

Cynthia Keppley Mahmood, *Fighting for Faith and Nation: Dialogues with Sikh Militants* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).

I believe ... that for the purposes of anthropology ... it is in some sense not the concrete details in which we are interested. (13)

Although Cynthia Keppley Mahmood's *Fighting for Faith and Nation* makes this claim in a limited context, it should clearly be expanded to include the book as a whole. Not only does this book lack concrete detail from the perspective of Sikh history (and as an historian of Sikhs, I am particularly troubled by this) but a large number of factors are absent from an ethnographic point of view as well. This is particularly damaging to an account that styles itself ethnography.

Since the end of the Cold War, political violence has been a disquieting and far too commonplace feature of the "new world order." Many disenfranchised groups, in their attempt to confront the hegemony of the modern nation state — and particularly its exercise over the use of force and its moral legitimization — have often taken to less than peaceful means to further their aims and to gain recognition. Indeed, in this context, the politics of identity often turns to violence. India has seen its fair share of such movements and contemporary ethnographers dealing with political violence and religious nationalism within the subcontinent have become frequent as of late (see, for example, Paul Brass, Dipankar Gupta, and Stanley Tambia). Cynthia Mahmood's book, it would seem, fits into this rather fashionable niche.

Mahmood's book deals specifically with the political violence which began in the Indian state of Punjab in the late 1970s. Although Sikh leaders had been grappling with the Indian government for a limited self-determination since at least Independence in 1947, it was in 1973 that many of these same leaders drafted and unanimously adopted a document known as the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (ASR). Endorsed in a series of decrees in 1978 the ASR requested from the government of India greater autonomy within the Punjab (the historical Sikh homeland) and also demanded that the Sikhs be recognized as a unique cultural entity, implying thereby that Article 25 of the Indian constitution, which labels Sikhs — along with Buddhists and Jains — as Hindus, be expurgated or expunged.

The government's consistent refusal to recognize this document as anything but "communal" began to feed a growing Sikh militancy which eventually resulted in a separatist movement for a sovereign Sikh homeland known as Khalistan. The rise of this militancy eventually saw the Indian government storm the Golden Temple in June 1984 (known as Operation Bluestar), the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in October of that year, as well as riots in New Delhi which left approximately three thousand

Sikhs dead. By 1993, when militancy in the Punjab had reached a low point, some tens of thousands of people on both sides had lost their lives.

Mahmood examines this militancy from the perspective of a small number of Sikh militants who have made their way to North America — some as political refugees. What makes Mahmood's account so troubling as ethnography is its partiality, its "one-sidedness." (268) One would assume from the subtitle that Mahmood's "dialogue" would engage various factions and peoples within the militant struggle whose ideologies and positionings differ. Indeed, there are many self-proclaimed militant factions within the Punjab, often times fighting among each other. Such engagement, alas, is sorely absent in Mahmood's book. All of her subjects share the view and ideology of her principle "interlocutor" Dr. Amarjit Singh. Having personally heard this man speak in the mid-1990s against the University of Toronto's right to further research in the Sikh tradition, and particularly against Pashaura Singh — a Sikh scholar whose 1991 doctoral dissertation was condemned as blasphemy (*gur-nindā*) — I cannot help but question both this informant's credibility as well as his personal and political agendas.

Mahmood never ventures into this terrain. She never asks Amarjit Singh, or any of her informants who have been involved in acts of horrific political violence, the "tough questions." Indeed, she supports this lack of critical stance — including an unwillingness to engage the victims of militant violence or the Punjab police who combated this militancy — as a "practical limitation in researching venues of ongoing conflict." (269) Perhaps this also explains why Mahmood chose North America as her research base rather than the Punjab. In any case, the dialogue for which the reader hopes is simply not there. When Mahmood does interrupt her narrative, she does so to reassert the statements of her militant informers, stories which, incidentally, she makes no effort to corroborate. Mahmood seems to have no trouble doing this, as she likens her role to that of the psychotherapist providing a "therapeutic echo" for these men and women. (54, 127, 211-12) She claims that this endeavour is in order to give these militants an arena in which they can speak with dignity. It certainly seems to me that Dr. Amarjit Singh, and the people to whom he introduced Mahmood, already have many forums in which to contest the claims of the Indian government. Among others, these include public information offices, the courts, the internet (where one finds numerous pages devoted to the Khalistani cause), and Sikh newspapers.

As a result of this arrangement, Mahmood becomes not an ethnographer concerned with "the truth, as I, in my best effort, understand it" (14) — a claim she reiterates at length throughout the book — but a spokesperson for these Sikh expatriates, involving herself within their political agendas and broadcasting their version of "the truth." Not only does she adopt their highly subjective terminology (when, for example, she refers to slain comrades as "martyrs" or "having achieved martyrdom" [159] and calls the slayers of

General Vaidya by their endearing nicknames, “Sukha” and “Jinda” [155, 191, 201, 208]), but she also parrots many of their views, particularly in regard to Sikh history. She claims, for example, that “the lives of many of the major figures in Sikh [in the Sikh tradition] are not shadowy legends but matters of historical record.” (74) This simply is not true. Contemporary historical records of the Gurus or of those traditionally considered Sikh martyrs, which Mahmood implies exist, do not. One can argue, moreover, that she makes this claim herself. Chapter Two presents a very typical popular reading of Sikh history and the role of martyrdom and militancy within that history. Only in the penultimate chapter — and this as an aside in her critique (237) of Harjot Oberoi’s award winning *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (1994) — are we finally told that this presentation is hagiography rather than critical history.

This critique demonstrates most clearly her complicity in the agenda of her interlocutors. Indeed, she attributes to Oberoi’s book a subversive nature which it does not possess by any stretch of the imagination. Oberoi’s book does not undermine Khalistani “resistive” identity. Rather it demonstrates how Sikh religious identity was socially constructed, particularly in the late nineteenth century. Especially unfair is the way that Mahmood assigns to Oberoi a sinister design in the preparation of his book:

The congruence between Oberoi’s vision and that of Brahmanic Hinduism is inescapable for non-Hindu readers [read, Khalistani Sikhs] though unremarked by the author. (239)

Here we hear the familiar echoes of the “Brahmanic conspiracy” which threatens to destroy corporate Sikh identity, a theory which dates back at least to the late nineteenth century and has been especially bandied around since Operation Bluestar in 1984.

It is a pity that this account is so partial, and lacks so much concrete detail, for there is a great need for a thorough and sober account of Khalistani militancy. For this, however, one must get beyond the romance of heroic resistance and provide enough contextualization to demonstrate how horrific and tragic these events were — and continue to be — for all involved.

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David Palmer, *Organizing the Shipyards: Union Strategy in Three Northeast Ports, 1933-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

David Palmer’s *Organizing the Shipyards* offers a richly textured historical account of union organizing in the U.S. shipbuilding industry spanning the pivotal years of the Great Depression through World War II. At first glance this