

Final Report for the International Peace Research Association

How Religion Shapes Views of Conflict and Peacebuilding: The Case of Punjab

Background

The original proposal submitted to the International Peace Research Association has been modified to some degree based on my field experiences as well as a more thorough read of the literature. What I found in my initial visit to state of Punjab in India was that it did not take the projected four months to select a village most appropriate to conduct the research. Most of the villages were predominantly Sikh or Hindu and I found that unlike the rest of India where Muslims are a minority, Malerkotla was a unique city in which there was a majority Muslim population living amongst Sikhs and Hindus. The history of Malerkotla is very unique and what I learned was that during the violent partition of India it was the only city that remained peaceful and untouched by the riots. This specific example appeared to be an excellent case for studying how religion helped to transcend conflict and create peace.

Historically the Partition of 1947 is remembered as one of the most critical events of the 20th century for India, reshaping the entire country both politically and socially. One result of an independent India was the division of Punjab, forcing many in this northern state to remain in India or step over the border to Pakistan. The chaotic division of peoples and the subsequent eruption of violence caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, creating a deep social scar that has still not healed for many. Punjab suffered some of the worst atrocities during this time. However, one city that remained untouched by the riots within Punjab was Malerkotla. Founded in 1657, Malerkotla was a former princely Muslim state during the colonial era, and it is located south of Ludhiana in the Punjab. A popular narrative shared by residents of Malerkotla which speaks to this unique occurrence of “peace” details the historical events that transpired between Sikhs and Muslims, setting the stage for peaceful coexistence.

This research helped to demonstrate how a region which has witnessed many outbreaks of violence in the past could reach a state of peace. This case study addressed some of the debates within the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (CA&R) which have evolved around the role of religion in conflict and peace. In speaking about the place of religion, scholars in CA&R admit that "...it remains inchoate and fragile, uncoordinated and in need of greater numbers of adequately trained practitioners, more study and testing and theoretical elaboration," further highlighting that although there are many ideas and proposals that exist for peace within different religious traditions, there is lack of application to conflict situations or insights into minimizing violence in critical contexts (Appleby, 2000). This research speaks to the concerns of the existing literature and will take another theoretical step by looking at under theorized topic of religion in CA&R at the same time looking at how oral narrative and past stories contribute to the present day peace.

This project was grounded in major questions that have come out of the work by those in CA&R as well as scholars from other fields interested in ethnic and religious conflict. The first challenge in researching the relationship between religion and violence is how to "measure it," that is, how do we know if religion is the cause or not, and if it is, how can we determine this? The main question of this research project deals with this challenge, and asks what historical contexts, religious exchanges, beliefs, ingredients, mechanisms and values are the strands which help to form the distinctive patterns of conflict or peaceful coexistence?

Research Schedule

January-April 2004: The first four months of 2004 were spent in the research phase of the project, conducting preliminary fieldwork in Punjabi regions of India and Pakistan. Collecting archival research, operationalizing measurement tools and making contacts. Interviews with non-governmental organizations, academics, community leaders and religious leaders were conducted. Collecting

background information and identifying political and social constraints to individuals within religious communities helped to further define issues at hand.

The village that was chosen for in-depth research was Malerkotla, situated in the Punjab state of India and the city of Lahore in Pakistan. Many contacts were made with religious leaders as well as academics and citizens within the community. The government college of Malerkotla and the faculty there provided solid support for the project and were willing to help by introducing me to people they thought were relevant to the project. In Lahore, Pakistan, I was also able to make significant contacts within the community and the faculty at the Punjab University of Lahore provided significant support. However the case of Lahore did not seem comparable to that of Malerkotla because there were not three religious groups living side by side. The first community of Sikhs (approximately 80 families) resided in Nankana Sahib which was two hours from Lahore. Most of the people in Lahore that I spoke with could not speak of Sikhism or Hinduism's peacebuilding capacities as they did not know much about the religions. Thus, instead of using the case study as I did Malerkotla I decided that Lahore would allow me to learn as much as I could about Islam and the way people interpreted its teachings but that Malerkotla would serve as the primary case.

The funds received from IPRA were utilized in the following way:

- 1) Airfare to India: \$1400.00 USD
- 2) Accommodations in India/Pakistan (Jan-April): \$700.00 USD
- 3) Travel from India to Pakistan/ travel expenses within Pakistan: \$400.00 USD
- 4) Lodgings in India and Pakistan/Research Expenses/Materials from Patiala University Publications Department: \$900.00 USD

Methodology

In January of 2004 the majority of the time was spent in Malerkotla, where I received the assistance of Professor Nirmal Singh (Department Chair of Political Science, Government College of Malerkotla). I was provided an institutional home for logistical privileges like email and given access to local library resources. I was able to make contacts with academics focusing on religion as well as religious leaders of different faiths, press correspondents and local citizens who were eager about contributing to this kind of study. In addition to this the local Mufti, Fuzail Rahman Hilal Usmani at the Darus Salam Islamic Centre was a key person in helping me establish contacts within the Muslim community. My communication for the most part was in fluent Punjabi although some of the individuals preferred to speak in English. My impression was that most people were eager to share their thoughts and interpretations of the way they understood conflict and peace through their unique religious lenses.

I collected 36 interviews in Malerkotla, Punjab (18 with Sikhs, 18 with Muslims). The interviewees were selected from people who live in the “outer” and “inner” city pockets of Malerkotla. Most of the Muslim population resides in the “inner” areas and the Sikhs reside in the “outer” areas. The initial setup of the interviews and subsequent contacts were facilitated with the help of Professor Nirmal Singh. The interviews were conducted primarily with academics, religious leaders, politicians and local citizens who adhere to values and beliefs derived from Sikhism or Islam. Informal interviews and participant observation in temples and around mosques helped me to understand how people’s values and beliefs pertaining to peace and conflict are shaped by their religion. In-depth interviews with selected individuals enhanced my ability to investigate the initial inquiry. Participant observation took place at various sites where devotees gather for religious ritual and prayer which will include: Haider Shaikh dargah, dargah of Shah Fazl and Gurdwara Hadanara.

Hypotheses:

Religion in Conflict: Reasons for peaceful coexistence within this community vary substantially based on local patterns of sacred space sharing and respect for historical rituals and events. However, this is not enough to foster peaceful coexistence. A deep understanding of religious traditions and historical narratives can help people to overcome feelings of animosity in their community and work towards peace.

H1: Local patterns of sacred space sharing and respect for historical rituals and events is a necessary but not sufficient cause of peaceful coexistence.

H2: In communities where there is evidence of high cross-group sharing of religious teachings, there will be a greater incidence of peaceful coexistence.

Religion in Peacebuilding: Individuals in Malerkotla negotiate norms and multiple identities within this unique and dynamic community, identifying with ideas of a pluralistic India while holding on to teachings from their unique religious traditions. Peaceful coexistence occurs only if religious teachings about peace and conflict are similar.

H3: Similarity of content in religious teachings about peace and conflict, regardless of religious origin, is a necessary and sufficient contributor to peaceful coexistence.

The crux of my research design lies in the comparison of regional religious communities. I studied questions raised through ethnographic research in Malerkotla, understanding the construction of peace and conflict through the religious traditions of Sikhism and Islam by carrying out structured observations in spaces – both public and private – where ideas about peace and conflict are manufactured.

Findings

The trip to Lahore helped me to further identify the ways in which Islam understood conflict and peace but I realized that the context of Lahore and that of Malerkotla were very different for many reasons and I found it more beneficial to focus on the single case. The questions posed to the participants are attached below. Many of the people I spoke with referred to the region's rich religious history. Mostly the rich narratives about the relations between Sikhs and Muslims helped pave the way for peace today. Beginning in the early 15th century to the mid 1980's the Indian state has suffered from violence under the rule of the British Raj as well as intense violence due to religious clashes. In the early 1600's the somewhat cordial relationship of the Sikhs and Muslims changed with the execution of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth guru of the Sikhs, by Muslim ruler Jahangir (1569-1627).¹ The many similarities of Sikhism and Islam laid out a larger area of common ground than what these religions shared with Hinduism. However, the ease with which one might accept Sikhism threatened the Mughal Empire, setting off continuing tensions between the two belief systems for years to come. In the time period of 1900-1915 the use of religion in politics became a dominant feature of all religions in the region, Sikhism, Islam and Hinduism. The British, in an attempt to deal with increasing demands for legislative representation would place the communities against each other. This plan did not achieve success but it would plant the seeds for greater communal violence in the state of Punjab.

Independence from the British Raj led to divisions during Partition which included the state of Punjab, setting the religions in this area on a collision course. The displacement of populations was very traumatic and essentially the Punjab was divided between India and Pakistan. Sikhs in the Western Pakistani part migrated to the east and to the Indian capital of New Delhi. Muslims in Indian Punjab migrated to Pakistani Punjab. The massacre that occurred during partition created wounds that may have healed but continue to ripple through generations as scars that seem to be unerased.

Due to the imposed partition, Sikhs were cut off from the Islamic world and communication lines were snapped between Sikhs and Muslims, forcing families and friends to separate and live in India or the newly created Pakistan. One event which took place during the time of Guru Gobind Singh, the last Sikh guru was when his sons were bricked alive by the governor of Sarhind, Wazir Khan. A close relative of Khan's, Sher Mohammad Khan the Nawab of Malerkotla, protested against the killings of children as a way of converting the Sikhs in the region to Islam. Walking out of the court in protest the Nawab did not see his request fulfilled but at the same time would gain the respect amongst the Sikhs in the region. This humanitarian approach would be remembered by many in later decades and lessons from the Nawab's gesture would resonate amongst the people of Malerkotla during the violent period of Partition. Religion was a central feature of conflict in the region but also central in peace.

Another "feature" of peace that many talked about was the similarities in the religious traditions, Sikhism and Islam. The oneness of god (Tawhid in Islam and Ekonkar in Sikhism) was talked about by many and allowed people to feel that despite the differences both groups were very close on divine unity. When I engaged students of Islam, Sikhism and Hinduism about why their city was so peaceful, they talked a lot of sharing festivals and traditions and how this helped them to live in such close proximity. The sacred space sharing such as the shrine of Haider Shaikh also allowed people to express their religious beliefs in the same place but based on the knowledge people had of each other's religions and their willingness to engage in joint activities, it was clear that space sharing was not enough for peaceful coexistence to occur, this confirming one of my initial hypotheses.

Conclusion

Thanks to IPRA, I was able to take a trip to the Punjab and engage in valuable research, not only to the field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution but also for studies of religion. The relationship between religion and history is critical to understanding how religions can coexist in present day. More importantly it is the nature of those religions and the way people make meaning of them that is useful in helping us gain insights into why conflict occurs and how peace can be maintained. My hope is to continue with this research as it can be expanded and applied to other regions in the world where peace through religion may be used to transcend violence.

Geographic Location of Malerkotla



Interview Questions

I. Religious Participation

- 1) How many times a day do you pray?
- 2) Typically, how many times do you attend temple or mosque on a daily/weekly/monthly basis?
- 3) What is your main reason for attending religious services?

II. Religious Values and Beliefs related to Peace and Conflict

- 4) How does your religion or concepts within it address peace and conflict?
- 5) Specifically, which texts or sections of texts have helped build and shape your ideas of peace and conflict?
- 6) What is the role of the religious leaders in your community in guiding you to apply religious ideas in your daily life?
- 7) How do you apply ideas of conflict and peace in your daily life?
- 8) How would ideas of peace and conflict help you in a conflict situation or in working with others to build peace?
- 9) Do you think if you had a better understanding of religious scripture you would be more likely to engage in peacebuilding activities with members of other religions?

III. Willingness to engage in Religious Activities Related to Peacebuilding

- 10) Have you ever been inside a temple or mosque that is of a religion different than your own?

- 11) How do you understand “peace” and “conflict” and how do you think this is different from your neighbor who has a different religious background.
- 12) As a majority/minority religious group in your community how would you identify or conceptualize the differences that you face in connection with your religion?
- 13) Have you ever been involved in any peacebuilding type of activities with members outside your religious group?
- 14) Would you be willing to participate in a dialogue or workshop to talk about peacebuilding activities with members of other religious groups?
- 15) What are some creative ways you think would help bridge religious differences in your community and build peace?

Once the interviews were collected and transcribed for conversational analysis, several different themes emerged under the three groups: religious participation, religious values and beliefs related to peace and conflict, willingness to engage in religious activities related to peacebuilding, Different themes emerged

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