Political Roles of Religious Communities in India

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Introduction

Nicklas Norling[*]

Few countries could claim to have as rich a religious diversity as India. To an overwhelming degree, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Sikhs live peacefully side by side and all share a common history of being at the crossroads of conquest, trade, and the cross-fertilization of ethnicity and religions. Northern India is, in particular, a microcosm of the world's religions since it is the very meeting point of Buddhism that was born there, Hinduism and Sikhism from the Indian subcontinent, and Islam and Christianity from the Near East. The northeastern region alone contains the largest concentration of tribal peoples in the country with more than 160 tribes and over 400 tribal and sub-tribal groupings. To preserve harmony among this religious mosaic, the Indian state has adopted a secular constitution and claims to preserve equal rights.

The record of violence and inter-religious and ethnic strife since partition in 1947 has cast, however, doubt on the success of these good intentions. The roots of this problem are many, not least the bloodshed of the partition itself. Moreover, the sheer size of India's territory often renders the sense of national belonging weak at the local level while religious identities often override nationalism. The territorial disputes over Jammu and Kashmir have further inflamed these inherent tensions while the detachment of northeast India from the "mainland" has made New Delhi's authority difficult to assert. Indeed, the northeastern region is only connected with the rest of India through a narrow corridor of 35 km representing only one percent of the region's borders. The rest, 99 percent, constitutes international borders with China's Tibet region, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Burma/Myanmar. This geography has also given it a unique religious cross-fertilization, defying the usual sharp distinctions between religions. The Kirantis in Eastern India, for

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instance, embrace a mixture of Nepali Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism; and is thus a primary example of peaceful religious co-existence.

India thus represents in many ways both a model of religious diversity and an example of the problems diversity may cause. At the center of this dichotomy stands the struggle for political power, which perhaps more than anything should be conceived of as a trigger to the current problems. For example, Christian groups in Northeast India perceive pressure both from Hindu missionaries and the Indian state, while Christian missionaries, for their part, are seen by other groups as political tools for various interests. Buddhist groups strive to reassert their political influence through regional Buddhist Associations while some Hindu groups have attempted to promote nationalist ideas through Hindu missionaries to preserve national unity. All of this promises to render India's struggle for national unity a long one.

The European experience of nation-state formation suggests that the consolidation of citizenships and the nation-state takes time and that the creation of a homogenous identity is a constant battle between the state and other sources of identity, such as language groups. Although India has a constitution granting its citizens equal rights, society is far from adapting to this in full and there is a wide gap between the state and society. Instead, and as can be seen in the rest of South Asia as well, many of the dominant religions challenge the state and its jurisdiction. Islam, in particular, has challenged India's secular constitution, and the advocacy for imposition of Sharia is viewed as a major threat, not only among other religions but also among modernist Muslims. Added to all of these various pressures from the local and national levels should be the impact of globalization. India is changing rapidly but the historical legacy, narratives, and local identities will likely endure for a long time and be passed on to subsequent generations. How will all of this affect the prospects of peace in India and the local, national, and regional balances of political power?

To further our knowledge of this the Stockholm-based Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP) organized a two-day conference in Kolkata, India together with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS) on January 16-17, 2008 on the topic of the political roles of religious communities. Scholars and politicians from throughout northern India were invited to discuss this in the Indian context.

The conference forms part of ISDP's South Asia project, and a larger seminar series intended to bring people together from across the region to discuss how religion and politics intersect and what the implications are. The Kolkata conference was the second conference conducted within the aforementioned project; the first conference was held in Islamabad, Pakistan on October 29-30, 2007. The overarching purpose of the South Asia project is to explore the role of religious communities and their relation to the state apparatus, status in law, and how the local, national, and regional levels interrelate. We believe this is important both for conflict-preventive purposes and to reach an understanding of the relations both within and between religious communities and how these relate to both local politics and larger geo-political perspectives. The project also places emphasis on the character of religious discourse and the relationship between religion and identity. The focus has been multidisciplinary in scope, including perspectives from sociology, economy, political science, law, and the history of religions.

Seven questions were asked: Which religious communities are of such importance that we need to pay attention to them as political actors? How are these religions important for a person's identity? What legal status follows religious belief in India? How do state authorities deal with their problems (where these touch on religious communities) in the realm of practical politics? What are the effects of the different approaches? What can be done in the way of conflict prevention and peace building to address emerging tensions? And finally, how are religious communities changing as a consequence of globalization?

The collection of essays in this report is the outcome of the Kolkata conference and the discussions held. It is in many ways a unique effort to not only bring together local professors and politicians but also European scholars, the latter contributing insights into this problem by illustrating the European experience of nation-building. The chapters are organized in three sections. The first section is intended to provide a holistic perspective of the changing role of identities and their interaction with religion and the state. Here, Professor Jan Hjärpe explores how changing global identities and narratives of the past impact new societal relations between the individual,

community, and the state. In particular, he argues how jurisdictions are being challenged both from below and from above by various groups. State failure has provided fertile soil for such struggles as evidenced by the establishment of various Sharia courts in failing states. Jan Hjärpe is followed by Mr. Kingshuk Chatterjee who problematizes the relation between secularism and modernity and the role of religion in politics. He argues how the principle of popular sovereignty assumes a degree of secularization and how politics of religion has become a "dialogue with the dispossessed." Globalization has increased the gap with the "dispossessed" and heightened the alienation of some groups. Next, Dr. Sona Khan gives an account on how "traditional values" and sharia challenge the Indian constitution. She exemplifies this with the tragic rape case of Imrana, a Muslim woman whose constitutional rights never were protected as Muslim clerics' verdict overrided that of the constitution. She argues that Muslim communities' claim to jurisdiction threatens the writ of the Indian state and Indian women's right to a secular treatment in law. Shafat Ahmad, in turn, shows how Kashmir has been a major source of conflict between India and Pakistan since the partition of the subcontinent on a religious basis. The situation has created many political actors/stake holders. The representative bodies of religious communities are also active in their demands and agendas. On the one hand, the major global state and non-state (like the UN and EU) actors keep an eye on the developments and, on the other hand, the stakeholders within Kashmir expect them to intervene. Shafat Ahmad believes that, in the absence of a genuine and official process, only a plural dialogue within the region and continued engagement between the stake holders and political actors, facilitated by civil society, can achieve dispute resolution.

The second section explores the political roles of religious communities in India. A background is first given by Professor Jayanta Kumar Ray to the current Hindu-Muslim strife and the partition of British India. He argues that India's democracy may be hijacked by radical Islamic forces facing a feeble response from the Indian polity. He gives a number of persuasive reasons why communal antagonism should be seen as the most severe threat to India's domestic and international affairs today. Next, Mr. Sonam Wangchuk Narboo, MLA of Ladakh, explores the role of Buddhism at the crossroads of China, Ladakh, and Tibet and how its pacifist nature will serve

as a positive force in the region. He also notes how religion will play a larger role in China as communism diminishes in importance, and suggests some of the implications of this for India and the region.

This is followed by Professor Jagdish Lal Dawar's detailed case study of the Tani group of tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. He explores how the tribal populations of Arunachal Pradesh have been affected by Christian missionaries and other alien religions since the 19th century. His study is a fascinating attempt to show how the conversion to Christianity became a "site of contestation" between Indian officials, Hindu missionaries, indigenous intellectuals, and the Christian missionaries and how this, in turn, has impacted the current political roles of religious communities in Arunachal Pradesh. Dr. Binoda Kumar Mishra's chapter, in turn, analyzes the complex interconnection between the identity politics of the Sikh community in the diaspora and Sikh homeland politics in India. Building on the history of Sikhism, his chapter focuses on the continuity and changes in the nature of Sikh political activism in the context of globalization. He concludes by emphasizing how the converging sites of globalization, changing identities, and the incomplete nation-building process in India can have a destabilizing effect if politics and religion are not distinguished from one another. Dr. Swapna Bhattacharya's chapter explores the Buddhist resurgence in Northeastern India and Bengal from the last quarter of the 19th century to the 1950s. She asks how Buddhist eastern India has used its academic and cultural assets to counter the communist challenge and how great power politics have affected Buddhism and the region. Professor D. Nath, in turn, gives an historical account on the formation of the Matak community in Assam and their struggle against the state from 1769 up until the beginning of the 19th century. According to him, this resistance laid the basis for the identity struggles, insurgency, and acquisition of political power defining 20th century Assamese society.

In the third section of this book, devoted to comparisons between the European and Indian experiences, Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed compares European and Indian nation-building and how religious communities have positioned themselves to influence these processes. He argues that one of the primary differences between the two cases is the development of egalitarian

citizenship and how it was imposed from above in India and through interaction between state and society in Europe.

We are confident that you will find these chapters of interest. We also encourage you to download or order the conference proceedings from the Islamabad seminar to compare the findings across these two contexts. Finally, our thanks go to the staff of MAKAIAS and particularly Professor Jayanta Kumar Ray and Ms Arpita Basu Roy.

Individual, Community, State, Globalization: The Role of Historiography and the Problem of Jurisdiction

Jan Hjärpe[*]

If, instead of being at this conference, I were to lecture before an audience of Iraqi Shii Muslims, I would certainly try to characterize the role of two of the most influential religious leaders, namely Ayatullah Ali Sistani and "the young one", Muqtada Sadr. I would do that by suggesting that Ali Sistani is *hasani*, but Muqtada Sadr is *husayni*. Regardless of the degree of religious belief – even if it is lacking entirely – everyone in a Shii environment is aware of the traditional narratives, the stories told about the Prophet's grandsons Hasan and Husayn, and of the ritual commemorations of their deeds and destinies, as they are repeated every year and thus have become a common ingredient in the cognitive universe of the individual.

This is the first point I want to make: the importance of patterns of perception and interpretation in the brain of the individual. They influence our perception of events and thus the choice of behaviour, the reactions. We need to know the narratives of the past in order to predict the future – *Hasani*: the word stands for a person with a pragmatic attitude. Hasan, the second Shii Imam, concluded a ceasefire with the (Sunni) Umayyad caliph Mu'awiya. He was able to show patience, he could retire for pragmatic reasons when a victory was not possible. He acted with precaution. *Husayni*: that word stands for militancy, revolt, and martyrdom. Khomeini, in his time, expressed very clearly that he was *husayni*. The third Shii Imam, Hasan's brother Husayn – according to what is told – heard rumours that the people of Iraq were eager to follow him in a revolt against Mu'awiya's son and successor Yazid. He went there. But the rumour was a false one. He and his followers were surrounded and killed, at Karbala, where he was buried. His grave is the well-known sanctuary there, visited by enormous crowds of

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pilgrims, and pictures or models of the grave are to be found in almost every Shii mosque – Sistani is a *hasani*, Muqtada Sadr a *husayni*.

We all have a tendency to perceive and interpret what happens now in the light of what we know of past events in history. But all historiography is a selection, a choice between stories of the past. Every community has its own selection. Narratives of the past (and for that matter our own experiences) and ritual commemorations of the past function as a language not only to express community, but to express what is in one's mind, giving patterns for how to perceive ongoing events and what to expect in the future. This means that they can have a very strong legitimizing and mobilizing effect, especially when connected with emotionally loaded memories.

Let me here point out one factor very much of relevance for the conditions in the world today and obviously for the immediate future too: The fact that the state and its institutions in so many of the conflict ridden countries and regions today are dysfunctional or even non-existent, as is the case, for instance, in Somalia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Palestine and Iraq, Kenya – and so on.

Somalia is an evident example. A country whose borders are not defined, a government existing due to foreign troops but unable to administrate the country, an interim parliament that can legislate but cannot enforce or implement any of its laws, non-existing state institutions, a people's whose lives are insecure and no functioning police or judiciary. This means that the individual is totally dependent, in order even to survive, on other networks, communities, and group belongings. What networks? Most often the extended family, the clan, the ethnic subgroup (the tribe), the religious community, the professional community (the mafia, the tribal or group militia), or varying combinations of these. We call that kind of society a tribal one.

Now, the next point has to do with the role of dualistic mythologies and historiographies. This is a phenomenon that we meet very much in the political language of today that is the propagandistic description of the world as divided in *two* entities: we, who are the good ones who are right, and the bad guys who are against us. The point with a dualistic worldview, in conflicts, is that it legitimizes violence, terror and disrespect for human

rights, as it reduces the world's population to being either allies or enemies. In this way it eliminates the category of "innocent civilians". Killed civilians are thus categorized as either the enemy (because they were not supporting "us") or as "collateral casualties": "Sorry we killed you, but otherwise we could not get at the enemies."

One point more: It has to do with the change in authority. Take a look at the Internet Cafés everywhere in the world today. They are jam-packed with young people, taking part in the immense global flow of information, disinformation, propaganda, discussions, even Web wars. You can find everything there, from extreme militancy to the mildest introvert, Tolstoyian pacifism. The young individual can choose, no, he has to choose. He can accept one standpoint and the other day the opposite. We can see very fast processes of change. The individual oscillates between all his different belongings or "identities".

Now to the problem of jurisdiction: It has not to do with the *contents* of laws in the legislation of one country or another, or with the actual rules to be found in any specific jurisprudence. The problematic has to do with the question of jurisdiction. *Who* is the one, or which entity is, regarded as having the right to decide? Who has (or takes) the right to decide what rule to apply, what interpretation to prefer, and to apply it in reality? The state and its judiciary? Some religious authority? The family or clan leaders? Some *vigilante* group? Or the conscience of the individual himself? Who is regarded as the legitimate judge or arbiter?[1]

The changes in jurisdiction have to do with a phenomenon connected with modernity,[2] modernity characterized by a *differentiation* of both individual and societal functions. In the pre-modern society the roles and "identities" of the individual were intertwined. We can take as examples local communities anywhere in the world in ancient times, in Northern Europe, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Africa – wherever. We could take for granted that most people would die within the same local community as where one was born. This was true also for a community of nomads – the circle of people which the individual was in contact with during his life was limited, and all his functions and roles had to do with little more than that specific group of people. This means that his life had a certain cognitive coherence. So much

could be taken for granted. There was no doubt as to who should decide what. The individual, born within that village or group of people, had his "primary socialization" (i.e. learning to talk and understand, getting the norms of everyday life), creating his basic concepts and understanding of life in this limited circle, the extended family and the immediate neighbourhood. He would almost certainly marry a girl from the same village/circle, and have the same kind of sustenance or profession as his father and grandfather. Family and neighbourhood constituted simultaneously both the ritual-religious community and the circle of jurisdiction. The village council or family council had the customary right to decide and to judge in conflicts. The rites and rituals of the family, the village, the agricultural year, and the *rites de passage* of the different stages in life (puberty rites, marriage, burial) were all intertwined. It had not to do with if you were a believer or not – the rituals had their societal meaning for the nonreligious individual too. The religious narratives were integrated with the different functions of life, including the norm systems, and the distributions of "punishments" by the social pressure and the customs of the community. The village constituted basically a self reliant and endogamous community, whose "cognitive universe" for all practical purposes was within the frame and horizon of village life. "Custom" and "law" were more or less identical.

Modernity meant a differentiation of these functions. Regardless of your background, regardless from where you come, it is very probable that you will die in another place than where you were born. Education includes today migration from the place of birth: schools, university, peregrination, studies in other countries. Knowledge, information and disinformation are transmitted by media too: Cassettes, Video, DVD, TV, Internet. Your profession will probably be another from that of your father's and grandfather's. Your marriage mate will probably not be a neighbour's daughter from your childhood, and she will probably have a profession of her own. You will move in order to get jobs. The professional community will be distinct from other such groups, such as family, neighbours, religious community, ethnicity, nationality, and interest groups. But in all these different circles there will be a kind of jurisdiction functioning in different ways and in different fields of competence. The economic structure of family life is different from what it once was. The traditional gender roles tend to

lose their social relevance, and the same happens in a considerable degree to other inherited norm hierarchies. They lose their character of being self-evident. This means that the traditional authorities are questioned. Who has the right to decide what is right and what is wrong? Who has – in reality – the authority to decide and the power to implement the decisions?

The frame of the mental "system" is no longer life in a local community. You know, even in detail, events in other parts of the Globe, and what ideas there are in the debate in other societies. Norms in this way become in a higher degree dependent on individual choices. The individual's belongings – the belonging to a professional community, a religious community, an ideological community, networks of common interest of different kinds – are not geographically limited.

Now, the Nation-State is something "in between" the local and the global. And here we can see one of the problems of jurisdiction. Who has the jurisdiction in the smaller local society, who in the Nation-State, who on the global level? We have passed from modernity to a global post-modernity.[3] One characteristic of this post-modern status is availability. We can choose among many competing ideas. The individual is aware of alternatives. Traditions, including the legal tradition and the hierarchies of norms, have lost their self-evidence. The religious affiliation cannot be taken for granted. It is no more, in the same degree as it was previously, linked to profession, neighbourhood, family or clan belonging. The process of globalization means that the question of any legal system's relation to international declarations and conventions is inevitable. If a law system, a legal practice, and a legislation (of a state) should be founded on religious sources, as is the case in the Islamic legal tradition, there must be developed some kind of at least a verbal accommodation to these international documents. An early example of this is the Iranian Constitution of 1979.[4] The Constitution declares itself as entirely an expression of Islamic law and Ja'fari jurisprudence, but its terminology and its structuring is very much in the model of other Nation-State constitutions and of international conventions (not without influence from the earlier constitutional debates in Iran – especially the constitution of 1906).[5] This terminological and structural accommodation is a part of the

strategy to get the Constitution accepted, not only for an international public but most of all for the reading public in Iran itself.

The problem is acute when the state is dysfunctional and citizenship gives no benefits to the individual, when stability, security, social welfare cannot be guaranteed by the state, and no participation in power, and so on. This means that the individual is by necessity dependent on these other belongings, other communities, be it the extended family, the clan and the clan alliances, very often related to religious belongings (or ethnic, or professional ones, or combinations of all three). Such a network has (sometimes) its own militia, certainly its economy, and its representatives in the intricate political play in the country. And it carries out its own verdicts, i.e. has its own jurisdiction in reality more or less independent of the state and the official administration, which is too weak to impose any national legislation. The individual's loyalty to this network is then a pragmatic necessity. The different belongings in their turn give the possibilities of changing alliances.

Let us for a moment consider the events in Pakistan, in July 2007, centred on and around the Lal Mosque in Islamabad under the aspect of the problem of jurisdiction. As we know, the groups in and around the Lal Mosque aspired just to that, to have jurisdiction. A special "Islamic court" was installed and in a way functioning in the Mosque, challenging the official judiciary of the state. Vigilante groups were putting their interpretation of Shari'a rules into practice, attacking shops and night clubs and amusement centres of different kinds, imposing by force (but without sanction from the state) *their* idea of an Islamic order in society. This was a challenge not only to the state but also to the traditional religious authority. Simultaneously, the legal legitimacy of the Musharraf regime was challenged by the state judiciary and the (secular) legal authority – the conflict between Musharraf and Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry. Who represents the legal authority? Who has the right of jurisdiction, and jurisdiction over whom? What is the relation between citizenship and legal belonging? And what is the relation to the traditional feudal loyalty system expressed by the political parties, characterized rightly as *clientage* parties, for instance the PPP around the Bhutto and the Zardari family? What is – in reality – the relation between the conditions due to citizenship and the conditions due to *other* belongings, kinship, social,

religious, ethnic, or professional identity? Who is the judge in the various field of legality (criminal law, economic rules, and personal law)?

ENDNOTES

[1] I have treated this question in the introductory part of a book on Islamic legal tradition, Jan Hjärpe, *Shari'a: gudomlig lag i en värld i förändring.* Stockholm: Norstedts, 2005, esp. pp. 16-36.

[2] Cf. Jan Hjärpe, "Religious Affiliation as a Problem for Universal Ethics," in Göran Bexell and Dan Erik Andersson (eds.), *Universal Ethics. Perspectives and Proposals from Scandinavian Scholars.* Dordrecht: Kluwer Law International, 2002, pp. 119-28, and Jan Hjärpe, "Revolution in Religion: From Medievalism to Modernity and Globalization," in Göran Therborn (ed.), *Globalization and Modernities – Experiences and Perspectives of Europe and Latin America.* Stockholm: Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1999, pp. 111-20. Cf. also. Kjell-Åke Modéer, "Optimal Legal Cultures? Modernity and Continuity in National and Global Legal Cultures," in Therborn (ed.), *Globalization and Modernities*, pp. 121-28.

[3] Cf. Kjell-Åke Modéer, "Global and National Legal Cultures: Consciousness and Interaction of the National Legal Identity," in Cecilia Lindquist (ed.), *Globalization and Its Impact – On Chinese and Swedish Society.* Stockholm: Forskningsrådsnämnden, 2000, pp- 275-91.

[4] Cf.Jan Hjärpe, "Some problems in the meeting between European and Islamic legal traditions. Examples from the Human Rights discussion," in Tuuli Forsgren and Martin Peterson, Martin (eds.). *Cultural Crossroads in Europe.* Stockholm: Forskningsrådsnämnden, 1997, pp. 52-69.

[5] For the earlier constitutional development in Iran, see Abdul-Hadi Hairi, *Shî'îsm and Constitutionalism in Iran.* Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977.

The Gordian Knot of Religion in Politics

Kingshuk Chatterjee[*]

According to an old Levantine legend, King Gordius of Phrygia had tied a rope of cornel bark into an intricate knot. The Oracles prophesied that anyone who could undo it would be destined to be the master of Asia Minor. When Alexander the Great was rampaging all over the Levant, the knot was produced before him. Failing to untie the knot, Alexander cut the knot with his sword – thus apparently indicating his potential mastery over Asia.[1] The problem with his cutting the knot was that it was *cut*, not quite *undone*. This makes it a bit doubtful whether the Gordian knot could be said to have been undone at all.

The issue of religion in politics in modern times is somewhat like the Gordian knot, because despite repeated attempts to establish any straightforward relationship between the two, either in terms of setting up a religious state/theocracy or a secular state, success has proven elusive.[2] A large number of social scientists, primarily following the trajectory of evolution of state and society in the western world, are inclined to identify 'secularism' as one of the attributes of modern states; which implies that the degree of 'secularism' of a state is the measure of its 'modernity.' In other words, it is assumed, the more modern a state is, the less role religion plays in its public sphere. Such an assumption can be fraught with problems. For instance, does the promotion of atheism by the People's Republic of China make it more modern than the Anglican state of United Kingdom? Also, how to account for a reversal of the direction of secularisation as had happened in post-Soviet Russia and post-1979 Iran? Should one argue that such reversals indicate retrogression from modernity?

The intractable relationship between religion and politics needs be put in proper perspective. Before the advent of modernity, religion (almost

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invariably of the ruler) used to be the primary source or legitimating factor behind laws promulgated by the ruling elite – i.e. laws should be obeyed because God willed it so. However, with the emergence of industrial societies from the 19th century, heralding the age of the masses and shaping the contours of the modern society, modern states witnessed the progressive broadening of the social basis of power. Whether they acknowledge it formally or not, modern states tend to accept the principle of popular sovereignty, implying an acceptance on principle that the laws governing a state must conform to the needs of the people who constitute it. Even an authoritarian kingdom like Saudi Arabia, which recognises God as the repository of sovereignty, identifies the stewardship of the monarchy in terms of defence of Islam in the realm, which in its turn is interpreted to be a promotion of the interests of its subjects.[3]

The principle of popular sovereignty in turn is assumed to entail a degree of secularisation. Once the rationale for governance is accepted to be safeguarding the interests of the people, the yardstick of legitimacy for any measure becomes, *ipso facto*, secular. Also modern states tend to be multi-faith, or at least multi-denominational. So, even from the standpoint of effective governance, promotion of any one religion/denomination by the state makes governance problematic. In the context of the modern state, religion enshrines merely private laws, (literally, *privileges*) which needs be pushed back to the realm of the private. In fact, frequently the modern state is believed to be an instrument for the emancipation of individuals from even the confines of such a body of private laws. The progressive secularisation of European and American societies from the 16th century onwards rested primarily on the urge to free both the state and the individual from the domination of the Christian church, and the state ultimately prevailed over the church because it underwrote that freedom.

States, however, have not always been the best guarantor of individual freedom. From its very inception during the French Revolution of 1789, the notion of popular sovereignty has frequently proved to be a useful instrument for ruling establishments to serve their own narrow interests. Governments around the world have found it easy to garner opinion around the position taken by the state in the name of the people, even as they deprived the people of their freedom or worked against their interest. Any

resistance to the ruling establishment is identified as acting against the interest of the people, hence presumably warranting complete suppression. This actually amounts to deploying the principle of popular sovereignty to work against itself, representing the totalitarian possibilities located in the heart of liberal democracy. Challenges to state activities have therefore to be in the name of some other idea that is capable of generating a powerful intellectual-emotional appeal, and also of accommodating the principle of centrality of the people in the scheme of things.[4] Nationalism has performed this function of an alternative discourse to state-power since the 19th century; socialism has done it since the beginning of the 20th; religion has emerged as another such alternative discourse from the middle of the 20th century. Those who have rooted for state power have identified each of these forces in its turn as a menace.

Prima facie, protagonists favouring political participation in order to push objectives inspired by religious values are believed to be working towards the foundation of a religious order. This then begs the question, how *religious* is a *religious* order? It is a moot point, as the understanding of what is *religious* varies with space and time, even in terms of the reading of 'eternal' laws sanctioned by religion. Participation of women in politics is still considered un-Islamic in Saudi Arabia; it used to be so in Bahrain and Kuwait till only recently. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini opposed enfranchisement of women in 1963 as un-Islamic, but endorsed it after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Pakistan of course gave women the franchise soon after independence. In each case the concerned positions were adopted in the name of religion. Similarly, over the raging issue of abortion, both 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' positions have been premised upon Christian values in Europe and America.[5] Hence, the category of 'religious' is more complicated than it appears.

It is important to bear in mind the point that the modern religious discourse of politics is somewhat different from that which obtained before the advent of modernity. Earlier, religious laws used to be the instrument of the ruling establishment to regulate public life, and often successfully encroached even into the private sphere of one's activities. Secularisation of society effectively reversed this trend, allowing the secular state to not only regulate public life, but also encroach upon the private, affecting areas that had been traditionally

associated with the religious orders viz. the family, education, social welfare, etc. While such encroachment by the state has created its own network of beneficiaries, it has also dispossessed those associated with the older order. Since the early 20th century, accordingly, the politics of religion became partially a dialogue of the dispossessed. In South Asia, it was arguably the apprehension of dispossession because of Hindu domination in post-colonial India that congealed into the Pakistan movement; almost at the same time, Hindu nationalist forces had surfaced hoping to reverse the process of secularisation that the British colonial rulers had used to dispossess them.[6]

As modern society progressed further and the promise of socialism failed to materialise, an additional dimension appeared. The onset of globalisation in the last quarter of the 20th century served to accentuate the sense of alienation of some segments of people across the globe. Growing discomfort with the omnipotence and omnipresence of the market forces often sparked a desire to have them regulated, or at least to prevent them from completely overwhelming the human persona. Many people around world tend to think that the urge to retain the autonomy of the human individual is no longer underwritten by the state: it is instead actually endangered by the way the state goes about its business. Many among such alienated people began in the course of the 20th century to use religion as an instrument of carving out such an autonomous space, which neither the state nor the market was allowed to invade.[7] This appears to be the principal reason behind the recrudescence of religion in the public sphere all over the world: ranging from Christian groupings opposed to globalisation, and Hindu nationalists advocating protectionist measures to Islamic civil society organisations promoting the cause of Islamic banking and creating a social security net.

It is this contrapuntal character of religion in relation to state power, modernity and the forces of globalisation in the modern world that makes the relationship between religion and politics so intricate. What at one stage appeared to be the 'unique selling point' of the modern state – secularisation of the public sphere – now appears to have become its undoing, as a range of forces seeking autonomy for the private sphere have resorted to the only arena where the secular state can not lay down the ground rules, i.e. the arena of religion. The phenomenon of secularisation was like cutting through the knot of religion in politics: it might have expunged religion from politics at

one stage, but it still could not *untie* the two. For the knot to be *untied*, the state needs be less invasive, and the forces of modernity and globalisation have to address effectively the issues of dispossession and globalisation. Cassandra is still calling.

ENDNOTES

[1] Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p. 83.

[2] Because of excessive and imprecise usage, the terms 'secular state' and 'religious state' have come to signify far less than their actual connotation. A secular state is supposed to concern itself with only the 'secular'/ 'temporal' concerns; in other words the state does not involve itself with matters that are 'eternal', which is meant to be the preserve of religion. A 'religious state'/ 'theocracy' by contrast is supposed to work towards implementation of 'eternal' religious laws and injunctions in a temporal setting using the apparatus of the state. Such definitions assume distinctions between eternal and temporal that are not quite self-evident. What to make of a state like India, for instance, that does not dissociate itself with all religions, but is instead equally proximate to each? Or for that matter, a state like Pakistan that was founded in the name of religion, Islam, but has continued to struggle against any blanket imposition of the *shari'ah*?

[3] Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 172.

[4] Instances of this instrumentality of religion as a means of resistance to state power abound in the 20th century: the Islamic revolution of Iran, the Solidarity movement backed by the Catholic Church in communist Poland, the liberation struggle led by Church leaders in East Timor, the HAMAS in Palestine, the Hizbullah in Lebanon, etc.

[5] The Pro-Life groups argue that life is given by God, hence human beings have no right to terminate it. Pro-Choice groups argue that God gave human beings Free Will, thus authorised them with the right to choose.

[6] For a brief but comprehensive exposition this argument, see Ian Talbot, *India and Pakistan*, London: Arnold, 2000, pp. 111-34.

[7] This argument functions as a cardinal assumption for many insightful assessments pertaining specifically to the resurgence of Islam. See for instance Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, (translated by Azizeh Azodi), London: I.B. Tauris, 2000; also John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Indian Laws and Muslim Women

Sona Khan[*]

I. Imrana and the Law

How do we regard the security of women under Indian law, regardless of the community they belong to?

From the stories appearing in the media, I wonder if some forces would not like to see Imrana's case[**] turned into a matter of Muslim personal law alone, rather than being treated as a matter of criminal law. If so, then there is cause

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[**] EDITORIAL NOTE: The Imrana case refers to a case of a married Muslim woman and mother of five who was allegedly raped by her father-in law in a small village in India in 2005. The local Muslim community declared that her marriage should be regarded as null and void and that she should thereafter treat her husband as her son, since "she had sex" with her father-in-law. This caused an outrage among non-Muslims in India. She refused to obey the decision of her community and they continued living as husband and wife. Later a local religious seminar issued a Fatwa confirming the principle, but other Muslim institutions in India had other interpretations of Muslim law and it became a matter both of interpretation of Muslim Law and of interpretation of the Indian constitution. Should this be a matter dealt with by the secular legal system or by the religious community? Article 44 of the Constitution of India states: "Uniform civil code for the citizens.- The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India." By "uniform civil code," the authors of the Indian constitution meant a commonly enforceable set of laws governing marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and other personal and familial matters. In practice this has been a "Guiding principle" and no such binding law has been introduced. Personal laws of various communities including Hindus are respected and the stated policy of the government ever since Independence has been that the personal laws will not be changed unless the demand is made by the concerned community itself. Now several non-Muslim politicians have demanded that the Imrana case should anyhow be cause for the introduction of a new legislation valid for all, regardless of religious affiliation. However, this case also involved the question of whether this was a matter to be decided by penal law, in which the religious community cannot interfere in defiance of the secular legislation of the Indian state. An Indian court sentenced the father-in-law to 10 years in prison for raping Imrana.

for national concern. We should be worried for all women and for Muslim women, but also for Muslim law, and for the freedom of religion. Violence against women, both in the family and outside, has become something of an issue in public life. There seems to me to be an attempt from certain quarters of the Muslim leadership to keep the Muslim women of UP away from the benefits of the proposed Bill relating to Domestic Violence, which recently received the Cabinet's consent. I cannot understand the directionless political churning in Imrana's matter, where institutions, groups and individuals are eager to play an unnecessary and perhaps unintended role.

Considering all the facts appearing since the matter has come to light, Imrana's case involves questions of a woman's security in the matrimonial home, culminating in the alleged commission of rape by her father-in-law or other male members of the extended family. Is the security of women, personal, social, economic and political, no longer the responsibility of the state? Is there enough being done, by the state, but also by other actors – NGOs and the media, for example – to secure the life and dignity of Indian women? Is the problem of women's safety reflected in our public policy? In the absence of a genuine women's movement in our country, it will take a very long time for things to really change on the ground.

The security of Indian women is a secular issue, even if our polity is highly pluralistic, multi-religious and culturally diverse. Human life is precious and cannot be allowed to decay – this is a basic mandate of the Constitution. "Decay" could be physical as well as mental. If the community – here, the religious community – arrogates to itself the responsibility for the well-being and protection of poor rural women, especially in matters relating to the family, does it not amount to a subversion of the individual freedoms of women? Should the preservation of the Constitutional mandate (to stop the decay of human life) fall to the community, when the life in question is that of women?

Cries of anguish are more attempts to gain political mileage than genuine calls for justice. Some believe that the initiative for reforms must come from the community itself, whereas women's demand for equitable treatment under the law is snubbed. Blatant illegal applications of outdated traditions and customs, fraudulently attributed to this or that religion, helpful in nourishing distinct community identity, are instead justified. Can the due

process of law in a sovereign democratic republic allow such abuse and injustice? What is the limit (hadd) of patriarchal forces in India? Is it even greater for Indian Muslim women than what we saw as a consequence of the Haddud Ordinance proclaimed by President Zia-ul Haq in Pakistan in 1980? Extra-legal developments in Imrana's case force us to re-visit the basic freedoms of women, when those women belong to a minority community. We must recognize that patriarchal forces work to prevent women from securing equity in a secular legal framework.

II. Women's Security in a Legal Perspective

Security of women is essentially a law and order matter, a subject on the state list, as prescribed in the Constitution. The administrative arms of the state are responsible for such bandobust in a meaningful manner. Instead of taking appropriate administrative measures by evolving a sound policy and investing in the security of women, the state has often pretended to be helpless in the wake of prevailing traditions and customary law. Time and again the courts have pronounced that traditions in conflict with the basic rights of citizens can no more be upheld, with directions to the state to perform its obligations, be it in the celebrated judgments of Tahira bi, Shah Bano, Sarla Mudgal, Mathura (rape) or scores of other such cases.

Unfortunately, since the 1970s, through legislative intervention attempting to negate the fallout of various judgments and provisions of Muslim personal law, and despite the mandate and compatibility of relevant Koranic verses, the Muslim leadership has attempted to opt out of the secular fold. These judgements relied on the Koranic texts. In some cases, the process of getting the same principles of personal law restored has been long, laborious and frustrating.

I challenged the validity of the Rights of Muslim Women on Divorce Act, 1986, enacted to negate the fallout of the judgement in the Shah Bano case. After fifteen years of lone struggle and wait, the five judge Constitution Bench in September 2001 granted the right to a Muslim woman to receive maintenance under the personal law from her divorced husband for the rest of her life (upholding the mandate given in the Shah Bano case), or till her remarriage. The judgement did not receive any attention from the media.

Leaders of the community are doing their best to hide its import from members of their community.

It is true that the right of receiving maintenance under the secular provisions of section 125 of the CrPC (Criminal Procedure Code) has not been granted. The legal fight of removing discrimination based on religious grounds in the CrPC, for protecting the right of equality and equal protection of law for Muslim women, has yet to be won in the area of the law of maintenance. The CrPC is a part of administrative law and the applicability of secular provisions to Muslim women in the area of prevention of destitution and vagrancy would make Muslim women beneficiaries of secular administrative law. If post-Shah Bano judgment legislation robbed Muslim women of the secular provisions of receiving relief for the prevention of destitution and vagrancy under secular criminal law, with the said Fatwa in place in Imrana's matter, a Muslim woman would be gagged and pressurized forever in search of justice, even when she is a victim of a heinous crime like rape.

The Supreme Court in its various judgments has based its decisions on issues of Muslim law on a Koranic mandate because it is compatible with the provisions of our Constitution. Politically-motivated legislative interventions for negating the law emerging from the judgments of the Supreme Court is neither in the interest of the country nor in the interest of the Muslim community. Such efforts push the community backwards. The recognition of such efforts by the authorities is described as minority appeasement. Devoid of any vision and pluralistic wisdom, Muslim leadership has simply concentrated its efforts on creating a minority state within a state, conducive for their own personal interest. They ignorantly rely on the provisions of Article 25-30 of the Constitution, without really understanding their import.

III. Legal, Learned, Humane – and Constitutional, Please

The verdict on Imrana needs to balance several pressures and forces: judicial, legislative, political and religious. But ultimately India needs Indian laws.

Imrana's matter has become a handy way to preserve minority character by isolating the Muslims from secular administrative law. Studies have shown that sexual abuse of women within the family goes unheard and unrecorded. Fatwas like the one on Imrana would certainly deter a Muslim woman

suffering abuse within her family from approaching a police station in the future.

The Muslim Personal Law Board's main stand in the Shah Bano case was that judicial intervention and reliance on the Koranic text to support the judgement for providing maintenance to a divorced wife by the husband under the secular provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code was considered interference in the personal law, based on traditions. It was thus construed as being against the guarantees perceived to have been accorded to minorities under article 25 of the Constitution. An attempt to apply personal law in a normal criminal matter has landed Imrana's case in the hands of the Muslim Personal Law Board and that of the Darul Uloom of Deoband. The confusion deliberately being created to have a face-saving device in case their attempts are aborted (by saying that there are five schools of judicial thought for Sunni Muslims and according to two, Imrana is 'Haram' for her husband and would not be so according to the other three), is unbelievably outrageous. Contradictory application of Muslim law norms to human conduct has no correlation to the Koran or to Islamic theology. It is clearly ordained for Muslims to conduct their affairs in the prescribed manner, and where it is not easy for an individual to understand, he should follow his reasoning, keeping his intentions (Niyat) as ordained. The action so pursued is required to reflect the beauty of the individual's conduct because that is what pleases Allah. Beauty of conduct (Husne Adula) would include justice, equity and fairness, based on principles of natural justice. Therefore, all human actions, in order to be acceptable to Allah, are required to pass the test of Husne Adula. What the Taliban did to the women of Afghanistan was anything but Islamic. We must save Indian Muslim women from a similar misfortune.

Scholars who claim to be relying on tradition in Imrana's matter must reveal their sources of law, as they are obliged to substantiate their opinion. They must establish the text(s) and the tradition(s) they cite. Traditions: when, where, in what context and propounded by whom?

Muslim marriage and all questions of its validity are the subject matter of a marriage contract agreed to between two consenting adults. If any of the spouses is found/deemed/presumed by the other to fall short of the required standards of sincerity in matrimonial conduct, and of the degree of sanctity

and piety attached to marriage, they can mutually decide to repudiate their contract of marriage. No institution or religious authority can declare unlawful a marriage previously recognized to be valid, upon the occurrence of any misfortune or accident, or in the event of one of the spouses becoming the victim of an offence, like rape.

Islam provides that all individuals are ultimately responsible to Allah for their respective actions and real justice would be done in the final analysis. In the meantime, only the authority of a duly established state can judge in these matters, in accordance with due process of law as prevalent.

Here the alleged rapist father-in-law has been arrested and charge-sheeted. Property-related issues between the father-in-law, Imrana and her husband are being suggested, generating suspicion about the commission of an offence. The court would decide the veracity of the charge. After the Mathura gang-rape case from Gujarat, the Indian Evidence Act was amended, and thereafter the solitary statement of the complainant, along with the totality of the circumstances, is enough to lead to the conviction of the accused.

The distinction between laws governing offences of rape and adultery in Muslim jurisprudence must be understood. If in any system such injustice prevails, as reflected from the import of the fatwa in question, where the rape victim is robbed of her home, parentage, marriage, social respect, dignity and self esteem, that system cannot be called Islamic. A rape victim has to be duly compensated for the wrong and the community is obliged to restore her dignity under Muslim law. Pakistan and Bangladesh are neighbouring Muslim states. In their duly established legal systems, such laws do not exist, where a victim of rape by her father-in-law loses her marriage and marital rights over her husband and home.

The important legal issue to understand is that even if such unreasonable tradition exists anywhere else (as for example in neighboring countries), it cannot even notionally be added to the personal laws of Indian Muslims, much less applied, even if the victim consents to such application, like the ban on the tradition of Sati. The import of any such atrocious extra-territorial traditions, long forgotten by history in their countries of origin, in the name of enjoying the minority rights under Articles 25-30 of the

constitution, are illegal and unconstitutional, besides being un-Islamic. I would be obliged if anyone can establish that the said tradition, based on which Imrana has become 'Haram', has found its way in any judgment of any country in the last 50 years. That country will be required to explain its system of governance before the International Court under prevailing international law and face the consequences.

What provision of Indian law empowers anyone to pass such fatwas and unnecessarily agitate the minds of people negatively? If the fatwa cannot be applied, then what is its need and value? What provision of law allows religious scholars to opine on such matters? Such opinions amount to attempts to derail the due process of law and constitutionally-established administrative justice. The Shariat Court did not proceed because of Imrana's absence. But who granted jurisdiction and directed the Shariat Court to take cognizance of this matter in the first place? This amounts to misguiding members of the community. The community thus gets deprived of the benefits of due process of law — law which is secular.

Assuming jurisdiction without authority is a matter of serious national concern. Any credence to such efforts would tend to divide the country on religious and social bases, a dangerous trend, both constitutionally and politically. The High Court should suo motto take cognizance of press reports, issue notices to parties and declare Imrana's marriage valid, in order to put all controversies at rest and uphold the supremacy of due process of law. In such matters regarding communities, Indian secular criminal courts alone have jurisdiction. Assumption of parallel jurisdiction and administering strange and unacceptable notions of social conduct are untenable in the name of freedom of religion, and counter-productive in the process of protecting minority rights.

Overview of the Kashmir Dispute and Engaging with Stake Holders

Shafat Ahmad*

It would be helpful to briefly discuss the demography of Jammu & Kashmir to provide a context for the ongoing conflict and thereby identify the communities affected by it.

Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir (Generally referred to as Kashmir) has a Muslim majority population. Though Islam is practiced by about 65 per cent of the population of the state, and by 95 per cent of the population of the Kashmir valley, the state has large and vibrant communities of Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists. In Jammu, Hindus constitute 67 per cent of the population, Muslims 27 per cent, and Sikhs 5 per cent. In Ladakh, Buddhists constitute about 51 per cent of the population, the remaining being Muslims. The people of Ladakh are of Indo-Tibetan origin, while the southern area of Jammu includes many communities tracing their ancestry to the nearby Indian states of Haryana and Punjab, as well as the city of Delhi. In totality, the Muslims constitute 65 per cent of the population, the Hindus about 30 per cent, the Buddhists 3 per cent, and the Sikhs 2 per cent.[6] These various populations and regions in Kashmir have added to the complexity and duration of the conflict.

Introduction

In the words of the late Eqbal Ahmad "There is a conflict in South Asia, which has outlasted most post-World War II disputes. This long-festering dispute is the one in Kashmir, and it is the primary cause of hostility between India and Pakistan and a source for endless misery for the people of Kashmir."[7] The Kashmir conflict is the outcome of a process of neglect, discrimination, suppression of Kashmiri identity and the pre-eminence of

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power-centric approach held by the successive regimes of India and Pakistan.[8] Former President Bill Clinton called Kashmir the "most dangerous place in the world" just days before his South Asia visit in March 2000. As a disputed territory, it locked nuclear neighbors India and Pakistan into a bitter hostility that has so far resulted in three wars and almost pushed South Asia to the brink of a nuclear disaster, when the mobilized armies of the two countries seemed to be on the verge of a fourth war in December 2001.[9]

Kashmir has been a major source of conflict between India and Pakistan since the partition of the sub continent on a religious basis. Kashmir, which has been a Muslim dominated area, has been claimed by both India and Pakistan as an integral part of their respective nationhood. The "Pakistani" viewpoint has it that since Pakistan was created on religious lines, Kashmir being predominantly a Muslim majority region fits within this scheme. On the other hand, India, professing itself to be a secular state with a constitution structured on those principles, also claims Kashmir as the "center piece of its secular and democratic diversity". The dispute continues till the present day. India and Pakistan have fought at least three wars over Kashmir. In the words of Prem Nath Bazaz, the well known Kashmiri author and journalist of yore, "It is an irony of history that by a combination of fortuitous circumstances a tiny nation of Kashmiris has been placed in a position of great importance, where it can be instrumental in making and marring the future of so many."

Conflict Dynamics

The ongoing conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced a large section of its population, besides being rooted in the historic context, has another facet – the relationship between Kashmir and India. The history of this relationship has witnessed constant ruptures through regular episodes of subversion and denial of democratic rights of Kashmiri people. The discontent within the Indian-Administered part of Kashmir, fueled by New Delhi's policies (especially its rigging of local elections and political suppression), led to an armed uprising in 1990, termed as *Tehreek* or freedom struggle, and was supported by Pakistan. There were massive protests in favor of "freedom" and popular uprising was backed actively by the local population.

However, since 2004, there has been a thaw in relations between India and Pakistan. The resumption of dialogue and subsequent Confidence Buildings Measures (CBMs) are viewed as positive signs, both in the Sub-continent and at the International level. The Kashmir conflict is now changing and is witnessing the gradual involvement of stake holders, though presently only at the level of civil society and to a limited extent at political levels in the process of dialogue. The recent visits of political leaders across the LOC (Line of Control) and mass rallies like *safer-e-Azadi* by JKLF (Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front), seeking grassroots involvement in the process of dialogue and reconciliation with minorities especially Kashmiri Pandits, are evidence of greater participation.

There seems to be willingness on the part of militant outfits, who claim to be fighting against the Indian occupation of Jammu & Kashmir, to participate in the dialogue process. In one of his recent interviews, Syed Salahudin's (Chairman of United Jehad Council, an umbrella of more than a dozen militant organizations fighting in Kashmir, and the supreme commander of Hizbul Mujhadeen) pronouncement that "militant leadership is ready to support the Irish peace model as a first step towards the solution of Kashmir issue, provided government of India accepts the disputed status of Kashmir issue",[10] marks a considerable drift from his earlier stance.

The Kashmir dispute is a political problem and its solutions can only be found politically, but the religious dimension of this conflict cannot be ignored. The state of J&K contains many religious communities: Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. The Muslims and Hindus of J&K are politically two important religious communities, keeping in view the overall political atmosphere of India. The mainstream political parties at the "national" level have used religion as a tool to mobilize vote banks. The socio-economic conditions and identity issues of religious communities are always included in the election agenda by them.

The situation in Kashmir since 1990 onwards has created many political actors/stake holders. The stake holders are from both sides: the pro Indian political parties, and those who want independence or implementation of UN resolutions on Kashmir. The representative bodies of religious communities in J&K are also active in their demands and agendas.

The Present Situation

As the mass uprising against the Indian state gained momentum, the government of India declared Governor's rule on January 19, 1990. Since then, many Pandits belonging to the minority Hindu community have left the Valley. Pandits contend that the militants forcefully drove them out of the Valley on grounds of being a Hindu minority and for supporting India. Kashmiri Muslims contend that it was a deliberate policy of the erstwhile governor, Jagmohan, to move the Pandit population so that those supporting the movement for independence could be dealt with an iron fist.

Kashmir has remained one of the most militarized zones in the world. A European Union delegation in 2004 memorably noted that "Kashmir is a beautiful prison". Around 600,000 troops currently guard this prison. In addition, there is a 65,000-strong police force and 25,000 of what are known as "special police officers", who are generally taken from the ranks of former militants. There are also an estimated 3000-5000 pro-government army-protected gunmen, officially known as "friendly militants", as well as around 5000 gunmen engaged in various government-sponsored village defense committees.[11]

Since 1990, the Indian state has perpetrated gross human rights violations in Kashmir. These have included custodial killings, illegal detentions, fake encounters, and torture at the hands of security forces and their agents. In a recent report published by the New York based Human Rights Watch, which while denouncing militant groups for serious human rights violations, found that Indian security forces were routinely implicated in acts of torture, disappearance and arbitrary detentions.[12] According to a survey conducted by a local NGO, J&K Yateem Trust, Srinagar, the number of orphans in Kashmir up to 1997 was 15,000, but since then has increased to 50,000.[13]

A long standing dispute like Kashmir creates its own constituencies. Several politicians in Srinagar and New Delhi have no real interest in resolving the Kashmir dispute, given that it has ensured not only their importance in the political firmament but also access to large development funds provided by the Indian Union Government to Kashmir to appease the local population. Much of this largesse is reputed to be misused by the administrative machinery, which includes the politicians, military administration and the concerned bureaucracy.[14]

The areas that have been largely affected by violence in the last seventeen years include Kupwara, Anantnag/Islamabad, Baramulla, Srinagar, and Pulwama in the Kashmir Valley, and Doda, Rajouri, Poonch and parts of Udhampur in Jammu. Ladakh has been largely unaffected by the violence. In Jammu regions along the line of control (which demarcates borders between parts of Kashmir under Indian and Pakistani control) the conflict intensified around 2002. Although people in Jammu & Ladakh participated in the 1996 and 2002 elections, the voter turn-out in the Kashmir Valley was very low and coercion to vote by forces was reported.

In the case of Ladakh and some districts of Jammu, since the people participated in the elections, they are represented by their elected members. In Kashmir, however, the majority of the people did not participate in the elections and rejected them because they do not believe the Indian electoral process will address their concerns of self-determination and human rights violations.

Of late, the main political parties of Kashmir have changed their conventional stands. The mainstream parties like National Conference (NC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) are using the phrases and language similar to that of separatists. The election manifesto of both the parties mentions that elections will not change the nature of the Kashmir dispute. The election manifestos of the PDP and NC mentioning human rights violations, rehabilitation of the families of militants, and demand of self rule and maximum autonomy to the J&K is a significant departure from their earlier stated position of a complete merger with the Indian union. Recently, even a state minister belonging to the PDP asked for a separate currency for J&K. The line between the mainstream and separatist politicians has blurred. A similar change of position has taken place among the separatist parties, who are now discussing joint management of Kashmir, and soft borders with maximum possible self rule. In the beginning of this year, the socio-religious organization, Jamat -e- Islami, announced that it will not participate in the door to door anti-election campaign, while the indigenous militant outfit Hizbul Mujahideen announced that it will not use the weapons in the coming election protests. But Amaranath land transfer issue gave new impetus to the

separatists and they came together for the anti-election campaign, as a result of which many of them have been booked under the Public Safety Act.

Kashmiri Muslims have been the worst affected by the conflict, both in terms of human losses and suffering at the hands of state authorities and existing laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Disturbed Areas Act, Public Safety Act, and POTA and TADA (the last two were later repealed). These laws, which India called anti terrorist laws, facilitated widespread and systematic oppression of the Muslim community. Compounded by the failures of the NHRC, SHRC & higher judiciary of Kashmir and Supreme Court of India to provide any relief to victims of human rights abuses and hold state actors accountable, impunity for gross human rights violations has become entrenched and further alienated the Muslim population. The recent Amarnath land transfer issue, followed by an alleged economic blockade by right wing groups in India, communalized the atmosphere and created a gap between Jammu and Kashmir. It witnessed its impact within the Jammu region also, as there were attacks on the Gujjar Muslim community. The political groups were raising the issues of domination of Kashmiri Muslims over the politics and economics of the state. Similar issues are being raised by the Muslims living in adjacent districts of Jammu about their economic deprivation at the hands of the Hindus of Jammu. New slogans and demands for regional autonomy within the Jammu region according to the pattern of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council have once again come to light. It is important to note that though Jammu is a Hindu majority region in terms of its population, many of its districts are Muslim dominated.

The Ladakhi Buddhist minority is another religious community whose concerns must be considered. In the early 1990s, the relationship between Ladakh Muslims and Buddhists became a serious law and order issue. The Ladakhi Buddhists feel they were living under Kashmiri Muslim domination. Subsequently, the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) spearheaded a movement against Kashmiri domination in the region. After their protracted agitation, the Ladhaki's established the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) in 1995. Despite the LAHDC, they continue to demand the status of a Union Territory.

Owing to the sensitivity of the issue of religion and region, there is a need for creative engagement between people of different faiths and from different regions. After the Amarnath land transfer issue, the contesting political parties in their campaign are coming up with a new set of formulas, like regional councils, economic integration, native governor and demilitarization. The resolution of the Kashmir card is being used by all political parties especially after they realized that pro freedom sentiment has once again been generated after the land row.

Conclusions

Thus, from the perspectives of the various stake holders, political actors, which represent the various religious, political and ethnic communities, there is a need for political engagements that can help in reaching a solution or delivering a framework for a process to resolve the Kashmir conflict in peaceful manner.

The peaceful resolution of the Kashmir conflict has its regional as well as international consequences. Globally it is seen as the main issue that hampers the economic and political stability of South Asia. On the one hand the major global state and non-state (like UN & EU) actors keep an eye on developments in the conflict and, on the other hand, the stakeholders within Kashmir are expecting them to intervene for resolving this age-old conflict.

  Peace in Kashmir, nevertheless, will not come easily. Activists, analysts and politicians have proposed many solutions. The ongoing turmoil in Kashmir has generated many debates over the issues of regions, identities, religion etc. Conflict resolution will only be possible with an unbiased overview of the past and present, and by developing a future system in accordance with democratic principles and the wishes of the people of Jammu & Kashmir.

In the absence of a genuine and official process, a plural dialogue within the region and continued engagement between the stake holders and political actors, facilitated by civil society, will be critical to ensure that violence does not escalate, and can make progress towards dispute resolution ensuring sustainable peace.

ENDNOTES

[1] "Jammu and Kashmir," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jammu_and_Kashmir. There has been also change in the composition of the population at different intervals of time due to wars and political unrest.

[2] Eqbal Ahmad, "Roadmap to the South Asian century," available at: http://www.himalmag.com/june2001/commentary.html

[3] Moonis Ahmar, "Kashmir and the Process Of Conflict Resolution," http://spaces.brad.ac.uk:8080/display/ssispsru/Home.

[4] Muzamil Jaleel and Tom Engelhardt, "Kashmir's Untouched Village," February 12, 2005 , http://www.antiwar.com/engelhardt/?articleid=4818.

[5] *The Kashmir Times*, December 17, 2007.

[6] Riyaz Masroor, "Special report: Marking time in Kashmir's beautiful prison,"-Himal Southasian (June 2007), http://www.himalmag.com

[7] Human Rights Watch, "'Everyone Lives in Fear': Patterns of Impunity in Jammu and Kashmir ," September 11, 2006, http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/09/11/everyone-lives-fear .

[8] Chapter "Children in Kashmir: The Conflict Zone," in *State of Human rights in Jammu & Kashmir 1990-2005*(Srinagar: Coaliation of Civil Societies,), p. 32.

[9] P. R. Chari, "Sources of New Delhi's Kashmir Policy," in Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, Bushra Asif, Cyrus Samii, eds, *Kashmir: New Voices, New Approaches* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rinner, 2006), p. 121.

Political Role of Religious Communities in the Indian Subcontinent

Jayanta Kumar Ray[*]

A fair – though not statistically confirmed – presumption is that ordinary persons – forming a vast majority of two important religious groups, viz. Hindus and Muslims – are peace loving and tolerant, and they are not interested in obtaining political dividends from their religious affiliations.

Some leaders of both these communities are interested in earning/enhancing their national/international influence by capitalizing upon religion. The question is: to what extent are these leaders successful in the competition with their counterparts in the rival community? Any answer to this question is a complex amalgam of facts, interpretations, experience and inevitable group/communal bias/orientation as also political compulsions. No answer is totally accurate. Each answer is debatable and tentative.

Prior to the commencement of British supremacy in 1757, the most significant experience of Hindus (especially in north India) was the domination of Muslim rulers over a period of about 700 years. A mention of only a few names, viz. Akbar, Aurangzeb and Dara Shukoh, is enough to point to remarkable variations, in levels of administrative efficiency and religious toleration attained by Muslim rulers. Certain facts are, however, incontestable – at any rate in the eyes of Hindus. One, Hindu peasants had to pay higher taxes than their Muslim counterparts. Two, not a single Hindu temple could be built in New Delhi (for instance) over a period of nearly 700 years. Whereas thousands and thousands of Hindu (Buddhist/Jain) temples were destroyed, portions were used to build Muslim monuments. Three, great universities at Nalanda or Vikramshila (for instance) were demolished, but not a single full-fledged university was built by Muslim rulers over a

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period of about seven centuries Hindus, moreover, were victims of a slave system organized by Muslims in medieval India.

In this perspective, one can explain (though not necessarily defend) the political role of the Hindu community in Bengal, when it did not resist the imposition of British rule in 1757, and when it did not support the revolt against British domination in 1857. In 1757, as also in 1857, the bargaining power of the leaders of the Muslim community appeared to be decisively inferior to that of their rivals. A cautionary note should be introduced here. No religious community is completely homogeneous, and none is free from intra-community strife. Still, it is possible to identify the most influential leaders, and assess their strengths and weaknesses.

The Partition of British India in 1947 on the basis of religion severely affected the fate of millions of ordinary Hindus and Muslims (especially in north India). The process of political developments, leading to Partition, illustrated the vast superiority of political skills of leaders of the Muslim community (especially of M.A. Jinnah) to those of their Hindu rivals, e.g. M.K. Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru. Whereas Jinnah's success in achieving Pakistan (to offer an unavoidably brutal synopsis) could be contrasted to the failure of Gandhi or Nehru to avert Partition, the short-term as well as long-term consequences of which, for innumerable Hindus and Muslims (mostly ordinary persons), were indeed cataclysmic.

The short-term and fully visible consequence was the massacre of around two million persons, and the displacement or forced migration of about eighteen million persons. No national/international court has ever been set up to fix responsibilities for (at least) the murders, and award punishment to the guilty. As to the long-term consequences of Partition, these included forced conversions, involuntary migration, etc. (easily observable in East Bengal/East Pakistan/Bangladesh even in 2007). But the most important and nearly irreversible consequence has been the perpetuation and consolidation of communal (Hindu-Muslim) antagonisms mutating into, among other things, *Jihadi* terrorism (an admittedly inadequate phrase for an immensely complex phenomenon). *Jihadi* terrorism was recognized rather late – in the fourth quarter of the 20th century – in the wake of several wars and decades of arms races between India and Pakistan, destroying the most important rationale for Partition. For, if there was any justification of Partition on the

basis of religion in the mid-20th century, it was that Partition was the only way out of a bloody civil war. In both quantitative and qualitative terms, human suffering caused by a civil war (whatever the duration) would have been incomparably less than what has been caused – what will continue to be caused – by wars and *jihadi* terrorism.

Leaders of the Muslim community must be credited with grand success in political mobilization that paved the way to the Partition of 15 August 1947. Correspondingly, the failure of such leaders as Gandhi and Nehru (who claimed – but were unable to fight for the claim – to represent both Hindus and Muslims) was rather pronounced. In order to gauge the true extent of this failure, one has to begin with the Government of India Act of 1935. Gandhi Nehru failed to comprehend the consequences of rejecting the 1935 Act. There could be no more lurid commentary on the quality of their leadership than the fact that, with a few amendments, the 1935 Act remained the Constitution of free India for three years after 1947. Gandhi even confessed as late as 1944 that he rejected the 1935 Act without reading it, whereas Nehru described this Act as a "charter of slavery". In contrast, Lord Mountbatten was probably correct when he observed that the 1935 Act, if accepted, could have averted Partition.

In 1939, Gandhi took a momentous decision that again raised questions about the quality of his leadership, especially the question whether he was unable or unwilling to calculate the consequences of his decision. Gandhi issued a dictate to the Provincial Governments (run by the Congress Party) to resign in 1939. A blind adherence to this dictate (by the Hindu political leaders) contributed enormously to separatism and Partition. Jinnah could deftly utilize the power vacuum created by the political abstinence of Congress Party's Hindu leaders. Jinnah spread the message of Muslim separatism throughout the Indian subcontinent, and demonstrated his mastery in political mobilization of a religious community.

This mobilization became somewhat indistinguishable from a blackmail of the majority (Hindu) community on 16 August 1946, when, with months long planning by undivided Bengal's Premier H.S. Suhrawardy (as also with the expected connivance of British rulers), Jinnah launched a 'Direct Action' that resulted in the 'Great Calcutta Killings'. It is only fair to recall that

Jinnah gave ample warnings of this premeditated venture, backed by concrete measures on the part of Suhrawardy, who issued a large number of arms licences, and carried out transfers of heads of Police Stations inside Calcutta – all to ensure the success of Direct Action on 16 August 1946. Hindu political leaders proved to be utterly incapable of forestalling the Direct Action, and unprepared to lessen its impact. Bengale Hindus did not have the capacity to arrange much beyond sporadic/spontaneous resistance. Their Bihari and Punjabi brethren, who retaliated in such a way as to compell Suhrawardy to deplore that he could hardly imagine how much his Muslim brothers would have to suffer as a consequence of Direct Action, rescued them.

Blackmail succeeded, Jinnah's Muslim League Party virtually immobilized the Hindu leaders of the Congress Party, who failed to play a proactive part during 1945-47 to avert Partition. The task of torpedoing the Pakistan proposal (and Partition) could not be deemed to be unmanageable in view of the following facts. At a press conference on 14 July 1945, Congress President Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (who was not a Hindu) affirmed: "In the provinces where Muslims were in a majority, there was no League Ministry. There was a Congress Ministry in the Frontier Province. In the Punjab it was a Unionist Ministry. In Sind, Sir Ghulam Hussain depended on Congress support and the same position was in Assam. It could not, therefore, be claimed that the Muslim League represented all the Muslims. There was a large bloc of Muslims who had nothing to do with a League".

Before the 1946 Provincial elections, Gandhi assured voters that Partition could take place only over his dead body. His assurance moved not only Hindus but also Muslims, so that, despite Jinnah's energetic campaigns in the preceding years (thanks to Gandhiji's feat of forcing a political emasculation upon the Congress since 1939), the Muslim League won only 429 out of a total of 1585 seats in Provincial Assemblies. Yet, when talks on Partition were proceeding apace, Gandhi never threatened to go on fast unto death, whereas on a number of occasions in his past career, Gandhi had decided to fast unto death for the fulfillment of political objectives.

Gandhi's surrender to blackmail by a minority religious/political group appears to be indefensible, when we remember the following comment of Wali Khan, the son of Frontier Gandhi, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. According to Wali Khan, the Partition of India was actually the Partition of

Muslims. This may be reinforced by the following comment by Mushirul Hasan: "Never before in South Asian history did so few decide the fate of so many. And rarely did so few ignore the sentiments of so many in the subcontinent".

To cut a long story short, after Partition, India stuck heroically to secularism, and got dividends which eluded Pakistan or Bangladesh. A few instances may suffice. In 1947, for reasons that need not be elucidated, the Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad was awarded to India, whereas the Hindu-majority district of Khulna was awarded to Pakistan. Such is the strength of India's secular-democratic order that Murshidabad still remains a Muslim-majority district, from where Muslims do not think of leaving for Pakistan or Bangladesh. In contrast, Khulna is now a Muslim-majority district, whereas Hindus in Khulna have been reduced to a tiny covering minority – as in the rest of Bangladesh – and live as second-class citizens, waiting for a suitable opportunity to move to India. Nevertheless, India has obtained enormous benefits from its practice of secularism. A large number of Muslims have advanced India's national interests in the fields of education, civil-military services, politics, science and technology, arts and culture, industrial enterprise, etc.

One must shamefully confess that India's adherence to secularism has occasionally suffered from aberrations. Atrocities have been committed against minorities on an unjustifiable scale – notably in Assam in 1983, and Gujarat in 2002. But the secular-democratic order is essentially so strong that Muslims have not left Assam or Gujarat for Bangladesh or Pakistan. On the contrary, thousands of Muslims have left West Bengal for Gujarat in search of dignified livelihood opportunities.

In post-1947 India, some Muslim political leaders have persisted in blackmailing the majority (Hindu) community, and many Hindu politicians have not hesitated to surrender to this blackmail. Instances are numerous. A few may be noted. Interests of a vast majority of ordinary innocent Muslims have been sacrificed by Hindu politicians, who have appeased the fanatics among Muslim leaders, and resisted changes in Muslim personal law. Enormous sums have been allocated by Hindu political leaders – including those in the progressive State (province) of West Bengal – for Madrasa

education, without insisting on a thorough revision of the curriculum. In the absence of such revision, most Madrasas maximize the teaching of hatred towards other religious communities, and minimize accessibility to gainful employment in post-Madrasa years. This – with or without assistance from unfriendly Muslim countries – cannot but promote extremism, which hurts the interests of the vast majority of ordinary Muslims and Hindus.

The obvious reason why Hindu leaders appease fanatical Muslim leaders in this fashion is the quest for Muslim votes. Paradoxically, thus, democracy demolishes secularism and modernity. This quest assumes a climactic dimension in some Indian provinces (States) where extremism and extortion go hand in hand, and Chief Ministers employ security forces to suppress extremists, but suspend operations when security forces are about to liquidate the extremists. The quest for votes interacts with the search for a share of extortion money to vitiate both democracy and secularism.

It is pertinent to refer to one recent incident typifying the capacity of fanatics among Muslim leaders to blackmail the majority community, and the incurable tendency of Hindu politicians to submit to this blackmail for the sake of vote bank politics. This incident took place in Kolkata (Calcutta) on 21 November 2007. The protest against acquisition of land for industry by the government got unnecessarily but deliberately mixed up with the demand for expulsion from Kolkata of a Bangladesh writer, who has been offering constructive criticisms of all religious scriptures and practices (including those of Islam) for many years. No immediate provocation by her was noticeable on 21 November 2007 or in the recent past. The incident on 21 November was carefully planned. The police requested countermeasures by Muslim leaders of all political parties in and around the locality where the incident was about to erupt. Muslim leaders refused to intervene. They adopted the same posture on 21 November when Muslim mobs blocked important crossroads in a central area of Kolkata, and launched violent attacks not only on citizens' vehicles on the road but also on the police. Obviously under instructions from Hindu officials and politicians, the police suffered injuries but did practically nothing against Muslim rioters (there being no resistance by non-Muslims). Innocent citizens patiently suffered.

This shameful saga of appeasement of fanatical Muslims by Hindu leaders was indeed incredible. Six police station areas were so affected by violence

that a curfew had to be imposed. The army had to march in. Meanwhile, several thousand school children remained stranded and hungry for as long as ten hours. The Bangladeshi writer (Taslima Nasreen) was expelled from Kolkata in violation of all secular-democratic canons. The police arrested a number of Muslim rioters. But all of them – including those arrested for such non-bailable offences under the Indian Penal Code as (a) rioting, armed with deadly weapons, (b) unlawful assembly of criminals, (c) causing grievous injuries by dangerous weapon, (d) arson, (e) causing hurt to deter public servant from his duty, (f) assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharging his duty – were released on bail in a few apologetic hours. Imams of some Kolkata mosques – who played an important role in inciting mobs – were not touched. Communal antipathies were aggravated.

One cannot guess whether – in the foreseeable future – Hindu leaders of India will stop the appeasement of fanatical Muslim leaders, damaging thereby the vital interests of an overwhelming majority of innocent Muslims and Hindus. In these circumstances, one wonders whether leaders like Gandhi, Nehru (and Vallabhbhai Patel) can be allowed to escape the indictment of history that they have been largely responsible for Partition, and the resultant consolidation of communal antagonism evolving into what is today (2007-08) the most intractable problem in India's domestic and foreign affairs. This is international Jihadi terrorism, piloted by Pakistan, which takes advantage of India's competitive electoral politics, and even threatens to destroy India's secular-democratic order.

Role of Religion in Peacemaking: Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh

Sonam Wangchuk Narboo[*]

Strange as it may seem, while all religions have peace and the brotherhood of mankind as their central theme, their role in fostering war and enmity among mankind cannot be denied. In fact, they have been pre-dominantly the reason for much of the strife and discord in the world through the ages. While this may be ascribed to genuine feelings of belief in one's own gods, and hence intolerance and enmity towards those who will not respect their feelings, one cannot help but have a sneaking suspicion that this is but a superficial veneer and at the bottom of it have most often been hard-headed calculations of territorial domination and such other worldly and tangible rewards rather than the mere salvation of souls, with the majority of people being maneuvered by a handful of motivated ones who exploit religious sentiments to meet their own ends. In other words, religion has often been used as an extension of statecraft and when that fails, the sword comes out.

As social structures evolved in the history of mankind, hierarchies had to be established, and this resulted in groups of people following one leader or the other, and as this led to enforcement of territorial rights, we see the first clashes of small groups which would gradually evolve into wars and eventually world-wars.

When Lord Buddha first started his religious teachings in the sub-continent, Hinduism was already a well-entrenched faith with the Brahmins at the pinnacle of the social strata, combining religious and political powers through patronage at the hands of the kings, who came second in the caste-system as warriors. As the teachings of the Buddha took roots in the country, large numbers of people flocked to him and sought shelter in his preaching,

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which was a direct challenge to the well-entrenched position of the Brahmin who started feeling vulnerable and insecure. Buddha's preachings were a direct contradiction of the rigid caste-system, and the resultant challenges could have been more drastic, had the new religion not been rooted in the doctrine of non-violence. Though there were clashes between the two differing sects, the truly pacifist nature of Buddhism ensured that these were fairly restrained. The message of the Buddha spread like wildfire through the inner fastnesses of Asia, and was also carried to the Far East over the sea-routes. While the essence of the teachings remained the same wherever it went, prevalent local customs and religions imbued this belief with their own colorings, and because of its tolerant outlook, older religions were also happily assimilated into it and their beliefs also found a place in it.

When Buddhism reached Ladakh through Kashmiri missionaries, the existing religion of Bon, which was shamanistic in nature, could not be displaced easily. So, some of the old practices were simply assimilated into the new religion. In the regions of Ladakh, Tibet and Inner Asia, where the immensity of the terrain made governance by lay-men a constant challenge, religious mooring of the peoples mind went a long way in ensuring peace and stability, and a unique form of re-incarnation of spiritual leaders evolved. This ensured a level of continuity and stability of the established systems, even though there were many exceptions to the rule.

Even today the religious practices of various groups of people around the world has a very strong effect on their mental make-up, as it has down the ages. The wars between the Christian and the Islamic world of the middle ages have, in a manner, been carried over into the 21st century because the suspicion of domination by one group over the other has not died down. In fact, it is stronger today than ever. Occasional misplaced utterances by secular leaders have not helped matters even when it was generally known that acts of aggression committed have often been due to economic considerations and not at all on religious grounds.

With phenomenal improvements in transport and communication, our world today is truly a global village where no nation can act, secure in the belief, that what it does is its own business. Today, whatever one does is everybody's business, like it or not. With everyone thrown into such close quarters with one's neighbours, the luxury of buffers has been lost, and

people will have to evolve new systems to deal with the loss of privacy. A new creed of tolerance is the need of the hour; where and how we will find it is the new challenge. A major problem before the world today is in the clash of Islamic and Western ideals, both of which are excellent in their own ways but without any meeting ground between them in a rapidly shrinking world. A world which is more a creation of Western ideals, but which is being met with a bewildered and dogged resistance from the Islamic world, which is seeking strength and shelter in its fundamental nature, and in the process is maligned as being regressive and backward.

Buddhism, though a pacifist religion, has seen its share of wars. The creation of the independent state of Bhutan is one such state where the religious wars between the various sects of Buddhists in Tibet resulted in the expulsion of the group that fled to establish the kingdom of Bhutan. Be that as it may, there can be no denying the fact that the pacifist nature of Buddhism has helped in moulding the psyche of the Ladakhi people to a great extent. Ladakh has been a fairly substantial Trans-Himalayan independent kingdom with over 1000 years of recorded history without any neighbouring country laying claim to it. Its diminution in status came about in 1834, when Wazir Zorawar Singh, on behalf of the Dogra Maharajas, annexed it to the erstwhile princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, ever since when it has existed as a province of the State, and after amalgamation of Jammu/Kashmir into the Indian Union in 1947, it suffered reduction to a district. The pacifist nature of Ladakhies permits them to see the gains in being part of a country where the identities of minorities are truly protected, unlike in some neighbouring countries, where population transfers are being routinely practiced in order to reduce ethnic races to non-existence. In an era of expansionism, assimilation of Ladakh into the Indian mainstream came as a blessing in disguise.

Recent events in Tibet are a cause for great concern world-wide, because it is clear that the Chinese Administration there has overreacted violently to demonstrations in the streets protesting China's forcible occupation of Tibet in 1959. It seems that the administration is paranoid about the position that the Dalai Lama enjoys in world affairs, and criticizes him severely, holding him responsible for every unsettling event in Tibet, and tracing them to his

so-called clique. They consistently ignore his appeals to his people to remain peaceful and abstain from violence. The Chinese could well take a lesson from the period when they were ruled by the Mongol emperor, Kublai Khan of the Yuan Dynasty, and understand what an invaluable role was played by the Grand Lamas of the period in maintaining peace and order among the warring tribes on China's frontiers. It is said that Kublai Khan wanted the Grand Lama to visit Peking and stay at his court and so an invitation was sent to him, but when he arrived he was expected to be seated below the emperor and bow to him. The Grand Lama announced that as a servant of God he could accept no mortal as his master, and that he would proceed back to Tibet. In the impasse that arose, the emperor suggested that in all religious functions he would agree to be seated below the Grand Lama, but in court he could not take a lower throne. This was accepted, and the Lama stayed on and contributed much to the furtherance and growth in prestige of the emperor. Successive Grand Lamas have enjoyed the role of patron-priest relationships with the ancient emperors throughout much of China's long and distinguished history.

Present-day China is coming out rapidly from a long self-imposed period of semi-seclusion. In the world as we know it, however much modernized and scientific it is today, the role that religion continues to play in the mental make-up of man is as strong as it has ever been. In China, as the role of communism gradually wanes, the need of the masses for the "opium of religion" (spiritual succour) will come to the fore. In that event, there is no need for China to go through another upheaval; everything is already in place, they only need to look around themselves and see things in the correct perspective.

The current Grand Lama, the Dalai, has time and again accepted the Chinese position in Tibet, and reiterated that he does not demand complete freedom but an extent of genuine autonomy within China for his people. The current attempts at massive population transfer into Tibet from mainland China is a step that will bring no satisfaction either among Tibetans or the people being moved and, in the long term, is a disaster waiting to happen, with the hatred and ill-will that will be generated from these people forced to live so close to each other. Actions based on today's realities, unless they are reasonable and can stand the test of time, could well become tomorrow's unsolvable

problems. With the world rapidly becoming a global village, nations are being thrown into ever-widening circles of contact. At an earlier age, ruling circles had the privilege to obliterate by sheer force the differences in perceptions, ways of life, and so on. This is no longer possible in the global village of today. Frictions can easily come to the fore in a fast-growing economy. A common ground in religion, shared cultural values, centuries of harmonious living alongside each other are the areas that we need to look into and strengthen. In all of these, Buddhism, the religion that had for many centuries remained a state-religion in China, will have a significant role to play in the years ahead.

Politics of Religious Identities in Arunachal Pradesh since the 1950s: A Case Study of the Tani Group of Tribes

Jagdish Lal Dawar[*]

Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), is situated in the extreme northeastern part of India. It lies roughly between 26° 28' to 29° 30'N latitudes and 91° 30' to 97° 30'E longitudes with a total area of 83,743 km². It is bounded by Bhutan in the west, China in the north and north-East (Tibet), and Myanmar in the east. There are as many as 26 major tribes and about 110 minor tribes that inhabit this area. The people basically belong to the Paleo-Mongoloid stock and mostly speak the Tibeto-Burmese group of languages. The population of Arunachal Pradesh was 336,558 in 1961 and 1,091,117 in 2001.

The area of present-day Arunachal Pradesh formed part of the Northeast frontier Tracts of Assam during the colonial period; in 1954 it became part of the North-East Frontier Agency and was directly administered by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. On 20th January 1972, the area was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh, and in the same year was declared a full-fledged Union territory. It was declared a State in 1987. Arunachal Pradesh can broadly be divided into three main cultural areas:[1] (a) People of western Kameng and Tawang, namely Monpas and Sherdukkpans, who are inspired by Buddhist ideas.[2] They are to a 'great extent under the influence of lamasery of Tawang.[3] Both these tribes 'combine in their religion and mythology traditional tribal ideas with the Buddhist theology.'[4] In fairly close 'geographical proximity live the Buguns [Khowas], Hrussos [Akas] and Dhammais [Mijis] who, although not Budhists, share some aspects of their neighbors' cultures.'[5] The Membas and other tribes living along the

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northern frontier may be conveniently grouped with them and so also may be the Buddhist Khamptis and Singhphos inhabiting the Lohit district.[6] (b) The central areas are populated by a large number of tribal groups: Nishing [Daflas], Tagins, Hill-Miris, APA Tanis, Na, Gallos, Adis [Abors], Mishmis [Idu, Digaru and Miju]. (c) The third group inhabiting the eastern Arunachal Pradesh is comprised of: Wanchos, Noctes and Tangsas. Noctes have 'adopted a very elementary form of Vaishnavism.'[7]

The Tani group of tribes – the subject of this study – belongs to the central areas of Arunachal Pradesh and consists of: the Nishis, Tagins, Hill – Miris, Na, Apatanis, Adis, Gallos and Mishings (also in Assam). All of these tribes claim themselves as the direct descendants of their great legendary Human Father, called ABO TANI. The people of these tribes 'are the ardent believers of a faith, called Donyi-Polo. By Donyi, they literally mean the sun and Polo stands for the Moon, The conjugation of DONYI and the POLO becomes a strong channel of socio-cultural aspiration of the Tanis.'[8] The tribal population residing in the central areas of Arunachal Pradesh, and specifically the population of the Tani group of tribes, constitutes the majority of the population of Arunachal Pradesh.

These tribes have come under the influence of alien religions, specifically Christianity. The history of Christianity in the areas of present Arunachal Pradesh can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when the American Baptist Missionaries opened Sadiya as a Mission Station in 1836.[9] But it is only in the last decade of the nineteenth century that the local tribes started accepting the Christian faith.[10] However, the missionaries were not successful in converting a large number of the people till 1950.[11] This paper is an humble attempt to study how conversion to Christianity became a site of contestation on the part of officials of the Indian state, Hindu missionaries, the indigenous intellectuals and, in turn, the Christian missionaries, thereby leading to the politics of religious identities.

1. Official Discourse and the Politics of Protectionism

The official attitude to conversion was marked by hostility. It can be comprehended in the light of the discourse provided by the policy-makers during the 1950s. This discourse emerged in the process of grappling with the

question of 'integration' of Arunachal Pradesh into the Indian 'mainstream.' The tenor of this official discourse may be summed up in Elwin's words:

> Our policy is to develop the tribes along the lines of their own tradition and genius. The whole stress of NEFA policy is on change. We are all aware that very great changes, which we hope will be enriching rather than impoverishing, will come, but we would like to see these come, not as imposed break with the past, but a natural evolution from it...there shall be no forcible imposition of another culture and ...the old culture should be helped to grow and develop into the new.[12]

The most effective method of 'integration'[13] was by means of exercising cultural hegemony[14] by 'appropriating' tribal cultural practices.[15] The critique of Christian missionaries formed an important aspect of this discourse since Christianity was perceived to be antithetical to tribal cultural practices.[16]

Some of the members of the Lok Sabha were apprehensive of the proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries in NEFA, and they have been raising this question in various sessions from time to time. In fact some of the members related it to anti-national activities, but the respective ministers had always denied it.[17]

Protection of Tribal Religion

The officials of the Indian state were in favour of providing protection to the tribal religious beliefs and practices. Thus an official Report of 1956-57 states:

'The people's religious beliefs are to be respected and sympathetically understood and on no account, are any efforts to be made to draw them into the rituals and faith of another religion.'[18]

It was being presumed that the tribal religion 'may survive as it is, provided the official attitude becomes one of respect for it and provided also the senior officers show a kind of official patronage to the tribal religious functions.'[19] However, it was also felt that the existing religion would not be able to 'meet

the spiritual needs of changing situation.'[20] Therefore, the officials were in favour of developing the tribal religion by providing State protection.[21]

II. Indigenous Voices

The missionaries' activities were a threat to the survival of their traditional culture. This was how indigenous leaders 'appropriated' the official discourse.[22] They responded in a dual way: (a) violence to the converts' property during the 1970s[23] and (b) pressure on the government to protect their beliefs and practices from the on-slaught of the organised religions, specifically Christianity. Therefore, Arunachal Pradesh Legislative Assembly passed 'The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Indigenous Faith Bill, 1978' (Bill no. 4 of 1978) to 'provide prohibition of conversion from indigenous faith of Arunachal Pradesh to any other faith or religion by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means and for such matters connected therewith.'[24] While introducing the bill, Mr. P.K. Thungon, the then Chief Minister, outlined the objectives and reason for the introduction of this Bill.[25] The Bill gained assent from the President of India in 1979. It was promulgated as the Indigenous Faith (Protection) Act 1979.[26]

III. Christian Voices

The Christian leaders perceived this Bill to be 'unconstitutional and anti-Christian' and aimed at 'legalising the persecution of Christians.'[27] It was perceived to be against the spirit of secularism and democracy.[28]

In spite of the hostility towards Christian missionaries' activities and the existence of the protection of indigenous Faith Bill, the Christianisation of the indigenous people of Arunachal Pradesh had been taking place very rapidly in a large number of areas of the state. The missionaries had been refuting the allegation that they were opposed to the local culture.[29] There had been emphasis 'now-on-wards' on the integration of the 'Christian ethos' with the 'local customs'.[30]

IV. Hinduism and Appropriation of Tribal Religion

Some of the Hindu organizations have been trying to 'appropriate' tribal cultural practices, and thus exercise Hindu hegemony. For example, the Ramakrishna Mission was encouraged by the officials of the Indian state to

open a hospital in Itanagar and school in the Along area, the district headquarters of the then Siang Frontier Division. Though the Mission's activities are related to social services, health and education and that the conversion of the tribes does not figure in its agenda, in the Ram Krishna Mission School at Along the 'appropriation' of tribal cultural practices has been attempted in a subtle way. The school was established on 27th July 1966.[31] A close observation of the life-style and everyday activities of the students and teachers of the school reveals to us how nationalist and Hindu hegemony has been exercised among the tribal children. However, this hegemony seems to be multivocal in nature, that is, it has tried to inculcate the values of Indian patriotism, Arunachal patriotism, multi-culturalism and liberal Hinduism.[32]

Right Wing Hindu Organisations/Hindutva

The Right-Wing Hindu Organisations have been actively operating in the tribal areas of North-East India, specifically Arunachal Pradesh. Their activities became very intense during the 1990s in Arunachal Pradesh. It is significant that it is during this time that globalization and Hindutva forces were becoming dominant in India. It is also the period when various cultural and literary societies were being established by the educated leaders of different tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, which aimed at protecting their cultural heritages. The Hindutva lobby has been operating through 'Arun Jyoti', 'Arunachal Vikas Parishad' and 'Kalyan Ashram'. Kalyan Ashram was 'founded in 1952 at Jashpurnagar of Chhattisgarh but it came to the Northeast only in 1978.'[33] Outlining its role in the Northeast, Dharmaraj writes:

> The only message that it has delivered to the people of Northeast is that "Traditional Faith and Culture" of different Janajatis is precious; preserve it and protect it to re-establish peace and tranquillity among the different ethnic groups and the Northeast region as a whole. If the traditional faith and culture (Sanatan Dharma-Sanskriti) is protected the society could be protected, which is essential for the national security and integration. Because, Bharat is known to the world for its

Sanatan dharma-sanskriti, for which it survived long, since the inception of this creation as a whole.[34]

The writer equates Sanatan-Dharma as the traditional faith and culture of the tribes. This organisation is opposed to the activities of the Christian Churches. As Dharmaraj points out, "Kalyan Ashram is going to 'undo' the blunders committed by the Church. Church has divided the society in ethnic line and Kalyan Ashram is trying to bring them together on a common platform."[35]

The Hindutava forces are trying to appropriate tribal religion and in the process trying to 'Hinduise' their gods and incorporate them into the Hindu pantheon. 'Dony-Poloism' is one of the best examples of this attempt at 'appropriation.'

Thus, the biographical sketch of the founder of the Donyi-Poloism movement, Talom Rukbo, along with biographical sketches of all the tribal leaders of India who strived to maintain their tribal religion, prominently figures in the booklet published in Hindi by Akhil Bhartiya Vanvasi Kalyan Asharam.[36]

V. Tribal Cultural and Religious Movements

The influence of alien religions created an identity crisis in the society. However, the social base for this had already been created by various changes resulting from: (a) Institutional changes in agriculture; (b) various changes in traditional occupations; (c) the developing urbanization; (d) the migration, internal as well as from outside the State;[37] (e) gradual abandonment of the so-called Nehru-Elwin policy; (f) super-imposition of 'mainstream' political structure over her traditional autonomous socio-political institutions, thereby bringing about a series of changes in tribal polity.[38] These developments threatened the traditional way of living, especially of the educated class, and therefore created an identity crisis in the society. However, it was the intellectuals[39] who were able to articulate this identity crisis and give it a coherent form.

The movement for cultural and religious identity may be traced back to 28th August 1968, when some intellectuals belonging to the Adi tribe held a

meeting at Along, the district headquarters, to consider the means for forming a 'larger socio-religious association for forging a larger identity.'[40] It was decided to construct a 'DONYI POLO-MOPIN-SOLUNG DERE' (Dony-Polo being the deity and divine figure of the Adis; Solung and Mopin being the most important festivals of Minyong and Galos respectively, Dere being the community Hall) which would provide a common meeting place for all communities residing in the area on the occasion of important 'social, cultural and religious celebrations such as Mopin and Solung' and 'veneration for the universal deity Donyi-Polo'.[41] The 'germination' of the idea which 'aimed at unification of Adi faith in the supreme 'DONYI POLO' was welcomed by all.'[42] The next step taken by the intellectuals was the formation of cultural and literary societies.[43] These formed an agenda for cultural defence against the onslaught of alien religions. 'The Adi cultural and literary society' was formally inaugurated at Along, the district headquarters of Siang,' with a two-day programme on 14th and 15th November, 1971.'[44] Simultaneously Adi cultural and literary society was formed at Pasighat.[45] The most important aims and objectives of these societies have been the preservation of traditional cultural heritage.[46] The intellectuals were aware of the fact that their folklores, myths, rituals, songs, dances etc. were not only important for sustaining their identity but also a great source of their cultural history.[47] Therefore, they felt it the utmost need to record the oral traditions.

The intellectuals felt the need to develop Adi (common for all the sub-tribes) language and literature and a suitable script for it. It led to the formation of Adi Agom Kebang (Adi Sahitya Sabha) on 12th November 1981. Talom Rukbo, a leading literary personality and vanguard of the cultural movement among the Adi groups, was one of the prominent founding members of this organization. Literature for him has been an important weapon for forging cultural identity among the Adis. The leitmotif of his poems and other writings has been that of cultural rootedness and cultural defense, which is an important expression of cultural identity.[48]

One of the important aspects of the movement for cultural identity has been a search for forging a religious identity based on the indigenous traditions. It had been a recurring theme in the writings of the intellectuals belonging to

Adis. They have constructed the belief systems, religious ethics and philosophy of this religion based on tribal traditions. It has been given the denomination 'Donypoloism'.[49] This nomenclature has been derived from the recognition of Donyi-polo, the combined divine figure of Donyi (the sun) and Polo (the moon), as Adis' popular gods.[52]

Some of the intellectuals led by Talom Rukbo have further given more concrete form to Adi religion by establishing DONYI POLO YELAN KEBANG (A society of DonyiPolo Faith) in 1991. They have started 'service of prayer on evening of every Saturday and mass gathering on every second Saturday for day service.'[50] On 31st December, 1992, the foundation of Dony-Polo Altar building was laid along with the raising of DonyiPolo symbol.[51] Since then 31st December is being celebrated as Donyipolo every year. Nowadays every Saturday morning a mass gathering takes place in Donypolo Gangin (temple), and mass prayer is performed, accompanied by selected rituals.

But many intellectuals among the various sub-tribes of the Adis are contesting this form of religious identity.[52] Some of them argue that it is an 'invention' and not 'an original religion.' But the leaders of this form of religious identity refute this, including the alleged 'imitation' of Hinduism.[53] They do not rule out the 'influence' of outside religions but it does not 'indicate imitation.' One may 'borrow' certain ideas from outside but 'that does not amount to imitation'. All the rituals and 'innovations' are 'derived from our own indigenous traditions.'[54]

Though the Adi group of tribes was the first to start the movement for religious identity, it gradually spread among other tribes of Tanis. Thus among the Nyishi, who are numerically the largest group, the movement for forging religious identity based on indigenous traditions began from the early part of the 1990s. First, it expressed itself at a cultural level in the form of 'Nyishi Culture Society'. However, the leaders of this society were not interested in taking up religious questions since the aim of the society was to preserve selective aspects of Nyishi, and, moreover, it was a broad-based forum and was open for Christian Nyishis as well. Therefore, some of the leaders established another society that was named 'Nisei Indigenous Faith and Culture society' (NIFCS). The aim of this society was to 'preserve, promote and propagate indigenous faith and culture' and it was decided to

promote the slogan 'loss of faith is loss of culture, loss of culture is loss of identity.'[55] However, for the purpose of forging religious identity, a religious body NYDER NAMLO (literal meaning –spiritual house) was established on 27th January, 2001 at Doimukh under the aegis of Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture society. A booklet containing prayers has been published in order 'to develop socio-religious, moral and spiritual value' among the Nyishis.[56] The 'Nyedar Namlo' organizes regular prayer meetings in a fixed place. The branches have now been established in different parts of the region inhabited by Nyishis.

Similarly, 'DonyiPoloism' as a movement has been spreading among other groups of the Tanis: Tagin, Apatani and Hill-Miris.

Thus, the movement for cultural and religious identity among the Tanis of Arunachal Pradesh evolved out of the dialogue with the official, Christian missionary and Hindu missionary discourses. The tribal intellectuals in the process of creatively engaging themselves in the dialogue with these discourses evolved a counter-hegemonic agenda and carved out their own space of forging a process of identity formation.

ENDNOTES

[1] I have borrowed this from Verrier Elwin, *Myths of the Northeast Frontier of India, North-east Frontier Agency,* Shillong, 1954, pp. xiii-xv.

[2] Ibid., p. xiv.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid, p. xv; also file No. 25, 1997-98 of Adi cultural and Literary society, Pasighat, p. 7.

[8] Oshong Ering, *Donyi-Polo-A Faith and Belief of the Tani, Donyi-Polo Mission,* Itanagar, Series-1, p.1.

[9] N. P. Mason, *These Seventy five Years,* 1911, cited in M.S. Sangma, "Attempts to Christianize the people of Arunachal Pradesh by the American Baptist Missionaries [1836-1950]," *Proceedings of North-East Indian History Association,* Pasighat, 1986 [seventh session], p. 263.

[10] M.A.Z. Rolston,"Persecution of Christians in Arunachal Pradesh," *National Council of Christian Review,* Vol. XCIX, No. 1, January 1979, p. 73.

[11] Sangma, op. cit, p. 263.

[12] Elwin papers, File No. ATA/G/55, Secret, serialized as File No. 96, p. 2, the manuscript section of the Nehru Memorial center for Contemporary Studies, Teen Murti, New Delhi; also see Nehru's Note on His Tour of the North-Eastern Frontier Areas in October, 1952, p. 5 (emphasis added). In fact, the most important exponents of the formulation of this policy towards NEFA were Sir Akbar Hydari and Jairamdas Daulatram [both of whom were governors of Assam], Jawaharlal Nehru [the then Prime Minister of India] and Verrier Elwin, Adviser, Tribal Affairs to the Governor of Assam. However, Elwin played the key role since 1953 and largely moulded the government's policy towards NEFA. The policy pursued during this period is generally known as Nehru-Elwin policy.

[13] Elwin papers File No. ATA/G/42, p. 18.

[14] I am using the concept of cultural hegemony after deriving insight from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Note Books,* ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York, 1971, pp. 12-13, 53, 55-60, 238-39, 261-64; see also Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From Cultural Writings,* ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower, Massachusetts, 1985, pp. 55-60, 164-65, 172-73, 220-21, 342-43; Walter L. Adamson, *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory,* Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980, ch. 6, esp. pp. 170, 173; and Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review,* 100, 1976-77, pp. 5-78; T. J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *The American Historical Review,* Vol. 90, No. 3, 1985, pp. 573, 578.

[15] For the concept "culture as appropriation," see Roger Chertier, "Culture as appropriation: Popular cultural uses in Early Modern France," in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture, Mouton Publishers,* Berlin, 1984, pp. 229-53.

[16] This generalization is based on the following writings that fairly well represent the official position on the role of Christian missionaries in the tribal areas: (a) Elwin Verrier views in Nari K. Rustomji, *Verrier Elwin and India's North-Eastern Borderlands,* Shillong, 1988, pp. 58-59; (b) G. A. Smali, a retired ICS had expressed similar views as early as 1946, see G. A. Smali to The Chairman, British Parliamentary; Delegation, c/o

Secretary, Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, January, 11, 1946, in G. N. Bordoloi Papers, Nehru Memorial Center for Contemporary Studies, Manuscript Section, and p. 7; (c) Elwin's views are also narrated in Ramachandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized, Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, And India,* Chicago (1999) 2001, pp. 165, 242; (d) also see Elwin to T. N. Kaul, I. C. S, Joint Secretary to the Govt. of India, Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, Feb. 12, 1953. File No. ATA/C/6, listed as file no. 8/88 in Elwin Papers; (e) File No.ATA/T/2. Listed as File No. 133, pp. 71-72 in Elwin papers; (f) Nehru to B. Das, May 19, 1951, in S. Gopal, General editor, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru,* Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi, 1994, Vol. 16, part 1, p. 283; (g) Nehru to B. R. Medhi, August 1952, in S. Gopal, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru,* p. 199. (footnote No. 5); (h) S. Gopal, Jawaharlal Nehru, *A Biography, Vol. 2, 1947-56,* Delhi, 1983, p. 209; (i) Nehru, "A Note on a tour of the North-Eastern Frontier Areas," 19-25 October 1952. This note is found in the Elwin papers; (j) Nehru to Amrit Kaur, October, 30, 1953, cited in S. Gopal, *Jawahar Lal Nehru, A Biography,* Vol. 2, p. 209.

[17] Third Series, Vol. XLI, 2 April-19 April, 1965, p. 8906, col. 843; Lok Sabha Debates, Fifth series, Vol. 20, Nos. 1-5, November 13-17, 1972, November 15, 1972, col. 528, p. 130, written answers; Lok Sabha Debates, Fifth series, Vol. 22, Nos. 21-25, 1972, col. 4254, p. 14;

[18] Elwin Papers, File No.110, p. 8.

[19] K.L. Mehta's comments in a note dated 2-6-55 on some of the points arising on Dr. Elwin's note on a summary of Experiences and Ideas gained during 1954-55, in Elwin Papers, File no. ATA/T/2 listed as File No. 133, p. 32. Elwin Papers, File No. 110, p. 8.

[20] Ibid.

[21] File No. 153, Elwin Papers, p.43. In a confidential note, Verrier Elwin stated that it was Shri Jairam Doulatram, the then Governor of Assam who had mooted the idea of developing the tribal religion.

[22] The Indigenous leaders submitted a long petition dated 22 April, 1971 to the then Prime-Minister of India wherein they stated that they had been following their age-old traditions and that they follow their own religion but the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries have disrupted the social and religious ecology of the Adis.This document was found in Talom Rukbo's archive. Talom rukbo was a leading cultural activist and had been in the forefront of cultural struggles against alien forces. He allowed me to consult his huge archive.

[23] It is based mainly on the Christian sources. When I interviewed a number of indigenous leaders about the violence on Christian converts they were silent and some of them denied this violence while others replied that they didn't remember. Either it was feigned ignorance or there were actual lapses of memory. It is possible that they were playing politics with their memories.

[24] *The Arunachal Pradesh Code,* Vol. III, pp.7-9. Government of Arunachal Pradesh, Law and Judicial Department, Itanagar, 1982.

[25] Cited in NCCR, Vol. XCVIII, No. 8, August, 1978, p. 399.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Reported in NCCR, Vol. XCVIII, No. 9, September, 1978, p. 462 (News Column: "News From Many Quarters," India.)

[28] See NCCR, Vol. XCIX, No. 1, January, 1979, pp. 51,73; NCCR, Vol. XCIX, April 1979, No. 4, pp. 179, 180, 182, 223; Nos. 6-7, June-July 1979, p. 361.

[29] NCCR, Vol. CIVI, No.7, August, 1984, p. 369.

[30] Thus, in his first Christmas message in Arunachal in December, 1979 after the passage of the Bill, the Bishop Rt. Rev. Joseph Mittathany DD, the Bishop of Tezpur

who had come to preside the Christmas celebration at Lekhi (in the Nishing area which was the scene of anti-Christian violence during 1970's), emphasized three aspects: (a) patriotism (b) preservation of every "good local custom" and (c) thus to incarnate Christian life into their environment. See NCCR, Vol. c. No. 3, March 1980, p. 154.

[31] Based on the information provided by the school authorities.

[32] I conducted my fieldwork in the school in 1998.

[33] Dharma, A Rousing Call from the Northeast, Guwahati, Assam, 2004, p. 40

[34] Ibid., emphasis added.

[35] Ibid., p. 41

[36] Akhil Bhartiya Vanvasi Kalyan Asharam, Swarana Jayanti varssh, 2003 (Golden Jubilee Year, 2003 of All India Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram), p. 11.

[37] For migration, see A. Mitra, *Internal Migration & Economic Development in the Hills*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 50-73.

[38] Atul Chandra Talukdar, *Political Transition in the Grassroots in Tribal India*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 91-159.

[39] I have derived the concept of "intellectuals" from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From The Prison Note Books*, p. 9; Karl Marx, *German Ideology*, London 1965, p. 61; Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Notes on the role of the intelligentsia in Colonial India: India from mid nineteenth century," *Studies in History*, Vol. I, No. I, January-June, 1979, p. 98; K. N. Panikkar, "The Intellectual History of Colonial India: Some Historiographical and Conceptual Questions," in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar, *Situating Indian History*, Delhi, 1986, p. 412.

[40] Donyi Polo Mopin Solung Dere, Along. The history of this event was inscribed on a board. Field Survey, 1998, Feb. 1998.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] These Associations have been registered and are listed in general file No. SR/ITA, Arunachal Pradesh Secretariat, Political Department. Jayanta Kumar Sarkar, "Development of Identity Consciousness in Arunachal Pradesh," in K. S. Singh, ed., *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol. I, Delhi, 1980, p. 234.

[45] Listed in general file No. SR/ITA, op. cit.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Oshong Ering, "Preservation and Revitalization of Cultural Heritage of Arunachal Pradesh," Adi Cultural and Literary Society, Pasighat, November 1976, p. 5; Talom rukbo, *Echo*, 19 June, 1987, p. 3; Tumpak Ete, *Nyibu Agom*, Vol. I, p. 2.

[48] Talom Rukbo's poems "Kaabom Kaaboma" and "Turmona Yelot" bring out the representation of the theme of cultural rootedness very effectively.

[49] *Donyi-Poloism: Its Faith And Practices*, Vol. 1, published by Adi Cultural and Literary Society, Pasighat, September 1987.

[52] Oshong Ering, "The Tanis and the Donyi-Polo cult," *NEFA Information*, February, 1970, pp. 22-25; Oshong Ering, "Adi belief and faith," *Arunachal News*, Vol. 12, No. 5, August, 1983, pp. 25-26; Lummer Dai, "Donyi-Poloism: A Scientific Religion," Arunachal News, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1977, pp. 56-58; Talom Rukbo, "Donyi-Poloism: A Religion," *Arunachal Review*, July-December, 1985, pp. 1-4.

[50] *Donyi-Poloism: Its Faith And Practices*, Vol. 1, published by Adi Cultural and Literary Society, Pasighat, September, 1987

[51] Talom Rukbo to The Chairman, Donyi Polo Mission, Itanagar, December 8, 1982, File No. ACLS-7/85-86, Archives of Adi Cultural and Literary Society, Pasighat.

[52] Interview with Oshong Ering, Pasighat, February 15, 1998; interview with Tumpak Ete, Along, February 23, 1988.

[53] Interview with Talom Rukbo, Pasighat, February, 15, 1998; interview with Kaling Borang, Pasighat, February, 21, 1998

[54] Ibid.

[55] Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Culture Society, Byelaw, Nahaarlagun, 1999, p. 16.

[56] *Aan Donyi Khumlaju,* published by Nyedar Namlo Committee, Doimukh, 2001, p.1.

Politics of Identity & Independence: Sikh Political Activism at Home and in the Diaspora

Binoda Kumar Mishra[*]

The paper seeks to analyse the complex interconnection between the identity politics of the Sikh community in the diaspora and the Sikh homeland politics in India. Building on the history of Sikhism, the paper focuses on the continuity and changes in the nature of political activism of the Sikhs both in the diaspora and homeland in the context of globalisation.

Throughout the late 20th century a new pattern of conflict emerged in which identity groups – racial, religious, ethnic, cultural – have become central. There is a debate about whether this "new pattern" should be dated back to 1945 (and include the decolonisation wars of the 1950s and 1960s, and the post-colonial civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s) or if it only began with the ending of the Cold War in the 1989. Without adding any other reference point to this debate, this paper aims at arguing that group identity has always been a source of conflict; only the nature, scope and objectives change in response to changing exogenous socio-political environments. The focus of the paper is the case of the Sikhs, a religious community indigenous to India. The intention is neither to project a monolithic picture of the Sikhism hiding all its nuances nor to create a stereotype, but to understand the reasons and implications of political activism of religious communities in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society like India. Sikhism is the youngest religion in India. Sikhs claim a logical home in the Punjab and boast of a huge global presence. There is an interconnection of the political activism of Sikhs in India and in the diaspora. The objective of the political activism of Sikhs in India and in the diaspora has been the same, i.e. protection of Sikh identity, but the nature of political activism differs drastically. In the host lands Sikhs have behaved pragmatically and used methods prescribed within a

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democratic set up such as legal procedures, lobbying and at the best demonstration. On the other hand, Sikhs at home have showed their determination to take recourse to militancy in order to protect their identity. In time line, the political activism of Sikhs can be divided into three phases namely, the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods.

A Brief History

Sikhs started asserting their identity no sooner than the articulation of their identity was completed. In the history of religions in India, Sikhism is unique in the sense that it is the only religion which carried a political connotation from its birth. Sikhism originated in 1499 with their first *Guru* (Teacher), Guru Nanak, attaining enlightenment. Beginning as a reform movement against the rigidities of Hinduism and Islam, Sikhism evolved to the status of a religion by the contributions of ten preachers known as *Gurus*. The evolution was complete with Guru Govind Singh abolishing the human incarnation of *Gurus* and assigning the *Granth* (Holy Text) the status of 11th and permanent *Guru*. The nature of the Sikh religion varies in interpretations. Some believe that "Sikhism is a syncretistic religion, originally related to the Bhakti movement within Hinduism and the Sufi branch of Islam, to which many independent beliefs and practices were added."[1] According to Khushwant Singh, "Sikhism was born out of a wedlock between Hinduism and Islam after they had known each other for a period of nearly nine hundred years."[2] Some believe that Sikh religion is a re-purification of Hinduism; they view Sikhism as part of the Hindu religious tradition. Many Sikhs disagree; they believe that their religion is a distinct development and emerged from the religious fluidity of medieval India – a religion that was not derived from either Hinduism or Islam.[3] However, over the course of time, Sikhism assumed a distinct identity of its own and Sikhs are willing to protect this identity in the face of any other identity or religion. Sikhism had a political character from the beginning. As the teachings of Guru Nanak started getting popular for their liberal and democratic nature, the Gurus attracted the atrocity of the Mughal emperors. Of the ten *Gurus*, two were killed by the Mughal rulers – which somewhat contributed to the formation of identity in the first place, and forced the

Gurus to advocate militancy for protecting the identity that had barely yet been articulated.

By the time *Guru* Gobind Singh died, the Sikh religion had achieved a certain degree of social popularity but lacked political clout. It does not suggest that the Sikh *Gurus* were not aware of the importance of having political clout, but given the struggle at hand against the Mughals, the importance was placed on elevating the socio-economic status of the Sikhs. But the Sikhs were constantly involved in a political struggle with the Mughals from the time of the sixth *Guru*, *Guru* Hargobind Rai. He for the first time tried to mix religion with politics. One of the measures he initiated was wearing 'two swords girded around the waist, one symbolising the spiritual authority and the second symbolising the temporal power. He started accepting horses and arms in gifts from followers. From this time, the Sikhs were involved in political battles with the Mughals. But these struggles did not have a territorial ambition, which makes the Sikh religion distinct from other religions of that time. However, Sikhs remained engaged in Low Intensity Conflicts[4] and sometimes in open military clashes with the Mughals. There was a brief period of peace as Shah Jahan adopted the policy of keeping away from the religious centres. But the armed struggle against the Mughals again resumed during the time of Aurangzeb who killed *Guru* Tegh Bahadur, the 9th *Guru* of the Sikhs. Following his execution, the tenth *Guru* propagated militant activities against the Mughal rulers. He termed such militancy as *Dharmayudh*. It was *Guru* Gobind Singh who created the Khalsa with the five 'Ks' as their symbol. They were: *Kes* (Unshorn hair), *Kanga* (comb), *Kachha* (Short drawers), *Kara* (arm bracelet) and *Kripan* (sword). These easily discernible symbols created a brotherhood among the Sikhs and established their separate identity distinct from the Hindus. The salient features of the prolonged Sikh militancy from its inception till the arrival of the British were: struggle against the inability to express one's free will; an expression of dissatisfaction against social discrimination; and finally an expression of the collective will to protect and follow their religion.[5] It is to be noted here that during this phase there was no political ambition of establishing a separate territorial state for the Sikhs.

In a sense, territorial expansion began with Banda Singh Bahadur who was handed over the political powers of the Sikhs. The Sikh religious leaders remained in charge of political affairs till Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rise to prominence as a secular ruler. He could create and manage a big empire because he convinced the people of Lahore and the Punjab that he did not intend to create a Sikh state. Rather, he aimed at establishing a secular "Punjabi" state. This conception remains as the reference point for the Sikhs in terms of their political claims to be made much later.

The British Period

The activism of Sikhs during the British period was more religious and social than political. The British realised the utility of the Sikhs for their battles. Thus, they attributed special qualities to the Sikhs by branding them as a martial race. They also respected the Sikh religious practices and symbols. The British also encouraged the Sikhs to preserve their own identity as separate from that of the Hindus. In the words of Lord Dalhousie: "Their great *gooroo* Govind sought to abolish caste and in a great degree succeeded. They are, however gradually relapsing into Hindooism, and even as they continue as Sikhs, they are yearly Hindoofied more and more; so much so, that ...in 50 years the sect of Sikh would have disappeared."[6]

The encouragement by the British and their promise to protect their religious identity yielded them complete Sikh loyalty. This became evident from the role the Sikhs played during the Revolt of 1857. The Sikhs not only remained aloof from the Revolt but also took active part in favour of the British to crush the revolt. Another instance of Sikh loyalty to the British was felicitation of the Jallianwallah Bagh culprit General Dyer by Arur Singh, the manager of the Golden Temple. Some Sikhs, with the hope of winning British sympathy and thus patronage, accepted this; the majority of the Sikhs, however, disapproved the move and joined the nationalists in their struggle against the British. The activism of Sikhs during the British colonial days goes on to prove the protectionist attitude of the Sikhs. During this period, there were large-scale Sikh conversions to either Christianity or to Hinduism. This trend bothered the Sikhs, and to protect their identity they created religious institutions, namely, *Singh Sabhas*. These *Sabhas* proliferated

in number and an institution namely, "Chief Khalsa Diwan" was created to coordinate the functioning of the Sabhas.

The principal objective of Sikh activism during this period was to save Sikh identity from the influence of resurging Hinduism. The Arya Samaj movement started by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, with its call to go back to the Vedas, sounded warning bells for Sikh identity. It is said that Swami Dayanada argued that Sikhism is a development to be noted, and forgotten. Sikh interpretation of the call of the Arya Samaj to "go back to Vedas" was that of "India for Hindus",[7] that Hindus are trying to establish their religious supremacy over the country, ignoring the other religions and particularly the Sikhs. At this time, there was no clear articulation of a homeland for the Sikhs independent of India. As independence neared and more importantly the division of the country on communal lines became apparent, the Sikhs feared for the loss of their identity. The Sikhs were never in favour of partition; they always advocated a multi-religious Punjab for them within undivided India. Thus, the religious revivalist movement suddenly took on political colours and started demanding a separate homeland for the Sikhs in line with Muslim demands. The demand for a separate Sikh homeland was formally articulated in the resolution adopted by the Akali Dal executive committee in March 1946. The demand was for creation of a separate *Sikhistan* or Khalistan with the following objective:

> ...whereas the entity of the Sikhs is being threatened on account of the persistent demand for Pakistan by the Muslims on the one hand, and absorption by the Hindus on the other, ... the Akali Dal demands, for the preservation and protection of the religious, cultural and economic rights of the Sikh nation, the creation of a Sikh state.[8]

Master Tara Singh, who represented the Sikhs and spearheaded the movement for India's independence, did not press for a separate Sikh homeland – for which he was subjected to severe criticisms. Later in his autobiography he admits that, "the reason for us not pressing the demand for

a Sikh state was our ignorance of history and world politics."[9] At this time the Sikhs were interested more in a homeland not necessarily outside the Indian Union of India but that a state that would ensure their identity. This demand was fulfilled in 1966 when Punjab was trifurcated, creating a Sikh dominated Punjab.

Post-Independence India

Even after getting a Sikh majority state, the Akalis were not satisfied and started questioning the power sharing arrangement between the centre and the states as is evident from the Anandpur Sahib Resolution of 1977, in which they demanded measures to recast the constitution of India, to make it a federation, and establish Khalsha dominance.

Question of Identity

Identity has always been a contested concept for the Sikhs. Though the articulation of Sikh identity – that was started by *Guru* Nanak, the first *Guru* of the Sikhs – was completed by the first five *Guru*s of the Sikh religious order, it remained contested. Often Sikh identity was made blurry by the Hindus who claimed the Sikhs to be brothers of Hindus, and Sikhism a militant face of Hinduism in the face of Islamic onslaught on Hindus. But for all purposes of reference, the creation of the *Adi Granth* in 1604 by the *Guru* Arjan, the fifth *Guru* is decisive. The *Adi Granth* became the key symbol of Sikh identity. Being a political religion, the sphere of influence of Sikhism varied with time and the changing political situation of the country, but the question of Sikh identity remained, though contested, largely unharmed during the colonial period, which followed the Mughal rule over the country. The question of identity for the Sikhs became important again after the British left the country, dividing it on communal lines. The assertive and religiously independent Sikhs revived their aspiration for a homeland to firmly establish their identity. The homeland movement that began in India just after independence was militant in nature, and highly mobilizational in method.

The Sikh mobilisation over the issue of identity crystallised primarily due to the initiative of the diasporic Sikhs. It was the racial discrimination by Canada and the United States that ignited the spirit of otherness among the

Sikhs which prompted them, as *per their characteristic of being reactionary*, to vent their ire by launching the first independent struggle of the then recognised motherland, "India". The story of Hardayal-initiated Ghadr movement appealed to Sikhs across the globe. But it failed miserably. The Ghadr movement failed because the initiative was presumed to obtain mass support in the homeland that is the Punjab. But, on the other hand, the homeland Sikhs were found to be aligned to the British who took enough care to respect the separate identity of the Sikhs and also promoted their distinctiveness. Declaring the Sikhs as a martial race boosted the ego of the Sikhs to the extent that they remained loyal to the *Raj*, despite understanding the alien nature of the governors. The inference one can draw from this discussion of the nature of identity manifest among the diaspora and from that among the homeland Sikhs is that *Sikhs* are politically reactionary and not proactive.

Homeland Demand

There are conflicting accounts about whether the Sikh homeland movement was primarily an initiative of the diaspora or the homeland Sikh religious and political organisations. But the fact is that the homeland movement began at the time of Indian independence. Just before India attained independence, the prospects of division of the country on communal lines became evident. Sikhs, by virtue of their loyalty to the British *Raj*, hoped to gain the political sovereignty they enjoyed under the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In the event of that not happening, the Sikhs felt betrayed by the *Raj*. The promise of greater autonomy by the centre pacified the Sikhs. It is interesting to learn, despite continuous racial discrimination in western countries, particularly in Canada and the US, that neither the diasporic nor the homeland Sikhs raised the question of a Sikh homeland for some time.

Diasporic Priority

Without getting into the argument of who initiated the violent Khalistan movement, one can conclude that there was a convergence of expectations among the homeland and the diasporic Sikhs on the question of homeland. But the priorities of the diasporic Sikhs differed from those of the homeland

Sikhs. The nature of the homeland visualised by the homeland Sikhs was in no way similar to that of the diasporic Sikhs. The homeland Sikhs were interested in establishing a "theocratic" state. According to the *Document of Declaration of Khalistan*, "control of religion over the state shall be constitutionally established and Sikh religion will be the official religion of Khalistan. It will be the duty of the Government to promote Sikhism".[10] The diasporic Sikhs were not at all interested in creating a Sikh theocratic state. The initial support of the diasporic Sikhs towards Sikhistan or Khalistan was their need for a political reinforcement of their economic standing in the host societies without having any clear concept of a Sikh nation. It was more of an emotional issue, particularly for that section of the Sikhs (mostly the *Jat* Sikhs), who had a strong material (economic) connection with the Punjab and intended to return in their advanced years.

The second explanation of the involvement of the diasporic Sikhs in the homeland separatist movement is that this presented an opportunity for the *Jat* Sikhs, the relatively more prosperous among the Sikhs, to establish their domination in the diaspora and in the homeland. Though such an explanation obfuscates the nature of diasporic involvement in the Sikh separatist movement, the fact remains that the entire movement was led primarily by the *Jat* Sikhs either at home or in the diaspora, and the other minority sections of the Sikhs (*Namdharies, Nirankaries, Radhasoamis and Ravidasis*) were highly critical of the Khalistan movement.

Diaspora Support for the Khalistan Movement

The support of the Sikhs from the diaspora towards the homeland movement was largely moral, and to a limited extent material. Only a small section of the diasporic Sikhs seriously associated themselves with the homeland movement directly till 1984. But Operation Blue Star proved to be a turning point. The event generated instant reactions among the diasporic Sikhs. The fever of Sikh nationalism spread to Sikhs of all walks of life in every part of the world. A closer reading of the events reveals that the entire separatist movement, which had a very local reach and a small demand such as a satisfactory degree of autonomy, changed into a full-scale war for independence on account of political manipulation or intervention of major political organisations of the country. The rise of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale

and his turning into a Frankenstein is largely due to the secret intervention of Mrs Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of the country. However, the diasporic Sikhs got involved in the real sense of the term only after the critical events of 1984 called Operation Blue Star and Operation Woodrose. The events, mainly Operation Blue Star, convinced the Sikhs the world over about the need for a separate Sikh homeland. Before the critical event, the political activism of the diasporic Sikhs was limited to mobilising themselves in the host society for articulating and aggregating the identity requirements of the local Sikhs. The methodology of such political action, more often that not, involved use of democratic methods such as taking legal steps and organising peaceful protests. The initial involvement of the diasporic Sikhs in the separatist movement was also to a great extent democratic, as they used their economic and socio-political standing in the host community to lobby the host political establishment and the international community for the cause of a Sikh homeland. It is only a section of the diasporic Sikhs, like the *Jat* Sikhs, who took part in the violent movement. Once the separatist movement was suppressed at home, it ceased to be a priority of the diasporic Sikhs. The important feature of the involvement of the diasporic Sikhs in the homeland movement is that the nature of support was directly related to the socio-political treatment the Sikhs received in their host countries. It is known that Sikhs from the United Kingdom and Canada were more involved in the homeland cause more actively than Sikhs in other countries. In these countries Sikhs had greater economic status but socially they lacked acceptance and respect from the indigenous population. This is an evidence of the reactionary attitude of the Sikhs, and their historically inherited nature of being protective about identity.

Conclusion

The current era of globalisation on the one hand is driving the world to a stateless economic system, on the other hand the world is facing assertions of ethnic and religious nature that challenge the persistence of the current form of political formulations. Identities are *en route*[11] and constantly change their nature of assertion on their way under the influence of global changes of the world system. The problem is particularly severe in the developing societies such as in South Asia. It is in this context of an incomplete nation building

process in India, that the role of religious communities has to be clearly understood and directed, since it can help escalate the conflicts inherent in this multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. After the partition of the country on communal lines in 1947, India experienced another major threat of communal disharmony and possible partition from the Sikhs.

This brief overview of the evolution and political activism of the Sikh community suggests that this is a classic case of social determinism. A benign reform movement, in response to social and more importantly political "interventions", evolved into a search for a distinct identity, and assumed a militant character. Thus, if the purpose of academic analysis is to explain, predict and, if possible, control future events, the lesson to be learnt is that religious identities do not cause conflicts on their own. Most often than not, their political roles are manipulated or influenced by political forces. Therefore, if politics does not cease to intervene in religion with a pugnacious intent, religion or religious identity has the potential to create political and social instability in India and in South Asia, as is evident from the story of the Sikhs.

ENDNOTES

[1] http://www.religioustolerance.org/sikhism1.htm.

[2] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs, Volume I*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 17.

[3] Gurudharm Singh Khalsa, "The End of Syncretism: Anti-Syncretism in Sikh Tradition", in Pashura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier (eds.), *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1999, pp. 93-107.

[4] Vivek Chadha, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 168.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Khushwant Singh, *My Bleeding Punjab*, New Delhi: USB Publishers, 1992, p. 33.

[7] Dr. Griswold observes that in the watchword, "go back to the Vedas", is implicit the idea that ... Hindu religion is for Indians and Indian Sovereignty for Hindus. Cited by Khushwant Singh, *A History of Sikhs, Volume I*, New Delhi: OUP, 1999 p. 147.

[8] Rajiv A. Kapur, *The Sikh Separatism: The Politics of Faith*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1986, p. 185.

[9] Jaswant Singh (ed.), *Autobiography of Master Tara Singh*, cited in Vivek Chadha, *Low Intensity Conflicts in India: An Analysis*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 186.

[10] *Document of Declaration of Khalistan* (Issued from the Golden Temple on April 29, 1986, by the five member Panthic Committee), cited in Laurent Gayer, "The Globalisation of Identity Politics: The Sikh Experience," *Working Paper*, May – 2002.

[11] Jan Aart, "Globalisation and Collective Identities", in Jill Krause and Neil Renwick (eds.), *Identities in International Relations*, London, New York: MacMillan/St. Martin's Press, 1996, p. 50.

Political Implication of Resurgent Buddhism in India with Special Reference to the Eastern Region

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Introduction

In this article an attempt has been made to highlight some aspects of the Buddhist resurgence movement visible in various forms during the period from the last quarter of the 19th century to the 1950s. The region to be covered is Eastern India, within the scope of which West Bengal, especially districts of North Bengal, some parts of Tripper, Assam and northeastern India are considered. Obviously, as in all discussions, here too, Bihar and Bengal have been taken up as one single regional unit. There are several factors which motivates me to go for academic exercise as the present one: first and foremost is to revisit Bengal's past, even as recent a past as the 1950s, when the people of Bengal felt no problem to identity themselves as Hindu as well as Buddhist. Second, to place Dr. Ambedkar, one of the most discussed figures of modern India so far as neo-Buddhism is concerned, in the context Buddhist resurgent movements of the 1950s. Third, to reinterpret the intellectual and academic tradition of Buddhist Bengal. While dealing with events of the 1950s, my submission goes to the extent of arguing that on account of the emergence of Communist China in 1949, eastern India's Buddhist past experienced a great shock. There was a clear voice of dissent heard in India when Buddhist Tibet lost its independence to communist China. The region that stood closest to Buddhist Tibet was Bengal, indeed eastern India as a whole. One only remembers names of scholars from Eastern India, like Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri, Sarat Chandra Das and Pandit Rahul Sanskritayan, just to mention a few who contributed a

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great deal towards unveiling Eastern India's age old link with Mahayanist Tibet.

The present writing will try to find some answers to this question: how Buddhist eastern India in general utilized her rich academic and cultural assets to contend with this communist challenge. Interestingly, the United States came up as one of the mentors for such Buddhist resurgence in Asia. There is no wrong in stating that Eastern India in those days was more passionately identified with the Buddhist countries of what we describe today as Southeast Asia. Myanmar (former Burma) enjoys special attention in my discussion. A sort of religious vacuum in Asia must have been felt by big powers as well. Military intervention of big powers (obviously USA, Britain, France etc) as such to fill up the vacuum and directly challenge communism appeared difficult, as that could be seen as attempts to impose neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism. Thus, we see for example the debut of the United States of America in the form of the promoter of Buddhist Studies, while, on the other hand, the socialist leaders from various countries, including India, showed their solidarity in a spirit in which a message became very clear: a Buddhist socialism only could save the nascent republics just freed from the colonial bondage.

I. Interpreting the Resurgence of Buddhism in Eastern India in the Context of Eastern India's Unique Religious and Intellectual Traditions

Buddhism as a religion with her major philosophy stands closest to Hinduism. Both the religions have come along, and have survived in India. Human life is taken basically as an experience full of sorrow (*dukkha*), and it is thus important to find ways to overcome it. Ways and means have been described in both the religions. Buddhism gives a high priority to truth, morality, individuality, simplicity and rational thought. Buddha himself advised his followers not to obey him blindly, but to find out one's own ways. The history of Buddhism, its spread to countries beyond the border of India, and developments of various schools within Buddhism, conflicts and points of consensus between Hinduism and Buddhism at various stages of Indian history, are subjects widely discussed, and a bulk of literature written in English and Indian languages is available. Let me first submit that my engagement with Buddhism, though quite old, has its limitations too. I have

never lived a long time in countries that have Buddhism as a major religion. To understand the Buddhist mind short visits to countries like Myanmar and Thailand, as I have undertaken, have their limitations. On the other hand, in Bengal where I was born in a Hindu family and grew up, I feel the presence of Buddhism in the form of various social norms, philosophy of life, and attitude towards other religious communities. In Bengal, in the western part, as well as in modern Bangladesh, various communities still adhere to Buddhist philosophy and express their minds through their songs: these are highly symbolic, indicating the constant conflict between the minds and the bodies on the one hand, and possibilities of going beyond the conflict on the other.

Bails and Sahajiyas of Bengal carry the message of Buddhist *"Sunyata"*, emptiness. Like in Bengal, also in Orissa, Buddhism remained with its remnants at the grass root level and mingled with the existing Hindu thought. An eminent scholar on Orissa and Bengal, Nagendranath Basu, referred to such Buddhist remains in his book *Modern Buddhism and its Followers in Orissa.*[1] Sashi Bhusan in Dasgupta,[2] his book *Obscure Religious Cults,* drew several examples from Bengali society where Buddhism and various Hindu schools of thought, belonging to Saiva Vaishnava local traditions, accommodated one another, leading to the rise of a Bengal, which became unique in many senses. No centralized hierarchy was visible in the social and religious life of early Bengal. Everything in Bengali society was "lax", decentralized, complex and of a mixed nature. During the entire period from the rise of the Palas (8th century) to the decline of the Hindu-Buddhist rule in Bengal in the 12th-13th centuries, royal and private promotion of Buddhist institutions went side by side with a similar promotion of Vaishnava and Saiva temples.

The *Viharas* (monasteries) like Nalanda, Vikramasila, Traikutaka, Somapura and others in various parts of Bengal and Bihar became centers of esoteric and syncretic thoughts.[3] Not orthodox Theravada but *Tantrayana, Sahajayana, Mantrayana* and *Vajrayana* are the schools that arose in Bengal, Tibet, Nepal and the Himalayan regions. Numerous Gods and Goddesses from the Hindu pantheon found their worshippers among a large section of Buddhists from Bengal and such regions as mentioned above. Obviously, the Muslim

invasion in Bengal in the 13th century posed a great challenge to the very existence of Buddhism itself. Monks were unable to cope with the rising tide of Islamic challenge to this religious life. To survive and to continue their academic and spiritual engagements, many monks and laymen fled to countries such as Nepal, Tibet, Arakan and Upper Myanmar. The Tibetan monk, Taranath, left an account of the History of Buddhism of the eastern region of India, narrating the flight of the Buddhism from its heartland. It should be noted that Mahayana developed out of the *Mahasanghika* School, one of the many schools of Buddhism. The teachings of *Sarvastivadin* were also incorporated. Another feature of Mahayana tradition was the emergence of biographical literature on the life of Lord Buddha. A third feature of Mahayana tradition appeared to be the worship of *Stupa*, a mound built over some Buddhist relics.

The most important feature of Bengal's religious life, so far as Buddhism is concerned, is its role of intercession bringing eastern regions of India closer to Southeast Asia (Myanmar and Thailand in major part) on the one hand, and to countries of northern Buddhism and Hinduism, like Tibet, Nepal, etc. on the other. Even Japan's religious and cultural link with Bengal could be explained by this trend. This international link of Bengal started from a very early period, as early as in the 9th century, when in the middle of the 9th century A.D when the Pala king,[4] Devapala, was approached by the Indonesian king, Balaputradeva, to grant five villages to the Nalanda monastery. Also the kings of Pagan Empire (c. 849-1287) in old Myanmar were interested in having contact with the Bengal-Bihar region with its centre, Bodhgaya. King Mindon Min, one of the most powerful kings of the Konbaung dynasty of Myanmar, took an active initiative to repair the temple of Bodhgaya (1875), and started a guesthouse for the Myanmar (Burmese) pilgrims. Edwin Arnold (1837-1904), an Englishman of eminence, in the late years of the 19th century, felt concerned for Buddhist Asia, and wrote his famous work *Light of Asia.* No less important are the names like Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott who visited the island of Sri Lanka and "rediscovered" the island's Buddhist heritage. Soon Anagraika Dharamapala appeared, a Sri Lankan monk who turned his attention to Buddhist Ceylon and Buddhist Buddhist India. His is the name that is regarded as the most active one in reminding the people of eastern India of the urgent necessity to

save one of the most valuable intellectual assets of their region.[5] It was Dharmapala who established the Mahabodhi society in Colombo and later in Calcutta (modern Kolkata) in the year 1892. Immediately thereafter a journal with the name *Mahabodhi* was launched by him. This journal and the platform of the Mahabodhi society offered the best possible platform for interaction between the Buddhist people across Asia and the people of the eastern region of India. Hinduism and Buddhism for Dharmapala belonged to a single religious tradition. Thus, we see him sharing the platform at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago with Swami Vivekananda in 1893. Even prior to that great event, Dharmapala in his first ever lecture in Calcutta in 1891, in the Albert Hall, chose the subject of kinship between Hindus and Buddhists. The urban middle class of Bengal, not overly preoccupied with any narrow notion of secularism, came forward to extend their patronage to this great monk. Babu Neel Kamal Mukherjee remained Dharmapala's *Dayaka* for the next twenty years.

As I have shown elsewhere,[6] Dharmapala was successful in establishing, or more appropriately "reestablishing", the contact between Buddhist centers of eastern India (Bodhgaya, Calcutta) and centers like Akyab (modern Sittwe of the Rakhine State/Arakan of Myanmar), Bangkok, etc. One must also take note of his western mentors, from various countries of Europe, and especially, from America. Another impetus, which strengthened the then prevailing wave of resurgence of Buddhism, was the event of archaeological excavations undertaken in various parts of India. A large number of European scholars were engaged in this task, often being helped by Indian scholars. Parallel to it should be seen the rise of Indian Studies (Ideology) in various countries of Europe, like Germany, France, England and the Netherlands.[7] Indian scholars worked with western archaeologists to unearth Buddhist monuments in various parts of India. For example, a Buddhist scholar of great repute from Bengal, Dr.Rajendra Lal Mitra, helped General Cunnigham in the act of the renovation of the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya. The discovery of such monuments, in view of their antiquity, gave Indians a new pride and necessary mental strength to combat the rising arrogance of colonial administrators.

It is interesting to note that throughout colonial India, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, people from all sections and economic strata felt an inner urge to go back to Buddhism. The first Hindu to become a Buddhist monk was Mahavira from Vihar. He was a nephew of Babu Kunwar Singh of Jagdishpur, Bihar, who took part in the Mutiny of 1857. In 1890 he became a Bhikkhu, and visited Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Myanmar (Burma). Another great name in this history of Buddhism in India is Dhramananda Kosambi. Bodhananda, a Bengali, born in Mirzapur, followed Kosambi. In 1914, Bodhananada got his ordination (Upasampada) from Kripa Sharan Mahathera, who founded Dharmankura Vihara in central Calcutta in 1903. Kripasharana's name is still cherished by all the Buddhists of the eastern region of India.[8] Prior to the foundation of the Vihara in central Calcutta, he had founded the Bengal Buddhist Association in 1892. He hailed from Chittagong of present day Bangladesh, a place where Buddhism remained a living social force, even after Islam rose in Eastern Bengal. Even today, a large number of Bengali Buddhists visit this temple, Dharmankur Vihara, situated in central Kolkata. The Bengal Buddhist Association brings out a journal named *Jagajyoti*, which is still in circulation. The other journal dedicated to Buddhist studies and rejuvenation of Buddhist heritage that is still in circulation in eastern India is *Nalanda*. One of the most significant steps undertaken in the 1940s by Hindus and Buddhists of India was the peaceful settlement of conflict between Buddhists and Hindu Mahants concerning the temple management in Bodhgaya.

This conflict disappeared with the passing of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Act in the year 1949. This important event left its impact on Indian political culture and brought India closer to the Buddhist countries of Asia.

When discussing Buddhism in colonial Eastern India, we must keep in mind that here in Bengal, a very rich school of Buddhist Studies grew and prospered. It revolved round Calcutta University, which was founded in the year 1857. Also, institutions like the Asiatic Society of Bengal founded by the English orientalist Sir William Jones and Bangiya Sahitya Parishad became centers of academic excellence where Buddhism enjoyed its deserved position. Another institution, which accorded attention to Buddhist Studies including Tibetan and Chinese Studies, sprang up when Rabindranath

Tagore founded Visva Bharati at Santiniketan. The University was founded in the early 1920s when the spirit of Buddhism was very high in the political culture of colonial India, and Myanmar, a country which was struggling against the British rule in her own way, but with having colonial India by her side. Rabindranath Tagore attached tremendous importance to studying Buddhism, as he saw ahead of his time. With his personal patronage, scholars were sent to countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar. Tagore accorded equal attention to promoting Pali studies. Besides this, he himself visited a number of Buddhist countries in Asia where Buddhism was a living religion (Myanmar and Thailand), as well as countries where Buddhism was once an established religion (like Indonesia). China's Buddhist past engaged him seriously, and it seems he was keen to see Buddhism with her lost glory regained in China. Tagore visited Bodhgaya several times and identified himself as a devout Buddhist. It is therefore no wonder that the luminous academic forum "Greater India Society", which was engaged in discovering India's cultural influence in Southeast Asia, invited Tagore to address important meetings. Colonial India's important business houses, like the Birlas, extended their cooperation in making a success of Tagore's trips to the Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia.[9] Seth Jugal Kishor Birla, for example, who played an important part was one such name.

Coming back to the role of Calcutta University in the Buddhist resurgence movement, we should first and foremost mention the name of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee. He was a well-known lawyer and scholar, and was, as many as four times (1906-1914 and again in 1921), the Vice Chancellor of the University. He was deeply occupied with the idea of promoting Pali and Buddhist Studies. The Department of Pali in Calcutta University, already in existence, enjoyed his sincere patronage. His son, Shyamaprasad Mukherjee, was the founder of the political party called Jana Sangh, out of which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was born. Shyamaprasad can certainly be regarded as one of the greatest political leaders of modern India. He acted as the General Secretary of the Mahabodhi Society of Calcutta, and played an immensely significant role in the Buddhist revival movements of India. A large number of very eminent scholars like Dr. Beni Madhav Baruah,

Nalinaksha Dutta and others taught Pali and Buddhism at Calcutta University. Dr. Baruah studied under the famous Buddhist scholars, Professor Rhys Davids and Mrs. Davids, at the University of London.

Scholars from various Buddhist countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka and Myanmar came to study at the University of Calcutta throughout the colonial period, and thereafter. The tradition is still alive. As I have shown in my writings[10] on Myanmar, Calcutta as an intellectual centre attracted the Buddhist population of colonial Myanmar in a big way. Especially for the Buddhist population from the Rakhine state (Arakan) of colonial Burma, Calcutta became a place of pilgrimage. Due to the close geographical and historical contacts between Chittagong and Arakan, a large number of Buddhists from Arakan could (still can) speak Bengali. A very eminent and politically powerful monk from the Rakhine state, indeed the whole of colonial Myanmar, was U Ottama. He is considered as the emissary of a common Buddhist identity of Myanmar and eastern India. In the early years of the 20th century, U Ottam spent a great number of days in Calcutta. He was closely associated with the Indian National Congress, exercised unique leadership in the colonial struggle against British Burma, and remained a great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, whose commitment to Buddhism impressed U Ottoma in an unprecedented way.[11]

The Buddhist intellectual tradition of 19th and early 20th century Bengal is linked with a few more names besides that of Rajendralal Mitra. These are Haraprasad Shastri and Sarat Chandra Das.

Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri's name is remembered by not only Bengalis, but all Buddhists across the eastern region, as his discovery of the palm leaf manuscripts from Nepal gave a new dimension to the identity of the people of Nepal, Bengal, Orissa and Himalayan regions. We know this bulk of literature, known to be the oldest specimen of the Bengali language, by the name *Charyapadasa*s. These thousand years old verses were written by the Buddhists, *Siddhycaryas* (Enlightened ones) as they were called. These enlightened Buddhist preachers were carriers of the remaining Buddhist traditions, of which the Tibetan scholar Taranath spoke, a mention of whom has been made earlier in this way. The publication of Haraprasad Shastri's *Bauddha Gan O Doha* in 1915 therefore regenerated a sense of Buddhist identity among Bengalis. Earlier, in the year 1892, H.P Castro, together with

Sarat Chandra Das, founded the Buddhist Text Society in Calcutta. The Society took up an immensely important task, as D. C Ahir[12] notes: publishing unknown Buddhist texts under the aegis of the Society.

Sarat Chadra Das is still widely remembered in eastern India, and being read as the author of *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow*. The book is a travelogue about Tibet, the country of Indian Buddhism.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of Buddhist tradition in eastern India: one is influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, existing in high Himalayan valleys such as Sikkim and Arunanchal Pradesh, and some pockets in the Darjeeling-Kalimpong regions. The other one is Bengal-Bihar centered, which is by and large Theravadin in nature. According to an estimation,[13] in 1971, in West Bengal there were 121,000 Buddhists, while in the same year, the number of Buddhists in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri areas of West Bengal was 107,000. To the second category belong the Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, Tamangs and Tibetans of North Bengal. Arunachal Pradesh (formerly called NEFA: North Eastern Frontier Agency) is unique in the sense that this State has both the schools: Mahayanists and Theravadins (Hinayanists as they are sometimes called by Indians). Monpas are Mahayanists while the Khamtis, and partly Singphos, are Theravadins. The Tawang monastery in Arunachal Pradesh is a major religious centre of eastern India which attracts pilgrims and general tourists from all over India. In an earlier writing, I dealt in great detail[14] with how the Khamtis continued their Myanmar model of Theravada Buddhism, though physical contacts with Myanmar became increasingly difficult from the period of the early 1960s. In the context of China's recent claim over Arunachal Pradesh of India, readers should be much more aware of the rich religious and cultural life of Arunachal Pradesh. The Khamtis are the kins of the great Shan race which came from Myanmar with a very rich cultural identity including a script of their own.

There are no less than 55,000 Buddhists in Assam. A large number of them are Tai Ahoms, the descendants of the great Tai-Shan race of Thailand and Myanmar. There is an increasing social and political awareness among this Tai Ahom community. This kind of double ethnic identity of being Tai-Ahom and Indian, may be politically helpful for India, exactly in this point of time when the Government of India is intensively engaged in a "Look

East Policy", in which Thailand and Myanmar have become very constructive partners. Road linkage projects[15] between Northeastern India, Myanmar and Thailand are making good progress. There are about 100 Viharas (monasteries) and 150 Bhikkhus in Assam. The Buddhist temples of Assam are mostly in Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Digboi, Golaghat, Sibsagar, etc.

One of the great names connected with the resurgence of Buddhism in Assam is Ven Nandabansa. He established in 1939 the All Assam Buddhist Association. He published 25 books on Buddhism in the Assamese language. As regards other parts of Northeast India, Manipur has only 473 Buddhists. This is understandable as Manipur is largely a Hindu dominated state. The area once known as Garo Hills, United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Mikir Hills of former Assam is now called Meghalaya. Here, in this state, there are 2739 Buddhists only. It may be mentioned in this connection that a rapid spread of Christian missionary activities in the past changed the religious demography of Meghalaya, just as what happened in the case of the Lushai Hills (Mizoram). The most important Vihara of Meghalaya is situated in Shillong, the capital of the State.

The state of Mizoram (known earlier as Lushai Hills) has 40,429 Buddhists. A large number of them are Chakmas of Chittagong Hill Tracts who live in southern Mizoram, which has a border with Bangladesh's Buddhist-dominated Chittagong Hill Tracts. There are about 40 Viharas and 130 monks in Mizoram. Very similar indeed to the case of Mizoram is the State of Tripura. Tripura has a large number (54,306) of Buddhists, most of them are also Chakmas, who came in various waves from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. Tripura has a long border with Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Venuvan Vihar, the most important Buddhist Temple of Tripura, bears witness to the Buddhist resurgence in eastern India during the 1940s. The Vihara itself was built in 1946 by the Maharja of Tripura, Vir Vikram Kishor Manikya Bahadur. It may be relevant to mention that during the mid 1980s, a large number of Buddhist Chakmas, facing threats to their existence, fled to south Tripura, and stayed in the refugee camps for more than 10 years. Their peaceful repatriation back home was possible due to the Peace Treaty signed in 1997 between the Parvatya Chattagram Janasamhati Samiti and the then Awami League Government of Begum Sheikh Hasina.[16]

Now let me come to our state: West Bengal. So far I have mentioned the purely academic and intellectual tradition that developed in West Bengal to promote Buddhist Studies. If we turn our attention to the state of living Buddhism,[17] we can witness a rather declining position, which however has lately been seeing a slow resurgence, with a number of new Buddhist temples emerging in various remote corners. Some of those Buddhist temples have schools and small hospitals serving the local people. In some such cases, temples are the works of once-refugee-monks from neighbouring countries. In West Bengal there are 156,296 Buddhists. Most of them belong to the Theravada school, and a large number of them are Brush Buddhists, who have been following Buddhism for some 2000 years. But, Bengal has also about 480 Tibetan Lamas, most of who are centered in North Bengal's Kalimpong-Darjeeling areas, where a large number of Tibetan refugees reside. During the period from 1951 to 1961, India received a large number of Tibetan refugees who took refuge in various parts of our country, as China occupied Tibet. The religious leader of the Tibetans, the Dalai Lama, himself had to leave his country, and the Government of India allowed this great spiritual leader to continue his religious activities, for which the place Dharmasala in Himachal Pradesh was selected. Among the Buddhists of West Bengal, the Dalai Lama enjoys a great position, and in various intellectual, religious and academic programs his presence was highly appreciated. After all, it was Bengal that took a prime role in spreading Buddhism in Tibet. Even today, every Bengali feels proud of the great Buddhist name Atish Dipankar Srijnana (born in 980 A.D), who during the Pala period went to Tibet, and built up the Buddhist culture of that country.

Let me now come to the most important centre of Buddhism in eastern India, i.e. Sikkim. Buddhism here is influenced by Tibetan Mahayanism. Sikkim became a political entity in 1642 A.D when three Lamas of Tibet consecrated Phuntshog Namgyal (1604-1670) as the king of the Lepcha land with the title Chogyal. The word "Chogyal" has the connotation of someone who rules according to righteous law. On 14 March 1975, Sikkim became a state of the Republic of India. There are about 70 monasteries or *Gompas* in Sikkim. The most important being the Rumtek monastery in East Sikkim, while

Tashiding monastery in the heart of Sikkim was of earlier origin. It was blessed by Padmasambhava of Tibet.

While discussing Tibetan Buddhism, a brief discussion on Pandit Rahul Sanskritayana is essential. Pandit Rahul Sanskritayana was born in 1892 in Uttar Pradesh. His name, though not so widely known in the Western countries, should always be remembered by all, spiritual leaders as well as by scholars, in connection with the Buddhist revival movement in India during the 1930s. He was ordained in Sri Lanka in 1930, but Tibet attracted him much more. He brought back a large number of Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in the monasteries of Tibet. His writings are largely in Hindi. Rahul Sanskritayana, Bhadatanta Ananda Kausalayana and Ven. Jagdish Kashyap jointly worked out various programs to promote Buddhism in India at all levels.[18]

Right from the early 1930s, there emerged in India a very exclusive political consciousness and political culture based on Buddhist values and morals which rejected Communism, and at the same time, rejected colonialism and imperialism. Marx as the "liberator" was not exactly rejected, but it was argued that Buddhism made Marxism irrelevant, as Buddha had shown the path of social justice and political emancipation long before Marx.

A kind of Buddhist socialism was in the air. In colonial Myanmar, the Thakin Movement, which gained a concrete shape in the mid 1930s, drew inspiration from Buddhism, and thus the Thakins developed their own political ideology of neutrality, independence and socialism. Similar trends were also visible in colonial India. I can mention here the name of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, whose letters written from Mandalay jail bear evidence of his deep reverence for Buddhism due to its socialist ideals (social egalitarianism). Like many other political leaders, intellectuals and academics, Subhas Chandra Bose also felt that India had neglected this great religion, which would have saved India from many social and economic problems. In the thoughts and writings of the great leaders of modern India – starting from Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. Ambedkar to socialist leaders like Ram Monohar Lohia and Jai Prakash Narayan – Buddhism enjoyed a very special position.

II. Neo-Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism: Post Colonial Scenario

In this section an attempt will be made to interpret some of the most important political events that took place in eastern India in the background of the neo-Buddhist revival. The term "Neo-Buddhist Revival" immediately triggers off thoughts of the great person Dr. B.R Ambedkar, who was one of the architects of modern India. As much as he is remembered for his brilliant contribution to the drafting of the Indian Constitution, he is also revered for his deep commitment to Buddhism. He saw Buddhism as a religion of activism, social justice and democracy. Thus, Dr. Ambedkar saw in Buddhism the only way of liberation for the nascent Republic that was India. We are aware that coming from the downtrodden Hindu caste (Mahar), he thought that mere political freedom would not help India achieve real social emancipation; Hinduism was for him the religion of immense social discrimination and exploitation. His total disappointment with the Hindu religion somewhat baffled those who saw Buddhists and Hindus as being two from the same mother. Dr. Ambdekar was deeply influenced by Lakshmi Narasu, one of the most brilliant Buddhist scholars and social leaders of modern India. Lakshmi Narasu hails from South India (Madras: modern Chennai). His book *Essence of Buddhism* became a kind of *Bible* for those who were looking for an alternative political and social ideology for India's future.[19]

A large bulk of literature is available on Dr. Ambedkar and his concept of *Dhamma*, about which he wrote in his famous book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. The book was published in the year 1956, the year of his passing away as well as the year of his formal initiation into Buddhism. It is not my intention to place Dr. Ambedkar in the centre of my discussion, yet no discussion on neo-Buddhism is complete without mentioning Dr. Ambedkar. The achievements[20] for which Dr. Ambedkar will be remembered are the inclusion of the provision of Pali study made in the Indian Constitution, the inscription of a Buddhist aphorism on the frontage of the Rastrapati Bhavan in New Delhi and the acceptance of the Ashok Chakra by Bharat as her symbol. It was due to his efforts that the Government of India declared Buddha Jayanti as a National Holiday. The events that deeply concerned him was the partition tragedy and the creation of Pakistan, the rise of communist

China and China's influence in Tibet, and last, but not least, the political influence of China over Myanmar. He felt somewhat alone and isolated, least understood on this score by his contemporaries. Nehru appears to be someone who failed to understand Dr. Ambedkar's political views. Myanmar (Burma) and Sri Lanka (former Ceylon) enjoyed a special position in his political thoughts and foreign policy perceptions. Besides visiting Ceylon (1950), he visited Myanmar (Burma) as many as three times.

There are strong indications that Myanmar attracted him immensely, not only for that country's adherence to Buddhism, but more for her independent way of looking at political liberation and social emancipation. He must have been impressed by the strong Buddhist ethos that guided Myanmar's foreign policy in the post-colonial era. Though politically close to China, Myanmar rejected communism and actively involved herself in various political movements, which had a very strong note of neutralism and non-alignment. He attended in 1954 the Vaisakhi celebration (the birthday of Lord Buddha in May) in Myanmar. In June he announced that he was going to start a seminary for Buddhist novitiates at Bangalore. In December 1954, Dr. Ambedkar went again to Myanmar, to Rangoon (modern Yangon), to attend the meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. From Yangon he went to the old capital, the city of Mandalay. He developed a close friendship with Dr. R.L Soni, a medical doctor of Indian origin based in Mandalay and an eminent Buddhist leader. According to a source, it was here that he announced his decision to embrace Buddhism in the 2500th year of the Buddhist era, i.e., in 1956-57. The rest is known to all: in October 1956, Dr. Ambedkar finally embraced Buddhism along with his wife and a large number of followers. The venue was Nagpur in modern Maharastra. In one stroke, the religious demography of modern India was changed by a single personality. Most of those who followed him and took up Buddhism rejecting their Hindu faith were the Mahars, the untouchables.

Three principles in Buddhism[21] appealed to him: *Prajna* (knowledge), *Karuna* (compassion) and *Samatha* (equality). From the 1940s onwards, Dr. Ambedkar became increasingly restless about the future of India. He saw little hope in the political leadership of the Congress, and found that the untouchables in Hindu society would remain deprived of any future benefit that the ensuing freedom may bring to the rest of the society in India. Dr.

Ambedkar's embracing of Buddhism was received by the then Indian political leadership with a mixed feeling. While little enthusiasm was visible among the great national leaders of India (Dr. Radhakrishnan, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlalal Nehru), the Baruah community of Calcutta were quite impressed by Dr. Ambedkar's decision. Arvind Baruah of Dharmankur Vihara (Bengal Buddhist Association) was one of those who congratulated him. His conversion to Buddhism was warmly welcomed by U Ba Swe and U Nu of Myanmar and Sri Lankan Buddhist leaders.

Ambedkar had a high regard for the Buddhist heritage of Myanmar, and especially for Arakanese Buddhism, the history of which was closely linked with the Eastern Indian civilization. It is no wonder therefore that U Cameraman, the Rakhine (Arakanese) monk, was invited to preside over the conversion ceremony and to become Dr. Ambdekar's *Dikkshaguru*. U Chandramani, who was staying in Kushinagara, was then the oldest monk living in India. His service to the cause of the rejuvenation of Buddhism in Asia is still remembered by the Buddhist population of India, Nepal and Myanmar. When it comes to Buddhist revival in India and Myanmar, the name of U Chandramani should be pronounced along with the great names like Sangharaja Saramedha (or Saramitta) of Akyab (modern Sittwe), Punnachara Mahasthavir and Kripa Sharan of Chittagong, Devamitta Dharmapala (Anagarika Dharmapala) and Devapriya Balisinha of Ceylon.

Before we come to other topics relating to post colonial Indian political movements and Buddhism, let me narrate some events concerning the United States' engagement with Asia so far as the promotion of Buddhist study is concerned. The United States of America saw in Asia an opportunity to coalesce the existing spirit of Buddhism prevailing in eastern India with that of Myanmar (Burma), the classical land of Buddhism. Both the regions are connected geographically as well as historically. We have already heard about America's involvement in the Buddhist resurgence movement in the form of theMahabodhi movement in Ceylon as well as in India. Very significant indeed is the patronage extended to Dharmapala by American donors and promoters.[22]

America was attracted to Myanmar (then Burma) and involved itself in the educational promotion of Buddhism. In 1954 a special four month-long course

in Library Science and Museology was held at the United States Information Service Library in Yangon/Rangoon. The foundation stone for the Institute was laid by U Nu, the first Prime Minister of Myanmar. The event took place in the neighbourhood of the great cave assembly hall of the Sangayana at Kaba Aye, and under the direction of Niharranjan Ray, Consultant. Prof. Niharranjan Ray of Calcutta University is widely known through his three books: *History of Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*, *History of Theravada Buddhism in Burma*, and *Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses of Burma*. Professor Niharranjan Ray benefited enormously from the support he received from the Ford Foundation of the United States. This was comparable to the valuable patronage of America to Anagarika Dharmapala and Swami Vivekananda in the last quarter of the 19th century. It may not be out of context to note that Dr. Ambedkar himself was a product of the academic tradition of the United States. He obtained his Ph.D from the University of Columbia. This University also promoted young Burmese scholars, who later toured centers of advanced learning in Paris, London and Leiden, and who on their return to their home (Myanmar) worked for the cause of closer cooperation between the West and the East, in the spirit of Buddhist values and international understanding.[23]

Let me again come back to the Buddhist-inspired political mood in South and Southeast Asia, including some Muslim majority countries, for example in Indonesia. Even though Islam was the most dominant religion in Indonesia, the basis for the newly independent nation (Indonesia) became the ideals of *Panchsil* (five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence) and not Islam.[24] The demand of the orthodox Ulemmas was rejected by Sukarna. It was due to this that Indonesia was selected to be the ideal platform for a neutral Pan Asian assembly, the Bandung Conference, in 1955. Equally remarkable was the Sarvodaya movement in Ceylon during the 1950s, in which Buddhism became the major inspiration. Taking note of the increasing political influence of Buddhism in Asia, Communist China took active initiative in making Buddhism part of her diplomacy. Myanmar or Burma, having a deeply committed Buddhist population, offered a fertile ground; China sent some Buddhist relics to Burma in those days.[25] This was certainly a good gesture, for China and Myanmar also shared a long history and a long border. Yet, Myanmar rejected communism in favour of a Buddhist social welfare

state in her domestic arena, and neutrality in her foreign affairs. It is no wonder that disappointment was visible among a large number of Buddhists in India who could not accept China's increasing influence over Tibet, and particularly China's double standard in promoting Buddhism, and at the same time disregarding the aspirations of the Buddhist population of Tibet. My own childhood memory when I was living in Santiniketan goes back to these very turbulent days of India-China relations in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. Had Tagore lived in Santiniketan during the 1962 War between India and China, he would have experienced the worst shock of his life, for it was none other than Tagore who was more interested in everlasting friendly relations between India and China, based on Buddhist principles of non-violence and non-interference.

A kind of Buddhist socialist idea, which was rapidly spreading across India and Myanmar, must have posed a challenge to communist China. Important events like Socialist Conferences in Rangoon (1953) and Bombay (1956) drew direct inspiration from a common Buddhist past. Two eminent spokesmen for Buddhist socialism were Ram Monohar Lohia and Jay Prakash Narayan. Like Dr. Ambedkar, these two socialist leaders saw in Buddhist Burma great potential for exercising leadership to rising Asian unity. Both these two leaders developed friendships with leaders like U Ba Swe and U Kyaw Nein of Myanmar and Djohan Sjahruzsh of Indonesia. At the Rangoon Socialist Conference, Jayprakash Naryana defended India's Buddhist identity, and the urgency to understand it in the context of the emerging Asian unity based on Buddhist priciples.[26] Eminent Sanskrit scholar, Satkari Mukhopadhyay, saw in every Hindu a Buddhist. Gandhiji's view about Buddhism and Hinduism is also along the same line.

As we will see, a country like Thailand, which was actually a party to the conservative military alliance like SEATO, and thus seen as an ally of the "imperialist" western block, was later involved in a big way in promoting Buddhism as the only religion of salvation. The fifth biannual meeting of the World Buddhist Fellowship met in Bangkok in 1958. Previously, in 1956, shortly before his passing away from this mortal world, Dr. Ambedkar visited Nepal to take part and deliver a speech in the Meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhism held in Nepal.

In the backdrop to such events, one has to understand why leaders like Ram Monohar Lohia and Dr. Ambedkar criticized Nehru for recognizing Tibet as a part of China. However, as a very valuable study by Dagmar Bernstorff and Hubertus von Welck (eds) shows,[27] Nehru's China policy and stand on Tibet was criticized by three different groups: first, the supporters of Realpolitik; second, Gandhians and religious leaders; third, opposition parties in Indian parliament. It is not that Nehru was less committed to Buddhism.

It is not that Nehru had any doubt in his mind about the political force that Buddhism was, or the strength of morality that Buddhism could offer to any nation. Indeed, in 1949, it was Nehru who, with the help of Devapriya Balisingh, brought the urns of Shariputra and Mudgalyayana from the British Museum. When this valuable Buddhist relic was brought to the Mahabodhi Society of Calcutta from the Raj Bhavan, a large number of Buddhists from Asia and the West were present on the occasion.

In 1952, the urns were sent to Sanchi from where a part was sent to Sri Lanka, and another part to Myanmar. In Myanmar it was kept in the Kabaway (World Peace Pagoda), which was built in 1956 when Myanmar was holding the Sixth Buddhist Council. Dr. Ambedkar[28] represented India, among others, in this celebration. One of the major tasks undertaken during this celebration was the revision of the Buddhist canonical texts, and of course spreading the message of Lord Buddha across Asia and the rest of the world. The ideas of the welfare state, neutrality, peace and non-interference were words that were heard everywhere.

Conclusion

The above is a simple submission of some facts of Indian history, in the context of India's age-old Buddhist tradition. The thrust area has been eastern India, Bengal in particular. I have tried to demonstrate how Bengal kept pace with the rest of India, so far as Buddhist movements are concerned, yet also that it went its own way, by which it linked the Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia and the world at large. Buddhism played a very constructive role in shaping the very identity of the eastern region of India. The transfer of political and economic power from the Buddhists or Hindu-Buddhists to the Muslim rulers in Bengal went off quite smoothly, as at the grass root, Islam also accommodated Buddhism and Vaishnava thoughts.

The caste hierarchy in Bengal was also not so rigid; there was mobility, and people could "change" their caste affiliations. Absolute dominance of Brahmins was also not tolerated everywhere in Bengal. There were social movements (for example the ones led by Sree Chaitanya, or later by Ramakrishna with his disciple Swami Vivekananda), which had a strong base in the Buddhist principle of equality and social justice. This left its impact on the neo-Buddhist movements as well as on the high academic tradition in Buddhist studies. While in some parts of southern and western India neo-Buddhism took a strong anti-Brahmanic tone, in Bengal this was not the case; indeed it became superfluous. The harbinger of the Buddhist resurgence movement in Eastern India, Anagarika Dharmapala, never saw Buddhism as contra Hindu. Indeed, as I have shown, he shared same kind of view with no less a person than Swami Vivekanada, the first person in modern India who successfully explained to the world what Hinduism was. Buddhist activists as well as Buddhist scholars of Bengal never regarded Buddhism as an ideological challenge to Hinduism. Indeed they saw both the religions as complimentary to each other. It is due to this, that Bengal could not wholeheartedly accept Dr. Ambedkar.

The recent idea of developing in Nalanda an international University is therefore a befitting plan and deserves applause. Bengal's uniqueness lies in its all-absorbing religious and social traditions, its tolerance and acceptance for all sections of Buddhists belonging to various schools. The spirit of revolt is as much present as the spirit of cooperation and consensus. This shows that Buddhists of eastern India could play a constructive role in the political life of modern India, in the area of social developments, as well as in the matter of policy formation and implementation.

ENDNOTES

[1] Nagendranath Basu, *The Modern Buddhism and its Followers in Orissa*, Calcutta, 1911.

[2] S. B Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cult*,. Calcutta, 1947. Side by side an important reading is Enamul Haque, *A History of Sufism in Bengal*, Dahka: Asiatic Society, 1975. Both the works make essential reading for those who are seriously interested to understand the three major religions Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam in eastern region of India and present Bangladesh

[3] For Mahayana Buddhism and Buddhism's various ramifications, see Trevor Ling, *The Buddha*, New York: Pelican Books, 1976; Sukumar Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1988; for Buddhism in all countries of Asia, see H. Bechert and R. Gombrich, *The world of Buddhism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1993. For Buddhism in Bengal, its developments, geographical position of various Viharas, activities and ideologies of the monks a very valuable piece of work is Dr. Puspa Niyogi, .*Buddhism in Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta: Jijnasa, 1980. A detailed description of archaeological excavations revealing the Buddhist past (Buddhist establishments) of southeastern Bangladesh up to the border of the modern state of Tripura of India is found in Barrie M. Morrison's *Lalmai, a Cultural Center of Early Bengal*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1974.

[4] Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), *Landschenkungen und Staatliche Entwicklung im frühmittelalterlichen Bengalen (5. bis 13 Jh. n. Chr.)*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1985, p. 154. Inscription No. 33 for details of this very important land grant to Nalanda.

[5] Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness*, ed. by Ananda Guruge, Sri Lanka. Ministry of Cultural affairs and Information,. Ministry of Socio-Cultural Integration Department of Cultural Affairs, 1991; P. V Bapat's *2500 Years of Buddhism*, 1997 (first published in 1956) is an extremely important work published by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govternment of India.

[6] Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948*. Kolkata: K. P. Bagchi, 2007.

[7] Germany of course emerged as the most important centre for Indology in the 19th and 20th centuries. The country still continues this tradition at the University level. I do not want to bring Max Weber, who also wrote on Buddhism, in to the fold of this tradition of Indology.

[8] Duly appreciating Kiap Sharan's noble mission, Dharmapala extended his helping hand to him in building up the centre for Buddhists in the heart of the city of Calcutta. In 1914 Kripa Sharan initiated Bodhananda. Since there was no consecrated *Sima* in the eastern region, or whole of India, the ceremony took place in a boat over the Ganges near Calcutta. See Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), "From Mahabodhi Movement of the 19th century (1891) to neo-Buddhist Revival (1956) in Post Colonial India," in *Myanmar Historical Commission. Conference proceedings*, Part 2, Ministry of Education, Union of Myanmar, 2005, pp. 339-64.

[9] For recent studies on Buddhism in general, with special reference to Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and Rabindranath Tagore and Buddhism, see Pranabananda Jash (ed.), *Perspective of Buddhist Studies (Giuseppe Tucci Birth Centenary Volume)*, New Delhi: Kaveri Books, 2002; Narendra Kumar Das (ed.), *Indo-Tibetan Culture (Golden Jubilee Volume.)* Visva Bharati: Kolkata, 2003. For Tagore's vision of "Greater India" and his visits to Myanmar, see also Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), "Rabindranath Tagore in Myanmar (Burma) and Tagore's Perception of Southeast Asia–India

Relations," in S. K Panda and M. Brandtner, eds. *Interrogating History: Essays for Hermann Kulke*, Delhi: Monohar, 2006, pp. 212-29.

[10] Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948*. Calcutta's academic potential was widely known in colonial Myanmar. Rangoon and Calcutta stood like twin cities and experienced exchange of monks, scholars, political leaders and intellectuals from all quarters. That tradition, which continued up to late 1950s, but is no more to existent. Buddhist scholars like Kalidas Nag and Niharranjan Ray can be considered as the last examples for this school of Buddhist Studies.

[11] Since the Government of India and the Government of Myanmar are committed to continue the tradition of Buddhist Studies U. Ottama remains the greatest inspiration for both the countries. For details on U. , see my book *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948*.

[12] D. C Hair, *Buddhism in Modern India,* N. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991, p 141.

[13] Trevor Ling, *Buddhist revival in India. Aspects of the Sociology of Buddhism.* London: The Macmillan Press, 1980, p. 50. This work gives an all India picture of living Buddhism and Buddhist population in various parts of modern India.

[14] The Khamtis of Arunachal Pradesh are one of the most advanced people with their script, traditions, festivals and material culture. To know details of the Khamti Buddhist culture and tradition in the context of their past history and accommodation and acculturation with the Indian nation, see Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), "Migration, Acculturation and integration of Myanmar Tribes in India: Khamtis and Singphos of Arunachal Pradesh," in Mahavir Sigh (ed.), *Home Away from Home. Inland Movement of People of India,* Delhi: Anamika Publishers for Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata 2005, pp. 145-87.

[15] I may mention in this context that building transnational highways between countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia enjoys a great priority in both the regions' foreign policy. Once Northeast India is connected by road with Thailand via Myanmar, the Buddhist population of Northeast India and Eastern India as a whole will feel linked with their kinsmen and co-religionists across the border. In the other direction, more towards the west, in the direction of the Bay of Bengal, on the other hand, the successful completion of the Kaladan Project linking Mizoram with the Rakhine state (Arakan) will be a great step forward towards the achievement. The old Buddhism of Arakan after all still remains the greatest inspiration for Bengali Buddhist population of eastern India. To know more about the Kaladan project and the role of Buddhism in such infrastructure project, see "Some observations on Political Systems, Religion and Culture of Western Myanmar, Northeastern India and Southwestern Bangladesh in the Context of Present Trends in India-Myanmar Relations," *Asia Annual*, Journal of Maulana Abul kalam Azad institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata, pp. 193-222.

[16] On Chittagong Hill Tracts and the recent developments there, see Willem van Schendel, "Bengalis, Bangladeshis and others: Chakma Visions of Pluralist Bangladesh," in Rounaq Jahan (ed.). *Bangladesh Promise and Performance,*London: Zed Books, 2000, pp. 93ff. See also Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti), "Refugee generating Chittagong Hill Tracts: Past Present and Future," in Sanjoy Roy (ed.), *Refugees and Human Rights,* Delhi: Rawat Publisher 2001, pp. 317-44.

[17] Two important works, one in Bengali and the other in English, on the present state of Buddhism in Bengal (mainly West Bengal and parts of eastern India) are Bhadanta Prajnananadasree Sthavir, *Pascim Banger Bauddha Dharma O Samskriti*, Kolkata:

published by Bodhendu Baruah; Chittaranjan Patra, *Present Buddhist Tribals and Viharas of West Bengal,*Calcutta: Sarkar & Co, 1991.

[18] K. David Pandyan, *Dr. B.R Ambedkar and the Dynamics of neo-Buddhism.* New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1996, p. 47. On Revival of Buddhism in India, see also L. M Joshi's works.

[19] See also another work by Lakshmi Narasu, *Religion of the Modern Buddhist*, Delhi: Wordsmiths, 2002. The text of the book was completed in 1930s. Narasu passed away in 1934, before it was printed.

[20] For Dr. Ambedkar and his ideas on Buddhism several works are available, see, for example, Dr. Ambedkar's own article "How Dhamma differs from Religion," published in D. C Ahir (ed.), *Buddhism in South East Asia*, Delhi: Sri Satgaru Publisher, 2001, pp. 25-30; Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 2006 (first South Asian Edition); a very comprehensive treatment of Dr. Ambedkar's political and intellectual life is found presented in chronological order in Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission.* 2005 reprint of the third edition of 1971. First published in 1954.

[21] See D. Keer, 2005, p. 490

[22] Two eminent promoters are Mrs. T.R Foster and Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Foster. For information on western enthusiasm, donation and patronage for neo-Buddhism in Southern Asia, see Anagarika Dharmapal, *Return to Righteousness*. For Colonel Olcott's visit to Akyab in Arakan and the Akyab Buddhists' contribution to Mahabodhi Movement in Calcutta, see *Anagarika* Dharmapal's Return *to Righteousness*, p. 725. For Chitagong-Arakan region in the realm of Buddhism, see Michael Charney, "Beyond State centered Histories in western Burma: Missionizing Monks and Intra-regional Migrants in Arakan Littoral c.1784-1860," in J. Leider and J. Gommans (eds.). *The Maritime frontier of Burma,* Leiden: Koninklijke nederlandse Akademie von wetenscherppen, Amsterdam, 2002, pp. 213-24. An important study of Buddhism in Bengal is Sukomal Chaudhuri, *Contemporary Buddhism in Bangladesh,* Calcutta: Atish Memorial Publishing Company, 1982. For Arakan's place in Myanmar and Indian Buddhism, see Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakrabrti), "History of Buddhism in Myanmar: Interpretation from Indian Perspective," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal,* Vol. XLVII, 2005, pp. 65-81.

[23] For the American promotion of International Buddhist Studies in Asia, in Myanmar, in particular, see E. Mendelson, *Singh and State in Burma. A Study of Monastic Sectarian Leadership*. Cornell University Press, 1975.

[24] Doughlas Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy Islam and ideology of Tolerance.* London: Routledge, 1995. For neutralism in India and Asia as a whole, see Prithwis Dutt,. *Neutralism (Theory and Practice).* Calcutta 1978.

[25] Referring to Buddha's tooth pagoda constructed outside Peking (now Beijing) in 1957, D. P Singhal states: "As part of the 'people's diplomacy' the tooth was sent to Burma and by building the pagoda to house it the Chinese government was able to demonstrate its patronage of Buddhism." See D.P Singhal, *Buddhism in East Asia*, New Delhi: Books and Books 1984, pp. 82-83.

[26] *Report of the first Asian Socialist Conference. Rangoon*, Rangoon 1953. For Satkari Mukherjee's view on Hindu- Buddhist identity, see Chittaranjan Patra, p. 22. For Mahatma Gandhi's view on Hinduism and Buddhism and Gandhiji's experiences in Myanmar (colonial Burma), see Raghavan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, Vol. I. In *India-Myanmar Relations 1886-1948* I have devoted an entire chapter on Mahatma Gandhi and his experiences of Myanmar. For a reinterpretation of the *Dharma,* Asian Buddhist Form of "social

gospel", and *Sarvodaya Shramadana* Movement led by Buddhist layman A. T Ariyartane and Gandhiji's contribution, see George D. Bond, The *Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation and Response* (first Indian edition), p. 243.

[27] Dagmar Bernstorff and Hubertus von Welck (eds.), *Exile as Challenge: The Tibetan Diaspora.* New Delhi: Orient Longman 2004, pp. 81-85 (first published in German in 2002).

[28] Sangharakshita has given some important information on Dr. Ambedkar and Myanmar. On Dr. Ambedkar and U Chandramani of Myanmar (Burma), see Sangharakshita, p. 79. and for Dr. Ambdekar's visit to Myanmar in 1950s, see p. 76 and U Ba Swe and U Nu's words of congratulation to Dr. Ambedkar, see Sangharakshita, p. 141, and Dhananjay Keer, p. 501.

The Mataks and their Revolt against the State in 18th Century Assam: Searching for Ethno-Religious Roots

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Introduction

Among the various religious communities of Assam known since at least the middle ages, the Mataks are perhaps the best known for playing a historic role in the political process of the State. They are found scattered almost over the entire State of Assam, although they are concentrated in the upper Assam districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat. They organized a great revolt against the Ahom state of Assam in the year 1769, and continued it till the beginning of the 19th century, when they obtained an autonomous territory for themselves centering on the present Tinsukia town. There are local sources in the form of chronicles, and accounts left by the early British writers, where the history of the community and their revolt against the state have been recorded. Besides, there are oral and folk records in the form of public memories and sayings among the members of the community reflecting on their revolt, bearing enough psycho-historical evidence. The present paper is an attempt, on the basis of these materials, to look into the formation of the Matak community and the ethno-religious background of their revolt.

Formation of the Community

Known variously as *Moamara, Moamariya, Mayamara, Mayamariya, Matak* or *Moran*, the Matak, and that is the name used here to mean the community, stands for both a religious sect and a community consisting of its followers. Belonging to the Vaishnavism of Assam affiliation developed by Sankaradeva (1449-1568) in the 16th century, this religious sect was developed by Aniruddhadeva (1553-1627), a nephew of Sankaradeva, and a disciple of

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Gopal Ata (1476-1541), founder of the *Kala Sanghati* order of Assam Vaishnavism. To understand the emergence of this sect, and the sectarian community, a more detailed narration is necessary.

The *khaki* religion, known also as *Neo-Vaishnavism* in Assam, developed by Sankaradeva, became divided into four independent sectarian divisions called *Sanghati/Samhati* after the death of Sankaradeva. The process of the division began immediately following the nomination of Madhavadeva, by Sankaradeva, as the successor in his religious order. Damodardeva, a Brahman disciple of Sankaradeva, who did not like to see Madhavadeva as the head of the order, seceded from it, establishing his own order, making inclusion of all Brahmanical practices (*karma-kanda*) which the founder of the sect had rejected as meaningless. Thus with Damodardeva, a brahmanical section emerged undermining the original ideals of Sankaradeva's *bhakti* religion and allowing Brahmanical ideals to filter back into the religion.[1] This division was soon followed by another division created by the descendents of the saint himself. Known as the *Purusha Sanghati*, this division too rejected Madhavadeva's headship, and claimed Sankaradeva as the *guru*, and did not give much stress on ritualism. The third division came when Gopaldeva *alias* Gopal Ata, a disciple of Madhavadeva, founded his sect with all forms of liberality in the practice of religion as allowed originally by Sankaradeva. Known as the *Kala Sanghati*, Gopaldeva's sect was the most radical of the divisions where Brahmanical practices were totally discarded, and even 'a rosary was considered redundant'; and reverence to the *guru* was given the supreme place. After thus the three *Sanghatis* were created, there remained the main stream directly under Madhavadeva. His disciple Mathuradas Burha Ata, therefore, in order to maintain the purity of the sect from further dilution, encompassed his own stream after the death of Madhavadeva, which soon came to be called *Nika* or *Nitya Sanghati* or the clean division, where ritualism played a minor role, but asceticism assumed prominence.[2]

Kala-Sanghati and the Mayamara Sect – Searching for the Ideological Background

According to Maheswar Neog, "The liberalism of *bhakti* came to have its full social play in the *Kala-sanghati* fraternity, and the sect easily spread to the very grass-roots of society, acquired large followings everywhere and gained

great social strength."[3] The sect did not attach any importance to the Brahmanical ritualism, and even the Brahman followers of this sect discarded observing *sandhya* and *gayatri* and did not treat the sacred thread as necessary.[4] This ideological base was given an established form by Aniruddhadeva in whose hands social equality and predominance of the preacher – the *guru* – became its chief features, and the guru was considered superior even to the God.[5] It recognized no barrier in community dining on the basis of caste differences, and there was no place for untouchability. This space for liberality and sense of equality and dignity attracted the mass of the people, particularly of the upper Brahmaputra valley, where the Mongoloid tribes had overwhelming predominance. Thus, Aniruddhadeva and his descendents easily accepted neophytes from among the *Morans, Ahoms, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Kaivartas* and other ethnic communities and lower classes into the fraternity. The biographical work of Aniruddhadeva and his descendents records that during this initial period, Aniruddhadeva also initiated into his sect one *Dheli,* a Muslim tailor, who was baptized as Dheli Bora, and registered among the Ahoms.[6] Thus, Aniruddhadeva started with the lowlies and the (so called) untouchables, going even against the ideals of his family and other influential sections of the society.

According to Neog, "The simplified and liberalized form of the *bhakti* religion presented no difficulty for these socially down-trodden peoples to adjust themselves to it, while their conversion gave them an unprecedented social uplift and a sense of bliss too."[7] According to S. F. Hannay, "disciples seem to flock into him (Aniruddhadeva) from all the different tribes, such as, Cassarees, Ahoms, Dhooms, Kuleetas, Kayasts, Harees, and others of the lowest classes. And from the upper part of the valley may be added Sooteas, Morans, &c. &c"[8] This social composition in the eyes of the 'pernicious casteism' was 'low', and hence the Mayamara sect itself was considered as low. Thus, the followers of the sect were pushed to the precipice of a social landslide.[9]

Nomenclature of the Sect: Searching for Roots of Discontent

The sub-sect of Aniruddhadeva's Vaishnavism was called *Mayamara.* An understanding of the origin of this name tells much about the formation of

this religious community, and about the seed that contained the possibility of a future upheaval. It is stated that Aniruddhadeva first preached his tenet among the members of the fishing community living on the bank of a lake where a small variety of fish called *Moa* was found. It is further stated that these people used to kill (*mara*) the *Moa* fish and lived on fishing; and it was due to this reason that Aniruddhadeva's sect was finally termed by the non-believers as *Moamara* i.e. a sect of the killer of the *Moa* fish.[10] There is no doubt that the *Moamara* is a contemptuous and derogatory remark used to ridicule the sect and its preachers who were proselytizing the lower echelons of the society. One of the Assamese chronicles, the *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, has clearly mentioned the Mayamara pontiff as 'Moamara.'[11] According to Hannay, "This residence of the first priest of this sect is said to have been on the *Majoilee*, on the banks of a small lake, which is now carried away by *Burhumpooter*. The name of this lake, from the circumstance of its abounding in a description of small fish, called *Moa*, was named in the usual style of Assamese phraseology *Moa Morah*, from whence arose the name of the sect, but which has been turned by those of the Brahmanical faith through a spirit of contempt to *Moa Mureeah*."[12] That Aniruddhadeva's sect was despised as 'Moamara', and that the term originated from the people who killed and lived on selling (or exchanging) the *Moa* fish, is also supported by some internal sources. Utsabananda Goswami, who was the *Satradhikara* of the Puranimati Mayamara Satra, has referred to an old biographical work to say that '*Mowamara*' came from the name of a *bil* (fishing swamp) abounding in *mowa* fish and standing near the northern barrack (*hati*) of the original sattra."[13] There is an interesting myth recorded in the genealogical work of the pontiffs of the sect about the origin of the term *Mayamara*. According to it, Aniruddhadeva was believed to have possessed supernatural power for which King Pratap Singha (1603-1641) was said to have invited him, a heretic by religion by his (the king's) own term, to show his miraculous power before the king. Accordingly, Aniruddhadeva was put to a test. The mouth of a large empty pot was covered with a piece of cloth, put before the public, and Aniruddhadeva was asked before the audience to say what the pot contained. Looking at the pot Aniruddhadeva is stated to have said that there was a large cobra inside the pot. The king was then inspired, having found an excuse to punish Aniruddhadeva. So, he opened the mouth of the pot only to show that it was empty; but to his astonishment, he found that

Aniruddhadeva was right, and a large cobra really came out of the pot.[14] However, Aniruddhadeva lost no time to quell the magical snake to show his further miraculous power. Seeing the entire event, the king called the sect of Aniruddhadeva as *Mayamara,* that is, creator and killer of illusion (*maya+mara*). There is no doubt that the name *Mayamara* was thus created to erase the name *Moamara,* which was not only ridiculous but was also one of contempt towards a supposedly heretic religious community. The discovery of a myth to defend the sect from being ridiculed is a clear example to show that there was an element of continued dislike of the Mayamara pontiffs against the orthodox Brahmanical section of the society represented by the other *Sanghatis.* The distinction is clearly recorded in the *Tungkhungiya Buranji* by mentioning the two factions as 'Moamariya' and 'Bamuniya'.[15] It is therefore clear that in parallel with the dislike was also a sense of protest from the Mayamariyas against the Brahmanical order which, as we shall see, emerged under direct state patronage.

The *Moamara* or *Mayamara* is also known as *Matak* religion, a name the origin of which involves much controversy. It appears that the name was derived from the name of the Moran tribe who were also called *Matak,*[16] a term which was also despised for being as low as the *Moamara.* The fact that some of the early British writers have mentioned the Brahmaputra-Dihing triangle on the southeast as *Matak* (region) is indicative of a tribe of the same name who were aboriginal to this region. Assamese chronicles mention a tribe called *Matak* who were subjugated by king Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam in the early 13th century.[17] Sometimes, it is also used synonymously with the term Moran, or else equated with it, and the Moran formed the bulk of the disciples of Aniruddhadeva. It is a fact that next to the fishing community, which formed the first batch of the converts, were the Moran *alias* Mataks, a jungle tribe, according to the early British records;[18] and among the converts, the Morans were the only single largest ethnic community which could give an identity to the religious sect. Thus, it was natural that the sect of Aniruddhadeva was also called *Matak*, a name that was used in much the same derogatory sense as the *Moamara.* As a matter of fact, there was an attempt to redefine it, as in the case of the creation of the term *Mayamara,* eradicating the tribal root. So, the same

reason that was at work behind the development of the term *Mayamara* from the term *Moamara,* by creating a myth, had acted again to erase its tribal stamp by attempting to derive it otherwise. The genealogical work on the family of the pontiffs of the Mayamara sect, mentioned above, has attempted to derive the term from the conjugal word *Matek*, which means people of one (*ek*) opinion (*mat*). [19] (There could not be coined, fortunately enough, any such word or conjugation to be used to define the name Moran!) An explanation given for this derivation is that their tenet teaches men to be united in their views in their stress on the *guru,* for, the *guru* is more important to them than any other being; even God was treated as inferior to him. Grammatically infeasible, this forceful derivation of the name *Matak* on the part of the Mayamara pontiffs to eradicate the tribal origin of the Mayamara or Matak pontiffs, simply de-recognized the attempt of the Brahmanical society to undermine them. It was here that we find the root of an inherent enmity between the two religious groups. But this derivation facilitated one thing; it helped in the inclusion of its followers coming from various ethnic and caste groups into a single community stamped as '*Matak.*'

In this connection one interesting development was the concerted attempt outside the Mayamara cult to defame Aniruddhadeva as a magician, who was alleged to have stolen a magical book from the store of Sankaradeva, and therefore, who was reported to have been publicly condemned by Sankaradeva. It was all publicized through, and recorded in, a book called *Adi Charit* or *Bhuyanr Puthi*, said to have been composed by Madhavadeva.[20] The fact is that neither Aniruddhadeva was a contemporary of Sankaradeva nor Madhavadeva. Therefore, the famous Vaishnava leader and littérateur per excellence could be the writer of the work.[21] It was simply an attempt on the part of the orthodox section to defame the *guru.* Be that as it was, in the tradition of the great saint Sankaradeva, Aniruddhadeva translated a part of the *Bhagavata Purana*, composed the *Bhakti Mangal Ghosha*, a book on prayer songs, about two hundred devotional songs, and a sacred book in both prose and poetry called *Nij-Sastra*. The last one is a secret scriptural work used in the society of the devotees of very high order. These writings supplied the ideological store of the sect.

The Revolt – The Reality

In the above socio-cultural background, there occurred a series of events of suppression of the Mayamara pontiffs by the state since the beginning of the Hinduisation of the Ahom kings. There is no doubt that the Ahom kings had no concrete religious affiliation to a particular sect. But, they were more attracted to the Brahmanical and Sakta practices than to the puritan form of Vaishnavism of Mayamara order. As a result, like the movement of Sankaradeva which was attacked in different ways by the Brahmans through the use of the state machinery,[22] the sect of Aniruddhadeva also was subjected to the same sort of atrocities and attack in the later times. Assamese chronicles and the biographical works of the Mayamara pontiffs contain evidence to that effect.

Starting with the rule of Susengpha *alias* Pratap Singha (1603-1641), the Mayamara sect met with a tartar in the state machinery.[23] This king, under the influence of the Brahmins, practised a series of cruelties upon the Sudra *gurus* (*Thakuriya Medhis*- non Brahman preachers), killed many of them, and forced others into exile in the forest of Namrup (incidentally, the homeland of the Moran tribe).[24] The king was informed that the disciples of Mayamara sect did not bow their heads before the king on the ground of their sectarian belief that this kind of reverence was reserved for their *guru* alone. Accordingly, four of the Ahom officers serving at the capital itself, who were known for their affiliation to the sect, were summoned and put to a test in which three of them preferred death to submission, while the life of the fourth was spared through the king's own interception.[24] M. Neog has stated that this "was possibly the first glaring demonstration of such all out devotion of the Mayamariya denomination to the *guru*, which persisted through later centuries and made the rebellion possible."[25] The same Brahmanical predominance prevailed at the time of the neophyte Ahom king Sutamla *alias* Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663). This king was so blind to his religion that it was said that the pontiff of the Dakhinpat Satra belonging to the Brahmanical order of Vaishnavism (*Brahma Sanghati*) was summoned to the side of his death bed when his time of death was nearing.[26] Even during his two successors – Chakradhvaj Singha (1663-1669) and Udayaditya Singha (1669-1671) – this predominance did not diminish. It is recorded that during

the reign of Surampha *alias* Bhagaraja (1644-1648), the Mayamara Mahanta Nityanandadeva was killed at the Ahom capital at the king's order. His crime was that he was accompanied by a huge number of disciples to attend a king's invitation – in contrast to the others of his class (the Mahantas) attending the same invitation at the king's court. It was alleged that looking at the strength of his following the Mahanta remarked: "These Mahantas are nothing compared to me. I am equal to the princely family of the Tungkhungiyas."[27] This being reported to the king commenting that keeping such a large following by a simple Mahanta, that is, *guru*, is a blatant affront to the king, the latter ordered for killing the *guru* by throwing him into the Dikhow river. His dead body was later recovered by his disciples who promised at the crematorium of their *guru* to kill the king and his intelligence in order to repay the debt to their *guru* (*mari jao, mari jao, gurur rin suji jaon.* We shall kill and get killed, and thus repay the debt of our guru).[28] Thus, the conflict between the state and the followers of the Mayamara sect became inevitable. Udayaditya Singha took initiation from a monk from Gakula named as Paramananda Vairagi, and issued orders that the non-Brahman preachers should take initiation from Paramananda.[29] This was resisted by the Sudra *gurus*, particularly, by the Mayamara pontiff. Thus, a strong possibility of conflict between the state and the Brahmins on one side, and the Sudra pontiffs, and more particularly, the Mayamara pontiff on the other side, soon surfaced to a visible extent even as early as the early 17th century.

King Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696) bore a grudge upon Vaishnavism, particularly, upon the Sudra Mahantas and their so-called low caste disciples. Edward Gait has rightly pointed out that "the neo-Vaishnava sects, founded on the teachings of Sankar Deb, had now attained remarkable dimensions. The country was full of religious preceptors and their followers, who claimed exemption from the universal liability to fight and to assist in the construction of roads and tanks and other public works. This caused serious inconveniences, which the Sakta Brahmans, who had the king's ear, lost no opportunity of exaggerating."[30] The king therefore started persecuting the Vaishnava *gurus* by adopting the same old method – deporting them to the jungle of Namrup. And among those killed there was Vaikunthanath of the Mayamara sect.[31] Thus, the second Mayamara Mahanta was killed by an Ahom king at the instance of the Brahman priests. He did not spare the

disciples of the low castes, such as Kewats, Koches, Doms and Haris, who were hunted down, robbed of their property, and forced to eat the flesh of swine, cows and fowls.[32] Under this order for penalty, the disciples of the Mayamara sect suffered the most.

Gadadhar Singha's successor, King Rudra Singha, went a step further. This king imported a Bengali Sakta Brahman called Krishnaram Nyavagish Bhattacharyya to Assam, and took initiation from him. He also made it a rule that since that time all his descendants will take initiation from Krishnaram and his descendants, and that all Mahantas, irrespective of their affiliation, will henceforth have to take initiation from him.[33] This king called a great assembly where he declared that henceforth no Sudra *guru* shall have a Brahman disciple, a custom prevalent since the days of Sankaradeva.[34] The Sudra *gurus* were also directed to worship idols, a system introduced to appease the Brahman *gurus*. According to Maheswar Neog, "the tenet of Sankaradeva thus continued meeting with heavy rebuffs in the hands of the greatest Ahom ruler through the instigation of Brahman priests."[35] Coming to the throne under this tradition his successor king Siva Singha (1714-1744), and his wife queen Phuleswari, went much further to insult the Mayamara Mahanta by compelling him to attend the *Durga Puja* held at the palace, and bow down before the idol, and besmeared their forehead with the stain of a sacrificed animal's blood, an act which was for them like going to the hell. Phuleswari also made them pay obeisance to the idols of the Brahmanical Satras of Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur. This shows how the Raghunandan code of the Bengali Brahman[36] and the Brahmanical sect of Vaishnavism (*Brahma Sanghati*) became united to form a house at the initiative of the state to fight the non-Brahman sect spearheaded by the Mayamara fraction of the *Kala Sanghati* sect. This was clearly a planned act of Vaishnava persecution on the part of the state, and exclusion of the Sudra Mahantas from governing the religious life of the people. The Mayamariyas therefore raised a protest, not caring for their life, which they sacrificed for the maintenance of their faith.[37] Thus, as pointed out by S. K. Bhuyan, "The adoption of Sakta Hindusm by the Ahom monarch followed by the conversion to that faith of his principal nobles introduced a new factor in the

social and political life of the people tending towards the acceleration of that decline which had already commenced."[38]

By the second half of the 18th century, conflict of a greater intensity between the king and the Sakta-Brahmanical religious group on one side, and the Mayamaras headed by their *guru* on the other side, became apparant. The indication of a kind of rehearsal for that purpose was seen in the act of the junior pontiff, Deka *Mahanta* Gagini, in the year 1768, when he invited the disciples from all over the kingdom to build a big plinth, *bar bheti*, at the low-lying field called Malau Pathar near Jorhat by the side of their Satra at Khutiya Pota.[39] It is recorded that eight lakh odd disciples gathered at Malau Pathar, and built a very large plinth for a prayer hall the remains of which still measures 900 ft x 200 ft x 13 ft (at the top) after a period of about two hundred and fifty years of exposure to erosion and demolition. This act of building the plinth indicated what manpower the Mahanta could command if and when necessary. It is stated that after having thus assessed the strength of his disciples, the Deka Mahanta conferred with the regional leaders of the community, the *Gaonburhas*, and observed: "With all the large laity at my back I can be a king. They have killed our *guru*. If my father permits, I can fight with these followers as my force."[40] There was no further development in this regard, but that there was a rehearsal to contest the state against oppression and insult on a particular sectarian community, now became clear.

In the summer of 1769 the war of succession came; and Mohanmala Gohain, elder brother of the deceased king Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769), who was deprived earlier of the throne, now put his claim and approached the Mayamara Mahanta for support.[41] This shows that the situation that had emerged was not remaining secret by now, and the Mayamara Mahantas' preparation to fight the royalty was a known fact. It was under this situation that Chief Executive of the State Kirti Chandra Barbarua insulted the Mahanta by returning with disdain the monthly presents (*nirmali*) sent by the Mahanta to the newly anointed king Lakshmi Singha (1769-1781). Two months after, the same Chief Executive further aggravated the situation by severely beating two leaders of the Mayamariyas – Naharkhora Saikia and Ragha Neog – who came to supply the king with elephants caught from the forests. It was in this situation that Ragha Neog shouted curses upon the

Barbarua in the "name of the elemental forces in the presence of all on the spot."[42] Ragha Neog was then carried in bandages to the Mahanta who exclaimed: "May the permission be given to lay down my life in order to repay the debt of the *guru* [*deh eri gurur rin sujibalai bolak*]". The Mahanta, who had already borne heaps of insults and atrocities, now became sorely afflicted. He now gave permission to his son and the disciples to fight and dethrone the wrongdoers. With the permission of the head of the religious sect, the Moamariya Revolt became a reality.

The two leaders of the Moran tribe, Ragha Neog and Naharkhora Saikia, initiated the process at the Namrup forest with their own men to "repay the debt of the *guru*." The chief architect of the revolt was the *Deka Mahanta*, Gagini, who deputed the head of the villages (*gaonburhas*) to organize people of their respective villages to join the revolt.[43] The revolt started in the form of a protest against the state act of felling down trees in the jungles of the Moran tribe. Assamese chronicles[44] have recorded that the Morans raised the banner of revolt against the Ahom king's order to cut down a kind of large tree called *dhak* in the forests of Namrup in Upper Assam, the home land of the Morans.[45] "In the same year in obedience to the royal orders, the Barbarua sent some men to cut *bardhaks* or drums. These men came back and reported to the Barbarua that they could not cut the drums, as the *Hati-Chungi* Morans[46] acting in a heretical and disloyal manner had made their own Raja and Barbarua and launched a war or rebellion."[47] They also cut down the bridge over the river Dibru, and separated their territory as an independent zone.[48] It is to be noted that the region of upper Assam on the banks of the rivers Checha and Dihing beyond Dibru formed the base of the revolt from where it spread to the other parts. There are historical reasons for that.

The Morans still form a major ethnic community of the Dibru-Chesa regions. They along with their brethren, the Borahis, had their own Chiefs and territories when Sukapha, the founder of the Ahom kingdom in Assam, came from Upper Burma in the early 13th century.[49] Sukapha and his men took over the territories and Ahomised most members of the tribes, and appointed them to serve the newly founded state with the supply of resources from their jungles, such as the wood, elephants, honey, fuel wood and so

forth. Thus, while the Morans, at the cost of losing their territories to the incoming invaders, had also to lose their right over their own resources, the Borahis completely lost their identity as a separate tribe. There is no doubt that these tribes submitted to the foreign rule because of their lack of an organized force, being then under an inferior economy. But they nurtured a natural dislike against the Ahom monarchy since inception as not only they had to submit to the intruders, but they had also to pay regular revenue to the state with whatever natural resources they had in their jungle habitat. The way they had subsequently protested under the leadership of Ragha Neog and Naharkhora Saikia against cutting down of trees in their jungle is a reflection of their traditional dislike for exploitation of their resources by an alien force. It was natural that they should unite, and at the extreme point of their exploitation, they would protest. The only requirement was an economy to sustain and a leadership to direct them.

By the 18th century the Morans had an established agrarian economy that they attained being a part of the Ahom system itself, and in the personality of the Mayamara Mahanta they found appropriate leadership. It is significant that the *Tungkhungiya Buranji* records how the Ahom forces used communal terms to heap contempt upon the Morans as an unsophisticated tribe (*ga̲ndhikhowa̲ Moran,* i.e. eater of an insect having dirty smell called *ga̲ndhi*), and despised them as *Moamariya,* being different from *Bamuniya.*[50] Thus, the Moamariya Revolt was a result of both ethnicity and religion; while the first precipitated the organization, the latter provided the ideology to create it. Assamese chronicles therefore very clearly named it as *Matak* or *Moran Bidroh.*[51] According to Maheswar Neog, it is significant that even though the laity of the Mayamara Sattra was spread over the whole length of the kingdom from Sadiya to the Manas, the war of rebellion was to be spearheaded by the Morans under the command of a Moran leader, Raghava, and that the action was confined to a single line from the Mayamariya camps on the Checha river through the capital at Rangpur to the king's fugitive camp on the Chintamanigarh on another small river, Sonai, to the northwest of the capital."[52]

The Moran revolt soon took the form of a civil war provoking various communities to participate. At the accession of the king Gaurinath Singha, it widely spread among the Kaivartas of Majuli and Jorhat living all around the

Khutiyapota Satra. The Kaivartas were called in Assam as *Dom* and were treated with much contempt. In the caste hierarchy they were put in the lowest rank. There are references to the effect that they were put to various kinds of oppression and insult by the newly Brahmanised kings of Assam. It was reported that one of their members was killed by the king Jayadhvaj Singha, because he performed a congregation prayer at his house which he was supposed to have no right to perform according to the king.[53] On another such occasion, a member of the same community was killed for his keeping long hair,[54] which again his community was not supposed to do.[55] As we have pointed out earlier, the name *Moamara* was coined to ridicule the sect of Aniruddhadeva because he began his act of proselytization first with the people living on the bank of a fishing pond and killing and exchanging its fish. This attitude of the Brahmanical society attained more strength after the arrival of Krishnaram Bhattacharyya, a Brahmin from Bengal, and his Raghunandanian code.[56] The emergence of the Brahmanical sect of Neo-Vaishnavism and the importation of the Sakta Brahman from Bengal, and their united growth under the royal patronage, proved detrimental to the subaltern communities which had experienced a lift and a relief from social suppression during the Vaishnava movement of Sankaradeva, and later within the sect of Aniruddhadeva. It is surprising that the lift to the lowlies allowed by the Mayamariya sect earned for it a low social status and social hatred. It is therefore natural that both the Kaivartas and the Mayamara Mahanta had a strong hatred towards the Brahmanical system and the state that patronized it. But they being handicapped in all aspects could not find enough scope to protest; fortunately the Moran revolt gave them that opportunity to rise in revolt. Thus we see the Kaivartas joining the Morans under their leader Hauha, who occupied the north bank and the Majuli Island, and ruled the area for a few years. It is significant that the rebels meted out punishments to their opponents everywhere and fined the big Satras – Auniati, Dakhinpat and Garamur – in the Majuli island and Kuruwabahi on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, which got much of the royal patronage, to the tune of Rs. 8,000.00 from each of Auniati and Dakhinpat, and Rs. 4000.00 from Garamur and Kuruwabahi.[57] The development in the north bank and the Majuli island shows that there was a strong Kaivarta element too in the total fabric of the Moamariya Revolt.

The significance of the Moamariya Revolt perhaps does not end here. As we have pointed out earlier, the term *Matek* was created to form an integrated socio-religious community into which were brought a few ethnic elements other than the Moran and the Kaivartas. These included the Chutiyas and the Ahoms in the main. While the Ahoms maintained their state, the Chutiya state was occupied by the Ahom giving the Chutiya princes a simple zamindary status within the Ahom state itself.[58] Assamese chronicles maintain how the Chutiyas continued to revolt against the Ahoms for more than a century for the recovery of their state.[59] It is significant that immediately after the creation of an autonomous territory for the Mataks in Tinsukia in Upper Assam, Sarbananda Singha, its ruler, declared himself to be a Chutiya by clan (Buruk branch of the Chutiyas).[60] The concern for establishment of an ethnic identity immediately after assumption of political power is not without significance. It is interesting that the Matak *alias* Mayamara community maintains within itself distinct ethnic identity for each of its social factions.[61] Thus, there are Ahom Matak, Chutiya Matak, Kalita Matak, Moran Matak, Kaivarta Matak and so forth. The assertion of the Chutiya identity on the part of Sarbananda Singha can thus be seen as having a link with the Chutiya revolt after they had lost their state to the Ahoms. That this is not altogether baseless can be presumed from the fact that immediately after assumption of his power and establishment of an identity as a Chutiya, the Morans, who in fact created the revolt, became sidelined, and concentrated within the jungles far away from the capital at Tinsukia. This has been noted by Sristidhar Dutta in his *The Mataks and Their Kingdom*.[62] It is due to this reason that there remained space enough for a second phase of the Moran revolt seeking a separate territorial jurisdiction and an ethnic identity, which are still marking the socio-political condition of this part of the country. Hiren Gohain, a noted social scientist from Assam, has therefore stated that the element of ethnicity cannot be ignored in evaluating the Moamariya revolt, nor can it be treated as a classical example of class struggle.[63] Even Amalendu Guha, who has examined the nature of the revolt on a Marxist line, and emphasized economic reasons, at its background, has noted the predominance of the Kaivartas and the Morans within the Mayamara community, and the tribal character of their socio-economic structure that was under suppression from the state.[64] It is significant that almost all groups of participants in the revolt, even besides

the Morans and the Kaivartas, had some kind of political grievances against the state. The Bhuyans, for example, who held sway over large territories exercising independent political powers in the early medieval period, had longstanding enmity with the Ahom kings who, in the process of expansion of their state, had occupied the Bhuyan territories one after another. Chronicles recording this phase of the history of the land maintain how the *Bhuyans* continued their attempts to recover their lost territories and political power till many centuries later. The aspiration of the *Deka Mahanta* who was a member of this class, to occupy the Ahom throne by himself, and the open challenge expressed by the Mayamara Mahanta equating himself with the king with half of the total population of the state at his back,[65] adds to the understanding of the ethnic character of the revolt.

The Moamariya Revolt is a very significant event of 18th century Assam. It marked the beginning of an attack on what was typically medieval, and ended with the assertion of ethnic constituents of its society to political power and social right against a system of oppressive religious and political power. It was this trend in the assertion of identity, insurgency and acquisition of political power that formed the basis of the history of 20th century Assamese society. The interesting aspect of this significant development was that the ideology at its backdrop was provided by a sectarian belief, perhaps like that provided by Sikhism in the growth of the Sikh struggle against the Mughal authority,[66] and its organization by an ethno-sectarian community.

ENDNOTES

[1] Maheswar Neog, *Socio-Political Events in Assam Leading to the Militancy of the Mayamariya Vaisnavas*, Calcutta: 1982 (henceforth referred to as SPAMV).

[2] Ibid., p.16.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.; *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Charitra aru Mayamara Gosain Sakalar Vamsavali* by Chidananda Das, Chabua, 1933, vv. 298-299; Maheswar Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times: Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Assam*, Gauhati, 1965, pp. 221f; Sristidhar Dutta, *The Mataks and Their Kingdom*, Allahabad, 1985, pp. 55, 69f.

[6] *Shri Shri Aniruddhadevar Charitra*, vv. 115-120.

[7] SPAMV, p. 25.

[8] S. F. Hannay, "A Short Account of the Moamarah Sect and the Country occupied by the Bur Senaputee," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, No. 80, August 1838, Vol. VII, Part II, p. 672; SPAMV, p. 67.

[9] SPAMV, p. 67.

[10] According to Gait, "Their designation is said to be a nick name given to the original disciples of Anirodh, who lived near a lake, where they caught large number of fish called 'Moa'. It may also perhaps be connected with the circumstance that Anirodh is reputed to have owned a celebrated book on magic." See Edward Albert Gait, *A History of Assam*, 2nd ed., reprint, Gauhati, 1981, p. 59; S. K. Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, 2nd ed., Guwahati, 1963, pp. 57f.

[11] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, pp. 57f.

[12] Hannay, "A Short Account of the Moamarah Sect," p. 671; William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, reprint, Delhi, 1975, pp. 326ff; also Dutta, *The Mataks and Their Kingdom*, pp. 13ff.

[13] SPAMV, p. 14fn.

[14] *Shri Shri Aniruddhadevar Charita*, vv. 158-166.

[15] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 62.

[16] According to Neog, "The race had another name Matak, meaning 'sturdy', as they possessed formidable physical build. This name, complimentary in character, was given to them by the neighbouring Khamtis – if we are to believe William Robinson. The epithet 'Matak' was to be understood in contradistinction to another epithet 'Mulung', supposed to mean 'the weak', which was applied to the general debilitated Ahom or other people, as in a folk-song that got current among the rebel Mayamariyas: *ei dheni ei kad...matakar dekadeo, mulung maribalai jao*- take up this bow and these arrows, o young master of the Mataks, for we are going to engage the Mulungs in fight"; cf. SPAMV, p. 26.

[17] *Ahom Buranji*, Raisahab G.C.Barua (trans), reprint, Delhi, 1985, pp. 31f.

[18] Robinson, *The Mataks and Their Kingdom* pp. 326ff.

[19] *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Charitra*, v. 299.

[20] Neog, *Socio-Political Events in Assam*, p. 29.

[21] Ibid.

[22] For details, see Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times*, pp. 47ff.

[23] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 48; SPAMV, p. 31.

[24] Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 200; *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Charitra*, vv. 280-298; SPAMV, p. 31.

[25] SPAMV, p. 31.

[26] *Asam Buranji* obtained from the family of Sukumar Mahanta, S. K.Bhuyan, ed., reprint, Guwahati, 1988, p. 86.

[27] Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 19.

[28] Maniram. Dewan, *Buranji Vivek Ratna* (Ms.); *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Charitra*, vv. 344-370.

[29] SPAMV, p. 31.

[30] Gait, *A History of Assam,*, p. 68.

[31] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 48.

[32] Gait, *A History of Assam*, p. 168.

[33] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, pp. 30f; SPAMV, p. 38.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid, p. 39.

[36] Raj Mohan Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, Shillong, 1948, pp. 145f.

[37] SPAMV, p. 41.

[38] Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 202.

[39] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 62.

[40] Maniram. Dewan, *Buranji Vivek Ratna* (Ms.); *Shri Shri Aniruddhadeva Charitra*, vv. 344-3.

[41] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 59.

[42] SPAMV, p. 47.

[43] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 62; Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 205.

[44] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 57.

[45] Ibid.

[46] *Hati-chungis* were the clan of the Morans who caught wild elephants from the forest of their range and trained and supplied them to the king and the high dignitaries.

[47] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 57.

[48] Ibid, p. 58.

[49] S. K. Bhuyan, ed., *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, 2nd ed., Guwahati, 1964, p. 101.

[50] *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, p. 62.

[51] Ibid, pp. 57ff.

[52] SPAMV, p. 48.

[53] S. K. Bhuyan, ed., *Satsari Asam Buranji*,2nd ed., Guwahati, 1964, p. 31.

[54] Keeping long hair was a style familiar with the inmates of a Satra, and those of the higher classes in the society of medieval Assam. See Jahnabi Gogoi Nath, *Agrarian System in Medieval Assam*, Delhi, 2002, pp. 200ff.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, pp. 145f; SPAMV, pp. 42f.

[57] TB, p. 66.

[58] *Deodhai Asam Buranji*, p. 200; S. L. Barua and D. Nath, eds., *Chutiya Jatir Buranji*, Guwahati, 2006, pp. 165, 185.

[59] It is significant that the Chutiya nobles under their fugitive prince presented themselves before the Koch King Naranarayan (1540-1587), who invaded and conquered the Ahom kingdom in the year 1562, and requested him to recover on his behalf his paternal kingdom. This is recorded in the N. C. Sarma, ed., *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, Guwahati, 1973, vv. 372-373; Lakshmi Devi, *Ahom-Tribal Relations*, Gauhati University, 1969, pp. 35ff.

[60] Dutta, *The Mataks and Their Kingdom*, p. 190.

[61] Recently one branch of the ruling clan celebrated its clan festival while the other did not join. The reason was that one claim Chutiya descent, the other claim descent from the Ahom royal family. The present author has dealt with this aspect of Chutiya ethnicity in Barua and Nath, eds., *Chutiya Jatir Buranji*, pp. 190f.

[62] Allahabad, 1985, pp. 214f.

[63] Amalendu Guha, *Vaishnavbadar Para Mayamara Bidrohalai*, Guwahati, 1993, pp. 21ff.

[64] Hiren Gohain, "Bingsa Satabdir Itihasar Uttaran Sankat," in the *Bingsa Satabdi Asam*, Golden Jubilee Volume of D. R. College, Golaghat, 2000, p. 22.

[65] Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, pp. 207ff; *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, pp. 62f.

[66] S. K. Bhuyan writes: "The transformation of the Moamariyas into a military body has its parallel, though in a much larger scale, in that of the Sikhs who contributed to the subversion of Mughal authority in India. In both cases the fighting element in their sectarial organizations was introduced as a result of the clash of the *Gurus* with the Government of the land." Cf. Bhuyan, ed., *Tungkhungiya Buranji*, pp. 256f. For details, see Surjit Hans, *A Reconstruction of Sikh History from Sikh Literature*, Jalandhar, 1988; Louis E. Fenech, "Martyrdom and the Sikh Tradition," *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 117, No. 4 October-December 1997, pp. 223 ff; Himadri Banerjee, *The Other Sikhs: A View from Eastern India*, New Delhi 2003, pp. 42f; Sristidhar Dutta, "From Community Formation to a State Formation: A Case Study of the Matak-Morans (Moamariyas or Mayamariyas)," *Presidential Address*, Annual Conference of the North East India History Association, Aizawl, 2006, pp. 16ff.

European and Indian Nation-Building: The Position of Religious Communities

Ishtiaq Ahmed[*]

European nation building began in the wake of the War of Religions of the 17th century. Following the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, the princes of Western Europe began to patronize a specific church; official national identity sharply distinguished between the primary nation deriving from membership in the state church and the religious and sectarian minorities. The latter were at most accorded the right to practice their faiths privately. A gradual expansion of rights under law had been taking place in the British Isles since at least the adoption of the Magna Charta (1215) by Parliament. The Habeas Corpus Act (1679) and the English Bill of Rights (1689) and other such acts of parliament which followed granted more and more civil rights to the expanding body of citizens – the clergy, nobility, gentry and the emerging propertied classes from amongst successful traders, bankers and soldiers of fortune that returned from overseas after taking part in colonial plunder.

It was, however, not until the French Revolution had taken place that the modern type of nation-building began in real earnest. Prior to that the individual was merely a subject of the king; those at the bottom of the social system, the vast class of poor peasants, landless labourers and the urban working people, were burdened with various obligations, often unpaid, to the superior classes. The French Revolution resulted in the overthrow of feudalism and absolutism and ushered in the era of rights-bearing citizens.[15] This transformation set the pace for similar changes in continental Europe but mainly in the western regions.

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Another model of nation building that emerged in reaction to the French notion of territorial or civil nationalism was that of cultural or ethnic nationalism among the German-speaking peoples of central Europe. The French Revolution had been followed by Napoleon Bonaparte's regime that embarked upon an expansionist military course. Napoleon wanted to bring the whole world into the orbit of the French Enlightenment, which preceded the French Revolution and had served as the intellectual force behind the revolution. The Germans, however, saw Napoleon's invasion as a threat to German identity and culture. Consequently, a movement, known as German Romanticism, started which idealized German culture and ethnicity. According to this approach, individuals were merely members of an organic nation constituted by culture and common descent. Later, this model was to be interpreted in a patently racist manner, and paved the way for the rise of Nazism.[16]

The creation of the so-called nation-states in Western Europe was, however, primarily a triumph of the majoritarian principle, whether of French or German leaning. In the 19th century working men were granted the right to vote, and women had to wait until the 20th century before they were granted the same right. Some vague commitment to the freedom of religion, of ethnic, religious and sectarian minorities, was made by West European states, but in practice discrimination and restrictions were prevalent, especially in relation to their right to take part in politics. In Sweden, for example, till the end of the Second World War, even to become a school teacher one had to belong to the Lutheran Church.[17]

The Individualistic Post-War Perspective on Human Rights

The unprecedented suffering caused in terms of loss of human life and destruction of ethnic minorities during the Second World War was a watershed in the evolution of the post-war perspective on human rights norms, rules and treaties. The new standpoint took a clearly individual-based approach, although the most appalling aspect of that war was the systematic annihilation of demonised and dehumanised minorities such as Jews and Gypsies and civilian populations. The main reason was the abuse of the doctrine of minority rights by Hitler. He justified the invasions of

Czechoslovakia and Poland in the name of defending the German minorities allegedly persecuted in those states.[18]

The Charter of the United Nations (1945) obliged all member-states to respect human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) recognized freedom of conscience and religion as an inalienable right of all human beings as well as their inalienable right to enjoy the right to vote and contest public office. These measures clearly favoured the French model of nation building. The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950) followed suit. It set in motion processes for the liberalization of citizenship. Such a reform encouraged many immigrants, among them several million from Asian and Africa, to apply and acquire citizenship of the countries where they had settled.[19]

Germany continued to practise ethnic citizenship till 1999, but then eased somewhat the processes for non-German immigrants, which included a large number of Turkish immigrants, to acquire citizenship. Consequently, in the contemporary European Union, all bona fide citizens enjoy the same civil, political and socio-economic rights. Needless to say, a long process of secularisation was concomitant with the expansion of equal rights and inclusive citizenship. Although state churches continued in some parts of Western Europe, religious law was confined only to spiritual matters and confined to the private sphere. In all other sectors of life, secular law consonant with human rights was accepted as the basis for human interaction.

In the European context, it is important to bear in mind that the expansion of rights and citizenship was the result of a dialectical interaction between the state and society. Popular struggles before the Second World War were the basis for the working class and women gaining the right to vote. The post-war consensus among the political elites to adopt inclusive and universal citizenship with equal rights for all citizens, including immigrants who voluntarily become citizens, can be considered to have an acceptance in the wider society as well. The terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005, in which many people lost their lives, have created a fear of Islamic fundamentalism, however. This can adversely affect inclusive, secular and universal citizenship and equal political status of all citizens if the very large

Muslim minority of nearly 16 million, of which several million are now citizens of the country in which they live, is perceived to harbour sympathies for terrorists.

India

Indian nation-building started in the background of a long tradition of pluralism but also social inequality. The classic Hindu *dharma-karma* theory presented an idea of justice in which right action in one birth would result in reward in a higher birth in the next, or vice versa, wrong actions result in a lower form of birth. From the time, of the Laws of Manu (originating around 800 BC), theoretically there has been no scope for social mobility, upwards or downwards, in one lifetime.[20] In reality, however, mobility was possible and many groups were able to elevate their standing in the caste order, or to have themselves included favourably in it through Sanskritization.[21] Nevertheless, such a theory created a vast number of low caste and casteless people based on ethnic and racial criteria.

The Muslim presence in South Asia dates from 711 AD. For the greater part of the period between the early 13th century and 1857, Muslim dynasties dominated the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. In general the main social components of the Muslim social order were the so-called *ashraf* and the local converts known as *aam log*. The *ashraf* traced their descent to Turkish, Afghan, Persian or Arab ancestors and below them were the large bulk of local converts.[22] During the Mughal period (1526-1857), roughly 86 per cent of the imperial services were manned by Muslims – 70 per cent by the foreign-born and their descendants and 16 per cent by the much larger group of indigenous converts.[23] Upper caste Hindus who became Muslims were accorded respectable status and in due course assimilated into the *ashraf*. Islamic theology did not recognize untouchability and the social esteem of the local converts belonging to the lower castes and the various agricultural and nomadic tribes indeed improved significantly but the *ashraf* kept their social distance from them.[24]

The State in Pre-Colonial Times

The pre-colonial political order was constituted by an autocratic ruler, Hindu or Muslim, at the apex of a segmentary power structure within which a

descending power hierarchy constituted by lesser princes, chiefs, caste leaders and tribal headmen presided over the mass of peasants, craftsmen, artisans, menials and others in the medieval period.[25] On the whole, the popular fiction that the ruler, Hindu or Muslim, was a guardian of all his subjects and an impartial judge of conflicting individual and communal conflicts, gave currency to words such as *insaaf* (Arabic-Urdu) and *nyaya* (Sanskrit-Hindi), which mean justice, and associated them with good government. Moreover, words such as *haqq* (Arabic-Urdu) and *adhikara,* (Sanskrit-Hindi), meaning a right or entitlement, were part of everyday parlance since pre-colonial times, and in a broad sense suggested recognition of the maxim: to each his due. However, since society itself was strictly hierarchical such terminology should not be construed to mean by any means some sort of equal proto-citizenship.[26]

British Colonial Rule and Idea of Modern Rights

Although the British had since at least 1757 been expanding their hold over various regions of the subcontinent, it was only after 1857 that India was directly annexed by the Crown. From 1858 onwards the British government assumed direct control over many parts of India. Colonial policy became centralized and was enforced through a bureaucratic system based on elaborate rules, regulations and procedures. Although the British were not particularly keen on fostering citizenship among the natives, and the Indian people remained mere subjects of the Crown, reforms fashioned on liberal constitutional theory and English Common Law nevertheless resulted in the educated classes, among whom a large number were lawyers trained in British schools and universities, acquiring a sense of citizenship and rights under the law. Such ideas gained wider currency as education spread and political activity acquired a more popular character.[27]

In legal terms, except for personal matters, religious law was supplanted with modified versions of Common Law. The practice of Sati (widow-burning) was outlawed, but untouchability was not declared unlawful, although Christian missionaries and British reformers, especially at local levels, were able to provide some relief to such people through conversions. In the political sphere, representative institutions were gradually introduced

although suffrage remained narrow and subject to property and educational qualifications.

Political strategy as well as a concern for representation led the British to give political recognition to religious communities and alienated and oppressed groups such as the so-called Untouchables. Thus, in 1909, the system of separate electorates was introduced, whereby the Muslim community was granted separate representation in the municipal and legislative councils. Later other minorities also began to clamour for separate electorates; among them the Sikhs of Punjab and the Untouchables were the most prominent. The former were granted separate electorates in 1921. As regards the Untouchables (who prefer to call themselves Dalits), the Congress leader M.K. Gandhi began a fast-unto-death to protest against them being given such a right. He asserted that the Untouchables were an integral part of the Hindu social order. He was able to convince the leader of the Untouchables Dr Ambedkar that in independent India untouchability would be banned and adequate measures taken to rectify their grievances.[28]

The Indian National Congress spelled out its ideas of citizenship in the Nehru Report published in 1928. It envisaged universal citizenship based on equal civil and political rights.[29] There was to be no state religion and men and women were to enjoy equal rights. Separate electorates and weightage (more seats than actual population proportion) were to be abolished, but reservation of seats for Muslims in provinces where they formed at least 10 percent of the population was to be permitted. This was unacceptable to the Muslim League, which later in the late 1930s began to clamour for a separate Muslim state in the Muslim majority regions of the subcontinent. On the other hand, Congress leaders such as Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru solicited support of the nationalist Muslim clerics associated with the Deoband school of Sunni Islam. They promised to the Jamiyiat Ulema-e-Hind that in independent India the government will not introduce measures to reform Muslim personal law, but would expect that in due course Muslims would themselves seek integration into the mainstream.[30]

India

After protracted and tortuous negotiations between Congress, Muslim League, the Sikhs of Punjab and the British failed to find a power-sharing

formula that could keep India united it was partitioned into two separate and independent states of India and Pakistan in mid-August 1947. The failure to keep India united left the Congress ideal of a composite Indian nation in shambles. However, when discussion began on the constitution, the notion of a modern individual-rights-oriented civic and composite nation fashioned on the French model of a nation prevailed. The Hindu nationalist lobby argued in favour of a Hindu cultural hegemony in terms of national identity, but was overruled.[31]

On the whole, the founders of independent India decided to continue working within the constitutional theory initiated by the British. Dr Ambedkar, the leader of the Untouchables, was made chairperson of the committee that prepared the Indian Constitution. The constitution gives equal rights to all citizens, irrespective of caste. A secular-democratic state upholding inclusive citizenship and universal human rights and backed with centralized developmental inputs, within a federal administrative and power-sharing structure, characterized the erstwhile public policy and political approach of independent India. The state did not constitutionally privilege any particular religion or cultural tradition. Article 44 envisaged the adoption of a 'uniform civil code throughout the territory of India' at some future date. Such a code would mean a comprehensive package of human rights enjoyed by all citizens on a universal basis without regard to caste, creed, colour or gender. The state also encouraged inter-caste and inter-religious marriages and the laws of the land recognize their validity.[32]

Such reforms were undertaken by an enlightened leadership and there is no evidence to suggest that the masses or lower castes clamoured for them. On the other hand, such a radical break with traditional culture greatly angered the Hindu nationalists, but for a long time they remained on the sidelines as the Congress Party continued to enjoy the support of the voters and was returned to power without any disruption till 1977.

Affirmative Action in Favour of Dalits

The Indian constitution lays down in Article 46: 'The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes (s) and

Scheduled Tribes (indigenous peoples), and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation'. In 1955 the union parliament passed the Untouchability (Offences) Act, which criminalized its practice. Also by an act of parliament quotas were fixed for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in government services, central and provincial legislatures and educational institutions. Consequently some 22 per cent jobs were reserved for them. Such reservations apply only to Dalits belonging to the Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jain communities. The argument was that these religions originated from within the Hindu tradition and retained some features of the Hindu caste system.[33]

On the other hand, Muslims and Christians of scheduled caste and tribal background do not benefit from the reservation policy because ideologically these religions do not recognize caste. In 1979 the Mandal Commission went even further to include other backward castes as qualified for reservations. It recommended up to 49.5 percent of seats to be reserved for the scheduled castes and tribes and other backward castes. Its recommendations have not been implemented effectively yet.

At any rate, the reservation of seats has been a slow process of upward mobility for Dalits and Adivasis. Social taboos are still widely prevalent in society, and brutal attacks by upper caste Hindus on Dalits and Adivasis reported almost daily in the press. It has been noted that upwardly mobile Dalits are more frequently attacked than those who remain at the bottom.[34] In recent years a maverick party, however, the Bahujan Samaj Party (party of the majority society), has made a significant impact upon the UP State Assembly elections. Its leader Mayawati managed an alliance with the large Brahmin group in that state, and she is now the chief minister of India's most populous state.

The Muslim Minority

As we mentioned above, Nehru and other Congress leaders had given assurances to the Deobandi clerics that the government would not interfere with the internal matters of the Muslim community, but hoped that in due course Muslims would voluntarily integrate into mainstream political life and thus partake in the democratic nation-building project. Consequently, when Nehru initiated a number of reforms to modernize and democratise the

Hindu marriage and inheritance laws, the Muslim community was exempted.[35] The new changes forbade Hindu men from having more than one wife; child marriage was also prohibited. Later more general changes were introduced, but it was not clear whether they applied only to Hindus or all Indian citizens.

In 1985 Shah Bano, a middle-aged Muslim woman, was divorced by her husband, M. A. Khan. Upon the advice of some well-wishers she filed a petition in the Madhya Pradesh High Court, that as an Indian citizen she was entitled to financial support from her former husband. The court ruled in her favour and Khan was ordered to provide a small monthly amount to his ex-spouse. Khan took the plea that in Islam no permanent financial responsibility devolved upon the man beyond the limited period of *idat* (period of probation of three months following divorce so as to establish if pregnancy had occurred prior to dissolution of marriage). He appealed against the decision of the Madhya Pradesh High Court in the Indian Supreme Court. The learned judges upheld that as an Indian citizen Shah Bano was entitled to financial support from him. Meanwhile the case had been thoroughly politicized. Khan mobilized the conservative ulema in his favour. Demonstrations and agitations took place in different parts of India.[36]

Many liberal and progressive Muslims including academics, lawyers, jurists, members of parliament, women activists and political workers came out boldly in favour of the judgment. Both sides of Muslim opinion put forth arguments, but the conservative forces greatly outnumbered the modernists. Unwilling to antagonize the large Muslim vote-bank, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi went along with the traditional standpoint, and a special law exempting Muslims from such obligations to ex-wives was passed by the Indian parliament.[37]

Such events were exploited by the Hindu nationalists to convey the idea that the Congress pampered the minorities and ignored the interests and sentiments of Hindus. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, founded 1980), which succeeded earlier Hindu nationalist parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha and Jan Sangh took up cudgels on behalf of Hindu religious and cultural interests. The BJP and enjoyed the support of the hardcore Hindu nationalist movement, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as well as

some new organizations with a strong following among Hindus in the West such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and student organizations such as the Bajrang Dal. They thus formed a formidable group of political agitators.[38]

In the 1980s, they began to mobilize opinion on what it described were historical grievances, blaming Muslim invaders for desecrating Hindu temples and other sacred places. In particular, the alleged destruction of a Hindu temple in early 16th century at Ayodhya in the northern state of UP by the founder of the Mughal Empire, Babur, became the focal point of a militant Hindu resurgence. It was asserted that Lord Ram had taken birth in that very temple upon whose ruins Babur had raised the Babri Mosque. The BJP also popularised the idea of Hindutva, or Hindu cultural nationalism, to replace the secular, territorial basis of official nationalism. Things came to a head in December 1992 when hordes of fanatical Hindus arrived in Ayodhya. They not only dismantled the Babri Mosque but also went on a rampage in which several thousand Muslims were brutally killed.

Now, although violent attacks on Muslims had continued to take place after the partition of India, for allegedly having been responsible for the partition of India the scale of the 1992 assault was much bigger and was politically organized and orchestrated.[39] This was followed by the carnage of Muslims in Mumbai in 1993, by bomb blasts in retaliation by Muslim terrorists that claimed several hundred lives. In 2002, another massacre of Muslims took place in the state of Gujarat after Muslims allegedly set a rail compartment full of Hindu pilgrims on fire. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that militant Islamism groups based in Pakistan such as the Laskar-e-Teyyaba and Jaish-e-Muhammad have been behind several terrorist attacks in the Indian-administered Kashmir as well as in other parts of India.[40]

On the whole, it has been noted that Muslims as a community have lagged behind other communities in terms of educational achievements and employment in the public and private sectors. The Sachar Committee Report of 2006 clearly showed under-representation of Muslims in both educational and government institutions.

Conclusion

The European Union, which now represents almost the whole of Europe, as well as India, opted for nation building in the light of the civic or French

model. Such a model prescribes equal rights for all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, colour or ethnicity. Both have rejected discriminatory criteria deriving from religion, ethnicity and caste as the basis for citizenship. In the case of India, a progressive policy of affirmative action in the form of reservation of seats for the historically disadvantaged Untouchables has been instituted as a complement to equal rights.

On the other hand, while developments towards egalitarian citizenship in the European context have taken place through a more or less dialectical interaction between state and society, in the case of India it was the state or reforms from above which set in motion egalitarian processes. In the latter case, we find that resistance to the equal status of the Untouchables continues to be offered from the larger society. There is also greater resistance among sections of Hindu society to accepting Muslims as equal members of the Indian nation. It derives largely from the wide gap between the enlightened reforms from the top that the Indian state has initiated, and the continuing influence of traditional culture and religion in the wider society.

ENDNOTES

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