

Community Identity and its Paradoxes--Mirpuris in Jammu city

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Identities and questions that they raise

The very fact of human existence means multiple identities: professional, personal, ideological and ascriptive. Most scholarship in the recent past has come to believe that identities are not fixed but fluid, malleable and fuzzy. Identities in maximum cases exist in a state of fuzziness since a particular group, or even individual, identity cannot claim to exhaust all the layers of selfhood of a person. Social scientists usually try to understand what processes and milieus result in a particular community-identity becoming unambiguous, with defined boundaries; that is, when does this fuzzy identity become exclusive and start vying for a share in the socio-cultural-political cake of the society.

However, before such an inquiry can be made the basic question of whether a particular community identity exists at all and in what forms it manifests itself, needs to be answered. Any endeavor that claims to do so would mean using historically and culturally sensitive methods & the nature of this manifestation, after all, is determined by the contexts that identities operate in. Such an exercise involves studying the manifold ways in which group of people identify themselves; for example, one could examine what cultural markers they evoke; do a comparative study of two community identities in one socio-political context to see how one identity is different from the other; do a comparative study of the same group identity in two different contexts, to understand how it manifests differently; and/or do a study of the political institutions and power structures that facilitate the politicization of such group identities.

This paper does not purport to do all of these tasks. What the paper seeks to do is to look at a particular group, that is the Mirpuris, who are settled in Jammu city and see how strong their self and other-identification is; what are the various dynamics and nuances that can make us understand how this identity becomes visible; how far is this identification politicized; and if it is, what are the reasons for it being so.

In endeavoring to answer the aforementioned questions, I primarily rely on interviews that I carried out from January 2003 to April 2003 with Mirpuris based in Jammu city and the limited literature on Mirpuris that is available. Since this is an introductory study, majority of the interviewees are well known Mirpuri personalities of the town. The generalizations that I have drawn are conditioned, therefore, by specific time and space. I have tried to be as value-neutral as possible by objectively portraying the views of my respondents.

The subsequent discussion is divided into five parts: first, it looks at how Mirpuris in Jammu identify themselves by relying on the stories and narratives that the Mirpuris in the city use to show allegiance to their particular community; second, it attempts to understand how in the process of affirming their identity Mirpuris view themselves in relation to other communities in the city; third, it looks at how Mirpuri identifications of self and the other inform their political identification; fourth, it looks at the broad trends that can be delineated from the earlier discussion and fifth is in the nature of a conclusion.

For the purposes of the paper, the Mirpuris are the people who come from the Mirpur district of the pre-1947 Jammu and Kashmir.¹ Like many other Partition affected communities of the subcontinent, the people inhabiting this region too were divided along religious lines, in 1947. Muslims of the region stayed behind in what became part of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir or Azad Kashmir, as it is called in Pakistan. Others migrated to Jammu (and other parts of north India) post-Partition.² They speak a particular dialect of Potohari Punjabi that is eponymously called Mirpuri.³
 Narrative of a Self-identifying Mirpuri

Displaced communities by their very definition consist of people who are in the process of relocating themselves and acquiring fractured multiple loyalties as a result. Their new hyphenated selves are sites of contestation between two parallel processes & an assimilative one, which results in the community members adapting to new lifestyles and customs, and a differentiating one, by which distance between the dislocated and other communities, particularly the host, is recognized. This contestation is usually expressed through anecdotes and stories.

The older generation of the community expectedly has more such stories to tell. A typical narrator of these tales is a Mahajan Mirpuri⁴ who was very young when the Partition took place and had to leave Mirpur (in case of Mahajans, the Mirpur town specifically) as a result. This person most emphatically identifies him/herself Mirpuri and recounts his/her version of his/her community's history. His/her story is an evocation of the past, both real and imagined. Like most oral histories that are unsubstantiated with written history, it is difficult to distinguish between myth and reality, history and memory.

According to this person's version, the town that s/he lived in was founded nearly 600 years back by two saints, Hazrat Ali Mira Shah Ghazi (also called Mian Mohammed Mir) and Gosain Budh Puri (also called Guru Govardhanwala Puri) who lent a part of their respective names to the town. These two saints in this popular history symbolized the good relations between the Muslim and Hindu communities. At the eastern end of the town, there was Hazrat Ghazi's tomb (as per some it was a samadhi) and at the western end Gosain Puri's temple. It was widely held that if the population crossed the limits of the darwazas (gates) of the town where these two popular shrines were situated, Mirpur would be ruined.

The next sequence in this narration is the account of the actual ruin of the town: the fall of Mirpur as it is called. The date is 25 November 1947 or 10 Magar 2004 of the Vikram Samvat in the Indian calendar. It was on this day, in this version of history, that the Pakistani Kabailis (the Afghan tribals) attacked the town and massacred 18,000 Hindus (both Mirpuris and the people of the neighboring regions, primarily Punjabis, who had sought shelter in the town post-Partition) out of the 25000 who were present there. The numbers in all probability are exaggerated to show the scale of the tragedy. What follows are accounts that any Partition affected person would tell you in different ways either side of the border — the women left behind, raped and killed; old people dying on the way; heroic deeds in the face of danger; the loot; the homes and property left behind; the treachery of age old friends; and an inevitable saviour from the other community who rescued them from a potential violent and horrific death. Similar stories that are told and felt differently, yet acutely by each individual.

I felt the intensity of this experience when I sought an interview with a person staying in Gurha Bakshinagar, a colony that has one of the largest Mirpuri populations in the city. I had wanted to interview just that one person that evening. However, when I reached there I was told that the gentleman whom I wanted to talk to had gone to call the other members of the community staying in the neighborhood so that I could get a "better and fuller" picture. Soon the room was filled with around twelve people who all wished to talk. I could not tell them that I had wanted to interview just one person at that time. And that I wanted to know how they identified themselves as Mirpuris and what exactly the word "Mirpuri" mean for them in the present circumstances not their experiences of the Partition.⁵ I soon realized that was not to be because all of them were just interested in speaking about the latter. It was a kind of a communal catharsis — about good old days in their beloved Mirpur, how they missed it and how they had undergone a lot of trauma as a result of their displacement. Some of them had stories to tell of their capture by the Pakistani troops and their subsequent internment in the Ali Beig camp.⁶ And others of the relatives left behind. In spite of the inevitable tears, all of them were happy that they had got together after a long time to share the old memories.

The tale of the ruin of Mirpur does not end there. The real end of Mirpur in this account came when the Mirpur town was submerged into Mangla Lake by the Pakistani government in the sixties for the construction of the Mangla⁷ dam on the river Jhelum. The living space that the community had been separated from due to the events of 1947 was destroyed altogether as a result. In spite of the distance (or perhaps because of it) the disappearance of the land that they belonged to evokes an expression of deeply felt grief in the people who narrate this tale. Thus Prof. Sansar Chand, who retired as the Head of the Hindi Department, Jammu University bemoans in an article titled Mirpur Ki Yaad (Memory of Mirpur),

"My ill fated Mirpur — why ill fated? Listen, this town has been obliterated from the world map. It is just a dream of the past. In reality the worst sufferer of India's independence was this beautiful town as it was sacrificed twice — at the altar of the independence war in 1947, first. It survived 1947 and lived on moan fully though. Luck did not like its very existence so, in the end, Mirpur was sacrificed again when it jumped into the huge lap of Mangla dam — The memory of this town is holy for me."⁸

Their land has disappeared yet the desire to go back and see what has become of it is still strong. As one respondent put it evocatively, "Mitti ki kashish," (attraction of the soil). Another summed it as, "Wahi galiyaan, Wahi mohalle, Wahi nazaare yaad aate hain, Wahi rishtedaar sab yaad aate hain, Jahan Khele, Jahan bachpan guzara tha, Rah rahke wahi nazaare yaad aate hain." (I remember the lanes and neighbors, the relatives and friends. Where I spent my childhood, those sights I remember). The constant refrain in this story is about the old Mirpur that was simple, where things were cheap, and customs and habits were different from those of the present day. Of course it is realized that things might have changed because of "progress" or modernization, as some call it, or just the march of time.⁹

However when the raconteur of this story is asked if s/he were given a choice to go back and settle down in the old Mirpur would s/he do so, the reply is in negative. Depending upon who this narrator is, the reasons are different — there is no place for Hindus out there, we have been settled here for too long, our children see where they live at the moment, and not Mirpur, as their homeland

This chronicler of the oral history of Mirpuri community in Jammu — the representative of the older generation that made its home here when it got displaced in 1947 — takes an immense amount of pride in the way the community survived the trauma of those times. Like his/her Punjabi counterparts who were affected by the Partition s/he talks of the hard work Mirpuris had to put in when they came to Jammu virtually empty-handed. S/he recounts countless stories of their labor and patience in the face of enormous hardships and destitution. The rags-to-riches account of the community, and their success "without the help of anyone" — the topic of many a conversation that s/he has with other

members of the community. They together boast about how they started from scratch by vending wares on the streets. They did not shirk from any kind of work and it was this attitude that made them succeed in the end, they say, because they were willing to do any work that they could. And they claim that it was only honest and hard work that they ever did.

This narrative shows that this group's self-identification is very strong. This "self" has its basis in the collective encounter with a tragedy of the scale of Partition, consequent displacement from "their" land and memories that are engendered as a result of these shared experiences. One would have expected to find that in the making of this "self" common language and culture, the usual suspects in such a case, to play an important part. They fade in front of the temporally more immediate constitutive identifiers of the community.

Identification of the self through an "other" – Stories and Stereotypes

Language and culture do make a more visible appearance when Mirpuris start talking about how they are different from the Dogras¹⁰ of Jammu city. "We speak Mirpuri, a Potohari language, while they speak Dogri.¹¹ We eat wheat they eat rice. We are so much more progressive than them. When we came here our women moved around freely, while their women covered their faces with long ghughats¹²(as someone put it lambe lambe jhund kadiyan si or wore long veils). We treated our daughters-in-law with a lot of respect while the Dogra daughters-in-law rati sasaan diyan latan ghutdian si (pressed their mothers-in-law's legs at night). We have always been much more educated than the Dogras. We always were more hardworking and that is why we did so well – the Dogras are jealous of us because of that." The list just goes on. "We even swear differently than the Dogras", said a respondent!

The litany shortens or lengthens along with the age – the younger folk have a shorter list and the older ones longer. The hybridization of the language is lamented. K.D. Sethi, one of the most famous Mirpuris settled in Jammu, says that Mirpuri is becoming Dogrinuma or Punjabinuma (Dogri-like or Punjabi-like). The respondent mentioned above talked of the adoption of the Dogri swearwords by the new generation. Many talk of the difference in customs and diet habits. And again bemoan the change that has taken place. Someone said, "we used to give just one rupee for the shagun¹³ in a marriage. Out here they give sweets and many other things." Another one states, "we used to wear shalwar kameez not pant shirt like they do here."

Mirpuris, the older generations especially, takes pride in the fact that their community is really well knit and unlike the other communities¹⁴ its members are always available for one another – dukhsukh vich hamesha honde ne (they are there share each other's joys and sorrows). HL Bhagotra, another prominent name in the community, asserted that if more than a hundred people are present in a funeral one should assume that it is a Mirpuri who has died – "the Dogras do not have the phursat (time)." Krishan Lal, the editor of Sach, a daily which was started in Mirpur of the old, said in the same vein, "samundar di tarah ikathe ho jaanden-n gam hoye ya khushi" (they gather like an ocean, be it joy or sorrow).

Significantly this difference is given as the reason why Mirpuris (particularly the older generation) prefer that their children, especially the daughters, marry within the community. The women are treated better in "our" community so even the Dogras prefer to marry their daughters with "our sons." This seems to fit in with the Mirpuris' constant refrain that they are so much better than the Dogras – culturally progressive and educationally more qualified.¹⁵ In fact they very emphatically tell you that they give first preference to Mirpuris for marriage, second to Punjabis and third to Dogras.

Many a people in the older generation talk about how, in the post-Partition period, the Dogras "sade nal sadhde si" (were jealous of us). Mirpuris say that this jealousy is explained by the "fact" that when they came to Jammu they took over the most important jobs from Dogras. Many became judges, lawyers, teachers and prominent businessmen.

However it is also true that in the post-independence history of the state the Mirpuris have been a disproportionately visible face in many fields – Dina Nath Mahajan, a minister in the state cabinet in 1950s; Ram Lal Gupta, first Accountant General of the state; HL Bhagotra, a retired sessions judge; Mahatma Budh Singh, one of the founders of National Conference¹⁶; Raja Jaswant Singh, a former Supreme Court judge; KD Sethi, a prominent name in state's politics; RP Sethi, former Chief Justice, Karnataka High Court and a retired Supreme Court judge; and Sushma Chowdhary, an IAS officer.

Political Self

Mirpuris' political affiliations are informed largely by the most important part of their self-identification in the past fifty-five years – the Partition and their consequent displacement. The communal carnage of 1947 and the subsequent help they got from Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates is the reason that many of them cite for their allegiance to the RSS and right-wing parties like the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) – "saath vi unhan ditta" (they alone helped us).

Some people from the older generation talk of the how there was communal amity in the old Mirpur and they felt

betrayed because their Muslim neighbors turned against them at the behest of outsiders. The RSS sympathizers among them boast that the Mirpur town was a stronghold of the RSS and its shakhas (training schools) were held all over the town. They recall how the old town had played host to Balraj Madhok and Kedar Nath Sahni¹⁷ as pracharaks (teachers of these schools) for some time. Others like KD Sethi and the daily Sach¹⁸ editor, Krishan Lal whose ideologies clearly differ from the right wing parties endorse the fact that the RSS had a presence in old Mirpur when they disapprovingly say that the riots in the old town might have been started by the local shakhawalas who attacked a few Muslim alaees (vegetable growers) and julahaas (weavers).

However, this overt identification with the Hindu right wing (like their Punjabi Hindu counterparts) at times gets blurred. KD Sethi, one of the most famous Marxist leaders in Jammu and Kashmir (affiliated with the CPI-ML¹⁹) told me that in spite of the fact that most of the Mirpuris in Jammu would not like to associate their names with Communists of any kind, they treat him as their own, meet him with a lot of apniyat (affection) and give him a lot of respect. Indeed when I asked the group of Mirpuris that I met in Gurha (all of them claimed to be the sympathizers of RSS) that if they were given a choice between KD Sethi and a BJP leader in an election then who would they vote for, almost unanimously they said Sethi.²⁰

Likewise, the voting pattern during the 2002 assembly elections in colonies predominantly inhabited by Mirpuris shows overwhelming support for the Congress against the common candidate of BJP and other Hindu right organizations in the region. If I were to make a conjecture here – the reason for this might lie in the fact that Congress had projected Ghulam Nabi Azad, its Muslim leader from Jammu region, as the future Chief Minister of the state, unlike the other parties whose Chief ministerial candidates were Kashmiris.

The first instance illustrates that Mirpuri identity can supercede ideological affinities. And the second that the Mirpuri identity can itself be superceded in different circumstances by a broader regional identity. Basically both the examples point to the fact that the political self of the Mirpuri community is malleable and not as fixed as would seem to be the case from the earlier narrative.

Age, Time and Politics

The preceding discussion is obviously a broad generalization culled out of the conversations that I had with thirty interviewees. As happens with such overviews many significant trends and nuances remain concealed.

One important trend that can be observed in the articulation of this narrative by the Mirpuris is that with age and time the way the community members articulate their Mirpuri identity has changed, some would even say that it has attenuated. The older generation with its past memories is more inclined to call itself Mirpuri, speak the language and practice whatever little customs have survived the passage of time. The younger generation is much more assimilated in terms of language and their habits and customs. Given that it was born and grew up in Jammu, its existence is much less schizophrenic than its older counterpart, which constantly evokes the old Mirpur and its culture while living in Jammu. In fact the number of people speaking Mirpuri language decreases age-wise. Most of the younger people have started calling themselves Jammuwalas, some even Dogras and do not have the same reservations as the older generation has about inter-community marriages.

An example from a particular family might be illustrative. I asked all the members of Krishan Lal's family how they would identify themselves. Krishan Lal said first Mirpuri and then anything else. His elder son, Ram Swaroop Gupta (54) said first Hindustani (Indian), then Mirpuri and in the end Duggar (Dogra). The second son, Victor Gupta (31) who is a Mukhya shikshak (the head teacher) in a local RSS shakha gave his order of preference as Hindu-Indian-Mirpuri-Duggar. The youngest son, Arun who was born twenty years ago calls himself a Hindu first and then an Indian. He did not mention Mirpuri at all.

The unexpected trend, ironically, is that when Mirpuri identification in cultural terms seems to be weakening the number of organizations that claim to espouse the Mirpuri cause has increased over the last twenty years or so. Mahajan Mirpur Sabha is the most famous of these. It was founded under the chairmanship of Justice HL Bhagotra who is considered the patriarch of the Mirpuri Mahajans. It is the organization, which has taken the lead in observing the date of the fall of Mirpur, 25 November (popularly referred to as the 10 Magar day) as the Martyrs day (Shahidi Divas). The day is observed every year and a procession is taken out in the morning (prabhat pheri), which ends at the Mirpur Shaheedi Smarak (Martyrs's memorial). Most of the older generation makes it a point to be present there. In fact even many Mirpuri children (who would not normally identify themselves as Mirpuris) also participate in the procession.

The members of the organizing committee, Mirpur Shaheedi Smarak Committee, specially formed to arrange this procession mention how after their representation to the government the memorial for commemorating the memory of the 'martyrs' killed in the 1947 violence was sanctioned. When the memorial was sanctioned, the community leaders renamed the road passing through Bakshinagar colony where the maximum number of the city Mirpuris live as Mirpur Road, though it has not been officially recognized.²¹

The Mahajan Mirpuri Sabha has done something that very few organizations based on community affiliations can do

– it claims to have collected the names of all the Mirpuri Mahajans in the town and has published a directory with their names, and phone numbers. CP Gupta, the person whose brain child this directory was, says that he felt that this would help in increasing the communication within the community which was slowly getting “disunited.”²²

In 2001 Mirpur Mahila Sabha (women’s organization) was founded. The organization though independent, at the moment functions more or less as the women wing of the Mahajan Mirpuri Sabha. Many respondents who lamented the disappearance of their language and customs pointed out that the women folk play a huge role in the survival of their culture and language. They said that when they came to Jammu the men folk had to interact with people of the other communities at their jobs and the market place. As a result, they had to change the way they spoke so that they could talk with their colleagues and clients. The women, on the other hand, interacted more with the members of their own community and therefore, spoke the pure form of Mirpuri at home. So, these respondents assert that the carriers of tradition in a community are usually the women. The institution and formation of Mirpur Mahila Sabha seems to be the result of this widely perceived notion.

Lest we forget, the displaced Mirpuris include non-Mahajans as well. There is substantial number of Sikhs present in Jammu who came from the Mirpur district. In the past few years the Sikh community under the banner of the Mirpuri Sikh Foundation of India (MSFI) has started jointly organizing the 10 Magar procession with the Mahajan Mirpur Sabha. At times they have also held a parallel function on the day. The MSFI was established in 1994 and like its Mahajan counterpart also makes a claim to have been instrumental in getting the Martyrs’ memorial and road sanctioned by the government through its representations. MSFI has also started a newsletter that appeals to “all the Sikhs of Mirpur district settled anywhere ... to enroll as the members of MSFI.” And foundation’s aim is “to bring the vast scattered Sikh society of erstwhile Mirpur District under one umbrella and to work whole-heartedly for its cultural, educational and social upliftment.”²³ Like the Mahajan Sabha, this organization envisages the publication of a directory with the names, addresses and other sundry particulars of its community members.

Interestingly in the recent years these organizations have started making a purely political demand for the Mirpuris. They have asked for political representation of the Mirpuri community in the State legislature. The state assembly has 24 seats for the parts of Jammu and Kashmir which are in Pakistan, these organizations say out of those at least 11 seats should be left for the refugees of whom Mirpuris constitute a huge bulk.

The community is also making other claims from the government. For example, in a function organized in November 2002 to commemorate the 10 Magar day, Dr. Kulwant Singh, founding member MSFI, demanded that Mirpuris should be given Freedom Fighter status and they should be given preferential treatment in admissions to professional institutions and recruitment for government jobs. In the same function the speakers talked of the “stepmotherly treatment” that they had been given by both the union and state governments.²⁴

Mirpuri leaders speak about how they were just given a relief package when they came from Mirpur as opposed to a proper compensation for the land and property they had left behind. The reason that this was done was because Mirpur was (and is) legally considered a part of India. Giving compensation for the land and property, which is regarded Indian would mean acknowledging Pakistan’s control of the region. The community leaders say that since it seems unlikely, at least in the near future, that India is going to get back the region that is in Pakistan’s control, they should be compensated like other Partition displaced communities.

In fact many of them cite the example of Kashmiri Pandits when they make these demands. As HS Bahri, an MSFI founding member commented “Kashmiri Pandits get preferential treatment in government institutions in India. Why can’t we? They were compensated when they left Kashmir, even though it is till a part of India, why can’t we be too?” They allege discrimination, though it should be pointed out that the reasoning seems to be retrospective.

Significantly if you talk to the younger generation which does not speak Mirpuri, and for whom Mirpuri self-identification is not so strong, it is willing to assert its Mirpuriness if that would result in monetary compensation and reservations in jobs.

When asked why Mirpuris have become organizationally more active in the recent years, the people interviewed gave various reasons. Some said that when they came to Jammu most of them were only bothered about basic survival issues – where to live, how to get food and jobs. Now as they have settled down, they feel the need to have organizations that talk of the difficulties that they face. The organizations thus are now working for what are perceived to be important issues for the community. Some say that once the community was settled, it realized that there should be some medium to revive old contacts, to organize programs to commemorate events like the fall of Mirpur and to honor their “achievers.” It is evident that the desire to hold onto the old associations and customs is one major reason that these organizations have come up. But the instrumental reason of getting their demands for compensation and jobs met is also an important reason.

Another rationale that is given by the people in these organizations is that since every other community has a separate organization for itself – Duggar Manch, Kashmiri Samaj, Gujar Sabha and so forth – why should not the

Mirpuris have one too. This me-too syndrome has actually led to many things: establishment of similar organizations, the demand for refugee status and compensation like the Kashmiri Pandits, the demand for reservations and the demand for inclusion in the Pahari Welfare Board.²⁵

Interpretations and Conclusions

So how does one interpret all this information that was gathered from a very preliminary study? It is evident that the way Mirpuris' self-perception differs with age and context. The older generation values its Mirpuriness more than the younger generation. The collective experience of the Partition and consequent displacement seem to hold them together and imagine themselves as a community. The answer to the question "Who is a Mirpuri?" would get a definite answer from most members of the community. They would be as able to name famous Mirpuris, as they would share the notion that they are different from Dogras. Also they would all assert forcefully that their community had worked "so hard" to make it big. However, when the context is wider they identify themselves with the same Dogras and even predominantly Muslim communities of Jammu region like the Paharis and Gujars, and consider themselves to be Jammuwalas.

Indeed the community seems to have integrated into the host society and their cultural identification may be weakening. When the interviewees were asked whether they knew of Saif-ul-mulook, a long verse written by Mian Mohammed Baksh, who was born in Mirpur, the majority replied in negative. Saif-ul-mulook (or Saimlook as it is called in its corrupted form) is considered the Heer²⁶ of this region and is an extremely popular poem with the Potohari and Pahari population.²⁷

Similarly very few of them knew about the fifteen-minute Mirpuri radio program started by the Radio Kashmir, Jammu. The few who knew about it did not listen to it due to its awkward time. Others point out that the Mirpuri spoken in the program sounds more like Punjabi than Mirpuri. Shashank Choudhary, who produces and comperes the program, pointed out that it is difficult to find people who speak authentic Mirpuri, and so he has to make do with the form that is adulterated with Dogri and Punjabi. What seems apparent is that the people and the language have adapted themselves to the dominant culture.

One important reason that might have facilitated this integration and adaptation to the host milieu is that they share more or less a similar language and same (similar in case of Sikhs) religion with the dominant local population. The perceived social distance between the Mirpuris and the rest of the city is thus very less and consequently the members of the community do not punish (and perhaps even encourage) the adaptation to the dominant culture as that means economic and social advantage. In fact the only form of exclusion that the community practiced – marriage-related – also seems to be breaking down.

Moreover the members of the other groups do not seem to oppose this adaptation. This conclusion is drawn from the way the Mirpuris have adapted to the local culture and the lack of any significant cultural boundaries between them and others. Obviously to get a fuller picture, there is a need to know what is the perception of other communities about the Mirpuris, which the paper has not done.

Paradoxically, as pointed out earlier, the number of Mirpuri organizations seems to have increased over the past few years. These organizations function as instruments of articulation and representation of the community demands to the political state. As the cultural identification of the community seems to be weakening, I think that the growing number of organizations indicates two things – one, that some members of the community see the community identity waning and they want to hold onto it by privileging the members by getting them together for social functions, awarding the achievers, honoring the prominent members and by evoking the past through commemoration events. Two, the political system that they operate in facilitates their very formation. After all, their main demands are in terms of asking for reservations, freedom fighter status, political representation and compensation package. These are the things that the system provides for and rewards to those who are organized in some form.

People in the community itself get together because they perceive that they shall share in the rewards that the group would get as a result of their organization. As mentioned, the younger generation seems to be keen on joining Mirpuri groups if they give it some economic and social advantage. These rewards are not just material but also in terms of reputation and name in the community, and the broader society.

To conclude, the Mirpuri identity articulates itself in different fashions. It can be very exclusive, especially when it expresses itself in the context of its Partition-related history and violence, and it can be equally non-exclusive when it forms a part of a broader identity like say the Jammu identity. And, therefore, Mirpuri identity's politico-ideological expression is not fixed and changes with time, space and context. Endnotes

[1] Mirpur district of Jammu and Kashmir was the third most populated district of the Jammu and Kashmir state after Srinagar and Jammu. It comprised of three tehsils (a sub-unit of a district) – Mirpur, Bhimber and Kotli – and a niabat tehsil (a smaller unit) of Nowshera.

[2] Muslims were a majority in this district, Hindus and Sikhs came population-wise second and third respectively. Most

of the migrants from this region to north India are Mahajans (usually traders or money lenders) who came from the Mirpur town, which unlike the whole district had a Hindu majority population. Others included a substantial number of Sikhs (who came from the neighboring villages of Dadiyal, Hill and Ali Beig), Brahmins, and members of castes considered lower in the varna system, like the Dhobis and Chheebas.

[3] Potohari is the dialect spoken in the Potohar region of the Punjab. It is part of what has been described as the Western dialects of Punjabi, identified locally by various names, like Hindko in Hazara, and Siraiki around Multan. These Western dialects actually form a separate linguistic group in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India (1911) called the Lahnda, literally meaning 'west' in Punjabi. According to C. Shackleton of all the dialects in this group only Potohari can lay claim to a literary status. See C. Shackleton, 'Punjabi in Lahore,' Modern Asian Studies, Vol.4, No.3, 1970, pp.239-267 and 'Siraiki: A Language Movement in Pakistan,' Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1977, pp. 379-403.

[4] The name given to the lending, merchant and trading caste.

[5] I do realize that their common experiences in 1947 form a major part of their identification with each other. However I wanted them to talk about how and why they viewed themselves as a community rather than get detailed accounts of their individual sufferings — which people much better equipped, academically and resource-wise, have already dealt or are in the process of dealing with. That, in any case, would require a paper specifically meant for the purpose.

[6] Ali Beig was a village in Mirpur district. Many Mirpuris who were captured by the raiders were kept in a Gurudwara for about five months before Red Cross intervened and got them repatriated to the Indian side.

[7] Interestingly, according to some of these old timers, the Mangla dam is named after Mangla Mai, a goddesses worshipped by Potohari Hindus. There was apparently a fort called the Mangla Fort in Mirpur. A very cursory look at the information available on the web on this dam tells that as a result of the construction of the dam a small town called Mangla has come up at the mouth of the dam and this castle is now situated on the banks of the lake that serves as the water reservoir of the dam. <http://www.gharib.demon.co.uk/ajk/mirpur.htm>

[8] Translated from Hindi. Sansar Chand, 'Mirpur ki Yaad,' Mahajan Samachar, 18 November-6 December, 1984.

[9] As an aside, most respondents lamented the lack of electricity in the pre-Partition Mirpur. Can we detect a trace of sibling jealousy here — after all the post-Partition Mirpur has the dam that provides electricity to most of the north Pakistan? When pushed on this point some of them did indeed say that the Mirpuris across the border now had electricity while they did not when they were there. Another digression — the Pakistani Mirpuris, on the other hand, talk of how Mirpur does not get the benefit of the electricity produced by the dam because most of it gets supplied to other parts of Pakistan.

[10] Dogras are the Dogri-speaking community and consider themselves the original inhabitants of Jammu. Dogri language is the second most spoken language after the Kashmiri in Jammu and Kashmir, and is mostly spoken by the people of Jammu region. It is also spoken with a slight variation in certain pockets of the Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and certain villages bordering Jammu, which are now a part of Pakistan.

[11] According to Shackleton, Dogri spoken in Jammu forms a separate dialect group of Punjabi (the others being the Eastern dialect which fades into the Western Hindi dialects spoken around Delhi, Majhi dialect which is considered the standard Punjabi and is also the basis for the literary language, and the Western dialects that we mentioned earlier).

[12] One end of a sari, an unstitched fabric draped around by many Indian women, used as a veil.

[13] The token given to someone on an auspicious occasion.

[14] Most of the times the comparison is made with the Dogras.

[15] This might actually be a claim to hypergamy, a practice in which group that is considered superior accepts daughters from the groups considered inferior but does not give its own daughters in marriage to them. In the Hindu classical literature this practice is discussed in detail and is called anuloma. In common parlance the roti-beti (bread-daughter) relationship usually means that the boundaries between the two communities are hazy.

[16] Sheikh Abdullah, the most popular mass leader and the first democratically elected executive head of the state, considered him his 'political guru.'

[17] Two famous names in the list of RSS leaders.

[18] A newspaper started by Raja Mohammad Akbar Khan, who was a National Conference (the oldest political party of

the state, with a soft-left bent) leader as well. After his death Krishan Lal's brother Master Roshan Lal became the editor of the daily.

[19] Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist, considered by many the extremist-most left in India.

[20] One person disagreed. When the others took Sethi's name his immediate response was "but he is a communist."

[21] A government appointed committee for recommending names for roads in Jammu city did recommend that the road should be called Mirpur road, however the report was never implemented.

[22] Apparently there was a tradition in the Mirpuri community, CP Gupta told me, that if there was a death or a marriage in the community in the Mirpur town, a nai (barber) would go to all its members and inform them about the event. When Mirpuris came to Jammu, they appointed one barber to do this task and bought him a cycle for the purpose as people were much more spatially dispersed here. However after some time even this became impossible because of the long distances involved. Now with the directory that has been sent to as many Mahajan Mirpuris as possible, they can contact one another on the basis of information given there. Many people I talked to mentioned that this directory would help them when they have to look for spouses for their children within the community.

[23] Editorial, Mirpur Sikh Foundation of India, Vol. No. 2, Issue No. 3 Oct-Dec 1999.

[24] "Rich tributes paid to Mirpur Martyrs," Daily Excelsior, November 25, 2002.

[25] Paharis colloquially are people from the region of Jammu and Kashmir that is in Pakistan, and its adjoining areas in India.

[26] The famous epic poem written by Waris Shah and sung all over Punjab since the last few hundred years.

[27] When quizzed about this cultural amnesia, some people who knew about the verse and the poet say that the reason for this might have something to do with the fact that the poet is a Muslim, the poem too is viewed as a Muslim verse rather than a Mirpuri one. Others point out that it might have something to do with the fact that the poem was never as popular in the urban areas as it was in the rural areas.