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## Licence to offend?

### *The Behzti affair*

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**ABSTRACT** Parekh and Touraine have stressed the importance of intercultural dialogue in the construction of multicultural societies. When, in 2004, the Repertory Theatre in Birmingham, UK, produced *Behzti* ('Dishonour' in Punjabi), by a British-born Sikh playwright, local Sikhs entered into a dialogue with the theatre management and tried unsuccessfully to change aspects of the play they believed offensive to their faith. A demonstration outside the theatre turned violent and the production was halted, with an international outcry against this affront to artistic licence. Although frequently represented as a Manichaeian conflict between proponents of free speech and those who sought to protect religious sensibilities, the affair may not have been about, or not mainly about, the clash between religious and secular values at all. It was much more complex, with a diversity of voices and arguments that slithered between principles of liberal and religious faith, culture, gender, and 'race'.

**KEYWORDS** intercultural dialogue ● multiculturalism ● religion ● secularism ● Sikhs

### A PLAY AND ITS AFTERMATH

If you had to write a theatrical pitch for what Birmingham has just witnessed over the play *Behzti*, you could do it in seven words: Play offends community, community protests, play cancelled. But that simple three act performance conceals a far more complex drama about how we all share the same space in a pluralistic society. (Casciani, 2004)

In December 2004, the Repertory Theatre in Birmingham, Britain's second largest city, mounted a production of *Behzti* ('Dishonour' in

Punjabi), by a British-born Sikh playwright, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti. *Behzti*, largely set in a Gurdwara (Sikh temple), deals with traumatic episodes in the lives of the characters culminating in the rape of the heroine, Min, by a Gurdwara elder, and his eventual murder by her mother. One reviewer thought it ‘an awe-inspiring masterpiece full of wit, grit and wisdom’ (<http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/5694/>), which subsequently won the Blackburn Prize (2005) for a female playwright who has created an outstanding work for the English-speaking theatre. Another, however, commented:

We have homosexuality, rape, violence against women, suicide, murder and thwarted love . . . if this is an attempt to lift the lid on the problems within Sikhism it leaves us a little disappointed. What begins as a sharp and black look at a modern family dilemma sinks beneath its own weight. (Parkes, 2004)

Irrespective of its artistic merit, members of Birmingham’s Sikh community (inverted commas understood) believed aspects of the play were offensive to their faith. After talks between those involved in the production and local Sikh representatives, it was agreed that a leaflet explaining their grievance would be distributed to the audience. The representatives, however, felt this was insufficient, and when the play opened organized peaceful demonstrations outside the theatre, attracting protesters from Birmingham and beyond. On the night of 18 December 2004, despite a strong police presence, some demonstrators broke into the theatre, which had to be evacuated. When it emerged that protests would continue and that neither Sikh representatives nor police could guarantee the safety of the audience, the theatre management ‘very reluctantly’ terminated the production: ‘Sadly . . . the violent protesters have won [but] the theatre vigorously defends its right to produce *Behzti* and other similar high-quality plays that deal with contemporary issues in a multi-cultural society’ (statement by Birmingham Rep). This decision led to an outcry in the local, national and international media,<sup>1</sup> and a debate that continued into 2006. What limits, if any, should be placed on freedom of speech and artistic licence? Should theatres be able to present any views irrespective of their offence? Should changes have been made to remove what some felt insulted religious sensitivities? Should demonstrators have resorted to violence? Should the production have been withdrawn in the face of it, or offered police protection? What did this say about British multiculturalism and interethnic relations?

Like the better known Rushdie affair, after which it is consciously named, the *Behzti* affair is seemingly about the incommensurability and incompatibility of religious and secular values in a multiethnic, multi-cultural, multi-faith society, the conflicting rights of freedom of speech/artistic licence and the protection of religious sensibilities, articulated through two sets of voices: the liberal, artistic establishment, and Sikh

community representatives. As this article shows, however, the issues were not clear-cut. Indeed, the affair may not have been about, or not mainly about, the clash between religious sensitivities and liberal values at all; *Behzti*'s offence may have had as much to do with gender as religion. Besides juxtaposing terrible deeds and sacred symbols in ways that Sikh representatives found offensive, the play seemingly attacked (British) Sikh core values of masculinity and family and presented a transgressive image of Sikh womanhood. Moreover, liberal defence of freedom of speech slipped into orientalist and colonialist representations of Sikhs/Asians as religious obscurantists, and attacks on multiculturalism in general. In a plethora of overlapping discourses arguments slithered between secular and religious rights, culture, gender, and 'race'.

There is another, related issue. The cohabitation of people of different culture, ethnic background and faith in what was a predominantly white, Judeo-Christian Europe seemingly poses difficulties. One view, drawing on Huntington's (in)famous account of contemporary global conflict (1993), is that of a 'clash of civilizations'. This trope has preoccupied politicians, church leaders and academics in many European countries, with, especially since 9/11, Islam replacing the Communism of the Cold War as the enemy within and without. Another view is 'multiculturalism', a contested notion with many critics across the political spectrum. Their criticisms are often well-taken and in response to them, and to the danger that an imagined clash of civilizations may become lived reality, some seek to shift the terms of debate from *multiculturalism* to *interculturalism*, and specifically to intercultural dialogue. Touraine, for example, argues that it is the intercommunication of cultures that makes a multicultural society, hence the necessity of 'a common language which will allow coming to terms with each other while recognising differences' (Touraine, 1997: 301). Parekh, agrees. A multicultural society 'cannot ignore the demands of diversity' (Parekh, 2000: 196), but requires a 'common sense of belonging' (p. 341), based on an 'interculturally created and multiculturally constituted common culture', which 'can emerge and enjoy legitimacy only if all the constituent cultures are able to participate in its creation in a climate of equality' (p. 221). This is what he means by a 'dialogically constituted multicultural society' (2000: 221), an optimistic, challenging vision of a society, constituted politically through a form of non-essentialist multiculturalism, and through individual and collective engagement in intercultural dialogue.

While there are multiple objections to simplistic ideas of a 'clash' of inherently hostile 'civilizations', it is impossible to ignore the existence of different values, apparently attached to different cultures, which superficially seem incommensurable. Isaiah Berlin's argument (2002) for the co-existence of such values, subject to the overriding right to choose, faces numerous difficulties in cities where people are 'sharing the same space', as Casciani put it (2004). Under such circumstances, dialogue would seem a



necessary, if not sufficient condition for resolving those difficulties. Yet the problems of engaging in dialogue, and how these might be overcome, require investigation. In the *Behzti* affair, dialogue (of sorts) between the theatre and Sikh representatives failed, with misunderstandings all round concerning its purpose, indeed what it should be called: a 'negotiation', as some Sikhs thought, a 'consultation', as the theatre management thought, or simply a 'conversation', as someone described it. Moreover, the multiplicity of voices and positions taken by participants in the *Behzti* affair reveals notions of 'constituent cultures' as problematic, and further illustrate the difficulties of reconciling different ways of living in contemporary multicultural Britain.

## SIKHS IN BRITAIN

In the 2001 UK census, 4 percent of the population declared themselves 'Asian' or 'Asian-British'. Although the first generation (now elderly) continues to be important, many have been born and brought up in Britain, rooted, if precariously, in British society. Residing, sometimes in small numbers, throughout the country, they are predominantly an urban population based in large and medium-sized cities in the London area, the Midlands and the North. In terms of religion, Muslims are the most numerous, followed by Hindus and Sikhs. The last are an ethnic-religious people who originated in Punjab (Western India), though many were 'twice migrants' (Bhachu, 1985) who came to the UK via East Africa where they had moved during the colonial period. The UK census found 336,000; Sikh sources report twice that number (Nesbitt, 2000 discusses problems of definition). Their presence is well-documented.<sup>2</sup> Some 30 percent live in the West Midlands metropolitan area, including Birmingham, rather more in London and its environs, especially the suburbs around Heathrow Airport, and in the satellite town of Slough where some 10 percent of the population is Sikh. They fared poorly in the recessions of the 1980s and early 1990s (Ballard, 1994b; Hall, 2002; Kalsi, 1992). Compared with other groups, they are:

less likely to be economically active, more likely to be unemployed, less well represented in top status jobs (particularly professional), more dependent on self-employment to achieve high status employment, and less well paid. (Brown, 2000: 1058)

Roger Ballard, writing about unity and disunity in the British Sikh population, says of them:

More graphically than any other comparable group, the Sikhs, with their distinctive combination of beard and turban, are a classic example of a group whose members have used physical and cultural symbols to construct an ethnic

identity around themselves. Not only does their appearance mark them off unmistakably from all their neighbours in their native Punjab, elsewhere in India and throughout their global diaspora, but the Sikhs themselves invariably represent their community as homogenous and particularly close-knit . . . The adoption of the title Singh by all males and Kaur by all females sets them deliberately apart from all other communities, but also explicitly underlines an ideal of non-differentiation, while the beard and the turban have exactly the same effect. (Ballard, 1994b: 88)

Although devout Sikh men should grow their hair, wear a turban, and abstain from alcohol and meat, many in Britain fail to follow all or some of those injunctions. Nonetheless, religious identification remains strong; Modood (1997: 303) reports that over 70 percent of Sikhs in Britain attended a religious service at least once a month.

Sikhism is described as a 'reform' religion arising from conflict between Islam and Hinduism in South Asia. Though not as homogeneous a faith as is sometimes believed (Ballard, 1996; Oberoi, 1994; Takhar, 2005), of central importance are the original holy men (gurus), and reading and reflection on Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Sikhism is organized through Gurdwaras, whose community role is stressed by the Council for Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham, an umbrella representative organization, in their Annual Report for 2001:

Gurdwaras are the main centres for social and cultural activity as well as religious services within the Sikh community. In addition to religious services, many Gurdwaras also administer and financially support some of the following services: supplementary schools; basic skills training; arts and cultural provision; welfare services; advice and support; day centres for elderly; community kitchen; libraries; schools visits; liaison with media and wider communities; production of appropriate materials; hospitality to visiting dignitaries.

The British Sikh Consultative Forum, Sikh Human Rights Group, British Sikh Federation, and Sikh Agenda for the UK Government claim to represent Sikh views nationally. Though its significance may be declining, caste, and the 'constantly changing mosaic of sectarian divisions' (Hall, 2002: 158), still permeate the organization of Gurdwaras, family life, and especially marriage (Ballard, 1994b, 2000; Helweg, 1996; Kalsi, 1992; Nesbitt, 2000). Though caste does not emerge unambiguously in the *Behzti* affair, and its significance or otherwise deserves further investigation, some observers (e.g. Bassey, 2005) point to the way in which members of the Jat farmers' caste, whose families generally came directly from Punjab, predominate in the Sikh population in the Midlands and North of England and are particularly important, historically, in the control of certain Gurdwaras. Members of the Ramgarhia (craft) caste(s) included many of the 'twice migrants' who came to Britain via East Africa, often with greater social and financial capital. They are important in the London Sikh population and among young professionals.

Post 9/11, Sikhs, like many Asians, feel insecure, fearful of being mistaken for terrorists: Shivani Nagarajah records the wearing of ‘Don’t freak, I’m a Sikh’ T-shirts after the London bombing in July 2005 (Nagarajah, 2005). Sunny Hundal, editor of *Asians in Media*, commented (2004): ‘Sikhs particularly, having been harassed after 9/11 for their turbans and beards, feel the UK needs to be educated more about their religion’. Similarly, Sarfraz Manzoor notes a shift from the use of ‘Asian’ as an all-embracing term, itself a product of time and place (1970s Britain), to categories differentiating on the basis of religion. When 9/11 led to increasing attention to Islam, Hindus and Sikhs sought to distance themselves from ‘trouble-making Muslims’ (Manzoor, 2005a).

Religious identification, and the concern to protect cultural traditions (Nesbitt, 2000) fit with the way in which religion provides a major channel of representation and consultation in British cities under the rubric of ‘faith communities’, with ‘faith’ councils, forums, schools and inter-faith networks. Manzoor suggests that the new-found confidence of religious groups in voicing their grievances, and having channels through which to do so, is the ‘price to be paid for multiculturalism’ (2005b). Against this, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2005), and others (e.g. Hundal, 2005a, Munira Mirza quoted in Millard, 2005, Singh, 2004) have attacked unelected religious leaders to whom, Alibhai-Brown argues, successive governments have ‘pandered’, with the consequence that religious groups are ‘over-powerful in the dialogues of the nation’.

## **BEHZTI: OFFENCE AND DEFENCE**

Although the ‘Rep’, a respected regional theatre proud of its role in a multi-ethnic city, had previously mounted a successful production of Bhatti’s play, *Behsharam* (‘Shameless’), it was clear from the outset that there would be problems with *Behzti*. The Director of Communications, Diocese of Birmingham, wrote that when he read the play he immediately felt it would cause offence, and ‘made the playwright and the Rep aware of this and both sought to consult widely with the Sikh community prior to staging the play’ (Arora, 2004). *Behzti*’s offence and the consultations that took place while the play was in rehearsal are discussed below, but first, ‘Sikh community’ requires comment.

That Sikhs, in Birmingham, or elsewhere constitute a collectivity with a single voice is a powerful idea projected by those aspiring to/claiming their leadership, and accepted by many Sikhs and non-Sikhs. Hanif Kureishi, for example, commented that in the *Behzti* affair ‘the Sikh community . . . has shown itself to be philistine’ (Kureshi, 2004). Some even argued that Sikhs were a collective agency, bearing responsibility for what happened: ‘The

Sikh community as a whole should be charged with hefty fines for the perpetrators along with the cost of the damage and clean up' (de Par, 2004). In reality, caste, country of origin (Punjab, East Africa), sect, generation, and gender create multiple lines of fission; unity and solidarity are apparent only in crises, e.g. when the Indian Government attacked Sikh 'Khalistani' separatists at the holy site of the Golden Temple at Amritsar in 1984 (among others Ballard, 1994b, 2000; Bassey, 2005; Kalsi, 1992; La Brack, 1996; Oberoi, 2001; Tatla, 1999), or in the fight to wear turbans at work and in school (De Lepervanche, 1992).

Prominent among the protesters against *Behzti* were the chairman of the Council of Sikh Gurdwaras in Birmingham, an experienced activist from the 1980s turban campaign (Bhachu, 1985: 177), and Sikh members of Birmingham City council representing Labour-controlled local government wards. They received support from several national Sikh organizations. In an article entitled 'Sikh leaders are not without blame for *Behzti* controversy' (2005b), Hundal wrote:

Not only are most of those who run Gurdwaras (and are by default labelled as 'Sikh leaders') from the first generation, they're also overwhelmingly men . . . Having grown up through the fight for civil rights, legal recognition of the turban and riots against the [far right British National Party], they harbour a very defensive attitude over their portrayal in the media.

These Sikh 'elders' had three main objections to *Behzti*:<sup>3</sup>

- 1 Use of hymns as background music. A contributor to a BBC website forum noted the scene where Min's 'screams [while being raped] are drowned out by the Ardas . . . the prayer where Sikhs remember the atrocities against them . . . To show this hideous act at the same time as the Ardas is very offensive' (BBC, 2004).
- 2 Abuse of sacred symbols. In an article (Ind, 2004) in which she interviewed Sikh women, the religious writer Jo Ind refers to a scene where a turban is put on a shoe rack: 'that image is shocking to these women who take their shoes off every time they enter the Gurdwara. Shoes are associated with dirt, which is perceived as the opposite of holiness'. On the Internet, 'Cyberwarrior' argued that the way symbols were 'abused in the name of comedy . . . is highly offensive and in our eyes completely unnecessary to the storyline' (Cyberwarrior, 2005).
- 3 As 'Cyberwarrior' observed, the symbols were intended to 'create the Gurdwara context for the play'. Sikh representatives claimed that they were not opposed to the themes: 'We are not bothered about rape scenes or paedophiles – we know that there are good and bad people from every background and religion. The problem is having these things take place in a temple', (BBC News, 2004a). 'Picture a



place where you feel safe, secure, comforted and most importantly a place you are proud of', said a contributor to the BBC website forum, December 2004, 'now think of people entertaining themselves by seeing terrible things such as rape and violence happening here' (BBC, 2004). The play misrepresented the nature of a Gurdwara and misled audiences as to what happens there. Consequently, in discussions with the producer and writer, representatives called for the setting to be changed to a community centre.

These objections were supported by leaders of religious and inter-faith groups (letters in *Times Online*, 2004), and backed by the right-wing British tabloid paper, the *Daily Mail*, which condemned the violence, but, in accordance with its antipathy towards secular liberalism:

confess[ed] a scintilla of admiration for the willingness of Sikhs to protest at what they regard as a gross insult to their faith. At least here are a people who believe their religion is a vital force in sustaining honest, decent family life and are prepared to fight for it (*Daily Mail*, 2004).

Although representatives only sought changes in the play, they were pleased that 'common sense', as they put it, eventually prevailed. They were nonetheless disturbed by the violence, condemned it and distanced themselves from what they described as 'militants', specifically the Sikh Federation (see Casciani, 2003, on the founding of British Sikh Federation, and Bassey, 2005, for an assessment of its role in the *Behzti* affair). The chair of the Birmingham Gurdwaras described the Federation as 'jumping on the bandwagon':

I was at pains to tell people that the protest had to be peaceful. When it became national news, people came from Leicester, Leeds, London and Manchester. When it became violent, I was pushed and jostled by people. They called me a sissy and told me to resign. (*Times On Line*, 22 December 2004)

The *Behzti* affair thus intersected with Sikh homeland politics: the Federation, and a predecessor, the International Sikh Youth Federation, now banned under British anti-terrorist legislation, supported the creation of an independent Sikh state.<sup>4</sup>

It also intersected with a resurgence of interest in protecting Sikh religious identity in multicultural Britain, exemplified by the 'Respect for Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji' campaign (Bassey, 2005), and dissatisfaction among the younger generation with an elderly, traditional leadership 'obstinately rooted to the politics of homeland while being ambivalent or unresponsive to the challenges of British society . . . incapable of addressing their concerns' (Singh, 2004). There was a determination to respond to any victimization of Sikhs or Sikhism: they had to 'take a stand' as one youth and community activist put it (in Bassey, 2005). As another contributor to a BBC discussion forum asserted:

if some fool thinks he/she can mock our religion, mock our faith, use our faith as a joke and to humiliate us, then they got another thing coming mate. Sikhs will never allow anything of the sort. Sikhs are going to stand for their religion and their beliefs until the end of time, and even beyond that. (BBC, 2004)

Although many objected to the violence (for example, ‘made us look like Taliban’, <http://www.tapoban.org/phorum/read.php?f=1&i=23398&t=23398/>), others approved of the Muslim example: ‘[they] hit hard anything that makes a mockery of them, so much so that people are afraid to tackle issues involving Islam’ (<http://www.tapoban.org/phorum/read.php?f=1&i=23398&t=23398/>). When they burned the *Satanic Verses*, ‘that soon put a stop to it’ (*Dispatches*, 2005). Only when protests turned violent, militants claimed, did anyone listen.

Those against the suspension of the play (predominantly, but not only, in the arts and media) centred their arguments around defence of the freedom of speech, artistic licence, opposition to the use of violence, and refusal to allow offence to religious susceptibilities to justify silence, at a time when the UK government was considering legislation to outlaw religious hatred. Madeleine Bunting called them ‘muscular liberals’, who ‘can no longer tolerate the intolerant [and] raise their standard on Enlightenment values, their universality, the supremacy of reason and a belief in progress’ (Bunting, 2005). A widely circulated petition (some Birmingham Sikhs organized a counter-petition) concluded:

It is a legitimate function of art to provoke debate and sometimes to express controversial ideas. A genuinely free, pluralist society would celebrate this aspect of our culture. Those who use violent means to silence it must be vigorously opposed and challenged by all of us, whatever our faith, belief or opinions.

A leader in the centre-left British broadsheet paper, *The Independent* (2004), thundered:

The threat of mob violence should not curtail the right of artistic expression . . . Broadly secular societies, such as Britain, are not immune to the gathering storm of intolerance and zealotry that is buffeting the world.

There were numerous references to the Van Gogh affair in Holland and comparisons with the Rushdie affair 15 years earlier. Rushdie himself asserted in an interview: ‘In this country, it is the liberty of any artist to express their view of their own society and their own community’ (Sayal, 2004), and in his capacity as President of PEN (an international organization promoting writers and literature), argued that in Britain there was an “‘anschluss” of liberal values in the face of resurgent religious demands’.

It seems we need to fight the battle for the Enlightenment all over again . . .

The idea that any kind of free society can be constructed in which people will never be offended or insulted, have the right to call on the law to defend them

against being offended or insulted, is absurd . . . do we want to live in a free society or not? Democracy is not a tea party where people sit around making polite conversation. In democracies people get extremely upset with each other. They argue vehemently against each other's positions. (But they don't shoot). (Rushdie, 2005)

The apocalyptic note of Rushdie's intervention ('The continuing collapse of liberal, democratic, secular and humanist principles in the face of the increasingly strident demands of organized religions is perhaps the most worrying aspect of life in contemporary Britain') was echoed by others: 'cultural terrorism' (Green, 2005), 'the Counter-Enlightenment surges on' (Martin, 2004).

Similar sentiments were expressed by those who chose the *Behzti* affair to restate an opposition to multiculturalism. Thus, Minette Marrin (2004):

Western ideals of the centrality of freedom of speech cannot and must not give way to the demands of any other culture or religion. This is where multiculturalism has to stop. . . . Minority cultures cannot expect an equal part with the host culture in deciding [the] limits.

A stark picture was drawn by the novelist Lionel Shriver (2004) and by Christopher Orlet (2004) who imagined a day 'in the not-too-distant future' when 'every outspoken European critic of radical Islam or Sikhism will be dead or in hiding'. Multiculturalism, he continued, had created 'theocratic enclaves' and tolerated 'barbaric traditions'. How could the West deal with people from societies which had 'literally sat out the Enlightenment and . . . 300 years of human progress', to whom concepts such as freedom of speech were 'not only foreign [but] inimical'? 'Ironically', he concluded, 'America and Britain are now belatedly trying to bring the ideals of the Enlightenment to places like Iraq and Afghanistan'.

## OFFENCE AND DEFENCE RE-EXAMINED

Although the *Behzti* affair was often portrayed as a Manichaean conflict between artistic licence and the obligation not to offend religious susceptibilities, it should already be apparent that this oversimplified. That Gurdwara elders were the mainstay of the protests is no surprise: they figured prominently in the play itself. Other Sikhs and British Asians were by no means unanimous in support or opposing *Behzti*, and had more nuanced, ambivalent views. Some, while condemning the violence, and generally agreeing about free speech and artistic licence, also argued that Bhatti, as a Sikh born and brought up in the UK, must have been aware of the likely impact of what she was saying and could, with minor adjustments, have made her case without rousing the fury she did (Khan, 2005).

Amardeep Bassey's programme (2005) included several young professionals unimpressed by the play ('struggle to read the script'), and its unbalanced representation of Sikhs. Yet the Rep was wrong to withdraw it: 'We don't like it, but she's got a right to produce whatever kind of play that she wants to, and she's got a right to show it'). But when asked for whom Bhatti was writing, Bassey's informants, like others (e.g. Wharton, 2005), expressed scepticism about the motives behind such productions:

For a white audience . . . a liberal community who want to see angst, and want to be shocked, and want to see that ethnic minorities are dysfunctional members of society. They want to see that women are oppressed. Because it's very easy now to use sex and gender as a political tool.

Bassey (2005) himself contended that 'the vast majority of Sikhs in this country are clean-shaven unorthodox moderates who were born here and share the same values as most of the rest of the population'.<sup>5</sup> Most, he continued:

are proud of the religion and Sikh identity and no doubt many of them found Gurpreet's play offensive, unrealistic and just not very good. But they do support her right to have it performed as well as the Sikhs' right to peacefully protest . . . They have little time for their so-called community leaders who the establishment are so keen to consult on their behalf, and still less for the minority who hi-jacked the controversy for their own sectarian ends.

Pnina Werbner, describing the multiplicity of orientations and alternative public spheres among Asians in Britain (cf. Hall, 2002, 2004; Kaur and Singh, 1996; Sharma et al., 1996), and commenting on the relationships portrayed in films such as *Bend it Like Beckham* (about a young woman in a Sikh family in West London), refers to:

[a] resistant and yet complicit public arena produced through the entertainment industry . . . that tells a story of cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism, of inter-generational conflict, inter-ethnic or inter-racial marriage, family politics and excesses of consumption; a cultural arena that makes its distinctive contribution to British and South Asian popular culture by satirising the parochialism and conservatism of the South Asian immigrant generation. (Werbner, 2004: 897)

'My generation of writers', said Ash Kotak, 'define themselves against the elders who have suppressed us . . . they are attempting to end the silence that exists around abuses and injustices that take place within their communities' (*Guardian*, 21 December 2004). Bhatti herself wrote (2004: 17):

Sometimes I feel imprisoned by the mythology of the Sikh diaspora. We are apparently a living, breathing success story, breeding affluence through hard work and aspiration. [But] Sikh principles of equality, compassion and modesty are sometimes discarded in favour of outward appearance, wealth and the quest for power . . . only by challenging fixed ideas of correct and incorrect behaviour can institutionalised hypocrisy be broken down.

Sarita Malik, however, referring to the '*Behzti* moment', regretted that such plays were exceptional: 'South Asian audiences are currently being kept sweet – literally – on a diet of ladoos and Bollywood-style frivolity, with clones of comfortable mainstream formulas such as "Bombay Dreams", or "Goodness Gracious Me" [a British Asian television comedy series] (Malik, 2005a). In Autumn 2005, Bhatti was reportedly working on a film about Asian businessmen selling curry and love potions from an ice-cream van in Dundee (Pendreigh, 2005).

Besides generation there is gender. One actor who observed the protests commented: 'On that night it felt like a lot of testosterone thrown at this little female play. The great powerful mass of men who had been roused to crush it because it, the tiny thing threatened them somehow' (*Dispatches*, 2005). Bhatti, writing in *The Guardian* (2005) describes the 'tension between who I am, a British-born Sikh woman, and what I do, which is write drama' (see also Bhatti, 2006). She and others, said Miranda Husain (2005), 'sought to challenge her community to lift the veil of silence and hypocrisy on the exploitation of women by a patriarchal society'. A similar point was made by some of *Behzti*'s non-Sikh supporters, e.g. the minority ethnic feminist campaign group, the *Southall Black Sisters*. *Behzti*, it is argued, offends not only by juxtaposing religious symbols and terrible events (Walsh, 2005; others have used verses from the Guru Granth Sahib without hostile reaction, Kaur, 2000), but in what it may be read as saying about kinship and gender in British Sikh life.

Not alone among British Asian artistic productions, *Behzti* questions relationships within the 'Asian family', disrupting the hegemonic notion of that family as morally solid, harmonious and supportive, as opposed to its dysfunctional 'western' counterpart. Portraying the family as a site of repulsive behaviour, *Behzti* challenged a central myth of post-independence India. Chatterjee (1993) argues that Indian nationalism sought to transform people's 'inner' ('spiritual') domain through language, literature, arts, etc., and the family. Reformulating familial relations against both 'traditional' and 'western' family values, nationalists created a new kind of patriarchy. The 'new' woman in Indian ideology was 'quite the reverse of the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males' (Chatterjee, 1993: 127). At the same time, if she were categorized as 'westernized', she would 'invite the ascription of all that the "normal" woman (mother/sister/wife/daughter) is not – brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous' (1993: 131). Guru, who studied Punjabi ideals of femininity among women in Birmingham, notes the 'heavy premium on honour, submission, modesty, sexual purity, domestication and obedience as virtues of womanhood' (2003: 8); transgression may 'bring shame and dishonour on women, their family and indeed their community'. One informant recalled that her mother 'taught her to talk with a *mitthi*

(sweet) tongue and never to answer back' (2003: 9). For many Sikh men, and indeed for the older women interviewed by *Dispatches* (2005), the behaviour of *Behzti*'s female characters betrayed Sikh womanhood. The implications of homosexuality and dishonourable male conduct also challenged Sikh accounts of masculinity (see Chatterjee, 1993: 136 on Indian nationalist images of 'ideal masculinity'). Brian Axel (2001: 36, see also Axel, 2004: 34), referring to 'Sikh subjectification through masculinized symbolism and imagery', argues that through 'bodily techniques, religious practices, visual representations, and narratives of Sikh "identity" . . . Sikh men became the privileged site for negotiating who could be recognized as a member of the Sikh *panth*' (Axel, 2001: 4).

Accusations of racism and culturalism also come into it. On the one hand, says Rahila Gupta of Southall Black Sisters, women who expose 'corruption and religious violence at the heart of a religious establishment', are accused of 'providing ammunition for racists' (Gupta, 2005). On the other, although there was little sign of groups such as the far right British National Party exploiting this affair (but see Barnes, 2004), some observers perceived racism and ethnic stereotyping, along with ignorance and hypocrisy, in the reporting of the protests (sikhionz.com, n.d.): 'the legacy of colonialism . . . now disguised as a defence of "free speech"' (Singh Rai, 2005). Remarks on 'western' values cited earlier might seem to justify this. Other statements are harder to pin down (e.g. the widespread use of 'mob'). Was the writer who referred to 'bow[ing] to thuggery' (Robieson, 2004) aware of the historical associations? At a conference in London in May 2005, the Rep's Executive Director is reported as saying there were people with 'no understanding of the concept of fiction . . . naturally against freedom of speech' (Jury, 2005); 'the very concept of theatre was alien to them' (Greene, 2005). Such sentiments, consciously or unconsciously, 'othered' the Sikhs, in terms of East/West, 'them'/'us'. Thus, a contributor to a BBC website forum wrote: 'We are expected to respect *their* religion, *they* should respect *our* fundamental belief in free speech' (BBC, 2004, my emphases). Someone replied: 'Sikhs fought in WW1 & WW2 FACT!! Fighting for freedom. Now we are being referred to as "they" . . . During the war I am sure we were referred to as "us"', and another commented:

Sikhs are repeatedly reminded of the values and sanctity of Free Speech held within the UK, as if the idea is alien to us . . . many sikhs laid down their lives to protect the liberties and values to which these people allude, whilst at the same time enjoying no such free speech, under British Rule in India. (BBC, 2004)

The freedom of speech principle, said Sarita Malik (2005b), is 'deeply racially coded', and 'Helena, Birmingham' stressed context:

It is in [a] climate of fear and mis-education and mis-understanding, that we are asking a mainstream theatre to put on a play featuring sexual abuse within one of the holiest sites of Sikhism. This ceases to be a case of free speech, but

becomes an issue of sensitivity, consideration and responsibility. The already well-ingrained ignorance would only be fuelled by this sort of play. If only we lived in a society of educated, non-prejudiced, non-racist people that did not have pre-concieved misconceptions about certain minority groups, then we could consider exercising our freedom of speech and putting out into the mainstream theatre scenes of abuse within holy sites – because only then would we be sure that some ignorant groups of people would not blow this out of proportion and draw further misconceptions about a minority . . . we have to be responsible when portraying already potentially vulnerable groups. (BBC, 2004)

Nonetheless, Rahila Gupta argued, as in the Rushdie affair, it was necessary to fight both the racism of the ‘liberal intelligentsia’, and ‘authoritarian strands in our own communities’ (*Guardian*, 12 March 2005).

Undoubtedly the way *Behzti* was staged upset some Sikh religious sensitivities, but that was only part of the story, as was its defence by reference to freedom of speech and artistic licence. In the affair, said Hundal, ‘Liberals railed about freedom of speech without having watched the play or understood the context, religious leaders jostled for media attention, while ordinary Sikhs came out feeling annoyed and embarrassed’ (Hundal, 2005c). Few emerged unblemished – the director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, described the Government’s stance as ‘pathetic’ (*Dispatches*, 2005). It is difficult not to sympathize with Paul Hoggart and fellow ‘liberal agnostic humanists’, who ‘bitterly resent any interference with freedom of speech, but hate to see other people’s sincere beliefs treated with contempt [and] end up wimpily wishing that everyone would just calm down and be nice to each other’ (Hoggart, 2005).

## A DIALOGUE?

There is a section of society who don’t want a dialogue (Stuart Rogers, Executive Director, Birmingham Rep, quoted in Jury, 2005)

The Rep and Sikh representatives engaged in a form of dialogue, though they named it differently and had different expectations. Sikh representatives thought they were in ‘negotiations’ for weeks before the production opened: several had a background in the Labour movement and had previously engaged in campaigns (e.g. over turbans) with negotiated outcomes. David Edgar, however, characterized the discussions as ‘a conversation . . . misinterpreted as a negotiation’ (Edgar, 2005). The Rep preferred ‘consultation’. In *Dispatches* (2005), which covered the disputes over *Behzti*, *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, and the Van Gogh affair, the Rep’s Executive Director explained:

Our approach to the community about consultation was not about shall we do the play, or shan't we do the play, because it was clear from day one that we were doing it. It wasn't about how would you like us to change the play because we made it clear also we would never change the play. What it was about was how we can work together to minimise any offence this might cause to some members of your community. And also equally importantly to us, how we can ensure that non-Sikhs coming to see the play don't go away with the thought that this is what happens in a Gurdwara every day of the week, because clearly it doesn't. It is a piece of fiction.

He later elaborated (in Bassey, 2005):

For any new play . . . there is a degree of consultation . . . in that the play is normally workshopped and we invite people to come and listen to a reading of it and contribute to the development of it, whatever the play is. That's part of the process of developing a new play. When a playwright says to us quite clearly this will cause offence to a particular section of the community, then yes we do think long and hard and in this case we did. We didn't go directly to the members of the Sikh community; we actually went first of all to the Bishop of Birmingham's Inter-Faith Committee, which is an organization that we've had links with in the past. And we said to them quite upfront. Look, we've programmed a play that we suspect will cause offence to some members of the Sikh community. We'd like you to have a look at it and let us know what's the best way of approaching this in terms of talking to the communities in Birmingham. And it was the secretary to the Inter-Faith Committee [actually adviser on interfaith relations to the Bishop of Birmingham] who then put us in touch with the two Sikh community leaders who we then started to talk with . . . I remember vividly at the first meeting [the secretary started] by saying: 'Let's get this clear; *Behzti* has been commissioned; we're not here to stop the play being produced; we're not here to change the play.'

Bassey reported that the representatives, a councillor and chairman of the Birmingham Council of Sikh Gurdwaras, were indeed offended, but, persevering, the Rep organized a reading. An actor commented:

There were people who seemed to think that . . . nothing like this could ever happen in a building connected to Gurdwara [It was] one of those wonderful patronising, liberal meetings where everyone's walking on eggshells and saying 'Of course we understand you, sir', and all that kind of conversation was going on, and nobody was really tackling the issue except that it was quite clear that there was no room for discussion. They just said: 'This is unacceptable. Change it.' . . . I asked the director and the management . . . whether their views would mean we would make changes to the play. They said 'Not at all. We're just doing it to inform them about the play, and to get their support for it, and to encourage people to come and see it.' (Bassey, 2005)

Another actor recalled that some swearing and jokes were removed as late as the dress rehearsal, held in the presence of Sikh representatives (*New Kerala*, 2005). The Rep's Artistic Director later concluded 'I don't know if



as a producer I would enter into a dialogue with a community like that again' (*Dispatches*, 2005), while others questioned the need for *any* consultation: 'Should consultations be made with self-appointed leaders of particularly sensitive communities? Certainly not!' (Kotak, 2004); "'Community leaders" have met with the play's producers and the police. Why? Why didn't they tell them to get lost? What's to negotiate?' (Liddle, 2004).

The consultation led representatives to believe they had a 'veto' (Swain, 2004), and in retrospect, the Rep's Artistic Director, thought their 'biggest mistake' was 'talking to the Sikh community . . . in a way that suggested the theatre was willing to discuss the content of the work' (Jury, 2005). Sikh representatives, therefore, had a different understanding of what discussions were about and what they might achieve (Hundal, 2005b), and were consequently disappointed:

The management of the Rep, at a lower level, were good enough to consult with us when they became aware of the cause for concern within the Sikh community and consulted Sikh elders who showed their concerns. But it is sad that having consulted the community and hearing our concerns they still did nothing about it. (Chair, Council of Birmingham Sikh Gurdwaras, cited in BBC News, 2004b)

Actually, my opinion was being a councillor they would listen to us. But I was surprised they didn't listen. They had a meeting, but they didn't understand, and they don't want to know. They just had a meeting and say 'Oh, that's OK, we give you time, we discuss the matter with you, but we are sticking to our point, and we are going ahead with the drama'. (Councillor, cited in Bassey, 2005)

It was complained that the councillor, representing a ward with a substantial Sikh electorate, was simply ignored, and Bassey argues that the 'consultation' inadvertently undermined his position. It seemed a 'tick-box exercise to only please the funders and cover their own back: there was never any intention to listen to nor implement the concerns raised' ([shaheedkhalsa.com](http://shaheedkhalsa.com), 2004).

Hundal (2005d) makes the further point that 'in the desire to be politically correct, British institutions end up listening only to highly vocal and organised religious groups' in the belief (reinforced by trends towards faith-based multiculturalism) that they are representative. 'For young British Asians who want to tell their own stories through theatre', he adds, 'it can mean facing an environment where censorship is imposed on them by their own community'. A dialogue constituted as a duologue between parties representing opposed interests inevitably ignores the many different voices engaged (as in this case) in both inter- and intracultural debate. But any dialogue, intercultural/intracultural, raises difficult questions: about language and (linguistic and cultural) translation, about the definition of the situation (what the process is to be called, what is happening and why),

about possible outcomes; and about the (macro and micro) politics (who is to be involved, who has the right to say what, to whom, when, who is heard).

Recognizing why (some) Sikhs were offended was crucial. Many non-Sikhs had little or no knowledge of the religion, indeed any religion, and as good secularists little if any sympathy for it. Renteln (2004: 1590) refers to a ‘tacit assumption’ that adherents of a faith ‘can easily discard their religious symbols’, adding ‘for those who are not a part of these traditions, there is no problem in stripping off the religious garb’. A letter-writer to the *Birmingham Post* (Ray, 2004) drawing on ‘30 years in India and Pakistan’ criticized the author and theatre management for a ‘very western lack of awareness of the dangers of producing such a play in the setting of a Gurdwara’, taking into account the attack on the Golden Temple, and speculated why there was such ‘incomprehension’. Jo Ind’s interviews with local Sikh women (Ind, 2004) also noted lack of knowledge. There is a substantial literature on honour (*izzat*) among South Asians in Britain (e.g. Ballard, 1994a, 1994b; Ballard and Ballard, 1977; Baumann, 1996; Guru, 2003; Hall, 2002), but popularly ‘honour’ is mostly associated with its defence, connoting violence against women, and twinned with ‘killing’. One of Ind’s informants reflected on the play’s title:

The word *Behzti* has connotations of gossip and slander. Just from the word itself I wouldn’t want to go because it’s against our religion to take part in dishonour or slander. It’s a very negative title for us, even before you hear it is set inside a Sikh place of worship. (Ind, 2004)

As Ind points out, ‘This is where a difference in cultural sensibilities begins to emerge. To the Western ear, the word “dishonour” does not strike right to the root of the being as it evidently does to a Sikh’. The very titles of Bhatti’s plays (‘Dishonour’, ‘Shameless’) are provocative.

## CONCLUSION

There is a fine line where there is a precious place in people that we must respect. We can’t go and kick someone in the arse just for the fun of it. (Peter Brook, cited in Dromgoole, 2005)

This scene from a multicultural society has many ramifications. Marcel Maussen (personal communication) has suggested that the principal issue addressed by this paper is ‘precisely *what the issue is about*’. This is true, but it is also about how the affair became a ‘site’ through which people articulated widely different interests and grievances, often only remotely connected with the event itself. In this respect, the Rushdie affair, the Van Gogh affair, etc., are very similar (Grillo, forthcoming, discusses the *Behzti* affair comparatively in the light of debates about legislation to outlaw

religious hatred; see also Bhabra 2005). Superficially, like *Behzti*, each apparently involve conflict between artistic licence and religious sensibilities, but religious sensibilities are only part of the story, just as freedom of speech segues into defending the Enlightenment against oriental obscurantist 'others', and the deficiencies of multiculturalism.

Enlightened liberals are startled to find conflict between religious and secular values reasserting itself in Europe when all seemed settled. Now, however, the values with which European secularism conflicts tend to be associated with 'other' cultures, whose relationship with Europe was in the past structured through colonialism, orientalism and racism: the 'guests', who may have powerful international and transnational links (as with Islam), are making inconvenient demands. The *Behzti* affair is thus not just a 'classic conflict between the artist's right to freedom of expression and a community's wish to have their faith treated with dignity' (Branigan, 2004). Nonetheless, although reducing the affair to two opposed values oversimplifies, the seemingly incompatible claims of religious sensibility and artistic licence were indeed present. Certainly the affair was presented as such, and Huntington and others who attribute values to ways of life associated with particular 'peoples' (e.g. 'Muslims', 'Sikhs') would interpret this as a 'clash of cultures', and the point made that 'they' should accept 'our' values, or leave. But if that is unacceptable, how are fundamental value disagreements in multicultural societies to be resolved?

In this instance the dispute was 'resolved' by the forces (actual and symbolic) that participants could bring to bear. The idea of 'peaceful co-existence', à la Isaiah Berlin, taken from the Cold War, and the clash of values between West and East (the Soviet bloc), may work when parties are continents apart, each with their sphere of influence, or possibly in a system of pillarization or 'parallel lives', but is harder to envisage in a mixed, multicultural city. Hence the need to work towards a *modus vivendi* through dialogue, as advocated by Parekh and Touraine. But *Behzti* reveals the obstacles that such dialogues must overcome. The British Commission for Racial Equality's proposed 'summit' (Commission for Racial Equality, 2004), inviting faith groups, playwrights, etc., to discuss how the arts should deal with religious difference, never materialized, and if those involved talked past each other, it might have been worse than nothing. There are ways of avoiding this, perhaps employing participatory methods, which might work under the right circumstances, with small groups and a will to find common ground. In *Behzti* there was room for manoeuvre: Sikh representatives were prepared to accept much of the play's content, provided that changes were made to the setting and use of symbols, and this is where dialogue was possible. But if people insist they are 'in sole possession of the truth' (Berlin, 2002: 345), there may seem little that can be done, and in the *Behzti* affair consultation/ negotiation/conversation led nowhere.

For many people (myself included) freedom of speech and artistic licence trump most claims. Nonetheless, few aside from complete libertarians would assert their untrammelled rule: ‘Nobody has the right to shout “fire” in a crowded theatre’, as Oliver Wendell Holmes famously put it. Moreover, affairs like *Behzti* are zero-sum. If one prevails, the other loses, and losers might feel justifiably aggrieved, especially when told: ‘This is *our* society; deal with it!’ Here, attempts to address the dilemma through dialogue failed. Touraine and Parekh’s Habermasian view is overly sanguine. Their idealistic goal of a multiculturalism where common ground is negotiated through intercultural dialogue is extremely difficult to achieve, and as this paper illustrates, it cannot resolve some of the problems that have to be tackled.

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### **Notes**

- 1 While initial protests received little notice, the violence and cancellation of the play were widely reported in print, radio, television, and the internet. Most national newspapers followed the story for several days. Tabloid treatment was minimal (their reticence deserves further consideration), though the right-wing *Mail* group reported the affair in some detail, commenting editorially, and printing an article by the chair of the Commission for Racial Equality. The ‘broadsheets’ had numerous reports, articles, commentaries and letters into 2005, interest intermittently boosted by a Salman Rushdie article, the televising of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, vociferously opposed by Christian groups, and the British Parliamentary debate on the proposal to make inciting religious hatred an offence: *Behzti* was thought a test case. The production of other, possibly provocative, plays by South Asian authors (e.g. Yasmin Whittaker Khan’s *Bells*, set in a Pakistani-owned brothel), also occasioned comparisons. There was brief coverage in non-English speaking countries (France, Italy, Scandinavia), more extensive in South Asia and North America, and much interest in the theatrical press. The British television channel, Channel 4, examined the reaction to *Behzti*, interviewing many of those involved (*Dispatches*, 2005), as did a Radio 4 programme (Bassey, 2005). There were articles and comments on the BBC’s website and in many internet-based forums, chat groups and web-logs (Sikh and non-Sikh), and in web-based publications such as *Asians in Media*.
- 2 Ballard (2000) has a succinct overview of Sikhs in Britain; Singh and Tatla (2006) provide a wide-ranging account, and also discuss the *Behzti* affair. See also Ballard, 1994b; Ballard and Ballard, 1977; Baumann, 1996; Bhachu, 1985; Hall,

- 2002, 2004; Helweg, 1986; Kalsi, 1992, 1994; Modood, 1997 passim, Nesbitt, 2000; Tatla, 1999; Tatla and Nesbitt 1994; Weller, 1997: 605–49.
- 3 One of the actors in *Behzti* cites further objections that were put to him (Sharma, 2005: 33).
  - 4 One of the *Ethnicities* anonymous referees commented that in the *Behzti* affair there was a ‘fortuitous’ intersection of several ‘utterly unrelated events’, and this helps ‘explain the periodic moral panics about a so-called conflict between freedom of expression and respect for religious sensitivities’.
  - 5 Modood (1997: 327) records that only 16 percent of young Sikh males under 35 interviewed in his survey wore a turban, whereas 37 percent over 35 did so.

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