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## From Protesters to Martyrs: How to Become a 'True' Sikh

Lionel Baixas & Charlène Simon

**Abstract.** This article studies the protest which started in Punjab in May 2007 following a ceremony performed by Baba Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh (GRRS), head of Dera Sacha Sauda, which was considered as blasphemous by a section of the Sikh community. The aim of this article is to understand the motivation of the actors of the protest itself: How did the Sikh protesters legitimate their reaction one year later? What kinds of reasons have led hundreds of Sikhs from very different social background to take the streets? What kind of emotions played a role in the Sikhs' mobilization?

*Vangar* (Challenge)

If you want peace, warriors, then pick up your swords.  
Enemy is coming for you and will challenge you.  
Our ancestors shall condemn us for sitting quietly.  
If we salute a lie, what kind of Sikhs are we?  
Those who fly high as a hawk do not value their death,  
As they take pride in what they do, you have to become hostile if you love Sikhism.  
You have to enlighten the path  
Of the community with the glitter of your weapons.  
Sing the hymns of the Gurus, this is their acceptance.  
We have to liberate our community and cut down the cords of slavery.  
The debt is still pending as renegades led to the Fall of Akal Takht.  
Our Gurus have told us: 'Respect shall be respected with heads'.  
You are born out of Khanda. Do not sit idle gentlemen,  
Get up and jump into the fields and sharpen your swords.  
Listen to the Guru because He is whole and soul of your acts.  
Swaran Singh, Kotdharam.

[1] On 11<sup>th</sup> May 2007, the Dera Sacha Sauda<sup>1</sup> a sect whose headquarters are located in Sirsa district, Haryana, performed a ceremony called *Jaam-e-Insa*<sup>2</sup>. This ceremony was held at its main branch in Punjab situated at Salabatpura village in Bathinda district, the heartland of the Malwa region. Two days later, on 13<sup>th</sup> May, several major English and Punjabi newspapers published pictures of the Baba performing the ceremony along with a short description of the rituals practiced there. Baba Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh, largely inspired by the way Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Sikh Guru) created the Khalsa<sup>3</sup>, asked seven of his followers to drink an elixir called *Jaam* and to renounce their caste name for the term *insa* (short for *insaniyat* or

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<sup>1</sup> A *dera* is a place of worship and Sacha Sauda means true bargain with god and refers to an event of the life of Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, in which he used the money his father gave him to feed some Saddhus instead of purchasing some goods in the city that he could then sell in the village to make some profit as his father asked him. Nanak truly felt he had done a true bargain and this event is interpreted as the origin of the institution of *langar*, the free kitchen to be found in every *gurdwara* open to everyone. The DSS presents itself not as a new religion or sect (in the Indian sense) but rather as an all-embracing spiritual movement. This ecumenism is clearly expressed in their chief's name: Ram refers to Hinduism, Raheem to Islam and Singh to Sikhism.

<sup>2</sup> We are thankful to Laurent Gayer for his precious reading advices. We are also very grateful to Christine Moliner, to Professors Gurharpal Singh and W.H McLeod and to Aarij Bashir for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa in order to distinguish the Sikhs and to generate a feeling of community belonging among them. In that perspective, Guru Gobind Singh insisted on the importance of wearing five symbols as well as the adoption of the name Singh for men and Kaur for women. He also instituted the initiatory ritual, which consists in taking *amrit* – a sweet liquid which is considered to be a symbol of the divine nectar- by getting the Panj Piare—literally the 'Five Beloved' – baptised.

humanity). This initiation ceremony was a symbolic rebirth by which the disciple could enter a community where the caste hierarchy does not exist anymore. In the picture published by the press, Baba Gurmeet Singh was dressed in a pink (the colour of DSS) dress, which looked very similar to the one in which Guru Gobind Singh is usually depicted in the calendar art and shown distributing *Jaam* to followers.

[2] The DSS had been established in 1948. At the beginning it was a branch of the Dera Radhasoami (Beas), one of the most popular sects among several castes in Punjab, which spread a system of rituals and beliefs very close to Sikhism. Several sects similar to DSS are very active in Punjab. Babas, gurus, saints and *deras* have always occupied an important place in the religious landscape of Punjab. If the Sikh community is commonly perceived, despite all its internal controversies (McLeod 1989), as a religious congregation in itself, which share a common belief in a set of myths, rituals, symbols as well as in the Guru Granth Sahib, it has not always been the case. In its early days, the Sikh Panth (literally the 'Way' and symbolically designating the enlarged Sikh community) appeared as a multitude of distinct sects led by various gurus (Oberoi 1994: 139-207). Fluidity and plurality were thus inherent to Sikhism. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, a process of institutionalization, which implied both the construction of highly delimited boundaries between religious communities (Jones 1973: 457-475) and the homogenization of the Sikh identity, took place within Sikhism. Although the Singh Sabha movement successfully promoted the Tat Khalsa (pure khalsa) identity as the unique and ultimate Sikh identity, especially among the Jats (Oberoi 1994: 207-381), popular religion managed to survive and *deras* are still flourishing nowadays. The main difference between Sikhism and the ritualistic system of beliefs promoted by these *deras* lies in the faith of their followers in a living master. This living master is an aberration in itself to the Sikh orthodoxy since in Sikhism the Guru Granth Sahib is the only holder of the divine knowledge. Nevertheless, the presence of these *deras* is tolerated by the orthodox Sikhs as soon as they show respect to the Guru Granth Sahib and to the main symbols of Sikhism and before 2007 no clashes occurred between the DSS and the orthodox Sikhs.

[3] A day after the publication of the news, on 14<sup>th</sup> May, hundreds of Sikhs armed with *kirpan* (sword) took to the streets, hurling infuriated slogans against Baba GRRS. According to them by acting like Guru Gobind Singh, the Baba was identifying himself with the tenth Guru of Sikhism and, as such, was denigrating the superiority of the latter. The epicentre of this protest

was the Malwa, especially Bathinda city, where the *premis* (literally 'lovers', term used inside DSS to refer to its followers) are particularly numerous. Some demonstrations also took place, though to a lesser extent, in Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi and abroad among the Sikh Diaspora.

[4] At the time of these protests, journalists and scholars provided three distinct kinds of explanations. According to some observers, the use of Sikh religious imagery by heterodox sects more or less distant from Sikhism is enough to stir up the Sikh community's primordial passions and have frequently propelled violent protests in the past (*The Hindu* 2007). Other analysts pointed out that there was an important political dimension in this protest (Swami, Sethi 2007). When Baba Gurmeet Singh became the spiritual master of the *dera* in 2000, his nomination was supported by the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a party which is well known for its defence of the Sikh orthodoxy. But during the last Legislative Assembly elections in February 2007, the Political Affairs Wing of the DSS in Punjab advised their followers to vote for Punjab Congress Party, resulting in the unprecedented electoral victory of Congress in Malwa region, a traditional bastion of SAD. This directive and the subsequent defeat in Malwa of the SAD's main faction, led by Prakash Singh Badal, which enraged the new Chief Minister of Punjab, activated a short-term politics of revenge and exacerbated the tensions following Baba Gurmeet Singh's appearance in the press dressed up as Guru Gobind Singh. Finally, a third explanation has been provided by emphasizing the caste dimension of the conflict (Ram 2007: 4066-4074). The DSS would be composed of around 70 per cent of Scheduled Castes (SC) and would operate as a space for the political assertion of Dalits identity, whose members constitute approximately 30 per cent of Punjab's total population. This dynamic would have infuriated the Jat Sikhs, an agricultural caste which owns most of the land and dominates most of the political and religious institutions of Punjab, as they resent the rise of SC awareness and intend to preserve their power.

[5] This wide range of explanations and the variety of motivations they suggest, show how complex it is to determine afterwards the cause of such a protest. The first one, by presenting the Sikhs as an archetype of the 'outraged community' who will systematically react violently against any misuse of its symbols, is too essentialist. If religious affects can play a role in this kind of collective mobilization, their real influence on the participation in the dissent needs to be more rigorously assessed. The second explanation, much more instrumentalist, also lacks of pertinence. Electoral politics may have played the role of an amplifier but such a hypothesis is unable to take into account the religious dimension claimed by the protesters as the only

justification to their violent reaction. The last one lacks empirical assessment: most of the followers of the DSS come from lower castes, while its main leaders belong to upper castes, starting from Baba GRRS himself who is a Jat. Our fieldwork at the DSS' premises has shown us that the sect cannot in any case be considered as a space for the political assertion of the Dalits, since in their discourses DSS' representatives made it clear that SC are for this *dera* just a mean to increase their following but there is no specific politics toward SC assertion. Moreover the behaviour of the Sikh orthodoxy towards the Dalits is really ambiguous and cannot be reduced to such an open fight (Simon forthcoming), all the more so that the deprecation of the Dalits from the Malwa doesn't allow them to be a real threat to the domination of the Jat Sikhs.

[6] These three explanations may have played a role in the protest but they have been formulated by outsiders who have adopted a macroscopic point of view, which is unable to explain how the emotions of the Sikh protesters have been 'organized' (Latté forthcoming). A protest is always an occasion for the protesters, as well as for the rabble-rousers, to introduce themselves in a certain way and to enact a social position. The aim of this article is to understand the motivation of the actors of the protests itself: How did the Sikh protesters legitimate their reaction one year later? What kinds of reasons have led hundreds of Sikhs, *Keshdharis* as well as *Sahajdharis*<sup>4</sup>, from very different social backgrounds to take to the streets? What kind of emotions played a role in the Sikhs' mobilization?

[7] The empirical material used in this study is based on the Indian press, on academic writings and on semi-directive interviews with Sikh protesters without any kind of affiliation with Sikh organizations, with Sikh leaders in Amritsar, Bathinda, Mansa and Patiala, with DSS followers and officials in Sirsa<sup>5</sup>. It is finally based on participant observation of the commemoration ceremony of the memory of Kamaljeet Singh, the first *shaheed* (martyr) of this protest held at his family's residence in Sangrur district on May 18th, 2008. In order to really understand the influence of the emotions in the decision to take part in protest, we have also taken into account the opinion of a few Sikhs who claimed they had felt offended by the DSS controversy but who have not participated in the protest.

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<sup>4</sup> *Keshdhari* Sikhs: other name for the Sikhs who belong to the Khalsa - Sikh orthodoxy. *Sahajdhari* Sikhs: Sikhs who didn't take the Khalsa initiation and do not wear its five symbols but who consider themselves as Sikhs according to their beliefs.

<sup>5</sup> All these interviews have been conducted during a fieldwork in Punjab and Haryana from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> April 2008.

[8] The first part of this article will focus on the first sequence of the protest, which carried out by individuals without any institutional framing. The actors' narratives about the protest and its empirical inception will be analyzed as to qualify the role of emotions and the apparent spontaneity of their reaction. The second part will investigate the role played by various mainstream and radical, political and religious Sikh organizations in the framing of the mobilization. The third part will explain how the logic of collective mobilization has progressively been replaced by a sense of individual sacrifice and how the initial logic of protestation has been changed to a logic of commemoration.

### **The making of a communal protest**

[9] Some previous studies (Goodwin et al. 2001: 15) have shown that in most of the cases the participants of a protest present themselves as rational actors by highlighting the material interests they wanted to defend through their participation. But the Sikh opponents to the DSS we met have emphasized the affective dimension of their involvement. Most of them expressed a suffering – 'I have been hurt'<sup>6</sup> - sometimes accompanied by a physical description of their reaction: 'My blood heated. If he [Baba GSRR] would have been in front of me, I would have shot him. This was the feeling of every Sikhs'<sup>7</sup>. In any case, according to them, the mobilization was 'hundred percent emotional'. It was the consequence of an unexpected outrage which was unthinkable: 'We were suddenly shocked and we really wondered what was happening'<sup>8</sup>, that is to say a 'moral shock' (Jasper 1998: 409).

[10] Since the representative Sikh organizations remained silent during the three first days after the publication of the news, the insulted Sikh masses felt that it was their responsibility to protest to prove what the true Sikh identity is: 'To protest meant being a Khalsa'<sup>9</sup>. This association by the protesters between their religious identity and their duty to react publicly results from the historiography that is valorised by mainstream Sikhism: 'There is a motto in our religion which says '*Gur ki ninda sune na kaan bheta kare sang kirpaan*' – 'If somebody says any

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<sup>6</sup> Expression commonly used by most of our Sikhs interlocutors while talking about the DSS controversy.

<sup>7</sup> A Sikh from Haryana who lives 270km away from the DSS (2008). Interview by the authors, 14 March, Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> Sikh students of Patiala University (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

<sup>9</sup> President of the Patiala Sikh Students Federation (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

bad word or any bad utterance about your Guru, you should pierce that person with the sword"<sup>10</sup>. Since the Singh Sabha movement, which has laid the basis of Sikh orthodoxy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by stressing the opposition between the Sikhs, the Hindus and the Muslims, heroism and martyrdom have been presented as the two main characteristics of Sikh identity. From the beginning of the existence of the Sikh community as a *qaum*<sup>11</sup>, the idea of its persecution by the other religious communities has always been stressed by the orthodoxy. This threat on Sikh identity has been nurtured by events like the desecration of the Golden Temple during the Operation Blue Star and the Sikh pogroms in Delhi as well as the Khalistani movement. This exacerbated feeling of persecutions has led Sikh orthodoxy to be very sensitive about the use of its symbols by the heterodox *deras* located in Punjab. In the past, two violent clashes occurred between the Sikh community and such *deras*: the first with the Nirankaris in 1978<sup>12</sup> and the second with the Dera Bhanjaravalla<sup>13</sup> in 2000-2001.

[11] Thus, in the eyes of the protesters, the protest is embedded into an 'emotional habitus' (Calhoun 2001: 53) and acquires, therefore, a meaning in itself: 'For both moral outrage and pride, *the assertion of agency* itself constituted part of the meaning of those acts.

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<sup>10</sup> President of the Patiala Sikh Students Federation (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

<sup>11</sup> In the Indian context, the term *qaum* is used to define a 'great' religious tradition which has important communitarian as well as orthodox dimensions such as the Christians, the Muslims or the Sikhs.

<sup>12</sup> On 13<sup>th</sup> April 1978, the Akhand Kirtani Jatha gathered together from all over India at Amritsar to hold their yearly festival called Vaisakhi Smagam. At the same time followers of Nirankari chief Gurbachan Singh were holding a procession in Amritsar and were shouting insulting slogans directed at the Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikh religion. Members of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha and of the Damdami Taksal, organizations which believed that the Nirankari sect was a stooge of the Indian government and part of the latter conspiracy to undermine the Sikh faith and community, went on to protest against this congregation. A clash ensued and 13 Sikhs were fired at. A case was then registered against Gurbachan Singh but he was eventually acquitted. He was subsequently killed by Bhai Ranjit Singh, an Akhand Kirtani Jatha member, on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1980. Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale emerged after the Amritsar Massacre, which is often depicted as the starting point of the Khalistan movement – an ethnonationalist and secessionist movement meant to secure a Sikh homeland where Sikhism could be preserved –, as the pivotal figure spearheading the Sikh response to the Indian government of Indira Gandhi.

<sup>13</sup> During the summer 2000, Baba Bhanjara asked some of his followers to compose a new sacred book: the Bhavsagar Granth, because the use of the Guru Granth Sahib to performed an *akhand path* – propitiatory ritual in Sikhism which consists in the uninterrupted reading of the Guru Granth Sahib during three days– has been refused to one of his SC disciple. In the summer 2001, the Bhavsagar Granth, whose content was very similar to the Guru Granth Sahib, was used in the premises of the *dera* and the Baba showed himself dressed like Guru Gobind Singh on particular occasions. Some orthodox Sikh organizations considered this as an offence and launched an attack against this *dera* in September 2001. Then the government of Punjab prohibited the Bhavsagar Granth, all the branches of the *dera* were either destroyed by some Sikhs protesters or placed under the management of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) and Baba Bhanjara was arrested.

Participation per se expressed moral outrage, asserted a claim to dignity, and gave ground for pride' (Wood 2001: 268). This way of relating present emotion with a specific communal tradition has a great influence on the decision to protest, on the form of the mobilization – during our interviews, many marchers have stressed the importance of wearing 'arms' while demonstrating – but above all, on the way the protesters conceive and interpret their reaction. In this particular case, the emotional component of the protest can only be understood as a respect to and not as a transgression of social norms. Emotions follow their own rationality and if outrage plays any role in the political culture of dissent, it is only because the community which reacts on this basis valorised this kind of emotional reaction in its repertoires of collective action.

[12] Nonetheless, many interviews reveal that the offence itself was not the only reason for getting involved in collective demonstrations. The important press coverage of the ceremony has also played a great role in the upsurge of the communal action, because it gave an awareness of the events to a large numbers of Sikhs scattered geographically. The media was used by the DSS from the very beginning, since the later send them a complete set of pictures and details about the *Jaam-e-Insa* ceremony which was performed at Salabatpura on the 11th, whereas one week earlier the same ceremony occurred for the first time in their headquarters without any press coverage. This manoeuvre shows the obvious will of the DSS to provoke the Sikhs, knowing that such a public provocation could only trigger the thunderbolt of the Sikh community<sup>14</sup>: 'So long as they do not come in direct clash with Sikhism, like they hold a ceremony that goes against the principles of Sikhism or they make such a statement that is denigrating the Sikh Gurus or the Sikh institutions, then there will be no clash. Since its [DSS] inception in 1947 there was no clash. If this time there has been a clash for the first time it is because of the advertisement'<sup>15</sup>. A comparison with the minor scale contest against the Dera Bhanjaravalla in the summer 2001 illustrates this role of the press, which did not convey any details about the event at that time, in allowing or not an offence to propel a collective movement.

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<sup>14</sup> The hypothesis of a deliberate provocation from the DSS appears to us as an obvious fact since in Punjab all the religious leaders of sects considered as 'heretics' by the Sikh orthodoxy know the following rule pretty well as shown by M. Juergensmeyer (1988). Nonetheless our fieldwork at the DSS did not allow us to understand the reasons of this provocation since the followers we met there were very sensitive about this issue and suspicious towards us.

<sup>15</sup> President of the Patiala Sikh Students Federation (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

[13] Besides, by showing explicitly the physical injuries faced by the first Sikh marchers, the pictures published by the press urged their coreligionists to take part in the confrontation to restore the honour of the Sikh fold: 'People became very angry when they saw everything on TV. First of all they [Baba GRRS and its followers] committed a crime [imitation of Guru Gobind Singh] and then they physically attacked the Sikhs on the 14<sup>th</sup>, and then they gave us open challenges'<sup>16</sup>. Thus it is not only the attack on religious symbols which explains the magnitude of the dispute as well as the huge number of protesters, but also the physical attacks on Sikhs. This sense of solidarity towards the Sikhs injured while trying to restore the pride of the Sikh folk played a great role in increasing the number of 'offended' Sikhs.

[14] This aggression towards the Sikh bodies was all the more powerful in terms of mobilization than it refers to one of the ideological basis of Sikhism, which urges the Sikhs to go beyond the mere status of victims. 'It is unacceptable that any Sikh man should, under any circumstances, no matter the odds, accept without resistance a violent attack against themselves and against their women and children'. The constitution of the Sikh Self is 'heroic' (Das 1995: 10). Hence, the 'heroic mode' (Yang 2005) which is promoted in contemporary Sikh historiography did have a major influence in the emotional sketches which have determined the decision to react forcefully: 'I was studying for my final exam at that time but I gave up everything to protest. I did not feel any fear at that time. I was so aggressive that I think I could have killed anybody at that moment! I was also ready to die'<sup>17</sup>. This 'bravery' was all the more needed then as the DSS' followers openly challenged the Sikhs when they heard about their will to demonstrate. In Patiala, when the Sikhs asked for the closure of the main market and publicised their demonstration journey, a few DSS' followers threatened to kill them if they entered certain places, stirring up the Sikhs' anger: 'They have challenged us! We had no other choice than continuing the fight!'<sup>18</sup>

[15] The process of violent reactions and counter reactions between the Sikhs and the DSS' followers, who also felt insulted when the Sikh demonstrators started burning the effigies of their Baba, led to a spiral of outrage that contributed to increase the scale as well as the vehemence of the popular protest.

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<sup>16</sup> Sikh protesters from Patiala (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

<sup>17</sup> A Sikh student of Patiala University (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

<sup>18</sup> Sikh protesters from Patiala (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

[16] The presence of an identified opponent who retaliates to the collective action is also an essential factor which needs to be taken into account in order to understand the form taken by the protest movement and its ability to heavily recruit new comers. The concentration of these Sikh protests in Bathinda and Mansa districts, where most of the Punjabi followers of the DSS are living and where some branches of this *dera* are located, illustrates how important is the physical proximity of the enemy to allow a collective mobilization to take place.

[17] The haste in which the protest took shape was clearly due to the very efficient mobilization of the Sikh relational networks either by phone or by proximity: 'When we saw the picture of Baba GRRS trying to imitate Guru Gobind Singh, we all phoned to our relatives and decided to meet at the *gurdwara* at 9 o'clock in order to decide what kind of actions could be undertaken. Around 1000 people attended this meeting'<sup>19</sup>. For a Sikh the most important thing is to maintain his *izzat* in the eyes of his environment. This notion of *izzat*, which has been defined by Pettigrew as 'the complex of values regarding what was honorable' (Pettigrew 1975: 58-59) not only implies a number of concerns such as power, reciprocity, protection of one's social status but also a constant judgment from the other members of the Sikh community. Thus, when Sikh individuals were called by members of their relational networks to join the demonstration in order to defend the Sikh sense of honour, they had no other choice but to get involved, in order to preserve their own social status. In this case, the *izzat* worked all the more as a driving force for the protesters as it was not only a matter of preserving the honour of one's family but also to restore the honour of the entire Sikh community. As Dusenbery (1990) has noticed, Jat Sikhs are so deeply concerned with their *izzat* that this moral as well as emotional component of their self-construction needs to be taken into account to fully understand their political culture of dissent.

[18] The presence of an historical meeting place, the *gurdwara*, which has ever played an important role in the Sikh culture of dissent, has also facilitated the gathering of outraged Sikhs: 'A *gurdwara* is not just a place of worship. It is the centre of all activities of the Sikhs. Actually, all along our history, it was never treated as a place of worship only. Even our Sikh Gurus used to gather in *gurdwara* all along the 18<sup>th</sup> century to decide all political matters'<sup>20</sup>. The choice of this particular place of gathering was also a part of the 'show' which was performed by the Sikh masses while demonstrating. 'Protest events involve ritual practices, symbolic gestures and

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<sup>19</sup> Sikh protesters from Patiala (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

<sup>20</sup> President of the Patiala Sikh Students Federation (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

shared experiences of empowering, collective effervescence which affect the move from framed emotions to action and from individual to collective, narrative identity' (Flam, King 2005: 4-5). The testimonies given by some protesters in Patiala show that the *ardas* (Sikh propitiatory prayer; the second section of which is entirely devoted to the invocation of the memory of the Sikhs martyrs) was carried out at the end of the *gurdwara* meeting and before the 16<sup>th</sup> May demonstration. The same kind of process is again found in the example of the students' mobilization: 'a meeting was organized in one of the students' room in each hostel, on the 15<sup>th</sup> in the evening to allow all Sikh students to perform a collective *ardas*<sup>21</sup>. Then a few students of each hostel met to decide the form of the protest and 'at the end of this meeting we bring back our *kirpan*, hoisted the Nishan Sahib [flag with the Khanda –Sikh emblem–] in front of our hostels, gathered as much people as possible and started to demonstrate all around the campus to the University gate'<sup>22</sup>. Both these testimonies show how the use of religious symbols and rituals contributed to a dramatization of the event that increased the protesters' feeling of bravery and gave a wider significance to their action, as if the future of the Sikh faith depended on them.

[19] Nonetheless both of these protests lasted only for a few hours and a great dissonance can be noticed between the way the actors portrayed themselves as individuals who felt so offended and whose anger was so powerful that they had no other solution but to show publicly their emotions by protesting and participating in the collective action. If all the Sikhs consulted felt insulted, very few of them did really take part in the protest and most of the time, the people who expressed the highest irritation towards the outrage are the ones who did not actually join the collective movement. Very often the Sikhs who did not protest justify their disengagement by stressing the fact that they were not available at that time because of some professional, academic, family reasons. By consequence, the feeling of being outraged cannot be considered as 'the' trigger event which will prompt someone into collective action. If this feeling makes the individual wonder whether he should react or not, the implementation of the collective action is not irreversible at all and depends much more on individual priorities and on social pressures exerted by some kinship and friendship networks on the individual. Moreover, as soon as the protest was institutionalized, this kind of emotion that arises spontaneously as reflection of one's unconscious mechanisms of self construction, faded away.

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<sup>21</sup> Sikh students of Patiala University (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

<sup>22</sup> Sikh students of Patiala University (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

## When Sikh organizations came to play their role

[20] After remaining silent for a while, the main Sikh religious organizations, the SGPC and the Akal Takht (Sikh supreme temporal and religious authority) were forced to intervene due to the violence of the popular mobilization against the DSS. Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, the current Akal Takht Jathedar (head priest appointed by the SGPC), convened a *Sarbat Khalsa* (assembly of the whole community) on 17<sup>th</sup> May at Takht Sri Damdama Sahib in Talwandi Sabo in the heart of the Malwa region, where *Premis'* presence and Sikh protests were the strongest. At the end of the meeting, the Akal Takht stated a *hukumnama* (edict) calling for a social boycott of DSS' followers, a ban on its activities in Punjab and the arrest of Baba Gurmeet Singh within ten days. This intervention, through old conventional tools which were reinvented by militants during the Khalistan movement, contributed to significantly frame the collective mobilization by fitting people's emotions into more conventional and legitimate patterns. The Akal Takht tried to contain people's anger and to prevent the spread of violence by inscribing the protest into a legal frame: the carrying of *kirpans* was forbidden and the attack of *Premis* was expressively condemned. The President of the Sikh Students Federation (SFF) branch in Mansa told us: 'Following 17<sup>th</sup> May, I received orders from the Akal Takht to calm down and canalize protesters' violence and to prevent the most radical elements from participating in demonstrations. I was myself ordered not to participate in any demonstration and to organize the protest at the local level [Jhandoke, Mansa district].'

[21] Following the first *hukumnama*, the Akal Takht called for a peaceful *bandh* (strike) on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, reiterated its ultimatum to the Punjab government in other *hukumnamas*, organized a 'peace march' on 31<sup>st</sup> May and asked for formal apologies from Baba Gurmeet Singh to the Sikh Panth. Three successive apologies were published in the press by the DSS but all were rejected by the Akal Takht because they were mere unsigned 'expression of regret'. Despite this collapse of the Sikh diplomacy, by the beginning of June, the protest was slowing down as neither the Akal Takht nor the Punjab government – though it was led by the premier Sikh political party, the SAD – tried to implement the edict which soon became a dead letter.

[22] This attitude represents a major change in Punjab politics. Since the Gurdwara Reform Movement of 1920-25, the Sikh polity in Punjab traditionally revolves around three power centres: the SGPC president, the SAD president, and the leader of SAD legislative wing who

automatically becomes chief minister when the party wins elections. Both the SGPC and the SAD came to represent the ultimate institutional expressions of the identity of the Sikhs and its communal and political consciousness. They entertain close, even symbiotic ties with each other and the boundaries between religion and politics have always tended to be blurred in Punjab as the Akalis are likely to strategically use religious issues to foster their own political interests and those of the Punjabi Sikh Community. Prakash Singh Badal, the leader of the main Akali faction and the current Chief Minister of Punjab, was hence expected by the Sikhs to support the Akal Takht's move against the DSS as it was the case in 2001 when he, also as Chief Minister, asked for the closure of Bhaniarawala's *deras* and for the arrest of its head.

[23] However, the Punjab government soon dissociated itself from the protest by saying that the *hukumnamas* were to be implemented by the DSS, not by the government. Badal then compelled the SGPC and the Akal Takht to soften their stand and the protesters to respect legality by claiming that: 'No one will be allowed to disturb the hard-earned atmosphere of peace and communal harmony and the government will deal firmly with anyone trying to take law in its hands'. Badal's conciliatory behavior was partly due to the wealth and popularity of the DSS and to the huge national media coverage of the controversy. But the most decisive factor was the way the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), SAD's ally in the Punjab coalition government, pressurized him to act immediately and firmly to diffuse sectarian tension, otherwise it would leave the government. As put by the Punjab BJP spokesperson: 'The image of shops being forcibly shut and damaged by Sikh youth brought back memories of the days of militancy [Khalistan movement] to our supporters. The Baba has undoubtedly done wrong but the inaction by the Badal government is not justified. We want Badal to ensure that the radical elements of the Sikh community do not take centre stage'.

[24] While experiencing a tension between its ecclesiastical-organizational dimension and its political dimension, the SAD (B) gave preference to its own political interests over the defense of the Sikh faith. Badal subsequently managed to pressurize the SGPC and the Akal Takht due to the current specific configuration of the Sikh political system. Since 1985, Badal is occupying both the post of SAD president and of leader of the legislative wing and recently his son became SAD president while he remained Punjab Chief Minister. It is the first time in Akali politics that such a dynastic move occurred. Moreover, since 1999, Badal managed to impose his hegemony over the SGPC and the Akal Takht by replacing their heads with loyalists (Vaugier-Chatterjee 1999:

96-101). This hegemony and the compulsions of coalition politics thus forced Badal to unwillingly act as an agent of moderation and secularization in Punjab politics (Narang 1999: 664-65). Indeed, by the end of May onward, only sporadic and small-scale protests took place.

[25] Badal's successful intervention to stall the protest against the DSS was strongly resented by a small group of former Khalistanis who had dedicated their life to the independence of a Punjab state during the 1980s-90s and are now reconverted into conventional politics. They stigmatized Badal as a 'traitor to the Sikh Panth' and accused the SGPC and the Akal Takht of being his stooges. According to Daljit Singh Bittu, the current convener of Khalsa Action Committee, 'This SGPC is under the direct control of SAD. They are not independent, even these Jathedars from Takhts, they are just like the employees of SGPC and SGPC is entirely the employee of Badal. They have killed all the real structures of Sikh institutions. Akal Takht is not independent now, it's under control'. As a consequence, they felt the need to merge their various radical political and religious organizations into a common platform from which they could spearhead the struggle against the DSS: the Khalsa Action Committee (KAC). The main aim of the KAC, as explained by its former convener and President of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, is to implement the demands expressed in the *hukumnama*: 'If SGPC was taking its responsibilities, there would be no need to create the KAC. The KAC was created to take action against the DSS because the mainstream Sikh organizations refused to act, to honor the Sikhs and to punish GRRS. It was also formed to put pressure on both Punjab and central government'.

[26] Contrary to the Akal Takht and SAD (B), the protagonists of the KAC tried to preserve and prolong the emotional dimension of the initial collective action. KAC leaders presented themselves as the real leaders of the masses, criticized the corruption of other Sikh leaders and denounced the manipulation of the 'Hindu (anti-minority) state'. This minority group interprets this controversy with the DSS as one more confirmation of their perception of the reality: the 'brahmanical' state is once again trying to undermine the Sikh community. This feeling of an historical injustice towards the Sikhs organized by a Hindu conspiracy as well as their strong minority complex (Sikhs are barely a majority in Punjab (55%) and a minority (2%) at the national level) have always been stressed by the Sikh orthodoxy to foster great mobilizations among Sikhs. This rhetoric of the Sikhs as a threatened community was first used by the Singh Sabha movement (1875-1905), was later reiterated by the Gurdwara Reform movement (1920-

25), by the Punjabi Suba movement (1950-66), by the Anandpur Sahib Resolution (1973) as well as by the Khalistan movement (1978-95), and is still an important argument exposed by the KAC to legitimate its protest against the DSS. Thus, for all these ex-Khalistani militants to protest means to defend their ideals; ideals that have already driven most of them through the sufferings of torture and imprisonment. Today all these militants have reintegrated a society, which has neither really believed in their fight nor really valorised their involvement<sup>23</sup>. This kind of protest is an opportunity for them to recreate a social role, which they had already endorsed before and which will allow their lifelong involvement to gain some kind of legitimacy in the eyes of the other members of the society.

[27] Since its inception, the KAC constitutes the sole common platform from which the protest against the DSS is still organized. It undertook various activities such as protest marches and lectures on *deras*' threat in general and especially on the struggle against the DSS. However, these events, which occurred from time to time, drew only deceptively small crowds, far smaller than during the first week of the protest. As time went on, the intensity of the emotions faded away and the presence of outraged protesters irremediably fell off. The KAC completely fail to revive the protest to its initial scale. At the same time, the repertoire of action gradually shifted: from collective mobilization to individual sacrifice, and from protestation to commemoration.

### **The use of the 'traditional' Sikh repertoire of mobilization**

[28] The KAC tried to exploit people's emotions through the instrumentalization of martyrdom, a traditional heroic idiom particularly strong in the Sikh religion and history (Fenech 2005), with the hope to revive the movement. These so called Sikh 'martyrs' have not willingly chosen to die for the defense of Sikhism, as their newly constructed hagiography points it, but were mere victims in the course of the protest. They were only subsequently transformed from victims into martyrs in order to emulate others to kill Baba Gurmeet Singh.

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<sup>23</sup> Laurent Gayer states: 'The majority of the Sikh population, in Punjab as well as in the Diaspora, has very soon turn its interest away from the Khalistani movement, whose popular supports have always been restricted, mostly reduced to the most practicing sections of the Jat caste, who appreciated the revivalist speeches of Bhindranwale'. (forthcoming article)

[29] Kamaljeet Singh, a married electrician of 27 years age living in a village of Sangrur district, was the first to be elevated, only ten days after his death<sup>24</sup> and in the presence of all the major Sikh leaders, to the status of *shaheed* (martyr) that is 'the one who lays down his life at the feet of his Guru by love for his Guru'. His decision to take part in the protest seemed to arise not only from a genuine sense of outrage but also from his need to assert that he is a 'true' Sikh in his quest for social recognition. According to his wife, his 'conversion' to Sikhism was due to his lack of integration in his village. Kamaljit Singh actually belonged to the Sunyar caste, an unusual fact in Punjab especially for a Sikh as it is a Brahmin caste. He was the first member of his family to take *amrit*. Since then he devoted most of his time to do *sewa* (community service) and created a small organization to promote the Sikh faith.

[30] However, though Kamaljeet Singh was among the perpetrators who first attack the *dera*, as per his wife's testimony, he was not willingly ready to die, hence resembling more a victim than a martyr. As a matter of fact, it is neither the manner nor the reason of his death that makes him a *shaheed* but the subsequent reconstruction of it by others. Referring to the martyrs of the Khalistan movement, Laurent Gayer explains that 'the individual sacrificial trajectories then faded into the martyrdom strategies displayed by identity entrepreneurs. Through these hagiographic discourses, the martyr becomes a political artifact' (Gayer 2006: 114). Kamaljeet's death experienced the same post-mortem hagiographic phenomenon. He has been quickly introduced in the pantheon of the Khalistan *shaheeds* as it can be seen in this picture bought in June 2008 in the small market next to the Golden Temple complex.

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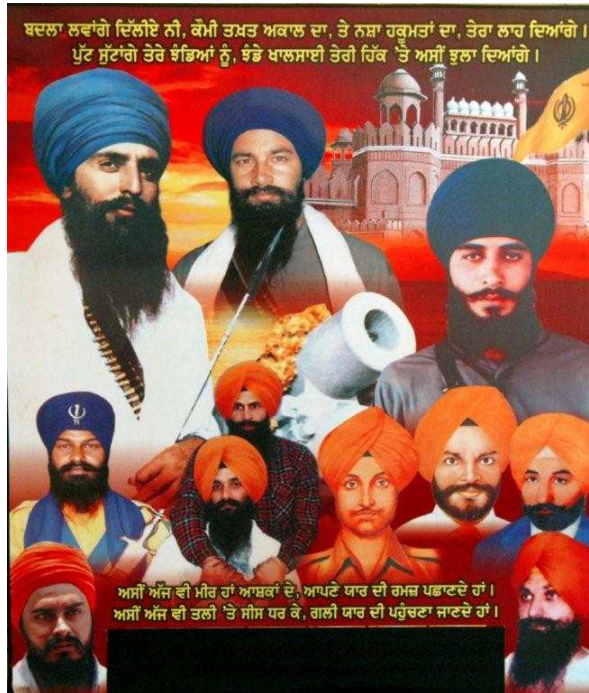
<sup>24</sup> On 17<sup>th</sup> May 2007, following the Sarbat Khalsa at Damdama Sahib in Talwandi Sabo, a group of angry protesters attacked the main branch of DSS in Punjab at Salabatpura on their way back to Sangrur despite the exhortation addressed by the Sikh leaders not to indulge into violence. Kamaljeet Singh was among the assailants. He was stabbed several times in the chest by Premis during the clash and died the day after at the hospital from his injuries.

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Baixas, Lionel; Simon, Charlene (2008) 'From Protesters to Martyrs: How to Become a 'True' Sikh', *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, Special Issue - Nb. 2, 'Outraged Communities': Comparative Perspectives on the Politicization of Emotions in South Asia. URL: <http://samaj.revues.org/document1532.html>. To quote a passage, use paragraph (§).

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### **Hagiographic painting of the most famous Khalistan *shaheeds***



Top, from left to right: Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, head of Damdami Taksal and iconic figure of the Khalistan movement, Bhai Amrik Singh, his right-hand man and President of All India Sikh Student Federation, and Surinder Singh Sodhi; Mid-range, from left to right: Kamaljeet Singh, Bhai Sukhdev Singh Sukha and Bhai Harjinder Singh Jinda, who killed General Vaidiya, the architect of Blue Star Operation, and Bhai Satwant Singh, Bhai Kehar Singh and Bhai Beant Singh, the conspirators and killers of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; down: Bhai Jagtar Singh Hawara and Bhai Balwant Singh, who killed Chief Minister of Punjab Beant Singh.

[31] While his wife first stressed the uselessness of her husband's death, she then reverted to the same discourse by explaining to us: 'He died for the sake of his nation and sacrificed his life for his Guru, which is, for me, a permanent source of pride and strength'. It represents for her a way to capitalize on her husband's death in order to get symbolic and material advantages.

[32] Three Sikhs, Swaran Singh, Mohinder Singh and Hoshiar Singh, later tried to emulate this tradition of heroism and martyrdom by attempting to kill Gurmeet Singh through a bomb blast with RDX against his convoy on GT road in Karnal district, Haryana, on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2008, allegedly under the guidance of a former Khalistani militant called Bakhshish Singh, but all failed and were jailed. These candidates to martyrdom are young male Sikhs, relatively educated but coming from backward rural areas, which see their sacrifice as an opportunity to glorify them and to enhance their family's prestige. The case of Swaran Singh, an unmarried 26 years old painter, is particularly interesting as he is coming from a family of Namdhari<sup>25</sup> and took *amrit* only two years ago. As Kamaljit Singh, he was a 'newborn' Sikh and probably also willing to prove the authenticity of his new Sikh identity to others. His father explained to us that the determining event which motivated his choice was a meeting with Sarabjeet Singh, an MP from Bathinda and the son of *shaheed* Beant Singh, Indira Gandhi's killer, as he was deeply moved by the respect and the success Beant's family got through his 'sacrifice'. He then became a *Keshdhari* following a Youth Awareness Camp organized by SSF in Mansa and entered the organization. Following Baba Gurmeet's offence, he was in charge of mobilizing and leading people from his village to protest. But realizing that no protestation would bear fruit, he allegedly decided to resort to violence.

[33] Daljit Singh Bittu, the current convener of the KAC, was the only one to pay a visit to the families of these *Bahadurs* (braves) and to praise their courage. It seems that for the KAC these acts now constitute the main mean to pursue the protest. He explained to us that: 'When people don't get justice, then individuals wake up and seek justice by themselves. Don't think this movement will slow down or be wiped out. Everybody knows and expects it. The KAC won't do it but individuals will'. These attempts hence fit into a constructed 'tradition' and allow its reactivation by emulating others. 'Such an occurrence may contain and collect enough energy and coherence to generate similar events in the future as well as recall the memory of those in the past. This sequence of events can set in motion a process of collective will formation whereby individual identities and biographies are fused into a collective characterized by feelings of group belongingness, solidarity, common purpose and shared memory, a movement in other words'

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<sup>25</sup> Namdhari or Kuka Sikhs are the members of an orthodox sect of Sikhism. Their main differences with mainstream Sikhs are their belief in Jagjit Singh as their living Guru and the fact that they give equal importance to the Adi Granth and the Dasam Granth (the holy book written by the 10th Guru, Guru Gobind Singh).

(Eyerman op. cit.: 45). Nonetheless, although mobilization peaked after the death of each new victim-turned-martyr<sup>26</sup>, it was only for a very short span of time and it soon receded.

[34] The politico-religious idiom of 'pugnacious dolorism' (Gayer 2008: 4), which valorised the individual suffering of the Sikh martyrs while stressing their voluntary sacrifice, has also been used in the course of the DSS' protest to prompt the collective mobilization of the Sikhs. The commemoration ceremony of the first anniversary of Kamaljit Singh's death, which took place on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2008 at his parent's place in Sangrur district had a rehearsal function that consisted in accentuating the importance of the *shaheeds* in the construction of the Sikh Panth, which is assimilated as 'a race whose history has been written in the blood of its martyrs' (Gayer 2006: 129). During the four and a half hours program in honour of Kamaljit Singh's memory, the different speakers and singers have constantly emphasised his will to die for the defence of the Sikh faith, his courage has several times been compared with the bravery of Sant Bhindrawale and the Jathedar of Talwandi Sabo has even related his fate with Guru Tegh Bahadur's and Guru Arjan's destinies. All these comparisons are parts of the didactic process, which makes contemporary Sikhs believe that they can still be actors of this long tradition aiming at protecting the authentic tenets of Sikhism: 'The sacrifice of Kamaljit Singh is a part of our history. We have to learn from our history, we have to get motivation; we have to get inspiration from it. So for us this commemoration ceremony is as important as for India to celebrate its Independence Day'<sup>27</sup>. In addition to the glorification of Kamaljit Singh who was depicted as a hero, all the speeches delivered during the ceremony urged the audience to meditate on this sacrifice and to consider it as a driving force, which should guide their future action.

[35] The tonality of the speeches delivered during this program cannot be assimilated with the free expression of an individual's feeling about the death of one of his relatives. On the

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<sup>26</sup> On 20<sup>th</sup> June 2008, a bodyguard of Baba Gurmeet Singh fired at a group of persons protesting against him in a mall in suburban Mulund in Mumbai. One Sikh protester, Balkar Singh Thakur, was injured and died later. Following his death, street violence, destruction of DSS' properties and disruption of public life occurred both in Mumbai and across Punjab. However, the protest vanished after a *rail roko* (block railway) agitation in Punjab on 25th June organized by groups affiliated to KAC. Then, on 18th July 2008 clashes occurred in Mandi Dabwali, Sirsa district, Haryana, between *Premis* and Sikh protesters when the latter tried to prevent the former to conduct their *naamcharcha* (morning prayer). A young Sikh, Mandal Singh, was killed in heavy brick-batting which left 30 other Sikhs injured. Soon thereafter, mobs went on rampage, damaged shops and set ablaze others. Curfew was imposed and army deployed in order to restore law and order.

<sup>27</sup> President of the Sikh Students Federation Patiala (2008). Interview by the authors, 25 March, Patiala.

contrary, it clearly proves the existence of a specific language register for the evocation of the martyrs in Sikhism, which contributes to the edification of a common collective memory. For the Sikhs, the commemoration is just an emotional means intending to reinforce their collective identity. This conventional role of the ceremony appears in the selection of the persons who have been called upon to deliver a speech: within the family and relatives of Kamaljit Singh, only his wife made a speech, whose emotive content was much more akin to a customary theatrical self presentation than to a spontaneous expression of her sufferings. The intervention of the other speakers, mostly local Sikh representatives such as members of the management committee of surrounding *gurdwara* and Sikh saints, and more strikingly the way the ceremony was organized, illustrates how the 'commemorative space' is also a 'conflicting space' where political stakes, ideological dissents and social will of individual assertion intermingle (Latté 2008: 3).

[36] During the celebration of Baisakhi on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2008 the KAC foretold its will to organize a program on the occasion of the first anniversary of Kamaljit Singh's death. Few days later, the SGPC and the Jathedar of Talwandi Sabo publicized their decision to organize this particular program and then planned to do it on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2008 in the main *gurdwara* of Sangrur city. Pleased to hear that the representative bodies of Sikhism were ready to fully undertake their responsibility on this issue, the KAC freed itself from the organization of the commemoration. Nevertheless on 16<sup>th</sup> May 2008 Kamaljit Singh's family was informed by the SGPC of its will to postpone the celebration. Rendered helpless by this news, Kamaljit Singh's family phoned to Daljit Singh Bittu, who immediately activated his local network to arrange a commemoration at a small scale. Three days later the commemoration took place, gathering less than 300 people, mostly members of Kamaljit Singh's family, relatives, inhabitants of the village and few local Sikh representatives who raised their voices against the 'sabotage' of the ceremony by the government of Punjab.

## Conclusion

[37] The failure of this commemoration and of the perpetuation of the protest shows how difficult it is to 'organize the emotions' (Latté forthcoming) in the long run. Despite the emotional tonalities of the testimonies of the Sikhs on the DSS' controversy, one year after its implementation, the protest had almost come to an end. None of our Sikh interlocutors, who claimed to be ready to die for their faith and stressed on the need to keep the memory of Kamaljit

Singh's sacrifice alive attended, once month later, to the commemoration of his death, nor did most of the representatives of the KAC since only Daljit Singh Bittu was present. Only for few former militants of the Khalistani movement and few people very close to this group does the protest against the DSS still have a 'raison d'être', which prompts them to act.

[38] This particular case-study of a mobilization around religious symbols should be understood as a minority mode of legitimisation in the long run but cannot be reduced to a popular mode of assertion since, even in its first stage; the demonstration gathered all kind of Sikhs, *Keshdharis* as well as *Sahajdharis*, with very different social and economic backgrounds. Moreover, that kind of protest cannot be reduced to an urban phenomenon: in this example, if the main demonstrations took place in cities, at least half of the protesters came from surrounding villages and this protest had a particular significance mostly for the rural Jat Sikh farmers of the Malwa, a region that has benefited from the Green Revolution but that is now enduring a sizeable decline. For them, the protest was also a means to reassert their domination as leaders of the Malwa, to convince themselves that they still have an influence on the society they belong to; influence that is day after day escaping from their hands.

[39] Nonetheless the ability of so many Sikhs, who have offered us very different definitions of what it means to be a Sikh, to mobilize spontaneously as soon as they felt that somebody was insulting their faith, contributes to enforce the perception of the Sikhs as the archetype of the outraged community. This case-study shows that not any community can pretend to be outraged. This specific mode of collective mobilization requires an elaborated historical tradition, as well as a constant feeling of threat on the community and the conviction of a collective honour which always needs to be reasserted and preserved. Finally, this mode of assertion is able to mobilize a large amount of people only for a short time.

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