

Fractured Foundations: Colonial Institutional Engineering and the Communalization of Muslim-Sikh Relations in Punjab: 1849-1947

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Abstract

By providing a radical reassessment of Muslim-Sikh ties in British Punjab, this article challenges both syncretist and primordialist histories. In order to establish religious community as the primary, frequently exclusive, axis of political and social life, British colonialism intentionally destroyed pre-existing fluid solidarities, according to this argument. Through a critical examination of colonial knowledge production (ethnography, census), socio-economic interventions (canal colonies), legal codification that prioritised religious orthodoxy, and the politically toxic system of separate electorates, the article shows how the Raj manufactured the very competition between communities that led to the violence of Partition. By combining postcolonial theory and subaltern studies viewpoints, it highlights the shortcomings of historiography that is centred on the elite and shows how colonial practices interacted with and frequently undermined local agency and resilient daily coexistence. It presents the horrifying violence of 1947 as the inevitable conclusion of this protracted process of officially sanctioned communalisation rather than as an anomaly.

Keywords: British Punjab, Muslim-Sikh relations, Colonialism, Partition, Institutional Engineering, Identity Formation, Communalism, Separate Electorates, Canal Colonies, Religious Reform, Subaltern Studies.

Introduction

Punjabi Muslim-Sikh relations are still distorted by the lingering effects of the 1947 Partition conflict. Problematically, dominant frameworks vacillate between romanticised views of pre-colonial concord and stories of inescapable ancient hostility (Gilmartin, 1988; Pandey, 2001). They are both analytically deficient. According to this article, the British colonial state (1849–1947) was the main architect of a major shift, actively creating the competitive structures and community categories that characterised politics in the late colonial era. Using a framework of colonial institutional engineering (Chatterjee, 1993; Scott, 1998), it goes beyond the straightforward "divide and rule" cliché to analyse how particular policies, such as census classification, "martial race" theory, canal colony development, legal restructuring, and separate electorates, systematically reshaped social reality. In order to highlight the frequently contradictory persistence of everyday coexistence and the agency of non-elites trapped within colonial structures (Guha, 1983; Amin, 1995), it critically engages with the limitations of elite political narratives (Jalal, 1985; Talbot, 2006). As a result, the violence of Partition is not the result of the eruption of timeless hatreds, but rather the disastrous result of decades of intentional colonial policy interacting with the political strategies of emerging communal elites operating within the limitations and opportunities the Raj provided.

Colonial Knowledge: Manufacturing Difference as Political Reality

The root of the colonial state's strength was its epistemic project. The well-known claim made by Bernard Cohn (1996) was that colonial knowledge was a kind of control rather than objective observation. The decennial census was its primary tool, and it was started seriously after 1857. By forcing the strict, mutually exclusive labels of "Hindu," "Muslim," and "Sikh" onto a complex environment that was marked by fluidity, overlapping customs, and localised identities, British administrators purposefully created these communities as

distinct political entities (Oberoi, 1994). Rather than being descriptive, this classification was performative. According to Malhotra (2002), Sikhs were bureaucratically consolidated into a separate "community" despite having a surprisingly porous identity that included a variety of beliefs and practices frequently shared with Muslims and Hindus, especially Sufi traditions. This enumeration process produced the crucial information needed for later political manipulation. "Martial races" was a parallel hypothesis that was equally constitutive. Sikhs were given preference in the enlistment of the Punjab regiments due to their designation as a top "martial race," which fostered a privileged relationship with the Raj (Yong, 2005). Critical Viewpoint: Although this policy benefited certain Sikh groups (mainly Jats), it was more than just practical militarisation; it was a calculated move to establish a loyalist opposing force in Punjab, which naturally fuelled animosity among Muslim groups (such as Rajputs or Pathans in some areas) that were considered less "martial" and thus excluded from this lucrative source of prestige and income (Roy, 2013). As a result, the production of colonial knowledge created the measurable, rival religious groups that served as the foundation for political activity, aggressively stifling alternative identities based on caste, geography, or family.

Socio-Economic Engineering: Resource Competition and the Erosion of Customary Mediation

Punjab's economic landscape was drastically altered by British initiatives, which purposefully created new levels of competition between communities. According to Ali (1988), the canal colonies in western Punjab are a prime example of state-directed socioeconomic engineering that has significant societal repercussions. Ex nihilo, this enormous endeavour produced valuable agricultural land, and the colonial state was the only one who could decide how to divide it. The bulk of new settlers were Muslims, frequently as tenants, although Sikh farmers, especially Jats from the central districts, were given large landholdings in a calculated move. Important realisation: This was not a

random occurrence; rather, it was a planned demographic experiment intended to upend long-standing socio-ecological balances and kinship networks, reward loyalty (Sikh military duty), and maintain a solid agrarian basis (Gilmartin, 1988). Crucially, this competition was structured by colonial institutions within the newly imposed religious categories. Colonial courts and administrative authorities, which only acknowledged religious communities as valid collective identities, were increasingly used to mediate disputes that may have been resolved through biraderi (kinship) or zaildari (local administrative) institutions (Sturman, 2012). The role of legal codification as a catalyst for community development Common standards were further undermined by the colonial judicial system. Although it claimed modernity through codification, it gave scripturalist interpretations of religious law (Shariat, evolving Sikh Rehat Maryada) precedence over pluralistic customary law (riwaj), which had historically governed relations between communities, especially with regard to inheritance, property, and village-level dispute resolution (Malhotra & Mir, 2012; Sturman, 2012).

Religious Reform: Internal Consolidation and External Demarcation within Colonial Constraints

The colonial background is essential to understanding the religious reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including the Singh Sabha and other forms of Islamic reformism. Critical Re-analysis: Even though these movements are frequently depicted as completely inward "awakenings," they were significantly influenced by and actively participated in the communal categories and competitive atmosphere that the Raj promoted (Jones, 1976; Oberoi, 1994). In reaction to colonial classification and Christian missionary activities, the Singh Sabha made a concerted attempt to establish a clear Sikh identity by eliminating "Hindu" accretions and standardising practices (Malhotra, 2002). Similar to this, Islamic reform organisations (Deobandi, Ahl-i-Hadith) placed a strong emphasis on a universal Ummah and scriptural purity, in part in response to criticism from the West and the perceived necessity of

fortifying communal identification within the colonial political system (Metcalf, 1982; Gilmartin, 1988). Subaltern studies perspectives are important because they remind us that, despite the propagation of exclusive ideologies by elites, everyday syncretism and shared cultural practices (such as worshipping at shrines like Sakhi Sarwar or Sehwan, participating in each other's festivals and life-cycle rituals, and sharing folk traditions of music and qissa) remained resilient at the village level (Amin, 1995; Mir, 2010). *Vital Difficulty: Historiography that only examines reformist rhetoric runs the risk of exaggerating the extent to which community exclusivism has permeated society and hiding the rich, if tense, subaltern realm of common lifeways that existed beneath elite politics.* *Sacred Place as Battleground: Because colonial rule politicised religious identity, the administration of places of worship became a crucial hot spot. Although it began as an internal fight against Hindu mahants, the Sikh Gurdwara Reform Movement of the 1920s became entwined in the communal logic since gurdwara control represented Sikh political assertion in relation to other communities (Fox, 1985). Likewise, disagreements over mosques became more prevalent in society. In these conflicts, colonial authorities frequently stepped in, further establishing the religious community as the pertinent political actor (Gilmartin, 1988). Thus, even as common practices persisted subalternly, reform movements both responded to and were made possible by the colonial institutional framework, helped to solidify boundaries.*

Political Institutionalization: Separate Electorates and the Death of Cross-Communal Politics

Separate electorates were introduced by the colonial authority as its most direct and destructive interference; this was fully realised in the Government of India Act 1935. Examining critically: According to Jalal (1985) and Chatterjee (1993), this system was the institutional pinnacle of the colonial agenda of communalisation, not just a concession to communal sentiment. It established a twisted political logic that made it impossible to avoid: success

necessitated the outright demonisation or marginalisation of others and the exclusive appeal to one's own "community" by requiring people to pick representatives of their own religious community. Election-related partnerships turned suicidal. The system radically altered political reasoning at all levels, but historians frequently concentrate on this. To garner support, local politicians, prospective leaders, and even voters have to work inside this communal straitjacket (Ahmed, 2009).

Sikh fears, which were heightened and used as weapons inside this system, were not illogical; rather, they were a result of their numerical minority status (~13–15%). In a Muslim-majority West Punjab, Sikhs saw the Muslim League's 1940 demand for Pakistan as an existential threat to their holy sites, political voice, and physical protection. The demand was presented as Muslim self-determination under the colonial communal logic (Talbot, 2006). Within the restrictive framework of sectarian politics established by the Raj, Sikh political responses (Azad Punjab, Khalistan, and demands for weightage) were essentially reactionary tactics (Shani, 2007). The Unionist Myth of Resilience: It is necessary to critically reevaluate the Unionist Party's early success, which is sometimes touted as evidence of persistent intercommunal class cooperation. Landed elites (Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh) who had momentarily similar class interests made up the majority of its support. The important thing is that it operated inside the structure of distinct electorates, depending on shaky agreements between communal blocs instead of overcoming them. Its demise in 1946 made clear that it was unable to resist the centrifugal dynamics that colonial policy had unleashed and institutionalised, particularly after the League utilised electorally sanctioned religious appeals to successfully mobilise the Muslim masses (Kamran, 2015; Ahmed, 2009). Communism's success was assured by the political structure itself.

Partition Violence: Systemic Culmination, Elite Complicity, and Subaltern Suffering

The terrible bloodshed that occurred in 1947, especially against Muslims and Sikhs in Punjab, was not an unplanned plunge into savagery. It was the natural, if hideous, result of the procedures that had been painstakingly planned for a century. A situation where communal identification became the main source of security and power was brought about by decades of colonial categorisation, communally structured resource competition, the legal primacy of religious identity, and the political logic of distinct electorates. Due to the existential crises brought about by partition, the "other" society became a barrier to both individual and national existence in the newly formed nation-states (Pandey, 2001).

The idea of solely "spontaneous" violence is being questioned by new studies. Local leaders, political groups (such as the Muslim League National Guards, RSS, and Akali leadership), and even components of the state's disintegrating bureaucracy and police played a part in planning, directing, and enabling the violence for political purposes—to "cleanse" the area and establish authority (Khan, 2007; Daechsel, 2015). The conceptual rationale came from decades of cultivating the discourse of communal exclusivism.

Subaltern historiography compels us to face the particular atrocities: forced population exchanges, the destruction of religious places (erasure of common holy geography), and targeted sexual abuse against women (symbolic attacks on community honour) (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998). Once enabling syncretism, the closeness now allowed for horrifyingly personal violence. The violence acted as a physical manifestation of the political demands of elites and the ideological division of communities created by colonisation.

The British government's disastrous inability to oversee the transition, which put speedy withdrawal ahead of upholding law and order, left a security void in which communal militias flourished (Talbot, 2006; Khan, 2007). Their departure was the last careless action that allowed the explosion to occur.

Conclusion

Colonial institutional engineering in British Punjab significantly altered the course of Muslim-Sikh relations. Through tangible policies, the British Raj actively created religious communities as the basic unit of political life rather than merely taking advantage of latent differences. For example, divided electorates made communal mobilisation the only practical political tactic, the census established categories, the canal colonies created competition that was framed in communal terms, and the legal system destroyed shared norms. Despite having their own dynamics, religious reform movements were greatly influenced by and helped to create this communalisation within the colonial context. As elite political actors manoeuvred and took advantage of these frameworks, and subaltern coexistence experiences continued to endure under mounting pressure, the colonial system as a whole inexorably prioritised communal identity over all other considerations. Thus, the violence of the 1947 Partition was not unique nor abnormal. It was the horrifying, but predictable, result of a century-long operation that methodically tore apart Punjab's social fabric, substituting hostile, hardened communal blocs for pliable solidarity. Accurately recognising colonialism as the main institutional architect of this divide is essential for comprehending the lasting effects of communalism and the unsolved traumas that continue to influence post-colonial India and Pakistan's politics and cultures. Bitter fruit is still being borne from the "fractured foundations" established in colonial Punjab.

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