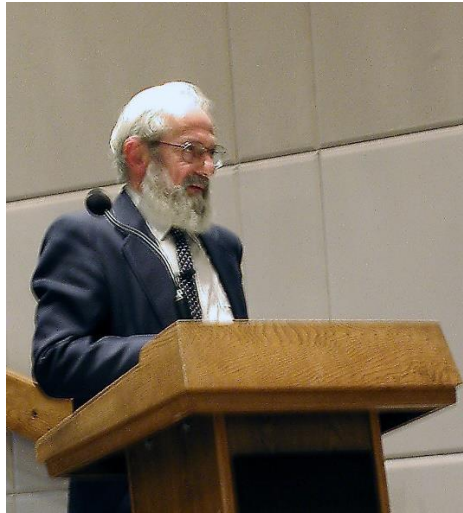


## In Remembrance

### Paul R. Brass (1936-2022)



[Photo courtesy of <https://www.paulbrass.com>]

Paul R. Brass, the leading American scholar on Indian politics for nearly five decades, passed away in his home near Seattle, Washington on May 31, 2022. Rarely has a scholar made such monumental contributions to the theoretical literature in political science on ethnic nationalism and to the area-studies literature on Indian politics. This included over a dozen books and scores of articles/chapters based on a lifetime of research and conference travel to India.

Prof. Brass was born in Boston and attended Harvard College for an undergraduate degree in political science, before going to the University of Chicago where he completed his doctorate in political science in 1964. He subsequently taught in the Department of Political Science and the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington (Seattle) until his retirement in 1999.

Some of Prof. Brass's major authored books include *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh* (1965), *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* (1974), *Ethnicity & Nationalism: Theory & Comparison* (1991), *Politics of India since Independence* (1994), *The Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (1997), *The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India* (2003), and a three volume set titled *An Indian Political Life: Charan Singh and Congress Politics, 1957-1967* published in 2012.

Yet, what is comparatively less known is Prof. Brass's groundbreaking and defining academic contributions on Sikh politics in post-Independence Punjab. He was in fact the 'first generation' of Western scholars, along with Raj Baldev Nayar and Paul Wallace, to study Sikh and Punjab politics in the immediate post-Independence era, particularly the formative 1960s, which included Sikh ethnonationalism and movement for the creation of the Punjabi Suba.

Prof. Brass's most important and influential work - *Language, Religion, and Politics in North India* - included a major section on the politics of language and religion in Punjab, focusing primarily on the Sikhs. In this three-case comparative study, Brass took an 'instrumentalist' approach to the study of ethnic/national identity formation and challenged the previously dominant 'primordialist' paradigm. In particular, he argued that the consolidation of ethnic/national identities was the product of communal elites successfully mobilizing their 'communities' around carefully selected cultural symbols, and the institutionalization of their leadership and emerging group identity into permanent political organizations. In particular, he found that leaders within the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and Akali Dal successfully marshalled and institutionalized select historical and cultural symbols - including the historic Sikh kingdom of Ranjit Singh, boundaries between Hindus and Sikhs, and the Punjabi language - during the 1960's to develop sufficient community consciousness to become a unique 'ethnic/national group' in India. In contrast, other potentially emerging 'ethnic/national' groups in north India failed in this process, and never achieved the same level of community consciousness and official recognition. As Brass argued, this process of 'nationality formation' was not an inevitable for any 'group'. Instead, 'nationalities' were created through political competition and specific historical processes, rather than being pre-existing 'natural givens'.

Prof. Brass's next major contributions to understanding Sikh ethnonationalism and politics came during the turbulent 1980/90s in the form of two book chapters, both which were eventually republished in his edited volume *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (1991). The first titled 'The Punjab Crisis and the Unity of India' remains the most well-structured and cogent causal account of the emergence of the Punjab crisis of the 1980's. In this work, Brass asked the simple, but very important, comparative question - why did Sikh separatism emerge during the Akali Dal's Dharam Yudh morcha of the 1980's but not during its Punjabi Suba movement of the 1960s? Drawing on his previous knowledge of the nature of Indian leadership and the structure of Sikh politics during the 1960's, Brass argued that two trends - Mrs. Gandhi's centralization of power at the center during the 1980's in contrast to Nehru's decentralized style of leadership during the 1960's, and the fractionalization of Akali leadership during the 1980's as opposed to its relative unity in the 1960s - helped explain violent Sikh separatism. In essence, Mrs. Gandhi's unprincipled interference in state-level politics during the 1980s facilitated fractionalization and 'ethnic-outbidding' within the Akali leadership and thus contributing to the rising cycle of violence. In his preferred 'instrumentalist' mode of analysis, Brass argued that Sikh separatism was not an inevitable product of 'primordialist' identities, but

rather a product of elite political competition and the selective use of cultural/ethnic symbols. This argument was also reinforced in another chapter on Punjab in *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (1991) titled 'Socioeconomic Aspects of the Punjab Crisis' in which he critiqued the causal significance of socioeconomic explanations for Sikh separatism, instead focusing on changed political dynamics during the 1980s as being the primary causal factors.

The last major contribution Prof. Brass made to Punjab and Sikh studies was an article titled, 'The Partition of India and Retributive Genocide in the Punjab, 1946-1947: Means, Methods, and Purposes' published in *Journal of Genocide Research* (2003). In this article, Brass continued to utilize his 'instrumentalist' approach to the study of politics but engaged in multiple levels of analysis ranging from political elites to ground-level participant accounts. He argued that the violence of the Partition served the instrumental political purposes of competing political elites who wished for their own preferred political outcomes. At the grassroots level, the selective 'categorization' and 'othering' of people - from a myriad of possible choices - explained the local patterns and intensity of violence. The political fortunes of the Sikhs, Brass argued, were particularly affected by Partition.

On an interpersonal level, Prof. Brass was known to sometimes be direct and argumentative in his style of communication. This often-tough demeanor, however, hid a much softer and humanistic side including his deep commitment to individual human rights, open research access for scholars to India, and unrestricted academic freedom in the pursuit of knowledge and 'the truth.' He was never hesitant to critique Indian political leaders for their periodic excesses against their own people and the scholarly community for its reluctance to unpack the power dynamics behind the 'construction of knowledge' in India. In fact, one of his last scholarly articles - 'Political Scientists' Image of India' published in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (1998) - offered a reflective methodological critique of the existing political science literature on Indian politics (including some of his own work). Brass called for more critically 'interpretive' research approaches attentive to the realities and perceptions of local populations in India, as opposed to state-centric paradigms preferred by traditional political scientists studying developing states.

In conclusion, Prof. Brass was one of the most influential American scholars on Indian politics, who also made groundbreaking contributions - both theoretical and empirical - to the study of post-Independence Sikh and Punjab politics especially in relation to ethnicity and nationalism. His academic research and theorization have impacted the work of most all political scientists currently working on Punjab and the Sikhs. Prof. Brass's contribution, impact, and personality were simply monumental. He may have passed on, but the impact of his scholarly work will continue to reverberate in academe for several generations to come.

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