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Modernity, Sikhism

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Synonyms

Modern; Modernism

Definition

Overview of the ways in which Sikh historical experience intersect with the category of modernity.

Introduction

The relationship that Sikhism maintains with the concept of modernity as it has developed over recent decades is twofold. The break with traditional authorities that the founder of Sikhism initiated itself instantiates somewhat of an organic Indian rational civil theology, replete with salient articulations of time, agency, subjectivity, and critique, all captured in immediately intelligible vernaculars. The subsequent subjection of the Sikh community to the imperatives of British colonial rule and the contradictions of Enlightenment marked for Sikhism significant departures from its past vernacular dynamism. Having gone through a difficult, at times violent, incorporation into colonial and postcolonial dispensations, often at substantial political cost, the Sikh community today struggles to find its bearings within these two conflicting legacies of modernity.

Reason in the Vernacular

Sikhism's genesis as a distinct practical path on the spiritual landscape of the sixteenth-century India coincided with and in many ways advanced experiments that ultimately marked significant departures from received wisdom and ancient instruction. For instance, widespread need for the renewal of intellectual foundations characterized traditional Sanskrit scholasticism over the very centuries Sikhism attained definition. For reasons that remain as yet unclear, several inherited disciplinary models (*shastras*) obsolesced by the middle of the second millennium of the common era and key intellectuals in influential sites of brahmanical learning such as Varanasi sought to establish distinctly different discursive norms, objects of inquiry, and methodological procedures in their stead. Such moves within traditional realms of learning allowed undoubtedly for unprecedented empirical richness to accrue to astronomical inquiry (*jyotis*) on [AU1] (jyotish) account of ecumenical borrowing. In linguistics (*vyakarana*), prominent language philosophers such as Khaunda Bhatta and Nilakantha Chaturdhara [AU2] adopted the "radically modernist position" that the mundane vernacular could serve just as well as the sacred Sanskrit as a vehicle for effective truth claims ([1], p. 31). Yet the potential of these scholastic shifts was constrained by a lasting adherence on the part of brahman pandits to a ritual *mentalité* fixed upon the ancient Vedic sacrifice. It is perhaps to the concerted effort on the part of Nanak and his followers to

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radically undermine such paradigmatic frames of reference in their practice and thought that a variety of fundamental breakthroughs can be attributed. Such a decisive departure from the presuppositions of Vedic ritualism, which governed questions of soteriology, social normativity, and the political imaginary, continued to inform Sikh social life well beyond the era of the living gurus and well into the late eighteenth century, especially the banning of brahmanical ritual in all collective rites in even the most ecumenical (*sanatan*) strains of the tradition [2]. Nanak expressed doubts about the salvific efficacy of Vedic ritual, yogic asceticism, and religious pilgrimage in general. These all missed what was considered essential – the immanence of the divine mediated by the power of love and caring devotion: "Though Vedas, Shastras, Smritis may be learnt by heart/Though as a yogi pilgrimages are performed, /Though worship and the six-fold rites are doubly done, /Yet not to love the Lord ensures despatch to hell" ([3], p. 30). This fundamental opposition to the brahmanical legacy eventually served to place Sikhism on a path in which it connected with widely salient economic, social, and political experiments that participated in, effected, or at the very least resembled key features of what has become known as modernity, including those which will be explored here: reason, critique, agency, commerce, and experiments with state-formation. Through a critique of the otherworldliness of competing religiosities and the crude self-interest of the workaday world – in what might be considered a general emancipation from various traditional authorities – Nanak instantiated many of these quintessentially modern qualities.

In ways parallel, yet diametrically opposed, to the striking renovations within traditional Sanskrit scholasticism, an equally classic Indic matrix of critique of Vedic ritual and all that it entailed spiritually, socially, and politically could serve as an inexhaustible resource for the kind of rupture that early Sikhism sought to embody. Thus, like the Buddha's critique of Vedic rites and his fostering of reason as an antidote to dogma in ancient times, Nanak's overturning of the brahmanical *Weltanshauung* allowed for the radical reorientation of religious experience on several fronts at once. The amalgam of theory and practice that obtained through Nanak's struggle to radically undermine the brahmanical degradation of lived experience outside the ritual and ascetic domains and general otherworldliness, on the one hand, and to open a political horizon beyond the closely circumscribed sociality of the existing Islamic power established the foundations for an experience of time as deeply historical. Nowhere does this temporal experience attain expression more poignantly than in the third guru's dialectical figuration of the lapse of old times and the regeneration of futurity. Two images capture Guru Amar Das's understanding of the historical moment: the world in conflagration (*jagat jalanda*), on the one hand, and the maintenance of an everlasting springtime (*basant*) through honest this-worldly living, on the other. The interface of these two images pushes *kaliyuga* or the traditional "iron age" into the past and begins anew the cycle of cosmic time, but this time on a more tangible, indeed, secular plane. Whereas his notion of the world on fire is reminiscent of the Buddha's legendary Fire Sermon (Adittapariyaya Sutta), thus demonstrating Sikhism's recourse to a treasure-trove of antinomian tropes for articulating novelty, his image of an epochally regenerative springtime in *kaliyuga* knows no precedent. This new image of newness concentrates within itself the potentials of the age as well as early Sikhism's strategies to actualize them. By examining such strategies and their fruitful interactions with the times, the innovative shifts of early Sikhism come into sharper relief ([4], pp. 48–68).

The most definitive dimension of this modernity is not exclusive to Sikhism. Various lines of Indic intellectual tradition, including early Buddhism (e.g., [5] and [6]) and Charvaka [7], had already plied their energies to formulating the central concept – the formation of an agential subjectivity on the grounds of reason – and this very concept would find powerful European articulations and challenges as well over the centuries of Sikhism's genesis. In northern India, an emergent antinomian critique grounded in reason could very well have been the source of the shake-up of orthodox spiritual hermeneutics and the staid disciplinary taxonomies and modes of argumentation of traditional brahmanical thought, as mentioned above in the case of the new linguistics of Khaunda and Nilakantha. In the generation preceding Nanak's, the voice of Kabir poignantly concentrated the critique of long-standing experiments with reason in the Indian tradition, including the antinomian tantric formations of *vajra* (lightning bolt) and *sahaja* (spontaneity) in the eastern Gangetic plains.

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Go naked if you want,
Put on animal skins.
What does it matter till you see the inward Ram? ([8], p. 50)

With such pithy imperatives and assertive interrogatives, the effort was already underway in Kabir's time to produce a subject on a general scale that could form its own judgments on concrete spiritual and practical matters and no longer be hampered by the submissive acceptance of scriptural authority. The manuscript record, extending several decades after Kabir's death yet proliferating in his name, testifies to the successful, indeed popular, reception of such a critical voice [9].

As will become evident, it was precisely through this turn inward that a rational counterpoint was discovered in subjectivity, opening forth new experiments in the long history of subject formation in India, eventuating, in the case of Sikhism, in state-formation. The question of reason – rather, the possibility of its recovery from a distorting utilitarian logic under Euro-American modernity – lies still at the heart of contemporary debates, political conflicts, and social movements at large (cf., [10–12]). Thus, the practice of translating between India's indigenous or vernacular modernity, coined in Hindi as *deshaja adhunikata* by the prominent critic Purushottam Agrawal in his study of Kabir [9], on the one hand, and roughly contemporaneous and increasingly hegemonic developments of European Enlightenment, on the other, is itself at the heart of struggles seeking to forge postcolonial futures beyond currently reified divisions. Considering the stakes involved, such translation is not necessarily just a scholarly exercise. How to bring into dialogue distillations of reason stemming from such distinctly valenced vernacular contexts and such geographically separated traditions, in spite of the imperial legacy and the nationalist turn, is also to ask what expanse of reason attains clearance across cultures, regardless of the historically objective limitations and the disparity of the efforts involved. As answers to these questions inevitably touch on possibilities of collective political will, it is futurity itself that is at stake for Sikhs as much as any other social grouping of whatever scope.

Nanak's experiments with subject formation bring out the wide potentials of his mixed vernacular milieu. The significance of these experiments is best understood with respect to a large Indian legacy as well as to Nanak's contemporary social and political environment. Being privy to the socially mediating position and overarching perspective of an emergent mercantile order and taking advantage of the political insights made possible by a social context in which money-based commodity exchange ever increasingly motored the economy, Nanak realized the situation was ripening for taking fundamental precepts of the brahmanical heritage and putting them, as it were, on their head. In his articulation of an inner voice of conscience attuned to the possibilities of social harmony based in love and compassion, Nanak elaborated the lines of thought put forth by Kabir in the direction of a self-positing and self-affirming subjectivity based in rational autonomy over against received wisdom and ritualistic convention. What this amounted to was a reworking of the long-standing hieratic notion and position of the guru. For founding texts of post-Vedic or classical Hinduism, such as the Bhagavad-Gita, the fundamental teaching aimed toward the subjective internalization of sacrificial practice in the form of renunciation of worldly attachments and desires. Yet what remains is the external iconic objectivity of Krishna, for instance, as godhead symbolic of transcendent divinity.

Nanak's iconoclastic orientation and his efforts to locate transcendence within mundane immanence led to the abstraction of the guru-concept and its figuration as the internal dialogical principle which, when externalized in actual practice, undoes the hierarchical structure that characterized the received distinction between guru and disciple (*shishya*). That is, in lieu of the antinomy that characterizes the brahmanical understanding of the *guru-shishya* relationship, what Nanak offered was *guru* as a mediating concept between two embodied subjectivities attuned to self-reflexive reason and its possibilities ([4], pp. 121–124). Through this mediating concept, the relationship between guru and disciple could be brought into generative tension, reversed, and ultimately even overcome in the practice of the collective *panth* ([13], p. 137). In a famous yet mysterious work of early modern India, *Dabistan-e Mazahib* (The Religious Orders) ([14], pp. 59–84), in which the followers of Nanak found their distinct place, one observes how brahmanical caste hierarchies were reversed, if not completely ignored by the followers of Nanak altogether. Such a radically egalitarian reconceptualization of the guru-concept emerged as the organic outcome of experiments in subject formation that aimed all at once to undo the debilitating sociocultural logics of caste, the radical individuation

of the subject in soteriological theories and practices, and the location of salvation in an absolute beyond, all of which were part and parcel of classical Hinduism ([3], pp. xxvi–xxxiv).

The social consequences of such dialectically resonant thinking were not lost on Nanak. Indeed, the social or practical dimension of Nanak's program was often indistinguishable from its theoretical or "religious" side. In keeping with his nondualist proclivity, the practical arena – that is, immediate social and material objectivity – could be considered just another field upon which the spiritual force of the guru-concept could be corrected, widened, and enriched. And, in turn, the theoretical domain's autonomy and authentic resources could only be guaranteed by a practical dispensation that was imbued with and oriented by self-possessed contemplation (*vicar*) as its proper telos. Here again the practical and theoretical advances involved overturning and ultimately exiting out of an ontological givenness of classical brahmanical society. Key to grasping the social shift that early Sikhism marked is the long-standing notion of ontological debt stemming from the Vedas. What Nanak did was socialize that idea and, in doing so, makes an advance toward retrieving the rational kernel within the Vedic presupposition of indebtedness to the gods. This occurred most powerfully through a sharp critique of egoistic selfhood (*haumai, man-mukh*) and all of its essential illusoriness through the reconfiguration of the indebtedness of that self to the larger social collectivity upon which it truly depended, materially as well as symbolically. The critique of egoistic behavior, often at the center of Hindu salvific practice, led to the innovation of institutions such as the communal kitchen and other forms of direct service to the wider community, regardless of caste, ethnicity, or confessional background. These practices not only undermined the ground of Hindu salvific practice, oriented generally on the individual self, but the social hierarchies and the taboos that they maintained. In this fashion, one can see that an ancient idiom of indebtedness was modulated in the vernacular into a vehicle for expressing a critique of socially necessary ego-illusion in the dynamism of a money-mediated regime of accumulation.

The consciousness of this kind of social debt is expressed in a language that indexes radically the underlying depths of the societal transformation underway in Nanak's time. The social dispensation that arises through following "[t]he all-wise Being who is Nanak's inner guide," which is how "guru" is understood in the Guru-Granth ([3], p. 28), is one that mitigates the irrational ego of market self-interest as well as the typically individuated soteriological aims of the otherworldly *sannyasi* or yogi in Indic traditions ([15], pp. 135–138). Salvific efficacy is only to be found in the guru's word or name, which together serve as a cure for the illness of ego in mediating general social unity and the self-awareness of that unity. As Christopher Shackle and Arvind-Pal Mandair note, the cure to ego involves a radical socialization of the long-standing spiritual battle with the "five enemies" of lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego, all of which mistakenly restrict the general subject of money-mediated social collectivity within the privative confines of an individually embodied phenomenology. Shackle and Mandair further observe that "[t]his is not a battle *against* the world but a battle to exist-in-the-world as radically interconnected to others" ([3], p. 42) and that in the last instance, "liberation from ego involves a realization that our singularity is punctured by the presence of other existent beings (not simply human beings), a fact which opens the possibility for an ethics and politics based on mind that is ever in a state of balance (*sahaj*)" ([3], p. 42). How far this interlocking set of ideas has departed from the framework of the brahmanical paradigm may be noted by reviewing the keen insights of the French indologist Charles Malamoud on the theology of debt that characterized orthodox thought and ritual. As Malamoud notes, canonical guides to Vedic ritual assert that "[w]hoever exists is born (as) debt. Man is not simply affected by debt, he is defined by it," as in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, or these ritual manuals take for granted that the human condition is "indebted," *rnavan*, as does the *Taittiriya Samhita*. Malamoud conjectures that the etymological obscurity surrounding the term "*rna*" may simply be due to the fact that "[I]n Sanskrit. . .the notion of debt is primary and autonomous, and does not allow a further analysis" ([16], p. 95). Nanak's program was nothing less than a re-grounding of such an axiomatic condition upon its proper social plane, a move made possible in all likelihood by the new social developments, and the privileged vantage point of the merchant order with respect to them. In this way, early Sikhism is expressive of a vernacular reason breaking with classical traditions and finding fertile territory upon a dynamic field of commercial activity and political possibility.

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Such a field was relatively agreeable for the unfolding of early Sikhism's rational civil theology [15]. Sikhism thus pointed to the possibilities of spontaneous collective growth that led beyond the confines of religious dogmatism and its practical normativity.

Colonial Contradictions of Enlightenment

Nanak's followers are described in the famous *Dabistan-e Mazahib* in the seventeenth century as "abstemious, soft-spoken, men of ecstatic delight in the contemplation of God" whose "essential worship consists in the study of their *murshid*'s verses which they also recite melodiously in pleasing tunes, using musical instruments." In the eyes of these *Nanak-panthis* notes the mysterious author of the *Dabistan*, "kinsmen and strangers, friends and foes, are all alike," and that much of their orientation is toward the other as a way to experience the self in God: "In their *murshid*'s name, which is constantly on their lips, they serve the wayfarers, regarding it a way of worshipping God" ([17], pp. 24–25). Such descriptions may strike one as befitting an ecumenical social order that wished to embody the wide-reaching rational ethic that emerged organically with the emergent market-mediated sociality of the early modern world. Yet such accounts do raise questions as to how such a quiescent civil-rational body within the Mughal imperium got transformed into a besieged political community fighting for autonomy against the eroding Mughal powers as well as an encroaching British imperial presence. How, in other words, did Sikhism go from being a critique of one-sided or otherworldly religiosity and its practical overturning into an instantiation of religion in its generally reified, that is, affirmative form? While the conditions under which a structural transformation of the religious sphere took place in India were modern, that is, in the metropolitan sense, it must be understood that the colonial mediation of metropolitan hegemony meant a significant departure for Sikhism from the vernacular modernity of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Shackle has described this as a "shift from previous Indic patterns of highly permeable community boundaries to the operations of Western 'either/or' notions" ([18], p. 75). In an analysis of Sikh reformers' response to Ernst Trump's controversial translation of the Guru-Granth into English for colonial authorities, Mandair sees an equivalence being struck between the colonial idiom and indigenous concepts. Mandair understands the consequence of "imposing structures of transcendence into the exegesis of Sikh scripture" as a process of "de-ontologization" ([19], p. 30). For Harjot Oberoi, the construction of Sikhism's boundaries in the colonial period hinged upon the adoption of a notion of religion "as a systematized sociological unit claiming unbridled loyalty from its adherents and opposing an amorphous religious imagination" at distinct levels of the colonial order ([20], p. 17). While a full reconstruction of the history that brought about these transformations is beyond the scope of this entry, the particular historical logic by which the imposition (or dialectic) of "Enlightenment" in the colony led to the undoing of Sikhism's vernacular modernity must be specified. An analysis of Sikhism's struggle for dignity, autonomy, and power within the crucible of the state since early modernity can bring to light how participation within the spiritual field inevitably involved encounters with secular authorities and worldly necessity. What must be traced is the way Sikh spiritual and political action within the structures of the modern state brought transformations and innovations into the spiritual field itself – what must be traced, in other words, is the reflexive impact that encounters with the categories of the state produced, and the kinds of predicaments the pre-political spiritual inheritance of Sikhism has experienced on account of such transformations. It has become unclear how one ought to keep to the word of the gurus just when the imperative to maintain fidelity to such alternative traditions of modernity becomes all the more acute.

It is likely that the institutional form that Sikhism adopted from the period of Nanak's Kartarpur commune came to partake in striking ways in the widespread state-like innovations of the early modern period. Distinguishing itself from a wide amalgam of spiritual systems through regular practices and collective cultivation of the guru's message, Nanak's path ultimately evolved into an autonomous institution that was upheld by the successive custodianship of nine gurus, culminating in a radical break with Mughal authority and the forging of an autonomous polity in early eighteenth-century Punjab. The fact that an institutional pattern slowly took hold from the days of the founding guru and could evolve despite the changing of the guard and the shifting relations between the emergent institutions of Sikhism, on the one hand,

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and the stronger and much vaster Mughal empire, on the other, attests to the stabilization and quasi-impersonal regularization of state-like structures during these centuries. These structures may themselves be seen as the product of all the contests for power within the vicissitudes of Mughal imperial authority: if one wanted to assert political control, one must hold together the institutions of government and means of coercion and be able to organize and preserve order among political communities in such way as to claim the loyalty of subjects in times of crisis [21]. It is just these criteria that the founding of the Khalsa dramatically fulfills in 1699.

Yet the politicization of Sikhism can be thought of as having begun at least a century earlier when, in 1598, the Mughal emperor Akbar crossed the River Beas to visit Guru Arjan. "The fresh luster" that the house of Guru Arjan received "through His Majesty alighting there" meant that the growing social and political influence of Sikh institutions, especially their capacity to collect revenue, would no longer be politically negligible for the Mughals ([14], p. 55). From this initial contact with a dominant state-formation, Sikhism was destined to work out its spiritual inheritance through ever more sharply defined political and social forms. The strategies that Sikhs took up were in part determined by the strengths and weaknesses of the Mughal state, but what needs special attention is the way such outwardly focused strategies redounded back into the Sikh fold, how, in other words, the forms of Mughal and wider Islamic political practices, such as capital punishment (*siyasat*) and martyrdom (*shahidat*), got reflected into Sikh selfhood. With the martyrdom of Guru Arjan in 1606 and the transfer of custodianship of the Sikhs to his son Hargobind, the community began developing its political resources to protect itself from further persecution under the Mughals. Guru Hargobind came of age cultivating the temporal dimensions immanent to Sikhism from the time of Nanak, especially the idea of living-in-death as the substance of ethical existence and the ecstatic forms of subjectivity meant to breakdown dualisms of self and other or life and death. To the sword of spirituality, Hargobind combined the sword of political power; to the serene otherworldliness of the Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, he erected the Akal Takht for organizing this-worldly affairs; and alongside revenue in coin and kind, he called for armed men ready to test their valor against a formidable enemy. The process of politicization would continue through the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur and culminate in the founding of the Khalsa in 1699 under Guru Gobind and the articulation of a Sikh state over the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. The elaboration of an autonomous Sikh polity involved the adaptation of Perso-Islamic and classically Indic forms of legitimation and governance. Though much of the administrative structure of the Mughals was incorporated into the Sikh state such as that of Ranjit Singh, the ruling elite was highly composite. And though "Sikhs were represented in a larger proportion in the civil administration and the army than the individuals belonging to other religious communities, . . there was no discrimination in principle" ([22], pp. 91–92). In her recent account of military mobilization under the Khalsa banner in the eighteenth-century Punjab, Purnima Dhavan observes that the "mobility of the military labor that Sikh peasants offered to Khalsa armies and their insistence on respectful treatment as fellow Sikhs meant that Khalsa armies could never function in the more hierarchical fashion of Mughal regiments or the Rajput forces of the period" ([23], p. 10). Such innovative transformations of existing institutions suggest that the idea of Sikhism as an alternative (*tisar panth*) to Hindu and Islamic legacies was neither accidental nor merely imaginary over the slow fragmentation of the Mughal empire. The institutional developments help explain the relative ease by which Ranjit Singh was able to reorganize his military forces along modern European lines and prolong his independence before an advancing British empire.

Whereas the Mughal state served as a catalyst for Sikhism's evolution as a political phenomenon and eventually a state-formation autonomous enough to elaborate its spiritual reason, the experience under colonial and postcolonial regimes in the subcontinent and beyond has ultimately posed several challenges to the possibility of extending the very vernacular modernity early Sikhism cultivated. The colonial side of metropolitan modernity was visited upon the subcontinent through the agency initially of the East India Company. Overtaking the remaining Sikh state left by Ranjit Singh in the Punjab in 1849, British rule was further consolidated with the liquidation of the East India Company and the establishment of crown rule after the Mutiny of 1857. As Prakash Tandon's family memoir *Punjabi Century* details, colonial state power worked its way deeply into social and cultural life, in

ways intended and unintended, ultimately bequeathing to the new nation states of India and Pakistan, a political state apparatus able to interfere bureaucratically in matters such as love and marriage, matters which in recent memory had been left to the adjudication of smaller, more local, and improvisational political bodies [24]. The penetration of metropolitan capitalist social relations into the colonial hinterland, into domestic space, into the fabric of religious communities, and into spiritual practices themselves was slow, uneven, and yet could have jolting effects. To grasp what kinds of potentials lay implicit within colonial modernity, what sorts of reversals of metropolitan Enlightenment were unfolding in the colonial realm, it is important to hold together both the social and political dynamics India's incorporation into the world market was producing, on the one hand, and the styles of colonial governance meant to manage and control these very dynamics, on the other. The contradictions that characterized colonial rule were often the very contradictions through which different religious communities in India found themselves. In the Sikh context, this meant entering into a contest with British domination all the while appropriating and adapting the reigning categories and modalities of colonial power.

The British annexation of Punjab provoked the last assertion of vernacular Sikh sovereignty in the seditious activity of Namdhari Sikhs. The quick and brutal suppression of the Namdhari movement in 1872 established firmly the ground for the direct interface of Sikhism with the modality of metropolitan Enlightenment ([25], pp. 127–135; [26], pp. 90–95). Enlightenment in colonial Punjab took hold in a myriad ways, and its power was evident as much through scientific mastery as through military might, as much through new media as through the new ways of imagining and constructing the world that they facilitated. As Bernard Cohn observed in his seminal work on the colonial census, the bureaucratic categories the colonial power deployed for its governmental purposes transformed decisively the manner in which Indian subjects imagined themselves, their methods of political mobilization, and the agendas that they now pursued ([27], cf. [28]). Enlightenment asserted itself in the colonial milieu by making virtually mandatory engagement with the technologies, terms, and methods imported or developed by the colonial power. The new terrain of political conflict that these generated brought out new contradictions: the Singh Sabha and the Tat Khalsa, two organizations that competed to return Sikhism to its putative original purity were doing so in the ill-conducive media of the new milieu, and the scientific procedures that these organizations' intellectual leaders promoted threatened to problematize the very origins that they wished to secure for their faith, including received wisdom about the provenance of scripture ([18], pp. 76–78; cf. [22], pp. 261–286). The new practices departed from the old as much as telegraph adopted by the agencies of Sikh reformism differed from the small army of foot messengers that the Namdharis had employed as recently as a couple of decades earlier to spread the prophecy of a return of Sikh sovereignty. That sovereignty and whatever historical logic it embodied was curtailed and rendered virtually irremediable by the colonial dispensation.

The most transformative and lasting impact that the colonial milieu had on Sikhism's political inheritance can best be illustrated through an analysis of the implications of the colonial census. The colonial officials' claim to merely mirror the Indian reality that stood alien before them in the categories of the census disavowed modernity's propensity toward domination and the reduction of the world's manifold diversity into manageable units through useful classificatory schemes (cf. [12], pp. 1–34, 137–172). The perpetuation of census claims to simply reflect what was given equally disavowed the transformative effect that the census information and the wider governmental apparatus would have on Indian subjects themselves. Key in this respect was the manner in which religious categories were deployed: mutually alienating, they rent asunder long-standing traditions of intercommunal borrowing; abstracting, they concretized the force of Western conceptions of religious being by making each community have to conjure from within, and even invent if necessary, the discursive, practical, communal, and institutional norms of its Western counterparts to qualify as a politically applicable religion ([29], pp. 1–18); politicizing, the census categories pitted one community against the other, providing measures for the institutional clout of one at the potential cost of the other. The unintended result of these zero-sum games of communal politics in late colonial India was often the emptying of the spiritual content of these traditions or, what may simply be another way of saying the same thing, rendering such content virtually indistinguishable from the political agendas of the competing communities. And thus, the

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dual impact of colonial power obtains: internally, the agents of religious reform had to make their traditions commensurate as much as possible with the classificatory schemes imposed from without, and this could happen at the cost of the valences and potentialities of these traditions which remained stubbornly incongruent to the presuppositions of colonial modernity (such as the rational-critical dimensions of Sikhism); externally, once religion was inseparable from political calculation, reformers risked instrumentalizing the very spiritual inheritance that had shunned or turned away from such worldly utilitarianism, and thus betraying exactly what they purported to stand for.

The predicament in which the colonial dispensation delivered the Sikh community was that of an official minority everywhere they are to be found today, with all of the political disadvantage that this status entails. The precariousness of being vulnerable to an often hostile majority population has been matched only by the inability to secure autonomous spaces for recovering precolonial legacies and allowing the sociopolitical dimensions immanent in those legacies to attain expression within the evolving contexts. Endeavors along these lines have proven politically and spiritually fraught, whether at the level of establishing an autonomous Sikh state in the subcontinent or at the level of securing rights as a religious group in diasporic contexts.

Cross-References

- ▶ Colonialism
- ▶ Ranjit Singh
- ▶ Sikhism
- ▶ Sikhism and Empire

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