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Mushrooming of Deras in Punjab: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: Dera, as a socio-religious institution, is not a new phenomenon in Punjab. Even during the lifetime of Sikh Gurus, many sub-sects within Sikhism were set up, by rival contenders. These deras included Udasis, Minas, Dharmis, Ramrai, Handilis and Masandis. During course of time, many more sub-sects were grown. These included Bande Khalsa (Bandaapanthi), Nankapanthi, Sevanthi, Bhaktapanthi, Sutharashahi, Gulabdasi, Nirmalas and Nihang. The distinctive feature of these new sub-sects was that they worked as centers of the Dalit movement. Most of these dera followers were people of the dalit background, who had embraced Sikhism to avoid the casteist Hindu social order. However, they continued to experience social exclusion in the caste hierarchy of the Sikh society, which led them to the dera and other organizations who promise social equality. Increasing politicization of Sikh institutions - Akal Takht and SGPC - and their domination of Jat Sikhs have driven a large number of people to the deras. The rich of the Punjabi Diaspora also contributed towards the development of the institution of the dera.

Key-Words: Dera, Scheduled Castes, Devotees, Dalit, Sikhism

Introduction: A Dera is technically the headquarters of a group of devotees, who follow the teachings of a particular spiritual guru and generally have a living representative of the guru who is equally revered. The representatives of the guru who hold the *gaddi* are normally appointed by their predecessors.¹ The word 'Dera' is derived from the Persian word, *Derah* or *Dirah*, which literally means a camp, abode, monastery or convent. Although an exact number of deras related to different sects, cannot be given, it is estimated that there are around 300 major and a total of around 9000 Deras across Punjab and Haryana. Out of these *deras* a dozen have a substantial following of over one lakh devotees each and there are thousands of others which are restricted to a few villages each.

When people looks for support in difficult times and traditional preachers fail to communicate satisfactorily with them, the alternatives become attractive. As M Rajshekhar says, "There has been a gradual increase in religiosity in Punjab hinterlands and in the number of dera followers owing to changing economic and socio-political situations, where a traditionally agricultural-based society has been running thin on old and new means of income ever since the adverse effects of Green Revolution began unfolding. Worship of a living guru, many of whom have their own holy books and their own accounts of how the world came into being, is not anathema in the non-Sikh deras.

¹ Article in 'Indian Express' dated May 25, 2009.

The role of the worshipped Babas goes beyond spiritual guidance to practical support (in the form of subsidized ration and medical care, for instance) for his followers, at a time when traditional means of redressal are perceived as corrupt or out of reach.”²

Major Deras of Punjab:

Dera Sachkhand Ballan:

The Ravidasia deras are estimated at 60 and they wield immense influence among lower castes that turned to Sikhism. Prominent among them are Dera Sachkhand Ballan (near Jalandhar) and Dera Chak Hakim (near Pathankot), which shot to fame during the Ad- Dharam period of rising Dalit consciousness. They follow the teachings of 14th century poet Guru Ravidas who belonged to a lower caste. The Ravidasias call their religious ideologues as “Guru”. This annoys the Sikhs, who not only traditionally stop at ten Gurus, Gobind Singh being the last: but also do not accept bowing before a living Guru.

Sant Niranjn Das, the Chief of Dera Sachkhand Ballan and Sant Ramanand, the deputy chief, were attacked by some Sikh assailants in Vienna, Austria on May 24, 2009. Sant Ramanand got killed in the attack. It resulted in wide-spread violence in Punjab and Haryana, which claimed two lives and destruction of assets worth thousands of crores. In 2010, the Dera announced a new religion named the Ravidasia dharma and broke away from Sikhism. The Ravidasias, although follow a number of Sikh practices and call their worship places as gurdwaras, are sometimes listed as Scheduled Caste Hindus.

Dera Radha Soami:

Radha Soami or Radhasoami Satsang is a religious organization founded by Shiv Dayal Singh in 1861 on Basant Panchami Day at Agra, Uttar Pradesh. It derives its name from the *gopi Radha* and *Soami* which refers to Krishna as swami, or as "lord of the soul" according to the Beas group of Radhasoamis.

In the words of Mark Juergensmeyer, “The Radhasoamis are considered in Punjab as an offshoot of Sikhism and can also be considered a part of Hinduism because they share their cultural outlook, some practices and theological concepts such as *karma*, *yoga (shabd)* and *guru*. However, they are also different from Hindus and Sikhs because they reject the concept of a sacred scripture, rituals such as *Karah Parshad* and pilgrimage gatherings and ceremonies. The Radhasoamis are a religious fellowship that accepts saints and living gurus from anywhere”.

The movement started in Agra, its present headquarters is in Beas, with parallel branches found in India and outside India. There are over 30 different Radhasoami groups in the world. According to Pierluigi Zoccatelli, there were an estimated 3 million Radhasoami followers worldwide in 2004, with many sub sects based on the Guru. Of these, the Radha Soami Satsang Beas is the largest and it had 2 million followers. Divine Light Mission, Eckankar Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, Science of Spirituality and others are the other sub sects and movements

² “Why is Punjab increasingly turning to new gurus for comfort?” by *M Rajshekhar*, in Scroll. in, Mar 28, 2016

Influenced by Radhasoami. Some of these groups have tried to distance themselves from the others. Since its beginning, succession upon the death of previous guru has been an issue of controversies and schism in the Radhasoami movement.

Sant Nirankari Mission:

The Sant Nirankari Mission identifies itself as "neither a new religion nor a sect of an existing religion, but an all-embracing spiritual movement dedicated to human welfare by helping seekers, realize God through the grace of a living true master (Satguru) ".

The Mission had its roots in the Nirankari movement started by Baba Dyal Singh; although is no longer affiliated with the movement. It was established in 1929 by Baba Butta Singh. The orthodox Sikh groups, term it as a heresy of Sikhism. Across the world, the Mission has more than 3000 centers and millions of followers. As desired and blessed by the fifth Nirankari Satguru Mata Savinder Hardev Ji Maharaj, holy sister Sudiksha Ji has been declared as sixth Nirankari Satguru and the spiritual head of the Sant Nirankari Mission on 17th July 2018. During the seventies, there had been violent clashes between the radical Sikhs and Nirankaris., The Akal Takht, the highest Sikh religious body, pressurized by Sikh radicals, released an edict or hukamnama in 1978, directing the Khalsa Panth (fraternity of Sikhs) to break all worldly relations with those Sikhs who were a part of the Nirankari organization, which it considered as 'enemy of dharma and Sikhism'. This excommunication of Nirankaris created several complications for the governments in Punjab and Delhi around the sensitive time of insurgency.

Divya Jyoti Jagrati Sansthan:

Ashutosh, born as Mahesh Kumar Jha in 1946 at Lakhnaur in Madhubani district of Bihar into a Hindu Brahmin family, founded Divya Jyoti Jagrati Sansthan as a non-profit spiritual organization in Nurmahal, Punjab, in 1983. It was registered as a socio-spiritual society/non-governmental organization in 1991 under the Societies Registration Act with its head office in New Delhi. The organization claims to have about 30 million followers. It has 350 branches spread across 15 nations. The value of its property has been estimated to be above 10 billion rupees. Their mission, according to the organization's website, is "To usher into a world wherein every individual becomes an embodiment of truth, fraternity, and justice through the eternal science of self-realization – 'Brahm Gyan', uprooting in its wake all social evils and threat".

Ashutosh, as the head of the organization, is seen as a controversial figure among the Sikh community, who have alleged him to be hurting Sikh religious sentiments. He has been accused of distorting Sikh Gurus' *bani*, and making negative comments about Sikhism and the Sikh Gurus. Various Sikh bodies demanded a ban on his activities. His followers and some Sikh groups have clashed with each other many times. A violent clash between the two took place in Ludhiana in December 2009,

which resulted in the death of one person and injuries to many. The then Punjab government provided him "Z+" security, which was later downgraded to "Z" class.

Ashutosh suffered a heart attack on 29 January 2014 and was declared clinically dead by a team of doctors. His followers believe him to be still alive and in a state of deep meditation called Samadhi. Since then, his body has been kept in a freezer by the management to create Himalayan-like environment suitable for meditation.

Pooran Singh, a former follower of Ashutosh, filed a habeas corpus writ, seeking the release of Ashutosh's body. After the writ was rejected, he filed another petition in the court, for a post-mortem examination of the corpse of Ashutosh. A person named as Dilip Kumar Jha, who claims to be a son of Ashutosh, also filed a petition in the court, demanding that the dead body of his father be brought to his home town in Bihar for cremation according to local rituals. The DJJS management has claimed that Ashutosh was single and had no family. The Punjab and Haryana High Court, on 1 December 2014 ordered that the last rites for Ashutosh be performed within 15 days. The ruling was later suspended, with further hearings postponed to 9 February 2015. The Punjab and Haryana High Court, in July 2017, granted permission for the followers to preserve Ashutosh's dead body in a freezer; although it was unclear whether the court had agreed with the argument of the Dera Noormahal, that its founder was still alive.

Bhaniaarawala dera:

Piara Singh Bhaniara, founder of the Bhaniaarawala dera, a breakaway sect, based in Ropar district of Punjab, had been a low level employee in a sericulture farm of the Punjab Horticultural department. He claimed to be a spiritually enlightened Guru and gathered a large following. After he was said to have asked his followers to stop praying from the Guru Granth Sahib, he made it to the hit list of radical Sikhs since 2001. His followers, majority of them Dalits, believe him to be a 'miracle healer'. Senior Congress Party leader Buta Singh had visited Bhaniaarawala several times between 1985 and 1995 in order to seek improvement in the health of his ailing wife; though he later distanced himself from the Baba. Piara Singh Bhaniara was arrested by the government in October 2001 for allegations of hurting religious sentiments after; he published his book, Bhavsagar Granth, describing his miracles among other things in it.

"One of the lasting ironies of most successful religions," notes IAS officer Meeta Rajivlochan in her 2007 paper 'Caste and Religion in Punjab', "is that they address themselves to be universal values and goodness. Yet, there is a strong element of exclusionism within them that separates one religion from the other." Especially those adherents of the religion, who may go against its universal tenets in the name of upholding its core values, practice it. The problem of Deras and sects lies in the fact that those, who are excluded, also claim to be as true as the dominant religion itself.

Causes behind mushrooming of the Deras:

The sharp rise in the number of Deras in Punjab can be attributed to a number of causes. Keeping in mind the fact that the main following of such Deras comes from

the under – privileged sections of Indian society as Scheduled Caste and Backward Classes, the first and the foremost cause responsible for the growth of these Deras is the grouse of the members belonging to so-called lower castes of Indian society against the so-called higher castes, who according to them do not allow them to hold responsible positions in Gurudawara management committees as the latter treat the former as socially inferior. Babusha Maingi, a scholar in History opines, “By and large these deras challenged fundamentalists (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) who claim as the protagonists of Sikhism and restricted the membership of the heterogeneous Sikh groups (particularly the non-Jats) in the Sikh institutions and organisation. They were able to offer to their follower’s, dignity, equality and belongingness which the dominant, mainstream religion couldn’t. Radha Soamis, Sacha Sauda, Nirankaris, Namdharis, Handalis, Divya Jyoti Jagaran Sansthan, Bhaniarawala and Ravidasias are among the most popular deras or sects. Some of these evoke far stronger rejections from orthodox Sikhs than others.”³

“Deras like Sacha Sauda ... came into the limelight in the late 60s and early 70s when Sikh institutions like the SGPC failed to address the issues being faced by the people, especially those belonging to Sikh castes and people living on the fringes,”⁴ renowned scholar Dr Darshan Singh told The Indian Express. Some the powerful Deras, with offices in every Punjab district and even elsewhere in India and overseas, did not only challenge the monopoly of orthodox Sikhism, but asserted their social, political and economic interests in Punjab.

Sikhism, which advocated to get rid of casteism and untouchability, failed to provide that social equality in practice. The hold of casteist prejudice and hegemony sustained in spite of Sikh Gurus’ preaching against such social evils and their propagation of equality when they said ‘Ik noor te sab jag upjeya’ (the entire world is born out of one light) as few concerted efforts in that direction were made in the 20th century. Punjab has the distinction of being home to the largest proportion of Scheduled Caste population (32 per cent, according to 2011 census, as opposed to national average of 16 per cent) who has a negligible share in the ownership of land. The landless Dalit Sikhs have not only, been dependent on big landowning Jat farmers for farming employment, they were also treated unequally in the Jat Gurdwaras. A true incident proving the above mentioned fact is worthwhile to mention here. A young man from the *chamara* caste became a baptized Sikh. When he was distributing *Prasad* to the devotees present in the gurudawara, a lady from the Jatt Sikh community refused to take *Prasad* from that *chamara* boy⁵.

The more traditional offshoots and anti-Sikh deras, who provided support to these marginalized communities, occupied the resulting vacuum.

³ As quoted in an article titled ‘Why deras and sects find Punjab fertile for growth’ by Nandini Rathi, Indian Express, August 30, 2017

⁴ Ibid

⁵ As mentioned by Manjeet Singh Dalla in his article ‘Dera Ballan Sikhi ton ulat, par iss da jawab Sikh parchar’ in June 2009 edition of ‘Khalsa Fatehnama’.

Apart from this, in another incident in a village named Talhan in Jalandhar district of Punjab, the Sikhs refused to give a share to the *dalits* in the management of the gurudawara Shahidan in 2003.

Secondly, as all these Deras have their respectable living Gurus, (a concept which the mainstream Sikhs see as antagonistic to tenets of Sikhism. (whereby there cannot be any living guru). Their guru is Guru Granth Sahib, the revered scripture of the Sikhs. The devotees of these Deras find a respite from a tense and complex life, while taking refuge in the feet of a living guru, who not only interprets the hymns, incorporated in different holy books to them, but also counsels and guides them on various issues concerning their day-to-day lives.

Thirdly the consciousness taking place among the under-privileged sections of Indian society about their civil and human rights, also drives them to the concept of unity and brotherhood, which they think can be attained through the formation of a common religious institutions namely the Deras.

Fourthly as mentioned earlier a dozen of the Deras in Punjab have a following of over one lakh each, these attract the opportunistic Indian politician to a great extent. Thus, the followers of these *deras* are seen by all political parties as a substantial vote-bank for them. Therefore these political parties provide patronage to these Deras in different forms, resulting in the mushrooming of such Deras.

Last but not the least, some unscrupulous elements find it easy to achieve popularity through a short-cut route. They first attain some healing powers through the *tantrik* and *yoga* cults and apply these on their followers to win their confidence. Side by side these elements spend a part of the devotees' offerings on social projects to attain legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This results in increase in the number of their followers, ultimately leading to the institutionalization of the followers into a Dera. The Deras in Punjab have mobilized the people on caste lines, though some of these can be termed as an exception to this.

Conclusion:

Despite their shortcomings, these Deras have played and are playing a significant role in the socio-economic progress of the state. They are creating an awareness among the people of Punjab regarding various social issues such as female-feticide, drug-addiction, environment pollution, dowry, evils related to women etc. Apart from this some of the Deras have opened charitable hospitals and educational institutions for the poor. Thus they play an important role in the field of healthcare and education. Barring a few of these, all the Deras have remained non-controversial since their birth. Therefore it would not be appropriate to outrightly rule out the impact of these Deras on the socio-economic-political life of the people of the Punjab. Deras like Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan, have become a symbol of Dalit consciousness. To quote Dr. Raunki Ram, a Professor in Political Science at Punjab University Chandigarh, 'Dera Ballan became a paragon of Ravidassia movement in north-west India and it made concerted efforts for the formation of a separate Dalit identity independent of both Hinduism as well as Sikhism. It is in this context

that Dera Ballan has emerged as an alternative religious site for the Dalits, with its own code of conduct that paved the way for a separate Dalit identity.’⁶

The Deras, devoted to the spread of ideologies of different religious icons have played a significant part in creating caste and sect consciousness among their respective followers which at times attains dangerous proportions resulting into bad repercussions for society.

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