

Panth, Kismet, Dharm te Qaum:

continuity and change in four dimensions of Punjabi religion

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Although Punjabi society has long been marked by religious diversity, until little more than a century ago Punjabis of differing religious persuasions lived together in relative peace and harmony. But since then much has changed. With the eruption of religious reform movements explicitly committed to socio-religious differentiation, the former condition of easy-going pluralism was swept away by processes of ever more vigorous polarisation, much to the distress, it must be said, to many of those involved. Yet how can we best explain these extraordinary developments? Why was it that religion suddenly became such a bone of contention that those who differed ceased to respect each other, and instead started to attack each other with such viciousness? Were the underlying tensions between Punjab's various religious traditions so great that the smallest spark was sufficient to precipitate a cataclysm? But if that was really so, why is the current condition of polarisation so unprecedented? Could it then be that far from being an outcome of ancient hatreds, current disjunctions are better understood as a *modern* phenomenon? If so, which aspects of modernity have been most responsible? British colonialism? Christian missionaries? An inadequately developed and/or an insufficiently progressive Independence movement? Stupidity? Democracy? False Consciousness? Fundamentalism?

Although champions for every one of these arguments can easily be found, none seems particularly satisfactory. Despite much spilt ink, no analytical perspective which makes comprehensive sense of Punjab's experience of polarisation has yet to be developed. Nor is this problem in any way specific to Punjab: while similar processes of ethno-religious polarisation can be readily observed in every quarter of the globe, all seem equally intractable – and just as inexplicable. It follows that any lessons we may learn about the nature and dynamics of such processes in a Punjabi context may well be applicable elsewhere, and of course vice-versa.

The intractability of ethnic polarisation

Let us consider for a moment some of the more obvious reasons why ethnic conflicts seem both to be so intractable and so explosive. First, the underlying (and usually mutual) processes of polarisation are invariably accompanied by the development of powerful currents of hostility towards outsiders, together with equally strong feelings of loyalty towards insiders; hence when open conflict does finally erupt, it is often accompanied by a cataclysmic release of violence. In Punjab's case well over 100,000 people lost their lives in 1947, and a further 10 million fled their ancestral homes, never to return. Nor did polarisation end there. Parallel – if so far rather less destructive – disjunctions have since emerged between Hindus and Sikhs in Indian Punjab, as well as between Muslims, Ahmadiyyas and Christians across the border in Pakistan.

A second striking feature of these conflicts is the inability of anyone but the most enthusiastic xenophobes to offer any coherent explanation of their dynamics. Such perplexity is, of course, by no means unique to the Punjab. Western European social science – whether Marxist, Functionalist, Post-modern or Liberal – finds itself just as perplexed by such processes. According to conventional expectations, in a "modern" (or at least "post-modern"), "civilised", and "rational" world, neither xenophobic exclusionism nor its regular partner, fanatical in-group loyalty, should have the popular appeal which they so manifestly do. How, then, can such tendencies be accounted for? One much favoured explanation, particularly in colonial contexts, was that the social and cultural traditions of non-Europeans were so unmodern, so unsophisticated and so irrational that they were left particularly vulnerable to the appeals of parochial tribalism and religious fundamentalism. Yet reassuring however reassuring this view may once have been to its European exponents, after the holocaust in Germany, the collapse of Yugoslavia, let alone the steady growth of inter-racial and inter-ethnic hostility in Europe and North America, there is now so much contemporary evidence to the contrary that it can no longer carry much conviction. Moreover the moment one brings Europe's appalling record of mayhem and slaughter during five centuries of religiously-legitimised Imperial expansion, it becomes clear that the European track-record of ethno-religious savagery is almost certainly a great deal longer than that of anyone else.¹ Thus while ethno-religious polarisation in Punjab is manifestly a product of local contingencies, it is anything but unique.

Against this background my aim in this Chapter is not so much to explore the political dynamics of polarisation in Punjab, but rather to examine its more *religious* dimensions.² In so doing I not only wish to consider how, why and what basis religious ideas have proved to be such an effective vehicle for political mobilisation in this context, but also how the whole character of Punjabi religion has been transformed as a result of a century of reformist criticism and mobilisation. Although there is still a strong sense, as we shall see, in which these transformations have been more apparent than real, they have nevertheless been so extensive – or so I shall argue – that the ideas and practices which it is currently conventional to identify as constituting Hindu, Sikh and Muslim orthodoxy are far less ancient than is commonly assumed. On the contrary they are very largely a product of the fertile processes of religious reconstruction which were let loose by nineteenth century reform movements. Hence my central objective in this Chapter is to explore – and also to construct an analytical vocabulary to account for – the radical changes which have taken place in the character of Punjabi religion during the past century.

Reconceptualising Religion in a Punjabi context

As Oberoi comments, religion is a slippery concept at the best of times, and as he goes on to show in his path breaking study *The Construction of Religious Boundaries* (Oberoi 1994), during the early years of British rule very little of what went on in the Punjabi religious arena either conformed to, or could be illuminated by conventional Euro-centric expectations. Nor has the situation improved significantly as a result of subsequent developments. In my view the currently conventional vocabulary for the study of religion remains as misleading as ever, certainly with respect to Punjab, and quite possibly in many other contexts, including Western Europe, as well. It is not hard to see why. Firstly one of the most central assumptions of the European enlightenment was that social progress would necessarily be accompanied by a steady trend towards secularisation, with the result that religion would progressively be restricted to the privacy of the personal and domestic domain – if, indeed, it survived at all; and although this view was also transmitted to elite groups throughout the third world, where

it often remains an article of faith amongst "progressive" intellectuals, it is a perspective which empirical developments have now rendered comprehensively threadbare.³ Secondly, and in consequence, the entrenchment of an impoverished and deeply Euro-centric understanding of what it is that religion might entail has almost wholly obscured the fact that religious experience can include a number of quite different dimensions, each which exert differential levels of interest and attraction over different groups of devotees. Instead Euro-centric assumptions have promoted a much more unitary vision of what religion is all about. Grounded in the spirit of the Protestant reformation, it seeks to reduce all religions to essentialised -isms. Within this framework texts are routinely prioritised over tradition, aspirations to moral and behavioural conformity over spiritual experience, and formal belief over ritual practice. Moreover it is also assumed that only the first half of each of these oppositions is properly "religious". Hence the second is either overlooked, or dismissed as nothing but irrational superstition.

The intellectual hegemony of these philosophical assumptions, as well as of the analytical vocabulary to which they have given rise is in my view thoroughly pernicious. Besides being a major obstacle to the acquisition of a more insightful and illuminating understanding of the role of religion in contemporary Europe, this alien outlook causes even greater confusion in South Asian contexts. If so, it follows that the best way of circumventing the crippling impact of these assumptions is to look elsewhere for theoretical inspiration. Hence even though my own personal roots are thoroughly European, being invited to present the Inaugural Address at the First International Punjab Studies Conference provided me with an excellent opportunity in which to try and throw off those blinkers, and to adopt a more open-minded approach. It follows, therefore, that my use of Punjabi to entitle my address, and my decision to retain it here should not be seen as mere exoticism. Rather it represents a deliberate effort to step beyond the analytical log-jams which are invariably precipitated when Eurocentric conceptual schema is uncritically applied in a Punjabi context.

In doing so I share common ground with Oberoi, who makes exactly the same point in the opening sentence of his book:

It is all very well for historians to think, speak and write about Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, but they rarely pause to consider if such clear-cut categories actually found expression in the consciousness, actions, and cultural performances of the actors they describe.... (with respect to historical material from) nineteenth century Punjab I was constantly struck by the brittleness of our textbook classifications. There simply wasn't any one-to-one correspondence between the categories which were supposed to govern religious behaviour on the one hand, and the way in which people actually experienced their everyday lives on the other. (Oberoi 1994: 1-2)

But in taking advantage of the conceptual space which Oberoi has opened up, and especially of his emphasis on the intrinsic clumsiness of the concept of religion, I have also drawn further inspiration from Mark Juergensmeyer's work, and especially from the careful distinction which he sets out between the *panthic*, *dharmic* and *qaumic* dimensions of religion in his study of the rise of the Ad Dharm movement amongst Punjab's untouchables. In my view Juergensmeyer's conceptual distinction offers a particularly attractive analytical starting point. Precisely because it is grounded in a Punjabi (as opposed to a Latin Christian) philosophical and conceptual universe, this schema enables us to unpack the otherwise undifferentiated phenomenon of religion in a particularly illuminating way.

It would, of course, be quite possible to translate each of Juergensmeyer's concepts into English, and thus into what is widely regarded as a much more universalistic analytical vocabulary. If so, the term *panthic* could be identified as referring to the mystical and spiritual dimension of religious ideas and practice, *dharmic* to its more moral and/or social dimensions, while its *qaumic* dimension highlights the capacity of religious ideas and loyalties to act as a vehicle for ethno-political mobilisation. Finally I have also found it useful to add a fourth dimension, which I have found it convenient to identify as *kismet*, to Juergensmeyer's scheme. Yet although each of these terms is readily translatable into English, I have nevertheless deliberately avoided doing so. Firstly to keep my analytical categories as congruent as possible with local realities, and secondly in an attempt to guard against the creeping impact of Euro-, and especially Protestant-centric ideas; and finally because I have found that it enables me to present my central thesis with much greater precision than I could otherwise have hoped for.

As I see it, during the pre-British period the most active features of popular Punjabi religion were concentrated in the *panthic* and *kismet* domains, to which its *dharmic* dimensions were in many respects quite secondary; meanwhile religion as a *qaumic* phenomenon was almost non-existent. But following the rapid growth of socio-political reform movements from the late nineteenth century onwards, each of Punjab's religious traditions began to organise itself ever more emphatically in *qaumic* terms; as each has done so, each one has steadily reinforced its *dharmic* distinctiveness, but at the cost of ever-growing hostility to the *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions. Yet despite the increasingly harsh criticism to which both the *panthic* and the *kismet* components of Punjabi religion have been subjected by the proponents of the new *qaumic* orthodoxies, these dimensions of Punjabi religion are still of immense significance in more personal and private contexts. Although hardly discussed in the literature, and routinely dismissed as misguided, irrational and superstitious spokesmen for the new orthodoxies – at least some of whom have imposed their judgements down the barrel of a gun – I would argue that these currently devalued dimensions remain to this day the primary source of spiritual inspiration and personal solace for most Punjabis, and most particularly so in contexts of severe adversity.

The Punjabi context

Yet before I launch into detailed argument, let me first establish just what I mean by Punjab, for I have no intention of restricting myself solely to the much truncated Indian state of Punjab, nor even the rather larger and considerably more populous region across the border in Pakistan. Rather what I have in mind is the fertile plain bounded by the Indus to the west and the Yamuna to the east, rising into the foothills of the Himalayas to the north and tailing off equally fuzzily into the desiccated deserts of Rajasthan to the south. Whilst all the inhabitants of this region will normally (electoral politics apart) readily identify themselves as Punjabis the social and historical specificities of this region are nevertheless worth reviewing before we begin. First of all, it is worth noting that this region had no clear political or administrative identity for at least a millennium. Whilst the greater part of Punjab may have fallen into the *Subeh* of Lahore during the Mughal period, it was nevertheless only a component (albeit one of very considerable importance) in the structure of a much larger Empire. And whilst Maharajah Ranjit Singh successfully incorporated the northern and western parts of the region into his self-established Kingdom, he was nevertheless unable to extend his rule into the cis-Sutlej region, whose rulers – fellow Sikhs though they were – preferred to ally themselves with the British East India Company as a means of avoiding the Maharaja's authority. Yet although Punjab experienced an unprecedented degree of political

and administrative coherence during the subsequent period of British rule, that solidarity did not survive Independence. With the collapse of British rule in 1947 Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan in the midst of an exceedingly vicious process of ethnic cleansing. But those paroxysms did not bring ethno-religious polarisation to a halt. In the aftermath of the sacking of the Golden Temple during the course of Operation Bluestar in 1984, tensions between Punjab's Hindus and Sikhs reached fever pitch. Although a re-run of the events of 1947 seemed for a while to be in prospect, as I write in 1995 all sides seemed to have reached a position of exhaustion. Hence the conflict is currently in abeyance.

Yet despite the depth and strength of these ethno-political disjunctions (to which there are several parallels on the Pakistani side of the border), there can be no dispute that Punjabis share a wide range of social and cultural commonalities. Amongst the most important of these is the Punjabi language. Besides bringing them all together within a single verbal universe, their common tongue also provides the foundations of their distinctive world-view: vigorous, earthy, practical and entrepreneurial, and giving far more respect to iconoclastic humour than to abstract intellectual analysis or philosophical argument. Yet despite the strength of these tendencies, and a consequent reluctance to accept or respect any kind of social, political or clerical hierarchy, the Punjabi tradition is in no way either anti-religious or anti-spiritual. On the contrary the key to Punjabi poetry – and there can be few regions in the world where poetic inspiration is more popular, more respected or more widely appreciated than in Punjab – is the taken-for-granted view that while the ultimate cause of existence is utterly transcendent and in that sense unknowable, that self-same Ultimate (whether conceptualised as Ram, Satnam or Khuda is quite immaterial) is also comprehensively immanent in every aspect of the existent world. It therefore follows that since that Truth enlivens (and is therefore present at the very heart) of every living being, it is also within the grasp of each and everyone – provided that they develop the wit, the sensitivity, the insight and the reflexive determination by means of which to penetrate the self-generated veils of *maya* which obstruct such a realisation.⁴

If so, it follows that in sharp contrast to contemporary processes of religious polarisation, there is a powerful sense in which Punjabi religion has historically manifested itself in a sense of spiritual inspiration which flows freely across current ethnic and religious divisions, and is consequently quite specifically *unbounded*. Nor is this easy-going sense of pluralism confined to the abstract spheres of poetry and spiritual inspiration. In terms of dress, food, music, leisure and entertainment – from games to jokes – a whole range of distinctively Punjabi attitudes, assumptions and practices can readily be discerned. So it is that most Punjabis willingly, and indeed proudly, identify themselves as such, regardless of whether they might otherwise be classified as Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, and regardless of whether they hold Indian, Pakistani, British, United States, Canadian or any passport. Indeed if cultural distinctiveness was the sole criteria for the construction of a nation-state, Punjab should have so established itself long ago. It is easy to point to many other population groups with far fewer initial commonalities than the Punjabis who have done so with considerable success.

But in fact Punjab's experience has been quite the reverse. Far from undergoing a process of national consolidation, Punjab has been sundered by apparently unstoppable processes of polarisation during the course of the past century. Even though Punjab's common religious, cultural and linguistic heritage provided an excellent vehicle for political consolidation, its potential has been largely eclipsed by the rise of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim revivalism. As a result each group has insisted that its own tradition is wholly autonomous, and has therefore

sought to eliminate any sign of possible overlaps between its own tradition and those of its rivals. "Tradition" has been quite shamelessly adjusted to this end. And despite occasional efforts by "leftist" intellectuals to generate a sense of Pan-Punjabi nationalism, religious revivalism has in fact proved to be by far the most effective means of political mobilisation. No-where has this been clearer than amongst the Sikhs. By the late nineteen eighties, hundreds – nay thousands – of idealistic youngsters were felt prepared to lay down their lives to assist in the creation of Khalistan, a comprehensively Sikh nation-state, should the call for self-sacrifice come.

It is developments of this kind that have set my agenda here. How can such outcomes be understood? How and why have such overwhelming processes of polarisation erupted in a region which is otherwise marked by far-reaching cultural and religious continuities? Are current outcomes the inevitable product of intrinsic and inescapable differences between Punjab's three major religious traditions? Or are they, to the contrary, the outcome of new and unprecedented developments in the whole character of those traditions? If so what are those developments, and how are they best understood?

The Religious situation in pre-British Punjab

The religious history of Punjab contains many paradoxes. On the one hand the region has always been a seed-bed of religious innovation. It was here that the initial admixture between the indigenous agricultural civilisations of Harappa and Mohenjdarō and the more nomadic Aryan invaders from central Asia took place more than three and a half millennia ago, and from whose interaction what we now know as classical Hindu civilisation first arose. But whilst Punjab may therefore have been the very cradle of Hindu civilisation, its centre of gravity soon moved off to the east and south. Meanwhile Buddhism became Punjab's pre-eminent religious tradition in the 3rd century BCE, in various forms remained so right up until the arrival of Islam well over a thousand years later. Hence the majority of Punjabi Muslims, and most particularly in the westernmost Potohar region, were much more Buddhist than Hindu in their beliefs and practices prior to their conversion to Islam. Moreover, despite much mythology about *jihad* playing a significant role in this process, there is little or no evidence to support that view. Far from conversion being precipitated by Hindustan's new rulers unleashing bloodthirsty Muslim warriors on an otherwise defenceless population, the prime movers in this shift in religious affiliation were innumerable charismatic Sufi preachers, whose teachings – which were based on a powerful synthesis between the gnostic theology of Ibn 'Arabi and local traditions of *sahajayana* Buddhism – proved immensely popular.⁵ Many of the most successful of these saintly teachers were immigrants from Central Asia, which is where the initial synthesis between these two traditions appears to have taken place. Moreover their tombs – as in the case of Baba Farid Shakarganj in Pakpattan, Datta Ganj Baksh in Lahore and Shaikh Abdul Qadir in Uch, to cite three leading examples – are widely revered to this day, and still attract pilgrims in huge numbers. Last but not least Punjab was the home base of Guru Nanak, whose teachings – grounded in an inspired synthesis between the *nirguna bhakti* devotionalism and the *tantric* philosophy of the Nath yogis – turned out to be equally popular amongst the non-Muslim population of central Punjab a few centuries later.

Yet despite the huge significance of these developments, our current knowledge of just how they occurred and what they entailed remains very limited. Whilst this may in part be a result of the relative paucity of documentary evidence about religious developments in Punjab, it also reflects the long-standing tendency for religious inspiration in this region to place far

more emphasis on reporting immediate gnostic experience than on developing formal philosophical arguments. Hence it is poetry, rather than dry textual exegesis, which is, and long has been, the most popular format for literary expression in Punjab. But in addition to all this a further force has been at work since the end of the nineteenth century: the tendency of the vast majority of scholars to assume that each of the region's religious traditions constituted autonomous and free-standing "-isms". If so it followed that the history, demography, and social and cultural experiences of Punjab's Hindu, Sikh and Muslim populations had followed such distinctive trajectories that each could safely be analysed entirely independently of the other two. This left little or no space to consider the significance of the very substantial overlaps between the three traditions, or whether the units of account postulated within such an essentialistic vision actually fitted the empirical task in hand.

But even if it was – and largely still is – assumed that religious history of Punjab could be constructed around separate and largely normative accounts of Hindu, Sikh and Islamic practice, topped off, if necessary, by a straightforward head-count of the size of each group, when the British authorities attempted to carry out just such an exercise in the 1881 Census, they soon discovered that empirical reality simply did not fit this procrustean scheme. This was not because Punjabis lacked religious commitment *per se*, but rather because those commitments were not ordered in such a way as to allow a straightforward categorisation of the population into "Hindus", "Sikhs" and "Muslims". As Ibbetson laments,

It would hardly be expected that any difficulty or uncertainty should be felt in classing the natives of the Province under their respective religions. Yet, with the single exception of caste, no other one of the details which we have recorded is so difficult to fix with exactness, or needs so much explanation and limitation before the real value of the figures can be appreciated. how far they still profess the creed in which they were brought up, how far they really believe in what they still profess, and what name should be given to their faith, if any, which they have substituted for the dogmas they have abandoned troubles only a few isolated individuals amongst the native community. ... it is difficult in many cases to draw the line between one Indian creed and another; for distinctions of faith, being attended by no deep spiritual conviction, are marked by a laxity and catholicity of practice which would be impossible to a bigot or an enthusiast. (Ibbetson 1883:101).

Yet despite the immense classificatory difficulties which he encountered, Ibbetson found plenty of religion: indeed he filled the next fifty quarto pages of his Census Report with a mass of carefully presented information about popular religious practice in Punjab, whose empirical detail remains unrivalled to this day. This paradox clearly raises a very fundamental question. Was it the case, as Ibbetson repeatedly suggests in the course of his discussion, that his problems arose because the Census respondents were really so confused and uncertain about the precise character of their religious commitments? Or did his difficulties arise because the orientalist conceptual framework within which he was working was largely inappropriate to the task in hand?

The *panthic* dimension of Punjabi religion

It is, of course, precisely in order to avoid such fallacies that I have sought to develop less eurocentric conceptual schema, and with that in mind let us begin by exploring what I have found it convenient to identify as the *panthic* dimension of Punjabi religion. The term *panth* is of course a familiar term in vernacular Punjabi, where it is used to identify those who

follow a particular spiritual teacher, as in the case of Nanak-panthi, Kabir-panthi and so forth. Yet although it would be easy enough to find an English equivalent for the concept of *panth*, I have deliberately avoided doing so. My preference is not to translate, but instead to continue to utilise the vernacular term as an analytical category in its own right. This does not obviate the need for formal definition, however, and with this in mind I shall use the term *panth* to refer to *a body of people drawn together by their commitment to the teachings of a specific spiritual master, be he living or (more usually) dead*. Whilst this definition is somewhat wider in scope than is everyday usage, the expansion is quite deliberate, since my objective is to establish a categorical term which can be deployed to identify the followers of *any* spiritual teacher, regardless of whether he takes the title Guru, Sant, Yogi, Mahant, Sheikh, Pir or more generic Baba. Thus whilst I am quite aware that the term *panth* is of Sanskrit rather than Arabic or Persian origin, and therefore normally used solely with respect to sectarian groups which are broadly Hindu (or at least non-Muslim) in character, my definition is constructed in such a way that the term becomes applicable across the entire spectrum of religious activity, regardless of conventional distinctions between its Hindu, Sikh and Muslim components.

But having thereby escaped from one set of entanglements it would be idle to become immediately enmeshed in another, so I should immediately emphasise that I am in no way suggesting that each of Punjab's many *panths* constitutes a separate religion. Rather they are much better viewed as variations on a theme. Thus even though the Punjabi religious scene includes a large number of spiritual masters who have gained a *panthic* following, and although each such master teaches in his own distinctive way, virtually all nevertheless share a similar goal: to find some means of penetrating the self-produced veils of ignorance and insensitivity which obstruct our awareness of the ultimate congruence between our individual microcosmic selves and the universal macrocosm. And to the extent that this is so, it follows that the spiritual dimensions of Punjabi religion can usefully be regarded as the contemporary manifestation of a multi-stranded *panthic* tradition which has its roots in the Sahajayana Buddhist tradition which flourished in Punjab over a thousand years ago.⁶ Since then further variations have been added to the theme. In particular Sufi Islam has been a major source of further inspiration, but set within a very similar cosmological vision. If so it not only follows that Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's *qawwalis* can be regarded as a vivid contemporary representation of the original way in which Baba Nanak originally taught, but that both are also the heirs of a tradition which stretches back to the *dohas* of Kabir and *sahajiya* poets such as Jalandari-pa. However outrageous such a suggestion may seem to those committed to contemporary essentialist understandings, it is nevertheless wholly in keeping with the sensibilities of Punjab's *panthic* tradition. After all if Nanak were still with us to comment on current developments, it is far from unreasonable to suggest that he would wish to add the phrase *koi na Sikh* to his celebrated epigram *koi na Hindu, koi na Musulman*.

This is not, of course, to suggest that there are no significant differences between the Islamic, Sikh and Hindu traditions, or that Punjab's innumerable Babas, Gurus, Sants, Mahants, Pirs and Yogis all preach exactly the same message. Of course not. Each spiritual master develops his own preferred theological synthesis, his own preferred perspective on the human condition, his own preferred method for achieving the ultimate condition of gnosis. That is what inter-*panthic* differences are all about. But whilst these differences are of considerable significance at the level of philosophical debate, Nanak is by no means unusual in suggesting that these are little more than an inevitable consequence of *maya*. Hence the more comprehensively one penetrates its illusory veils, and the more richly one appreciates the Truth which it conceals, the more insignificant such differences become. From this

perspective all Punjab's many *panths* emerge as little more than variations on a theme, offering alternative routes to the same ineffable goal. Devotees of the Truth can therefore quite legitimately express themselves in either Muslim, or in Sikh, or in Hindu terms (or in a synthesis of all three) without feeling any sense of contradiction.

The *Kismet* dimension in Punjabi religion

Yet however rich the mystical dimensions of Punjabi religion may be, it would be a great mistake to assume that all – or even most – of the religious activity precipitated by Punjab's multitude of *panthic* movements are primarily directed at gaining personal gnostic experience. On the contrary, many of the devotees of living Babas, Sants, Pirs and Yogis – and virtually all of those who flock to the shrines of long-dead saints – are primarily concerned with gaining occult assistance in the face adversity, revealing a further dimension of religious practice which I have found it convenient to identify as *kismet*. Perhaps other analysts will be able to suggest a more felicitous term, but it seems to me that the concept of *kismet* (fate, in the crudest of terms) provides a convenient umbrella under which to group all those actions and ideological constructions which those who have experienced severe and unexpected adversity – such as death, serious illness, infertility and other forms of personal affliction, or who have found themselves victims of war, flood, famine, and other similar disasters – deploy in an effort to cope with, and above all to make sense of their experience. Whilst some may insist that such adversities are simply the outcome of pure (and therefore quite meaningless) chance, Punjabis are far from alone in rejecting this bleak philosophy, or in seeking to construct a conceptual and religious framework which not only seeks to explain disaster, but also the prospect of reversing (or at least subverting) the malign influences which caused it. Hence what I have in mind as the *kismet* dimension of religion can be defined as *those ideas, practices and behavioural strategies which are used to explain the otherwise inexplicable, and having done so to turn adversity in its tracks.*⁷

Let us begin by reviewing the various possible causes of adversity which the Punjabi tradition envisages. First of all, if every event in the existent world is the outcome of the inscrutable will of the Creator, it follows that every single being's *kismet* (or *karma*, if one wishes to render the same sentiment in Hindu or Sikh terms) is underpinned by divine purpose, even if that purpose is by definition beyond human comprehension. The attribution of misfortune to *kismet* in this sense not only provides an answer to the "why me?" question, but also eradicates any sense of personal responsibility – and therefore of guilt – for the event itself. If a disaster was an act of God, it follows that no amount of human intervention could have prevented it. But although such an explanation is a great deal better than nothing is, it only provides a limited degree of psychological satisfaction. If "what is written on one's forehead" is by definition both unknowable and unchangeable, it also follows that there is nothing whatsoever that one can do about it.

So it is that in addition to *kismet*, popular religion suggests that misfortune can also be precipitated by a wide range of other sources, such as the malicious activities of disembodied spirits. Amongst the most important of these are Bhuts, Jinns, Dhags and Churails. Suspended in disembodied limbo, these beings are held to be bitterly jealous of those who have been fortunate enough to enjoy a human birth. As a result they take every opportunity to vent their malevolence on living beings either by causing all manner of accidents, illness or injury, or by entering their victims' very persons as a possessing spirits. Furthermore humans are also regarded as having a capacity to wreak occult havoc on their own account, either as a

result of the unconscious impact of envy and jealousy (*nazar*), or through deliberately executed magical practices (*jadoo* and *tuna*).

That these ideas constitute much more than ‘superstition’ is immediately apparent if we consider the way in which ideas of this kind are deployed by those who have suffered some kind of personal disaster. Not only does it provide them with a much wider set of possible precipitating causes in terms of which to explain their misfortune, but also suggests that if the specific source of disaster can be identified, points in the directions of the counter-measures which it would be appropriate to take to guard against possible future attacks from the same source of malevolence. But just how is that identification to be achieved? It is here that the *panthic* dimension comes firmly to the fore, although on a very different plane from that described earlier.

As everyone familiar with popular religious practice in Punjab will be well aware, guiding devotees towards an ever-richer level spiritual experience is by no means the only – or even the most important – role which Punjab's spiritual masters fulfil. So it is that whilst having (or rather being believed to have) an advanced degree of gnostic awareness is a prerequisite for being accepted in the role of Pir, Sant, Yogi or Baba, the vast majority of those who approach such figures do not seek personal enlightenment, but rather to tap into the occult powers of *siddhi* which all such figures – and especially the shrines of their long-dead predecessors – are popularly held to possess. Such powers are not only perceived as being diagnostic, so enabling them to offer advice on issues of *kismet* causation, but remedial as well. Hence powerful saints are held to be able to conjure up *siddhic* powers of such intensity that they can put whichever malevolent force is causing the distress to comprehensive flight. So it is that devotees still flock to such figures in huge numbers, searching for remedies for otherwise insuperable difficulties.

How should such activities be adjudged? Most members of Punjab's western-educated elite tend to argue (so long as they themselves are not in the midst of just such troubles) that all such ideas and practices are intrinsically irrational; hence they reject them out of hand as a mass of superstitious mumbo-jumbo. But is such scorn really justified? My own experience suggests that these practices not only have an underlying logic of their own, but that they can also produce some strikingly positive therapeutic outcomes.

In the first place it is worth emphasising that the assumption that spiritual masters – and even more so their tombs – are by definition imbued with *siddhic* powers is a well established component of all of Punjab's *panthic* traditions.⁸ Since the central objective of gnostic practice is to rediscover the identity between one's personal being and its universal Source, it follows that the higher the level of spiritual experience which any given Baba, Pir, Yogi, Sant or Guru achieves, the more comprehensive his experience of oneness with – and hence his capacity to share in the powers of – that Source will be; and since Khuda, Allah, Satnam, Ishwar, Paramatma (or whatever epithet one chooses to deploy) is by definition all-seeing and all-powerful, spiritual masters will also begin to acquire these self-same powers. Moreover, since that union becomes even more complete at death – in this case described as *urs*, marriage – it follows that a saint's *mazar*, or tomb, is the site of even more comprehensive *siddhic* powers. Nor are such powers confined solely to tombs. If *siddhi* is an inevitable adjunct of spiritual experience, it follows that all saintly figures will find themselves pursued by devotees seeking assistance in the resolution of their *kismet* problems; and since those powers are held to directly proportional to the intensity of their spiritual commitment, it follows that the further they retreat to inaccessible deserts, remote jungles or the depths of the

Himalayas, the more vigorously sought-after they will tend to become. It is on this basis that wonder-working Pirs and Yogis, as well as the *mazars* and *samadhis* of their long-dead predecessors, still attract huge flocks of devotees to this very day.

Yet even if these considerations may begin to account for devotees' belief that possessors of *siddhic* powers may have the capacity to assist them with their troubles, sceptics will doubtless still question whether such beliefs and practices can possibly have any kind of beneficial effect. Whilst it would be idle to suggest that such practices *always* have a positive outcome, my experience suggests that they may very often do so; and because analyses of just how this may occur are very rarely articulated, it is worth doing so here.

In the first place, it should be self-evident that having access to a set of ideas and images through which to explain the otherwise inexplicable is deeply reassuring in psychological terms. In the absence of such an explanatory system – and western science offers no such explanations – victims of disaster almost inevitably begin to believe that they must in some way have been personally responsible for causing it, even if there is no rational reason for reaching that conclusion. But if deep-seated feelings of guilt well up to fill the yawning chasm left by an absence of explanation, it follows that an ideological system which contains positive resources for the attribution of meaning can have a very positive therapeutic effect. From this perspective visiting a shrine in search of solace not only amounts to a useful exercise in occupational therapy, but the whole exercise rendered all the more effective to the extent that it is reinforced by a belief that doing so the act itself can trigger off an occult process of distress-relief. Added to this the shrine's officiants often display a considerable degree of psychotherapeutic skill. Having subtly guided supplicants towards a form of causal explanation which is congruent with their immediate personal circumstances, they frequently go on to use this as a means of relieving the real, although for practical reasons often unarticulatable, source of their distress. To take a simple but all too frequent example, a daughter-in-law who finds herself victimised by an unsympathetic and over-exploitative mother-in-law may well become so ill that the wider family concludes that the only cure is to take her on a therapeutic visit to a distant shrine. Whilst the consultation which takes place on her arrival at the shrine may seem at first sight to be nothing more than mumbo-jumbo, closer inspection of the process itself soon reveals otherwise, especially when one realises that the various interpretations which the saintly officiant puts forward can be read as a kind of symbolic algebra through which he begins to explore some much more concrete social processes. For example a discussion as to whether a young woman's aberrant behaviour is the result of involuntary possession by a malevolent agent such as a *bhut* or *churail*, or wether, to the contrary it is the result of unconscious, or worse still of conscious, malevolence by another human being – not least by her mother-in-law – engages very directly with real social issues. When and if a husband can be persuaded to accept that his wife's distress is the result of malfeasance on his mother's part, the effects are dramatic: in doing so he not only accepts his wife's need for greater autonomy, but is implicitly taking his first steps towards partition of the entire extended family. By contrast a finding of malfeasance by some other person is much less serious, and is likely to be remedied by providing the patient a protective *tawiz* (amulet) to keep the hostile forces to which she has hitherto been subjected at bay. There is also third possibility: the attribution of her distress to the presence of a possessing spirit, such as a *bhut*, a *jinn* or a *churail*. This might seem, on the face of it, to dodge the issue entirely – until one notices that such possessing spirits not only routinely “cause” their victims to spit out the otherwise unsayable before they can be persuaded to leave, but that their price for leaving (spirits invariably have to be bought off) requires the victim to be provided with resources which at least temporarily relieve the pressure upon them.

Once we fix our attention the outcomes of these procedures rather than becoming distracted by the occult character of the local analytical jargon, not only does their underlying rationale become much more comprehensible, but it also becomes possible to distance ourselves from Oberoi's suggestion that all this is located in some kind of enchanted universe. Rather this dimension of Punjabi religion is better understood as being grounded in a highly sophisticated – although manifestly symbolic – conceptual framework, whose central purpose is to make sense of the trials and tribulations of everyday life. It also allows us to recognise that rather than being irrational mumbo-jumbo, the processes of diagnosis and treatment to which it give rise are far from incongruent with more “scientific” forms of psychotherapy.⁹ In sum, any suggestion that the *kismet* dimension is “mere superstition” must be dismissed as both analytically unsustainable and deeply ethnocentric.

Nevertheless these activities have long been a target for ill-informed criticism, not least because they are also because it is strongly gendered in character: whilst officiants in *kismet* activities are overwhelmingly male, supplicants are predominantly female. The reasons for this are not hard to identify. Besides being exposed to a much greater degree of personal vulnerability in a gender-divided society, women are also expected to shoulder far more responsibility for domestic mishaps than are men. It is precisely because *kismet* religion answers so directly to female concerns that on any Thursday night women can be seen lighting lamps at a multitude of little shrines across the length and breadth of Punjab, whilst the better known *mazars* and *samadhis* draw in crowds of devotees from far and wide. Yet so intense is the prejudice against this dimension of Punjabi religious practice that I cannot point to a single serious contemporary study of such activities. Scholarship appears to have bent to the demands of the formal representatives of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim “orthodoxy”, the vast majority of whom not only express extreme hostility towards such practices, unequivocally denounce them as shameful, misguided, irreligious and wrong.

The *dharmic* dimension of Punjabi religion

By contrast with its *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions, the *dharmic* (or moral) component of Punjabi religion is much less esoteric. Nevertheless a straightforward equation between the Indic concept of *dharma* and the Western concept of morality can be most misleading. In standard Hindu usage, *dharma* refers to all forms of systematic order, whether at a cosmic, a social or a personal level. With this in mind the *dharmic* domain can in my view best be defined as *the divinely established set of rules to which all activities in the existent world, whether amongst humans, animals or even the Gods themselves, should ideally conform*. At first sight, this definition may seem wholly straightforward to western observers. The Christian (and especially Protestant) tradition has always assumed that living in conformity with the scripturally legitimated moral and ethical order is a central prerequisite for salvation, so much so that that is routinely assumed to be the very essence of what religion is all about. But how far is this also true of the Indic context in general, and the Punjabi context in particular? In sharp contrast to Eurocentric expectations, the *panthic* dimension of Punjabi religion puts relatively little emphasis on moral conformity: indeed moral conformity is widely regarded as largely irrelevant to spiritual progress. This is not to suggest that *panthic* domain actively promotes amorality. On the contrary the great majority of Punjab's spiritual masters are – and always have been – highly critical of those who follow the extra-social path of *sannyassic* asceticism, insisting instead that spiritual fulfilment is most richly experienced by those who continued to fulfil their everyday social obligations.¹⁰ Nevertheless they also insist that moral conformity is not, in itself, a route to salvation. Rather the experience of

ineffable bliss – *moksha*, *sahaj* or *ishk* – can only be achieved by those who step way beyond the mundane limitations of the everyday world, to reach a plane of spiritual awareness which rises far above, and which is ultimately at odds with, *samsaric* existence and the *dharmic* order. Indeed it is only at the point of comprehensive and irreversible self-extinction – namely death itself – that the ultimate Truth can be fully experienced.

It is for this reason that the painful paradox of life itself is the central theme in Punjabi poetry. Whilst humans are privileged, thanks to their condition of consciousness, to be in a position to experience that ultimate Truth, that very condition simultaneously distances them – or more accurately still veils them – from realising the immanent presence of the Source in every single fragment of existence. If so it follows that as one's gnostic awareness becomes ever more acute, so the more thrilling – and also the more deeply painful – the very experience of life becomes, for whilst that condition necessarily separates the lover from the Beloved, it is life and consciousness which allows the very experience of *ishk* to occur. As ever, Bulleh Shah catches these contradictions with immense precision when he sings:

I'm caught in the mouth of a trap

This passion of ours weighs so mountainously heavy
That just a second's glance can shatter my whole being
Yet still my efforts yield so little – just echoes of your blows!

I'm caught in the mouth of a trap

But as purity makes its own path, you've found your way to me
Enlivening life, shaking me up, and exchanging such endearments
That sharing in this secret love brings deep savours of contentment!

I'm caught in the mouth of a trap

Since your resplendent Name illuminates the universe, why reject my passion?
But keep yourself hidden in the folds of the veil
To grab my handcuffs right in the middle, dangling me upside down!

I'm caught in the mouth of a trap¹¹

Hir Ranjha, Punjab's most popular folktale, makes just the same point. Besides providing endless examples of the ways in which *dharmic* conformity obstructs the experience of *ishk*, the tale's swift and tragic end also demonstrates that such passion can only be fully consummated in death. Waris Shah's epic is therefore wholly congruent with the central theme of Bulleh Shah's poetry: that whilst the exquisitely bittersweet experience of *ishk* is only possible within the context of *samsaric* existence, anxious conformity with *dharmic* conventions means little or nothing to the spiritually committed.¹² This is not to suggest that Punjabi religion lacks a *dharmic* dimension, but rather that morality is not derived from – nor is it of any great significance within – the *panthic* domain of spiritual experience.

But having established what the *dharmic* domain is not, we also need to consider just how it is actually constituted. Although it might seem reasonable to expect that the foundations of this domain would lie in the system of moral and legal rules developed by each of the Punjab's major religious traditions – the Hindu *Dharmashastra*, the Sikh *Rahit* and the

Muslim *Shari'a* – we must nevertheless be cautious here. Can we afford to rely solely on textual sources to identify what *dharma* consists of, when the social and moral conventions which Punjabis *actually* follow often differ sharply from those to which Qazis, Pandits and other scholarly experts insist they ought to conform? Asking such questions also seems particularly appropriate in a society where such priestly specialists are routinely dismissed as venial manipulators, constantly inventing spurious rules and regulations to suit their own interests – and pockets! Guru Nanak had a great deal to say about that. So whilst we must undoubtedly take note of the textually grounded moral schemas on which scholarly experts of all kinds routinely rely, I would argue that it is worth paying as much, if not more, attention to the popular social conventions in terms of which Punjabis *actually* organise their everyday lives. Once one does so, the far-reaching differences between Hindu, Sikh and Muslim modes of behaviour on which the textual sources insist begin to shrink quite dramatically.

As soon as one focuses on popular practice, it is immediately apparent that in a very wide range of contexts – including most aspects of family and kinship relations, the ideas and conventions deployed in the preparation and consumption of food, in the maintenance of purity and the avoidance of pollution, and in sustaining a sense of personal dignity or *izzat* (which together constitute the most crucial components of the popular moral order) – almost everyone follows a very similar set of *dharmic* rules and conventions, regardless of which of the three major religious traditions they are formally affiliated. But alongside these substantial continuities there are also a number of equally crucial diacritica, including

- ◆ whether death is followed by cremation or burial
- ◆ whether boys are circumcised or not
- ◆ whether the meat one eats is *jatka* or *halal*
- ◆ whether one's *kesh* (hair) is cut or left uncut
- ◆ whether one is vegetarian or non-vegetarian
- ◆ whether one smokes tobacco or avoids it

which invariably serve to establish whether the person in question (and his or her entire family) is best identified as Hindu, Muslim or Sikh.

But although this limited range of behavioural markers provides a sufficient basis for religious categorisation in the broadest sense, they are clearly only a component (and a relatively small one at that) of a much larger spectrum of *dharmic* activity. Moreover despite the efforts of reform movements such as the Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabhas and the Jamaat-i-Islami to reinforce mutual differentiation, their excited rhetoric has had relatively little impact on actual practice: everyday Punjabi lifestyles still display a remarkable degree of continuity right across the spectrum of formal religious affiliation. So it is that even though neo-traditionalist movements have put a great deal of effort into widening the political divisions between Punjab's Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, there is still a strong sense in which members of all three traditions still occupy a common *dharmic* space.

The *Qaumic* dimension of Punjabi religion

Nevertheless the upsurge of ethno-religious nationalism during the course of the past century has led to an increasing degree of *dharmic* differentiation. As a result of the growing influence of religious reform movements, each religious community has made increasingly determined efforts to delineate its boundaries as sharply and as unambiguously as possible. The most dramatic outcome of this kind of process was the comprehensive separation of the region's Muslim population from its Hindu and Sikh components in 1947.¹³ Rendered into my own preferred terminology, this can be represented as a process in which the *qaumic*

dimension of Punjabi religion gained ever-increasing salience; and as this occurred, its *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions began to be sidelined, especially in public debate, while its *dharmic* dimension began to be radically transformed in order to support and legitimate an ever-greater tendency towards *qaumic* polarisation. But I must not anticipate myself too much: before proceeding further we must first establish just what the *qaumic* sphere consists of, and how it was organised before processes of ethno-religious polarisation had become so all-consuming as they are today.

In contrast to *panth* and *dharm*, both of which are Sanskritic terms, the word *qaum* (social group or community) like *kismet*, has Arabic and Persian roots. Although widely used in colloquial Punjabi, I shall once again allocate the term a more specific technical meaning, and hence use *qaumic* to refer to *the set of ideas and activities by means of which a body of people set about closing ranks as a community, and to use their enhanced sense of mutual solidarity to advance their collective interests*. It is also worth emphasising that in sharp contrast to the *panthic*, *kismet* and *dharmic* domains, *qaumic* activity is by no means necessarily religious in character. *Qaumic* activity in contemporary Punjab may indeed be so organised, but it was not always so. During the early days of the British Raj social and political mobilisation was – as we have seen – much more commonly articulated in terms of solidarities of *zat* or *biraderi*, or in other words through communities which the early British administrators identified as castes and tribes.

From this perspective the social order of pre-modern Punjab can usefully be regarded – at least to a first approximation – as having been constructed around a limited number more or less coherently organised and generally localised *qaumic* communities of this kind. Each such *qaum* was normally associated either with a specific hereditary occupation, and – in the case of peasants and pastoralists – control over a particular territory. The social boundaries of each such group was further reinforced on the one hand by a myth of common descent, and on the other by a commitment to endogamy. The prospect thought that all this maelstrom of *qaumic* groups might be ranked in a single comprehensive hierarchy ranging from the purest of Brahmins at the top to the most polluted sweepers at the bottom has, of course, exercised almost as great a fascination over modern orientalists as it did from nineteenth century British administrators. Nevertheless as Ibbetson himself seems to have been on the point of realising, any attempts to construct a definitive rank order – even on a local basis – turned out to be fruitless. Even though local ideology suggested that the social order was indeed constructed around just such a hierarchy, relative rank has turned out to be a far more fluid phenomenon, and also one which is riddled with many more internal contradictions than essentialist expectations had predicted.

Yet although Denzil Ibbetson's pioneering efforts to conduct such an exercise showed that the questions about religious affiliation, no less than those about relative rank, were surrounded by so much uncertainty that his attempts to represent his findings in numerical terms were – on his own admission – seriously flawed, his questions about *qaum* or *zat* (the terms were deliberately offered as alternatives) yielded a far more coherent and reliable pattern of answers. Not only could most respondents identify quite unambiguously to which local *qaum* or *zat* they belonged, but at least within that local arena there was little dispute about the validity of such claims.¹⁴ This is hardly surprising. As well as being hereditary, endogamous and linked to a specific occupation, these *qaumic* units (as I would prefer to describe them) were self-consciously organised interest groups which formed, amongst other things, the basic collective bargaining units within the local *jajmani* system. Moreover each such *qaum*

normally had recourse to its own well-developed means of resolving (or at least attempting to resolve) internal disputes – the *panchayat*.

Yet if the *qaumic* dimension of Punjabi society in this sense was very well organised, the 1881 Census also revealed was that the great majority of these *zat* and *biraderi* included Hindu, Sikh and Muslim members: in other words these aggregations cut right across the *qaumic* divisions which loom so large in contemporary Punjab. In other words a major change has taken place. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, *qaum* in the sense of *zat* and *biraderi* were the principle vehicles for socio-political mobilisation, the religiously grounded *qaumic* divisions were then a very much more marginal phenomenon. There were other differences too. During the nineteenth century *qaum* in the sense of *zat* and *biraderi* had little or no association with either the *panthic* or the *kismet* domains, since individual members of any one such *qaum* invariably displayed a wide and disparate range of *panthic* and *kismet* involvements. By contrast there was a great deal more congruence between the *qaumic* and the *dharmic* domains, for in keeping with the classical concept of *varnadharm*, each local *qaum* not only sustained its own distinctive set of moral rules and conventions, but also a means whereby these could be enforced. If nothing else what all this indicates is that only a century ago the pattern of relationships between the *panthic*, *kismet*, *dharmic* and *qaumic* dimensions of the Punjab's socio-religious order was strikingly different from that which can be witnessed today. Not only was each dimension a good deal more autonomous, but only the first three dimensions were clearly religiously inspired – although in quite different ways. As such they stood in sharp contrast to the bulk of activities in the *qaumic* domain. But above all religion in the contemporary sense was not a particularly significant vehicle for political mobilisation.

Since then much has changed. Although contemporary religious practice in the Punjab is still very much a four-dimensional phenomenon, the balance between its four components has changed substantially, above all because its *qaumic* dimension has undergone a radical shift of character. Hence whilst *zat* and *biraderi* are still very significant vehicles of political mobilisation in local contexts, competition between Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam – understood in each case in wholly *qaumic* terms – now dominates the greater part of political activity in larger-scale arenas. As a result virtually all public discussion, including almost all forms of academic debate, is framed within the context of an assumption not only that one need look no further than these three essentialised entities to understand all aspects of contemporary religious activity, but also that the same set of distinctions can be mapped quite readily onto the past. But however much this historiographical vision may suit current political imperatives, all the empirical evidence indicates that past developments were a great deal more complex than this. Once we break through contemporary reifications, it becomes quite clear that the *qaumic* dimension of religious activity was of such much more limited significance in pre-British days, and that since then each tradition has in effect reinvented the greater part of its theological and ideological position, as each formed itself into (or at least represented itself as being) the clearly bounded and essentialised *qaumic* -ism whose existence virtually all contemporary debate and discussion takes for granted.

If, however we regard this state of affairs as being an outcome of a process, and one which is in any event still far less complete than public rhetoric suggests, a much richer field of understanding begins to open up. In particular it allows us to explore the far-reaching impact which increasing salience of *qaumic* activity has had on the status of – if not quite so comprehensively on practice within – the other three domains of activity. In the *dharmic* sphere the emergence of late nineteenth century reform movements – such as the Arya Samaj

amongst the Hindus, the Singh Sabhas amongst the Sikhs, and the Ahmadiyyas amongst the Muslims – led to an immense amount of effort being put into the propagation of new (or as those involved insisted, "forgotten") orthodoxies. The Sikh case is particularly instructive in this regard, for as Oberoi has shown, this effectively entailed the construction – virtually *ab initio* – of a new *dharmic* order around which the *qaum* could begin to mobilise itself, whilst the tradition's more plural dimensions in the *panthic* and *kismet* domains were subjected to ever more vigorous criticism. But these developments were by no means a uniquely Sikh phenomenon. Parallel initiatives, although perhaps rather less dramatic in scale, are easy enough to identify amongst both the Hindus and the Muslims.

Yet however useful this may be as a means of explaining how and why the *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions of Punjabi religion should have faded so comprehensively into the background, many readers may still be sceptical about my suggestion that religion was of relatively limited significance as a vehicle for *qaumic* terms during the early British and pre-British period. After all the Sikh tradition in general, and Gobind Singh's institution of the Khalsa in particular, appears on the face of it to be a prime examples of a religiously grounded *qaumic* movement. It is to this issue which we must now turn.

The Sikhs as a *Qaum*

While there can be no doubt that in a contemporary Punjabi context the Sikhs do indeed form a *qaum*, was that always so? If we go right back to the beginning, all the evidence suggests that such a prospect would never have crossed Baba Nanak's mind. Whilst he never tired of emphasising the importance of continuing to participate in the everyday social world, the whole objective of his teaching – in true *panthic* style – was to enable his followers to transcend their mundane experience of *samsaric* existence; and because he advocated taking a wholly internal route to *sahaj*, he comprehensively resisted any kind of *qaumic* classification, and was equally disinterested in *dharmic* innovation. But all this soon began to change following Nanak's death, such that Nanak's previously inchoate *panth* began to develop ever more explicit *qaumic* dimensions. Typically enough, his successors' headquarters, first in Goindwal and then in Amritsar, became places of pilgrimage; and as devotees' offerings began to flow into the movement's central exchequer on an ever-increasing scale, the Sikh Gurus' adoption of the deliberately ambiguous title Sachah Padshah gave further emphasis to their steadily increasing political as well as spiritual power. However it was Guru Gobind Singh's creation of a *khalsa* in 1699 – a *qaumic* development if ever there was one – which was the most significant change of all. By requiring all those who accepted the new spiritual discipline to make some very overt, and manifestly *dharmic*, changes in their everyday lifestyles, *khalsa* membership directly signalled commitment to a new and unmistakably *qaumic* brotherhood. Yet all this established a new and largely unprecedented basis for interpreting what it meant to be a Sikh, we must take care to avoid reaching over-hasty conclusions about the precise significance of these developments. It is all too easy to misread the past by viewing it uncritically through the distorting lenses of contemporary assumptions and expectations, especially when the events in question have become the raw material of contemporary myth makers.

Whilst there can be no doubt that the creation of the Sikh *khalsa* was a highly significant *qaumic* initiative, during Gobind's own lifetime only a minority of Nanak Panthis appear to have accepted the Guru's invitation to join the new movement. Hence in its original form the Khalsa did not include all, or even the majority of those who were inspired by the *panthic* dimensions of Nanak's teaching.¹⁵ But just what was the status of those who did not join

Gobind's new regiment of *sant-sipahis*? Nineteenth century reformers had no hesitation in describing the *sahajdharis* (as opposed to the *keshdharis* who joined the new *khalsa*) as "slow-adopters", thereby suggesting that when they eventually gained the courage of their convictions they would find their way into the Khalsa. But just how fair was this judgement? Not only do we need to remember that this usage was coined by reformers who were deeply hostile to *panthic* pluralism on ideological grounds, but that far from being weak-kneed slow-adopters, the *sahajdharis* had good grounds for arguing that the path which they continued to follow was much more congruent with Nanak's own teaching than that of the hirsute *keshdharis*.

Putting all this in historical context, it is worth re-emphasising that Banda Bahadur, Gobind's political (although not his spiritual) successor, was not a Khalsa member, even if subsequent historical revisionists have made strenuous efforts to suggest that he was. Last but not least, the use of the term Khalsa to identify a brotherhood of mystically inspired semi-ascetic military activists is by no means such a uniquely Sikh phenomenon as virtually all extant accounts of Punjabi history tend to assume. As Peter van der Veer relates in his instructive account of the development of the Ramanandi *panth*, not only does this movement still contain a number of loosely aggregated orders of itinerant *sadhus* which are also known as *khalsas*, but during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries *khalsas* of ascetic warriors (saint-soldiers, indeed!) were a salient feature of both the Shaivite and Vaishnavite traditions in northern India. However they were not holy warriors in the modern sense: members of these *khalsas* fought on a mercenary basis on behalf of a wide variety of rulers, Muslim no less than Hindu (van der Veer 1989: 107-137).

Set in this broader context, Gobind Singh's Khalsa emerges as much less unique than contemporary Sikh myths would have us suppose: in its time it was but one amongst many, even its subsequent history has given it a far greater social and political importance than any of its rivals. It is also worth considering just what these khalsas were *for*, most especially in political terms, since recently constructed myths not only suggest that Gobind's khalsa was unique, but also that it was in essence a *qaumic* vehicle which enabled Punjabi Sikhs (possibly in conjunction with the Punjabi Hindus) to challenge the injustice and exploitation of oppressive Muslim rule. Lectures on this theme can regularly be heard in every contemporary Gurudwara, and they certainly make a good and rousing story. But how congruent are such accounts with historical reality?

Although it is certainly true to say that Gobind Singh pursued an autonomous political agenda for the greater part of his life, and also that his formation of a *khalsa* was manifestly an effort to advance the collective interests of his emergent *qaum*, it is far from easy to specify against whom, and in the face of just what challenges, those interests were being advanced. To argue – as uncritical contemporary commentators all too often suggest – that the Guru's central concern was to counter Muslim oppression is altogether too simplistic. In the first place every one of Gobind Singh's early military exploits brought him into conflict with local *Hindu* hill-rajās, not with the Mughal authorities; and although he and his followers were constantly harried by the Imperial authorities after he had moved his headquarters from sheltered Paonta to more exposed Anandpur, the resulting conflicts are better understood as reflecting the Empire's regional satraps' effort to contain a well-armed local dissident than the outcome of deep-rooted religiously-motivated polarisation within the local Punjabi population. The argument that Gobind was not systematically engaged in religious war is further sustained by the well-attested fact that the Guru employed a number of Pathan (and therefore Muslim) warriors throughout his political career, let alone the further irony that when the Guru met his

death in 1708 (at the hands of one of those self-same Pathan servants) in far-off Deccan in 1708, he had left Punjab to offer implicit support to the new Emperor Bahadur Shah's efforts to suppress a rival claimant to the Imperial throne, his brother Kam Baksh.¹⁶

Hence while Gobind Singh's Khalsa was undoubtedly a *qaumic* development, in the sense that it was a clearly bounded, internally resilient and strongly politically motivated brotherhood, what it quite obviously did *not* do was to unite all those inspired by Nanak's teachings – or in other words Sikhs in the broadest sense – into a single coherent community. Nor did this begin to occur in the immediate aftermath of the Guru's death. Although the khalsa manifestly a potent political symbol for Banda Bahadur, for the late eighteenth century *misdars*, as well as for Maharajah Ranjit Singh – who identified his government as *Sirkar Khalsaji* – between Gobind's death and the imposition of British rule no serious attempt was made to use its ideology as a means of uniting all Sikhs into a socially, culturally and politically coherent community. Although it is at least arguable that members of the Khalsa were rather more committed than most towards attaining such a goal, at least amongst themselves, as Oberoi (1994:24) makes very clear, the Khalsa Sikhs were but one subdivision within a whole series of *panthic* groups which also included Udasis, Nirmalas, Nanak-Panthis, Sahajdharis, Kukas, Nirankaris, Sarvarias and so forth.

While all these issues could easily be discussed at much greater length, enough has been said to underline some basic points about the structure of Punjab's social, political and religious order in the pre-British and early-British period. Firstly while its *panthic* dimension was strong and comparatively well organised, and stretched right across the formal religious spectrum, the *political* significance of such *panthic* movements was relatively limited even when they acquired *qaumic* characteristics. Hence in sharp contrast to developments during the century and a half which has passed since Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, religious loyalties, however conceptualised, were little used as a vehicle for social and political mobilisation. Hence there was then no sign of the comprehensive polarisation between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs which has since become such a salient feature Punjab's contemporary socio-political order.

The British Raj and its Impact

While it is easy enough to identify the imposition of British rule as being the principal precipitant of these changes, tracing out the many strands of action and reaction which were set off by the British Raj itself, and which have continued to unfold ever since is such a complex task as to be far beyond the scope of this Chapter, so all I can do is pick out its most crucial dimensions as a precursor to my concluding discussion of their impact on the various dimensions of Punjabi religion.

Following their conquest of the province, Punjab's new rulers saw themselves as having a "civilising mission", so much so that they sought quite unashamedly to impose comprehensive social, political and cultural hegemony over their subjects, making no secret of their view that all things British – whether biological, social, cultural or religious – were by definition comprehensively superior to all things Indian. If Indians were ever to progress to the same level as their rulers, so the new regime insisted, they too would have to learn to be civilised.

Exposure to such an immensely self-confident form of over-rule precipitated very mixed feelings amongst its subjects, and nowhere more so than within Punjab's rising, but

overwhelming youthful, new educated elite. On the one hand British disdain precipitated strong feelings of nationalism: to the subjects of this wholly alien Raj, the need to get together to throw out the intruders was self-evident. Yet at the same time they also felt that until they had reformed their own society, and above all had remedied the deficiencies which enabled the British to establish their Raj in the first place, all their efforts would come to nought.

To cut this long story down to a manageable size, let us move straight on to consider by far the most important movement of ideological resistance and reform to emerge in late nineteenth century Punjab: the Arya Samaj. In contrast to all the religious developments we have considered so far, the Samaj owed its existence, and even more so its popularity, to the novel socio-political environment generated by the British Raj;¹⁸ and since one of its principal objectives was political mobilisation, there can be no doubt that it also falls within my definition of a *qaumic* movement. Hence it is useful to consider just whom the Samajis sought to mobilise, on what basis, for what ends. Let me address these in reverse order. The ultimate objective of the Samaj was clearly nationalist: to do away with British rule, and to re-establish India's social, political, and cultural autonomy. The means by which the movement sought to achieve that goal is equally clear. Indian civilisation had lost its autonomy – so the movement's propagandists argued – because the purity and strength of its Aryan heritage had been so seriously weakened by growth of irrelevant and unjustifiable accretions, with the result that it had been unable to resist two successive alien invasions, the first Muslim, and the second British. Given this diagnosis, it followed that without a comprehensive program of social, cultural and above all religious reform, there was no prospect whatsoever of India regaining its lost strength. Hence in their own version of "back to basics", the Arya Samajis insisted that in the interest of national regeneration all diversionary accretions and all foreign imports must be discarded forthwith, so enabling everyone to return to the true values of their tradition as enshrined in the ancient Vedic texts.¹⁷

Just what moral and social injunctions the Vedas *actually* contain need not detain us for long. Even more so than texts such as the Hebrew Bible, the Vedas have always been open to a wide variety of readings, most particularly because their contents are for the most part so cryptic and obscure that their possible meaning and significance is very much an open question. Indeed if one accepts – as the Hindu tradition has long held – that the Vedas enshrine all possible forms of knowledge, it is quite useful to regard them as a kind of "black box" within which support for any argument or analysis which one might choose to make can by definition be found. If this is so, the most appropriate way to approach the "Vedic" prescriptions put forward by the Arya Samaj is not through an assessment of the accuracy of Swami Dayananda's interpretations of the textual sources, but rather through an analysis of the meanings which he and his followers chose to assign to them.

The broad outlines of Dayananda's conclusions are well known. Once stripped of its subsequent Hindu accretions, the Aryan religion – so the Swami argued – was a comprehensively monotheistic faith with clearly defined ethical groundings. As opposed to this the whole gamut of popular religion, and most especially practices such as image-worship, *sati*, the veneration of saints and their shrines, and the hereditary ascription of caste status, was dismissed as wholly alien to the faith. Although it is relatively easy to demonstrate that the Vedas themselves offer relatively little support for these conclusions, such criticisms largely miss the point. What matters far more is the consequence of this interpretation, especially in the context of late nineteenth century Punjab, where Christian

missionaries were subjecting all aspect of popular religious practice to vitriolic criticism. One of the most important results of the Samaji perspective was that virtually everything with which the missionaries found fault could now be dismissed as an un-Aryan accretion. In ideological terms this was a brilliant move. By surreptitiously adopting the missionaries own agenda, Dayananda's wholly unprecedented reading of the ancient Vedas provided his followers with a vision of Indian civilisation which might well be highly artificial, but which was nevertheless a highly effective means of resisting the denigration to which their involvement in the institutions of the British Raj – in which the missionaries formed the ideological cutting edge – exposed them.

Nor was that all. Dayananda went on to argue not only that the Aryan tradition was more closely congruent with missionaries' ideal of ethical monotheism than trinitarian Christianity, but also that it was far older than, and therefore superior to, all of the three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Hence a central component in the force of Dayananda's perspective arose from his success in borrowing large chunks of the moral, symbolic and conceptual agenda of the new Raj, and having indigenised his borrowings by presenting them in Vedic clothes, using them to demonstrate that no matter how physically powerful India's arrogant new rulers might be, their own indigenous heritage was in fact far superior to all things European. Hence it is hardly surprising that Dayananda's teachings found a very enthusiastic audience amongst the newly emergent Western-educated elite in the last of India's major provinces to fall under the control of the Raj.

In this respect Swami Dayananda's tour of Punjab in 1879 was particularly well-timed, since it coincided with the emergence of the first set of graduates to have passed right through the new educational system. With few local precedents on which to build, not least because the Brahmo Samaj was perceived as far too much of a Bengali movement to suit Punjabi tastes, these upwardly mobile young graduates had few defences against the poisoned chalice from which they had been forced to sup during the course of their education: no wonder that so many of them became enthusiastic followers of the Arya Samaj. In addition to comprehensively legitimating both their elite status and their "modernity", the Samaj also provided a very effective platform from which to begin to challenge the arrogant Eurocentrism of the colonial regime.

Conclusion: religious reform and its consequences

While the impact which the Arya Samaj and its many successors has had on social, cultural and religious developments throughout the subcontinent is so extensive as to be far beyond the scope of this Chapter, let me draw my argument to a conclusion just by restricting myself to a Punjab context, but also by limiting myself to answering three very specific questions. Firstly just what sorts of people did the Samaj succeed in mobilising within its new ideological framework, and just whom did it alienate? Secondly what kind of agenda for collective mobilisation did its program establish? And thirdly what impact did this have on the four dimensions of Punjabi religion which we have identified?

As far as mobilisation is concerned, the eventual outcome of Samaji nationalism has been deeply contradictory. Although its objective was to unite the entire indigenous population of India, its in-built anti-Islamic polemic was so strong that it alienated – and continues to alienate – the vast majority of Indian Muslims; and although many Punjabi Sikhs were initially attracted to the Samaj because of its capacity to provide a sense of ideological resistance to racism and Eurocentrism, the movement's dismissal of Nanak and his teachings

as yet another irrelevant and weakening diversion from Aryan purity soon drove them out again. In other words far from presaging the development of a pan-Indian – or even a pan-Punjabi – nationalism, the Samaj soon put the Punjabi social order onto a track of mutually competitive *qaumic* mobilisation, in which Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims found themselves engaged in a vicious circle of ever-intensifying mutual rivalry.

As commitment to *qaumic* consolidation grew steadily more intense, each group began to follow a similar agenda to that developed by the Arya Samaj. Sikhs and then Muslims also set about establishing unambiguous boundaries around themselves, with the aim of generating the strongest possible sense of moral solidarity amongst those within, the better to resist their rivals. Hence the Sikhs and Muslims followed the Hindus in spawning reform movements whose central aim was to “restore” their tradition to its original condition of pristine purity. So just as Dayananda had systematically reinterpreted the Vedas to generate a novel *dharmic* order which suited the Hindus’ *qaumic* objectives, the Tat Khalsa movement “rediscovered” a whole series of social and religious practices (eventually codified in the *rehat maryada*) to which they insisted all Sikhs must now conform. As a result the reform movements which sprang up in all three traditions began to put an ever-increasing emphasis on the need to “restore” *dharmic* conformity. Similar developments also eventually emerged amongst the Muslims, pressed forward by so-called “fundamentalist” groups such as the Jamaat-i-Islami. But whilst these developments were in every case far more novel than their proponents were ever prepared to admit, and although they are far from being fully implemented to this day, they also had far-reaching consequences in other spheres. Not only did each tradition set about revamping and rebuilding its *dharmic* order, but the logic *qaumic* mobilisation was such that each group also sought comprehensively to homogenise itself, with the result that the “deviant” *panthic* and *kismet* components of religious practice found themselves subjected to ever more vicious criticism and attack. Quite apart from their allegedly “unmodern” character, the easy-going pluralism which still underpins the greater part of popular belief and practices is wholly antithetical to the dynamics of *qaumic* polarisation, as well as to the politically driven vision of *dharmic* orthodoxy developed within – and still enthusiastically supported by – the greater part of Punjab’s western educated urban elite.

But although the *panthic* and *kismet* dimensions of the Punjabi tradition have consequently been driven to the very margins of public discussion on both sides of the Indo-Pakistani border as well as throughout the diaspora, it would be quite wrong to conclude that such activities have been eclipsed. Quite the reverse. They remain almost as popular as ever, and for very good reasons. Whilst the supporters of publicly conventional neo-orthodoxy may feel very shamefaced about acknowledging any degree of participation in *panthic* and *kismet* activities – for when push comes to shove virtually everyone does so – the plain fact is that these dimensions of domain religious activity provide an opportunity to explore the meaning and purpose of the human condition at a level of sophistication of which the banal certainties of protestantised neo-orthodoxy cannot even begin to conceive. Meanwhile neo-orthodoxy also has a great deal to answer for on its own account. Shameful tragedies such as the bloodbath of 1947, the trauma of Bluestar and its aftermath, and the current persecution of Christians and Ahmadis in Pakistan are in each case a direct consequence of the rise of implacable *qaumic* intransigence. But if these developments are testing the resources of Punjab’s the *panthic* and *kismet* traditions virtually to breaking point, those involved would do well to remember that if Nanak, Gorakhnath and Fareed could witness what is currently being done in the name of Truth, all three would share the same feelings of despair at the depth of human folly.

NOTES

¹ An argument to this effect is set out in considerable detail in my paper "Islam and the Construction of Europe" (Ballard 1996).

² In addition to an earlier paper of my own (Ballard 1993), the development of these processes of ethno-religious polarisation has been explored in much greater depth by Kapur (1986).

³ The term secular is understood in a rather different (although in my view no less bankrupt) way in South Asian contexts.

⁴ Precisely because it explores these themes so graphically as well as so comprehensively, Waris Shah's *Hir Ranjha* (1983) remains an extremely popular source of spiritual inspiration to all Punjabis, whether Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or Christian.

⁵ In the Potohar region, close examination of the physical structure of many of the most noted Sufi shrines suggests that they have been erected right on top of ancient Buddhist stupas.

⁶ Although there is no space to explore the matter in detail here, Das Gupta's immensely detailed study (1969) of the Buddhist, Vaishnava and Nath manifestations of the Sahajiyā tradition in northern India during the mediaeval period reveals a theological and spiritual universe which displays a remarkable degree of congruence with those which can still be observed in the *panthic* dimension of contemporary Punjabi religion; and whilst White's study of *The Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* is ostensibly focused on the ascetic dimensions of the Nath Yogis, his examination of the logic of their cosmological vision is of much wider relevance, especially in understanding the *kismet* dimension of Punjabi religion.

⁷ As the routine inclusion of a "Your Stars" column in virtually all popular newspapers and magazines published in Western Europe and North America serves to emphasise, *kismet* religion is by no means a uniquely Punjabi phenomenon.

⁸ In more formal terms the idea that *tapas* conveys powers of *siddhi* on the *tapasvi* is a wholly orthodox component of Hindu mythology; such ideas are particularly elaborately developed in the Nath tradition (see White, 1996).

⁹ The *kismet* world contains its fair share of charlatans, as does western psychotherapy and western medicine; but since only those with a positive reputation for effectiveness can expect an expanding customer base, the loop of positive feedback built into such systems tends to weed out the worst offenders.

¹⁰ Nanak's concept of *raj men yog* is an excellent example of this view.

¹¹ This represents my own best effort to render Bulleh Shah's words into meaningful English. I have relied on the Punjabi original set out by Taufiq Rafat (1982:83), but the English translation he presents misses many of the poet's more subtle allusions. Puri and Shangari (1986: 177 - 181) present a translation of a longer version of the same *kafi*, set within the midst of a useful commentary Bulleh Shah's *oeuvre*.

¹² A very useful commentary on the way in which Bulleh Shah systematically uses the popular folk tale *Hir Ranjha* as a point of reference to reach such conclusions can be found in Matringe (1992); and while Matringe highlights the joint presence of Vaishnavite, Nath and Sufi elements in *Hir*, Puri and Shagari (1986) read just the same material from a Radha Soami Sikh perspective.

¹³ Significantly enough, there was one component of Punjab's population which was almost entirely unaffected by Partition, for it stood (and to a large extent still stands) right outside this three-way categorisation: the *Dalits* so-called untouchables. Whilst there is no space to explore the issues in detail here, the processes about which Juergensmeyer writes with such insight – and which are also the source of the analytical model deployed in this Chapter – were also developed as means of resistance to the very processes I am seeking to outline.

¹⁴ As Ibbetson makes clear in a lengthy commentary (1883: 187-190), the vocabulary in terms of which the question was posed, and especially its efforts to elicit three different segmentary levels of *qaumic* affiliation cause an immense amount of confusion.

¹⁵ Largely because of the immense symbolic importance of the events which took place at Anandpur on Baishaki 1699, most recent historiographers of the Sikh tradition have covered them with a strong mythical gloss, such that they implicitly suggest that all good Sikhs must have promptly joined the Khalsa. However not only did the newswriter on the spot report that many that many of the Brahmins and Khatris explicitly rejected the Guru's invitation to do so, but in his careful assessment of the level of support level of support enjoyed by the Khalsa in Gobind's lifetime, Grewal (1990: 81) judiciously concludes that "it was yet to become the mainstream".

¹⁶ Most Sikh historiographers have sought to cast a veil over these events. So, for example, having noted that Gobind Singh attached himself to the Imperial court for more than a year, Grewal (1990:79) goes on to suggest that the Guru's sole purpose in doing so was to "get Anandpur back". This is most disingenuous. As Banerjee (1972) shows, during the last year of his life Gobind and his warriors became Imperial camp followers; those seeking favour from the Emperor in such circumstances had no alternative but to offer the imperial authorities their implicit allegiance.

¹⁷ Jones (1976) provides an excellent overview of the origins of the Arya Samaj, while Graham (1993) explores some of the movements to which it subsequently gave rise.

¹⁸ In his recent and immensely popular polemical essay *The Hindu Phenomenon*, Girilal Jain (1994) articulates a very similar perspective.

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