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THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ETHNIC MAPPING

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Introduction

What has been euphemistically termed the 'global ethnic explosion' has generated a huge quantity of literature on the causes and the consequences of politics that are practised in an ethnic mode.[1] In general, theorists agree that ethnic identities are not a 'given', nor are they the reason for a particular kind of politics. The evocation of ethnic identity in politics needs to be explained in terms of factors other than ethnicity or culture in themselves. The politicisation of ethnic identities is not a cause but a consequence of many other things: for instance political, social and economic discrimination, or the search for emotional shelter in a homeless modern world. However, most accounts have underplayed or ignored the way that ethnic identities are constituted and legitimised through the practices of modern states, themselves embedded in ethnic categories. Such states not only privilege certain ethnic groups and discriminate against others. They also recognise their citizens as members of a particular ethnic group; map their populations according to ethnic categories (religion, caste, language and region); and in some cases grant entitlement to certain collective goods according to group identity.[2] I will suggest in this essay that state practices of ethnic mapping in some cases initiate and in other cases intensify the politicisation of ethnicity.

This is not to deny the role of political/cultural entrepreneurs in these matters; after all their self-styled business is to excavate and bring to the forefront of individual consciousness loyalties to the group; loyalties that otherwise may lie in the purely subterranean realms of individual awareness. Admittedly, identities are politicised in and through a set of complex transactions between the state and organisations (particularly their leaderships) in civil society. What we need to recognise is the centrality of the modern state to individual and collective projects of citizens in civil society; and one of the ways in which the state influences politics in civil society is through practices that connect ethnic mapping with collective goods. That all this prompts people to think of themselves as members of an ethnic group more, and as individual citizens of a liberal democratic state less, is not surprising.

The reason why postcolonial states such as India practice politics in the ethnic mode has to do with historical legacies: (a) the way in which the colonial state institutionalised ethnic mapping and group representation; (b) the politics of the freedom movement that forged a

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[1] I am personally uneasy with the term ethnicity for it obfuscates much of the specificity of struggles that may be based on radically different principles or identities. These struggles may be based on language as in the case of Sri Lanka or erstwhile East Pakistan, sectarian differences as for instance the conflict between Shias and Sunnis in Pakistan, religion as in the case of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India, or the tribal versus non-tribal conflict as in the case of the North East of India. The case of the struggle in Punjab can strictly be seen as an ethno-regional movement. In an ethno-regional movement, the leadership of the dominant groups puts forth a case for autonomy or even secession on the ground of claims to distinctiveness. In this essay, however, I employ the concept 'ethnicity' as it is used in contemporary literature: as a catchall term to capture the politicisation of group identity, no matter how constructed that identity may be.
[2] Usually collective goods refer to goods that are indivisible and that therefore pertain to the entire population living in a particular territory (for instance, a clean environment); here collective goods are goods that are available to individuals in their capacity as members of an ascriptive group.

gigantic coalition between groups; and (c) the manner in which the leadership of the movement balanced one group demand against another. Matters become somewhat more complicated in a complex society like India, where certain castes are associated with specific professions, and consequently with the formation of specific identity/interest groups. For instance, the Jat Sikh community in Punjab,[3] or the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas in Karnataka largely constitute the landed peasantry in their respective states. It is of some interest that it is precisely these castes, which have led the movement for separate linguistic states within the Indian federation.[4]

Whatever the historical or sociological compulsions might be for the embeddedness of state practices in ethnic categories, the implications of ethnic mapping are not slight. Firstly, such mapping often prompts, and in other cases buttresses, the production of the ethnic bond, which often comes to dominate the political imagination of its members over other bonds of solidarity such as class.[5] This is not to say that members of every group think of themselves as belonging to only one identity group out of the many that are available in a modern and complex society. However, the ethnic bond greatly circumscribes the range of political options that are available to individuals. Since politics unfortunately is based on the silence of majorities, leaderships that may well represent only a minority in the group are necessarily both articulate and forceful and it is their voices that become politically significant.

Secondly, the fact that only groups are entitled to certain collective goods – for instance, where individuals can take advantage of reservations (entitlements) in educational institutions and government jobs only if they privilege their identity as backward or scheduled castes and tribes – boosts competition between groups. In India, the link between collective goods and community has led to the discovery of new identities and the resultant proliferation of groups, each of which hastens to claim collective goods. Amidst all this rivalry the state acquires a great deal of power as the arbiter of competitive ethnic politics.

Thirdly, generally some groups win and others lose out. Since the state plays such a large role in rewarding some groups and denying entitlements to others, it is not surprising that members of the latter category tend to interpret their losses in terms of generic discrimination against the group. Perceptions of discrimination on grounds of identity lend grist to the ethnic mill.

This essay explores the unfolding of these dynamics in the context of the formation of linguistic states within the Indian Union in the 1950s and the 1960s, with special reference to the case of Punjab. I argue that these dynamics reinforced and intensified perceptions of ethnic discrimination, memories of which fed into agitation for state autonomy or separatism, in the period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

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[3] The non-Jat Sikhs and the Hindus belonging to the Khatri, Arora, and the Bania castes in Punjab have been largely if not wholly based in urban professions of trade and the service sector.

[4] The phenomenon of overlapping caste and professional/interest groups has generated its own trajectories.

[5] Why individuals privilege the ethnic bond over other bonds of solidarity such as gender and class is the subject matter of an intense debate. A number of reasons have been offered to explain this phenomenon: that individuals in their search for emotional security naturally gravitate towards those who they consider their own, to the suggestion that political mobilisation along the lines of ethnicity entails lower transactional costs.

The Case of Punjab

The separatist movement in Punjab has challenged many of the accepted explanations of ethno-nationalism, notably the posited link between underdevelopment and political discontent. Ever since the green revolution in agriculture took off in the state in the mid-1960s, Punjab has witnessed unprecedented prosperity, the likes of which are not seen in many of the constituent states of the Indian federation. Between 1964-65 and 1977-78, the state trebled its output of food grains, which rose from 3.4 million tonnes to 10.3 million tonnes. During this entire period, Punjab had the highest per capita income in the country. Although the state dropped to the fourth place by the 1990s, per capita income has remained relatively high. In 1985-86, the per capita income of Punjab was Rs 4578, when the all India average was Rs 2739.[6] By 1990-91, per capita income had risen to Rs 8423, compared with Rs 4964.[7] Increasing productivity and high incomes transformed the social landscape as well. Despite the fact that the agricultural revolution did not benefit everyone equally, not only did the average Punjabi farmer became more affluent, high returns from agriculture dictated that people joined the farming sector in preference to other opportunities in the professions and in industry. Moreover, compared to other minorities in India, the Sikh community, which constitutes about two percent of the total national population, is disproportionately represented in the bureaucracy, army, police, paramilitary, professions, national politics and industry.[8]

Yet between 1984 and 1992 Punjab was wracked by intense violence caused by armed militancy on the one hand, and the operations of the security forces on the other, all of which resulted in thousands of civilian deaths, massive violation of civil liberties, and the imposition of draconian legislation. The unrest was to lead to the assassination of one prime minister, anti-Sikh riots that following the assassination resulted in hundreds of deaths of Sikhs and displacements of Sikh families in the city of Delhi alone, near civil war conditions, and threats of secession.

Most explanations of the crisis followed the well-trodden paths of political economy on the one hand and cultural determinism on the other. Robin Jeffrey suggested that the 'Punjab problem' was the outcome of rapid and uncontrolled modernisation, which had been unleashed on the state following the revolution in agriculture in 1965. Urbanisation and the disintegration of village communities, consumerism, mass literacy, and the emergence of mass society both intensified expectations and generated discontent among those who failed to benefit from the gains of the green revolution:

> The 23 percent of families who own two-thirds of the land in Punjab face the problem of controlling and channelling the sense of deprivation that arises in poorer peasants and the landless…One way to deal with the problem is to encourage a religious fundamentalism in which all believers are invited to share equally.[9]

In other words, since the green revolution in the state brought prosperity only to some and impoverishment for many, generalised feelings of alienation, rootlessness, and increasing unemployment created a fertile ground for the rise of messianic sentiments. Even as social change outstripped the capacity of political institutions to channel the consequences of such

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[6] Using 1970-71 as base year. *Statistical Abstracts Punjab*, Delhi, Central Statistical Office, 1974-93.
[7] *Statistical Abstracts Punjab,* CSO.
[8] Shinder Purewal, *Sikh Ethnonationalism and the Political Economy of Punjab*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, p.1.
[9] Robin Jeffrey, *What's Happening to India?* Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1986, p.33.

changes, politicians 'adrift on the sea of mass politics' launched a desperate game to contain unrest by employing the religious idiom. The use of the religious idiom to gloss over class schisms within the Sikh community led to religious fundamentalism.

For most scholars the initial euphoria that the green revolution had brought unprecedented prosperity to the state was succeeded by the more sobering realisation that the agrarian revolution had also unleashed a number of developments that were to prove counter-productive. The rapid increase in rural capital formation, peasant differentiation, and the emergence of a class of capitalist farmers, meant that the interests of the rich farming class came to conflict with the urban bourgeoisie on the one hand, and with the interests of the poor peasantry and agricultural labour on the other. That each of these classes belong to a different caste or religion (the rich peasantry belongs to the Jat Sikh community, the landless peasant and agricultural labourers belong to the scheduled castes – the Mazbi Sikhs and the Ram Garhias – and the Hindu Khatris control urban based trade and professions, with the Sikh Khatris occupying a subordinate position) intensified tensions between communities.

"Agriculture and trade", wrote Harish Puri in 1983, "are evidently very much linked with each other":

> During the last fifteen years or so, this link has grown much stronger in the wake of modernisation of agriculture and most of the inputs and outputs of agriculturalists in the rural areas have to pass through traders in urban areas. It results in a clash of economic interests between the dominant castes in the two religious categories.[10]

And Victor D'Souza suggested that the Sikh trading castes who are subordinate to the Hindu traders in the urban areas, find in religious symbols the only way of defending their trade interests.[11]

In a similar vein, S. S. Gill and K. C. Singhal located the basis of the problem in history, in the clash of interests between the Jat Sikh peasantry and the Hindu (and before Partition the Muslim) trader and moneylender. After the introduction of the green revolution, agricultural production became highly dependent on the market, which is controlled by the Hindus. As a result, the interests of the Jat Sikh peasantry, which was looking for cheaper inputs and higher prices for agricultural production, clashed with that of traders and the industrial monopolies that produce inputs such as chemical fertilisers. The Akali Dal, which represents mainly the Jat farmers, was to manipulate precisely these sentiments of antagonism in order to maintain its dominance over the Sikh community.[12] Purewal is more direct and hard hitting in his attack on religious fundamentalism. Suggesting that cultural identity is a mere ploy and that the kulak farmers under the leadership of the Akali Dal were actually engaged in pursuing their own economic interests, Purewal argued that the specific form of ethno-nationalism that emerged in the 1980s cannot be de-linked from capitalist development in the state, and from the workings of national and international capital. The essence of Sikh ethno-nationalism can

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[10] Harish K. Puri, 'The Akali Agitation: An Analysis of Socio-Economic Bases of Protest', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 January 1983, p.116.

[11] Victor D'Souza, 'Economy, Caste, Religion, and Population Distribution: An Analysis of Communal Tension in Punjab', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 8 May 1982, pp.783-792.

[12] Sucha Singh Gill & K. C. Singhal, 'The Punjab Problem: Its Historical Roots', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7 April 1984, pp.603-608.

be understood only in the context of the struggle for primacy between agricultural and industrial capital.[13]

Along the culturalist axis, Paul Brass, employing an instrumentalist argument, suggested that the dynamics of elite competition for economic and political advantages lead to the politicisation of ethnicity in Punjab. The Sikh elites appropriated historical symbols derived from the Sikh kingdoms in the Pre-British period, religious symbols that demarcate the boundaries between the Hindus and the Sikhs in modern Punjab, and linguistic symbols that distinguish the language Punjabi, which is otherwise common to both Sikhs and Hindus, on the basis of scripts.[14] Brass argued that leaders found the ethnic card useful simply because it served to mobilise people behind projects that were really about access to material and political resources. In the instrumentalist framework, ethnicity is politically meaningful only because it possesses a strategic advantage over other identities when it comes to political mobilisation.

Among other scholars who subscribe to cultural determinism, Sikh ethno-nationalism is seen as a reaction to Hindu majoritarianism,[15] as a reflexive mechanism to protect a culturally homogenous minority from the hegemonic and violent designs of the majority. Gurharpal Singh is of the view that the Sikh community is united by its strong subjective historicity, its increasingly high degree of homogeneity, its fears of assimilation into Hinduism, and its integration of the religious and the political.[16] He suggests that such explanations that view identity as a resource for mobilisation with the Sikh political system, as a resource for mobilisation within the regional political system, and as a resource that is intensely factionalised, underemphasise the less transactional dimensions of Sikh identity. For Singh, Sikh identity is seamless, continuous and almost trans-historical inasmuch as it is trans-contextual.

Many of the theories that have been offered to explain the 'Punjab Crisis' serve to highlight different dimensions of the issue: the contradictions unleashed by the green revolution, the machinations of political parties to retain and consolidate their constituencies, the use of the religious idiom to cover intra-community contradictions, or minority fears of assimilation into the majority. The only problem with these explanations is that they reduce complex processes to one set of dynamics and then proceed to read off the consequences from the causes. These dynamics may be economic; the clash of economic interests between communities that are slotted into definite occupational niches; modernisation that neatly delivers discontent into the laps of political entrepreneurs who in turn are just waiting to tap unrest; or a constant and unbroken stream of cultural consciousness. Ethnic conflict, in other words, is immanent, waiting in the wings for a chance to unleash itself in often destructive ways. What is missing in these accounts is the 'big picture': how states provide structures of political opportunity, how groups compete for the goods offered by the state, and how identities are hardened and consolidated as a result.

Oberoi, in his nuanced and contextual explanation of the politicisation of ethnic identities in Punjab, takes account of precisely this phenomenon, of the role that was played by the colonial state in the formation of identities. Initially writing against the backdrop of the Indian

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[13] Purewal (2000), ch.1.

[14] Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison*, Delhi: Sage, 1991, pp.15-16.

[15] Gurharpal Singh, 'The Punjab Crisis since 1984: A Reassessment', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 18:3 (1995), pp.476-493; G. S. Dhillon*, India Commits Suicide*, Chandigarh: Singh & Singh Publishers, 1992.

[16] Gurharpal Singh, *Ethnic Conflict in India*, Houndsmill: Macmillan, 2000, p.95.

army's assault on the Golden Temple,[17] Oberoi mounted a sustained theoretical attack on the idea that religious communities in India were unitary and homogenous and not plural and often divergent. He argued that it is just not possible to separate or indeed distinguish groups that have lived together in a defined territorial area along the lines of religion. Nor is it possible to speak of clear-cut religious categories such as Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism in Punjab, at least till the end of the nineteenth century, for the following reasons. Firstly, Sikhism permitted its adherents to belong to a number of groups each of which had its own traditions: the Udasi, Nirmala, Khalsa, Nanak-panthi, Ram Raia, Baba Gurditta, Baba Jawahar Singh, Guru Bhag Singh, Nihand, Kalu Panthi, Ram Dasi, Nirankari, Kuka, and Savaria. Many Sikhs shaved and cut their hair, many smoked, and many did not observe the five external symbols of the faith subscribed to by the *Khalsa panth*. Plurality of life styles, of rituals and heterogeneity of religious belief were freely allowed. Resultantly, the Sikh community simply did not possess an essentialised or pure form.

Secondly, Punjabis across religious lines have experienced life as members of a *zat* (caste) or a *biradari* (lineage) more, and as members of a discrete religious group less:

> What an individual did with his life, the values that guided him in this universe, the cultural equipment through which he interpreted daily experiences, the control over land, labour, and patronage, and the distribution of power was determined not so much by the framework of a single religious community but by what *biradari* or *zat* a person belonged to.[18]

In turn, membership of *zat* and *biradari* not only cut across religious divisions, it brought members of various religions together in and through the practices of every day life. In sum, Sikhs moved in and out of identities: village, cults, caste, lineage, or tradition. There was no single source of authority, and multiple definitions of what it means to be a Sikh competed with each other.

Oberoi identified four causes for the drive to homogenise an otherwise plural Sikh identity and cast it in the image of the Khalsa in the late nineteenth century. The first was the powerful attempts of the Khalsas to impose their own doctrinal version on the community. The new discourse of identity, which was given the name of Tat Khalsa, or the 'pure Sikh', disowned plurality and enunciated a singular and orderly form of Sikhism:

> The Tat Khalsa were determined to tear Sikhs away from any moorings they may have had in what was seen as the amorphous sea of Hinduism… innovations were made in dress, language, the annual calendar, and dietary taboos to provide Sikhs with a distinctive symbolic universe.[19]

Popular practices were relegated to the realm of superstition and Sikhs were presented with a single source of religious inspiration, the *adi Granth*, the gurudwaras, and the Gurmukhi script. Whereas the drive to negate other traditions was not new, it emanated from the attempts of the Khalsas to monopolise history, imaginations, traditions, and visions of the world in the eighteenth century; what was new was the drive to dislodge other identities and to discourage practices that did not conform to the dictates of the Tat Khalsa.

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[17] H. S. Oberoi, 'From Punjab to "Khalistan": Territoriality and Metacommentary', *Pacific Affairs*, 60:1 (Spring 1987), pp.26-41.
[18] Harjot Singh Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp.418-419.
[19] Oberoi (1994), p.345.

Secondly, with the beginning of intra-elite competition for urban professions and administrative jobs in the 1880s, the Sikh elite used this reinvented tradition to elbow out adversaries and profit from the opportunities provided by the British Raj. Even though this new religious identity did not mesh well with existing traditions that were polytheistic and that covered a wide spectrum of practices, it came to command political imaginations among the Sikhs simply because it was lucrative. Thirdly, the drive to homogenise the Sikh identity was a response to the fact that other communities were also forging their own boundaries at roughly the same time. For instance, the Arya Samaj, which tried to purify Hinduism of all accretions and which was to create a new identity for the Hindus, rejected religious groups that emerged later on the scene, such as the Sikhs, as non-Hindu. The Aligarh movement similarly constructed a new exclusive identity called Muslim. In sum, the definition and the conceptualisation of the sacred was the product of many strands of history, which coming together in the late nineteenth century constructed boundaries around religions, thereby negating shared practices and histories.

But fourthly, and more importantly, Oberoi identifies British rule and the colonial encounter as the major precipitant of the move towards Khalsa hegemony. The colonial state was to construct ethnic categories in order to index and administer populations, extract revenue, and govern populations. In the process it created taxonomies that served to lump disparate Sikh traditions into one generic identity. For instance, the British decided that only the identity of the Khalsa was authentic to the Sikh tradition and that other identities were either spurious or Hindu accretions. The impact of this and related colonial practices was indeed great: for instance, all Sikhs who entered the army had to undergo baptism and adopt the five sacred symbols even if they did not belong to the Khalsa tradition.[20] Oberoi seems to suggest that in order to benefit from the opportunities provided by the colonial state, one had to belong to the right identity group within the Sikh community. This in a major way led to the homogenisation of otherwise plural identities and to the consolidation of Khalsa identity within the Sikh community.

Oberoi's argument is much more comprehensive and sophisticated than other studies on the making of modern identities in India, inasmuch as he weaves into his explanation a variety of factors, the combination of which were to provide a ready context for the forging of separate community boundaries. What is important is the central role that Oberoi gives to the practices of the colonial state. These were to prove crucial because they propelled other moves, such as the move made by sub-elites to forge an identity that would help them in their search for power and pelf within the structures of opportunities provided by the colonial state. For instance, the grant of collective goods, such as a quota for the Sikhs in the Indian army on the grounds that the Sikhs constituted a 'martial race', was linked to colonial practices of ethnic categorisation, stereotyping, and mapping. Thus these practices generated both the homogenisation and the politicisation of Sikh identity.

In a similar vein, Donald Horowitz, in the context of Malaysia, has argued that self-perceptions of groups play an important role in explaining the volatile nature of ethnic conflict. As in India, much of this self-perception was the handiwork of colonial officials. Colonial officials in Malaysia commonly attributed favourable or unfavourable characteristics based on educational and economic performance to groups. The Chinese, for instance, were seen as more industrious, cleverer, and more enterprising than the indolent and improvident

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[20] Historians have dwelt in some detail on the way in which colonial categories that were constructed through the politics of enumeration or the census, through reports by administrators, or through Orientalist scholarship, and how these were assembled for the purposes of administering a subject population.

Malays.[21] These stereotypes had a powerful impact on group psychology, shaping in turn both politics between groups and politics within groups inasmuch as they led to an awareness of group identity. In sum, self-perceptions of group worth, and perceptions that have been heavily influenced by the practices of the colonial state, feed into many situations of ethnic conflict.[22]

Both Oberoi and Horowitz situate the politicisation of ethnic identity in the practices of the colonial state, particularly the practices of ethnic stereotyping and mapping, which in turn governed access to collective goods. The argument is persuasive because it suggests that ethnic mobilisation and conflict is the consequence of state distribution of collective goods along ethnic lines, including quotas in jobs, representation in legislatures, and access to other material and symbolic opportunities. This proves particularly handy for political entrepreneurs, and ethnic constituencies can be easily mobilised by elites when such practices have a direct consequence for large sections of the population. For instance, group representation in decision-making bodies assures the ordinary members of the group that the leadership will protect the interests of the group as a whole.

The State and Ethnic Life

Theorists writing in the 1970s and the early 1980s argued that modernisation dissolves discrete and identifiable communities because it allows for communicative interaction. However, in many societies ethnicity continues to be a powerful emotive force because modernisation spreads unevenly across societies. Therefore political entrepreneurs find it easy to mobilise ethnic followings when they pursue power or when they compete for the rewards of the market. But when modernisation completes its project, when it permeates a society thoroughly and rewards it equally, and it fulfils its promises, ethnic politics should simply melt away.[23]

However, the time when these identities were conceived of as transitional phenomena, or when it was hoped that ethnicity would melt in the crucible of modernity, has passed. Politics that are practiced in an ethnic mode seem to have become the dominant idiom for the practice of politics itself. But if ethnic identities are not transitional phenomenon, or if they are not remnants of a bygone era that should have transited to modern forms of politics by now, then ethnicity must be part of the modern project itself: a project whose major part is condensed in the form of the modern state.

There are two ways in which we can understand the proposition that ethnicity is part of the modern project, which is in turn condensed in the form of the modern state. One is to see the state as nothing but an instrument of the dominant ethnic group, or as a set of institutions and organisations that practice their craft solely in the interests of this group. Andreas Wimmer, for instance, suggests that "nationalist and ethnic politics are not just a by-product of modern state formation or of industrialisation; rather modernity *itself* rests on a basis of nationalist and ethnic principles". Whereas modern principles of democracy, citizenship, and popular sovereignty allow for the inclusion of large sections of the population previously confined to

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[21] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, p.162.
[22] Gyanendra Pandey, for instance, traces the roots of communalism in India to the manner in which colonial administrators and Orientalist scholarship in the nineteenth century interpreted group clashes (Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990).
[23] Horowitz (1985).

the status of subject and subordinate, this is accompanied by the development of new forms of exclusion based on ethnic or national criteria.[24] In other words, access to the rights and the services a modern state is supposed to guarantee, is contingent upon belonging to the right ethnic group.

Wimmer goes on to argue that in newly formed nation states in the postcolonial world, which are marked by weak state apparatuses and an undeveloped civil society, we find the politicisation of ethnic difference and an ethnicisation of political conflict. Bureaucracies that are not representative of the entire population take on an ethnic hue because people in power favour their own community at the expense of others. Consequently, minority groups at the peripheries of the state are not taken into consideration, when policies of infrastructural development, educational reforms, or linguistic standardisation are charted out. This provides a fertile ground for the politicisation of ethnicity, since resources and services dispensed by an ethnicised bureaucracy do not appear to be public benefits available to all but rather collective goods attainable by those who belong to the proper ethnic group: "The boundaries between them [ethnic groups] then harden and multiple identities become increasingly reduced to a single ethnic dimension".[25]

In the same vein, David Brown argues that we can no longer dismiss ethnic favouritism in state recruitment, language, and development policies as mere temporary shortcomings. Numerous states have found it expedient to recruit their armies, police, judiciary, and civil services predominantly and disproportionately from one ethnic community. Alternatively, state power is used to change ethnic designations, or to promote distrust of particular minority groups. Ethnicity simply proves to be a valuable resource for the state: to legitimise authority, enhance power, strengthen state security, or promote national unity.[26]

Both the authors cited above seem to ascribe a certain inevitability to ethnic politics: ethnic politics happen simply because the state in a multiethnic society is either captured by dominant groups, or because the state itself sets out to represent, in a disproportionate manner, the interests of the majority at the expense of minorities. Though these theories are welcome simply because they place the state at the centre of their explanations, they seem to mirror older Marxist conceptions, in which the state was nothing but the organising committee of the bourgeoisie. The difference is that now the state is seen as the organising committee of the dominant ethnic group. In both cases the 'specificity of the political', as Nicos Poulantzas argued in the 1970s, is obscured. The specificity of the political rests in the fact that sophisticated holders of state power; holders that know well how to practice the craft of politics, have no option except to reach out to all groups in order to ensure the reproduction of the larger political and economic system. In other words, the holders of state power just cannot be seen as acting at the behest of the dominant classes/groups, for this would subvert both legitimacy and reproduction of power. Of course if states practice the crudest of discriminatory politics (Rwanda, Burundi or the Sudan being cases in point) this provides a ready recipe for resentment, generalised discontent, and civil war. However, these are precisely states that are seen as 'failed states', as 'pathological states', and as departures from the norm rather than as the norm.

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[24] Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.1.
[25] Wimmer (2002), p.103.
[26] David Brown, 'Ethic revival: perspectives on state and society', in John Hutchinson & A. D. Smith (eds), *Nationalism: Critical Concepts in Political Science*, Vol. 3, London: Routledge, 2000.

Matters become infinitely more difficult when we come to 'normal' states such as India, which have institutionalised not only equal rights but also constitutional protections for minorities and ethnic groups. Yet we have seen in India the ethnicisation of politics, even though the country possesses formal democratic credentials and even though the system seeks to incorporate the minorities through a variety of means. Certainly there have been times when holders of state power have engaged in discriminatory and vengeful acts against the minority, as in the case of the anti-Sikh riots of November 1984, and more specifically the Gujarat riots of April-May 2002. But it is also true that politics in India have witnessed the makings of an elaborate system of checks and balances in the form of the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, a powerful civil liberties movement, a free press, and regular elections. These ensure that in general these criminal and unconstitutional acts are seen as aberrations from the norm rather than as normal politics run according to the constitution.

I am by no means suggesting that the Indian state, however neutral and impartial it may present itself, has *not* proved amenable to capture by dominant groups. I make another kind of argument consisting of nine sets of propositions:

- The modern democratic state, quite contrary to assumptions that it deals only with individual entitlements in the form of citizen rights, categorises populations according to ethnicity: religion, caste, tribal origins, regions, and language. To put it differently, the postcolonial state deals in ethnic categories as the basis of governance much in the same manner as the colonial state has been accused of. Consequently, citizenship in India is constituted both by the principle of individual and group rights;[27]

- Practices of ethnic mapping have been in crucial ways historically determined both by the legacies of colonialism and by the legacies of the freedom struggle;

- The system of ethnic categorisation and mapping frames, as well as validates, ethnic identities;

- This happens particularly when the state ties the grant of collective goods to group identities, inasmuch as the citizen benefits from these entitlements as a member of a group and not as the 'unencumbered' citizen;

- As groups organise to compete for these collective goods and profit from the structures of political opportunities that are provided by the state, group identities get a new lease of life;

- The linking up of collective goods to group identity inevitably leads to the emergence of new groups, each of which is anxious to take advantage of the structures of opportunity;[28]

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[27] The tension between the two principles is more than evident in much contemporary Indian politics. One example is the contradiction between the demands of gender justice and the commands of personal codes, which are deeply inimical to gender justice. Attacks on the rights of religious minorities have come both from the majoritarian camp, and from people who subscribe to democracy and individual rights and who are deeply suspicious of the claims of communities over their members. Secondly, the entire controversy over protective discrimination, which allots reservations to the scheduled castes and tribes, and other backward castes, has erupted between those who subscribe to the concept of individual merit and those who believe that protective discrimination has to be extended to the entire group and not to individuals.

[28] Of course, the criterion for determining which group is entitled to collective goods shifts with changes in social and political contexts. For instance, in the first phase of state formation in India, the criterion was that of

- All this results in enhanced and often bitter competition among groups;

- The state emerges as the arbiter of inter-group competition;

- Since not all claims can be honoured or met, particularly in a situation of proliferating group competition, the losers tend to interpret their losses in terms of regular and systematised discrimination against the ethnic group. This feeds into a generalised feeling of discontent and the politicisation of identities.

Ethnic struggles are therefore not only a response to activities of political entrepreneurs, but the activities of these entrepreneurs are often shaped by the practices of the state: differentiation among populations on lines of ethnicity; ethnic mapping; and particularly by the link between ethnic groups and entitlements to collective goods.

A clarification may be in order here. I believe that the link that has been made between group identity and collective goods is both normatively desirable and politically wise in a society like India, because the individual continues to be privileged or disprivileged in the social hierarchy on the basis of her group affiliation, predominantly caste. Till today caste determines not only access or lack of access to structures of political and economic opportunity, but also access to an intangible good called respect or dignity. Therefore remedial action has to be taken at the level of the group. It is not surprising that the Indian state expends tremendous energy in delineating caste membership and in determining which caste is entitled to the benefits of protective discrimination. The exercise has been intensified since the recommendations of the Mandal Commissions were implemented in 1990 by V. P. Singh's government, because reservations were extended to 'other backward castes' (backwardness being measured in terms of education and social status, or the lack thereof, in the caste hierarchy); and now the exercise of caste mapping may be further expanded because the economically backward upper castes have made a plea for reservations in educational institutions and in jobs in the public sector on the criteria of economic backwardness. Therefore ethnic mapping is connected in this case to social justice or remedial action for past wrongs.

The same case can be said for scheduled tribes, which have suffered from social discrimination in history. Religious minorities possess rights to their culture and religion because this protects them against the depredations of majoritarianism. In sum, the reason why the Indian state engages in ethnic mapping has to do with purposes that relate to democracy and justice in a highly differentiated and unequal society. It is not that categorisation on the basis of group identity is necessarily a bad thing. It is perhaps the only option for plural and differentiated societies as the burgeoning literature on minority rights tells us.[29] What I am interested in here are the *political consequences* of ethnic mapping: the *proliferation* of group identities, the *consolidation* of these identities, increased *competition* between groups, the actions of the state that *arbitrates* between groups, and the *consequences* of such arbitration for group identities.

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linguistic groups, in the second and third rounds of state formation, the criterion shifted and tribal identities and backward regions came to be considered as appropriate for statehood. Similarly, while protective discrimination was initially granted to scheduled tribes and castes, in 1990 the other backward castes also became eligible for these collective goods.

[29] I have myself written on this earlier, see Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

A Brief Historical Overview of Ethnic Categorisation

A great deal has been written on the manner in which the colonial state engaged in policies of divide and rule through instituting separate electorates for different religious communities in legislative bodies. The consequences of these policies were not slight since many scholars hold them to be responsible for the partition of India along religious lines. It is to a large extent true that separate electorates led to political mobilisation on religious lines, competition among groups, an awareness of cultural distinctiveness, and ultimately, as in the case of the Muslim community, to the demand for a state of one's own. In recent times the emphasis on the policies of separate electorates has been replaced by studies that focus on the more complex and more intangible practices of the colonial state: the politics of enumeration that made groups aware of demographic balances and imbalances; the practices of colonial ethnography that tended to interpret, as Pandey has put it, clashes between communities as communal clashes; the practices of colonial officials who sought to administer populations on the basis of categories and stereotypes; and the way in which the colonised internalised these categories and stereotypes.[30] In other words, the production of a colonial discourse influenced the manner in which the colonised came to think of themselves, as members of a group rather than as the sovereign citizens of a modern state.

What has seldom been remarked on is the way in which colonial categories influenced the freedom movement, or the way they determined the construction of strategies of political mobilisation. To put it bluntly, the shadow of colonial ethnographers and colonial policies loomed large over the project of the freedom struggle. The freedom movement not only built a massive coalition of individuals as well as groups, it recognised and validated group identities through the politics of coalition building. Even as the social base of the freedom movement widened considerably in the 1920s with the advent of Gandhiji onto the scene of Indian politics, even as he transformed what was hitherto an elite into a mass movement, Indian society was united as never before in the quest for independence. It was in this period that the Indian National Congress acquired its famed umbrella-like character. However, the process of building a mass movement by bringing in an increasing number of groups and communities was not without its problems, and the 1920s were not happy days for inter-religious alliances. The emergence of Hindu majoritarianism in the shape of the Hindu Mahasabha, the rise of separatist feelings among the Muslims who had organised under the Muslim League, and the large scale communal riots in the mid-1920s stalked the project of building a grand coalition out of groups that had come to confront each other often murderously.

It was at this precise political moment that Gandhi conceptualised relationships between communities on the principle of *sarva dharma sambhava* (that all religions are equal). The formulation, which was to become the linchpin of the modern concept of secularism in India, may have been the product of purely pragmatic considerations, or may have been initially designed as a holding mechanism that would bring groups together in the freedom struggle, but it rapidly acquired the status of a norm. No group would be discriminated against on the basis of religion even if it happened to be in a minority, and no group would be privileged even if it happened to be a majority. What is significant is that secularism was to validate group identities rather than transcend them.

Towards the end of the 1920s the Congress leaders drafted a constitution that would set out the political framework for a postcolonial India. The authors of what came to be known as the Motilal Nehru draft constitution, notably Motilal Nehru and Tej Bahadur Sapru, appealed to

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[30] Pandey (1990); also Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.

the Muslim League to join the exercise. However, they could not acquiesce to the demands of the Muslim League: that the separate electorates that had been introduced by the colonial power be recognised. Nevertheless, they realised that the minorities needed to be assured that they had a right to religious liberty and autonomy, and that their identity would be protected in a majoritarian India. In sum, the 1928 constitutional draft introduced group rights in the shape of cultural and religious rights of minorities, partly to allay the fears of the religious minorities that they would be swamped in a Hindu-dominated India, partly to stave off the demand for separate electorates, and partly to devise a principle that could regulate inter-group relations in the Congress coalition. What is important for our purposes is the introduction of group rights along with that of individual rights as the defining feature of a postcolonial India. Significantly, minority groups were granted the status of the bearer of rights, even though in classical liberal democratic theory, which deeply influenced the leaders of the freedom struggle, it is the individual who is generally seen as the bearer of rights.

Admittedly group rights are important inasmuch as they safeguard the religious identity of the minority communities – the Muslims and the Christians. But this recognition has also strengthened the hold of community leaders. The privileging of community identity has carried some rather adverse consequences particularly for the rights of women, since the *one* casualty of group rights has been gender justice. For instance, in 1985 the Supreme Court ruled in the Shah Bano case that section 125 of the Criminal Procedure Code overrides Muslim personal law or the *Shariat*, and that Shah Bano was entitled to maintenance after her divorce. The judgement created a storm of protest among patriarchal sections of the Muslim community on the ground that the Supreme Court judgement interfered in the affairs of the community and that it sought to dilute the identity of the community. Rajiv Gandhi's government subsequently gave in to pressure and adopted legislation that abrogated the right of the Muslim woman to maintenance. In the process gender justice was rendered hostage to the identity of the community. In fact, the tension between individual and group rights, and between individual and group identity, has governed much of the debate over minority rights in India.

What is significant is that practices of ethnic mapping and the explicit grant of entitlements to groups, whether in the shape of separate electorates or collective rights, have often served to propel and harden identities even as groups compete for entitlements. This, as suggested above, was historically determined, since group identities often created by colonialism could not be transcended through the freedom movement. On the other hand, new group identities emerged as forceful claimants for power sharing in an independent India. Arguably a large proportion of the political energies of the leadership of the movement were devoted to ironing out or negotiating the competing demands of leaders of groups, for separate electorates, for statehood within the Indian union in a post-independence India, and ultimately for a separate state for the Muslims. In fact, the leaders of the freedom struggle in India had to spend most of their time promising safeguards to various regional, caste, and religious leaders, many of whom demanded a piece of the post-independence Indian pie. In sum, if the colonial state had perfected the twin arts of ethnic mapping and that of linking collective goods to ascriptive identities, the freedom movement could hardly begin to wipe out group identities and insist that the subject of the struggle would be no one but the 'unencumbered' individual so dear to liberal democracy. It is not surprising that the Constituent Assembly, meeting as it was held in the shadow of the partition and accompanying massacres, was saddled with historical legacies of tremendous import, all of which were to imprint the new constitution with the granting of cultural rights to religious minorities, and separate representation for the scheduled castes and tribes in the parliament and in the legislative assemblies. It follows that individuals were, and

continue to be, encouraged to think of themselves as members of a group in order to benefit from the grant of collective goods.

However, group identities asserted themselves in another and rather aggressive manner in the immediate aftermath of independence. This was with the formation of states within the federation on the basis of linguistic groups. The moment when linguistic identities became the linchpin of massive political mobilisation and confrontation with the central government may have passed in India. But there was a time when Indian democracy was still in its infancy, that language riots not only engulfed the country, but also sorely threatened the stability of the post-independence order.

A State of One's Own

The roots of the language issue, like many of the issues that have troubled post-independence politics in the country, can be traced to the late nineteenth century. Around that time, a movement for the establishment of Hindi as the national language made its appearance in North India. The case for Hindi was primarily propelled by the anxiety to emancipate the country from the influence of an alien language (English). But more importantly, aspirations that Hindi would attain the status of a national language were closely connected to the project of building a viable nation out of a multi-lingual society, much as in the case of France in the nineteenth century. But we find a twist in the tale here. For the language movement rapidly acquired a communal complexion, even as it tried to purify Hindi of all Urdu words, simply because Urdu was identified with the Muslim community; and this though countless linguists and political commentators have argued that Urdu as spoken in North India has more to do with Hindi than Persian.[31] For these reasons a variety of people across religious and regional identities took to the language. Urdu acquired a still more communicable avatar (manifestation) in the form of Hindustani, which could be written in both the Persian-Arabic as well as in the Devanagari script. In effect, Urdu in its avatar as Hindustani became a link language in large parts of Northern India.

Despite the efforts of Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru – who believed that only Hindustani, which could be written in both the scripts, could be the link language of India – the movement for Hindi proceeded to draw boundaries between those who wrote Hindustani in Urdu and who were for this reason identified with Islam, and those who wrote Hindustani in the Devnagari script. This was a division that simply did not exist before the time when Hindi came to be identified with the Hindu community.[32] In sum, if one aspect of the movement for Hindi was connected to the politics of emancipation from colonial rule and colonised mentalities, the

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[31] Urdu, which derives from the Turkish word *Ortu* (a military camp), and which was developed in the Cantonments and in the bazaars, had evolved from *Khari Boli*, which is a branch of Hindi spoken in North India, and which owes its origins to one of the linguistic families of Sanskrit. In sum, Urdu is a *patois*, where a Persian-Arabic vocabulary has been grafted onto to a *prakrit* syntax and grammar. See Mukul Kesavan, 'Invoking a majority. The Congress and the Muslims of the United Provinces 1945-47', in P. C. Chatterjee (ed.), *Self-Image, Identity and Nationality*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Studies and Allied Publishers, 1989, pp.91-111. Alok Rai has dealt with the complexities of the issue (*Hindi Nationalism. Tracts for the Times,* New Delhi: Orient Longmans, 2000).

[32] This has its own spin-offs: the process of clearing Hindi of all words that 'belonged' to Urdu, and their replacement with other words that belonged to Sanskrit. Commonly used words such as *padho* [study] were replaced by an archaic word like *adhyan*, and *trikon* or the triangle was replaced by *tribhuj*. In the process, not only wa*s* the spoken language of the people stripped of its vitality and vibrancy, it was subordinated to the language of the nation.

other aspect revealed a rankly communal face;[33] for in time the idea of Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan posited not only a close link between language and nationhood, but also between language and religion, driving a wedge between people who used to speak a common language. It is of some interest to note that in the Constituent Assembly the move to replace Hindi with Hindustani was overruled by only one vote in 1946.

If the move to replace Hindustani with Sanskritised Hindi was connected to the desire to control state power in post-colonial India, matters were even more explicit in the case of regional languages.[34] Around the first decade of the twentieth century, regional language movements, which contested the claim of Hindi to be the national language, also made their appearance on the political scene. The resurgence of regional languages, which consolidated both linguistic and regional identities, in time catapulted the issue of linguistic states onto political agendas. This was a significant event inasmuch as British India had carved out administrative units in complete disregard to ties of language. By the first decade of the twentieth century, however, groups that spoke a language other than the one that dominated these provinces began to mobilise for statehood within the projected Indian union. The uproar in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal in 1905 was to prove decisive for this tension.[35] The Congress began to conceptualise a post-independence India in terms of linguistically-based administrative units. Beginning in 1908, when a 'province' of Bihar was created in the organisational set up of the Congress, the party was organisationally restructured with the creation of twenty-one vernacular units in the form of Provincial Congress Committees. In 1927, the Congress adopted a resolution suggesting "that the time had come for the redistribution of provinces on a linguistic basis". In 1928, the Motilal Nehru Report reiterated that the principle of linguistic states was desirable.

However, the leadership of the newly constituted Republic of India hesitated and prevaricated when the time came to realise its earlier commitment to linguistic states. Linguistic states may just have opened the proverbial Pandora's box in a country that had been already divided in the name of religion, and cleared the way for further balkanisation of the country. On 27 November 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru stated in the Constituent Assembly that though there were pressing issues facing the government, language was not one of them. Before the need for economic development and security, he said, the language issue paled into insignificance. In 1948, a committee consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, and P. Sitaramayya concluded that the Congress had not examined the language issue in its full complexity during the freedom struggle, and that it should be rethought.[36]

Shortly after demands for linguistic states began to mount and Sri Potti Sriramulu, a greatly respected leader of Andhra and a disciple of Gandhiji, went on hunger strike for a separate Andhra state in 1952. Nehru was reluctant to concede to the demand, since influential Tamil leaders would have protested at the division of the state of Madras. But by 13 December of that year, discontent erupted in Andhra even as the condition of Sri Sriamulu deteriorated. His death two days later prompted language riots in Telugu-speaking areas. On 16 December 1952, Nehru announced that Andhra would be a separate state.

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[33] See Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts. The Hindi movement in North India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

[34] The people of India speak languages or dialects that belong to five linguistic families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Andamanese.

[35] The move to partition Bengal on the basis of religion was opposed on the ground that the Bengali language united all Bengalis irrespective of religious identities.

[36] See Robert D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, ch.4.

In the meantime, as other demands for linguistic states burst forth on the political horizon, Pandit Nehru was forced into appointing a States Reorganisation Commission on 22 December 1953. The Commission received and considered about 152,250 documents for or against linguistic states. The Report of the States Reorganisation Commission, which ran to 267 pages and which consisted of four parts, was made public in October 1955. The report proposed the reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis.[37] In 1956, the Seventh Amendment to the Indian Constitution substantially reordered the political map on the basis of linguistic considerations, with territorial boundaries being made contiguous with linguistic ones.

Even though the demand for linguistic states had erupted in civil society once the state accepted the principle, it acquired immense power, because it proceeded to map linguistic groups in India for the purpose of deciding which group was entitled to a state of its own. The state thus acquired the power to arbitrate between competing claims, even as groups proliferated rapidly, and organised even faster, in order to stake their claim to collective goods, in this case statehood within the Union.

The leadership of the Akali Dal, which purported to represent the Sikh community in Punjab, hastened to claim statehood on the basis of language (that is, Punjabi), but more importantly on the basis of the script that is employed in the Sikh scriptures (Gurmukhi).[38] The demand incorporated the suggestion that Punjabi-speaking areas in existing Punjab-PEPSU[39] and Rajasthan be amalgamated, and that Hindi speaking areas of Punjab and PEPSU be merged into the neighbouring Hindi-speaking regions. The demand for statehood was, however, refused by the Commission, a refusal that was to lead to bitter resentment and the onslaught of a series of agitations in the cause of a Punjabi Suba.

The resentment can only be understood against the backdrop of the historical formation of Sikh consciousness and the link between this consciousness and control over territory. In undivided Punjab, which was actually dominated by the Muslims and the Hindus, the Sikhs constituted about 15 percent of the population. In the 1920s, two organisations that rapidly came to dominate the Sikh religious and political system–the Akali Dal, which represents itself as the sole spokesperson of the Sikh community, and the Shrimoni Gurudwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC), which controls the Gurudwaras – came into existence. Since 1925, when the colonial government passed the Sikh Gurudwaras and Shrines Act, which transferred management and control of all Sikh religious organisations to the community, the overlap between the two organisations has allowed them to monopolise the sacred and the non-sacred practices of the community in the realm of religion, education, and politics, as well as monopolise the massive material resources of the SGPC.

In the Government of India Act 1935, the Sikh community was granted 33 seats in the 175 member Punjab Legislative Assembly, though the Sikh leadership had demanded 30 percent reservation.[40] In 1940 the Muslim League began to pressurise the Muslim leadership of Punjab to support the Pakistan resolution. The leaders of the Muslim community had asked for a separate state on the grounds that Hindus and Muslims constituted 'two-nations' and that

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[37] Government of India, *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, Delhi: Government of India.

[38] The distinction between language and script is important, for whereas Hindus who constituted a majority in Punjab after Partition also spoke Punjabi, they wrote it either in the devnagari script or in Urdu.

[39] The Patiala and East Punjab States Union, which was a federation of former princely states.

[40] The Muslim community had 86 seats, the Hindus in the general category had 42 seats, and others such as landowners, women, and graduates had 14 seats in the legislative assembly. See G. Singh, *Communism in Punjab*, New Delhi: Ajanta, 1994, ch.2.

therefore each of these nations was entitled to its own state.[41] The demand for Pakistan caused political reverberations among the Sikh community, and some sections of the Sikh leadership began to speak of a separate state of Punjab, which would possess a population ratio of 40:40:20 among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. However, this was ruled out by the colonial government and by the leadership of the freedom movement.

Even as it became clear that communal electorates, weighted representation for minorities, and legislative reservations (except for the scheduled castes and tribes) would have no place in an independent India, anxiety beset the leadership of the Akali Dal. They feared that Sikh identity would be held hostage to the assimilationist designs of the majority. In March 1946, the Akali Dal, declaring that Sikhs were a nation, adopted a resolution, which called for a Sikh state that would protect the religious, economic, and cultural rights of the community. In effect, though the Akali Dal expressed itself against the partition of the country, it insisted that if Pakistan was conceded the demand for an independent Sikh state should also be allowed.

The suggestion for an independent Sikh state was undermined, however, by geographical and demographic factors. Firstly, the Sikh community represented a bare 15 percent of the total population of Punjab; and secondly, the Sikhs did not inhabit a concentrated geographical area that would enable a separate state, since they were equally divided between East and West Punjab. In retrospect, it is clear that the purpose of the demand was not designed so much to counter-weigh the demand for Pakistan, as to seek assurances of a favoured status in independent India. The demand was therefore given up when Pandit Nehru, who was slated to be the first Prime Minister of India, declared in July 1946 that the Sikhs of Punjab were entitled to special consideration in independent India. "I see nothing wrong", he said, "in an area and a set up in the north wherein the Sikhs could also 'experience the glow of freedom'".[42] This assurance swung the Sikh leadership in favour of the Congress and it accepted the partition of Punjab as inevitable. The Constituent Assembly, however, denied the Sikhs a special status, and the Sikh representatives responded by not signing the draft constitution and launching an agitation for a Punjabi Suba.

The demand for a Punjabi Suba was subverted by one major development. Since the demand was interpreted as excluding the Hindu community, the latter retaliated by ensuring that Punjab was bilingual. Insisting that Punjabi was a dialect of Hindi, and that it was not distinct grammatically or spatially from Hindi, communal Hindu organisations prompted the community to record its language as Hindi in the 1951 and later in the 1961 census.[43] Although the Congress party in the Punjab represented the Sikhs, it supported the move, because it also represented the Hindus in substantial numbers. Thereupon, the Congress party under the leadership of Pratap Singh Kairon, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, dismissed the demand for a Suba as communal and as divisive. Pandit Nehru, who had already declared that his government would not tolerate any demand for statehood that was based on secessionist, violent, or religious and communal principles, also rejected the demand as communal.

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[41] It is by now a truism to note that the chief legitimacy claim of the creation of Pakistan, that it was created as a homeland for the Muslim community, was punctured when more Muslims stayed on in India than those who moved to the new state of Pakistan. The two nation theory was once again invalidated in 1971 when East Pakistan seceded from West Pakistan, creating thereby three nations out of what used to be undivided India.

[42] Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs: 1839-1988*, Vol.2, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.291.

[43] The Hindus had already opposed two formulas that had accepted bilingualism and that had demarcated a Punjabi and Hindi speaking area-the the PEPSU formula of 1948 and the Sachar Formula of 1949. It is of some interest to note that by the time of the 1971 census only half of the Hindu community recorded its language as Hindi.

Further, the States Reorganisation Commission rejected the demand for a Punjab Suba on the grounds that the majority in Punjab were opposed to it and that the state was bilingual.

State policy that linked collective goods to group identity proved to be highly contentious in the case of linguistic states. On the one hand, it led not only to the politicisation of group identities, but to the emergence of new groups, each of which demanded a state of its own. In the process the central government had a dominant say when it came to determining which language group would have a state of its own, which language group had to live in a state dominated by another linguistic group, and which language group was *not* entitled to a state of its own. On the other hand, the resistance of Hindus to the makings of a Punjabi Suba only makes sense when we recollect that the demand for linguistic states was, as a matter of course, connected to political and economic aspirations: the desire to monopolise the resources of the state. Resources arguably came to be viewed as collective goods that were exclusively meant for those who belonged to the 'right' linguistic group. In the Madras Presidency, for instance, the demand of Telugu-speaking groups for a state was based on the fact that the Tamil-speaking Brahmanical elites dominated jobs, education and power. It is not surprising that the Telugu speakers belonging to the Kamma and the Reddy caste, which had been fairly marginal in the politics of the Madras Presidency until the early part of the twentieth century, had led the movement for a separate state of Andhra. Similarly, the two powerful peasant proprietor castes, which spoke Kannada – the Lingayats and the Vokkaligas – demanded a separate state of Karnataka. On the other hand, other groups were to resist the making of linguistic provinces. For instance, Telugu speaking groups in areas of the Madras Presidency that were dominated by Tamil speakers, opposed the idea of a Telugu-speaking state, because they feared a backlash by the Tamil majority in their region. Conversely, both Tamil- and Telugu-speaking Brahmins feared that the making of an Andhra dominated by the Kammas and the Reddies would put an end to their domination.[44]

The demand for linguistic states therefore raised a host of other problems. Groups that did not speak the dominant language within the projected state lost out on both material opportunities as well as the chance to exercise power. Equally, linguistic states provided new windows of opportunity for groups that did speak the language. "Let us be frank", wrote one observer of the linguistic re-organisation of states, "and accept the Dal-Roti… basis of this enthusiasm":

> It is the middle class job hunter and place hunter and the mostly middle class politicians who are benefited by the establishment of a linguistic state, which creates for them an exclusive preserve of jobs, offices, and places by shutting out in the name of the promotion of culture, all outside competitors.[45]

This was more than evident in the case of Punjab. Taking all these complexities into consideration it is not surprising that the Hindus in Punjab, who spoke Punjabi but who used a different script, insisted that Punjabi was a mere dialect of Hindi.[46]

Even as the Indian state rejected the claims of the Sikh community (a rejection which led to tremendous bitterness, heightened agitation, and further politicisation of identities in Punjab), two things happened. Firstly, the Hindu and the Sikh Punjabis, who share much more than a

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[44] J. E. Schwartzberg, 'Factors in the Linguistic Reorganization of Indian States', in P. Wallace (ed.), *Region and Nation in India,* New Delhi: American Institute of Indian Studies, 1985, p.170.

[45] K. Mukherji, *Reorganization of Indian States,* Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1955, p.31.

[46] Brass argues that the recording of Hindi as the mother tongue by the Hindus in the 1951 and 1961 census was "an overt and deliberate political act designed to undercut the linguistic basis of the Punjabi Suba demand" (Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974, p.327).

language, were split on the basis of the very ethnic categories that had been legitimised by the Indian state as the basis of statehood within the federation. In the process, the borders between groups were not only solidified, inter-group relations were emptied out of any kind of ambiguity or fluidity, which necessarily results when two or more communities share a common space. In sum, the link that had been recognised between linguistic identity and statehood, or between ethnicity and collective goods, both hardened identities and bred resentment.

Secondly, even as the rejection aroused great resentment among the Sikh community, all this led to further politicisation of ethnic identity. The Akali leadership articulated the general feeling that the Sikhs had been denied statehood simply because they were not Hindus. From then onwards the political idiom in which the language of the Akali Dal was cast, was that of hurt, of rampant discrimination, and of the need for a state in which the Sikhs could dominate religiously and politically. On 15 August 1961, when Master Tara Singh went on a 'fast unto death' for a Punjabi Suba, he was to state that:

> A national principle has been adopted that to make the people feel the glow of freedom states should be created on the contiguity of language affording full scope for the development of one's language in the state. Whereas this principle had been implemented in other parts of India in Punjab the area, which even the government experts feel is a Punjabi speaking area, is not being afforded the status of a state, simply because the Hindus do not agree to it.[47]

And in 1965, the Akali Dal Conference adopted the following resolution:

> The Conference recalls that the Sikhs agreed to merge in a common Indian nationality on the explicit understanding of being accorded a constitutional status of 'co-sharers' in the Indian sovereignty along with the majority community, which solemn understanding now stands cynically repudiated by the present rulers of India.

The Sikhs, the resolution went on to state, have been systematically reduced to a sub-political status in their homeland Punjab, and to an insignificant position in their motherland India. Therefore there is no alternative but to frame the political demand for securing a self-determining status within the Republic of India.[48]

These sentiments were intensified by the fact that the demographic balance, which neutralised the demand for Sikhistan before independence, had altered in the wake of the massive migration from West Punjab that followed the partition of the state. After partition, the Sikhs constituted 35 percent of the population in the state with the Hindus numbering about 61 percent. But now Sikhs were concentrated in the central districts of the region: they constituted a majority in six districts and a large minority in five districts. This encouraged the Sikh leadership to demand the special status that the community had been promised before partition. Partition in effect transformed the Sikh claim on Punjab as homeland and holy land from "an imaginative vision into a realistic project".[49] It is somewhat ironic that the policy of the Indian government – that state formation was connected to linguistic identity – served to fuse territorial ambitions and the identity of the Sikh community.

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[47] Singh (1988), Vol. 2, p.300.
[48] Darshan Singh Tatla, *The Sikh Diaspora: The Search for Statehood*, London: UCL Press, 1999, p.23.
[49] Tatla (1999), p.22.

The Sikh community, feeling that it had been unjustly denied its own state, launched a struggle in 1955 to be recognised as a *staatsvolk* in its own right, and for the right to be represented by its own people in the government of the state. It was of the opinion that only when its own members were in control of the collective goods would the community feel protected from arbitrary discrimination. The campaign for a Suba drew a vast number of volunteers, and over 26,000 people were arrested during demonstrations. Though a series of initiatives were undertaken to deal with bilingualism in Punjab,[50] the Hindu community, under the leadership of Hindu communal organisations, initiated the 'Save Hindi' agitation in 1957-58.

In 1960, the Akali Dal retaliated by intensifying the agitation for a Punjabi Suba in 1960, and the Akali leader Master Tara Singh undertook a 'fast unto death'. But both Prime Minister Nehru and Pratap Singh Kairon, the Congress Chief Minister of Punjab, continued to oppose the demand, and after 43 days Master Tara Singh gave up the fast without any substantial concessions. Though the leadership of Master Tara Singh was replaced by that of Master Fateh Singh, who held a more inclusive notion of the Suba, the central government refused to give in.

Nehru, who had dismissed the demand for a Suba as communal, died in 1964 and Kairon died in 1965, removing most of the hurdles to the formation of a Punjabi-speaking state. By the mid-1960s, a movement for the formation of a Hindi speaking state of Haryana in the South East of the state modified the thrust of the Hindu communal movement within Punjab. After the end of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war a Parliamentary Committee, which was set up to look into the issue, recommended the creation of a Punjabi Suba. On 1 November 1966, the Punjab Re-organisation Act came into effect.

Punjab was divided once again into the states of Punjab and Haryana, with some of the mountainous areas going to the state of Himachal Pradesh. Now Sikhs constituted almost 60 percent of the population of Punjab, and dreams of a Sikh majority state were finally realised. But the division of the state in 1966 also left major contentious issues on the horizon. Firstly, because the boundary commission had accepted the 1961 census returns as the basis of demarcation, many Punjabi-speaking areas were excluded from the new state, including Chandigarh, which became a Union Territory. This once again led to discontent, because Chandigarh had been designed as the capital of Punjab. Moreover the prestigious Bhakra Nangal power and irrigation project was transferred to the central government. Sant Fateh Singh went on another fast over the issue of Chandigarh in 1966 and again in 1970. This resulted in the Indira Gandhi award of January 1970. Chandigarh was to be transferred to Punjab, but the transfer was contingent upon the exchange of 114 villages – the majority of which were Punjabi-speaking – in the Fazilka and Abhor *tehsils*,[51] to Haryana by 1975. Since these villages were not contiguous to Haryana, access to them was ensured by the construction of a corridor along the inter-state border. In addition Punjab was to compensate Haryana with the grant of Rs 200 million for the construction of a new capital.

The leadership of the Hindu community in Punjab, unhappy with the formation of a Sikh majority state, extracted concessions from the Akali leadership in the form of the three-language formulae in which Hindi was given the status of a link language. This was in

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[50] In 1956, the regional formula created separate Hindi and Punjabi speaking zones, merged PEPSU (Patiala and East Punjab States Union, which was a federation of former princely states) and established regional committees in the legislative assembly for the two zones with the right to legislate on fourteen listed subjects. But this did not work out well.

[51] An administrative district consisting of several villages.

exchange for support that Jan Sangh (the forerunner of the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), the political party that ironically considered itself as the representative of the Hindus, extended to the Akali Dal-led coalition government in 1969. But right up to 1981, when the BJP encouraged the Hindu Punjabis to declare Punjabi as their mother tongue, the Arya Samaj persisted with its avowal of Hindi as the language of the Hindus.

Even though the first round of state formation on the principle of language was concluded with the division of Punjab in 1966, and the second and the third round of state formation was based on other principles such as tribal identity and backward regions, linguistic state formation left its imprint on politics in Punjab. The Akali leaders continued to articulate a sense of betrayal, all of which was to feed into the further mobilisation of the community along the lines of ethnicity.

Wrapping up the Argument

Let me recapitulate the argument I have made so far. Much of the literature on the ethnic upsurge draws upon a number of theoretical and conceptual resources to explain why people opt for ethnic and not other identities, which are freely available to them in modern and complex societies,[52] to press their claims upon the state. Few scholars have considered that, in part, the perception that ethnicity is a viable tool for struggle is validated and legitimised by the practices of the modern state that deal in the construction, in the consolidation and in the mapping of such identities, as well as connecting these identities to collective goods. In India, state practices continue to harden ethnic identities even as groups continue to compete for the profits that are linked to group identity.

Group entitlements can be a good thing. In Indian society, membership in caste and religious groups decides how individuals will live out their lives in society – what employment they pursue, what friendships they enter into, what kind of social respect they command, who they marry, and something as mundane as who they dine with. Therefore, policies of social justice and recognition have to be granted to groups rather than to individuals. Admittedly the objective of treating groups as subjects for entitlement is in pursuit of a worthy cause, that of recognition and redistribution. Nor am I denying that the recognition and validation of ethnic categories was preordained simply because these identities had made their place in Indian society through the practices of the colonial state and the unleashing of the dynamics of the freedom struggle.

Colonial categories, particularly those that provided for separate electorates, had both reinforced and constructed group identities; and the project of building a grand coalition, which had the persuasive power to move masses to action, and which carried the potential of inviting the people of India into history, necessarily involved the recognition of group identities that had already been separated through history and through politics in the colonial mode. In fact, the first factor was to reinforce the second, even as the practices of colonial administrations and Orientalist scholarship in the late nineteenth century were to cast their long shadow on the freedom struggle. The freedom movement, in effect, was to re-inscribe ethnic categories even as it built, under the towering leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, a grand coalition between groups to struggle for independence.

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[52] Among the most obvious of identities that is freely available to people is that of class. But even class wars have taken on an ethnic form.

Arguably the grant of group rights has hardened perceptions that: (a) individual identities are subordinate to the group; and (b) groups are politically significant because membership entitles individuals to certain material and symbolic collective goods, which are in short supply. It is not difficult to envisage that when people, who have been identified as members of a particular group by the state, identify with and participate in struggles for collective goods such as statehood, they tend to do so as members of a group and not as the atomised, sovereign citizens of modern democracies.

Given the link made by the Indian state between ethnic identity and the grant of entitlements in the form of collective goods, people are encouraged to make demands upon the state *not as individuals but as members of a religious, a caste, or a linguistic group*. If the leadership of the Muslim community demanded a state of its own in pre-independent India, linguistic groups competed with each other to demand a state of *their* own within the Indian Union in the post-independence period.[53] The link between linguistic identity and statehood came to be considered as both legitimate and deserved, simply because the category had been sanctioned by the state. Understandably the groups that lose out resent that their demand was not considered worthy of attention, even though they satisfy all the requirements for the grant of these collective goods. Moreover, the link between statehood (within or without the state) and ethnicity drives a wedge between people who have otherwise shared histories, traditions, the spoken language, and the practices of everyday life. The experience of the mobilisation of the Hindu and the Sikh community in Punjab on linguistic lines, though they have historically participated in more than one common ways of being, is evidence of this. The reification of ethnic categories in and through the practices of the state, it is evident, breeds its own consequences and not all of them are favourable politically speaking. In sum, the employment of ethnicity as a tool by political entrepreneurs is not made in a political vacuum; it is the result of the placement of some, if not all, groups within categories that have been carved out by the state itself.

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[53] That these demands can spill over into demands for self-determination is neither unknown nor uncommon. History bears witness to this.

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