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## The Various Strands of Dalit Assertion in Punjab

Karthik Venkatesh

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Followers of Dera Sacha Sauda sect head, Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh entering a multiplex to watch his film 'MSG: Messenger of God' in Chandigarh on February 13, 2015, as seen in this file photo. The Dera followers are predominantly Dalits who have faced social boycott from the Sikhs in the past. Photo: Akhilesh Kumar

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*Contrary to popular perception, caste politics in Punjab has not been fully and adequately resolved either through the dominant influence of Sikhism, or through party politics. In October 2016, caste violence broke out between Jats and Dalits over auctioned land in Punjab's Jhaloor village. Similar violence had broken out against predominantly Dalit followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda in 2007. To understand politics in Punjab, it is also imperative to move the discussion away from an understanding of broad Sikhism to an understanding of Dalit politics within and in reaction to dominant Sikhism. For instance, the arrival of Ginni Mahi, a young Dalit singer, on Punjab's frenetic music scene signals one type of Dalit assertion. A second type of assertion is found in the proliferation of sects and deras. In this piece, **Karthik Venkatesh** suggests that both these phenomena point to a*

*broader caste tension that has been present in Punjab in a unique way. Negating the language of equality preached by Sikhism, Punjab politics has attenuated caste tensions between upper castes and Dalits to some extent. However, Dalits remain landless in large numbers, even while socially, culturally and religiously they continue to assert unique identities.*

## **A Unique Cultural Assertion**

Punjab's popular music sphere is a world unto its own. Seeking largely to cater to Punjab and the Punjabi diaspora worldwide, the popular music culture is centered on a sugar-and-spice world that talks of unrequited love, first love, the pains of separation from Punjab in distant Canada or England and other themes that are unlikely to find resonance beyond Punjab and Punjabis. Often openly casteist, it is sometimes also an escapist world that does not make a concerted effort to decode the rude realities of the Punjabi sociopolitical landscape. Also, while the odd female singer like Miss Pooja (Gurinder Kaur Kainth) is popular, the music scene is largely a man's world.

In such a space, which was both gendered and lacking in thematic variety, Ginni Mahi emerged as a brave new voice. At 17, hers was a precocious talent. Her song themes only made her even more so. Two songs in particular—*Danger Chamar* and *Fan Babasaheb di* (*I'm a fan of Babasaheb*) came in for particular attention from the local and, in time, the national and the international press. *Danger Chamar* proclaimed Ginni Mahi's caste identity brazenly while *Fan Babasaheb di* paid tribute to Dr. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian constitution. Ginni Mahi brought to music what assertive Dalit writers had brought to literature, particularly over the last one hundred and fifty years. There is much to be thought about with respect to Ginni Mahi's songs about Ambedkar, a Dalit revolutionary, and, how her music is the latest manifestation in a series of Dalit assertions in Punjab. Such assertions have been imperative in the Sikh religious landscape and have been hard won inclusions. In this piece, I will focus on the advent of the Ravidassi sect of Punjab and outline the competing Dalit assertions that have made their mark on Punjab politics in the current age.

## **Caste in Punjab**

Gurdwara Shaheed Burj Sahib is located in Chamkaur Sahib in the district of Rupnagar (Ropar), Punjab. Burj Sahib is smaller than its better-known neighbouring gurdwaras—Qatalgarh Sahib and Garhi Sahib. Burj Sahib was built as a memorial to Bhai Jiwan Singh (1649-1705), a warrior and an early Sikh chronicler. Bhai Jiwan Singh was martyred in the Battle of Chamkaur Sahib in 1705. The original shrine where the Guru Granth Sahib is housed today is believed to have been built by Mazhabi Sikhs, the caste to which Bhai Jiwan Singh belonged.

Bhai Jiwan Singh was born Bhai Jaita and it was he who brought back the severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadur to Guru Gobind Singh (then Gobind Rai) in 1675, when the Guru was executed by Aurangzeb in Delhi. Moved, the young Guru Gobind is said to have proclaimed, "Ranghrete Guru ke Bete" (Those who belong to the Ranghar caste are sons of the Guru). It was considered an honour for the low-caste Jaita to be hailed thus. Adopting the name, Jiwan Singh was inducted into the *panth*, which paved the way for many other low-caste families to enter the Khalsa fold.

Bhai Jiwan Singh, was a writer of considerable ability. His composition *Sri Gur Katha*—a biography of Guru Gobind Singh—could be an important source for the study of Guru Gobind Singh's life, but has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention <sup>1</sup>. Another important early Dalit cultural figure was Giani Ditt Singh (1850-1901) of the Singh Sabha Movement. Originally a member of the Vedantic Gulabdassi sect, Ditt Singh was drawn into the Singh Sabha

movement, which was attempting in the last quarter of the 19th century to articulate a distinct Sikh identity independent of Hinduism. Ditt Singh was in the forefront of articulating these positions in several works of Sikh philosophy and theology.

The 20th century witnessed the flowering of talents like Sant Ram Udasi and Lal Singh Dil, besides a host of others who all wrote from a specific Dalit standpoint. Sant Ram Udasi (1939-1986), who hailed from a Mazhabi Sikh family, initially attempted to create a space for himself within the confines of Sikhism, but came to the conclusion that caste consciousness had established itself strongly. In the 1970s when the Naxal ideology gained considerable currency among a section of Punjab's literati, Udasi emerged as a powerful radical poet, publishing three books of poetry, *Lahu Bhije Bol* (Blood-soaked Words), *Saintan* (Gestures) and *Chounukrian* (The Four-edged). He was arrested and tortured for his Naxal connections. The tortures to him were apparently far more severe than were meted out to the high-caste Jat Naxals owing to his Dalit origins <sup>2</sup>.

Lal Singh Dil (1943-2007), who was from a Chamar family, also became involved in the Naxal movement in the early 1970s. Arrested, tortured and forced to leave Punjab in 1971, Dil moved to UP where he supported himself by doing a string of odd jobs. He also converted to Islam during this time hoping to shed the burden of caste. Returning to Punjab in 1983, Dil supported himself by running a tea-stall in Samrala, near Ludhiana. He published three important collections of poetry *Satluj di Hawa* (The Breeze of the Satluj, 1971), *Bahut Saare Suraj* (A Million Suns, 1982) and *Naglok* (The City of Snakes, 1997), besides his autobiography *Dastaan* (1998) <sup>3</sup>.

Both Udasi and Dil were strident voices who articulated their Dalit consciousness without hesitation. In a documentary on Punjab's Sufi traditions and the Dalit connections with the Sufis, *Kitte Mil Ve Mahi* <sup>4</sup>, Dil states a position not dissimilar to Mahatma Phule's position in *Ghulamgiri*. *Ghulamgiri* talks of usurpation of land that originally belonged to the lower castes through deceitful means <sup>5</sup>. Dil too makes a similar claim on behalf of Punjab's Dalit population. Contemporary poets like Balbir Madhopuri, Manmohan, and a host of others continue in the vein of Udasi and Dil. They continue to be assertive about Dalit identity even while attempting to look at historical traditions in new light.

When Guru Gobind Singh initiated the institution of the Khalsa on April 13, 1699, he explained in an address that he wished for all Hindu castes to abandon their caste identities and adopt a life of cooperation and intermingling with each other with one expression of this intermingling in inter-caste collective dining <sup>6</sup>. This was in effect a continuation of the practices (including the idea of inter-dining—*langar*) initiated by Guru Nanak towards creating a casteless society. It is believed that close to twenty thousand of the gathered crowd assented.

The creation of the Khalsa united a considerable section of the population. The largest numbers of those who entered the new creed were members of the Jat peasantry that took over the leadership of the community from the Khatri (the caste of the Gurus). Members of lower castes too—*chuhars*, *chamars*, *nais* etc.—were well represented in the Khalsa <sup>7</sup>.

Sikhism was meant to create a new casteless society. But age-old prejudices did not relinquish their hold on society. Sikhism only succeeded in tempering the practice of caste in the region. The lower-castes remained mostly on the margins of society practising professions that the other higher castes shunned.

In terms of both its religious and caste make-up, Punjab presents a picture fairly different from other parts of the country. Since the formation of the composite Punjab in 1966 (post the creation of Haryana and the union of the

hill regions with Himachal Pradesh), the state has had a Sikh majority. As per the 2011 census, Sikhs constitute about 58 per cent of the population. Hindus constitute the majority of the remaining 42 per cent since Christians and Muslims are a miniscule minority together accounting for just over three per cent.

In theory, Sikhism does not recognise caste. In practice, it is divided into several castes, a few of which overlap with Hindu castes of the same name and societal stature. As opposed to the Hindu caste system, which has a textual basis in the *Manusmriti* and the *Purusa Sutra*, the caste system among the Sikhs is based on power and privilege <sup>8</sup>. Keeping with that paradigm, the dominant Sikh caste and the de facto 'high caste' is the Jat Sikh community—the peasantry that traditionally owned much of the land and did most of the farming. They constitute close to 60 per cent of the Sikh population, which amounts to about 30–35 per cent of the total population of the State <sup>9</sup>. Then there are the *Khatri* and *Arora* castes among the Sikhs who are also found among the Hindus. Other Sikh castes include the *Ramgarhias*, *Tarkhans*, *Chimbas* and others, who could be said to constitute the middle caste strata of Sikh society.

The Scheduled Caste community among the Sikhs consists mostly of *Mazhabi* Sikhs, who hail from the *Ranghreta*, *Chuhra* and *Balmiki* Hindu castes that converted to Sikhism. These castes were traditionally associated with scavenging and sweeping professions.

Another Scheduled Caste community, the Ravidassis, consists largely of people from the Chamar (leather-workers) community. The Dalit population in Punjab is close to 29 per cent (Census 2011), the highest in the country (in percentage terms) <sup>10</sup>. The *Mazhabis* along with the *Chamars*, *Balmikis* and *Adi Dharmis* (*Ravidassis*), comprise close to 85 per cent of the total Dalit population in Punjab. The *Chamars*, *Balmikis* and *Adi Dharmis* (*Ravidassis*) are counted as Hindu, though in practice, they also follow a few tenets of the Sikh religion, too. Dalits are part of the social fabric of both the Sikh and Hindu religions, the dominant religions of post-partition Punjab. Equally, Dalits could be said to comprise a separate community of their own, a distinct *qaum* <sup>11</sup>, to use a Punjabi phrase, that has its own traditions, icons and religious and secular practices.

In the 20th century, the influence of modernity spurred a hitherto unseen assertion within the Dalit community. Independent India with its affirmative action policies and democratic political processes also contributed to a strengthening of this assertion. Equally, a cultural awakening in music and literature led to a new spirit within the community.

### **Ravidassi Identity: Punjab's Unique Experiment at Assertion**

In the 1920s, Punjab witnessed a unique attempt at identity assertion by the lower castes. In a decade that witnessed considerable political upheaval, this attempt by a group of young, educated, motivated young men to fashion an identity was informed both by idealism and practicality. This was the Adi Dharmi movement—the brainchild of Mangu Ram, a Chamar from Hoshiarpur. Having lived and worked in California as a fruit-picker and then involved with the Ghadar party, Mangu Ram returned to Punjab in the early 1920s determined to do something for his community. His first action was to open a school for his community in conjunction with the Arya Samaj. Soon he was roped in by a few others, who were attempting to start a community organisation. Perhaps the most novel idea that emerged from their many discussions and meetings was that the Dalit community ("untouchables" as they were known then) constituted a distinct *qaum*; a distinct religious community. This *qaum* was not new, they asserted. It had always existed and, hence, their religion was the Adi Dharm—the first religion. Appealing for unity



in the name of a glorious past, which had since been snatched from them by other interlopers, the Adi Dharm sought to reclaim its rightful status in society.

The Adi Dharm movement was akin to the Adi Dravida movement, which was beginning to take root in the Tamil-speaking areas of Madras Presidency and the Adi Hindu movement in the United Provinces. This renewed interest in *qaum* tapped into the existing regard that many of the Chamar community had for Ravidass, a well-known bhakti poet of the 15th Century, whose verses were part of the Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhism's religious text. It was expected that a separate holy book based on Ravidass' verses, separate places of worship and separate rituals would follow. But the movement in the initial phase attempted to build a following. This it did with significant success. By 1931, the movement had gained significant strength in parts of Punjab and census enumerators were told to count those who professed this new creed as their religion, under a separate head. Close to 4,00,000 chose to identify themselves as Adi Dharmis, a considerable number for a movement not even a decade old <sup>12</sup>.

The Adi Dharm, in attempting to create a 'separateness', inevitably came into conflict with the Arya Samaj, which at that time was attempting to create a united Hindu society on a supposedly 'vedic' pattern. Even as the Arya Samaj was attempting to create an inclusive Hindu society, the Adi Dharmis were asserting their separate identity. Part of the reason why the Adi Dharmis were able to hold their own, especially in the areas in and around Jalandhar, was a result of the British presence. The British Cantonment in Jalandhar had spawned a flourishing demand for leather products—shoes, belts and the like—enabling many Chamar families to make a living. The Buta Mandi area in Jalandhar became a Chamar stronghold and it was there that the Adi Dharmis had their strongest backers. The Adi Dharmi movement eventually floundered in the late '30s. In part, it was a victim of its own success as it could not meet the enormous tide of expectations it's founding had engendered. In part, personality clashes also took their toll on the organisation. The numbers soon dropped and the movement appeared to have lost its way. But the cult of Ravidass that had existed prior to the movement did not quite fade away. It grew stronger in the years to come. Many *deras* professing the creed of Ravidass continued to flourish all over Punjab. Post-independence, the Chamar community began to experience the benefits of reservation and the Ravidassi identity began to crystallise further.

The Dera Sackhand Ballan near Jalandhar was in the forefront of the Ravidassia movement. One of many Ravidassi *deras*, but the biggest of its kind, the *dera* became an influential public space for the Dalit community. The Ravidassis continued to assert their separateness even as mainstream Sikhism and Hinduism attempted to build bridges with the community. It is interesting to note that even during the days of the Khalistan movement when Hindu-Sikh tensions were sharp, the Chamars' eclectic religious affiliations did not come in for much questioning. The relationship actually came apart only in the first decade of the 21st century though there had been tensions for a long time before that.

In 2010, the Dera made an earth-shattering announcement. It proclaimed a separate religion with its own prophet and writings, all centered on the person of Ravidass. This was the culmination of a conflict that had played out both in India and among the Punjabi diaspora in Europe that had an influential Ravidassi component.

In India, tussles between the Ravidassis (Adi Dharmis) and the dominant Jat Sikh caste in a village named Talhan, also near Jalandhar, in 2003 had worsened further an already fractious relationship between the landowning Jat community and the largely landless Adi Dharmis. Tussles over the control of a local shrine built on village common land were the immediate provocation. The resulting cycle of violence and counter-violence eventually led to the

shooting of a Dera Sachkhand leader, Sant Ramanand Dass in Vienna in 2009. The proclamation of a new religion followed soon after.

As of today, the new faith appears to be taking tentative steps towards a firmer footing. In 2012, it formally consecrated its religious text (Amrit Bani Ravidass) in its biggest shrine in Buta Mandi, Jalandhar. In the shrine, the text has received a pride of place, as has the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book of Sikhism.

Clearly, the two faiths are estranged, but perhaps not permanently.

### **Dalit assertions in the context of land**

Rural areas in Punjab are largely Sikh-dominated with Jat Sikhs constituting the majority. In terms of numbers, Jat Sikhs are only matched by the Scheduled Castes. The Jat Sikhs of Punjab are primarily an agricultural community and, by far, the dominant caste in the State.

The Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh and the subsequent British rule over Punjab helped the Jat Sikh population considerably by establishing their hold over the land in the State. Dalits, on the other hand, were deprived the ownership of land under the Punjab Alienation of Land Act (1900) that forbade the transfer of land to non-agricultural castes. Post the formation of composite Punjab in 1966 and the subsequent Green Revolution, the economic and social clout of the Jat Sikh community increased considerably <sup>13</sup>. Alongside this, the political influence of the Jat Sikhs also increased as most Punjabi political parties reflected the marginalised groups in the State only peripherally.

Punjab's economy mostly rests on agriculture and that is the sector where most jobs are to be found. This meant that many Dalits, particularly Mazhabis, had to work on the land of the Jat Sikhs for their livelihood. Given this scenario the relationship of the Mazhabis with the Jats is that of landless agricultural workers versus property owners, leading to regular clashes.

In recent times, the attempt by Dalits to enforce the provisions of the Punjab Village Common Lands Regulation Act in its true spirit has not been welcomed by the Jats. The Act, passed in 1961, stipulated that a third of every village's panchayat land—government-owned land managed by the panchayat (*shamlat* in local parlance) and allocated to villagers through public auctions—would be reserved for members of Scheduled Caste communities. For a long time, the Jats managed to circumvent the provisions of the act by propping up Dalit proxies, who would bid for the land. The Jats would thereafter manage the land employing Dalits as labourers. In village Benra in Sangrur district, a Dalit collective—the Pendu Mazdoor Union—managed to secure the land in 2008 despite the machinations of the local administration. Similar efforts were successful in another village in Sangrur—Balad Kalan—and in Shekha village in Barnala under the auspices of Zamin Prapti Sangharsh Committee in 2014. The struggle remains underway in a number of villages throughout Punjab <sup>14</sup>.

As always, violence has been an endemic part of such struggles, as exemplified in the recent incidents (October 2016) of Jhaloor village in Sangrur. After a local villager obtained the *shamlat* land in an auction, the Dalits of the village occupied the land in protest since it was common knowledge that the land allottee was a proxy. Requests to the local administration to cancel the allotment as it circumvented the Act went unheeded. The Jats attacked a Dalit rally that was protesting the injustice. Subsequently, Dalit households were attacked in the village and an old

woman was killed in the attacks. Cases were slapped on Dalit activists. The issue continues to remain unresolved <sup>15</sup> .

Land is bound to be a central issue in the years to come in the context of rural Dalits attempting to carve out a space for themselves. Chamar assertion has been largely an urban and a semi-urban phenomenon. Mazhabi assertion in rural Punjab is perhaps the next issue on the anvil.

### **Religio-political assertion and the lack of Dalit leadership**

In May 2007, southern Punjab (known as Malwa in the local parlance and Punjab's heartland) and its de facto capital, Bathinda (the stronghold of the Badal family) were rocked by a series of riots. The issue centered on the larger-than-life personality of the godman who called himself Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh (Pitaji to his followers), of the Dera Sacha Sauda. The godman who was based in Sirsa, a Haryana town that bordered Bathinda, had allegedly impersonated the attire of Guru Gobind Singh sparking off a series of retaliations by fundamentalist Sikhs who alleged blasphemy on the part of the godman and demanded an apology. Followers of the godman (most of them Dalit) faced a social boycott and their prayer meetings came under attack.

Analysts saw a political and caste angle to the whole series of events though the stated grievance was religious. In the Assembly elections of February 2007, the godman had backed the Congress. His close relative, Harminder Singh Jassi had been a minister in the previous Congress government and had also triumphed in the Bathinda seat in February. The Congress, too, had done unusually well in the Malwa region, which hitherto had been an Akali stronghold, in large measure due to the support of the Dera's followers. While the Akalis managed to win the election in part due to their tie-up with the BJP, they were shaken at the loss of Malwa.

Now, the godman's alleged impersonation was their chance to wreak vengeance. A series of cases were filed against the godman and his supporters. Many of them were revivals of pending cases. But, many of them were new. The intent was to loosen his hold on the region's Dalits.

The Dera Sacha Sauda is perhaps the largest and most influential of the many *deras* that dot Punjab's landscape. Typically, a *dera* blends Hindu, Muslim and Sikh beliefs and serves as a site of syncretic beliefs that many in the countryside subscribe to. The Dera Sacha Sauda dated back to the pre-partition days and the current chief is the third chief to hold the coveted post. But, its massive influence is largely a post-millennium phenomenon and can be attributed to its current godman. Calling upon his followers to eschew non-vegetarian food and liquor, he imposed a strict moral code on the *dera's* followers. He was also able to lend his followers, many of them poor Dalits from the countryside, a certain dignity that was denied them in Sikh gurdwaras, where, contrary to the religion's tenets, discrimination in the form of a separate *langar* or separate entrances for Dalits was often practised.

Soon, the godman had a huge following and commanded a sizeable vote bank that both the Akalis and the Congress coveted. In 2007, he instructed his followers to vote for the Congress, which they did. The Akalis retaliated after they came to power. It was soon clear that the Akalis would not be able to dent the hold of the godman over his followers. A tentative peace returned to the region after a peace deal was brokered. In subsequent elections, Gurmeet Ram Rahim has not made any public declaration of support, but rumours of deals abound.

In 2015, much to the chagrin of many strident Sikhs, the Akal Takht on instruction from the Badals issued a pardon to Gurmeet Ram Rahim. Harsh condemnation followed and the pardon was withdrawn. It was a blatantly political move that the Badals had made with an eye on the 2017 elections.

Gurmeet Ram Rahim is emblematic of Punjab's Dalit politics. Dalits in Punjab lack a leader. Most Dalit leaders exist in the shadows. Dera heads with pockets of influence barter the Dalit vote in return for favours. In 1983, the Bahujan Samaj Party won its first election in Hoshiarpur on a pro-Dalit platform. But it could never successfully repeat its maiden electoral performance in Punjab.

In Malwa, Dalit political assertion is recent and largely routed through the Dera. But what is more puzzling is this: Dalits in Jalandhar and its neighbouring districts (Doaba in the local parlance) constitute close to 45% of the population<sup>16</sup>, which coupled with the Adi Dharmi heritage, ought to have resulted in a larger role for the Dalits. It hasn't.

The Doaba region sends as many as 23 members to the 117-member assembly. The BSP has not won a seat here since 1997 and its vote share was only four per cent in the last elections. There is not a single Dalit leader to speak of who commands more than a narrow constituency following. This is a pan-Punjab phenomenon. This election, too, has not witnessed any of the three contenders (the Congress, the AAP and the Akali Dal-BJP combine) highlight any Dalit issue of note. No Dalit leader of note has come into the limelight. Panthic issues that revolve round the larger Sikh identity are dominant in their hold over the political landscape.

## Conclusion

Punjab's unique caste composition and dynamics have resulted in a series of assertions that differ from the rest of the country. But while the nature of the assertions are dissimilar, the familiar tropes of upper-caste power and privilege are similar in their workings. That said, what is worrisome is that 1) no Dalit leader has emerged on his/her own steam and 2) political formations do not deem it necessary to sufficiently highlight Dalit issues.

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*(Karthik Venkatesh lived in Bathinda, Punjab between 2005 and 2016 and ran a rural school. He is now an editor and freelance writer based out of Bangalore.)*

E-mail: [venkkarthik@gmail.com](mailto:venkkarthik@gmail.com)