

Deravad - An Offshoot of Discontentment Among Dalit Sikhs in Punjab

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Abstract

Presently, the social divisions among Sikhs due to the caste factor and urge to ascertain the supremacy over lower caste groups pose a serious challenge to the Sikh society. The rise of deravad, social discriminations with downtrodden Sikhs, the growing frustration and the sense of alienation among Dalit Sikhs, dalit assertion, and the violent caste conflicts in rural areas have tarnished the image of Sikhs at the international level and badly damaged the spirit of Sikhism. There is mushroom growth of Deras in Punjab in the recent past. Deras are playing prominent role in Punjab politics and the Sikh socio-religious affairs. They are supporting, motivating, guiding and mobilizing the vulnerable sections in Punjab to resist the social oppression, economic exploitation and political marginalization.

Introductory Background:

Five hundred years ago, the Sikh Gurus and Sikh Scripture vehemently denounced the casteism, caste symbols and caste practices and urged for casteless society. However, in the gradual process, the casteism began to influence the behaviour pattern and mind set of Sikh people. Sikh people in general move away from the Sikh way of life, which is based on principles of unity of humankind, social equality, justice,

mutual love and peaceful coexistence. The socio-cultural, political and economic factors have played a crucial role in the rise of casteism in the Sikh community. The dominant caste groups among Sikhs have swayed by racial arrogance, caste pride and better standards of living. They look down upon the downtrodden Sikhs for various reasons. The dominant caste groups in the urban and rural Punjab deny the equal rights to downtrodden Sikhs and exploit them due to their weaker economic position. The dependence of Dalit Sikhs on dominant landed caste groups in the rural areas further diminishes their social status. Illiteracy, poverty, unemployment and lack of knowledge among vulnerable sections in rural areas perpetuate their inferior position as compared to the economically dominant and politically influential caste groups among Sikhs.

Deravad is an offshoot of dalit assertion in Punjab in general and within the Sikh society in particular. The proliferation of Deras and faster growing linkage between Deras and casteism in Punjab is a recent development. Deravad is now a new buzzword in the Sikh socio-political



discourse. The politicization of Deras and their role in the socio-political mobilization of downtrodden Sikhs is contributing to rise of new kind of political equations in Punjab. Dalit Sikhs deeply felt that the Sikh socio-religious institutions are not doing fair with them. They face acute social discriminations, social apartheid and injustice in Punjab. Despite their wholehearted commitment to the Sikh ethos and their unparalleled contribution to Sikh society, they still face discriminations in social gatherings, political institutions, working places and even in the places of worship. Consequently, in the search of respect for their human dignity, and to confront the violation of their human rights, they seek the ideological support and political guidance from various Deras.

The Rise of Deravad in Punjab:

Of all the states, scheduled castes are the most disadvantaged in Punjab. Constituting more than 28 per cent of the state's population, they control only 2.4 per cent of the operated area (in 1990-91). The land holding position instead of improving has declined further. It is true that Punjab was also strongly affected by social reform movements with anti-Brahmanical over tones in the later 19th/early 20th century. The state experienced the uprising of 1890-1900 and the Agrarian unrest of 1906-07 in Lahore, Amritsar, Rawalpindi. However, these movements have not given adequate opportunity to the lower castes, especially the scheduled castes, to organise themselves against the upper caste landed interest.¹ In the

recent past, many dalit castes have become involved in the religious movements and sects in the space between Hindu and Sikh orthodoxies, such as the Sant Nirankari, the Radha Swami and the Adharmi movements and today Ravidasis. The Dalits search for different cultural space to overcome humiliation is reflected in their large-scale movement towards Deras and sects such as Radhasoami, Sacha Sauda, Dera Wedbhag Singh and Piara Singh Bhanjarawala.²

The ever-increasing numbers of Deras all over Doaba, Majha, Malwa regions of Punjab is widely attribute to the denial of a respectable place to the Dalits and backward caste people in religious places and Sikh Panth . The major factor for the marginal position of the dalits in the state is the monopoly of the land in the hand of Jat Sikhs. As the Jats Sikhs of Punjab are, primarily an agriculture community and the Dalits in the Punjab were deprived of the land. In the absence of other job opportunities, they were forced to depend upon the land of Jat Sikhs for their livelihood. So the confrontation between these communities can be described as a struggle of landless agriculture labour versus the landlords. This in turn, often led to caste clashes between these two communities, the Jats and the Dalits.³

The popularity of Deras is directly linked to the perception among the backward castes in Punjab and Haryana that the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) is dominated by the upper castes. That the SGPC is close to the Shiromani



Akali Dal (Badal) in Punjab is also a source of discomfiture for these sections. Many within the Sikh community feel that only a genuine effort on the part of Sikh institutions to involve the lower and backward castes will help stem the increasing sense of alienation that these sections feel and the periodic violent outbursts, which are a symptom of this alienation.⁴ Large numbers of Scheduled Castes and rural proletariat of the Sikh community felt alienated not only from the Akali Dal, which was identified with the rich farmers who were Jats, but also from established Sikh institutions. To many among the socially and economically oppressed, it came to be identified as the religion of the oppressor Jats who with 20 per cent of the Sikh population owned 60 per cent of land.⁵

The caste considerations have crept up in the management of Sikh socio-religious affairs. May it be management of our religious institutions, or foundation of social groups, caste considerations are being brought in the picture? They succeed in arousing emotions on both sides, resulting in exhibition of destructive energies. Some Gurdwaras are even named after caste labels. Further, it is not uncommon that caste adherence is an important element in electing managing committees of our institutions at many places.⁶ The emergence of caste-based Gurdwaras in Sikh community is significant development, both in India and in the Diaspora. Although Sikh Gurus vehemently rejected the notion of

caste, it remains an important factor in the daily lives of Sikhs. Caste-based Gurdwaras are one of the main instruments for perpetuating caste consciousness and caste solidarity.⁷

Deravad, Caste Conflicts in Rural Punjab and Sikhs:

The Dalits, who for centuries have been subjected to humiliation and untold miseries, since Independence have refused to submit to violation of their human rights. They have strengthened their economic position through hard work and acquired increasing political consciousness to guard their interests. Although the contribution of constitutional affirmative action, in terms of reservations in education, jobs, and legislation, has been significant in uplifting the Dalits, the case of Ad Dharmis in Talhan village and Boota Mandi is unique. The Ad Dharmis of Talhan village overcame their poverty and squalor through ventures abroad, while the Ad Dharmis of Boota Mandi, also known as Ramdasapura, are an example of Dalit upward mobility through acquisition of self-made riches in the leather trade.⁸

Dalit consciousness in Punjab emerged against the backdrop of the teachings of Bhagat Ravidas's, who provided a middle path between assimilation and radical separatism. It charts an identity and a course of action for the Deras to shape the contours of the Dalit assertion within Indian society without following the Ambedkarite model of religious conversion or adopting the strategy of



assimilation, as advocated by the protagonists of the upper-caste movements, such as the Arya Samaj and the Chief Khalsa Diwan. The saints of Dera Ballan gradually adopted this middle-path model of Dalit emancipation as formulated by Ravi Dass, and it evolved into a powerful socio-cultural movement for a distinct Dalit identity. They provided Dalits with an array of concrete and tangible identity markers that helped sharpen the we/they dichotomy.⁹ In Punjab, the dalit assertion is propelled through the aegis religion. It began first with the ad dharm movement launched by Mangoo Ram during the 1920s. The ad dharm movement projected itself as a new religion and the untouchables as a distinct religious community from Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Their separate status was recognised by the 1931 colonial census and this movement enjoyed a great popularity among the Chamars of the Doaba region. The Deras played an important role in the articulation of dalits' identity and interests and could command growing numbers of followers who asked for their share of power and wealth. In fact, in Punjab, religious rebellion from mainstream Sikhism became the vehicle of dalit resistance against alienation and discrimination.¹⁰

The Sikh leather workers now call themselves Ad Dharmis (etymologically linked to Phule's concept of adi) and refuse to bow down to the dictates of the dominant Jat Sikh community. The Ad-Dharmis have set up their own Gurdwaras and

refuse to go to those run by Jat Sikhs. It is true that SC Sikhs have often felt alienated and unwanted in local Sikh Gurdwaras, although Sikhism is officially against casteism. Ad Dharmi Gurudwaras also give the Sikh holy book the pride of place but have a bust or engraving of Ravidas, the devotional medieval low caste saint who challenged Brahman orthodoxy. Although Ravidas's contribution is acknowledged fulsomely in the Sikh holy book, his image is not to be found in any mainstream Jat Sikh Gurdwaras. Ravidas is an important figurehead among former untouchables, especially in North India, and by installing his image in the Gurdwara; the Ad Dharmis were reaching out to others elsewhere, even those outside Sikhism.¹¹

The disassociation of Dalits from the menial and agricultural work in Punjab and their relatively better economic conditions have not enabled them to get an entry into the local structures of power, almost totally monopolised by the so-called dominant/upper castes. This is what forced them to look for alternate ways of social emancipation and empowerment giving rise to all sorts of Deras and a growing yearning for a separate Dalit identity in Punjab. The fast growing popularity of Deras and the enormous amount of wealth they receive in the form of donations from the local as well as diasporas followings eventually brought them into a sort of direct confrontation with the long established and deeply institutionalised Gurdwaras and other

dominant Sikh Panthic organizations resulting in intermittent caste conflicts in Punjab over the last few years. The Vienna attack and its backlash is just another violent manifestation of this trend.¹²

In rural Punjab, Dalits are still facing wide range of socio-political and economic discriminations. They have not significant say in local politics despite their considerable numerical strength. When elected, they are not always given the respect due to them. Their opinions in the village Panchayat meetings did not carry as much weight as it would in case of the dominant caste sarpanch. Ordinary members have even lesser say. Jat /upper caste sarpanches did not even let them speak during the meetings and when they were able to say something, rarely were their views taken seriously. The Jats also disliked visiting the house of a dalit sarpanch unless they urgently needed his/her favours. In most villages, the upper castes strongly resented the reservations of seats for dalits in the village Panchayats.¹³

In 2003, the Talhan episode in Punjab had exposed the gulf between various caste groups in rural areas in Punjab. Despite the overall empowerment of Dalits and near complete absence of a Brahmanical social set-up, rural Punjab has not forgotten caste and the fact that it means inequality. In other words, while pollution has nearly disappeared, the upper caste prejudice vis-à-vis dalits remains. The ad-dharmis revered Baba Nihal Singh almost as much as

the Jats did and participated in all events at the shrine with similar enthusiasm. However, when they demanded representation in the committee that looked after the affairs of the shrine, the jats did not even take their claim seriously. This happened for the first time some four or five years back and since then caste relations in Talhan have not been cordial.¹⁴ Violence broke out first in January 2003 after the courts ordered new elections.

On January 20, Jat Sikhs of the shrine's management committee passed a resolution calling for a social boycott of the local Dalit Sikhs. The resolution barred interaction with Dalit Sikhs, and instituted a fine of Rs. 10,000 if a Jat Sikh even as much as spoke to a Dalit Sikh. It forbade some Dalit Sikhs from entering Jat-owned fields for fodder and closed some village streets to them. In February, a team from the Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes also found the boycott of Dalit Sikhs to be true. The team asked the district administration to punish the guilty under sections of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and to provide compensation to victims. However, these directives were ignored.¹⁵ The Talhan episode also provides a good idea of the growing aspirations of the Dalits. The demand by the Dalits for representation in the Management Committee is not just a demand for an equal share in the cake but it is an indication of Dalit assertion for equality and equal rights. It questions the age-old assumption that the landowning



dominant castes of Jats have the right to the exclusive control over the economy and socio-cultural resources of the village. It has also highlighted their resolve to determine their course of action in day to- day life as well as in crises.¹⁶

There is still another alarming case of caste conflicts in Punjab in recent past, which involves the Dera Sach Sauda, which is composed of around 70% of Scheduled Castes (SC) and operate as a space for the political assertion of Dalits identity, whose members constitute approximately 30% of Punjab's total population. This dynamic would have infuriated the Jat Sikhs, an agricultural caste that owns most of the land and dominates most of the political and religious institutions of Punjab, as they resent the rise of SC awareness and intend to preserve their power.¹⁷

In Doaba region of Punjab, the Dera Sach Khand Ballan has also the large number of followers mainly belonging to the downtrodden sections of society. After Vienna episode, it had drawn the attention of people at the national and international level. This episode has exposed the high degree of resentment and frustration among Dalits in Punjab.

Dera Sach Khand Ballan runs various kinds of philanthropic projects. Their projects do not merely provide services to their devotees and the poor rather they demonstrate a sense of achievement to other social groups and castes. Thus, Ravidassi community leaders now provide services to Jats, who are patients in

their hospitals and students in their schools, if not dependent upon them – a neat reversal of the roles which Ravidassis and other SCs have had to endure for centuries. This reversal of social status is an essential outcome of Ravidassi efforts to secure social recognition through achievement, because these institutions are both symbols of equality in a caste-ridden society and distinctive markers of communal success. They have helped to instil among the Ravidassis a new social confidence, which celebrates their achievements in leading and effectively managing social development projects, as well as a deep sense of personal and collective pride in their Ravidassi identity.¹⁸ The socio-economic mobilization of Dalits in Punjab has transformed the thinking pattern of Dalits. They want to participate in Sikh socio-religious affairs with dignity. They resist any kind of social injustice and economic exploitation. The socio-religious Deras provide them a ray of hope, vigour; enthusiasm and platform to unite and mobilize their scattered strength to struggle against caste based social discriminations in Punjab.

Conclusion:

From the above analysis, it can be concluded that those who are at the helm of affairs in the Sikh community do not hear the grievances of marginalized Sikhs sympathetically. This leads to the emergence of Deravad, which diminished the significance of Sikh socio-religious institutions. The emergence of Deravad in Punjab has brought the far-

reaching changes in social, religious and political spheres.

The most interesting aspect of these Dears is that the majority of their followers belong to the schedule castes. The chiefs of these Dears give them socio-political and religious platform to raise their voice against the dominant caste groups.

The caste conflicts in the rural areas in Punjab and the construction of caste based Sikh Gurdwaras expose the prevalence of high degree of casteism among Sikhs.

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