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"Tests of Faith"

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Dear Peter,

I am finding it increasingly difficult to make distinctions at a time when they are becoming crucially important. It's bad enough, given my interest in nationalities, to not be able to tell apart Japanese- and Chinese-Canadians on the streets of Vancouver. What's worse is to have trouble distinguishing white lies from half-truths--a subtle but helpful distinction when sizing up someone's character or story. Sometimes I'm not even sure I can tell the difference between brazen lies and utmost sincerity.

This is a general problem with far-reaching implications, as I am sure you'd agree. In the context of my experience with members of Canada's Sikh minority, discerning the difference between peaceable and violence-prone factions has turned out to be a real headache. Trying to settle the related question of what differentiates terrorists from freedom fighters adds another knot in the brain. A similar difficulty arises in evaluating the various responses of the mostly white, mostly Christian Canadian majority to the growing and troublesome Sikh element in their midst, as there is often a fine line between patriotism and xenophobia.

What exasperates me even more is that the more I learn about Sikhism (as a religion), Sikh nationalism (in India and abroad, including Canada), and Sikh identity (a mixture of ethnic, ideological, economic and historical factors in addition to politics and religion), the less certain I become about just what Sikhs are all about. I am losing faith in my own capacity to make accurate generalizations, about this particular group of Canadians, to be sure, but also about every other ethnic and cultural minority in the Canadian mosaic.

Stephen Maly is an Institute Fellow studying the ethnic and cultural "nations" of Canada.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

The same is true in a broader perspective: despite survey data and opinion polls the world over; despite the accepted dogma of sociology and political science; despite the jargon of reporters who blithely use obfuscatory phrases like "The Kremlin says" or "Yugoslavs feel" or "Ottawa thinks"; despite all this knowledge about nations and states, only a few people can speak with authority about the sentiments and intentions of groups. The Dalai Lama is qualified, I suppose, to talk about the aspirations of most Tibetans. Because Newfoundland has a fairly homogeneous culture, the premier of that Canadian province may actually know the score and can sing it true out on that big Atlantic rock. Most big countries, however, are made up of diverse subgroups and a figurative infinity of individuals. Who can articulate anymore the "national interest" of a multinational state without imperious pretension and without resorting, in the end, to crass threats of force?

The last decade of the 20th century is shaping up to be one of increasing political fragmentation, deepening social cleavages, spreading sectarian violence, a progressive fracturing of hitherto seemingly stable federations. The Soviet Union could blow apart in all directions any day now. The Indian subcontinent is in a similarly fissiparous state. The process of dis-integration that started with partition and independence from Britain in 1947 continued with the bloody birth of Bangladesh; it is still very much engaged in the panoply of religious, ethnic and territorial conflicts that now plague India. (Author V.S. Naipal's just published political travelogue about India is subtitled "A Million Mutinies Now.") Canada too is once again on a collision course with Quebec separatism, and this time, barring a political miracle, there's no turning away from a fateful crash of contrary views on what it means to be a nation.

Whose Country is this?

Sikhs are a doubly visible minority. They figure prominently in India's fractious political environment, occupying a key position in economic and geopolitical terms as well as sharing responsibility with Indian troops and Hindu extremists for thousands of killings in recent years. Sikhs have also played several minor but not insignificant roles in the protracted drama of Canada's identity crisis, and they're still at it. Back in 1913, for example, a group of wealthy Sikhs chartered a Japanese tub named the Komagata Maru and sailed it across the Pacific into Vancouver harbor with the deliberate intention of testing British rules regarding migration between different dominions in the Empire. The Sikhs believed they had the right, as British subjects, to live and work in Canada. The ship was not allowed to dock, however. The 376 passengers on board suffered hunger and disease for two months, and 19 of them were shot dead by Indian police upon returning from their failed mission. It was a sordid incident that revealed both the nastiness of British Canadian racism and the vulnerability of Sikhs to persecution in their homeland. Now, at the same time that militant Sikhs are attempting to carve out an independent

state in the northwest part of India, their compatriots and coreligionists in Canada find themselves on the cutting edge of majority attitudes towards multiculturalism, immigration, and the rights and duties of Canadian citizenship.

A 1985 Supreme Court of Canada decision held that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (a sort of Bill of Rights attached to the 1982 Constitution) applies to anyone residing in Canada, including refugee claimants waiting to be processed by immigration officials. The plaintiff in the case was a Sikh. The Singh decision, as it is known, has set an important precedent, but not a very popular one.

In Western Canada particularly, Sikhs are readily associated with controversy over how many Third Worlders should be admitted to the country and to what extent they should be persuaded, if not compelled, to conform to certain "national" standards. Turbans and daggers offer two recent cases in point.

Sikhs who have been baptized into the Khalsa brotherhood (the "pure ones"--I'll explain later) are required to wear their turbans at all times. In 1988, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police recruit named Baltej Singh Dhillon requested a change in the Mounties' uniform regulations to allow him to wear his headgear instead of the standard Stetson. After a year of dithering and indecision, the request was granted, mainly on the basis of legal arguments that not to do so would violate Charter guarantees against discrimination on the basis of religion. This bending of old rules to suit newer ones outraged a lot of Canadians, especially in the western provinces, where the Mounties are a big part of history and also serve as provincial police. Over 90,000 signatures were gathered on petitions to protest the change in dress code. In March of this year, a group of three retired RCMP officers filed a lawsuit in federal court alleging that any exemption made on the basis of a recruit's religious beliefs is also a violation of the Charter.

It's anybody's guess what the outcome of this court challenge will be. It is important to note, however, that the people opposed to allowing turbans insist that their argument concerns culture, not race. A member of Parliament from Calgary put it this way: "The main feeling is [that] the dress uniform of the RCMP is part of our heritage and Canadian culture and it must be preserved." Contrast this statement with the following admonitions from a little Sikh catechism I picked up, and you can see the underlying dilemma:

If wealth is lost, nothing is lost
If health is lost, something is lost
If character is lost, much is lost
If HERITAGE is lost, YOU are lost.

For a Sikh, wearing a turban is at least as important as white Canadians' sacred image of the Mountie.

Last November the Calgary (Alberta) school board voted in favor of baptized Sikhs' right to wear their religious daggers (called

kirpans) in the classroom. Several restrictions apply: the knife must be sheathed, blunt, worn under one's clothing, and no more than seven inches long. A similar decision was taken more recently by Canada's largest school board, in the Toronto suburb of Peel, Ontario. No violent incidents involving kirpans have been reported in Canadian schools for the past 100 years, but resistance to the new permissive policy has been understandably strong.

Before the Peel board changed its rules, an Ontario teacher named Harbhajan Singh Pandori was fired for having protested against the barring of kirpans. He is reported to have said then that "I think that it's time that people understood that this country is for the people of the earth, and we should live with understanding and respect."

Is Canada to become the repository of detached, disinherited nations, or does it exist for its own sake? Whose country is it? In an effort to accommodate every culture, faith, philosophy, value system, moral code, and defining myths of nationhood, Canadians find themselves in a country without a binding vision of the future. This is the view of Reginald Bibby, a sociologist from the University of Calgary and author of *Mosaic Madness*, published last year. As a Western Canadian, Bibby's opinions are congruent with the masses. "We are losing control of our borders" is a common complaint from Canadians who also fear the loss of their country altogether in the decade ahead.

The Taint of Terror

I keep fighting off (not quite successfully) the temptation to lump Sikhs together into convenient verbal molds, to use adjectives like "militant", "extremist" or "moderate" with the same ease as do the local newspaper reporters. I am trying to be sensitive to Sikh complaints about labelling and misinterpretation of their cause, but it's not easy to keep all the Singhs straight. There have been contradictory reports in the media about who represents which faction, who did what to whom, and why. The World Sikh Organization, the International Sikh Organization, the International Sikh Youth Federation, the Khalsa Diwan Society, the Babbar Khalsa: all are organizations active in Vancouver and openly supportive of an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, although they differ--sometimes violently--on how to achieve that end.

Several prominent Vancouver Sikhs have been shot in the last two weeks. The past president of the Khalsa Diwan Society temple was gunned down in his East Vancouver driveway and is now in hospital, under police guard. Another had her elbow shattered by a shotgun blast fired through a kitchen window. Authorities believe the would-be assassin was after her husband, who also holds a position of authority in the temple's governing committee. According to the local press, the violence stems from a December election of temple officials wherein more "radical" elements lost out to the "moderates;" that is, the ones who aren't so keen on funding or fighting a civil war for Khalistan in India. The ensuing investigations involve shadowy

figures who frequently operate in secret. Nobody has been arrested. There is no way of ascertaining to what degree the internal feuding is fueled by disagreements over Khalistan or by simpler, petty squabbling over money and power in the local Sikh community. Some Sikhs argue that intra-temple rivalries relate to Punjabi kinship ties and village origins as much as to ideological conflicts.

Factionalism is the achilles heel of the Sikh struggle for independence. "Give me Sikh unity for six months and I'll deliver Khalistan!" is the line that Talwinder Singh Parmar once preached in Canada. He is the charismatic leader still widely believed to be the mastermind behind the downing of an Air India jet in 1985 (he was acquitted of formal charges in a Canadian court), but his present whereabouts are unknown. There is an umbrella group, made up of representatives from the different organizations, called the Council of Khalistan, but it does not meet regularly, and it has no binding authority. There is no such thing, apparently.

Meanwhile, the Reyat trial I told you about last time (also involving a bomb placed in luggage bound for India) is still going on, and some Sikh leaders are upset with the way in which unproven allegations of terrorist activity on the part of just a few persons tend to implicate a broader community. In a letter to the Vancouver Sun, for example, the president of the World Sikh Organization in Toronto complained that journalists have been unfairly assuming Mr. Reyat's culpability and at the same time smearing Sikhs in general. "The Sikh community, he wrote, "is not willing to be alleged guilty by association. And even if the guilty party is found, he or she should not be identified by religious affiliation. Would you run headlines condemning a Jew as a bank robber or an Anglican as a rapist?" The point is well taken, I believe, but Sikhs themselves contribute to the problem by not distinguishing in any public fashion between their religious beliefs, their cultural norms, and their political aspirations.

"The Sikhs are approaching a line in our society," I was told by the former head of Canada's Multiculturalism ministry, "and they know it. They can believe anything they want, but there are legal and moral limits to what the rest of us will tolerate." Advocating the breakup of India is technically against Canadian law, and using bombs and pistols to make a political point also violates cherished Canadian ideals about a peaceful, ordered society. This sort of testing the boundaries of acceptability has been going on for over 75 years, ever since the Komagatu Maru arrived with its human cargo, and during which time Sikhs have been indicted for murder and convicted of attempted assassination, gun-running, illicit narcotics trade, and immigration fraud, including the movement of illegals through the so-called "Punjabi pipeline" from B.C. to Washington, Oregon and California.

I'm not sure yet where I am with the Sikhs I've met. They have all been friendly, and forthcoming; each, in his own way, has disavowed violence, and any connection to political chicanery here in Canada. In a visit with a local temple representative,

for instance, I couldn't help but be favorably impressed with the man's willingness to answer questions and his seemingly genuine sense of humor. He spoke openly of his advocacy of an independent Sikh state, but said nothing positive about violent means to achieve that end. There was a noticeable twinkle in his eye. (It sounds corny, but Alice saw it too, and commented on it later.) Because of his cheerful demeanor, and that look in his eye, I trusted this Sikh spokesman implicitly. I have no firm reason not to do so still, but since that brief discussion I have run across several written accounts of others' meetings with Sikh leaders in which specific references to that same twinkle are made in ways that do not inspire confidence.

Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee suggest in *The Sorrow and the Terror* that the twinkling eye is a cipher for something sinister:

That merry twinkle has an eerie charm, and the assertion of simultaneous opposites--of peaceable rhetoric and terrorist aims--is familiar to anyone who has tracked the leaders. It rarely comes across in cold print, in the sanctimonious denunciation of violence. Ambiguous smiles, coded words and winks are crucial to understanding the true message.

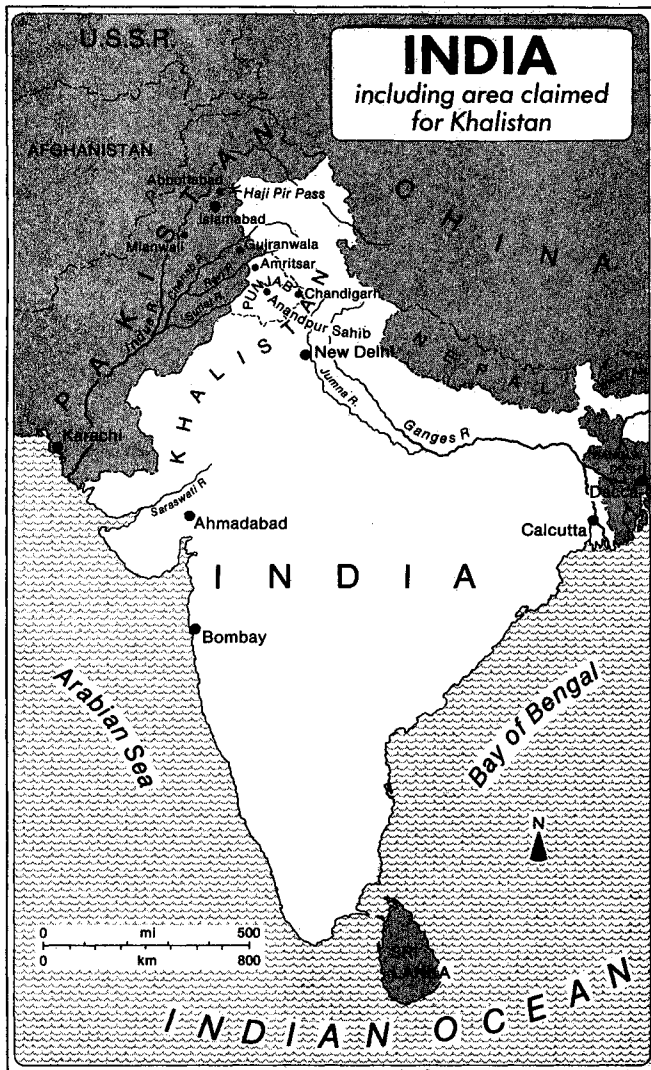
With that caveat imbedded in my mind, I am no longer certain about the verisimilitude of our Sikh host, nor am I fully confident that my first impressions were accurate ones.

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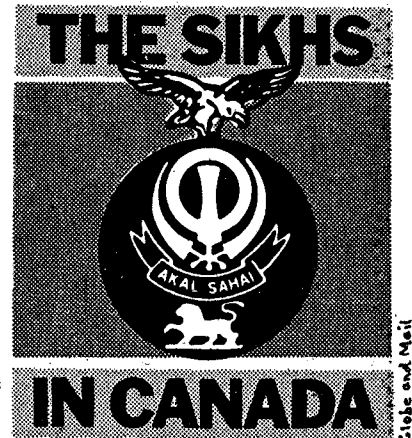
Narinder Singh Dhillon is a refugee from the Punjab who showed up at our literacy class a few weeks ago, eager to learn English. He arrived in Canada in 1987, one of 174 Sikhs who traveled overland to Europe, boarded a freighter in Rotterdam, Holland, spent several miserable weeks in the crossing, and landed on the shores of Nova Scotia. As the story goes (gleaned from books, press clippings, and Narinder's patchy recollections), the first thing these bedraggled aliens did was to try to hail a cab to Toronto. The second thing was to claim refugee status. Immigration officials set them straight on Canadian geography, but were then faced with a quandary: how could these guys qualify as refugees when they came from a democratic country with strong trade and diplomatic ties to Canada? Indian officials insisted that the Sikhs were simply economic migrants--mere boat people--and that some of them were suspected terrorists.

Well, Mr. Dhillon was among those who were ultimately accepted as refugees from political persecution; he rode a bus across Canada to Vancouver and is now a landed immigrant, well on his way to Canadian citizenship. He has told me, in halting, broken English, that he wants to help young people avoid drugs and stop eating junk food and not fall into a life of crime. I believe him, but I also catch myself wondering what he's been doing for the past four years, since it's obvious he hasn't spent much time with people who speak English on the job. He is an

energetic student, repeating words often to get the sound right, listening patiently as I attempt to explain the several meanings of crazy English words like "still" (still breathing, still here, still of the night, sitting still, whiskey still...) Sometimes Narinder cuts me off and says "yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," his sparkling eyes closing and his head bowing slightly, just for a second. I think this is his gentle way of saying let's get on with it, but I could be wrong about the gentleness.



FROM: THE SORROW AND THE TERROR (1982)



Tarnished Jewels

In numerical terms, there are about the same number of Sikhs in the world (approx. 18 million) as there are Jews. The vast majority of Sikhs (15 million) live in the northwest Indian state of Punjab; the rest live in diaspora, scattered across all continents. As a religion, Sikhism is relatively young (it got started about 500 years ago); as a nationalist cause, Khalistan

is almost new (the first serious call-to-arms went out in 1980.)

In 1984, Indian Prime Minister Indira Ghandi ordered a military assault against the Golden Temple at Amritsar, Sikhdom's holiest shrine and the principal redoubt of militant leaders. Several hundred Sikhs were killed in the brutal melee of what was called Operation Bluestar. Some months later, in a deftly executed act of revenge, two of Mrs. Gandhi's Sikh bodyguard riddled her with bullets. The assassination was followed by a massive crackdown on Sikhs all over India, and in New Delhi anti-Sikh riots left three thousand dead. From that time forward, pro-Khalistan Sikhs have been in the ascendancy. Operation Bluestar is to Sikhs today what the burned and gassed village of Holapjah will probably be to embittered Kurds in Iraq for many years to come.

There are roughly 250,000 Sikhs in North America, 200,000 of whom reside in Canada, mostly in Ontario and British Columbia. A little over half of all Canadian Sikhs live in B.C., 50,000 or so in the Vancouver area. These numbers are fuzzy, owing to inconsistent census data and varying official estimates, but they lend a sense of disproportion: Sikhs make up a mere 2 percent of India's population of 850 million and less than half of one percent of Canada's 26 million, but in both countries they command more attention than their relatively small numbers would normally warrant. The Sikhs are a tiny minority with a very high profile on two continents.

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I cannot imagine two countries more different from one another than Canada and India. My exposure to India is limited to vicarious travels, mainly through film and television, so that when I think of that country, I think in sepia tones of rivers of people and the incongruous mixture of dust and jungle. I see smoke rising from outdoor funeral pyres and throngs of people bathing in the Ganges River. India is mostly hot and crowded; Canada is mostly cold and almost empty by comparison. In a recent edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, British historian Paul Johnson described India as "huge, unwieldy, poor, divided by faith, caste, race and income differences." Canada is huger still, with an area three times the size of India (but only 1/30th the population), and is also unwieldy, but it is a rich country with a broad middle class and a much narrower range of religious, ethnic and economic differentiation. It's disturbing to witness the fraying of civility in Canada, but I shudder at the televised pictures of Indian peasants hacking at one another with long knives and bamboo staves.

Despite these differences in physical scale and social character, Canada and India have much in common as former dominions of the British Empire, wards and worshippers of Queen Victoria, inheritors of political traditions like the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy. Both countries maintain their Commonwealth ties; they chase each other's vote at the United Nations (to stay in tune with the Non-Aligned Movement); they do a substantial amount of trade with one another (worth \$600 million in 1989.)

During the past 10 years, India has consistently ranked in the top six countries of origin for immigrants to Canada. Since 1980, nearly 100,000 Indians--two thirds of them Punjabi Sikhs and Hindus--have opted for Canadian citizenship. Most are attracted by Canada's high living standards and relative peace. India is an increasingly dangerous place to live, especially for Sikhs not enamored with the Khalistani movement. In 1990 alone some 3,000 Sikhs were murdered by their co-religionists. (This number is comparable to that of Sikhs slain in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's murder.) Widespread sectarian violence is threatening to undermine one of the political virtues India has traditionally shared with Canada. As University of British Columbia professor K.C. Holsti points out in an unpublished conference paper, "Canada and India are among the few countries in the world that have policies and expend national resources to sustain the cultural uniqueness of ethno-religious minorities and to assure legal equality among all."

India and Canada are federations in trouble. Holsti's generous observation may soon have to be placed in the past tense. I've told you plenty in past months about Canada's internal divisions. The only thing lacking in Lord Durham's famous (in Canada) 1840 adage about "two nations warring in the bosom of a single state" is that in the 1990s Canada is more than two nations, counting immigrant groups and aboriginal peoples. Moreover, the modern English Canadian "nation" is turning out to be a collection of fractious regional groupings hurling insults at one another in a common language.

India is in much worse shape. To get a better sense of what's been going on there, I went to a noon-hour lecture by Dr. Harjot Oberoi, a professor of Asian Studies at UBC, and a Sikh. The event was sponsored by the Royal Commonwealth Society, an unofficial, non-profit organization whose members maintain a keen interest in Britain's former colonies. Professor Oberoi delivered his remarks to a spartan crowd in a basement meeting room at Christchurch Cathedral in downtown Vancouver. He told us about the ongoing, dangerous struggle for supremacy over Kashmir between India and Pakistan; about bloody feuding between Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab; about fights between Muslims and Hindus over mosques that are built atop ancient temples; about the war between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka (in which India is very much involved); about inter-ethnic conflicts in the eastern state of Assam, near the border with Myanmar (Burma.) Why, we asked, so much internecine violence after 44 years of Indian independence?

Dr. Oberoi gave a thoughtful and complex answer. The part which struck me as having immediate relevance to Canada went something like this: Two opposite strains of ideology have surfaced in India at the same time, the secular nationalism of Indian elites--people employed in government bureaucracies, the commercial and higher education sectors, the communications media--and an ethnic/religious fundamentalism, which is particularly strong in the rural areas. Secularism is the legacy of the British Raj; it was felt then that there was no

other way to govern a society split so many ways by the Hindu caste system and the presence of a huge Muslim minority than to create a non-religious state that could keep order and render impartial justice. The problem is that the state never did reflect the society it is supposed to govern, and internal pressures are nearly always at the breaking point.

Hindus are fearful of encroaching Muslim fundamentalism, fueled by the mullahs in distant Iran, and transported to India via Pakistani agents with ulterior motives. Sikh fundamentalists see a similar peril in Hindu revivalism, and have adopted a number of Muslim-inspired tactics, like muzzling the press, forcing women to wear veils (a practice with no basis in the Sikh religion), and intimidating moderates with threats of violence.

Thank heavens this kind of paranoid zeal is absent in Canada, but the growing gap between state and society applies here just as it does in India. English-speaking Canadians are forever complaining about having government-mandated bilingualism shoved down their throats (They ALWAYS use this anatomical reference.) Quebec separatists repeat over and over again that federalism is kaput in Canada. The aboriginal people have lost all faith in the Canadian justice system and are gearing up for another summer of roadblocks and confrontations with police. The British North American formula for governance may turn out to be as dysfunctional in 21st century Canada as the British legacy seems to be already in India. The Empire still has some crumbling to do.

Inside an Inner Sanctum

Punjabis constitute two thirds of all immigrants from India. While not all of these people are Sikhs, those who are are immediately more noticeable than the rest, mainly because of their dress. Naturally, newcomers gravitate toward friendly and familiar surroundings, and end up in neighborhoods already densely populated by Sikhs. The electoral constituency of Vancouver South has the highest concentration of East Indians in Canada. This area has provided a point of convergence and departure to other locations for Sikh immigrants since the early 1950s because of the sawmills situated on the banks of the nearby Fraser River. Most of the 10,000 or so residents of this riding profess the Sikh religion and speak Punjabi. A strip of mostly Sikh-owned and operated shops on Main Street is known as "Little India." This part of Vancouver is also the location of the largest Sikh place of worship outside of India.

Alice and I visited the temple on Ross Street on a chilly Sunday in early spring. We parked on a side street and approached the large square building with a bit of trepidation. The surroundings were plain enough--boxy, dull-colored houses with aging Chevy Impalas at the curb. Rusting tricycles and windblown papers littering the lawns. We joined an irregular stream of worshippers funneling through the front door, and were immediately immersed in a zone of exotic sounds, flowing gowns, pungent smells, and curious stares.

The entryway was crowded and abuzz with Punjabi small talk. I had made an appointment with a Mr. Singh (this was before I realized that nearly all Sikhs carry the appellation), and I asked a man behind a small desk for directions to the temple office. He looked up from the little notebook in which he was making some notations, and summoned a young boy from the throng. The lad shepherded us downstairs and through a series of unadorned meeting rooms where older Sikhs sat around long tables, as if in conference. They stopped talking as we passed through; I remember a lot of steely whiskers, broad smiles, and twinkling eyes.

We had a brief chat in a small office with a youngish man about basic tenets of the Sikh religion and about the prospects for Khalistan. He was hopeful. His eyes, as I mentioned already, positively sparkled. As we talked, other men kept popping into the room, issuing rapid-fire questions in Punjabi of our host, and then digging into various file drawers for pamphlets about Sikhism and about human rights abuses in India. All the while there was high-pitched singing and praying emanating from an old loudspeaker in a corner next to the ceiling--we were getting a live broadcast from the religious ceremonies above. On the wall were old-fashioned, salesman-style calendars showing the Golden Temple of Amritsar instead of ads for Jerry's Buick dealership or Pepsi-Cola or Handy Andy's Hardware.

We were interrupted by a tall fellow wearing a long grey overcoat, Floursheim shoes and those socks so thin they're called men's hosiery. He reminded me of Basil Rathbone playing Sherlock Holmes disguised as a "Hindoo fakir." Mr. Gian Singh Bains was introduced as a visiting scholar from India and our official temple tour guide. After exchanging a few apologies (he had been waiting at the front door for a group of 30 Montanans--our signals got crossed), we followed our leader back upstairs.

Like everyone else entering the temple's main sanctuary, we had to take our shoes off and cover our heads. (The man taking notes at the front door also issued white, unisex scarves.) We followed Gian down a center aisle of sorts, shuffling between large groups of mostly women and children sitting on the burnt orange-colored carpet that covered the entire floor. There were no chairs or pews. The place was sparsely adorned, just a few hanging flower pots and two mirror-like panes of glass suspended from the ceiling near the canopied altar, next to which stood a trio of singing preachers and a single microphone stand. For no good reason I had expected shadowy alcoves and much splendor, not a bright big room that reminded me right away of an oversized junior high school gymnasium.

At the foot of the altar area was a collection box full of coins and small bills and a man sitting cross-legged in front of a huge bowl of what looked like some kind of porridge. Our leader bowed his head toward the altar and indicated we should do the same; then he bade us squat down and cup both hands together to receive a wad of the holy gruel, which turned out to be a rather tasty combination of flour, sugar, and butter. Everyone eats a

little of this stuff from the same bowl, signifying equality as well as communion with God's gifts to humanity.

After washing our hands in one of a battery of simple sinks in a back corridor, Gian explained to us that the altar itself, a squarish, roofed platform covered with brightly covered silk fabric, simply provided a daytime resting place for the Sikh bible, known as the **Adi Granth** (First Book.) The hymns being sung were actually passages from the granth set to music. We then proceeded upstairs, to the sacred book's bedroom. Each night, we were told, the Temple Society's half-dozen copies of the Sikh bible are placed on one of two canopied double beds and covered for the night. During the day, while one copy is placed on the altar for church services, others are usually being read straight through in shifts. Any Sikh--man or woman--is eligible to engage in this "very holy act," which takes 48 hours to complete. Every copy of the **Adi Granth** is the same: 1430 pages. The book is a compilation of sacred verse written in many languages: Punjabi, Urdu, Sanskrit, Farsi, Hindi and others. It is four centuries old, and is regarded not just as a message from God, but as a living messenger--a Guru.

In a slow, methodical, didactic fashion, Gian told us a great deal about the Sikh religion. It was obvious he had been trained in what we might call the Sunday School tradition. I will relate just a bit of what we learned, a capsulized (I hope not brutalized) version of how Sikhs came to be known for their martial spirit and recognized by their outward appearance.

Sikhism came into being during a period of religious revival in India in the late 15th century. It was originally founded as a Hindu sect by Guru Nanak, who preached about the fundamental truth of all religions and whose mission was to end religious strife between Muslims and Hindus. He rejected the formalism of Islam and the Hindu caste system. Nanak was followed by nine more Gurus in succession, all of whom were tortured, torn apart, and killed in various ghastly ways. The 10th Guru was Gobind Singh, whose father had been executed by India's then Moghul rulers for not embracing Islam. Gobind decided that the only way Sikhism would survive the encroachments of Hinduism, the enticements of secularism and, not least, persecution at the bloodied hands of militant Islam was to get tough. He established the Khalsa brotherhood as defenders of the faith.

This is the origin of what are often referred to as the Five K's: Kesh (uncut hair, thus the turban); Kangha (a comb to keep it clean); Kachha (soldier's underwear--a symbol of readiness and chastity); Kara (a steel bracelet on the right wrist); and the Kirpan (a dagger for self defense, and to help summon courage.) These symbols were initially meant to differentiate Sikhs from other sects; they also made it more difficult for Sikhs to pretend to be Hindus in times of crisis. Today, the Five K's stand for, as one Sikh scholar puts it, "the exteriorization of the Sikh religious psyche," a commitment not only to be, but to appear to be as well.

Unwittingly, Gobind Singh created two designations of Sikhs: the Keshdhari (the toughies, baptized into Khalsa) and the

Sahajdharis (the laggards, wimps, "slow adopters"), and this bifurcation has been a source of internal friction to this day. This last human Guru was stabbed by an enemy. About to die without an heir, he told his followers that the Adi Granth should forever-after be considered an on-going Guru, the only living guide for Sikhs. From then on, power would be invested in the Khalsa, not based on blood inheritance.

Gian could not tell me how many Canadian Sikhs have been Khalsified; it seemed as if perhaps three quarters of men in the temple that day were wearing turbans. He showed us his own comb, bracelet and kirpan, a tiny little thing maybe four inches long in a fancy wooden scabbard. (We took him at his word about the underwear.) After exhausting him and ourselves with questions, we went down stairs to the basement, where scores of people were having lunch in the communal kitchen, known as the langara. (Every Sikh temple has one, as well as guest rooms for travellers; the food and shelter are free of charge.) Alice and I were issued well-used, just-washed plates and coffee cups made from thick plastic, into which the volunteer cooks ladled large portions of curried lentils, peas, and some soupy yoghurt. We were each given a pink, deep-fried pretzel-like thing that turned out to be very sweet. The cups were for water only.

After we sat down on benches alongside long wooden tables, a man carrying a bucket and some ice tongs rushed over to deliver hot chipatis, big delicious discs of bread cooked like a pancake. This was a great meal, and the price was right. Nobody seemed to mind our presence, although Gian, after pointing out the paintings on the dining room walls of various Gurus being butchered and burned at the stake, abandoned us for a group of his associates, and no one else stepped up to say howdy.

We were rejoined by our guide after lunch. He showed us around the still unfinished grounds outside the temple. We stepped over piles of dirt and concrete block and steel reinforcing bars--the materials for a fountain. There was a Mercedes parked nearby. Looking out over the mostly industrial real estate next to the Fraser River in the distance, Gian Singh Bains said the supporters of Khalistan are exploiting people's ignorance, and collecting lots of money.

Divining the Future

The viability of a Sikh state is highly questionable. Wedged between Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India, due south of strategically located Kashmir, the source of five rivers and considered vital to India's total economic space, the Punjab will never be relinquished to Sikh control without a fight. By continuing their armed struggle, Khalistanis risk genocidal violence against all Sikhs. It is unlikely that any foreign government would intervene on their behalf; what Great Power's interests would be served by helping Sikh militants undermine the stability of the world's largest democracy?

Many Canadian Sikhs support Khalistan as a guarantee of long-term cultural security, not as a homeland for religious

fundamentalists. This I was told by Professor Oberoi. He also said that most Sikhs in Canada have no desire or intention to return to India, or to Khalistan, should it ever come to pass; their sympathies are akin to Irish American support for the IRA. It is difficult to imagine how the creation of Khalistan would improve the Sikhs' status in Canada, as the certainty of mass violence in India would cause demonstrations against Indian consulates and could easily provoke more terrorism on Canadian soil. Such action would only raise the Sikhs' profile even higher, and guarantee firmer resistance to their acceptance in Canadian society.

One of the most vexing aspects of modern Sikhism is that it defies reductionist analysis. We Western secularists are accustomed to dissecting a complex social phenomenon in order to understand the nature of the beast--we try to separate religion from politics, and church from state, because that is how we comprehend (perhaps mistakenly) our own society. We try to segregate ethnic and racial factors from political and economic interests in order to arrive at some satisfying rational explanation of behavior and forever useful terms of classification, like right wing and left wing, progressive and reactionary. But the Sikh religion often appears to be wholly indistinguishable from the political cause of Sikh independence.

In this respect, Sikh militants are much like militant Zionists before the creation of Israel. It is still possible, and it may be absolutely necessary, to distinguish between modern Judaism (in all its varieties) and contemporary Zionism (in all its contradictory manifestations), but who can say that the intellectual exercise is anything but enervating, leaving one with the sense of having worked very hard, but accomplished very little?

As an offshoot of Hinduism, with a hefty dose of Islam mixed in, Sikhism is doubly offensive to purists of those religious groups and doubly exotic to most North Americans. What Westerners like myself might find attractive about the Sikh faith--its universality (all truly spiritual paths lead to the same God within), acceptance of the equality of men and women, objuraton of class and caste distinctions, disdain for miracles and other supernatural mumbo-jumbo, disregard for compulsory fasting--drives Hindu revivalists and Muslim fundamentalists mad. They think such heresies are anathema, and must be stamped out. At the same time, the theocratic nature of Sikh nationalism makes it unattractively anachronistic in view of our preference for secular, pluralistic democracy. It's one thing to accept the legitimacy of Sikhs' resistance to Indian state tyranny and religious zealotry, but it's another to condone, even in abstract terms, the creation of a conceivably powerful religious state--a sort of Vatican with armories and granaries and geography--where spiritual and temporal power are one.

The Sikhs have no obvious place in the evolution of the Canadian state. They are not "heavy hitters" in any regular sense of the phrase; that is, they are not sufficiently organized or united politically to make or break a politician's chances of success, let alone figure significantly in the power struggle between

Quebec and the rest of Canada. When Liberal Party leader Jean Chretien came to British Columbia a few months ago, a visit to a Sikh temple on Vancouver Island was part of his itinerary. The Vancouver Sun's color photograph of Chretien draped in a makeshift silk turban made him look silly--just another grandstander trying to curry favor with a coterie of potential voters.

It would be easy to dismiss the Sikhs as one of a large number of minorities that both suffer and enjoy Canada's double-edged approach to multiculturalism, which at the same time celebrates diversity and helps to keep ethnic groups at the margins of society. This would be a mistake, I think. Since the early part of this century, Sikhs have played an important role in testing the liberal attitudes of the white majority in Canada. The much-vaunted "tolerance" toward so-called visible minorities is wearing thin. A concern about the balance of color and creed in Canada is growing steadily. People proud of their Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Celt (and Quebecois) heritage are worried sick about the thickening wedge of Third Worlders in the country's demographic profile, and Sikhs seem always to be at the sharper end of that wedge.

I have a long way to go before I can safely say I understand the Sikh mentality. Confident predictions about the future of Sikhs in India and Canada are equally distant. So far, I am intrigued by the notion that the activities of the Sikh minority in Canada reveal a great deal about the fragility of this country's "national" identity, the strength and durability of a religion-inspired nationalism, and the highly volatile state of the present world order, which lacks the institutional mechanisms to allow groups like the Sikhs, Kurds, Armenians, Tibetans, Palestinians et. al. to make their case for self-determination without resorting to "terrorist" violence. My faith in alternative means of attaining political and cultural autonomy is dwindling, and so is my belief that Canada can show itself off as a model multicultural federation. This is the age of chaos and confusion, of clouded distinctions and pervasive doubts about the future. It's a time to test...you know the rest.

Cheers,

Stephen Maly

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