

Journal of Research Practice
Volume 1, Issue 1, Article M3, 2005



Main Article:

“Why Did We Have the Partition?” The Making of a Research Interest

Satish Saberwal

Formerly, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, INDIA

Address for correspondence: MD2 Sah Vikas, 68 I. P. Extension, Delhi 110 092, INDIA

saberwal@bol.net.in

Abstract

This “case study” examines the shaping of a research interest. It turns on the Partition of the South Asian subcontinent in 1947, leading to the Independence and establishment of the sovereign states of Pakistan and India. The Partition was a climax within a pattern of recurrent violence in the name of Hindus and Muslims for several generations before 1947, a pattern that recurs at lower intensity continually. This study explores the emerging of an interest in the social origins of the Partition out of several decades of the author’s personal experience. It tracks the origins of a sense of difference between the religiously defined social categories to the medieval period--though the Mughal period saw wide-ranging cooperative activity too. The colonial period saw a major change of phase, with heightened insecurities amidst large changes in polity, economy, and society, and the rise of influential institutions for religious revival on both sides. Amidst comprehensive enlargements in the scales of organisations, communications, and activities, the sense of opposition between groups, defined in religious terms, grew; and so too the frequency and intensity of aggression across the divide. The violence in 1947 was exceptionally brutal and large in scale; but the underlying attitudes had long been in the making. To take full measure of that long inception, one needs to summon the resources not only of history but also of a wide array of other social sciences.

Keywords: case study; Partition, 1947; India; Pakistan; religious revival; conflict; multidisciplinary

Suggested Citation: Saberwal, S. (2005). "Why did we have the partition?" The making of a research interest. *Journal of Research Practice*, 1(1), Article M3. Retrieved [Date of Access], from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/7/13>

“Research practice” in an abstract sense is a new term for me. I have some familiarity with research methods in the social sciences and a passable acquaintance with some of those in the natural sciences; but this journal sets itself the ambitious task of looking for more general principles which might conceivably be portable between the various traditions. Dr Dash has persuaded me to try to do this in relation to my own current work, broadly a theme in South Asia’s historical sociology. I must warn the reader that this essay is highly idiosyncratic, far from being the kind of treatments common in the social sciences. My work relies on published literature in history, sociology, and anthropology, and draws on theoretical understanding from social psychology and other fields, absorbed over nearly five decades past. To say anything about my “practice,” then, I have to explain the circumstances in which these several strands came together for me. I have to begin, then, with apologizing for the largely autobiographical cast of this discussion. My excuse lies in a tradition in the social sciences, going back at least to the sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959, pp. 8ff), that significant research issues can arise in the following conjunction: that a researcher’s “*private troubles*” are often of a piece with wider, *public*, social issues; and there may be advantage in identifying a research theme, necessarily on a public issue, which would speak to one’s private troubles too. There can be a dual advantage then: one harnesses the psychic energy trapped in one’s private troubles for one’s research effort; and the latter may help resolve the former.

Late in March 2000, when I was visiting Lahore in Pakistan, a student in a philosophy class at Punjab University asked me a simple question, “We find that there is a great deal in common between people in India and Pakistan. Why did we have the Partition [of South Asia into Pakistan and India in 1947, see below]?” For this poignant question I have been trying to put together a *sociologically* adequate response over the four years and more since then. I embarked on that long search *because* (1) I had lived with its various aspects for more than fifty years, at times actively, and (2) during those decades, while I did others things, I had also run into varied personal experiences, analytic and interpretative concepts, and awareness of published work, especially in sociology and history, which turn out, in retrospect, to bear on the question. Here I outline the processes as I lived them out; and therefore the pages below refer to numerous experiences and activities which have gone into my sense of the problem overall. Space is short, and this account can do no more than sketch an outline.

*

16 August 1946: as the negotiations for Transfer of Power from the British to Indian hands approached a climax, the Muslim League proclaimed August 16 as Direct Action Day, in support of its demand for Pakistan, a sovereign state for the Muslims of India. The most dramatic manifestation of the call was in Calcutta--where I happened to be: a thirteen year old, visiting my father, who had lived there alone through World War II. The rest of the family had moved, at the end of 1941, to Ludhiana in Punjab, to tide over Calcutta’s wartime disruptions. August 16 saw the beginning of widespread violence between Hindu and Muslim gangs, before Army took control of the city several days

later. Violence on this scale was unprecedented in my observation, though I had grown up taking a difference, indeed animosity, between Muslims and Hindus for granted.

How had that sense of difference come to that thirteen year old? We are dealing here with widespread, relatively long standing, patterns of relationships between the two categories; one may speak of this pattern of relationships between them briefly as their *interface*. I list several channels through which the sense of difference had flowed in:

(i) Both in Calcutta and Ludhiana, I was conscious of some localities being clearly Muslim--featuring somewhat distinctive personal bearing, dress, decoration, and the like; but one had dealings in, or walked through, them routinely.

(ii) My mother was ardently *Arya Samaji*--a member, that is, of a late nineteenth century reformist sect among Hindus--and her children learned its rituals early. An Arya Samaj congregation held an annual function spread over two or three days: its activities would include students from Arya institutions and other groups displaying their varied skills--and travelling Arya propagandists combining entertainment with ideology, which, in the tense 1940s, was often virulently anti-Muslim.

(iii) My other Muslim contacts were few enough. In Ludhiana, a friendly Muslim *dhobi*, washerman, picked up the family wash once a week. In the bazaar, my grandfather's shop faced that of a cordial Muslim tobacco merchant, whom we knew as Hajji; but their relationship did not stretch beyond the bazaar. Then there was the occasion when two young Muslim women came to visit us; my sisters had met them at a common friend's home, and had had a friendly welcome at their home. The visiting ladies were served snacks--on crockery, which was not used within the family; family dishes were all metal. The visit was not repeated.

(iv) In Ludhiana I studied at Arya High School. During my last year in school (1946-47), my class had at least one Muslim student. I did not have much contact with him though he sat within touching distance. He was a quiet man. I do not recall his participation in any playful activity. I have no way to tell how the lone Muslim felt amidst Hindu classmates and teachers, and their tacit prejudices, but I cannot think of there having been any unpleasant incident. Between him and the rest of us fell, no doubt, the not always silent shadow of the Partition that loomed ahead.

(v) When I was in Class 9, I think, we got a new teacher. I liked him. He was active in RSS--*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, founded in 1925 to mobilise Hindus--and he persuaded me to attend its *shakha*, a daily gathering. For the next couple of years I participated in one regularly, virtually every day. For one thing, it opened new horizons for me, socially and mentally: a new axis for social relationships, and for participating in a variety of discussions and other activities at various places in the city--while absorbing a good deal of the anti-Muslim attitudes for which RSS is justly execrated.

(vi) A settled rhythm began to be rocked in early 1947. Success at Class 10 examinations those days, conducted by the university, used to clear the way for entering college. Set for March 1947, the examinations that year were disrupted, partially, by the waves of communal violence sweeping Punjab, amidst severe political upheaval. The violence and the disruption were to worsen in subsequent months, culminating in slaughters, and in millions moving across the frontier rising between the new states of Pakistan and India. From the safety of our locality we could see columns of smoke rising from fires raging in the city. Later I saw crowded trainsful of refugees. The Hajiji's family left, depositing some of their movables in my grandfather's home until they could return and take these away at leisure. Kin from western Punjab passed through our home, to wherever they found rehabilitation in India.

*

In September 1947 I moved to Calcutta, there to enter college. Bengal had been spared the acute disruption of Punjab but refugees kept coming from what was then East Pakistan. Once or twice I helped in refugee relief, organised from my college.

My life during the 1950s was more open-ended than ever before or since. I must have sensed early on that I would not get much guidance for shaping my life from within the family; and somewhere I picked up the notion that one ought to explore the unfamiliar. Completing a Bachelor's in physical sciences in 1951, a year later I dropped out of the Master's course in chemistry. The next six years turned basically on earning a living, principally in two rather small organisations, with varied experiences, of selling, small scale manufacturing, working in a large press, and office organisation--which provided also for travelling a good deal, especially in eastern India.

Probably in summer 1951, I came in contact with the Friends Centre in Calcutta. Established by the Quakers in the mid-1940s, in the wake of the Bengal famine, for organising famine relief, it had continued as a base for Quaker efforts at encouraging political dialogues during the difficult transition to Independence: the imminent withdrawal of British colonial power which, as it happened, led to the Partition of the subcontinent into the sovereign states of Pakistan and India. By summer 1951, it was a vigorous cultural centre whose diverse activities, several times every week, included lectures to fairly small audiences by an array of speakers. My experiences there over the next couple of years included listening to the anthropologist, Nirmal Kumar Bose, once Gandhi's secretary, and to the legendary M. N. Roy, who had moved from a major role in the Communist International to formulating a sharply contrasting doctrine "radical humanism".

More consequential for me was my meeting there Bill Cousins, a sociologist from the United States, whom I saw in Calcutta off and on over the next six years. Bill introduced me to sociology. He loaned me several books, including a textbook, Bennet and Tumin's *Social life*, and then I found assorted titles in sociology and related fields in the American and the British libraries in Calcutta. Thanks to Bill I could also attend a three-weeks

Quaker-organised *International Peace Seminar* in Bangalore, in April 1954. Its thirty odd participants must have been selected for maximal, easily accessible, diversity: several from Pakistan, both east and west, several Africans studying in India--my first contact with anyone from Africa--and a few from Europe and United States who happened to be in India for their own reasons.

1950s was a time of considerable turmoil in West Bengal. In the city's complex social mosaic, I lived in a Punjabi-Hindi-Marwari enclave within a Bengali universe--which I understood little. The Congress party seemed to offer the state a stable government but the streets were live with rallies by the Left, fuelled by social and economic discontents. "Normal" life was interrupted routinely. It was all very puzzling for me; but my recent readings held out promise of a *scientific* study of society--for me a vague notion that the kind of understanding and prowess that I had encountered at college in the physical sciences might also be attainable for the social realm. On the other hand, over the previous five years my career seemed to be settling into an uneventful plateau. By summer 1957, I was aged 24; my girlfriend and I had drifted apart; and I was willing to take a gamble with my life--quite unsure of where it would lead me. I decided that I would become a sociologist.

Where I would find the money for doing this, I had no idea; and I would almost certainly have developed cold feet soon--had Bill Cousins not shown me a newspaper ad asking for an interpreter for anthropological research in a village near Delhi, some 1500 km away. The disciplines of sociology and anthropology are close siblings, and university departments have often accommodated both under one roof. For the next year and a half I worked with Stanley Freed and Ruth Freed in that village, an experience which, I hoped, would carry me along the path I wished to pursue. Largely on the strength of a letter of recommendation from Stan, I headed for the United States at the end of August 1959, with a Teaching Assistantship in anthropology at Cornell University! I had gambled; but I was in luck.

*

I was out of India nine years: the first six years--based at Cornell, working for a Ph.D.--had included a semester in London and eighteen months of field research in Kenya; and then three years in Canada, teaching. Cornell had a wide open Ph. D. programme. Its faculty had the freedom, and the confidence, to admit to a Ph. D. programme even someone like me, with virtually no credentials in the social sciences. During my early conversations with Professor Morris Opler, my initial advisor there, I expressed an interest in inter-group relations, the general term that would include what is known in India as *communalism*, and the wish to do fieldwork in Africa--such had been the mark made on me by the students I had met in Bangalore five years earlier.

A Ph. D. programme at Cornell covered one "major" field and two "minor" ones related to the student's research interests. What courses one did was tailored more or less to one's interests. My programme included a minor, and several courses, in *social*

psychology. I learned elements in the then American social psychology: that *attitudes* towards an *out-group*, for example, have three aspects: *cognition*, beliefs about the other group's characteristics; *affect*, one's emotional responses to the group; and *conation*, how one would behave towards a member of the other group (say, on willingness to have one as neighbour, as guest for dinner, as marriage partner). I got a feel for social distance scaling and small group dynamics--which included the area of inter-ethnic relations. Above all, I read and heard enough in the field to be able to think in social psychological terms when need arose later. In communal relations, as in all inter-group relations, one needs to consider (1) personal attitudes--beliefs and practices; and (2) the ways in which these are influenced by, and in turn go into reproducing, the prevailing, wider, social patterns: on these issues social psychology has had much to say.

While I thought of the Muslim: Hindu theme vaguely, my immediate interests turned on Africa where I wished to do my pre-doctoral research. At least one contemporary there, Partap Aggarwal, did take on a theme bearing on communalism. While living in Gurgaon, near Delhi, for some years before going to Cornell himself for a Ph. D. in anthropology, he had been puzzled by people in the vicinity known as the Meo. They were Muslims, but they carried the faith lightly. Partap went back to Meo country to do fieldwork for his thesis and documented a remarkable transformation in their *identity*, in their sense of who they were: put briefly, their sense of themselves had undergone a rather dramatic shift. They had long been small-scale landowners, who had dominated their villages: and had functioned as one caste among others. At about the time of the Partition, the Meo became targets of large scale violence, much of it sponsored by the (Hindu) princely rulers of Bharatpur and Alwar. This trauma had persuaded them to begin to respond to *Tableeghi Jamaat*, an Islamic missionary movement which had been trying since the mid-1920s to draw them into the fold more firmly (Aggarwal, 1971, pp. 225ff). Aggarwal demonstrated that, in the cementing of their religious / communal identities, their experience of this violence had been crucial; and this insight has been important in my own, much later, understanding of the growth of communal conflict.

In course of my three years at Cornell, before going to Kenya for my research in late 1962, I spent a semester at University of Chicago, concentrating on the anthropology of Africa, an area on which Cornell did not then have a specialist. While in Chicago, I took a short train journey to Northwestern University, to meet Paul Bohannon, the Africanist and anthropologist. During the day I spent there, I also called on the social psychologist, Donald Campbell, with whom I had corresponded a little earlier. During 1963-64 I was doing my field research in Kenya, among a people called the Embu, which would go into my thesis for Ph. D. Campbell and the anthropologist Robert LeVine visited me where I was working. They were pursuing a large-scale enquiry on ethnocentrism, in relatively remote regions: the patterns of inter-group relations, as these were *before* becoming "contaminated" with western patterns through close contact with the West. By 1963, there were not many places in the world where such an enquiry could be conducted. The Embus' first contacts with Europeans had occurred only around 1906, and my oldest informants could still talk about social arrangements and practices that had prevailed in their early youth. Campbell and LeVine invited me to run their long, flexible

questionnaire with my elderly informants, to produce a case study for their project (Levine and Campbell, 1972).

In September 1965 I moved to my first teaching job, at University of Alberta in Edmonton in western Canada. The city had sizable groups from South Asia, and the then confrontation between Pakistan and India aroused strong feelings in some quarters. Soon after I arrived, I was told that Indians in Edmonton were issuing a press statement for India, and they wanted my name on it. My nationalist convictions have been fairly tepid, however, and I said no. In fact the University had interesting colleagues from Pakistan, and I did not wish to sour my academic relationships. Saleem Qureshi had spent his youth in Pakistan, and he taught political science at Edmonton. Both Saleem and I were panellists in a discussion on Kashmir later in the year, though my credentials on the theme were slight.

*

When in June 1968 I joined the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla, shifting academically to India permanently, I had to forego my career as an Africanist since there was little prospect of finding adequate library resources on Africa in India, let alone funds for adequate field research there. Instead, in 1969, I spent nine months doing field research in Phagwara, a budding industrial town in Punjab. The interface there was not Muslim-Hindu but Sikh-Hindu: the sometimes taut, somewhat suspicious, dealings of Sikh farmers (largely Jat in caste) selling their produce: sugarcane to the (Hindu managed) sugarmill, and wheat through the largely Hindu brokers, of *bania* caste, in the grain market. In these interfaces, there were simultaneously differences of caste, of class, and of religion. Propagandists, or analysts, may claim that one of these dimensions--say *class*--is the key difference; but in real life, all three were equally real in the observed moment.

IIAS had several distinguished colleagues of Muslim background from whom I learned much: Shamun Lokhandwala, who talked at length about the Shia-Sunni interface; the medievalist Hameeda Khatoon Naqvi and her Marxist husband, Shafiq Naqvi; the gracious, gentle Matin Zuberi; and many more. Apropos the relations between Muslims and Hindus, perhaps the most interesting conversation I had during those years was one with my friend and colleague at IIAS, Mushirul Haq, in the early 1970s. I had met Mushir first in 1966 or 67 at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, where I had moved as faculty, and he was doing his Ph. D. in Islamic studies. Later we were both Fellows at IIAS. Professor Haq taught at Aligarh Muslim University and at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi before going to Srinagar as Vice-Chancellor, University of Kashmir. These were violent times; and there he fell victim to militancy.

I recount my conversation at length because it made me see how a sincere academic friend could be personally committed to a sense of one's identity which was to some extent separative. There is a point up to which, he said, Muslims in India share their sense of the past with Hindus; beyond that, the Muslim sense of the past diverges into west

Asia. I was puzzled--and asked him why it had to be so. Why should our sense of the past be fixed, given to us by that past? We can choose which parts of the shared human past we wish to make our own. My own sense of my past includes a good deal from outside India--it is vastly different from what my parents would have regarded as their past. (Today I would put it somewhat differently. We have to be discriminating over what aspects of the past to accept and what to reject. I reject various parts of Indian tradition, say the caste order and much else of the beliefs and practices associated with Hinduism. I would apply the same critical judgement to elements in the Islamic and other traditions available to me.) Mushir was the gentlest and kindest of men I have known. He heard me out politely, and appeared to agree, but I doubt that he saw my kind of stance as viable for himself. His mind had been formed, his fundamental attitudes to life had been defined, in a *madrassa*--an Islamic religious school where he had studied before going into a university. So he was comfortable in a particular identity: comfortable enough that he felt no need to try other ways of being.

*

I have written previously about my early years at Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, where I was appointed sociologist in December 1973 (Saberwal, 1996, Chapter 8). The Centre was then led by Romila Thapar and S. Gopal; and the reigning orientation in the modern history section, where I was placed, blended the Marxian with the nationalist, both in their moderate forms. The discourse was heavy with such terms as capitalism, colonialism, working class, peasantry, national movement, and hegemony. One set of difficulties dogging the Indian national movement had culminated in the Partition; perforce, therefore, some of my colleagues in modern history had to attend to the question of communalism too.

Central to the making of an anthropologist, in contrast, is the experience of doing research, for a year or more, while living in a local community. It had equipped me principally for dealing with face-to-face relationships: in tribes, in villages and other localities, in caste groups. Tracking individual lives, and trails of empirical relationships, could take one far and wide; but I was clueless in the worlds of capitalism, working class, national movement, and the like. It was important for me that my colleagues see the point of what I did. Given the chasms of scale separating the historians' habits of thought from mine, I had difficulty identifying areas of enquiry that I was competent to handle and whose significance my colleagues would understand.

More than five years of trial and error later, I stumbled on the theme of communalism. In course of a long train journey in summer 1979, I read news of communal riots in Jamshedpur, the steel city. Clearly communalism arose in social processes which ought to be amenable to sociological analysis. Religious beliefs and identities have been staple fare in sociology and anthropology; and the associated prejudice and conflict are, at least in part, a face-to-face phenomenon. These identities framed communalism in India; but why and how did religious identities get implicated in conflict? Prejudice and conflict are

local, face-to-face; but their repercussions can spread far and wide: these had led to the Partition in 1947. Would this theme be my bridge to the historians?

Historians in India *had* written on communalism; but their writings tended to be partisan--for one or the other community, or for an aggressive secularism, dismissing the pervasive fact of communalism, say as an “epiphenomenon”. They tended to be curiously oblivious of the sociological understanding of the nature of religious beliefs, and of their (sometimes unintended) social consequences. I had access, then, to several hitherto separated realms: conceptualisation in the wider *sociological* and *social psychological* traditions; *anthropological* monographs on Indian communities which made passing reference to communal divisions or to the aftermath of communal riots; and *historians’* writing on various movements which had culminated in the Partition--and had continued thereafter. I would have to dig into the nature of symbols, and into the history of Islam and of medieval India (to balance what I understood of Hindu tradition). If I could also review the rich history of religious conflicts in Europe’s past, some insight might emerge by way of contrast. As I explored these several areas of thought and experience, the elements constituting the phenomenon of communalism, overall, began gradually to fall into place.

A year’s sabbatical leave, in 1980, enabled me to read on the theme extensively. I built up thick files of notes and wrote one paper which introduced itself thus:

This essay... begins with a synoptic review of the work of sociologists and historians and asks why we have not been able to sustain an interest in communalism. Later it sketches the terms proposed for the analytic field. Material interests are part of this field, and these are especially important in explaining the phenomenon at local, and sometimes regional, levels. These enter the wider processes too, but here one may have to acknowledge greater weight for beliefs and attitudes and traditions. Still later it considers the nature of religious traditions from several angles, dilating on the issue largely because it has been so sadly neglected in India over the decades. This review will clear the way for sketching, in conclusion, the context wherein communalism grew during the colonial period (Saberwal, 1981).

That paragraph needs some decoding. Written in the early 1980s, and published first in *Mainstream* weekly--an undogmatic, Left, journal--it sought especially to show the Marxists a way of dealing with religion and communalism; beginning the list with “material interests” was a bow to my Marxist friends though the argument itself did not give such interests primacy. It offered a necessarily theoretical argument on how a variety of analytic nodes--ideas, interests, religious traditions, symbols, patterns of socialisation, the unconscious and its observable expressions--how all these lie together in human experience, moving it one way or another. To get a handle on communalism, I had to take on board the regional variations and the historical changes, for communalism was not stable or constant; it had changed, evolved, historically, and its countenance varied from

one region to another. I used the phrase “analytic field” to refer to the *space* arising from the presence of these diverse nodes in a single, brief, text.

The essay noticed the importance of symbols and ideology, as against the then high tide of “class”; but it ended up *essentializing*: the picture that emerged was one of symbols, rites, and a style of life, running steadily, smoothly, into the future, virtually without human intervention. I had explained, I thought, why persons growing up as Muslim and Hindu would see each other as different over a long spell of time, and how the other’s identity could come to acquire negative charges. Beyond that, however, I could recognise no *puzzle*--no interesting questions I needed to answer, in the first instance for myself; and the essay seemed to leave my colleagues in both sociology and history cold: I felt no pressure to push further in this direction.

*

I had exhausted what I felt I could do on communalism; but I had to continue my search for themes around which to *scale up* the categories in which I thought. Sociologists working principally with western societies had struggled with processes of large scale rather more than anthropologists. Consequently, during my sabbatical I had begun also to prepare to teach a course on the Sociological Tradition, to be addressed to students of history. As part of this preparation, I read Max Weber in some depth. Weber’s work is grounded in world history twice over. There is, first, the major question: how was it that Western Europe took to the complex, relatively open-ended, process labelled *rationalisation*, while other major civilisations--China, India, Islam--took to other paths? And there are, secondly, dozens of minor questions, concerning the *logic* of various social processes and institutions, noticed apropos the first question: these too are considered comparatively, in relation to a breathtaking range of societies and periods--most tellingly in his *Economy and Society* (1968).

As I tried to grapple with Weber, and with the world historical record, two things became clear:

(i) The ancient societies of Greece, Rome, and Palestine, where Christianity had emerged, had some unusual attributes; and there were remarkable continuities between these and the later evolution of the West.

(ii) The field of sociology had arisen amidst vast social and political dislocations associated with the French and the industrial revolutions in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The early theorists--Comte, Spencer, Toennies, Simmel, Durkheim--had sought to locate, underneath the ongoing social flux, the relatively *invariant* social processes and analytic categories which would capture the difference between what had been and what was emerging (Nisbet, 1966, Ch. 2; Hughes, 1958): day-to-day happenings are less puzzling and, therefore, less threatening, if these can be identified as instances of relatively unchanging processes. (I owe my tendency to think of the different kinds and levels of variables, and invariants, to several sources: mathematics in school

and college and courses in social psychology and in philosophy of social science at the university.) It appeared to me that India in our time is host to an even more serious social and political upheaval, yet we sociologists had failed to take due measure of the processes at work.

What was happening here? I had wandered into another puzzle, what seemed like an opening for asking a whole lot of questions. When, early in 1981, Professor Ravinder Kumar asked me to apply for a fellowship at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, offering two years or more to do what I would, I thought I could use the time to try to sort out the upheaval--the crisis, if you will--in contemporary Indian society.

The Emergency (1975-77) and its aftermath had helped push that sense of *crisis* into everyday consciousness. Newspapers were thick with reports of a widespread sagging of political and administrative institutions, of arbitrary uses of power, and of mounting resort to violence in everyday issues. The violence in communal conflict was part of this more general scene. It was not at all clear initially how I would define my *problem* or how I would go about addressing it. As a state of the mind, however, this uncertainty was no different from the one I had carried to Embu country two decades earlier. For years, however, I had been filing away numerous, if disjointed, notes on ongoing experiences; and I felt ready then for a major assault. The twin themes of the crisis and of comparing the long term historical experience of Europe and India were to engage me for a decade following 1982. (By the time my comparison of Europe and India drew to a close, I was persuaded that substantial civilisational comparisons have to delve into more than just two cases. I needed at least a third, and China was the obvious choice. Between 1997 and 2000, I read on pre-modern Chinese history in some depth; but I have since been distracted away from my China project by the theme in these pages.)

*

My students in the course on the Sociological Tradition indicated at one point a preference for *social conflict* as a theme in the course. It occurred to me then that though the social sciences in India had been much concerned with specific kinds of conflict--agrarian, industrial, political, and so forth--the phenomenon of social conflict is rarely discussed at a general, inclusive, level. When T. N. Madan asked me, about that time, if I would edit a reader in sociology and social anthropology in the series he was commissioning for Oxford University Press, I proposed one on social conflict. Eventually, N. Jayaram, then at Bangalore University and now at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, joined me in editing the volume. On communal conflict, it carried excerpts from papers by Sudhir Kakar, the psychoanalyst, and another by Dipesh Chakrabarty, the historian, on communal riots among jute mill workers on Hooghlyside in Bengal in the 1890s. Jayaram and I wrote two long editorial essays for the volume, arising from wide-ranging readings in the theoretical and other literature on social conflict (Jayaram & Saberwal, 1996).

*

“Why did we have the Partition?” A day after the student in Lahore asked me the question which opened this essay, I began to sense that, as a sociologist, I did not really have an answer. Historians, biographers, and others *had* given numerous accounts of what led to the Partition, but these had tended to bypass what had been happening in the society. What I had absorbed over the decades--events, concepts, interpretations, ideologies, and awareness of literature--gave me the feeling, however, that there was a story here waiting to be told.

The Partition was an extraordinary, nearly unique, event: demonstrably an outcome, on the surface, of decisions by a small group of political actors. There is a tension here, arising in contrary pulls. On one side, *Occam's Razor*, the imperative to parsimonious explanation, avoiding needless complexity; on the other, the imperative to look for links between that which is observable, the *phenotypic* level, and that which leads to the observable--phenomena that generate the observable--the *genetic* or, if you prefer, the *genotypic* level. Good reasons for acting one way or the other can be given on both sides. How one resolves the contrary pulls will set the course of a particular enquiry; so there is room for multiple perspectives--which should yet be reconcilable, so long as we respect the rules of the game, the evolving canon of critical scholarship in the field, for the multiple perspectives bear on a common phenomenal world.

Sociologists in India have tended to be wary of large scale historical processes, though there have been notable exceptions, among them A. R. Desai on *The social background of Indian nationalism* (1948), resulting from his Ph. D. thesis, which remained true to its Marxian strait-jacket; and T. N. Madan's concern is with the themes of fundamentalism and secularism (1997). Historians in India, on the other hand, have been deterred by several considerations. To search for long term antecedents of an outcome could seem to be *teleological*: you might be accused, that is, of writing as if the course of history were predestined over generations and centuries; and you may also be pilloried for employing a “communal” perspective, a risk common enough in the politics of reputations in the social sciences in India. I work with the premise that, in scholarship, one has to take such professional hazards in one's stride.

My argument below will posit that certain institutional and ideological initiatives, and broader social changes, began to converge in late nineteenth century towards redrawing maps of society in terms of religious affiliations. A range of political appeals could then begin to evoke responses which made certain kinds of outcomes gradually more probable. Among my intellectual ancestors in this effort I count Hannah Arendt, and her tracking of twentieth century fascism in Europe in the social tendencies, and episodes, in several centuries past (Arendt, 1958; I read her work first in the mid-1970s, amidst our own experience with authoritarianism during the Emergency, 1975-77).

My procedure in this enquiry has been one that I have long known: the anthropologist immersing herself or himself in a social field--and waiting for insight to emerge. In this case, my sources have not been villagers or men in the street but historians reporting on an institution, a region, an event, or a period; and the field of enquiry stretched back in

time; but the mental processes at work remained those of exploring, looking for multiple perspectives, positing tentative explanations, piecing together larger patterns, and searching for *disconfirmatory* evidence. A historical sociologist addressing a large theme of this order is inevitably indebted to the prior monographic labours of historians and others.

After this long introduction, I have space only to indicate briefly the kinds of elements that are going into my account of the winding road to the Partition.

One has to begin with the relations between the two categories, Muslims and Hindus, during the medieval period. There was a tension in those middle ages: on one side, the logics of governance and of everyday life, which drew different groups into *shared spaces*; on the other, the respective scripturally stated *truths*--sovereign, eternal--which kept at least the religious specialists moored to their distinctive, contrasting poles. Writing in the early 1960s, Louis Dumont, the anthropologist, ascribed the Mughal success from Akbar to Aurangzeb (1556-1707) in integrating immigrants and indigenes politically, across religious differences, to the cement of *power*; but there was no "general social fusion" (1970, p. 95). Nowhere would this lack of fusion be greater than in the networks of religious specialists and the great sacred centres; it was these centres and specialists--itinerant; sometimes available for armed combat--that kept alive the distinctive pieties, coloured at times with a sense of rivalry and opposition, whatever the reigning political and other everyday arrangements (van der Veer, 1996).

With the rapid decline of the Mughal Empire during the eighteenth century, the erstwhile bridges between the ruling dynasty and certain indigenous groups began to lose their political function. The waning Mughal state ceased to beckon groups such as Rajputs and Kayasthas. The last Rajput wife in a Mughal palace was reclaimed by her father, Maharaja of Jodhpur, in 1718 or shortly thereafter (Taft, 1994, p. 224). What had been the rather ambiguous links at the level of royal marriages and kinship finally faded away.

Islamic religious establishments--mosques, Sufi *dargahs*--had commonly counted on the state's support, for themselves and for spreading their faith. As the state tapered off, so did such support. The consequent anxiety in some Islamic religious circles was reflected in the writings of an outstanding mid-eighteenth century religious scholar, Shaikh Waliullah (1703-1762): living in Delhi in the lengthening shadows of Mughal rule, he wished for, and encouraged, a strong Muslim ruler to take the throne. Independently, and regardless, of that hope, however, he "sought an important role for the religious leadership, the kind of role he himself exemplified in advising rulers, guiding the [Islamic] community, and safeguarding the intellectual heritage" (Metcalf 1982, p. 36). Leaders of the movements for Islamic revival in nineteenth-century India, who could not count on the support of a Muslim ruler, continually found inspiration in the path Waliullah had charted.

For the growth of communal antagonisms during the colonial period, the British are often held culpable. To be sure, the regime did at times play one group against another--and

could claim that these conflicts justified its own continuing presence in India. More consequential was the loss of the cement of power: throughout the nineteenth century, Indians were virtually excluded from competing for power, and from having to cooperate in its management. Their competitive energies took to other channels; and as we shall see it was the *religious* networks, symbols, and sentiments that fell into place quicker than any other.

The processes at work were varied and complex; I have considered them at some length elsewhere (Saberwal, 2004, 2005). The following synoptic review distinguishes four, overlapping, phases from early nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Such a formulation is necessarily highly selective in what it includes and what it leaves out. Its advantage is in bringing into relief a range of fresh, separative, triggers which come into view in each successive phase, and how their effects exerted cumulative force.

Face to Face

Continuing from the medieval period, the early nineteenth century society was overwhelmingly *local*, organised in networks of *kinship and marriage and caste*; along these networks *religious and other symbols*, and memories of the past, were distributed somewhat contrastively--though much was shared by way of attitudes to the supernatural, in seeking succour in distress, and the like.

Within that social order, north India carried a significant discontinuity. Even as the medieval ruling class had been predominantly Muslim, commerce had remained with Hindu merchant castes (substantial Muslim merchants had always been scarce, except along the coastal areas--which are marginal to the events considered here). With the change of regime, even as the erstwhile ruling class lost its political function, colonial commerce opened up fresh opportunities which the merchant castes were quick to seize. Very little of the new wealth, appropriated from growing commerce, would flow to Muslims, though some of them were large landholders. The neo-rich Hindu merchants went on then to underwrite various symbolic challenges to erstwhile dominant Muslim groups, as in provocative urban religious processions (Freitag, 1989; Bayly, 1983, p. 337). The use of religious symbols for rallying a crowd was not a new discovery; it merely got a new lease of life.

Scales Enlarging

As the nineteenth century advanced, the prospects opened for tendencies already at work to grow in scale. Litho printing became available in north India by the 1830s (Naim, 2004, p. 265f). Stretching beyond the limited reach of the face-to-face groups, and of manual copying of texts, the printing press enlarged dramatically the size of the impersonal public that could be addressed. And it was the respective religious specialists,

devoted to their particular truths, with traditions of manually copied texts and of spoken sermons, who were quick to harness the new technology to their own purposes.

At about the same time, new institutional designs also came into view: partly in a few new *educational* institutions, like Delhi College (1825 on) with its hundreds of students, teachers specialising in particular subjects, and instruction framed by a syllabus and a timetable (Metcalf, 1982, pp. 71-75; Naim, 2004, pp. 262-71); and partly in the working of Christian missionaries, with their salaried propagators and ancillary activities like schools and hospitals. As the religious specialists formed themselves into institutions of new designs, these latter helped form and enlarge the channels along which their messages could be carried. The impact of the printing press--in reaching impersonal publics, defined by religious identity--grew manifold as the technology was absorbed by institutions keen to spread their faith.

A Subcontinental Level

It is necessary to remember that religious identities had not interfered with cooperative effort in the 1857 uprising; and there were notable political alliances later: in Khilafat and non-Cooperation, and in government formation in Bengal and Punjab, the last continuing into early 1947. Yet, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, public issues were being perceived increasingly in Muslim:Hindu terms. What had earlier been skirmishes at the local, or at the most regional, levels began to find echoes at the subcontinental level, or at least through all of northern India. Railways were beginning to facilitate travel over longer distances; and as one moved away from the familiar, local, social integrations, one looked for fresh moorings, social frameworks, in the new metropolitan and industrial settings; and the ones readily available, given the ubiquitous public places of prayer and worship, tended to inflect towards religious connections. There are reports, for instance, of active late nineteenth-century contacts between Muslim jute mill workers near Calcutta, immigrants from present day Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and an important Muslim merchant in the city. Chakrabarti noted that "Community consciousness... gave to these socially marginal people psychological comfort and security" (1990, p. 163). Mattison Mines, the anthropologist, writes of Tamil Muslim villagers, indistinguishable from their neighbours in village settings, upon moving to a city changing their "dress, religious activities, and patterns of association" to recognisably Muslim forms; it helped them find "companionship and places of residence and congregation" (cited in Metcalf, 1982, p. 256).

The significance of religious identities in public consciousness grew with the beginning of the decennial Census in 1871. A sense of relative deprivation could then be fastened on religious identities relatively easily: as when the proportions of different religious categories in the population were set against their representation, say, in government jobs or in elective positions (as in Municipal Boards, starting late 1800s: Robinson, 1975, pp. 51-57 for western Uttar Pradesh; Ahmed, 1981, p. 161f for Bengal). Public discourse was beginning to resort to these categories frequently--making these the familiar, "natural",

categories of contestation--more frequently than alternative sets, say those of landlords/tenants / landless labourers, or of Brahmins vs. non-Brahmins as in South India.

By the time the Indian National Congress came to be floated in 1885, the prospect of a common political forum was becoming problematical. Syed Ahmad Khan in Aligarh and others were able to undercut Budruddin Tyabji's attempt to lead Muslims into the Congress in strength (Lelyveld, 1978, Chapter 7); and matters were not helped by the efforts of Tilak, the political leader in Maharashtra in western India, to build himself a mass political base: he promoted large scale public activities around such symbols as Ganapati, a Hindu god, and Shivaji, the seventeenth-century challenger to Mughal rule, who went on to have himself crowned a Hindu King. These symbols left Muslims cold.

The response to Curzon's partition of Bengal (1905-1911) followed substantially communal lines. While a "nationalist" opposition saw in the partition a colonial attempt to puncture the growing nationalist sentiments in Bengal, a Muslim skepticism saw in that opposition primarily an anxiety that the new entity in the eastern part would offer greater room for Muslims' ambitions. Here was an illustration of an elementary tenet in the social sciences: a given object or experience can convey very different messages to, and have sharply different meanings for, different actors and observers; their responses are shaped by their prior stock of beliefs and anxieties and purposes, which vary from one to the other.

Given the intensity of the nationalist opposition, Curzon's partition was repealed; but the extent to which its mobilisation had relied on Hindu themes and religious symbolism stoked Muslim suspicions further. It helped persuade Muslim elites to raise a demand for separate electorates, so that electoral bodies would have adequate Muslim representatives, who would be elected by Muslim voters alone, even in regions where Hindus were in majority. The promulgation of separate electorates in 1909 ensured that, henceforth, the mega-categories Muslim and Hindu would provide the principal axis around which the politics of the subcontinent would turn.

Aggression

In the three previous phases we have seen the sense of separateness spread from local oppositions to one on the subcontinental stage, receiving public, statutory recognition in the form of separate electorates. Through the century we noticed a growing range of vigorous separative triggers coming into play; in contrast, the protagonists for shared interests and purposes were few and laid-back. The more the adversarial assumptions settled into what was emerging as common sense, the less remained of mutual trust and goodwill within local communities, and the easier it became for minor issues to slide into confrontations--each episode helping to renew and strengthen the wider, ongoing process. Rafiuddin Ahmed has examined the scene in rural Bengal in late nineteenth century. In Kushtia in 1897 things got to a point where Muslim villagers had to secure police protection in order to proceed with the customary cow sacrifice at Id festival (Ahmed, 1981, p. 179). For the Bengal of the 1920s, Pradip Datta has documented the tendency for

a variety of incidents--the 1911 Census, the death of a long silent, destitute man of unknown antecedents, some women in rural areas deserting their husbands--arousing anxious comments in newspapers, counterposing the interests of Hindus and Muslims (Datta, 1999).

Datta's canvas includes the period of the Khilafat and non-Cooperation, which in fact had witnessed shared public effort in unprecedented measure. Gandhi and a galaxy of *ulama* had mounted that effort despite widespread reservations and expressions of mistrust. One part of the movement had sought to rally mass support around Islamic religious symbols and issues; and when a series of violent incidents persuaded Gandhi to terminate the movement, there was a reaction, and the communal situation became more fraught than ever before.

Experience of communal violence, and perceived threats thereof, are potent cementers of exclusive identities (Jayaram and Saberwal reviewed the issues briefly, 1996, p. 19, p. 514f, esp. fn. 11 there). In a charged milieu, an aggressive act can set off a chain of reprisal and counter-reprisal in the subcontinental theatre; and the forms of aggression on record have included not only violence against the physical body but also that against body social: namely the threat of large scale conversions. As Khilafat had gathered steam, the heightened religious passions found expression in northern Kerala in Mapilla peasant violence against Hindu landlords--which included some forced conversions. The riposte came from Swami Shraddhanand, an Arya Samaj leader in north India, who organised a coalition of Hindu groups--which worked then on the vast numbers who had accepted Islam long ago but had kept their earlier bonds and cultural practices in tact. Over a two year period, in the region around Agra and Mathura, some 163,000 were persuaded to "return" to Hinduism. The consequent anxieties among some Muslims spurred the formation of Tableeghi Jamaat, aiming to forestall future surprises of this kind: it has worked among the millions throughout the subcontinent who have carried their Islamic identity lightly, urging them to become better Muslims (Sikand, 2002, p. 35 and later). Somewhat similar anxieties among some Hindus came to be embodied in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The consequent social contestation, now silent now raucous, continues down to our day (Mayaram, 1997).

This was the setting in which the tortuous debates and negotiations over the framework in which Indians would govern themselves during the final years of the Raj and upon the dissolution of Empire in India. In a political milieu framed by separate electorates, the feeling spread among Muslims that they needed a homeland of their own in order to realize their full potential; and Mr Jinnah's call to that end began to gain a virtually irresistible momentum even though the Muslim League's grassroots political organisation remained minuscule (Jalal, 1985).

*

The Partition of 1947 was a seismic event, changing the lives of tens of millions; and *catastrophe theory* has taught us that we may approach an event like this as if it were a

climax to diverse, slow moving, processes over very long periods. To take full measure of that long inception, one needs to summon the resources not only of history but also of a wide array of other social sciences.

This essay has an inordinately complex tapestry, interweaving the myriad threads of a difficult aspect of subcontinental history with one man's experiences--and the slow emergence of questions seeking to comprehend that aspect of history. The *research practice* here is idiosyncratic; it cannot be codified for replication by others. At best it may be taken as a *case study* of the kind used by students of very complex fields--medicine, management, anthropological field research. A case study sensitises one to the nature of complexities and hazards marking a particular field and the kinds of evolving strategies that other practitioners may try in their own practice.

References

- Ahmed, Rafiuddin (1981). *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A quest for identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The origins of totalitarianism* (2nd Edition). London: Allen & Unwin.
- Bayly, C. A. (1983). *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: north Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770-1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh (1990). Communal riots and labour: Bengal's jute mill-hands in the 1890s. In Veena Das (Ed.), *Mirrors of violence: communities, riots and survivors in south Asia* (pp. 146-184). Delhi: Oxford University Press. Reprinted from: *Past and Present* (1981), 91, 140-196.
- Datta, Pradip Kumar (1999). *Carving blocs: communal ideology in early twentieth-century Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Desai, A. R. (1948). *Social background of Indian nationalism*. Bombay: Popular.
- Dumont, Louis (1970). Nationalism and communalism. In his *Religion/politics and history in India*. Paris: Mouton; excerpted from *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1964), 7, pp. 30-70.
- Freitag, Sandria B. (1989). *Collective action and community: public arenas and the emergence of communalism in north India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hughes, H. Stuart (1958). *Consciousness and society: the reorientation of European social thought, 1890-1930*. [1979. Brighton, Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press]

- Jalal, Ayesha (1985). *The sole spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the demand for Pakistan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jayaram, N., & Saberwal, Satish (Eds) (1996). *Social conflict*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Lelyveld, David (1978). *Aligarh's first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- LeVine, Robert A., & Campbell, Donald T. (1972). *Ethnocentrism: theories of conflict, ethnic attitudes, and group behavior*. New York: Wiley.
- Madan, T. N. (1997). *Modern myths, locked minds: secularism and fundamentalism in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Mayaram, Shail (1997). *Resisting regimes: myth, memory and the shaping of a Muslim identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. (1982). *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mills, C. Wright (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press. (Grove Press paperback, 1961).
- Naim, C. M. (2004). Ghalib's Delhi: a shamelessly revisionist look at two popular metaphors. In his *Urdu texts and contexts: selected essays* (pp. 250-273). Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Nisbet, Robert A. (1966). *The sociological tradition*. London: Heinemann (reprint).
- Robinson, Francis (1975). *Separatism among Indian Muslims: the politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860-1923*. Delhi: Vikas.
- Saberwal, Satish (1981). Elements of communalism. *Mainstream* March 21 and 28. Modified in Saberwal, 1996: Chapter 6.
- Saberwal, Satish (1995). *Wages of segmentation: comparative historical studies on Europe and India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Saberwal, Satish (1996). *Roots of crisis: interpreting contemporary Indian society*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Saberwal, Satish (2004). Anxieties, identities, complexity, reality. In Mushirul Hasan (Ed.), *Will secular India survive?* (pp. 93-124). Gurgaon: imprintOne.

Saberwal, Satish (2005). Integration and separation of traditions: Muslims and Hindus in colonial India. In Supriya Varma, & Satish Saberwal (Eds), *Traditions in motion: Religion and Society in History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, in press.

Sikand, Yoginder (2002). *The origins and development of the Tablighi Jamaat (1920-2000)*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

Taft, Frances H. (1994). Honor and alliance: reconsidering Mughal-Rajput marriages. In K. Schomer, J. L. Erdman, & D. O. Lodrick (Eds), *The idea of Rajasthan: explorations in regional identity. Vol. II: Institutions* (pp. 217-241). New Delhi: Manohar.

van der Veer, Peter (1996). *Religious nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Received 19 September 2004

Accepted 29 October 2004

[Copyright © 2005 Journal of Research Practice and the author](#)