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ETHNONATIONALISM AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY: THE CASES OF PUNJAB AND ASSAM

BY

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This analysis addresses the relationship between pre-political cultural identity and political outcomes. It posits that the political mobilization of sub-national groups cannot be understood without an examination of the cultural processes of identity formation. The analysis engages cultural discourse and its organization as an explanatory factor in the examination of the variation in ethnic political outcomes. Hence, important questions about ethnonational conflict can be answered by engaging the levels at which identity is constructed and reshaped through cultural discourse. It shifts the arena of analysis from the state to the ethnic groups themselves. The two empirical cases analyzed are that of Sikh nationalism in Punjab and 'ethnic' Assamese nationalism in Assam.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflict, nationalism and the politics of identity have been growing all over the world in the post-war period, but the last few decades have displayed their increasing malignancy. The recent politics of India have been marked by a duality of political tendencies, both integrative and disintegrative. (Varshney 1993) The integrative tendency is reflected in the discourse on 'national' integration of the postcolonial Indian State. The latter, despite its secular justifications, has in recent years become increasingly synonymous with a *Hindu* nationhood. The disintegrative tendencies have been reflected in the separatist claims of regional identities. The most prominent examples of the latter are the cases of Punjab, Kashmir, Tamil Nadu and Assam. The latter have been termed 'ethnonationalisms.' This is a study of ethnonationalism in India. It is a comparative case study of ethnonational mobilization of the 'ethnic' Assamese in Assam and the Sikhs in Punjab. The attempt is to move away from structural explanations of ethnic nationalism to questions of content and variation in the

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construction of ethnonational discourse. Hence, this is primarily an analysis of discourses rather than of institutions. At the center of this study lies an examination of the elements of symbolic discourse that shape identity and subsequently, ethnic and political boundaries. The study has two primary objectives. Foremost, instead of taking the state as the arena in which identity and ethnic groups arise, I attempt to delineate how and why cultural identities arising within the ethnic group influence political outcomes. Cultural factors are thus seen as having a dynamic that influences both political discourse and political behavior. Hence, I examine how and to what extent cultural resources provide the symbolic justifications in ethnonational self-determination. This is done by identifying the most significant of these 'cultural bases' (Penrose 1995) or the 'ethno-symbolic resources' (A.D. Smith 1996a;1996b;1996c) called upon in ethnonational mobilization in India. Secondly, I explore why ethnonational discourses on identity shift and evolve over time through nationalist mobilization. The claim is thus not to regard either discourse or identity as fixed and immutable. Ethnonational discourse is instead analyzed as being actively shaped by its interaction with the political realm and the nationalist (in the case of India 'statist') discourse.

Much contemporary scholarly work on ethnic conflict in India has relied heavily on the analysis of the state and the state elite as the primary causal factors in the rise of ethnic identity and ethnic conflict (See Ahmed 1996; Brass 1991). This is an attempt to examine the agency of the sub-national groupings themselves. I do this by an examination of the cultural discourse of ethnic groups and their

leadership and examine how this discourse on identity provides the resources in political mobilization. Thus, in the Sikh case the analysis addresses three issues pertinent to the Sikh discourse on identity. Firstly, how and why Sikhism delineated its religious boundaries. Secondly, why Sikh identity was transformed from its fluid *Sanatan* tradition, to that of the *Khalsa* towards the close of the nineteenth century. Thirdly, why this hardened *Khalsa* identity provided the emotive language in the cry for the separate state of *Khalistan* in the 1980s. In the case of Assam, firstly, I examine the evolution of an inclusive Assamese identity rooted in the territory of the Brahmaputra Valley. Secondly, why this identity became tied to the question of language. Thirdly, why the Assam movement of the 1970s and early 1980s shifted its discourse from that of language to that of religion. I thus posit that the politico-territorial assertions of sub-national groups cannot be understood without an analysis of the 'imagining' of cultural boundaries that *precede* political mobilization.

I use the comparative case study method of two ethnic movements: (a) Sikh nationalism in the Punjab, where ethnic demands were most militant from 1973-1989 and (b) the *Assamiya* movement in the North-eastern state of Assam, where demands were most militant from 1979-1985. Though the case studies on which this analysis draws are from South Asia, the attempt is to develop a model - that may be applicable not only to other post-colonial experiences, but also to nationalism and the nation-state in other parts of the world. This is not to claim that ethnonational conflict everywhere is the product of forces similar to those

operative in the Indian case, but to posit rather, that similar patterns may be discerned elsewhere.

I address three primary questions in the Sikh and Assamese cases. (i) How far has cultural resistance to assimilation preceded political demands in the rise of ethnonational identity in India? Thus, whether there is a relationship between 'pre-political' cultural identities and the language of modern nationhood. (ii) What were the mechanisms through which Sikh and Assamese cultural discourse came to be constructed and imagined. How and why did these discourses change? (iii) What explains the variation in intensity of ethnic conflict – why demands for autonomy rooted in the discourse of a distinct 'homeland' became more potent in the case of Punjab than in the case of Assam. Thus, while the timing of ethnic revival may be seen as a function of social and geopolitical changes, the content and variation between ethnic movements is largely determined by pre-existing "ethno-symbolic resources" and "cultural bases."(A.D. Smith 1986;1996a;1996b: Penrose 1995) The 'ethno-symbolic resources' referred to here are ethno-history, language, religion and the manner and extent to which territory has been historicized in the cultural discourse of ethnic groups. (See A.D. Smith: 1996a;1996b;1996c)

Out of these questions arise three primary hypotheses: (i) that cultural resistance to assimilation *precedes* demands for power within the state apparatus and that cultural boundaries are imagined prior to perceptions of political sovereignty. I will show through an examination of the case studies that both Sikh and Assamese identities were framed within the context of a cultural resistance to

assimilation. This resistance not only pre-dated their political mobilization but also provided the emotive and symbolic resources in the latter. It is important to note that this does not suggest the 'essentialist' nature of these sub-national identities. Admittedly, identities are reshaped by their interaction with both the institutions and the discourse of the state. However, what I do attempt to indicate is that the shaping forces and foundational elements of these identities are provided by the 'pre-political' cultural discourse of the ethnic group itself. Hence, the agency that I focus on is that of the ethnic group rather than that of the state.

A WORD ON DEFINITIONS

A large part of the problematic of finding satisfactory explanations for the phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism is the lack of definition of the terms employed. Some of the most problematic of these terms that relate directly to the crux of this discussion are the *nation, nationalism, ethnicity* and *culture*.

The "nation" as defined by Smith, involves subjective elements of group identity like myth and memory that however become objective realities since each element has an empirical referent – a piece of territory, an epic, a chronicle, ritual. (A.D. Smith 1994:381) The subjective is also transformed into the objective insofar as it influences action. Thus, a nation may be defined as "a named cultural unit of population with a separate homeland, shared ancestry, myths and memories, a public culture, common economy and common legal rights and duties for all its members." (A.D. Smith, 1991:chs.1,4) Two factors appear crucial to this definition of the nation. Firstly, the primacy of notions of culture and secondly, the

ethnic group as the level at which identity is first constructed. This definition also contributes to the construction of a theoretical approach that sees culture as an element with a dynamic capable of influencing political action. Thus, cultural resistance and its symbolic tools cannot be ignored as incentives to action in political nationalist mobilization.

If the nation is a cultural unit then nationalism is the ideological manifestation of this identity. Nationalism is examined here on two levels. Firstly, as a discourse exalting the nation as a form of moral and cultural regeneration and a unit of political obligation. Secondly as a movement with national aspirations and goals. (See A.D. Smith 1994:379) It is with the first level of the definition, of the *discourses* of the nation that I am especially interested since it is here that group identity is first 'imagined.' (Anderson 1983) It is this discourse that provides the symbolic impetus for the organization of political movement. The Sikh religious discourse, that invoked the Sikh scriptures, the place of the Sikh *Gurus* and the Sikh code of discipline was crucial in the invocation of a Sikh identity. The *Singh Sabha* movement of the early part of this century celebrated the distinction of a Sikh identity through its literary narratives and its rituals. Similarly, in the case of Assamese sub-nationalism the poetics of Assamese cultural identity are significant. These poetics, premised on perceptions of cultural alienation "transformed the geography of North-East India into a primal, homelike sacred space." It also transformed the Assamese people into a "collectivity with imagined ties of shared origins and kinship." (Baruah 1994:652) The place of the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* (Assamese Literary Society) was significant in the

development of Assamese nationalist imagining through its literary discourse on the regeneration and protection of the Assamese language. Hence while the two usages of the definition of nationalism may often be treated as a single phenomenon, it is important to recognize that the two might be separable. (See M. Hroch 1985)

The term 'ethnicity' has "always comprised a kind of catch-all term for social features such as language, religion, customs of food or dress, folklore and/or general groupings by country or regional heritage." (Tilley 1997:498) Lately, all kinds of social organization are being swept under the umbrella of 'ethnicity to include not only groups "differentiated by language, religion and color but also 'tribes', 'races', 'nationalities' and 'castes.'" (Horowitz 1985:53) Smith defines an ethnic community or an "ethnie" (A.D.Smith 1986) as "a named human group claiming a homeland and sharing myths of common ancestry, historical memories and a distinct culture." (A.D. Smith 1992a) Hence, ethnic identity is neither a thing outside the self imposed by acculturation, nor an automatic consequence of descent. (M.P. Smith 1992) It is rather a "dynamic mode of self-consciousness, a form of selfhood represented if not reinvented generationally in response to changing historical circumstances." (M.J. Fischer 1986:195) One of the expansions of the use of 'ethnicity' refers to its increasing use as a euphemism for 'culture.' Insofar as ethnic identity is a "symbolizing act, that is a cultural one, dependent on, at the very least a shared interpretative scheme of some sort, an ethnic group that identifies itself as ethnic is in some sense a culture group as

well." (Cornell 1996:269) However, it is important to note that ethnicity and culture are not one and the same thing.

Culture is by far one of the most complicated words in the English language. Drawing from the definition of Raymond Williams one may identify three main usages of the term 'culture.' (1) the description of a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; (2) references to a particular way of life and (3) the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity. (R. Williams 1976:90) Thus, these broad definitions of culture delineate culture in two ways: culture as an idea or a *discourse* and culture as a way of life.

Culture, is also one of the least concrete and least treated subjects in social science, which few outside the field of anthropology have ever confronted systematically. While most often treated as a component of ethnicity, cultural discourse, as an element with a political dynamic is often glossed over. One of the key questions to be confronted in any study of nationalism (ethnonationalism in particular) is how notions of culture relate to questions of ethnicity and national identity and the political manifestation of the latter in ethnic nationalism. In other words, the attempt is to bring 'culture' back into the debate on ethnicity and nationalism. As soon as one attempts to shift the discussion of ethnonationalist identity construction from the realm of the state to the realm of actors within the ethnic community, it becomes paramount to examine the cultural discourse of the ethnic community.

Much of the literature that looks beyond structural contingencies in nationalist and ethnic nationalist mobilization suggests that the discourse of culture

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is significant in the shaping of ethnic and national identity. It also suggests that cultural narrative also determines the narratives of resistance in the political realm. Thus. cultural discourse becomes a central theme in this analysis. The cultural discourse looked at here in the Sikh and the Assamese cases are the discourses on religion, language and finally territory in constructions of Sikh and Assamese identity. Thus, the Sikh discourse of the nation was intimately tied to the invocation of the history of the Sikh *Gurus*, the Sikh scriptures. the Sikh code of discipline and the Punjabi language. Assamese discourse was intimately tied to the preservation of the Assamese language and later the invocation of the golden age of *Vaishnavite* Hindu religion. It is important to note that nowhere is the effort to imply cultural identity as predetermined by hardened cultural tradition; this is the reason that I discuss culture and ethnonational imagining as discourse. subject to evolution and agency as they confront the political ideology of nationalism. The drive to convert culture into a discourse of political separatism and independence has been amply illustrated by separatist movements in several parts of the world. over the past twenty years. The movement of the Basques and the Catalans, the Quebecois. the Ulster Catholics. the ethnic assertions in the former Soviet Union and the Scottish separatist movement all point towards the ubiquity of culture as an element in national imagining. (See Gusfield 1996:54)

National identity is defined by Sahlins: "as a socially constructed and continuous process of defining 'friend' and 'enemy'...... national identities... do not depend on the existence of any objective linguistic or cultural differentiation but on the subjective experience of difference." (Sahlins 1989:270-71) Sahlins thus

assumes that something called national identity is "there," but he also insists that national consciousness is a "constructed" identity. The failure to engage the levels at which identity is constructed in the study of ethnic conflict and ethnonationalism is a dangerous failing since in several cases the origins (and hence solutions) to conflict lie therein.

CASE SELECTION

The two cases of ethnonationalism in India, Punjab and Assam are selected as the empirical examples to address my hypotheses for several reasons. On the one hand are the differences between the regions themselves. Punjab is economically prosperous while Assam is one of the most industrially and economically underdeveloped states of the Indian union. However, both regions experienced violent assertions of identity, which became most intense under Indira Gandhi's Congress regime. Hence, the variation on the economic variable acts as a control in the explanation of ethnonationalism and brings out the limited utility of both 'internal colonialist' and 'relative deprivation' theories. Theories of relative deprivation may provide a plausible explanation for the rise in conflict in Punjab, a state that was in the throes of the success of the Green Revolution and the rising economic expectations unleashed by the latter. However, they are of limited utility in the case of industrially and economically backward Assam.

Similarly, theories that trace the rise of ethnonational conflict to perceptions of 'internal colonialism' also fail to explain fully the outcomes in Punjab and Assam. (See M. Hechter 1975) Given Assam's underdevelopment

relative to other regions in India, the expectation, according to the internal colonialist theories would be that conflict would be most likely here. Admittedly, the relative underdevelopment of the region of Assam and the economic dominance of the Bengalis played a part in Assamese unrest. However, it fails to explain why ethnic cleavages take one particular form rather than any other and how cleavages come to be in the first place. Also, this assumption fails to explain secessionism in the context of Punjab which was, at the time that conflict became most intense, one of the most economically prosperous of the Indian Union. Moreover, conflict in Punjab gave way to full blown secessionist demands while *Assamiya* demands did not. Hence, there are obviously some other factors at work here apart from the purely economic ones. Thus, the economic explanation, though useful, is of limited utility in the explanation of conflict in these two cases.

Both movements sprang out of an evolving discourse of a distinct identity, one that was both constructed and transformed at different points in the political history of the post-colonial nation state. Both movements are historically grounded in a persistent struggle between the post-colonial state and the rights of the periphery both on the level of discourse and on the level of action.

Further, though both Assam and Punjab experienced ethnonational assertions, the case of Punjab was transformed into demands for full blown secession, while the Assamese demands remained limited to those for a specific kind of autonomy within India's federal structure. This divergence in outcomes allows for the possibility of analyzing why certain ethnic demands begin to identify more strongly with the idea of a sovereign territorial homeland than others

do. Thus. Punjab and Assam are the cases selected, in order to address a key question -- namely why some ethnonational demands are more easily assimilated within the 'national' structure than others are. The Assam movement was accommodated relatively easily. The Sikh demands, though muted since 1989 still persist. This variation becomes particularly significant given that the Assam movement in its early stages was able to garner much more popular support than the Sikh movement. The latter, except in the much later stages, was confined to the *Jat* Sikh population. Moreover, while in the Sikh case the territory of Punjab did not become a significant element of Sikh identity till the mid-1980s, the territory of Assam was ingrained in the Assamese imagining of identity right from the early colonial period onwards. Admittedly, the differential nature of the behavior of the Indian State played a part in the differential outcomes. However, what cannot be ignored is that the resources of cultural discourse that the Sikh nationalists were able to draw on differed in scope and intensity from those the Assamese nationalists were able to invoke, not to mention that as both movements moved into their most potent stages that Sikh discourse diverged more and more from the pan-Indian 'national' one, while the Assamese discourse moved towards a convergence with the Indian 'national' one. (See D. Gupta 1992,1996)

THE THEORETICAL DIALECTIC

One of the foremost hurdles in the examination of ethnonational conflict is the inability of scholars to come to any consensus on the nature of the 'nation' – its relation to 'antiquity,' its political manifestation in the ideology of nationalism and its underlying tools of identity. The terms of the debate are succinctly and aptly summed up by Anthony Smith-- "is the nation a seamless whole or an a la carte menu? Is it an immemorial deposit that archaeology has recovered and history explained, or a recent artifact that artists have created and media chefs purveyed to a bemused public? Are nationalists to be compared with intrepid explorers of an often distant past, or with social engineers and imaginative artists of the present? Does nationalism create nations, or do nations form the matrix and seedbed of nationalisms?" (A.D. Smith 1995:3) Are Sikh and Assamese ethnonationalisms products of little more than the political and economic contexts of the time or does their power gain from a prior struggle against cultural assimilation into the Indian 'national' fold? It is to this question that this study is devoted: the examination of the relationship between notions of culture and modern political nationalism.

Scholarship on the politics of identity has broadly spanned two fields: (1) The study of ethnicity and ethnic community and (2) The analysis of 'national' identity and nationalism. (See A.D. Smith 1992) These two fields, which were formerly treated as separate have converged over time leading scholarship to study the phenomenon of ethnicity and the phenomenon of nationalism as intimately

intertwined. Nowhere is this truer than in cases of ethnonationalism. While ethnonationalism in India has become increasingly, applied to the 'Hindu' revivalist discourse of the Indian State, I am here concerned mainly with those nationalisms that present challenges to metanarratives of the modern nation-state. I am concerned with the manner in which theoretical approaches to nationalism provide an adequate framework within which to understand these ethnonationalist movements and their quest for self-determination.

The labyrinthine theoretical debate on nations and nationalism makes it necessary to clarify the varied scholarly approaches devoted to their study. It is through an examination of this debate on the role of community cultural discourse in the emergence of a sense of nationhood (albeit in close interaction with the discourse of the state) that an adequate concept of the phenomenon of 'ethnonationalism' may emerge.

The primary dialectic within the study of nationalism has been between theorists that are classified into the *perrenialists*, the *primoridialists*, the *instrumentalists* and the *modernists*. This classification has been determined by the value or primacy theorists place on the continuity between past and present in national imagination or between the place of ethnic ties and 'pre-political' cultural discourse in the shaping of nationalist discourse. The *primordialists* and the *instrumentalists* are most often pitted against each as representatives of the two fundamentally contending ideologies. It is in order to bridge this seemingly impenetrable gulf between these approaches that recent scholarship has posited an approach that takes account of both. This third approach has been termed

constructivist and is represented most prominently by theorists like Anthony Smith. This *constructivist* approach seems to be the most appropriate in an examination of Sikh and Assamese ethnonationalism. Both, movements, put forth their demands within the context of the modernizing processes of democratic and electoral politics. capitalist development and national self-determination. However. the language of both conflicts harked back to cleavages that reflected their pre-political cultural discourse. This *constructivist* approach addresses what the categorization of scholarly debate into *primordialism* and *instrumentalism* has glossed over. namely the inconsistencies within the two schools of thought themselves.

Perhaps the most contentious issue in the study of the ethnicity and nationalism is the question of 'primordiality': whether ethnic identity is actually driven or determined by some 'deep' cultural, psychological or even biological human quality. There are thus three *distinct* branches of the *primordial* school though they are most often spoken of as synonymous. (See Tilley 1997) Biological approaches argue that ethnic attachments are formed when people act on instinct to form bonds of kinship and thereby take their power from forces *essential* to the human condition. (See Van den Berghe 1979) Psychological primordialists find ethnic bonds to reflect deep human attachments to the natal community, even to natal geographic location. (See Isaacs 1975) The culturalist school represented by Shils and Geertz holds that human culture is the shaping force of conceptions of reality and that concepts of ethnic identity arise from the experience of difference among such meaning systems. (See Geertz 1973; Shils 1957) It is this culturalist

school represented by Geertz and Shils that emerged as the most prominent representative of what has come to be known as 'primordialism.' The latter has often rather erroneously been understood as synonymous with the determinism of the biological and psychological approaches. (See Eller & Coughlan 1993) It is this conflation of the three branches of *primordialism* that has led several more contemporary scholars to discard this approach as one that is overly deterministic on account of its being bereft of all agency and its emphasis on the 'ascriptive' and 'subjective' elements of human action. It may also be the reason that much contemporary literature on nations and nationalism has steered clear of engaging culture in its debate for fear of being associated with a form of determinism considered taboo within scholarly circles. Admittedly, by reducing as complex a process as identity formation and ethnic consciousness to little more than biological or psychological 'givens' is a dangerous flaw. However, some elements of the culturalist school's engagement of culture as a significant element in ethnic identity may be useful in understanding the recent explosions of ethnonational movements for self-determination. To quote from Geertz's, *Interpretation of Cultures*:

> By primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the "givens" – *or more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed "givens"* – of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the giveness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. (Geertz 1973:259; emphasis added)

It is important to note here that Geertz does not argue that these 'givens' that he talks about are either natural or ultimate 'givens.' What is key here is the understanding that cultural attributes must be 'perceived' as being 'given' by the

individuals that make up the group. Hence, culture is attributed by the individual rather than being external to such a perception. (A.D. Smith 1994) Nowhere in this culturalist debate then is the cultural component of identity viewed as independent of choice, and construction of a perception of difference. What this school of thought does however, is shift agency of this construction to the members of an ethnic group. Thus, the suggestion is not that such community identities *are* primordial only that the members *feel* they are. (A.D. Smith 1994) However, what Geertzian theory fails to do is to address the question of *why* certain attributes are taken to be given, and why attributes that were once salient decline and are superceded by others in the course of ethnic mobilization. An explanation of the latter is important to an understanding of the mutable salience of language and religion in Sikh and Assamese nationalism. In order to address this question it becomes essential to engage this culturalist debate in conjunction with one that takes into account the contextual environment within which political movement occurs.

It may be argued, that, in any study of ethnic nationalism and ethnic nationalist mobilization the prominent clamor is one for a distinct identity based on an 'ascriptive' element – language, religion, race or caste—the assertion of a 'national culture.' It is because of this 'illusion' of ascriptivity that cultural arguments have been somewhat erroneously discarded as 'primordial'. Analyzing culture per se as primordial is probably where theory approaches a pitfall – for is not culture in itself a conscious construction of an evolving community and its discourse, an invention of tradition (See Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) if you may?

In fact even the 'illusion' of primordiality becomes then little more than an evolving discourse with different aspects of these 'ascriptive' identities becoming salient at different points in time. In fact, it is fairly plausible that it is in this creation of illusion that lies the power of the cultural narrative in the shaping of both boundaries and identity.

The *instrumentalists* and *modernists* on the other hand, treat ethnicity and nationalism either as instruments of political gain for political *elites* (Brass 1974,1991; Breuilly 1982); or as recent products of specifically modern conditions like the modern state, secularism and capitalism. (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1986). This approach has a strong explanatory power in answering questions about timing in the rise of political nationalist mobilization. It is useful in explaining the causal relationship between context (increased state centralization, elite manipulation) and ethnic mobilization. However, the *instrumentalists* "by conflating all ethnic movements within a profile of political opportunism fail to recognize the varying contributions of culture and its discourse to outcomes in the political realm." (Tilley 1997:498-499) Thus, for such theorists, "nationalism is above all and beyond all else about politics and politics is about power. Power in the modern world is primarily about control of the state." (Breuilly 1982:1-2) The latter approach thus divests the 'political' phenomenon of nationalism of all notions of identity. Even those *instrumentalists* and *modernists* that do engage in a discussion of identity (Brass 1991; Young 1993) engage it only as a malleable tool in the quest for electoral and political power undermining the possibility of sub-altern agency. (See Pieterse 1997) Reflecting a preoccupation with political power, these

analyses generally take the state as the arena in which ethnic groups arise while some *instrumentalist* theorists even go so far as to assert that ethnic identities are the product of the modern state system and do not really arise elsewhere. (Anderson 1994) The problem with this approach is its assumption that elements of culture have no political dimension of their own. "In other words, this view omits from consideration the ways in which cultural segmentation translates into political fragmentation." (Tilley 1997:499) While in the case of both Sikh and Assamese nationalism, the role of the state cannot be denied, (and this with particular regard to the escalation of conflict) the evolution of Sikh and *Assamiya*, political segmentation cannot be adequately examined without an examination of the delineation of their pre-political cultural boundaries.

Arguably, political contingency requires the manipulation of ethnic tools in the gaining of political ends. However, this elite statist model seems insufficient in explaining why political cleavages are so often shaped by cultural cleavages or how these cultural symbols come to have such riveting power. This points to the necessity of examining the possibility that there must be some degree of the imagining of cultural 'otherness' and cultural boundaries, quite distinct from what takes place within the realm of political and electoral competition. Stephen Cornell's critique here seems apt: "while the instrumentalist approach explains the emergence of ethnic identity in terms of situational variables, this essentially instrumentalist conception awards the content of that identity – what it is people within the ethnic boundary share – little influence in ethnic processes." (Cornell 1996:267)

While it is claimed that human beings have expressed ties to cultural identity and tradition since the beginning of civilization, most historians argue quite persuasively, that nationalism is a unique creation of the modern era. Hence, 'social modernization' and nation-building appear inseparable. (Greenfeld 1992) Leah Greenfeld defines the "nation" as *the constitutive element of modernity*. She also suggests that modern civilization should see "modernity as defined by nationalism." (Greenfeld 1992:18) The latter thus emphasizes the link between nationalism and modernity. This is a useful framework for the analysis of the phenomenon of nationalism, but overlooks the possible causal link between cultural nations and nationalism.

This is not to imply that theories that see the politics of identity as intimately tied to the forces of modernity must be disregarded. Admittedly, the rise of ethnic nationalisms in the various parts of the globe are specifically 'modern' phenomena with no historical precedent either in terms of the modes of political struggle or in terms of the political demands presented. While Sikh and Assamese ethnonational discourse in the 1970s and 1980s was novel in many ways, set very much within the context of a socio-economic modernization and change, they differed from each other as much as they differed from their own prior formulations. Thus, while modernization perspectives do capture an important aspect of the phenomenon of nations and nationalism, they are incapable of explaining the paradox of the variety of nationalist demands, or of why different forms of ethnic nationalism manifest such vast differences in their content and style of expression.

Thus, while cognizant of the analytical utility of the these *modernist* theories, what must be confronted is the issue that while modernity and its tools are significant (even necessary) in the dissemination of the national idea, neither modernity nor elite manipulation are the single determinants of the forces of political conflict unless certain cultural boundaries are already imagined. Further, I claim the possibility, in fact even the likelihood that though cultural segmentation precedes political segmentation, cultural boundaries may be fuzzy before political mobilization occurs and are hardened as mobilization intensifies. There is enough evidence of this transformation from amorphous to hardened cultural boundaries in the Sikh and Assamese cases that I discuss at length later on.

Thus, while the two prominent approaches to ethnicity and nationalism provide food for thought, they are on their own insufficient in explaining either the rise in ethnic nationalism or its variation in varying contexts. Hence the attempt to understand ethnonationalism, particularly ethnonationalism in the post-colonial context as primarily rooted in a form of cultural resistance to assimilation into the master narrative of the modern, post-colonial nation state. Thus points to an examination of the position that conflict does not produce culture; rather it is cultural boundaries in their interaction with the political realm that produce conflict. (See Warren 1993)

A study of ethnonationalism calls for the discussion of an approach that attempts to bridge the gap between the *primordialists* and the *instrumentalists* and *modernists* in the rise of ethnonationalism. The most prominent theorists that call for bringing culture and questions of identity back into the debate on nationalism

are John Armstrong and more recently, Anthony Smith. (Armstrong 1982; A.D. Smith 1986,1991,1992a,1992b, 1995,1996a,1996b,1996c) These authors question the premise that culture is an incidental or parochial issue in the analysis of political outcomes. Where these theorists diverge from the *primordialists* is in their adherence to the view that nations and nationalism are critically 'modern' phenomena; where they differ from the *modernists* and *instrumentalists* is where they posit a significant relation between ethnic group and nation — "nations before nationalism." (Armstrong 1982) Arguing that most approaches to nationalism assume too much of a break between pre-modern and modern forms of collective identity, Smith's position is that national identities are rooted in an "enduring base of ethnic ties and sentiments" and that "ethnicity forms an element of culture and social structure which persists over time." Modern nations, in Smith's view, thus evolve out of "culture-rich communities" that retain "the sentiments, beliefs and myths of ethnic origins and bonds,' all of which contribute to nationalist cultural movements and to aspirations for independent national states. (A.D. Smith 1981, 1983, 1986, 1991) Hence, the ethnic past not only explains the national present, but also provides the symbolic language wherein nationalist mobilization is expressed. (A.D. Smith 1995) This is not to suggest however that the nation follows an evolutionary form of development, nor can it be convincingly claimed that modern nations simply 'grew' out of earlier ethnic communities. For the "evolutionary metaphor minimizes the discontinuity, the dislocation and the struggle with outside forces which has so often accompanied the rise of modern nations." (A.D. Smith 1995: 14) It is to address this paradox that Smith uses the

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metaphor of the nationalist as archeologist where the role of the nationalist is "to reinterpret the ethnic past as the key to understanding the present epoch of the modern community, much as archeologists reconstruct the past in order to locate a culture, community or civilization in history, and thereby also relate it to the present era." (Smith 1995:15) Both Sikh and *Assamiya* political mobilization in the 1980s was replete with a discourse rooted in a pre-political past. At the same time however, the more contemporary narrative differed significantly from prior formulations of struggle. This belief that the ethnic past explains the present is an understanding quite different from the *modernist* (and post-modernist) belief that the past is a construct of the present state of conflict. This approach becomes especially valuable in an analysis of identity construction among the Sikhs and the Assamese as both developed undeniably distinct cultural imaginings of separateness before political demands came to the fore. The Sikhs had distinguished themselves culturally from the Hindus decades before the territorial imagining of *Khalistan* came into being. Similarly, the Assamese had actively distinguished themselves a separate cultural community before the issue of the infiltration of foreigners gave rise to militant autonomous demands in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

For Smith, the unit of analysis in his discussion on ethnicity and nationalism shifts from structure to culture and from determination to construction and representation. (A.D. Smith 1996a, 1996b) Moreover, by stressing the necessity to look at culture and its discourse as the units of analysis in the understanding of political outcomes, authors like Smith are immediately placing

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themselves within a school of thought that reckons with the possibility of nationalist construction moving from the realm of the state to that of the ethnic community. Thus, the nation, nationalism, and ethnicity become "cultural productions of public identity." (Fox, 1990:4) What becomes essential then is the active intervention by ethnic nationalists and others in the construction of the nation which involves the three-fold process of 'rediscovery,' 'reinterpretation,' and 'regeneration.' (A.D. Smith 1995:15-17) Thus, rather than looking at culture as if it existed in advance of human action, it becomes essential to look at it as a system of meaning "emerging from the sum of social relationships composing a society, arising only as men and women struggle to make it." (Fox 1985:196)

This *constructivist* approach, insofar as it uses cultural symbolism as the primary unit of analysis, must not be mistaken for one that rejects the element of agency or stresses the 'essential' nature of cultural and ethnic boundaries. What is critical to this understanding is, in fact, a heightened sense of identity and its evolution. This is very much a discourse of the ethnic group, (rather than simply that of the state elite) and a conscious imagining of cultural boundaries that are neither immutable nor inflexible as these identities enter the political realm of self-determination and political separatism. In the words of Stanley Tambiah:

> Although actors themselves.... speak of ethnic boundaries as clear cut and defined for all time and think of ethnic collectivities as self-reproducing bounded groups, it is also clear that from a dynamic and processual perspective there are many precedents of 'passing' and the change of identity for the incorporations and assimilation of new members and for changing the scale and criteria of collective identity. (Tambiah 1989:335-36)

Thus, ethnic groups become agents in their own construction, shaping and reshaping their identities and the boundaries that enclose them out of the potent

raw materials of history, culture and pre-existing ethnic constructions. Even theorists like Hobsbawm, who is writing in the fundamentally *modernist* tradition acknowledges the possibility of pre-existing cultural bonds as tools in the creation of modern nations and states. He refers to these bonds as 'proto-nationalism.' (Hobsbawm 1990) Hence, "*proto-nationalism*, where it existed made the task of nationalism easier — insofar as existing symbols and sentiments of *proto-national* community could be mobilized behind a modern cause or a modern state." (Hobsbawm 1990:77) What is critical to this debate on culture is to look at culture not as an essentialist but as an evolving element in ethnic and political identity, the necessity of its symbolic and emotive power in nationhood rather than its essential ascriptive quality. As the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, or the *Islamization* of Iran suggests, ethnic national imagining does not require retention of a culture or notions of a homeland intact, as long as "the new religion enshrines the ancient symbols, memories and myths or at least some of them." (A.D. Smith 1992a:439)

THE POETICS OF NATIONHOOD

THE 'NATION' AS A NARRATED DISCOURSE

"The nation is a communion of imagery, nothing more nor less." (A.D. Smith 1995:9) Historians have recognized for some time that the success of nationalist ideas depends on their dissemination. What have now become significant themes in the dissemination of nationalism are the communication systems and narratives that promote nationalist identities. Hence, a nation is not just a line on a map, nor a set of rules or procedure, or coercive apparatus. It is the product of a narrative discourse, authenticated by popular sentiment. (D.Gupta 1996:18-19) Thus, "the nationalist creed requires a language, a literature, and a group of interpreters who sustain the narrative of the nation like theologicians and priests sustain the narrative of a religion." (Kramer 1997:534) Benedict Anderson provided the influential model for this study in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson 1983). Anderson emphasizes the development of print media or what he refers to as 'print capitalism' that made it possible for people to 'imagine' themselves as part of the same community. This imaginative act of identification depended from the very beginning on new cultural institutions, because the dispersed people in these societies would never meet or know anything about those individuals whom they envisioned as their community. The imagining of nations takes many forms including the narratives of national novelists, stories in national newspapers, the interactions of colonial governments and their subject populations and the

interactions of post-colonial 'nationalist' elite and the diverse communities that make up their state. (Kramer 1997)

Homi Bhabha in his *Nation and Narration* (1990) also emphasizes the importance of communication and language in the construction of nationalisms. but suggests that nationalist narratives are comparable to most other discourses of the world. "Like politics, religion and every other cultural practice the meaning of nationalism is constructed through narrative processes that resemble and include the narrative constructions of novels, films, art. folklore. and ritual. Thus the nation "is ultimately a text, or a set of texts, that must be 'read' or 'narrated'. a particular historical discourse with its peculiar set of practices and beliefs, which must first be 'deconstructed' for their power and character to be grasped." (A.D. Smith 1995) Similarly, for Bhabha, the nation is a text, much as Anderson suggests in his discussion of "imagined communities." Bhabha goes beyond Anderson however. in stressing that the narrators of this text must contend with contradictions and alien supplements that can never be fully accommodated within the master narrative that seeks to construct a fully coherent nation. Sikh and Assamese discourse was disseminated through narrative forms and challenged the master narrative of the nation-state conception. "The text of the nation, like all other texts, relies on unacknowledged sources or assumptions. represses issues or ideas that would call its assertions into question, interacts with 'others' (traditions, outsiders, critics) that can never be entirely effaced, and remains "always already" situated in a context of relationships that precluded pure identity or absolute origins." (Kramer 1997:536)

Any discussion of nationalism makes it clear that states play a crucial role in the politics of nationhood and in the creation of links between identity and territory. This is particularly true given that the ideology of 'nationalism' and the presence of the territorial component in this ideology has its origins in the growth of statehood in Western Europe. What has made the study of nationalism that much more complex is the fact that the contemporary state has become both the modern and the 'national' state. Theorists of nationalism see the French Revolution as the source of the Jacobin nationalist state. The forces of the French Revolution thus spawned forces that transformed the state into the political expression of 'the nation.' Fichte's formulation of nationalism thus becomes a statist doctrine that prescribes that individuals can find autonomy only by total integration within their natural polities which in turn are defined in terms of their distinctive cultural attributes. (See Hutchinson, 1992:102) Though often ethnically heterogeneous, the state has sought to become unitary by adopting the ideological postulates of nationalism as its legitimation. The state thus attempts to mold, homogenize and create 'the nation' out of various ethnic categories that are incorporated in the domains of the state, most often at the expense of the minority ethnic groups. (Connor 1972) "The nationalist discourse of the nation-state is thus tied to rights of citizenship, and reason as the ethical basis of the community, often inspired by the *polis* of classical antiquity." (Hutchinson, 1992:102-103) The 'nation' is continually represented in state institutions such as courts, schools and bureaucracies. These institutions employ the icons and symbols of 'the nation' –

flags, currency, seals etc. (A. Gupta, 1992:72) The statist discourse on nationalism as encountered in state controlled media, and education refers to an emotional attachment to one's state and its political institutions. Hence, we speak of a *British, Indian, Spanish* or *Canadian* nationalism. The latter definition overlaps closely with the definition of patriotism, with the state as the popularly perceived agent or political expression of the 'nation.' Admittedly, patriotism and nationalism do often reinforce each other and are often closely connected. However, it is important to recognize that they are not always synonymous, particularly in multinational states. Also, this is not to deny that patriotism, like nationalism, can be a very powerful sentiment. The state has in its power many effective means for inculcating a sense of attachment to the territory that makes up the state – this is what social scientists often refer to as 'political socialization.' (Connor 1993) One of the most effective of these means is the control over public education, particularly the study of 'national' history. Thus, states, particularly multinational states do often adopt the idiom of nationalism in their inculcation of loyalty to the state.

The overlap between a statist nationalist discourse and patriotism becomes most apparent in post-colonial plural societies. Anti-imperial struggles forced the articulation of collective consciousness in the context of the struggle against European imperialism leading to the adoption of the notion that "collective identity and hence both loyalty and legitimate deployment of power is determined by sovereign territorial relations." (Boyarin 1994:9) Thus, post-colonial states have had to work doubly hard to create an illusory inclusiveness of their entire

population and to reshape identity in the image of the dominant collective. Post-colonial Indian nationalist discourse is a case in point where the narratives of secularism and non-sectarianism became the most prominent elements of the post-colonial Indian 'nation-state.' The Congress party, that inherited the reigns of power in independent India devoted a great deal of attention to the question of what came to be termed 'national integration.' It saw as its most fundamental task the "creation of political conditions favorable to the development of new forms of production and political institutions by integrating the different nationalities and moving towards the adoption of a single 'national' language." (Sathyamurthy 1983:193) At the same time however, the Congress was compelled to take account of the nationality and language demands of the different parts of the country. Thus nationalist discourse is a distinctly modern form that "attempts to create a new kind of spatial and mythopoetic metanarrative, one that simultaneously homogenizes the varying narratives of community while paradoxically accentuating their difference." (B. Williams, 1990:127)

Nationalist statist discourse may take two forms. On the one hand, the "national narrative seeks to define the nation and construct its typically continuous and uninterrupted narrative past in an assertion of legitimacy and precedent for the practices of the narrative present." (Layoun 1990:7) On the other hand, nationalist narrative acknowledges and 'celebrates' diversity. However, "it needs to be emphasized that shaping political union through difference is also a mode of creating subject positions for subordinated narratives. "Thus nationalism does not so much erase existing narratives, as *recast* their difference." (A. Gupta 1992:71-

72) Hence the recognition that different ethnic groups, locales, communities and religions each have their own role to play in the 'national' project "underlines their difference at the same time that it homogenizes and incorporates them." (A. Gupta, 1992:72) The Indian national anthem, for instance, while sequentially naming the distinct regions (and hence languages, cultures, religions and histories) that are all distinctive parts of the Indian Union, through this incorporation hierarchically organizes subject positions for diverse groups of citizens. (A. Gupta 1992:72)

Indian nationalist discourse, which has percolated into the post-colonial phase is distinct in many ways. Though it was inspired by Western concepts of territorial and political nationalism it is not identical with it insofar as the prominent place of the cultural and religious factor. (Chatterjee 1993; Reetz 1997) Thus, the writing of 'indigenous' history appeared to take two self-contradictory courses—"configuration within the Orientalist constellation by an emphasis on the ancient past and an urge to break away from that very past." Thus, "in terms of modernity and development the nation-state could follow hardly any other direction than what had been modeled by the British. The ambivalence is seen in the abandonment of ancestral culture for a more standard advanced standard and the demand that the ancient be retained as a mark of identity." (Sethi 1997:954) Hence, much of Indian nationalist discourse is characterized by the invocation of the past where "dilemmas and crises are partly resolved through the quest for a lost and submerged past, whose ideal images and exemplars act as prototypes and models for social and cultural innovation." (A.D. Smith 1983: x) Where the dilemma lies then is in the fact that with the overt call for a nationalism based on

the negation of belief, the primacy of reason and the embracing of secularism. the Indian nationalist discourse implicitly championed a hegemonic discourse on identity. Hence, Gandhi, Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai (to name a few) all used the rhetoric, and symbols of a Hindu discourse that was to be embraced as the pan-Indian discourse on nationalism. It is ironic that it is in this ambivalence that lies both the success and the failure of Indian 'national' discourse. The rise of *Hindutva* in contemporary India and its concomitant articulation of a distinctly 'Hindu' discourse on nationhood has once again surfaced to fill the vacuum created by the loss of appeal of the 'secular' macro-nationalist project of the Indian state. The imagery and symbolism of this Hindu nationalist discourse with is highly charged poetics is increasingly becoming the hegemonic discourse of identity that has gained precedence by symbolically excluding and culturally subordinating all other identities. (See S. Baruah 1994:670) It is within the context of this Hindu discourse and its articulation of a pan-Indian narrative of identity that sub-national challenges like that of the Sikhs, and the Assamese can be understood.

While states play a crucial role in national imagining, it is important to note that state ideologies are far from being the only place wherein national imagining is politicized. In India, 'nationalism' has been developing at two levels – at an all India level on the basis of pan-Indian cultural homogeneities and a shared anti-imperialism; at a regional level (Bengali, Marathi, Assamese, Tamil, Punjabi) on the basis of a regional cultural homogeneity. From the very outset, the two nationalisms are found to be intertwined. (A. Guha 1980) Sudhir Chandra tells us

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that "the development in Assamese, Oriya and Gujrati literature during the nineteenth century would suggest that regional consciousness was beginning to emerge contemporaneously with national consciousness." (Chandra 1982) These images of regional consciousness have increasingly evolved into oppositional images of both self and group identity where allegiance to the regional 'nation' has often superceded patriotism to the Indian nation-state. Oppositional images of identity have been extremely important in the quest for self-determination on the part of "ethnic counter nations." (Gupta, 1992:12) Examples of challenges to the master national narrative of the state are the sub-national challenges of the Eritreans and the Armenians. Similarly, Basque and Catalan nationalism has often been in conflict with a Spanish nationalism. Flemish with a Belgian nationalism, Quebecois with a Canadian nationalism; and "events within what until recently, was known as the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia certify that Albanian, Bosnian. Croatian and Slovene nationalism has each proved itself more potent than a Yugoslav patriotism." (Connor. 1993:376)

ETHNONATIONALISM AS A DISCOURSE OF CULTURAL RESISTANCE

The contemporary wave of ethnic politics represents a "politics of assertion on the part of 'others' protesting their subordination or exclusion by the 'nation.'" (Pieterse 1997:365) Even the ethnonationalism of dominant groups like Hindu revivalism in India may be seen as a challenge to the secular discourse of the Indian nation-state. The resurgence of ethnic nationalisms in recent decades forces students of nationalism to confront the primacy of culture, albeit culture as an

evolving, transforming entity rather than as a static essentialist one. Most of the contemporary movements for self-determination are based on a significant history of cultural rejuvenation and a delineation of cultural boundaries. Hence, even when demands for political separatism are at the forefront, the symbols and discourse are very much a continuation (if even in an altered form) of the discourse on cultural separateness. Thus, in the case of the Basques in Spain the primary symbol is linguistic, as it is in Belgium between the Flemish and the Walloons; in Northern Ireland it is religious between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants as it is between the Jews and Palestinians in Israel. At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that politicization of cultural identity in most cases serves to recast cultural boundaries. The fact that these ideas about culture are enmeshed in the legitimization of a right to independent statehood points to the fact that an examination of these 'cultural bases' that support separatist movements must be a crucial part of the study of these movements. (See Penrose 1995) In order to understand the phenomena of ethnicity and nationalism and their discourse it is essential to fully delineate the meanings of the terms as they have been used in the scholarly literature.

The term *ethnonationalism* was coined by Connor though even he does not define the term explicitly. (See Connor 1973,1987) What is clear in Connor's definition however, is the existence of a relationship between ethnic group and nationalism. Hence, he defines a nation as a "self conscious ethnic group." (Connor 1973, 1987) It is important to question how the term *ethnonationalism* may be distinguished from *nationalism*. It is Connor who makes the distinction:

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where he states that the term nationalism, which should refer to loyalty to the ethnic group, has commonly and often mistakenly been employed to describe loyalty to the state. Hence, the term ethnonationalism must be distinguished from the term 'patriotism' the latter often synonymous with the nationalist projects of most post-colonial states. (See Connor 1993:374-76) Similarly, Smith posits a relationship between ethnic group and nation. He terms this *ethnic nationalism* where an ethnic group is a precondition for the formation of a nation and no nation can be formed without first creating an 'ethnic culture.' (See A.D. Smith 1983) The realm of the ethnonational must thus "focus on groups' own assertions of what lies within what they perceive as their cultural boundaries, and the ways in which they use their cultural resources to affirm their distinctiveness and promote their interests." (Cornell 1996:267) This promotion of interests refers to both the cultural and the socio-political realms.

Thus, the defense of ethnic communities continues after independence because new national states, like their colonial predecessors, inevitably create a gap between the "state" and its 'people." The aspiration for congruence between state and nation remains unfulfilled, thus fostering new forms of ethnic nationalism among intellectuals and other social groups who find themselves excluded both culturally and socially from the nation-state. Although intellectuals often see nationalism as a way of reconciling the need for modernization and the need to protect national cultures they eventually discover that the modernizing project ignores many of the "people" that the state claims to protect. Thus ethnic nationalism for Smith grows out of a pre-existing cultural base, but the pre-modern

culture takes on new forms among intellectuals who claim to speak for ethnic communities that have not been recognized even in their own states. (A.D. Smith: 1983: 231-54) This is often done in ways not incompatible with 'modernizing projects' like state building and capitalist development.

Hence, ethnonationalist discourse propounds a cultural narrative that not only reaffirms a cultural distinctiveness but also renders an alternative vision of politics. "The history of nationalism is thus a history of conflicts over competing narratives that seek to define a social community. More specifically, it is a history of contestation between those who seek a full coherent narrative of the community's existence and those whose presence, ideas, color or culture undermine the possibility of that coherence." (Kramer 1997:537) Thus Sikh demands for a state based on the linguistic principle not only forced the Indian state to confront diversity, but was also perceived as a communal threat to the construction of a coherent, non-sectarian discourse. Ethnonational discourse is thus representative of the dialectical struggle between that quest for coherence and the frustration of that quest by the challenge of difference.

Hence, the criteria for ethnic membership are developed by the participants in the social system, and are not always externally given; ethnic identities are creatively 'imagined' to explain group identity in relation to some Other—whose identity is likewise 'imagined.' Hence ethnic identity is not a stable social unit, but a developing and changing discourse. (See Young 1993:21-5) It is the "presence of 'otherness' that both fuels the desire for a fully coherent nation/narrative and also makes it impossible for that totalizing desire to be fulfilled." (Kramer 1997:537)

What Smith and Penrose posit as being an integral part of this ethnonational cultural discourse is the recourse to ethno-symbolic resources (A.D. Smith 1996a, 1996b, 1996c) or the creation of 'cultural bases' (Penrose 1995) extolling the nation. There are several 'ethno-symbolic resources' the invocation of which provides the tools in ethnonational imagining. Crucial elements in Smith's analysis of 'ethnic nationalism' are the potent images of ethno-history -- invocation of a 'golden age,' the historicization of 'sacred' territories and 'the myth of ethnic election.' The invocation of powerful ethno-histories that hark back to a 'golden age' has been the ubiquitous element in the Armenian, Jewish and Irish imagining of cultural and subsequently, their political separateness. (See Armstrong 1982: ch. 7)

Thus, the ethnonational discourse is very much one of cultural regeneration, one that "includes recollections not only of wars and their heroes, but of religious movements and their leaders, migrations, discoveries and colonizations, foundations of cities and states, dynasties and their kings, lawcodes and their legislators, painters, sculptors, poets, musicians and their immortal works." (A.D. Smith 1996:593) This is the case in the ethnonationalisms of both dominant and subordinate groups. The discourse of the 'golden age' is replete with elements of genuine shared memory, along with myth and legend and it is this imagining that reinforces cultural boundary formation and territorialization of identity. The 'myth of ethnic election' refers to the belief that "we are a chosen people;" and to be chosen is to be placed under moral obligations—"one is chosen on the condition that one observes certain moral, legal, and ritual codes." (A.D.

Smith 1992a:441) According to Smith these 'myths of ethnic election' perform

three functions – they help mobilize communities to ensure their survival over

long periods, they strengthen a community's attachment to a historic territory and

can incite a community to expansion and war. (A.D. Smith 1992a:445-46) The

indication would thus be that cultural resistance to assimilation precedes political

separatism and largely provides the shaping force in political conflict. (See also P.

Chatterjee 1993) The invocation of cultural separateness provides the symbolic

justifications for political and territorial separateness for the liberation of the land

from the oppressor (in several cases the nationalist state). In the case of Basque

ethnic mobilization against the Spanish state for instance, the discursive elements

of folklore have been used as political narrative. (Watson 1996) Likewise, the Sikh

and the Assamese separatist discourse was adept at harnessing the rhetorical power

of language, history, myth and memory in its articulation of identity. Thus,

separatism is not simply a political or economic necessity; "it is instead demanded

by a unique history that requires fulfillment in a glorious destiny through the

rebirth of a community on its own terrain." (A.D. Smith 1996:590) What is vital to

an approach like that of Smith, one that is *constructivist* rather than *primordialist*

or *instrumentalist* is, that while recognizing the potency of the cultural element in

ethnonational imagining, it cedes to the possibility of change and mutability in the

shape of the discourse. "There is nothing fixed or immutable about a 'golden age'

or the principle of its selection. Successive generations of the community may

differ as to which epoch may be regarded as the golden age depending on the

criteria in fashion at the time." (A.D. Smith 1996:583-84) Thus, while the

discourse on a cultural distinctiveness provides the foundations of political rhetoric in nationalist mobilization, 'nationalism' itself continues to evolve out of continued nationalist mobilization.

It should be made clear that nowhere do these theorists imply that these 'ethno-symbolic resources' or the 'cultural bases' on which cultural identity is embedded are 'essential' or immutable. Instead they imply that the cultural elements in national imagining are powerful legitimators of nationalism because they are constructed, promoted and most importantly, perceived as essential to human beings and to the organization of human society. (Penrose 1995:400) Thus the *perception* of culture as essential rather than its actually being so is what explains the power of cultural imagining in ethnonational mobilization. Hence, "nations are ideologically essentialised," and this essentialization "transforms culture from something which has *personal* value into something that has *political* value as well." Thus, "through the concept of nation and the nationalist belief that all nations have a right to self-determination, culture as a particular way of life becomes a means of attaining power." (Penrose 1995:407) Furthermore, it is essential to understand the shifting nature of ethnic and cultural identity. In Sri Lanka for instance, Singhala identity used to be a matter of language first, religion second; however, after independence and in the wake of the agitation by the *Buddhist Sangha*, a new identity developed in which religion became central, language secondary: "where previously to be Singhala implied Buddhist, now to be Buddhist implies being Singhalese." (Brass 1991:31) The new inflections and the new ways in which cultural elements are symbolized changes the way in which

group boundaries are drawn. The role of the ethnic nationalist is thus one of a political and social engineer "whose activities consist in the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the ethnic past and through it the regeneration of their national community." (A.D. Smith 1995:2) The existence of the various ingredients of the nation – history, symbols, myths and language must thus precede this rediscovery.

CULTURAL AND POLITICAL NATIONALISM: SPLIT DOMAINS?

If there were, as the theorists of the *constructivist* tradition posit, a significant relationship between ethnic, cultural ties and modern nations, it would be analytically desirable to distinguish between cultural and political nationalism and to define how far the former provides the symbolic language for the latter. Is cultural nationalism a distinct phenomena from political nationalism and what is the relationship if any between cultural notions and modern nations? One of the primary critiques of nationalist scholarship is that the latter, in its preoccupation with the political realm of the nation-state in Europe has largely obscured the importance of cultural nationalism in the formation of modern nations, and the relationship between cultural and nationalist discourse. (See Hutchinson, 1992) This conflation of cultural and political nationalism is characteristic of much of the literature of the *modernist* persuasion that would not concede to the cultural domain as one of independent resistance. (Gellner 1983,1994,1996) While theorists like Anderson do grant some degree of power to the cultural narrative as dispersed through 'print capitalism' even he is primarily engaged in an analysis of 'political' nationalism and national liberation. (See P. Chatterjee 1993) Besides,

Anderson's analysis focuses on an examination of the technologies of culture rather than its poetics. These technologies are certainly significant, particularly in the 'dissemination' of cultural discourse, but are inadequate in explaining why a particular discourse gains enough hegemony to warrant dissemination in the first place.

Hutchinson, in distinguishing between cultural and political nationalism provides a cultural definition of the nation:

> The core of the nation is its unique and differentiated civilization, which is the outgrowth of the strivings of countless generations settled in unique homelands, each of which has added its contribution to the common heritage. Nations are then not just political units, but creative personalities continually evolving in time, and it is to this history that its members must return to discover the triumphs and tragedies that have formed them and the lessons they may draw for the future. (Hutchinson, 1992:103)

Chatterjee, who is concerned primarily with the anti-colonialist struggle in India, delineates two clearly defined realms of resistance – the 'material,' which corresponds to the political and the 'spiritual,' that corresponds to the cultural realm. (See P. Chatterjee, 1993) Chatterjee's work is a critique of nationalist historiography (specifically Anderson, 1983) that sees the anti-colonial nationalisms as purely political movements, i.e. movements for the control of power and state institutions within the modern state structure. The argument is that anti-colonial nationalism had a significant cultural component, (one that was born way before the demands for independent statehood emerged) and it was this cultural component that preceded the political struggle for state power. It is this crucial cultural component in the nationalisms of the colonies that differentiate them significantly from the nationalisms of the Western world. (P. Chatterjee

1993: ch.1) Chatterjee is thus attempting to challenge the assumptions made by Anderson that nationalism in the colonies was only an imitation or a 'modular' form of nationalisms of the West, Western Europe in particular.

Chatterjee's dichotomy between the 'spiritual' and the 'material' domains mirrors Hutchinson's distinction between 'cultural' and 'political' nationalism. The reason, why the two domains are conflated may be attributed to the fact that most manifestations of political nationalism also have a cultural component. However, not all cultural nationalisms make the transition from 'spiritual' to 'material' realms. Thus, while the two often appear together, it is crucial to remember that the two processes are distinct, with distinct forces, and goals at play. Hence, "the objective of political nationalism is to achieve an autonomous state based on common citizenship that will enable the community to participate as equals in the modern world." (Hutchinson. 1992:104) The prominent discourse of cultural nationalism is the moral regeneration of a unique historical community. "Since this is essentially a spontaneous social order, it cannot be constructed like a state from above, but rather can only be resuscitated from the bottom up in a manner that pays respect to the "natural" diversities (regional, occupations, religious and so forth) within the nation." (Hutchinson, 1992:105)

Cultural resistance movements that manifest themselves in terms of linguistic, regional, or religious movements are often glossed over as little more than grass-roots movements. Theorists like Gellner regard such demands as reactionary phenomena, a construct of secular intellectuals in backward societies, who, when faced with more technically advanced cultures compensate for feelings

of inadequacy by retreating into a visionary golden age in order to claim descent from a once great community. (Gellner 1983) It is however, misleading to narrow cultural revival to a product of little more than perceptions of inadequacy in the face of modernity. Hutchinson argues that cultural nationalism must be given a more dynamic role in determining outcomes in the social, political and economic spheres. (Hutchinson 1992) Hutchinson maintains that "cultural nationalists act as moral innovators who establish ideological movements at times of social crisis in order to transform the existing belief systems from within and to thereby enable socio-political development along indigenous lines. (Hutchinson 1992:106)

In both the Sikh and the Assamese cases, it is evident that cultural renaissance not only significantly shaped Sikh and Assamese cultural boundaries. but also preceded their perceptions of political community. The *Singh Sabha* movement in the Sikh case and the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* in the Assamese case played the influential role in cultural renaissance and moral rejuvenation of community.

ETHNONATIONAL CONFLICT IN PUNJAB

THE CONFLICT: A BRIEF OVERVIEW (THE 1980s)

The 1980s saw a vocal Sikh minority backed by the *Akali Dal* make a series of demands to the Government of India in the name of the preservation of Sikh identity. A large number of these demands were first put forth by way of the *Anandpur Sahib Resolution* of 1973. This resolution is seen by many as the manifesto of Sikh separatism, while its declaration is viewed as the precipitating event in the political determination of the Sikhs.

In 1981, the *Akali Dal* presented the government with a revised list of demands. The Sikh community became increasingly restive in the pursuit of these demands, while the relationship between Sikhs and Hindus became increasingly hostile and distant. Indira Gandhi, the erstwhile Prime Minister of India, sought to deal with the deteriorating political situation in Punjab. She developed ties with Sikh fundamentalists such as Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to weaken the *Akali* front. This move on the part of the Central government was significant, for the increased legitimacy gained by Bhindranwale led him to develop his own agenda for an independent Sikh nation through acts of terrorism.

As the political situation in Punjab deteriorated, the Union government declared a state of emergency in Punjab in October 1983 and imposed President's rule. However, "terrorism intensified as armed gangs of extremists carried out gangland-style slayings largely under the direction of Bhindranwale, ensconced in the sanctuary of the Golden Temple." (Nyrop 1985) Finally, on June 5, 1984 the

Indian Army was ordered into the Golden Temple complex to flush out the terrorists. This siege on the holiest of Sikh shrines and the supreme symbol of Sikh identity was a watershed event in the history of the Sikh movement, and had critical implications for center-state relations. "Inevitable as the army action was and supported by most of the Indian population, the reaction of the Sikh community was one of outrage. The action united the moderate and the extremist Sikhs in India and abroad and created a deep division between the Sikhs and other Indians." (Nandi 1996:186) It was at this point that the cry for secession from India became magnified and gained wider Sikh support manifested in the demand for the sovereign Sikh state of *Khalistan*. (Land of the pure) It was also at this point that the *Khalistani* activist Jagjit Singh Chauhan called for the assassination of Indira Gandhi. This marked the culmination of Sikh demands which had evolved from demands that the state adhere to some of the Sikh scriptural edicts, to the demand for an autonomous Sikh state and finally to demands for secession from the Indian union.

It is significant that Sikh separatist demands were replete with evocations of a glorious Sikh past, deliberate in its distinction from the Hindu past, reverence of the Punjabi language as a critical element of Sikh identity and potent images of martyrdom. It is also significant that the Sikh discourse on identity began in the late nineteenth century with the call for the cultural and moral rejuvenation of the Sikh *Panth*. This evolved into a linguistic and a religious discourse and then into a discourse on violent secession. These narratives of Sikh cultural identity were deeply invoked as part of the political struggle and later in the demands for

succession. Hence, it appears insufficient to look at the Sikh struggle for self-determination simply as contingent on the repressive actions of Indira Gandhi's rule even though the latter, no doubt played a significant part in the escalation of conflict in the mid-1980s.

An examination of the material indices such as the federal government's increasing centralization, the drainage of the Punjab's resources, the growing inequalities in rural Punjab and the shrinking electoral base of the *Akali Dal* is no doubt important in the explanation of the political turmoil in the Punjab. However, what is equally important is an examination of the semantic sources that have contributed to constructions of a Sikh identity and to the drive for a Sikh nation. "The Sikhs are a highly symbolic people, and their politics and everyday life cannot be fully understood without taking the symbolic dimension into account." (Oberoi 1987:41) This symbolic dimension and the discourses therein are crucial in the explanation of Sikh separatism. It is through an examination of the latter that we may learn how the Sikh community constructed and disseminated its own identity and how these identities evolved into demands for independent statehood.

SIKH DISCOURSE ON NATIONHOOD

The Sikh discourse on nationhood has been intimately tied to the discourse on Sikhism itself and how the latter identity is to be defined. The discourse or the 'metacommentaries' (See Geertz 1975; Oberoi 1986) has evolved and been shaped in part according to the shifts and the transformations faced by the Sikh *panth.* (community) The contemporary struggle for an independent statehood cannot be

understood without a close examination of how the Sikh identity came to be 'imagined' and constructed in the stages prior to its entry into the political realm. It becomes clear that Sikh ethnonationalism and demands for secession drew significantly from this 'pre-political' stage of cultural renaissance and boundary construction. Hence, I examine four stages in the history of Sikhism: the Guru period covering the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries is looked at briefly to examine the context of the origins of Sikhism; the heroic age until the British annexation of Punjab is also looked at briefly. It is essential to look at these two stages, as it was the images of this period that provided the symbolic resources in the invocation of a 'golden age' (See A.D. Smith 1995) of martyrdom and glory in the subsequent calls for cultural and political regeneration. The colonial phase and the post-colonial (or the nation-state phase) are looked at in depth since it was during this period that cultural resistance to assimilation into the dominant 'metanarrative' emerged most strongly. It was also during this period that the violent secessionist mobilization reached its zenith manifested in the call for *Khalistan*. (See Oberoi 1987, 1990, 1994) An examination of the most significant periods in Sikh history allows an analysis of how cultural boundaries are constructed, how they affect political mobilization and why they harden in the course of nationalist mobilization.

A HISTORY OF THE SIKHS: THE SIKH GURUS

Sikhism as a distinct faith originated in India in the early sixteenth century. It is essentially described as the synthesis between the Vedic philosophy of the

Hindus and the mysticism of the Muslim Sufis, emphasizing inward meditation and salvation by divine intervention. (Nandi 1996:180) The spiritual leader of the Sikhs and the founder of Sikhism was the first of the ten Sikh *Gurus*, *Guru* Nanak Dev (1469-1539). It was allegiance to the *Guru* Nanak and his nine successors that constituted significant axes of identity to the then embryonic community of the Sikhs. An examination of the manner in which the *Guru* phase is narrated in Sikh historiography is significant since the invocation of the glory and the martyrdom of the Sikh *Gurus* provided the reaffirmation of identity that the cry for separate statehood demanded. This becomes doubly significant given that the history of Sikhism begins only with the *Gurus*. Thus, the mythical construction of history became a necessity as it served as a "representation of the past linked to the establishment of an identity in the present." (Friedman 1992:195)

The Sikh religion in this phase became identified with the teachings of the Gurus (*bani*), the foundation of congregations (*sangats*), the setting up of pilgrim centers: the convention of the communal meal (*langar*) and the compilation by *Guru* Arjan of an anthology that ultimately became the sacred scripture of the community, "making Sikhs, like the Judeo-Christians into a people of the Book." (Oberoi 1987:31) This book or scripture that developed in 1603-4 and came to be known as the *Adi Granth* was to have far-reaching consequences for Sikh history. (Oberoi 1994:49) The transformation of the Sikhs into a textual community implied that those who were beyond the pale of the text began to be viewed as outsiders, "as people unable to attain the level of spirituality in those who imbibe the teachings of the text." (Oberoi 1994) While there are no explicit statements on

an independent Sikh identity during this phase. there are indications in the verse of several scribes, that of Bhai Gurdas in particular that both Muslims and Hindus miss the correct path and that the solution is a Sikh way of life, a third path to human problems, with the ideal man a follower of the *gurmukh* (a follower of the Sikh *Gurus* and their doctrine.) (See Oberoi 1994:50-51) The forth *Guru*. *Guru* Ramdas. laid the foundations of the Golden Temple in the Indian state of Punjab. which was later completed by *Guru* Arjan Das. the fifth *Guru*. This temple remains the holiest of shrines and has been a critical symbol of Sikh identity and a significant element of organization in the contemporary Sikh demands. (See Kapur 1986) It must be understood that at this point the category Sikh was flexible -- "a long historical intervention was needed before it became saturated with signifiers. icons. narratives and thus lost its early fluidity." (Oberoi 1994:53)

Soon after the death of *Guru* Nanak in 1539. the followers of the new religion started experiencing persecution at the hands of the erstwhile Mughal emperors of India, particularly during the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707). Earlier in 1606. *Guru* Arjan Das. the fifth *Guru* had been tortured to death on the orders of the Mughal emperor Jehangir. His martyrdom became a turning point for the Sikhs in that it led to two distinct historical events. First the spiritual and temporal authority of the Sikhs became united in the person of the *Guru*. This indivisibility of religious and political power is known as the *Miri-Piri* doctrine. This *Miri-Piri* doctrine was symbolically significant in the more contemporary Sikh struggle. It was invocation of this doctrine that provided the symbolic justification for the Sikh temporal state of *Khalistan*. Second, the emphasis of the Sikhs shifted from

peaceful propagation of the faith to defending the faith by arms if necessary. (Nandi 1996:181) However, this is not to say that the discourse of violence was the most salient aspect in the definition of Sikh identity at this point. The discourse of violence only gained precedence in the 1980s when the Sikh militants, in their struggle against the Indian state, invoked what had until then been only peripheral to Sikh definitions of identity. In 1699, the tenth and last *Guru*, *Guru* Gobind Singh organized his followers into a sect of warrior saints called the *Khalsa* (meaning brotherhood). Symbolism became paramount in the organization of the *Khalsa*; Gobind Singh gave the *Khalsa* five emblems that would foster a strong sense of identity: *kesh* (uncut hair), *kangha* (comb), *kirpan* (sword), *kada* (steel bangle), and *kachha* (shorts reaching just above the knees). (See Kapur 1986; Oberoi 1994) It is this endowment of the *Khalsa* with an intricate symbolic universe that allowed its attributes to be voiced as the hegemonic discourse on Sikh identity in the more contemporary mobilization for *Khalistan*.

Heroism and Martyrdom

With the death of the last *Guru* in 1708, it became imperative, more so than before, for the heterogeneous Sikh community to develop distinct symbols and doctrine, "both to replace the institution of the human guru and to survive, in what must have appeared to many as an increasingly hostile political environment." (Oberoi 1987:32) The *Khalsa* rose up in arms against economic, political and religious repression perpetrated against them during the last decades of Mughal reign and extended its dominance over a territory that stretched from the Indus

river in the West to the Yamuna river in the East and from the town of Multan in the South to Jammu in the north. However, despite this dominance over a vast geographical area these geographical boundaries of the Punjab as a political territory continued to remain vague and did not take shape until the colonial phase in Sikh history. Thus, the fact that the more contemporary sense of national identity is grounded in the territorial principle -- the separate state of *Khalistan*. (See Oberoi 1987) becomes significant to this analysis. It illustrates how national imagining evolves through nationalist mobilization.

While *Guru* Gobind Singh left a rich religious and cultural heritage it was not without deliberate action on the part of the Sikh *panth* that these came to be accepted as part of the Sikh identity. "These practices gained wider currency in the eighteenth century, although their origins may be traced to an earlier period." (Oberoi 1987: 32-33)

According to Sikh religious narrative, two of *Guru* Gobind Singh's most enduring contributions to the survival of the Sikh *panth* were his creation of the *Khalsa* and its outward symbols of the *five K's* and his naming of the *Adi Granth* as his spiritual successor. Moreover, what needs to be noted is that there are two major doctrines that gradually grew out of the utterances ascribed to *Guru* Gobind Singh -- the *rahit* (the Sikh code of discipline) and the doctrine of the *Guru Panth*. (See McLeod 1982:103-26) "Both have played a central role in the articulation of Sikh identity, and it is hard to imagine a Sikh community without them." (Oberoi 1987:33) The *rahit namas* or the manuals of conduct were a clear manifestation of the aspirations and the ethos of the *Khalsa* sub-tradition. It was these that

foreshadowed the homogenization of Sikh identity and religious boundaries in the late nineteenth century. (Oberoi 1990) Thus, the scriptures and the 'corporate community' gradually became the sources to which the Sikhs were to turn for guidance, ritual and authority. In addition, it was during this period that Sikh identity incorporated two more cultural indicators of the collective identity of the community. Firstly, Sikh proper names, particularly for males, now increasingly added the suffix *Singh* or Lion. Secondly, the Golden Temple at Amritsar became the foremost center of Sikh pilgrimage. It did this by displacing the other sacred sites that had occupied this place particularly during the lifetime of *Guru* Gobind Singh. "Great religious merit, it was believed, accrued to those who visited the holy shrine." (Oberoi 1987:34) The dominant discourse during this period was the celebration of the valor and battles of the *Gurus*, particularly the sixth and the tenth *Guru*. Thus, Sikh identity according to these narratives of heroism came to defined through a "powerful myth of origin, whose principal characteristics are bravery, suffering, persecution, blood, sacrifice and martyrdom." (Oberoi 1987:34) Hence, this was the period during which there emerged the need to found a distinct cultural and religious identity. However, even during this period, the notion of a territorial component to that identity was conspicuously absent. (See Oberoi 1987, 1994)

Despite the evolution of specific symbols of cultural and religious identity and the evolution of a symbolic code that claimed to identify the community, it is important to note that the Sikh identity during this period remained both amorphous and syncretic. While religious narrative and symbolic codes came into

being, the actual practice of the Sikh religion itself remained very close to the practice of Hinduism. "In brief, the semiotic, cultural, affective and territorial universe of the Sikhs and the Hindus were virtually identical." (Oberoi 1990:137)

Moreover, the identification of the Punjab as the territorial component of the Sikh 'nation' is not a significant feature of this period. This is significant, since despite the fact that Sikhs in their recent history have come to claim Punjab as they homeland, they did not belong exclusively to Punjab, but were in fact settled all across Northern India. It was Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839) that brought the Sikhs under a unified Punjabi kingdom. He reached an accommodation with the British colonizers in India by signing a treaty with the East India Company that recognized the Sutlej river as the frontier between their territories. However, after the death of Ranjit Singh, the British annexed his kingdom and created the British State of Punjab. (Oberoi 1987)

COLONIALISM AND THE IMAGINING OF SIKH IDENTITY (1849-1947)

It is this period that is considered by several scholars to be the phase during which Sikhism entered into an identity of its own. Hence the argument is that the Sikhs before this time were essentially devoid of any sense of identity or consciousness of themselves as a distinct socio-cultural community. It might be said in critique of such views, that fluidity in the interpretation of the Sikh religion, and its syncretic tradition has erroneously divested Sikhism of its rich and distinct array of symbolism, myth and history. These observations suggest that identity construction is entirely a product of the arena of the state fairly reflective of the

instrumentalist approach to ethnic identity formation. While it is hard to subscribe to this approach given the existence of a distinct cultural and symbolic code, prior to the colonial take over of the Punjab, "there is little doubt that the Sikh *Panth* constructed a paradigm in the colonial period which was non-existent in the earlier phases of the Sikh movement, and, what is more crucial, this paradigm has not been deconstructed since." (Oberoi 1987:34) Admittedly, this might be posited as the phase during which the Sikh *Panth* first awoke to the element of 'territoriality' in their imagining of identity. (Oberoi 1987) "Today for most people it appears "natural" that many Sikhs claim Punjab as their homeland. Many of the Sikh *Gurus* were born in the villages and towns of Punjab, and they constantly traversed across this ancient land...... the verses in its sacred literature draw their rich imagery from the surrounding landscape; the major pilgrim centers are scattered over the Punjab; and the faithful over the past five centuries have tried to mould the land in their own corporate image. They have aimed to do so through a repertoire of myths, metaphors, signs and symbols and gestures." (Oberoi 1987:27) However, despite these strong linkages with the region of Punjab the concept of territory has not for most of the Sikhs history, played a key role in their definition as a community. It is only more recently, that Sikh identity, defined, constructed and changed over the centuries has come to be associated with 'territorial' nationhood.

However, to claim that it is only through the acknowledgement of this territorial factor that Sikhs came into their own as a community is to ignore their prior struggles for cultural differentiation and rejuvenation. It might thus be most

appropriate to say that this was the period during which Sikh ethnic discourse made its final transition from syncretism to rigidity.

Sikhism in the early colonial period was still characterized as syncretic, with a fluid sense of cultural and religious identity. Hence "at the start of this period it was possible to be an Udasi, Nirmala, Sunthresashi, Sangasaihbie.......or a votary of Muslim *pirs* (saints)...... and still be considered a Sikh" and "except for the Sikh initiation right, the communities *rites de passage* were in no way different from those of the bulk of the population" while "contemporary vehicles of knowledge—myths, texts, narratives, folklore, plays—produced by non-Sikhs authors were accorded a place within Sikh cosmology." (Oberoi 1987:35-36) Thus, the cultural and symbolic identity of the 'Sikh' during the early nineteenth century was quite amorphous. It was in 1897 that the Sikh scholar Kahn Singh Nabha first proclaimed a distinct Sikh identity through a vernacular tract. This tract, proclaiming *Hum Hindu Nahin*. (We are not Hindus) transformed what had until then been four centuries of Sikh tradition. (Oberoi 1990; Jarnail Singh 1984)

The British did their part in contributing to the hardening of cultural boundaries among the Sikhs. They began treating one identity, that of the *Singh* or the Lion as the only 'true' Sikhism, leading the Sikhs themselves to identify with this version of Sikhism in order to remain recipients of colonial patronage. (See Fox 1985) The colonial discourse on Punjab provided the conditions within which a Sikh self-image could come into being, a self-image that provided the poetics of Sikh nationalist imaginings. The British, assisted by historical readings constructed a 'communalist history' of the Punjab so that the benefits of the Pax

Britannica could be contrasted with the chaos that had supposedly preceded it. (Talbot 1996:8) Colonial discourse thus situated Banda Bahadur's career (a disciple of *Guru* Gobind Singh) within a context of fanatical religious animosity between Muslims and Sikhs. These colonial histories constantly underestimated the shared cultural values of the Punjabi communities.

On the partition of India, the Radcliffe line that cut across the British province of Punjab awarded almost sixty-six percent of the territory to Pakistan and the rest to India. Hence, the Sikh community awoke to a territorial identity only towards the close of the colonial phase "when the British empire-builders, ignoring one of their staunchest allies, the Sikhs, exhibited a willingness to let Hindus and Muslims carve two separate countries out of the brightest jewel in the crown." (Oberoi 1987:37)

The partition of India into India and Pakistan thus created a sense of alienation among the Sikhs. "Tossed between a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India, and with the prospect of Punjab being split into two, the Sikhs in desperation opened the sluice gates of history and began saturating the landscape of the troubled province with a systematic use of signs through the genre of metacommentaries. The underlying logic behind the message was simple: Sikhs belonged to the Punjab; the Punjab belonged to the Sikhs." (Oberoi 1987:36-37) It was thus at this point that the Sikhs, for the first time explicitly expressed the idea of a Sikh 'nation' in territorial terms. The *Akali Dal,* the political arm of the SGPC passed a resolution in 1946 stating:

> Whereas the Sikhs being attached to the Punjab by intimate bonds of holy shrines, property, language, traditions, and history, claim it as their homeland and holy land which the British took over a "trust" from the last Sikh ruler during his minority and whereas the entity of the Sikhs is being threatened on account of the persistent demand of Pakistan by the Muslims on the one hand and of danger of absorption by the Hindus on the other, the executive committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal demands for the preservation and protection of the religious, cultural and economic and political rights of the Sikh nation, the creation of a Sikh state which should include a substantial majority of the Sikh population and their sacred shrines and historical gurudwaras with provision for the transfer and exchange of population and property. (Quoted in Nayar 1966:89)

It is critical to note that the formulation of this form of the Sikh 'nation' both in its cultural and later, its territorial 'imagining' may be attributed to a cultural elite whose primary discourse was that of a 'moral' regeneration of the cultural community. This vehicle of cultural assertion on the part of the elite slowly filtered down to the populace. The *Akali* resolution itself was incorporated as narrative of a glorious Sikh nation-state relayed through vernacular newspapers, pamphlets and books wherein "the Sikhs may not have attained their paradise, but their metacommentaries confirmed its existence."

(Oberoi 1987:37)

The Singh Sabhas and their Discourse on Cultural Boundaries

While in pre-British society there never was one social group that sought to generate cultural meanings, in colonial Punjab there emerged for the first time a new cultural *elite*. This elite was new not in terms of its origins but rather in terms of its function. With the new instruments of dissemination of a codified Sikh identity at its disposal (the printing press for example) the discourse of this elite

subsumed the sub-traditions of Sikhism into a monolithic, reified religion. (Oberoi 1990)

Exposure to Christian missionaries during the colonial era, as well as to the reformist activities of the Hindus in the form of organizations such as the *Arya Samaj* led the Sikhs to start reforms of their own. It was at this point that the Punjabi language, widely spoken by both the Hindus and the Muslims inhabiting pre-Partition Punjab, evolved into a symbol of Sikh cultural identity. This led to what is known as the *Singh Sabha* movement the leadership for which came primarily from the new cultural elite. The *Singh Sabha* period that extended from 1870-1919 was devoted to the strengthening and institutionalization of Sikh identity. The *Singh Sabhas*, composed of the literary Sikh intelligentsia, were committed to challenging the impact of the *Arya Samaj* who adopted Hindi as the communal symbol of Hindu nationalism. The *Singh Sabhas* were thus involved in constructing a counter identity to what was increasingly being disseminated as a 'Pan-Indian' discourse on identity. The Punjabi language became the primary tool in the construction and dissemination of this counter identity. A significant role of the *Sabhas* was in expanding the scope of literature in Punjabi written in the *Gurumukhi* rather than in the *Devangari* script. Moreover, preservation of the Punjabi language thus made it necessary to develop a strong literary tradition, one that embodied the values and rhetoric of what made up the Sikh identity. (See Eagleton et.al. 1990)

Two of the main goals of the *Singh Sabhas* were to achieve a distinct identity for the Sikhs vis-à-vis the Hindu majority and to gain control over the

Sikh shrines. The Sikh shrines had until then been under the control of Hindu *mahants*.(priests) The prominent discourse of the *Singh Sabhas* was the invocation and revival of ancient traditions and a call for the revitalization of existing institutions and a creation of new ones where they did not already exist. (Barrier 1990) The *Singh Sabha* and its inheritor the *Chief Khalsa Diwan* sought to purge Sikhism of its syncretic tradition. They established a *new* version of what it meant to be a Sikh; however, the discourse of this 'true' vision of Sikhism was replete with the symbolic code, myth and heroism of the prior phases in Sikh history. This symbolic code that was invoked by the Sikh reformers is akin to what Smith refers to as 'ethno-symbolic resources' or what Penrose refers to as the 'cultural bases' of the community. (A.D. Smith 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Penrose 1995)

The *Singh Sabha* reforms established a vision of what it meant to be a Sikh, this vision defined largely in symbolic terms: subscription to the *five K's*, the worship at Sikh shrines, the adoption of Punjabi as the sacred language of Sikhism, and the conduction of *rites de passage* according to distinctly Sikh ritual. (Oberoi 1987, 1994) In other words, the Sikh identity came to be defined at this point increasingly by the *Khalsa* tradition. Hence, all other identities became subsumed under this monolithic vision of a Sikh 'culture' and the older *Sanatanist* (the name given to the syncretic vision of Sikh beliefs and practices in the nineteenth century) paradigm of Sikhism was replaced by what came to be known as the *Tat Khalsa*. The establishment of the *Tat Khalsa* identity marks the point at which a standardized Sikh identity was forged for the first time. This *Tat Khalsa* identity, largely the confine of the rural *Jat* Sikh community became in turn the

hegemonic discourse that was to guide the movement for Sikh separatism and secession in the 1980s. Hence, what the *Singh Sabha* reformers did was take existing traditions such as the *Khalsa* identity and then attempted to standardize a community identity around them. (Talbot 1996:27) Hence. the role of the Sikh intelligentsia and their discourse on identity cannot be ignored in the examination of Sikh ethnic identity construction and Sikh ethnic mobilization.

A significant part of the forging of a distinct Sikh identity by the *Tat Khalsa* was symbolic in nature. Thus. one of the critical moves in resisting cultural assimilation and in distinguishing the Sikh from the Hindu identity was in revising the Sikh *rites de passage*. "Since *rites de passage* are the most fundamental statements of group identity. with a deep emotive content, Sikhs desirous of distancing themselves from Hindus could not be seen performing Hindu rituals.... the *Tat Khalsa*, with the organizational support of the *Singh Sabhas*. started a massive campaign through newspapers, tracts. lectures and congregations to replace Hindu rites with Sikh rites." (Oberoi 1990:150, 1994) Thus. it was through reforming an integral part of what was to become Sikh 'culture' that a distinct Sikh identity was forged. It is important to remember however, that the revised rituals that served in the demarcation of cultural boundaries radically departed from those of the pre-*Singh Sabha* phase. However. the *Tat Khalsa* couched this revision in a discourse that claimed sanction by the Sikh *Gurus* who were said to have been opposed to the existing practices and had therefore developed separate rites for their followers. (See Oberoi 1990:136-158)

The discourse of the *Khalsa*. thus played a significant part in the

construction of Sikh identity, very much through mapping the constructions of a Sikh self-image or what Dipankar Gupta refers to as the Sikh 'imago'. (See D. Gupta 1996,1992) The Sikhs gave notice through their rituals that they were not Hindus thus inculcating a self-image that fostered the hardening of a cultural boundary. This invocation of specifically Sikh rituals, narrated as practice sanctioned by a distant past is similar to what Hobsbawm refers to as the "invention of tradition." Thus, ancient materials are used to construct "traditions" of a novel type for novel purposes" "these materials are stored in the past of every society and an elaborate language of symbolic practice and communication is always available." (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983:6)

The *Singh Sabhas* also set up a new political organization, the *Shiromani Akali Dal* party which established a committee known as the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC) for the purpose of gaining control of the Sikh *gurudwaras* from the government as well as from the Hindu priests. Further, Sikh efforts in this regard led to the enactment in 1924 of the Sikh *Gurudwaras* Act, a significant result of which was that the SGPC became a de facto parliament of the Sikhs, with the authority to enforce decisions in the community. This fusion of political and temporal power was sanctioned by the *Miri-Piri* doctrine and foreshadowed the imagining of the territorial nation-state of *Khalistan*. Thus, Sikh cultural identity during the colonial era evolved largely around the religious *gurudwara* institutions and from the imperatives of defending the Sikh culture against assimilation into the Hindu fold. The Sikh self-image during this period was occasioned to a great extent by the intolerance of the Hindu revivalist *Arya*

Samaj in Punjab as well as by the norms generated by the British Indian Army. (See Fox 1985:48:87:141)

THE INVOCATION OF A SIKH NATION-STATE (1947-1985)

The postcolonial discourse of the Sikhs has been formulated largely in terms of "the Hindus got Hindustan, the Muslims got Pakistan, what did the Sikhs get?" (Master Tara Singh quoted in Nayar 1966:102) According to Oberoi, "one dominant response, within the multiple discourses which have tried to answer this problem, has been to fuse the emblem of territoriality into Sikh ethnicity." (Oberoi 1987:38)

The Sikh political leadership in the form of the *Akali Dal* played a part in three major agitations prior to 1984. Firstly, the *Akali Dal* was the major player in the resuscitation of the idea of the *Guru Panth* – the demand for the management of the *Gurudwaras* by the representatives of the Sikh *Panth*. And it was the *Akalis* who were perceived as the upholders of the *Panth* both culturally and politically. This discourse drew its strength from the assumption that the Sikh *Panth* collectively had the right to manage their own religious affairs. Secondly, the *Akalis* as the cultural and political upholders of the *Panth* also agitated for the setting up of a *Punjabi Suba*, a state within the Indian Union where the Punjabi-speaking population would be in a majority. Thirdly, the *Akalis* were also the proponents of what has come to be regarded as the pre-cursor to the political determination of the Sikh nation, the *Anandpur Sahib Resolution* of 1973.

The Punjabi *Suba* demand arose out of the public resolution on the part of

the Indian National Congress during the anti-colonial movement to accept the principle of linguistic states for a free India. However, on attaining independence, Nehru opposed this principle on account of his fear of regional and fissiparous tendencies. Unable to resist the mounting popular pressure, however, the principle of linguistic states was agreed upon for most regions except Punjab. The demand for a Punjabi-speaking state, put forth primarily by the Sikhs represented politically by the *Akali Dal*, was refused on account of the fact that this demand was perceived as little more than a communal ploy. The Punjabi language, which had been increasingly disowned by the Punjabi speaking Hindus in the region served to communalize the issue of language. The Punjabi language and Punjabi culture thus became increasingly equated with Sikh culture. (Gopal Singh 1984:47) It was during the *Akali* agitation for a Punjabi state that a significant development occurred—"The leadership of the *Akali Dal* changed from the traditional non-*Jat* urban leadership to the newly emerging rural *Jat* leadership" as a consequence of the rise to power of Sant Fateh Singh. (M. Singh 1990:203) Fateh Singh, who rose to the helm of the *Akali Dal* leadership after ousting the middle class non-*Jat* leader Master Tara Singh carved out a different path for the struggle for the *Punjabi Suba*. The *Akali* discourse changed from one with communal ramifications to one that explicitly stressed a 'purely linguistic' consideration. (M. Singh 1990:203) This was achieved by demanding the Punjabi speaking state of Punjab and the Hindi speaking Haryana in the same breath. This shift in stand served to weaken Hindu opposition to the *Suba* demand. Sant Fateh Singh thus "redefined *Punjabi Suba* from communal to linguistic criteria.

Redrafting of state boundaries on a linguistic basis became acceptable in the 1950s, while changes based on religion were politically unacceptable. Hence, while the redrafting of linguistic boundaries did in fact make Punjab a Sikh majority state, the *Akalis* couched this demarcation in linguistic rather than communal discourse. This political formulation enabled the Sikh *Akali Dal* and the Hindu *Jan Sangh* leaders to cooperate successfully until the consociational arrangement collapsed in 1979." (P.Wallace 1990:272) Hence, the linguistic consideration emerged to the forefront of the Sikh discourse. The *Punjabi Suba* was finally acceded to in 1966 after a bitter struggle between the *Akali Dal* and the 'secular' nationalist Congress leadership. This bitter and protracted struggle for a Punjabi speaking state served to establish the nexus between Sikh identity, the Punjabi language and the territory of Punjab. Hence, by the time that Ganga Singh Dhillon delivered his speech in Chandigarh in 1981, proclaiming the Sikhs to be a nation, many within the community already viewed the Punjab as the territory of this Sikh nation. (Oberoi 1987) "This theme was given further fillip by the different protagonists of *Khalistan* (land of the pure) from 1982 onwards." (Oberoi 1987:39) Hence, Sant Bhindranwale, when he came to power with the help of Indira Gandhi's Congress party, did not need to 'invent' the idea of *Khalistan*, for *Khalistan* had already been imagined within the Sikh consciousness. This was made possible by the fact that the concept of the *Sikh Panth*, had in Sikh religious and political discourse become coterminous with the Sikh nation. (Oberoi 1987)

The *Anandpur Sahib Resolution*, which was first proposed by the *Akali Dal* in October 1973 is one of the most provocative documents which attempts to set

forth Sikh positions towards Indian federalism. (P. Wallace 1990:259) Thus, on the political level, the resolution sought to reorient center-state relations, limiting the power of the central government to defense, foreign affairs, railways, communications and currency. All other powers were to be transferred to the state government, including the right to frame its own constitution. (Y. Malik 1986:345-362) The resolution that deals with issues such as greater state control over river water, and industry and farming is also the first time that Sikh demands were posed within the context of political rights. While the resolution was thus seemingly purely a federalist challenge to the Indian state, its symbolic and semantic dimensions cannot be ignored for it is these latter that made the Sikh demands unique compared to the other regional/federalist challenges to the central Indian state. Demands for a reorientation of state-center relations have been voiced in several other parts of India: the Marxists in W. Bengal, the National Conference in Kashmir, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Telgu Desam in Andhra Pradesh. However, where the *Akali Dal's* definition of state autonomy differed from the others is in its demand that the Sikhs be recognized a 'nation' rather than as simply a religious community or a regional group. It is this latter discourse that is the essence of the *Anandpur Sahib* Resolution.

The resolution originated in the birthplace of the *Khalsa*, where Guru Gobind Singh had, in 1699 established the orthodox *Khalsa* tradition. (P. Wallace 1990:259-60) Hence, despite its political content, it was enunciated very much within the context of prior formulations on which the contemporary Sikh identity rested. Further, the *Akali Dal* charged that failure to grant the demands articulated

by the resolution was "itself paving the way for *Khalistan.*" (Cited in P. Wallace 1990:260) Hence, formulation of the resolution, its implementation, Sikh identity and the territoriality of Punjab were linked at the level of discourse.

MILITANCY, MARTYRDOM AND THE CALL FOR KHALISTAN

While up until the late 1970s the *Akali Dal* represented Sikh resistance to cultural and political assimilation into what had become the pan-Indian Congress fold, towards the latter part of the decade Sikh demands took a turn towards militancy. "In the 1980s, a group of Sikhs, mainly, young men marginal in many ways to Sikh society saw themselves as a saving remnant of the kind that fought the Muslims emperors at Delhi, only now the warfare was against the Hindu central government of India." (Embree 1990:123) Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale or *Sant* (Saint) Bhindranwale as he came to be called by his followers was at the center of this group of militant soldiers. Bhindranwale was a popular preacher and in 1977, became the head of the *Damdami Taksal*, a religious school where the emphasis is on the Sikh scriptures and the traditions and beliefs of Sikhism. Indira Gandhi who had lost the elections in 1977 was seeking new allies in Punjab in order to regain Congress power in the Punjab. Her main opponent in Punjab was the *Akali Dal*, who after the passing of the *Anandpur Sahib Resolution* had by then become fairly conservative. (Embree 1990:125) Gandhi, taking advantage of Bhindranwale's opposition to the conservative *Akali* platform, chose him as her ally against the *Akali Dal*. This gave Bhindranwale and his followers more prominence and influence within the Sikh community and forced the *Akalis* to

more radical positions in order to maintain their credibility as spokesmen for the Sikh community. (Embree 1990:126)

Bhindranwale and his supporters took possession of the Golden Temple in 1980 and used it as their center from which they conducted their violent war aimed at the secession of Punjab from India:

> Their dream was to establish a state where Sikhs would be free to create a society based on a true understanding of the teachings if their founder , Guru Nanak. Their vision of a good society, their utopia, was in conflict with that of the Indian national state, with its allegiance to secularism. For Bhindranwale. secularism as defined by the Indian government was a thin disguise for Hindu religious and cultural imperialism. (Embree 1990:126)

It is significant that Bhindranwale's militant guerillas in their quest for *Khalistan* disseminated a discourse on martyrdom, and it was through this martyrdom that they sustained what had come to be understood as their "tradition." However, what is important to point to is that tradition is paradoxically shaped to suit the political temper. Hence, "while tradition is an identifiable repository of past culture, in actual fact its alleged qualities of uniformity and homogeneity are variously interpreted by the very exponents of tradition in changing political contexts." (Seth 1997:956) The invocation of the *Khalsa* tradition was significant since it justified the use of violence given that in Sikh imagining the *Khalsa* had become associated with the fusion of the military and the religious. (McLeod 1976:4) The supreme symbol of this martyrdom was *Guru* Tegh Bahadur who, despite being martyred, did not in fact inaugurate a martial tradition. (See D.Gupta 1996) Hence, it is insignificant whether a martial tradition is the most salient aspect of the Sikh 'tradition;' it is enough that its followers imagined it as such. Faced with a political context of cultural and political alienation, the martial soldiers invoked the

martyrdom and martial spirit of their *Guru* ancestors and the glory of the victory of Maharaja Ranjit Singh over the Mughals. Thus, the Sikh militant discourse fused the concepts of martyrdom and martial tradition into their discourse on Sikh identity. This image of the invincible army of saint Sikh soldiers thus became increasingly associated with definitions of Sikh identity. Since their sacrifices were for the *Panth*, their deaths were thereby dignified and they became the martyrs of the Sikh nation. (Pettigrew 1991:36) Hence, the martial tradition, that had, until then, played little part in the constructions of Sikh identity, became the most prominent aspect in the discourse on Sikh nationhood.

Indira Gandhi's storming of the Golden Temple in 1984 (Operation Blue Star) not only symbolized the desecration of the holy shrine but also the once familiar loss of control over the *Gurudwaras*. The storming of the Golden Temple in 1984 and the brutal massacre of the Sikhs in Delhi in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards created tremendous outrage in the Sikh community. It also represented a turning point in the popular Sikh position towards the Indian State. It caused the moderate and extremist Sikhs (who had up until then been divided) to unite and created deep divisions between the Sikhs and other Indians. The Sikh *Panth*, which became the foundation for the Sikh nation in the popular imagining also presented at this point a figurative dichotomy of allegiance. Hence, Sikh allegiance was focussed on either the *Darbar Sahib* (Golden Temple) or on the Delhi *Darbar*, (the Government in Delhi) where allegiance to the latter signified the abandonment of the *Guru* model of sacrifice to the *Panth*. (See Pettigrew 1991:28) It is significant to note that

militant secessionist discourse had until then, largely been opposed by popular sections of the Sikh community. However, in the aftermath of Gandhi's desecration of the *Darbar Sahib*, the gulf between the militant and popular discourse diminished. It thus marked the point at which the Sikhs were most alienated from the discourse of the pan-Indian nation-state. *Khalistan* thus became the symbol of the rejection of the Indian State. As Murray Leaf states – "the Punjab crisis has not, fundamentally been a clash between Sikhs and Hindus, nor between Sikhs and Indira Gandhi...... It has been a clash between two visions of the future and of India's proper political and social constitution." (Leaf 1985:488-89) The cry for secession on the part of the Sikhs had a double ethnic twist as two processes occurred here simultaneously, both influencing each other. While *Khalistanis*, on behalf of all Sikhs demanded a sovereign homeland in which Hindus would be outsiders. Hindus in Punjab propagated a discourse that was in line with that of much of India – to declare Sikhs as outsiders in the 'Indian' nation. (D. Gupta 1996)

The discourse of the radicals in the post-1984 period differed significantly from their predecessors. The *Akali* discourse had primarily been one of cultural segmentation of the Sikh community and preservation of places of worship. Moreover, this discourse was propounded within the context of electoral politics. The radicals however, declared that they were fighting for *Khalistan*, a separate homeland for the Sikhs. This move towards militant secession, while seemingly very much a political move must also be understood within its symbolic universe: "while the idea of secession might seem purely political, for the Sikhs it surely

represented dreams and visions of a homeland of the kind that had made such powerful emotional appeals to Muslims in India before 1947 and, in very different contexts, to Jews in Europe and America." (Embree 1990:128) The justification for the call for a Sikh nation-state was given fillip by the invocation of the *Miri-Piri* doctrine, that propounded the fusion of temporal and political power. It is significant that the discourse on *Khalistan* was rooted in this doctrine since the *Miri-Piri* in Sikh theology essentially sees the Sikh community not as a spatial entity but rather as a collective body of those believing in the Sikh faith. Thus, from a theological viewpoint territoriality is conspicuously absent from the Sikh imagining of community. However, the Sikh leadership, faced with a hegemonic central state was able to fuse the spatial territorial conception into what was a theologically justified doctrine.

Neither force, nor the political accord between *Akali* leader Haracharan Singh Longowal and then Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi in 1985 alleviated the spate of terrorism rampant in the Punjab. This terrorism was motivated by the demand for *Khalistan*. Even with an *Akali* victory in the September 1985 elections, they failed to translate a clear majority into the resolution of what had by then been termed 'the Punjab Problem.' By 1987, the Punjab problem had reverted back to the terror of 1984. Failure in the implementation of the Rajiv-Longowal accord only led to renewed action on the part of the militants and the declaration of the formation of *Khalistan* by a faction of the All India Sikh Student Federation. (A.I.S.S.F.) (P. Wallace 1990:258) The Sikh discourse thus became not only increasingly militant, but also increasingly accentuated a territorial component to

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its definition of identity. It is significant that the period during which militancy and the call for a Sikh homeland became most intense is also the period during which an increasingly Hindu revivalist discourse was being articulated at the center. This made the Sikh demands a double edged sword -- an articulation of a discourse on nationhood that was increasingly divergent from that of the pan-Indian one. and a nationalist imagining in which territoriality and temporality came to be the dominant theme as a result of nationalist mobilization.

It is. no doubt theoretically valuable to examine the Sikh ethnonational demands within the context of state repression and manipulation of the state elite within electoral politics. since the repressive moves on the part of Gandhi and her Congress government contributed significantly to the escalation of the conflict. However. what is equally important in the Sikh case is to take into account the construction and evolution of Sikh identity for it was this identity that was the "powerful force capable of mobilization under conditions where the religious community was believed to be in danger." (P. Wallace 1990:271) The cultural discourse of the Sikh community thus played a significant part in constructions of Sikh identity and the imagining of cultural boundaries. The cultural markers separating the Sikhs from the Hindus were self-consciously and deliberately developed by the Sikhs from around the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Hence. the political context of Sikh secession cannot be understood without an examination of the prior struggle for cultural rejuvenation and resistance to assimilation within the Hindu fold. While the cry for *Khalistan* was put forth within the context of modernizing forces of the territorial nation-state. the emotive

language and the cleavages called upon were critically rooted in a distant past and in an imagining of identity that had evolved prior to the struggle for political determination.

The Sikh ethnonationalist movement also illustrates the transitivity of identities. It has been shown that the cultural and temporal discourse on Sikhism significantly shaped the Sikh national imagining. However, the evolution of a temporal community into a territorial one was an equally significant illustration of how pre-political identities are reshaped through discursive interaction.

ETHNONATIONALISM IN ASSAM

THE AGITATION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW(1979-1985)

The precipitating factor in the 'political' turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s was the demographic transformation of the frontier region in North-east India. This region included the present state of Assam as well as other smaller states in North-eastern India. The Assam agitation. demanding the deportation of Bengali immigrants from the region has been looked at within the context of Assamese middle class chauvinism faced with increasing economic competition by Bengali middle class immigrants. Admittedly, Assam was one of the least industrialized states in the Indian Union. Also, the demands for the deportation of foreigners were put forth very much within the context of a loss of economic power to the Bengalis.

However, the anti-foreigner agitation was not simply that. It has deep historical and cultural roots. The articulation of an Assamese identity can be traced back at least a century. if not more. These historical roots significantly contribute to an examination of why ethnic cleavages took the form that they did and why the Assamese political demands were closely intertwined with questions of identity. The tensions produced in the region facilitated a realignment of cleavages into ethnically cohesive bodies. "The group distinctions reverted to those that corresponded to a language of centuries-old conflicts." (Darnell & Parikh 1988:277) These lines established by the language of centuries of conflict present

an insight into the relationship between cultural discourse as a factor in political mobilization. Thus, the "politics of Assamese ethnonationalism can be located in the theoretical space referred to as 'civil society.'"(S. Baruah 1994:651)

Since 1947, large influxes of population from East Pakistan (subsequently Bangladesh) kept pouring into Assam. The latter, being the least populated of the border states became the most promising of destinations. Not all the immigrants were Hindus, for a large number of Bengali Muslims moved illegally into Assam. lured by opportunities of casual labor and cheaper rice. These migrations threatened both the cultural and the economic fabric of the region. The accumulation of apprehensions and perceived cultural threat that simmered over several decades, finally found an outlet over the issue of the electoral leverage of the "foreigners" in 1979. (See Chhabra 1992; Gohain 1985) The 1979-1985 political turmoil in Assam centered on the question of illegal immigration from Bangladesh that was allegedly turning the Assamese into a linguistic and cultural minority in Assam -- this phenomenon in turn became a symbol of the perceived powerlessness of the Assamese. (Baruah 1994:658) It is moreover, significant that Assamese fears of being culturally inundated under this invasion of immigrants had been raised in every successive parliament since Indian independence.

In 1979 the agitation intensified when the close scrutiny of electoral rolls revealed that a large percentage of the voters were foreigners. Several indigenous groups mobilized around the cause for the deportation of the foreigners, the most prominent of which was the All Assam Student Union (AASU). These groups boycotted the 1979 election, while the latter also instated a blockade to the

movement of petroleum out of Assam. The Assam movement, at least in its early stages, thus received a great deal of popular support, both from the tribal and non-tribal indigenous population. The inauguration of President's rule in December 1979 and the return to power of the Congress (I) in 1980 inaugurated a new phase in the state's politics. The confrontations between the movement and the government became more and more intense with Assamese perceptions of alienation (both culturally and politically) manifested in violent separatism. The signing of the Assam Accord in 1985 between the AASU leadership and the Rajiv Gandhi government at the center did bring with it some sense of a constitutional resolution to the regional demands. However, a violent insurgent movement with demands that reflected secessionist tendencies continued for several years. However, this insurgency or ultra-nationalist movement represented by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and its secessionist discourse failed to receive popular support and hence was unable to maintain its insurgency.

This discussion of the politics of identity in Assam attempts to engage the levels at which Assamese identity came to be imagined and how the hardening of cultural boundaries provided the symbolic language in the political agitation. Firstly, I examine the construction and transformations of Assamese identity. The history of the Assamese and their *Ahom* ancestors are an important part of this analysis. Secondly, I examine the colonial encounter, since it was during this period that a discourse on a distinct Assamese identity was first put forth in the face of the Bengali threat. Thirdly, I examine the reshaping of Assamese cultural boundaries in the course of the mobilization. Hence, at certain periods,

linguistically defined identity became salient, while at others Assamese identity came to be defined in religious terms and at other times in terms of neither. These questions of identity are analyzed as discourses with their distinct symbolic narratives.

THE HISTORICAL QUEST FOR ASSAMESE IDENTITY

The Assam agitation and the rise of ethnic demands reached its zenith over the issue of illegal migration in the late 1970s. However, it is crucial to view this movement in terms of the quest for identity on the part of the 'ethnic' Assamese from the colonial era into the immediate post-independence era and beyond. It would not be incorrect to say that the Assamese cultural renaissance and the construction of a symbolic universe and the 'ethno-symbolic resources' providing the tools in ethnic Assamese national imagining, preceded the colonial encounter. However, the colonial period, that brought with it the Bengali threat may be looked at as the period during which questions of identity and cultural preservation came to the forefront. Thus, the foreigner's issue "was not a 'genie' invented by the Assamese students. It had been in the making since the beginning of this century when migration of people into Assam began." (K.M.L. Chhabra 1992: vii-viii)

Over the centuries, Assam has been beset by streams of migration, particularly from bordering Bengal. This dynamic spawned fear on the part of the indigenous Assamese of cultural inundation under the Bengalis. The mortification of seeing Assamese displaced by Bengali as the medium of instruction in Assam further accentuated the pursuit of identity. Thus, the national question in Assam

cannot be understood outside the context of the historical struggle for the articulation of an Assamese identity distinct from a Bengali one.

The incipient stages of Assamese discourse on identity can be traced to the middle of the nineteenth century as an assertion of the distinctiveness of the Assamese language and culture in the face of the colonialist view of Assam as a periphery of Bengal. (S. Baruah 1994:654) However, the symbolic language for these definitions of identity are invoked from an even earlier period in Assamese history, the age of the *Ahoms*. The *Ahom* age has provided the somewhat ˙primordial˙ discourse on a shared ancestry and a deep attachment to the land of the Brahmaputra valley. The themes of autonomy and distinctiveness have recurred in post-colonialist Assamese nationalist discourse, which was accentuated by heavy Bengali immigration into the area that exacerbated the fears of minoritization among the Assamese and other indigenous people in the region. (S. Baruah 1994:654)

THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

Historically, the foremost feature of the social order of North-east India has, and continues to be, its heterogeneity. Three major groups inhabit the region: the hill tribes, the plains tribes and the non-tribal population of the plains. Within each of these groups there is a tremendous amount of variety in terms of race, language and religion. Over the centuries, "the ethnic cauldron of north-east India has been kept boiling by the contradictory processes of assimilation and preservation of ethnic identity." (B.P. Singh 1987:259) Hence, in North-eastern

India, the issue of identity has surfaced with persistent frequency in one form or another.

The history of Assam is marked by migrations, the Austrics, the Tibeto-Burmans, the Indo-Aryans, the *Ahoms* and the Mughals. This demographic diversity seems to have had three significant consequences with regard to Assamese discourse on identity. Firstly, it has contributed to one of the most diverse regional populations in India. This has opened up the possibility for both cultural segmentation and cultural assimilation. Secondly, the intermingling of settlers with the original inhabitants has problematized the question of who makes up the "true" Assamese. Thirdly, regions that are defined by conquest and migration also open up the primacy of the concept of territory in the imagining of identity. Given the pluralistic mixture of races, ethnic and religious groups the question of Assamese identity during the early part of this century was defined primarily in territorial terms. Hence all those who occupied the territory of the Brahmaputra valley were immediately assimilated into the Assamese fold and accepted as 'native' to the region. It is here that early Assamese discourse differed most significantly from the early Sikh discourse. While the former defined identity in terms of the nativist territorial concept, the latter defined identity in terms of the temporal nation.

The colonialists contributed significantly to the territorialization of identity, not simply of what is modern day Assam but also of the entire North-east region. Most importantly, the colonialist effort that encouraged the migration of labor into Assam contributed to the fear of Assam's native inhabitants of being dominated,

both economically and culturally. By adopting the 'inner line' policy in areas that are now part of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram, restricting travel between the hills and the plains, they contained the spread of assimilation and instead enhanced ethnic distinctiveness. (See B.P. Singh 1987:262) Moreover, Assam, that had once been an undivided territory, had by the mid 1980s been divided into five states and two Union Territories – the state of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura and the Union Territories of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. (Both of which have now acquired the status of states).

While the territorialization of Assamese identity has no doubt been channeled by the changing political geography, one cannot ignore the fact that the territory of the Brahmaputra Valley has been a key theme in Assamese narrative tradition prior to the colonial encounter. "The Brahmaputra is to Assam what the Hwang Ho and the Yangtse are to China, the Nile to Egypt and the Mekong to Laos, Kampuchea and Vietnam. It is both life giver and life taker. An entire culture, spanning socio-economic and political systems has grown around this great sheet of water.... Immortalized through songs, plays, poems and ballads, the power and pain of the Brahmaputra has been a constant theme in Assam." (S. Hazarika 1994:43) This would also explain why, in Assam the element of territory was so intimately tied to that of an Assamese identity right from the very start, while in the case of the Sikhs, the territory of Punjab did not become associated with a Sikh nationalism till much later on in the political struggle. In the Sikh case, the Sikh theological discourse provided the symbolic justifications in the imagining of a Sikh identity, at least during the early part of this century. In

Assam, given the diversity of the region and the potential for the emergence of several discursive alternatives, territoriality was the most inclusive element.

Up until the twelfth century the religious discourse and consciousness of the Brahmaputra Valley was dominated by animism and the tradition of the ancient Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Buddhism was introduced to the region in the seventh century, Islam in the thirteenth and Christianity in the nineteenth by Christian missionary activity and the American Baptist church. What is important to note in any study on constructions of identity in the region is that the early history of North-east India is richly endowed in mythology, which despite the diversity of the region has historically been presented as a 'Hindu' discourse. (See E. Gait 1963) Even the *Tai-Ahom* rulers of Assam were said to have assimilated into the Hindu fold in the early part of the seventeenth century. (Miri 1993) However, a staunchly 'Hindu' communal discourse did not emerge as the salient factor in Assamese conceptions of identity till much later on in the struggle. The overtly 'pro-Hindu' tilt gained salience shortly prior to the anti-foreigner movement and intensified as the agitation continued. The fact that the ethnic Assamese discourse on identity, while initially rooted in an inclusive agenda, nevertheless remained intertwined with a 'Hindu' discourse might explain why the Assamese did not come into direct conflict with the increasingly Hindu revivalist discourse of the Indian State like the Sikhs in Punjab did.

The advent of the *Ahom* conquerors marks an important milestone in the history of the region. This is true particularly in the history of the 'ethnic' Assamese, the group that provided the leadership in the Assam agitation in the 1970s and the 1980s. The *Ahoms* ruled Assam before the advent of the British in 1926. The *Ahoms* ruled Assam between the early thirteenth to the nineteenth century. (See E. Gait 1963) Essentially the forerunners of the ethnic Assamese community, the *Ahoms* came originally from the Patti Hills of Thailand. They arrived in 1215, crossing over to Assam from Burma and settled in the region, which took its name (*Asom*) after them. (D.P.Kumar 1990: ch 3) At the time of the *Ahom* invasion, the term 'Assamese' was defined in broad, inclusive terms. Hence, several indigenous groups, tribal and non-tribal, Hindus and non-Hindus alike were included within the Assamese fold by virtue of the fact that they were indigenous to the region that constituted Assam. However, in more recent times, the glory of the *Ahom* rule has come to be increasingly associated with what has come to be understood as the 'ethnic' Assamese identity. The 'ethnic' Assamese are those that claim their ethnic descent from the *Ahoms*. During the anti-foreigner agitation, 'Assamese' identity came to be increasingly defined by this caste-Hindu, Assamese speaking 'ethnic' group. (Also referred to as the *Assamiya* identity.) The *Ahom* period is thus an important one in examining the early constructions of the 'ethnic' Assamese identity. In fact, this *Ahom* period and invocations of the glory of the *Ahom* ancestors has played a significant part in the discourse of the 'ethnic'

Assamese in their quest for identity. It has also given fillip to the nativist claims of the ethnic Assamese that the territory of Assam is the property of those after whom it is named i.e. the ethnic Assamese.

The *Ahom* period is of special significance to the Assamese quest for identity since these conquerors rather than coercing conversion among the indigenous population, assimilated into the cultural tradition of the indigenous population. This assimilation of the *Ahoms* into the Assamese cultural and linguistic tradition is invoked by modern day ethnic Assamese leaders who exalt the richness of Assamese cultural identity – the genius and capacity of Assam to assimilate even conquerors who ruled the population for six hundred years. (D.P. Kumar 1990:23) The *Ahoms* thus became Hindus and adopted the indigenous Assamese language. Hence, a history of the *Ahoms* becomes an extension, or rather a source of the history of the Assamese in the 'ethnic' Assamese imagining. It is therefore significant, that the ethnic Assamese, who claim descent from the *Ahoms*, required assimilation into their way of life as a pre-requisite to entrance into the 'true' Assamese fold.

Ahom historiography, that has now become that of their descendents, the ethnic Assamese, is the dominant one in the region. This might explain why the ethnic Assamese discourse on identity and descent emerged as the hegemonic discourse of the region during the anti-foreigner agitation. The *Ahoms*, through their power were able to successfully defend their territory against outsiders. This resulted in the creation of a secluded society that instilled in the Assamese a sense of permanent belonging to the area and exclusive ownership of its resources. (S.

Nag 1990:27) This sense of nativism, of indigenous rights to land and what it had to offer was what pervaded the agitation in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is significant that the evolution of historiography in Assam dates from the coming of the *Ahoms*, for they brought with them the tradition of recording history in the form of chronicles. During the six hundred years of *Ahom* rule, numerous chronicles in both *Tai-Ahom* and Assamese were written forming an important branch of Assamese literature. These chronicles "are eloquent testimony to the sense of history of the elite in Assam" and have played the part of a 'national' literature. (S.L. Baruah 1986:62) These chronicles that were originally in *Tai-Ahom* were then written in Assamese, symbolizing the acceptance of Assamese as the language of the *Ahom* courts. Known locally as *buranjis*, these chronicles, which were originally secular dynastic histories, were, in the course of time accorded with sanctity and were converted into religious scriptures. (S.L. Baruah 1986) Hence, by the end of *Ahom* rule, the Assamese had established a distinct cultural identity that was reflected in the growth and development of the Assamese language and its literature. The fall of the *Ahom* dynasty to the British is disseminated in ethnic Assamese narrative as symbolic of the loss of Assamese power to the Bengalis. The defeat of the *Ahoms* signifies the loss of sovereignty of the Assamese language as sovereignty passed from the *Ahoms* to the British. (B.P. Singh 1987:273)

The modern Assamese narrative exalting the *Ahom* period may be attributed to the fact that this was also the period during which the cultural renaissance of the Assamese occurred. It was during the *Ahom* rule that the Hindu

Vaishnavite movement was founded by Mahapurush Shri Shankar Dev (1449-1569) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. (D.P. Kumar 1990; B.P. Singh 1987) The cultural renaissance of the Assamese may be traced to this Hindu reformist movement. (S. Nag 1990:28) The *Vaishnava* movement was a religious, social, cultural and literary movement whose discourse used the language of the people by enriching the vernacular. (H. Gohain 1985) This reformation called for a restoration of Hinduism based on the *Bhakti* cult and built around the heroes of the Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The result of this renaissance was the large scale homogenization and unification of the Assamese community particularly on the basis of language. Thus, the fact that more recent assertions of *Assamiya* identity have been put forth within the context of an increasingly Hindu discourse is not without precedent. Symbolic definitions of Assamese identity, right from the *Ahom* age have been replete with the discourse of a reformist Hinduism. However, this pro-Hindu discourse did not become salient until the issue of Muslim immigrants presented itself during the latter half of this century. Also, despite the homogenization of the Assamese community it is important to note that the early *Vaishnava* discourse included within its spectrum a lot of the originally non-Assamese tribal groups of the region. This assimilation of non-Assamese groups however became increasingly tenuous, particularly in more recent times. The fact that the *Ahom* period is invoked in ethnic Assamese discourse as the pre-cursor to an Assamese identity, rooted in the Assamese language, the region of the Brahmaputra Valley and lately, the Hindu religion is significant given that the *Ahoms* were neither indigenous to the region, nor

essentially Assamese speaking, nor essentially Hindus.

THE COLONIAL PERIOD, PARTITION AND THE BENGALI THREAT

The British conquered Assam in 1826. Several Bengalis had settled in Assam prior to the colonial period. However, it is the British that brought with them the Bengali 'babus' educated in English and trained in white collar jobs to run the railways, communications, oil installations and tea plantations. (D.P. Kumar 1990:1) The British opened up the region of the Brahmaputra valley in 1886 by introducing the railway to the region. (Jaswant Singh 1984:1058) This brought with it the most lasting manifestation of the waves of immigration and acculturation that the region has been subject to, taking the form of importing Bengali staff to perform administrative duties. At the turn of the century, the British, for administrative convenience, joined Assam and the North-east Frontier agency which was then east Bengal (now largely Bangladesh). This was perceived as an attempt to obliterate the administrative identity of Assam and the North-east. "The seeds or near schizophrenic fear about identity in the otherwise beautiful, mild, somewhat ease-loving, and highly civilized inhabitants of Assam were sown by these early experiments." (J. Singh 1984:1059)

When the British incorporated the district of *Sylhet* into Assam the Bengali-speaking people became more numerous in Assam than the Assamese speakers. Bengali became the official language of administration as well as of higher education, with the Assamese language relegated to the status of a dialect of Bengali. The mortification of seeing Assamese displaced by Bengali as the

medium of instruction in Assam accentuated the pursuit of identity. The need to preserve Assamese as a distinct language led to the linguistic element to gain salience in definitions of Assamese identity. Hence, al those who declared themselves Assamese speakers were accepted into the fold.

The partition of Bengali in 1905 caused large-scale immigration of Muslims into the eastern part of Bengal. The Muslim League also encouraged this increase in the Muslim population in Assam as it gave boost to the Muslim League idea of creating Pakistan on the eastern flank of India. (D.P. Kumar 1990:1) These immigrations, causing a vast number of Bengali speakers, both Hindu and Muslim to enter the region disturbed the ethnic and linguistic balance of the Brahmaputra Valley. It was during this period that Assamese identity came to be increasingly defined in terms of the Assamese language. Hence, all those who spoke the Assamese language were immediately incorporated into the Assamese fold and accepted as 'native' to the region.

Further, periodical truncation of Assam, since independence has resulted in a considerable shrinkage of territories under Assamese administrative jurisdiction. (K.M.L. Chhabra 1992) With the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947. *Sylhet*, with a Muslim majority went to East Pakistan. Assam however, remained part of India. The partition brought with it a deluge of Bengali speaking refugees, who fled East Pakistan to take shelter in India. Thus, between 1901 and 1951 Assam's population increased by nearly thirty five percent, much higher than the all India average. It has been noted that had Assam's population grown at the same rate as that of the rest of India between 1901 and 1971, the 1971 population would

have been 7.6 million rather than 15 million. It is thus likely that the immigrants and their children account for the 7.4 million difference. (Weiner 1978:81) The Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, once again caused another influx of refugees into the region, as did the Bangladesh war in 1971.

The changing political geography of Assam significantly affected its cultural geography. Certain factors in definitions of Assamese identity gained salience as responses to this changing political geography. However, it is important to note that these linguistic, religious and territorial factors were symbolically constructed prior to Assamese conceptions of political community. Assamese fear of cultural domination has historically been directed at the Bengalis, beginning in the nineteenth century when all or part of Assam was incorporated into Bengal for jurisdictional purposes. Hence, Assamese nationalism during the colonial period was closely intertwined with a cultural movement for the regeneration and preservation of the Assamese way of life. The growth of Assamese national discourse in the latter part of the nineteenth century was linked to the struggle of establishing the rightful place of the Assamese language vis-à-vis Bengali. It was this discourse exalting the Assamese language that dominated the early struggle of the Assamese. This concern was exacerbated more recently by the continual flow of immigrants from overpopulated Bengal into relatively under-populated Assam. However, given the fact that early Bengali immigrants were predominantly Hindu, language, rather than religion occupied the dominant discourse on identity.

The rate of population growth in Assam showed an extremely dramatic

increase in the aftermath of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh sending hordes of refugees over the border. The continual flow of Bengali Muslim refugees into the region in the aftermath of the creation of Bangladesh saw the discourse on Assamese identity become increasingly communal, with the pro-Hindi discourse emerging as the most prominent one. Hence, while to be Assumes initially coincided with speaking the language and inhabiting the region, in the aftermath of the Bangladesh war, to be Assamese became increasingly synonymous with being a high-caste, Assamese speaking Hindu.

What is striking about the Assam movement, particularly in its early stages is that the Assamese Hindus were not historically in conflict with the Bengali Muslims, the latter having largely assimilated themselves within the Assamese cultural fold. (Darnell & Parikh 1988:272) Instead, the ethnic Assamese competed primarily with the Bengali Hindus who dominated the urban economy. This might be explained by the fact that the Bengali Muslims, acutely aware of their tenuous position within the region, claimed Assamese as their mother tongue and thus assimilated themselves within the ethnic Assamese fold. This would also explain why the Assam movement did not present overly communal tones in its early phases, not accentuating the conventional Hindu/Muslim divide that had beset a lot of India. This also points towards the assimilative nature of early discourse on Assamese identity with a definition that initially stressed little more than indigenous birth and the adoption of the Assamese language. This allowed several groups, including the tribals from the hills of Assam to fall within the fold of

Assamese identity. It was not till the later stages of the conflict that the 'ethnic' and religious elements came to define the Assamese struggle.

As the migration of Bengali Muslims grew in the post 1971 period, the ethnic Assamese discourse began to take on more and more of a communal tone. The Assamese identity, that had up until then been defined almost exclusively by the Assamese language and inhabitation of the region of the Brahmaputra valley added to its definition the discourse of pro-Hinduism. Hence, the ethnic Assamese, during this period and a large part of the militant period that was to follow, propounded a discourse on the Assamese nation that included "the Brahmaputra valley as their homeland, Assamese as their language and Hinduism as their religion." (B.P. Singh 1987:273) In fact the BJP-*Jan Sangh* faction is said to have extended its support to the communal stance of the Assam agitation. Thus, Assamese identity had, in its early stages been largely assimilative, where being Assamese meant an assimilation into Assamese culture and the adoption of the Assamese language in particular. (Just as the *Ahoms* had done centuries ago). However, by the 1970s it became increasingly associated and hardened into one of high-caste, Assamese speaking Hindus. Thus, while the linguistic and territorial questions still remained primary elements in the definition of an Assamese identity, this identity became infused with a communal definition. It was this group of Assamese caste Hindus that was most threatened economically by the Bengali Hindus. However, it was also this group that was involved in the cultural constructions of Assamese identity and was the most threatened by the possibility of cultural inundation. The call for the removal from the electoral rolls of all those

who came into Assam after 1971 was symbolic of the pro-Hindu tilt of the Assam movement (given that most Bengali's who immigrated after 1971 were Muslim refugees from Bangladesh,) Further, it also symbolized resistance to the ruling Congress party, given that the latter received a great deal of electoral support from these illegal immigrants. This electoral support is also posited as the primary reason the influx of refugees was ignored by the Indian government.

Thus, the scope of the ethnic category 'Assamese' emerged as both inclusive and exclusive. Assamese identity was first defined in terms of the territory of Assam including all residents of Assam. This would explain why the Assam agitation gained so much popular support from the non-ethnic Assamese in its early stages. However, this inclusive definition, was gradually transformed into a more exclusive one where only those who were speakers of the Assamese language, and later only those who were *indigenous* speakers of the Assamese language fell within the fold. As the struggle intensified, more and more groups began to fall beyond the pale of an Assamese identity, which became increasingly synonymous with the discourse of Hindu communal revivalism. This weak link in the coalition of what was initially a pan-Assamese identity, is what might explain why the Assamese struggle was unable to maintain the same symbolic power in its later stages as it had earlier. Hence, while different categories fell away from the Assamese fold, with cultural discourses of their own, often challenges to what had become a hegemonic Assamese caste Hindu discourse on identity, the Assamese agitation lost in popular support. This was especially true of the Bodo tribals, who were staunch supporters of the Anti-foreigner agitation in its early stages. As the

definitions of Assamese identity became more and more exclusive the Bodos fell beyond the pale and have presented in recent years a counter discourse to the ethnic Assamese one. "They are quick to point out that when the Assamese leaders trace their heritage from the *Ahom* era, they actually glorify invaders from an alien culture. They use the category "artificial Assamese to describe the present generation of Assamese ethnonationalists who represent the relatively upper formations of the Hindu caste structure. The latter according to the Bodo leaders. can be traced to migrants from northern India." (Datta 1993:122)

THE CULTURAL NATIONALISM OF THE ASOM SAHITYA SABHA AND THE AASU

While the Assam agitation of 1979-1985 contained overtly political demands for the deportation of Bengali immigrants. this agitation drew its emotive power largely within the context of national preservation and national regeneration and hence cannot be looked at in isolation from the prior struggle for the preservation of Assamese identity. It is moreover significant that the two organizations that played key roles in constructions of Assamese discourse on identity were non-political cultural organizations. These two organizations were the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* (Assam Literary Society) and the All Assam Students' Union. (AASU) Thus, a large part of the Assamese struggle against assimilation and the Assamese narrative of cultural regeneration had already taken shape within the cultural nationalist realm before the foreigner's issue came to the fore.

The imagining of national identity in Assam centered around the Assamese language.Hence a great deal of the ethnic Assamese discourse took to exalting the Assamese language. This need for the regeneration of the Assamese language was

a response to the hegemony of the Bengali language in the region particularly during the colonial period. The attitude of Bengalis and colonials alike towards the Assamese language relegated it to little more than a dialect of Bengali, dependent on Bengali literature and media for its creativity and excellence. (B.P. Singh 1987:274) The preservation of Assamese thus called for a renaissance in literature written in Assamese. It was here that the Asom *Sahitya Sabha* (Assam Literary Society) played a key part.

The *Sabha* has historically had an agenda of aggressive cultural nationalism. The role of the *Sabha* as upholder of the cultural integrity of the Assamese civilization is intimately tied to the idea of Assamese discourse on nationhood. For instance, in 1967 at the height of the struggle for the preservation of the Assamese language, the *Sabha* president is said to have referred to the *Sabha* as the "great national sacrifice." (Cited in Baruah 1994:665) It was the *Sabha* that played the key role in the agitation for the establishment of Assamese as the national language in 1960. The *Sabha* embodied the struggle of the Assamese people against cultural and linguistic subordination. The literary tradition led by the *Sabha* contributed to a dissemination of Assamese 'national' literature and to an Assamese 'national' imagining. The *Sabha*, along with the All Assam Student's Union (hereby AASU) professed itself as a non-political organization and hence occupied a key position in Assamese civil society. It is significant then that it was both these organizations that later played a key role in the political agitation in the 1980s.

It is through the discourse of associations like the *Asom Sahitya Sabha* that the idea of the nation becomes a narrated discourse, in opposition to the discourse of what is perceived to be the 'other.' The idea of the nation as mother is a familiar motif in Assamese literary narratives. "The mother motif achieves a number of things – it makes the connection of a people to its homeland primal, the implied idea of a common womb gives members of the nation a sense of shared origins that minimizes difference." (Baruah 1994:655)

The AASU started as a voluntary federation of students from schools and colleges and boasts an extraordinary organizational base. Given that only predominantly Assamese-speaking schools and colleges have become a part of the federation by what Sanjib Baruah refers to as a "remarkable process of self selection." it is "not surprising that the explosion of micro-nationalist politics in Assam coincide with the founding and consolidation of this organization." (Baruah 1994:667) It was the AASU that led the campaign against illegal immigration into Assam. It was student leaders of this campaign that later formed the political party the *Asom Gana Parishad* and were elected to power in the state government after the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985. The AASU, very much like the *Asom Sahitya Sabha*, claimed to be a non-political organization despite the fact that they succeeded in bringing the normal political process to a standstill between 1979 and 1985. (S. Baruah 1994:668) Moreover, it was also the student leaders of this body that were responsible for the negotiation with the central government in the signing of the Assam Accord in 1985, which brought some semblance of peace, if not a complete cessation of conflict to the region. Hence, despite the amorphous

political nature of the AASU, its popularity has historically sprung from its involvement in issues that are of immediate and direct appeal to the sentiments of the Assamese people. (Misra 1984:78)

THE ANTI-FOREIGNER AGITATION (1979-1985)

The anti-foreigners issue in Assam cannot be seen in isolation from the national question, for the fear of the Assamese of being reduced to a minority in their own state and of losing their culture, language and way of life has strong historical roots. Given that the Bengali middle class in Assam had a hold over large parts of the Assamese economy, it has been put forth that the agitation for the deportation of Bengali immigrants drew its impetus purely from forces of economic competition and economic exploitation. (See Dubey 1980) Though the economic factor was no doubt a potent force in the Assam agitation, an exclusive reliance on this economic explanation that fails to consider the larger poetics of Assamese resistance is dangerous. "Through much of the 1960s, a weakness of will was an important theme in Assamese self-perceptions. If 19th century nationalists blamed themselves for their economic underdevelopment, the post-colonial generation began to explain Assam's backwardness by their perceived powerlessness." (Baruah 1994:657) The fear of being reduced to a political and economic minority (as manifested by the agitation to revise electoral rolls) was intimately intertwined with being reduced to a cultural minority. What was originally a cultural threat had manifested itself in the early 1970s as a political threat. Thus, in Assam the politico-territorial element was given fillip by both a

prior as well as a simultaneous move towards cultural resistance to assimilation. "By the late 1970s. Assamese micro-nationalism came with a vengeance into the streets to protest the state's demographic transformation through illegal immigration. which became a symbol of Assam's powerlessness vis-à-vis the state." (Baruah 1994:657) Despite the fact that during the Assam movement itself. the political and cultural demands appear to have occurred hand in hand. they can however. be regarded as distinct processes. The political demands for the deportation of the foreigners took place within the context of political rights and the demands for control over regional electoral outcomes. The cultural resistance to assimilation played out within the context of a moral and literary regeneration of the Assamese language and the history of the Assamese people and clearly preceded the demands for electoral and political rights.

The collective expression of Assamese community interests assumed two different forms during the state of agitation. Established political organizations were involved in several of the issues. Secondly, there were the non-political organizations such as the AASU that while going for drastic action were not averse to compromise. A third militant form, wedded to insurgent violence "also emerged from the margins of ambiguity associated with the AASU." (Dasgupta 1997:352) This militant insurgency, represented most prominently by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) will be discussed briefly later. It was the activities of these militant groups that bore the stamp of secessionist tendencies. They were, however, unable to gain entry into the AASU/AGSP fold and hence remained little more than a violent insurgency movement till its back was broken by the Indian

army action in 1990 and 1991.

The incident that marked the beginning of the Assam agitation was a parliamentary bye-election to the Mangaldoi constituency in 1979. The Mangaldoi constituency located in an area with a heavy concentration of east Bengali immigrants, drew attention to the rapid expansion of the number of voters since the previous election two years earlier. At the time of the revision of the electoral lists objections were filed against 70,000 voters as their being foreign nationals and not eligible to vote. Of these, 45,000 were declared foreigners by competent courts. However, the court verdict was objected to by political parties that stood to benefit by the inclusion of these voters on the list. (Oomen 1990:80) Hence, right from the inception of the Assam agitation. what pervades the discourse is the precedence of the government's bid for electoral power over the Assamese demands for a cultural and political voice. This was reflective of the increasingly centralist tendencies of the central government and the latter's reluctance to heed demands put forth in terms of sectarianism of regionalism.

On June 8, 1979, the All Assam Students Union, (AASU) the vanguard of the Assam movement, sponsored a general strike in the state to demand the detection, disenfranchisement and deportation of the 'foreigners.' (Baruah 1986:1192) The AASU had earlier submitted a set of twenty-one demands to the government in 1974 of which the detection and deportation of aliens was only one. However, these demands disregarded by the government, surfaced once again in the event of the necessity for the Mangaldoi bye-election on the death of the latter's Janata Party representative in 1979. (Rafiabadi 1988:12-13) For the central

government of India, acceding to the Assamese demands would have had great

political costs. As Baruah states:

> To treat Hindu immigrants from East Pakistan and what subsequently
> became Bangladesh as illegal, irrespective of what the citizenship laws
> state, would have alienated significant sections of Hindu opinion in the
> country. On the other hand, to explicitly, distinguish between Hindu
> refugees and Muslim illegal aliens would have cut into the secular fabric
> of the state and would have alienated India's Muslim majority. (Baruah
> 1986:1192)

Though the first phase of the Assam movement started with peaceful

demonstrations and rallies, the inauguration of President's rule in December 1979

in the wake of the fall of Borbora's Janata ministry and the return to power of the

Congress (I) in 1980 inaugurated a new phase in the state's politics. The

confrontations between the movement and the government became more and more

intense. The leaders of the movement called for a boycott of the parliamentary

elections of 1979 unless the government agreed to remove the names of the

foreigners from the electoral rolls. The *Assam Gana Sangram Parishad* (AGSP)

was formed on August 26, 1979 as an ad hoc coalition for the co-ordination of a

state-wide movement. This was followed by an unprecedented mass popular

upsurge in the form of sit-ins, strikes, and symbolic disobedience of the law. (S.

Baruah 1986:1192) The decision on the part of New Delhi to end President's rule

in 1980 and form a state government indicated the center's decision to challenge

the power of the movement and to back electoral institutions that reflected the

demographic realities of the state. (S. Baruah 1986:1196) Mrs. Gandhi, on

reconvening her assembly, was able to command a majority and formed a

government with Anwara Taimur as Chief Minister of Assam. (Darnell & Parikh

1988:263-81) The Congress government under Taimur further took action against

ethnic Assamese officials who were sympathizers of the movement. These measures accentuated the crisis of legitimacy in the state, for the process was perceived as one of de-Assamization of the state bureaucracy, which in turn served to reinforce the fear of Assamese minoritization, and the loss of Assamese hegemony to immigrants. (S. Baruah 1986:1197) The Taimur ministry was viewed with suspicion by the agitators as the former was known to be suspicious of the movement. Their suspicions were borne out as the government took a harder line against the agitators. Between 1980 and 1982 there were twenty-three negotiating sessions between the leaders of the movement and the central Congress government. (S. Baruah 1986:1196) However, despite the government's hegemonic actions, the movement, instead of declining in intensity only, became more militant, while the demands became more intense:

> State coercion was a double-edged device. While it was expected to increase the costs of participation in the movement, it also reinforced a sense of justice of the cause, while the erosion of influence of ethnic Assamese officials reinforced the fears of Assamese minoritization. (S. Baruah 1986:1197)

Thus, as the negotiations appeared less and less likely to produce an agreement, the movement leaders only intensified their protests. The center in turn "attempted to raise the costs of participation in the movement by using more and more coercion in dealing with protesters and by taking disciplinary actions against state government officials who participated in the movement. The Assamese press that was sympathetic to the demands of the movement came under censorship. In November 1980 the Indian army was used to break the eleven-month oil blockade." (S. Baruah 1986:1196) The center attempted to assuage the damage

done by appointing an ethnic Assamese, Gogoi as Chief Minister in 1982. Though this did serve to reduce both the levels of government coercion and violence, the Gogoi government did not last long. "The President's Rule regime that was brought in after the collapse of the Gogoi government in March 1982, once again went about the task of cleansing the administration of officials in sympathy with the movement." (Baruah 1986:1198) By 1983, Assam, particularly the capital city of Gauhati was overrun with state police forces and paramilitary forces from the center. Moreover, the central government seemed determined to hold elections in Assam in 1983 despite the opposition and demands of the Assamese movement. States Baruah:

> The State Assembly election of February 1983 marked the breakdown of Assam's framework of ethnic accommodation and of political order. The election was a direct challenge of the central government to the Assam movement. The election was to be held on the basis of the electoral rolls prepared in 1979, which had precipitated the Assam movement. No attempt was made to revise the rolls to incorporate the points of agreement between the movement leaders and the government. (S. Baruah 1986:1198)

The holding of the election thus became the focus of the contest between the center and the Assam movement. The escalation of violence during these elections took place along ethnic cleavages with the supporters of the election clashing with the opponents. The central government once again responded by mobilizing large contingents of military and police forces from all parts of the country. The actions of the state in the post-1979 period suggest that the state was primarily concerned with re-establishing its control and domination over Assam. (Darnell & Parikh 1988) The violence that ensued during the 1983 elections and its boycott gave fillip to the theme of martyrdom in Assamese nationalism:

A song about the violence of the 1983 elections composed by prominent literary figure Bhupen Hazarika, seeks to build a collective Assamese connection to a 'martyr' of 1983—by evoking the ties of family and of village community, the martyr becomes every parent's son, every sibling's little brother and every person's friend. (Baruah 1994:658)

The boycott of the poll was quite effective in several districts of the Brahmaputra Valley. In 14 constituencies, elections had to be cancelled because of the total breakdown of law and administration. In some strong ethnic Assamese constituencies, the polling was as low as 0.38% (269 voters), 0.49% (360 voters) and 0.68% (440 voters). (J. Singh 1984) The election brought a new Congress (I) government to power headed by Hiteshwar Sakia, an ethnic Assamese *Ahom* by caste. The new Congress government strategy was to "wean support away from the Assam movement by allocating governmental patronage to groups that constitute weak links in the Assamese ethnic coalition."(S. Baruah 1986:1200) Thus, the new government's strategy involved strategic maneuvering combined with the use of coercion. The effort on the part of the government to weaken the links in the ethnic Assamese coalition, with the intention of weakening the intensity of the movement proved somewhat effective, but in turn gave rise to a new set of demands.

By May 1983, there was an indication of a split in the AASU, with several of the Muslim members demanding a correction of the pro-Hindu communal tilt. This growing pro-Hindu communal tilt became increasingly apparent particularly with the signing of the Assam Accord between the AASU and the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, which agreed to the deportation of all those immigrants who had entered Assam after 1971. This had implicit communal undertones given that most of the entrants after 1971 were Bengali Muslim refugees from Bangladesh. We thus see that Assamese fears of cultural assimilation were important in bringing

about the agitation, and that the discourse on cultural preservation was reiterated throughout the period of conflict. (See Shekhar Gupta 1984; Murty 1983) The cultural discourse evolved as a response to the political context while at the same time influencing the political outcomes. Hence, while preservation of the Assamese language remained the dominant tool of cultural resistance, a Hindu religious discourse came to the fore in the later stages of the mobilization.

After the signing of the Assam Accord two new political parties emerged: the *Asom Gana Parishad* (AGP) whose membership was composed largely of the student leaders of the AASU and the United Minorities Front (UMF) formed by major East Bengali Hindu and Muslim politicians. (S. Baruah 1986:1204) The AGP, under the leadership of Prafulla Mahanta came to power in the 1985 elections on a wave of popular support. While the AGP consisted mainly of ethnic Assamese and appeared to represent their interests the outcomes of the election reflected a remarkably inclusive appeal to several other ethnic sub-groups. Thus, the constraints of electoral politics had made necessary the extension of what was to constitute the Assamese identity. The main platform of the AGP at this point was its commitment to the implementation of the Assam Accord, symbolically representative of its commitment to a 'national' linkage and collaboration. While the AGP devoted itself to the implementation of the Assam accord within the context of the conventional political process, it was criticized on several accounts by its soft stand towards the central government. Thus, "the transition from ethnic rage to statesmanly exercise of the art of governance was not easy for the inexperienced leaders of the AGP.... At the same time the collective alienation of

the non-Assamese speaking tribal and other people gradually intensified." (J. Dasgupta 1997:354) Thus, as diverse counter discourses presented themselves to the ethnic Assamese master narrative, the movement declined in intensity. This would explain why, the Assam movement was unable to sustain its power and was increasingly accommodated within national politics. Most importantly, the weakening of the coalition, the plains tribals, who had closely supported the Assam movement, the Bodos in particular began to make demands that emphasized their distinctiveness from the Assamese coalition. These demands consisted of the recognition of Bodo as an official language, the adoption of the Roman script instead of the Assamese script and the creation of autonomous districts and regions for the tribals. Baruah sees the government as playing a significant role in these rifts as a strategic and hegemonic move to weaken the Assam movement. "For instance the government actively patronized the Bodo Sahitya Sabha and promoted it as a rival of the *Assam Sahitya Sabha* in tribal areas. (S. Baruah 1986:1201) The primary criticism to the AGP's gradualist tactics came from the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA).

THE RISE OF THE ULFA AND ITS MILITANT DISCOURSE

"The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) took shape in April 1979 at the Rang Ghar Pavilion in Sibsagar, once the seat of the *Ahom* Kingdom, and the sporting and cultural center of that dynasty of immigrants who 'assimilated' as did many others, with the people they conquered." (Hazarika 1994:167) Thus, the birth of ULFA was imbued with a potent symbolism. The ULFA was born out of

dissatisfaction with the AASU and its agitation against the immigrants. The ULFA remained dormant for a long time after its inception in 1979 and did not appear as a force to contend with till the late 1980s. when it emerged as a militant guerilla movement in the shadow of the failure of adequate implementation of the Assam accord by the AGP. "The ULFA discourse on Assam differed from that of the AGP. Most statements of the ULFA leaders indicate that their notion of Assam is more territorial than ethnolinguistically exclusive." (Dasgupta 1997:355) Hence, the ULFA proclaimed a commitment to the separation of the territory of Assam. It was in the discourse of the ULFA that secessionist tendencies were discerned. It is however. important to note that this discourse on secession did not take hold of the popular imagining as the call for *Khalistan* did for the Sikhs post 1984. Instead, the popular sentiment among the Assamese remained committed to the struggle for regional rights within the context of a national linkage with India rather than as separate from it. The brazen terrorism of the ULFA was severely challenged by the Indian state when it ordered two armed operations in 1990 and 1991 that broke the back of the ULFA.

Like the Sikh, case. it is no doubt useful to analyze the Assam agitation as a response to the centralizing tendencies of the Indian state. It cannot be denied that the actions of the central government played a part in the alienation of the Assamese people. However, this alienation and its manifestation in a language of cultural uniqueness force us to confront the fact that the anti-foreigner movement was the culmination of a struggle that the Assamese had waged over a major part of this century. The Assam movement was the political manifestation of moves

towards cultural resistance and cultural regeneration that the inhabitants of the region had been engaged in prior to the constraints of electoral politics. A study of the emergence of Assamese identity shows that identity was constructed, and transformed very much at the level of the society and non-political groups within this society.

Moreover, the Assamese case, like the Sikh case also illustrates the transitivity of identity as a result of national mobilization. Thus, different elements of identity gained prominence at different times in the course of Assamese political mobilization. It also illustrates the manner in which amorphous ethnic boundaries are hardened. Thus, the elements of territory, language and religion were all defining elements of an early Assamese identity. These provided the 'ethno-symbolic' resources in the Assamese political mobilization. At the same time, political mobilization served to recast and hegemonize elements of identity. Thus, as political mobilization intensified Assamese identity was associated increasingly with the hegemonic discourse of the caste-Hindu *Assamiya*.

SIKH AND ASSAMESE ETHNONATIONALISM: A COMPARISON OF OUTCOMES

The above discussion on Sikh nationalism in Punjab and Assamese nationalism in Assam shows the critical importance of cultural discourse in the shaping of identity and in providing the symbolic language in ethnonationalist mobilization. Both movements were critically grounded in a discourse of cultural resistance to assimilation. At the same time. the contemporary demands in both cases were put forth within the modernizing contexts of electoral politics, national determination. and in the case of Punjab. the nation-state principle. However, the mobilizing language and the cleavages that emerged in the 1980s were shaped very much by prior struggles for a distinct identity.

We may thus admit that both Sikh and *Assamiya* nationalism were manifestations of ethnic nationalist mobilization. However, it is also important to point out that the two movements reflected different outcomes. Sikh nationalism during the mid-1980s escalated into full-blown secession. In fact the existence of the separate Sikh state of *Khalistan* was even declared by members of the All India Sikh Students in 1987. The Assam agitation, while representing a regional challenge to the Central Indian State did not present an overtly secessionist discourse.

Theorists have attempted to explain this divergence in outcomes through an examination of the actions of the Indian State in both cases. It can be confidently stated. that insofar as both the Assamese and the Sikhs presented federalist challenges to the center, the Indian State, in turn, presented centralist, hegemonic

responses to both, at least prior to the signing of the Assam and Punjab Accords in 1985. This macro-structural analysis goes far in explaining why conflict escalated in Punjab and Assam. However, this analysis of state actions and institutions alone fails to explain why Sikh ethnonationalism was able to gain a secessionist momentum while Assamese nationalism did not.

It thus becomes necessary to look at internal differences, differences within the discourse of the two groups themselves in order to explain the divergence in political outcomes. If internal ethno-cultural discourse plays a significant role in shaping political conflict, it might also go some way in explaining the variation in political outcomes among ethnonational movements.

The differences in the internal organization of discourse at the level of the ethnic group, might, to a large extent, explain the divergence in outcomes in the two cases. Sikh militancy in Punjab and Assamese assertions in Assam both represented ideological proclamations that thematized the need to maintain and defend cultural unity in the face of the "other." However, the symbolic definition of the "other" differed. In the case of Assam, even while the cultural assertions were directed against the other, the outsider, the immigrant, the "insider," the native to the region was defined very much in terms of the "national." The "outsiders" were thus the anti-nationals, anti-Indian immigrants, infiltrators from beyond the borders of the Indian State. The AASU and the AAGSP, even at the height of the anti-foreigner agitation, repeatedly affirmed their commitment to the Indian constitution and to upholding the unity and integrity of the country. (K.M.L. Chhabra 1992:49) The discourse of the Assam agitation itself, demanding

the deportation of foreigners was set within the context of a sense of ownership of the land of Assam and by defining the "other" in terms of the foreigner, a sense of belonging within the borders of the Indian nation-state. Hence, while the Assamese leadership did challenge the authority of the Central government through its oil and petroleum blockade, the discourse of its agitation vis-à-vis the Indian State was nativist rather than secessionist. It is true that slogans like "Indians go back" did appear at some places and coupled with the activities of the ULFA pointed towards secessionist tendencies infiltrating the agitation. However, these secessionist elements did not gain entry into the AASU/AAGSP fold and reflected little more than a counter-insurgency movement that gained little popular support.

In the Sikh case on the other hand, particularly in the later stages of the movement, the Sikh identity was constructed very much in terms of the "outsider" to the Indian nation. Thus while the Sikhs and the Hindus were on opposite sides of the linguistic issue during the Punjabi *Suba* demands, their respective identities within the Indian nation-state were never an issue. However, prior to the movement for *Khalistan* in the 1980s the Sikhs had begun to perceive themselves as outsiders to the Indian nation, while Hindus, increasingly aligned with the Hindu majoritarian discourse of the Indian state began perceiving the Sikhs as external to that majority identity. (D. Gupta 1996) This became particularly true in the aftermath of the desecration of the Golden Temple and the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984.

Moreover, the Assam agitation, particularly in it militant stages exalted an Assamese identity wherein pro-Hinduism became the most salient aspect. This

caste Hindu definition of *Assamiya* identity definitely hegemonized the discourse on identity in the region. This hegemonic discourse alienated the non-caste, non-Hindu tribal population in Assam who had until then supported the movement. However, it simultaneously aligned the *Assamiya* discourse to that of the Hindu nationalists emerging at the level of the center. Thus, the Assamese demands, towards the mid-1980s increasingly converged with the Hindu-Muslim communal divide. Sikh discourse on identity on the other hand, increasingly diverged from the majoritarian Hindu discourse that was emerging at the center. The Sikh ethnonationalist movement thus had a double ethnic twist. *Khalistanis*, on behalf of all Sikh demanded a sovereign homeland in which Hindus would be outsiders. At the same time, Hindus in Punjab linked with the Hindu majority in the rest of India to declare Sikhs as outsiders to the "Indian" nation. (D.Gupta 1996:8-9) Thus, while both *Assamiya* and Sikh ethnonationalism presented federalist challenges to the center, the Sikh discourse also presented a challenge to the master narrative of Indian nationalism.

Both the Sikh and the *Assamiya* discourses on identity developed to a large extent as hegemonic discourses. Thus, the Sikh discourse was dominated by the *Tat Khalsa* definition of Sikh identity, while the *Assamiya* definitions were largely the prerogative of the urban middle-class caste Hindu. However, its is significant that these discourses evolved from hegemony to inclusiveness and vice-versa in different ways. Hence, the *Tat Khalsa* discourse on identity began as the hegemonic discourse of a small portion of the Sikh community, with little popular support. This would explain why the Sikh demands received little popular support

to begin with. However, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's invasion of the *Darbar Sahib*. the Sikh discourse became increasingly inclusive with several factions of the Sikh community united. The internal cleavages within the Sikh discourse were thus bridged at the peak of the movement.

The *Assamiya* identity. during the early part of this century was defined in inclusive terms, with the territorial component being the most salient element in that definition. Hence, the identitive term 'Assamese' extended to include several heterogeneous groups that occupied the region. However, this originally inclusive identity became increasingly hegemonic during the 1980s. alienating several groups that had fallen beyond the pale. allowing for the emergence of several counter discourses that challenged the metanarrative of *Assamiya* identity. Thus, at its peak the Assam movement lost a great deal of popular support. Thus, the call of secession in the Sikh case, but not in the Assamese case may be explained by these internal cleavages and these cleavages in turn may be seen as shaped by the cultural discourse of the ethnic group. Despite differing political views among the Sikhs on the issue of *Khalistan*, the cultural cleavages among the Sikhs did not run deep, as did the cleavages in the ethnic Assamese coalition. "While ethnic, cultural and linguistic homogeneity are no longer believed essential in maintaining a stable political community, they may be more important for a successful secession." (MacIver 1982:301) Thus, if internal cleavages are very deep a secession movement may not be wholly successful. Hence, it might be concluded that cleavages at the levels at which identity is constructed play a significant part in determining the manner in which political cleavages emerge.

CONCLUSIONS

The above discussion is intended to offer a discussion of the varied approaches to the study of nations and nationalism and to offer some theoretical bridges to help reconcile the scholarly views that often find themselves at odds. The discussion calls for an approach, that even while rooting ethnic identity and nationalism very much within modernity, also points towards the need to bring back elements of culture, symbols, myth, and tradition into the debate. These so called 'subjective' elements have shown their recurring power in recent ethnic nationalist mobilizations and point increasingly towards a pre-political stage of cultural resistance to assimilation that in turn provides the symbolism and emotive power in demands for political self-determination. An inquiry into ethnonationalism in Punjab and Assam points very much in this direction. In both cases the symbolic and emotive elements of cultural discourse played a key role in construction of identity and the imagining of nationhood. Moreover, the diversity in outcomes in the political sphere for both movements can be explained, at least partially by the organization of discourse and internal cultural cleavages within the groups themselves.

Further, the fundamental argument that informs this work is that even though notions of culture are extremely influential in motivating and legitimizing action they are neither 'natural' nor 'immutable.' Instead, the argument is that the capacity for cultural discourse to stimulate ethnonationalist movements must be understood against the historical backdrop that highlights the centrality of particular ideas about culture to the development of the ideology of nationalism.

This above discussion, insofar as it engages notions of culture and identity, is also a call for shifting the debate on ethnicity and nationalism from the arena of the state to that of the community for it may be at this level of examination that lies the understanding of and solutions to protracted ethnic conflict, separatism and secession.

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