Chapter 7

India

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Religion can be a source of comfort and motivation for soldiers. It can also be a source of conflict in a diverse army. How then do religiously diverse armed forces engage religion? How do they maintain cohesion while recruiting from a religious society and conducting operations in multifaith environments? By drawing on the experience of the multifaith Indian Army, which has recruited from and operated in a conflict-ridden religious society, this chapter identifies the challenges religion poses for the military and outlines the institutional mechanisms the army relies on to cope with these challenges.

The multifaith Indian army defends a constitutionally secular state, yet it remains a force of believers.1 This poses distinct challenges for the institution. First, the military has to accommodate religiosity – faith and culturally embedded religious practices – while establishing the primacy of institutional authority over religious authority in the minds of its soldiers. In India, religious conflict is a staple of the political environment in which the military exists. The army is regularly deployed to enforce the writ of the state during periods of Hindu-Muslim communal violence and domestic insurgencies. Second, given this backdrop, the open acknowledgment of religiosity with its accompanying practices exposes the military to the danger of faith-driven mutinies and interfaith conflict within its own ranks. These faith-related challenges have a bearing on the military’s organization and operations.
The Indian military includes army, naval, and air forces. Instead of discussing religion across the Indian military, this chapter confines its focus to the army. There are three reasons for this choice. First, the army is the largest component of the Indian armed forces. Second, it has been the most widely used and consequential arm of the military during all domestic and international military operations. Third, many of the practices described are not restricted to the army but rather are common to the other branches of service.

This chapter draws on field research and interviews conducted between December 2009 and January 2011 in addition to incorporating materials from secondary sources. I do not reveal the names, regiments, and locations of officers and soldiers unless they have already appeared in public elsewhere. I conducted a total of 174 interviews with retired and serving officers and soldiers across six states in India. These individuals belonged to four infantry and two support regiments. Overall, I interviewed 45 officers and 129 soldiers from other ranks.

The chapter begins by describing how the army engages religion, then outlines two challenges it poses for the institution. The next section enumerates the institutional mechanisms put in place to cope with these challenges. The final two sections illustrate these mechanisms during an army operation in a religious shrine and evaluate their efficacy during the subsequent mutiny among soldiers triggered by the events surrounding the operation.

**Religion in the Indian Military**

India is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world and is home to Hindus (80.5 percent), Muslims (13.4 percent), Christians (2.3 percent), Sikhs (1.9 percent),
Buddhists (0.8 percent), and Jains (0.4 percent). Moreover, Indian society is religious. In the 2009 Indian National Election Study, 74 percent of respondents reported praying weekly, and 54 percent reported attending a place of worship weekly. Among my interview subjects, 88 percent were comfortable describing themselves as “religious.” Today, the Indian Army has a volunteer force of more than 1.15 million active personnel recruited from this diverse and religiously observant environment. It is difficult to obtain precise figures on the religious composition of the army; the army does not provide these data. Still, it is well known that not all communities are represented in proportion to their total populations. Hindus make up the largest section of officers and soldiers. Sikhs are believed to be overrepresented, comprising perhaps as much as 10 percent of the army, while Muslims are thought to be underrepresented, perhaps amounting between 1 to 3 percent. The religious composition of the Indian Army has changed over time, especially after the departure of British troops in 1947 and the creation of the newly independent states of India and Pakistan. Muslim and Christian proportions were most affected by this; the large majority of Muslim officers and soldiers joined the Pakistan Army. It is noteworthy that despite widespread communal violence at the time, serving officers and soldiers of different faiths did not turn on each other. The Indian Army has recently increased the total number of Christians serving by raising new battalions from Northeast India, a region with a high concentration of Christians.

Most armies in secular states provide for the spiritual needs of their soldiers. The Indian Army, however, goes to great lengths to accommodate religion and uses it instrumentally to motivate its ranks. When joining the army, all soldiers take an oath on the Constitution of India and their respective religious text. The army celebrates a variety
of religious holidays and regional festivals. Officers, regardless of their faith and ethnicity, are required to participate in these observances with their soldiers. The army maintains places of worship on its bases and provides a religious teacher – a pandit, granthi, maulvi, priest, or monk – for every 1,000 soldiers (a battalion). This teacher remains with the unit during regular operations and accompanies it to forward areas of battle. Army grooming and uniform regulations allow Sikhs to wear turbans, Muslims and Sikhs to keep beards, and Hindus to wear sacred threads.

Religion is a source of motivation in the Indian Army. Regiments predominantly made up of Hindus frequently adopt deities that reflect their regional character. Religious teachers use folktales and stories from holy texts such as the Hindu Mahabharata and Sikh Dasam Granth to inculcate their troops with the concepts of pride and valor. Battle cries are frequently religious in nature. Pictures of fallen soldiers are kept inside places of worship on army bases. Religious teachers offer prayers before military exercises. Officers call on these teachers to give inspiring sermons and reassuring advice ahead of operations. Finally, weapons themselves are worshipped through certain rites.

Accommodating religion through state policies further entrenches the power of religion. That said, religiosity is a defining feature of the lived experience of many soldiers. The challenge for a professional army, therefore, is to acknowledge this reality and to harness the benefits religion has to offer while still limiting its pernicious effects. The accommodation of religion and its instrumental use pose two challenges for the army: (1) subordinating religious authority to military authority, and (2) maintaining unit cohesion. These are explained in the next two sections.
Two Competing Authorities

Both religion and the military impose a set of regular practices, behavioral constraints, and a moral code on their members. These are supposed to order individuals’ lives. When the military can accommodate the essential attributes of a religion, the two coexist, and religion can even reinforce the military’s goals and objectives. It is when religious attributes come into conflict with the military that insubordination, interfaith conflict among the ranks, and even mutinies can arise.

Distinct hierarchies with different centers of authority define the Indian Army and the multiple faiths of its troops. Historically, one major organizational challenge for the army has been to establish the supremacy of the nation-state over religion. The Indian Army makes a concerted effort to accommodate religious tenets, but that effort is fundamentally limited. In instances when the two hierarchies are in conflict, the military’s authority overrides religious authority. One retired officer characterized this tension between simultaneously accommodating and subordinating religion. He said, “Since faith can often be an important part of a soldier’s life, he must know that it is respected in the army. At the same time, his training must instill in him the belief that his duty and loyalty to the army, his fellow men, and his country are greater than his obligations to his faith.” Another former officer described his efforts to assist his brigade’s religious teacher, but within clearly defined limits. He related, “Our brigade was moving during a military exercise. We had a Sikh battalion and I asked the Sikh granthi to travel with me in my helicopter, instead of moving with the rest of the battalion in vehicles.” The officer extended this courtesy to the granthi because he knew that the granthi would ritually carry the heavy Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, on his
head during the move. Military regulations require passengers in military aircraft to wear their uniforms, but religious teachers do not wear uniforms. The granthi expressed reluctance to don one. The officer stated, “I told him, if you are not in uniform, you do not travel with us. He had to fall in line.”

Officers understand the management of religion is not as simple as establishing rules and commanding they be followed. In practice, subordinating religious authority to military authority can be difficult, especially during periods of communal violence, and is an ongoing process. A major general heading a division explained, “Suspicions of loyalty do arise, even among officers, especially when things are difficult in the country like they were around the Babri Maṣjīd demolition and Operation Blue Star. It is not possible for the soldiers and officers to shut the world out completely in this day and age.” A majority of officers interviewed agreed with this view. At the same time, they felt the army had the means to reinforce its claim to the soldiers’ loyalty over rival claims. Another brigade commander pointed out, “Life in the army is tough and people, irrespective of their faith, caste, or regional identity, go through these experiences together. This shared experience binds us. The honor of our regiments and our fellow men is at stake.”

Officers and soldiers alike adopt the distinct codes and practices of a regiment. The regimental history, traditions, mottoes, insignias, and awards are used to immerse personnel in the regimental identity. Long tenures of duty with the battalion of the regiment cement this identity over time. The adoption of the regimental identity helps establish the army’s authority over the other allegiances of the soldiers. By grounding the idea of honor in regimental identity, the army undercuts the hold of faith on soldiers.
The army’s operations, especially when forces are conducting counterinsurgency duties or restoring order in the aftermath of communal violence, also require it to remain sensitive to religious concerns. The army’s accommodation of, and attentiveness to, faith lend it some credibility. And yet, every time the army’s operational success comes at the expense of violating religious practices or codes, it endangers the trust that the army enjoys among its own ranks and society at large. Historically, because religion has been one of the most potent triggers for civil disturbances, a less-than-cautionary approach while negotiating religious considerations would seriously undermine the military’s legitimacy.

**Internal Cohesion**
Managing diversity while retaining an effective fighting force has been a long-standing challenge for Indian armies. It is important to point out that in India, identity politics – religious and ethnic – remains one of the key motifs of democratic politics. The army exists within an environment where religious and ethnic conflict is commonplace, and the state regularly turns to the army to enforce law and order during communal riots and to conduct counterinsurgency operations. The army therefore needs effective mechanisms to remain apolitical and maintain cohesion.

Religion presents the military with two possible challenges related to internal cohesion. First, religious bonding potentially provides both the issue and the resources for mutiny. After all, it is easier to politicize religion among collectives in which soldiers already share religious beliefs. A sense of group solidarity, it has long been feared, could enable group rebellion. Second, recognition of the salience of religion poses the danger of interreligious conflict within a multifaith army. For example, the religious cleavages
common to the society could easily be imported into the military, causing it to rupture as has been the case in Bosnia, Lebanon, and Nigeria.

Because the army draws from and operates in a multifaith society, it must enjoy the support of the population. More important, to maintain force cohesion, it must have in place mechanisms that will allow it to manage religious diversity effectively and maintain interfaith harmony. The following section identifies four institutional mechanisms: (1) institutionalization of interfaith respect, (2) an apolitical organization, (3) selection of ethnicity as an organization principle, and (4) elite control. Together these are used to ensure the primacy of organizational authority and contain religiously motivated conflict within the army.

**Four Institutional Mechanisms**
The literature on ethnic and religious conflict suggests that institutional design matters for controlling violence. It points to a variety of institutional mechanisms that can variably exacerbate or reduce the prospects for conflict.\(^{xvii}\) These range from electoral rules to power-sharing arrangements. States sometimes consciously select institutional designs that lower the probability of conflict. In other cases, conflict containment is an unintended consequence of institutional design. In either case, institutions are implicated in producing peace and preventing and containing violence. The Indian military also turns to institutional mechanisms to meet its faith-related challenges. The modern Indian Army imbibed the concern over the politicization of religion in the military from its parent institution – the British colonial army.\(^{xviii}\) From it, the Indian Army also inherited some of the institutional mechanisms to address these concerns.\(^{xix}\)
Institutionalization of Interfaith Respect
In keeping with its secular approach, the army insists on interfaith respect. Criticism of faiths or religious practices is viewed as detrimental to troop discipline and is punished. More important, the large numbers of religious teachers recruited into the army are required to undergo a yearlong training program together at the Institute for National Integration, irrespective of their faith. The program is directed at making the religious teachers aware of the need for religious harmony and fostering a spirit of cooperation. These religious teachers are required to abide by army rules at all times and to adhere to the same command structure as other soldiers.

The army is very particular about presenting itself as a national institution, and respect for all faiths is a fundamental tenet of this image. The army, for example, celebrates men belonging to different faiths among its heroes, including the winners of gallantry awards. In the schools that it runs for the children of soldiers and officers—effectively catchment areas—prayers from multiple faiths are drawn on during school assemblies. Despite relying on religion to motivate soldiers during battle, the Indian Army does not define the enemy in religious terms because doing so would prove counterproductive for a mixed-faith force. In interviews with 126 soldiers belonging to different regiments that took part in operations during the Kargil conflict in 1998, 67 percent of soldiers talking about the Pakistani forces used terms such as dushman (enemy) or “Pakistani.” Pakistani opponents were almost never referred to directly as Muslims. The construction of the Indian soldier as the enemy has occurred differently within the Pakistani military, where Indian and Hindu identities are synonymous.
An Apolitical Organization
Traditionally, the army has remained apolitical. It has not demonstrated any inclination toward interfering in politics and has resented attempts by politicians to interfere in its internal affairs. As a result, it takes an adverse view of serving officers who express political views or associate with political or social outfits, especially those that have religious leanings. This again is a legacy of the British colonial army which, fearing the influence of nationalist politicians and sporadic religious strife, turned distance from politics into a virtue for a soldier.

Similar fears and a desire to preserve its isolation continue to make the Indian Army into an apolitical organization. It maintains its distance from political parties, does not comment on political issues, and does not allow political parties or leaders to campaign before its personnel on military bases. The appearance of these guidelines being violated draws a sharp response from inside and outside the army. The army also resists regular political demands in the matters of recruitment from a particular ethnic or religious community or the creation of new ethnic regiments.

Selection of Ethnicity as an Organizational Principle
At the national level, religion, in India, makes a claim on a larger community than ethnicity. Hence, the politicization of religion potentially poses a greater threat to the army than the politicization of ethnicity. In multiethnic and multifaith societies, the social cleavage structure can take two possible forms. It can be cumulative, where the different cleavages reinforce each other, or it can be crosscutting, where people united by one attribute could be divided by another. When cleavages cumulate, the fault lines run deeper, and a master or central cleavage can often divide societies. When cleavages
crosscut, differences do not reinforce each other, and it becomes difficult for a master cleavage to emerge.

Indian society is characterized by crosscutting cleavages. As a result, where a common religious identity can potentially unite a people, their ethnic differences – understood as regional, linguistic, and caste differences – can potentially divide. Through its organizational design, the army harnesses the cleavage structure to act as the first line of defense against a small, faith-based mutiny turning into a large-scale revolt. One of the lessons British commanders drew from the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was that religion could be a potent trigger for revolts and had to be managed carefully. Similarly, ethnic, religious, and cultural sensitivities had to be accommodated. Another was that when the loyalty of a group broke down and the group rebelled, other ethnic groups could be used to subdue it. There has been a long-standing predisposition in India toward organizing the army ethnically.

The colonial army followed a martial race theory for recruiting soldiers. According to this idea, some groups were especially well suited to soldiering because of their physical and cultural attributes. This system has been discontinued. Instead, each Indian state, a sizable number of which are organized along ethnic lines, has a quota for contributing soldiers to the military based on its population. Nevertheless, certain regions continue to contribute a disproportionate share of soldiers because of a tradition of military service.

Today, the army is made up of mixed and ethnic regiments. The combat support and logistic support regiments have always been mixed. For example, in the engineer, artillery, and signal regiments, as well as in the service, medical, and ordinance corps,
troops are drawn from different ethnic and religious groups. By contrast, a significant number of the infantry regiments remain ethnically organized. For example, the troops in the Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry Regiment are recruited from the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and troops in the Bihar Regiment are recruited mostly from the state of Bihar. Although there are now a growing number of mixed infantry regiments, the battalions (1,000 men led by a colonel) and companies (120 men led by a major) in these regiments are often ethnically homogeneous (i.e., their troops are all drawn from the same region).xxvii Despite not always sharing the same religious faith, they often share language and similar customs. As a result, regiment insignias, colors, and symbols of valor are mostly rooted in regional cultures.

Under this arrangement, the emphasis on ethnicity undermines the significance of faith. So, for example, even though the Rajputana Rifles, the Gurkhas, and the Jat regiments share the same faith – they are mostly Hindus – each one of these groups has an ethnically rooted, distinct regimental identity. The formation structures through which the soldiers of a particular regiment are deployed further limit the possibility of internal conflict. These structures disperse them into smaller groups, making containment of religiously or ethnically motivated group action easier.

Although regiments can be homogeneous or mixed, army formations are always mixed during times of both peace and conflict. A brigade formation typically brings together battalions from different regiments. Thus, even if a battalion is ethnically homogeneous, at the brigade level it may serve with other battalions composed of soldiers from other ethnic groups. This arrangement also ensures that any identity-motivated conflict within a company or a battalion can be easily isolated. Because the
army draws from multiple ethnic groups, and emphasizes ethnicity in its organizational setup, any force-wide rebellion would have to overcome the significant challenge of cross-group coordination. This arrangement then allows the army to use forces belonging to different ethnic groups to quell any mutiny within a particular formation. In this way, using a largely ethnicity-centered organizational principle, the army defends itself from religiously and ethnicity-motivated internal conflict.

Elite Control
On the whole, the army relies on a professional and well-trained officer class for the success of the mechanisms it has put in place to maintain cohesion. In this sense, these mechanisms remain primarily elite-centric, with their efficacy dependent on the quality of officers. An officer is expected to adopt a paternal relationship with his men. The officers usually belong to a higher socioeconomic class and are better educated than the soldiers they command. Although among themselves officers converse in English, they converse with their men in the regional languages of their units or in Hindi. This social distance is also maintained through the segregation of dining and recreational facilities for the officers and soldiers. The considerations of ethnicity and religion followed for soldiers are overlooked in the case of officers. Whereas soldiers are often assigned regiments based on their ethnic identities, officers join regiments irrespective of their religious or ethnic identities. Thus, a Sikh officer can command Hindu troops and a Bengali officer can command a Gurkha battalion. In this way, officers become fluent in a multireligious and multiethnic discourse during their careers.

For officers, a group identity–based discourse enables them to relate to the soldiers under their command. At the same time, a nationalist-secular discourse, although
acknowledging group identities, privileges national identity over group identity. For example, although officers are expected to immerse themselves in the religious and cultural practices of their troops, in areas that are designated exclusively for the use of officers (such as the officers’ mess), discussions of religion are discouraged. Religious teachings do not feature in the curriculum at any of the officer training academies. In addition, officers are trained and tasked to overcome coordination-related challenges arising when battalions made up of different groups must work together in a brigade. Multiple tenures with different formations enable the development of these skills; military exercises further test this ability.

In India’s highly religious society, military operations in and around sacred sites are embedded with many difficulties. The symbolism and the danger of desecrating a sacred site can inflame an ongoing conflict. The army is vulnerable to appearing partisan, which can result in the loss of support among a group. If this group forms a part of the army, offending group sensibilities can provoke revolts among its own ranks. For these reasons, security forces find such sites especially challenging for carrying out counterinsurgency operations. By contrast, groups opposed to the state find such sites to be especially useful because of the protection they can provide against state action and the publicity they can bring to causes. Over the years, then, insurgent and terrorist groups in India have attacked sites of worship and have taken shelter there.

The efficacy of institutions is tested in moments of crisis. Next, I draw on the Indian Army’s experience in one such crisis to illustrate how the mechanisms outlined here fared during a period of stress. The crisis was triggered by the army’s operation in a religious shrine and subsequent mutinies in some of its battalions. Operation Blue Star
severely tested the Indian Army’s engagement with religion. In setting aside sacred considerations in favor of operational requirements, it angered the Sikh community. A mutiny among its ranks then tested the mechanisms the army had in place to contain internal conflict.

**Operation Blue Star and the Indian Army’s Accommodation of Faith**

In June 1984, the Indian Army was ordered to enter the Golden Temple to flush out armed men who had already been holed up in the complex for a few months. Located in Amritsar, in the North Indian state of Punjab, the Golden Temple is the most sacred site to the Sikhs. The decision to use military force was triggered by an impasse in negotiations between a militant Sikh faction demanding a separate state and the federal government. The violence – assassinations and arsons – perpetrated by this group had paralyzed the civil administration in the state of Punjab.

The army’s operation lasted seventy-two hours. Estimates on the number of casualties vary. According to the Indian government’s figures, 83 army personnel were killed and 249 were wounded, and 493 people – including both militants and civilians present in the shrine – were killed, and 86 others were wounded. Operation Blue Star occurred near the anniversary of the death of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth among the lineage of Sikh gurus, and a large number of pilgrims who presumably could not leave the complex were trapped in the crossfire.

The operation conducted at the most sacred site in the Sikh faith had far-reaching effects. It deeply angered the Sikh community within India and beyond, and the army immediately confronted and quashed mutinies among Sikh soldiers in its ranks. In October 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by two of her Sikh
bodyguards. A resulting anti-Sikh pogrom claimed more than 3,000 lives and destroyed entire Sikh neighborhoods in the national capital of Delhi. Sikh militants also assassinated the chief of the Indian Army, who had retired one year after the operation.

The following discussion illustrates the conflict between the desire to accommodate religious sensitivities and the need for operational success, and how in one instance the army set aside religious considerations to meet its objectives. Prior to and during Operation Blue Star, the army took steps to demonstrate its respect for Sikh religious sentiments. As the operation progressed, however, some of these were set aside. To begin, a Sikh officer, Maj. Gen. K. S. Brar, was chosen to lead Operation Blue Star. Although no exclusively Sikh battalion participated in the operation, Sikh officers and soldiers participated as members of mixed battalions. The operation was made voluntary, and soldiers of all four of the participating battalions were given the option to opt out on religious grounds; few did, however.

According to Gen. Brar’s account of the operation plan, soldiers were instructed to use light weapons to avoid damage to key structures inside the temple complex, especially the Harmandir Sahib (the central sanctuary); pilgrims were to be separated from the militants and brought out safely; all troops taking part in the operation were to uphold the religious sanctity of the temple; and their personal behavior and conduct were to be unimpeachable.

The operation began at dusk on June 5, 1984. The planners were eager to accomplish their task before dawn, after which they believed soldiers would find it difficult to move in the complex without the cover of darkness. The army also feared that a protracted struggle could encourage an uprising in rural Punjab, where there was
support for the separatists and their charismatic leader, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale.xxxii

The separatists’ group was headquartered in the Akal Takht, the second holiest structure in the complex and the seat of Sikh religious authority. This initially ruled out the use of heavy weapons during the assault. Multiple assaults on the Akal Takht by commando teams using CS gas – a stunning agent – were all repelled. The structure was well fortified, and without good intelligence, it seemed impossible to access it. As dawn approached and army casualties mounted, the army decided to use tanks to end the resistance. In the process, the Akal Takht suffered extensive damage.xxxiii

After the operation, when the army gained entry into the Harmandir Sahib, care was taken so that Sikh soldiers entered the shrine first. With the assistance of army granthis, the recitation of prayers was resumed in Harmandir Sahib within forty-eight hours after the operation commenced.xxxiv In its statements, the army insisted it had gone to great lengths to preserve the sanctity of the Golden Temple complex in keeping with its respect for the Sikh faith. Recounting his experience, Gen. Brar wrote, “In order to fight a battle righteously, there is no doubt that the army paid a heavy price in terms of casualties, and its soldiers never disobeyed the orders given to them, despite extreme provocation.”xxxv Speaking to journalists, the officer commanding troops in all of Punjab during the operation, Lt. Gen. Dayal, himself a Sikh, said, “As all of you know, the Indian army is a very religious army. Once the orders are given to them they follow them to the letter and once it was told to them [not to damage the Golden Temple] I was sure they will obey this and I am proud to say they did until the end.”xxxvi Lt. Gen. Sunderji, the man who oversaw the entire mobilization as the area commander of the Western Command under which the state of Punjab falls, said, “We went inside with humility in
our hearts and prayers on our lips. We in the army hold all places of religion in equal reverence."

With the aim of accommodating religious sensitivities, the army chose a Sikh commander to lead Operation Blue Star, Sikh soldiers were given the option to remove themselves from the operation, instructions were given to keep the Harmandir Sahib out of the line of fire, and heavy weapons were not deployed in the early stages of the operation. Only when soldiers failed to enter the Akal Takht after repeated attempts and when casualties mounted, did the army seek permission from the prime minister’s office to use tank fire in the temple complex. One retired officer who was closely connected with the operation recounted the dilemma for me. He said, “All hell had broken out. … We had bad intelligence. … We had taken heavy casualties on the Parikrama. … After losing so many men, there could be no turning back. Had we done that, it would have been a disaster for the morale. So we used tanks against the Akal Takht, which was also a disaster.”

The operation angered many Sikhs. Although the Harmandir Sahib, a square structure at the center of the fight, remained largely untouched, the damage suffered by the Akal Takht and other buildings, in addition to heavy civilian casualties, represented the desecration and defilement of the Sikh religion’s most sacred site by the army.

The tactics and implementation of Operation Blue Star point to the tightrope the army had to walk to meet its objective. To the extent possible, soldiers respected the religious sensitivities associated with the sacred site, perhaps at the expense of higher casualties. The operation was guided by military objectives, however, and when these
conflicted with sacred considerations, operational success took priority. This success came at a heavy price.

**Operation Blue Star: Managing the Sikh Mutiny**

The reports of the assault on the Golden Temple and the accompanying rumors spread a wave of anger among Sikhs worldwide. The Indian Army did not remain untouched. Sikh soldiers stationed in different cantonments revolted. They looted armories, deserted their positions, and, in one instance, killed their commanding officer. The modern Indian Army had not faced a revolt of this nature before. A complete information blackout ordered by the government during the operation resulted in the circulation of highly inflammatory rumors. In many instances these triggered the revolts. But there was no denying the grievance of Sikh soldiers. When soldiers chose to break army rules and overrule their commanders, the claim of faith trumped the claim the army made on these soldiers. Operation Blue Star had turned Religion, an ally that the army used to motivate men, into a rival. A Sikh Regiment soldier who participated in the revolt in his battalion said, “When I joined the army, I took an oath on the Guru Granth Sahib. The army tells us to be good warriors in the name of our faith. Then how could I sit quietly when the very foundation of my faith was attacked by the army?”

The cantonment revolts highlighted the difficulty of isolating the military as an institution from the social and political upheavals occurring around it. It was discovered that separatists had managed to influence some army units. As a result, soldiers had provided the separatists with financial, emotional, and material support in the form of weapons. There were close to a dozen instances of revolts spread over multiple locations.
The mutinies seem to represent a failure of the army’s institutional mechanisms. On the whole, however, these measures prevented a catastrophe from unfolding. Only 2,000 men, or 3 percent of the Sikh soldiers serving in the army, participated in the mutinies. In the most sensational case, in which around 1,400 soldiers deserted after killing their commanding officer and arming themselves, a significant number of the participants were found to be new recruits unschooled in regimental traditions, and who, as a result, were incited easily or, in some instances, were forced to participate at gunpoint. None of the Sikh battalions stationed close to the shrine revolted. And, perhaps most important, no serving Sikh officer joined the mutiny. For a large part of the army, the fallout remained limited. The mechanisms it had in place to deal with such a contingency, as I argue in the following section, curtailed the incidence of mutiny and its spread.

Ethnic Organization
Among Sikhs, religious identity is reinforced by a territorial identity because most Sikhs originate from the Punjab. Sikh grievances centered on both regional and religious issues, making them potent for use. And yet, the decision to participate in the mutiny reflected caste differences. Higher-caste Jat Sikhs join different regiments from lower-caste Mazhabi Sikhs. Despite a common grievance related to the desecration of their holiest site, the mutinies occurred mostly in the Jat Sikh battalions from the Sikh and Punjab regiments. Battalions from the Sikh Light Infantry – the regiment of the Mazhabi Sikhs – did not participate. Where mutinies occurred, help was often at hand because of the mixed nature of the formations. Soldiers from the adjoining non-Sikh battalions were used to disarm and round up the mutineers. New recruits at the regimental center were
found to be most easily incited. They had yet to be socialized into the traditions of their units and failed to grasp the stigma their actions would impose on their regiment.

Elite Command

As noted earlier, the efficacy of the institutional mechanisms turns on the quality of leadership shown by the officers. In its official and unofficial assessments of the factors responsible for the revolts, the army assigned blame to its officers. For the army, a mutiny was symptomatic of a broken officer-soldier relationship. In some instances, assessments suggested that officers had failed to communicate with their soldiers and had not preempted their potential for incitement. They also found that officers had failed to check the influence of religious preachers who were advocating for the Sikh militants inside army cantonments. These situations marked a failure of the officer-centric elite command structure.

According to comments appearing in the Indian press, retired officers – even those who disagreed with the government’s policy to send the army into the temple – concurred with this official view. Lt. Gen. Harbaksh Singh said, “They thought their villages were being attacked when they heard the announcement that the army was being deployed in the Punjab. Regiments should have sent small parties under the command of officers to the Punjab to see what was happening and to report back to their colleagues.” Lt. Gen. S. K. Sinha went further. In a newspaper interview, he said, “As far as the mutiny goes, I will squarely blame the officer corps, because they apparently did not know what their men were thinking. … I am very clear in my mind on this issue. Officers must know their men better than their mothers. In this case they obviously did not.”

A survey of approximately 100 Sikh and non-Sikh officers echoed similar sentiments. Both
groups blamed poor performance among officers for the mutinies more than any other factor.\textsuperscript{xli}

Still, no serving Sikh officer joined the mutiny. To appreciate fully how consequential the lack of participation by Sikh officers turned out to be, consider the following. One of the reasons Operation Blue Star ran into heavier resistance than expected was because of the involvement of a retired army general in fortifying the Golden Temple complex. Maj. Gen. Shahbag Singh (ret.), a decorated officer and an expert in guerrilla warfare, had joined the Sikh militants and was commanding the resistance. His early discharge in 1976 following charges of corruption had caused him to become disaffected.\textsuperscript{xlii} If mutinying soldiers had been organized under the leadership of serving Sikh officers, the effects would have been catastrophic.

There are also instances in which Sikh and non-Sikh officers were able to prevent a mutiny among their Sikh soldiers. It is fair to assume that without the intervention of these men the mutiny could have spread across additional Sikh battalions. During field research for this project, I identified officers commanding Sikh battalions in June 1984 and then interviewed those who were willing to discuss their experiences. Among those identified and interviewed, five officers played a pivotal role in calming passions and reassuring troops. When asked why his troops listened to him, one officer explained, “They had respect for me. I had been there for them. That night, if my men did not trust me, they would have shot me. They were very angry. They had been hearing all types of stories about what was going on in their villages.” Another officer, recounting a nightlong conversation with his troops, said, “I was like a parent, sometimes I had to shout at them, while at other times I had to be gentle with them.”\textsuperscript{xliii} Officers also said
that, in trying to calm the passions of their soldiers, they appealed to their regimental and battalion identity and its honor, telling their soldiers that if they revolted, their units would be dishonored forever.\textsuperscript{xlv}

Ethnic organization and elite control mechanisms were not sufficient to prevent a mutiny among all Sikh battalions during a politically charged period. At the same time, these measures were able to limit the damage in instances where the soldiers revolted. Caste divisions among Sikhs and the mixed-deployment model prevented the mutiny from spreading across all the Sikh battalions. The army turned to its elite command structure as the primary bulwark against the widespread breakdown of discipline. Where mutinies occurred, fault was found with the army’s command structure.\textsuperscript{xlv} Although some retired Sikh officers openly backed the militants, no serving officer joined them. A few senior Sikh bureaucrats resigned to protest Operation Blue Star, but no Sikh officer resigned in protest. Under remarkable stress, the army strived to remain apolitical throughout the conflict; it deferred the decision to increase force to the prime minister’s office. Soldiers followed norms of interfaith respect. Sikh soldiers were not attacked by non-Sikhs, and mutinying Sikh soldiers did not turn on soldiers of other faiths stationed in their vicinity. When investigations revealed that in a few instances Sikh granthis had played a role in instigating troops to rebel after Operation Blue Star, the army acted swiftly and in 1985 set up the Institute for National Integration, a school for training all religious teachers who join the armed forces.

The two parts of the case study illustrate the religion-related challenges the Indian Army faces and the four institutional mechanisms it relies on to meet them. The army has been deployed regularly for internal security duties within India and suffered very high
numbers of casualties in the process. The conflicts it is involved in have implications for its internal cohesion, organizational discipline, and the support it enjoys among the civilian population.

**Conclusion**

According to conventional wisdom, the organization of militaries should be driven by the objective of projecting maximum military power during battle. Militaries are not perpetually engaged in fighting wars with other states, however. They are often called on to perform duties related to internal security or to assist with state administration. Officers and soldiers alike have to live and train while still being a part of society. In multiethnic and multireligious societies, militaries are exposed to the social conflicts that surround them. Militaries can build barriers to shield themselves from these pressures, but an active role in the preservation of internal security can make them vulnerable to social conflicts. Therefore, they must strive to ensure self-preservation. As organizations, militaries also have an institutional memory informed by their experiences.

The modern Indian Army inherited from its colonial predecessor the fear of internal conflict and a concern for its own preservation while existing in a society prone to religious and ethnic volatility. Because religion could not be separated from the soldiers recruited into the force, it was accommodated and, where possible, harnessed to provide motivation and comfort. The army has continued to use and refine the institutional mechanisms it inherited to contain the danger religion poses to the organization. Even as it has repeatedly been assigned internal security responsibilities, it has accepted these reluctantly. Given the political backdrop against which it operates, and
the internal security-related responsibilities it is instructed to discharge, it is faced with the constant danger of being influenced by the politicization of religion in Indian society.

Today, from Iraq to Afghanistan, constructing national armies remains a challenge for multinational states. The experience of the Indian Army offers important policy lessons for managing issues related to religious and ethnic diversity. The Indian Army recruits from a society with a history of identity conflict and political violence. As a result, it has had to develop mechanisms to manage diversity; these should be instructive for other multireligious and multiethnic militaries.
A Buddhist soldier, a Christian soldier, a Sikh soldier, a Muslim soldier, and a Hindu soldier stand with their religious scriptures during a Presidential Colours Presentation ceremony in Rangreth on the outskirts of Srinagar, November 3, 2006. Photo copyright DANISH ISMAIL/X01584/Reuters/Corbis.

The army takes a “neutrality approach” to secularism, which emphasizes equal respect for all faiths by state institutions and has been preferred for centuries in India. This is different from the more austere “prohibition approach,” which enforces strict separation between religion and state institutions and has found favor in Western democracies. See Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity* (: Penguin, Books Ltd. 2005): 16–19.


The Indian National Election Study is conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi.


For information on religious diversity in the Indian Army, see Raju G. C. Thomas and Bharat Karnad, “The Military and National Integration in India,” in *Ethnicity, Integration, and the Military*, ed. Henry Dietz, Jerrold Elkin, and Maurice Roumani (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); and Omar Khalidi, “Ethnic Group Recruitment in the Indian Army: The Contrasting Cases of Sikhs, Muslims, Gurkhas, and Others Source,” *Pacific Affairs* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2001–2002): 529–552. Khalidi references data from a 1997 parliamentary debate indicating that there were “religious teachers of the following categories: Hindu pundits, 1568; Sikh Granthis, 194; Muslim Maulavis, a mere 54; Christian padres, 27; and 11 Buddhist monks” (544). The Indian Army purportedly provides one religious teacher for every 1,000 soldiers of each faith. This allows for a rough extrapolation of the religious composition of the Indian Army. The army itself collects data on soldiers’ religions but does not make them available, a fact lamented by the government’s own Sachar Committee Report (2005) on the social, economic, and education status of the Muslim community of India.

Khalidi, “Ethnic Group Recruitment in the Indian Army.”

This instrumental use of religion can be traced to the British colonial army and before. After the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, the British colonial army executed and imprisoned hundreds of Muslim religious teachers. And yet, in the following decades, the colonial military had once again begun to tolerate independent maulvis and faqirs in its cantonments. According to Nile Green, the relationship between the religious traditions of the soldier and the exigencies of the British Empire was one of give and take. He writes, “The Islam of the Indian soldier was capable of assisting or resisting imperial agendas, lending mechanisms of loyalty no less than rebellion” (xi). The British consciously tolerated these teachers in spite of their danger – they were the brokers who promised protection, promotion, comfort, and miracles to their soldiers. The significance of these men in the lives of the sepoys required their accommodation. See Nile Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Hindu Gurkhas are known to use the battle cry “Jai Ma Kali” (Victory to the Goddess Kali). The cry “Jo Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akal” (Blessed is the one who proclaims the truth of God) can be heard among the Sikh Light Infantry and the Sikh Regiment. Muslim soldiers in the Jammu and Kashmir Rifles, Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry, and the Grenadiers have used the battle cry “Allah hu Akbar” (God is great).

In countries with officially recognized state religions, militaries may remain autonomous (as in Pakistan and Bangladesh) or subordinate their authority to religious officials to varying degrees (as in Iran and the Holy See). In the latter instances, the army’s capacity to act can be heightened by religion.

Personal interview, June 2010.

Personal interview, July 2010.

Personal interview, March 2010. The Babri Masjid was a sixteenth-century mosque in a small town in North India purportedly built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. It was destroyed on 6 December 1992 by hundreds of right-wing Hindu nationalists. The event sparked Hindu-Muslim communal violence across the country that killed more than 2,000 people. Operation Blue Star was a military exercise conducted to remove Sikh militants from the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The events surrounding the operation and its aftermath are related in further detail later in this chapter.

Personal interview, July 2010. Honor, or *izzat*, is a powerful norm in Indian society.
The army ranks among one of the most trusted national institutions. The 2005 State of Democracy in South Asia survey project by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies found 73.5 percent of Indians expressed trust in the army. The corresponding figure for the police was 51.4 percent.


The mechanisms developed by the colonial army cast a long shadow because, over the decades, the army has undergone a limited transformation. The modern Indian state inherited a variety of state institutions from the colonial state. But more than any other institution in India, the army retains the strongest resemblance to its colonial parent. The political pressures that have transformed other institutions have affected it to a far lesser degree. Although as compared to its colonial predecessor it enjoys a vastly reduced role in the decision-making structure with the civil-military relations skewed significantly in favor of the civilian bureaucracy and the politicians, it has been able to resist political interference in its organization and its internal functioning. See Stephen P. Rosen, *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996); Stephen P. Cohen, *The Indian Army: Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

I conducted these interviews in 2010 across three cantonments.

The Indian Army can be distinguished from the U.S. and Israeli armies with regard to military officers becoming political candidates. Retired Indian military officers seldom seek political office. One exception was the first chief of the Indian Army, General K. M. Cariappa, who contested elections on the ticket of the Hindu Nationalist Party and lost.


The Vellore Mutiny of 1806 and the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 were both triggered by the religiously rooted grievances of soldiers.

Charles Wood, British Secretary of State for India from 1859 to 1866 articulated the intention clearly: “I wish to have a different and rival spirit in different regiments, so that Sikh might fire into Hindoo, Goorkha into either, without any scruple in case of need.” Cited in Perry Anderson, “Gandhi Center Stage,” London Review of Books. Vol. 34. No. 23, 5 July 2012, pgs. 3-11.

Rosen, Societies and Military Power; Cohen, The Indian Army.

The Parachutes and Guards are elite regiments, which can be completely mixed even at the unit level.


Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi’s Last Battle (Calcutta: Rupa and Company, 1985). The government did not break down the casualty figures into combatants and noncombatants. While few questions have been raised over military casualty figures, the veracity of the nonmilitary casualty figures has been widely questioned. The police official charged with cremation recalls counting more than 550 bodies.


Ibid.

In Amritsar, Tully and Jacob write that, in a statewide operation, the army also surrounded thirty-seven other Sikh temples the same night to eject separatists from them. With the exception of the temple in Patiala, where twenty-one people were killed, it did not encounter significant resistance.

Ibid.


Tully and Jacob, Amritsar, 158.
Ibid.

Personal interview, January 2011.

Personal interview, December 2010.

Tully and Jacob, Amritsar, 197–198.


According to Tully and Jacob, Amritsar, 89–90, many retired officers were sympathetic to the Sikh extremists, although few advocated an armed insurrection.

Interviews conducted between March and July 2010.

Kundu, “The Indian Armed Forces’ Sikh and Non-Sikh Officers’ Opinions of Operation Blue Star.”

In the Sikh revolt, the army was facing one of its worst nightmares. Sikhs formed a substantial component of its fighting forces. A religious divide, if it had taken hold, could have split the army. Therefore, the army was quick to learn lessons from Operation Blue Star. Since then, similar situations have arisen twice in Punjab, and subsequently in Kashmir. In the two occupations of the Golden Temple precincts by Sikh militants in 1986 and 1988, and of the Hazratbal shrine by Kashmiri separatists in 1993 and 1996, the army laid siege to the complexes but did not enter. A Sufi shrine besieged by the army in Kashmir was gutted in a systematic fire started by Pakistani militants. See C. Christine Fair, “The Golden Temple: A Tale of Two Sieges,” and Sumit Ganguly, “A Mosque, a Shrine, and Two Sieges,” in Fair and Ganguly, Treading on Hallowed Ground.