CHAPTER IX
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CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters we have addressed ourselves to the task of delineating the overall pattern of social relations and community life among the Assamese Sikhs.

In view of their being overwhelmingly rural, social relations and community life of the Sikhs have been examined in the context of an Assamese village, Barkola. The Assamese Sikhs of Barkola make up the largest Sikh community of Assam. In this village, the Sikhs live side by side with Hindu and tribal villagers. In order to obtain a comprehensive picture, the networks of social relations have been examined at various levels: the village Sikhs themselves; the Sikhs and non-Sikhs in the village context; the Assamese Sikhs residing in and outside the village; the Assamese Sikhs as a whole and the wider Assamese society.
The historical material on the Indigenous Sikhs, presented in Chapter III, have indicated that various forces and factors played a significant role in the emergence of Assamese Sikhs as a discrete social formation. These forces and factors have also resulted in the emergence of a social situation among the Assamese Sikhs which in many respects is unique when compared with the non-Assamese Sikhs. It is in this perspective that we have tried to understand the functioning of the contemporary Assamese Sikh social life and also find out answers to some of the questions raised in Chapter I.

It is evident from the preceding chapters that the local and extra-local settings, to a considerable extent, determine the patterns of social relations and community life of the Assamese Sikhs. On the one hand, their exclusive community institutions and organizations provide them with avenues for interaction among themselves. On the other hand, their participation in the village level institutions and organizations along with the common mode of livelihood provide channels for contact and interaction between them and their neighbours in a variety of situations. Further, the participation of the Sikhs in various spheres of the
wider society has resulted in the expansion of their social horizon leading to the extension of the web of social relations. This has become possible because the Assamese Sikhs identify themselves with the common culture of the Assamese people.

To a large extent the quality and content of social life of the Barkola Sikhs epitomize that of the Assamese Sikhs as a whole. In other words, it can be stated that the wider Assamese Sikh social situation is expressed in the localized framework of Barkola.

The traditional occupation of the majority of the rural Assamese Sikhs, like the Assamese peasants, is agriculture. But significant occupational changes have taken place both among Sikh and non-Sikh Assamese peasants. Many a rural Sikh has switched over to occupations other than cultivation. The extent of occupational change is tellingly revealed when the occupations of the present, parental and grand parental generations are analyzed. Educational attainment as well as migration of a section of the Sikhs from village to town have paved the way for occupational mobility among them. As a result, a small but distinct section of non-peasant Assamese Sikhs has
emerged. These Sikhs have relatively higher economic status and educational attainment when compared with their rural counterparts.

The basic values of the Assamese Sikhs are derived from Sikhism. But there are significant regional and synoratistic variations. The indigenous Sikhs observe Sikh rituals and practices, but not as rigorously as the non-Assamese Sikhs. The socio-religious life of the Assamese Sikhs tends to be guided by the doctrines of Sikhism. But at the same time the influence of indigenous folk beliefs and customs is quite appreciable in their life. The descriptions on the religious life of the Sikhs of Barkola, presented in Chapter VI, testifies this fact. Sikhism followed by the Assamese Sikhs may be called 'folk Sikhism' because of the prevalence of many traditions, norms and values which lack Sikh religious sanction. Elements from both Sikhism and indigenous folk tradition co-exist in the social life of the Assamese Sikhs. This phenomenon is due to the historical background of the Assamese Sikhs. Social intercourse, including marriage, of the early Sikh settlers and their descendants with the indigenous people is responsible for the presence of folk elements
in Assamese Sikh social life.

Some important features of social organization of the Assamese Sikhs may be summarized as follows: The elementary family-centred household is the dominant unit among the rural Assamese Sikhs. The household is a unit having socio-economic imperatives and often forms a part of the wider patri-kin group (bangsa) within which mutual assistance and help are a common practice.

An important dimension of social relationships among the Assamese Sikhs is kinship. Corporate kin groups outside the range of immediate familial kin are present and these are effective social units. In the spheres of kinship, use of kinship terminology, marriage relations and day-to-day social interactions, the indigenous Sikhs follow the Assamese social idiom. In other words, the Assamese Sikh relationships are in conformity with the indigenous folk traditions.

The marriage situation obtaining among the Assamese Sikhs is somewhat unique not only in the context of Sikh marriage, but also in the regional context. The marital alliances of the Assamese Sikhs with the indigenous Hindus have been playing a significant role in the growth of the indigenous Sikh
population. These have also played an important role in organizing their intra- and inter-community relations since the early years of their migration and settlement. History says that the earliest Sikh migrants to this region married locally. This has been more or less a recognized practice continuing till this day. The Assamese Sikhs constitute a numerically small community of around 3,000 persons. Hence, at times it becomes difficult for a young Sikh to find a suitable bride from within the community. Therefore, many Sikhs marry local Hindu girls who adopt their husbands' faith. Analysis has shown that nearly 46 per cent of the wives of the Assamese Sikhs are Assamese Hindus of various castes. Thus, intermarriage has constantly widened the affinal kin horizon of the Assamese Sikhs. This in turn has provided the Sikhs with more and more avenues for interactions with the wider society.

The beliefs and customs associated with the institution of marriage of the Assamese Sikhs exhibit an interesting synthesis of Sikh rites and ceremonies and indigenous Assamese Hindu beliefs and practices.

In Chapter VIII, we have discussed the social relations between the Barkola Sikhs and their non-Sikh
neighbours as well as between the Sikhs and the wider society. In the village context, the Sikhs and their Hindu neighbours interact in a variety of social and economic levels. The identity of being a Sikh or a Hindu is of little import in day-to-day interactional fields. They interact as equals, as members of a wider village community. The ritual distance and religious difference between the Sikhs and their non-Sikh neighbours should have created a sort of barrier in the fields of inter-community relations. But the sharing of a large number of common elements of socio-economic life by the two groups has considerably reduced the social distance emanating from religious difference. We have pointed out in Chapter VI that the philosophy and doctrines of Assamese Vaishnavism and Sikhism exhibit many similarities. To quote Neog (1934: 173):

"..... Sikhism and Assam Vaishnavism are happy parallels. That is why the earliest Sikh settlers in Assam were absorbed into the general population and those who came within the last two centuries had no difficulty in living in great amity with the local people".
The ideological convergence of Sikhism and Assamese Vaishnavism, propounded by Sankardeva, has helped in reducing the inter-group social distance.

The pattern of Sikh — non-Sikh social relationships in the finite social universe of Barkola is also observable in the Sikh — non-Sikh relationships in the wider social context of Assam save for certain minor variations. For example, the complex and diffuse socio-economic milieu in the urban context do not provide avenues for the type of Sikh — non-Sikh social relations prevailing in the village context.

The Assamese Sikhs have become an inseparable and integral part of the wider Assamese society through their sharing of a common language, pursuit of similar rural and urban occupations, participation in the same socio-cultural field and in the same political processes.

At one level, the Assamese Sikhs can be viewed as an example of the process of effective integration of a small community in the multi-community social formation which is the Assamese society. The Assamese Sikhs have retained their separate identity while sharing in many common definitions of the Assamese social situation. To this extent, they are a well-
integrated unit of the wider Assamese society. At another level, the Assamese Sikhs can be viewed from the points of view of "cultural" and "structural assimilation" as delineated by Eisenstadt (1965) and Gordon (1961). The 'assimilation process' of the Assamese Sikhs to the Assamese society offers examples of both "cultural" and "structural assimilation". These Sikhs have not only imbibed many cultural features of the Assamese society but also a large number of them are related, especially to the Assamese Hindus on the intimate levels of family, affinity and propinquity.

To come to the questions raised in Chapter I:

On a purely ideological level, it can be said that whether Assamese or non-Assamese, the Sikhs of this region constitute a religious category. But on the empirical level the Sikhs of this region may broadly be divided into two distinct ethnic categories. Language, social customs, economic practices, beliefs and rituals divide the Sikhs of this region into two distinct ethnic groups: Assamese and non-Assamese. The Assamese Sikhs tend to express a feeling of pride for being a part of the Assamese society. They wish to perpetuate the group and retain their 'Assamese Sikh'
identity which they believe to be important. They seek to maintain their discrete identity but not separateness from the wider Assamese society. The Assamese language is a distinctive feature of Assamese Sikh social life. It is through the Assamese language that the Assamese Sikh socio-cultural traditions have been transmitted through the generations. This language has helped them to perpetuate their identity apart from other Sikhs.

The Assamese Sikhs display certain distinctiveness as a socio-cultural group in the wider Assamese society. This distinctiveness is discernible in terms of certain customs and values which are basically religion oriented. But such distinctiveness has never stood in the way of contact and communication between the Sikhs and the Assamese people. Such a distinctiveness has helped the Assamese Sikhs to keep their identity as a social order in the wider Assamese society without affecting the channels of contact and communication between the two. The Assamese Sikhs may be conceived as a community having many ingredients for the creation of social awareness, maintenance of group identity and separateness. They also possess avenues and forums for consolidating their efforts at maintaining
a well-defined ethnic identity in a multiethnic society. But no such trend or effort is yet observed among the Assamese Sikhs. This is remarkable in view of the emerging trends in the north-eastern region of consolidation and strengthening of identity through political mobilization by several ethnic groups (Bhagabati 1988). In the long history of their existence spanning the last three hundred years, no external or internal forces have ever adversely affected the inter-community relations between the Assamese Sikhs and other Assamese people.

The similarities in many facets of socio-cultural and economic life of the Assamese Sikhs and the Assamese people are striking. There are differences too, but the similarities are more numerous and sufficiently deep to result significant interactions between the two groups. The contact and communication channels between the two groups have resulted in a process whereby the Assamese Sikhs have become more akin to the Assamese in terms of language and indigenous folk beliefs and customs, although they continue to exist as a distinct social formation.
It has been seen in the preceding chapters, there are a number of ways in which the Sikh doctrines and indigenous cultural values and beliefs co-exist and interact in Assamese Sikh social life. It is a kind of social life which is a meeting point of two sets of factors: the religious ideology of Sikhism and the indigenous socio-cultural mores. While the former prevails in the obligatory ritualistic domain, the latter prevails within the social, cultural and economic spheres. The two sets of divergent factors influence each other, exist in mutual association and interact in a way as to make each adaptive to the other. Thus, the Assamese Sikh social life, in Redfield's (1956) terms, shows a combination of influences from two different sources. A part of Assamese Sikh social life is derived from Sikh socio-cultural tradition while another part is derived from the indigenous folk cultural tradition.

The future social and ideological orientations of the Assamese Sikhs are as yet not very clear. Whether the ignorance of the Punjabi language and culture will pose as a threat to their existence and whether they will be able to sustain the faith and maintain the
discrete identity by merely acquiring the 'Assamese Sikh socio-cultural traditions' are some of the issues which have a bearing on the future of the Assamese Sikhs. As yet, they have had little exposure to the trends of developments among the Sikhs of India. The explosive growth of communication media — transistor radio, television, newspaper, magazine, etc., — and increasing visits to Punjab expose the indigenous Sikhs to wider Sikh religious and cultural values. The new contact and communication channels have facilitated the importation of material and non-material cultural traits into Assamese Sikh life from outside Assam. Despite these, they have so far not been able to abandon their 'folk' Assamese practices and go in for wholesale adoption of orthodox Sikh ways.