

Intersectionality of Deras, Social Capital and Conflict Formation: Dera Sacha Sauda as an Exemplar

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Deras are generally perceived as an alternative socio-religious space frequented mostly by lower castes and economically weaker sections of the society. Pushed to the margins of society, such lower-caste and lower middle-class people are historically deprived of their due share in both formal and informal structures of power and common resources. This exclusion further precludes them from gaining necessary education and other capabilities to effectively compete with the upper castes and wealthier sections of society. Though affirmative action measures were enacted by the state for their upliftment, the overall deterioration in public health, education, and employment opportunities, especially after the adoption of neo-liberal reforms in the early 1990s, militated against the conferment of the envisioned advantages. Religion and caste-based oppressive social structures further reinforced the economic backwardness and social exclusion of the deprived sections of society. It is against this backdrop that the *deras'* promises of making a significant difference in the lives of such vulnerable sections of the society, by lending them much needed moral and social support, needs to be interrogated. It is generally agreed that such promises are the *deras'* foremost allure. Banished from participation in the mainstream public domain, the deprived sections of society are provided with what has come to be called the 'subaltern counter public' within the premises of *deras*. The vast expanse of social capital groomed by *deras* seems to provide them fertile ground, which in turn also leads to socio-religious conflict formation with the adherents of mainstream religions in the region. The growth of *deras* could thus be seen as an index of expanding alternative socio-cultural and syncretic religious space, with serious implications for intercommunity relationship between followers of mainstream religions and *dera*-based alternatives. It is against this backdrop that *deras* need to be studied from the perspective of their contribution towards the generation of social capital on the one hand and conflict formation between their followers and those of mainstream religions, on the other.

I. Problematising Deras

Etymologically speaking, Dera,¹ which comes from the Persian word *derah* or *dirah*, has several connotations: dehra, dero, daro, dhoru, dahar. It is a Sindhi, Kutchi, Saraiki, Punjabi, Gujarati and Dogri language word (Nabha, 2004: 421; Singh, 1997: 553). Frequently referred to as sacred places in the medieval period of India, deras resemble pagan sites free from the moral and authoritative structural bindings of institutionalised religious rituals and ceremonies where people belonging to different faiths, regions, languages, castes and classes converge together to seek blessings of their spiritual mentors, popularly known as babas, and find solace and sources of resolution of their mundane problems. A dera is a dwelling, abode, residence or camp of a baba, monk, sant, mahant, pir, murshid, bhagat, sadhu or guru,² who is supposed to be a person of high moral and spiritual values, and it is around him that core identity of a dera is established (Batra and Prabhakar, 2024; Pattanaik, 2017; Singh, 1997;). Thriving on distinct philosophy, teachings or a way of life of a particular holy person/baba, deras are believed to have large constituencies of followers among socially deprived and economically insecure sections of society whom they often tend to lure by motivated charity and preying on their insecurities by offering hope for a better future in contrast to a bleak reality of discriminatory social structures and a withered, minimalist 'welfare' state.

Neo-liberalism, Widening Inequities and Deras

In the wake of the rise of a faceless globalisation, the neo-liberal market regimes have, as argued by Ajay Gudavarthy, 'created their own antidote in foregrounding visible interpersonal interactions,' which 'made the formlessness of God less appealing. God in flesh and blood (babas), feels more enticing.' He further argues that '[t]he euphoric appeal of *babas* becomes even starker when it's understood in the context of the fading stardom in Bollywood, the irreverence of politicians and public representatives and the normalisation of the heroics of cricketers and other sportsmen' (Gudavarthy, 2004). The overall negation of champions of eminent domains further emboldened babas of all hues to fill this void by projecting themselves as saviours of the victims of the neo-liberal market economy. As argued by Santosh Singh, 'Gone are the days of babas, who were hermits, renunciants and ascetics' (Singh, 2024). They

dress themselves fabulously and equip their deras with state-of-the-art gadgets and facilities. Known for spiritual, psychological, social, material, and even political importance, babas and their deras were and continue to be instrumental in helping their adherents to reconstruct distinct socio-religious identities in the wake of neo-liberal reforms. Given their wider social reach and moral acceptability, deras often act as credible agencies for the convergence of elites and commoners, rich and poor, as well as reputed state functionaries and other ordinary mortals of the civil society.

Close affinities between babas and their ardent followers, on the one hand, and between babas, politicians and bureaucrats, on the other, at a time when the erstwhile welfare state has to contend with a parallel neo-liberal market regime, have not only augmented the personal aura of babas but also hugely expanded the social, political and cultural reach of deras. Instead of resolving the contradictions between caste and class, neoliberal market reforms have further deepened this divide by undermining the capacity of the state to resolve discrimination of lower castes and weaker sections of society by reducing inequality in social and economic domains. In an agrarian economy, caste and class are often correlated. Castes among Scheduled Castes (SCs) are mostly embedded in lower classes, whereas 'upper castes are frequently found in higher classes with access to larger landholdings and formal, salaried, "skilled" work' (Karamchedu, 2024:5; also see, Maiorano *et al*, 2022: 217-48). As most of India's population (about 65 per cent) lives in rural areas, land ownership can be a critical palliative for rampant inequality. The neo-liberal reconfiguration of the State has impeded both the federal government and the states in taking steps to bridle inequality through the introduction of land reforms and/or distribution of the surplus land of the villages to landless lower castes – which ironically are often the actual cultivators/agricultural labourers of this very land, who have been struggling for cultivating rights for quite some time (Moudgil, 2019; Singh and Bhagirath, 2023; Singh, 2024; Venkatesh, 2017).

Thus, the induction of neo-liberal economic reforms in India has further complicated the resolution of preexisting contradictions between caste and class and *Savarnas* and *Avarnas* (upper and lower castes respectively). Though the neo-liberal economic reforms were adopted to counteract the impending menace of a fiscal crisis and to help India rid itself of its chronic poverty, the latter situation has taken a severe turn for the worse, and become a task of herculean proportions. Chronic poverty is now not only an economic issue rooted in the Indian hierarchical social

order, but has been complicated further by an omnipresent neo-liberal market economy (for details see, Khilnani, 1999; Alam, 2004: XVII; Jenkins, 1999; Kumar, 2000: 803-12; Nayyar, 2007: 361-96; Thorat, 2023; Thorat, 2010). In a Global South country like India, where neo-liberalism-based free market economy has been deepening its roots since early 1990s, with a frayed hole-ridden social security net and an uncaring society which adulates 'winners' and consigns 'losers' to the wastebasket of a collective amnesia, *deras* – with their promises of community, spiritual purpose, and social amenities – are seen by many, and especially socially disadvantaged groups, to offer a sanctuary, a safe haven, from their harsh daily realities. From this equation, it is but one further step for the heads of major *deras* to be projected as saviours, and not only of their faithful congregations but of humanity at large, becoming transcendental and 'Messengers of God' (Atri, 2017; Lal, 2009: 226) offering hope for those existing on the fringes of a mainstream society enamoured of the comforts and delights inherently promised by a free market economy.

Deras: Alternative Religious Sites

Though often equated with gurdwaras, temples, sects³ and cults,⁴ *deras* are nonetheless distinguishable from them in terms of their structures, beliefs and practices. For instance, gurdwaras are religious places wherein only *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* (hereafter SGGS) – the central holy scripture of the Sikh faith – is revered as eternal Guru, and no other religious scriptures whatsoever are recited. Worship of idol and human gurus – both of which are common practices in temples, sects and cults – has no place in gurdwaras. In contrast to gurdwaras and temples, a motley of various sacred scriptures – which often include verses from SGGS – are recited in *deras*. They also differ from sects and cults insofar as the former are derivatives/sub-sets of mainstream religions with their own distinct belief, ceremonies, traditions and practices (Gillin, 1910: 236-252; Marty, 1960: 125-134; Ownby, 2008: 12-29; Shah, 2006: 209-248). However, in some respects, *deras* are closer to cults (Beckford, 1985; Levine, 1981:34-49; Olson, 2006: 97-106; Robbins, 1988), which are quasi-religious groups headed by *babas* (charismatic, mostly male, persons) with distinct and unorthodox ideologies, rituals, and practices, who either directly, or through their authorised representatives, reveal 'holy-naam' (an allegedly spiritually-charged word) to their followers during initiation ceremonies. *Deras* provide what Nancy Fraser called 'subaltern counter public', to

socially excluded, poor and marginalized sections of society (Fraser, 1990: 56-80; Kampourakis, 2016; Rathi, 2017; Sandhu, 2007:63-78; Upmanyu, 2017). Dera-based subaltern counter public eventually give rise to distinct socio-religious and cultural identities that followers of such alternative religious spaces embrace proudly to distinguish themselves from their counterparts in mainstream religions.

Deras are self-regulating quasi-religious establishments independent of any mainstream religious governing bodies, and given the large amount of remittances they receive from their nouveau riche Non-resident Indians (NRI) followers, many of them have acquired a cult-like structure with their own charitable educational, healthcare services, gas stations, and even sometimes gone so far as to 'venture into fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) businesses, producing a range of products from cosmetics to packaged food and even films' (Mahaprashasta, 2017; Upmanyu, 2017). The spiritual, social, economic, and in a surreptitious way, even political reach of some of the deras, have led to an ever increasing consolidation of their widespread network of social capital with undercurrents for conflict formations. Political outreach by babas of deras often results in multi-faceted political conflicts between their followers and those of mainstream religious bodies on the one hand, as well as between opposing political parties on the other, i.e. between those supported by a dera and its rival(s) in the electoral political arena, resulting in a vitiation of inter-community relations at different levels.

Though initially begun as alternative religious sites with their distinct doctrines and traditions (Batra and Prabhakar, 2024), however, with the passage of time some deras came to acquire so much currency that cities were named after them. Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan, Dera Allah Yar, Dera Bugti, Dera Murad Jamali, Dera Dildar, Dera Alampur Gondlan (all in Pakistan), Dera Baba Nanak, Dera Bassi, Dera Kanjli, Dera Gopipur, and Dehra (all in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh in India) are some of the districts and towns rechristened with dera as a prefix. Deras are not merely spiritual domains; they also provide *seva* (service) to the needy and downtrodden (Batra and Prabhakar, 2024; Mahaprashasta, 2017; Singh & Gaur, 2009) by undertaking varied social welfare measures. Without openly critiquing mainstream religions, deras ensure that their followers experience a prejudice-free, uplifting social ecosystem within a non-discriminatory administration and with the further possibility of participation in their various dera management committees.

Refuge of Subalterns

The immense penchant among subalterns (lower castes and poorer sections of the society), for taking recourse to deras made the latter highly influential in a society where the boundaries between religion and politics often get blurred (Ram, 2021; Ram, 2022; Ram, 2022a). As mentioned above, apart from lower castes and economically weaker sections of the society, large numbers of people from either or both the upper castes and wealthier sections of society have also gravitated towards deras. Since lower castes and poor generally seek respite from social discrimination and economic hardships in deras, the attendance of upper castes and the rich at deras may appear oxymoronic but these sections likewise seek the sustenance offered by these institutions for various social, spiritual and domestic reasons. Many people, especially women, visit deras to seek the blessings of babas of deras with a view to getting the addicted members of their families rid of drug abuse and other socio-psychological ailments. The prevalence of patriarchy in the Northwest region of India provided further motivation to many families across the caste-class spectrum to seek blessings for the birth of a male child. Others ask for *mehar* (grace) to excel in their worldly endeavours or for successful emigration to a foreign country. Further to the last instance, there are some deras where people offer toy aeroplanes as a token of their *mannat* (wish) to go abroad.⁵ Many lower caste members of the Indian diaspora take pride in making devotional visits to their respective deras in what can be termed as some sort of pilgrimage (Bochkovskaya, 2016: 76-84), and to seek their babas'/guru's blessings – especially so in the case of newly-weds. The aforementioned strengths of deras have given hope, imparted confidence, and created a sense of fraternity among the lower castes – something that scholars of political sociology refer to as social capital.

It is commonly believed that deras inspire their followers and provide them moral strength to face the challenges of their day-to-day life by building wider social networking. They inculcate and disseminate moral values and also cultivate a sense of social cohesiveness among their votaries. Deras also counsel, eulogise, disparage, and sometimes criticise the heads of state and political leaders across party lines. Close ties between babas of deras and political leaders strengthen each other – if large number of followers of deras are perceived by various political parties as their potential electoral support structures, the latter in turn provide deras with state patronage to protect, sustain, and promote their

social, religious and political interests once they come to form government. Deras mediate between state and civil society, government official and common people, and also facilitate dialogue between different religious groups. Primarily based on the allegiance of historically excluded, marginalised, and poverty-stricken sections of the society, deras have collectively emerged as a credible alternative to the mainstream religions, offering welcoming avenues for socio-religious gatherings free from the constraining boundaries of multiple social stratifications. Some other possible reasons for the fast-growing constituency of deras could be the persistence of discriminatory caste-based social structures within the mundane boundaries of the so-called egalitarian domains of the mainstream religions, erosion of the institution of joint family, and the gradual but continuing withdrawal of the state from its public welfare measures.

This study primarily seeks to critically analyse the role of deras in generating such friction as a corollary of their social capital and how the same leads to conflict formation within the political and religious realms in the region. The first and second part focus on the epistemology of deras, and contextualise their origin and various formations in Northwest India. The third part problematises the process of 'social capital' formation within deras. The fourth part focuses on the edifying origin and expansion of Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa as an exemplar. How social capital formation evolves within DSS and in what ways it generates political and social conflicts has been explicated in detail in the fifth and sixth part. The last, seventh part, summarises the overall arguments developed throughout the study.

II. Contextualising Deras

The First Wave

The phenomenon of deras is not new to Punjab. The vast expanse of undivided Punjab was characterised by the dense presence of deras of various nomenclatures – *Tillas*, *Khanqahs*, *Takiyas*, *Maths*, *Akharas* and *Gufas* – abodes of Yogis, Sufis and Pirs, Naths, Nagas and Siddhas respectively. Its lineage can be extended to the Nath Sampradaya (Dwivedi, 1950; Mallinson, 2011:1-20; Pattanaik, 2017). The Nath Sampradaya (tradition), a conjunction of the ideas of Buddhism, Shaivites, Vedantism and Yoga traditions (Briggs, 1938 rpt. 1982: 100; Burchett, 2019:

169-175), is the earliest tradition (the first wave) of deras that emerged in Punjab as far back as the 10th century C.E. Founded by yogi Matsyendranath (Kalyani, 1954: 11; Singh, 1937: 21), deras of this Sampradaya were called shrines/monasteries/*Nath-warah/akharas* (Ghurye, 1953: 154-155). Yogi Matsyendranath had been succeeded by one of his illustrious disciples Yogi Gorakhnath under whose lineage the Nath Sampradaya expanded into twelve *panths* (branches) of yogis across the Indian sub-continent (Briggs, 1938 rpt. 1982: 2-3; Chandra, 1997 rpt. 2011: 253-254; Grewal, 1996: 24; McLeod, 1978: 287-95; Singh, 1937: 7). The twelve panths in turn established a large number of Gorakhnathi deras in different parts of India (Chandra, 1997 rpt. 2011: 253-254; Grewal, 1996: 18; Grewal and Goswamy, 1967). '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 excursion) 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).

The Second Wave

Sufi deras, the second wave of deras, is another early tradition of deras that emerged in Northwest India in the thirteenth century during the Sultanate period in India (Chandra, 1997 rpt 2011: 241). Sufi deras, popularly known as *Khanqahs* and *Jama'at Khanas*, can be categorised into 12 *silsilahs/tariqahs* (schools/orders). Among them Chishtiyyah and Suhrawardiyya were the two most famous Sufi orders. The Sufi dera tradition particularly began with the foundation of the *Chishtiyyah silsilah* in Ajmer city of Rajasthan of Northwestern India laid down by Sufi sant Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Sistan (Eastern Iran, Southwest Afghanistan). He visited Lahore in 1190/1192 C.E. (Arberry, 1942: xii), reached Delhi in 1193 C.E., during the end of Ghurid reign, and finally settled in Ajmer-Rajasthan in 1206 C.E., where he established his dera, popularly known as the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, in 1236 C.E. (Chandra, 2007 rpt. 2009: 241). Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti laid stress on deep devotion to formless God, selfless service to the poor and needful irrespective of

religion, caste and class (Rizvi, 1978: 123-124; Chandra, 1997 rpt 2011: 241). It was the first of the four Sufi orders (Chishti, Naqshbandi, Qadiri, and Suhrawardi) that came to be established in this part of the country. Qutab-ud-Din Bakhtyar Kaki, Fariduddin Mas'ud (popularly known as Baba Farid/Shaiikh Farid) and Nizamuddin Auliya were successors of the Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti respectively. In their respective line of succession, 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 SGGS.

The Chishtiyyah deras were patronised by rulers likes Muhammad Tughlaq, Mahmud Khilji and Akbar (Chandra, 1997 rpt 2011: 241). Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar, popularly known as Baba Farid, was one of the eight additional famous Sufi Dervishes (Sants) of the Chishtiyyas order, who is equally venerated by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in Punjab – a popular syncretic socio-religious-cultural Punjabi tradition. His significant contribution lies in making Sufism a popular religion among the people across various faiths, regions and castes in undivided Punjab. In East Punjab (India), his famous dera/khanqah is situated in Faridkot (a city and now District named after him) and in West Punjab (Pakistan) in the holy city of Pakpattan. Baba Farid's kalifa Hazarat Sheikh Allauddin Ali Ahmad Sabir started his sub-order i.e. Chishti-Sabiri. In Punjab, Hazarat Sayyid⁶ Miran Bhikham Shah of Ghuram and Hazarat Pir Zot Ali Shah of Sherpur are the most reputed Sufis of the Chishtiyya-Sabiri order (Talwara, 2016: 40-62). Other prominent Sants of this Sufi silsilah in undivided Punjab were Bu Ali Qalandar Chishti in Karnal, Khwaja Shams-Ud-Din in Panipat, Abdul Khalik in Lahore, Abdul Rashid in Jalandhar, Atiq Ullah in Jalandhar, Bahlal in Jalandhar, Sayyid Ali Shah in Jalandhar (Anand, 2023: Chandra, 1997 rpt. 2011: 243; Rizvi, 1978: 241-247; Rose, 1914 rpt. 2008: 530-31).

Another Sufi silsilah that played a significant role in the formation of deras in Punjab was Suhrawardiyya silsilah. Bahauddin Zakariya, the founder of this silsilah constructed a magnificent dera/khanqah in Kot Karor, Multan that became the hub of Sufism in medieval India (Rizvi, 1978: 239). After the death of Bahauddin Zakariya, his disciples, Sheikh Fakhruddin Ibrahim, Sheikh Sadruddin Arif, Ruknuddin, Ahmad Mashuq, Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi and Nasiruddin Mubarak, continued to play a significant role in Punjab, Sindh, Bengal, Delhi and different parts of the country for a century-and-a-half (Rizvi, 1978: 193-201).

Suhrawardiyyas differed from Chishtiyyahs order in that they did not believe in starvation, poverty or self-mortification as necessary means for a spiritual life. They accepted royal grants i.e. *iqta* (grant of villages), *ilhya* (uncultivated land), *futuh* (unsolicited gifts) for the maintenance of the deras/khanqahs and their chiefs. (Rizvi, 1978: 193-201). Suhrawardi Sufis were rich and led a life of material comfort like some of the present-day babas of contemporary deras. Bahauddin Zakariya attempted to rationalise such wealth by asserting that money enabled him to serve in a better way the poor and the deprived who thronged around him. It is pertinent to mention here that similar to the process of politicisation of deras in contemporary Punjab, the babas of Suhrawardiyya khanqahs used to take an active interest in politics, and were in turn cordially welcomed by the rulers because 'they considered that their (Sufi Babas) blessings, and their goodwill with the people would not only enhance their own prestige but legitimize their position also' (Rizvi, 1978: 246-247).

Qadiriyyah silsilah, founded in Punjab in the mid-fifteenth century by Shah Niamatullah and Makhdum Muhammed Jilani, was another equally popular Sufi silsilah. Abdul-Qadir Gilani (1077-1166) was the eponym of the Qadiriyyah order (Rizvi, 1978: 54). Famous *murshids* (spiritual guide/teacher) of the Qadiriyyah silsilah in Punjab were Syed Muhammad Ghons (Panipat), Muhammad Fazol (Batala), Shah Latif Barri (Nurpur), Shah Husain (Lahore), Bhuleh Shah (Kasur), Shah Anayat (Lahore), Sultan Bahu, and Mian Mir of Lahore (Rose 1914 rpt. 2008: 540-41; Talwara, 2016: 40-62). It is commonly believed that Sufi saint Mian Mir of Lahore laid the foundation stone of the Golden Temple of Amritsar. In contemporary Punjab, *khanqah* of Pir Budhu Shah in Batala and Pir Abdula Shah Qadiri in Mandhali (Phagwara) are famous sufi deras of Qadiriyyah order. Another famous silsilah of Sufis in Punjab is Naqshbandi. In Northwest India and undivided Punjab, among the famous shrines of Naqshbandi order were: Dargah Hazrat Sain Tawakkal Shah in Ambala, Dargah Shaikh Ahmad Faruqi (Mujaddid) in Sirhind, Dargah Saif-ud-Din Sirhandi Faruqi in Sirhind, Sayyid Nur Muhammad in Sirhind, Sayyid Imam Ali Shah in Gurdaspur, Mahmud Shah in Lahore, and Haji Muhammad Sayyid in Lahore (Parihar, 2004: 481-500; Rose, 1914 rpt. 2008: 550).

Sufi orders and their deras were able to carve out an important space in the social and spiritual life of people in general and especially the marginalized, in Punjab. Given their alleged miraculous powers, Sufis

protected both the tribal and agrarian population, and their livestock, from the distress caused by nature and disease (Gaur, 2009: 154). Mohan Singh's poem *Khanqahi Diwa Baldiye* (lightening the earthen-lamp on Khanqah) justifies the relevance of *khanqahs*/deras in rural society of Punjab. In the pre-partition Punjab, various Sufi deras came up in different towns/cities namely Ambala, Batala, Delhi, Dera Ghazi Khan, Ghuram, Ferozepur, Gurdaspur, Gurgaon, Hazara, Jalandhar, Karnal, Kohat, Lahore, Mandhali, Muzaffargarh, Nakodar, Panipat, Phagwara and Sham Chaurasi, Sherpur among others (Rose, 1914 rpt. 2008: 574-621).

The Third Wave

The third wave of deras in Punjab arose during the early period of the historic Sikh Gurus (Mann, 2017: 326). Soon after the passing away of Guru Baba Nanak (1539), the founder of the Sikh faith, his eldest son, Baba Sri Chand, established a separate and parallel seat of authority/cult/dera at Dera Baba Nanak. This alternate tradition of deras came to be known as *udasis dhunas* or deras. Subsequently, many more alternative religious traditions emerged at different intervals during the early Guruship tradition of Sikhism.⁷ The emergence of alternate Sikh religious deras was primarily the outcome of unsuccessful attempts by disgruntled 'fake' claimants to the title of Guru within the evolving mainstream Sikh faith (for details see: Anand, 2023; Archer, 1946: 221-226; Bingley, 1970: 85-93; Chaturvedi, 1951: 360-69; Grewal, 1996: 39-46; Marengo, 1976: 28-30). The sectarian tendencies during the Guru period were encouraged by the Mughal state. With the rise of the Khalsa in the eighteenth century these dissenting cults simply withered away. Only the udasi and nirmala traditions 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.⁸

During the Sikh dera wave of the early Guru period, the rise of a popular Sikh sant tradition⁹ led to the formation of another variety of Sikh deras in undivided Punjab (Elsberg, 2017:403-410; Juergensmeyer, 2017: 386-93; Nesbitt, 2017: 380-85; Robinson, 2017:397-402; Singh, 2017: 359-67; Takhar, 2017:394-96; Tatla, 2017: 368-79; Webster, 2017:351-58). 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 dera headed by a *masand* (territorial deputies or vicars) to look after its allocated area of jurisdiction (McLeod, 1987: 234). 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. Generally thought to have the blessing of Guru Gobind Singh (Ahluwalia, 2017:333-40; Mann, 2017: 325-333; Tatla, 2017: 370), it came to acquire prominent space within the Sikh Panth for a lengthy period. It is commonly believed that Guru Gobind Singh deputed five of his followers to Benaras (Varanasi), Hindu Pilgrimage on the bank of the river Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, to gain expertise in Sanskrit language and the Hindu sacred scriptures. Eventually, this belief gained traction leading it to become an integral part of the Nirmala sant tradition from the 18th century onwards, to visit Benaras 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 (Singh, 1982: 383-87; 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 the 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: Anand, 2023; Juergensmeyer, 2017: 386-93; Nesbitt, 2017: 380-85; Tatla, 2017: 372; Webster, 2017:351-58).

Apart from the above-mentioned early alternative deras of the historic Sikh Gurus' period, many more deras of varied nomenclatures appeared at different intervals along the long and tortuous process of consolidation of the Sikh religion. Some of the most prominent among them were: Addan Shahi, 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, Nanakpanthis, Nihang, Ramdas

Ka, Sahajdhari, Sangat Sahibiye, Satinamia, Satkartaria, Sewapanthis, Suthrashahi, Singh Ji Mat, Udasi, and Vanjara (Anand, 2023; Chaturvedi, 1951: 361-69; Mann, 2017: 333; McLeod, 1984: 121-133; Oberoi, 1994: 24; Singh, 2002: 78).

The Sikh dera wave got further intensified with the emergence of a popular rural sant lineage in the early 20th century Punjab. The rural sant lineage grew independently of the above-mentioned Sikh Sant tradition. Various Sikh sants belonging to rural Sikh tradition established their impressive deras/gurdwaras in many villages all over Punjab. Almost every village in Punjab has one or more such deras/gurdwaras built around the personal spiritual aura of their sants/babas or in their sacred memory. Some of the frequently visited rural Sikh sant deras are built in villages of Bhindran, Bhucho Mandi, Dhadrian, Harkhowal, Harian Belan, Kaleran, Mastuana, Nanaksar, Rarewala, Ratwara, Reru Sahib, and Takhtupura (Tatla, 2017: 377).

Though many of the deras of Sikh sant and rural 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, 2017: 333). Almost all the Sikh literature produced by the lineages of *udasi* and *nirmala* sants until 1849, argues Tatla (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 of 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, 2017: 331-32).

Deras of the *Nanaksar* sampradaya have many distinctive features that distinguished them from the mainstream Sikh tradition. 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 meditation on a tiger or leopard skin, calling gurdwara *takht* (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, like the one donned by Namdharis, 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 (GNNSJ) that explicitly distinguished them from the identity markers of the mainstream Sikh gurdwaras (Nesbitt, 2014: 364; Takhar, 2017: 395). The caretakers of GNNSJ, mainly an overseas-based dera established initially in Kericho, Kenya, and later institutionalized in UK, refer to themselves as Bhais or Bhai Sahibs, which may be seen as lying outside the mainstream Sikh tradition, and are known for their promotion roles (Nesbitt, 2014: 365). In the case of UK's GCNSJ, Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh's dera on Soho Road – as part of a Baba/Sant tradition – may be seen as promoting inter-faith dialogue and peace reconciliation.¹⁰

The Fourth Wave

The fourth wave of deras began emerging with the founding of the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab in the 1920s (for details see: Juergensmeyer, 1988; Ram, 2004: 323-349). 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 them 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 Guru Ravidass, who was already well known among the lower castes of Punjab, was systematically projected in order to concretise 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*, 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, 2021a: 1-2).

The Ad Dharm movement has tactically cashed in on the mass appeal of Guru Ravidass by using his pictures as its emblem, reciting his bani, and narrating legends about him as illustrations of the power, pride, and glory of oppressed segments of society (Ram, 2009: 3; Ram, 2012: 667). Ensconced in the glory of the messianic image of Guru Ravidass, the Ad Dharm movement, despite all sorts of pressures and local resistance, succeeded in prevailing upon the British regime to declare a separate religion (*Ad Dharm* – primeval religion) for the lower castes in the Punjab. Consequently, a total of 418,789 persons registered themselves as Ad Dharmis in the Punjab census of 1931 (Juergensmeyer, 1988: 72-80). Eventually, this newly-found religion of the lower castes dwindled into a separate caste – Ad Dharmi – that now comprised 11.48 per cent of the Scheduled Castes population of East Punjab as per 2011 Census. Since then, Ad Dharmis have organised themselves into various Guru Ravidass Sabhas (societies) and established a large number of Ravidass deras both within India and abroad (Kamble, n.d.; Ram, 2009: 4). There is hardly a village in East Punjab that does not have a gurdwara, temple, or a dera. Most of the deras are dedicated to the legacy of Ravidass. A field study conducted in 2003 recorded their number to be around one hundred (Qadian, 2003). Judge and Bal put their number at 176 (Judge and Bal, 2009: 106).

Ravidass deras have also emerged in foreign countries where a large number of SCs from Punjab have immigrated. Some of the most prominent Ravidass deras abroad are in: Brampton, Calgary, Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver (Canada); Austin, Fremont, Fresno, Houston, New York, Pittsburg, Sacramento, Seattle, and Selma (United States); Bedford, Birmingham, Coventry, Derby, Kent, Lancaster, Southall, Southampton, Wolverhampton (United Kingdom). In the last few years, many Ravidass deras have also come up in Australia, Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Lebanon, New Zealand, Spain, and Italy. According to a rough estimate there are 75 Ravidass deras overseas (Ram, 2012: 690). In Indian (East) Punjab, there are more than 9,000 Sikh and Non-Sikh deras in about 12,000 villages of Punjab (Tehna *et al*, 2007).

Apart from the above-mentioned deras emerged during different waves, there are some other deras like: Dera Radhasoami Beas (Juergensmeyer, 2017: 386-393; Juergensmeyer, 1991), Dera Sach Khand Ballan (Ram, 2008: 1341-64; Ram, 2009: 1-34), Divya Jyoti Jagarti Sansthan

Noormahal, Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa (Copeman, 2012: 156-180; Singh, 2017a: 20-23), Dera Baba Murad Shah, Nakodar, Bhanjarawala Dera (Meeta and Rajivlochan, 2007: 1909-1913), Dera Baba Mast Ram Ji Ucha Jatana, Dera Baba Vadbhag Singh (Una, Himachal Pradesh), and deras of Nirankaris and Namdharis (Anand, 2023; Nirankari, 1974: 18-25; Singh, 2017: 359-367; Takhar, 2014: 350-356; Webster, 2018; Webster, 2017: 351-358), which claimed to be non-denominational 'social' or 'spiritual' movements, open to everyone – Sikhs, Hindus, and members of all castes – irrespective of religious affiliation. Established on syncretic lines and mostly headed by upper castes, however majority of their followers belonged to lower castes and poor people (Muksar, 2007). The chief of the Nirankari deras often belong to the Sikh Khatri caste, and that of the Sacha Sauda and Radhasoamis come from Jat Sikhs of the Sidhu and Dhillon sub-castes respectively. In these deras, along with the sacred 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. With their 'loose syncretistic practices', they throw a formidable challenge to the mainstream Sikh-Khalsa identity (Meeta and Rajivlochan, 2007:1910).

Though aforementioned deras of various nomenclatures profess specific alternative faiths and beliefs, their tirade against various social ailments like drug abuse, dowry, female infanticide, caste discrimination, gender inequality, and domestic and communal violence is what binds them together. However, at times, some deras also lure gullible people in the vortex of false promises and quick solution to their social, economic, and psychosomatic problems, which in turn facilitated the heads of such deras to present themselves as messiahs of subalterns and 'messengers of God', and eventually pushed them in multiple controversies, social conflicts, immoral and criminal acts – often followed by convictions in courts of law.

III. Deras and Social Capital

Some of the deras in Punjab/Haryana – mainly Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa, Dera Radhasoami, Beas, and Dera Sach Khand, Ballan – have been generating social capital for the empowerment of historically disadvantaged sections of society what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called a 'durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). Social capital

emanates from varied socio-religious and cultural networks, and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that exist in the relations among persons (Putnam, 2000: 16; Fukuyama, 2000). It is not located either in the actors themselves (like less tangible human capital, which is embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual) or in the physical implements of production (as is the case of physical capital, wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form). Nonetheless, though less tangible in comparison to both physical and human capital, social capital enhances the capacity of adherents of *deras* to excel in their chosen sphere of life by honing their interpersonal relations (Coleman, 1988: S98; Fukuyama, 2000). American sociologist James Samuel Coleman further defined it 'by its function', which manifests itself through different forms within the ambit of 'some aspect of social structures' – embedded, as mentioned earlier, with extensive trustworthiness and mutual trust (Coleman, 1988: S98-S101; see also Fukuyama, 2000: 3).

Bonding-Bridging: Mechanisms of Social Networks

An amalgamation of both 'bonding (exclusive)' and 'bridging (inclusive)' social capital networks (Putnam, 2000: 20), some *deras* have established their own hospitals, educational institutions, technical training centres, provision stores, local transport systems, weekly magazines, and libraries (Ram, 2004a: 906-908; Ram, 2007: 4071-4072; Ram, 2008: 1347-1357). The widespread institutional set up of such *deras* fosters further networks of dense reciprocal social and religious relations amongst their followers. Daily routine *darshan* (face-to-face interactions) between the heads of *deras* and their devotees – an exercise that develops norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness in the relations among followers of *deras* on the one hand and their *baba/guru* in the *dera* on the other – are organised in many *deras*. In addition, many *deras* regularly organise monthly/annual *samagams* (religious congregations), especially on the birth/death anniversaries of their saints/*babas*, which are attended by large numbers of their followers as well as notable political figures. It is during such routine gatherings that their devotees – comprised of all societal strata – generate significant volume of social capital by providing *deras* with a unique socio-religious and cultural status as well as elements of reciprocity and trustworthiness among themselves vis-à-vis the phenomenon of mainstream religious orders. Though most of such relationships are formed among the marginalized and historically

deprived sections of the society, their sheer number, measured in terms of electoral arithmetic, generates a rich haul of 'bonding social capital' that works like 'a kind of sociological superglue,' argued American political scientist Robert Putnam (Putnam, 2000: 21).

Moral Code: Vehicle of Social Mobility

Deras have gained unique profiles over the course of time with the adoption of distinct rituals, ceremonies, traditions, slogans, symbols, auspicious dates, customs, *ardas* (prayer), *kirtan* (musical rendering of sacred hymns), religious festivals, iconography, and attire of babas. Distinct identity markers meticulously devised by the heads of deras are what Devine & Deneulin called 'the moral code' of an emerging alternative socio-religious *samaj* (society), which together with mammoth physical infrastructure, form a viable agency of upward social mobility for socially discriminated and economically poor sections of the society (Devine & Deneulin, 2011: 74). These informal sets of norms and values (Coleman, 1987), which seamlessly bind together followers of deras, were chiseled over extensive periods of time within the compounds of deras wherein congregations were, and are, perennially regaled by announcements against drug abuse, female feticide, dowry malice and communal vilifications, before the main spiritual discourses are delivered.¹¹ This has resulted in believers gradually internalising a common code of ethics, which congealed them further still with the dera culture eventually leading to, what American political scientist Francis Fukuyama cogently argued, 'constituting social capital itself'. Socially charged spiritual discourse '... offers a kind of moral compass to help people live their lives in a proper manner' with the purpose of facilitating believers in realizing their maximal potential (Devine & Deneulin, 2011: 74) – an outcome of social capital of deras.

Inter-community Networks: Sinews of Social Capital

The diverse followings of deras propel people of different caste, class, creed, gender, status, and region not only to bond together (in the form of a bonding/exclusive social capital networks) on the premises of deras on special occasions, but also cultivate long-term inter-community relationship (bridging/inclusive social capital networks) within their neighbourhoods for feasible mutual empowerment (Putnam, 2000: 20).

All activities within *deras*, including cleaning work, administration, security arrangements, managing traffic flow on both public and *dera* roads during *dera* events, and *langar* (which is free food offered to visitors irrespective of their caste, class and creed) preparation and distribution are all managed by *sewadars* (volunteer workers drawn from *dera* members) – who thereby become de facto ambassadors of *deras*' social capital. Dispatching such work is no mean feat since at times the number of visitors comes close to a million, especially during annual *bhandaras* (yearly religious congregations to pay obeisance on the anniversaries of the founders of the faith).¹²

The aforementioned institutional infrastructure together with the diverse bonding social networks of *deras* and their emphasis on social values – such as leading a truthful life, earning by the sweat of one's brow, respecting mainstream religions, non-discriminatory behaviour, and equality – are what generate the immense tangible and intangible social capital, also called 'sacred surpluses' (Chidester, 2005: 117; see also: Fukuyama, 1997: 378-379), which further boosts mass appeal of *deras* through a progressive social spiral. However, there is an attendant downside, social capital, cautioned Putnam. It "may also create strong out-group antagonism" (Putnam, 2000: 21) that may eventually snowball into outright conflict formation.

Facets of Social Structures

Taking a clue from Coleman's explication of social capital as discussed above, it can be safely argued that *deras* represent 'some aspect of social structures', which precipitate behavioural changes among their followers, thus facilitating the performance of various functions, including mass manual labour that, in turn, inculcate what Putnam called 'norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness', mutual respect, and truthful behaviour, eventually leading to the creation of a critical mass of social capital (Putnam, 2000: 16; also see: Hanifan, 1916: 130-138). Other than *dera*-based social structures promoting such virtues as trustworthiness and mutual respect within the tangible physical boundaries of such *deras* (bonding social capital), they also influence the formation of social, community, and family ties between followers in the form of marriage alliances and other close social associations across caste, class and creed divides (bridging social capital). Coleman further explicates that social capital makes 'possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence

would not be possible' (Coleman, 1988: S98). It is in this context that *deras* are distinguishable from other social constructs such as cooperative societies, sports clubs, ethnic groups, literary associations, self-help groups, cultural bodies, environment protection organizations, and varied social reforms organizations. Focusing on the role of religion in the generation of social capital, Candland argues:

Social capital arises in a variety of manners – as a response to the perception of a common threat, as feeling of duty, respect, and loyalty, or as norms of solidarity or service. Given the affective character of many of these social bonds, it is somewhat surprising that little attention has been devoted to faith as the basis for social capital formation. Few studies give detailed attention to the origin, expression, or maintenance of religious norms or to the relationship of public policy to religion (Candland, 2000: 355; for more details on social capital see: Coleman, 1988: S95-S120; Coleman, 1987: 133-155; Field, 2008; Fukuyama, 1997: 375-484; Fukuyama, 2000: 1-18; Portes, 1998: 1-24; Putnam, 2000; Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen, 2003; Woolcock, 1998: 151-208; Wuthnow, 2002: 669-684).

It is against this backdrop that the phenomenon of *deras* needs to be studied from the perspective of their contribution towards the generation of social capital – and the emancipation and empowerment of lower castes and middle-class people in particular – and the unfortunate but seemingly inevitable formation of social conflicts as an outcome of the political economy of religion.

In the face of insidious and creeping structures of social and economic discrimination, especially since the onset of a neo-liberal regime in the early 90s, the poor and lower castes became increasingly disempowered in the cut-throat competition for private sector well-paid jobs. Deprived of due representation in the corporate sector on the one hand, and with dwindling job opportunities in the public sector on the other, these socially and economically isolated sections of the society turned en masse towards *deras* which administered a balm by way of their egalitarianism outreach – through health and education facilities – the tangible social capital. Therefore, one of the major attributes of *deras* is their capacity to provide succour to those who were left to fend for themselves under the dominant neo-liberal moorings, akin to what in more developed countries

would be offered by such professional service providers such as marriage counsellors, psychologists, and caregivers. Indeed, to draw an unorthodox parallel, the social capital alchemized by deras is likely to achieve a far stronger bonding amongst a much larger group of people than what corporate houses might achieve with their team-building excursions and exercises.

Triangular Matrix and Social Capital

The social and material support structures generated by deras can be illustrated by a triangular matrix consisting of followers from everyday walks of life, politicians, and both the babas of deras and their managerial staff. Different categories of people visit deras for getting reprieve from varied socio-religious and psychological traumas created in the majority of cases by economic deprivation and social discrimination. The ever-increasing number of dera-followers makes the cultivation of deras a compulsion for the second component of triangular matrix, i.e. politicians (Ashraf, 2016). The babas of deras and their managerial staff, the third node of this triangular matrix, play a crucial role in keeping their following intact among the populace and politicians by projecting their enhanced prestige and importance within corridors of political and administrative power-circles. The modus operandi to build up the popularity of deras is based on intertwining myths about the unlimited spiritual powers of such babas with their proximity to centres of power within the civil, business, and administrative domains to create a 'power-halo' effect.

All three aspects of this triangle – babas, followers, and politicians – therefore mutually reinforce each other, with political parties practicing outright hard-headed realpolitik by viewing massive dera followings as potential vote banks, and therefore a good investment in terms of political patronage.¹³ This proximity to political power, and perceptions of individual deras' political affiliations, in turn, play a significant role in raising their profiles and hence followings. Thus, a paradigm of mutual reinforcement becomes operative. Babas of deras are not mere mortals, but rays of divinity in the eyes of their followers. During the regular *satsangs* (sacred congregation for spiritual discourses) on the premises of the deras, it is repeatedly emphasised that babas/gurus are physical links to a formless God and it is only through them that devotees can meet God or more readily resolve their worldly woes and realise their aspirations. It

is emphasised in sacred texts of the *Sant Mat* (path of truth/ true teachings of the bhakti sants) literature that the spiritual utility of a guru resides in the invisible form of a *shabd guru* (spiritual sound), which can only be experienced through meditation on the guru or baba's image while silently reciting sacred *naam* (holy word) shared by the guru at the time of initiation. Thus, in the terrestrial world, the guru or baba is indissolubly intertwined with the *shabd guru*, which is the physical manifestation of God, and God himself (Juergensmeyer, 1991:22-31).

Devotees are implicitly groomed to avoid criticism of their babas/gurus since they are cast as causal linkages to God and transcendent of worldly cares and mores. Such deeply-instilled sentiments are what motivated thousands of followers of Baba Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan, chief of Dera Sacha Sauda headquartered in Sirsa, Haryana, to camp in Panchkula's Sector 23, turning it into a mini-Malwa of Punjab (Gupta and Dhaliwal, 2017) for three days – until the verdict of his decades-old rape case was announced on August 25, 2017. Subsequently, they created a state of anarchy in the area around the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court in Panchkula once their baba was convicted and being taken into Haryana Police custody for the announcement of the quantum of punishment. Despite the deployment of a huge posse of police and paramilitary personnel for the maintenance of law and order, mob violence erupted within three hours of the announcement of the verdict, killing and injuring a large number of people (HT Correspondence, 2022; Sharma, 2022; TNN, 2019). It is in such precarious contexts that the social capital of deras can mutate into what Putnam called 'malevolent, antisocial purposes, just like any other form of capital' (Putnam, 2000: 19; also see: Fukuyama, 1997: 378-379), which consequently gives rise to conflict formation in society.

IV. Dera Sacha Sauda: An Overview

Shah Mastana: Continuation of a Spiritual Legacy

Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa (hereafter DSS; literally 'the true deal')¹⁴ was founded by Shah Mastana Ji Baluchistani (hereafter Shah Mastana)¹⁵ on five acres of land at Malian di Dhani on Begu road (now Shah Satnam Singh Marg), two kilometers from Sirsa in Haryana. Originally, known as Mastana Ji Dham (now nostalgically referred to as the 'Old Dera'), DSS did not consider itself a new religion, cult, sect or movement. The

literature on DSS, describes it as a 'socio-spiritual organisation that is a confluence of all religions' (The Warriors of Humanitarianism n.d.: 5), wherein God is worshipped under the guidance of the Satguru (Singh, 2011: 26). It came into existence as a 'non-profit social welfare and spiritual organisation' to help people of the neglected regions of Bangar (comprising Eastern Rajasthan and Western Haryana), and Malwa (south of the Sutlej river, also known as Cis-Sutlej during the British period) rid themselves of various superstitious practices and social evils through meditation with 'God's True Words' (Manager, 1981: 94).¹⁶ It laid emphasis on vegetarian food, meditation, selfless services, humanitarianism, and the prohibition of intoxicants and adultery. Shah Mastana had acquired popularity amongst the people of these relatively backward regions of Bangar and Malwa even before the establishment of DSS since he had served in the Dera Radhasoami Satsang at Sirsa for two years, spreading the spiritual teachings of *Sant Mat* (the spiritual way of Sants of North India Bhakti movement).¹⁷

On the instructions of his Guru, Baba Sawan Singh of Radhasoami Beas, the then head of Dera Baba Jaimal Singh Beas, near Amritsar, Shah Mastana established his separate mission (on April 29, 1948) in Sirsa to spread the legacy of the *Sant Mat* in the spiritually neglected regions of Bangar and Malwa (cf. Kaushal, 1998: 148-49). Initially, the dera was constructed on five acres of land, comprising a *gufa* (cave) and a two-storied building, a canteen and a langar hall. Later, large halls for the states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Delhi were constructed. In addition, several rooms for the accommodation of *Sadhus* (permanent residents at DSS) were also constructed. Regular spiritual discourses and the austere lifestyle of Shah Mastana made DSS a household name. Shah Mastana gradually expanded construction activities on the Old Dera premises as well as establishing a large number of branches of DSS in various villages and cities in the states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi etc (Kaushal, 1998: 148).¹⁸ Facing the Old Dera is an air-conditioned market, which was constructed by the management of DSS. The shops in the market are either leased out or run by sewadars of the DSS. For the comfort of followers, residential apartments were constructed in the vicinity of the market (Singh, 2020).

Shah Satnam: Taking the Legacy Forward

After the death of Shah Mastana (April 18, 1960), two factions led by Satnam Singh¹⁹ and Gurbaksh Singh (Manager) respectively, emerged and each laid claims on the headship of DSS (Kaushal, 1998: 149). Finally, the faction led by Satnam Singh emerged victorious and he was declared the head of DSS on August 26, 1960 and was revered as Shah Satnam Singh.²⁰ Under the headship of Shah Satnam Singh, the following of DSS expanded significantly and he initiated approximately 12 lakh people into the cult of DSS. Some people believed his affinity with the Sidhu clan of the region facilitated him (Shah Satnam Singh) to expand his flock because a significant portion of the population in the villages surrounding DSS belonged to the Sidhu and Pannu Jat Sikh families who had migrated to Sirsa and its adjoining villages from Malwa and Majha (between Beas and Ravi rivers) regions of Punjab. Under his leadership, DSS purchased adjoining land and constructed further sets of rooms for the comfort of the sangat (devotees). Shah Satnam Singh also got constructed in 1980 a branch of DSS at Barnawa, Bagpat, Uttar Pradesh, for the convenience of followers who otherwise had to travel long distances to reach DSS at Sirsa.²¹ It is the same place where Gurmeet Ram Rahim was allowed to stay during his paroles/furloughs. Later, the branch was named 'Dera Sacha Sauda Shah Satnam Ji Ashram.' Shah Satnam Singh had not only completed many unfinished construction projects of his Guru, but also opened many more branches of DSS in the states of Northwest India. He purchased a large tract of land for the construction of new buildings to accommodate fast growing following of DSS. True to the spirit of DSS, he guided his followers to guard themselves from slipping into many social evils like drug addiction, dowry, child marriage, female feticide, caste-based discrimination, and discouraged the squandering of money on birth and death rituals and other formal ceremonies. For the benefit of less educated followers, he composed the sacred texts in vernacular.²² Before his death on December 13, 1990, Shah Satnam Singh declared Gurmeet Singh, one of his many disciples, as his successor on September 23, 1990.²³ However, another narrative, widely in circulation at the grassroots, underlined the use of force and pressure tactics for his elevation to the headship of DSS (Mahaprashasta, 2017; Singh, 2020: 108; Tripathi, 2018:97).

Shah to Insan: Formation of a New Identity

After taking over the charge of headship of DSS, Gurmeet Singh acquired a new identity and became known as Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan (hereafter Gurmeet Ram Rahim). It is important to mention here that Gurmeet Singh did not follow the tradition set by the earlier two heads of DSS of prefixing the title 'Shah' before their name as well as adopting a new name after taking over the headship of DSS. Instead, he chose the title 'Sant' to be prefixed before his original name and added a few more titles – Ram, Rahim, Insan – as suffixed after the name. Born on August 15, 1967 in a landlord family of the Sandhu Jat Sikh clan of a non-descript village Gurusar Modia in Sri Ganganagar district of Rajasthan, he was initiated into DSS on March 31, 1974 by Shah Satnam Singh at the tender age of 7. At the age of 23, when Shah Satnam Singh declared him as his successor on September 23, 1990, he permanently left his ancestral home to serve his Guru and the sangat (devotees) at DSS.

Under the leadership of Gurmeet Ram Rahim, DSS expanded manifold and at its peak claimed to have 5 crore (50 million) followers. It is also believed that Gurmeet Ram Rahim has initiated over 10 million people into the cult of DSS. In addition, he is credited with many humanitarian works for the upliftment of his followers. Under his guidance, the dera achieved new heights in the field of education, health and social welfare services. Many infrastructural projects were taken up and completed under his leadership at DSS, Sirsa and many of its branches within India and abroad. Within two years of taking charge of DSS, Gurmeet Ram Rahim shifted its headquarters from Malian Di Dhani to 'Shah Satnam Ji *Dham*' (also known as new dera), built on Sirsa-Bhadra-Chopta road, five 5 km ahead of the old Dera.²⁴ This new and elegant complex (Dera Sacha Sauda Param Sant Sawan Shah) of DSS was built within a few months period (May 1993-October 1993) after levelling around 50 acres of earth and sand dunes. About 3000 volunteers supported by 250 tractor-trolleys from Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh worked together around the clock to clear the sand dunes (The Warriors of Humanitarianism n.d.: 11).

After the completion of the first phase of the construction of this complex, Gurmeet Ram Rahim held an impressive *satsang* there on October 31, 1993.²⁵ This new complex had a huge Sachkhand Hall,²⁶ a two-storey canteen with the capacity of accommodating around 800 persons, a printing press, and even a massive Langar Ghar (community

kitchen hall) to cater to many followers. A housing complex of about 200 living quarters and separate rooms for the greater comfort of Sadhus were also built within this complex. The new deras also has a market in front of its premises, an administrative block, offices for various *samities*, and a vast luggage store. It also has a residential building of Gurmeet Ram Rahim known as *gufa*, later changed into *Terawas* (your dwelling).

DSS has also developed various health, sports, shopping, cinema and restaurant utility services in its vicinity for the followers. In 2002, DSS established Kashish restaurant on Shah Satnam Ji Marg, Begu road Sirsa with a state-of-the-art building. On November 30, 2014, Gurmeet Ram Rahim inaugurated the building of the SMG Resort, the 5 star resort having 32 premium rooms and 9 premium suites with world class amenities for the comforts of its NRI followers.²⁷ Under the effective leadership of Gurmeet Ram Rahim, the DSS not only spread all over India with its branches in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chandigarh (Union Territory), Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Orissa, and Rajasthan, but also in other countries, e.g. Australia, Canada, UAE, UK, and USA.²⁸ Multifarious social, humanitarian and infrastructural activities conducted by DSS Sirsa and its various branches earned wide acclaim both within the country and abroad that further enhanced its popularity significantly. The composition of hundreds of hymns and multiple books by the heads of DSS further popularised it within India and abroad.

A series of satsangs organised by the DSS, Sirsa on second and last Sunday of every month added significantly to its surging popularity. Similarly, two massive spiritual gatherings in the veneration of Shah Mastana, founder of DSS, on his birth anniversary, on the full moon day of Kartik of every year, and of Shah Satnam Singh, on every 25th January annually to celebrate his birth anniversary, and regular satsangs on specific days in every month at different branches of the DSS in Punjab and different states in India as well as daily prayers and the chanting of hymns from the sacred texts at every dera of DSS further enhanced its reputation. In the initial few decades, DSS massively expanded its reach within the spiritual and social domains under the leadership of Shah Mastana and Shah Satnam Singh. During the stewardship of these two pioneer heads of DSS, many DSS branches were constructed in different states of northern India, massively expanding its profile. The massive infrastructural/construction activities were mostly financed from

donations given by the followers of the dera including its rich NRI devotees, as well as its various entrepreneurial establishments. DSS not only succeeded in winning over the hearts of poor and socially excluded sections of the rural population, but it also built cordial relationships with followers of other sects and mainstream religions in the region.

The outreach of DSS got further impetus under the headship of its current Guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, who not only greatly increased construction works at Sirsa and other places, but also motivated lakhs of people in joining the dera, which in turn prompted top political leadership in Northwest India – including the late Parkash Singh Badal, five-time Chief Minister of Punjab, his son and President of Shiromani Akali Dal (henceforth SAD), Sukhbir Singh Badal, Manpreet Singh Badal, his nephew and former Punjab Finance Minister, Captain Amarinder Singh, former Punjab Chief Minister, Vasundhara Raje, former Rajasthan Chief Minister, Kuldeep Bishnoi & Anil Vij, BJP leaders, Deepender Hooda and Ashok Tanwar, Haryana Congress leaders – to make beelines at DSS to seek blessings for their political endeavours (Manav, 2024). However various allegations labelled against him, coinciding with his foray into the competitive domain of power politics, pushed DSS into a maelstrom of political insinuations, conspiracies, and lawsuits, which culminated in the dénouement of him, landing behind the bars.

V. DSS and Social Capital

DSS has institutionalised 161 different free humanitarian services for social development including medical treatment, construction of houses for the economically weak sections, marriage of destitute girls, blood and eye donation, community-based conflict resolution, humanitarian service during natural disasters and a remarkable system for assisting childless couples who wish to adopt a child which has benefitted hundreds of couples.²⁹ To effectively execute these varied social-service activities, DSS has formed a special welfare wing known as the ‘Shah Satnam Ji Green ‘S’ Welfare Force’. More than 45000 persons have already registered in this wing.³⁰ Inspired by Gurmeet Ram Rahim, volunteers of this wing have vowed to serve humanity during natural disasters in any part of the world. The Dera has set many world records, as is generally believed, in humanitarian activities to the astonishment of people across the world (Copeman, 2009: 162; Singh, 2020: 113-114). In addition to Green ‘S’ Welfare Force Wing, led by Gurmeet Ram Rahim, DSS has formed a youth

federation and several other wings – administrative, political, medical, and information & technology – as well as multiple *Samities* (working bodies) to streamline the provision of its services to its followers and to society in general. Some of the most important samities, amongst others, include langar samiti, water samiti, sachi shikhsa samiti, pandal (satsang hall) samiti, and agricultural samiti.³¹ Each samiti has a head, some permanent volunteers and a large corpus of open volunteers, as well as offices, which can either be separate, or a common office for two samities in one room.³²

Apart from the above-mentioned various infrastructural and administrative endeavours undertaken by Gurmeet Ram Rahim at DSS Sirsa and its various branches, a firm for the sale of various consumer products called MSG All Trading International Pvt. Ltd., was founded at DSS Sirsa in January 2016. The DSS has established more than a dozen schools and colleges³³ in Sirsa, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh, and a state-of-the-art multi-specialty hospital as well as a MSG *Khedd Pind* (games village) for the physical well-being of its vast followings. Additionally, it has also constructed royal palatial houses for the family of Gurmeet Ram Rahim on Najia Khera Road near the dera, and a colony – in the village Najia Khera – for followers who made the dera premises their permanent abode for social and spiritual sewa (service).

Assured of the unwavering backing of over one million followers, Gurmeet Ram Rahim became a brand exuding an influence, which permeated the corridors of power politics, the cutthroat environs of a free market economy, and the inner circles of the flamboyant entertainment industry. He leveraged the glamour of the cinema screen to project his archconservative views and to hugely enhance his profile. To further bolster the dera's resources, Gurmeet Ram Rahim began an online business which grew to over 150 consumer items comprising *daals* (pulses), dry fruits, bottle water, wafers, cosmetics, hair colours, ice-creams, biscuits, kitchen items, Ayurveda items, pickles, and other such daily household use goods (FMCG) which were sold by MSG All Trading International Private Limited online through tele-shopping and mobile Apps. All varieties of MSG products are briskly sold to followers of the dera.³⁴ Many of these are food crops grown on the 700 acres of agricultural land owned by DSS at Sirsa for in-house consumption as well as for commercial purposes, including different varieties of basmati rice, wheat, and organic vegetables. Blessed by Gurmeet Ram Rahim, many food items are bought by dera followers at exorbitant rates – for an

instance a crate of grapes was sold for Rs. 25 lakh (2.5 million); a pumpkin for Rs. 67,000; one okra piece at Rs. 5,000; a single piece of cucumber picked and blessed by Gurmeet Ram Rahim is sold at Rs. 7000. Similarly, a single piece of green chilli is sold at a price of Rs. 300, and a brinjal at Rs. 3000 per piece (Rajalakshmi, 2017; Singh, 2000). They command such high prices because of the deep faith that dera followers repose in their guru – Gurmeet Ram Rahim.³⁵

To optimise the multifarious humanitarian and social activities undertaken by DSS, volunteer followers of the dera are structured into various functional groups – all chosen from amongst themselves – beginning at the village level: All the dera follower residents of a given village are made member of this unit. The village level unit is bifurcated further into two sub-units – ‘Youth Wing’ and ‘Senior Citizens Wing.’ These two sub-units collectively conduct and coordinate at village level *naam charcha satsangs* (spiritual congregations for discourse on the word of Guru) and other social welfare activities. The members of these two sub-units select one of them as a common coordinator popularly called *Bhangidass* (literary lowest caste) to manage the affairs at village level.³⁶ Above the village level, there exists a block level (comprising 30 villages) consisting of two wings of exclusively women and men respectively, each with seven members. The block units, also called committees, manage multifarious humanitarian and welfare works, spiritual congregations, and coordinate village level committees and other dera activities. Next is a district committee, which has two 15-member wings of men and women respectively. These district committees supervise the work of block level committees. Above the district level, followers select a state level committee to supervise the functioning of the block level committees as well as the dera affairs in their state. These also consist of two separate wings for men and women but with 25 members each. On the top of this pyramidal organisational structure is an apex national committee, which supervises the activities of functional units at different levels.

All the above-mentioned administrative bodies and social-welfare institutions including hospitals, sports structures, housing for the sewadars, and restaurants for visitors to the dera, helped in developing multilayered social and spiritual bonds among the followers of DSS, which in turn generated what Coleman called ‘extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust’ among them ‘to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust’ (Coleman,

1988: S100-S101). Intimate social ties among the DSS followers generated through various aforementioned administrative organisations and social welfare bodies eventually led to the cultivation of massive social capital, so much so that the construction of a Sachkhand Hall at DSS, Sirsa with dimensions of 500 ft. x 400 ft. (200000 sq. ft.) was completed in just 30 days – something which would likely otherwise have taken many months, perhaps years.³⁷ Similarly, Shah Satnam Ji International Cricket Stadium – with three pitches in the ground and sitting capacity of about 30000 people, was constructed in 42 days.³⁸ The social capital generated by DSS has not only enhanced its reach and respectability, especially among the lower castes and the economically marginalised, but has also cemented seamless spiritual, social and cultural ties among them, thereby achieving a stature such as to challenge mainstream religions in the region by making a dent in the numerical strength of their following, and consequently in offerings. It is in this crucial context of a multi-religion competitive northwestern socio-political landscape that the kind of social capital that DSS has generated also contributed to the process of conflict formation between its followers and diverse mainstream religious communities.

VI. DSS and Conflict Formation

Another, equally important, but often neglected dimension of deras in Punjab, is their role in conflict formation. Deras with their massive followings and political patronage de facto enter the quagmire of power politics – an inherently combustible mix. The ever-increasing following of some deras – namely DSS in Sirsa, Dera Radhasoami Beas, Sach Khand Ballan, and Divya Jyoti Jagarti Sansthan, Noormahal – also means that they have been excavating many such followers from the constituencies of the mainstream religions in the state – one of various factors of conflict generation between deras and mainstream religious centres. The latter attribute much of the decreasing strength of their followers and the fall in the quantum of their offerings to the surging influence of deras, thus leading to conflicts, sometimes even violent, between the followers of some deras and those of mainstream religious organisations.³⁹ Talhan (Jodhka and Louis, 2003: 2923-26; Ram, 2004a: 906-12; Ram, 2007: 4071-72), Meham (Ram, 2007: 4072), and Vienna violence (Ram, 2009: 1-4) are some instances of dera-related social conflicts in Punjab and Punjabi diasporas (Alig, 2008; Copeman, 2012: 158-59; Zaidi, 2007). The latest case of such a

conflict was witnessed after a special CBI court convicted the head of DSS on August 25, 2017, in a 15-year-old rape case of two of his female followers, which he was accused of committing in 2002. It is against this backdrop that we seek to critically examine the role of DSS in conflict formation as an exemplar.

DSS commands enormous followings particularly within the Northwestern region, and the network of its shrines is well established abroad as well. (The Warriors of Humanitarianism n.d.: 13; Singh, 2020: 111-12). The following of DSS increased manifold after Gurmeet Ram Rahim took over its charge in September 1990. Popularly known as ‘guru of bling’, for his kitschy costumes and extravagant jewellery, Gurmeet Ram Rahim gave a unique turn to the otherwise silently expanding reach of DSS in the region vis-à-vis the mainstream religions. Unlike other heads of deras, Gurmeet Ram Rahim chose to enter the glamorous worlds of music, social media, sports, pop/rap singing, film industry⁴⁰ as well as business by venturing into the huge Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) market by leveraging his own persona as a brand as well as that of DSS. Moreover, DSS organised several cleanliness campaigns in different states in the country, got registered 14 Guinness book of world record, two Limca book of world records, and eight Asia book of records in various humanitarian and social welfare ventures of mass blood and eye donations, tree plantation, and disaster management (Copeman, 2009: 162; Singh, 2020: 113-114). These expeditions, combined with his natural political inclinations, inevitably brought him access to the corridors of power but eventually sucked both him and his well-guarded dera into a morass of following controversies, conflicts, and violence.

Controversies, Conflicts and Violence

Controversies, conflicts and violence related to DSS began surfacing in 2002. The complex process of conflict formation in DSS originated with the accusation of Gurmeet Ram Rahim of raping two of his *sadhvis* (female disciples), which in turn led to the murder of Ranjit Singh, one of the managers of DSS and also brother of one of rape victims, for his alleged involvement in the circulation of an anonymous letter addressed to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the then Prime Minister of India, and various top institutions, including the Punjab and Haryana High Court, to draw their attention to the alleged sexual exploitation of *sadhvis* at the dera headquarters which occurred between 1999 and 2002, and also the murder

of Ram Chander Chhatarpati, a DSS-based journalist, who published the letter in his local newspaper, *Poora Sach* (whole truth), highlighting the case of rape and sexual harassment (Express Web Desk, 2019; Rao, 2023). After a gap of five years, another controversy emerged on May 13, 2007, relating with the blasphemous act of DSS chief, who mimicked Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, by dressing himself similarly and performing a ceremony of distributing *Jaam-e-Insan* (colorful sweetened water) to baptize his followers – replicating the style of the Sikh baptizing ceremony that believed to be performed by Guru Gobind Singh on the Vaisakhi day of 1699 at Anandpur Sahib – during a religious congregation at the Salabatpura branch of DSS in the Bathinda district of Punjab. Like the title of *Khalsa*, the head of DSS also initiated a new identity marker – to henceforth be known as '*Insan*' – for his followers, also known as *Premis* (literally 'lovers', term used by them as reference of address to one another).

This act of commission by the DSS chief – considered grossly blasphemous by orthodox Sikhs – was advertised in several local English and Punjabi newspapers. Taking its cognisance, the SAD and various radical Sikh organisations organised protests within Punjab and adjoining states on May 14, 2007. During the protests, which turned violent, mainly in Bathinda and Mansa districts of Punjab, three people were killed, many, including policemen, injuries, buses were torched, and a news channel's broadcast van was also put on fire (Asia News, 2007; Baixas, 2007; Baixas and Simon, 2008: 2-10; Dogra, 2022; Duggal, 2022:103-106; Joshi, 2017; Singh, 2017a: 21). On May 17, 2007, Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, the then Jathedar (head) of Akal Takht, convened a Sarbat Khalsa (assembly of the whole community) at Takht Sri Damdama Sahib in Talwandi Sabo, near the Salabatpura branch of DSS in the Bathinda district of Punjab, the site of alleged blasphemous act by the Chief of DSS. At the end of the meeting, the Akal Takht issued a *Hukamnama* (edict) calling for a social boycott of followers of DSS, closure of all branches of the DSS in Punjab within a week, and the arrest of the head of DSS within ten days (Alig, 2008; Baixas and Simon, 2008: 7-8; Dogra, 2022. 'Following the first hukumnama,' argued Baixas and Simon:

[T]he Akal Takht called for a peaceful bandh (strike) on 22 May, reiterated its ultimatum to the Punjab government in other hukumnamas, organized a 'peace march' on 31 May and asked for formal apologies from Baba Gurmeet Singh to the

Sikh Panth. Three successive apologies were published in the press by the DSS but all were rejected by the Akal Takht because they were mere unsigned 'expression of regret' (Baixas and Simon, 2008: 8).

To preempt the highly volatile situation from snowballing into an open clash between followers of DSS and various Sikh organisations, the then Chief Minister of Punjab, Parkash Singh Badal, convened an emergency meeting of officials and requested the Union Home Minister, Shivraj Patil, to deploy 50 companies of Central Forces in the state (Asia News, 2007). Also, on June 27, 2007 the Punjab government gave the sanction for arresting and prosecuting the DSS head after the Akal Takht had rejected his fresh 'apology', without signature, for his alleged blasphemous act (PTI, 2007), and also his refusal to present himself before the Akal Takht (Duggal, 2022: 105). But subsequently, given the electoral weight of the mammoth following of DSS, especially in the Malwa region, the SAD-BJP government in Punjab had circumspectly played proactive role to withdraw the blasphemy case registered against the chief of DSS (Pubby, 2015; Sikh Siyasat Bureau, 2015). In return, the dera Chief had unofficially lent support to the SAD-BJP alliance in the 2012 Punjab assembly elections (Mahaprashasta, 2017). In August 2014, the trial court at Bathinda had also dismissed the blasphemy case against the DSS chief for lack of evidence, again allegedly at the behest of the SAD-BJP government,⁴¹ which was challenged in Punjab and Haryana High Court in January 2015 (HT Correspondent, 2017; Sikh Siyasat Bureau, 2015).

Convictions, Paroles, and Elections

Investigated by the special CBI court Panchkula, Haryana, Gurmeet Ram Rahim was convicted in each of the aforementioned three cases filed against him in 2002. In the rape case of two of his female disciples, he was convicted on 25 August 2017 and sentenced to 20 years in jail on August 28, 2017 – 10 years each to run consecutively. 'The court also fined him Rs 15 lakh in each of the two cases, of which Rs 14 lakh each would go to the two victims who were part of his sect and were coerced into having sex with him' (Timesofindia.com, 2017). In the murder case of journalist Ram Chander Chhatrapati, DSS chief, along with his three other co-accused allies (Krishan, Lal, Nirmal and Kuldeep), was sentenced to life imprisonment on January 17, 2019. In the murder case of Ranjit Singh,

Gurmeet Ram Rahim was sentenced to another life term along with his four other co-accused allies (Sabdil Singh, Jasbir Singh, Krishan Lal, and Avtar Singh) on 18 October 2021 (Sehgal, 2021; Sura, 2024b; Sharma, 2024). In the murder case of Ranjit Singh, the special CBI court also imposed a fine of Rs. 31 lakh (one Lakh is one hundred thousand) on the dera chief, 1.50 lakh on Sabdil Singh, Rs. 1.25 lakh each on Jasbir Singh and Krishan Lal, and Rs. 75,000 on Avtar Singh (Sura, 2024).⁴² Another case filed on February 1, 2018 against the dera head and two doctors for castrating a large number of his followers is still pending before the CBI court in Panchkula (Sura, 2024a). Gurmeet Ram Rahim was also named as an accused in a case relating to the theft of a 'bir' (copy) of the Guru Granth Sahib from the Burj Jawahar Singh Wala Gurdwara on June 1, 2015 (Sehgal, 2021).

The involvement, conviction and imprisonment of Gurmeet Ram Rahim in the rape and murder cases, and thereafter, repeated paroles/furloughs granted by the Haryana government, further inflamed conflict formation between his followers and members of mainstream religious communities. For instance, the violent conflict that erupted in Panchkula town near Chandigarh, capital of two states of Punjab and Haryana, after his conviction on August 25, 2017 in the rape case, left 32 people dead, 250 injured, 28 vehicles burnt, two government buildings damaged, and six private shops burnt down after several thousand DSS followers who had been camping there during the trial of their Guru – Gurmeet Ram Rahim – ran amok. Many cases of riots and arson were reported from some other places in Punjab and Haryana, particularly Panchkula and Sirsa. Delhi, the adjoining national capital city of Panchkula, was also put on high alert after at least seven cases of arson were reported. Keeping in view the assemblance of up to 200,000 followers of DSS in Panchkula in a show of defiance and support of their Guru,⁴³ electricity supplies, mobile internet and cable television network had been snapped in parts of Haryana and Punjab. Security forces were compelled to resort to use of teargas and water cannon to contain the rioting (for details see, ANI, 2017; Gupta and Dhaliwal, 2017; Safi, 2017; The Wire Staff, 2017; TNN, 2019). The dera chief challenged all of his convictions before the Punjab and Haryana high court. Though in the murder case of Ranjit Singh, the Punjab and Haryana High Court acquitted him and four others, on May 28, 2024, for lack of evidence, his appeals in two more cases – the rape and murder case of Ram Chander Chhattarpati – are still pending (Sura, 2024; Sura, 2024a).

Since his incarceration in the Sunaria jail in Rohtak district of Haryana on August 28, 2017, after his conviction in the rape case, the chief of DSS has been granted multiple paroles/furloughs (short-term temporary release) on various pretexts, which further contributed toward conflict formation in the region between the followers of DSS and some Sikh religious bodies. So far, he has been granted paroles/furloughs on eleven different occasions since his conviction in the rape case of two of his sadhvis, and later two murder cases: Thrice in 2024 (total 91 days in January, August, and October), thrice in 2023 (total 91 days in January, July, and November), thrice in 2022 (total 91 days in February, June, and October), once in 2021 (May 21, 2021), and again once in 2020 (October 24, 2020). Thus after the completion of his latest 20-day furlough, which was granted to him on October 1, 2024, he would be competing total of 275 days on temporary release in the last four years since his conviction (for details see: Bhatia, 2024; Manav, 2024; Express News Service, 2024; Express News Service, 2023; Sharma, 2024; Sura 2024b; Shivsaran, 2024; Siwach, 2024).

Curiously, in the last two years, DSS Chief's parole/furlough periods have coincided with the local/assembly/by-poll elections in the northern states (Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan), all of which are DSS strongholds. On October 24, 2020, the one day temporarily release of dera chief – from sunrise to sunset – to meet his ailing mother at a hospital in Gurgaon coincided with November 3, 2020 Baroda assembly by-poll in Haryana (Sura, 2024b). Similarly, in February 2022 (February 7-28), he was temporary released on 21-day furlough, just 12 days ahead of Punjab Assembly elections, on the plea to visit his family in Gurugram (Shivsaran), and in the same year, he was released for 30-day parole from June 17 till July 18, which led to what Bhatia said:

raising eye-brows as the municipal elections were then round the corner in Haryana for 46 local bodies, including 18 municipal councils and 26 municipal committees. Though he stayed put in his Baghpat ashram, his online satsang (discourse) in Rohtak district created a stir after BJP leader and ex-Karnal mayor Renu Bala Gupta was seen seeking his blessings virtually. In these polls, the BJP won 25 local bodies while the Congress and the party-backed Independents won 20 (Bhatia, 2024a).

And again, in the same year, he was granted 40-day parole (October 15-November 25, 2022) ahead of Haryana's panchayat elections on October 30 and November 2, 2022, and the bypoll in Adampur on November 3, 2022, a stronghold of former chief minister Bhajan Lal's family. Bhavya Bishnoi, grandson of Bhajan Lal, contested this bypoll election on the BJP's ticket and won the seat (Bhatia, 2024a). In July 2023, DSS chief was released on 30-day parole (July 20-August 20), ahead of Panchayat elections in Haryana, for five gram panchayats across three districts, scheduled for August 13, 2023, in which a majority of the BJP-backed candidates won (Bhatia, 2024a; Shivsaran, 2024), and also in the same year DSS chief was released on 21-day furlough (November 21-December 13, 2023), which coincided with Rajasthan Assembly polls on November 25, 2023, in which the BJP won 115 out of 200 Assembly seats as against the 70 seats of the Congress (Bhatia, 2024; Bhatia, 2024a; Sehgal, 2023a; Shivsarn, 2024). Being a native of Gurusar Modia village of Sri Ganganagar district of Rajasthan state, Gurmeet Ram Rahim has substantial following in Haryana's border areas in Rajasthan (Express News Service, 2023). His 50-days parole in 2024 (January 19-March 10) was also alleged to have been granted keeping in view the model code for the 18th general parliamentary elections as well as three days ahead of 'the *'Pran Pratishtha'* (consecration) of the Ram temple in Ayodhya. Immediately upon his release, he had issued a video statement asking his followers to celebrate "Ram ji's festival" like Diwali' (Express News Service 2024; Manav 2024). Similarly, his second furlough of 21-day in 2024 (13 August 13-September 2, 2024), and the third, the latest 20-day parole (October 02-22, 2024), also coincided with the Assembly elections in Haryana. The latter was granted barely four days before the Assembly election was held in Haryana on October 5, 2024 (Siwach, 2024).

Proving all exit polls wrong, the BJP, despite anti-incumbency, corruption, unemployment, farmer and wrestler anger over long-lasting protests, urban dysfunction, and discontent over the Agniveer scheme, won the Haryana Assembly election 2024 for the third consecutive time with 48 seats out of 90 as against 37 of the Congress (Mathew and Sharma, 2024, Mehta, 2024). Consolidation of lower OBCs, non-Jatavs and upper castes votes in favour of BJP, replacement of chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar, a Punjabi Khatri, with Nayab Singh Saini, an OBC, Congress's over-confidence, lack of alliances and infighting, as well as the fear of '*Jatshahi*' (Jat dominance) and the '*kharchi, parchi*' system of giving jobs to favourites under a possible government led by Bhupinder Singh Hooda

were also among some other factors considered responsible for the failure of the Congress party to form government in Haryana (Kamra, 2024; Kumar, 2024; Chowdhury, 2024; Khan and Korada, 2024; Mehta, 2024; Sanghi, 2024). Despite persistent claim by the Congress on Jat votes (25 percent of the population) throughout its election campaign, around 28 percent of them voted for the BJP, perhaps for their so-called pro-Hindutva inclination, as revealed by the CSDS-Lokniti survey (as quoted in Khan and Korada, 2024; cf. Mehta, 2024; Varshney, 2024; Sanghi, 2024).

According to Trivedi Centre for Political Data of the Ashoka University, out of the total of 29 Jat-dominated seats, the BJP won 18 seats, the Congress nine, and the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) two constituencies (quoted in Chowdhury 2024). Reflecting critically on the data, Neerja Chowdhury, a senior journalist and political commentator, was of the opinion that the victory of the BJP did not necessarily mean that Jats voted in large number in favour of the former. It could also mean that in these constituencies, with a sizable Jat population (above 20 percent), 'non-Jats polarized sharply and voted for the BJP' (Chowdhury, 2024). Similarly, SC votes (21 percent of the population) were also divided among Jatav Dalits, who favoured the Congress, and non-Jatavs – more numerous among SCs in Haryana – who preferred BJP to the Congress. In such a sharply divided electoral landscape, '[h]ow much of a factor Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh's release was, in the final analysis, is an open question' (Mehta, 2024). It is impossible to assign primacy to any one factor – whether it was the parole granted to DSS chief on the eve of elections, the fear of Jatshahi, or indeed any other factor from several others – which propelled the BJP to victory in Haryana (Khan and Korada, 2024; Mehta, 2024). Nevertheless, the release of DSS chief from Sunaria jail on 20-day parole just 72 hours, and just the latest of many such before the onset of elections, before the Haryana Assembly election 2024, gives credence to speculations concerning this Baba's continued influence on, and centrality to, Haryana politics.

The role of the chief of DSS in the electoral politics in Punjab was an open secret even before his imprisonment in rape and two murder cases. Given the massive following of DSS, political leadership across party line never lost an opportunity to elicit political support of DSS during elections both at the state and national levels. In fact, DSS began taking interest in electoral politics after Gurmeet Ram Rahim took over its headship in 1990. Since then its mingling with political personalities across political spectrums has never been diminished. For the first time, DSS lent its

support, though indirectly, to the SAD in 1996 parliamentary election. Again in 1997, it also indirectly supported SAD in Punjab assembly election, and in return the latter helped its followers in their various official works after it was able to form the government in the state (Singh, 2020: 188-190). Subsequently, in 1999 parliamentary election, DSS again lent its support to SAD, which helped it in winning two of the 13 parliamentary seats in Punjab.

During Punjab Assembly election 2002, in the backdrop of rape and murder cases filed against Gurmeet Ram Rahim, DSS shifted its support to the Indian National Congress (henceforth Congress party). The main reason behind the shift in support from SAD to Congress party, which was then a ruling party at the centre, was to solicit the support of the latter in the rape and murder cases of DSS chief. In the subsequent 2007 Punjab Assembly elections, the DSS openly supported the Congress party. Its Political Affair Wing (PAW) – being the sole Dera to have an overtly political – released advertisements in favour of candidates fielded by the Congress, particularly in the Malwa region. The Congress party secured 37 out of total 65 assembly seats in the Akali dominated Malwa region (south of river Sutlej), but created a political feud between DSS and SAD, despite the alleged political support by the former to ‘the Akalis in three constituencies including Lambi from where chief minister Badal contested’ (Dogra, 2022; Mahaprashasta, 2017). Since 2007, DSS started throwing its weight openly in favour of political parties at all levels of electoral arenas, which it considered helpful in furthering the cause of DSS and its followers. Until then, it used to influence elections only indirectly through an informal process of communicating its followers during routine satsang congregations.

However, the vulnerability of DSS chief to surging opposition for the blasphemous act of him imitating the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh in 2007, on the one hand, and the hold of the SAD among Sikhs in the region, on the other, as well as it being a ruling party in coalition with the BJP in Punjab, all inexorably led to major reorientation in its political alignment in Punjab. In the 2012 Punjab Assembly elections, DSS supported SAD for its favours to DSS chief during 2007 post-blasphemy period, for which it had to pay a heavy price both in terms of its political rout in the subsequent state Assembly (2017 and 2022) as well as parliamentary (2024) elections. It was also for such reasons, among others, that the Jathedar of Akal Takht declared Sukhbir Singh Badal a *tankhayia* (guilty of violating Sikh *rehat maryada* – religious code of conduct) on August 30,

2024, for harming the image of the 'Panth' and causing damage to Sikh interests. The only time that DSS kept aloof from elections was in 2019 following the conviction of its chief in the rape case in 2017. Cautioned by the rape and murder cases as well as the blasphemy episode of 2007, the DSS chief lent its support in a balanced manner to both the SAD and the Congress party in the 2009 parliamentary election (Surinder, 2020:195).

Given his massive following and resultant ability to influence election outcomes, the DSS chief's support has long been solicited by political parties. However, his electoral support to BJP is an open secret and the DSS has been enjoying the patronage of the BJP since long. Applauding commitment of Gurmeet Ram Rahmm to the Swachh Bharat (clean India) mission, Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, tweeted on October 29, 2014: 'Appreciable effort by Baba Ram Rahim ji & his team. Will motivate people across India to join Swachh Bharat Mission' (Special Correspondent, 2021). DSS chief's closeness to BJP can also be gauged from the fact that at least three senior BJP ministers in the government of Haryana have together gifted him Rs. 1.12 crore (11.2 million) to DSS from the state's discretionary funds 'to promote sports' among others – Ram Bilas Sharma 51 lakh, Anil Vij 50 lakh, and Manish Grover 11 lakh (News18.com, 2017). Commenting on his decision to gift money to DSS, Anil Vij told media, 'I could not give more than Rs 50 lakh out of discretionary fund. Had it been possible, I would have given more' (News18.com, 2017).

In the 2014 parliamentary elections, the DSS chief had openly supported the BJP in Haryana, which secured seven out of 10 seats in the state (Bhatia 2024a). Similarly, in the run-up to 2014 Haryana state assembly elections, DSS chief 'urged his followers to vote for the party, which went on to win the vote' (Pandey, 2023; also see, Bhatia, 2024a). After the poll verdict, 'several BJP leaders made a beeline,' said Bhatia, 'to meet Ram Rahim with the pictures of their vehicles lined up outside the Dera headquarters going viral' (Bhatia, 2024a). Yet again, during the 2024 general elections, the DSS openly extended its support to the BJP by forming 'a committee for election duty across 10 Lok Sabha seats in Haryana', which 'despite anti-incumbency against the State government, farmers' grievances, and the wrestlers' protest ... may have consolidated its vote base – even though its tally fell to 5 from the previous 10' (Sharma, 2024).

Still further, in the recently-held Haryana Assembly election 2024, the DSS headquarters urged its followers to support the BJP by mobilising

additional voters in their colonies. The directive was delivered, however, discreetly at a satsang in Sirsa, a day after his release on a 20-day parole (Sharma 2024a). In January 2023, two BJP leaders, Krishan Lal Panwar, Member of Rajya Sabha, and Krishen Kumar Bedi, former minister, attended an online satsang delivered by Gurmeet Ram Rahim and also had interaction with him during his 40-day parole. Though both of them denied any political motive, the Congress party considered their action tantamount to a 'vote-catching ploy' (Rao, 2024). However, the downside of such electoral support rendered by the DSS to one or the other political party, was that it was pushed into a vortex of political feuds as well as protracted social conflicts.

Paroles/Furloughs and Conflict Formation

During multiple paroles/furloughs, Gurmeet Ram Rahim was allowed to stay at Dera Sacha Sauda Ashram – a branch of DSS, Sirsa – at Barnawa in Bagpat, Uttar Pradesh, where he held several online satsangs, celebrated birth anniversaries and released his music videos. On one occasion, during his 40-day parole (January 21-March 3, 2023) to attend the religious function to mark birth anniversary of the DSS's second chief Shah Satnam Singh, he celebrated the birthday by cutting a huge cake with a sword. He was also heard saying in the video that "Got a chance after five years to celebrate it like this, so I should cut at least five cakes, this is the first cake" (Bhatia 2024; Express News Service 2024). On another occasion during 40-day parole (October 15-November 25, 2022), DSS chief released three music videos authored, sung, composed and produced by him – *Saadi Nit Diwali* (Everyday for us is Diwali), *Jaago Dunia De Loko* (Wake up people of the world), and *Chat pe chat* (Talk after talk) on his Youtube channel' (Bhatia, 2024; Sura, 2022; The Economic Times News, 2023).

The President of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (hereafter SGPC) – the apex religious body of the Sikhs – and the Jathedar (head) of Akal Takht (supreme temporal seat of the Sikhs) have repeatedly, though unsuccessfully, opposed the paroles/furloughs granted to Gurmeet Ram Rahim stating that, 'If the Dera chief, who is convicted in serious crimes, can be given repeated paroles, then why is the government not listening to the voice raised by the Sikh community for the release of "Bandi Singhs"' (The Economic Times News, 2023; see also: ANI General News, 2023). Reacting sharply to the grant of 21 days

parole to the dera chief on November 2023, SGPC President, H.S. Dharmi said:

The government's repeated leniency, despite the serious nature of his crimes, is creating an atmosphere of disbelief among the Sikh community. The political interests of the government are causing Ram Rahim's gruesome offences to be overlooked, which is not in the best interest of the country (Express News Service, 2023). 'By giving the Dera chief parole on a regular basis,' said the Akal Takht Jathedar, Giani Raghbir Singh, 'the government is trying to let down the Sikh community (The Economic Times News, 2023).

The grant of repeated paroles to DSS chief has also drawn flak in the past with Swati Maliwal, the Delhi Commission for Women, saying that "all limits of shamelessness have been crossed" (Sehgal, 2023a). In response to a petition challenging the parole, the Punjab Police had submitted:

that his frequent temporary release from custody has led to resentment in particular religious community in Punjab and created festive and celebratory atmosphere among the dera followers, which is highly resented by some sections of the society, which may lead to law-and-order problems in the state – *with far-reaching implications for fomenting social conflicts* (Sura, 2023; Scroll Staff, 2024 emphasis added).

However, the BJP-ruled Haryana government had supported DSS chief's parole, stating:

that the Dera Sacha Sauda chief does not fall under the definition of a hardcore prisoner and cannot be termed a serial killer. Manohar Lal Khattar, Haryana's chief minister at the time, had also said that he would not interfere with the parole granted to Singh (Scroll Staff, 2024).

Justifying paroles/furloughs of DSS chief, Haryana Chief Minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, further said:

Parole is given based on conduct in jail. Every convict has the right to get parole and furlough. We are now creating an open jail. Inmates showing good conduct will be placed in an open jail (Sehgal, 2023).

As per 2023 figures of the Haryana government, out of the total 5,832 convicts in the three central and 17 district jails in the state, 2801 prisoners availed of temporary release, of which 2007 obtained parole and the remaining 794 obtained furlough. Some convicts obtained both, and that too multiple times during the same year (Bhatia, 2024a). Manohar Lal Khattar, former Haryana Chief Minister, and Nayab Singh Saini, who replaced him before the recently concluded Haryana Assembly elections 2024 have 'consistently supported paroles and furloughs for Ram Rahim, maintaining that no rules have been violated' (Bhatia, 2024a).

Taking note of the SGPC petition filed in February 2023, the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the Haryana government on February 29, 2024 not to consider DSS chief's case for grant of further parole without the permission of the high court, and to explain if similar provisions of furlough and parole were extended to other convicts (Sandhu 2024; Sandhu 2024a). However, in June 2024, the dera head approached the Punjab and Haryana High Court for vacation of stay on granting him temporary release citing his good conduct during his already spent time in imprisonment so far, as well as his acquittal on May 28, 2024, along with four other convicts, in the case relating to the murder of Ranjit Singh, a former manager in the dera, in which a Panchkula CBI court sentenced them for life term (Sandhu, 2024b; Sura, 2024c). On August 9, 2024, the Punjab and Haryana High Court, reversing its earlier decision of February 29, 2024, decided that the government of Haryana under the Haryana Good Conduct Prisoners (Temporary Release) Act, 2022 can grant parole to DSS chief without any 'arbitrariness or favouritism', and disposed of the petition moved by SGPC against alleged misuse of law in granting parole/furlough to the head of DSS (Dogra, 2024).

Though the current ruling dispensation in Haryana has strenuously underlined the legal veracity of these multiple short-term temporary reliefs given to the convicted head of DSS, nonetheless their correlation with elections cannot be brushed aside as mere coincidence (Express News Service, 2024; Sharma, 2022; Brar, 2024; cf. Brar, 2024a). Opposing the parole plea of DSS chief for his latest reprieve (October 2-22, 2024),

Anshul Chhatrapati, son of the murdered journalist Ram Chandar Chhatrapati, approached the Election Commission:

urging it to direct the Haryana government to cancel dera chief's parole plea insisting that releasing him ahead of the Assembly elections would be a violation of the democratic values as he 'can influence the voters by sending messages to his devotees to benefit a particular political party (Siwach, 2024).

The Haryana Pradesh Congress Committee (HPCC) also approached the Election Commission (EC), just before the release of DSS chief, to preclude his parole, mentioning the Model Code of Conduct (Bhatia, 2024a). Critically reflecting on multiple reprieves granted to the DSS chief by the Haryana government in the last two years, Jagmati Sangwan, national vice president of the All India Democratic Women's Association, was of the opinion that '[t]he State government is misusing the law time and again in Ram Rahim's favour for electoral considerations, ignoring the concerns of civil society and his victims' (as quoted in Sharma, 2024). Given close attractions between babas of deras and political leadership across parties in general, and vast following of the DSS, in particular, the influence of the latter on the political choices of its followers cannot be ruled out. 'He definitely influences a large section of voters in Haryana. The BJP is trying to use his religious clout to consolidate votes,' Jagmati said (Sharma, 2024). This is a clear instance of quid pro quo. 'He wants his freedom back and they want support from his cadre' (Sharma, 2022).

DSS and Intra-Akalis Conflicts

Although, with the passage of time, mainstream political parties have toned down their rhetoric with reference to various unconscionable activities of DSS (cf. Singh, 2015), the resultant social conflict has continued to escalate, albeit in a subterranean manner. The protracted conflicts between DSS and various Sikh political and religious groups once again came on the surface, and rather more vehemently, on September 24, 2015, after the Akal Takht clergy pardoned DSS chief of his alleged blasphemous act with regard to Salabatpura incident (Press Trust of India, 2015; Pubby, 2015; Vinayak, 2015). Generally believed to be orchestrated by SAD president, Sukhbir Singh Badal, the pardon – which

was widely held in the state to be in return for a promised goodwill by the head of DSS who commands a sizeable vote bank in Malwa region of Punjab – was followed by a series of incidents of sacrilege of the SGGS in Bargari Kalan, Burj Jawahar Singh Wala and some other places in Punjab⁴⁴ on September 25, 2015 culminating in Sikh anger and protests against the then ruling SAD, which led to police firing at Kotkapura and Behbal Kalan on October 14, 2015, leaving two people dead in Behbal Kalan⁴⁵ and several injured in Kotkapura (Singh, 2018; see also Special Correspondent, 2022; Vasudeva, 2019; Mahal, 2024).

The exoneration of the DSS chief in 2007 case of blasphemy, and the sacrilege incidents in Burj Jawahar Singh Wala and Bargari villages followed by protests and killing of two persons incited further such widespread protests in the state that within 23 days of its controversial decision the Jathedar of the Akal Takht, Giani Gurbachan Singh, had to withdraw the pardon on October 16, 2015 as well as submit his resignation (Gopal and Brar, 2015; Singh, 2015; Tribune News Service, 2015). The annulment of the pardon was seen as a consequence of simmering tension in Punjab over the alleged act of desecration of SGGS 'as rumours swirled that it was the handiwork of Dera supporters' (Singh, 2015). As far as resignation of the Jathedar of Akal Takht was concerned, it was 'seen as a part of Akalis' carefully-crafted damage control strategy to blunt a fresh surge in the anti-Badals mood ignited by the Justice Ranjit Singh panel report that indicted both former CM Parkash Singh Badal and Sukhbir for sacrilege incidents and excessive use of police force' (Singh, 2018; Singh, 2015). What further rattled SAD was the overwhelming response to the radical Sikh leaders'-led Bargari Morcha for action against those responsible for the sacrilege and the subsequent police firing – still an unresolved and complex simmering issue of conflict formation in the state (Singh, 2018).

Thus the exoneration of DSS chief of his alleged act of blasphemy, thereafter occurrence of series of incidents of sacrilege of SGGS followed by massive protests and brutal use of police force, afterward the revocation of the pardon and resignation of the Jathedar of Akal Takht, and later the imprisonment of DSS chief in the long-drawn-out pending case of rape of two of his female followers as well as the murder of one of the managers of DSS and a DSS-based journalist followed by multiple paroles/furloughs granted to him since then on one excuse or the other continued to feed the conflict formation process in the state uninterruptedly.

It was against such a backdrop of DSS-induced conflict formation that some senior rebel SAD leaders⁴⁶ had appeared before the Akal Takht in Amritsar on July 1, 2024 and submitted a letter seeking forgiveness for their mistakes, which they claimed, had led to 'people's disillusionment with the party when it was in power in Punjab from 2007 to 2017,' and further blaming the incumbent SAD president for various decisions made during the SAD-led government's tenure that 'harmed the party' (Brar, 2024c). Taking cognisance of this letter, a committee of five Sikh high priests had convened a meeting under the leadership of Jathedar of Akal Takht Giani Raghbir Singh at Akal Takht Secretariat on July 15, 2024.⁴⁷ Among the issues referenced in the said letter were incidents of sacrilege in 2015 whereby the then SAD-BJP government had allegedly prevaricated over identifying, and then prosecuting, the miscreants. The letter also alleged that Sukhbir Singh Badal had used his 'influence on the Akal Takht' to ensure a pardon for the DSS chief, who had been booked in 2007 for allegedly imitating Guru Gobind Singh (Baghria, 2024).

The letter further mentioned that the SGPC – an elected Sikh religious body which is dominated by members of SAD and which is also the appointing authority of the Jathedar at Akal Takht – had acted in tandem with the SAD supremo by spending nearly Rs 90 lakh on advertisements in newspapers towards this end (Brar, 2024c). Resultantly, the Akal Takht Jathedar, Giani Raghbir Singh, had summoned Sukhbir Singh Badal, SAD president, to appear in person before the supreme temporal seat within fifteen days and to submit a written explanation of the rebel leaders' accusations that 'he did not represent the sentiments of the Panth', to which he agreed to appear as a devout Sikh (Brar, 2024b).

As per the orders of the Jathedar of Akal Takht, Sukhbir Singh Badal appeared before the Akal Takht on July 24, 2024, and submitted his explanation in a sealed letter, which further led to questioning by the senior rebel SAD leaders, who a day after his appearance before Akal Takht Jathedar, had demanded that the contents of the letter be made public at the earliest (Jagga, 2024). Taking cognizance of the request of the rebel SAD leaders, the Akal Takht secretariat, released a copy of the three-page written explanation submitted by Sukhbir Singh Badal, on August 5, 2024, which reads:

I am a humble servant of the Guru's house. I have always been dedicated to Sri Guru Granth Sahib and Sri Akal Takht Sahib. Whatever has been written against us, I present myself before

the great throne of the Guru, seeking unconditional forgiveness from Guru Sahib and the Guru Panth. I take all the mistakes upon myself. Whether these mistakes are from the party or the government. I am seeking forgiveness for all the mistakes and shortcomings, whether done knowingly or unknowingly (Brar, 2024d).

In the meantime, the intra-SAD fracas took a new turn, when one of the accused (Pardeep Kler) in the 2015 sacrilege case, appeared on TV channels alleging that Sukhvir Singh Badal, SAD President, met the DSS chief ahead of the 2012 and 2017 Punjab assembly elections despite the injunction issued by the Akal Takht against any relations with the dera chief (Kamal, 2024; Jagga, 2024a). This further aggravated dissension within the SAD, leading to dissolution of the 25 member core committee of the party on July 23, 2024, including eight senior members of rebel SAD faction that launched a campaign (called 'Shiromani Akali Dal Sudhar Lehar') for the removal of Sukhbir Singh Badal from the presidentship of SAD.

Further, taking notice of these alleged 'anti-party activities' by rebel SAD leaders the disciplinary committee of the party, led by senior Akali Dal leader Balwinder Singh Bhundar,⁴⁸ expelled them from the primary membership of the party on July 30, 2024 (Jagga, 2024; Nibber, 2024). In a quick sequence of events, on August 1, 2024, a day after the party patron Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa had rejected the expulsion of eight rebel leaders, a three-member disciplinary committee led by Balwinder Singh Bhundar, in turn expelled him from the primary membership of the SAD - again for alleged for 'anti-party activities'. This entire chain of events vividly demonstrates the continuing role of the DSS in fomenting conflict within the SAD in particular and Punjab in general (Express News Service, 2024a; Sandhu, Kamaljit, 2024).

Deliberating upon the letter – submitted by the senior dissident Akali leaders on July 1, 2024, which accused Sukhbir Singh Badal of committing 'mistakes' during SAD-BJP coalition government in Punjab from 2007 to 2017, and written explanation thereof submitted by him to the Jathedar of Akal Takht – the adjudicating five Sikh high priests⁴⁹ delivered their verdict on August 30, 2024 declaring him *tankhaiya* and also summoning him to appear before the Akal Takht within 15 days to seek apology for the decisions he took as SAD chief that deeply harmed the image of the 'Panth' and caused damage to Sikh interests, and pronouncement of the

quantum of punishment to be meted out to him by the five Sikh high priests (PTI, 2024; Brar, 2024e). He would remain a tankhaiya until he apologises for his 'sins' said the Jathedar of Akal Takht while pronouncing the verdict from the Akal Takht complex (PTI, 2024). The verdict also encompassed summons to all cabinet ministers of the SAD-BJP led government from 2007-2017,⁵⁰ to appear before the Akal Takht in person and submit their written explanations within 15 days for their 'mistakes' that the dissident Akali leaders mentioned in their letter of July 1, 2024 (Rana & Singh, 2024a). A day after the pronouncement of guilty of religious misconduct by the Akal Takht, Sukhbir Singh Badal, accompanied by his former cabinet colleagues, Daljit Singh Cheema, Gulzar Singh Ranike, and Sharanjit Singh Dhillon, and Mahesh Inder Singh Grewal, advisor to Parkash Singh Badal, the then chief minister, appeared before Akal Takht on August 31, 2024 and separately submitted written explanation seeking an apology including consent to undergo *tankah*⁵¹ (punishment) to be pronounced by the Akal Takht for the 'mistakes' committed by the SAD and its government in alliance with BJP during 2007-2017 (PTI, 2024).

Though the rebel Akali leaders mentioned 'four mistakes' – failure to punish those responsible for 2015 sacrilege incidents, influencing the Akal Takht to grant pardon to DSS chief in a 2007 blasphemy case, appointment of Sumedh Singh Saini, who faces the allegations of fake encounters in Punjab during terrorism, as Director General of Police (DGP) of Punjab in 2012, and giving a ticket to the wife of former cop Izhar Alam, Farzana Alam as party's candidate from Malerkotla, also accused of violation of human rights in Punjab during terrorism⁵² – in their written complaint submitted to Akal Takht on July 1, 2024 in the form of an implicit confession of their being party to SAD's religious transgressions during its two consecutive terms rule in coalition with BJP in the state, neither Sukhbir Singh Badal, deputy chief minister and president of SAD, had specified the 'mistakes' he had mentioned in his written explanation submitted in person in a sealed letter to the Akal Takht Jathedar on July 24, 2024 in response to allegations made by Akali dissidents, nor had the Akal Takht Jathedar mentioned any such in its verdict declaring him tankhaiya. The verdict reads:

Till Sukhbir Singh Badal appears at Akal Takht in the presence of Guru Granth Sahib, Singh Sahibaans (high priests) and apologise for his '*gunahan*' (crimes) in the past, he is declared

tankhaiya. ... Some of the decisions taken by Sukhbir Singh Badal as deputy chief minister and as president of Shiromani Akali Dal caused huge damage to the Panthic image. SAD was weakened very badly and Sikh interests were badly harmed (Rana & Singh, 2024; see also Brar, 2024f).

The verdict termed transgressions committed by Sukhbir Singh Badal and the cabinet ministers as 'decisions' and '*gunahan*' (crimes) in the past (Rana & Singh, 2024).

The entire chain of events discussed above vividly demonstrated the continuing role of the DSS in fomenting conflict within SAD in particular and Punjab in general – a clear case of DSS-induced conflict formation. Among the four 'mistakes' cited by the dissident senior Akali leaders for the ongoing fracas within the SAD, two were corresponding to the blasphemy and sacrilegious cases of the DSS chief that dated back to 2007 and 2015 respectively.

VII. Conclusions

My key argument in this study is that deras are not only the custodians of alternative religious spaces for those who do not feel at ease within the organisational domain of mainstream religions, but also generate social capital, which augments the spiritual as well as material and socio-cultural profiles of their followers. Furthermore, this social capital, as generated by deras, does not only serve the interests of their followers, but also multiplies their followings, tremendously enhancing the prestige and electoral values of the latter that brings them closer to the centres of political power. DSS is a case in point: The majority of its followers are from the lower castes and low-income groups – people who find spiritual solace and material relief and social equality within its well-guarded socio-religious domain – a domain which is moreover spread over both the huge complex at Sirsa in Haryana and many branches both within the country and abroad. It, therefore, creates a fellowship of belonging, intrinsically feeding off the insecurities of some of the most vulnerable sections of the people in the civil society

Another key argument is that along with the cultivation of social capital, deras inevitably stimulate socio-religious conflicts, sometimes even violent, given their ever-shifting political affiliations as well as customized symbology and rituals with their latent scope for conflictual

connotations (cf. Coser, 1956). Both the alleged political support rendered by DSS, which helped the Congress party attain a decisive edge over the SAD in the 2007 Punjab State assembly elections in the Malwa region – a political stronghold of the latter, even though the SAD won an overall majority in the state – as well as the subsequent emulation by the dera chief of the iconography of Guru Gobind Singh, clearly delineate the role of DSS, as well as alleged amoral and criminal acts by its chief, as major drivers of conflict formation. In very broad terms, it is postulated that deras present a dilemma in the form of a paradox, innately promoting the two contradictory phenomena of social capital and conflict formation, and de facto an epistemological challenge for social scientists in the critical domains of social capital and conflict studies. A second dilemma, and eminently exemplified by the rise and fall of the head of DSS, is that the greater the proximity to power, the greater the repercussions when matters go awry – as they almost always do in the long run. Gurmeet Ram Rahim's paroles, furloughs, and even acquittal in one of two murder cases notwithstanding, such developments intensified the undercurrents of conflict formation as such explosive issues as blasphemy, sacrilege, rape, murder, and castration refused to fade away in the face of persistent opposition from various Sikh organizations (sans the SGPC) – an opposition moreover, which has now been buttressed by the addition of a coterie of senior rebel SAD leaders.

[Acknowledgements: This study is an enlarged and revised version of a study, a part of which was presented at ICAS: MP's Thematic Module 4 (Normative Conflicts & Transformations) Conference entitled: *Born Again Selves: New Religious Movements (NRMs) and the Norms of Belief*, co-organised by University of Erfurt, Augustinerkloster, Erfurt, Germany, 6-8 June 2022. I would like to thank Sanjay Srivastava and Martin Fuchs for providing me with an opportunity to share my findings and get benefitted from brilliant deliberations during the conference. Incisive comments and valuable suggestions by Dhilpreet Gill, Shinder Thandi, GS, Mann, HS Gill, Pramod Kumar, Amarjit Chandan, and Deepak K. Singh on its several earlier drafts were of immense help in sharpening my arguments and making the whole text much more coherent. Finally, my thanks to Seema, Sahaj, and Daksh for their cooperation and encouragement]

Notes

¹Dera 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 (for details see: Punalekar, 2001: 214-241; Rao, 2008: 11-27; Zelliott, 2001: v).

² Sant/mahant/Baba/bhagat/sadhu are honorific titles for addressing saintly figures/holy persons.

³ For details see: Gillin, 1910: 236-50; Marty, 1960: 125-34; Ownby, 2008: 12-29; Shah, 2006: 209-48; Wilson, 1959: 3-15.

⁴ For details see: Beckford, 1981; Campbell, 1977: 375-88; Levine, 1981: 34-49; Olson, 2006: 97-106; Richardson, 1993: 348-56; Robbins, 1988.

⁵ The practice of offering toy aeroplanes at some shrines in hopes of a foreign journey has gained momentum in various places in Doaba rejoin of Punjab over the last few decades. This practice had become so prominent that a Gurdwara in Jalandhar is being called as *Aeroplane Gurdwara*. "This trend has now spread to the Golden Temple as well, where recently a picture depicting the offering of a toy aeroplane went viral on social media. In light of the directive from Sri Akal Takht Sahib, the management of the Golden Temple, led by Manager Bhagwant Singh, has issued strict instructions to employees and volunteers to put a stop to this practice. Additionally, SGPC is planning to raise awareness among the public about the prohibition of offering toy aeroplanes in Gurdwaras" (FPJ Web Desk, 2023).

⁶ Lord or Master. Also spelt Sayed, Sayyed, Seyyed, Saiyed, Saiyid, Seyd, Seyed, Syed, and Seyit.

⁷ 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), *Ramraiya*s (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, *Ramraiya*s at present day Dehradun, and *Masandias/Handalias/Niranjanias* at Jandiala.

⁸ Based on author's personal communication with Pashaura Singh, the University of California, Riverside, CA, August 26-28, 2020.

⁹ The word 'Sant' has its origins in Sanskrit word 'Sat' (truth), which implies that a person who realised the truth. For Sant tradition see: Cox, 2006: 373-87; Juergensmeyer, 1991:22-31; LaBrack, 1987: 265-79; McLeod, 1987: 251-63; Nesbitt, 2014: 360-371; Schomer, 1987: 1-17.

¹⁰ I am thankful to Shinder Thandi, formerly of University of California, Santa Barbara (CA), and Coventry University, UK, for bringing this point to my notice.

¹¹ It is a common practice to display video clippings highlighting the evils of infanticide before the commencement of spiritual discourses at Dera Radhasoami Satsang Beas. Based on field visits by the author.

¹² Based on field visits by the author.

¹³ In 2013, Punjab Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal, gave approval to the construction plan of a temple, museum and panorama at Valmiki Ashram at Ram Tirath near Amritsar at a cost of Rs. 115 crore. For details see: HT Correspondent (2013). Similarly, on December 31, 2021, Punjab Chief Minister, Charanjit Singh Channi, announced to establish state-of-the-art Guru Ravidass Bani Adhiyan (Research) Centre at Dera Sachkhand Ballan with a cost of Rs. 50 crore, while handing over a cheque worth Rs. 25 crore on the spot for this purpose (for details see: <https://yespunjab.com/cm-channi-announces-to-establish-guru-ravidass-bani-research-centre-at-ballan-with-a-cost-of-rs-50-crore/> (downloaded on 27.10.2023). Again, in March 2023, Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal also visited Dera Sachkhand Ballan and handed over the cheque of Rs. 25 crore for setting up of Guru Ravidass Research Centre at Dera Sachkhand Ballan (for details see: Singh, 2023).

¹⁴ Dera Sacha Sauda is defined as a 'spiritual activity' to worship God as per the instructions of the spiritual guide popularly known as Guru (Singh, 2011: 26).

¹⁵ His original name was Khaima Mal. Born on November 1, 1891 (Manager, 1981: 50) in village Kotra, tehsil Gandhey/Gandahwah of district Kulait in Baluchistan, he left the home at age of 14 in the search of spiritual wisdom and true Guru (<http://derasachasauda.org/history/> accessed November 2, 2023). He reached Dera Baba Jaimal Singh of Radha Soami cult at Beas, Amritsar in 1920. Baba Sawan Singh, the then head of Radha Soami Movement embraced him as his disciple and initiated him into Sant Mat.

¹⁶ See also <http://derasachasauda.org/history/> (downloaded on 27.10.2023).

¹⁷ Earlier he also used to hold satsangs among the people of the provinces of Balochistan, Sindh and some parts of Western Punjab such as Sangla, Multan, Gojra, Lyallpur and Montgomery.

¹⁸ The DSS management constructed an AC market in front of the Mastana Ji Dham. Shops in the market are either given on lease or running by the Dera. For details see: <http://derasachasauda.org/history/> (downloaded on 18.10.2023).

¹⁹ Before becoming disciple of Shah Mastana his name was Harbans Singh.

²⁰ The faction led by Gurbaksh Singh, however, established its separate Dera at village Jagmalwali in the Dabwali tehsil of the district Sirsa of Haryana. Later on, Mangu Mal, nephew of Shah Mastana, founded his own separate Dera known as Dera Mastana Shah Balochistani at Ludhiana (Kaushal, 1998: 149).

²¹ It is at this place that the dera head used to stay during his parole and furlough (temporary releases) from the given jail term.

²² See also: <http://derasachasauda.org/history/> (downloaded on 31.10.2023).

²³ For details see: <https://www.derasachasauda.org/a-month-of-great-benevolence-and-divine-blessings-congratulations-on-the-advent-of-msg-maha-paropkar-month> (downloaded on 4.11.2023).

²⁴ For details see: <http://derasachasauda.org/shah-satnam-ji-dham-sirsa-haryana/> (downloaded on 04.11.2023).

²⁵ For details see: <http://derasachasauda.org/shah-satnam-ji-dham-sirsa-haryana/> (downloaded on 04.11.2023).

²⁶ The Sachkhand Hall covering 2 hundred thousand (200000) square feet area rose on various solid pillars erected inside the hall width-wise and at the distance of 40 feet each has been constructed in just 30 days. For details see: <https://www.derasachasauda.org/massive-sachkhand-hall-complex/> (downloaded on 15.11.2023).

²⁷ For details see: <https://www.derasachasauda.org/grand-opening-of-5-star-smg-resort-by-revered-guru-ji> (downloaded on 04.11.2023).

²⁸ Ibid, p. 13. For details see also: <http://derasachasauda.org/shah-satnam-ji-dham-sirsa-haryana/> (downloaded on 04.11.2023).

²⁹ For details see: <http://www.derasachasauda.org/humanitarian-work/> (downloaded on 02.01.2024); <https://www.derasachasauda.org/restoring-light-saint-dr-msgs-visionary-initiative-to-cure-blindness> (downloaded on 04.11.2023).

³⁰ Insan, *Holy Discourse—Vol. 1*, p. 13. For details see also: <http://derasachasauda.org/shah-satnam-ji-dham-sirsa-haryana/> (downloaded on 4.11.2023).

³¹ Other samities include chayavan samiti, electricity samiti, pehra (Security) samiti, safai samiti, sach kahoon samiti, shahi canteen samiti, construction samiti, nursery samiti, horticulture samiti, insa locket samiti, theater samiti, restaurant samiti, literature (sacred texts) selling samiti, MSG products samiti, luggage samiti, satsang samiti, majlis samiti, rubru night samiti, parchar (publicity) samiti, and gardening samiti.

³² Based on information shared by Surinder Singh, Panjab University Rural Centre, Kauni, Punjab, September 4, 2017. Also see, (Singh, 2020).

³³ Shah Satnam Ji Girls School, Sirsa, Shah Satnam Ji Girls College, Sirsa, Shah Satnam Ji Boys School, Sirsa, Shah Satnam Ji Boys College, Sirsa, Shah Satnam Ji College of Education, Sirsa, Shah Satnam Ji Institute of Technology and Management, Sirsa, Shah Satnam Ji Girls School, Guruser Modia, Rajasthan, Shah Satnam Ji Boys School, Guruser Modia, Rajasthan, Shah Satnam Ji Girls College, Guruser Modia, Rajasthan, Shah Satnam Ji Girls School, Tara Nagar, Churu, Rajasthan, Shah Satnam Ji Noble School, Kotda, Udaipur, Rajasthan. Satnam Ji Girls School, Budni, Madhya Pradesh, and Saint MSG Glorious International School, Sirsa (Based on information shared by Surinder Singh, Panjab University Rural Centre, Kauni, Punjab, September 4, 2017).

³⁴ Based on information shared by Surinder Singh, Panjab University Rural Centre, Kauni, Punjab, September 4, 2017. Also see, (Singh, 2020).

³⁵ Based on information shared by Surinder Singh, Panjab University Rural Centre, Kauni, Punjab, September 4, 2017. Also see, (Singh, 2020).

³⁶ ‘Bhangidass’ titles are conferred on those followers (nodal persons) who would be responsible for holding meetings, recruiting new members and spreading the mission of DSS chief. ‘They would also be used to mobilise votes for any particular party that had “received the blessings” of the Dera head. Bhangi is a derogatory term used by caste Hindus for the Dalit scavengers in northern India. By adding the suffix of ‘dass’, Gurmeet conferred an aura of respectability to an occupation considered to be inferior in the caste hierarchy’ (Rajalakshmi, 2017).

³⁷ For details see: <https://www.derasachasauda.org/massive-sachkhand-hall-complex/> (downloaded on 15.11.2023).

³⁸For details see: <https://www.derasachasauda.org/shah-satnam-ji-cricket-stadium/> (downloaded on 15.11.2023).

³⁹ As far as mainstream religions in the state are concerned, DSS had been primarily involved in conflictual equations with Sikh religious/political organisation – Akal Takht, SGPC, SAD (Chima, 2021: 15). The possible reason why no case of confrontation between DSS and mainstream Hindu religion in Punjab was reported could be the presence/acceptance of deras as a normal case under Hinduism, which does not see them (deras) as a threat. I am thankful to Shinder Thandi for bringing this point into my consideration.

⁴⁰ DSS Chief produced six movies: MSG: The Messenger; MSG 2: The Messenger; MSG: The Warrior Lion Heart; Hind ka Napak Ko Jawab: MSG Lion Heart 2; Jattu Engineer; and Online Gurukul. DSS earned lots of revenue from the screening of these movies, which is allegedly spent on social welfare functions (Singh, 2020:112).

⁴¹ ‘The petitioners have alleged that later dera head used his influence in forcing the Punjab government to delay investigations. The petitioners also alleged that when the state government found itself engulfed in the case, an affidavit was filed on behalf of complainant Rajinder Singh, which said he was not present at the congregation and the complaint was filed, based on media reports. The police had then filed a cancellation report in January 2012. The complainant had later told the court that he had not signed the affidavit. The district and sessions judge, however, accepted the report submitted by the state, which sought the dismissal of the case’ (HT Correspondent, 2017).

⁴² One of the accused had expired during the trial (Sura, 2024).

⁴³ To influence investigation even earlier during the trial of rape and murder cases against Gurmeet Ram Rahim, a follower of DSS and member of its Qurbani Dasta (sacrifice wing), Jaswant Singh, set himself on fire in 2007, and later, two more followers of DSS and its Qurbani Dasta shot themselves on March 23, 2011 and April 28, 2011 in front of the district court of Sirsa. After the conviction of Gurmeet Ram Rahim in the rape case in 2017, the Qurbani Dasta issued threatening letters to Haryana police, media persons and those who deposed against DSS chief (Tripathi, 2018: 101-117).

⁴⁴ The theft of a ‘bir’ of Guru Granth Sahib from a Burj Jawahar Singh Wala gurdwara took place on June 1, 2015, hand-written sacrilegious posters were put up in Bargari and Burj Jawahar Singh Wala on September 25, 2015 – a day after the Akal Takht clergy pardoned DSS chief of his alleged blasphemous act with

regard to 2007 Salabatpura incident – and torn pages of the holy book were found at Bargari on October 12, 2015 (Vasudeva, 2019).

⁴⁵ Gurjeet Singh of Sarawan village and Krishan Bhagwan Singh of Niamiwala village in Faridkot district (Mahal, 2024).

⁴⁶ Eight members included: former MP Prem Singh Chandumajra, former SGPC chief Bibi Jagir Kaur, former MLA Gurpartap Singh Wadala, and former ministers: Parminder Singh Dhindsa, Sikander Singh Maluka, Surjit Singh Rakhra, Surinder Singh Thekedar and Charanjit Singh Brar (Brar, 2014c; Jagga, 2024a).

⁴⁷ The meeting was attended by Jathedar of Takht Damdama Sahib, Giani Harpreet Singh, Jathedar of Takht Sri Kesgarh Sahib, Giani Sultan Singh, Granthi of the Golden Temple, Giani Baljit Singh, and one of the Panj Pyare of Akal Takht, Giani Mangal Singh (Brar, 2024b).

⁴⁸ Other two members of the disciplinary committee were Maheshinder Singh Grewal and Gulzar Singh Ranike. The committee met at the party's headquarters at Chandigarh (Nibber, 2024).

⁴⁹ The five Sikh high priests committee included: Giani Raghbir Singh, Jathedar of Akal Takht, Giani Sultan Singh, Jathedar of Takht Keshgarh Sahib, Giani Baldev Singh, Jathedar of Takht Harminder Ji Patna Sahib, Giani Harpreet Singh, Jathedar of Takht Damdama Sahib, and Giani Baljit Singh, Golden Temple Granthi (Rana & Singh, 2024).

⁵⁰ Among those who were asked to submit their clarification include: Dr. Upinderjit Kaur, Adesh Partap Singh Kairon, Gulzar Singh Ranike, Parminder Singh Dhindsa, Sucha Singh Langah, Janmeza Singh, Hira Singh, Sarwan Singh Phillaur, Sohan Singh Thandal, Daljit Singh Cheema, Sikander Singh Maluka, Bibi Jagir Kaur, Bikram Singh Majithia, Manpreet Singh Badal, Sharanjit Singh Dhillon, Surjit Singh Rakhra, and Mahesh Inder Singh Grewal (Times News Network, 2024).

⁵¹ Punishment for violating the Sikh *rahit maryada* – religious code of conduct (Brar, 2024g).

⁵² For details see: Brar, 2024d; Brar, 2024e; Nibber, 2024.

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