# Understanding Diversity and Deras within the Sikh Panth (Community): Some Critical Reflections

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The dignity of women and negation of caste are two basic tenets of the philosophy of Sikhism. Other, equally significant, postulates of this egalitarian philosophy are earning by the sweat of one's brow, the sharing of the fruits of labour with others, and meditating on the name of the single and formless God – *Akālpurakh*. The articulation of these moral postulates and their implementation in the everyday life of followers of the faith from the time of Baba Guru Nanak (1469-1539) has attracted a large number of people, especially from the historically deprived and socially excluded (so-called lower castes) sections of the Hindu society that creates rich caste diversity within the Sikh Panth (community). Unfortunately, the conversion of the so-called lower castes into Sikhism did not liberate them from the spectacle of their earlier blemished caste identity over the centuries. This realisation, and the resultant disillusionment and estrangement of many such lower caste adherents, eventually led to the mushrooming of a large variety of deras (alternate religious spaces) parallel to the gurdwaras, though within the Panth, further deepened the diversity in the latter half of the last century. This describes a general phenomenon, but specifically what motivated the lower castes within the Sikh community to carve out a separate identity independent of, though related to, the overall Sikh identity is the main concern of this study. Gendered diversity is another equally challenging task within the Panth, which invites an in-depth explication of difference between the doctrinal principles of an egalitarian spiritual domain of Sikhism against the actual 'on the ground' essence of hierarchical panthic order, and how this has developed historically within Punjab and across the global diaspora.

**Keywords:** Caste, Dalit, Dera, Diversity, Gender, Gurdwara, Jat, Mazhabi, Panth, Rai Sikh, Ramdassia, Ravidassia, Religion, Sansi Sikh.

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## Introduction

Dignity of women and negation of caste are two prominent canons of Sikh philosophy. Other equally significant doctrines of this religion are: earning by the sweat of one's brow, sharing the fruits of one's labour, and – above all – meditating on the essence of *Akālpurakh* (God). The articulation of such moral norms and emphasis on their implementation in the day-to-day life of the followers of the faith from the time of the first guru Baba Nanak (1469-1539), founder of the Sikh faith, has attracted a large number of people into its fold, particularly various historically deprived and socially excluded sections of Hindu society. Consequently, over the passage of time, magnificent diversity evolved within the Sikh Panth[1] (community). Bhai Gurdas[2] in his *vārān* (ballads), mentioned the names of multifarious castes and sub-castes in the Sikh Panth such as Jat[3] (about thirty of them belonging to different parts of the Punjab. Bains, Bhullar, Chahal, Cheema, Deol, Dhaliwal, Dhillon, Gill, Grewal, Khaira, Mann, Nannar, Pannu, Randhawa, Sandhu, Sidhu are a few of them),[4] Khatri[5] (Beri, Bhalla, Chaddha, Jhanji, Julka, Kapur, Khullar, Kohli, Marwahs, Mehra, Nanda, Ohri, Passi, Puri, Sehgal, Sodhi, Soni, Tuli, Uppal, Vij, Vohra, and Wadhawan)[6], Brahmin[7] (Bhardwaj and Tiwari), Arora (trader), Chandāl (in-charge of cremation grounds), Chhimba (Calico-printer/tailor), Dhobi (washerman), Kumhar[8] (potter), Lohar (ironsmith), Mochi (cobbler), Nai (barber), Raj-mistry (mason), Sood (trader) Sunar[9] (goldsmith), and Teli (oil-presser) (Grewal 1996: 30-31; Grewal 2009: 195-196).

In his detailed account of about 200 prominent Sikhs of Guru Arjan, Bhai Gurdas included among them ten Brahmins, eight Jats (including two whose caste is given as Jatu, which is a Rajput sub-caste), three fishermen, three calico-printers, two Chandāls, two bricklayers, two Bhatts,[10] one potter, one goldsmith and one Muslim. The remaining Sikhs were reported either as belonging to the Khatri and similar other castes of businessmen and traders, or were mentioned without the specified caste titles (Bhai Gurdas as referred to in: Singh 1986: 334). Koer Singh[11] listed three Bhatias, five Khatris, four Aroras, three Lubanas[12] and two water-carriers in his account of twenty-five *Muktās*.[13] The information about the caste titles of the remaining eight Sikhs was not mentioned (as referred to in: Singh 1986: 336). Among the forty Sikhs – Chali muktās – who engaged the overwhelming Mughal forces led by Wazir Khan[14] at Chamkaur Sahib,[15] during the turbulent period of

Khalsa, Koer Singh listed five Bhatias, four Aroras, some Khatris and Kalāls (distillers of home-made liquor), two Rangretas, two Brahmins, Sangat Singh of the Trans-Indus areas, two sons (Sahibzada Ajit Singh and Sahibzada Jujhar Singh) of Guru Gobind Singh and the Guru himself (Singh 1986: 336). This clearly runs counter to the hypothesis of the dominance of the Jats in the army of the Guru as put forth by most of the European scholarship. A.H. Bingley, a celebrated authority on Jats, Gujars,[16] Rajputs and Sikhs, included Aroras, Brahmins, Chhimbas, Jats, Jhiwars[17] (water-carriers), Kalāls, Kambohs (traders/agriculturists)[18], Khatris, Lubanas (transporters/agriculturists), Mahtons (agriculturists),[19] Mazhabis (former Chuhras[20] who embraced Sikh religion), Nais, Rajputs (warriors), Ramdassias (Julahas/weavers), Sainis (vegetable cultivators/agriculturists) and Tarkhans (carpenters) as adherents of Sikhism in the great military brotherhood of the Khalsa (Bingley 1970, reproduction of the 2nd edn: 40).

The above-mentioned account of the social profile of the early emerging Sikh Panth divulges its rich caste diversity. However, given the doctrinal egalitarian stance of Sikhism, the majority of its adherents came from the lowest Hindu castes such as 'Chuhra' and 'Chamar,'[21] who were historically denied dignified social status within mainstream Hinduism (Davis 1951: 165). At the time of their initiation into the newly established egalitarian Sikh faith, they left behind their stigmatized caste titles. However, it might well be that because of a subconsciously cultivated inferiority complex, nurtured by the wider Hindu community, that except in the case of higher/dominant castes such as Jat,[22] Khatris and Rajput, other converts to Sikhism did not as a rule file their caste on official forms. Moreover, the enumerators were instructed that they should not press Sikhs to return their caste (Census of India, 1931, Vol. 17 [Punjab], Part 2, p. 308 as referred in Davis 1951: 165). This has rendered the otherwise wide prevalent diversity within the Panth invisible. At the ideological level too, the rich egalitarian spiritual philosophy and teachings of the Gurus do not allow any space to caste and gender-based divisions within the sacred realm of Sikhism that further deepens the invisibility of its otherwise wide diversity at the panthic ground level (Singh 1986a: 288-304). Though the Mazhabis were able to leave behind their stigmatised Hindu caste identity (Chuhra/Valmiki), but once again they found themselves entrapped within a new caste identity (Mazhabi) within the distinct Panthic caste hierarchy (discussed below).

Caste in India is an elusive social category. It has been around for many centuries; and does not show any sign of demise in the near future. At a time, it was absurdly blunt and has currently metamorphosed into a variety of subtle forms. The rise of various caste-based organizations and political outfits is a clear testimony of its vibrant existence. One is born into a caste and cannot choose and/or abandon it at will. Once one is born in a caste, s/he continues to live with that caste throughout the life. Caste has thus attained the status of a permanent social category though with varied connotations. Here lies a dilemma: when one abjures Hinduism and embraces some other religion, is it that the person in question performs the very act of conversion as a person *per se* or a person of a particular caste? Since the primary and foremost social identity of a person in Hindu religion is caste, it is implied that she will carry her caste identity along with at the time of her conversion into the fold of another religion. So, it is often presumed, as discussed above, that those who embraced Sikhism did so along with the tag of their perennial caste identities.

Though the presence of varied castes within the Sikh community seems to be a misnomer, as Sikh Gurus did not recognize any sort of social stratification, given the context of the overwhelming presence of caste identity in a Hindu-dominated society, it was not possible for those who wanted to embrace the Sikh faith to leave behind their distinct caste identity. The social baggage of caste continued to be with them even in their newly embraced religious fold. "The Sikh religion, which began in part as a protest against caste," argued Kingsley Davis, "is today almost as caste-ridden as Islam" (Davis 1951:164). Taking his argument further, he documented that in Punjab out of the 58 castes,[23] 29 or half of them have 'Sikh branches, despite the fact that the Sikhs constituted only 14 per cent of the total Punjab population' (Davis 1951: 165).

Although Sikh doctrine does not assign any place to the institution of caste and lays stress on the brotherhood of all irrespective of caste, religion, gender and occupation, it must not be inferred, as Paramjit Judge argued, "that Sikhism was able to transform the caste structure into an egalitarian moral community of the Sikhs. Sikhism remained far from a casteless society" (Judge 2002:184; see also: Marenco 1976; McLeod 1996; Puri 2003). The Sikh doctrinal ideals forbid the use of all sub-caste/surname titles. As a marker of their egalitarian social identity, Sikhs were supposed to use only 'Singh' (in case of men) and 'Kaur'

(women) after their names as suffix. However, with the passage of time, the practice of using village names as markers of distinct identity – e.g. Partap Singh Kairon, Parkash Singh Badal, Sant Harchand Singh Longowal etc. – became popular among the members of the dominant peasant caste. Kairon, Badal and Longowal are village names. In the latter half of the twentieth century another practice of hiding caste under the cover of adopted *gotras* (clan surnames) of the dominant/upper castes, especially among the lower castes, became quite popular. Gotras like 'Atwal', 'Gill', 'Sandhu', and 'Sidhu' are often being adopted by many 'ex-untouchables' in their desperate attempts towards upward social mobility. The surname Sohal is commonly used by Jats, Ghumiars, and Tarkhans alike. Many lower castes people have also adopted the Khatri sub-caste surnames like Bhatia, Chadha, Puri etc.[24]

The presence of caste within the Sikh society has its own distinct malady of social discrimination – based more on *vitkara*/prejudice than *bhitt*/pollution (Singh 1989: 293; Jodhka 2000: 381- 403). The so-called lower castes, mostly landless, often complain that the kind of social discrimination they undergo at the hands of the dominant/upper castes in the Sikh society emanates from almost absolute control on the ownership of agricultural land by the Jat Sikhs (for details see: Ram 2009: 9) as well as a few other agriculturalist castes: Kamboh, Lubana, Mahton, Rajput and Saini. Caste discrimination in Punjab is more based on material conditions in contrast to cultural factors as observed in the Hindi dominated parts of the country (Ram 2009a: 17-23; Ram 2012: 656). The lower castes suffer more social discrimination at their work places than in the mainstream religious places in the state. Moreover, the taint of social discrimination at the religious places has less to do with the observance of pollution-based Brahminical practices of rituals and ceremonies than the prejudices emanating from the political economy of the agrarian state of Punjab (Santos-Fraile 2017: 559; Mishra 2017: 552). The very fact that the members of Mazhabi[25] and Ramdassia communities were not allowed equal access to the sanctum sanctorum within the holy premises of the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries,[26] proves the persistence of social exclusion even within the sacred realm of their embraced faith.[27] Moreover, that the Mazhabis continued to live along with their fellow Hindu counterparts in the segregated dalit[28] neighbourhoods on the peripheries of mainstream villages further proves the presence of caste-based social discrimination within the Sikh

community. Consequently, the continuation of the caste-based social exclusionary practices led many of the so-called lower caste members of the Sikh communities to establish their own separate religious places (gurdwaras/deras) based on their distinct caste identities. One hardly finds a village in Punjab having a single religious place commonly frequented by all castes.

The apparent presence of separate caste-based gurdwaras/deras of Bhatra, Mazhabi, Ramgarhia (carpenters/ironsmiths), Ravidassia (leather workers), and Valmiki communities is a clear testimony to the existence of caste-based religious diversity within the vibrant Sikh community within India and abroad. The phenomenon of caste-based gurdwaras is not only confined to Punjab. Bhatra, Ramgarhia, Ravidassia and Valmiki communities of the Sikh Panth have established a large number of their separate gurdwaras abroad.[29] The earliest possible instance of caste-based gurdwaras abroad could be found in Nairobi (Kenya, East Africa). Migration to Kenya became possible under the Kenya-Uganda Railway Line construction project, which facilitated the passage of a large number of Punjabi artisans (mostly Sikhs bricklayers, carpenters, plumbers, tailors, motor mechanics and electrical fitters) to Kenya between the last decade of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Chandan 2004: 12; Bhachu 1985; Bhachu 1989). Eventually these artisans established their common community gurdwaras – 'Gurdwara Bazar' and 'Gurdwara Singh Sabha' – as identity markers of their upward social mobility.[30] Ramgarhia, Namdhari (sect, mainly of the artisans), and Valmiki communities also established their separate community gurdwaras in addition to the two general gurdwaras (Chandan 2004: 12-14).[31] Another instance of early Sikh diversity in the diaspora is the presence of various gurdwaras in Malaysia and Singapore based on diverse regional (Majha, Malwa, and Doaba)[32] as well as caste affiliations of Sikhs in Punjab, who interpreted and articulated their distinct religious traditions and events with reference to their respective regional and community orientations (Mishra 2017: 552; Singh & Kaur 2017: 519).

This paper primarily seeks to explore the presence of caste, religious, and gendered diversity within the Sikh Panth vis-à-vis the egalitarian principles and spiritual teachings of communitarian living as inscribed in the sacred scriptures of Sikhism. Though there is theoretically no place for any kind of social differentiation be it on lines of caste, religion, gender or class, within the sacred domain of Sikhism, the fact of the

centuries-old psychological baggage of socially constructed and graded caste hierarchies, which converts have brought with them into the Sikh fold, nevertheless had led to the creation of its own kind of diversity within the Panth and its related social hierarchy, especially after the close of the golden period of ten gurus. This paper is divided into six sections. The first one focuses on the social background of the early entrants into the Sikh faith, the majority of whom belonged to marginalized sections of Hindu society. What sort of Panthic structure it had given rise to within both East Punjab as well as within diasporic domains has also been touched upon briefly. The second section draws heavily on the caste diversity within the Panth as it evolved with the passage of time within the overall caste-dominated social milieu of the predominant Hindu society and the caste-based proclivities of its converts. The basic thrust of Sikhism on manual labour and sharing one's hard earned livelihood within the communal living has lent utmost importance to the profession of agriculture. How it impacted the social character of the emerging diversity within the Panth has also been addressed in this section. Sikh diversity has its own distinct caste hierarchy different from that of the Hindu society, which has been discussed in the third section. Endogamy and gendered diversity is dealt within the fourth and the fifth sections respectively. Lastly, the sixth section focuses on the rise of Deras and their concomitant alternative ecclesiastical cultures right from the guru period to the contemporaneous, which collectively pose a major challenge to the Sikh Panth as a whole. The study is primarily based on archival sources and discussions with various scholars of Sikh studies as well as religious persons from within the Panth.

## II
## Sikh Caste Diversity

Despite the egalitarian ethos of the sacred Sikh scriptures and the efforts of various Sikh reform organisations, the Sikh community has been unable to dissociate itself from the malady of caste. The Census of 1881 and 1931 recorded Ahluwalias, Aroras, Bhatras (see end note 10), Chhimbas, Jats, Jheers, Kambohs, Khatris, Lohars, Lubanas, Mahatam, Mazhabis, Nais, Ramdassias, Ramgarhias, Ranghretas[33], and Sainis as separate castes within the Panth (Verma 2002: 33). Out of these: two agrarian castes (Jat and Kamboh); two mercantile castes (Arora and

Khatri); four artisan castes (Chhimba[34], Lohar, Nai and Tarkhan); two outcaste groups (Chamar and Chuhra) and one Kalal[35] were considered to form the core of the 'caste constituency' of the Sikh community (McLeod 1996: 93-94; McLeod 2007: 184-87).

Indera P. Singh, in his seminal field-based study, categorised Sikhs into two broad caste groups: the *sardars*/upper castes, and the Mazhabis. The sardars/upper castes comprised Jats, Kambohs, Tarkhans, Sunars, Chhimba and Nais. They were further bifurcated into two sub-groups: agriculturists and traders. The agriculturist sub-group consisted of Jat, Kamboh, Mahton, Rajput, and Saini Sikhs. Arora, Khatri, Bhapa and Bhatra Sikhs formed the trader sub-group among the Sikhs (for details see: Singh 1977a: 69-70). Within the Hindu caste hierarchy, however, the agriculturist sub-group of Sardars/Upper Castes was clubbed with the Shūdra (artisan/lower castes) category. Barring Jat Sikhs and Rajputs, the rest of the caste categories falling within the agriculturist sub-group of sardars were declared as Backward/Other Backward Classes (BC/OBCs) under the state affirmative action-based classification provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of India. Excepting Rajputs, the remaining caste categories under the agriculturist sardar sub-group, were Shūdra according to Hindu Varna-based social classification.

Another seminal point that needs to be kept in mind while discussing caste diversity within the Panth is the politics of reservation vis-a-vis the widening graph of poverty and unemployment among the Jats of Northwest India who also launched agitations for their inclusion into the category of backward classes (Shankar 2017) – something contrary to the doctrinal non-recognition of caste by the Sikh faith. Ironically, Sainis and some other agriculturist caste groups have simultaneously been pressing the government to take them out of the backward class category on account of their improved economic conditions. This is seen as an attempt to elevate their social status within the Panth caste hierarchy, and highlights the recent rise of caste consciousness within some sections of the Panth. It has more to do with the political economy than the sociological underpinnings of the Panthic social structure.[36] Mazhabis, the second sub-group of the Indera P. Singh's classification of Sikh diversity, consist of the so-called erstwhile lower castes within the Hindu social order. In the following sub-sections an attempt has been made to explicate Sikh caste diversity along these two broad caste groups – upper/dominant and lower-caste – within the Panth.

**Upper/Dominant Sikh Castes Diversity**

Ahluwalia, Bhapa, Jat, and Ramgarhia Sikh castes are generally considered upper/dominant castes within Sikh caste hierarchy. Sikh caste hierarchy has nothing to do with the archetypal Brahminical caste hierarchy. In fact many of the Shudra category castes of the Brahminical caste hierarchy have attained the elevated status of upper/dominant castes (discussed below) within the Sikh caste hierarchy.

**Jat Sikhs**

Jats, originally of Indo-Scythians stock and later low Shūdra Hindus, constitute a large segment of the population of the Punjab (Habib 1996: 94-95, Habib 2017: 264). Their entry into the Sikh religion absolved them of their Hindu low status (Habib 1996: 99; see also McLeod 1996:13). Within the Panth, they comprise 60 per cent of the total Sikh population, which is roughly about 1/3 (30 to 33 per cent) of the entire population of the Punjab state (McLeod 2007a: 113; Kaur 1986: 225; Singh 1997: 178-9; Puri 2003: 2693). Their overwhelming control on land, religion, and politics in the state, as defined by Srinivas, elevated them to the status of dominant caste within the Panth (Srinivas 1955:1-36; Srinivas 1959: 1-16). Originally, they were believed to have settled in the Indus valley, especially in central Sind, in the seventh century (Habib 1996: 94). They were ruled over by the Brāhmana dynasty of *Chach* that imposed harsh constraints on them (Habib 1996: 95; for details of discrimination faced by Jats as mentioned in the *Chachnama* see: Habib 2017: 263-65). Their appearance became apparent in the Punjab by the beginning of the 11th century (Ibbetson 1883, rpt. 1970: 97; and Habib 1996: 95). The entry of Jats into the province of Punjab must have been a result of their migration from the Sind (Habib 1996: 95; Bingley 1978: 9-28). However, for a period of four hundred years between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries there is no account of them in the chronicles of the Punjab. The absence of the Jats in the chronicles for such a long period simply shows their insignificance in the society of Punjab. Alberuni, whose historical account covered the period of eleventh century, designated them as “cattle-owners, low Shūdra people” (Habib 1996:95, Habib 2017: 264). In contradistinction to Alberuni, the author of the classic *Dabistan-I-Mazahib*, described them as “the lowest caste of the Bais (Vaishyas)” (Habib 2017: 264). They were known as people “of an unfeeling and hasty temper” and were “given to bloodshed only”

(Habib 2017: 263). However, as far as their intra-clan personal relationships were concerned, they were free from the dichotomies of superior or inferior', 'small or great' and 'rich or poor' (Habib 2017: 264).

References to Jats began to surface again after a long gap of four centuries in "*Āin-I-Akbarī* and its record of *Zamīndār* castes, compiled about 1595" (Habib 1996: 96). During the four centuries of their invisibility, they seem to have expanded and metamorphosed from a pastoral to an agricultural community in Punjab (Habib 1996:96). This was probably also the period during which cultivation expanded substantially in Punjab. The introduction of the Persian wheel, reiterated Habib, was the main driving force behind the "critical change in the agricultural situation of the Punjab" (Habib 1996: 98). The expansion of cultivation in the province of Punjab might have led to the massive shift among the Jats from pastoral to settled agricultural community. It is safe to say that it might have also elevated their social status in the political economy of the rural society of the state. In the sixteenth century, when many of the Jats turned to cultivation, they "…were not only entirely peasants but, in so many localities of the Punjāb, also *Zamīndār* …" (Habib 1996: 99; see also Ibbetson 1883, rpt. 1970:103). It would not be out of context to state that what the Green Revolution was to the post 1960s Punjab, the introduction of the Persian wheel was to the Punjab of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In both these cases, it was the Jat community that remained the main beneficiary of the transformation process since they were the predominant caste in rural settings. But, how did a pastoral Jat community transform into a settled agricultural community and establish control over the land? This question cannot be answered simply by asserting that since the pastoral Jats were tending cattle, and cattle are generally related with the agriculture so they gradually adapted to agricultural profession, with periods of accelerated crossover at the two inflection points mentioned above: Agriculture is not merely an occupation; it is also an asset that bestows on the owners of the land a special status of *zamindar*. In fact, it was their hold on the land and expertise in farming that became a marker of their 'Jat identity'. By the time Baba Nanak came to establish the town of Kartarpur, about 50 kilo-meter away from Lahore by boat, as 'a self-sustaining social order', a large number of Jat clans' villages had already been established around the place. Jats of these adjoining villages who were adept in the profession of the cultivation of land, argued Mann, might have helped

Baba Nanak in his scheme of establishing the town of Kartarpur (Mann 2017a: 11).

Mostly concentrated in villages, Jats are primarily landowners and agriculturists, and are also widely considered to be the backbone of the Punjab peasantry. Their reputation for fine husbandry earned them the epitaph of the 'yeomen' of the Punjab" (Smith: 2018: 60). "So close has become the connection of the Jatts with peasant-agriculture in the Punjāb that, besides being a caste-name, the word Jāt can mean an agriculturalist and Jatakī similarly can mean agriculture" (Habib 1996: 97; Habib 2017: 264). Jat and agriculture, thus, became synonymous. "The Jat might be employed as a school teacher, or service in the military but he sees his primary role as that of an agriculturist; his connection with land is what he holds most dear and what identifies him" (Kaur 1986: 233). Therefore, it is likely that Jats' hold on agricultural land is what propelled them upwards in economic status – though not in terms of caste status, as is explored further below.

The improved economic conditions of Jats failed to push them up the caste scale within the Hindu social order. Thus, to escape the oppressive and suffocating structures of Hindu social order, Jats of Punjab embraced Sikhism – a newly emerged religion, free from the hierarchies of caste and gender (Habib 1996: 99; see also McLeod 1996:13). They saw in this new religion a hope and a promise to win over the dilemma of the incommensurability between their improved economic position and humiliating social status. Since Jats constituted a large segment of the population of the Punjab, their entry into the Sikh religion quickly made them the preponderant community. In fact, the large-scale entry of Jats into the Sikh religion had not only expanded the base of this new religion, it also seriously impacted its social outlook. Allegedly, it introduced elements of militancy and caste in its organization. The militant outlook of the Panth especially after the martyrdom of the fifth Guru Arjan Dev is generally attributed to what McLeod called the preponderance of 'Jat cultural patterns' within Sikhism (Cf. Singh 1986c: 325-385; Singh 1989: 214-233). The preponderance of such patterns also turned Jats into a dominant caste within the very religion that purged them of the taint of their lower caste status. In due course of time they became the dominant caste in the entirety of Punjab – so much so that Punjabi culture and identity became synonymous with Jat culture. In the words of Grewal, "[a]lthough due to the present agricultural crisis in East Punjab this community is in an

unfortunate and painful condition, but still if anybody asks who is most powerful in Punjab, we would have to acknowledge that these directionless, Jatt Sikh families of Punjab, that is committing suicide [sic], are the ruling class here" (Grewal 2006:16). Jat Sikhs claim to occupy the top position in the social hierarchy of East Punjab (Singh 1977: 70). Joyce Pettigrew, an anthropologist who did intensive fieldwork on Jats, argued that "[a]ll Jats alike are brought up to be proud irrespective of what they possess in terms of education, wealth or power. No Jat defines himself as subservient and none can actually be trampled upon" (Pettigrew 1978: 20).

Jats of Punjab are also considered the backbone of the Sikh community. Sikhs are the majority community (63 per cent) in East Punjab. Within the Sikh community, Jat Sikhs, as a single largest caste, comprised 60 per cent of the total Sikh population of the state, which is roughly about 1/3 (30 to 33 per cent) of the entire population of Punjab (McLeod 2007: 113; Kaur 1986: 225; Singh 1997: 178-9; Puri 2003: 2693). Their overwhelming control on land, religion, and politics in the state has made them the dominant caste, as defined by Srinivas (Srinivas 1955:1-36; Srinivas 1959: 1-16; see also Ram 2007: 4066-68). Though they displaced Brahmins (the priestly class) in Punjab in terms of social status, they did not inherit the complex paraphernalia of rituals and ceremonies practiced by the former. All brahminical rituals, ceremonies and traditions were completely forbidden by the Sikh Gurus. However, with the passage of time, the Sikh religion has assembled its own distinct rituals, ceremonies and sacred practices – the *Rahit Maryada* (Sikh code of conduct). Although all the ten historic Sikh Gurus belonged to the Khatri caste, traditionally the majority of their followers have come from the Jat caste (Kaur 1986: 225). The overwhelming majority of the Jat Sikhs (since 1962) in the leadership of the Shiromani Akali Dal, the main political party of Sikhs, allegedly made it 'virtually a Jat political party'.

Jats also consider themselves the saviours of the Sikh religion, having contributed significantly in defending it militarily throughout its turbulent history. In the *Misl* (military bands, confederacies, autonomous armed bands with an absolute control over an ill-defined area in centra Punjab) system of the eighteenth century, leadership was largely under the control of the Jats and "eventually it was a Jat misldār, Ranjīt Singh, who secured total ascendancy" (McLeod 1996:18). "Each Jat felt tremendous pride," argued Pettigrew "that it was *his* section of the community that had built up the military organization which led to the

establishment of Sikh rule in the Punjab. He felt that prestige lay with the Jats because of this" (Pettigrew 1978:41, emphasis in original). They often treated other castes as timid and incapable of defending themselves. They called Aroras 'Kiraar' (org. Sanskrit, money-minded, coward), and commonly applied the term 'Bhāpā' (which carries a perceptible degree of opprobrium) to Khatris and Aroras who migrated from the Pothohar areas (McLeod 1996:100; and Pettigrew1978: 41).

Though Sikhs are identified by their Khalsa identity, Jat Sikhs are generally liberal in their observance of the mandated norms. Since Khalsa symbols were considered part of the 'Jat cultural patterns' much before the entry of Jats into Sikhism, their adherence by the Jats could not become an identification mark of their Sikhs identity (McLeod 1996; Pettigrew 1978:25).[37] Many Jat Sikhs trim their beard, cut their hair, and rarely visit Gurdwaras (Kaur 1986: 222-23). However, in spite of their lackadaisical approach towards the Khalsa identity, Jats both in their own eyes (Pettigrew1978; Mooney 2011) and in those of others, remained Sikhs. "For other castes," argued McLeod, "it is very different. If a Khatri shaves he is regarded as a Hindu by others and soon comes to regard himself as one" (McLeod 1996: 98). The Sikhs who strictly followed *Rahatnama* (code of conduct) belong to the lower class of north Punjab (Singh 1953: 179). Hence, the importance of the Khalsa symbols did not make much difference to a Jat after he becomes a Sikh. So, it is not the symbols that determine the Sikh identity of the Jats. They remained Sikhs even sometime without wearing these very symbols. In other words, the entry of the Jats into Sikh religion did not dilute their 'caste identity'. On the contrary, it got further strengthened leading to the growth of diversity within the Sikh community.

**Bhapa Sikhs**

Bhapa Sikhs is a cluster of merchant castes among the Sikhs. This particular cluster of Sikh merchant castes came into existence in the aftermath of the partition of Punjab in 1947. Bhapas (literally elder brother in the Pothohari dialect) are Khatri or Arora Sikhs whose ancestors belonged to the Rawalpindi area in the present-day Pakistan (McLeod 2007: 121). Bhapa Sikhs, also called refugees, is not a caste category. It is largely used as a stereotype or pejorative term by the Jat and non-Khatri Sikhs for the Arora and Khatri Sikhs (mostly well-off urban merchant castes) who migrated from what is now Pakistan and addressed each other as 'Bhapa ji'. The frequent use of the term 'Bhapa

ji' by them, most probably, led them to be called Bhapas. They constitute 'a little under 10 percent of the Sikh population' (Kohli 1990: 355). The migrated Arora and Khatri Bhapa Sikhs are distinguished from the local Arora and Khatri Sikhs/Hindus in terms of regional differentiation on account of their residential location in the pre partition Punjab. There is no such term as 'Bhapa Hindus' because of the fact that almost all the migrated Aroras and Khatris were Sahajdhari[38] Sikhs and the local Aroras and Khatris were both Sikhs and Hindus.[39] Since almost all the migrated Aroras and Khatris were Sikhs, the question of marriages between them and those called 'Bhapa Hindus' does not arise at all. As far as marriages between Bhapa and non-Bhapa Arora and Khatri Sikhs are concerned, they are comparatively more common in contemporary Punjab than it used to be during the immediate years of post-partition.[40] Though, Khatris across the religious and regional differentiations considered themselves superior to Aroras, marriages do take place between the Khatri Bhapa Sikhs and Arora Bhapa Sikhs too.

**Ramgarhia Sikhs**

Ramgarhia Sikhs, former lower castes Hindu artisan, are generally considered second only to Jat Sikhs (McLeod 2000: 217-234). They encompass artisan castes of *Tarkhan/Thokkas* (carpenters), *Lohar* (ironsmiths) and *Raj-mistry* (masons/stonemasons). Though blacksmith and mason castes are also included in the Sikh Ramgarhia caste, originally the carpenter caste constituted the rank and file of this Sikh artisan caste. Sikh carpenters used Ramgarhia as their collective surname adopted from Jassa Singh Ramgarhia, which provided them upward social mobility. Hindu carpenters use *Dhiman* as their surname. There are many Dhiman Sikhs as well.[41] Though bracketed with other backward class communities in the Hindu fold, the Ramgarhia Sikhs improved their social status rank tremendously after embracing the Sikh faith and achieved the status second only to Jat Sikhs in the Sikh caste hierarchy (McLeod 2000: 217-234). Many of them have settled abroad, first in East Africa and then in Europe, which further enhanced their social status (Kalsi1999: 255-273). However, their lower status in comparison to Jat Sikhs in the distinct Sikh caste hierarchy, together with their feeling of being discriminated against, led them to build Ramgarhia Gurdwaras both in India, and abroad (first in East Africa in the early twentieth century).[42]

The surname Ramgarhia is believed to have originated in the renaming of the mud fort of Ram Rauni (at Ramdaspur near Amritsar) into Ramgarh by Jassa Singh Thokka, who defended the fort when it was besieged by the *Subedar* (ruler) Adina Begh and rebuilt it in 1752 (Grewal 2000: 75; McLeod 2000: 218). The title Ramgarhia, in turn, is believed to have originated from the above-mentioned title Ramgarh during the establishment of independent *misls* named after their chieftains, during the historic *misl* period before the establishment of the Kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the Punjab in 1799. The *misl* headed by Jassa Singh came to be known as Ramgarhia *misl* - named after his moniker. The Ramgarhia *misl* was one of the three *misls* assigned the responsibility to take care of the Golden Temple (also called Sri Harmandir Sahib and Sri Darbar Sahib) at Amritsar where Jassa Singh Ramgarhia also built famous Ramgarhia Bunga (mansion) in 1755. After the establishment of the Ramgarhia *misl*, Jassa Singh abandoned his original Hindu caste designation of Thoka/Tarkhan and adopted the name of his *misl* – Ramgarhia (Ram 2017a: 284). Thus, Jassa Singh Thoka became Sardar Jassa Singh Ramgarhia and accordingly the Sikh Tarkhans came to be known as Ramgarhia Sikhs (Kalsi & Nesbitt 2017: 274-282). The latter inherited the 'Ramgarhia' title from their ancestor Jassa Singh Thokka, who after establishing Ramgarhia *misl*, adopted the name of his *misl* – Ramgarhia (Ram 2017a: 284). Henceforth, all Sikh artisans came to be known as Ramgarhia Sikhs (Kalsi & Nesbitt 2017: 274-282; McLeod 2007a: 114). The Ramgarhia Sikhs eventually developed into a Sikh composite caste comprising Tarkhans, Lohars, Raj-mistry and Nais – thus enhancing caste diversity within the Sikh community (McLeod 2007b: 114).

**Ahluwalia Sikhs**

Ahluwalia Sikhs, akin to Ramgarhias, drew the title 'Ahluwalia' from their forefather Jassa Kalal, who founded the Ahluwalia *misl*, named after his native village 'Ahlo'. Though within the traditional Hindu social hierarchy, they were considered lower to Thokkas (carpenters, and artisans in general), these two groups placed in the middle rank of the Sikh caste hierarchy (McLeod 2000: 217). Ahluwalia Sikhs, formerly of 'Kalal' caste (professional distillers and sellers of home-made liquor), before their embrace of the Sikh faith, were a low caste in the Hindu social order. Like the Ramgarhias, their upward social mobility began after their entry into the Sikh faith. One such convert, Jassa Kalal, rose to

become head of the Ahluwalia *misl* – a great honour during the early consolidating period of the Sikh ascendancy in the second half of the 18th century Punjab. Another factor that propelled the Ahluwalia Sikh caste upwards was the connection of the Kapurthala royal family with Jassa Singh Ahluwalia. The descendants of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia started calling themselves 'Ahluwalia' who himself derived his title name of Ahluwalia' from his native village named 'Ahlo'. In their traditional Hindu social hierarchy, Kalals (Ahluwalias) were considered lower than Tarkhans (Ramgarhias) (McLeod 2000: 217). Eventually, as against their earlier stigmatised title of Kalal, all Kala sub-castes of Hindu and Sikh faiths preferred to adopt the Sanskritised Sikh caste title of 'Ahluwalia'. Ramgarhia and Ahluwalia castes are generally placed in the middle of the Sikh caste hierarchy, being above the dalit Sikh castes.

**Dalit Sikhs/Lower-caste Diversity**

The lowest castes among Sikhs are commonly called dalit/Mazhabi Sikhs (Webster 2007: 132-154; Ram 2004a 5-7; Ram 2017a: 283-289). They comprise Mazhabi, Ramdassia, Rangreta, Ravidassia, Sansi and Rai-Sikh castes. All castes within the dalit/Mazhabi Sikh category are broadly assembled within two major segments – Mazhabis/Rangretas, and Ravidassia/Ramdassias. Mazhabis and Rangretas are former members of the Chuhra caste who converted to Sikhism. Ramdassias are usually Julahas (weavers) who are believed to have converted to Sikhism during the time of the fourth Guru of the Sikh faith, Guru Ram Dass (Ibbetson 1883 rpt 1970: 300). Though Ravidassias, one of the two most numerous dalit communities in East Punjab, are generally included within the dalit Sikh castes, they often assert their separate identity independent of both Hindus and Sikhs (for details see Ram 2009: 1-8). Dalit Sikhs embraced the teaching of the Sikh Gurus in the hope of gaining dignity and social equality, but even in their new religious avatar, social exclusion continued to bedevil them. They often allege that they are inconsequential to the local structures of power (Ram 2010: 265-295).

Power in the Punjab, being an agricultural state, revolves around the axis of land, and much of the land is owned by Jat Sikhs. Although dalits constitute a significant proportion of the Punjab population (31.94 per cent vs. 16.64 per cent for India as a whole, Census of India 2011), their share in land ownership is negligible, owning only 63000 (5.98 per cent) of the total number (1053000) of operational land-holdings in the state, and occupy just 3.20 per cent of the total area under cultivation

(calculated statistics from the Agricultural Census 2010-2011: 65-73). In other words, less than 5 per cent of them are small land-holding cultivators. Being landless, they were forced to depend on the land-owning castes for their livelihoods, which in fact only served to perpetuate their social deprivation and oppression. However, a significant change has taken place over the last few decades – many dalit Sikhs have made inroads into vocations associated with the artisan castes, i.e. Ramgarhias, by working as carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, barbers and tailors, thus leading to a sharp decline in the availability of dalit manual labour for the landowning Jat Sikhs.

Military service is yet another field where dalit Sikhs found avenues of social mobility (Cohen 1969: 460). In the valiant culture of Punjab, association with the military enhances one's social status. Serving/retired soldiers irrespective of their caste affiliations are almost equally honoured in the villages of Punjab as *fauji saab*[43] or *subedar saab*. Dalit Sikhs have had the privilege of long association with the armed forces. Among them, especially Mazhabis and Ranghreta Sikhs proved their mettle in various battles fought since their inclusion in the Khalsa army of Guru Gobind Singh, including those of Banda Bahadur (a great Sikh warrior who was initiated in the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh), and the five *dals* (warrior bands) and twelve *misls* before the establishment of the Khalsa Raj of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1849). One of the five warrior bands headed by Bir Singh Ranghreta was composed exclusively of Mazhabi/Ranghreta Sikhs. However, it was during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that Sikh caste hierarchy started emerging within the Sikh Panth and separate companies of the Mazhabi Sikhs were formed and attached with the high-caste battalions (Cohen 1969: 455). After the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, Mazhabi Sikhs entered into the British army, by way of recruitment into the newly-formed First Pioneer Sikh Regiment. This was expedited by the need of the British to neutralise the mutineers in Delhi in 1857. After successfully quelling the Mutiny, two more Pioneer Sikh Regiments consisting of Mazhabi Sikhs were formed. These Pioneer Sikh Regiments actively participated in military operations in both India and abroad (Cohen 1969: 455-56). During World War I more dalit Sikhs found space in the Pioneer Sikh Regiments, which were later merged into the Sapper and Miner units. Subsequently, during World War II, even larger numbers of Mazhabi and Ramdassia Sikh soldiers were recruited in the British Indian army. In 1944 these dalit Sikhs regiments were converted into the Sikh Light Infantry (SLI)

which remains an exclusively dalit Sikh regiment even today – a case in point of vivid caste diversity.

*Akhand path*[44] and *kirtan*[45] were some other alternate avenues to identify the presence of caste diversity within the Sikh community (Ram 2004a: 6). Those who perform akhand path are called *granthis*.[46] They also conduct Sikh marriages as well as other ceremonies (Singh 1975: 277; Ram 2004a: 6). Though any Sikh can perform *akhand path* and *kirtan*, generally dalit Sikhs are associated with these professions. Bhai Bakhshish Singh and Padam Shri awardee Bhai Nirmal Singh Khalsa were among the most prominent dait Sikh *Hazuri ragis* (those who perform kirtan at the Darbar Sahib). The recent controversy related to not allowing the cremation of the dead body of Bhai Nirmal Singh Khalsa, who was fallen victim to Covid-19, at his own village highlights the prevalence of caste-based discrimination within the Panth (Sethi 2020). Dalit Sikhs, like their counterparts in the Hindu caste hierarchy, do not represent a single unified caste category. They are divided among themselves on caste lines. Following graded caste hierarchy within their social domains, they marry within community boundaries: Ramdassia Sikhs consider themselves superior to the Mazhabi and Ranghreta Sikhs, who in turn, look down upon Sansi Sikhs. For non-Dalit castes, however, hierarchy within dalit Sikhs carries no meaning. For them Ramdassia, Mazhabi, Sansi and Rai Sikhs are of the same rank (Singh 1977a: 70). In the following sub-sections, a brief account of some of the main dalit Sikh caste communities is presented.

**Mazhabis and Ranghretas**

The Mazhabis and Rangretas (formerly of the sweeper caste within the Hindu caste hierarchy) were able to attain significantly in terms of upward social mobility during the period of ninth and tenth Gurus. Guru Gobind Singh had bestowed the title of *Ranghreta Guru Ka Beta* on Bhai Jaita – a young low caste Rangreta who brought to Anandpur Sahib the severed head of the ninth Guru after his martyrdom in Delhi. The tenth Guru also renamed him Jivan Singh and declared him as his *panjwan sahibzada* (fifth son). Mazhabis and Rangreta Sikh proved their mettle in various battles from the time of Guru Gobind Singh to the Khalsa Raj of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1849). Despite attaining significant level of upward social mobility within egalitarian tradition of the Khalsa social order, the pre-Khalsa taint of their lowest Hindu caste legacy refused to retreat completely. A recent case of caste diversity and

discrimination came into limelight when the mortal remains of Padam Shri awardee Bhai Nirmal Singh Khalsa – one of the most prominent Mazhabi Sikh *Hazuri ragis* (those who perform kirtan at the Darbar Sahib) who was fallen victim to Covid-19 - weren't allowed to be cremated at his ancestral village (Sethi 2020).

Before their conversion to the Sikh faith, Mazhabi and Ranghreta, primarily scavengers, were known as Chuhras. While defining Mazhabi Sikhs, D. Ibbetson writes "Of course a Mazbi will often have been returned as Chuhra by caste and Sikh by religion … Mazbi means nothing more than a member of the scavenger class converted to Sikhism" (Ibbetson 1883 rpt. 1970: 294). They were good soldiers and some of the British Army's regiments in comprised Mazhabis entirely. Though Mazhabi and Ranghreta Sikhs are considered similar, D. Ibbetson differentiates them:

> "[t]he Ranghretas are a class of Mazbi apparently found only in Ambala, Ludhiana and the neighborhood, who consider themselves superior to the rest ... but it appears that Ranghretas have very generally abandoned scavengering [sic] for leather work, and this would at once account for their rise in the social scale" (Ibbetson 1883 rpt. 1970: 294).

However, Niranjan Arifi traces the origin of Mazhabis and Ranghretas to the inter-caste marriages among the Hindus of all castes across the *varṇa* (fourfold division of Hindu Society) hierarchy. In his views, Ranghretas are the descendants of different castes intermingling. Born to parents of different castes, they were given new caste titles (Arifi 1999: 177-200). Similarly, another Dalit Sikh historian, Shamsher Singh Ashok, is of the opinion that Ranghreta Sikhs are superior to Chamars in that the former abandoned eating dead animals' meat. He further argues that Ranghreta Sikhs also differentiate themselves from Chamars by completely distancing themselves from the Brahminical ceremonies of birth and death (Ashok 2001: 53-54).

Mazhabi Sikhs are mostly settled in *Majha* region (Amritsar, Tarn Taran, and Gurdaspur districts) of East Punjab. They played a crucial role in all the battles fought by Guru Gobind Singh and thereafter. By the mid-eighteenth century when the Sikhs organized themselves into five dals (warrior bands), one of these was constituted under the command of Bir Singh Ranghreta with a force of 1300-horsemen. It was known as

Mazhabi/Ranghreta *dal.* Throughout the eighteenth century, the Mazhabi Sikh militia played a very crucial role in the Khalsa army. The soldiers in the Khalsa army were called Akali Nihangs/*Guru di fauj* (army of the Guru). Most of the Nihangs (Singh 2017c: 341-350; Judge 2014: 372-381) came from the dalit communities and were known for their martial skills. Even Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) used to be careful of them. Though initially he used their power in capturing several places including Srinagar (Kashmir), where many Dalit Sikhs settled permanently, but eventually he reduced their influence, probably under the pressure from the Jat Sikh aristocracy that could not digest Dalit Sikhs wielding commanding positions in his army (Hans 2008; Hans 2009). Thus, after the formation of the Khalsa rule under the aegis of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, concerted efforts were made to undermine the influence of Mazhabi and Ranghreta Sikhs as the process of consolidation of the Sikh Panth was under way. Sikh identity from then onwards began yielding to dormant but strong caste tendencies among the Jat Sikhs (Omvedt 2008: 22).

**Ravidassias**

The other segment of dalit Sikhs comprises Ravidassias and Ramdassias (weavers). Ravidassias often asset their separate identity and are very much particular about their distinct faith believing in the teachings and bani of Sant Ravidass whom they worship as Guru and bow before his portrait. They also touch the feet of the sants of Ravidass deras and also revere them as Guru. A large number of them assert that they are neither Sikhs nor Hindus, and consider themselves followers of a separate dalit religion, Ravidassia Dharm (Ram 2016: 371-83). Ravidassias, the followers of Guru Ravidass – the most popular *Nirguni* Sant (holy persons who believe in the formless God) of the north India Bhakti movement – are often confused with dalit Sikhs. Although, some of the Ravidassia dalits wear a beard and unshorn hair, like the initiated Sikhs, and worship the sacred scriptures – S*GSS*, they still do not identify themselves as dalit Sikhs. They are very particular about their distinct religious tradition and often emphasize their separate identity – Ravidassia. They believe in the teachings and *bani* (spiritual poetry) of Sant Ravidass whom they regard as Guru (Takhar 2011: 165-184;. Takhar 2014: 105-120; Simon 2010:51-62).

Distinct Ravidassioa identity emerged during the Ad Dharm movement. The Ad Dharm movement was the only movement of its

kind in the Northwestern part of India that aimed at procuring a dignified space for the lower castes by building a distinct socio-cultural and political identity for the lower castes through religious regeneration, spiritual empowerment, cultural transformation, and political assertion (Ram 2004: 324). The main objective of the Ad Dharm movement was to carve out a separate identity for those who were socially excluded (Ram 2004a: 900-901). It was during this movement that the image of Ravidass, who was already well known among the lower castes of Punjab, was systematically projected in order to concretize the newly-conceived lower caste cultural space in the Punjab region. His struggle against the system of untouchability, anchored in an enlightened vision of *Begampura* – a city free from all sorts of fears, sorrows, sufferings, restrictions and scarcities – at a time when no one could dare to speak for the socially excluded sections of the society, made him a messianic figure of the lower castes (Ram 2012: 666-667; Ram 2021: 1-2; and Ram 2021a: 1-2). In modern times, the Ad Dharm movement has tactically cashed in on his mass appeal by using his pictures as its emblem, reciting his bani, and narration of legends about him as illustrations of power, pride, and glory of oppressed segments of society (Ram 2009: 3; and Ram 2012: 667). Ravidassias established their own Ravidass *Sabhas* (Ravidass societies) and separate gurdwaras. However, in official records, they are still bracketed with Chamars. Since Chamars are counted among the Hindus in the census records, so are the Ravidassias. But in sociological terms, they are a group apart and different both from Hindus and Sikhs (cf. Takhar 2011: 165-84). They also believe in human guru-ship – in Sikhism, human guru-ship ceased to exist after the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, declared the *SGGS* to be the eleventh guru.

Even though strong links exist between the Sikh religion and the Ravidassia sect, the latter has been declared a separate dalit religion (Ravidassia Dharm) on 30 January 2010 by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan.[47] The announcement was made in response to the assault on the topmost *sants/gaddi nashins* (heads) of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, who were on a sermon tour in Austria. This unfortunate event happened during a religious ceremony at a Ravidass Temple in Vienna on May 24, 2009. The attack left one dead and many injured including the current *gaddi-nashin* of Dera Ballan, Sant Niranjan Dass. The person who was killed was none other than the deputy chief of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, Sant Ramanand, popularly known as the soul of the Ravidass mission (Ram 2008: 1341-1364) and mesmerizing *Kirtaniya* (devotional singer) of the hymns of

Guru Ravidass. The followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, mostly dalits, perceived the episode as a direct attack on their emerging distinct Ravidassia identity.[48] Within hours, this event resulted in a massive backlash, causing a huge loss to public and private property back home in Punjab. The situation was finally brought under the control by imposing a state curfew. This violent episode finally culminated into the announcement of a separate Ravidassia Dharm (Ram 2012: 696-700).

The patron saint of the Ravidassia Dharm is Guru Ravidass. His forty *shabads* (hymns) and one *shaloka* (couplet) are included in *SGGS* and are considered to be the most authentic of his *bani*. But the fact remains that, despite the existence of similarities between the Sikhs' and Ravidassias' religions, the latter have a separate religious code of conduct tightly woven around the *bani* of Guru Ravidass. Ravidassias are often heard complaining that irrespective of the popular Sikh belief that the 'bani is Guru and Guru is bani,' Guru Ravidass is not considered a Guru. He is accepted only as *bhagat/bhakta* (devotee) by the upper/dominant caste Sikhs and his followers, as they often allege, too are not considered equal by them. Peter Friedlander argues that Ravidass occupies a unique position "among the bhagats of *Guru* Granth in that he is the only bhagat whose presence in the *Guru Granth* has led to the development of distinct movement based on his teachings" (Friedlander 2017: 323). The caste-based discrimination against dalit Sikhs by the upper/dominant caste Sikhs is perhaps one of the most prominent reasons that forced them to construct their separate religion and religious places, popularly called deras – a clear case in point of a vibrant Sikh religious diversity (Ram 2009: 6).

**Ramdassias**

Ramdassia Sikhs, originally Chamars, are usually *Julahas* (weavers) who believed to be converted to Sikhism during the time of the fourth Guru (Guru Ram Das) of the Sikh faith. They are still included within the larger caste category of Chamar within East Punjab Scheduled Castes list. Though there is a wide distinction between the Ramdassias, typical weavers, and the Ravidassias, typical leather workers, "yet they are connected by certain sections of leather working classes who have taken to weaving and thus risen in their social scale," argues D. Ibbetson (Ibbetson 1883. Rpt. 1970: 296). The distinction between them is primarily linked with their diverse occupations. While making a sharp

distinction between these two occupationally distinct classes of the single main caste of Chamar, D. Ibbetson cogently argues that:

> [t]he Ramdassias are confused with Raidasi or Rabdasi Chamars. The formers are true Sikhs, and take the Pahul. The latter are Hindus, or if Sikhs, only NanakPanthi Sikhs and do not take the Pahul; and are followers of Bhagat Rav Das or Rab Das, himself a Chamar. They are apparently as true Hindus as any Chamar can be, and are wrongly called Sikhs by confusion with Ramdassias (Ibbetson 1883 rpt. 1970: 300).

Though Ramdassias and Ravidassias are clubbed together, Ramdassias considered themselves superior partly because of their occupation of weaving as against the so-called lower status profession of leather working, and partly because of their adoption of the Sikh religion. It is important to mention here that they were provided with reserved posts in the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in 1925, much before the provision of the official reservation for the scheduled castes (Bambhia Bhai 2011: 42-43). Ramdassias have built their separate deras/gurdwaras, especially in the Doaba region of Punjab. Ramdassia deras at villages Johlans in Jalandhar, and Thakarwal at Hoshiarpur are among the most popular Ramdassia Sikh deras in Punjab (Ram 2017b: 55).

Ramdassias are known by various names in different districts of Punjab: 'Khalsa' in Anandpur Sahib, Ropar and Fatehgarh Sahib; '*Rahtias'* (devout followers of Sikh code of conduct) in Ferozepur, Moga, Muktsar, Faridkot, Faridkot, Bathinda, Mansa, Sangrur, and Barnala; '*Baune Sikhs'* (weaver Sikhs) in Patiala, Dhuri and Nabha (Ram 2017b: 53-54). In the Doaba region of Punjab, Julahas are mostly called Ramdassias. The majority of Ramdassias are Sahajdhari Sikhs (liberal in observation of Sikh code of conduct). Like Jat Sikhs, many of them do not strictly follow the Sikh *rahit* (code of conduct). Babu Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, representing the lower classes, was a clean-shaven Ramdassia Sikh of the Ropar district of Punjab. Many Ramdassia Sikhs, like him, are still clean-shaven. Though lackadaisical in the observance of the Sikh code of conduct, Ramdassia Sikhs with their distinct identity add even further to the visibility of diversity within the Sikh religion.

**Rai Sikhs**

Rai and Sansi Sikhs are yet two more allegedly low castes that underline the malady of caste within the Panth. Rai Sikhs, formerly Mahatam Hindus, were considered almost equivalent to untouchable castes. Though they themselves claim a numerical strength of two million, the Census of India 2011 listed them at only 850,000 (Kumar 2015, 104). Rai Sikhs are members of the Mahatam (lit. praiseworthy) ethnic group. Mahatams were originally Hindus. Those who embraced the teachings of Sikh Gurus became Rai Sikhs. Some of them also embraced Islam. The Rai Sikhs are strictly endogamous and practice clan exogamy. They are mainly concentrated in the low-lying river land bordering the districts of Ferozepur, Fazilka and Amritsar of Punjab. They are also found in pockets of Kapurthala, Jalandhar and Ludhiana districts. In the pre-Independent India, they lived in the Sheikhpura, Montgomery, Bahawalpur and Karachi regions of Pakistan. They mostly lived on riverbanks and in forests, which provided ample scope for hunting and illicit distilling. They also used to earn their livelihood while making *rassi* (rope) and *sirki* (mat) from *sarr* (the wild grass), which they harvested from river shrubs (Kumar 2015: 96). Their distinct occupation of making *rassi* and *sirki* led them to be popularly called *Rassiwat*/rope-makers and *Sirkiband*/mat-makers (Rose 1919: 50). Because of their indulgence in the illicit liquor trade and petty crime, the British administration declared them a criminal tribe in 1918 (Major 1999: 682). Their criminal status deprived them of land allotment in the canal colonies and recruitment in the armed forces. They were absolved of such severe deprivations and embarrassments after India's independence.

In terms of social hierarchy, Rai Sikhs, the erstwhile Mahatams, were considered almost equal to formerly untouchable castes. The colonial administration first included them in the list of Depressed Classes in 1931 and subsequently brought them under the British Government of India (Schedule Caste) order 1936. However, the Kaka Kalekar Commission, which was constituted by the Government of India to ascertain the number of socially and economically backward classes, declared them "Most Backward Class in 1953-54" (Kumar 2015: 97). But after their long struggle to be designated as Schedule Caste, the Constitution (Schedule Caste) order (Amendment) Act (2007) was passed that included Rai Sikhs in the Punjab list of Scheduled Castes at Sr. No. 39 (Times of India, Aug 17, 2007).

Politically they are very active, but they are not permanently affiliated with any political party in the state. They cast their votes in line with their changing perceptions of their conglomerate vis-à-vis the manifestos of different political parties. There are 516,000 Rai Sikhs estimated to be in East Punjab, which is 1.82 percent of the population, ranking third among 39 Scheduled Castes. Rai Sikhs have a strong presence in the 35 Assembly and seven Lok Sabha segments of the Punjab, and they have been pressing for their own reserved seats in the state legislative assembly and in parliament.

**Sansi Sikhs**

Sansi Sikhs, like Rai Sikhs, before their conversion to Sikhism, were also primarily Hindus. Traditionally shepherds and hunters, and considered lower in status than the Mazhabis (Singh 1975: 276), Sansis are divided into two main clans named after their two mythical ancestors, *Mahala* and *Beehdoo*. They also call themselves *Bhatus* or *Bhantus*. Their nomadic lifestyle is considered the main cause of their social exclusion and backwardness in terms of their social and educational parameters that degraded them to a lower caste. The British government condemned them as robbers and thieves and declared them a criminal tribe in 1873 (Major 1999: 670), which was nullified only after India's independence (Puri 2008: 322-323). Traditionally vagrants, they served Jats as their hereditary genealogists, and in return used to receive some grain at each harvest. Though they take immense pride in claiming Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) to be of the Sansi tribe (Bhatti 2010: 114), in terms of social status they are considered even lower than the Mazhabis (Singh 1975: 276). Though a lower caste, they trace their origins to the Bhati Rajputs of Rajasthan. After their defeat by Alla-ud-din Khilji of the Delhi Sultanate in 1303 CE, they were allegedly forced into a nomadic lifestyle.

## III
## Hierarchy within Diversity

Along with diversity, a distinct caste hierarchy has also evolved within the Sikh community (Marenco 1976; McLeold 1996; Cf. Singh 1986; Singh 1981; Grewal 1998). In Sikh caste hierarchy, Jats, who were assigned a mid-level status in the Hindu social order, occupy the top position (Singh 1977:70; see also Judge 2002:178-85). Caste hierarchy within the Panth is primarily woven around ownership of agricultural land. The

close relationship between farming and the forces of nature (*paun* [air], *pani* [water], *dharati* [earth], and the *divas*, *rut* [days and seasons – ecosystem]) what Gurinder Mann, a scholar of Sikh textual sources, succinctly called *rabbb naal sanjh* (relationship with the divine), and folk wisdom of the sort prevalent around the newly established town of Kartarpur ("Creator's Town") by Baba Nanak himself along with his emphasis on the cultivation of land as its mainstay, were strong drivers for the assignment of farming atop of the hierarchy of means of livelihood (Mann 2017: 11). The local dictum of *uttam kheti*, *madham vayopar*, *nikhidh chãkri* (farming is the best, business is medium and service is the least desirable), further undergirded the exalted status of farming as well as its practitioners – the Jat Sikhs.[49] Thus, the pre-eminence assigned to the occupation of farming was a prime reason for the social elevation of Jat Sikhs, agriculturists par excellence, to the top of the caste hierarchy within the Sikh Panth. To quote Mann further, "[t]rading, salaried employment, and begging come in at progressively lower levels" (Mann 2017: 11). Thus, the Arora, Bhapa, Bhatra, and Khatri Sikhs (the trading communities), who were otherwise placed within the upper caste category of the Hindu caste hierarchy got slipped to a lower social scale within the Sikh caste hierarchy (Singh 1977a: 69-70; Singh 2017a: 578; Singh & Tatla 2006: 28). The traders and the artisan Sikhs have to compete with the dominant agriculturist caste of Jat Sikhs, which was otherwise included in the artisan category of the Hindu caste hierarchy (Singh 1975: 279; Singh 1977a: 69-71).

While building an engaging narrative of the multi-faceted life of Baba Nanak and his founding of the new township at Kartarpur, Mann pithily argued that Jats:

> far from being relegated to a permanently low position within the Hindu social hierarchy, as often happened, or from becoming a relatively anonymous segment within the majority Muslim community, … could look forward to having a chance to assume leadership roles if they entered the *Panth* at Kartarpur (Mann 2017: 12; emphasis in original).

In other words, given the choice between a well-entrenched segmented character of the Hindu society and the dominant position of the Muslim population on one hand, and esteem of agriculture in Sikhism, on the other, Jats (agriculturist par excellence), articulated Mann, were

overwhelmingly attracted to the faith of Baba Nanak – the only viable platform for their upward social mobility. He further argued that "[t]hey would have a real opportunity to shape its (*Panthic*) destiny along the lines of their own modes of thinking and behavior" (Mann 2017: 12. Emphasis added). This argument, however, does not go well with the earlier part of his meticulously woven narrative, wherein Mann portrayed Baba Nanak not only as a well-travelled and widely experienced personality, but also one whose liaison with the Almighty had metamorphosed him into "a vessel of divine authority" (Mann 2017: 6). It raises many questions that how such a spiritually awakened figure as Baba Nanak who appointed a Khatri (Bhai Lehna) as his successor (Guru Angad) rather than a Jat like Baba Buddha, failed to see through the hidden design of one section of his followers who joined his fast-expanding faith, as Mann articulated, more motivated by their vested interests than any attraction for spiritual leanings or egalitarian values. However, given the current status of Jat Sikhs within the Panth, Mann's analysis seems to be vindicated to some extent. As far as their monopoly over the control of the gurdwaras and state politics is concerned, Jat Sikhs are indeed in a dominant position vis-a-vis the other Sikh castes in the Panth (for details see: Singh 2007a)[50].

Next to Jat Sikhs, are Khatri Sikhs who belong to the same mercantile caste as all the ten historic Gurus of the Panth (Marenco1976: 296; Singh 1982: 146-7; Alam, 1982: 103-107). The Ramgarhia and Ahluwalia Sikhs are placed next or even equal to the Khatri Sikhs due to their military adventures during the *Misl* period (McLeod 2000: 216-34). Following the similar descending order, Marenco states that:

> [t]he other agricultural Sikh castes, like the Kamboh, Mali and Saini Sikhs, other trading Sikh castes, e.g. Arora Sikhs, and other artisan Sikh castes, e.g. Lohar or Sunars, came somewhere after the aforementioned castes in the hierarchy. Then there were the Sikh menial castes (Jhinwars, Kahars, Banjaras, Lubanas, Bahrupias, Batwals and Barwalas), and, last of all, there were the Sikh untouchables, the Ramdassias and Mazhabis, who continue to be ranked the lowest despite the many advances they had made since conversion to Sikhism (Marenco 1976: 296, emphasis in parenthesis added; see also: Puri 2003: 2698).

Sikh caste hierarchy, in fact, is a highly contested phenomenon within the Panth. Some scholars are of the opinion that since the practices of Brahminic ritual purity do not hold any ground in Punjab, the defining principles of Sikh caste hierarchy are different from that of the Brahminical Hinduism (Ibbetson 1883, rpt. 1970:1-87; Singh 1986a: 231-314). These principles are based on hard manual labour on ones' own land, caste homogeneity, martial strength, numerical preponderance in the mainstream Sikh religion, and hold over the politics in the state. Furthermore, it is the complex combination of all these different sources of power (social, ethnological, economic, political, religious, and numerical) that determines status in Punjabi society. The only caste in which all these multiple identities coalesce is that of Jats in Punjab. Jat Sikhs are Jats by caste, Khalsa or Singh by religion, and martial by virtue of their being sturdy - and an important part of the armed forces in the past and even present - and are also landowners. All of these different identities reinforce each other and thus helped Jat Sikhs in becoming the dominant caste in Punjab. Such a rare combination of powerful multiple identities and their concentration in a single caste as well as religion is conspicuous by its absence among the dalits, who interestingly enough, are almost equal to the Jat Sikhs in terms of their numerical proportion in the total population of the state.

But unlike Jat Sikhs, dalits are sharply divided into thirty-nine castes, fragmented into varied religions (Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity, Buddhism, Ad-Dharm and Ravidassia Dharm), mostly landless, economically marginalized, socially oppressed, and politically neglected. Their being politically neglect is partly attributable to the lack of unity among their varied sub-castes and the resultant failure to have their own exclusive political party. It was perhaps due to this lack of unity amongst themselves that, despite their whopping numerical strength (almost 1/3 of the total population in the state) their own political parties such as the Scheduled Castes Federation, Republican Party of India and Bahujan Samaj Party, were never able to achieve an electoral strength commensurate to the total dalit numerical electoral strength in Punjab. It is in this context of extreme disparity between the otherwise numerically comparable communities of Jat Sikhs and dalits that the distinct pattern of Sikh caste hierarchy assumes critical importance. This unique but often overlooked phenomenon of numerical parity but extreme socio-economic disparity, is what has brought these two communities in open confrontation with each other on one hand,

and impelled dalits to seek refuge in various deras (also divided along their political affiliation with different political parties in the state),[51] on the other.

On the other side of the debate, there are some scholars (Singh 1986a) for whom caste hierarchy within the Panth is a misnomer. And many other scholars of Punjab and Sikhism who simply ignore and avoid the caste question, by implication suggesting that it doesn't exist at all. Jagjit Singh was of the opinion that the phenomenon of caste hierarchy stands on three pillars (i.e. caste ideology, Brahmins, and the caste-society) of Brahminic orthodoxy. Since none of these are found within Sikhism, then it is absurd to talk about caste and caste hierarchy within the Panth (Singh 1986a: 243-263). Moreover, almost all the castes of the 'Sikh caste constituency' have been able to enhance their social status (Singh 1981; Judge 2002: 184), with the Mazhabi and the Ramdassia Sikhs being the only exceptions. Notwithstanding their bottom placing in the Sikh caste hierarchy, Mazhabis and Ramdassias consider themselves superior to their counterparts in the Hindu caste system. Although Ramdassias have originated from Chamars, they considered themselves superior to the latter (Ibbetson 1883 rpt. 1970: 297, 302; Bingley 1970: 62; Marenco1976: 130 & 285-286). Similarly, Mazhabis consider themselves socially superior to Valmikis (their erstwhile community fellows) with whom they don't intermarry (Walia 1993: 226).

Another dimension of distinct social hierarchy among Sikhs is the distinction between the Sahajdhari and the Kesdhari (initiated) orders of the Panth (Oberoi 1992: 377).[52] Though Sahajdhari-Kesdhari dichotomy relates more to the degree of adherence to the core Khalsa identity in the historical evolution of Sikh community and does not fall at all within the caste hierarchy, it impacts the complexity of the latter in its own way. The Kesdhari Sikhs, also known as Khalsa (pure), are generally considered superior to the Sahajdharis. But this does not come true in the case of the Mazhabi Sikhs who, despite being Khalsa, are still allegedly considered inferior to that of Sahajdharis. The latter practiced endogamy and commensality in comparison to that of the Khalsa (Marenco 1976: 43, 50, 63, 64-65, 153&157; Judge 2002:180 &184). A concrete example of this is provided by Rashpal Walia, who has observed that "Nihangs (saint-soldier/immortal) with upper caste background don't partake of food cooked for those with Mazhabi Sikh origin ... Most important, the 'Amritpan' ceremony for the Mazhabi

Sikhs among the Nihang is also separately performed" (Walia 1993: 219 & 250, emphasis in parenthesis added).

Though social mobility among the caste constituency in the Panth is often referred to as one of the greatest achievements of the new religion, which even facilitated some of the lower castes in acquiring the status of dominant castes in the state, that was not an objective of the Panth of Nanak and his nine successors – including *SGGS* as the last, and the final *Sabad* Guru, albeit not in human form – who all worked for the creation of a meticulous egalitarian social order, free from the structures of caste and caste hierarchy. However, soon after the end of the Gurus period, a distinct caste hierarchy re-emerged within the Panth, with Jat Sikhs occupying the top position and dalit Sikhs at the base. Inter-caste marriage and inter-dining are among the prime tests as to the annihilation of caste system.[53] On both these counts a considerable gap persists between the doctrinal principles and the actual practice within the Sikh community, particularly in the context of the dalit Sikhs. Inter-dining and other interactions between the Jat, Khatri, Ramgarhia, Ahluwalia, and other artisan Sikh castes is very fluid. However, barring Khatris, there was not much difference between the social positions of the Jats and that of the other artisan castes even before their conversion to Sikhism. They were all clubbed together in the category of Shudras and commensality was not a taboo for them. However, the status of the dalit Sikhs and their relations with the dominant castes within the Panth remains an intractable problem (McLeod 2000; Grewal 1998: 208). In matters of commensality clear distinctions are made between 'caste' and 'outcaste' members of the Panth (Grewal 1998: 210; Walia 1993: 203&233). The dominant castes (Jats, Khatris and Ramgarhias) continued to identify the Ramdassia, Rangreta and Mazhabi Sikhs by their earlier titles – Chamars and Chuhras – at least in their private conversations (Ibbetson 1883 rpt. 1970: 268-69). "They are still not tolerated within the main halls, and are forced to sit separately in a corner at the entrance of the gurdwaras, including baptized Mazhabi and Ramdassia Sikhs" (Bhullar 2007). In her field based doctoral study of the "Problem of Untouchability among Sikhs in Punjab," Rashpal Walia found that "Mazhabi Sikhs feel that their status in Sikh society is still the lowest … though they are not removers of night soil" (Walia 1993: 264, 266-7).

What we have argued thus far, is that caste hierarchy does exist within the Panth. Valmikis, Mazhabis, Ravidassias, Ramdassias, Rai Sikhs and Sansi Sikhs continued to face discrimination on caste grounds.

This is probably one of the major reasons behind their migration to deras, which has often been a cause of confrontations between them and dominant caste Sikhs. Mushrooming of alternate caste/community-based religious places parallel to that of the mainstream exposed the otherwise immanent caste diversity within the Panth.

## IV
## Endogamy and Sikh Diversity

Endogamy is another explicit indicator of discriminatory practices within Sikh society. Converts continued to follow their previous caste practices regarding connubium and commensality even after receiving the Pahul – Sikh form of initiation (for details see: Cunningham 1849; Grewal 1998: 197; McLeod 1996; Marenco 1976; Singh 1977). Based on his empirical study of caste endogamy among the Sikhs in India and abroad, Sewa Singh Kalsi observed that marriages within castes are the norm and inter-caste marriages are strongly disapproved by Sikhs (Kalsi 1999: 260). In his analysis of the matrimonial columns of newspapers in India, he found that 94 advertisements in the column of Jat Sikh and 120 in other non-Jat Sikh category sought marriage alliances from within their own respective caste communities. Similarly, in UK out of 35 matrimonial advertisements taken up for content analysis, it was found that 24 Jat Sikh, 3 Khatri Sikh, 2 Ramgarhia Sikh, 2 Arora/Khatri Sikh, 1 Saini Sikh, and 3 others also specifically invited marriage alliances from their own respective caste communities (Kalsi 1999: 261). The wide prevalence of intra-caste endogamy among Sikhs in India as well as in the diaspora is further stressed in a recently concluded ethnographic study covering the Jat Sikh community spread over both Newcastle (UK) and the Doaba region of Punjab (Taylor, Manjit and Booth 2007: 341). In a similar study conducted among the Sikhs of Southern California, Anantdeep Singh underlined how the existence of caste among Sikhs is a strong deterrent against inter-caste marriages (Singh 2014: 393-424).

There are some scholars, however, who argue that in comparison to the orthodox Hindu caste system, the principle of caste endogamy is still 'a little weaker' among the Sikhs (Puri 2003: 2698; Singh 1986b: 315-321). This is fine, but given the class and caste background of the Sikh families involved in inter-caste marriages, it can be argued that they are more common among the marginalised Jat Sikh peasants, and even in such cases, the normal practice is that "the Jats willingly accepted women

from the lower castes, but showed no inclination to give their daughters to them" (Judge 2002:180; see also: Singh 1977: 72; Walia 1993:220). Even still, what distinguished the phenomenon of caste within the Sikh society from that of its counterpart in the Hindu religion, argues Jagjit Singh, is that inter-caste marriages are neither considered sacrilegious nor are "…visited by penalties such as those imposed by the caste ideology" (Singh 1989: 293). On the contrary, the opposition in that regard, if any, is more to do with 'prejudice' and 'honour' rather than 'pollution'. To quote him further, "… intermarriages are prevented by sentiment and not by hard and fast rules" (Singh 1989: 293). Prejudice versus pollution apart, the point, however, is that the phenomenon of caste, irrespective of its form, is very much alive within Sikh societies, whether in India or abroad.

Reflecting on the distinction between 'caste' and 'outcaste', Joyce Pettigrew observed: "[t]he only custom in which any solidarity was expressed among the Jats on a caste basis was that in the village they did not visit the houses of Mazhabis, take food from them, eat with them or intermarry with them" (Pettigrew 1978: 44; see also: Grewal 1998: 210; Bains and Johnston 1995: 48). Although the *Jajmani/sepidari* mode of production – the prominent socio-economic structure in Punjab based on traditional patron-client relationship – has ceased to exist, the dominant castes still consider the artisans and those whose ancestors did, or still do, perform menial work, to be *chhotian-jatan/nikia-minia-jatan* (low castes) (Ram 2016a: 34). In this regard, it is appropriate to quote Izmirlian: "Master (Teacher) Gurdial Singh was born a Ramgarhia in 1915. The reality of his caste identification surrounds him like a shroud because Ramgarhias are carpenters and viewed as menials by Jat Sikh agriculturists" (as quoted in Kalsi 1999: 259, emphasis in original).

## V
## Gender and Sikh Diversity

Gender equality, along with decimation of caste, occupies centre-stage within the sacred scriptures of Sikhism. However, with the onset of the process of politicization and institutionalization of the Sikh community sometime after the early Guru period, nuanced behaviours with regard to social dichotomies, including gender, began to take hold within its social fold. Spiritual and social realms are two distinct domains of religion. The former, is mainly concerned with precepts, whilst the latter

deals with the day-to-day functioning of its given lived reality. Doris R. Jakobsh, an eminent scholar of gender Sikh studies, argues that the gender question is often understood as within the sacred realm of the Sikh ideal called 'the realm of apologetics' (Jakobsh 2003). As and when the issue of women's status is brought out within Sikh society, the Sikh ideal of gender equality embedded in the 'Golden Age' of the Gurus as well as scriptural passages about women's equality and doctrinal injunctions against their so-called impurity are brought forward (Jakobsh & Nesbitt 2014: 19). But, as far as the actual position of Sikh women is concerned, there is a yawning chasm between the ground reality and the ideal. Jakobsh was of the opinion that if Sikhism is read with critical feminist approaches, it will unravel its (presently) entrenched gender-bias. In her various seminal field-based studies, Jakobsh has critically explored some of the tangible and intangible sacred and temporal domains of the Sikh religion, vis-à-vis which Sikh women need to be empowered to bring them at par with their male co-religionists.

Space is a constraint in expounding on the details of the various domains where male has been assigned more importance in comparison to female within Sikh society. For instance, the very name *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and sacred scriptures epithets like "sahib", "master", and "lord," are alleged as masculine honorific titles/nomenclature (Shackle & Mandair 2005: l; Jakobsh 2017: 243). The Sikh Gurus, *masands* (designated representatives of the Gurus), and other Sikhs who played key roles in concretizing the Sikh movement were almost overwhelmingly men (Jakobsh 2017: 244). Similarly, the nomenclatures of *Khalsa* ("the pure"; fraternity of saints-soldiers or initiated Sikhs), *Akal Purkh di Fauj* (Army of God) and *Sarbloh* (All Steel), which became an integral part of the terminology of Sikh theology, after its concretization into a well-organized and militarized religious structure since 1699 under the divine stewardship of the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh, are also allegedly considered masculine in content and form (Jakobsh 2017: 243). References to women within *SGGS* were confined only to Mata Khivi, the wife of Guru Angad. N.-G.K. Singh, another feminist Sikh scholar, was of the opinion that even the nomenclature of *Bhagauti* ("The Divine Feminine," another name of Goddess *Durgā*) employed by Guru Gobind Singh for the depiction of the divine has also been masculinized as the "Revered Sword" (N.-G.K. Singh 1993: 118–149 as quoted in Jakobsh 2017: 244). Reflecting on the deeply entrenched patriarchal values of the

Punjabi society, J.S. Grewal, an accomplished scholar of Sikh history, cogently articulated that women within the Sikh community are provided spiritual space but without abandoning embedded patriarchal social structures of inequality and subordination, which moreover, became reinforced with the metaphorical use of conjugal relationship between the Gurus and the divine (Grewal 2009: 216; Jakobsh 2017: 244). This has led Jakobsh to argue that "While there were exceptions to the rule, the ethos dominating the developing Sikh community was clearly patriarchal, hierarchical, and masculine" (Jakobsh 2003: 22-49: see also Jakobsh 2017: 244). She asserts that contrary to the ideal of Sikhism's proclaimed egalitarian values, prevailing Punjabi Sikh values like honour, modesty, and dignity, were preeminent, thus reinforcing the pre-existing gender-based dichotomy and hierarchy of male over female members embedded in the traditional Punjabi society (Jakobsh 2003: 44; Jakobsh 2014: 239; Cf. Grewal 2009: 206-225).

The role of women was further considered to be marginalised within Sikhism, especially by scholars of feminism, after the founding of the "Khalsa" Singh-identity in 1699. The distinct "Singh" ("Lion") identity of the turbaned male followers of the Sikh religion based on the five sacred symbols (five Ks/*kakaars*) – *kara* (steel bracelet), *kangha* (comb), *kachhera*/*kachh* (breeches), *kirpan* (dagger) and *kes* (unshorn hair) – distinguish them from their female counterparts with the "Kaur" ("Princesses") identity as suffix of their name. The "Singh" identity, exclusive to the male members of the Sikh community, ensued from the initiation ceremony, popularly called *Khande-de-pahul*.[54] The sacred institution of *Panj Piare* (all male) emerged during a well-organized congregation at Anandpur Sahib on the Baisakhi day – 30 March/13/14 April 1699 – by Guru Gobind Singh, happened to be bereft of females as none of them came forward at the call of the Guru. The legendary *Panj Piare* volunteered to offer their heads at the call of Guru Gobind Singh, who initiated them into the new order of Khalsa brotherhood and also himself got initiated from them, thus setting a unique example of *vah vah Gobind Singh aape gur chela!* (Hail, Hail, Gobind Singh, who is both Guru and Disciple!). With the passage of time, the Singh/Khalsa-identity (unshorn hair, "Siṅgh" title, weaponry, the turban, and *kachh* [breeches]) became the standard text of what it means to be a Sikh (Jakobsh 2017: 245). This line of thought also implies that the Khalsa identity was crafted as an answer to the then-prevailing martial climate. Whether it was intended to be either permanent or some exclusionary elevated

brotherhood is an open question that needs to addressed while keeping in mind the postulate of gender equality engendered in the *SGGS*. The institutions of the *Panj Piare*, *Khande-de-pahul*, and Khalsa brotherhood were not at all originally intended to exclude females from their purviews as the real purpose for their creation was to nurture an egalitarian and valiant community to stand against all kinds of injustices including indignity and marginalization of women. Since the converts had their roots in the caste-ridden social set-up, it would not be an exaggeration to say that many of them carried along with them their lineage of caste baggage, which eventually gave rise to gender and caste-based dichotomies. It is in this context and in the face of threat posed by competing alternate traditions/groups such as Minas, Dhirmallias Ramraiyas and followers of Masands (discussed below), that the Khalsa identity has acquired a permanency which was perhaps not envisioned by the tenth Guru. Khalsa orthodoxy prevails in all Sikh institutions,[55] perhaps as a pushback against the mushrooming of deras of varied nomenclatures. Over the last few decades, it became more visible among the Sikh diasporas (Singh 2018: 260-279). Though the number of Khalsa Sikhs may be small (20 percent of the total Sikh population) but they are widely regarded as the solid core of the Sikh Panth.[56]

The institution of the sacred ceremony of *Khande-de-Pahul*, as mentioned-above, had the unfortunate effect of further entrenching gender bias within the Sikh community (for details see: Jakobsh 2014: 242). Until the endorsement of the Tat Khalsa vision in 1915, which brought women at par with their male counterparts in the initiation ceremony of *Khande-di-Pahul*, a wide range of gendered practices were sanctioned in varied Sikh manuals. Initially, The *Khalsa Dharam Shastar*, one of the earliest Sikh code manuals, was silent on the administration of the *Khande-de-Pahul* to women. Since this ceremony was originally introduced to organize a warring race of men, women, being non-warrior, were excluded from it. The *Chaupa Singh Rahitnama*, also considered to be one of the earliest, even considered the administer of *Khande-di-Pahul* to women a grievous offence (McLeod, 1987, 186). Though *Prem Sumarag,* yet another early *Rahitnama*, allowed women to receive *Khande-di-Pahul* (McLeod 2006: 26-27), its prescribed short liturgy testified to, and helped undergird, gender differences between male and female members of the community. As against the mandatory tradition of initiation of males by *Panj Piare*, females could be initiated by only one devout Singh (Jakobsh 2003: 210-215), the *Pahul* for females was allowed

to be prepared by using a single-edged sword as against the Khanda (double-edged sword) that was mandatory for the initiation of the male members of the community; also a sword, turban, *kachh* (breeches), and "Singh" title were not required or bestowed upon females.

Yet another difference that underlined the gendered stance of the female Khalsa identity was their black attire against that of the blue of their male counterparts (McLeod 1987: 180 as referred to in Jakobsh 2003: 47-49). Female members, during the initiation ceremony, were also enjoined to be respectful to their husband. Within the female members, widows were distinguished from other women members of the Sikh community by *Kara* (distinct steel bracelet) that they were supposed to wear as a marker of their distinct identity (McLeod 2006: 27; Jakobsh 2017: 245-6). All such gendered practices reinforced the already well-entrenched patriarchal values of the Punjabi Sikh society and thus deepened the gender schism within it (Jakobsh 2003: 44; Jakobsh 2014: 239). Though, the Sikh *Rahit Maryada*, adopted by SGPC[57] on February 3, 1945 vide its resolution number 97 allowed both men and women to be initiated into the Khalsa in equal terms without any kind of difference in the standard practice of the ceremony, Jakobsh argued that only a minority of women undergo initiation (Jakobsh 2014: 242; Jakobsh 2003: 210-235; Jakobsh 2017: 246-7). The sacred ceremony of *Sukhasan* (reverently carrying of *SGGS* to a room in the Akal Takhat to lay to rest for the night) at the Golden Temple, Amritsar, is yet another prominent domain that testifies the prevalence of gender diversity within the Sikh community. Women are not allowed to carry the *palkhi* (palanquin) of *SGGS* in the night from Sri Hari Mandir Sahib to the Akal Takhat amidst chanting and reciting of hymns and blowing of trumpets. And the same sacred ceremony is repeated early in the morning, when the *palkhi* of *SGGS* is brought back from the Akal Takhat to the sanctum sanctorum of Sri Hari Mandir Sahib. Women are also not permitted to read the sacred scriptures and perform *kirtan* at Sri Hari Mandir Sahib. Therefore, in culmination, the gender biases in Punjabi society which preceded the Sikh Gurus appear to have succeeded in gradually reasserting themselves over time, becoming embedded in the very nomenclature and practices of modern Sikhism.

## VI
## Diversity and Deras

The phenomenon of deras[58] is not new to the Punjab. It is, in fact, older than the Sikh faith itself; with its lineage extending to the Nath Sampradaya (Dwivedi 1996; Mallinson 2011: 1-20). Nath Sampradaya (tradition), a conjunction of the ideas of Buddhism, Shaivites, Vedantism and yoga traditions (Briggs 1982: 100; Burchett 2019: 169-175), is the earliest tradition of deras that emerged in Punjab as far back as the 10th century A.D. Founded by yogi Matsyendranath (Kalyani 1954: 11; Singh 1937: 21), deras of this Sampradaya were called shrines/monasteries/*Nath-warah*/*Akhara*s (Ghurye 1953: 154-155). During the 16th century, this Sampradaya, under the leadership of yogi Gorakhnath, the famous disciple of Matsyendranath, occupied centre stage in the Punjab. Eventually, it expanded into twelve Panths (branches) of yogis across the Indian sub-subcontinent (Chandra 2011: 253-254; Briggs 1982: 2-3) – all having close allegiances with yogi Gorakhnath (Briggs 1982: 2-3; Singh 1937: 7; Grewal 1999: 24). The twelve Panths in turn established a large number of Gorakhnathi deras in different parts of India (Grewal 1996: 18; Chandra 2011: 253-254). 'Tilla Yogian,' in the Jhelum district of undivided Punjab, was their headquarters and one of the oldest and most famous establishments of Nath Sampradaya (Grewal & Goswamy 1967: 41). It is commonly believed that Baba Nanak visited 'Tilla Yogian' during his Western *udasi* (preaching tour) and mentioned the names of Matsyendranath, Gorakhnath and Charpatnath in his *bani.* Like the present day deras, the deras of Nath Sampradaya were open to all irrespective of caste, class and creed, and all were welcomed to partake langar – free food in the community kitchen (Rose 1914 rpt. 2008: 397).

Deras of Nath Sampradaya were followed by another early tradition of deras that coincided with the beginning of the Sultanate period in India in the 12th century A.D., particularly with the foundation of the *Chishtiyyah tariqa*/*Silsila* (order) in Ajmer city of Rajasthan of Northwestern India. Founded by Sufi saint Abu Ishaq Shami in Chisht-i-Sharif region of Afghanistan, the Chishti order was established and popularized in India by Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. He visited Lahore in 1190/1192 A.D. (Arberry 1942: xii), reached Delhi in 1193 A.D., during the end of Ghurid reign, and finally settled in Ajmer-Rajasthan in 1206 A.D. (Chandra 2007 rpt. 2009: 241), where he

established his *Khanqah*/*Jama'at Khana*/dera in 1236 A.D., what is now popularly known as the Ajmer Sharif Dargah. It was the first of the four Sufi orders (Chishti, Qadiri, Suhrawardi and Naqshbandi) to be established in this part of the country. Qutab-ud-Din Bakhtyar Kaki, Fariduddin Mas'ud (popularly known as Baba Farid/Shaik Farid) and Nizamuddin Auliya were successors of the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti respectively. They established various Sufi deras in different parts of the country. In Punjab, Chishtiyyah deras got multiplied during the period of Baba Farid (1173/1175-1266), whose *bani* (sacred poetry) is included in the sacred scriptures of *SGGS*.

After the spread of Nath Sampradaya and Sufi deras, Sikh deras cropped up in Punjab during the early period of the historic Sikh Gurus (Mann 2017b: 326). Baba Sri Chand, the eldest son of Baba Nanak, founder of the Sikh faith, established his separate and parallel seat of authority/dera at Dera Baba Nanak, immediately after the passing away of Baba Nanak in 1539. Similarly, Dattu, the eldest son of Guru Angad established his separate religious centre at Khadur, and Mohan, the eldest son of Guru Amar Das followed suit at Goindwal. The later four dissenter sects of mainstream Sikhism – *Prithias*/*Chhota Mel* (lesser clan)/*Minas* (scoundrels), *Dhirmallias* (followers of Dhir Mall, eldest son of Gurditta son of the sixth guru Hargobind), *Ramraiyas* (followers of Ram Rai), and *Masandias* (followers of *Masands*) – also established their deras at different places: Prithias/*Chhota Mel*/*Minas* at Hehar (a village near Lahore, presently in Pakistan), Dhirmallians at Kartarpur, Ramraiyas at present day Dehradun, and Masandias/Handalias/ Niranjanias at Jandiala.

This early Sikh diversity, which exhibited itself in the form of alternate Sikh religious centers/deras, was primarily the outcome of the disgruntled and unsuccessful attempts of the 'fake' claimants to the title of Guru within the evolving mainstream Sikh faith (for details see: Chaturvedi 1951:360-69; Marenco1976: 28-30; Bingley 1970:85-93; Archer 1946:221-226; Grewal 1996:39-46). The sectarian tendencies during the Guru period were encouraged by the Mughal state. With the rise of the Khalsa in the eighteenth century these dissenter sects simply withered away. Only the Udasis and Nirmalas (discussed below) survived because of the Khalsa support to them in lieu of their services towards the care of historical gurdwaras at a time when Khalsa was otherwise engaged in battling the Mughals in guerrilla warfare.[59]

Apart from these early alternate deras of the historic Sikh Gurus' period, many more deras of varied nomenclatures appeared at different intervals on the long and tortuous consolidation of the Sikh religion. Some of the most prominent among them were of: Addan Sahi, Almast, Bala Hasna, Bandei Khalsa (Bandapanthis), Bhagat Bhagwaniye, Bhaktmalliye, Bhaktpanthi, Bindrabani Nanak Sahi, Divana, Gahir Gambharia, Gangu Sahia, Gulabdasi, Handali, Hiradasia, Jitmalliye, Mihanshahiye, Mahima Sahia, Namdhari/Kukas, Nanakpanthis, Nihang, Nirankari, Nirmalas Radhasoami, Ramdas Ka, Sacha Sauda, Sahajdhari, Sangat Sahibiye, Satinamia, Satkartaria, Sewapanthis, Suthrashahi, Singh Ji Mat, Udasi, and Vanjara (Chaturvedi 1951: 361-69; McLeod 1984: 121-133; Mann 2017b: 333; McLeod 1984: 121-133; Oberoi 1994: 24; Singh 2002: 78). Another powerful wave of Sikh deras that brought religious diversity within the Sikh community on the surface is known as Sikh sant tradition. Darshan S. Tatla, in his exploratory study of "19th -21st Century Sants" traced the origins of the Sikh sant tradition to the guru period (Tatla 2017: 368-79). Guru Amar Das, the third Guru, established 22 *manjis* (peripheral religious centers), each headed by a Sikh chosen for his piety (known as a *masand*) to propagate the faith, which also helped distant followers to congregate and to handover their offerings to make them reach the Guru. Eventually each *manji* developed into a Sikh religious place/dera headed by a *masand* to look after its allocated area. Bhai Allah Yaar, Bhai Darbari, Bhai Gangu Shah, Bhai Handal, Bhai Mahesha were some of the *masands* of the *manjis*.

*Nirmalas* (spotless/unsullied/pure/bright) and the *Gianis* (knowledgeable persons in sacred scriptures) constituted yet another early Sikh sant tradition. Popularly thought to have the blessing of Guru Gobind Singh (Tatla 2017: 370), it came to acquire prominent space within the Sikh Panth for quite a long period of time. It is commonly believed that Guru Gobind Singh deputed five of his followers to Haridwar (Hindu Pilgrimage on the bank of the river Ganga in Uttar Pradesh) to gain expertise in Sanskrit language and the Hindu sacred scriptures. Eventually, it became an integral part of the Nirmala sant tradition from the 18th century onwards, to visit Haridwar for learning Sanskrit and the study of Hindu sacred texts. Headquartered in Patiala (*Nirmal Panchayati Akhara*) since 1862, the Nirmala sant tradition established its deras all over Punjab. The *Giani* Sant tradition came to acquire a prominent place within the Sikh community after the Singh Sabha-led movement dislodged *Udasi* mahants (custodian of the

Gurdwaras) from all major historic gurdwaras in the early 20th century (Tatla 2017: 372). The Giani tradition has its two main education training centers of sacred scriptures – Damdami Taksal at Mehta (Amritsar district) and Bhindran (Moga district – which trained *granthis* for Darbar Sahib and other Sikh historic religious places. As compared to Udasi and Nirmala sant traditions, the Giani sant tradition is thoroughly imbibed in the teaching of the Gurus and their egalitarian social order. It has three main lineages of Sikh sants: traditional scholars, sant-martyrs and sants of Damdami Taksal (for details see: Tatla 2017: 372).

Sikh diversity is further enriched by the emergence of a number of popular rural Sikh sant lineages in the early 20th century Punjab. This rural sant lineage grew independently of the above-mentioned three main lineages of the Giani Sant Sampradaya. These popular rural sants have raised their impressive deras/gurdwaras in a large number of villages all over Punjab, thereby adding to the kaleidoscope of the Sikh diversity. Almost every village in Punjab has one or more such deras/gurdwaras built around the personal spiritual aura of their sants or in their sacred memory. Some of the frequently visited rural Sikh sant deras are built in villages of Bhindran, Bhucho Mandi, Harkhowal, Harian Belan, Kaleran, Mastuana, Nanaksar, Rarevala, Ratwara, Reru Sahib, and Takhtupura (Tatla 2017: 337). Many of these deras have allegiance to the Nanaksar tradition formed by Baba Nand Singh and his successor Baba Ishar Singh.

Baba Nand Singh was the disciple of Baba Harnam singh, a Nirmala Sikh of the Bhucho Mandi village of the former princely state of Patiala (Nesbitt 2017: 381). The massive popularity of these rural sant lineages motivated some of them to visit the Sikh diaspora. Sant Teja Singh, Harbans Singh Domelivale, and Sant Amar Singh Barundivale are prominent amongst those who went abroad and catalysed the building of gurdwaras at Victoria, British Columbia, Edmonton (Canada), Stockton (USA), Putney, Birmingham, and Stratford in the UK (Tatla 2017: 378). Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (Takhar 2017: 396), and Sachkhand Nanak Dham (Robinson 2017: 397-402), and Dera Vadbhag Singh gurdwara in Greenford and Coventry (UK)[60] are some more diaspora based alternate Sikh religious traditions that further added to the Sikh diversity. Language, culture and religious traditions of certain migrant Sikh communities to the Deccan (South, Hyderabad) and the North-East India (Shillong and Guwahati), whose forefather participated in the military expeditions of Maharaja Ranjit Singh to help the Nizam of

Hyderabad and the Ahom ruler Assam in 1820, further added to the richness of the Sikh diversity. Similarly, Maharashtrian Sikhs, progeny of those Sikhs who accompanied Guru Gobind Singh in his move to Nanded, also enriched the Sikh diversity (Banerjee 2009: 155-219; Banerjee 2010: 235-273; Banerjee 2012: 87-112; Banerjee 2013: 271-300; Banerjee 2020: 3-30; Singh 2014: 163-170; Singh 2018: 117-134; Singh 2017d: 162-180; Singh 2020: 1-18).

Though many of the above-mentioned alternate Sikh sant lineages reposed faith in the sacred scriptures of the historic Sikh Gurus, some of them produced their own distinct, and vast, literature that was "either neglected or sidelined, as it was considered to be false, i.e. '*kachi bani* ', and any dealings with them were pronounced to be punishable as per the mainstream Sikh code of conduct (Ahluwalia 2017: 334; Mann 2017b: 333). Almost all the Sikh literature produced by the lineages of Udasi and Nirmala sants until 1849, argues Tatla (2017: 371), was soaked in the "Hindu religious discourse with profuse allusions to the Vedas and puranas, and with parallels drawn from the discourses of sastras and Nyaya (one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy). Until recently the names of the heads of many of these alternate Sikh religious centers were not accompanied by the suffix 'Singh', and in one the these deras "the text of the *Guru Granth* that was kept at the central place of worship was quietly replaced by a late 19th-century printed text entitled Lakshmi Tulsi Sagar Granth" in the late 1990s (Mann 2017b: 331-32).

Deras of the Nanaksar sampradaya have many distinctive features that further add to the least discussed phenomenon of Sikh diversity. Nanaksari sants don a white turban, scarf, and cloak in distinction to the blue, yellow or saffron color being used by their counterparts within the mainstream Sikh community. Many of their traditions, ceremonies, and sacred practices are reminiscent of Hindu ascetics: Pictures of sants sitting in meditating on a tiger or leopard skin, calling gurdwara *takhat* (throne), absence of the *Nishan Sahib* (pennant) in the gurdwara, no provision for the preparation of *langar* (communal meal) within the premises of the gurdwaras, and replacing *katha* (religious discourse) by the term *bachan* (Nesbitt 2017: 382-83). They also follow distinctive style of *kirtan* (musical rendering of sacred hymns/devotional singing), *Ardas* (prayer) and *amrit* ceremonies (Singh 1996: 157; Nesbitt 2017: 383). White turbans in a horizontal style of tying, restriction on female followers to conduct service in the gurdwara during *akhand path*, preparation of *Karah prasad* (sacred sweet-meal) to be distributed after the completion of the

*akhand path* by an amritdhari male, and to strictly follow vegetarian diet are some of the distinctive features followed in the religious centers of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (Takhar 2017: 395) that explicitly distinguished them from the identity markers of the mainstream Sikh gurdwaras.

Apart from the above-mentioned varied alternate religious centers, there are some other deras like Radha Soamis (Juergensmeyer 2017: 386-393) and Sacha Sauda (Copeman and Ikegame 2012). Claimed to be non-denominational "social" or "spiritual" (not religious) movements, they are open to everyone (Sikhs, Hindus, and members of all castes irrespective of religious affiliation) alike. Though claimed to be non-sectarian, they too have been able to establish their identities distinct from the mainstream Sikh gurdwaras. Deras of Radha Soamis and Sacha Sauda have an altogether different *Maryada* and guru lineages. Originally, Sacha Sauda is an offshoot of the Radha Soami dera at Beas, near Amritsar that in turn has its origin in the Radha Soami Sampradaya at Dyal Bagh in Agra. Some of these deras, particularly Radha Soamis, have branches in all districts of the state and as well as in other parts of the country. They are also very popular among Punjabi diasporas and have their branches in all countries with sizable Punjabi strength. The composition of these deras is along syncretic lines, with the majority of their followers coming from lower castes: scheduled castes/dalits, backward castes, and poor Jat Sikh peasantry. Ironically, though the majority of their followers are of lower castes, they are often headed by members of the upper castes (Muktsar 2007). Nirankaris and Namdharis have their own distinct centers/deras (Takhar 2014: 350-356; Webster 2017: 351-358; Singh 2017b: 359-367) The chief of the Nirankari deras often belong to the Sikh Khatri caste, and that of the Sacha Sauda and Radha Soamis come from Jat Sikhs of the Sidhu and Dhillon sub-castes respectively. In these deras, along with the scared scriptures of *SGGS*, *bani* sourced from other sacred texts is also recognized, and recited. Idol worship and devotion towards a human guru are not an anathema in non-Sikh deras.

Meeta and M. Rajivlochan have described the phenomenon of above-mentioned deras as an alternate guru movement in Punjab' (Meeta and Rajivlochan 2007:1910). The alternate guru movement with its 'loose syncretistic practices' throws a formidable challenge to Sikh-Khalsa identity. Modernity and apostasy are its two other main adversaries (Swami and Sethi 2007; see also Singh 2007a). Modernity is

considered to be corrupting young Sikhs who become lackadaisical in their observance of the Khalsa principles purported to have been advocated by the tenth Master. Another factor often overlooked in discussing formidable challenge to the Sikh-Khalsa identity, was the interference of the state in the affairs of the Sikh Panth in the twentieth century. Bhindranwala, who at one point of time was supported by the Congress, strove to assert the Sikh-Khalsa identity, in particular by taking up cudgels with a dissident sect, the Nirankaris, and by keeping it unalloyed by the influence of Hindus ceremonial and rituals influences, after he started following his independent course of action (Bal 2019: 1-12; Nayar 2012; Singh 2007b).

Another recent instance of the intermingling of religion and state politics is the controversial case of dera Sacha Sauda and its chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh (Mahaprashasta 2017).[61] These deras, like Radha Soami Beas, Sacha Sauda, Ballan etc., in fact, pose perhaps the most serious challenge to mainstream Sikhism (Swami and Sethi 2007). It is in this context that confrontation between the deras and mainstream Sikhism assumes a critical importance with far-reaching implications for the relationships between dalits and Jat Sikhs in Punjab and the diaspora, especially since many dalit Sikhs visit them and have established their own separate gurdwaras/deras. In contrast, the mainstream Sikh deras both draw a large majority of their followers from the Jat Sikh community and are invariably run by Jat Sikhs – it is a rarity for the head of a Sikh dera to be a non-Jat Sikh. Even if there would be one that would never be a Ramdassia/Ravidassia/Mazhabi Sikh. The participation of dalit Sikhs in Sikh deras is mainly confined to the narration of the sacred scriptures and the performing of Kirtan (for detail see: Ram 2004a: 5-7).

**Sikh Faith, Dalits & Deras**

The unfortunate reality of the prevalence of social discriminations based on the institution of caste within the Sikh community – which runs completely against the teachings of the founding Gurus – together with the rise of dalit consciousness, led to the emergence of deras of varied nomenclature as a "counter public" (Hardtmann 2009; Narayan 2011). [62] These discriminatory social practices, the baggage of Sikhism's erstwhile Hindu varna system backdrop, initially led the Bhatra and Ramgarhia communities, highly mobile and entrepreneurial, to establish their separate Sikh gurdwaras both within East Punjab as well as within other

states of India and abroad too. Dalits followed in the footsteps of these two socially upward mobile non-untouchable lower caste communities in establishing their own gurdwaras/deras dedicated to spiritual mentors of their respective castes – mainly Bhagwan Valmiki and Guru Ravidass (Ram 2010: 271-90). Dalits in Punjab constitute 31.94 percent of the total population of the state, which is largest in comparison to their counterparts in all other states in the country and much higher than their overall national share (16.6 percent). The share of the dalit population in Punjab is more distinct in its rural sector – 73.33 percent against 26.67 percent of the urban dalit population (Ram 2017b: 45). In other words, dalits live mostly in villages (Puri 2004: 3-4).

Historically, villages in Punjab have been divided into two segments: *pinds* (mainstream villages inhabited by upper/dominant castes), and dalit settlements, contemptuously called *vehras*, *thathees* and *chamarhlees* by the upper castes (Ram 2016a: 33). In addition to upper/dominant castes, various artisan/backward castes including Ramgarhias and Ahluwalias also live in pinds. But dalits – irrespective of whether they were Sikh or Hindu – were forced to reside exclusively in these separate dalit neighbourhoods, which were located on the Southwestern periphery of villages. Dalit neighbourhoods were mostly built on *mauroosis/shamlats* (village common land). Under the local customary law of *razat-namas*, dalit Sikhs were denied property rights on their segregated residential plots, which were historically owned by the agricultural castes. Under the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, dalit Sikhs were further marginalized. They were deprived of the right to buy agricultural land, as were the other non-agricultural castes. Until the adoption of the constitution of Independent India, dalit Sikhs along with their Hindu counterparts were not allowed to build pucca (concrete) houses in their segregated neighbourhoods. The situation is entirely different now. The segregated dalit neighbourhoods are now projected as contesting site of the rising dalit consciousness (Ram 2016a: 32-39).

Moreover, even for their *kucha* (mud) houses, dalits were supposed to do *Bega*r – unpaid customary labour (Puri 2008: 320). *Begar* in the form of *siris* (attached labourers/sharecroppers) under the s*epidari* or *jajmani* (patron-client) system was common until recently. Surinder Jodhka in his empirical study published in 2002 reported that in 26 villages in the Malwa region, he found 21 dalits working as *siris* (Jodhka 2002: 1816). The women of the dalit Sikh siris had to clean the cowsheds and make *pathians* (dung cakes) for the hearth of their jajmans (landlords). In

return, they were given a few chapattis, buttermilk and some fodder for their cattle, in what was effectively a form of barter. Although in present-day Punjab, such work is now performed on non-jajmani basis, there are still many dalit Sikhs in the Malwa region who work as siris. An empirical study of 26 villages in the Malwa region showed that dalit Sikhs were working as *siris* in 21 of them (Jodhka 2002: 1816). It is primarily in this region also that dalits have been struggling under the banner of the Zameen Prapati Sangharsh Committee, an informal Left-wing organisation, since 2009 for their share of 33 percent of agricultural village common land reserved for them under the Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Act (Moudgil 2019; Martin 2015: 41-42). Apart from the oppressive working conditions under the *siris* system and the denial of their due share in the village common agricultural land, dalit Sikhs were/are not allowed to cremate their dead on the main cremation grounds of the villages. This is instead done in their separate cremation ground. In some villages even the *shamlat* lands meant for the dalit cremation grounds have been grabbed by the upper castes (Puri 2008: 323-24). It is this backdrop of denial of their economic rights and the malady of social exclusion that pushed a large number of dalit Sikhs towards deras of varied nomenclatures in Punjab – a clear testimony of the widening but conflictual state of caste and religious diversity within the Sikh Panth. Ironically, this was a motivation once attributed to Jats in their flocking towards Sikhism.

**Dalit Sikh/Ravidassia Deras**

Dalit Sikh deras are mainly Ravidass deras. Interchangeably known as temples, gurdwaras or simply deras, Ravidassia deras began emerging in Punjab in the early twentieth century. A vernacular field study completed in 2003 puts their number as around 100 (Qadian 2003). Since then many more such deras have come into existence in Punjab (Ram 2008:1343). Ravidass deras devised their own separate rituals, ceremonies, slogans, symbols, auspicious dates, customs, *ardas* (prayer), *kirtan*, religious festivals and some other iconography. The entire array of religious and cultural activities in Ravidass deras revolves around the teachings and life of Sant Ravidass. Many Ravidass deras have erected state-of-the-art buildings equipped with all modern utilities as a signature of their upward social mobility. In order to look different from both the Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples, Ravidass deras designed their architecture by combining both of them. Idols of Guru Ravidass are

installed and worshipped in the sanctum sanctorum of these deras. Guruship is also bestowed on the head priests of the Ravidass deras, popularly known as *gaddi nashins* (heads of deras). Calendar posters printed in the image of Guru Ravidass decorate the walls of the premises of these deras. Many Ravidass deras have replaced the sacred scriptures of the mainstream Sikh religion with their own recently prepared sacred scriptures reverently called *Amritbani Satguru Ravidass Maharaj* (Arsh 2012).

The phenomenon of Ravidass deras has taken the form of a new socio-cultural dalit movement. It is popularly known as the 'Ravidassia movement' or the 'Ravidass deras dalit movement'. Led by the sants of Dera Ballan, this new dalit socio-cultural movement 'is silently sweeping the Punjab countryside offering a new hope to the untouchables, particularly the Chamars', argues V.T. Rajshekar, editor of the *Dalit Voice* (Rajshekar 2004: 3). It has generated a sense of confidence among some sections of dalit Sikhs and provided them with an opportunity to burnish their dalit identity. The movement of Ravidass deras, argues Rajshekar, 'reflects the fast-changing socio-cultural scene of Punjab where the once powerful and revolutionary Sikh religion is failing to meet the needs of the oppressed who discovered a remedy to cure their wounded psyche in the Ballan experiment' (Rajshekar 2004: 3).

Dera Ballan has become a paragon of the Ravidass movement in northwest India. It has also been regulating the affairs of various Ravidass Deras overseas through its international trusts. Their central concern has been to present themselves as different from the Sikh gurdwaras, and to provide an alternative religious domain where their followers need not hide their identity and meekly suffer the onslaught of social exclusion. Their distinctiveness also lies in the fact that they neither take refuge in any of the established theologies, nor present themselves as emulating the dominant socio-cultural ethos of upper-caste society. On the contrary, they proudly differentiate themselves from the mainstream religious systems and also contest the long-imposed supremacy of those systems over dalits.

Another key factor that underlines the assertion of a separate identity by the Ravidass deras is the distinct nomenclature preferred by its priests, distinguishing them from their counterparts in Sikh gurdwaras. The titles of the last names of the sants of Ravidass deras are "Dass" (humble). It seems that they have inherited the tradition of suffixing the title "Dass" from their Guru Ravidass, whose first name is

suffixed with Dass. The Sikh title "Singh" invariably follows the first names of male Sikhs initiated in the Khalsa. Though Sants of Ravidass deras keep unshorn hair, a flowing beard and don a turban, like that of the Khalsa Sikhs, they still do consider themselves different from Sikhs. Some of the heads of Ravidass deras were also clean-shaven. *Har* (Supreme Being), the insignia of Ravidass deras, known as *koumi nishan* (community symbol) of the Ravidassia Samaj, is yet another distinct identity marker that endows them with a separate identity.

The religious symbol of the Sikh gurdwaras is *khanda* (a two-edged sword over a quoit with two crossed sabres below the quoit). The insignia *har* is composed of a sun-like circle with an image of forty rays on its circular edge. The forty rays round the circle of the insignia signify the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass included in *SGGS*. Within the circle, there is another smaller circle within which *har* is inscribed in Gurmukhi script with the sign of a flame on the top of it. The flame represents the *nam* (word) that illuminates the entire world. The sign of the flame crosses over into the bigger circle. In between the larger and smaller circles is written a couplet: *Nam tere ki joti lagayi, bhaio ujiaro bhavan saglare* (Your name is the flame I light; it has illuminated the entire world). This inner circle couplet is taken from one of the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. The insignia *har* represents the very being of Guru Ravidass and his teachings. The insignia *har* is chosen after the name of their Guru (*Ravi* [Sun] + *Dass* [Servant] = Servant of the Sun). The dalits, especially the Chamars of Punjab, proudly hoist flags with the image of *har* over their religious centers, atop vehicles during processions on the occasions of Guru Ravidass's birth anniversaries and other festivities, and raise slogans such as *Guru Ravidass Shakti Amar Rahe* – long live the grace of Guru Ravidass (Ram 2017c: 66-70).

The insignia *har* has become a distinct marker of a separate dalit identity. It is also being circulated in the form of souvenirs, stickers and wall calendars printed in the image of Guru Ravidass. The format of the *ardas* (a formal prayer recited at most Sikh rituals) performed in the Ravidass deras also differentiates them from the Sikhs gurdwaras. It is comprised of a *shloka* (couplet) and one of the forty hymns of Guru Ravidass. The *ardas* closes with the utterance *Bole So Nirbhay, Sri Guru Ravidass Maharaj Ki Jai* (Fearless is the one who utters: Victory to Shri Guru Ravidass), whereas in the Sikh religion the *ardas* concludes with *Bole So Nihal, Sat Sri Akaal* (Blessed is the one who utters: True is the Immortal One). The reference to *nirbhay* (fearless) in the conclusion of

the *ardas* of the Ravidass deras has become a central motif of dalit consciousness within Punjab and diasporas as well (Takhar 2005: 112-113). The inclusion of this word, *nirbhay,* in the *ardas* of Ravidass Deras is thus not only symptomatic of the historical oppression of the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, but is also indicative of their determined willingness to confront it head-on.

The salutations in the Ravidass deras have also been formulated selectively in order to project their separate identity. *Sat Sri Akaal* (True is the Immortal One) is the greeting of the Sikhs. Ravidass Deras adopted the greeting *Jai Gurudev* (victory to the divine Guru) or *Jai Guru Ravidass* (victory to Guru Ravidass) to which they reply *Dhan Guru Dev* (blessed the divine Guru). The forms of *ardas*, insignia and salutations adopted by the sants of Ravidass deras have thus become distinct markers of their separate identity which not only differentiate them from the mainstream religious communities in Punjab but also proclaim them to be prominent dalit social and religious sites. Ravidass deras, in fact, have become a testing ground for the cultivation of a separate dalit identity in the form of a 'separate religion based on the *bani* (sacred scriptures) of Guru Ravidass Ji' (Lum 2010). In other words, Ravidass deras, as mentioned above, have evolved into a nursery of distinct symbols, icons, signifiers and narratives of a separate dalit identity that have helped greatly in shaping the contours of a separate Ravidassia Dharm, which was formally declared on January 30, 2010 (for details see: Ram 2016: 371-383).

The distinctiveness of Ravidass deras lies in the fact that they proudly distinguish themselves from the mainstream religious systems and also contest the supremacy of the dominant castes over dalits. Such differences have increased polarization between the Sikh and dalit Sikhs within the state as well as those in diasporas itself. This has led to bitterness, provocations, confrontation and even violent clashes between Dalits and dominant castes (for details: Ram 2004c: 895-912; Ram 2009: 1-34; Ram 2016: 371-383). The emergence of dalit consciousness in Punjab and its manifestation in the form of separate dera-based religious identity have immense importance from the perspective of the interests of marginalized sections of Punjabi society on the one hand, and the politicization of the sacred sphere in the state, on the other. It is in this specific context that the distinct identity of dalit Sikhs assumes critical importance and strengthens diversity within the Sikh community.

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**Notes**

[1] From Punjabi word *path* – a 'way'; system of religious believes/practices – the term *Panth* is derived. It refers to Sikh community having its distinct system of belief/practice of religiosity as well as unique socio-cultural and political world view of *Miri-Piri* in which the temporal and spiritual authority (state and religion) are inextricably blended/combined in Guru, the spiritual Master (Smith 1948: 461). For more details see: McLeod 1978: 287-95.
[2] The original scribe of the *Adi Granth* also revered as *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*; hereafter *SGGS*.
[3] The erstwhile nomads who finally settled as agriculturists in the northwest plains of India since the thirteenth century.
[4] Ascendency of Jat Sikhs started taking shape within Sikh religion by the sixth decade of the 17th century. During the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, they were able to consolidate their position to a large extent (Alam 1982:99; Singh 1982:147).
[5] Mainly urban mercantile/business caste.
[6] These are some of the various sub-castes/gotras within the main Khatri caste. Gotras are generally exogamous units within the endogamous castes. For an instance members of Khatri caste will marry within the Khatri caste but not in the same gotra.

[7] Priestly caste.
[8] Also spelled Ghumiar.
[9] Also spelled Suniar
[10] Also spelled Bhatra/Bhattra/Bhatia. Traditionally panegyrist, they were also called Bhatt, Bhat, Bhatta, Bhatraju, Bhatrai, priest, scribe, poet, and bard. For details see: (Ghuman 1980: 308-316; Nesbitt 1981: 70-72; Nesbitt 2017: 222).
[11] Koer Singh was the contemporary of Bhai Mani Singh who had the honour of meeting seventh, eight, and ninth Gurus. Bhai Mani Singh had long association with Guru Gobind Singh until the departure of the latter towards the southern part of the country. Koer Singh's narrative about the life of Guru Gobind Singh published under the title '*Gurbilas Patshahi 10* [Punjabi]' is the first work of its kind that provides authentic description about the life of the 10th Guru. This one of the earliest work is based on Koer Singh's interactions with Bhai Mani Singh. (For details see: Singh 1968: vii-xxvi).
[12] Also spelled Labanas. They are traders/transporters/agriculturists par excellence.
[13] *Mukta*, plural of Sanskrit '*mukti*' – liberation/emancipation from ego, worldly misdeeds and fears, cycle of birth and death, envy, enmity, ager, pleasure, sensual temptations, indulgence, and greed. There are two prominent uses of the term *Mukta* in valorous Sikh tradition: *Muktas* of Chamkaur Sahib and of Muktsar Sahib.
[14] Subedar (Governor) of Sirhind.
[15] A town in Ropar district of East Punjab, where Guru Gobind Singh stopped for a while on the night of 5 and 6 December 1705 after leaving his headquarter at Anandpur Sahib.
[16] Also spelled Gujjars/Gurjaras. They are an ethnic pastoral community traditionally involved in diary and livestock farming.
[17] Also spelled Jheers or Jhinwars or Jhivers.
[18] Also spelled Kambojs or Kambos.
[19] Also spelled Mahatams. Traditionally farmers/hunters/fishermen/distillers
[20] Chuhras are sweepers. They are also called Balmiks/Balmikis/Valmiks/Valmikis.

[21] Both these terms are used here in the academic context without any reference to prejudice whatsoever. Chamar is an umbrella caste category. According to the official list of Scheduled Castes issued under the "Constitutional (Scheduled Castes) order 1950 and (Amendment) Act, 1976 (Amnedment) Act, 2002 and (Second Amendment) Act, 2002, it clubbed together Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, Ravidasi, Ramdasia, Ramdasia Sikh, Ravidasia, Ravidasia Sikh (https://punjabxp.com/list-scheduled-castes-punjab/ accessed: September 2, 2020). It also includes Julahas (weavers) and Mochis (leather workers) within its wider caste fold. Julahas and Mochis are called Ramdassias and Ravidassias respectively.
[22] Who otherwise were considered as Shudras or at the most Vaishyas in Hindu caste hierarchy, and raised their status only when they joined the Panth.
[23] As listed in the Imperial Caste Table of the Census of India, 1931, Vol. 17, Punjab, Part 2.
[24] I am thankful to writer Amarjit Chandan for bringing this point to my notice.
[25] Also called Balmikis.
[26] Giani Pratap Singh (1933: 146-147&156-157) and Harjot Oberoi (1994: 106-107) in their writings noted that Mazhabis, Rahtia and Ramdassia Sikhs were not allowed beyond a certain point to enter the Golden Temple and their *degh* (offering of *Karah Prasad*) was not accepted by the Sanatani priests. Oberoi based his account on the *Khalsa Dharam Sastra* of 1914, an authoritative manual, which referred to the exclusion of lower caste Sikhs (Puri 2004: 205-206).
[27] It was against this discriminatory practice that on October 12, 1920 a group of Mazhabi Sikhs took a procession for the purpose of entering into the premises of Golden Temple. With the support of some of the Professors of the Amritsar Khalsa College and students, the organisers of the procession were able to put an end to this social evil of restrictions on the entry of Mazhabi Sikhs beyond a particular point in the Golden Temple complex. Dalit and Minorities Organization (DAMO), an organization of Mazhabi Sikhs recently celebrated the centenary of on this historic event in Amritsar on October 12, 2020. For details see: (Singh IP: 2020; Singh and Hans 2020).
[28] The term dalit (literally, broken/oppressed/grounded) is the "politically correct" nomenclature, which was deployed by the Mahar community in the late twentieth century for the Untouchables, those people who have traditionally been placed at the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy. The *Varnashramdharma* divided Hindu society into four Varnas (hereditary occupational categories): *Brahmina* (priest), *Kshatriya* (soldier), *Vaishya* (trader), *Shudra* (artisan). The untouchables were the 'unclean' outcastes. They were placed beyond the Varna order and relegated even further down the Shudras, the last and the lowest Varna category. Variously known as *Avarnas*, *Ati Shudras*, *Achhutes*, *Chandalas*, *Antyajas*, *Pariahs*, *Dheds*, *Panchamas*, *Anariyas*, *Namashudras*, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, they used to perform hereditary menial

occupations often considered polluted, such as animal carcass removing, scavenging, shoe-making etc. (For details see: Ambedkar n.d.; Chopra 1982: 121-122; Beltz 2005: 39; Ram 2001: 146-170).

[29] For details of Sikh gurdwaras abroad see: (Hutter 2017: 452-55; Johnston 2017: 470-71; Ilkjaer 2017: 481-83; Hirvi & Timonen 2017: 485-86; Moliner 2017: 490-91; Stephanus 2017: 495-97; Papageorgiou 2017: 500; Bertolani 2017: 505-08; Sato 2017: 510-13; Singh & Kaur 2017a: 519-21; Jacobsen 2017: 534; Lourenco 2017: 540-43; Bochkovskaya 2017: 547-49; Mishra 2017: 552-54; Santos-Fraile 2017: 559-60; Myrvold 2017: 563-66; Baumann 2017: 569-71; Singh & Kaur 2017b: 574-75; Singh 2017a: 578-79; Singh 2017:584-595).

[30] Based on author's WhatsApp conversation with Amarjit Chandan on August 24-26, 2020. Born in Nairobi in 1946, Chandan returned to his native place Nakodar in Punjab in 1957 along with his father, Gopal Singh Chandan, who spent most of his life in Kenya (Chandan 2004).

[31] It is important to mention here that some members of the Ramgarhia community did not approve the construction of separate community gurdwaras (Chandan 2004: 12-14).

[32] The area between the rivers Sutlej and Beas is called Doaba, south to river Sutlej is Malwa, and the area that falls between Beas and Ravi rivers is called Majha.

[33] Traditionally sweepers/leather dyers.

[34] During the field study the author did not find Nais and Chhimbas being considered Ramgarhias.

[35] Also termed by Marenco as an artisan caste (Marenco 1976: 176).

[36] I am indebted to Professor Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA for making be aware of this important factor of economy induced caste consciousness.

[37] For a critical viewpoint on 'Jat cultural pattern' and militarisation of the Sikh movement see: Singh 1989: 214-233; Singh 1986c: 325-385.

[38] *Sahajdhari* Sikhs are non-Khalsa Sikhs, who do not follow the prescribed *Rahit* - Sikh code of conduct – precisely because of their being not initiated by *Khande-di-Pahul* practice/ceremony. The *Panj Piare* (five beloved), pioneers of the Khalsa order, who took the maiden *Khande-di-Pahul* from Guru Gobind Singh were: Bhai Daya Singh, Bhai Mokham Singh, Bhai Sahib Singh, Bhai Dharam Singh and Bhai Himmat Singh.

[39] Based on author's telephonic conversation with Tarlochan Singh, former Chairman of Indian Minority Commission and Member of Parliament, held during the beginning of July 2016.

[40] Based on author's communication with A.S. Narang, an academic settled in New Delhi, during the beginning of July 2016.

[41] Based on author's WhatsApp conversation with Amarjit Chandan, August 25, 2020.

[42] Based on author's WhatsApp conversation with Amarjit Chandan, august 25, 2020.
[43] Also spelled Sahib.
[44] *Akhand Path* is the common practice of uninterrupted recitation (continuously/without any break of SGGS from the beginning to end. It is normally completed within 48 hours. As against this common practice, the recitation of *SGGS* from its first *ang* (page) to the last one, at the reader's own pace, is called *Sahaj/Khulla* or *Sadharan path*.
[45] Musical rendering of hymns from the sacred scriptures of *SGGS*.
[46] Those who recite/read the sacred scriptures and perform various sacred duties at the sanctum sanctorum of Darbar Sahib and other Sikh gurdwaras.
[47] The most popular Ravidassia dera, also known as Dera Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass ji or simply Dera Ballan, is situated on the Jalandhar-Pathankot road about twelve kilometers away from Jalandhar city of East Punjab.
[48] Based on author's interviews with some of followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan during the last week of May 2009.
[49] However, as far as the veracity of authorship of the *shloka* is concerned, a difference of opinions prevails among the scholars. Sahib Singh and Jasbir Singh Sabar, eminent scholars of Sikh scripture, are of the opinion that the *shloka* in question was of Kabir – listed in the Kabir bani, *Shloka* 242, at page 1377 of the SGGS – whereas Bhai Jodh Singh, Dharampal Singhal and John Stratton Hawley, equally celebrated academic on this subject, considered that it was authored by Ravidass (Singh 2000: 49; Hawley 1988: 12; Singhal 1986, 75; see also Singh 1999: 20-25). The *Shloka* 242 was also included in the Bani of Ravidass compiled and published by Dera Ballan (Arsh 2012: 196; and Jassi & Suman: 2001:327).
[50] Narinderpal Singh in his empirical study of the caste profile of the members of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Cmmittee (SGPC) found that 80 percent of its administrative posts were under the control of the Jat Sikhs, 15 percent were managed by other castes and only 5 percent were with the Mazhabis and Ramdassia Sikhs. All the three secretaries of the SGPC were Jat Sikhs. Out of the additional secretaries three were Jat Sikhs, one was Lubana Sikhs and two belonged to Other Backward Castes (Singh 2007a).
[51] Recent controversy over Ravidassia *vs* Adi Dharm to be included as separate columns in the 2021 Census for the SC communities in Punjab highlights the politicization process of dalit dera affairs. (For details see: Arora 2020).
[52] Jugdep Chima differentiates (based on my personal communication with him) between "Sahajdhari" (those who believe in the SGGS, but cut their hair), "Kesdhari" (those who believe in the SGGS, but keep their hair), and "Khalsa Sikhs" (those who believe in the SGGS, and wear all of the 5K's after baptism.)
[53] Like caste in India, racism refuses to decimate in the so-called liberal democratic countries of the Western and North American worlds. Black churches faced attack from the white ultra-radicals even though both sides are Christians.

Is it something to do with the very religion of Christianity? Such conflicts have their roots deeply entrenched in the cultural prejudices of the people across the cartographical boundaries of their civilizations. Similar differences followed by violent clashes between varied groups are often reported from within the Islamic world. Such conflicts are neither the product of religious prejudices nor the failure of the teachings of the precursors of faiths of Christianity and Islam. The same applies to the youngest religion of Sikhism. Caste is the problem of the community of the Sikhs, but not of the Sikh religion *per se*. (Based on author's conversation with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 27, 2020).

[54] Sweetened water (*amrit*), stirred in an iron bowl with a double-edged sword (*Khanda*) – which is administered by *Panj Piare* (five beloveds).

[55] Based on author's personal communication with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 26-28, 2020.

[56] Based on author's personal communication with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 26-28, 2020.

[57] Prepared by its *Rahit Maryada* sub-committee and approved by the All-India Sikh Mission Board on August 1, 1936 vide resolution number 1; and by the SGPC on October 12, 1936 vide its resolution number 149; and further modified by its Religious Advisory Committee on January 7, 1945. Based on author's WhatsApp discussion with Giani Avtar Singh, Birmingham (UK) on July 24, 2020.

[58] Dera literally means a holy abode free from the structural bindings of institutionalized religious orders and is the headquarters of a group of devotees owing allegiances to a particular spiritual person, who is reverently called Baba, Sant or Maharaj. Dera thrives on a distinct philosophy, rituals and symbol, which are inspired by the teachings and philosophy of a particular holy person after whom it has been formed.

[59] Based on author's personal communication with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 26-28, 2020.

[60] Based on author's WhatsApp conversation with Amarjit Chandan, August 25, 2020.

[61] Based on author's personal communication with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 26-28, 2020.

[62] Professor Pashaura Singh shared his experiences with me of the recent visit to his native village. He was of the opinion that it was not social discrimination but the rise of Dalit consciousness along with economic success, reservations, and diaspora situation that eventually led to the emergence of dalit deras. In his own words: "I went to my village in 2019 and found out that Guru Ravidas Gurdwara was built in addition to our original Gurdwara Patti Dhaliwal. In my younger days there was no such thinking and all people would gather in the same Gurdwara. I remember Bhai Nazar Singh (a Ravidassia Singh) was a member of

our executive committee. We used to go to his house many times and shared tea or langar at some functions. I was startled to see this new development. The President of Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, who is also the Sarpanch of our Dhaliwal Patti told me about this new development. However, they had installed the Guru Granth Sahib in the Gurdwara and had no intention to replace it with newly prepared Ravidas Granth. Most of them were Amritdhari Singhs. The Granthi delivered a sermon on Sukhmani Sahib. So, they felt proud of building a Gurdwara of their own, but there was no conflict with other Sikhs (Jats, Ramgarhia or other castes). This new development did not arise from any kind of discrimination. I think the situation in Doaba region is entirely a different phenomenon" (Based on author's personal communication with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 27, 2020.

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