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Amritsar. Syncretic and Sectarian Traditions among Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in an Urban Conflict

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Amritsar. Syncretic and Sectarian Traditions among Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in an Urban Conflict

The article presents memories of everyday religious, economic and social life of the inhabitants of Amritsar's walled city in the aftermath of the partition of India in 1947, based on oral history, ethnography and secondary sources. The religious conflict triggered by partition drastically transformed the urban demography and religious diversity of the city. Most of the 49% Muslim inhabitants migrated to Pakistan. Sectarian violence was traumatic for all inhabitants, as historically the city had not experienced such religious conflict. Prior to this, an important feature of the city's religious diversity were eclectic and syncretic practices among its inhabitants. The observance of festive rituals and belief in the curative and healing powers of the Golden Temple's sacred tank and Sufi shrines were integral to the city's folklore. During the ethnographic mapping of the city and by interviewing some inhabitants, I sought to answer the question of whether the experience of sectarian violence undermined local eclectic and syncretic traditions among Hindus and Sikhs after 1947 and the 1980s. I also asked if the post-1947 absence of Muslims reduced religious conflict in the city as Sikhs and Hindus perceived them as common enemies in the charged atmosphere of partition violence.

1. Introduction

With the partition of India in 1947, the city of Amritsar – located 475 km west of Delhi in Punjab – became a border city. Traditionally the religious centre of Sikh religion and home to the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib), Amritsar until 1947 had been characterised by its religious diversity and the peaceful coexistence of its Hindu, Sikh and Muslim inhabitants, as exemplified by practices of religious syncretism at the city's mosques, shrines, temples and gurdwaras. Partition, and even more so the violence in its aftermath, fundamentally altered the demographic and thus religious set-up of the city: The majority of Amritsar's Muslim families left, many for Pakistan and in many cases as a direct response to the post-partition violence. In the 1980s, sectarian violence recurred on a major scale in the city as the Damdami Taksal Movement, led by Jarmail Singh Bhindranwale, fought to separate a Sikh Khalistan state from India. The conflict culminated in Damdami Taksal's occupation of the Golden

Temple and their unsuccessful ten-day fire fight against the Indian Army over control of the temple in June 1984, leading to military and civilian casualties.

One possible interpretation of Amritsar's 20th century history is that of a city whose urbanity – characterised by practices of religious syncretism and pragmatic co-existence – was altered by episodes of sectarian violence. This prompts a series of questions. First, how do Amritsar's inhabitants today remember the sectarian violence of 1947 and 1984 – especially its impact on inter-religious relations and the narrative of Amritsar as a city of religious diversity? Second, did the experience of sectarian violence in 1984 undermine local eclectic and syncretic traditions among Hindus and Sikhs? Third, did the exodus of Amritsar's Muslims after 1947 reduce religious conflict in the city as Sikhs and Hindus perceived Muslims as common enemies in the charged atmosphere of post-partition violence?

The extent of oral history and ethnographic research on post-partition Amritsar is rather limited. Most of the literature centres on the history and contemporary world of the Golden Temple, considered to be the "Mecca" of the Sikh religion.[1] In her excellent ethnographic narrative, Radhika Chopra focusses on the newly renovated spaces around the Golden Temple, reconstructed as Heritage Street. Her main emphasis rests on analysing the coexistence of the Shani Temple and Golden Temple, a Hindu and a Sikh sacred shrine adjacent to each other. She also highlights two sectarian incidents in the city, one in 1905 and the other in 1982, without addressing the issue of communal relationship between the two communities.[2] Urvashi Butalia presents oral narratives of traumatic memories of partition survivors before leaving their homes in Pakistan.[3] G. S. Rai's edited volume is a magnificent pictorial history of Amritsar city, its heritage monuments, architecture and contemporary renovations with focus on the Golden Temple, but with barely any reference to the everyday lives of the inhabitants.[4] Walia provides important information related to some of the prominent personalities and places of the city.[5]

1 J. S. Grewal, The City of the Golden Temple, Amritsar 1986; Rajinder S. Jutla, The Evolution of Golden Temple of Amritsar into a Major Sikh Pilgrimage Centre, in: AIMS Geosciences 2:3, 2016, pp. 259-272, https://doi.org/10.3934/geosci.2016.3.259; Param Bakhshish Singh, et. al., Golden Temple, Patiala 1999.

2 Radhika Chopra, Amritsar's Heritage Street. Mapping Heritage, Eclipsing Offence, South Asia, in: Journal of South Asian Studies 44, 2021, pp. 554-567, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2021.1933719.

3 Urvashi Butalia, Partition. Memory and Memorializing, in: G. S. Rai (ed.), Amritsar. A City in Remembrance, Noida 2021, pp. 194-205.

4 G. S. Rai (ed.), Amritsar. A City in Remembrance, Noida 2021. It features photographs by Raghu Rai.

5 Varinder Singh Walia, Amritsar. A City with Glorious Legacy, Amritsar 2012.

This article is part of my larger work on the everyday social, economic and religious history of the walled city of Amritsar in the aftermath of the partition of British India in 1947. It is based on oral history, ethnography and secondary works. I walked through the city's bazaars, alleys, katras and its suburbs between October 2015 and August 2018. Prominent among these bazaars, situated to the northwest of the Golden Temple, are Katra Ahluwala and Guru Bazaar, both wholesale textile markets operating since the 19th century. The oldest one is Guru Baazar that combines a textile market and jewellery business. Katra Jaimal Singh market, destroyed during post-partition violence, is now a new and spatially broader street full of up-market showrooms selling garments. In their vicinity, post-partition Hindu and Sikh refugees set up Tahli Sahib and Shastri Markets for fabric business. Hall Bazaar, which once serviced the colonial elite, is now a market selling a diverse variety of goods including garments, televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, mobiles, watches, medicine and books. It is a major artery that links Hall Gate to the newly renovated Town Hall housing the newly built Partition Museum, Heritage Street, Jallianwala Bagh park and the Golden Temple. Three big mosques, built by Kashmiri Muslim businesspeople during the second half of the 19th century, have survived and are still functioning. One prominent Sufi shrine is located across the Hall Gate. To the south and southeast of the Golden Temple are Laxmansar and Dhab Bast Ram, wholesale groceries markets, and Majith Mandi, at one time the biggest spice and dry fruit market in India. There are small sacred shrines of different Hindu pantheons in the middle or vicinity of these bazaars and alleys, revered by shop owners and visitors alike every day.

Within the walled city – home to approximately 230,000 inhabitants – streets, alleys, *katras* and bazaars are very congested and narrow spaces. I walked randomly into the shops and establishments, a mix of Hindu and Sikh owners, in these markets. Most shop owners welcomed me assuming that I was a foreign tourist because of my attire and fair skin. They were surprised when I addressed them in the Punjabi language, which ignited their curiosity about me. I explained my identity – a retired academic from Delhi University – and revealed my family origins in the city. This helped hugely to elicit warm responses to my queries about them, their families and business histories.[6] I adopted a participatory observer methodology of conversation, explained my research project to the respondents and recorded testimonies with their consent. Most conversations took place in Punjabi, which I transcribed and translated

[6] I am grateful to the people of Amritsar, including members of my extended family, for their incredible hospitality and warmth. Every respondent welcomed me graciously and answered my queries without any reservations. I was born in Amritsar in 1949 and left for Delhi after the completion of high school education in 1965.

into English. In the case of both native inhabitants and refugees of the partition, the oral interviews jogged memories of displacement, the struggle for recovery and the fearful years of Sikh militancy during the 1980s and 1990s.

2. Eclectic and Syncretic Traditions in Amritsar

Partition violence was unusually shocking and traumatic for Amritsar's inhabitants because, as I argue in this article, they had never experienced such religious conflict in the past. From its very foundations by the Sikh gurus in the 16th century, religion and urbanity were integral to the city's history. The history of Amritsar is intertwined with the history of the Sikh religion. Until today, city life centeres around the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib), which was founded and expanded by successive Sikh gurus. From the very beginning, the founders encouraged the settlement of various religious communities of businesspeople and artisans.[7] By the middle of the 19th century, the city's religious demography was a diverse mix of Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities.[8] Eclectic and syncretic practices emerged as prominent features of everyday religious life. Heterogeneity in religious beliefs, plurality of rituals and a diversity of lifestyles were the norms in everyday life.[9]

Prior to partition, the urban landscape of Amritsar was dotted with a large number of temples, gurdwaras, mosques and Sufi shrines. The observance of festive rituals and belief in the curative and healing powers of the Golden Temple's sacred tank and various Sufi shrines became integral to the city folklore and their celebration was part of the cultural, social and religious traditions of the walled city. During the troubled times of intense anti-colonial popular protests in 1919, the religious communities of the city displayed remarkable solidarity and fraternity. For example, on 13 April 1919 the city's diverse religious communities gathered at Jallianwala Bagh for the Baisakhi festival in a show of mutual solidarity. In an act of brutal oppression to avenge the killing of six Europeans in the city on 10 April 1919, General Dyer, the "infamous" British colonial military officer, entered from the narrow alley into the Bagh with a force of Gurkha and Baluchi regiments and immediately ordered his troops to fire on unarmed civilians, killing nearly 700.[10] In his poem, the fam-

7 Grewal.

8 Anand Gauba, Amritsar. A Study in Urban History 1840-1947, Jalandhar 1988, p. 262.

9 Harjot Oberoi, Culture, Identity and Sikh Tradition, New Delhi 1994; Rana Behal, Religion, Religiosity and the Urban World. Everyday Lives of People in Amritsar City, Punjab, India, in: South Asia. Journal of South Asian Studies 44:3, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2021.1933719.

10 V. N. Datta, Jallianwala Bagh. A Ground Breaking History of the 1919 Massacre, Ludhiana

ous Punjabi language writer Nanak Singh, who was in Amritsar at the time, celebrates the martyrdom of "Sikh, Hindu and Muslim together, seeking justice fair and honour" in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.[11]

Before this, the earliest known moment of sectarian tension in the city was on the issue of beef sale and establishing slaughterhouses during early 1870s.[12] A minor riot was recorded in 1897, but apart from this, the relationship between the different religious communities in Amritsar remained free of any serious sectarian violence.[13] The emergence of Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha – socio-religious reform movements among Hindus and Sikhs, respectively – during the late 19th and early 20th century increased communal stress.[14] Hindu idols were removed and a Shiva temple was demolished near the Golden Temple in 1905.[15] The Punjabi language novelist Narula refers to a stray incident of *mohalla* (neighbourhood) tension between a Sikh and some Hindus in a mixed neighbourhood during the Singh Sabha movement's attempt to wrest control of the Golden Temple from the Hindu Mahants. However, the novel – set in Amritsar between 1885 and 1918 – features no depiction of open animosity between the city's different religious communities.[16] The introduction of communal elections in 1917 by the colonial government also brought with it an atmosphere of suspicion and anxiety.[17] None of this, however, translated into any major conflict among the communities in the city. All this was to change drastically with partition in 1947.[18]

3. Pains of Partition, Sectarian Violence and Recovery of the Normal

In the summer of 1947, the sheer scale of sectarian violence following the partition of British India in Punjab was tragic and the human cost colossal. A fair number of literary, historiographical and biographical works, as well as oral history narratives, have appeared over the decades, detailing the (memories

1969 (Reprint Gurgaon 2021); Kishwar Desai, Jallianwala Bagh 1919. The Real Story, Chennai 2018; Kim A. Wagner, Jallianwala Bagh. An Empire of Fear and The Making of the Amritsar Massacre, Gurgaon 2019.

11 Bhai Nanak Singh, Khooni Vaisakhi. Translation by Navdeep Suri, Noida 2019, p. 33. The text was originally published in Amritsar in 1920.

12 V. N. Datta, Amritsar. Past and Present, Amritsar 1967, p. 50. Also, Gauba, p. 25.

13 Wagner.

14 Gauba; Wagner.

15 Chopra.

16 Surinder Singh Narula, Pio Puttar [Father and Son], Ludhiana 1981, p. 372 and pp. 305-10. Originally published in 1946.

17 Cf. Gauba.

18 Cf. Behal, Religion.

of) trauma, violence, and death butchery, which millions of people experienced on both sides of the new border. Abduction, rape, arson, looting and killing are the terms that occupy the centre stage in these narratives.[19] Sexual violence was widespread. Urvashi Butalia estimates that 75,000 women were abducted and raped by men of different religions.[20]

In Amritsar city, all communities committed acts of pillage, incendiarism and communal violence. For several months, the city presented a picture of a "veritable inferno".[21] Large-scale sectarian violence and destruction seriously affected the social, religious and economic fabric of the city. Almost forty per cent of property was destroyed, including important markets like Hall Bazaar, Katra Jaimal Singh and Pashminawala Bazaar. Industry and business suffered immensely. The religious conflict drastically transformed the urban demography of the walled city. A centuries-old tradition of religious diversity drastically shrank as a consequence of partition violence and ethnic cleansing. Of the vast majority of Hindus and Sikhs uprooted from Pakistan, many came to Amritsar as refugees. Correspondingly, almost all of the city's 49% Muslims were forced to migrate to Pakistan.[22] The Muslim community and most of their places of worship disappeared from Amritsar. As a result, Muslims ceased to play a part in the everyday experience of the city as remembered by the interviewees. This is the case for both the areas within and surrounding the walled city. The homes of departed Muslims were now occupied by Hindus and Sikhs who themselves had been displaced and were allotted houses under the evacuee property distribution scheme. While growing up in the city during the 1950s and 1960s, I didn't see or meet a single Muslim.

[19] M. S. Randhawa, Out of the Ashes. An Account of the Rehabilitation from West Pakistan in Rural Areas of east Punjab, Bombay 1954; Fauza Singh (ed.), The City of Amritsar. A study of Historical, Cultural, Social and Economic Aspects, New Delhi 1978; Ian Talbot, The Tale of Two Cities. The Aftermath of Partition for Lahore and Amritsar 1947-1957, in: Modern Asian Studies 41, 2007, pp. 151-185; Alok Bhalla, Stories about the Partition of India, Delhi 1994; Urvashi Butalia, The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India, New Delhi 1998; Ritu Menon/Kamla Bhasin, Borders and Boundaries. Women in India's Partition, New Delhi 1998; G. D. Khosla, Stern Reckoning. A Survey of the Events Leading up to and Following the Partition of India, Delhi 1989; Gyanendra Pandey, Remembering Partition. Violence, Nationalism and History in India, Cambridge 2004; Ian Talbot/Darshan Singh Tatla, Amritsar. Voices from Between India and Pakistan, London 2007; S. Settar/Indira B. Gupta (eds.), Pangs of Partition. The Human Dimension, New Delhi 2002; Ishtiaq Ahmed, Forced Migration and Ethnic Cleaning in Lahore in 1947. Some First Person Accounts, Stockholm 2014.

[20] Butalia, Other Side.

[21] Singh, City, p. xi.

[22] Talbot, p. 151.

Ian Talbot believes that unlike Lahore, Amritsar never regained its prime economic status of pre-colonial times, when it had been a major industrial and business centre in northern India, in the post-Independence era.[23] The intensity of sectarian violence forced many industrialists and businesses to migrate to Bombay with their capital. Industry seriously suffered as it lost most of the skilled labour force with the departure of Muslim workers. In addition, Indian industries and businesses lost a major source of raw material as well as its traditional markets with the formation of Pakistan.[24] In contrast to Talbot, the Punjab historian Fauza Singh is less pessimistic about the city's ability to bounce back. He argues that the city displayed amazing capacity to recover from the state of depravity.[25]

In the early decades after partition, the city witnessed countless struggles for livelihood and efforts to recover, revive and reconstruct business, industry and trade. Newly arrived Hindu and Sikh refugees had to restart their lives from scratch. Many among them were businessmen, traders, landowners, educated professionals and service people. They had lost most of their worldly possessions and were grief-stricken over the loss of their loved ones in the sectarian violence. One immediate problem was the acute shortage of housing to accommodate them and provide opportunity to set up businesses. While many were accommodated in temporary camps, others squatted at roadside pavements and in public parks.[26] Large numbers of Muslims vacated residential properties in localities such as Bhaghtanwala Gate, Lahore Gate and Rambagh Gate, Sharifpura, Tehsilpura, Hussainpura and Islamabad. Newly arrived refugees, both Hindus and Sikhs, occupied these.

The sheer grit, resilience and effort of the city's old and new inhabitants helped the recovery and revival of trade, business and industry. The oral testimonies of the people of that generation narrate stories of their struggles and incredible efforts in everyday life. Recovering and re-establishing normal working lives and making a living was hardest for the refugees without any financial means.[27] Some of them occupied spaces vacated by the Muslim business communities in Katra Jaimal Singh, whose leather business shops had been completely destroyed by fire.[28] The industry suffered because of the loss of a

[23] Rana Partap Behal, Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Amritsar City. A History of Social, Cultural and Economic Change, colloquium paper at Max Weber Kolleg, Erfurt University, Germany, 5 February 2019.

[24] Talbot.

[25] Singh, City, p. xi.

[26] Singh, City, p. xi.

[27] Cf. Behal, Religion.

[28] Conversation with the late Mr. Somdutt Sood on 14 February 2016. His father's electricity goods shop was also destroyed in the fire.

large section of the working population of Muslim inhabitants and was only partly compensated by the arrival of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan. Many of them found work as labourers, factory workers and shop assistants. Some became (street) traders or sold food from roadside kiosks, others set up shops selling household goods, textile products, et cetera.

The city gradually recovered from the partition destruction and re-assembled its industrial organisation and commercial activities during 1950s and 1960s.[29] This recovery, however, faced challenges with the carving out of two new states in Punjab – Haryana in 1966 and Himachal Pradesh in 1971. Then, being a border city, Amritsar suffered from the impact of two Indo-Pakistani wars in 1965 and 1971. These events led to the loss of markets for the city's businesses and the flight of capital. The vibrancy of business activities in the wholesale textiles, jewellery, food, grains, groceries and spices markets of my childhood memories, I observed during my field trips, was missing. Most of the industries, the textile industry in the city's suburbs in particular, which had recovered during the post-partition decades, disappeared during the 1980s and 1990s. Majith Mandi, the biggest dry fruit market, has lost all business activity. Its share of 70% of Indian market has now shrunk to 18%. Several dry fruit merchants shifted to Delhi and Bombay.[30]

4. Sectarian Violence in the 1980s and 1990s

While touching the everyday lives of Amritsari people in their spiritual and materialist devotion to gods, goddesses, gurus and Sufi peers, religion also played an important role in sectarian politics. The early years of the 1980s witnessed the rise of Sikh militancy in the form of the separatist Khalistan movement in Punjab. The political relationship between Amritsar-based Sikh militants and the Indian state was severely strained and rapidly deteriorated into insurgency. The violence engaged in by Sikh militants and the state affected the everyday life of people in Amritsar. After Dal Khalsa, a Sikh separatist organisation, took responsibility for placing two severed cow heads at the door of a Shiva temple in Katra Ahluwala on 26 April 1982, clashes between the bands of Sikhs and Hindus in different parts of Punjab were reported and 350 persons were arrested. The ensuing violence led to curfews in Amritsar and Patiala.[31] The policies of the central government in dealing with Sikh militancy in Punjab further accentuated the already deteriorating political situation. The Sikh mil-

[29] Amritsar District Gazetteer, 1971, Chandigarh, Government of Punjab, Chapters 5 and 6.

[30] Conversation with B. K. Bajaj, President of the Federation of Dry Fruit Merchants at his residence on 9 October 2016.

[31] INDIA SEIZES 350 AFTER RELIGIOUS CLASHES, New York Times, 4.5.1982; Chopra.

itants had amassed arms and fortified themselves inside the Golden Temple complex. In June 1984, the Indian government sent the army into the Golden Temple to flush out Bhindrawale and his followers in Operation Blue Star. The fighting between the armed militants and the army led to casualties on both sides and destroyed the Akal Takht and damaged Darshini Deuri (gateway to the Sanctum Santorum) as well as the main Temple, the Sanctum Sanctorum.[32]

This was a huge blow and shock for the Sikh community. They compared this act of the Government of India with the Afghan rulers desecrating the Golden Temple during the 18th century. Sikh militancy was further fuelled by large-scale violence against Sikhs in Delhi and other parts of northern India immediately after the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh guards on 31 October 1984 in retaliation to Operation Blue Star. This violence against the Sikh minority could be described as pogroms committed by bands of majority religious community of Hindus outside of Punjab.[33]

What impact did all these developments have on Amritsar and its people? Did it create fissures among the Hindu and Sikh communities? I was in Amritsar a couple of weeks before Operation Blue Star and remember that the city was reeling under fear and insecurity among all the inhabitants. There were rumours that Hindus and Sikhs were shifting their residences to "safer" neighbourhoods. During my interviews, however, respondents denied inner city migration of any significant extent, but agreed that there was a sense of disquiet and insecurity. Many shared memories of terrible suffering and displacement during the partition violence. They had struggled together to rebuild and secure their lives in the city and did not turn against each other during these provocations. Their belief in the continuation of social and cultural ties survived, and they continued to share neighbourhood, businesses and matrimonial bonds.

During the course of my field work since 2015, some of the respondents narrated their memories of sectarian violence in the wake of Sikh militancy. M.L., with whom I spoke in his home, was a kite merchant in Amritsar's Nimak Mandi market. He recalled that the "spate of killings of Hindus by Sikh militants had generated a deep sense of fear in the city. Within our *mohalla*s in the city, however, it did not create any disharmony between the two communities. People have lived together for very long time and formed close ties with each other".[34] Another interviewee, M., a housemaker in her early sixties, recalls an all-pervading sense of fear due to the violent killings of Hindus in the city by

[32] Mark Tully/Satish Jacob, Amritsar. Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle, Delhi 1985; Jaspal Singh Sandhu, Sant Bhindranwale de roo-b-roo June 84 di Patarkari, Amritsar 2016.

[33] Tully/Jacob. These acts received extensive coverage on both electronic and print media.

[34] Conversation with M.L.B. (b. 1933, d. 2021) at his residence on 18 July 2018.

Sikh *uggarwadis* (militants). She remembers visiting the Golden Temple after Operation Blue Star and being "shocked seeing the scale of destruction and desecration of Akal Takht and Darshini Deuri (gateway to the Sanctum Santorum). Many Sikh men and women were upset and angry – women in particular were beating their chests, screaming, shouting and crying. There was a huge uproar among the gathering. They were angrily cursing Indira Gandhi and her government".[35] She said some people closed their business and went away, but most stayed put. Echoing M.L.'s assertion, she said that people still felt secure because of long-term relationships in between the communities in mixed neighbourhoods: "Our own street was a mixed Hindu-Sikh *mohalla*".[36]

Shami Sarin, editor of a Hindi newspaper in Amritsar, wrote in 1986 that sectarianism began to affect people to some extent. Constant violence had an impact on everyday lives in the city. During our conversation in 2017, he also recounted the bonds of friendship and comradery between Hindu and Sikh friends and families. He remembers his childhood and adolescence growing up with his friends, both Hindus and Sikhs, in school and college.[37] The experiences of sectarian violence profoundly saddened him. Expressing, in my eyes, a deep anguish in his article, he asked in 1986: "Why it is changing now? How and why are Darbar Sahib and Durgiana Temples now considered segregated and exclusive Sikh and Hindu shrines? Even Hindu and Sikh journalists are now standing in segregated manner. I want my city back the way it used to be."[38] Fortunately, he said, this trend was short-lived and would not continue because of the nature of the socio-cultural relationship between the two communities. He mentioned that inter-community marriages still took place.[39]

However, in contrast to these claims of largely unscathed inter-community relationships, one of my interviewees, G.S., replied: "There is a bit of *tarer* (crack) visible in the mutual relationship now among the communities. Yes, for a short while the relationship did become sour. Of course, time is a healing agent and things did not go too far. Both communities have shared very close social and cultural relationships in the city. There are familial ties and relationships among families including ours. That still exist. But things are quietly changing partly due to experiences of 1984".[40]

35 Conversation with M. at her residence on 19 July 2018.
36 Ibid.
37 Conversation with Shami Sarin in his office on 14 January 2017 in Amritsar.
38 Shami Sarin, Amritsar. Mera Shahr Mujhe Lota Do in *Dharmayug*, in: Hindi Language Magazine, 27.07.1986.
39 Ibid.
40 Conversation with G. S. at his office on 9 January 2017.

This was the second time in its history that the city experienced sectarian violence after 1947, but with an important difference: there were no incidences of neighbourhood violence between Hindus and Sikhs. The perpetrators of violence were Sikh militants against both Hindu and Sikh inhabitants. Many innocent Sikhs also became victims of the state's retaliatory violence against the militants. In everyday religious, cultural and social lives, syncretic traditions and practices survived, yet in a somewhat scarred form.

5. Growing Religiosity and Survival of Eclectic and Syncretic Traditions?

Sectarian violence declined by the mid-1990s and the resilience of the city inhabitants encouraged a spur in the recovery of normal life and business activities. One interesting feature of the city life I observed during my field work was the growing religiosity among the inhabitants.[41] Some of the older and modest Sufi Shrines, temples and gurdwaras have been expanded into more opulent and grandiose styles and newer ones have been built in the last three decades, thanks to many large number donations. The income of these shrines grew manifold with generous daily donations and offerings by middle-class devotees. Members of the aspiring middle class and politicians of the city are actively involved in the management and control of these expanding religious institutions. The Golden Temple and other Sikh gurdwaras are managed by a statutory organisation, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). An important new development during the last few decades is the growing number of Sikh pilgrims to the Golden Temple, both diasporic and from other parts of India.[42] One interesting feature of this growing religiosity that I observed is the sharpening of religious identities among the sections of the Sikh and Hindu institutional religious organisations in the city.

The growing veneration of Sufi shrines by Hindus and some Sikhs conveys the impression of continuation of eclectic and syncretic practices. Yogesh Snehi argues that these shrines are sites of living memory and as such rupture both the communal and nationalist narratives of the city space. These street shrines are a blend of pre-partition and contemporary practices. They are embedded in the long history of space of Amritsar and can be considered a part of "popular" religion. The diverse variety of street shrines and their practices in the city defy easy classification as "Hindu", "Sikh" or "Muslim".[43] Two of my re-

41 Behal, Religion.

42 Jutla.

43 Yogesh Snehi, Spatiality, Memory and Street Shrines of Amritsar, in: South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal 18, 2018, https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4559. See also Borayin Larios/Raphael Voix, Wayside Shrines. Everyday Religion in Urban India, in: South

spondents, the Sikh scholar and Punjabi language publisher Gursagar Singh and the historian of religion in Punjab Joginder Singh, use the term "folk religion".[44] Joginder Singh believes that the religious establishments like Dargahs of Sufi saints are the legacy of Muslims of the British Empire. These shrines continue to be revered by Hindus and Sikhs (there are migrant Muslims in the city) because the "verses of several prominent *sants* (holy person) and *babas* (religious older person) in Punjabi language are cherished by the Punjabis for depicting profane as well as sacred reality".[45]

The Golden Temple occupies the most revered and sacred religious space in the centre of this dense urban world. The celebration of anniversaries of Sikh gurus in the Golden Temple and other gurdwaras are mass events organised by the Shrimoni Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC).[46] These celebrations are special occasions attracting thousands of devotees both from within the city and outside. From my childhood days, I remember the Golden Temple beautifully decorated and adorned with colourful lights and fireworks displayed at night.

There has been a huge transformation of the Golden Temple and its neighbourhood during the past three decades. The density of its adjacent areas was greatly reduced by the demolition of several markets and residential areas in the aftermath of Operation Blue Star in the summer of 1984. Several markets and residential areas of my childhood memories have vanished from around the Golden Temple: parts of Atta Mandi, Kathian Bazaar, Papranwala Bazaar and Mai Sewan Bazaar were demolished and reduced to half their size. Chowk Baba Sahib, Maniaran Bazaar, Ghantaghar Chowk, Kaulsar, Chowk Farid and several other markets and residential areas disappeared from the city map. These dense markets and residential areas, which had existed for nearly two centuries, have been transformed into a green landscaped corridor and white marble paved *galiara* (passage) around the Golden Temple. The redeveloped pedestrian street, now known as Heritage Street – planned by the government – extends to the newly renovated Jallianwala Bagh and Town Hall.[47] Heritage Street is now traffic-free to facilitate the growing inflow of pilgrims into the Golden Temple. Large numbers of small and medium-size hotels and guest

Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal 18, 2018, https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4546.

44 G.S.; Conversation with Prof. Joginder Singh at his office in Amritsar, 21 July 2018.

45 Joginder Singh, Religious Pluralism in Punjab. A Contemporary Account of Sikh Sants, Babas, Gurus and Satgurus, Delhi 2016, p. 7.

46 Conversation with Mr Roop Singh, Secretary of the SGPC, in his office in the Golden Temple on 12 February 2016.

47 Heritage Rejuvenation Infrastructure Development Augmentation Yojna of Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India ("City HRIDAY Plan"), National Institute of Urban Affairs and Ministry of Urban Development, Volume II/V, 2016.

houses have sprung up in the residential areas in the vicinity of the Golden Temple, catering mainly to religious pilgrims. According to the Secretary of SGPC, approximately 250,000 to 300,000 believers from within India and overseas visit the Golden Temple every day.[48]

6. Conclusion

The narrative presented above evolves around two main themes: the coexistence of diverse religious denominations in the walled city of Amritsar and memories of its socio-political and economic transformation following the partition of British India in 1947. *Guru di Nagari* (City of Gurus) is how the inhabitants reverentially describe the city; one where a religiously diverse community of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims were invited and encouraged to live in harmony by its founders, the Sikh gurus. Thus, in Amritsar, religion and urbanity were intertwined from the very beginning.

The city's space was dotted with Hindu temples, mosques and gurdwaras, with the Golden Temple at its centre, and socio-religious harmony prevailed due to the syncretic and eclectic religious practices followed by its inhabitants. These practices survived despite the desecration and destruction of the city and the Harmandir Sahib by Mughal and Afghan rulers during the 18th century. From the early 19th century until partition, the city developed into one of the most significant transnational business, industrial and trading centres of North India. Mutual economic dependency and goodwill among the diverse communities by and large helped to sustain a socio-religious harmony, and unlike other parts of colonial India, Amritsar was spared any major sectarian and communal conflict.

The 1947 partition and subsequent sectarian violence disrupted this general equanimity and social harmony among the city's inhabitants, severely straining its cherished syncretic and eclectic traditions. It also transformed the city's religious and social demographics with far-reaching consequences. With the forced migration of Muslims to Pakistan and the arrival of large numbers of Hindus and Sikhs as refugees displaced from Pakistan, the city's religious diversity shrank drastically. Islam as a religion and its followers, who constituted the majority community until 1947, almost completely vanished from the city, accounting today for less than one percent.

The resilience, hard work and grit of the city's new and old inhabitants in the three decades after the partition helped restore, at least partially, the city's

[48] These figures were provided by Mr Roop Singh, Secretary, Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), during conversation in his office in the Golden Temple on 12 February 2016.

life, business and industry. However, the process of post-partition recovery and communal harmony encountered a major challenge in the form of the separatist Khalistan Movement during the 1980s. City life came under communal strain during the years of Sikh militancy and the desecration of the Golden Temple by the Indian army in June 1984. The terror let loose by Sikh militants and the Indian state impacted both Hindus and Sikhs. The violence of Sikh militants and the actions of the Indian army drove out many – from both communities – from the agrarian hinterland. Unlike during the aftermath of partition, this instance of sectarian experience did not ignite violence between these two religious communities. Amritsar's religious and social fabric remained somewhat intact because of the traditional socio-cultural ties between the two remaining communities of Hindus and Sikhs. Nevertheless, the eclectic and syncretic religious practices of pre-partition times never fully returned. While the city lost its status as a key industrial and business centre, it has reinvented itself as the centre of a "spiritual economy" centred on the Golden Temple, as well as a major national and global Sikh pilgrim destination.[49]

To summarise, traditional syncretism in the city dropped in the immediate aftermath of the two violent conflicts covered in this article: after the partition of 1947 and in the 1980s. They regained some momentum after each instance as part of a gradual re-building of everyday life in the city. The memories of my respondents – Hindu and Sikh – share the narrative of both religious communities in the 1980s having lived through painful experiences of sectarian violence without engaging in inter-communal violence to a degree that had been the case after 1947.

[49] Pritam Singh, Labour, Economy and Spirituality, in: Rai, Amritsar, pp. 80-107; Jutla.