

Rise of Deras in Punjab: A Serious Challenge to Main Stream Sikhism

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Abstract

This research paper reveals that Deras and politicians both thrive on each other in Punjab. While Deras use politicians patronage to attract devotees, the politicians woo dera Managements to get votes of their large number of followers. Further this paper explores that these Deras not only became the centre of religious, but also the venue of social and political thinking of the community. In fact, these Deras played a decisive role in rising of the social and political consciousness of the Dalits which led to sharpening the contradictions between the Jat Sikhs and them in the state. As a result Punjab has witnessed a volatile situation and led to a series of violent Jat-Dalits clashes in the state. This kind of situation poses a serious challenge not only to main stream Sikhism but also to political stability of the state. The importance of Deras in Punjab and their resistance to the monopolistic authority of the Sikhs has acquired significant importance in current political history of Punjab. Even this issue seems unresolved in future also. This kind of phenomenon pose a serious challenge to the institution of democracy in India.

Keywords: Deras, Dalits, Sikhs, Caste Clashes, Confrontation, inequality, region, Punjab Politics

Deras or sects are not new either to Punjab or the Sikh religion. Rather is as old as the Sikh faith. The history of Deras in Punjab is older than the Sikh Panth. Basically, the Deras in Punjab belong to Muslim Peer and Yognaths's dera. With the emergence of Sikh Panth, some prominent Sikh and non-Sikh Deras came in to existence as like Udasi Deras, Dera Baba Ram Thaman, Namdhari and Nanaksar etc. However Deras that came into existence in twentieth century are most popular among people in Punjab.

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While there is no statistical figure on how many Deras do exactly exist in Punjab. But as per rough estimate figure given by Sikh scholars, there are more than 9,000 Sikh as well as non Sikh Deras in 12,000 villages of Punjab. However there are about 300 major Deras across Punjab and the neighbouring state of Haryana and they are popular in both states. Out of these almost a dozen have over one lakh devotees each.

The main Deras in Punjab includes:- Radha Soami (Beas), Dera Sacha Suda (Sirsa), Nirankari, Namdhari, Diya Jyoti Jagran Sansthan (Nurmahal), Dera Sant Bhaniarwala (Ropar), Dera Sach Khand (Ballan) Almost all of these Deras have branches in every district of the state and even outside Punjab in the neighbouring states .

Though all of these Deras have followers among every caste, yet most of followers of these Deras are Dalits and backward caste people, who are often economically weaker also. Punjab has been witness to the emergence of a large numbers of Deras due to prevailing inequality in social and economic order and the marginal position of the Dalits in society. The rise of these Deras to seat of power in primarily due to the facts that Sikh religion in its modern form didn't accept the Sikhs of lower castes.

As the Sikh religion and their leaders failed to propagate equality, these Deras arose to fill up the vacuum, where all were invited with open arms equally. Thus 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 Panths. 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.

Though Dalits constitute about 30 percent of Punjab population that happens to be the largest proportion in the country, but they occupy the lowest share in land. The Dalits and backward classes in Punjab also feel excluded from making the political and economic choices for the state. On the other hand, the Jat Sikh population not only own 60 percent of land but also control the politics and economy of the state.

However the Deras situated in Punjab have their egalitarian ideology, played a historical role in formation of Dalits consciousness in the state. Dera sach khand ballan, Dera sant swaran das and Adhi dharm movement led by babu mango ram have been playing an important role in raising dalit consciousness and also acting as agencies for providing health and education facilities to the dalits. As a result dalit community in Punjab and especially in Doaba region have started to acquire non agricultural occupation and settled in abroad in large number too. In this way, the dalits of Punjab are striving for an independent identity by way of isolating themselves from main stream Sikhism. These Deras in fact pose a serious challenge to main stream Sikhism. This has led to series of violent caste conflicts between the Dalits and the Sikhs and created a communal posture and tension in the state.

Some of the most prominent conflicts between the Dalits (The Deras followers) and the Jat Sikhs include the Nirankar crisis of 1978, the Bhaniarwala crisis 2001, Talhan crisis of 2003 and the recent crises of the dera sach Khand (ballan) 2009. These all above said clashes between the Dalits and the Jat Sikhs lime lighted the challenge which main stream Sikhism faces from these Deras. These clashes can be described more about identity politics between the Jat Sikhs and the Dalits than a row over religion.¹³

However these spiritual Deras of various sects have also been playing active role in Punjab Politics. These Deras situated in Punjab had exercised the influence on followers to vote for a particular political party or individual candidate. As a result the political parties Shiromani Akali Dal and the Congress remained attached and affiliated with different Deras to get support of their followers.¹⁴

While Sikh religion does not approve of these Deras especially worship of Gurus in physical form yet all the Sikh leaders in Punjab are affiliating themselves to Deras to get a large number of committed votes of the Dera's followers.

During 2007, Punjab assembly the dera factor played a crucial role in the Punjab politics. During these elections, the Dera Sacha Sauda based in Sirsa in Haryana headed by the Ram Rahim Singh, played a decisive role in the Congress winning with a good number of seats in Malwa region and the SAD suffered a greatest set back in the Malwa belt which was its traditional support base.¹⁵ However during 2009 Lok Sabha elections SAD managed to win the Dera Sacha Suda's support back as the SAD candidate Harsimrat Kaur (Wife of Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab Sukhbir Badal) defeated the Raninder Singh (Son of former Congress Chief Minister Amrinder Singh) by over one lakh votes.¹⁶ Apart from Deras Sacha Suda both the SAD and the Congress party leaders has also been making efforts to reach out other Deras situated in Punjab like Namdharis, Radhaswami, Bhaniarwala, Dera Baba Jaure etc. to win over their followers.

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