

**RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND NATION BUILDING :
CASE STUDIES OF THE SIKHS,
BUDDHISTS AND CHRISTIANS ✓**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
award of the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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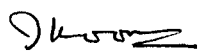
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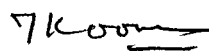
July 11, 1984

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for any degree of this or any other University.

We recommend this dissertation be placed before
the examiners for their consideration for the award
of Master of Philosophy degree.


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my deep debt of gratitude to Dr. T.K. Oommen, without whose encouragement and guidance, my M.Phil. dissertation would have been difficult to complete. While I was writing it, Dr. Oommen frequently remarked on my economy with words; characteristically, then, my expression of gratitude is brief, but heartfelt nevertheless.

My parents who not only bore with fortitude my absence from home, but who also extended invaluable moral support, I will not presume to thank.

I would also like to thank Shri Om Parkash, who, despite a busy schedule, found the time to type my dissertation.

And finally, I would like to thank the many friends who helped me tide over the minor crises associated with writing a dissertation.


JANAKI MENON.

CHAPTER I

THE ISSUES

The twentieth century has seen the emergence of several independent nation states in Asia and Africa. It is interesting to examine the basis of nation building in these states. In most cases, religion, language or tribe became the unifying factor. Our focus in this study is on religion as a factor contributing to the maintenance of, or posing a threat to the nation state. Where does India stand in such a situation? A look at India's immediate neighbours demonstrates that India stands out in several ways. In Pakistan, Islam is the state religion. Nepal is the only Hindu Kingdom in the world. In Bangla Desh, although officially there is no state religion, in effect, the Bengali Muslims are dominant. Burma is the land of Theravada Buddhism, which has been proclaimed the religion of the state. In Sri Lanka, the Singhalese Buddhists dominate the nation.

[Against the backdrop of these nation states which pursue policies in favour of one or another religion, India stands out as a secular state. Indian religious pluralism presents a varied and complex picture. Different religious communities exist side by side.] Over 80 per cent of the population is Hindu and this forms the dominant group.

However, apart from this there are followers of almost every faith in the world, and these are accorded the status of minority religious groups - the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis, Jains, Buddhists and Jews. The growth of group consciousness in India's plural society cannot be singular.¹ People identify themselves and play their roles in relation to different groups and become conscious of the same at different levels.] In the context of Indian nationalism, many kinds of social groups and relations become important - religion, region, language, caste and so on.

x [When we examine the Indian situation more closely, several things become clear. Although Hinduism is not accepted as the dominant religion, by very virtue of the fact that it is the faith of more than 80 per cent of the population, it is so. This, coupled with the generally aggressive stand taken by the Hindus from the Arya Samaj movement to the formation of the more recent Virat Hindu Samaj and the Vishva Hindu Parishad, has meant that they are seen as a threat to the minority groups. In the face of such a threat, what then, is the attitude of minority religious groups towards the dominant Hindus and towards the nation state? ✓

✓ [The threat to the minority religious groups in India takes two forms depending on the attitude of the Hindu

majority. In the case of the 'indigenous religions', Hinduism attempts to draw them back into the fold. Sikh reaction to this has been to assert its identity in an aggressive manner.] In the case of the Buddhists, because of the fact that most of its adherents are from the untouchable groups, they have taken on the new identity of the neo-Buddhist. [In the case of religions viewed as alien by the Hindus, the threat is of exclusion rather than assimilation. The Muslims react by asserting their distinctiveness and attempting at a political identity.] The Christians on the other hand withdraw from political involvement and remain a marginal group by and large. We can thus see, that given the fact that Hinduism is the religion of the vast majority of Indians, the religious minority groups are threatened by assimilation or exclusion. This makes it all the more difficult for India to sustain herself as a secular state.

Several types of religious communities exist in India. The Muslims, Christians, Parsis and Jews are regarded as followers of alien faiths. However, Islam and Christianity, because of their association with conquest, colonisation and proselytisation, are regarded with suspicion by the Hindus. With the Parsis, this has not been so. They have remained an insular group. At the same time, their

role in Indian economic history has accorded them a special place in Indian society. In the case of the Jews, they are far too few in number to pose any kind of threat.

The Sikhs, Buddhists and the Jains are seen as followers of indigenous religions. In fact the Hindus have, time and again claimed that they are only offshoots of Hinduism, a claim which has been refuted by each of these communities. While the Sikhs have been a militant religious group, the Buddhists and Jains have not really posed much of a problem to the nation state.

What is it then, that makes a religious community a potential threat to the nation state? Is religion by itself a threat? If so, then why is it that the Sikhs pose problems to the nation state while, say, the Christians do not. Or why is it that the Muslims are potentially more of a threat to the nation state than the Parsis? [In the context of a plural society like India, it is important to see how each religious community responds to and is handled in the context of national integration. It is generally accepted that the simpler a community the simpler it is in terms of management at the level of the nation state.] Does this hold in the case of the religious community in India?

A tremendous amount of work has been done on religious communities in India. However, by and large, they view

the religious community in question as a monolithic group, a homogeneous entity. Such a view is, we believe, simplistic, and such studies ignore factors of great importance. It has been said that India is really a confederation of minorities.² [The so-called religious majority and minority groups are neither homogeneous nor a monolith. They are divided along several lines. Despite the fact that they are referred to as religious communities, some of them have internal religious differentiation as well.] Thus when we refer to the Christian 'community' for example, numerous divisions spring to mind.] We can talk of the Catholic community, the Protestant community the Jacobites and so on. So also with the Muslim community, which is clearly divided into the Shias and the Sunnis. [A second basis for differentiation, is territory and language.] Apart from the Sikhs who are confined to the Punjab and adjoining areas, and proclaim Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script as their language, and the Parsis whose language is a Gujarati dialect, no religious community in India can be territorially or linguistically defined. Thus, for instance, ^{Fig} although Urdu is associated with the Muslim community, for the mass of Muslims, language divides them from their religious brethren in other parts of India.³ [Another basis for differentiation is social, that is, based on caste. Although caste is a phenomenon generally associated with Hinduism,

it has seeped into several other religious groups as well, so that in several cases, caste unity transcends the religious divide.

It is not enough, then, to concentrate on inter-religious problems alone. Nor should the religious community be viewed as a homogeneous entity. To do so would be to ignore a series of otherwise important variables. The identification and analysis of these factors is our aim.

Three religious communities have been selected for the purposes of this study. The first community under consideration are the Sikhs, whose demand for a separate state and active political involvement make them a unique religious cum linguistic cum political group in the Indian context. The second group to be studied are the Buddhists who, like the Sikhs are followers of an indigenous religion. However, because most of them are recent converts from untouchable castes, they have an identity as a caste group as well, and this dual identity makes them an interesting group to study. The third group taken up for study are the Christians who, as a group have no defined notion of territory and language, and are characterised by great internal differentiation. The Christians are regarded as followers of alien faiths and have, in consequence, always been viewed with a degree of suspicion. Unlike the Sikhs,

and to some extent, the Buddhists, the Christians have never played an active role in the political arena.

The study of religious minorities in India is particularly significant in the present day context, given the unrest of the Sikh community, Hindu-Muslim unrest, the trouble in the North-East and so on. The question of the nation state becomes even more important. It is then not sufficient to deal with problems between religious groups or even relations within groups. It has also become important to place these religious communities against the backdrop of the nation state, to examine what factors hinder the unity of the state, and what factors help. It becomes important to see why some religious communities pose a threat to the nation state and others do not. We anticipate that questions like these will be answered in the course of this study.

Notes:

1. K.K. Gangadharan, Indian National Consciousness: Growth and development, Kalamkar Publications, New Delhi, 1972.
2. Moin Shakir, Politics of Minorities, Ajanta Publications, New Delhi, 1980.
3. Jyotindra Dasgupta, Language Conflict and National Development, University of California Press, California, 1970.

CHAPTER II

THE SIKHS

The first community under consideration are the Sikhs, who are, in many ways, a unique religious cum linguistic cum political group in India. They are the only group in India to have a territorial anchorage, in that they are mainly concentrated in the state of Punjab. They are the only religious community in independent India to have claimed separate territorial status. The Sikhs also claim a distinct linguistic identity, having proclaimed Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script as the language of the community. As a religious community, the Sikhs have had the advantage of being able to trace common descent. These factors, of territory, language and descent, should have made for a great sense of cohesion within the community. What makes the Sikhs at once a simple and complex focus of study, is that these strengthening factors are greatly weakened by tensions based on three factors, which have tended to pull the community apart. Religious sectarianism, the existence of caste and, due to the tie-up between religion and politics in the Sikh perception, political factionalism, have worked as divisive forces.

Given the existence of a territorial and linguistic

oneness and a commonality of descent, the Sikhs should have been able to press their case for a separate nation, or at least a separate state with great effect. After all, while Pakistan was created on similar grounds as a religious state, the Sikhs gained nothing. Within the new Indian secular state, the division of states along religious lines was not to be. On linguistic grounds, however, it was possible. So the Sikh struggle acquired a new emphasis, in the demand for a linguistic state. Unfortunately, for the Sikhs, due to the divisive forces of social heterogeneity, doctrinaire pluralism stemming from these social divisions and a religious doctrine geared to political action, the impact of the Sikh movement has not been great. The tussle between the cohesive variables of territory, language and descent, and the divisive ones of religious sectarianism, caste and politics is reflected in the turbulent situation in the Punjab today. This study of the Sikh community is an attempt to analyse each of these variables.

Territory and Language:

The Sikhs constitute less than 2 per cent of the population of India, numbering 10,378,797.¹ Of this number, some 78 per cent live in the Punjab, and the largest concentrations elsewhere are found in Uttar

Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi. Following the large scale migrations that were necessitated during and after partition in 1947, the demographic composition in terms of religious communities in the Punjab changed. Prior to partition, the Muslims were a majority in the state after the Hindus. The situation changed after 1947, with the Sikhs emerging as the second largest group in the state.² In terms of linguistic areas, the Punjabi speaking area comprises 56.3 per cent of the state, and the Sikhs constitute 52.3 per cent of this area. Of the 43.3 per cent of the state that constitutes the Hindi speaking area, the Sikhs form only 8.0 per cent of the population.³ The Sikhs can thus be seen to have both a territorial anchorage and a linguistic identity.

Origins of the Community:

The transformation of the Sikhs from a pacifist group to a highly organised military group dates back to the time of the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. At the time of the founder of Sikhism Guru Nanak, the Sikhs were a pacifist group, but thanks to recurrent conflicts with the Mughals, the Sikhs under Hargobind Singh, the sixth Guru, turned themselves into a military group. Gobind Singh, in order to emphasise their importance as a separate cohesive group, conducted a baptismal ceremony, which changed the

face and direction of the Sikh community. From that time onward, the Sikhs have striven to maintain a distinctive identity.

Three major stages have been generally accepted as far as the evolution of the Sikh community is concerned.⁴ Guru Nanak is universally accepted as having been the founder of the faith, having propounded original teachings and gathered around him people drawn from both Hindus and Muslims.⁵ This basic stage, which took place in the first half of the 16th century was followed in the lifetime of the sixth Guru Hargobind in the early 17th century. Following the death of his father Amar Singh, while in the hands of the Mughals, Hargobind was persuaded that for the defence of his following, he would have to resort to arms. The final stage in the evolution of the community is also attributed to the evil designs of the Mughals. In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh, realising the weaknesses of his followers, as well as the hostility of the Mughals, reached a momentous decision. This decision resulted in the formation of the Khalsa, the order of the pure. The Khalsa is perhaps best described as a society possessing a religious foundation and a military discipline.⁶ The religious foundation was already in existence, as also the beginnings of military discipline, but Gobind Singh

transformed it into something stronger - a community dedicated to the preservation of righteousness by the use of the sword, an invincible army of saint soldiers destined to withstand the fiercest of persecutions, and destined to usher in, under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the most glorious period in the history of the Punjab.

Internal cleavages with the Community:

Despite the cohesive bonds of territory, language and common descent, the history of the Sikhs has been one of internal differences and factionalism. The Sikhs are beset by divisions based on religious differentiation, caste differences and political differences. The result has been that in the absence of a direct threat from outside, the conflicts between the various parts of the group have been made manifest in one form or another. This kind of infighting goes back to the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who, in the forty years or so that he ruled, tried to bring warring Sikh factions under the umbrella of a single state. Despite the fact that, very broadly speaking, the Sikhs are a cohesive group, there are several internal differences between them that prevent them from making an impact as a group. On the face of it, the Sikhs appear to be one of the more cohesive religious groups in India. However, when this community

is examined closely, a different picture emerges, and three major cleavages become apparent. These are cleavages based on caste, religious sectarianism and political differences.

A. Caste in the Sikh Community:

The religious dogma of the Sikhs was brought into existence to do away with the Hindu caste system.⁷ The faith explicitly denies the religious sanctions of the Hindu caste system. However, as many studies⁸ have shown, there are Sikh castes. While the various groups are regarded as equal for religious purposes, they function as castes in day to day life.

All the ten Gurus of Sikhism were Khatrias, members of a trading caste accorded Kshatriya status in the Hindu caste hierarchy. However, most of their followers were Jats, an agricultural caste ranked as Sudras in the Hindu hierarchy. The Jats form the bulk of the Sikh community. The other caste groups constituting the Panth are, apart from the two agrarian castes (the Jats and Kamboh), the two mercantile castes (Khatrias and Aroras), four artisan castes (Tarkhans,⁹ Lohar, Nai and Chimba) and the two outcaste groups (Chamar and Chuhra).¹⁰

The interesting thing about the existence of caste practices within the Sikh community is that it existed in a hierarchy different from that of the Hindus. The

struggle for supremacy within the community between the higher caste Khattris and the lower caste Jats ended in Jat dominance. The period of political supremacy under Maharaja Ranjit Singh raised Jat Sikhs to the highest level of the newly designed hierarchy.¹¹

Two major cleavages along caste lines exist in the community: (a) the division between the landowning agricultural castes, the Jats and the non-Jat castes, especially the Khattris and Aroras, and (b) the division between the untouchable Sikh groups and the other castes.

(a) Jats Vs. Non-Jats:

The Jats are the most dominant group within the Sikh community. As has been mentioned earlier, all ten of the Sikh Gurus were Khatri, and during the early 17th century, the Khattris enjoyed a position of pre-dominance within the group.¹² The symbols which came to be seen as distinctly Sikh were evolved during Gobind Singh's time, and coincided with the influx of a large number of Jats into the community. Gobind Singh's attempts to turn a small band of religious believers into a political community coincided with a large number of Jat conversions. The rise of military Sikhism in the Punjab was, in fact, the rise of the Jats.¹³

During the latter part of the 17th century and the 18th century, the Jats came to acquire increasing predominance, with increasing numbers of them joining the Khalsa. This situation persisted, and the 1881 census revealed that the Jats formed 66 per cent of those who were returned as Khalsas.¹⁴ The Jat supremacy attained a new high during the reign of Ranjit Singh. Himself a Jat, he had no compunctions about recruiting into his army and administration, members of this caste group.

The Jats benefited greatly from the British annexation of the Punjab. They were regarded by the British as the foremost agricultural caste in the Punjab and were generally the recipients of favoured treatment in terms of educational facilities and so on.¹⁵ Due to the advantages accruing to Sikhs, there was a resurgence in conversions to the faith, and the bulk of these converts were Jats.

By the 20th century, the Jats had consolidated their position at the top of the Sikh hierarchy. Not only were they regarded as the finest agricultural community by the British, but, by the time of partition, they were also one of the most literate groups. The Jats also dominated the community economically.

The Land Alienation Act of 1900¹⁶ was designed to

protect the agriculturist from the clutches of the money-lender, and it succeeded somewhat. Yet, because the question of who was or was not an agriculturist was determined by caste and not by occupation, all Jats were classified as agriculturists, while all Khatrias and Aroras were not. The community most adversely affected were the Sikhs. Sizeable numbers of Khatrias and Aroras because they were in agriculture had developed an identity of interests with their Jat co-religionists. The Act severed the ties between Jat Sikh farmers and non-Jat Sikh farmers, and at the same time brought Jats of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faiths closer together,¹⁷ so that the economic tie cut across the religious divide.¹⁸ Common economic interest were reflected in political life as well with Jats aligning with other Jats against non-Jat Sikhs. According to Khushwant Singh,¹⁹ these economic and political differences ultimately affected social life as well, Jat Sikhs often preferring to marry into Hindu Jat families rather than non-Jat Sikh families. Finally, the third group, the untouchable, found that they had more in common with Hindu untouchables than higher caste Sikhs, and sought statutory privileges accorded to scheduled castes. So the Sikhs came to be split into three divisions based on caste, Jats, non-Jats and the untouchables.²⁰

The Jats and Khatri were the major groups in the race for power in the Sikh community. The Khatri occupied a higher position in the Hindu caste hierarchy than the Jats. Therefore, unlike the Jats, the Khatri never showed an interest in Sikh identity as a means of enhancing their status. For this reason, a significant degree of Khatri adherence has been Sahajdhari rather than baptised Khalsa.²¹ This also explains why in contrast to steady increase in Jat membership over the period 1981-1991, Khatri adherence actually declined between 1911 and 1931.²²

The Jats still occupy a dominant position within the community. The status they enjoy does not derive exclusively from economic success as agriculturists, but from political success as well. The voice of the Jats is a decisive one in Punjab politics. Although factionalism persistently divides the Jats, effective leadership has never been far from their grasp. The Jats have, by and large, backed the Akali Dal, while the Khatri and artisans have gone with the Congress.²³ Master Tara Singh, who came to be the leader of the Akali Dal, was a rare example of a Khatri who came to power. In the post partition years, thanks to the Green Revolution, the Jats could outmatch the rich Khatri Sikhs who provided the backbone to Tara Singh's

leadership. When Tara Singh eventually fell from power in 1962, it was a Jat, Sant Fateh Singh who overthrew him. All the major political leaders of the Punjab have been Jats with the exception of Giani Zail Singh, from the Tarkhan caste, who was the first non-Jat chief minister of the Punjab.

The Jats have thus occupied top position in the Sikh hierarchy. Further, over the last three centuries, they have consolidated this position economically and politically as well.

(b) Sikh Untouchables:

More interesting than cases of high caste conversion from Hinduism to other faiths, are perhaps, conversions of the so-called untouchables. The interest lies not so much in the conversion itself, for that is hardly surprising, given the attractive 'egalitarianism' of faiths like Sikhism, Christianity etc. The point to ponder is whether the conversions do in fact make for a difference in the lives of the erstwhile untouchables, in the religious faiths to which they convert. Undeniably, some benefits have accrued to such outcastes, but in many ways things have not really changed.

Sikh outcastes fall into two categories according

to their origins. Those who come from a Chuhra background (sweeper) are known as Mazhabi Sikhs,²⁴ while those from a Chamar (leather worker) background are known as Ramdasias Sikhs.

In 1881, the Chuhra Sikhs took the pahul and were generally strict in their observance of orthodox or Kesha-dhari Sikhism. But they were still kept at bay by the other Sikhs. For the Chuhra Sikhs, the great Guru was Teg Bahadur, whose mutilated body was brought from Delhi by Chuhras, who were then admitted into the fold.

Higher in the hierarchy than the Chuhra was the Chamar, called 'mochi' when converted to Islam and Ramdasias when converted to Sikhism. The name Ramdasias was taken from the fourth Guru Ramdas, who was the first to accept them into the Sikh fold. Although their position was higher than that of the Mazhabis, they were still not admitted to religious equality with the other Sikhs.

In 1891, Sikhism was advancing among the Jats, Khatrias, Aroras and Chuhras. Between 1881 and 1891, the most remarkable increase by conversion had been among the Sikh Chuhras. A substantial proportion of both Mazhabis and Ramdasias today represent the result of an influx into the Panth during the early decades of this century.²⁵

There can be no doubt that the reason behind this movement was a desire to expurge the traditional taint of the out-caste status.

The Mazhabi Sikhs reached the position they did through the corporate type of caste mobility.²⁶ This group fared undoubtedly better than other untouchable groups as a result of their special favour with the British, on whose side they fought during the Sepoy Mutiny.²⁷ They, along with the Chamar Sikhs carried on a good deal of agricultural labour. As a result of their having given up their traditional occupation of scavenging and leather work, they were ranked higher than their Hindu counterparts. At the same time, they were often barred entry into gurdwaras along with high caste Sikhs.

The Sikh untouchables are socially and economically under the dominant Jats. It is for this reason that all through the somewhat stormy course that Punjab's history has taken since independence, they have not supported the Jat dominated Akali Dal.) They fear even greater Jat domination in the event of Akali leadership of the state, since a Sikh Punjab would necessarily be a Jat Punjab.

In the Sikh caste hierarchy, there is reference to the all encompassing brotherhood of the Sikhs, whether



converted from higher or lower castes. Nevertheless, they are arranged in a hierarchical order with the Jats at the top and the untouchables at the bottom. The persistence of this caste structure has often prevented the Sikhs from functioning and acting as a community. Apart from social divisions, political alignments have also been along caste lines as we shall see presently. For the present, suffice to say that caste is a major source of differentiation within the Sikh community, despite the fact that the faith is a self professedly egalitarian one.

B. Religious Sectarianism:

The major schism among the Sikhs was a religious one. Subsequently, divisions based on caste and politics became more and more visible.

Guru Gobind Singh initiated his followers into a new fraternity called the Khalsa. They swore to observe the five K's²⁸ and committed themselves to the defence of the Khalsa. Gobind Singh also declared that he was the last of the tenth Gurus. He thus completed the religious facet of Sikhism, commanding his followers to be armed crusaders rather than pacifists.²⁹ Those who accepted the new idea of the Khalsa and the symbols that went along with it were called Keshadharis or orthodox Sikhs. Those who did not

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were called the Sahajdharis. This was the first major religious cleavage within the community.

After this, a number of sects developed with time. John Clark Archer³⁰ says that in the 18th century, the Sikh religion was a conglomeration of sects. Among the major ones mentioned is the Nanakpanthi sect which was fairly numerous but never closely organised. In 1909, Max Arthur Macauliffe³¹ attempted a breakdown of the sects within Sikhism in terms of the Keshadhari and Sahajdhari branches. Under Keshadhari he listed the Nirmalas and Nihangs. The Nanakpanthis he listed as a major sect of the Sahajdharis.

An interesting aspect of the Khalsa-Sahajdhari cleavage was its caste basis. Followers of Gobind Singh largely Sikh Jats, while Sahajdharis were mainly from the Hindu high castes like the Khatri and Aroras.

In addition to the numerous sects, there were also sects which began movements for religious reform, directed at keeping Sikhism free from Hindu elements. Two important movements have been those of the Namdharis and Nirenkaris.

(1) The Namdharis:

The Namdhari sect was founded by Balak Singh (1792-

1862), who exhorted his followers to live simply and to practice no other religious ritual other than repeating God's name (nam), hence the name Namdhari. His successor Ram Singh introduced some changes in forms of worship, appearance and forms of address which distinguished them from other Sikhs. Ram Singh was from the Tarkhan caste (carpenter). His beliefs were accepted largely by the members of his caste alone and other poorer castes, showing once again how religious sects polarised along caste lines. Ram Singh had separate gurdwaras built for his followers. The sect, also called Kukas,³² were fed on prophecies of a Sikh resurgence. In making an issue, they clashed with Muslim butchers on the cow slaughter issue, and murdered several in the 1870's. Several Kukas were hanged on account of this and were hailed as heroes by the sect. Kuka passions were inflamed and they attacked Malerkotla, a Muslim state where cow slaughter was permitted. Ram Singh and several followers were arrested and jailed. The Namdharis lost the little support their movement had with the Sikhs on account of this kind of violence. The Kukas have at present two centres, one at Bhain and the other in Hissar district. They maintain little contact with the parent community and are largely an insular subject.

(ii) The Nirankaris:

The Nirankaris are of great interest in terms of the current political troubles of Punjab. Akali-Nirankari tensions form one facet of the Punjab problem today.

During Ranjit Singh's time, a number of people were baptised and joined the Khalsa fraternity. Most others, though still describing themselves as Hindus, switched over from the worship of Hindu Gods to reading the Granth and going to gurdwaras. There developed a custom among Hindus of bringing up at least one son as a Keshadhari Sikh. These half-Hindu half-Sikh people belonged to the Khatri, Bania and Arora families.³³

One member of this community, Dyal Das (1783-1855) condemned idol worship and paying obeisance to holy men, and preached instead that God was formless, 'nirankar', and consequently described himself as a Nirankari. He soon acquired the status of a guru and gathered several disciplines around him. However, he had to face the opposition of Hindu Brahmins as well as Sikhs, and was forced to build separate places of worship.³⁴ The differences between orthodox Sikhs and the Nirankaris are limited to the latter's worship of Gurus other than the ten recognised by the Khalsas.³⁵

Khushwant Singh, writing in 1966, said 'the Nirankaris are fast losing their separate identity and may, within a few decades merge back into the Hindu or Sikh parent body'.³⁶ However, post 1966 events have proved him wrong. Increasing friction between the Akalis and Nirankaris reached alarming proportions on Baisakhi day in April 1979 at Amritsar.³⁷ Agitations against the Nirankari Sammelan, and clashes which resulted in the death of eighteen Nirankaris, took place under Akali leadership of the state. Sikh was now pitted against Sikh.

Despite earlier comments of observers that cleavages within the Sikh community had not erupted into violence since 1849, and were unlikely to do so,³⁸ there is now overt conflict. A new brand of Sikh extremism surfaced in the wake of incidents that marked the confrontation between the Nirankaris and the followers of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale,³⁹ a sworn enemy of the Nirankaris.

Religious differentiation has thus constituted an important cleavage in the Sikh community, and the clash between the dominant Akalis, most of whom are Jats, and the Nirankaris has, over the last five years erupted into overt conflict. The polarisation of religious sects along social divisions, that is, along caste lines, is

also a point to be noted. We shall see later how caste division and religious differentiation have worked their way into the tangled web of Sikh politics.

C. Political Cleavages:

Perhaps the most important cleavage that the Sikh community faces is that of political division. This is so because of two reasons. One is the fact that in the Sikh perception, religion and politics are inextricably linked. This is clear from the well-known slogan of the Sikhs, 'raj karega Khalsa', the vision of a Punjab where the Khalsa rules. Two, the fact that caste differences and religious ones make themselves manifest in the political conflicts, adds to the complexity of the situation. This has meant that on the one hand, political alignments are based more or less on caste loyalties. On the other it has meant in the Sikh case that leadership of the Akali Dal, the political organ of the Sikhs ^{has} been closely linked with the committee for the management of the Sikh gurdwaras. This in itself demonstrates the intimate relation between the religious and political spheres within the Sikh community.

The major opposition party in the Punjab is the Akali Dal, an organisation which is not only confined to Punjab,

but whose membership is open only to members of the Sikh community. It thus stands for the inextricable mix of religion and politics that makes the Sikh community so distinctive. The Akali Dal claims to be the sole representative body of the Sikhs, and stands for the protection of the Sikh religion, and the furtherance of the interests of the community. However, on account of the deep rooted factionalism faith in the Akali Dal it has not been able to make a major impact. The history of this organisation is sufficient to demonstrate this.

(a) The Akali Dal:

The management of the Golden Temple has always been of special interest to the community. The gurudwaras were run by hereditary mahants who, by the early 1900's had changed them from places of worship to dens of corruption and vice. In 1920, as a result of the Gurudwara reforms, a committee was formed called the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (S.G.P.C.). It consisted of 175 members and was set up for the management of Sikh gurudwaras.

The more radical elements organised a semi-military corps of volunteers known as the Akali Dal, the army of immortals. The S.G.P.C. became a sort of parliament of the Sikhs. The disbursement of gurudwara income in

management of shrines, patronage of teachers and professors etc. made the S.G.P.C. a government within the government. Its control became the focal point of Sikh politics.⁴⁰

The gurudwara reform movement of the early 1920's was spearheaded by Sikhs, mainly westernised non-Jats. The prominent leaders were Sardar Mehtab Singh, an Arora, Baba Kharak Singh, an Ahluwalia, Master Tara Singh, a Khatri, Mr. Bhagat Singh, a Ramgarhia and Mr. Bhushan Singh Samundari, a Jat.⁴¹ These leaders could not have been successful without the unstinted support they received from the large, illiterate Jat Sikh masses. At the height of the agitation, however, the leaders backed down and approved the Gurudwaras Reform Bill of the British.) But the Sikhs carried on the struggle under Kharak Singh, Tara Singh and others and won a resounding victory in 1925.⁴² These leaders condemned Mehtab Singh and his party as collaborators and ousted it from control of the S.G.P.C. Akali unity was shattered. This split marked a watershed in the history of the community.

The second split occurred in 1929 on the issue of whether Nehru's report on constitutional reforms should be accepted. Baba Kharak Singh and his group wanted total rejection of it and severance of ties with the National

Congress. Tara Singh and his group favoured continued cooperation with the Congress, though critical of the report. Kharak Singh was pushed out of power and Tara Singh began to dominate the party. He enjoyed the confidence of the moneyed Sikhs as well as the poor and illiterate ones. For two decades, he had considerable influence over the S.G.P.C. as well and was the undisputed leader of the Sikhs.

(b) Partition and its aftermath:

In the Punjab, ever since the days of the earliest Islamic invasion, communal tension developed between invaders and their supporters on the one hand and indigenous inhabitants on the other. Some enlightened rulers tried to minimise the differences, and a few like Ranjit Singh succeeded. The 1920's and 30's were particularly bad decades of communal bitterness in the Punjab.⁴³ The communal riots of 1946-47 were in every way different from those that had taken place earlier. Up till then, the riots had been minor affairs, in contrast what took place in 1946 and 1947 was a general massacre.

The Sikhs were in a peculiar position in the Hindu-Muslim conflict. They professed a neutral creed, but were a part of the Hindu social system. They were the

most prosperous section of the Punjab peasantry. The Sikhs often tried to play the role of peacemakers, but since their sympathies were manifestly Hindu, they were felt to be aggressively anti-Muslim. In any case, the Muslims felt that if Pakistan was to bring prosperity to their people, Sikhs who owned the best wheatlands of the Punjab would have to be dispossessed.⁴⁴ In the riots of March 1946, the largest number of victims were Sikhs.⁴⁵ The riots were a rude awakening of the Sikhs. The fear that their name had at one time aroused had evaporated, and their talk of martial prowess was dismissed as the bombast of a decadent race.⁴⁶ On account of the humiliation they had suffered, the mood of the Sikhs was of aggression and not compromise. On Baisakhi day of 1947, Master Tara Singh and 280 jathedars vowed to sacrifice their lives for the community. From then onward, the Sikhs began to reorganise their defunct jathas in towns and villages, to arm them with swords and, if possible guns.

As the nationalist agitation moved towards independence, the Sikhs were spurred on by the Muslim demand for Pakistan to demand a separate Sikh homeland. The Sikh position in the Punjab at the time was a precarious one. On the one

hand, the majority of Muslims supported Jinnah's demand for Pakistan. On the other the Hindus espoused a complete break with the British and were, by the 1940's at any rate, willing to grant concessions to the Muslims. Being in a complete minority, the Sikhs, on the principle of *saue qui peut*, made their own declaration of autonomy, and so the Akali Dal began its agitation for Azad Punjab.⁴⁷ The first official demand for a Sikhistan was made on March 22, 1946 by the Akali Dal.

Once the partition of the country became imminent, it was inevitable that the partition of the Punjab would divide the Sikhs, divided as they were through the state. The Sikhs had hopes that the Boundary Commission appointed would help in salvaging Sikh shrines, homes and land in western Punjab. However, this was not to be, and the Sikhs as a community suffered with their richest lands, over 150 shrines and half their population left on the Pakistan side of the border.

Partition brought about revolutionary changes in the social, economic and political structure of the Punjab. From having been the most prosperous community, the Sikhs were reduced to the level of other Indian communities. This applied both to the agriculturist as well as the trading classes. Sikh farmers of western Punjab who owned large estates were reduced in the process of resettle-

ment. Those of Eastern Punjab were levelled by legislation fixing 30 acres as the maximum holding of land.⁴⁸

The change in the political complexion of the state was also significant. It was clear that the community, scattered as it was could easily lose impact as a political force. The exodus scattered the following of the leaders of western Punjab and weakened their position. Master Tara Singh retained his hold over the masses somehow, but other urbanite non-Jats were compelled to secure their future with the ruling party. In contrast the Akali leaders of eastern Punjab who were mainly Jats began to assert themselves.

A significant effect of the migration was to create Sikh concentrations in certain areas of East Punjab. This, along with other factors revived the demand for a Sikh state. The most vociferous demand for the reorganisation of the state has been made by the Akali Dal in the form of its demand for a Punjabi Suba, as a Punjabi speaking state. The exact territorial limits of Punjabi Suba have undergone many changes since the demand was originally articulated, but in recent years, the Akali has asked for the conversion of the Punjabi speaking region into Punjabi Suba. The demand for the Suba was presented as being

based on language but Akali leaders have, from time to time, made explicit their aim of establishing a state in which the Sikhs as a religious community would be able to hold power.⁴⁹ From the time of Master Tara Singh, whose leadership of the Akali Dal left an indelible mark on the Sikh movement, and Sant Fateh Singh, to leaders like Harcharan Singh Longowal and Bhindranwale, one thing has become clear. There is a myth propagated by the Akali Dal that the Punjab trouble is about river waters and territory. There have been many disputes over river waters and territory in other states, but never have they led to the kind of situation Punjab faces today. The real problem in the Punjab is the rise of Sikh fundamentalism partly as a backlash against the modern life style brought in by prosperity, and partly in response to demographic changes which threaten to make the Sikhs a minority in the state.⁵⁰

The demand for a separate state must be seen in terms of the effect of partition on the Sikhs. The tremendous insecurity faced by the community in the wake of their uprootment from west Punjab and the subsequent feeling of unsettledness, the fear of Hindu revivalism, and the dissatisfaction of knowing that the Muslims gained Pakistan, have contributed in no small way, to the aggressive, extremist

and separatist stand taken by some of the Sikhs today.⁵¹

The Jat rise to power after Independence:

After partition and the subsequent migration of business groups of the Sikh community, the Jats began to challenge Tara Singh's leadership. They started a campaign against him during the 1948 elections for office bearers to the S.G.P.C., exhorting his followers to throw off the yoke of non-Jat, educated Sikh leadership. The strategy succeeded and they won a resounding victory in the elections. However, Tara Singh would not give up the leadership of the Panth and by outwitting his opponents, remained in power for another twenty years.

After gaining control of the S.G.P.C., however, the Jathadars began to use this essentially religious organisation to capture leadership of the Panth, supported by national leaders like Pratap Singh Kairon, Darbara Singh and Giani Zail Singh. Tara Singh adopted increasingly extremist positions. He agitated for a sovereign state and when that failed he undertook a fast unto death, but finally withdrew it. This failure to coerce the government led to divisions within Akali leadership. In 1962, Sant Fateh Singh, a Jat, set up a rival Akali Dal group.

It built up a new coalition among the Akalis, defeated the Tara Singh group in the general elections of 1965. In the realignment of power, the Akali Dal effectively became a strong voice of the interests of the Jat community.

At the best of times, the Akali Dal has been a faction ridden entity. When in the seat of government, differences between extremists and moderates were controllable as during Prakash Singh Badal's tenure as chief minister, but no sooner were the Akalis out of power than the agitation started.⁵²

In 1980 when the Akali Dal was voted out of power, it split again into one group led by Jasdev Singh Talwandi, successor to Fateh Singh, and one led by former chief minister Badal. By the end of 1982, the central government had begun negotiating with a five member Akali Dal committee, in the face of the numerous Akali demands, ranging from the blatantly separatist to the merely symbolic.⁵³ The Akali camp is, however, beset by tensions between moderates like Badal and Longowal, and extremists like Talwandi, Tohra and Bhindranwale.

In Sikhism the revival of fundamentalism has come in the person of Bhindranwale. He has managed to push the moderate Akalis to take a hardline. He has also

converted older extremists to his line of thought. Bhindranware's fanatical defence of his faith is based upon his conviction that any power that opposes it should be exterminated.⁵⁴ Since he considers the Nirankaris one such opposition, and given his position of strength in Sikh politics today, it is not surprising that the brand of Sikh extremism he has come to represent, involves attacks against the Nirankaris as well.

In the present context, the religious frenzy was also the result of a deeper uncertainty of present Sikh politics, and schisms within the community. Although the faith prohibits caste, it is the caste factor that is responsible for the widespread factionalism in the Akali Dal. This is because while differences between extremists and moderates have always existed, the leadership of the Akali Dal is drawn mainly from the Jat community.

Three major variables exist, then, within the Sikh community, which make for cleavages. One, the strained relations between two caste groups, the dominant Jats and the socially, but even more, economically subservient untouchables. This tension has largely been manifest in the lack of support the Jat dominated Akali Dal has had from the untouchables. Two, the tension giving way to

open conflict, between the Akalis and the Nirankaris. This tension has been strikingly manifest since 1979, and is also associated with the rise of the Sikh firebrand Bhindranwale. Three, the tensions between various factions within the Sikh political party, the Akali Dal. Differences on religious issues, political issues and personal rivalries, have made for periodic splits within the organisation. The Akali Dal claims to be the sole spokesman for the Sikh community. Since they command the support of the Jat community alone, by and large, this is not really so. However, since the Jats are in dominance, they wield considerable influence. Because the Akali Dal is beset by so many internal contradictions and differences, it has been unable to push forward the Sikh case with great effect.

Conclusion:

Thus we have seen that the Sikhs have a territorial anchorage, a linguistic identity, and are able to trace common descent. This strength is, however, offset by the fact that it is a socially heterogenous community. The situation is compounded by religious sectarianism stemming from the social complexity of the community. Last, but not least, the religious doctrine of the Sikhs is geared towards political action, and the resulting political cleavage

have diffused the marked impact the Sikh community and movement would otherwise have had. We may venture to suggest at this stage that the existence of religious sectarianism along with a religious doctrine oriented to political action may provide the basis for overt manifestation of internal conflict. At this stage it is enough to say that a religious community which is united by territory and language, but divided along religious and political lines is likely to be a community, like the Sikh, in which the bonds of cohesion are not very strong.

Notes:

1. Census of India 1971, Series I, Paper 2 of 1972, Religion.
2. Quoted in R.A. Schermerharn, Ethnic Plurality in India, Univ. of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1978, p.130.
3. Ibid., p.130.
4. Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs, vol.II, Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi, 1966, pp.96-8.
5. W.H. Meheod (The Evolution of the Sikh Community, Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi offers a considerably modified interpretation and 1975, p.5) advances what he calls a more radical concept of development. He says the term 'founder' is misleading, since it implies that Nanak originated not only a group of followers, but also a school of thought. According to Meheod, Nanak stands firmly in a well defined historical tradition in that he offers the dearest expression of miguna sampradaya, the sant tradition of North India.

6. Ibid., p.4.
7. Ethue K. Marengo, Transformation of Sikh Society, Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1976, p.1.
8. Marion W. Smith ("The Mists: A Structural village group of India & Pakistan", American Anthropologist, vol.54, No.1, Jan-March 1952, p.50) describes the denial of caste in the Sikh community along with the existence of it. K. Davis (Population of India & Pakistan, Princeton, NJ, 1951, p.181), also describes caste distructions among the Sikhs.
9. Tarkhans are generally known as Ramgarhias after the most famous of their leaders, misl leader Jassa Singh Ramgarhia.
10. W.H. Mcheod, op. cit., p.93.
11. Ethue K. Marengo, op. cit., pp.54,55.
12. W.H. Mcheod, op. cit., pp.191-92. During the first century of the existence of the Panth, a broad spectrum of castes was incorporated, more diverse than was so from the late 16th century onward. However, one caste does emerge in prominence, the Khatri caste, to which the gurus belonged. It is clear from the evidence of Bhai Gurdas who wrote in the 17th century that Khatri leadership was significant.
13. Joyce Pettigiew, Robleer Noblemen, London, 1975.
14. Census of India, 1881, vol.I, Book I (Lahore, 1883), p1108.
15. Ethue K. Marengo, op. cit., p.92.
16. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.155. The Act forbade the attachment of land in execution of decrees and outlawed mortgages which had a conditional sale clause attached to them. It also forbade the sale of land by members of agricultural tribes to non-agriculturists.
17. Ibid., p.156.
18. Ibid., p.156.

19. Ibid., p.156.
20. Ibid., p.157.
21. W.H. McLeod, op. cit., p.99.
22. Census of India, 1931, vol.I, Part I, p.345.
23. Seminar, Feb. 1984. The Punjab Tangle - a symposium on the dimension of a crisis. "The Sequence", K. Gujral, p.15.
24. Chuhras who converted to Islam were called Mussallis, and those who converted later to Sikhism were called Mazhabi Sikhs.
25. W.H. McLeod, op. cit., p.103.
26. The Mazhabis changed from an untouchable caste to an agricultural and military caste.
27. Ethus K. Marengo, op. cit., p.285.
28. The five K's - to wear their beards un - keshy
to wear a pair of short, kaccha; to wear a steel
bangle on the right wrist - kara; and to carry a
sword - kirpan.
29. Ethus K. Marengo, op. cit., p.28.
30. John Clark Archer, The Sikhs, Princeton Univ. Press,
Princeton, NJ 1946, pp.221-26.
31. Max Arthur Macanliffe, The Sikh Religion, vol.I,
Oxford at Clarendon Press, London, 1909, p.Lii.
32. Following Ram Singh's example, his followers, chanted
hymns, and, like whirling dervishes, worked them-
selves up into a frenzy and emitted loud shrieks
(kukas) so they came to be known as Kukas. The Kukas
wore only white handspun cloth and bound their turbans
in a style of their own. They greeted each other with
'sat akal purakh' instead of 'sat sri akal'.
33. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.123.

34. The biggest of these was near Rawalpindi when Dyal Das died, his sandals, which became an object of reversion were placed on an altar alongside the Granth. After partition, then religious centre shifted to Amritsar and then to Chandigarh.
35. The Nirankaris style Dyal Das and his successors with honorifies like 'sri sat guru' (the true guru) and greet each other with 'dhan nirankar'.
36. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.125.
37. Attar Singh, "What went wrong", Seminar, Feb. 1984, says crucial issues were ignored or underplayed (a) Nirankari movement evolved from quasi-Sikh sect to a cult, (b) That the Nirankari session was held in Amritsar, Sikhs' holy city on Baisakhi, the birthday of the Khalsa. This was like showing a red rag to a bull, (c) Nirankari procession displayed aims, a fact ignored by everyone except the P.M. Morarji, Desai. So says Nirankari actions were provocative.
38. Baldev Raj Nayyar, Minority Politics in the Punjab, Princeton Univ. Press, NJ, 1966.
39. One of the developments following the Akali-Nirankari conflict was the rise of sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who established for himself the symtation of a militant religious leader. He swore by the gun for the Panth and drew more Sikhs towards himself, impressed as they were by his religious zeal. Today he has emerged less as a religious leader and more as a political factor of considerable importance in the Punjab.
40. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.214-15.
41. Satindra Singh, "Genesis of the Akali Split", Tribune, Aug. 13, 1980.
42. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.211. Sir Malcolm Hartley, Lt. governor of Punjab from 1924, presented the draft of a new gurudwara bill to Akali leaders which met all Akali demands and was passed in 1925.
43. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., pp.265-67.

44. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.266.
45. Ibid., p.271.
46. Ibid., p.272.
47. R.A. Schermerhour, op. cit., p.141.
48. Khushwant Singh, op. cit., p.285.
49. Baldev Raj Nayyar, op. cit.
50. Swaminathan S. Aiyar, "What is a Moderate", Indian Express, March 19, 1984.
51. Stephen L. Keller, (Uprooting and Social Change - the role of refugees in development, Manohar Book Source, New Delhi, 1975) on these three stages of refugeeism. (1) the actual flight. (2) Reaching destination and the subsequent horror of life as refugee camps and the gratitude for what is given to them by the local authorities. (3) Once resettlement takes place, a number of developments take place which endure long after the refugee has reestablished himself. One is a sense of invulnerability that grows with the realization he has come through the trauma safely. This is manifested in a heightened willingness to take risks. In an economy of scarcity, where others don't share risk taking sentiments, this may lead to individual gain and community wide economic development. This is clearly evidenced by the post partition prosperity of the Punjab in general and the Sikh community. Another effect of flight and the associated trauma, Keller says, is guilt, which may result from having survived where others have not, and for not living upto ideals of ones religion. The guilt is seen as anger directed inward and can undergo those transformations which normal anger may, including a change towards aggression which may be outward or inward. The suggestion that guilt feelings account for subsequent aggression might well be true. Perhaps, however, the struggle for resettlement in the land of destination compounded by the competition for resources with the local inhabitants, contributes in some way to the instinctive aggression on the part of the Punjab and Sikh refugees.

52. "Punjab - state of Tension", India Today, Oct. 31, 1981, pp.32-43.
53. "Sikh Militancy - Battle Cry", India Today, Nov. 15, 1982, pp.70-81.
54. "Punjab - Rising Extremism", India Today, April 30, 1983, pp.16-27.

CHAPTER III
THE BUDDHISTS

In some ways, the Buddhist and Sikh religions have points of convergence. Both had their roots in protest movements against Hinduism, the dominant religion. Both are indigeneous religious doctrines. Here, however, the similarity ends. Buddhism originated in India about the sixth century B.C., but it did not survive long in this country. Instead it spread to various parts of Asia,¹ some of which are Buddhist majority states today. The twentieth century saw a revival of Buddhism in India under the charismatic leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

While the unity of territory, language and descent have given the Sikhs a certain strength of purpose and a degree of cohesion, this has not been possible with the Buddhists. Unlike the Sikhs, the Buddhists in present day India have no territorial anchorage. They are also divided linguistically. As was observed in the last chapter, Sikh unity on territorial and linguistic grounds notwithstanding, the community is beset by cleavages of various kinds, and conflict has been overtly manifest in several cases. This has not happened with the Buddhists. Does this indicate

that despite the gulf of region and language separating them, the Buddhists are still a cohesive group? An examination of the Buddhist community will, we anticipate, provide some answers.

Like the other religious communities in India, the Buddhists have multiple identities. They have, first and foremost, an identity as a distinct religious group. However, because of the formation of a large part of the community through low caste conversion, the group also has a caste identity, which has become very significant. The interesting thing about the Buddhists has been, that while unlike the Sikhs, their religious doctrine is not geared to political action, Buddhism and politics have been complementary in twentieth century India. This is also because the Buddhist community in India consists largely of the old scheduled castes, Neo-Buddhists as they are now called. Consequently, political action has been specifically in the name of scheduled caste interests, Buddhist and non-Buddhist. It can thus be seen, even at this stage that the salient identity in the case of the Buddhist community is that of caste.

The ideology and the act of conversion demanded a new identity of the Neo-Buddhists. This identity has

two images, religious and political. The search for a new identity was provided by Ambedkar, through the fusion of the religious identity of Buddhism with that of politics, in the establishment of the Republican Party of India. Its members are mainly Mahars, members of an untouchable caste, who form the bulk of the Neo-Buddhists today. The political image and the religious one overlap, with the Mahars becoming Republicans politically, and Neo-Buddhists socio-religiously. Caste, politics and religion mingled in the Neo-Buddhist movement.² We shall now study the Buddhist community in terms of these variables.

Territory and Language:

There are nearly four million Buddhists in India,³ and they form about 0.2 per cent of the population. Of these, the largest group, of over three million, is found in Maharashtra. The rest of India's Buddhists are to be found on the fringes of India in two main areas, along the north-east frontier, containing about 350,000 Buddhists, and the north-west frontier, containing about 93,000 Buddhists, in what is now West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Jammu and Kashmir. Another 100,000 or so are scattered widely, but unevenly through the rest of the country, so that Buddhists can be found in Punjab, U.P., Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka as well.

It is easy to see, then that language is not a binding factor in the case of the Buddhists. With the linguistic division of Indian states, the Buddhists have become encapsulated in their own cultural milieu.

Origins of the Community:

In modern India, both the streams of Buddhism, the Theravada or Hinayana, and the Mahayana traditions are prevalent.⁴ The Buddhists can be further divided into four groups according to their origins.

- i. The survivals from the Buddhist period. This type is mainly represented by the Buddhists of Bengal, Tripura, Mizoram, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh.
- ii. The ethnic overlaps from Nepal, Thailand and Burma, such as the Tamangs and Sherpas, who are settled mainly in the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of Bengal.
- iii. Those who were attracted to Buddhism as a result of missionary activity spearheaded by the Mahabodhi society.
- iv. The followers of B.R. Ambedkar, who adopted the Buddhist faith in 1956. These Neo-Buddhists form

as much as 92 per cent of the Buddhist population in India, and the majority of these Buddhists are to be found in Maharashtra.

Buddhism emerged as a protest movement against Hinduism, challenging as it did the authority of the Brahmins. It was a faith oriented to the cause of the common people, stressing the equality of all men, compassion and love for all living things, and rejection of Brahmanical authority. Despite the fact that it was an indigenous religion, Buddhism did not survive long in the country of its origin, and spread instead all over the Indian sub-continent. In India, Buddhism survived longest in Bengal and Assam until its very rapid decline from about the 11th century onward.⁵ What exists on the fringes of India today, represents a residue of what was once a thriving, living tradition.

In Calcutta, however, there is an Indian Buddhist society which derives from an early effort in the late 19th century to reestablish Buddhism in India, and was founded by an original monk from Chittagong.⁶ Later, in May of 1891, the Maha Bodhi Society of India was formed by Angarika Dharmapala of Ceylon, with its headquarters in Calcutta from 1904 onwards. It had centres in various

parts of India, and though its initial purpose was the restoration of the Maha Bodhi temple at Bodh Gaya, and other Buddhist shrines, it undertook missionary work as well.

The Neo-Buddhist Movement:

In the period 1951-61, the percentage increase in the number of Buddhists was 1671 per cent. This phenomenal increase in the size of the Buddhist community was the result of Ambedkar's influence and took place primarily in Maharashtra. For the greater part, the growth and varying size of religious communities in India have been the result of conversion. Conversion to another religion as a way to escape the disabilities of untouchability is not new in Indian history. Islam and Christianity grew in large part by low caste conversions. But the Neo-Buddhist conversion movement, like earlier conversions to Sikhism, differed from conversions to Islam and Christianity. Apart from the fact that both Buddhism and Sikhism were born on Indian soil, neither of them had any connection with any outside missionary body. However, while Sikhism attracted people from various Hindu castes like the Khatri, Aroras and Jats, as well as untouchables the converts to Buddhism were only from

the untouchable castes, and from one touchable caste in particular, the Mahars of the Maharashtra region. Another distinct feature of the conversion to Buddhism was the fact that it resulted from the influence of one leader from within the caste, namely Dr. Ambedkar. Its post-independence timing also places it apart from the Sikh conversions which took place over four centuries beginning from the mid-17th century.⁷

Himself a member of the untouchable Mahar caste,⁸ Ambedkar was the catalyst of aggressive forces within the community and a symbol of achievement for many untouchables. Before Ambedkar, Mahar attempts to elevate their social and economic status were made through claims to recognition of worth within Hinduism itself. Ambedkar's criticism of Hinduism became total rejection when, in 1955, he resolved that he would not die a Hindu, even though he had been born one. Religions like Christianity, Islam and Sikhism were quick to open their doors to Ambedkar and his followers. After rejecting Islam and Christianity, and toying with the idea of converting to Sikhism, Ambedkar finally decided to adopt the Buddhist faith.

It is interesting to analyse the Hindu reaction to this conversion. It was critical as is only to be expected

from a religious community whose members begin to leave the fold. However, this reaction would have been much stronger and harsher had Ambedkar and his followers converted to Islam or Christianity instead of Buddhism. The Hindu attitude to other religious communities in India has been quite clear. The attitude towards the religions of alien origin has two aspects. The Parsis who have long existed as an insular, generally non-proselytising group, are tolerated by the Hindus. The Christians are regarded with a greater degree of suspicion, because of their extensive missionary activity and relative success as a proselytising group. But the attitude towards the Muslims has, perhaps been the most comprising of all. Strained relations over centuries since the Muslim invasion of India, aggravated at the events following partition, have made Hindu-Muslim relations a sensitive subject. On the other hand, these religions which stemmed from protest against dominant Hinduism; Sikhism, Jainism and Buddhism, are regarded by Hindus as part of the larger family of Hinduism and are in consequence treated with a great degree of tolerance. The feeling is not mutual. While the Buddhists and Jains have remained passive groups by and large, the Sikhs have made no bones about the fact that they consider themselves totally separate from the

Hindus. Given the Hindu attitude to the other religious communities in India, it is not surprising that when, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion in 1981, lakhs of scheduled castes converted to Buddhism,¹⁹ Hindu reaction was not very strong. However, when about two hundred Harijans converted to Islam in Meenakshipuram in Tamil Nadu in 1981, the Hindu dominated public was outraged.

Ambedkar founded the Bharatiya Bouddha Mahasabha, the Buddhist society of India in 1955. It had attained little formal organisation at the time of his death. Although branches of the society appeared elsewhere in India, its membership was concentrated in Maharashtra. While in theory it was separate from the Republican Party, in practice its leaders were usually involved in political activity.

On October 6, 1956, Ambedkar took diksha at the hands of the oldest Buddhist monk in India. He then administered a conversion ceremony to a crowd of between 300,000 to 600,000. The Buddhist conversion movement spread to Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh where Ambedkar's personal influence was strong. In U.P. most untouchables of the Jatav group followed Ambedkar into Buddhism. As

Buddhists they claim to be the original residents of India who were forced into servitude by the Brahmins and the instrument of their oppression, the caste system.¹⁰

Four elements were involved in the choosing of Buddhism as the new religion.¹¹ Apart from the fact that Buddhism was an indigeneous religion, it was also strongly anti-caste and presented an alternative to the Hindu caste system. Because Buddhism existed outside India as well, it was expected that non-Indian Buddhists would take up the cause of the depressed and persecuted Buddhists of India. Their claim to being the original residents of India gave an ideological and moral justification, Lynch says, to Jatsav political demands for giving land to the tiller and government back to the people.

Conversion to Buddhism has made the Neo-Buddhist, the erstwhile Mahar, make the last break with any symbols that defined their earlier low status. It has also removed any vestige of a feeling of insecurity from them. The Buddhists often say that they experienced a sudden sense of release, a psychological freedom.¹²

The social significance of Neo-Buddhism is that it was the culmination of the process begun years ago of denying and attempting to remove the doctrine of untouchability

Adoption of the Buddhist religion has not really been an escape for the untouchables; the term Neo-Buddhist has become synonymous with Mahar. The major change has been in terms of the sense of freedom and progress it has given him.

Caste Identity among Neo-Buddhists:

It is significant that the call for religious conversion did not cross the frontier of caste. Original Buddhist appeals were to all the castes. Ambedkar could only rely on caste loyalties. The very structure he wanted to demolish inhibited the scope of his action.¹³ In the ultimate analysis, conversion was mainly restricted to the Mahars. Because of the close correlation between the Mahars and Neo-Buddhists, the caste element has been perpetuated even after conversion. The dream of escaping caste by a return to the original Buddhism still possesses the followers of Ambedkar, but it has not been fulfilled. If there had been members from other Harijan castes, the identity of the Neo-Buddhists with the Mahars alone would not have occurred. Conversion has brought about the realignment of castes, with caste associations operating in different contexts. The formal activities of the Mahars are to be seen in their political movement. The Republican

Party, the political voice of the Buddhists consists only of the Mahars, and it exhibits caste like features, attitudes and group identity.¹⁴ Constitutional and legal attempts to eliminate untouchability have done little to remedy the situation. Buddhism is actually a handicap in regard to legal rights of untouchables. Rejection of caste has less of an exterior, that is social, economic educational etc., than internal, psychological breaking free, which is its chief strength.¹⁵

The Dual Identity of the Neo-Buddhist:

The new Buddhists are mainly converts from the down trodden and underprivileged untouchables. These low caste converts are referred to as Neo-Buddhists to distinguish them from the handful of old Buddhists. Thus they have a dual identity because of the fact that the term Neo-Buddhist has become synonymous with the term Mahar. This dual identity is of tremendous significance in understanding the position of the Neo-Buddhist today.

It means that while the Neo-Buddhist rejects the idea of untouchability, he does not reject the benefits conferred on him by the government. He feels that Ambedkar won these benefits for him and they are recompense for the ill treatment of the untouchables.¹⁶ Thus there exists an

ambivalence because of this dual identity. While religiously and socially they are Buddhists, they utilise all privileges as scheduled castes.¹⁷

This dual identity has also meant that relations between the Neo-Buddhists and the Hindu community of which they were till so recently a part, become important at two levels, between the Neo-Buddhists and the rest of the Harijans, and between Neo-Buddhists and high caste Hindus.

There has been a growing distance between Neo-Buddhists and other Harijans. By becoming Buddhists as a group, they alienated their sister communities with whom they had shared a low ritual status in society. Although Ambedkar's vision was of a party, the Republican Party, that would represent the interests of all scheduled castes, this has not happened. The Republican Party's activities have been largely confined to the interests of the Mahars alone. The Neo-Buddhists have no involvement with the larger Harijan community, and this is one source of tension. The other Harijans are also bitter about the double role played by the Neo-Buddhists, in proclaiming themselves Buddhist on the one hand, and utilising scheduled caste privileges on the other.

Relations between the Neo-Buddhists and the high caste Hindus, whose domination they suffered for centuries,

has been even more strained. The problem has been particularly acute in the rural areas, where the Mahars gave up their traditional occupations, bringing them in direct conflict with the dominant caste.¹⁸ Another aspect of this tension was the feeling of pride and aggression on the part of the Neo-Buddhist which did not permit them to brook any indignity, and made them assert their right to the use of constitutional privileges. This brought them up against the high caste Hindus. As a result from 1958 onwards, reports of boycott of Neo-Buddhists, burning of Neo-Buddhists' houses obstruction of Buddhist ceremonies and community prayer and so on began to trickle in.¹⁹ Thus we see that the dual identity of the Neo-Buddhist has created problems for the community. They are still identified as the old untouchables and face the opposition of high caste Hindus as well as other Harijan groups. Change and a new status among the Neo-Buddhists has been mainly of a psychological nature. In terms of the practical problems of day-to-day life, they avail of the opportunities accorded to scheduled castes, so that while they are Buddhists in thought and faith, effectively they are still scheduled castes.

The Buddhists as a Religio-Political Group:

The interesting thing about conversions to Buddhism,

according to Zelliott,²⁰ is that it took place among a people who were already involved in an independent political party, the Independent Labour Party in opposition to the Congress. The Mahars alone among the Harijans of Maharashtra have taken successfully to political means for enhancing their status. By discarding Hinduism for Buddhism, the Mahar community can be said to have achieved social mobility. This is so, not because conversion per se leads to upward mobility, but because of the complex character of the Neo-Buddhist movement in being politico-religious and a group movement on a large scale.

In 1936, when the Mahar conference decided to abandon Hinduism, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party (ILP) to fight Congress in the 1937 elections. The ILP programme was quite broad in scope mildly socialistic with only an incidental mention of the depressed classes. It enjoyed considerable success in the elections. With increasing pressure for separate electorates, Ambedkar turned the ILP into the All India Scheduled Caste Federation (AISCF) in 1942, thus appealing to scheduled caste loyalties directly, exhorting them to gain power through united action. This resulted in a loss of caste Hindu support for Ambedkar in Bombay. The objective of the AISCF in

its party constitution was securing for the scheduled castes, a status as a distinct and separate element and obtaining for them the political, economic and social rights they were entitled to on account of their needs, numbers and importance. The scheduled caste Jatavs of Agra who were already under the influence of Ambedkar and were, later to convert to Buddhism with him formed the Scheduled Caste Federation of Agra in 1944 as an organisation affiliated to the AISCF,

The Republican Party of India:

Plans for the Republican Party of India (RPI), which was formed in 1957, were not completely formulated at the time of Ambedkar's death. As a successor to the AISCF which was disbanded after Ambedkar's death, its interest was laid down in its manifesto as cooperation with the organisations of the backward classes and scheduled tribes which it considered lacking in political consciousness.²¹ The name itself suggests that Ambedkar had hopes of it becoming an effective political party of national character in opposition to the Congress. The overall goal of the RPI and its leaders was to organise the interests of all the scheduled castes and defeat the Brahmin dominated Congress.²²

The search for a new identity for the Mahars was supplied by Ambedkar in bringing together the religious identity of Buddhism and political identity with the establishment of the RPI. With the conversion and formation of the RPI, the Mahar movement was no longer purely religious or political, it became religio-political. The act of conversion, its institutional expression as well as the formation of the RPI, gave the movement a new character.²³ Neo-Buddhist became not just a symbol of realisation of certain fundamental values, but a means to the achievement of well-defined socio-economic and political ends.

Neo-Buddhist - Republican Identity:

The identity of Neo-Buddhists with the Republican party is significant. For all practical purposes, the RPI is an adaptation of caste organisations.²⁴ In Maharashtra, RPI members are Buddhists, and Buddhists are Republicans. Although an effort is being made to create a new religious culture unrelated to the political field, the leaders of the RPI are the leaders of the Neo-Buddhist movement as well. This Neo-Buddhist-Republican identity has meant that the party is, by and large, the voice of Mahar/Buddhist interests. Although it claims

to act on behalf of all scheduled castes, the fact remains that most of the scheduled castes themselves do not support the RPI, owing allegiance instead to the Congress. In fact the general movement even within the RPI seems to be towards merger with the Congress. The splinter group within the RPI led by Gaikwad has already joined the Congress.²⁵

Ambedkar's hope that the RPI would be a more broadly based political group than the AISC has not been fulfilled. This is because the same factor which accounts for its strength, that is, the solid support of the Mahars, imposes corresponding limitations. Support is limited by the small number of Buddhists, since the identification of the party with the Neo-Buddhists defined its constitution. The result has been that the RPI and its predecessor, the AISC, have been related in one way or another with almost every other political group on either the national or local scene.²⁶ Alliances have been formed with the socialist parties, the communistic Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti and even the Muslims of U.P., with whom the RPI has had the most effective alliance.²⁷

Political Divisions:

In addition to the problem of limited constituency and unsatisfactory electoral alliances, the RPI has been

sorely troubled by splits within the organisation. These have stemmed primarily from the lack of effective leadership of the community after Ambedkar. There is, in spite of a general unity and cohesion, much quarrelling over leadership and much local factionalism. According to Zellott,²⁸ two factors affect the leadership of the party: (a) the temptation to a man of lower economic status to make secure his position at the expense of a larger ideal, and (b) the fact that the way up for a Buddhist is through government service removing most educated and concerned Buddhists from direct political activity.

The RPI has, even after its inception in 1957, seen splits in the organisation largely on account of political ambitions and personal rivalries. Beginning with the split which occurred in 1959 over the issue of whether the RPI should have a continued alliance with the communists or not, to the 1970 split of the organisation the RPI has been beset by internal divisions. In 1972, a group of young Mahars calling themselves Buddhists, formed themselves into an activist group, the Dalit Panthers, spearheading a movement to liberate the oppressed groups in India. The existence of splits at the political level has brought about a loosening of group cohesion.

We can thus see that the Buddhist situation is somewhat more complex than that of the Sikhs in that, unlike them they have no territorial or linguistic identity. This very fact however renders them a more manageable group in the national integration terms. However, as a caste group they do have a degree of cohesion which means that they are effective as a pressure group. In the case of the Sikhs, caste made for divisive forces, while in the case of the Buddhists it has been a unifying factor.

In talking about the Buddhists as a political group, one important point must be taken note of. In the case of the Sikhs, no demarcation between the ecclesiastical order and the political one is perceived. In the Buddhist case this is not so. The ecclesiastical order is clearly separate from the political one, and the only way in which the religious body is linked with the political one is as a pressure group. This is true even in those countries where Buddhist is the state religion. The attitudes of these two communities in India today, the violence of Sikh politics and the general non-violence of the Buddhists may perhaps be studied in this light as well.

Conclusion:

We have thus seen that, unlike the Sikhs, the Buddhists

have neither a territorial anchorage nor a linguistic identity. In addition they do not have the unity of religious descent. The existence of these factors among the Sikhs has made for strengthening of the bonds of cohesion between them. However, because the Neo-Buddhists are scheduled caste converts, they are part of a larger cause, a union along caste lines which is a strengthening one. Because of the fact that the religious doctrine is not oriented to political action, as is the case with the Sikhs, an overt manifestation of internal conflict has not taken place. We may then say that a religious community, which is not united by territory or language, and in which the religious doctrine is not geared to political action, is a community which is complex, but which, by very virtue of its complexity, is a more easily manageable one from the point of view of the nation state than a community in which the aforementioned factors exist.

Notes:

1. Hinayana Buddhism spread to Ceylon, Burma, Cambodia and Thailand, and is generally referred to as the Southern school. Mahayana Buddhism spread across Tibet and China and is known as the Northern school.
2. Sunanda Patwardhan, Change among India's Harijan - Maharashtra, a case study, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1973, p.142.

3. The exact figure is 3,812,325. Census of India, 1971, Series I, India, Paper 2: Religion.
4. Theravada Buddhism is, however, dominant.
5. D.C. Ahir, Buddhism in Modern India, Bhikkhu Niwas Prakashan, Nagpur, 1972.
6. Trevor Ling, Buddhist Revival in India, Macmillan, London, 1980, p.49.
7. Eleanor Zelliot, "Psychological dimension of the Buddhist Movement in India" in G.A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia, Manohar Book Service, New Delhi, 1972.
8. The Mahar was, in broad terms, the odd job man in the village, and did the work of sweepers, servants etc.
9. T.K. Oommen, "Religious Pluralism in India - a sociological appraisal", Paper presented at the Colloquium on Christian Perspectives on Contemporary Issues, p.9.
10. Owen Lynch, The Politics of Untouchability - Social Mobility and Change in a city of India, Columbia Univ. Press, New York, 1969, p.92.
11. Ibid., p.92.
12. Eleanor Zelliot, "Buddhism and Politics in Maharashtra" in D.E. Smith, South Asian Politics and Religion, Princeton Univ. Press, N.J., 1966, p.205.
13. Patwardhan, op. cit., p.131.
14. Ibid., p.13.
15. Harjinder Singh (ed.), Caste among Non-Hindus in India, National Publishing House, Delhi, 1977.
16. Zelliot, op. cit., p.161.
17. In Maharashtra, the Neo-Buddhists are entitled to scheduled caste privileges, but not elsewhere, so that many Buddhists are reluctant to declare themselves as such for fear of losing these privileges.
18. Patwardhan, op. cit., p.131.

19. Ibid., p.158.
20. Zelliott, op. cit., p.192.
21. Ibid., p.201.
22. Lynch, op. cit., p.92.
23. Patwardhan, op. cit., p.161.
24. Lynch, op. cit.
25. Patwardhan, op. cit., p.162.
26. Zelliott, op. cit., p.208.
27. Ibid., p.209.
28. Ibid., p.211.

CHAPTER IV
THE CHRISTIANS

The Christian community stands apart from the other two communities studied, primarily because of its standing as an alien religion, which, along with Islam, was associated in the minds of the dominant Hindus with centuries of conquest, colonisation and proselytisation. It has, as a result, been viewed with a degree of suspicion by the Hindus. Yet, in terms of coexistence with the other communities, the Christians, have been far less problematic than, say, the Sikhs, whom the Hindus see as belonging to their fold.

The Christians are the largest minority among the three groups being studied, much larger than the Buddhists and larger than the Sikhs as well. Yet despite the fact that the Sikhs are a smaller body, their impact as a group has been much greater. This is, we believe, because the Sikhs are the only religious community in India to have a linguistic and territorial identity. Unlike the Sikhs, the Christians have no religious or territorial identity. Their social origins are even more varied than those of the Buddhists. It was seen in the second chapter that the Sikh

religion prescribes a tie-up between the faith and politics. In the third chapter it was seen that in the Buddhist case the ecclesiastical order and the political one are clearly separate, and yet, because of the circumstances of their origin, a certain religio-political identity is seen. The Christian case as we shall see, shows that in India they are not a political force at all. Unlike the Neo-Buddhists, who attempted a political grouping in the formation of the Republican Party of India, the Christians in India have not even tried to converge on a political platform. These factors, the lack of a territorial and linguistic anchorage, the differences in origin, and the absence of political organisation makes the Christians a difficult group to analyse while at the same time making them a more manageable group in the context of the nation state.

Territory and Language:

The Census of 1971 lists the Christian population at 14,223,382 or 2.60 per cent of India's population.¹ Compared with the Muslims who form 11 per cent of the population, their number is relatively insignificant. However, they are the largest group among those being studied by us. The Christians in India are widely scattered. The southern region of India, particularly the states of Andhra

Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, account for more than 60 per cent of the population. In fact, in Kerala, they form 21 per cent of the state's population. Apart from this there are the smaller states and union territories where Christians are present in large numbers. In Nagaland, they are in a majority, forming 67 per cent of the population, in Meghalaya, they form 47 per cent of the population and in Goa, Daman and Diu 32 per cent. The third major area in which the Christians are to be found is in the tribal belt of Central India.

It is clear then, that the Christian community, scattered as it is, does not have a territorial anchorage. Consequently, they have no linguistic base either and are bound by regional variations in language, tradition and culture.

Origins of the Community:

It is difficult to refer to the Christians in India as a community. At a very broad level, we may use the term to tie them up as a group, but in actual fact they form collectivities in terms of their denominations and in terms of their origins, Catholics, Anglo-Indians, tribal Christians and so on. Christianity in the world today is characterised by great denominationalism, and many of

these divisions were transplanted in India. Dealing with the denominations within Christianity in India would not be very fruitful. More rewarding would, perhaps, be an examination of the group in India in terms of broad categories in which we may place them. We can deal with Christians in India under three categories, very broadly speaking.

- i. Pre-colonial Christians,
- ii. Colonial Christians, and
- iii. Offshoots of Colonial Rule.

i. Pre-Colonial Christians:

The earliest evidence of Christian presence in India was about the first century A.D., when, it is said, St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus, converted a small group of high caste members to Christianity in Malabar in north Kerala. The historicity of these events is doubted by some scholars, but at any rate, by the fourth century A.D., there was a colony of Syrian Christians, so called because of the allegiance they owed to the Bishop of Antioch in Syria. With the arrival in India of the Portuguese in the 16th century, Roman Catholicism made its entry into India. The Portuguese in Goa, converted as they conquered, and when they confronted the orthodox Syrian Church, they

attempted to pressurise them into taking an oath of allegiance to the Church of Rome. This led to a split within the Syrian orthodox church, and paved the way for a series of splits in later years. Thus the Church in Kerala today consists of various denominations like the Mar Thoma Church, the Jacobites the Syrian Catholics, the Roman Catholics etc. With the arrival of the British, Protestantism made its presence felt in India and the period saw the conversion of several members of low castes to Christianity. Although attempts have been made to unite the various Christian groups in Kerala, this has not been possible. However, in Kerala, perhaps, more than anywhere else because of its existence over several centuries, the Christians have been assimilated into the cultural milieu and have, in fact, been accorded an unofficial standing in the caste hierarchy there.

ii. Colonial Christians:

With the establishment of the East India Company, Protestantism entered India through the chaplains of the company. During the late 18th century, William Carey, the founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, began to work in Bengal. People like him, however, made few converts, primarily because the East India Company as a

policy decision, discouraged inroads made by missionaries.² With public demands by evangelical groups in England to allow missionary activity in India, Parliament nullified Company restrictions on missionary entry in 1813. Following this, Christian missionaries began to arrive in India in ever increasing numbers, and missionary activity took on an organised character. The British encouraged missionary activity everywhere, but particularly in two areas, the North-East border and the tribal belt in Central India.

(a) Christianity and the Tribals: North-East India:

Christianity first came to the North-East about 1812 with the arrival in the Khasi hills of Krishna Chandra Pal, an early convert of William Carey.³ At this stage, proselytisation work continued in fits and starts, with the translation of the Bible into Khasi using the Bengali script, and the establishment of schools. Sustained missionary activity began in 1841 with Thomas Jones of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission. He advocated the use of Roman characters for the script of tribal languages. Under his influence, the Khasis slowly began to accept the faith. Once the task of evangelisation was entrusted to native preachers, the success of missionary work became spectacular. With the emphasis that the missionary placed on literacy, and the resultant educational, economic and

social advantages to the adherents of the new religion, Christianity began to forge ahead. The result of such missionary work, conducted by British, European and American missionaries has made Christianity the dominant religion in most parts of North-East India, particularly Nagaland.

Christianity and the Tribals: Central India:

The missionary movement was strong in the tribal belt of Central India as well, among the Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Santals, Bhils, and others who have contributed thousands of converts to Christianity.⁴ Missions in this area began in 1845, later than in the North-East. They used as their main lever, the economic subservience of the tribal cultivators to the landlords. The establishment of the German Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Ranchi in 1857 created an educated section among the tribals and many later leaders of tribal movements received their education in missionary schools.⁵ The fact that the missionaries encouraged tribal resistance to exploitation by landlord, angered the Hindu zamindars, so much so that during the Mutiny of 1857, the missions were advised by the government to leave Ranchi. Much church property was destroyed in their absence, but they returned and

the mission continued to flourish. During the mass movement during the late 1880's when Father Lievens arrived, hundreds of thousands were converted to Christianity.⁶

(b) Christianity and the Backward Castes:

In the 1860's and 1870's, the Christian missions particularly protestant missions became aware of an unexpected and dramatic movement. In various parts of India, churches which had remained static for decades began to grow at a rapid pace through group conversions among untouchable castes.⁷ It took the Protestant missionaries a while to grasp the impact of such a movement and handle it. In any case, it made them willing to fight the cause of the downtrodden sections in the early 19th century in many controversies about equal access to public facilities.⁸

These conversion movements leant towards Protestantism rather than Roman Catholicism. This was primarily because the Catholics were more tolerant of caste, and conversion to Catholicism probably seemed a less plausible escape from the ills of that system. The conversion movements occurred in various parts of the country. The onrush of adherents was so great that there were even times when missions tried to stem the tide of conversion where it

seemed artificial.⁹ In the Punjab, various missionary bodies attracted converts from the Chuhra untouchables.¹⁰ The Protestant community in the Punjab increased from 3,823 in 1881 to 493,081 in 1947.¹¹ Combined with Chuhra conversions to Sikhism, the result of the mass movement was that hardly any Chuhras were left as untouchables.¹²

In Kerala, the bulk of the converts to Christianity during the 19th century were from the Pulayas and Parayas, two untouchable castes who converted to escape the shackles of the caste system. In the Telugu speaking region, mass movements developed among two untouchable castes, Malas and Madigas.¹³

The case of the Nadars of Madras and Travancore is one of the most interesting of mass movements.¹⁴ The Nadars who were toddy tappers, converted en masse to Christianity. In fact, the London Missionary society and other bodies developed a Nadar exclusivism with converts from other castes not given encouragement to join. However, all Nadars did not become Christians, some seeking Sanskritization as a path to social mobility. The interesting thing is that the caste as a whole retained a considerable degree of coherence, and in their struggle for an enhanced status learned the value of caste solidarity.¹⁵

The rapid influx of members from the outcaste groups created problems of assimilation and consolidation which will be discussed later.

iii. Offshoots of the Colonial Order - The Anglo-Indians:

The Anglo-Indians occupy a peculiar position in Indian society. Caught midway between two worlds as a result of the circumstances of their origin, they never got to know the west, to which they aspired to belong, nor did they develop a strong emotional linkage with India, to which they did belong.

An Anglo-Indian is described as a person whose father or any male progenitor was of European descent, but who was himself a native of India.¹⁶ Offspring of mixed marriages like these originated with the Portuguese and carried on with the British. The British were quick to realise the advantages of mixed marriages between their soldiers and native Indian women. The offspring grew up loyal to the nation of his father since his mother was usually excommunicated from the group and had little to do with her Indian relatives. From the 17th century onward there was a slow emergence of a hybrid community which came to be known as the Anglo-Indians.¹⁷ Identification with the British, having access to western education and

good jobs till 1786 was good for the community. With the promulgation of several acts unfavourable to the community,¹⁸ the tide began to turn. With the nationalist movement at its height in the early 1930's and 40's, the Anglo-Indians faced a severe identity crisis. Declared by the British to be natives of India, and aware of the inevitability of Indian independence, the Anglo-Indians became apprehensive about their position in a free India. By force of circumstance, they began to change their attitude towards India.¹⁹

From the point of view of other Indians, the Anglo-Indians were the object of much social prejudice. In 1949, the Anglo-Indians were recognised as a distinct minority community in India and certain safeguards were guaranteed to it. The right to political representation, educational grants and quotas in services was recognised. However, the Anglo-Indians have remained an isolated and withdrawn part of the Christian community and Indian society. They are unlike the Parsis, another minority community who, despite a deliberate maintenance of a separate identity, have occupied a special place in Indian society because of their economic achievements. Not only are the Anglo-Indian numerically insignificant, but they are not well-off economically. They are concentrated in small pockets

in various large towns and cities, particularly railway centres.²⁰ Their major problem is the shaking off of a deep rooted prejudice. By and large, they remain a secluded group.

If we take each of these categories just deal with, we see that the pre-colonial Christians, having been centuries in India, have strong roots in the area where they are settled, and have been assimilated into the regional linguistic and cultural milieu. In the case of colonial Christians, things have not been as smooth, the more recent timing of their conversion, coupled with their origins, have made them reassert their tribal or caste identity. As for the Anglo-Indians, as we have seen, they have more or less resigned themselves to a back seat in the affairs of the country, and lead an insular existence.

The one advantage that the Christians as a community have had over all other communities in India has been in terms of education. All the missionary groups who come to India established educational institutions in the country. With the backing of at least an elementary education, they were ahead of the other communities. In the case of the Syrian Christians, this has meant that,

for instance, the earliest printing presses in Kerala were started by them, and they had opportunities to move to other parts of the country in search of jobs. In the case of the tribals, education contributed to a degree of Westernisation, and helped tribal leadership in their struggle. The case of the Anglo-Indians was somewhat different in that a mere nodding acquaintance with the English language and perhaps an elementary education gave them an advantage in terms of employment until the other Indians began to receive Western education and caught up with them.²¹

The attitude of other communities especially that of the dominant Hindus towards the Christians, has been mixed. On the one hand the association of missionaries with colonisation and proselytisation has made the Hindus view them with suspicion. As mentioned earlier, there was considerable destruction of Christian property in Ranchi in 1857, since the Hindu landlords saw them as a threat to their economic prosperity, inciting the tribals as they did to react against the exploitative landlord. Also, the fact that the Christians as a community played a negligible role in the national movement has led to a questioning of their integration in the Indian nation.

There are reports that the Christian community resents any such suggestion. In fact, the United Maharashtra Christian Conference which was convened in Ahmednagar in December, 1953, recorded strong protest against V.D. Savarkar who advised Hindus to resist conversion on the grounds that a change of religion would lead to a change in nationality.²² At the same time, the Christian record of social service, and tremendous contribution in the fields of education and health have stood them in good stead.

All religious communities have multiple identities. In the case of the Christians, the Christian identity is not invoked; it is, rather the tribal identity or the caste one that is asserted.

Caste and the Christians:

Like the Sikh and Buddhist faiths, Christianity is an egalitarian religion. Unfortunately, however, like the Sikhs and Buddhists, the caste identity is fairly strong among the Christians as well. In the case of the Sikhs, caste was a divisive factor; in the case of the Buddhists, caste was a unifying factor, cutting across the religious division. The caste identity among Indian Christians is manifest in several ways.

During the mass movement to Christianity in the 19th century, caste boundaries proved to be considerable obstacles to conversion. In the Telugu country, for example, the movement occurred among the Malas and Madigas who had disputes about their relative status. On the whole, where Malas became Christians, Madigas were unresponsive, and vice versa. Where substantial numbers of both converted, they either drifted towards different denominations or their traditional animosity led to trouble in the congregation.²³ The case was different with two castes similar in occupation, but occupying different areas. For instance, the Nadars' movement of South Madras and Travancore had tremendous influence on the Ezhavas of North Travancore and Malabar.

The other manifestation of caste in the Christian community is as in the case of the Nadars. Although the entire caste moved towards an enhancement of status, only some took to Christianity, others preferred Sanskritization. But despite the religious barrier, caste ties have been very strong and in many cases, the caste identity has taken precedence over the religious one.

The major problem with the Christian community in Kerala is a differentiation between the 'old' Christians and the 'neo' Christian converts from the untouchable castes. Converts from the higher castes are never referred

to as neo-Christians, but as Syrian Christians. So the accepted meaning of neo-Christian is low caste Christian. Converts from low castes, the Pulayas and Parayas are still treated as outcastes although with conversion they ceased to be untouchables. Syrian and neo-Christian members of the same church conducted rituals separately. In fact, when Pulaya Christians found that they could not achieve total membership in the Christian church, and had to be satisfied with a subordinate position, they began reconvertng on a large scale, because as Hindu untouchables, they received several benefits from the government.

As far as the missionaries were concerned, they were more or less in agreement that the retention of caste was incompatible with Christianity. Caste was not very apparent among converts in the Bombay and Bengal Presidencies, where missionaries had insisted on its exclusion from the beginning. In South India though, Protestant missionaries had allowed some caste practices to creep in. Oddie²⁴ feels that the missionaries opposed caste among Christians partly because it was an essential part of Hinduism. They were also influenced by the fact that caste distinctions in the church inhibited attempts to build it up in terms

of numbers. They felt that converts who retained caste had not fully renounced Hinduism and it was easy for them to slide back into it. Although there was widespread consensus that converts should be required to renounce caste at their baptism, in actual fact there seems to have been considerable compromise with caste in practice.

Thus we see that despite the fact that Christianity professes to be an egalitarian religion, in several parts of India, it has not been able to shake itself free from the bonds of caste.

The Political Identity of the Christians:

The Christian community stands distinctly apart from the Sikh and Buddhist communities in terms of political involvement. The case of the Sikhs with their perception of the inextricable link between religion and politics, and the Buddhists' with their attempts at a political party despite the separation between the ecclesiastical order and the political one, have already been discussed. In the case of the Christians, there has never been an attempt at forming a Christian political party. Like the Buddhists, the Christians also see a clear cut demarcation between the church and the state. This naturally inhibits their organisation on a communal platform. Even

if they did decide to do so, the magnitude of the problem would be enormous, given the great fragmentation of the community based on denominations. Following independence, the Christians rejected the idea of separate electorates and they have tended in the direction of non-involvement in political affairs. The Anglo-Indians have been on the periphery of Indian politics in any case, apart from the political representation they are guaranteed under the Minority Safeguards Act. The Syrian Christians, those in the north east and Central India have been politically involved to some extent.

The Syrian Christians in Kerala are one of the three major communal interest groups in the state.²⁵ They are organised into Catholic and non-Catholic groups. The Christians in Kerala form an important minority since they comprise one-fifth of the state's population, and of these, the Syrian Christians form 75 per cent. The Syrian Christians are the leading business and farming community. In addition, they run most of the schools and colleges in the state. They also control most of the newspapers in Kerala, and this is an important channel through which the Syrian Christians exercise an influence. The fact that they have not been able to function under

the leadership of a single community association has hampered them somewhat. Since the Catholic and non-Catholic groups have not always seen eye to eye, and no leader has ever enjoyed the support of the entire community. We can thus see that the Christians are not politically organised. One point must be made clear, however. Even in a party like the Kerala Congress, which is predominantly Christian in terms of its social composition, is not in any sense of the term ideologically Christian. As a pressure group though, they are effective, because of the tremendous economic power that they wield as a community.

In Central India, the country's large tribal belt, the Jharkhand region accounts for the largest tribal population in India.²⁶ In addition, it has also been leading in tribal politics. As mentioned earlier, missionary activity in the area was tremendous. The Christian Students' Conference was convened in 1910, and began with philanthropic ideas, but soon turned to socio-economic upliftment. In 1939, the question of a Jharkhand state was raised for the first time and the organisation was opened to non-Christian membership. The Jharkhand Party which was formed in 1950 enlisted non-Christian tribals. Thus we can see that although many members of these

organisations like the Jharkhand Party were Christians, it was not a Christian political party. Rather, it was an attempt at the assertion of a tribal identity which ^{was} the salient one. The situation is similar in the North-East. Although the people of Nagaland and Mizoram are predominantly Christian, the demand for greater autonomy has cut across the Christian identity, including Hindu Manipuris and the Buddhist people of Arunachal Pradesh.

We see then, that the Christians in India are not politically organised. There has, indeed, been no attempt on the part of the Christians to create a separate political party like the Akali Dal, where every Akali is a Sikh, or the Republican Party, where every Republican is a Buddhist. Given the spatial dispersion of the Christian community in India, and its deep fragmentation, this has not been possible. At a regional level there is an indication of the Christians emerging as an interest group, as is the case in the Kerala Congress. This is true of the North-East as well. In formal terms there is no Christian political party, but substantively a Christian dominated party is possible. In areas where the Christians are relatively numerous, and politically involved, the assertion is of either a tribal identity or a caste one. In the

case of the tribals the notion of a separate homeland also exists. This is possible because of their territorial concentration, and the fact that the tribal identity unites them rather than that the religious identities divide them. This is not so in the case of caste groups, primarily because in terms of the nation, they cannot be isolated in any particular area. The Christians, further, do not operate as a communal group - communal as being the assertion on the part of a religious or a political identity, since they accept in theory the disengagement between religion and politics, following the trend in the Christian west.

Conclusion:

We thus see, that in the case of the Christians, the salient identity is not the religious one. The salient identity varies from region to region, from the assertion of a tribal identity in Central India and the North-East to that of a caste identity as is the case, say with the Nadars of Tamil Nadu. Politically they are not an organised community, even in Kerala, where they exert an influence as a pressure group. The spatial spread of the community with its lack of territorial and linguistic identity and the great denominationalism and ethnic variation makes the Christians a complex group. But by very virtue of

this disparateness, the Christians are also a simple and non-problematic group at the national level.

At this point we can say that any religious community which is characterised by, (a) doctrinaire pluralism and denominationalism, (b) which is not held together territorially, linguistically or in terms of descent, and (c) which envisages a clear separation between the ecclesiastical order and the political one and which is, in consequence, not politically organised, is unlikely to be a threat to the nation state. But precisely because of this, it is likely to occupy a marginal position in the political context, as is the case with the Christian community in India.

Notes:

1. Census of India, 1971, Series I, India, Paper 2: Religion.
2. The Company drew lucrative profits from pilgrim taxes on Hindu and Muslim shrines, and it suited them to keep missionaries away. R.A. Schermerhorn, Ethnic Plurality in India, Univ. of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1978, p.185.
3. Panna Lal Dasgupta (ed.), A Common Perspective for North-East India, Calcutta, 1967, p.240.
4. J.W. Pickett, Christian Mass Movements in India, Abingdon Press, New York, 1933, p.27.

5. Nirmal Sengupta (ed.), Fourth World Dynamics: Jharkhand, Authors Guild Publications, New Delhi, 1982, p.28.
6. Ibid., p.30.
7. Duncan B. Forrester, "The Depressed Classes and Conversion to Christianity" in G.A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia, Manohar Book Service, New Delhi, 1977, p.35.
8. See R.L. Hardgrave, The Nadars of Tamil Nadu - the political culture of a community in change, Univ. of California Press, California, 1969, pp.55-70.
The breast cloth dispute in Travancore is the best known of the public controversies.
9. In Bihar, after an incident in which Hindus attacked Muslims, The British levied a tax on the Hindus for damages and Muslims and Christians were exempt. So many workers applied for Christian baptism.
See J.W. Pickett, op. cit., p.54.
10. E.Y. Campbell, The Church in the Punjab, National Christian Council of India, Nagpur, 1961.
11. Ibid.
12. Khushwant Singh, History of the Sikhs, vol.2, Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi, 1966.
13. G.A. Oddie, "Christian Conversion in Telugu Country", IESHR, vol.XII, No.1, Jan-March 1975, p.65.
14. R.L. Hardgrave, op. cit.
15. Ibid.
16. This definition given in independent India's constitution in 1950 as a reproduction of that in the Government of India Act of 1935.
17. Anglo-Indians, was a term given to them by Lord Dalhousie. Earlier, they were referred to contemptuously as half caste, half breed, Eurasian etc.

18. Three acts passed in 1786, 1791 and 1795, which prohibited Anglo-Indians from going to England for education, stopped them getting jobs in the civil services and from enlistment in the army.

See V.R. Gaikwad, The Anglo-Indians, Bombay, 1967; also Frank Anthony, Britain's Betrayal in India, New Delhi, 1961.

19. As H.A. Stark wrote in Hostages to India (Calcutta, 1926, "...if England is the land of our fathers, then India is the land of our mothers. If to us England is a hallowed memory, then India is a living reality ...in truth we are England's hostages to India...")
20. Many Anglo-Indians were employed in the railway services, and were therefore concentrated in large junction towns.
21. V.R. Gaikwad, op. cit.
22. Times of India, January 1, 1954.
23. G.A. Oddie, op. cit.
24. G.A. Oddie, Social Protest in India - British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms, 1850-1900, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1979, p.51.
25. V.K.S. Nayar, "Communal Interest Groups in Kerala" in D.E. Smith (ed.), South Asian Politics and Religion, New Jersey, 1966, p.176.
The other two interest groups he mentions are the Nair Service Society and the Stee Narayana Paripalana Yogam.
26. Nirmal Sengupta, op. cit.
He mentions also the other cultural zones: Gondwana (Madhya Pradesh), Bastar (M.P.-Orissa-A.P.-Maharashtra), and Bhilwara (Rajasthan-Gujarat-Maharashtra-M.P.), p.xviii.

CONCLUSION

This study has afforded several bases for comparison of the various religious communities dealt with. To begin with, the Sikhs stand clearly apart in several ways. Firstly, they are the only group among the three being studied to have a territorial and linguistic identity. This has strengthened the feeling of community among them unlike the Buddhists and the Christians. In terms of being able to trace common religious descent also the Sikhs stand apart from the Buddhists and Christians. In addition, and this is very significant, in the Sikh perception, there is an inextricable link between religion and politics. This is not so with the other two groups. The above mentioned factors have been the greatest source of strength for the Sikh community. However, this strength is offset by the religious sectarianism that exists in terms of the Akali-Nirankari conflict. Social differentiation as well as political differentiation have also weakened the Sikh cause.

The case of the Buddhists is somewhere midway between that of the Sikhs and the Christians. Like the Christians and unlike the Sikhs, the Buddhists have no identity of territory and language, barring the fact that the majority are to be found in the state of Maharashtra. The interesting

thing about the Buddhists, as we saw in the third chapter is the dual identity they have, as Buddhists on the one hand, and as Scheduled castes on the other. The Republican party of India which was the only attempt on the part of the community at political involvement, began as a Buddhist party, but it was always envisaged as a possible platform for all untouchables. The result has been that caste rather than religion has been the salient identity of the Buddhists. Thus while caste has been a unifying factor, the clear separation perceived by the Buddhists between the political and ecclesiastical orders has not made for sustained political activity. What activity there has been, has been in the name of caste rather than religion. This, coupled with the lack of territorial and linguistic identity has meant that the voice of the community has not been very strong.

If the Sikhs stand at one end in terms of being a 'simple' community, then the Christians are surely the most complex. Not only are they scattered geographically, and therefore have no linguistic identity, but more than the other two communities, they are divided by tremendous denominationalism. They also do not have a commonality of descent, and indeed, are also ethnically divided. Caste

affects the community in two ways, both of which weaken the sense of community of the group. On the one hand, caste operates vertically as a socially differentiating force. On the other, operating horizontally, it cuts across the religious barrier. For the very reason stated above, political mobilisation would have been difficult enough, even if there had been no separation between church and state in the Christian perception. Given that this is not so, it has meant that organisation on a political platform has been virtually impossible. It is only as a pressure group that the community wields any political power, and even in the Christian dominated areas where there appears to be Christian participation in politics, it is an assertion of an identity other than the religious. All these factors have made the Christians a marginal community in India.

From our analysis of the three religious communities, we can say that the Sikhs are the most homogeneous and the Christians the least so. We can also see that the Sikhs are the simplest community to study because of the greater degree of homogeneity that exists among them. Conversely in terms of the great degree of heterogeneity that exists among the Christians, they are the most complex. However,

by the very virtue of their simplicity the Sikh cause vis-a-vis the nation is, and has been very complex. Likewise the complexity of the Christian community has meant that they are not likely to ever pose a threat to the nation, unlike the Sikhs who can. Likewise with the Buddhists. It is our contention that the manifestation of internal differences in overt conflict among the Sikhs is due to the link up between religion and politics that exists in the community. The essentially non-violent stance of the Buddhists and Christians is, similarly due to the church-state separation that is envisaged.

We see, then that religion by itself does not pose a threat to the nation state. However, religion, coupled with a territorial and linguistic identity, a lack of doctrinal pluralism, and a religious doctrine oriented to political action, can pose a threat to the nation state. It is for this reason that the Sikhs have been as successful as they have in threatening the unity of the nation state, and why the Christians and Buddhists are unlikely to.

What, then are the implications of this study. In a country like India, which is characterised by religious pluralism, and in which one religious community, the Hindus, are overwhelmingly preponderant, the position of religious

minorities becomes threatened. These minority groups react in different ways to the dominant group. We have already discussed the conditions under which a minority religious community is able to assert itself effectively. We have also seen how it has been possible for one particular group, the Sikhs to demand a nationality grouping. Such assertions coupled with an aggressive stance on the part of the dominant community do not make for the maintenance of nation statehood or the promotion of healthy religious pluralism. It is necessary to allow the minority groups to retain their distinctiveness as religious groups while at the same time not excluding them from the national orbit. It is necessary for the religious minority to have a sense of distinctiveness as well as a sense of oneness. This is necessary in the interest of the preservation of the nation state.

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