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## The Pre-history of ‘Communalism’? Religious Conflict in India, 1700–1860

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CURRENT events are always likely to turn academic and public interest back to the well-worn topic of conflict between members of India’s major religions. The manner in which antagonism between Bengali immigrants and local people in Assam has taken on the form of a strife between communities, the revival of Sikh militancy, even the film ‘Gandhi’—all these will keep the issue on the boil. There are more scholarly reasons for awakened interest also. The rapid expansion of work on Indian Islam pioneered by scholars such as S. A. A. Rizvi,<sup>1</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed<sup>2</sup> and Barbara Metcalf<sup>3</sup> has given us a new awareness of the structure and attitudes of Indian Muslim learned classes and sufis which inevitably reopens questions about the ideological component in communal consciousness. Nearer the theme of this paper, the work of Dr Sandria Freitag has provided valuable new insight into the popular mentalities which informed Hindu and Muslim behaviour in cases where violence occurred as a result of clashing religious festivals in Indian cities.<sup>4</sup>

What remains striking, however, is the unanimity with which scholars have accepted that the quality and incidence of communal violence

This paper was first given at a seminar of the Middle East Center of the Ohio State University, Columbus, in March 1983. I would like to thank Professor Stephen Dale and members of that seminar for their constructive comments. Professor Paul Brass and Sandria Freitag also read the paper carefully and made many valuable suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> S. A. A. Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and his Times* (Canberra, 1980); *Shah ‘Abd al-‘Aziz. Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad* (Canberra, 1982); also, Qeyamudin Ahmed, *The Wahabi Movement* (Karachi, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed (ed.), *Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India* (Delhi, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Sandria B. Freitag, ‘Community and competition in religious festivals: the north Indian prelude’, unpubl. paper; ‘Sacred symbol as mobilising ideology: the north Indian search for a Hindu “community”’. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxii (1980), 597–625; see also her University of California, Berkeley Ph.D. dissertation, ‘Religious rites and riots’.

changed dramatically in the last third of the nineteenth century. The reasons given for this change of tempo are very diverse. Some scholars still hold to more or less sophisticated versions of the 'divide and rule' theory—that the British raised Muslim communalism as a counterweight to emerging Indian nationalism. Others, like Peter Hardy, emphasize the slow diffusion of more intransigent, 'revivalist' streams of Hinduism and Islam, which originated in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries but were vitalized by the spread of communications after 1860.<sup>5</sup> The old 'Cambridge school', myself included, emphasized the importance of new arenas of local power in which local social conflicts could be played out.<sup>6</sup> Dr Freitag sees the period 1880 to 1930 as the crucial one when 'religious' conflict over the boundaries of local practice during festivals became abstracted to a new form of group identity in which affiliation, not practice, was the justification of strife. Even Pakistani historians who adhere to the notion that Hindus and Muslims had always been 'two nations' tend to argue that Muslim identity was given a great fillip at the end of the nineteenth century by pan-Islamism.

All these theories rest to some extent on assumptions about the nature of, often the absence of, communal conflict before 1860 which remain largely untested. The unfortunate emperor Aurangzeb has taken a beating at the hands of non-Pakistani historians for his supposed divergence from the pre-colonial Hindu–Muslim synthesis, but otherwise the existence of religious riots before the late nineteenth century has hardly been considered.

My interest in this theme was awakened in the first place by finding in the course of other research fairly extensive documentary evidence of Hindu–Muslim riots in north Indian cities during the first half of the nineteenth century. Their origins and form seemed remarkably similar to those of the riots of the later half of the century. This in itself raised questions about the novelty of the events after the Rebellion of 1857. Next a number of similar events came to light outside north India in Calcutta and Surat. But most interesting, the Company period disturbances pointed back in turn to a range of conflicts which had taken place in the mid-eighteenth century, when new regional states were forming in the wake of a weakening Mughal central authority.

Discussions of the causes of religious and communal riots have always run into severe problems of logic and method. First, it is important to

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge, 1972); also Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871–1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> F. C. R. Robinson, *Separatism among Indian Muslims* (Cambridge, 1974).

avoid the danger of assuming that whenever Hindus and Muslims or Sikhs and Muslims were in conflict, a significant number of people saw these events in 'communal' terms. Certainly, it is not justifiable to class conflicts as religious or communal simply because the antagonists predominantly had different religious affiliations. In all the cases discussed below, however, there is adequate evidence that participants and observers both recognized that subjective matters of religious affiliation *did* in fact represent a significant, if not exclusive, issue in the conflicts.

Secondly, there is the question whether a distinction should be drawn between 'religious conflicts'—disputes over symbols, rites and precedents—and 'communal conflicts' in which broader aspects of a group's social, economic and political life were perceived as being unified and marked off from others by religious affiliation. Such a distinction must obviously be highly subjective, but the cases cited below do seem to contain examples of both types. There are cases of conflict limited to closely defined issues such as the priority of festivals or the location of mosques. But there are also cases where religious symbols appear to mark off, mobilize and sustain communities over much longer periods. Yet there is no clear development in time from closely defined 'religious' disputes to a broader perception of communities in conflict.

This leads on to a third issue: the question whether there existed or was coming to exist a broader Hindu or Muslim or Sikh 'consciousness' and if such consciousness did exist, the extent to which it provided an impetus to conflict between groups. There is certainly a growing body of sophisticated literature which demonstrates that some forces were tending in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to create areas of greater ideological and practical uniformity within the broad boundaries of religious affiliation. Thus among Muslims the spread of purist beliefs connected with teachers such as Shah Waliullah and Shah Abdul Aziz was such a force, influencing the learned and common people well beyond Delhi.<sup>7</sup> Again the growing convergence between the mystical and scholarly branches of Islam gave elite teachers greater access to the masses.<sup>8</sup> So, too, the expansion of the power of a locally rooted Muslim gentry after 1650 and the decentralization of power from Delhi to provincial centres after 1700 spread pockets of purist Islamic practice both deeper and more widely across the face of Indian society. An autonomous desire for reputation, religion and respectability among

<sup>7</sup> Rizvi, *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz*; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*.

<sup>8</sup> F. A. Nizami, 'Madrasahs, schools and saints: The Muslim response to the British presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab, 1803-57', Oxford D.Phil, dissertation, 1983.

Muslim artisans ensured a popular interest in these new currents.<sup>9</sup> Among Hindus, too, there were some developments which tended to greater uniformity within the great range of beliefs and practice. The expansion of heavily endowed Vaishnavite sects such as the Ramanandis<sup>10</sup> influenced large areas of north Indian Hinduism while newly emergent Hindu states provided a good medium for the spread of a more ritualistic and Brahminical type of religion.

However, there are three points to be made when one tries to relate these changes to the incidence of tension between different communities.<sup>11</sup> First, the impact of such changes in consciousness can easily be exaggerated. They were predominantly an urban and small-town phenomenon and left vast areas of customary religious practice untouched. Secondly, powerful and articulate religious movements which tended to suppress differences between the major religious traditions flourished contemporarily with the more purist ones (Bengal Vaishnavism or the followers of Kabir in north India, for instance). Thirdly, even if the unilinear growth of a more homogeneous Hindu or Muslim consciousness can be postulated (which seems doubtful), it is not the case that this necessarily gave rise to overt conflict or to the development of hostile communities. Thus, for instance, Delhi which was the major centre of Waliullah revival and resort of powerful and pious Hindu and Jain commercial groups, was relatively free of Hindu-Muslim tension throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

From the outset, then, it must be clear that this paper is not seeking to resurrect surreptitiously any simplistic 'two nation' theory. Yet the opposite is also true. If religious revitalization did not necessarily give rise to religious or communal conflict, it is also the case that the widespread Hindu-Muslim symbiosis of the pre-colonial and early colonial periods did not totally exclude the possibility of riot and disturbance along communal lines. When and how religious riots occurred in a predominantly syncretic culture is therefore the major concern of this paper. But in order to demonstrate that there is a question at issue, one must first dispense with the notion, fostered by

<sup>9</sup> G. Pandey, 'The bigoted julaha', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xviii, 5 (Jan. 1983).

<sup>10</sup> For the Ramanandis see the discussion by Hamilton Buchanan partially reproduced by Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, ii (London, 1838), pp. 485-7; W. Crooke, *The North-Western Provinces of India* (London, 1897), p. 255. Dr Richard Burghart of S.O.A.S. is working on this sect.

<sup>11</sup> Issues such as this are considered in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Communal and Pan-Islamic Trends in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Narayani Gupta, *Delhi between Two Empires* (Delhi, 1980).

some colonial writers and by Maratha and Muslim communalists of the present century,<sup>13</sup> that eighteenth-century Indian powers, particularly the Sikhs, Marathas and Mysore, were committed to exclusive strategies of religious revivalism. Only when the extent of interpenetration between the major religious traditions during the eighteenth century is appreciated does it become possible to ask questions concerning conflicts between their adherents.

### **Eighteenth-Century Religious Syncretism**

The imperatives of regional and local state building during the eighteenth century and the flexible, all-India warrior society to which they gave rise both tended to confirm or newly to create relationships between the religious practices of the major faiths. Until the very last years of the eighteenth century the umbrella of Mughal legitimacy was hardly shaken. Kingship, essential for the building of a coherent body of supporters, retained its character as redistribution, protection and incorporation in the localities, even for rulers who challenged the *political* dominance of the Mughals or the Islamic religion. As the Maratha war chiefs turned their eyes to north India after 1740 they, too, were domesticated into a Mughal life style. Maratha temples incorporated Islamic features; Maratha chiefs were painted in court dress by Mughal miniaturists. To a face-to-face local sovereignty trying to stabilize itself in the context of the armed camp, association with the Sufi concept of charisma (*barakat*) inherent in the holy man was particularly appropriate. Muslim rulers had often tried in life or death to associate themselves closely with saints, perhaps because their participation in the transcendent sovereignty of the Khilafat was so distant. The Maratha chiefs did the same. Thus the saint Mansur Shah was mentor (*pir*) of the great war-leader Mahaji Scindia, and also his chief companion.<sup>14</sup> Twenty years after Mahaji's death his son Daulat Rao Sindia prostrated himself before Mansur Shah's son, Bala Qadir, before commencing Hindu worship. At the death ceremonies of Mansur Shah the Maratha warrior nobility made offerings to Bala Qadir while Muslim holy men of any origin were always welcome in the Maratha camp.<sup>15</sup> There were many similar examples. The Sindias and Holkars, more famed today for

<sup>13</sup> J. S. Grewal, 'J. D. Cunningham and his British predecessors on the Sikhs', *Bengal Past and Present*, 83 (1964), 101-14.

<sup>14</sup> T. D. Broughton, *Letters from a Mahratta Camp* (London, 1813), pp. 129, 239-40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

their construction of bathing ghats at Benares, were considerable donors to the Pirzadas of Sheikh Moin-ud-Din Chishti at Ajmere.<sup>16</sup>

Such syncretic practices were common among other small Hindu chieftains establishing themselves in the wake of the declining empire, but it still remains interesting to see how general it was among powers whose acts and public pronouncements often had a decidedly anti-Mughal character. Nor was it only the mystical branch of Islamic practice which was associated with the new warrior rulers. Ranjit Singh consolidating his kingdom after 1800 continued to associate himself with the militant tradition of the Sikh Khalsa, issuing his coins in the name of its central council of chieftains, the Gurumutta.<sup>17</sup> But at the same time he was content to secure tribute from, rather than obliterate, the power of the Gillanee and Bukhara sayyids in view of the reverence that the Muslims of the Punjab showed them.<sup>18</sup> When Ranjit assumed a royal title for the first time in 1801, he was careful to have Muslim learned men present in court to validate his claim to the title of agent of god, or sirkar, which implicitly rejected the Mughal's authority. At the same time he appointed Nizammuddin kazi and head of all the Muslims of the Lahore region who recognized his legitimacy,<sup>19</sup> and thus fulfilled one of the key criteria if the Punjab was to remain Dar-ul-Islam, a land in which Islam could be publicly practised.

On the other side, emerging Muslim regional states were equally concerned to link themselves to major Hindu shrines and festivals, though this was a more surreptitious process than among the Hindu rulers. Barnett has recently emphasized the extent to which the nawabs of Awadh came to rest on the compliance of groups of Hindu and converted Hindu warriors, administrators and revenue farmers.<sup>20</sup> While the middle nawabs fostered a peculiarly Shia court culture, withdrawing patronage from a number of Sunni shrines and endowments, they were careful to maintain indirect links with major Hindu centres. Substantial donations of land grants were received from the nawabs by the Vaishnavite priests and Gosains of Muttra and Ajodya, while in a move comparable with Akbar's Hindu-Muslim synthesis, Asaf-ud-

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173, 240.

<sup>17</sup> Indu Banga, *The Agrarian System of the Sikhs: Late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries* (Delhi, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> William Murray, 'Historical and political memoir of transactions in the Punjab' (c. 1830) in H. S. Bhatia (ed.), *Rare Documents on the Sikhs and their Rule in the Punjab* (Delhi, 1981), p. 86.

<sup>19</sup> Dewan Umer Nath, 'Memoir of the reign of Runjeet Singh' (*Calcutta Review*, 1858), *ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

<sup>20</sup> R. Barnett, *North India between Empires* (California, 1980).

Daulah offered direct aid to the monotheistic Hindu reformer, Jagjivan Das of Kotwa, founder of the Satnami sect.<sup>21</sup> The allusive and indirect manner in which Muslim rulers were constrained to make connections with Hindu temples and festivals is particularly well illustrated in the case of the Arcot regime of south India. The *Tuzak-i-Wallajahi* records how the nawabs customarily went the rounds of the Islamic saints' places thus binding themselves to the sacred geography of the region. At the same time, annual gifts to the pious people of Mecca and Medina caused his name to be mentioned there 'next to that of the Sultan of Rum'. Yet even the pious court chronicler was aware that in parallel with this obeisance to the tradition of the central Islamic lands went a sedulous effort to foster links with the majority Hindu population. The Nawab became the protector of the great Hindu temples of Chidambaram and Tirupati. He also made special provision for, and reverence to, the most syncretic of the south Indian dargahs, the shrine of Shahul Hamid Sahib at Nagore. Moreover, 'As it was commonly believed by the Hindus, Muslims and others that Salambar had been the resting place of the prophet Sulayman (on him be peace) he gave presents to the inhabitants, honoured them and made them feel happy.'<sup>22</sup>

While this style of sacred incorporation had been common to all previous Hindu kingdoms and had influenced Muslim rulers since the time of Akbar, the emergence of an all-India military culture was particularly favourable to these syncretic tendencies. Soldiers were necessarily distanced from the orthodoxy of the ulama and purism of the brahmin; the warband relied on tactical alliances, buying in skills by participation in local schemes of redistribution on an *ad hoc* basis. Kolff has noted how mobile Rajput warbands of the early Mughal period kept Muslim women in their harems to the annoyance of the orthodox ulama.<sup>23</sup> Hindu and Muslim commanders in later Mughal campaigns made special provision for the prayers of both religions on their marches, and a Jain Urdu temple was constructed close to the Red Fort to accommodate Jains serving with the imperial forces.<sup>24</sup> While the

<sup>21</sup> B. H. Badley, 'Jagjivan Das, the Hindu reformer', *Indian Antiquary*, viii (1879), 289; cf. note 10 above for patronage of Ramanandis by the Awadh nawabs; also B. Goswamy and J. Grewal, *The Mughals and the Sikh Rulers and the Vaishnavas of Pindori* (Simla, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Burhan Ibn Hasan, *Tuzak-i-Wallajahi* (trans. and ed.) S. Muhammad Husayn Nainar, *Sources of the History of the Nawwabs of the Carnatic: Madras Islamic Series*, 4 (Madras, 1956), 244; cf. Susan Bayly, 'South Indian Islam: Purist or Syncretic?' in D. H. A. Kolff (ed.), *Colonial India and Indonesia (Comparative Studies in Overseas History)* (Leiden, forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> D. H. A. Kolff, 'Soldiering in India', unpubl. MSS in possession of the author.

<sup>24</sup> *Archaeological Survey of India: List of Muhammadan and Hindu Monuments of Delhi*, i, *Shahjahanabad* (Delhi, 1907), 'Jain Urdu Temple'.

ideological movements within Islam in the later eighteenth century led by the disciples of Shah Waliullah and the Naqshbandi Sufis of the Delhi area may have been directed to some extent against syncretic practices, it must be remembered that the comradeship of an increasingly complex warrior culture pointed in precisely the opposite direction. By 1780 most regional armies had contingents of Afghan horsemen or Lukhnavi swordsmen while the Bairagi and Gosain ascetics had become the most powerful single military force north of the Kavery. Pindari bands were composed of Hindus and Muslims and appear to have developed a syncretic popular religion in which goddess Kali featured alongside Muslim saints as the object of veneration. Muslim fakirs and Hindu sannyasis were auspicious and welcome frequenters of armed camps, often playing a crucial role in the military politics of alliance and bargaining over pay and conditions. The Rohillas who built up bodies of political support from slave castes of converted Hindu Rajputs had a particular interest in honouring the religion of their Hindu feudatories. Conversely, the patronage of great revenue-farmer magnates such as Almas Ali Khan encouraged specialist Hindu agriculturalist castes such as Kurmis, Kacchis and Malis to introduce aspects of Islamic religious symbolism into their caste life-styles and caste regalia. Indeed, the emergence of sharper boundaries between Hindu and Muslim religious practice in the period after 1820 must to some extent be attributed to the decline of this mobile and eclectic warrior culture.

Thus far we seem to have been giving a somewhat embellished picture of the conventional pre-colonial symbiosis between Hindu and Muslim. Even the later eighteenth century, a much vaunted period of Muslim revival and purification, displays quite contradictory features in popular practice. For this reason it is most important to take note of the many striking examples of religious conflict scattered throughout the record of this period and put them into some sort of interpretative framework.

### **State Communalism**

The argument has been that the consolidation of regional states in the course of the eighteenth century tended generally to strengthen the bonds of patronage and veneration across the boundaries of the major religions. Yet this was not always the case. Aurangzeb's own retreat to a firmer restatement of the Muslim law along with the imposition of taxes on Hindus and the destruction of Hindu temples has been interpreted as an attempt to reformulate the ideological basis of the late Mughal state

in line with its requirement for constant military expansion. This also seems a plausible interpretation for the most aggressive example of eighteenth-century 'state communalism', the military despotism of Tipu Sultan in Mysore.<sup>25</sup> Tipu's attacks on one temple in Seringapatam, the Hindu culture of the Kerala Nayar aristocracy, and the Portuguese and Syrian Christian populations associated with the European settlements of the Malabar coast, were acts of policy rather than examples of mindless 'fanaticism' as early British observers characterized them. Mysore temple priests were too closely tied to the Hindu Wodiyar house which Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan had replaced; the Nayars formed a dangerous body of recalcitrant feudatories on Mysore's western borders, and the Christians were the symbol of dependency on external trade and European influence which both sultans saw as the Achilles heel of their state. Yet despite their increasingly Islamic style of pronouncement neither of these rulers could afford to establish a real jihad (holy war) state. Lokiya or 'administrative' brahmins inevitably provided much of Mysore's bureaucracy and bewailed its later destruction by the British.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, tribal warrior communities such as the Beyadaru who were indirectly linked to the great Hindu temple complex of Tirupati formed an important element in Tipu's army. Many temples were carefully patronized by the sultans.<sup>27</sup>

Early nineteenth-century Awadh displayed similar features. The later Nawabs strengthened the emphasis of the dynasty's founders on a specifically Shia form of Islamic polity.<sup>28</sup> When the Awadh ruler threw off Mughal sovereignty and became king of Awadh he also brought Shia theologians directly into the administration.<sup>29</sup> Undoubtedly, growing Shia political influence in north India was partly responsible for the aggressive Sunni response of authorities such as Qazi Thanau'llah Uthmani and Shah Abdul Aziz. The resurgence of polemic between the Sunni and Shia branches of Islam in the late eighteenth century was associated with a spate of conversions to Shiism in the Panipat region

<sup>25</sup> For the legend see M. Wilks, *Historical Sketches of the South of India* (reprint, 2 vols, Mysore, 1930), and William Kirkpatrick, *Select Letters of Tipoo Sultan to Various Public Functionaries* (London, 1811); a balanced modern account is Mohibbul Hasan, *History of Tipu Sultan* (Calcutta, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> Francis Hamilton-Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London, 1811), i, 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, i, 178-9; cf. H. Nanjudayya and L. Ananthakrishna Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, ii (Mysore, 1928), 198 ff.

<sup>28</sup> M. Fisher, 'The Mughal court and the province', Ph.D. dissertation, Chicago, 1978.

<sup>29</sup> Mr Juan Cole of the University of California, Berkeley, is now working on the role of Shias in Awadh under the Nawabi.

near Delhi<sup>30</sup> which reflected the influence of Persian noblemen there and perhaps the propinquity of trade routes to Shia Iran. After 1790, when the Lucknow court began more openly to emphasize its Shia status, pamphlet polemics between Delhi theologians and leading Shias such as Sayyid Dildar Ali (who received extensive patronage in Lucknow) became sharper. Finally, against the background of Awadh's final political crisis and annexation religious debate was transformed into social conflict between members of the sects. By the 1860s riots had begun to occur at the small-town headquarters of leading ulama, such as Nasirabad.<sup>31</sup> The tension between Shia officials and the predominantly Sunni population of major towns also appears to have complicated relations with Hindus which deteriorated sharply with rioting in Lucknow in 1847, 1853 and 1856.<sup>32</sup> The Awadh state's attempt to strengthen itself by emphasizing its Shia adherence was, in fact, a costly mistake. Without it scholarly debate need not have given rise to the communal conflict which continued to embitter Sunni-Shia relations in Lucknow.

### **Sovereignty and worship at the holy places**

Yet the occasions when rulers encouraged or initiated conflict through attempts to establish an official orthodoxy were rare. More often in the eighteenth century it was much more limited aims which gave rise to the appearance of religious conflict. Rulers or powerful groups within newly emergent states attempted merely to redraw boundaries within an accepted framework of religious compromise. They insisted not on the exclusiveness but on the primacy (or merely the equality) of their form of worship. Thus Hindu and Sikh rulers in the late eighteenth century sought generally not so much to attack a homogeneous Muslim community as to establish their own status as donors-in-chief and as protectors of the major cult centres of their own faiths. The demand that they should have ceremonial primacy at temples or holy places without the intervention of any form of Muslim sovereignty reflects Hindu principles of belief which stress that direct interaction with the gods

<sup>30</sup> Rizvi, *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz*, p. 256.

<sup>31</sup> *Gazetteer of the Province of Awadh* (Allahabad, 1877), iii, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Here it must be noted that British intervention in Awadh's terminal political crisis formed an equally important context for the latter incident when large bodies of Muslims assembled with the intention of demolishing the Hanumangarhi temple at Ajodhia. See Mirza Ali Azhar, *King Wajid Ali Shah of Awadh* (Karachi, 1982), pp. 374ff, based largely on Najmul Ghani Rampuri, *Tarikh-i-Awadh* (Lucknow, 1919), pt v.

improves embodied rank.<sup>33</sup> Sacrifice is marred or at least less efficacious when it is made on land where another is sovereign.<sup>34</sup> Freeing the holy places from Muslim domination was therefore quite compatible with eclectic religious practice in other spheres: it embodied no statement about Muslim religion or the Muslim community such as might be expressed in the term 'communalism'.

Let us take some samples from those social and political movements which have already appeared as eclectic, syncretic, or flexible in their relationships to individual Muslim shrines or ulama. Madhav Rao Peshwa, for instance, several times recorded his desire to drive Muslims from Malwa or Gujarat in order to become protector of the major shrines in those territories. His will of 1772 explicitly enjoins the conquest of Hindu holy places on his successor. The successor should first pay his debts, thus ensuring the spiritual continuity of the family; next, lighten and modify the land-revenue in the Maratha domains, putting legitimate rule on a firmer foundation. But then he is urged to free Prayag (Allahabad) and Benares from Muslim control as a prerequisite for the pilgrimage of the dead Peshwa's mother to the holy cities, and obsequies of his uncle there, and the establishment of hereditary stipends for the cities' brahmins.<sup>35</sup> The notion of a united Hindu religious community does indeed enter here, but only in a limited sense: the freeing of a holy place where the sacrifices of all Hindus have merit (because in theory Benares and Gaya belong to the sovereignty of Shiva) will increase the efficacy of all Hindu worship in its turn. But pronouncements such as this do not imply the existence of any ethnic or community based sense of religious war.

Wherever Muslim states conceded effective sovereignty to Hindus or Sikhs strenuous efforts were made to stop the slaughter of sacred cattle by Muslim butchers. This again asserted the right of the non-Muslim sovereigns to protect and gain merit from association with these sacred beasts. It is interesting that the only recorded acts of Maharaja Ranjit Singh which could be considered anti-Muslim were the banning of cattle slaughter throughout his domains and an order to desist from public calling to prayers in the Sikh holy city of Amritsar. His sovereignty was considered incompatible with the public assertion that Amritsar was an Islamic city or with open cow-slaughter.<sup>36</sup> Otherwise,

<sup>33</sup> Cf. A. Appadurai, *Worship and Conflict under Colonial Rule: A South Indian Case* (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>34</sup> J. D. M. Derrett, *Essays in Classical and Modern Hindu Law* (Leiden, 1975), ii, 25, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in G. Sardesai, *A New History of the Marathas* (Bombay, 1948), ii, 541.

<sup>36</sup> In Benares similarly the new Bhumihar rulers banned the slaughter of cattle within the holiest parts of the city.

as we have seen, his policies were directed to building up a core of support among Punjabi Muslims.

Much the most interesting illustration of this theme of sovereignty over religious places comes from an earlier period of Sikh history. In efforts to stamp out the religious and political threat of Sikhism Aurangzeb had carried out a relentless policy of repression against the sect. He had personally ordered the execution of the Sikh Guru Tej Bahadur, while his governor of the city of Multan had earlier killed the wife of Guru Govind Singh. These incidents assumed great symbolic significance in the ideology of the Sikhs and vengeance for them was a key aim in all subsequent relations with the Mughal throne and north Indian Muslims. When the Sikhs conquered Sirhind in 1764 they made a deliberate policy of destroying every building, including its mosques. An early nineteenth-century observer noted that in the town of Sirhind 'To this day it is deemed a meritorious act in a Sikh to pull down from a standing wall three bricks and convey them to the Sutlej or Jumna'.<sup>37</sup> To raze Delhi to the ground when it was conquered in 1783 was, however, neither politic nor possible. The Sikhs, it is true, succeeded in destroying the Rikabganj mosque, near to the place where Guru Tej Bahadur was cremated, and replacing it with a Gurdwara. But both here and in the case of the Sisiganj mosque where the Guru had been executed there were elements of compromise with the local Muslim community. The Sikh leader Baghel Singh authorized attacks by his followers on the rural landholdings of leading members of the Delhi Muslim aristocracy to force them to *agree* to the demolition of the Rikabganj mosque. The use of force is perhaps less surprising than the fact that the Sikhs were seeking a formal acceptance of the act by the Muslim leadership and its legitimation by the powerless emperor. In the case of the Sisiganj mosque which was located near the kotwali and the heart of the Muslim city, the Sikhs and Hindus who supported them were fought to a symbolic draw. A gurdwara was built adjacent to the place of the Guru's execution which was located by an ancient Hindu water carrier who remembered the spot. But this did not involve the destruction of the mosque: instead the gurdwara was constructed inside the mosque compound.<sup>38</sup>

A similar delicate compromise was effected in the case of the state visit of the Sikh leader to the Mughal emperor.<sup>39</sup> Hoping to capitalize on his

<sup>37</sup> W. Murray in Bhatia (ed.), *Rare Documents*, p. 137, n. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikhs* (Delhi, 1980), iii, 168-9 (the account is based on Calcutta Foreign Department despatches, Delhi chronicles and indigenous histories).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 169-70.

remaining legitimacy, the emperor had called for an audience with Baghel Singh. But the Sikhs had customarily pledged themselves never to bow before the Mughal emperor or to accept his sovereignty. Nevertheless, an agreement was reached which satisfied both parties. The Sikh leader was to approach the imperial presence surrounded by his own troops, fanned with peacock feathers, the symbol of royalty. In deference to the Sikh religion Muslim butchers were to be moved out of the quarters through which he passed; introduced to the emperor he should say 'Sat Sri Akal' rather than the customary words of submission. On the other hand, Baghel Singh's cavalcade was to be headed by Mughal mace bearers, ceremonial gifts were to be offered and received, and a Mughal chamberlain was to do obeisance on behalf of the Sikhs, thus avoiding a personal obeisance by Baghel Singh.

These incidents provide a key for understanding the nature of much religious conflict in the pre-colonial period. Savage destruction and slaughter could take place between groups who continued to venerate the shrines and holy figures of each other's traditions, but fought strenuously for immediate sovereignty over holy places. Sikhs may sometimes have vilified Muslims as 'Turks', but it seems unlikely that any monolithic 'communal' identity existed or was in the process of emerging.<sup>40</sup> Most important in view of the currency of teleological views about Hindu or Islamic revivalism, there was no necessary or unambiguous connection between purification or fundamentalist movements within these faiths and the likelihood of conflicts between them. Thus, for instance, the saints of the Chishti revival in the Punjab appear to have extended their influence more rapidly than the purist Naqshbandiya of Delhi precisely because their beliefs accorded more with those of the syncretic rural society of the Punjab. Yet it was these teachers and not initially the reforming Delhi ulama associated with the tradition of Shah Waliullah who provided the most stubborn opposition to the rise of Sikh secular power.<sup>41</sup>

### 'Land wars' and Communalism

So far we have been concerned with situations where religious buildings and festivals were the chief objects of conflict and where rulers played an

<sup>40</sup> Limited and localized examples of 'communal' behaviour are, however, revealed; e.g. attacks by Akalis on Muslim rites. Bhatia, *Rare Documents*, p. 80; Sikhs deplore obsequious conduct to Muslims, *ibid.*, p. 177; the call of operating against 'Turks' in Amritsar enthuses Sikh war leaders, *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> M. Zameeruddin Siddiqi, 'The resurgence of the Chishti Silsilah in the Punjab during the 18th century'. *Indian Hist. Cong. Procs. 1970* (Delhi, 1971), pp. 408-20.

important part in originating or compromising disputes. This class of 'religious conflict' can, however, be set apart from cases where economic or social conflict occurred predominantly between groups with different religious affiliations, and where such disputes came to be seen as conflicts between religious communities as such, or to be expressed in the vocabulary of 'communal' antagonism. These 'communal' conflicts might cause or exacerbate strife over temples, mosques or festivals, but they derived from broader social antagonisms. Yet when using this term 'communal' it is important to stress that no unified ethnic consciousness is being postulated, and certainly no teleology by which the conflicts of this period broaden out to provide the background for Hindu-Muslim or Hindu-Sikh contention in the late nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

One important example of such conflict was what might be called the 'land wars' between Hindu and Sikh zamindars and Mughal tenureholders in the course of the eighteenth century. The background to these rural conflicts was the slow expansion during the Mughal period of land rights held by literate gentry and court servants who were predominantly of Muslim aristocratic origin. Indian Muslim families had long been established in rural towns closely associated with the shrines of sufi saints and colonies of Muslim artisans. Such communities had provided jurists, officials and military leaders for the emerging state machinery of Muslim India. But it appears to have been quite late that the gentry-literati began to acquire substantial zamindari rights around their rural seats or to build up significant holdings of madad-i-maash or other privileged tenures. As late as 1590, Muslims held only small patches as zamindars in Awadh and the Ganges-Jumna Doab. In Hardoi District, for instance, where there was a large number of famous Islamic towns in Akbar's time, Muslims held as proprietors only part of the town of Bilgram and about fifty villages elsewhere. By 1860, however, they held as many as 1,445 in Sitapur Division, and that was rather less than the total had been in 1800. In the later eighteenth century Sheikh families may have held proprietary rights in as many as two-thirds of the Awadh villages and made significant contributions to the economy of the area by putting in wells and planting grove lands. This build-up of rural Muslim power (apparently a feature of the Punjab also) resulted from a slow process by which the proceeds of military and clerical salaries were invested in land rights, the clearing and settlement of marginal lands and the creation of new markets and town quarters.<sup>42</sup> But after 1690 a new feature was added. In the early

<sup>42</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion* (Cambridge, 1983), ch. 9.

days of Mughal supremacy the emperors had set their faces against their servants building up areas of landholding beneath the system of transferable jagirs. But from this time on, as Muzaffar Alam shows, Delhi began to connive at the expansion of the power of local gentry and madad-i-maash holders. Local Muslim magnates were allowed to assimilate the weak and non-hereditary privileged tenures given for service or sanctity into the stronger zamindari rights, thus giving a stronger basis for their power as hereditary landowners. This policy appears to have been an element in Aurangzeb's 'tilt' towards Islam and an effort to build up local support against the power of 'refractory' Hindu zamindars.<sup>43</sup>

The consolidation of this overwhelmingly Muslim gentry appears to have been a largely peaceful process, as a later official put it, 'the slow accumulation of thrift and diplomacy exercised on a more simple people'. It was materially advanced by the fact that Muslim gentry families usually dominated the offices of kazi and the lower administration both in the late Empire and the eighteenth-century successor states.<sup>44</sup> But as Muzaffar Alam notes, 'In Awadh in a number of cases, the hostility of the Rajput zamindars was directed against the Muslim madad-i-maash holders who had begun to behave as zamindars by the beginning of the eighteenth century'.<sup>45</sup> Documents from western Awadh towns mostly concern disputes between factions composed of both Hindus and Muslims, but there were also a number of cases of violent conflict which took the form of local battles between Hindus and Muslims. A representation of the third regnal year of Farruksiyar, for instance, records the attack of Sukha, Bacchu and Uday Singh residents of village Pachuan and others on the Sayyid proprietors of village Ahror. The Rajputs attacked the village which had been granted as madad-i-maash to the Sayyids, murdered three landlords, burnt five women alive and demolished all the houses one by one. They then plundered six other villages and laid waste the revenue-free lands attached to them, 'turning the graveyards belonging to the plaintiffs into culturable land'.<sup>46</sup> The

<sup>43</sup> M. Alam, 'Some aspects of the changes in the position of *madad-i-maash* holders in Awadh, 1676-1772'. *Ind. Hist. Cong. Procs. 1974* (Delhi, 1975), pp. 199-203.

<sup>44</sup> Clerical families could thus advantage each other in the recording of land rights, etc.

<sup>45</sup> M. Alam, 'Aspects of agrarian disturbances in north India in the early 18th century', unpubl. MSS, p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Mahzar* of village Ahror, 3rd regnal year of Farruksiyar, Central Record Office, Allahabad, trans. in S. A. Rashid (ed.), *U.P. Records Series: Calendar of Oriental Records*, iii (Allahabad, 1959), 8-9.

destruction of the graveyards was, of course, a straightforward piece of communal savagery unmitigated by any search for local compromise.

Attacks of this sort seem to have grown in violence and generality throughout the eighteenth century, culminating in mass assaults of Sikh zamindars and peasants on Muslim holdings in the Punjab and western Hindustan. The weakening of Muslim military power provided conditions in which Hindu and Sikh country people could assert themselves against intrusive elements which they saw as local agents of the state revenue-collecting machinery. Habib must be right in stating that in the western areas south of Delhi or in the Deccan this rural reaction represented the response of an impoverished rural society to the pressure of an inexorable revenue machinery. But my impression bears out that of Muzaffar Alam in seeing this widely as the rising of a prosperous and increasingly self-confident zamindari against alien competitors. It came from areas such as Baiswara or the Benares region which were apparently secure and becoming increasingly commercialized. In the Punjab, too, it was substantial Jat zamindars west of Delhi who took up the Sikh war-cry and set out to destroy the Muslim gentry in the second half of the century, rather than the younger sons from the desert regions who had been prominent earlier.

What made these land wars 'communal'? First, the nature of the Mughal state and administration ensured that the majority of holders of privileged tenures such as madad-i-maash were Muslims or Islamized Hindu clerical groups such as Khatris or Kayasths, while their local competitors were members of the great Hindu agricultural castes: Jats, Bhumihars or Rajputs. Secondly, the form of these land wars was often a savage attack by the totality of rural society against the small-town headquarters of the Muslim gentry. In the Punjab there are cases of the obliteration of the old Muslim towns and their replacement by totally new semi-urban settlements under the complete control of the local Sikh warrior lineages. In these attacks the demolition of mosques, graveyards and sufi shrines along with the houses and groves of the Muslim gentry seems to have been a prime objective.<sup>47</sup> These religious symbols after all formed the heart of the rural Muslim communities, the outposts of the lowest level of imperial official and the most tangible representation of the process of Islamization. The Sikh attacks of 1764 on the upper Ganges Doab were directed quite precisely against the strongholds of the Barah Sayyids who were the classic exemplar of Muslim gentry

<sup>47</sup> See e.g., M. Alam, 'Sikh uprising under Banda Bahadur', *Studies in History*, i, 2 (1979), 204.

formation.<sup>48</sup> Many small incidents of deliberate religious harassment were recorded. A large Sikh band attacked village Jalalabad, for instance, because its Muslim coparceners were alleged to have mistreated a Hindu girl; the headman was burnt alive and the village sacked.<sup>49</sup> In the Punjab, again, it had been the deliberate desecration of Muslim buildings and mosques which had forced Hafiz Jamal Multani, one of the major leaders of the Chishti revival, to emerge from meditation in his retreat, declare holy war and display his efficiency as an archer against the massing Sikhs.<sup>50</sup> In all these conflicts the vocabulary of religious conflict was freely used: 'Wah Guru' was answered by 'Allo Akbar'; Sikhs sought to extirpate 'Turks' while Muslims fought 'idolatry' with their ancient battery of abuse.

The tendency of such land wars to take on the lineaments of communal conflict and to assimilate religious symbols was common throughout the period. Sayyid Ahmed of Rai Bareilly's conflict with Sikh authority in the 1820s was assimilated to older tribal wars in the area west of Peshawar. In Kerala<sup>51</sup> and Bengal,<sup>52</sup> by contrast, themes of religious militancy became enmeshed with conflicts between Muslim peasantry and their Hindu landlords during the well-known Moplah and Faraizi outbreaks. Even during the Rebellion of 1857 in the western Gangetic area local social conflict sometimes took on a communal aspect. In Rohilkhand, for instance, the so-called Mutiny often seems to have involved attacks by rural Hindu peasant castes on Muslim small towns during which the green flag was raised and deliberate assaults were made on the Muslim quarters of the rural seats.<sup>53</sup> Two conclusions emerge from this. First, that there are no grounds for the common assumption that communal violence in the countryside was only an 'export from the towns' in the course of the later nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Secondly, the widely attested syncretism of rural religion, which received encouragement from the state in the course of the eighteenth century, by no means excluded the possibility of communal conflict where lines of religious division happened to coincide with deep economic antagonisms. Communal violence was not incompatible with eclectic religious practice as the orthodox nationalist view of communalism has so often contended.

<sup>48</sup> Gupta, *Sikhs*, iii, 78-9; cf. C. Williams, *Calcutta Review*, 1875, pp. 27-9.

<sup>49</sup> Gupta, *Sikhs*, iii, 78-9.

<sup>50</sup> Siddiqi, 'Chishti revival', 4.

<sup>51</sup> Dale, *Islamic Frontier*.

<sup>52</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Bengal Muslims*, ch. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 325-8.

### Strife in the Towns

Until recently little was known about conflict in Indian cities before 1860, but fragmentary evidence has now begun to accumulate, revealing a long history of violence associated with clashing religious festivals or disputed mosques and temples. The well-documented events of the later nineteenth century look more and more like a continuation of these trends rather than harbingers of a new era of 'communal identity'. Many of the incidents of religious strife in the years 1700–1860 occurred when ruling groups sought, as we have shown, to renegotiate the boundaries of local religious practice. But others appear to have been more spontaneous, reflections of severe local economic change which became confounded with ceremonial or religious disputes. S. A. A. Rizvi has collected evidence on conflicts in the Mughal cities of north India about which least is known. One feature that stands out from his account is the participation in them of mercenary soldiers from outside the locality or even from outside India. We have suggested that eighteenth-century military culture in the broadest sense encouraged syncretic religious practice across religious boundaries. But smaller uncontrolled bodies of soldiers quartered in an unfamiliar urban environment may sometimes have formed the centre of violent disturbances. In the riot at Ahmedabad in the second year of Farruksiyar's reign, for instance, when rioting broke out against Muslim cow-slaughter, it was Afghan soldiers of the Mughal governor of the city who took a leading part in the attack on the Hindu quarters of the city.<sup>54</sup> Several riots broke out in Delhi, Agra and Kashmir during the early 1720s. Here again the sparks appear to have been struck by disputes over Holi, Muhurram and Id festivities, but Rizvi notes that new Muslim leaders such as 'Arabs and Abyssinians, Turks from Istanbul and Afghans'<sup>55</sup> were prominent in all of them. These military leaders, often from areas of Sunni orthodoxy, had replaced the old Irani and Turani officials who had tended to be more sympathetic to Hindu interests.

The frequent mention of Afghan soldiery in these riots is interesting. The Rohilla Afghan rulers of the eighteenth century states north-east of Delhi were later noted for their 'Sunni orthodoxy', but this did not prevent them from developing close ties of fealty and military brotherhood with the local Kutheir Rajputs. In 1774 when the Nawab of

<sup>54</sup> Rizvi, *Wali-Allah*, p. 197; Khafi Khan, *Muntakhabul Lubab*, ii, 755, trans. H. Elliot and J. Dowson, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, vii (London, 1877), p. 455.

<sup>55</sup> Rizvi, *Wali-Allah*, p. 201.

Awadh attacked Rohilkhand and Hafiz Rehmat Khan Rohilla offered resistance, '... zamindars of the Rajput tribe, who lived in peace under his [Hafiz Rehmat's] rule, came in troops to support him without summons'.<sup>56</sup> Again in the anti-British riot of 1816 in Bareilly, Hindu urban and commercial men joined the revolt of Maulvi Mahomed Ewaz, pledging to fight for both endangered religions. Mahomed Ewaz was himself a strict Naqshbandi Sunni associated with the school of Shah Abdul Aziz of Delhi, so the influence of 'Sunni orthodoxy' did not necessarily operate in the direction of Hindu-Muslim conflict.<sup>57</sup>

A more plausible general explanation is that small bodies of undisciplined mercenary soldiers isolated in an urban environment could easily provide the impetus for communal violence in the early stages of state-building. When, however, state formation was more complete, the new military rulers were particularly concerned to build up a solid basis of support and cooperation among their non-Muslim subjects and sought by careful control and eclectic religious patronage to avoid incidents of conflict. This line of argument also has interesting implications for the riots and communal conflicts which occurred in many north Indian cities in the 1830s and again in the 1850s. Here again bodies of soldiery, irregular barkandazis and gangs of cudgel-men were prominent. At Aligarh in 1820, for instance, when a Hindu-Muslim dispute broke out at the time of Muhurram the ostensible cause was the usual jockeying about procession routes and some minor incidents between Hindu and Muslim vendors of oil and sweets. But it was notable that the most radical elements who opposed the compromise worked out between the Hindu and Muslim leaders were 'led by Agra Nujeebs and chaprassies at the Collector's office.'<sup>58</sup> Both groups were armed irregular soldiery formed under the pre-British regimes but sometimes retained on low pay by the incoming colonial power. They were in fact prime examples of the process of 'demilitarization' which had gone on in the early decades of British rule and had fostered what William Sleeman called an 'unquiet spirit' among the large mercenary armies which had been displaced, downgraded or broken up by the new British rulers. Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan noted something similar in Bijnaur District in 1857. Communal relations had been good, he said, when the great Muslim families had employed Rajputs and other Hindus as their

<sup>56</sup> Sadatullah Khan, 'Gulistan-i-Rehmat', trans. Elliot and Dowson, *History of India*, viii, 311.

<sup>57</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 325-7.

<sup>58</sup> Aligarh Magistrate to Chief Secretary to Government, 18 Oct. 1820, Bengal Criminal Judicial Oct. 1820, Range 134/44, IOL.

armed retainers. But as the great households had declined, the links had atrophied and small incidents could thus ensure that 'the tree of Hindu-Muslim aversion' grew deeper roots.<sup>59</sup>

One deeper social context, then, for these incidents of religious conflict was the rise and decline of warrior kingdoms and the culture they bore. As studies of European riots have shown, men of war and carriers of violence often stood at the heart of civil conflict. But it was at the point when warrior states were forming, and once again when they were in decline, that the potential for violence was greatest.

A similar consideration holds true when we consider the role of Hindu and Muslim judicial and revenue officers in cases of communal violence. Both in the record of the late Mughal period and in the years of the Company Raj the 'chief registrars' (kazis) and 'chief executive officers' of the towns (kotwals) often took a leading role in religious violence. In itself this is hardly surprising. These officers were in an ambiguous position. Their existence—particularly that of the kazi—was itself a technical criterion that the land was Dar-ul-Islam. They were thus the formal guarantors of the supremacy of Islam in the locality. At the same time, however, they were justiciars of a Mughal Empire which in theory guaranteed its Hindu and Jain subjects some rights as protected subjects, and in practice gave them virtually equal rights out of equity. The tension between these two roles was intolerable so that when conflicts of a religious nature broke out the position of kazi and kotwal was always compromised on one count or another.

What is more interesting is the possibility that general changes in the personnel or the function of these offices could give rise to added instability in urban arenas, and thus provide the conditions for more sustained religious conflict. In the early eighteenth century, for instance, the position of the local officials was coming under a variety of pressures. The conflict between factions at the imperial court and in the provinces representing the Indian-born Sheikzadas and the older Irani or Turani nobility was leading to rapid changes in office-holders. Many offices were being leased out or even under-leased, and powerful Hindu landowners from the hinterland were whittling away the law officers' authority by setting up their own quarters and markets in many major towns. All these conditions impinged on the resolution of religious conflicts. So in the Ahmedabad riot, the kazi of the city, who was closely connected with a notably pro-Hindu governor and was accused of

<sup>59</sup> Sayyid Ahmed Khan, *Tarikh-i Sarkashiy Zillah Bijnaur*, trans. H. Malik and M. Bembo, *Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan's History of the Bijnaur Rebellion* (East Lansing, 1972), p. 16.

ignoring Muslim interests, had his house burnt down.<sup>60</sup> Mughal policy was tilting towards a closer relationship with powerful Hindu commercial interests after the death of Aurangzeb and the role of the governor and his protégés among the local officials seems to have incensed the ulama. Similarly, in the Delhi riot of 1729 the kazi who was aligned with the older Shia nobility came under attack from mobs of Punjabi Muslim shoe-sellers who were protected by representatives of the rising Rohilla Afghan interest in the city.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, in Benares in 1752 it was the kazi who led sections of the Muslim population in the demolition of the Vishwanath temple, thus setting the scene for two hundred years of sporadic local conflict. Here, the rise of the Bhumihar dynasty after 1739 and the growing influx of Maratha wealth and power into the city had sharply tipped political power against the Muslim law officers.<sup>62</sup> In an earlier incident Delhi had intervened to release the Hindu population from some of the rigours of the tax on pilgrims which had been operated by the town officials. The officials saw their chance to rectify the slow erosion of their position in 1752 when the ruler of Awadh temporarily expelled the Bhumihar ruler from his city.

However, the pressures on the local law officers released by the faction fighting and decentralization of power within the later Mughal empire were nothing to the sharp redefinition which took place in the early days of British rule. It was this deliberate diminution of the social and judicial role of the kazi, mufti, and kotwal which formed an important precondition for the riots in north Indian cities in the period 1820–50. The British sought to turn these officials—the guarantors of Dar-ul-Islam—into subordinate agents of the district collectors and magistrates, thus severing the link between Muslim law and the operation of local justice and politics. An officer in Allahabad in 1815 noted that ‘the synodical assemblies’ majlis etc. and their censures for pollution of caste, heretical conduct, debauchery, gambling, etc., are fast falling into disrepute, and not upheld by our institutions’.<sup>63</sup> The changing role of the Muslim law officers added to the volatility of religious disputes. Some sought to respond to decline by an uncompromising line. In Kashipur in 1833, for instance, the kazi had to be removed when he denounced a police officer as a heretic and threatened to pollute the

<sup>60</sup> Rizvi, *Wali-Allah*, p. 197.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201; cf. Khafi Khan on Kashmir disturbances, Elliot and Dowson, *History*, vii, 493.

<sup>62</sup> A. L. Srivastava, *Shuja-ud-Daulah* (Delhi, 1961), i, 27–31; cf. Gyanbaffee Mosque File, Benares Collectorate Records, Central Records Office, Allahabad.

<sup>63</sup> Report of the Allahabad Magistrate, 1 Sept. 1814, Home Miscellaneous Series, 776, IOL.

town with cow-slaughter if an unpopular compromise with the Hindus was maintained.<sup>64</sup> In 1838 the decline of the dominance of the Rohilla ruling group over the police and the office of kotwal seems to have encouraged Hindu leaders to bargain for a better scheme of precedence during clashing religious festivals. The magistrate responded by further diminishing the kotwal's authority in Bareilly and trying to put Hindu and Muslim leaders on a basis of 'equality' for the first time. Previous disputes had been easily settled because there was no question of representation of interests; Hindus had been protected but there was no doubt that they were in a ceremonially inferior position.

This argument fits well with the findings of Dr Freitag and others that the role of the local magistracy and the police was a crucial component in the communal riots of the later nineteenth century. Here again the nature of the police, in particular, was undergoing a further dramatic transformation as the colonial authorities sought closer control through the agency of a police force now drawn from a much broader social range.

Finally, this discussion of religious conflict in the urban setting must turn to the impact of more general economic change on the balance of power between local elites. There is no question, of course, of arguing that religious disputes can simply be 'reduced' to conflicts of material interest. Yet it is quite plain that the strains of rapid urbanization, or deurbanization, could significantly threaten the balance of local ceremonial precedence and also provide the circumstances of wider communal identification. The evidence for the late Mughal cities of upper India remains scarce. But it is perhaps significant that mercantile groups,<sup>65</sup> and Jains above all, appear on several occasions as champions of the anti-Muslim parties. Jain and Vaishnavite merchants from Rajasthan, an area relatively unaffected by Islamic influences, were building up their power throughout the Ganges valley in the eighteenth century. Certainly in the early years of the nineteenth century it was recent migrants among the merchant people, unsure of their local status and not yet domesticated into patterns of local compromise by association with the Muslim revenue machinery, who played a most uncompromising role in local conflicts.

The record is much fuller, however, for the seaport towns where the decline of the dominant commercial groups of Mughal India was

<sup>64</sup> Commissioner Moradabad to Government, 20 Aug. 1833, Bengal Criminal Judicial Procs., November 1833, 140/43, IOL.

<sup>65</sup> Rizvi, *Wali-Allah*, pp. 197 (the case of Kapur Chand), 198 (Ratan Chand), 200 (Jawhari Bazaar).

compounded by the rise of the British. Das Gupta has revealed a number of incidents of mercantile conflict in Surat where sharply defined groups of traders and ship-owners appear to have perceived their economic interests in terms of community with 'Turks', 'Abyssinians', 'Bohra Muslims', 'Hindus' and 'Parsis' arrayed against each other. The decline of the Gujarati Hindu merchants and the rise of the Rustomji Parsi family under British protection, for instance, took on a distinctly communal aspect in 1734 when the inter-family dispute broadened.<sup>66</sup> The Muslim governor laid penalties on all of Surat's 'bania' community to please the English, while in the hinterland, the Marathas harassed all Parsis, branding them as 'worse than slaves'.

An even more interesting case occurred in Calcutta in 1789, for this was a city which has commonly been seen as free from Hindu-Muslim tension before the later nineteenth century. The occasion of violence was the clashing of the Muhurram and Durga Puja festival which caused 'the greatest tumults and riots in the bazaars for some days and have been productive of several murders'. When Muslims attacked the Durga Puja procession of Rama Kant Bannerjee, a wealthy Banian, he assembled 'fifty or sixty armed peons and demolished all the Mahometan Durgahs they could find in the neighbourhood of Boitacannah'. Later a mob of about 3,000 Muslims attacked the house of 'Sookmoyi Thakur' in the Bow Bazaar, plundered it of jewels, 5,000 gold mohurs, Rs 8,000 in Company bonds, and having killed two cows, were supposedly seen disappearing into a local Muslim school with their loot. Other Hindu houses were also attacked.<sup>67</sup>

In 1789 Calcutta was still an important Muslim city, and Hughly over the river retained some of its character as a Mughal port. With the European commercial growth since 1720, many clerical and artisan Muslims from Dacca and Murshidabad had migrated to the city and together they made up about 30 per cent of its population.<sup>68</sup> The great beneficiaries of Calcutta's growing role in the world economy were the British and the Hindu banians who served them as agents and brokers; with the decline of trade in the hands of independent Muslim sea-captains and Mughal officials, Muslims had few rich or powerful men in the city. Against this background the clear undertone of class conflict in these riots is explicable: it was particularly the houses of rich banians which were attacked, and straightforward plundering was more

<sup>66</sup> A. Das Gupta, *Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, 1700-50* (Wiesbaden, 1979), p. 277. See also Lakshmi Subramanian's article, below, pp. 205-37.

<sup>67</sup> *Calcutta Gazette*, 9 April 1784.

<sup>68</sup> S. Mukherjee, *Calcutta. Myths and History* (Calcutta, 1977), p. 101.

in evidence than in many religious riots, alongside the examples of deliberate sacrilege. For their part the new Hindu rich were asserting sovereignty over their city by conspicuous displays of Goddess Durga images through Muslim quarters.

In the broadest terms the Hindu-Muslim riots in north Indian cities in the period 1820 to 1850 had a similar context. The growing assertiveness of rising Hindu and Jain commercial groups matched the widespread decline of the Muslim warrior and gentry classes of the old regime and of the established Hindu magnates who had been long associated with them. Jains from Bhewani and Rajasthan, 'Gurwala' banias in the Kanpur region, the Umar petty traders of the east—these were the most volatile and intransigent elements when it came to working out a compromise between the patrons of Hindu, Muslim and Jain festivals.<sup>69</sup> And it was particularly in the regions of the western Gangetic plain where such commercial communities had been until recently constricted within the embrace of powerful Muslim conquest states that the contention was most fierce. Muslim writers were aware of the social tensions which fed into these riots. In the days of the Sayyid brothers during the 1710s and 1720s chroniclers had bewailed the rise of 'grocers' under the patronage of bad Muslim rulers and unscrupulous revenue farmers. The theme was clearer by the early years of the nineteenth century and was taken to its ultimate form by Sayyid Ahmed of Rai Bareilly who stated that 'the foreigners had become the masters and the merchants had become the rulers'.<sup>70</sup>

The economic context of communal violence was clear also in the case of artisan communities, though it must be admitted that the evidence here is sketchy in the extreme and the case ambiguous. There has long been an assumption that the tight-knit, guild-like organization of Indian artisans predisposed them to a strong sense of social and religious community, and perhaps to great intransigence in matters of religion. This notion has probably arisen from an analogy with the role of sectarianism among artisan communities in the European context.<sup>71</sup> There is, in fact, some justification for this view. In the 1729 Delhi riot, for instance, petty Muslim shoe sellers of Punjabi origin were at the forefront of disturbances. Because of the nature of their profession butchers and other small-scale vendors were often involved in violence at festival time. During the early nineteenth century the pressures on weavers and spinners may have worked to increase their volatility.

<sup>69</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 337–8.

<sup>70</sup> Rizvi, *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz*, p. 534.

<sup>71</sup> But see also Pandey, 'The bigoted julahah'.

Certainly, dyers and weavers were at the forefront of the crowds in Bareilly in 1816; Muslim weavers of eastern Awadh seem to have been peculiarly receptive to Islamic puritanism, and directed their wrath against their Hindu neighbours from time to time. In 1857 also there were cases in the western districts where the conflicts between 'rebel' armies took on religious overtones as Muslim weavers attacked the houses of petty Hindu traders in force, prominently displaying the Mahomedi flag.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, it cannot be argued that artisan culture in itself gave rise to a particularly strong 'communal identity'; indeed it could work in quite the opposite way, encouraging syncretic practices. So, for instance, Hindu and Muslim artisan castes participated together in veneration of the Sayyids of Pirana near Ahmedabad. In the early nineteenth century the Hindu followers of these sufi teachers were predominantly of the vegetable vendor castes, while the Muslims were silk and cotton weavers. So far had the shared religious culture proceeded that while the Hindus continued to cremate their dead, they carefully cut off the right forefinger of the corpse and buried it within the compound of the shrine.<sup>73</sup> While the piety of many of these artisan communities cannot be in doubt, it seems quite incorrect to attribute to them any generalized 'fanaticism'. Tensions between artisan communities, or between them and merchants or hucksters, reflected quite specific and local economic grievances, though these might express themselves in 'communal' form on occasions.

### Conclusions

The first purpose of this paper has been to draw attention to the incidence of communal conflict in India over the period 1700 to 1860. This is important because many scholars are only dimly aware that widespread contention of this sort ever took place before the end of Company rule, let alone in the eighteenth century. But this finding also has implications for those authors who recognize that forms of Hindu-Muslim or Hindu-Sikh conflict did take place in the pre-colonial or early colonial period but hold that their nature and frequency decisively increased after 1860 whether as the result of colonial policy, religious revivalism or the extension of new types of representative government. What is striking in the examples that we

<sup>72</sup> Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, p. 364.

<sup>73</sup> H. G. Briggs, *The Cities of Gujarashtra* (Bombay, 1849), p. 314.

have cited here is that they bear a very close resemblance to the riots of the later colonial period. Like them, they often occurred when local structures of police and urban government were in the process of change. Again, religious conflict seems to have taken on an overtly communal form when local systems of compromise and bargaining were being rapidly modified by the social mobility of new groups of merchants, or artisans or by the defensive manoeuvres of a declining urban gentry. Nor is there much justification for the view that 'communal conflict' only spread into the countryside in the present century. The 'land wars' of the eighteenth century which saw the rise of agrarian Sikh and Hindu peasantry against Muslim rural gentry were apparently no more or less 'communal' than the riots in eastern U.P. in the 1920s or eastern Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s.

This paper has also challenged the widespread view that there was a necessary antithesis between forms of syncretic religious practice and communal violence: that is to say that while Hindus and Muslims lived face to face in villages or towns, conflict could not emerge. It is certainly true that the warrior culture of the eighteenth century encouraged many remarkable examples of syncretic practice. But this did not eliminate the possibility that clashes might occur over the status that different religious traditions held in relation to the control of festivals or holy places. The most savage rioting and destruction could take place between groups which in no way challenged the validity of syncretic practice.

Yet while this paper does not provide much support for the old nationalist view that pre-colonial and early colonial times (with the deplorable exception of Aurangzeb's reign) were characterized by entirely peaceful relations between the major religious groups, it cannot be taken to endorse the 'two nation' theory either. What seems difficult to show is that there was any unilinear or cumulative growth of communal identity before 1860. Indeed, one may very well doubt whether there was ever an identifiable 'Muslim', 'Hindu' or 'Sikh' identity which could be abstracted from the particular circumstances of individual events or specific societies. The notions of 'identity' or 'consciousness', so widespread in the literature now, whether applied to peasants or ethnic groups, seems most dubious on methodological and philosophical grounds, quite apart from the virtual impossibility of proving empirically that such entities ever existed. In some ways, the *Annales* term 'mentalité' seems much more acceptable, implying as it does a more variable, ambiguous or fragmented form of consciousness and one that is partly contingent on social and economic circumstances

rather than constructive of them. All in all, it seems fair to say that many forms of political and economic change in India in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were accompanied by conflicts over religious symbols when social and economic groups temporarily perceived themselves and others as 'communities'. Certainly, there existed reform and revitalization movements which reflected ideological shifts among learned and committed men in all religious traditions. But these did not necessarily lead to conflict between communities, or even a pervading sense of social separateness.

Many of the incidents which have come to light must be regarded as contingent. They resulted from chance political events or the clashing of festivals. But ultimately, the evidence presented in this paper tends to re-emphasize the importance of preconditions in social structures for sustained communal violence. Analyses of consciousness seem to lead nowhere if taken out of context. Religious differences were more likely to become communal conflicts when they coincided with shifts in political and economic power. Conflicts between Hindu and Sikh peasantry and Muslim gentry, or between Muslim peasantry and Hindu gentry did not inevitably lead to polarization on communal lines. Preconditions are not the same as causes. But in the context of severe crises such as those attendant on Mughal decline, early colonial rule or the Depression of the 1930s they provided pre-existing lines of social fracture.