Chapter V

Community Concerns - II

India is a symphony where there are, as in an orchestra, different instruments, each with its particular sonority, each with its special sound.

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5.1. Introduction: Minority Communities

Every culture has to come to terms with the unequal power relations that exist between the majority and minority communities that comprise it. Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Co-existence of Cultures* says “‘Pure’ cultures do not exist, and neither do ‘mixed’ ones, but only ones which recognise and value their diverse character, and others which deny or repress it” (Quoted in Punter 2000:45). In totalitarian states, the problem remains invisible, but a democracy needs to address it in order to ensure justice and equitable distribution of rights and duties for all its citizens, irrespective of religion, race, language or culture.

In post-independence India, the issue of minorities has continued to be a thorny one. In spite of the safeguards built into the Constitution of India, violence between the majority and minority communities has reared itself with alarming frequency and intensity. Though the Constitution does not define the term ‘minority’, it recognises mainly both linguistic
and religious minorities, and a working definition of the term may be adopted for the sake of discussion in this work:

Any section of the citizens, being small in number in a definite area, in respect of religion, language or any other ground, seeking equal or preferential treatment either to maintain its identity or to be assimilated with the majority is a minority.

(Wadhwa 1975:21)

Therefore, Muslims, who constitute 11.35% of the population of India, Christians with 2.43%, Sikhs with 1.96% and others, like Parsees, Jains, Anglo-Indians, with 1.59%, according to the 1991 census (Dube 1997) are the visible minority communities of India. The Indian English novel of the 1980s, which, ostensibly, seeks to explore the question of pan-Indian identity and nationhood, does register the presence of the minorities, and at least one of them, Allan Sealy’s *The Trotternama* is an attempt to portray the struggles of the Anglo-Indian community; the political concerns of the minorities, however, are hardly touched upon. The Muslims, the Christians, the Sikhs are viewed in terms of their identity crisis and their attempts to either forge a separate identity or to become part of the mainstream culture of the nation bringing the questions of hybridity, exile, dislocation and isolation/assimilation to the forefront. However, it is important to remember that a unitary approach cannot be
applied to the depiction of a multicultural society like India; as Devy points out:

In India there has been such a complex interrelationship between various social, linguistic, racial and religious cultures... that it is virtually impossible to fit them in a common formula of sociological, linguistic or ethical cultural structure.

(Devy 1995:13)

Any analysis along uni-cultural lines involves, therefore, a process of over-simplification, and is used for the sake of convenience only.

5.2. The Muslim Presence in the Novels

Most of the novels of the decade are directly concerned with historical and political issues; inevitably, therefore, the relations between communities, especially between the Hindu and Muslim communities comes under scrutiny in one way or another. Partition, the single most cataclysmic event of Indian history is featured in almost all the novels. In The Shadow Lines, Muslims remain on the periphery for almost the entire novel, and they emerge as a living reality only when the Grandmother and some of her family members cross over to Dhaka; but their presence is palpably felt in the tensions that simmer in Calcutta. The riots that take place in Calcutta after the loss of the hair of the prophet from the shrine at Hazaratbal are viewed through the eyes of
the child narrator, and form a link with the riots that claim the lives of the
family members at Dhaka. Interestingly, the centrality of this event in the
Muslim psyche becomes evident from the fact that it is portrayed in both
Ghosh's novel and in Midnight's Children, - in fact it also forms the
subject matter of a short story by Rushdie, 'The Prophet's Hair' (Rushdie
1995b). Surprisingly, though Muslims are integral to the history of the
Punjab, they are almost completely absent in Days of the Turban, except
in the partition memories that Lok Raj harbours. Midnight's Children
and A Suitable Boy try to explore the identity crisis faced by the
community, whereas in A Fine Family and Raj, they are viewed almost
patronisingly and their relations with the majority community
romanticised.

5.2.1.1. The 'Liberal' Muslims in Midnight's Children

Midnight's Children, in many ways represents the struggles
of the Sinai and the Aziz families to adapt to the forces of Westernisation
on the one hand and Indianisation on the other; Aadan Aziz and his wife
Naseem symbolise the two extremes of this conflict; Naseem, who tries to
hang on to any and all traditions that can give her a sense of identity
initiates an unending battle for political and religious space with her
'progressive' husband, Aadam Aziz. She is scandalised by his sexual
expectations of her, unhappy with his dalliance with the Hummingbird, with Nadir Khan and the Rani of Cooch Nahi, - all of whom oppose the Muslim League. She is also adamant in her insistence that her children receive an 'islamic' education, and she is violent in her rejection of her husband's demand that she break purdah following their marriage. Her unquestioning adherence to her faith makes her rigid in her attitude to the other members of the family, and her influence can be felt in the manner in which the process of their islamisation is completed when they move to Pakistan.

Aadam Aziz, on the other hand, emerges as a fractured person, and becomes symbolic of the fractured identity of the 'secular' Muslims, who are caught between the forces of modernisation and tradition. He represents the notion of the alienation of the postcolonial subject, becoming a 'hybrid', perhaps, a 'political object that is new, neither the one nor the other' (Bhabha 1994:25).

I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on my chest that turned me into an Indian. I'm still not much of a Muslim.

(Rushdie 1983:40)

His loss of faith which takes place when he views his Kashmir valley through 'foreign' eyes, is both dramatic and devastating:
My grandfather bent his head towards the earth. Forward he bent, and the earth, prayer mat covered, curved up towards him... it smote him upon the point of the nose. Three drops fell. There were rubies and diamonds. And my grandfather, lurching upright make a resolve. Stood. Rolled cheroot. Stared across the lake. And was knocked forever into that middle place, unable to worship a God in whose existence he could not wholly disbelieve. Permanent alteration: a hole.

(Rushdie 1983:6)

the hole at the centre of his being, in true postmodernist style takes on frightening dimensions as the novel proceeds. The bullet wound he receives at Jallianwala Bagh and which establishes his Indian identity ruptures his links with both Tai and Naseem, both of whom continue to torture him in their own ways. His insanity at the end of the novel, which leads him to the shrine at Hazratbal, is the final ‘punishment’ for this rupture with the ghetto mentality of Naseem and Tai.

Aziz’s failure is also revealed by the fact that though his grandchildren, Saleem and Brass Monkey have a cosmopolitan upbringing at Methwold Estate in Bombay, they succumb to the forces of fundamentalism, especially when they migrate to Pakistan. Particularly, the transformation of Brass Monkey into Jameela Begum mimics in reverse the ‘Indianisation’ of Aadam Aziz. She becomes a disembodied voice, - the voice of Pakistan. She retreats into purdah and wears an ‘all-concealing, white silk chaddar, the curtain or veil heavily embroidered in
gold brocade work and religious calligraphy' (ibedum:374), to honour her father's protests over her public role as a singer. Her voice becomes the voice of the nation, and as President Ayub Khan declares 'Jameela daughter... your voice will be a sword for purity; it will be a weapon with which we shall cleanse men's souls' (ibedum:376). The religious and the political merge, as religion becomes a potent weapon to straitjacket the 'deviant' non-believers like Adam Aziz and Saleem Sinai.

Rushdie touches upon the insecurity felt by the Muslim community in India in the decline of the fortunes of Ahmed Sinai: twice, his business suffers because of political upheavals; at Delhi, the members of the Ravana Gang set fire to his godown, and when his assets are seized in independent India when he suffers business losses, he suspects that he is victimised for belonging to the Muslim community. However, Rushdie is careful to point out the commercial nature of this victimisation:

... it posed as a fanatical anti-Muslim movement... it burned down Muslim-owned factories, shops, godowns. But, behind this façade of racial hatred, the Ravana gang was a brilliantly conceived commercial enterprise. Anonymous phone calls, letters written with words cut out of newspapers were issued to Muslim businessmen, who were offered the choice between paying a single, once-only cash sum and having their world burned down.

(ibedum:80)
The Aadam Aziz-Jameela Begum paradigm is ironically reworked in the parallelism of Saleem Sinai and Shiva; the dividing lines between Aziz and Jameela are sharply etched, while they are blurred in the case of Saleem and Shiva: Saleem – truly cosmopolitan in being Hindu, Anglo-Indian and Muslim simultaneously; and Shiva, the Muslim who goes on to become an avatar of the Hindu God of destruction; the blurring of the boundaries in the case of these two seminal characters becomes symptomatic of the blurring of the boundaries which demarcate the two communities in India and Pakistan. In its own strange, paradoxical manner, *Midnight’s Children* presents an effort at pointing to the essential unity of India, rather than at raking up differences between communities. The cosmopolitan agenda of the novel is obvious even in the fact that it is a novel about the ‘construction’ of India, with Parsees, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Anglo-Indians, all getting together to inherit Methwold Estate from the Englishman. The Hindu names and symbols reverberate throughout the novel giving it a broader sweep; and the romantic and the mandatory saving of the Hindu dugdugeewala from a violent Muslim crowd by the Muslim Amina echoes both with sincerity and irony.
5.2.1.2 The 'Nawabi' ethos in *A Suitable Boy*

*A Suitable Boy* and *Midnight's Children* represent two diametrically opposed modes of fiction in terms of vision, form, technique and style; however, they have one aspect in common: in both the novels the foregrounding of one community does not suppress or seek to decimate the concerns of other communities, but actually succeeds in highlighting them. Therefore, *Midnight's Children*, with its dominant Muslim background retains a strong Hindu flavour; and, *A Suitable Boy*, a novel ostensibly focussing on the Chatterjees and the Mehras and the Kapoors, also explores the worlds of the Muslim Khans. Seth's novel also reinforces the plurality inherent in the muslim community. As Mushirul Hasan says, 'The Indian Muslims do not constitute a single, homogeneous and monolithic entity and the differentiating features that characterise Indian society as a whole are also to be found within the Muslim community' (Hasan 1988:2). Thus, the Nawab of Baitar with his extended family of two sons, a married daughter, a brother who has migrated to Pakistan and a fiery sister-in-law, along with his faithful retainers at the Baitar Estate speak for the weightage of the Muslim community in Purva Pradesh (loosely representing Bihar and U P). Rasheed Khan becomes instrumental in taking the reader into the distant villages of a district like Debaria. lifting the veil over the concerns of the
rural Muslims. These two worlds – the urban and the rural – are bridged by another element of Muslim culture – the world of the courtesan, represented by Saeeda Bai and her entourage. On the periphery of this dramatic core are the ‘unsuitable boy’, Kabir Durrani, and his insane mother. The world of sophisticated poetry, music and culture is represented in the worlds of nawab, Saeeda Bai and Ustad Majid Khan; and, being the ‘dominant’ culture in Srinivas’ use of the term, infiltrates into the world of Mahesh Kapoor and, to a greater extent, his errant son, Maan.

The Nawab Sahib is the picture portrait of the conservative Muslim, - exuding religious and social fervour. He follows all the conventions of his community, offering prayers/namaz at the stipulated times, the women of his family scrupulously observe purdah and derive strength from it, he is suitably censorious of ‘disruptive’ women like his sister-in-law, Begum Abida, and he has nurtured family and religious values in his sons. The family has moved on to modern professions like medicine and law, but unlike Aadam Aziz, in Midnight’s Children, remain custodians of their culture and the traditional way of life. The Nawab’s assiduous attempts to preserve the past in his library, which contains the learning and erudition of generations, make him a potent symbol of all that is valuable and lasting in his culture. He is not a fanatic,
as is obvious from his abiding friendship with Mahesh Kapoor; and it is his tragedy that the heritage that he has so conscientiously fostered, slips into the hands of lumpen, unscrupulous and uncultured members of his community like Waris Khan, who emerge as the strident and intolerable, uncontrollable voice of the community.

The Nawabi ethos is seen as the repository of all that is rich and invaluable in the muslim community, since the Nawab, by virtue of his feudal authority becomes a patron of music, dance, literature and culture. This aspect links it with the world of Saeeda Bai, - the courtesan who is outside the pale of family, but not community.

Saeeda’s world is one of pleasure, patronised mainly by the affluent; but it also provides employment to impoverished musicians like Ishaq Khan and urdu language teachers like Rasheed Khan. It is also the place where poets like Mir and Dagh are brought to life; so much so that even conventional Hindu households like that of Mahesh Kapoor welcome them to perform for ceremonial events, much to the chagrin of chaste, caste housewives, for whom the sexual aspect of Saeeda’s place over-rides all other considerations. Her ‘kotha’ is also the significant link between the worlds of the urban and urbane Nawab and the dusty interiors of Rasheed’s village and province. Again, in a neat rounding up of events and themes, Seth emphasises that if the Nawab of Baitar has been
enraptured by the charms of Saeeda in the past, his son, is attracted to her
dughter (and his half-sister), Tasneem, and Rasheed, too, is willing to
marry her in spite of opposition of his entire family. All this constitutes a
tribute, no doubt, to the luxury, the ambience, and the seductive power of
this world.

5.2.1.3. Rasheed’s village: Rural/Provincial Muslims

Provincial Purva Pradesh represents the backwaters of India,
making the position of an educated Rasheed pitiable. He neither fits in
with the Nawabi ethos of Brahmpur, nor can he be at ease at his native
Debaria. He is a victim of the extreme orthodoxy of his provincial world:
he has been forced to marry his brother’s widow as per the custom; as if to
give a lie to the preconceived notion that muslims take multiple wives, his
family reacts violently and vituperatively to his desire to marry Tasneem:

in our family we don’t marry four women at a time; we do
it one by one. One dies, we marry another: we have the
decency to wait. But he is talking about another woman
now, and he expects his wife to understand

(Seth 1993:1180)

The village elders also expect obedience to the tenets of Islam both in
letter and spirit. The fact that Rasheed misses his namaz frequently gets
him into trouble with them, inviting their sarcasm and hostility:
Do you propose to attend the dawn prayer at the mosque at Debaria, tomorrow, Maulana Sahib? We understand that you are a late riser and it may involve some sacrifice...

(Seth 1993:657)

It is impossible for his individual voice to be heard, and when he tries to express his views, it causes resentment in a rural community that is feudal, hierarchical and politicised. The village mosques, the madarasas which impart religious education to the children of the village and the roof-top of Rasheed’s ancestral home, where community conferences are held form the enclosed world from which Rasheed seeks to escape: this world does not understand his concern for the under-privileged, and it resents his socialist ideas, branding him a communist.

The easy acceptance of the traditional world by the Nawab’s family contrasts sharply with the conflicts that simmer and even erupt when the village society feels threatened by the presence of the reformist Rasheed. Neither Rasheed nor the patriarch appears in a flattering light. The purdah, which adds so much dignity to and becomes a source of empowerment for Zainab, emerges as a cloistering and claustrophobic force when one comes face-to-face with an entire village where no woman may be seen except by close members of the family; where an outsider like Maan cannot even enter the house because of its strict adherence to the norms of purdah. Purdah links the two worlds:
'The Nawab Sahib has purdah in his house at Brahmpur, so I shouldn't have assumed it would be different,' said Maan. 'It is, though,' said Rasheed. 'The Muslim women of the lower castes need to work in the fields, so they can't maintain purdah. But we Sheikhs and Sayyeds try to. It's simply a matter of honour, of being the big people in the village.'

(Seth 1993:512)

An important conclusion that emerges is that in contravention of the egalitarian society that Islam stipulates, the caste system has seeped into it; and the focus of the novel, in both the rural and urban explorations remains restricted to the upper classes.

Another aspect that brings the urban and rural worlds together is the controversial Zamindari Abolition Bill which affects not only the Nawab of Baitar and Rasheed's family, but also the lower caste and marginalised Kacheru. Seth explores the ramifications of the bill on the class which ostensibly is supposed to benefit from it, but is tricked out of it by the manipulations of the upper castes. Rasheed's intercession on Kacheru's behalf only makes matters worse: Kacheru has to pay with his life and Rasheed is banished from his village.

Rasheed's failure to bring about reform in his community is not a personal failure: it is also a failure of the community itself, which refuses to shake off its shackles and refuses to address itself to the rebelliousness of a Rasheed. This attitude is typified in his father's reproach to him:
‘On your first evening in the village, you missed both the evening and the night prayer. Today when I went into the fields I wanted you to accompany me – but you were nowhere to be seen. I had something important to show you. Some land. What kind of influence will people think you are under? And you spend your day going around from the house of the washer-man to the house of the sweeper, asking about this one’s son and that one’s nephew, but spending no time with your own family.’

(Seth 1993:537)

So, what is expected in this society is: fidelity to family, class, caste, community and religion. Any transgression invites severe retribution – eventually leading to the banishment and suicide of Rasheed.

Further, the electoral success of a leader like the communal and expedient Waris Khan indicates the fact that the political set-up encouraged self-serving opportunists like him as an easy way out by wooing the ‘sectional and parochial interests and to make occasional friendly gestures towards the minorities even if it meant heightening their community consciousness’ (Hasan 1988:15). In a novel, that eschews the overtly dramatic, Seth’s depiction of this closed community life becomes significant for its underlying sense of helplessness, bitterness and failure. It is not redeemed by the light touch of comedy or even satire that marks almost every other aspect of the novel.
Muslims in The Trotternama

The Trotternama, 'a moving and all-embracing story of a misunderstood people' (Ganapathy-Dore 1997:74), the Anglo-Indians, 'modern India's first metaphoric children endowed with a "stereoscopic vision" as insiders and outsiders to the society in which they were born, (ibedum:67), the focus is on 'communities rather than on individuals', (Conrad 1993:388). Its depiction of other communities is, however, restricted to the interactions of the Anglo-Indians with them. Therefore, Hindus are few and far between, like the Brahmin Sunya and the wife of Alex Kahn-Trotter, Sucheta; they are perceived as the 'other', their depiction is stereotyped and satiric. Thus, Victoria derides her husband for coming under the influence of Gandhi and is entirely contemptuous of him:

Maybe this Gandhi will come and show some people how to tie their table-cloths personally. And then, we can all sit on the ground and spin cotton and eat with our fingers and do what-not and serve the country, no?

(Sealy 1990:436).

Earlier on, the sartorial changes of the Great Trotter from the European to the Indian, including his adoption of the Indian cuisine fail to meet the approval of Fonseca, even though they add to his power and acceptability in the circles of power.
The Anglo-Indians' Muslim antecedents are explored at length. They form one side – maternal - of the lineage of the race. So, two of the wives of the Great Trotter – Sultana and Farida - are Muslims. But, Sealy emphasises the fact that both these marriages take place as a matter of convenience and in the absence of any viable alternatives.

Sultana responds to Aloysius’ persistent offers of marriage and elopes with him, because of the extreme orthodoxy of her family. Since her family claims to belong to the Prophet’s line, she and her two sisters find no eligible matches ‘because no men of their own kind are available’ (Sealy 1990:129). She escapes from the purdah of her father’s home to create almost a prototype of it at San Souci, assiduously recreating a zenana for herself. Farida, his second wife, marries him because her father, Salim Wilkinson, is a Christian converted to Islam. She, however, shakes off her Islamic heritage after she marries Fonseca, on the Great Trotter’s death. Elise (Jarman Begum) enters purdah only after her marriage to Yakub Khan. But again, the Muslim background of Yakub Khan is eclipsed when his progeny alter their name from Khan to Kahn in order to pass themselves off as Germans. Thus, the Muslim connection of the Anglo-Indians is found only way back in history and the Trotter tribe is, later on, at pains to disown any of its Indian antecedents, since they seek to align themselves with the colonial powers, the French and the
English. Even the *Din Hawai*, the religion founded by the Great Trotter, and reminiscent of Akbar’s *Din-e-Ilahi* is forgotten, as his clan moves towards anglicisation and the approximation of European life-style and ethos.

5.2.2. **Hindu-Muslim Relations**

The Partition of the Indian nation can be seen as the culmination of the mistrust between the Hindus and Muslims. It is described as ‘the drawing of borders based on headcounts of religious identity – so many Hindus versus so many Muslims’ (Butalia 1998:3) and it as Rajmohan Gandhi says, finally ‘divided the independent subcontinent, politically into India and Pakistan, and emotionally into several religions, sectarian, caste, ethnic or linguistic groupings in both countries’ (Gandhi 1999:263).

Representations of Partition abound in the novels of the 1980s, and will be taken up for discussion in a later chapter. However, the political conflicts that are so symptomatic of the Hindu-Muslim equation, are often balanced by cordial social relations during times when there is no immediate provocation to conflict. Hence, on the one hand, *A Suitable Boy* depicts an Ayodhya-like situation, which nearly gets out of hand, and on the other, it highlights the heart-warming friendships between Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab of Baitar and between their sons, Firoz and Maan. The
Saleem-Shiva baby-switch in *Midnight's Children* seems to imply that at base the divisions between the two communities are immaterial; at the same time, the frame-by-frame blow-up of the two wars between India and Pakistan underline the hopeless co-mingling of religious and political issues.

5.2.2.1. **Romanticisation – The Softer Option**

Urvashi Butalia ends her painful account of the traumas of Partition, in *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) by recalling a heart-warming story about the friendship of Harkishan Das Bedi and Choudhary Latif, which grows across the borders of India and Pakistan. Latif, who has occupied Bedi's house in Pakistan, responds to his requests to preserve the intellectual heritage that Bedi has left behind and their correspondence offers rich insights into the spirit that binds them:

> I write to you as a human being. I hope you will not be put off that a Hindu has written to you. We are human beings first and Hindu and Muslim only after that. I firmly believe that you will answer this letter in the name of the human bond we have.

(Butalia 1998:369)

This kind of human-interest story may appear to verge on the sentimental, but it also can supply the much-needed healing touch in the troubled communal relationships. When it is narrated in a facile manner and with
the obvious intention of glossing over the problem, it becomes ineffective; in other cases, it can go beyond rhetoric and become the footboard to explore meaningful aspects of this kind of bonding. In a post-colonial situation, when the need is to overcome the indignities of the colonial experience, bonding between indigenous communities goes a long way in the task of nation building. Romanticisation, therefore, becomes a strategy to salvage and reaffirm the concept of unity in the postcolonial scenario.

A case in point is the friendship between Mahesh Kapoor and the Nawab of Baitar in A Suitable Boy which is replicated in the younger generation, too – in the bonding between Firoz and Maan. In spite of the fact that the novel is set in 1951, just four years after independence and partition, no bitterness exists in these relationships. Mahesh Kapoor, obviously modelled on Jawaharlal Nehru, is viewed as a champion of muslim causes, and even his Zamindari Abolition Bill, which threatens the very livelihood of the Nawab does not drive a wedge between them.

According to David Myers, this friendship is ‘Seth’s moral contrivance against religious fanaticism’ (Dass 1994:84). In an unobtrusive, laid-back style, the novelist works around the thesis that hostility and conflict between the two communities is a matter of political considerations, while social interaction between them is marked by amity
and grace. Thus, even when Maan, in a frenzy of sexual rivalry assaults Firoz at Saaeda Bai’s ‘kotha’, it is, finally, the testimony of Firoz that saves him:

Mahesh Kapoor embraced his son. He too was dumbfounded. He turned towards the courtroom, which was now in uproar, and saw the Nawab Sahib talking to Firoz. Their eyes met for an instant. Mahesh Kapoor’s were full of perplexity and gratitude. The Nawab shook his head slightly, as if to disown responsibility, and turned again to talk to his son.

(Seth 1993:1311)

The restoration of the friendship between the two families becomes symbolic of the abiding respect that can exist between the communities; it gains significance in the light of the hatred and communally inflamed rhetoric that the Maan-Firoz episode has given rise to:

... a small handbill printed in Urdu... announced that Firoz had died the previous night, and called upon all faithful people, in his grieving father’s name, to cast their vote in such a way as to express their indignation against the author of this great misfortune. The murderer even now walked the streets of Brahm pur, free on bail, free to strangle more helpless muslim women and slaughter the flower of muslim manhood.

(Seth 1993:1244)

However, in the context of other markers of communal harmony, like Rasheed’s friendship with Maan, Haresh’s regard for Dr Durrani, Kabir’s love for Lata, the rescue of young Bhaskar at the Pul Mela, by Kabir
Durrani, the social amity does not strike one as false or contrived. In fact, the respect of the characters for each other, and the dignity and restraint with which they conduct themselves offers real hope in a multicultural society.

In *Raj*, the Hindu-Muslim bonding is worked out through the persona of the Prime Minister of Sirpur, Sir Akbar. He has stood by the royal family even when muslims elsewhere have been divided by the demand for a separate Pakistan. His death at the hands of a bloodthirsty mob and the death of Prince Arjun while trying to save him emerge as deeply tragic and strangely revitalising, like the death of Tridib in *The Shadow Lines* in trying to save Jethomoshai and the muslim richshaw-puller, and Amina Sinai’s sheltering of Lifafa Das from a violent muslim mob in *Midnight’s Children*:

As they were returning to Sirpur House, a Hindu mob surrounded the car, demanding to know why a Hindu King was travelling with a Muslim. Sir Akbar’s tunic must have alerted them. Arjun shouted that Sir Akbar was the Prime Minister of Sirpur, but they dragged the old man out of the car and ripped off his clothes to see if he was circumcised. The mob rocked the car to prevent Arjun from getting out. He still managed to open the door. But it was too late. They had already cut off Sir Akbar’s manhood...

‘Your son died like a true warrior, Bai-sa.’

‘Savaged by a bloodthirsty mob, trying to protect the dignity of his Prime Minister?’

(Mehta 1993:446)
Like the short stories of Manto, these episodes in all their violent, gruesome, and frightening aspects also hark back to the restoration of human dignity and nobility, re-establishing faith in the midst of communal mayhem.

Das, too, seeks to depict balance and harmony between communities in *A Fine Family*. But there is a kind of facileness in this depiction often, as if the author is out to prove a point. For example, there is a scene in which some Muslim boys come to kill Bauji and he handles them with extraordinary suavity and cordiality:

‘Good Morning,’ said Bauji. ‘Do come in. I am sorry you have dragged yourself out of bed so early for my sake. I know you have come to kill me. And I am ready to die. But please do sit down. Shall we have a cup of tea before the ... um... event?’

(Das 1990:99)

As a contrast to the false note in this episode, there is the more realistic situation in which Bauji is spat on by some Muslim boys in a train, after they have ascertained his Hindu identity, only to receive a resounding slap from a fellow traveller, who is a Muslim (Das 1990:32). An even more touching event is the one in which we learn that the youngster who boasts about killing Hindus during the day and weeps for what he has done at night.
The simmering tensions between the two communities, always on the verge of bursting into a conflagration, are portrayed quite early on in the novel, in the confrontation between Chachi and Mirza Khan, at Tara’s wedding:

‘Yes, yes,’ impatiently admitted Chachi. ‘But why must you equate one-fourth Muslims with three-fourth Hindus? Or rather why can’t you treat all Indians as one?’

‘Islam says that Muslims should be ruled only by Muslims,’ said Sir Mirza firmly.

‘Come, come, Sir, we both know that the Hindu-Muslim conflict has little to do with religious tenets...’ said Karan.

‘No, young man. The differences are religious and cultural; the English are rightly concerned to protect the minority from the potential tyranny of the majority. We would prefer the English to continue in India rather than turn it over to the Hindus,’ said Sir Mirza...

‘I always thought that the Muslims were anti-national. But I didn’t believe it till I heard it with my own ears this evening,’ said Chachi provocatively.

(Bas 1990:85-86)

Bauji’s pro-Hindu bias is very successfully concealed in his apparent understanding of and feeling for the Muslim community. His romance with Anees, the mysterious and unattainable woman is in keeping with the perception that a Hindu-Muslim love affair ought to remain only on the Platonic level, and thrive only on romantic yearnings. She also emerges as a spokeswomman for the Muslims and Bauji learns to appreciate their plight from her. It is Anees who shelters Bauji and his family during their long journey to India in 1947, and who is instrumental in arranging
for their safe transit through the riot-torn areas. To emphasise the romantic role of Anees, she is present at his deathbed; she also renounces her earlier advocacy of Partition and confesses to Bauji that she had been mistaken in her judgement:

We got swayed by Jinnah into believing that Muslims couldn’t survive in India. Look at the Arab world: one religion, one language and a dozen nations. And if Jinnah himself had not believed in it he wouldn’t have left forty million Muslims in India.

(Das 1990:285)

Of course, this romanticisation of Hindu-Muslim relationships can be related to the need to reinforce the importance of communal harmony; but, being formulaic and predictable, it hardly ever rises to the level of debate or exploration; either it remains facile or it gives rise to empty rhetoric, as is seen in the case of A Fine Family. Conflicts, ever present, in the body politic of the concept of the nation, are often treated in this novel only in a very superficial and facile manner.

5.3. The Anglo-Indian Community

Unlike the other novels discussed in this chapter, The Trotternama, specifically takes up the concerns and the identity crisis faced by a miniscule community – the Anglo-Indian community, within the parameters of the Indian nation, and addresses itself to the threat faced
by it, in the face of a majoritarian set-up. According to Maria Couto the term ‘Anglo-Indian’ was first used by Warren Hastings in 1655 to denote Europeans domiciled in India (Kirpal 1996). Gradually, however, it came to be applied to the new race fathered by them in India. Even in the 1960s the general perception was to use the term to designate those members of the community who were ‘fair-skinned enough to pass for Europeans’ (Ibedum:202). The Constitution of India, however, is quite specific in its definition of an Anglo-Indian:

a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors in the male line is or was of European descent, but who is domiciled within the territory of India and is or was born within such territory of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only...


Wadhwa further informs us that ‘the religion of the community is Christianity and the mother-tongue English’ (Ibedum:15).

Right at the beginning, the novel, The Trotternama, makes evident the painfully meagre minority status of this community by highlighting the fact that they are a minority of the minorities:

The Sikhs are two percent of India’s population; well, we’re two percent of that.

(Sealy 1990:5)
The novel seeks to explore the half-and-half identity of a community which has been the victim of stereotyping, called derisive names like, 'country born', 'mixed blood', 'half-caste,' 'East India', and 'Eurasian'.

The ambivalent situation of the Anglo-Indians has been the subject of historical accounts of them, and as Gaikwad points out:

midway between two cultural worlds, under the peculiar conditions of their origins, and their socio-cultural development, they could never really get to know the West to which they aspired to belong, nor did they have emotional ties with India where they really belonged

(Gaikwad 1967:4)

Being the progeny of liaisons/marriages between European men (often English and French), and Indian (low-caste/ muslim) women, the alienation of the Anglo-Indians from the mainstream communities has been almost total by virtue of their origins, their divided loyalties, their highly imitative, westernised life-styles and their aspirations to belong to the West. In India, they have found it extremely difficult to integrate themselves with the mainstream.

5.3.1. The Trotternama – An Anglo-Indian Chronicle

The Trotternama appears to be the novel of the Anglo-Indian community, spoken of by Rudyard Kipling, who, it appears was well aware of their misrepresentation in the fiction of his time:
This people will turn out a writer or poet, and then we shall know how they live and how they feel.

(Kipling, quoted in Younger 1987:30)

It seeks to authenticate their voice, represent their failures and their decline, to ‘reclaim, the past for the community, and give a ‘marginalised community an etiological myth and a fictional voice’ (Conrad 1993:386). It is a dark ‘story of a disintegration, the falling apart of a life-style that is the dissolution of a race and of its culture’ (Antao, 2001:1), and a valiant attempt to salvage a history and an identity. Even though the last Trotter, Eugene, a failed miniaturist and an art thief, is a far cry from the Great Trotter, Aloysius, and the meticulously constructed Sans Souci, degenerates into a commercial hotel, the tragedy of a people who never learned to belong can, nevertheless, be read into its very structure.

5.3.2. History Fictionalised

Obviously written in the magic realism mode, The Trotternama, can be considered to be one of Rushdie’s midnight’s children, since like the Sinais, the Trotter family is also ‘handcuffed to history’ (Rushdie 1983:3). The history of the Trotter clan is representative of the history of the Anglo-Indian community, even though, unlike Raj, it is not a traditional historical novel. It is ‘a blend of history, fantasy, epic, a Raj
novel gone wrong, a nama, a potpourri of fact, fiction, recipes, battles, panegyric, satire, mock-epic, and what-not, chronicle, not history as Sealy himself claims (Sealy 1990:7). It is the multiplicity of styles and registers that it employs that sustains its sweep and magnitude, that carries along with it the self-reflexivity and the self-questioning so essential to the post-modern spirit.

The 'history' depicted in The Trotternama covers a period of two hundred years (1748-1947), seven generations and two cultures. It can be viewed as 'a sightseeing tour of Indian history from the decline of the Moghul Empire through the arrival of the British, the Company and the Crown administrations, the Sepoy Mutiny, the rise of Congress, Home-Rule to Independence [to] ... contemporary internetted world time' (Ganapathy-Dore 1997:68). One can also read into it what Leela Gandhi calls 'the pervasive exhaustion with the mantric iteration of the embattled past' (Gandhi 1999:128). Within this framework, the fictionalised history of the Trotters may, thus, be explored in the following four time zones.

5.3.2.1. The Beginnings (up to 1857)

Mik Trotter, the son of the Great Trotter, the Frenchman turned Englishman and his muslim wife, Sultana, is the first Anglo-Indian of the Trotter family. His struggle typifies the plight of the Anglo-Indians at this
juncture in history. The fact that he has no name for a long time symbolises his total lack of identity and his ambivalent and vacillating position in the communities of his father and mother, as also his wastrel, vagrant existence. Brought up in an orphanage and educated at various charitable institutes set up for destitute Anglo-Indian boys, he emerges as a symbol for the reluctant protectionism which the British reserve for the community they have fathered, but do not wish to fully acknowledge.

However, the irresolute attitude of the British to the race prompts them to summarily withdraw all concessions made to the Anglo-Indians, because they remain suspicious of their loyalties. The ‘irrefragable necessity of a khakhi skin for British military espionage in India’ (Sealy 1988:201), becomes a liability when in the 1790s, the Company passes two orders disqualifying Anglo-Indians from active high level military service. These orders are important not only because they are so blatantly unjust, but also because they constitute what the community came to consider as the great betrayal of India and the Anglo-Indian community. Mik’s plight telescopes the plight of the entire race:

Mik found his luggage deposited on the pavement; they had reached Cimmerii street. The houses were grey and pealing and streaked with moss from many monsoons.; built fifty years ago by Europeans, they had lapsed to shabby genteel Anglo-Indians and been divided into tenements. As the next Trotter paid his fare, another tonga arrived, rattling and jingling and then another and another and still others.
From each one stepped a newly discharged Anglo-Indian officer, a Skinner, a Powell, a Hearsay, a Gardner, a Gray. Mik was puzzled: he had imagined himself the only one. So apparently had the others who were standing erect in their civilian clothes and wondering what to make of it all.

(Sealy 1990:202-203)

Rejected by the British, they join forces with the Indian princes, particularly, the Marathas. But when they march against the East India Company under the Maratha regiment, another order dislocates them, an order which declares that their services to the Princes would be considered ‘treasonous, and the officer in question a traitor’ (ibidem:223). Their attempts to align themselves with the French under the leadership of Marcel Petard prove equally disastrous. As the representative of the Anglo-Indians in the next generation, Jacob Kahn-Trotter puts it to the House of Lords:

We are sometimes Europeans and sometimes natives, as it suits the purpose of the government…As Christians [we were] answerable to Mohammedan criminal law; as country-borns [we were denied civil and military employ in the East India Company, except as clerks’.

(Sealy 1990:307-309)

It is when the British establish a cavalry unit, the Trotter’s Horse or the Rose Boys, accommodating the dismissed Anglo-Indian officers that some kind of rehabilitation takes place, but it hardly opens up any new, viable job opportunities for them.
Apart from the displacement that Mik faces in the various Army units which he serves, there is also the persistent demand to prove both his identity and loyalty and he has to constantly 'switch his culture code according to the needs of his social situation' (Devy 1995:13). The British and the French both distrust him because of his father's antecedents – Frenchman-turned-Englishman; by various legal pronouncements, he is disqualified from serving the British, the French and Indians; his dark skin, an asset to him as a spy, prevents him from passing himself off as a European; as an Anglo-Indian, he cannot inherit his father's estate and Sans Souci in the absence of a will, since as a country-born, no law applies to him. On all fronts his alienation from all communities is complete and he and his race emerge as the quintessentially disinherited and the marginalised of the earth.

1857 – the first Indian revolt against the British, the 'Sepoy Mutiny' in colonial language, marks the turning point in the fortunes of the Anglo-Indians, and provides them the much-needed opportunity to prove their loyalty to the British: it is Mik who seeks to warn the British Resident of Nakhlau of the distressed caused by the Enfield cartridge, is killed in action by a nationalist Mahavir Pandav (Mangal Pandey), and becomes the first victim of the blood-bath, gaining the much sought after legitimacy in British eyes. Thomas Henry Trotter, the uncovenanted clerk
in the British administration finally finds his heroic vocation when he goes on to win the Victoria Cross for bravery. It is the scores of Anglo-Indian railwaymen and telegraphists who are responsible for keeping the essential lines of communication working during the mutiny, and it is one of them, Cyril Brendish, who sends the telegram ‘that disarmed the Punjab’ (ibedum:337). Thus, their loyalty to the British and the severance of their ties with the ‘natives’, is complete only when it is sealed with their blood; and post 1857, the community is ready to reap the rewards of their unstinted support to the race of their forefathers, at least for the time being.

5.3.2.2. The Years of Prosperity (1857-1919)

1857 is the year, which marks the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British Crown, and it ushers in an era of reforms and governance; it also marks the second phase of colonisation in which the British seek to colonise the mind and the systems of India. Naturally, the accent now is on benevolent governance and the need to convince the ‘natives’ of the civilising mission of the colonisers. So, the education system is revamped, with the opening up of the three major universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras; English education, brought in by Macaulay in 1835, acquires a broader base; railways and other government jobs are
made accessible to Indians, and newspapers flourish, underlining the avowed British policy of ruling over India for the advancement of Indians. The largesse extended is, indeed, very generous, and among the major beneficiaries of these new policies are the Anglo-Indians, who have proved their loyalty to the British.

Thus, Thomas Henry Trotter, erstwhile cranny and petty clerk, tied up in the red-tape of his own creation, finds himself a hero: a recipient of the Victoria Cross for his valour in the 1857 uprising, his journey to England ("home") is a dream come true. His promotion in the ranks of service signals the lifting of the ban on recruitment of Anglo-Indians in positions of authority:

As a reward for meritorious services rendered, the government elevated him to the covenanted civil service, making him an Assistant Collector on a salary ten times higher than his previous one. He was admitted to the European Club in the former Umbrella Palace.

(Sealy 1990:360)

The proliferation of the Trotter clan and their relative prosperity at this stage is summed up by Sealy as follows:

Victors had grown up and chuffed their way across to the railway colony by the line... Behind them stood their multitude of wives brought home from Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and the many little stations and railheads where the railways had penetrated, and their broods of steam-and-coal children.

(ibedum:398)
Not only is this the age of prosperity for the community, it is also the time they rediscover and reassert their European antecedents; Victoria, the daughter of Thomas Henry Trotter, emerges as a mini replica of the British monarch herself, and seeks to replicate the ethos of Victorian England in her home and life: she untiringly drapes and covers the legs of tables and chairs, tries to make herself as severely plain as possible at the age of sixteen, takes to wearing purple and painfully straightens her hair, mimicking the severity and austerity of Victorian cultural ethos.

Victoria carries on the process of Anglicisation to its extreme. Her first public act of asserting her loyalty to the British is her opposition to the proposed Ilbert Bill which sought to permit Indians to try Europeans in court; her objection to it, strongly worded and aggressively expressed clearly points to the fact that she considers herself and her race as European: 'I wouldn't want an Indian to sit in judgement over me, and that's that' (Sealy 1988:397) [emphasis added]. However, the Anglo-Indians have yet to learn that, in spite of their patronage, the British consider them as 'the other':

By Christmas, the Ilbert Bill was withdrawn ... The association always looked up those events as a Trotter victory. It assured the British community of Nakhlau of the loyalty of the Trotters, threw a party and invited the
officials to view the charter enshrined in the institute. But the British did not come...

( Ibidum:400 )

Echoing the quarrels of the Sinais in Midnight’s Children regarding the education of their children, Victoria is engaged in a relentless struggle to get one of her sons to get ordained as a priest at Rome. And, they have other quarrels, too, for her husband, Mr Theobald Montague-Trotter, is a nationalist, who is being increasingly influenced by Gandhi. When Alex marries Sucheta, Victoria’s reaction is typically contemptuous: ‘Marrying Indians and all!’ (Ibidum:411); and the death of Queen Victoria, in England in 1902, induces a year of mourning at Sans Souci.

Victoria’s language, too, is a product of a century of hybridisation – English, yet a localised variety of English, and Sealy is at his creative best when he renders samples of what was to become the typical lingo of the Anglo-Indians:

Maybe some people would like to eat with their fingers. Why not get some brass thalis and little-little bowls from Suresh and sit on the ground and eat and do don’t know what-all like Indians. No more fricassee for dinner. Curry and rice like at lunch – only sitting on the ground and making little, wet-wet balls with our fingers.

( Ibidum:436 )
This kind of language becomes not only a marker of the hybridisation of both the race and language, it is also a marker of class: the language belongs to 'a lower level of society from that of the English progenitors...and the Indians they have come in contact with' (Antao 2001:1)

Ironically, this period of prosperity reflected in the fortunes of Thomas Henry, is also the period of the beginning of their decline and increasing marginalisation. Their isolation from the mainstream is complete and their reluctance to align themselves with Indians is further heightened; at the same time, the nationalists among them have clearly learned to recognise the fact that their very survival might in future depend on the patronage of the very Indians they have been so contemptuous about.

5.3.2.3. The Years of Marginalisation (Upto 1947)

Coralie Younger, in her extensive survey of the Anglo-Indian community (1987), marks 1919 as the dramatic year of change in their history. 1919 ‘saw their official recognition as an autonomous, relatively cohesive community with legitimate communal claims’ (Younger 1987:9), which in The Trotternama can be seen as the culmination of the lobbying
efforts of Jacob Kahn Trotter, Theobald Montague Trotter, Alex and Young Paul on behalf of the community. It is also the year which saw

the Indianisation of employment in Government services which the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1919...recommended [which became] the first major step in the social, economic and psychological deterioration of the Anglo-Indian community.

(itedum:9)

the half-and-half identity of the community resurfaces in the failure of Alex in the movies, Paul’s realisation that all his war-time services cannot gain him an entry in the European Club, and that the only legitimate way of acquiring a British identity was to have been killed in the War. New strategies are, therefore, adopted to get assimilated with the mainstream, marked by the increasing association with nationalists, the formation of various Anglo-Indian Associations which seek to increase their bargaining power in the new set-up (Paul, Gidney-Trotter), the demand for a homeland that culminates in the Car Nicobar scheme and the waves of migration.

If the government of India gave the Nicobar Islands to the Anglo-Indians, they could be transformed in a generation from a sinking, scattered community to a wealthy, unified one. At first, Trotters might hanker for the cities that had formed them, but in a little while they would remember that they were a frontier people: surveyors, dacoit-chasers, builders of railways, roads and telegraph lines. In time a city would grow up; meanwhile, Madras was not far away. There would be a government house, a radio station, a
newspaper that he might edit, a port for the customs crowd and shippers and boat builders. Although the inhabitants of a small island, they could become a sea-faring nation (there were precedents), and under the right leadership they would take their place among the nations of the world.

(Sealy 1988:457)

However, like most of their schemes, the Car Nicobar scheme is also doomed to failure from its very inception – like the actual McCluskieganj township established in the Chotanagpur plateau of Bihar, which today has ‘only a few families left, the others have migrated or died’ (Younger 1987:49). So, though many of the Trotters continue to be successful as telephonists, sportspersons, soldiers, educationists, occasionally even zoologists, botanists, musicologists, nurses, railwaymen, canal engineers (Sealy 1988:462-464), most of them slide into unemployment and poverty, and the only option open to them seems to be migration to England, Australia and Canada, ensuring that ‘the Trotters would always live out of trunks’ (ibidem:501). Victoria, significantly, dies in 1947 and then her family either scatter all over the world or die.

5.3.2.4. After Independence - Migrations

Minorities in post independence India have often had to cope with the charge that they are unduly favoured or pampered, and this is exactly what both Wadhwa (1975) and Gaekwad (1967) point out with reference
to the Anglo-Indians. On the other hand, social and cultural discrimination against them surfaces frequently, as Eugene learns when he applies for the post of a clerk in the Nakhla waterworks, which has been the seat of his family’s power:

The interviewer Mr. Mathur... said: ‘But what is this Trotter? It is not an Indian name.’ It was the standard response. Nowadays, if you were a Trotter, you might as well not bother applying.

(Sealy 1990:521)

This happens in spite of the fact that Marris makes it to Parliament as a nominated member, becomes a chief voice of his community and even manages to wrest a few concessions for his community:

He lobbed for a new lease on the special concessions that the British had allowed Trotters: job quotas in the railways, the post and telegraph services, police and customs, the grant for the continuation of the Trotter schools across the country. The Government of India...[decreed that]... jobs...would be reserved for another decade; the grants would be contingent on the admission of other Indians to Trotter schools. The schools, moreover, had a constitutional right to teach in English, since that was the mother tongue of a recognised Indian community... they were appointed representatives in the legislatures both in Delhi and in the state to protect the interests of the Trotters...

(ibedum:516)

Such concessions given to the infinitesimal minority, does not however detract from the fact that independent India does not hold much promise...
for the Anglo-Indians – that migration becomes for them the most viable, or at least, attractive option. The uneasiness and the insecurity faced by the community drives all the surviving Trotters - the Belle of Bangalore, Thomas Atkins, Ruby and their families, as also the entire hockey team - to search for fresher pastures in Australia and Europe, reducing them to homelessness and a diasporic existence. It is such an existence that is telescoped in the wanderings of the last of the Trotters, Eugene, who becomes, in the words of Leela Gandhi, ‘the ambivalent, transitory, culturally contaminated and borderline figure of the exile, caught in a historical limbo between home and the world’ (Gandhi 1999:132). The success story of Marvis and the abysmal failure of Eugene are the two extreme points of reference for the community, with most of the other Anglo-Indians floundering or flourishing somewhere in between.

5.3.3. To Sum Up

The showcasing of history in The Trotternama, through legend, diaries, historical documents, published and unpublished documents and letters, the interspersing of actual historical figures with fictional characters succeeds in recreating the past of a community living in perennial fear of extinction. Fictional and historical figures rub shoulders at important watermarks of Indian history like the Maratha wars,
the Quit India Movement, the 1857 riots, and the partition of India – thus, broadening the sweep of the narrative. Further, it is not merely the history that is being re-told; Sealy is recreating and re-constructing an entire lifestyle: the opulence of the first Trotter, the identity crisis of Mik Trotter, the importance of a fair skin which could enable an Anglo-Indian to ‘pass’ for a European, the contempt of the race for their Indian connections and Indian life-styles, their pariah position in British circles, the hybridisation of their cuisine, dress and language, their poverty, their rootlessness, the closed avenues for employment and their attempts to escape the unenviable predicament by migrating. The canvas is not only vast but varied: even if one were to concentrate only on one aspect of this process of hybridisation, i.e. language – the growth of the typical Anglo-Indian lingo is typified in their speech from Victoria to Eugene:

Anyway, come on now I’ll show you where I live. Not Soosie-foosie, men – just here in the city. You see that lane? See that butcher’s next to where the sign says HEM BECAN SOONCES? ...  

(ibedum:566)

It is the Chronicle form, moreover, that absorbs all this portmanteau material, sifts it into a novel and gives it a rich texture and a resonant quality.
5.4. The Sikhs in *Days of the Turban*: Perceptions

The Sikh community, largely unrepresented in the novels of the 1980s, becomes the focal point of interest in Partap Sharma’s *Days of the Turban*. Unlike *The Trotternama*, however, which depicts the ‘insider’ view of the Anglo-Indian community, Sharma’s novel retains the ‘superior’ tone of the mainstream voice, which preaches down to the ‘other’, in an attempt to civilise it employing the Prospero-Caliban relationship in postcolonial societies in a new context. Of course, its chief merit lies in the fact that it does not fall for the typical mock-portrayal of ‘sardarji’ jokes, making the likes of Khushkismat Singh [an obvious reference to Khushwant Singh] (*The Great Indian Novel*), stand for a whole community; or Sikh ‘boys’ in the fashion of *A Fine Family*, making them symbolic of the misguided youth in the tales of partition, nameless and faceless.

In *Days of the Turban*, Sikhs are scattered throughout the narrative, since it is located in a Sikh-majority state, and it attempts to tackle the volatile subject of Sikh terrorism and Hindu-Sikh conflict in the Punjab in the 1980s. Thus, it ventures into a more diagnostic look into the concerns of the community. Though the central character of the novel, Balbir is not a Sikh, but a Hindu Muhiyal Brahmin, his attempts to free himself from the shackles of family become a potent symbol of the Sikhs’
endeavours to establish their own identity outside the fold of Hinduism. This parallelism is stated by Balbir himself in one of his extended ‘debates’ with the terrorist Amar Singh, and points to the sense of directionlessness and lack of a definite focus in both cases:

Amar...you want to be free of the warm embrace of Hinduism, just as I want to be free of my family. I want to get away, where I don’t know or really care, but somewhere I can grow on my own, be on my own.

(Sharma 1986:331)

There is no doubt that *Days of the Turban* is a political novel and that its agenda and ideology can be defined clearly as anti-terrorist, rational, and pro-hindu-sikh unity. The message it wants to get across is that the Punjab problem is the work of a handful of misguided terrorists who have, forcibly, made themselves the spokespersons of the community; and that by highlighting the question of Sikh religious identity, they have succeeded in distracting attention from the more pressing economic problems of the state. The pro-establishment stance of the novel prevents it from becoming a dialectic and incisive look at the more agonising aspects of terrorism.

In his portrayal of the Sikhs, Sharma does try to avoid the esoterising of the other by divesting them of the outward symbols of their religion: so, most of the Sikhs in the novel are clean-shaven, ‘mona’
Sikhs as they would be called; in the case of Amar Singh or Uday Singh, the beard-and-hair aspect is mentioned very casually. The stereotyping, however, takes place on a much deeper level, in that the Sikhs are seen as a bloody, violent martial race – as is obvious in the elaborate and gory descriptions of the many acts of murder and terrorism that take place. But it is not only the Sikhs who are masculinist and aggressive: the Punjabi community, in which even Brahmins are warriors, valorises the tradition of violence and bloodshed.

The Sikh-as-other is also viewed as caught in a time wrap; the religion specifically seeks to do away with the caste system; but, the ground reality portrayed is that caste considerations continue to hold sway even in the highest seat of Sikh culture and religion – the Golden Temple. The 'mazhabi' Sikhs, who have joined the terrorists are confined to menial tasks in keeping with their low caste identity:

Another came up to Amar and complained:
'I'm sick of cleaning his pee and shit. Can't you depute someone else? The others tease me saying you've given me this job because I'm a mazhabi.

(Sharma 1986:232)

or again

'Go and tell the sweeper, that mazhabi fellow, and tell him
to bring a bottle of phenyl... Only one mazhabi in our lot. They don’t join.

(ibedum:364)

the Sikh terrorist, outside the pale of society is a figure to be feared, a threat to the body politic and the fabric of nationhood; however, it is perhaps erroneous to view *Days of the Turban* as a novel depicting the Sikh community as a whole; its focus is the terrorist, and it would be unfair to view the terrorist as representative of the whole community. As one of the characters points out to Balbir:

‘I’m a Sikh too,’ said Karnail. ‘There are only about two thousand extremists. But there are fourteen million Sikhs.’

(ibedum:362)

Fortunately, *Days of the Turban* does not claim to speak about those ‘fourteen million’. It restricts itself to proving how wrong the ‘two thousand extremists’ are – by making the terrorist-in-control, Amar Singh and the terrorist-victim, Uday Singh mouthpieces for the ideology.

5.4.1. The Terrorist Mindset

Through a ‘novice’ like Balbir, Sharma reveals the confusion and dogmatism that lies at the heart of terrorist ideology:

‘You don’t really want to discuss, you want to dominate.
You don’t want to debate, you want to dogmatise. Its even
possible that you are not quite sure of what you are doing.

(Sharma 1986:330)

The lucidity and clarity with which Balbir apprehends the situation is ironically lacking in more seasoned and intellectual individuals - particularly Uday Singh and Amar Singh. The terrorists believe that they are fighting for a cause, but the cause is so ill-defined and amorphous that they are unable to make a rational defence of it. Uday has no specific motive for joining them, unlike Tarsem, who is with them for purely mercenary reasons. The fumbling of Uday is, perhaps, intended to represent the lack of focus of the misguided youth of the Punjab, who are victims of unemployment, lack of education and an irresponsible social system which has created no opportunities for them. He also falls prey to the sheer rhetoric of the movement, and becomes instrumental in enlisting vulnerable young people like Balbir. He remains confused about his role within the fold; in fact, he fails to understand even the ground rules of the organisation, remaining unaware of the repercussions of his escapade with Gulnari Kaur. Neither does Gulnari herself understand the ethos of the creed: she does not realise that by denying her romantic involvement with Uday Singh, she is actually laying him open to the charges of abduction and seduction; charges which are grave enough to send him to his
gruesome death. As a beloved, she could have perhaps saved him: as a
comrade-in-arms, she becomes responsible for both their deaths.

Amar Singh represents the human face of the terrorist – suave,
intelligent and articulate. It is not surprising, therefore that the Akali
demands are voiced through him, to give them a veneer of authenticity and
respectability. He speaks feelingly of the need for Sikhs to reassert their
identity against the onslaught of Hindu culture, stop the interference of a
hostile government in the religious affairs of the Sikhs, exempt the
Gurudwaras from the Land Ceiling Act, recognise Sikh Personal Law as
constitutionally valid, ensure the control of Gurudwaras in Pakistan and
permit Sikhs to wear the symbols of their religion like the kirpan
(ibedum:222-227). The bonding between Balbir and Amar Singh
redeems the otherwise facile narration, at least in part:

Clasping him close, his eyes shut in genuine pain, Amar kissed him on the cheek, over his beard. ‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I’m very, very sorry. I...I don’t hate you at all.’

Balbir stood there uncomprehending. And slowly as Amar remained clinging to him, he became aware of a strange warmth between them that disturbed him.
He heard Amar say, ‘It’s...it’s very lonely here.’ Then he added. ‘For someone like me.’
And he thought: Amar is not as tough as the men he directs or those he obeys. Maybe that’s why he tries to be
tougher.

(ibedum:335)
But this conflict remains at the level of discussion and rhetoric only. There is a softening in the attitudes of both Balbir and Amar, who, do try to reach out to one another and appreciate each other’s stance. But this relationship is closed off as soon as the possibility of a real dialogue and understanding begins to take shape. For most part, the novel functions on the level of statement only, as when the author tries to show that the Hindu-Sikh divide is merely a construct of politicians, of self-serving leaders who misuse religion and religious identity to satiate their own hankering after power. One of the various spokespersons of the author, a nameless farmer is made to enunciate the political and economic nature of the conflict:

‘Every Punjabi, whether he is Sikh or Hindu, wants more electricity, more water, but the Akali Dal is mixing this up with some purely religious demands on behalf of a section of Sikhs so it ends up seeming to be a communal party that is out to drive a wedge between people of the same household.’

(ibedum:23)

the trouble is that in spite of its rich subject matter and theme, Days of the Turban, fails to create the tension that would go into a more meaningful exploration of the conflict. Its pro-establishment voice takes away from the authenticity created by the stark documentary detail it provides. Its interpretations become too facile and one-sided, marred by unnecessary
authorial interventions, generalisations, direct statements, and a gratuitous overstating of the case, as in the following randomly picked statements:

They are as generous and as hospitable as any rural family

(ibedum:7)

Though the waters of the Ganga may seem unhygienic they are also sacred, and eminent bacteriologists will sip them along with millions of less sophisticated pilgrims.

(ibedum:29)

The simplistic narrative, therefore rules out the possibility of a more focussed and honest reading of the Hindu-Sikh relationship in the troubled state. Worse, it seems to suggest that with the rescue of Balbir from the clutches of the terrorists and his return to the family fold, all conflicts have been resolved. Even more disruptive is the banal idea that with the ‘success’ of Operation Bluestar in 1984, terrorism has finally been curbed in the Punjab. The overt masculinism and facile patriotism of the novel may be the result of the attempt of the novelist to fit into the double identity of the Indian English writer,- the nationalist as well as the local – the marga and desi cultures as Devy calls them (Devy 1995:13-19).
5.5. The Summing Up

The concerns of the minority communities - the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Anglo-Indians - are voiced, therefore, from, basically two perspectives: the 'insider' perspective as in Midnight's Children and The Trotternama, and the 'outsider' perspective as in A Suitable Boy, The Shadow Lines, A Fine Family and Days of the Turban. The secular framework of both the perspectives, however, is reinforced by the fact that they make a case for the integration of minorities with the mainstream and focus on the essential unity of the nation. Even though the agony, alienation and sense of displacement of the Sikhs, the Muslims and the Anglo-Indians is made evident, the solution is seen to lie in their integration with a pluralistic, pan-Indian ethos and assimilation with the dominant culture, while also retaining the flavour of their individual identities.

And who can signify the multiplicity yet individual identity better than Saleem Sinai of Midnight's Children? By birth an Anglo-Indian (the son of the departing British Methwold and the Hindu street singer Vanita), brought up in a Muslim household, with a Hindu alter-ego, Shiva, and reared among others by the Christian Mary Perriera, he emerges as a symbol of the multiplicity of communal identities in India. His truncated identity subsumes within itself these various identities. In a novel marked
by overwhelming pessimism and anxiety about the state of the nation, the idea that Saleem is Shiva and Shiva is Saleem, may well be seen as its most redemptive aspect.