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Book Reviews

The Legacy of Militancy in Punjab: Long Road to 'Normalcy'

Inderjit Singh Jaijee & Dona Suri,
New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2020,
213 pp., ISBN 978-9352806287

The phases of militancy and “normalcy” in Punjab have been the most debated and contested terrains in the recent scholarship on Punjab. Different scholars, while perceiving the legacy of militancy from various perspectives, have constructed different and, in some cases, even contradictory perceptions with regard to the ramifications of this period of violence. This book authored by Inderjit Singh Jaijee and Dona Suri presents an original, objective, and comprehensive mapping of the undercurrents of the militancy and post-militancy era in Punjab. In particular, it focuses on the lasting political, economic, and socio-cultural effects of the period of militancy which continue to negatively affect the period of post-militancy (or “normalcy”) in Punjab.

The book provides a chronology of events sequenced from 1984 onwards up to 2020 in explaining the political personalities, processes and perceptions related and relevant to the era of militancy and post-militancy. The book amply describes how key, previously unrealized, players in the state have acted to create a sense of “normalcy.” For example, various “mafias”---whether liquor, transport, or mining---have emerged over a period of time under political patronage. There has also been a rising tide of illegal migration of youth to foreign shores because of political and economic turmoil. Indian democracy is increasingly influenced by business tycoons, often closely associated with the political bureaucracy. Dynastic politics, including the selection of candidates on basis of family lineage (so-called “blue blood”) rather than coming from the grassroots has increased intra-party conflicts. Grassroots leaders and “outsiders” are hence unwelcomed in politics, leading to unresponsive and dysfunctional democracy in Punjab. As a result, reformist agendas have been picked up by new groups emerging from middle class concerns such as the Am Admi Party (AAP) but it has been largely unsuccessful in dislodging the traditional Akali Dal and Congress, which continue to hold the reigns of power supported by cronies in the judiciary and bureaucracy. Challenges to these traditional political structures are often labelled “Khalistanis” by the dominant national media. These are some of the new concerns (or

perversions to democracy) emerging from militancy and the new phase of “normalcy” that are highlighted by the authors of this book.

The book begins with a chapter titled “Normalcy” which explains how the term “Khalistan” evolved as a political point of contestation, owing its origin to media-frenzy behavior. The conditions lay bare the political crises that eventually engulfed the state. The actors, be it the central government headed by Indira Gandhi or the state government headed by incumbent ministers, were playing game of political music chairs. The Akalis added to the mix with agitations such as *Rasta Roko*, *Rail Roko*, and *Nehar Roko*. The centre did not pay heed to the regional demands that were being generated in Punjab. The Green Revolution, which was once considered to be the magic word of development promoted by the state, was fading. The chronology of politics demonstrates the destructive competition of two political parties---the Akali Dal and Congress---polar opposites of each other in ideology. The result of Operation Bluestar. These two parties continue to rotate in and out of power even during the post-militancy period of “normalcy,” without bringing any significant change at ground level. Realities are same or have actually become worse than earlier, and no solutions seem to be in sight for the so-called democratic governance apparatus. No fruitful discourse has emerged to sustain the legacy of Punjab and introduce new political ideas into the future. In fact, the political elite in Punjab, irrespective of party, are dominated by traditional, landowning “*sardari* families” who send their children to boarding schools and are thus a socio-economic class apart from most of the Punjabi populations. As the authors show, they use their political clout, kinship networks, and matrimonial alliances to consolidate their family and political power in the state.

The chapter on “Due Process: Punjab” highlights how the unprincipled promotion of political cleavages in society based on religion and ethnicity catalyzed the “Punjab crisis.” To overcome the unfortunate post-1984 political problems, the central state then systematically created draconian laws to clamp down on democracy and use extrajudicial means such as “faked encounters” to restore law-and-order and construct an eyewash for its political failures to the detriment of those living in Punjabi society. The genuine demands of the Punjabi people were covered up by the nomenclature of terms such as “separatists,” “the militant agenda,” and “extremism.” The repressive central state came to function through various ordinances and promulgations as deemed desirable to further strengthening its agenda of ruling by hook or crook. Newly introduced acts such as TADA were torturous in disabling the activities of those who questioned why

the state acted as the supreme entity in all matters and how they were supposedly lesser citizens. These laws were the entry doors for ruthless government professionals who played tricks of evidence and confession to undermine the innocence of youth. The broad categorization of a “terrorist” came into being for repressive (and sometime lucrative) purposes. Torture, extrajudicial killings, and illegal confinement were run by the police and security forces, and their victims were denied the basic right of existence and many of them passed away into oblivion. These illustrations can be compared to problems which emerged later in other regions of India. The kind of treatment Punjab received, being stigmatized for no fault of its own but rather crisis, came from top-down (centralized) approach toward Punjab’s issues.

This book provides gruesome detail of those people branded as “terrorists” or declared as being “anti-national.” Many innocent Sikhs became victims of state-sponsored violence and corruption. The case studies in this book provide ample evidence of how property and wealth were attached on the pretext of being products of “terrorism,” and how many police officers openly indulged in capturing this booty. The events which unfold also saw the spectacle of the glorification of police officers, as they were given coveted postings and position. The case of SSP Ajit Sandhu, who was involved in many extrajudicial killings and yet “escaped” legal repercussions by supposedly committing suicide, is well documented in this chapter. Sandhu sought sadistic pleasure in gruesome cold-blooded murders of unaccounted persons and got decorated with medals and promotions. Those who tried to expose the acrimonious agenda of the police such as Jaswant Singh Khalra were also hunted, tortured, and eliminated. Their cases are still lingering in the judicial system. The term “extrajudicial killing” became the matter of a day which was linked to parties, prizes, and promotion for police officers.

The chapter “Due Process: Delhi” examines the 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms and subsequent travails of its victims. It also provides the backdrop of 1984 pogroms in which the state failed to defend the innocent Sikhs being killed in most cities across north India and, in fact, may have aided and abetted this violence. In fact, both Congress and BJP activists may have been involved in this violence, which the book examines. New dimensions have been added to the tragedy, as previously unknown sites such as Hondh Chillar and Patuadi in Haryana have been identified by human right activists, who have sought information under Right to Information Act. The title for this chapter is “due process” which is satire on the existing system. In fact, insufficient “due process” has been given to

the victims of these pogroms after long decades of court hearing and many have died of old-age awaiting “justice.” In fact, the chapter details how the riots may have eventually been a golden egg for real estate investors and projects in the affected areas, who attained prime property at lower rates after the dislocation of their community residents.

The economic dimension of the era of both militancy and also post-militancy (that is, “normalcy”) is a particularly interesting theme in this book. For example, the chapter titled “If You Can’t be Good” provides insights into the rags-to-riches stories of police officers who confiscated the properties of so-called “terrorists” under TADA, and become rich with these ill-gotten gains. This chapter also provides empirical evidence of how real estate values mushroomed upward as a byproduct of “terrorism” and “counterterrorism,” especially for those who were in power and had close political connections. This networking led to the formation of the so-called PPP (police, *patwari*, and property dealer) gang. In some instances, NRIs in the Doaba belt became the soft targets of this unholy business alliance operating under the guise of fighting militancy. Newspapers eventually carried stories of the open trading of such confiscated properties referred to as “Game of Golden Goose.” This type of scenario also carried into the post-militancy phase of “normalcy,” including the encroachment of land in villages near north Chandigarh adjoining Punjab. As this book points out, the whole process of illegal land deals is subjected to changing hands with the dirty money of politicians and government officers. This “colonization” of spaces becomes an important strategy in the supposed liberal investment friendly scenario dominated by government elites. Thus, the no “normal” in Punjab is a direct result of the era of militancy.

This book also covers the cultural effects of militancy into the subsequent era of “normalcy” in a fascinating fashion, particularly in the chapters “On the Cultural Front” and “Khalistan Redux.” This includes cultural memorabilia related to Punjab’s decade of militancy now innocently plastered on T-shirts, car decals, and posters such as those of militant leader Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who is idolized by Punjabi Sikh youth who did not experience the dark days of militancy. Bollywood songs offer a glimpse of history not presented by academicians in such a chic manner. The “ethnification” of Sikhs through music, including advertising their issues and demands, have played an important role in staging Sikh identity to youth in both Punjab and the diaspora. Cinema movies play a particularly important role in this sense. The characters in these movies depict the suffering and atrocities committed by the state such as torture and extrajudicial killings.

Some movies show victims of 1984 riots, and their uprooting and moving to safe places in Punjab. “Historical memory” plays an important role in facilitating information regarding the values of freedom and liberty that have been important markers for Sikh community rather than being affected by the homogenization processes of the Indian state. The wounds of 1984 are memorialized in Punjabi-language films *Punjab 1984* and *Saada Haq*. The 1996 Hindi movie *Maachis* also documented the episodes of terrorism and corrupt politicians. It questioned democratic credentials of the Indian state, and showed the displeasure and dismay among the Punjabi youth during those turbulent years. This book captures both the consumer culture around these cultural modes of expression, and also their deeper social meaning.

In conclusion, Jaijee and Suri’s book is a refreshing work of research and presentation on various aspects of militancy and “normalcy” in Punjab, particularly emphasizing how the current mode of “normalcy” has actually been conditioned by the previous period of militancy. This book is must for both academicians and educated readers in general to understand contemporary Punjab beyond militancy, not only in a political sense, but also other socio-cultural and economic concerns that are important, but that have been sidelined when dissecting the Punjab problem and its aftereffects. These points have all been well taken by the authors, hence adding new a dimension to the writing on the “Punjab problem” and providing holistic view of post-militancy “normalcy” in Punjab. As the authors emphasize, this is not the “old normal” but the “new normal” conditions by the era of militancy.

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Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab: Dreams, Memories, Territoriality

Yogesh Snehi,

Routledge, 2019,

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The ongoing farmers' protest has emerged as a critical site for both consolidating and complicating regional, religious, and caste identities in North India. With the movement spreading beyond its epicenter, the National Capital Region (NCR), we are witnessing the formation of new political alliances in tandem with an intense scrutiny of past conflicts and violence. Yogesh Snehi's book does not address these recent developments; still, it is an invaluable reading for anyone interested in understanding the vicissitudes of Punjabi identity in postcolonial India.

Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab, as the title unequivocally suggests, is an intricate analysis of popular forms of Sufism and their locally embedded spatial dynamics. Through a well-curated set of case studies, Snehi examines the quotidian religiosity of smaller and lesser-known shrines from post-Partition Punjab in India, covering places like Malerkotla, Jalandhar, Gurdaspur and Abohar. Once we dive into the chapters, it becomes evidently clear that the book presents a much deeper and broader analysis than that suggested by the title. Snehi's extensive research gives an intimate overview of the historical as well as the lived landscape of religion in Punjab. In addition to providing place-specific minutiae about lived religiosity of Sufi shrines, Snehi in each chapter addresses larger questions of identity formation, political contestation, nationalist historiography, communal boundaries, and religious traditions in Punjab.

The book begins with a deceptively simple question, i.e. why does the veneration of Muslim saints continue to thrive among different Sikh and Hindu castes and communities even after the violent religious schism of Partition in the region? Snehi's answer to this question encapsulates the complexity of his argument in the book. He states, "While shrines renegotiate their everyday realms in the post-partition realities, they also continue to be deeply embedded in rituals, memory and dreams of pre-partition social milieu" (83). Like many recent scholars, Snehi questions the linear colonial/nationalist narrative of identity formation, underscoring the significance of "absences, appropriation, adaption, abstraction or exclusion" (49) as processes through which shrine spaces respond to complex social settings and overcome temporal/religious binaries of modern nation-states in South Asia.

With each chapter, Snehi introduces a complex grammar of devotional practices that transform shrines into “archives of everyday, a mirror to understand the complex reciprocity, contestation and dissent of dominant discourses” (59). In Chapter 1, Snehi visits three sites – Dargah Haidar Shaikh at Malerkotla, Baba Lakhdata Pir Nigaha at Langhiana, and Roza Mandhali Sharif near Phagwara – and explains how the popularity of *deras* across Punjab rests on the followers’ belief in *barkat*, the embodied sacral authority and spiritual power of saints, that transcends orthodox hagiographies of conquest and conversion. Chapter 2 traces the widespread practices of Panj Pir veneration from medieval to present-day Punjab and explores the sacred landscape of this tradition through a shrine dedicated to Panj Pir in Abohar. Snehi introduces the concept of *wilayat* (spiritual territoriality) to show how sacred geographies overcome statist notions of territoriality after Partition to create an “organic interplay of popular tradition with everyday lives of people in contemporary Punjab” (124). With Chapter 3, Snehi takes us into the realm of the uncanny, where dreams and memories become palimpsests of dissent against the increasing polarization of religious identities in India. While dream interpretation remains a central tenet of Sufi traditions, Snehi uses three case studies to demonstrate how the dreamscapes of Sufi shrines are kept alive through oral histories, and become “a potent tool for reclaiming a popular memory of Hindu and Sikh veneration of Sufis and their shrines” (166). The final chapter underscores the importance of visual and music cultures in circulating ideas of popular piety beyond reformist critiques or revivalist representations of Punjab’s history. According to Snehi, popular forms like collage posters, pamphlets, videos, paintings, animation, etc. “localize as well as navigate spaces, circulate ideas and ideals of veneration, induce dreams, sustain memories of belonging and materialize saint veneration” (187).

Popular Sufi shrines, according to Snehi, open up a theoretical space to examine the lived Punjabi experience beyond the “metanarratives” of state formation and give important insights into the quotidian practices of piety, patronage, and sovereignty in Punjab. While most scholarship on Sufi shrines locates them within Islamic histories and Muslim cultural milieus, Snehi focuses on encounters, interactions, and negotiations through which Sufi spirituality is imagined and reproduced. Since many of these lesser-known saints from Punjab lack textual hagiographical traditions, their veneration exists on the margins of mainstream religious discourse and remains largely unexplored in academic studies of South Asian history and culture. Snehi’s book fills this lacuna in scholarship by underscoring the liminality of Sufi shrines in Punjab and foregrounding their

peripheral locations as “sites of memory” through which societies reconcile with their violent pasts and a divided present (228).

Snehi argues for a methodological approach that remains attentive to affective modalities of memorialization while unraveling alternate temporalities through spatial practices. He challenges established scholarly traditions of studying Sufi shrines through a liberal-secular lens, pointing out how scholars often interpret Sufi practices as a utopic alternative to the increasing religious polarization in South Asia. Cautioning us against this ‘modernist’ impulse, Snehi takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the imaginative topography of Sufi shrines. Combining insights from historical anthropology, visual studies, and semiotics, Snehi provides a rich ethnographic study of the shrines, but, at times, relies a little too heavily on either existing scholarship or available historical records to contextualize his materials instead of interviews with the visitors to the shrines. The length of the literature review and theoretical framing in each chapter further obfuscates Snehi’s own argument and the originality of his extensive fieldwork. Despite Snehi’s repeated disavowal of historical methods, this book is as much a project of historicizing spaces as of spatializing history, and that, in my view, is its biggest strength.

Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab makes significant contributions to South Asian studies by going beyond conventional readings of Sufi shrines as nostalgic sites of syncretic practices or spiritual remnants of Muslim polity. With Snehi’s brilliant and conscientious research, Sufi shrines emerge not only as living embodiments of everyday religiosities, but also as uncanny habitations that refuse to give into the territorial demands of nation states. Despite heavily-patrolled borders and closely-guarded communal boundaries, Sufi shrines continue to flourish in Punjab as not only physical sites of veneration, but also as shared spaces of affective belonging realized through saints’ *barkat*, *wilayat*, dreams, and memories.

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