

COMMUNITY WITHIN COMMUNITY: POLITICS OF EXCLUSION IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SIKH IDENTITY

Abstract

The article examines the construction of religious identity among the Sikhs from the socio-historical perspective. It has been argued that the Sikh identity was constructed as a result of the colonial intervention in which the emphasis turned to the appearance instead of faith as such. The new identity was a product of the politics of the times and it was perpetuated in order to maintain the hegemonic domination. Sikhism, despite its egalitarian ideology, failed to create a casteless community. Discrimination and exclusion of lower castes continued. An empirical investigation into the conditions and perceptions of the lowest caste, namely Mazhabis clearly demonstrated their exclusion, whereas discourse of equality among the Sikhs is used to create a moral community. Despite the equality of worship among the Sikhs, the Mazhabis at the local level are denied the equal religious rights in the gurdwaras (Sikh temple) owned and controlled by the upper dominant castes. Roots of the exclusion have to be located in the history of the making of the religious community and the way a few castes after benefiting from religious conversion perpetuated the caste-based exclusions.

Keywords: exclusion, discrimination, Mazhabis, Sikhism, five symbols, caste hierarchy, religious community

The central argument of this article is to emphasise the discrepancy between the claimed and the actual practices of the communities, which theoretically speaking, emerge from the fundamental distinction between religion and community. It has been argued that the hegemonic structure within the community is the major source of both the social hierarchy and the discourse of equality the objective of which is built into the logic of power which expands from informal to the formal levels. For the purpose the case of the Churhas/Mazhabis, who are lowest in the hierarchy of castes in India, has been elaborated to show how the politics of religion is embedded into the hierarchical order of castes within the Sikh community. The discussion been divided into five parts. The first part

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succinctly outlines essential features of the Sikh community, whereas the second deals with the issue of caste among the Sikhs. The third part takes cognisance of the Mazhabis, whereas the findings of the empirical study of the Mazhabis have been briefly described and examined in the fourth part. The discussion is concluded in the fifth part.

I. Sikh Community

The Sikhs are the fourth largest religious community in India and have the population of about twenty million persons¹. Of all the religious communities including the Zoroastrians the Sikhs are the youngest religious community, as Sikhism established itself as a religion in the 18th century though the first Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Nanak Dev, founded the Sikh faith sometimes in the early 16th century. Despite their small size, the Sikhs constitute the majority population in the Indian province of Punjab (sixty per cent). The Sikhs, however, are spread all over India and in the world and are among the most prosperous communities in the country. It is evident from the fact that among various religious communities living in rural areas the Sikhs have the second highest mean monthly per capita income at Rs. 864.72 (the Jains have Rs. 978.36) and in the urban areas the Sikhs have the highest expenditure patterns at Rs. 1498.81 (Thorat 2011). It is clear from the data that the Sikhs have done well in improving their economic conditions after India achieved independence in 1947. There are two factors that have contributed significantly towards their economic prosperity. One, the green revolution – a phenomenon of high agricultural productivity - occurred in Punjab in the second half of the 1960s. Since a majority of the Sikh live in rural areas among whom most of them are peasants, they benefitted from the agrarian change. Secondly, the religious factor of community solidarity has significantly helped them to survive odds and through their hard work they have done well.

There are two salient features of the Sikh community, which are strongly linked to the politics of religion. Firstly, the religious identity of the Sikhs is defined by the state and secondly, there has been a powerful separatist movement among the Sikhs to achieve sovereign state of Khalistan during the last two decades of the previous century. It is interesting to note that the Sikh identity is legally defined (Judge and Kaur 2010) and it happened in 1925 when the British Indian government enacted the Gurdwara Reform Act. The history of the development of Sikhism shows a great degree of diversity in its religious tradition (Oberoi 1993). The role of British policy towards Sikhs has played decisive role in the making of the Sikh identity. As early as the 1880s, Bingley (1985) wrote a book for the purpose of understanding the Sikhs to ascertain how useful they would be as soldiers in the British army. He emphasised the need for saving Sikhism from the powerful influence of Hinduism. The Singh Sabha movement in 1880s emerged in reaction to various challenges emanating from the activities

of Christian missionaries as well as the religious enumeration through the census operations by the British Indian government. Singh (2004) argues that the Sikh symbols of identity emerged as a result of negotiation between the British and the Singh Sabha leaders². These symbols were: *Kesh* (unshorn hair), *kanga* (comb), *karha* (iron bangles), *kachha* (breeches) and *kirpan* (sword). Fox (1987) has analysed the way the British constructed the martial races in India and one of them was Sikhs. It is interesting to note that the British strictly imposed the five symbols of Sikh identity in the Sikh regiments exclusively comprised by Sikh soldiers.

The distinct identity of the Sikhs was established in the Act of 1925 which also established a managing body called the Shiromani Gurdwaras Parbandhak Committee (henceforth SGPC) to look after the Sikh historical shrines. The control over the shrines gave unlimited access to the financial resources to the SGPC and consequently, it began to create a homogenous Sikh community called Khalsa by insisting on the five symbols as mandatory for every Sikh³. The SGPC has been an elected body of the Sikhs, but to be eligible to vote one has to sign an undertaking that one observes the Sikh principles as prescribed by the SGPC. Over a period of time, the issue of elections has created litigations with regard to whether all Sikhs should have the right to vote in the elections of the religious body or only the Khalsa Sikh should have the privilege (Judge and Kaur 2010). It is interesting to note that the definition of the Sikh in the Act of 1925 applicable to all historical Sikh shrines in Punjab has not been the universally applicable definition of the Sikh. It is clear from the fact that the Delhi Sikh Gurdwaras Act of 1971 does not recognise the person with shorn hair as the Sikh.

It is clear from the discussion on the issue of Sikh identity that the politics is essentially predicated upon the notion of religious community by articulating the constitutive rules as immutable and must be adhered to by all members of the community. At the same time, the practice of politics is located in the production of differences and accepting the two in general. A person becomes Sikh by adhering to the basic principles of Sikh symbols and thus becoming eligible to vote in elections of the religious body, but his/her ineligibility does not imply his/her excommunication from the faith. Even when the constitutive rules of Sikhism are observed, the politics of exclusion embraces the internal caste-based heterogeneity of the community. The issue of caste in the Sikh religion which claims to be egalitarian is not only a social issue but also a political issue.

II. Mapping Castes among the Sikhs

The caste question in the Sikh community has been both muted and loud – an apparent paradox prevalent as a result of the disjunction between claim and empirical reality. One may argue that such paradoxes could be found among all religions and religious communities. Egalitarian values in Christianity are neutralised by racism in the USA. There is a widespread belief – and that belief has

been consistently and continuously claimed to be true – is that Sikhism does not preach caste inequality. Kahn Singh Nabha (1973) and Bhai Vir Singh (Bal 2006) in the 19th century and the SGPC after independence have claimed that there is no caste among the Sikhs. The empirical reality is that among the non-Hindu religious communities, Sikhs are covered under the constitutional provision according to which certain castes among them are identified as schedule castes. All such castes are covered under the reservation policy. So far, despite the anti-caste rhetoric, neither the SGPC nor any Sikh leaders have demanded the end of reservation policy for the scheduled caste Sikhs. The existence of castes among the Sikhs has never been an issue of contestation among the intellectuals and academia, for everybody in Punjab – where 75% of the Sikhs live – takes it for granted that Sikhs are divided along caste lines. Various studies on castes among the Sikhs (Singh 1985, Judge 2002, and Puri 2004) have shown that caste system exists among the Sikhs. As a matter of fact any review of literature on caste consists of a section on caste among the non-Hindus. In a way, caste system is now regarded as the feature of Indian sub-continent. However, are caste hierarchies common among all religious communities? It seems that while determining the correspondence and separation among caste hierarchies, it is important to situate Brahmin and the practice of caste endogamy. The Sikh community in Punjab does not have a visible presence of Brahmins, whereas caste endogamy persists and maintained with the threat or use of violence in cases of hypogamous and sometimes hypergamous marriages where the couples have taken an independent decision. The absence of Brahmin in the non-Hindu religious communities structured the caste hierarchy in distinct forms which were different from the Hindu caste hierarchy. How do we understand this difference?

To understand the issue of distinct caste hierarchies, it is important to make a distinction between the ideal construction of caste hierarchy and the empirical reality. The concept of dominant caste, coined by Srinivas (1987), sought to understand deviations from the ideal hierarchical positions of various castes which are fixed under the Varna scheme. Srinivas (1966) maintained that Varna was unchangeable, whereas castes were dynamic. However, despite the concept of Sanskritisation according to which a lower caste could improve its status by changing its ways life through emulation, Srinivas looked at these changes merely within the Varna scheme. He separated the notion of dominance from social hierarchy by arguing that certain lower castes could dominate in a region. It implies that even if a caste was able to improve its condition, it continued to occupy the original Varna position, for Varna was fixed and unchangeable. Such a position is theoretically untenable, because it put a permanent moratorium on the claims of Kshatriya Varna among various middle castes. As a matter of fact, the process of Sanskritisation did not implicate caste as much as Varna – the evidence of which could be found in a large number of cases where a particular low caste claimed Kshatriya status.

In the case of non-Hindu religious communities, such as Sikhs, the ideological basis of caste was eliminated, but the caste system continued. At the same time the caste hierarchy among the Sikhs could not be understood in the light of Varna scheme, because Sikhism did not share the justification of caste system with Hinduism. As a result of lack of justificatory principles of caste system and the emphasis of the first Sikh Guru on physical labour, a distinct caste hierarchy emerged among the Sikhs in which the owner cultivator and the numerically preponderant caste took the place of upper caste. The Jat Sikhs – Shudra caste in the light of the Hindu tradition – became the upper caste. However, Jats were not the only one who improved their caste status. Other castes such as Tarkhans, Kalals, etc. were also able to remove the low caste stigma and emerged as the major caste groups within the religious community. Such a change could not take place among the low untouchable castes, particularly the Mazhabis.

III. Mazhabis and Their Exclusion

Among the various low castes, which were later on included in the schedule of the list of depressed castes of the Indian Constitution, were Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Sansis, Bazigars, Julahas, Meghs, etc. However, most of these castes were also comprised by members who did not convert to Sikhism. Interestingly, some of these castes converted to different religions among which the Churha/Bhangis were the most prominent. The Hindu Churha became Balmiki, Sikh was called Mazhabis, the Muslim was known as Mussali, and the Christian was christened as Masih. However, the Mazhabis and the Balmikis were more prominent than others. Masihis are now designated as the backward class, whereas the Hindu and Sikh Churhas are included among the scheduled castes. According to the Census of India, 2001, the total population of Mazhabis Sikhs is 22, 20,945, whereas the number of Balmikis is 7, 85,464. Since most of the Muslim Churha might have remained in or migrated to Pakistan in 1947, there is no way of estimating it. On the other hand, their conversion to Christianity has been so overwhelming in contrast to other caste communities that Christians and Churha have become coterminous in the popular expressions among the upper caste people. If we assume that all the Christians of Punjab belong to the Churha caste, which is not the case, then we can say that there are 292,800 persons of Churha caste who are Christians. Thus we can have the following figures presented in Table 1.

Category	Total Population	Percentage
Mazhabis (Sikh)	22,20,945	67.32
Balmikis (Hindus)	7,85,464	23.81
Masih (Christians)	292,800	8.87
Total	3,299,209	100

Table 1: Population of Churhas according to religion and religious nomenclature,

Source: Census of India, 2001.

Earlier information regarding the population of Mazhabis Sikhs is available in the census records. Webster (2007) has worked out the data covering 50 years starting from 1881 till 1931. According to the figures provided by him, the total population of the Mazhabis/Sikh Churhas was 169, 247 in 1931.

Among the Scheduled caste Sikhs the Mazhabis are an overwhelming majority, but more interesting is the fact that more than two third of the total members of the Churha caste are Sikhs. The Mazhabis are also concentrated in the major pockets of Punjab, particularly Amritsar, Bathinda, Mansa, Firozpur, etc. On the other hand, the Balmikis are concentrated in the Doaba region. Interestingly, whereas the Balmikis are concentrated in the urban areas of Punjab, the Mazhabis live in villages. By occupation the Mazhabis are involved in agriculture and were sirs under the traditional *sepidari* system in villages³. Their women had been working in the houses of the landowners as sweepers. The Balmikis living in the rural Punjab were almost similar to their Sikh counterparts. However, in urban areas they were mostly sweepers. In a recently conducted study it was found that the Balmikis as well as the Mazhabis have diversified their economic activities, though a major section among them is involved in the occupations which they had been doing for a long time (Judge and Bal 2009). If we specifically focus on women (both Mazhabi and Balmiki), changes are far more limited than men. In villages Mazhabi women are largely doing the job of sweepers in the houses of upper caste landowners. In certain cases they have become domestic help as cooks, which, from the point of view of commensality, is a major change.

The Balmiki/Mazhabi women have started undertaking certain measures to restructure their symbolic universe. Most of those who are working as domestic servants have stopped cleaning the toilets. Interestingly, unlike the earlier vocation of carrying the night soil on their heads, which was demeaning and humiliating work, cleaning modern toilets does not carry such a stigma. Avoiding or refusing such work is a negation and rejection of the humiliating work which symbolises centuries' old subjugation and dehumanisation.

We may now turn our attention to a significant anthropological aspect which has tremendous heuristic value. It seems that the lower castes never accepted their low caste position and the evidence is found in their symbolic universe. It may be underlined that the low castes have large number of stories in the form of myths and legends which depict the mode of their fall in the caste hierarchy. Obviously, all the narratives also inform that the concerned caste was earlier occupying the higher caste status. Two of such narratives may be stated here before taking up the same issue in the case of Churhas. Deliége (1999) has collected myths of origin of various low castes in Tamil Nadu. Let us narrate two of these myths thus

Two brothers went to a temple to conduct a prayer ceremony (*jabbam*). On their way, they found the remains of dead cow. As the younger brother was weak and

small, the elder proposed to remove carcass himself. The people present told him that he should conduct the prayer session instead, but he answered: *Een thambi pappaan*. The people understood that his younger brother was a Brahmin, *paappaan*. To thank the elder brother for his work, God blessed him a Paraiyar, whereas the younger brother became a Brahmin. (1999: 74).

The following myth brings out the story of origin quite clearly:

Once four Brahmin brothers were going to a fair. On their way, they had to cross a river, but as they came to the river, they saw a cow stuck in the mud by the bank. One by one, they tried to extricate the cow from the mud by the bank. As the younger was pulling on the tail of the cow trying to get it out, the cow died. As the younger brother was touching the cow when it died, his brothers considered him to be unclean and had nothing to do with him from then on. The present-day Camars [sic] are descendants of this outcasted Brahmin. (Ibid. : 85)

These two myths, in essence lead us to the notion of fall, which is related to cow either dead or in trouble and dying. In this regard, the creators of this myth have advertently or inadvertently accepted the Brahminic tradition of pollution and purity. Touching the dead cow does not only pollute the person, but also degrades him irreversibly. The second important insight one gets from these myths is that these untouchable castes originated from the higher caste, that is, Brahmin. Thirdly, the fall had occurred without any conscious violation of religious principles. In other words, the degradation of their forefather to the low caste occurred without him being guilty of any violation. The story of upper caste origin and the myth of fall constitute the most significant elements in the construction of anthropological past by these castes.

Similar attempt has also been made by Ashok (2001) in his work with regard to Churhas. According to him, Balmikis, Chandal and Dhanik castes emerged as result of hypogamous marriage between Shudra man and Brahmin woman. Before the arrival of Aryans, Ashok (ibid.: 9) informs that Dravidian were living in Punjab. One of the castes among the Dravidians was known as "Churhamani", which was a warrior caste. The people of this caste always kept weapons with them owing to which they were called Dhaniks and they were responsible for the protection of the country. The word Dhanik means the one who carries *Dhanush* (bow and arrow). When the Aryans invaded this region, the rich Dravidians left the place and Churhamins were left behind. Owing to their small number, they

could not continue to fight against the Aryans. Over a period of time, the Aryan rulers pushed them to the bottom of the society.

The above narration of Ashok is no different from those of myths from the South India in respect of the story of 'fall'. They also claim to be once occupying upper caste status though unlike the low castes of South India, who claimed to be Brahmins, they alleged that they were Kashatriyas. The major difference is the reason for 'fall' – an important difference seems to be connected with the specific upper caste status. The fall of Brahmin is in line with the myth of touching carcass of cow, whereas the myth of degradation of Kashatriya caste people is woven around ostensibly historical occurrences of loss in war and subsequent subjugation of the warrior class. In the contemporary cultural moorings of Punjab the construction of Mazhabis Sikh as brave and aggressive tends to lend tremendous support to such a mythical narrative. It is important to note that irrespective of valorisation of tradition by Mazhabis writers, the Mazhabis as brave and aggressive is a widely accepted point of view, opinion or stereotype. The involvement of Mazhabis in feuds between the Jat landowning families is regarded as an indispensable fact. It is important to elaborate this aspect of social anthropology of Punjabi society.

Pettigrew (1978) in her study of Jat Sikhs of Punjab has shown the intertwining of village level factional feuds and state politics. The Jats, who are mostly Sikhs, are landowners of Punjab. They employ the Mazhabis as their attached workers under the *sepidari/jajmani* system. Under the *sepidari* system the families of Jat and Mazhabis are connected to each other for many generations. Along with the Mazhabis male head of the household, his wife also works in the house of the landowner. The *sepidari* system started declining after the green revolution when cash economy replaced the traditional mode of payments in kind. Mechanisation of agriculture further weakened the system. However, the major change occurred as a result of the emergence of better opportunities outside agriculture. Despite all these changes, its practice continues to a limited extent (Judge 2009). The distinctiveness of the *sepidari* system actually operating between the Jat landowners and the Mazhabis workers from its usual practice in Punjab in general has been the involvement of the Mazhabis in the interfamily feuds of the landowners. Since these feuds continued for generations, the Mazhabis remained equally involved. It is a popular saying in Punjab that no murder takes place without the participation of Mazhabis. Such an attachment of the Balmikis in villages of Doaba is absent.

It is also important to mention that there have been a regiment of Mazhabis in the Indian Army known as the Sikh Light Infantry (Sikh Li). The tradition was started by the British as early as 1857 when 12,000 Mazhabis soldiers were raised to lay siege to Delhi (Puri 2004). The caste prevailed even in such recruitments despite the British recognition to the bravery of the Mazhabis. Puri (*ibid.*: 200-201) writes,

Mazhabis constituted Mazhabi regiments – the Sikh Pioneers 23, 32, and 34, later named ‘Sikh Light Infantry’ – separate and distinguished from exclusively Jat Sikh Regiments. No Sikh Jat or any other caste man could be recruited in the Sikh Light Infantry. Conversely, in the Sikh regiments, as an old retired Brigadier explained to the author, “not even a Labana Sikh be recruited to the Sikh regiments”. The fear of pollution of the high castes could compromise their loyalty. However, association with the army gave a boost to the Mazhabi’s sense of dignity, marking them out in distinction to the other un-touchable castes.

It may be noted that the valiant Mazhabi image was not solely sustained by their recruitment to the British army. It was the participation of the Mazhabis in the Akali movement in the second and third decades of 20th century that reinforced their image. The following observations of Hares have been cited from Webster (2007:144):

During the Akali agitation many thousands of Sikhs had been thrown into prison for their lawless behaviour, and in order to fill the ranks of the Akali Shahidi Jathas or Bands of Martyrs, the Sikh leaders welcomed warmly anyone and everyone who would help their cause in any way. Many thousands of Chuhras, the outcaste farm labourers of the province, joined them and, adopting all outward marks of Sikhism, were enrolled as the *Mazhabi* Sikhs. But when the Akalis had attained their object they had no further use for the *Mazhabis*, and the latter returned to their villages, disappointed and disillusioned, to find themselves still treated as outcastes, forbidden to draw water from the village wells, or to enter the Sikh temples, or to take part in the social life of the Sikhs.

The struggle for better status among the lower castes has taken many routes one of which is religious conversion. The conversion to Sikhism has created a distinct caste of Mazhabis who have distinguished themselves from their Hindu Balmiki counterparts. Has religious conversion brought about changes in the status of the Mazhabis? What is the perception of the Mazhabis with regard to their social status within the Sikh community? Are they experiencing exclusion in social and religious spaces? What is the nature of exclusion of Mazhabis?

Is it a product of social inequality of castes? Is there religious exclusion felt and experienced by the Mazhabis within the Sikh community? What is the form and content of these exclusions of Mazhabis? It was in the context of these queries that data were collected by administering an interview schedule in the villages of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts. According to the information provided by the Census 2001, the Mazhabis are concentrated in Amritsar, Ferozepur and Bathinda (including Mansa) districts. The area of Gurdaspur district adjoining Amritsar district also has high concentration of the Mazhabis.

A total of 140 Mazhabis respondents from ten villages, five each in Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts, were randomly selected and interviewed. Five villages in Amritsar district are Janiyai, Nangal, Mahal, Jeewan Singh Nagar and Preet Nagar. In the case of Gurdaspur district, the villages are Bhumbli, Alawalpur, Babari Nangal, Alowal and Khunda. The information about these villages which was collected in each village was regarding the number of gurdwaras and caste basis, if any, of these gurdwaras. As we shall just see, gurdwaras were linked with caste. Let us start with the Amritsar villages. In Janiyai there were three gurdwaras out of which one was owned and run by Jat Sikhs, whereas there were two gurdwaras of the Mazhabis. Nangal consisted of two Mazhabis gurdwaras and one Jat gurdwara, whereas in village Mahal there were five gurdwaras of Mazhabis and two Jat gurdwaras. Jeewan Nagar, an exclusive Mazhabis settlement had two gurdwaras, whereas in Preet Nagar there were two Mazhabis gurdwaras and three upper caste gurdwaras. In Bhumbli village in Gurdaspur district two Jat gurdwaras, two Mazhabis gurdwaras and one gurdwara of the Kumhar (potters) caste unambiguously depicted the caste basis of gurdwaras in villages. However, Alawalpur village did not have any Mazhabi gurdwara though there were two Jat gurdwaras and one belonged to other castes. Same was the case of Babari Nangal where two Jat gurdwaras and one other gurdwara meant for other non-Jat Sikhs showed caste divisions in place of worship. Alowal had only one Jat gurdwara, whereas one Jat, one Kumhar and one Mazhabi gurdwaras each was in existences in village Khunda.

The information regarding the existence of gurdwaras in the study villages shows castewise division among the villagers, but at the same time, it depicts separate localities of various castes. United by religion, villagers are divided by caste. How do the caste-divided villagers create religious divisions through exclusionary practices? So far as their social profile was concerned, the following picture emerged: The Mazhabis respondents belonged to all age groups ranging between 21 and 80 years with the mean age of 42 years. In terms of education, though majority (75.71%) of them were educated, yet very few of them (3.37%) had got education above school level. It clearly shows that though illiteracy is declining, but the Mazhabis are not acquiring education which is critical for the radical change in their occupational status. As discussed earlier, Mazhabis are largely involved in agricultural labour either as daily wage labourers or attached

labourers under the *sepidari/jajamani* system. In the changing socio-economic conditions, due to the penetration of capitalism, the traditional economic formations have more or less declined, but the Mazhabis are still involved in low status occupations. Businessmen, doctors and school teachers constituted only five percent of the respondents, whereas the rest of them were involved in the low status occupations. It is clear from the socio-economic profile of the Mazhabis that most of them are still low in education and high prestige occupations.

IV. Identity and Exclusion

One of the crucial elements in the profile of the respondents is related to their religious identity – the issue shrouded in controversies with claims and counterclaims. Earlier parts in this article have already underlined the significance of five symbols in the making of the Sikh identity. One of the Sikh traditions emphasises *bana* (dress) and *bani* (writings of the Gurus) as equally important dimensions of the Sikh identity. It was important to know the appearance of the Mazhabis respondents. Interestingly, thirty five percent of them had unshorn hair implying that majority of the respondents have deviated from the standard prescribed identity of the Sikhs.

As a corollary to the above mentioned logic, it was important that we inquire about respondents' own perception of what makes a person Sikh. They were asked to define who is Sikh? It is interesting to note that most of the respondents were ambivalent towards the identity of the Sikh. Almost half of them gave answers, such as "I believe in and follow the tenth Guru", "Granth Sahib" or "Gurus and *nitnaim*" (Sikh Religious Routine). These respondents did not give priority to the appearance. However, these responses could be interpreted as definitive in terms of appearance. A Sikh may say following the tenth Guru or Guru Granth Sahib corresponds with the tradition of keeping unshorn hair. Since these responses cannot be unambiguously put into a neat category, it may be held that these responses are inclusive in terms of religious identity. For example, love for humanity is a desirable trait in every person, but cannot be taken, as stated by 3.57 per cent of the respondents, as the basis of Sikh identity. Religious identities are not constituted by the universal principles of justice, equality, truth, etc. Any religious identity is based on exclusive definitive traits largely in terms of beliefs and certain cultural/ritual practices.

The Sikh construction of Khalsa during the 19th century attaches great significance to five symbols. The baptism ceremony alleged to be initiated by the tenth Guru in 1699 got the central space in defining the Sikh traditions. It is thus natural that we know the views of the Mazhabis respondents with regard to the significance of five symbols in the Sikh identity. To situate five symbols at their proper place in Mazhabi consciousness, two important aspects have been examined. The first is to know their opinion regarding these symbols, whereas

the other is to inquire whether there is a particular symbol which is central in defining the identity of Sikh. The responses were quite interesting as about 45 per cent of them attributed symbolic importance to five symbols, but these were also considered important for the baptised/amritdhari Sikhs by 17.86 per cent of the respondents. It is thus clear that most of the Mazabi respondents did not think that five symbols were crucial and indispensable for the Sikhs to keep.

The SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee), originally formed to manage historical gurdwaras after the enactment of the Gurdwara Reform Act, 1925, has now turned into the sole agency with the monopoly to handle ecclesiastical issue of Sikhism. From time to time, the SGPC has been issuing *hukamnamas* (orders) to define various dimensions of the Sikh issues including the question Sikh identity. The Mazhabis respondents were asked to describe the SGPC and its role in the lives of the Sikhs. The rationale behind seeking this query was to not only know the level of their awareness, but also their sense of belongingness to the Sikh institution. An inclusive approach of the SGPC would definitely create a sense of belongingness among the members of community. In a way, just more than half of the respondents correctly understood the role of the SGPC in terms of management of gurdwaras. At the same time, two fifth of the Mazabi respondents seemed to be either indifferent or hostile to the SGPC. There is a reasonable basis to argue that the role of the SGPC could be put under scanner so far as its democratic and egalitarian practices are concerned.

One of the important dimensions of the democratic ethos of the Sikh body (SGPC) is that there are periodic elections that take place after every five years. Even before 1947 since its inception, different political parties used to participate in the SGPC elections. For example, Sohan Singh Josh, the veteran communist leader, was the elected member of the SGPC. After independence there has been a decline in its democratic spirit through systematic attempts at redefining the meaning of Sikh. As a result, the SGPC has been consistently excluding and depriving people professing Sikhism from the voting rights in its elections. When the respondents were asked whether they had voted in the SGPC elections, 65 per cent of them told that had never voted despite the fact that they claimed to be Sikhs. Situating the definition of Sikh provided by the SGPC in the broader Sikh context requires an examination of how the Sikhs define themselves and their religious identity. It is worthwhile to examine the definition and multiple shades of Sikhs as these empirically exist.

There is a gap between the ideal and reality and it is a result of how the world is seen empirically and how it actually exists. The division of the world into sacred and profane may not necessarily demarcate boundaries between socially constructed routine life and religious living. Religion has strong propensity to transverse lines of demarcation between the two. Religion acquires this tendency as it is based on the notion of an infallible world that could only emanate from god and its moral vision. People are not perfect and their world is equally imper-

fect. Needs govern and control their actions, for the survival is the most essential value in the life. From it emerge various kinds of imperfections and movement away from the strict moral code provided by religion. Thus emerge differences of opinion regarding religious identity though central element in the definition of Sikh is keeping unshorn hair. We find that the dominant view is liberal and provides for lot of variations. The respondent who took a very narrow and definite view of the Sikh identity were only 12.14 per cent.

It is equally important to examine how the Mazhabis understand and respond to those persons who claim to be Sikhs but trim/shave their hair. Interestingly, there are more than one fourth of the respondents who stated quite categorically that without unshorn hair a person could not be Sikh, whereas 45.71 per cent of the respondents were clear that such persons could claim to be Sikhs but they could not be the Singh's of the Guru. However, despite a degree of Catholicism and liberal attitude with regard to the definition of Sikh, the issue of unshorn hair occupies a central place in the discourse of Sikh identity. In other words, there is a degree of ambivalence towards the Sikh identity, which is handled by emphasising the crucial importance of the Gurus and their writings (bani) which are personified in the Guru Granth Sahib – the sacred book of the Sikhs.

The presence of castes among the Sikhs is an issue which sometimes create strong reaction among the Sikh establishment only in such situations where attempts are made to make Sikhism coterminous with Hinduism. The fact that there is a provision of reservation for the scheduled caste Sikhs, it implies that the Sikh leadership accepts the existence of castes in the Sikh community in principle. The Mazhabis are the scheduled caste and they are eligible for the preferential treatment under the reservation policy. What are the experiences and perceptions of the respondents with regard to caste is an important issue for examination. What emerges from the data is highly expected. An overwhelming majority of the respondents (eighty per cent) was clear about the castes. Obviously the discourse of equality within the community has struck some roots. However, asking a question whether caste exists among the Sikhs is not a very right kind of query, because there is no need to ask this question. The Indian state through its Constitution acknowledges castes among Sikhs.

One of the arguments is that there is existence of caste-based discrimination against the Mazhabis at religious places. Judge and Bal (2009) noted that the Mazhabis were not permitted to carry the sacred book, Guru Granth Sahib, to their homes arguing that they were dirty and they could violate the maryada (code of conduct) of properly keeping the book. However, this was not the only reason. It was also found by them that each separate gurdwara is located in one locality. Since the Mazhabis have their own separate locality, they also had their own gurdwara. In other words, the Mazhabis have constructed their own gurdwaras due to various reasons and caste based discrimination is one of the major reasons. When the Mazhabis respondents were asked about why they had their

own separate gurdwara, they give different reasons. Two main reasons for the separate gurdwaras of the Mazhabis could be understood along the lines discussed above. The most important is the discrimination against the Mazhabis in the upper caste gurdwaras followed by the rationale of locality. Almost half of the respondents did not give any clear reason, but avoided indulging into the issue of caste-based religious discrimination.

In conclusion, it may be stated that despite the historical intimacy of the Mazhabis with the Sikh tradition, particularly the tenth Guru, they are at the margin of the religious community. One Mazhabis leader also became the president of the SGPC, but their inclusion in the Sikh community as equals is far from realisation. They feel excluded with regard to the SGPC elections and representation.

V. Concluding Discussion

The detailed discussion of what has been described and examined is required to bring out the issue of the politics of religious exclusion in its rightful historical and social context. Two important issues emerge from the earlier discussion and require further elaboration. These issues become important and essential to be tackled in the light of the fact that the Sikhism is egalitarian in theory and its leaders continue to claim to be so despite obvious empirical evidence. Keeping in view the fundamental distinction between religion and community, what makes the issue worthy of analysis is that the discrimination and exclusion are maintained within the framework caste in one of the cases, whereas the other implicates the political economy of religion. First, the Sikh identity was constructed by the state through enactment and the Sikh is defined by law and not by faith. As part of the state intervention the SGPC was created which began to manage not only the Sikh shrines but also the identity issue. The result was that two discourses were created in identifying the Sikh. One was related with the right to vote in the SGPC elections and the second was the exercise of vote in the political elections at the province and country levels. Both the SGPC and the Legislative Assembly in Punjab are under the control of one political party, that is, the Shiromani Akali Dal (henceforth SAD). At the time of provincial elections the Sikh is defined by the SAD on the basis of faith in the sacred book, whereas in the case of the SGPC elections the voting rights are limited to a much smaller number of Sikhs. The politics of exclusion is practiced in maintaining and sustaining the differences in identity making it a contentious issue within the community.

The second issue is the prevalence of the caste system and the exclusion of certain castes from equal participation in all walks of life thus denying them the opportunities of a good quality life. In order to make sense of the exclusion of Mazhabis, we need to examine the symbolic universe of caste system in general and its implications for the Sikh community believed to be based on the discourse of equality. Dumont (1998) constructed the binary model of pure and

impure castes based on the principle of pollution. Accordingly, the castes which pollute and which are polluted are located in a system of hierarchy based on the Hindu texts. However, what is the basis of purity and impurity did not get needed attention from Dumont. It is my contention that the binary opposition between the physical and non-physical labour has been the principle located in hierarchy constructed on the two broad divisions of pure and impure (Judge 2002)⁵. Despite the occupational diversity within the caste, underlined in many studies, physical labour remained the basic principle of separation of various castes. For example, a Brahmin or a Rajput could be landowner, but he never tilled the land. Sikhism which emerged as a result of interaction between Hinduism and Islam in late medieval period was based on the fundamental principle of equality. It paved the way for the rise in the status of certain lower castes, particularly the cultivating castes located in the Shudra Varna the most notable among them were the Jats. However, the rise of peasant castes in the caste hierarchy in the Sikh community simultaneously accompanied by the emergence of new hierarchy in which the erstwhile low castes of the peasants occupied the dominant position without changing the status of the castes located at the lowest rungs of the Sikh community. The Mazhabis, who were located at the lowest rung of the Sikh community continued to face discrimination though they changed their occupation from scavenging to agricultural labour/landless cultivators.

Whereas the hegemonic structure perpetuates the dominance of the upper caste Jats, the practice of democracy provides the semblance of equality and consensus within the Sikh community. The perpetuation of difference is marked by the politics of exclusion within the Sikh community. Difference is political when it is irreversibly connected with power and status. Even when the claim of achieving inclusive community is made, it is expected that it is based on achievement of equality with difference. The Politics of difference in the case of the Sikh community is upheld by the articulation of the discourse of equality which is stated to have originated from the founders of the faith making it irrefutable and beyond doubt. Therefore, exclusion and difference become inseparable in the internal institutional and social practices of the Sikh community.

Notes

- 1 Hindus, Muslims and Christians are followed by the Sikhs in population.
- 2 The Singh Sabha movement carried out the propagation of the Sikh faith and made an attempt to create a homogenous community by removing various parallel traditions from the mainstream.
- 3 The Jajmani/Sepidari system is a system of economic interdependence among castes wherein the lower service castes provide services to the landowners and in turn are paid in kind at the harvesting season.
- 4 In certain ways, it could be equated to the institution of inquisition initiated by the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe. However, the SGPC does not have the power to physically punish the people. The methods used are to deny the unorthodox Sikh the access to certain resources and privileges.
- 5 However, swordsmanship and cooking could be exceptions making physical labour as impure.

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**ЗАЈЕДНИЦА УНУТАР ЗАЈЕДНИЦЕ:
ПОЛИТИКА ИСКЉУЧИВАЊА У КОНСТРУКЦИЈИ
ИДЕНТИТЕТА СИКА**

Резиме

Овај рад истражује конструкцију идентитета Сика из друштвено – историјске перспективе. Тврди се да је идентитет Сика створен као резултат колонијалне интервенције у којој је акценат стављен на изглед, уместо на веру. Нови идентитет је био производ политике времена која је спровођена ради задржавања хегемонистичке позиције. Сикизам, насупрот егалитарној идеологији, није успео да направи заједницу без касти. Дискриминација и искљученост нижих касти се наставила. Указаћемо на емпиријско истраживање услова и перцепције нижих касти, рецимо Мазбахи су отворено указивали на њихову искљученост, упркос томе што су Сики користили дискурс једнакости да би створили моралну заједницу. Упркос једнакости обожавања међу Сикима, Мазбахима је на локалном нивоу одбијена верску једнакост у гурдварасима (сикистичким храмовима), који су у власништву и под контролом виших (доминантних) каста. Корени искључивости могу бити лоцирани у историји стварања верских заједница и начина преко којег су више класе, након користи од верске конверзије, одржале искључивост засновану на кастинском систему.

Кључне речи: искљученост, дискриминација, Мазбахи, Сикизам, пет симбола, кастинска хијерархија, верске заједнице

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