reduced to colonial construction or a product of elite manipulation by the Singh Sabhas. Such a reading of Sikh history gives the Singh Sabhas a degree of agency and instrumentalism which, viewed comparatively in the formation of ethnic and religious groups, is difficult to entertain. As Paul R. Brass pointed out in the 1970s, all religious communities in Punjab were mobilizing at the end of the late nineteenth century by selecting symbols of differentiation. This process was possible because these communities, despite porous boundaries, had a high degree of institutionalization with which the symbols coincided rather than conflicted. This institutionalization, as in the case of the Sikhs, was further strengthened during the Akali Movement (1920–1925), but that it was possible to do so was predicated on a strong sense of common subjectivity about being a Sikh. Even if we accept the fact that this subjectivity was somewhat consciously forged by linguists, historians, novelists, and theologians, there is sufficient cohesion within the Sikh tradition at this stage to transform it into a national community. Crucially, this process had as much to do with what was happening to the nationalist claims of other communities (Hindu and Muslims) as well as how Sikhs articulated their own claims. In this sense, though the debate about Sikh religious boundaries before the late nineteenth century is important *religiously*, sociologically it highlights how the process of modernization was already determining where these boundaries were likely to lie.

Second, another key issue is the role of the Sikh diaspora in the development of Sikh nationalism and statehood. Is the diaspora the leading actor, the instrument of ‘long-

distance' nationalism, or is it a weathervane responding to developments in Punjab and India? Post-1984, most accounts have highlight the contribution of the Sikh diaspora in spearheading the discontent. However, before 1984, the Sikh diaspora, despite its best efforts, was a marginal player in terms of its engagement with the homeland. In the early part of the twentieth century, Sikh migrants to California and British Columbia formed the Ghadar Party to overthrow British rule in India. Following the failure of the party's revolt, many of its followers turned to Moscow and became communists. The efforts of Sikh communists to organize a revolt through Afghanistan were also unsuccessful. During the 1950s and 1960s, the decades that saw the largest migration of Sikhs to the West, the main institutions of the Sikh diaspora were controlled by familiar homeland agents – the Communist Party of India, the Congress, and SAD. More often than not, the diaspora mirrored homeland developments rather than carving out a space for independent activity that could set the agenda for Punjab politics. Indeed, in the 1960s and 1970s, most of the diaspora was too preoccupied with establishing social, economic, cultural, and religious institutions in the new host states to lead the reconstruction of Sikh nationalism. In fact, the vast flows of chain migration from the central districts of Punjab created social, economic, and political links that made the diaspora, at this stage, further dependent on Punjab. For example, marriage was the primary route for outward migration; most first-generation weddings took place with partners sponsored from Punjab. The early migrants were also prodigious investors in land and buildings, as such investment was seen as a means of establishing family honour. The diaspora was also the stomping ground for Sikh politicians from Punjab who were mainly interested in tapping patronage and revenue channels, often through illegal transactions involving currency exchange, migration, and support for overseas constituents. All the leading political parties in Punjab had overseas units that directly funded and sponsored institutions in the homeland. The extreme shortage of hard currency in India in the 1960s and 1970s created a powerful network of Punjab politicians, travel agents, and diaspora middlemen who thrived on the political economy of migration.

In the post-1984, some accounts have dramatized the role of the Sikh diaspora as the 'eruption of Sikh ethnicity' in a new globalized order in which it imposed its own agenda on the homeland community (Gayer 2000). But this was far from the case. The diaspora continued to respond as a weathervane to influences from Punjab (Singh 2000), where the ground rules changed with the virtual military occupation of Punjab until the mid-1990s. For most of this period, the political process in the state was suspended as Sikh militants waged a bloody campaign for a separate Sikh state of Khalistan. It was under these exceptional conditions that the diaspora came to occupy, somewhat fortuitously, a lead role in Sikh politics. Apart from the material and political support – which any diaspora would have been expected to provide – the Sikh diaspora neither restructured Sikh nationalism nor led it astray by imposing its own mission. The language of self-determination and human rights articulated by Sikh activists in the west added a new currency – as well as a sense of urgency – to the political struggle in Punjab. But it would be seriously misleading to construe this as a form of 'long-distance nationalism', a case of a deterritorialized community constructing a vision of nationhood in the West and imposing it willy-nilly on the innocent and beguiled peasantry in Punjab. What the diaspora articulated in terms of Sikh demands represented mainstream developments in Punjab. As the militancy in Punjab waned, diaspora Khalistanis' efforts to mobilize the community became increasingly more difficult. Despite assertions to the contrary,

the Sikh diaspora's embedded links with the homeland constrained its autonomy, shaped its outlook and, perhaps most significant of all, territorialized its main objective – Khalistan.

The *politics of homeland* of the Sikh Diaspora, as chronicled in great empirical detail by Darshan Singh Tatla (1999) among others, may be contrasted with the emergence of a post-nationalist 'politics of recognition' (Taylor 1994). Since 9/11 in particular, Sikhs have been victims of hate crimes in their places of settlement and have, at times, successfully mobilized to increase public recognition of their distinctive identity and counter racial discrimination. The *Sikh Federation* in the UK and the *Sikh Coalition* in the USA are examples of two groups, which have attempted to articulate a distinct *diasporic* identity, in response to the retreat from multiculturalism in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7 (Shani 2007). They have done so with differing degrees of political mobilization and success. As 'the first ever Sikh political party in the UK', the *Sikh Federation* aims to give Sikhs a stronger political voice by taking an increasing interest in mainstream politics in the UK (<http://www.sikhfeduk.com/>). Specifically, it is charged with implementing the Sikh Agenda which was produced for the UK government in 2001. The key features of the Agenda are grouped into eight headings: Sikhs and the British establishment; government funding and Sikh organizations; the promotion of the Sikh identity and the Punjabi language; the establishment of State-funded Sikh schools; preserving Sikh heritage; the protection of the human rights of Sikhs and humanitarian aid; self-determination for the Sikh Nation' and lifting the ban on the International Sikh Youth Federation (<http://www.sikhfeduk.com/>). The Sikh Agenda illustrates the tension between the two narratives of 'nation' and 'transnational community'. The politicization of Sikh identity by the *Sikh Federation* suggests a potential challenge to the nation-state which constructs British subjects as citizens with equal rights and relegates religious and ethnic identity to the 'private sphere'. In this sense, the *Sikh Federation's* narrative may be considered 'diasporic', referring to a form of community consciousness and solidarity that maintains identifications outside of the nation-state 'in order to live inside, with a difference' (Clifford 1997, 251). In so doing, it points to what Sayyid describes as 'the impossibility of the nation', here defined as the British state, 'to provide a common "home" for all its inhabitants' (Sayyid 2001, 36). However, the Sikh Federation operates within the confines of the British political system and articulates its demands to the British state, in the space opened up for it by the state's discourse of multiculturalism. *The Sikh Federation* utilizes, and thus implicitly *legitimizes*, the categories of 'religion' and 'ethnic group' in order to represent its interests to the British political system despite the fact that the Sikhs are 'at home' in neither category. This illustrates the *limits* of diasporic politics in the absence of a homeland. The centrality of *nationalism* to the Sikh Agenda is furthermore reinforced by *The Sikh Federation's* commitment to seeking the UK government's support for 'self-determination for the Sikh Nation'. According to Bhai Amrik Singh, the Chair of the Sikh Federation (UK), the establishment of 'an independent sovereign Sikh state' remains the Sikh Federation's 'ultimate goal' since it will provide 'a solution to many difficulties faced by the Sikh community' in the diaspora. This seems to suggest that *The Sikh Federation* cannot be considered a strictly *diasporic* organization in Clifford's sense as it cannot go beyond *Khalistan* and envisage a Sikh identity in a non-national form.

Unlike the *Sikh Federation*, the *Sikh Coalition* is not an explicitly political organization and may consequently be expected to advocate a post-nationalist understanding of Sikh

identity. Founded in the weeks following 9/11 by a group of young Sikh professionals from diverse professional backgrounds in response to the dramatic increase in the number of hate-crimes and religious and racial profiling, the ‘Coalition of Sikh Organizations’ set out to ‘create an organization that would act as a clear and accurate voice on behalf of Sikh-Americans’. Based in New York City, the Sikh Coalition as it came to be known, developed affiliations in Toronto, Boston, Washington DC, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles through their website (<http://www.sikhcoalition.org/>), which was set up with the help of activists in Chicago. Today, the Sikh Coalition is the largest Sikh-American advocacy and community development organization in the USA.

According to its mission statement posted on the web, the Coalition seeks to provide direct legal services to persons whose civil or human rights are violated, advocate for law and policies that are respectful of fundamental rights, promote appreciation for diversity through education, and foster civic engagement in order to promote local community empowerment.

It has been active in community relations, education, government affairs, and legal affairs and, under a banner of education, advocacy, and protection, has scored some notable successes. Immediately after its establishment, it successfully lobbied for introduction of legislation condemning hate crimes against Sikh-Americans in the wake of the post 9/11 backlash. The resolution (Senate Congress Resolution 74) passed unanimously and called upon local and law enforcement authorities to ‘prosecute to the fullest extent of the law all those who commit crimes’ against Sikh-Americans. The tragic events of Oak Creek in 2012 when a deranged gunman opened fire on a Gurdwara killing six people illustrated the persistence of anti-Sikh violence in the USA and the Sikh Coalition successfully campaigned for more stringent tracking of hate crimes. Other noteworthy ‘victories’ include the passing of Workplace Religious Freedom Acts in New York and California which enhances religion-based protections for employees.

At the heart of the *Sikh Coalition*’s agenda is the protection of (male) *Keshdari* Sikh identity, the *panj piare* and the right to wear a Turban. In short, this ‘post-nationalist’ identity is founded on a *politics of difference* not dissimilar to the one which led to the rise of the *Singh Sabha* movement in the colonial period. This diasporic’ politics of difference, however, was only made possible by the prior mobilization of the Sikh community through the politics of homeland, the movement for Khalistan. If, as Singh and Tatla have pointed out, in the recent past, ‘the Sikh diaspora has been the main driver of the Sikh nationalism and homeland project, today it is also the site of creative alternatives’ (Singh and Tatla 2006, 25). The politics of homeland, however, continues to place clear territorial limits placed on the ‘creative alternatives’ advocated by the Sikh diaspora. Thus, although the potential for the Sikh diaspora to move from a reactive to an agenda-setting agent is implicit in the activities of diasporic organizations such as the *Sikh Federation* and *Sikh Coalition*, this change has not yet happened. To paraphrase Marx, the memory of Operation Blue Star continues to weigh heavily like a nightmare upon the minds of those Sikhs living in the Diaspora.

Third, the existing literature on Sikh nationalism is remarkably community-centric, that is, focusing on the inner dynamics of the community’s processes, identity, and political actions. This was perhaps inevitable given the tragedy which befell the community after operation Blue Star. It is, however, also surprising given that most approaches to the study of nationalism, until recently, have been dominated by structural methodologies. In

short, there has been no engagement with the theoretical literature on nations and nationalism with a few notable exceptions (Deol 2000; Singh 2000; Shani 2007, 2014). A cursory examination of theories of nationalism reveals three or four established positions: primordialism, ethno-symbolism, modernism, and constructivism. As applied to an analysis of Sikh nationalism, the first two approaches privilege *continuity* within the Sikh tradition, whereas the latter two focus on *change*. While primordialism may be discounted as providing a very static and essentialist reading of identity, Anthony Smith's 'ethno-symbolic' approach may here be deployed to explain the rise of Sikh nationalism. Ethno-symbolist accounts of Sikh nationalism attribute the rise of nations to the coherence of a religiously and culturally defined *ethnie*. Sikh nationalism is, therefore, seen as a form of *ethno-nationalism*. The second position regards the ethnic cohesiveness upon which claims to Sikh nationhood to have been based as a recent phenomenon; Sikh nationalism, to paraphrase Gellner, 'invented' the Sikh nation (Gellner 1983). Ethno-religious coherence is, therefore, a result of political mobilization and the institutionalization of the Sikh political system. A variant of this approach sees Sikh ethno-nationalism essentially in socio-economic terms as an ideology propagated by rich, capitalist farmers to unite the rural Sikh masses under their hegemony (Purewal 2000). Constructivist accounts take their cue from the seminal work of Benedict Anderson who defined the nation as an 'imagined community'. The nation is *imagined* because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. The nation is *imagined* as *limited* because 'even the largest of them encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations' (Anderson 1991, 6–7). Post-structural and post-colonial approaches see modern Sikh identity as a 'construction' of colonial Orientalism (Fox 1985) and 'ethno-sociology' (Dusenbery 2008) and Sikh nationalism to be, in Partha Chatterjee's words, a 'derivative discourse' (Chatterjee 1993) or even a 'pathology' of modernity (Fox 1996). However, there are *limits* to the capacity of elites – whether socio-economic or religio-political – to 'imagine' the nation. As Chatterjee (1993, 5) asked rhetorically in his critique of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, 'if nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine?' Applied to the study of Sikh nationalism, it has been argued that the mythology surrounding the establishment of the *Khalsa* in 1699 acts as the foundational event around which the Sikh nation is imagined (Shani 2014). Sikh elites in other words did *not* choose from the modular forms of nationalism made available to them by the West but chose to imagine *their* nation on the basis of a pre-existing ethno-religious community with its own history and traditions. Thus, contra Chatterjee (1986), Sikh nationalism cannot be seen merely as a 'derivative discourse' but as a *modern* instantiation of the *Khalsa Panth*; a religio-political community which has its origins in the teachings of the Gurus, the Gurumukhi script, and the Punjabi language and its political foundations in the establishment of the *Khalsa* and the Empire of Ranjit Singh.

Structural methodologies require that we pay heed to not only the sociological changes within the Sikh community but also the broader social and political formation within which the Sikhs reside. Only by so doing can we get a measure of the negative and reactive nature of Sikh nationalism both to the movement for a separate state of Pakistan, and subsequently, the process of nation-building in India which has been dominated

by Hindu majoritarianism. Sikhs reacted negatively and, ultimately, violently against Pakistan, which consolidated the community in East Punjab. The search for a separate status within the Indian Union led to a long and drawn out campaign for a Punjabi-speaking state that has enabled the partial reproduction of the community's values against overwhelming odds. The systematic attempts by the Indian state to promote its own nation-building have led to unsophisticated efforts to disarticulate Sikh identity by encouraging fissures and factions with the community while simultaneously rejecting its legitimate constitutional, economic, social, and political demands. Indeed, the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) which defined – and continues to define – the political aspirations of the community was passed after nearly two-and-half decades of continuous ethnic negotiation during which time the India state reneged on all of the accords signed with the community's political leadership. Even at the height of the *Dharm Yud morcha* before Operation Blue Star, the community's political leadership studiously avoided the positive case for a separate statehood.

Seen in this light, Sikh nationalism is overwhelmingly the negative response of process extraneous to the community, most importantly of nation and state-building for a separate Pakistan and, post-independence, India. It is by force of circumstances that an expansive, open, and the smallest of the major communities of Punjab (alongside Muslims and Hindus) has been driven to the project of state-building, whereas its interests could easily have been accommodated by granting non-territorial, polytechnic rights by a polity genuinely valuing diversity. In the event, the constitution of India created a framework for the domination of minority (religious) rights by the majority with agenda of centralized nationalist reconstruction.

The Indian state was never secular in a Western sense. Secularism in the West developed in the context of the 'wars of religion' in the sixteenth century and is closely associated with the Protestant ascendancy. As institutionalized through the Peace of Westphalia through the principle of *cujus regio eius religio*, the power of the sovereign was to be considered sacrosanct in his realm; claims to territory based on religious authority were to be considered illegitimate. Secularism, as it developed in the West, involves three interrelated relations concerning state, religion, and the individual. The first relation concerns individuals and their religion from which the state is excluded. This is guaranteed by constitutional rights which safeguard the individual freedom of worship and expression. The second relation concerns that between individuals and the state from which religion is excluded. Citizens in secular societies are granted equal rights irrespective of religious affiliation. Finally, secularism entails the mutual exclusion of state and society, so that the state does not interfere in the spiritual and religion does not encroach on the temporal domain (Bhagarva 1998). Secularism in the Western sense refers, therefore, to the strict separation of religion and state in order to guarantee individual citizens equal rights to religious freedom.

The Indian variant of secularism, *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* ('let all religions flourish'), does not attempt to banish religion from the public sphere but sees it as an integral part of India's democracy. Although the post-colonial Indian state abolished separate electorates, it continued to uphold the colonial distinction between majority and minority religious communities, most particularly in the realm of personal and civil law. At the time of the framing of the Constitution of India, Hinduism was seen as the religion of the majority and a Committee on the Rights of Minorities was established to identify the cultural and political rights of religious minorities. A Hindu Code Act established a

uniform civil code for all ‘Hindus’ while leaving Muslims with their own Personal Law. Sikhs were considered Hindus for the purposes of the Act, thus negating over a half century of religious reformism (and half a millennium of religion-making) designed to clearly delineate boundaries between Sikhs and Hindus. The adoption, furthermore, of Hindi as the official ‘national’ language and the implementation of bans on cow slaughter in most states suggest that a clear distinction between Indian ‘secularism’ and Hindu majoritarianism cannot always be made (Singh 2000). To this day, minorities, especially Muslims, Christians and Sikhs, have struggled to assert their cultural – and sometime – political rights in a project of nation-state building in which both the secular Congress and the Hindu Right have treated Hinduism as a form of civic religion.

This has arguably been accentuated by the rise of Hindu nationalism. As a form of cultural nationalism, *Hindutva* may be seen as a discourse of ‘Hindu-ness’ which constructs Indians as Hindu subjects, not in a religious but a cultural sense. As the BJP explicitly state, *Hindutva* is a ‘nationalist, and not a religious or theocratic, concept’ (Bharatiya Janata Party 2014). The violence which occasionally has been carried out in its name should thus be seen as more ‘cultural’ than religious in inspiration since it is motivated by a desire to *assimilate* – or, in the words of one of its most important advocates, M.S. Golwalkar, ‘digest’ (Sharma 2011, 176) – India’s ethno-religious ‘Others’ into the Hindu ‘Self’. In the absence of a Sikh state, there is a very real possibility that Sikhism will be swallowed whole into a Hindu polity.

Finally, nationalism is, above all, about collective consciousness, unity, or at least the idea of common shared cultural identity. But this does not imply that most nationalisms do not have the normal cleavages of class, region, language, religion, and caste. Equally, Sikh nationalism, despite its fragments, has been remarkably cohesive. As Paul R. Brass noted in 1974, ‘of all the ethnic groups and people of north India, the Sikhs come closest to satisfying the definition of a nationality or a nation’. But today this cohesion, or at least the hegemonic vision of a Sikh identity, is contested by competing visions accentuated by rapid globalization and the emergence of transnational Sikh identities. It is true that this political universe is much more complex and plural than ever before, but it would be empirically stretching the argument too far to suggest that it conforms to the pre-modern period to which the debate about Sikh boundaries alludes. Within the new plural universe of Sikh politics today, whether in the diaspora or Punjab and India, there is sufficient common cultural capital to mobilize around the familiar icons of Sikh identity. Even the Dalit assertion of separatism, best epitomized by the formation of the Ravidass Dharam in 2010, has yet to mark a major break with conventional Sikhdom. It will certainly be the case that in the future, the internal cleavages within Sikh society are likely to assume greater significance. However, given the external pressures on the community, it would be premature to suggest that Sikh political identity is at a point of irreversible fragmentation. In other words, Sikh society is undergoing the same kind of social transformation as is being experienced by social formations which coexist alongside it. Mobilizing on common causes might therefore become more difficult. But equally given the power of the social media through which the now the nation communicates with itself and is being reinvented, it would be too premature to rule out the new opportunities for mobilization, especially if the community is again engulfed by an another critical event. The contemporary condition of social fragmentation makes the project of cultural identity much more challenging; it does not make it impossible or irrelevant as some discourses have appeared to suggest.

Overall, in returning to the two events mentioned at opening of this article, the power and the enduring appeal of nationalism, and Sikh nationalism in particular, should encourage scholars to adopt a more historically and sociologically informed understanding of the subject, one which is less hidebound by the political challenges before the community or the inconclusive debate about religious boundaries. In the past studies of the subject have struggled to identify the appropriate species of nationalism to which the Sikh case study belongs, though ‘ethno-nationalism’ seems to be the most commonly accepted classification. As both the study of Sikhs and of nationalism has dated considerably since the post-1984 literature emerged, the time is opportune to revisit the subject in light of the contemporary challenges. This article has attempted to outline some of these challenges. First, we need to revisit the debate about the community’s religious boundaries. To what extent did a cohesive Sikh identity predate the rise of the Singh Sabha movement? How were the logic and articulation of Sikh identity altered in the colonial period and what were the *continuities* between modern Sikh identity and the *Khalsa*? A second key issue identified was the role of the Sikh diaspora in the development of Sikh nationalism. Is the diaspora an instrument of ‘long-distance’ nationalism or a weathervane responding to developments in the ‘homeland’? Furthermore, to what extent has the diaspora moved on from Blue Star to embrace a ‘politics of recognition’ post-9/11? Third, the *structural* dynamics of Sikh nationalism need to be further taken into account by focusing on similar developments in South Asia and beyond. An explicit engagement with theories of nationalism is needed to overcome the community-centred approach of many Sikh studies scholars. Any such effort, however, if it is to be serious, needs to overcome not only some of the key issues identified above, but also the highly normative debates which dominate the subject matter. But then, as the partisanship over the Scottish referendum demonstrated, no other issue polarizes as much as nationalism, however it is understood.

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