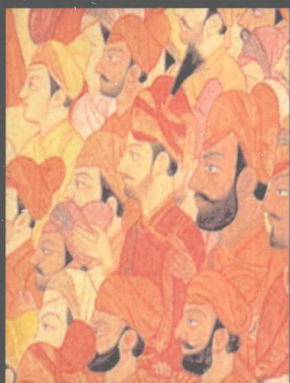


A Sea of Orange



Writings on the Sikhs and India
by Cynthia Mahmood



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Writings on the Sikhs and India

CYNTHIA MAHMOOD

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Library of Congress Number:	2001118570
ISBN #:	Hardcover 1-4010-2857-8
	Softcover 1-4010-2856-X

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Preface

The orange here is saffron, really – the saffron color of the turbans worn by Sikhs who at this point in history choose the radical political stance of Khalistani separatism. Whether massed on the Mall in Washington, in Hyde Park or Downing Street in London, in front of the United Nations in New York, or on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, crowds of protesting Sikhs do indeed resemble the “sea of orange” described by a Sikh journalist I knew, years ago.

Today the Sikh community has spread far beyond its homeland in Punjab, India, and exists in diaspora across the world. The expansion of the diaspora and the elevation of the demand for an independent Sikh state of Khalistan have occurred in tandem, a concurrency we have seen in other ethno- or religio- nationalisms as well. This is a conjoining that calls into question traditional understandings of nations and nation-states and sovereign territories (Basch, Schiller and Blanc 1994) . Indeed, in the sphere of religion prominent scholars have paired the notion of “transnational religion” directly with “fading states” in a well-known collection by that name (Rudolph and Pescatori 1997). The jury is not yet in as to what will happen to the nation-state as the primary entity of human organization and global communication of our time. But there is no doubt that the upheavals surrounding ethnic, religious and national identities today demand study.

Although commentators have noted that the nature of warfare has dramatically changed over the past century (van Creveld 1991), overall levels of bloodshed in the world have unfortunately not decreased. This

fact makes the new shape of our world an arena not only for study but for action as well. Coincidentally, the academic fields that comprise the Western academy are also newly challenged to be “relevant” by a postcolonial clientele that largely rejects ivory-tower neutrality in favor of moral advocacy. In anthropology, both of these sea changes – toward a decentering of the state as the global actor of importance and toward an academics of praxis that puts the people we study at the center of our work – have utterly transformed our discipline.

Attempting to get beyond the drama of the tangerine oceans and umber rivers of radical Sikh activists – so stunning in their visual impact! – the anthropologist of the Sikhs must forego the almost aesthetic pleasure of ethnographic dazzle, instead getting to know from within who these people are and what it is that they so vociferously want. That is the task in which I have been engaged for the past decade, whose fruits are reproduced here in the form of ten essays about the Sikhs, the civilizational complex in which they swim, and the ethical issues of rights and responsibilities that arise when we look at aggrieved minorities in powerful states.

The first section of this book takes as its starting point Clifford Geertz’s admonition that as anthropologists we choose not to exoticize nor familiarize our subjects, but to try to understand them as they are. As he eloquently puts it, neither to domesticate nor to demonize dragons, but to face them head on (Geertz 1984). Here I include three essays in which I attempt to do just that vis-à-vis Khalistani militants. As many readers will know, I have done this more elaborately in my 1996 volume, *Fighting for Faith and Nation*. I refer readers interested in pursuing this further to that book.

In the second section here, I turn to the larger complex called “India” (both a state and a civilization) to turn the burden of understanding from the restless Sikh minority to the powerful Hindu majority. It is important that we make this shift, as a paradigm that begs explanation from dissenters but accepts as given the order against which they dissent is inherently inaccurate in its one-sidedness and unfair in its political and moral implications.

Finally, in the final section of this volume I include articles and

speeches involving the praxis side of anthropological labor in fields of violence: issues of human rights, of violence, its perpetrators and survivors.

This collection could not have been put together without the help of Domonic Potorti, my student assistant at the University of Maine, and Ann Gurucharri, my student assistant at the University of Notre Dame. Andre Ratasepp provided invaluable help with computer technique and cover design.

My sincere appreciation also goes to the journals in which these chapters originally appeared and to the hosts of the conferences in which the two speeches were originally given. The venue of each is listed at the end of each chapter in this volume. Minor editing changes have been made in the interests of consistency throughout the volume.

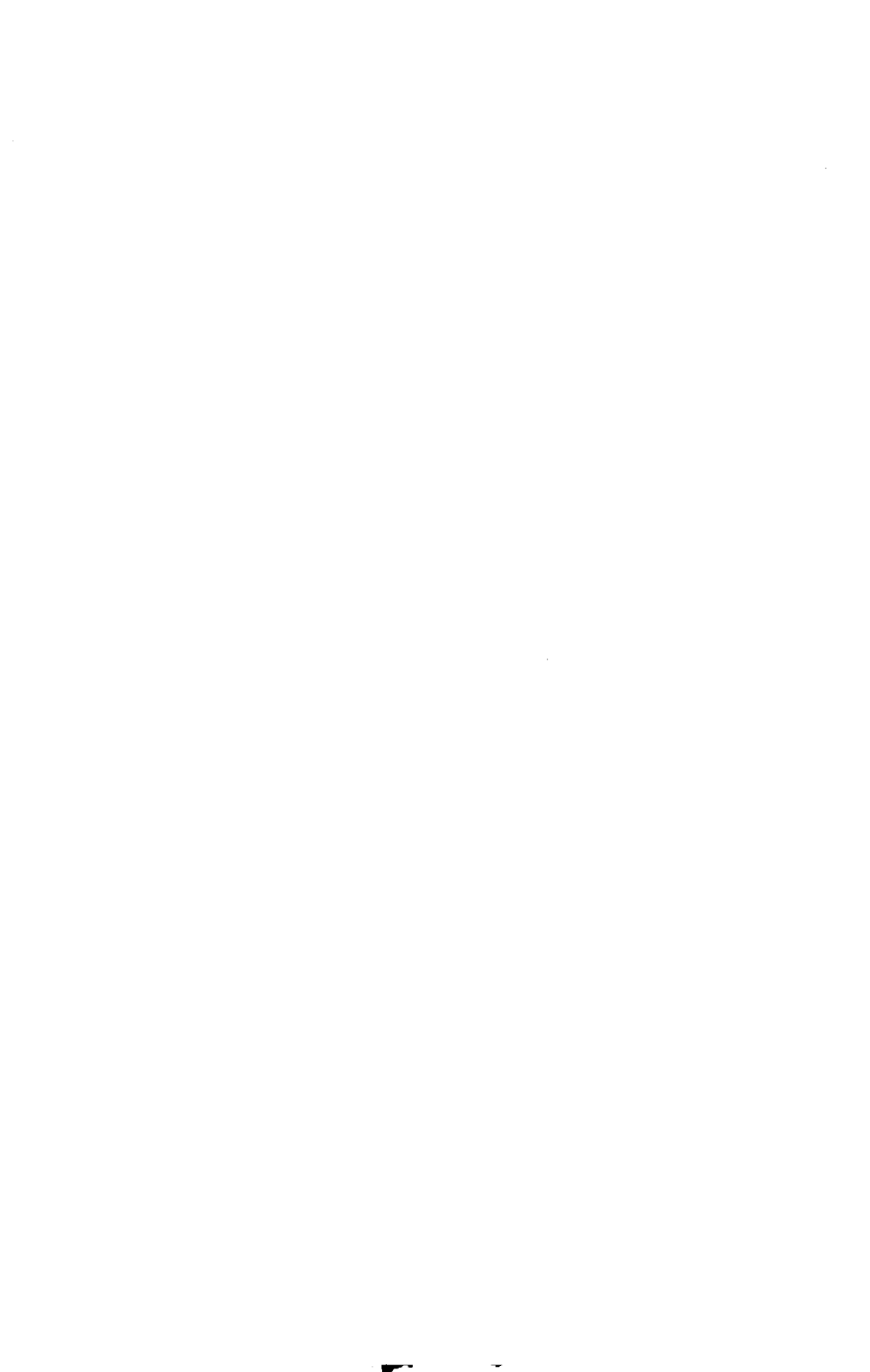
Most importantly, I offer my gratitude to the many Sikh men and women who have given me love, support and respect over the many years of our association. Their friendship remains the solid rock behind the ups and downs of controversy, denigration and acclaim that swirl round when academic work cuts fresh channels and plots new courses. In the eddies of this maelstrom I have found some of the most beautiful and peaceful moments of companionship I have ever experienced. Thank you for those.

Of course, all mistakes and deficiencies in this collection of writings are entirely my own. None other should be held responsible.

Sat Sri Akal—Truth is Highest.

Cynthia Mahmood
July, 2001

I. Facing Our Dragons



Chapter One

WHY SIKHS FIGHT

Sikh separatists in Punjab, India have been fighting for an independent state called Khalistan for the past ten years. The commitment of a section of the Sikh population to armed struggle draws on Sikh religious tradition, which provides for a militant siblinghood whose duty it is to defend the faith and the community at all costs, and which celebrates the sword as its most significant religious symbol. The valorization of death in battle expressed in Sikh religious literature is carried through to the present struggle, in which martyrdom on behalf of Khalistan is a central theme of separatist discourse. The appropriateness of using violence to achieve political goals, while controversial in the wider Sikh community, likewise has a lengthy historical pedigree and is heartily defended in militant circles.

For an ethnographer interested in the hermeneutics of violence, the Sikh case is particularly intriguing. While there are many examples of religious communities which proclaim pacifism but regularly engage in war, and others which accept the necessity for physical defense but theorize little about it, the Sikh tradition stands virtually alone in its elaborate and explicit theology of violence. As Juergensmeyer points out in *The New Cold War: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular*

State (1993), the conflation of religion and politics is a central fact of our time, and it is clearly those cases in which this conflation leads to violent conflict that are of the most urgent interest. Anthropology is in a particularly good position to make sense of this intertwining of faith and power, so alien to many in the secular West. Our entire professional tradition rests on our ability to apprehend difference and to make sense of it in terms that both sides of a cultural gulf can understand.

Based on extensive interviews with separatist Sikhs and their families, I provide here an interpretation of violence in the Khalistani Sikh community, attempting to comprehend not only the aspect of this violence centering on political opposition to the state, but also to consider the more philosophical side of what militancy means to Sikhs as spiritual beings. The struggle for Khalistan is indeed a resistance movement against the perceived injustices of the Indian state and a political movement aimed at sovereign rule, but it also provides an existentially meaningful way to be a Sikh and a human being independent of instrumental political goals. Though most scholars of Punjab focus on the former, more easily comprehensible, part of this equation, I believe that we neglect the latter aspect, experientially central to many of those involved in the conflict, at our peril. That policies aimed at the resolution of conflicts such as this one which fail to recognize the radically different premises on which religious militants operate rarely succeed should be no surprise to anthropologists, who have long bemoaned the inefficacy of development plans which neglect indigenous realities, the unenforceability of laws which do not take cultural traditions into account, and the minimal viability of treaties based on external conceptions of political order.

In this chapter I first describe the development of the Sikh ethos in which spiritual and temporal order are closely interrelated, and go on to review the events which led to the current insurgency. I then consider what participation in acts of violence means to Khalistani Sikhs today. Finally, I comment briefly on what role ethnography has to play in the study of intergroup conflict.

The Development of the Saint-Soldier

Sikhism is the youngest of the major world religions. The founder of the faith, Guru Nanak, was born in 1469 in what is now Pakistani Punjab. While orthodox Sikhs believe that Nanak's message was totally new and divinely inspired, Western scholars point to elements of both Hinduism and Islam in his teachings (e.g. McLeod 1989). It is certainly clear that Nanak rejected much of what he observed in both religious communities, focusing particularly on the empty ritualism which he saw as an impediment to true spiritual understanding. He founded a community which would eventually comprise about 2% of the population of India and count some twenty million members worldwide.

In his many travels through the subcontinent and beyond, Nanak gathered disciples or *sikhs*. To them he emphasized the importance of meditation on a unitary divine spirit and on rightful living in this world. In direct contrast to the surrounding Hindus, the Sikh community ignored (at least in theory) caste distinctions, breaking one of the most sacrosanct caste taboos on interdining by eating together in a community kitchen. The temples or *gurdwaras* in which Sikhs congregate were likewise open to all, and women and men were (at least in theory) to be fully equal.

After Nanak's death the Guruship passed to a loyal disciple, and has been passed down from one to the other through a series of ten Gurus. Among the ten "Masters" of Sikhism, there are three of particular interest here. Guru Arjun, the fifth Guru, was not only the compiler of the scriptures which would become in their final form the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs, but he was also the first to be martyred for the Sikh faith. Through hideous tortures by the Mughal emperor Jehangir, Guru Arjun is believed to have remained in a state of bliss through his communion with the divine. "The Guru remained unruffled," and "The Guru was as calm as the sea" are some of the descriptions given of his attitude under torture in Sikh tradition. This state of spiritual grace, overshadowing the insults being perpetrated on the body, is represented in Sikh religious art, poetry, and song, and is the foundation on which an elaborate tradition of martyrdom devel-

oped. “The true test of faith is the hour of misery,” said Guru Arjun, in a phrase of particular moment to many Sikhs today. Portraits of this first martyr adorn the walls of the homes of Sikhs who have attained political asylum overseas after having suffered similar tortures in today’s Punjab.

The sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind (1595-1644), is key to understanding another important strand of the Sikh martial tradition. Recognizing the persecution faced by the growing Sikh community, Hargobind was the first to take up arms in defense of the faith. The double swords of Guru Hargobind, which today form part of the emblem of Khalistan, represent the complementarity of spiritual and temporal power (called *miri* and *piri* in Sikhism). Though there has been some tendency among Western scholars to portray the evolution of Sikhism from Guru Nanak through Guru Hargobind as a move from pacifism to militancy, a counter-scholarship has emerged from within the Sikh community tracing the roots of the *miri-piri* doctrine all the way back to the founder. That Guru Hargobind made explicit a commitment to worldly affairs central to Sikh tradition and established the key symbolism of the double swords is undoubted.

It is important to the contemporary militant conception of “the just war” (*dharm-yudh*) that it be recognized that while Hargobind was a valiant fighter, his battles were entirely defensive in nature; “not an inch of territory was gained.” Hargobind also initiated a tradition of mercy (“those who repent shall be pardoned”) extended even in the current tumultuous times, in which several key figures in the crackdown against the militants have petitioned the highest Sikh authority for pardon and been granted the performance of penances (a way of re-including them in the Sikh community). Hargobind also supplemented the symbol of the sword, to defend the weak, with that of the kettle, to feed the hungry. “Kettle-Sword-Victory” (*Deg Teg Fateh*) is a Sikh motto that remains popular in the militant community. The image of immigrant Sikhs feeding the homeless in the wake of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles complements perfectly the picture of the Sikh “freedom fighter” with assault rifle in hand, in the indigenous understanding.

The tenth and last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708), took