

Politics Behind the Sikh Militant Movement

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Book Review

Religion, Identity and Nationhood: the Sikh Militant Movement

by Paramjit S. Judge. Rawat Publications, Jaipur. Pages 272. Rs 550.

In the last week of April of 2017, I get the chance to meet with one of the best sociologists at Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, Prof. Parmjit S. Judge, regarding my research work. After the valuable interaction with Prof. Judge, I have received a book as a gift from the Prof. Judge, and this book was *Religion, Identity and Nationhood: the Sikh Militant Movement*, and after going through it carefully I get clarity about the militant movement of Punjab and later this book become one of my favorite book from all my book collections. So here I have tried to review this book with very prudently. The Sikh militant movement that spanned one-and-a-half decades raised a lot of issues, many of which questioned the character of the Indian state and the alleged greatness of the Indian tradition. Punjab never witnessed such a magnitude of violence and killings in the post-independent period. Punjabis were reminded of the riots of 1947 in which the people who died and got displaced or uprooted numbered in millions. In the 1980s the Sikhs living in villages began to discuss albeit quietly the possibility of the formation of Khalistan. The main thrust of this work by the Judge is that there is a reason to think about the issue of how the facts are presented and what kind of events and facts are selected for presentation. Still, the more important issue was how a particular narrative becomes a part of people's perceptions. The study of the Sikh militant movement by Parmjit S. Judge from this perspective entails second level analysis in the sense that was Bhindranwale and the militant leaders after his death said and did was that they articulated the already existing narratives available in popular Sikh tradition in which the valour and martyrdom of the Sikhs are glorified. In other words, there was no rupture in the construction of the tradition. The fact that such a tradition could be used for political purposes showed the strength with which it had existed as a collective representation. So, in this book Judge's work is an attempt to understand how the militant narrative constructed religion, identity and nationhood by subverting the Sikh community.

Like other virtuous writers for the convenience of the readers, Judge has also divided his book into eight chapters. The first chapter of his book provides a sociological profile of the Sikhs as a spiritual community. The primary cause for taking up the discussion from this profile is to situate the speech contents of Bhindranwale in the setting of his existential and social background to have some insights into his mass appeal. It may also help in making a sense of the messages of the militants. Thus, the first chapter of the book specifically takes into cognizance the social divisions among the Sikhs. The

second chapter looks into the process of emergence of communal politics in Punjab by covering three important aspects, namely political dynamics of Punjab, background history of the fashioning of the legend of Bhindranwale, the history of Damdami Taksal, the life of Bhindranwale and the picture of the events contributing to his emergence in politics.

In the third chapter, the subject of the structure of Sikh identity, originating from the Singh Sabha movement to its fundamentalist assertion, has been investigated by Judge very artistically. The articulation of the Sikh identity by Bhindranwale forms the core of this chapter. The fourth chapter is again largely based on the speeches of Bhindranwale concerning whether the Sikhs are a separate community. The event has its ground in the construction of religious nationalism during the colonial period that led to the establishment of Pakistan in 1947. The fifth chapter is organically linked with the third and fourth chapters in the sense that in the constructions of identity and nationhood the Sikh militant movement also defined the other that could be excepted from these. In the process, the movement defined what is Hinduism and what are the characteristics of the Hindus? The militant movement also tried to draw its legitimacy from the constructed tradition of militancy and martyrdom in Sikhism in the sixth chapter an attempt has been made to make sense of the articulation of this tradition in the speeches of Bhindranwale as well as the messages of the militants later on. The hermeneutics of these messages have been decoded in the setting of the Sikh history and the historical development of the Sikh traditions.

In the seventh and eighth chapters the interaction between the activists and the Sikh masses, as mediated by the coercive power of the former, has been studied by the writer with great ingenuity. This interaction took place through the, and in the pattern of messages that appeared largely in the Punjabi newspapers under the headings 'warning' and 'clarifications' in those days. The last chapter, which is entirely around the conclusion traces the process of subverting the Sikh community that was accelerated by Bhindranwale and intensified by the militant leaders. The argument that has been offered by the writer is that in a multi-religious society like ours an attempt to valorise the community may give rise to temporary mobilisation, but the eclectic space that differentiates the society from community never disappears.

Therefore, this volume affords an idea at an extensive stage that the Sikh militant movement spanned one-and-a-half decades (1978-1992) during which a considerable loss of life occurred in and outside Punjab. In terms of its feat, it almost became international in character largely due to the presence of diaspora Sikhs in most of the western world. And this volume is fundamentally founded on the analysis of the speeches and messages of the leaders of the militant campaign. It has been contended, without essentializing the problem, that the nature of the treatment of the militant movement could be drawn

backward to the construction of Sikhism in the second half of the nineteenth century. The political orientation of the Singh Sabha movement and its attempt at the expression of singular religious identity provided the dynamics to the Sikh community. In the process, the religious tradition was invented, which underscored the singular Sikh identity by paving the way for the fundamentalist discourse of separatism. The composite religious tradition in Sikhism was put in the perimeter of the community as a consequence of which it became possible to

construct Sikh nationhood. Paired with this construction was the attempt of the militants to purge the community from all syncretism practiced by the Sikhs. It has been argued that despite this construction, the Sikh community has continued to observe the composite tradition though the threat of militant violence greatly reduced the eclectic space of inter-subjective communitarian understanding and interaction.