

**ASSERTION OF RAVIDASSIAS COMMUNITY IN
DOABA REGION OF PUNJAB: A CASE-STUDY OF
DERA SACHKHAND BALLAN**

Thesis Submitted for the Award of the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

History

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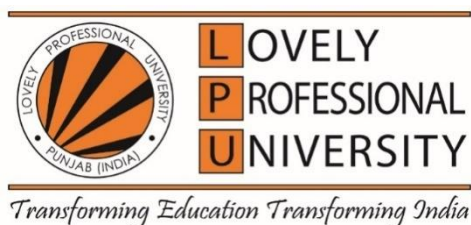
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DECLARATION

I, hereby declare that the presented work in the thesis entitled “Assertion of Ravidassias Community in Doaba Region of Punjab: A Case-Study of Dera Sachkhand Ballan” in fulfilment of degree of **Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)** is outcome of research work carried out by me under the supervision of Dr. Manu Sharma, working as Professor and Head, in the department of History, School of Social Sciences and Languages and Dr. Tariq Ahmad Sheikh (Co-supervisor) working as Associate Professor in the department of History, School of Social Sciences and Languages of Lovely Professional University, Punjab, India. In keeping with general practice of reporting scientific observations, due acknowledgements have been made whenever work described here has been based on findings of other investigators. This work has not been submitted in part or full to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree.



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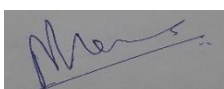
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work reported in the Ph.D. thesis entitled “Assertion of Ravidassias Community in Doaba Region of Punjab: A Case-Study of Dera Sachkhand Ballan” submitted in fulfillment of the requirement for the award of degree of **Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)** in the department of History, School of Social Sciences and Languages, is a research work carried out by Dev Kumar, (Registration No. 41700237), is bonafide record of his/her original work carried out under our supervision and that no part of thesis has been submitted for any other degree, diploma or equivalent course.



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Abstract

The circumstances which led to the announcement of 'Ravidassia Dharam' in the year 2010, aroused my interest in this area as it needs to be explored in its entirety. As a village-dweller, I always observed that social dynamics between the Ravidassias and the Jatts have never been cordial, at least in the village of my residence. There are two separate gurudwaras in my village; one each of the Ravidassias and the Jatts. They observe their religious functions separately, not cooperating with each other. Same is the case with a majority of around 12000 villages in Punjab. Shackles of caste are so strong that even cremation grounds for each of these two communities are separate. In Punjab, called the land of Gurus, such kind of things disturb a right-thinking person who aspires for an egalitarian society, based on the principles of equality and social justice for all.

The present work revolves around five major sub themes: (a) Historical perspective of the Ravidassia community, (b) Analysis of the social hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes in Punjab. (c) Understanding social relations among the Sikhs and the Ravidassias in particular and among the lower castes and the upper castes in general, (d) Contribution and impact of Dera Ballan in assertion of the Ravidassias and (d) The Ravidassia diaspora and its role towards formation of Ravidassia religious identity.

The Ravidassias, though not known by this nomenclature then, have had traditionally been a part of the Shudra varna of the Chatur varna system of Hindu society during the Vedic era. The Adi-Dharm movement was instrumental in the formation of a new Dalit identity for the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region of Punjab. It is argued that the Dalit identities of the Ravidassia Sants in the Sub-Region of Punjab, known as Doaba, were formed during the course of this movement itself. In this context, the Ravidassias of Punjab had been able to establish a distinctive religious (qaumi) identity in the form of the Adi Dharma movement.

Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan, commonly known as Dera Ballan in Punjab, India, has emerged as a dominant religious institution of the Ravidassia community during the eighth decade of the twentieth century. It has paved the way for

the formation of a separate Dalit identity independent of both Hinduism as well as Sikhism. The other Deras committed to propagating the ideas of various religious icons, have made a substantial contribution to the growth of caste and sect consciousness among their respective adherents, which can occasionally take dangerous forms and have detrimental repercussions on society.

Caste phenomenon is so deep-rooted in Indian society that various caste clusters exist even within the Scheduled Caste population of Punjab. An analysis of caste system at the India level reveals that there is a certain hierarchy among the Castes in Hindu society. Unlike the Hindu society where the purity-pollution kind of relationships exists, the framework of caste discrimination in Sikh society is significantly freed from this.

The Dalit Sikhs in the state of Punjab, which is the only Sikh-majority state in the Indian Union, often lament that they remain peripheral to structures of power even in the present-day Indian society, but the recent elevation of Charanjit Singh Channi-a Ramdasias Sikh, to the post of Chief Minister, and thus the first ever Dalit CM of the state, has dramatically propelled the issues and political identity of the Dalits in Punjab to the center stage of contemporary Indian politics. The Dalits (once untouchable castes) in the Punjab appear to have benefited significantly from Sikhism's liberating influence. The religious precepts, the tribal cultural traditions of the dominant caste of Jats, and their power interests interacted in a complicated dynamic that shaped the development of the Sikh community. The Sikh struggle after partition for securing constitutional safeguards for Sikh Scheduled Castes at par with their Hindu counterparts was a major step in the formation of an egalitarian society. The massive building of independent Gurdwaras by the Ravidasias, Mazhabis, and other caste groups, parallel to those controlled and maintained by the Jat Sikhs in villages of Punjab has witnessed a sharp increase in the recent years, thus creating a rift between the Jatts and the Dalit community, which could have far-reaching social implications in times to come.

The Dalits in Punjab are designing, forming, and regulating a network of new sociocultural features, artifacts, and buildings that give them separate physical and social places to challenge the dominant culture's repression of their historical

marginalization in the caste hierarchy. The Deras, with Guru Ravidass's teachings at its foundation, are reshaping the discourteous culture and identities that have long kept Dalits at a social and economic disadvantage in contemporary India. The Ravidassias are also generating distinctive cultural spaces for the Dalits. A survey was conducted to determine the general public's knowledge of the Dera in question, and the adverse impact of the 'Ravidassisa Dharm' on social relations between the Ravidassias and the Sikhs, using a questionnaire distributed to 200 respondents, 50 from each of the four districts (Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar) of Punjab's Doaba region. The results of the survey showed that with respect to the first question, 166 (83%) respondents out of 200 responded assertively and 34 (17%) responded negatively. To the second question, 61 (30.5%) responses were positive, 132(66%) responses were negative, and 7(3.5%) were neutral.

The Dera Sachkhand Ballan has become a key institution of the Adi-dharma community in a variety of domains, including social service, medicine, education, and other areas. It has been able to exert its en-bloc voting impact on the state government and is well on its way to achieving its goal of constructing a state-sponsored heritage building at Khuralgarh village in the Garhshankar tehsil of Hoshiarpur.

The Ravidassia Diaspora of late has been playing an active part in the direction of assertion of the Ravidassia community overseas and back home. The role of Dera Sachkhand Ballan could not be under-estimated in guiding and directing the Ravidassia Diaspora in asserting themselves in the form of establishing separate religious places or forming various caste associations for the well-being of their community. The Dera followers have established separate Ravidass temples different from the mainstream Sikh gurdwaras across the world. It is with the support of the Ravidassis, settled abroad that the Guru Ravidas temples have been established in many of the European countries, where the Rashidas have a substantial population. As a result, despite different assertions to the contrary, it is a religious formation that developed in the diaspora in response to the Ra+vidassiaas' exclusion from managements in some Sikh temples.

In spite of the efforts put in by the Dera Balland and the Ravidassia diaspora, the Ravidassia community has still to cover a long distance in order that the 'Ravidassia Dharm' gets an official recognition by the governments of India and the other countries where the Ravidassias are settled in a substantial number. This is due to the fact that South Asia has had an ambiguous and unsettled religious history. A prominent social scientist Prof. Ronki Ram argues that in the history of religions, no caste has ever been granted the status of a separate religion. for a thumping majority of the Ravidassia people belong to a particular caste, named, Chamar/Adi Dharmi,

Scope of the Study:

As the 'Ravidassia Dharam' is relatively a new faith system in the field of religions and there is not so much of research work done in this regard; significance of the present work is therefore very immense. For a thorough study of the various aspects of the Ravidassia community, their historical background, initiation into the Adi-Dharam movement, failure of the said movement and establishment of the Dera Ballan in question, the Chamars' following in huge numbers to the Dera and ultimately, declaration of a new religion by the Dera in the year 2010 and its repercussions for Punjab are the sub themes which need to be studied thoroughly in an order to reach at a logical conclusion.

By undertaking such a study some hitherto unknown social phenomenon related to caste-hierarchies shall be explored. The study will shed light, on how socio-religious relations between the Ravidassias and the upper-caste Sikhs have undergone a change after declaration by the Dera under study, of a new religion. The scope of this study will also expand to social tension emanating in some Punjab villages after the installation, in Guru Ravidass gurudwaras of a new scripture named Amritbani Guru Ravidass ji in place of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, a sacred book of the Sikhs. After undergoing the whole caste phenomenon in Punjab, some remedies to be undertaken on the part of the State as well as the Central government shall be suggested; so that there should be better policy-making as well as its implementation for the upliftment of the socially and economically weaker sections of our society, in order to fulfil the dream of an egalitarian society.

Review of Literature and Research gap identification:

There are some fundamental works, related to the Ravidassia community. They give information with respect to social, economic, political and religious aspects of this community. Upon investigation of the related literature, some missing links have been found with respect to the religious developments in the region under study. In the present study, an effort will be made to connect such missing links. Apart from it, all those areas which haven't been covered in the literature, reviewed, will be covered in the undertaken study.

1. ***Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste, by Mark Juergensmeyer:*** Mark Juergensmeyer is a professor of sociology and global studies, at the University of California. In this work Juergensmeyer dwells upon the idea that when untouchables decide they are not Hindus and refuse to subscribe to the caste-related concepts, and then what is its outcome. They form their own religion. The Ad Dharm movement of Punjab founded in the 1920s by Mangoo Ram, stakes claim as a religion separate from and superior to both Hinduism and Sikhism. In this pioneering work, Mark Juergensmeyer chronicles the history of the Ad Dharm movement based on extensive field research, sociological surveys and interviews that weave the life stories of Dalit leaders into the history of the movement. He also explores Ad Dharm's links with organizations supported by the Dalits: Arya Samaj, Valmiki Sabha, Ambedkar and Dalit Panther movements, Christianity, Marxism, the Congress party, Radhasoami Satsang and the lifestyle of modern secularism. Juergensmeyer takes one bold step forward from conventional social history and he deserves our unqualified praise for that.
2. ***'Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab' by Ronki Ram:*** Ronki Ram who is a professor at PU Chandigarh. In this work of his, Ronki Ram delves in detail about Sant Ravidass and Dera Ballan. Through many an example he establishes a relation between Dera

Ballan and the rising Dalit identity. He says, '.... the spontaneous violent reaction and the subsequent deviation from the tradition of the 'Prakash of Guru Granth Sahib' at Dera Sachkhand Ballan underline deeply the question of a separate Dalit identity in Punjab rather than what unfortunately and also wrongfully projected as an issue of intra-Sikh communal divide.'

But somehow this work of the learned Professor fails to deal with the announcement by the Dera of a separate religion for the Ravidassias and its aftermath. His work deals little with the ways through which the Rasvidassias have asserted themselves vis-a vis the upper caste Sikhs of Punjab.

3. 'Dera Sachkhand Ballan: Repository of Dalit Consciousness' by Ronki Ram:

Ronki Ram, in this article, published in 'The Deccan Herald' issue of May 25, 2009 writes about the nature and composition of the followers of Dera Ballan. He also talks about various projects of the Dera. To quote him, 'Of all the major contributions made by the Dera Ballan, the construction of a mammoth 'Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir' at Guru Ravidass' birthplace at Seer Goverdhanpur in Varanasi, is the most significant.' Ultimately this article leaves the gap of issue of Ravidassia assertion and does not address the topic of Dalit consciousness at all.

4. 'The Genealogy of a Dalit Faith: The Ravidassia Dharm and Caste Conflicts in Contemporary Punjab by Ronki Ram:

This article explores the rise of the Ravidassia Dharm and the emerging contours of caste conflicts between some sections of Dalits and the followers of the Sikh religion in contemporary Punjab. It has grown out of the complex power politics of claims and counterclaims around sacred texts, Rehat Maryada, emblems, rituals and narratives that remain central to the critical processes of conflict formation between some sections of the Ravidassia community and followers of the Sikh faith. This article also fails to fill the gap as to what were the social repercussions after the Ravidassia religion came into being. It does not deal in detail with various points of clash between the Ravidassias and the upper caste Sikhs of Punjab.

5. 'Religious Transnationalism, Development and the Construction of Religious

Boundaries: The Case of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Ravidass Dharm' by Gurharpal Singh: The writer in this paper tries to make point that 'Transnationalism' is central to the process of differentiating between the followers of Dera Ballan and Sikhism. He further argues that it also provided critical support for the birth of a new religion in 2010, the Ravidass Dharm. The writer talks of new social divisions and hierarchies in Punjab. The limitation of this paper for me lies in the fact that the author does not address the causes responsible for the birth of a new religion for the Ravidassias and its socio-religious repercussions.

6. ***'Face to Faith'*** by Kathryn Lum: In her article, the writer opines, "In the Punjab, where a high percentage of Ravidassias live, religion has traditionally been syncretic and fluid, involving both Hindu, Sikh and Sufi elements without any conflict. The effort to create more clear-cut boundaries reflects the growing religious and caste polarization that India has witnessed in the political realm." She further argues that the role of Ravidassiaderas in Punjab in promoting broader social change is limited in the directions of gender relations and root causes of casteism.
7. ***Caste and Race*** by Mohan Dass Namishray: In this book, the author draws a comparison between two terms, 'caste' and 'race'. While quoting Oliver C Cox, the writer of this book elaborates that while caste pride in the Indian context is based upon internal group invidiousness race pride in the Western context cuts across caste lines and reaches out to a whole people, commanding their loyalty in a body. Mohan Dass Namishray while comparing the Dalit movement led by B.R. Ambedkar to the Black movement of Martin Luther King, states that both these leaders had realized that in order to bring about a significant transformation in the status of their respective communities, a mass revolution is a must.
8. ***Punjab Da Dalit Itihas*** by S.L. Viridi: This book by Advocate Dr. S.L. Viridi deals in detail about the Dalit history of Punjab. Starting with the historical perspectives of Dalits in India, the writer goes on to discuss the Ad-Dharm

movement in Punjab led by Mangoo Ram Muggowal. He co-relates this movement with the mass popularization of Guru Ravidass, a 14th century poet-saint among the chamars of Punjab. Then the author deals with the Ambedkarite movement and the Dalit Panther movement of 1972. Somehow the writer of this book fails to discuss the role played by DeraSachkhand Ballan in assertion of the Ravidasia community of Punjab.

9. ***Dalit Chetna: Sarot te Saroop (Punjabi) by Ronki Ram:*** Ronki Ram, in this book, talks about the Dalit consciousness and its sources and nature. He elaborates that the main source behind Dalit consciousness is the realization by Dalits that they are being discriminated against and are being deprived of their human rights by the upper castes. The writer also deals in detail about the Ad-Dharm movement and the Republican movement. In the last part of his book, he gives a detailed description of the Dalit Deras in Punjab; wherein he argues that the root cause behind the mushrooming of these eras on Punjab is caste-based discrimination against the Dalits and their economic status. The writer then talks about the famous Vienna incident wherein Sant Ramanand of DeraSachkhand Balan was killed in Austria by some Sikh assailants. The Dalit reaction to this incident in Punjab was the culmination point of Dalit consciousness in Punjab, according to the author.

10. ***India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India by Christophe Jaffrelot:*** Since the 1960s a new assertiveness has characterized India's formerly silent majority, the lower castes that comprise more than two-thirds of the population. Today India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, is controlled by lower-caste politicians, as is Bihar, and lower-caste representation in national politics is growing inexorably. Jaffrelot argues that this trend constitutes a genuine "democratization" of India and that the social and economic effects of this "silent revolution" are bound to multiply in the years to come. In this work of his, the learned author deals in detail about the uneven emancipation of lower castes in India. He further elaborates the quota politics in order to mobilize the masses on caste lines. In the third part of his

book, the writer discusses the Bahujan Front led by Babu Kanshi Ram, which was a pioneering point in the political assertion of the Dalit castes in north India.

11. ***'The Ravidasis of Punjab: Global Contours of Caste and Religious Strife'*** by **Surinder S. Jodhka**: The writer observes that misrepresentations of caste and religious realities of Punjab could lead to communal divide between Dalits and upper caste Sikhs.
12. ***Ravidassia Dharm te Har da Nishan*** by **Rajesh Kainth**: There is description of Ravidassia Dharm and its rules and religious symbols. But description of the socio-religious impact of the new Ravidassia dharm is missing.
13. ***'Baba Saheb Se Jud Gayi Hai Ravidass Ki Vaishvik Prampra'*** by **Arvind Kumar**: The author has established co-relation between Sant Ravidass's concept of 'Beghampua' and Ambedkar's utopian state where there is absence of any caste.
14. ***The Namdhari Sikhs: Their Changing Socio- Cultural Landscape'*** by **Joginder Singh**: The doctrines of Namdhari movement include any discrimination on the basis of caste. Ramdasia Sikhs who are considered inferior socially constitute a sizable number of Namdharis.
15. ***The Arya Samaj*** by **Lajpat Rai**: The Arya Samaj though believes in division of society into four parts by virtue of qualification and occupation, is against evils of caste and untouchability.
16. ***The Causes of Ranked Rhetoric: From Hierarchy to Ethnicity: The Politics of Caste in Twentieth- Century India*** by **Alexander Lee**: Landowning groups and groups with limited contact with the state bureaucracy tended to emphasize hierarchical themes, much as their ancestors had done in pre-colonial times. Large groups in areas with democratic elections, by contrast, did not emphasize hierarchy, prefiguring the type of non- Sanskritic caste politics that became more common after independence.
17. ***Amritbani Satguru Ravidass Maharaj Ji Steek)*** by **Surinder Das Bawa**: It

contains a detail of the Ravidassia Deras and interpretation of Guru Ravidass 's hymns as incorporated in 'Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji'

18. **Census Report by Registrar General Census Operations, Punjab:** Numerical strength of various Scheduled Castes in Punjab is given in this document.
19. **Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji by Ramanand Das:** The scripture contains hymns of Sant Ravidass as incorporated in Guru Granth Sahib as well as anywhere else.
20. **Jagat Guru Ravidass Sampardaye: Sant Te Sadhna Sathal (Punjabi) by Som Nath Bharti:** The book describes a brief history of Dera Ballan and the other Ravidassia Deras in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir. Decorated with pictures of Dera Ballan Sants, various Dera buildings and various Dera heads, the book provides good information with respect to all the projects, accomplished and being carried out by Dera Ballan.
21. **Dalit Shaheedan Da Itihaas (Punjabi) by S. L. Viridi:** An Advocate and a Dalit activist, the writer traces the Dalit history through Mohenjo-Daro civilization, also taking into account the Hindu mythical characters like, Mahishasur, Hiranya Kashyap, Meghnath, Jarasandh, Bali etc. The book chapters on the Adi Dharm movement and the assassination of Sant Ramanand of Dera Ballan are of special significance for the task at hand.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the historical background of the Ravidassia community.
2. To study and analyze the social hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes in Punjab.
3. To compare the social dynamics among the Sikhs and the Ravidassias in particular and among the lower castes and the upper castes in general.
4. To assess the contribution and impact of Dera Ballan in assertion of the Ravidassias.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The first: Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan is playing a leading and dominant role in terms of preaching and spreading Sant Ravidass's philosophy across all corners of the world and mobilizing the Ravidassia community around sectarian lines with the motive of creating a separate religious identity of the Ravidassias, independent of Sikhism.

The second: Social dynamics between the Ravidassias and the Sikhs have been greatly adversely affected after the announcement by Dera Ballan in 2010, of a separate 'Ravidassia Dharm'. Social tension between the two communities increased with respect to replacement of the holy Guru Granth Sahib with a new scripture of the Ravidassia community in the Ravidassia gurudwaras.

Acknowledgement

As 'religion' and 'society' have had always been the topmost topics of my academic interest, therefore for me, selection of this topic for the present study was quite but natural. A major socio-religious happening during the year 2010 was when Dera Ballan, a Ravidassia Dera, situated in Jalandhar district of Punjab announced a new 'Ravidassia Dharam' independent of Sikhism, as a repercussion to the assassination of its deputy head Sant Ramanand in a gurudwara in the Austrian capital, Vienna on May 25, 2009. Resultantly, mutual brotherhood at the village level between the Sikhs and the Ravidassias got somewhat disturbed, which led to a new socio-religious debate. These circumstances aroused my interest more to dwell deep into the social dynamics between these two communities. Hence, the journey towards the accomplishment of this present work got under-way.

First and foremost, my head bows before the almighty for blessing me with courage and intellect to start and accomplish this task. The contribution of my parents late Shri Darshan Ram and Late Shrimati Charan Kaur can never be over-looked, without whose heavenly blessings, the present work could not have been completed. I am highly obliged to Dr. Manu Sharma, my supervisor and Dr. Tariq Ahmad Sheikh, my co-supervisor, who guided and supported me at all stages of the present work. She/He always spared her/his precious time, whenever I needed her/his help, during the course of this work. My gratitude also goes to the Head of School of Social Sciences and Languages, Dr. Pavitar Prakash Singh, who provided a congenial atmosphere in the department to focus on the present work. My better half Mrs. Meena Rani stood by me all the time and always encouraged me to accomplish the task at hand.

I would be failing in my duty without expressing my thanks to the Dera Ballan authorities who always extended a helping hand whenever I needed it the most. All my interviewees and the respondents, during the course of this work also deserve my gratitude. Last but not the least, I am obliged to all the faculty and other staff of L.P.U. Phagwara for helping me in various ways for the accomplishment of the present work.
July, 2024



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Introduction

The Ravidasia community is a major caste/religious group in one of the sub-regions of Punjab, known as Doaba. They look up to Sant Ravidas, a *Chamar* by trade and a social and theological reformer of the Bhakti movement during the 14th century. Sant Ravidas was born on January 15, 1377,¹ in the untouchable Chamar community. Santokh Dass was his father, while Kalsa or Kalsi Devi was his mother. Seer govardhanpur is the village in Varanasi city in Uttar Pradesh state, where he took birth. A significant pilgrimage site as regarded by Guru Ravidas's followers today, the birthplace is currently commemorated by Sri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan (Begampura). One of the earliest biographic works, named, *Anantadas Parcai* describes about the birth of this mystic poet of the 14th century (Winnand, 2013). *Bhaktamal*, (Plate 1) a medieval age text suggests that Sant Ravidass was one of many famous disciples of Sant Ramanand, a Brahmin bhakti poet. *Ratnavali* another medieval text, authored by King Harsha says that Ravidass attained spiritual knowledge from Sant Ramanand; therefore, the former belonged to the Ramanand Sampradaya. He believed in *Nirguna* (without attributes) form of supreme beings.

The traditional occupation of Sant Ravidass was shoe-making. (Plate: 2) Many of his hymns, incorporated in the Guru Granth Sahib, refer to his family occupation of shoe-mending, as:

ਚਮਰਟਾ ਗਾਂਠਿ ਨ ਜਨਈ॥
ਲੇਗੁ ਗਠਾਵੈ ਪਨਹੀ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ॥

(I'm a shoe-maker but don't know how to mend shoes. People come to me to mend their shoes.)

(Guru Granth Sahib *Anga*: 659, Page: 08)

The Sant, according to his devotees, passed away in Benares at the age of 126. Historically the Ravidasias had been a part of the Shudra *varna* of the *chatur-varna* system of Hindu society. They were involved in the so-called menial works of

¹ Sharma, Arvind (2003). *The Study of Hinduism*. The University of South Carolina Press. p. 229.

scavenging and tanning of dead animals. When Sant Ravidas visited Punjab, during one of his religious visits, a large number of local populations, mostly from the Dalit sections of Indian society, was impressed by his personality and became his disciple. With the passage of time, these disciples came to be known as the Ravidasias.

The Ravidassia movement can be studied broadly under three different phases, according to S. Jodhka a scholar on Dalit issues and Avinash Kumar. Phase 1: Its origin in the Ad Dharm movement; Phase 2: Its evolution since the 1940s; Phase 3: Trends in the 1990s. (Jodhka & Kumar, 2010)

While tracing the social background of the Ravidassia community, one comes to know that during the colonial rule; more than half of the population (53.2%) of the Punjab was Muslim as per 1941 census. Among the Hindu population, which was 29.1 of the total population of the Punjab at that time, only 5.91% belonged to the Scheduled Castes and if we further talk about the Ad Dharmis who had been provided a special column apart from the Scheduled Castes in the population register in the 1931 census, they formed a meager 1.01% of Punjab's total count of population, which is visible from this following table:

Category-wise population	%age of total Hindu population of 3,430,9,861crores
SC: 17,72,572 lakhs	5.91
Ad-Dharmi: 3,49,863 lakhs	1.01
Mazhabi Sikhs: 3,38,729 lakhs	0.88

Table 1.1: Category-wise population of Punjab in 1941

Source: Census of India Vol. VI 1941, Punjab Tables

Whether Scheduled Castes or Adi-Dharmis, they were economically the most disadvantaged and from a social and cultural perspective, the most excluded.

When our Colonial Masters annexed Punjab to the British Empire in 1849 A.D.² they established canal colonies here in order to expand agricultural activities in the state. With the growth of agriculture, urbanization also took place. As a result of this, many urban centers started flourishing here. The British, with the aim of recruitment of soldiers from the region laid the foundation of a military Cantonment at Jalandhar in 1848 which got completed in the due course and was officially inaugurated on May 1, 1849.³ This resulted in a significant growth of this town in terms of opening up of employment avenues for the local youth. The local Chamars (who dealt in leather work), especially those living in adjoining villages of Jalandhar city (as in the city leather business was controlled by the Muslim traders), found in it a special opportunity for their social mobility as there was a huge demand for leather shoes for the newly recruited British soldiers. Several of the Chamar community's more business-minded individuals, residing in villages tried to exploit the newly emerged situation. They moved to the city and abroad also. Consequently, this economic and social mobility later on became instrumental in readying the basis for the political empowerment of the Scheduled Castes in Punjab.

Movements of socio-religious reform and the Dalit assertion: Movements of socio-religious reform among the Hindus and the Sikhs during the 19th century played an important part in Dalit assertion. The protagonists of these movements tried their best to attract the Punjabi Dalits to their respective folds through various means. The Arya Samaj of Lahore for instance, through its *Shudhi* movement, encouraged the

² Puri, H. K. (2003b). The Scheduled Castes in the Sikh Community – A Historical Perspective.

Economic and Political Weekly, 38(26), p. 269

³ Khaira, R. (2017, June 4). The old & beautiful cantonment. *The Tribune*.

‘untouchables’ for their ‘purification’, so that they can again be made a part of the mainstream Hinduism. In addition to that, the Dalits were urged to enroll their kids in Arya Samaj schools. The same was true with Sikh reformers. They also lured Dalits to their fold by preaching against casteism and untouchability publicly.

In the past or now, there has never been a single, cohesive Dalit movement in the nation. Various movements, centred on various philosophies, have brought attention to various Dalit-related issues. Even if the connotation may not be the same for everyone, they all claim to be Dalits. There has been a similar drive for equality, self-dignity, and the abolition of untouchability notwithstanding disparities in the nature of Dalit movements and the definition of identity. (Shah, 2001:194). This can be found in the Adi Dharma Movement in Punjab, the Mahar Movement in Maharashtra, the socio-political mobilization among the Jatavas of Agra, and the Anti-Brahman Movement in south India. It can also be seen in the Satnami Movement of the Chamars in the Chhattisgarh plains in eastern M.P.

A watershed moment came in the history of the Ravidasias during the 1920s, when Mangu Ram Muggowal, a resident of Hoshiarpur district of Punjab and his associate B. L. Ghera, led one section of the Ravidasias and started the Ad-Dharma (the original faith) movement. This movement was started with the aim of gaining a different religious affiliation for the *Chamars* of Punjab. This movement introduced Sant Ravidas as its spiritual master and adopted a sacred book *Adi-Prakash* for different ritual traditions for Ad-Dharma followers. In 1931, having a huge support by a majority of the Ravidasia population, the Adi-Dharma movement triumphed in having the Adi-Dharma registered for the census, in which over 4, 50, 000 people of the Scheduled Caste community registered themselves as the members of a new Dalit faith called the Adi-Dharma.

To quote Prem Kumar Chumber, a Dalit scholar,

“It was perhaps for the first time in the neglected/unrecorded history of the Dalits in India that Scheduled Castes in Punjab declared themselves as belonging to an indigenous non-Aryan religion totally different from that of all the mainstream religions of the region. Not only that, the

movement even contested the first provincial election of 1937 and returned the community candidates from 7 out of 8 reserved constituencies in Punjab. That was also the first great success of the Dalits in Punjab towards their march to gain political power....”⁴

But, after attaining its peak in 1931, the Adi-Dharma movement started declining. It made a variety of political pacts with the British, went in various directions and eventually, by the end of the decade, became a pale shadow of its former self. It soon joined Ravi Das Mandal in 1946 and distinguished itself as a distinct Hindu caste to benefit from reservation. It tied up with Dera Sachkand Ballan situated in a village named Ballan near Jalandhar.

Although the Adi-Dharmis were followers of Guru Ravidas (now Ravidasia religion), after the decline of the Adi-Dharma movement, they incorporated features of Sikhism since they regard Sri Guru Granth Sahib as their sacred text. Each of their areas has a gurudwara and a Ravidas Bhawan, which are centers of worship as well as places of activities related to their community.

The traditional occupation of the Adi-Dharmis was tanning. A majority of them became agricultural laborers. There is much more mobility among them in Punjab than in other parts of India. For instance, many Ad-Dharmis migrated to cities and towns, where they adopted many blue and white-collar occupations. A small but a significant section among them migrated to Europe, most notably the U.K. and the North America. According to the 2011 census data, Punjab has 14.8% Ad-Dharmis of the total Scheduled Caste population.

The Adi-Dharm Movement: The concept of a distinct socio-religious organization for the *Chamars* had started taking shape in the early 1920s; although it materialized in the form of Adi-Dharma only after Mangoo Ram Muggowal’s arrival on the scene.

Mangoo Ram (Plate: 3) belonged to a village Muggowal in Hoshiarpur district of Punjab, where he took birth on 14th of January, 1886. His ancestors were engaged in

⁴ Chumber, P. K. (2008). The Ad Dharam Movement: The Pioneer Dalit Movement of India. *Ambedkar Times*, p. 15.

leather trade. Therefore, they too, like their fellow community persons, had to face the stigma of being *Chamars*. This made an indelible impact on the mind of young Mangoo Ram. During those days, Western Europe was a popular destination for migration for the inhabitants of the Doaba sub-region; as they deemed it a great source of their cultural and social mobility. After completing his education in an Arya Samaj school, he was sent by his father to USA in 1909. There he got associated with the Ghadar Party. But as the Ghadar movement was almost exclusively an upper caste movement; Mangoo Ram, a lower caste boy appeared to have nothing much to gain by joining it⁵. After his return from the USA in 1925, Mangoo Ram opened a school in his native village and named it Adi-Dharma School. This very school became the venue of the meeting of some Dalit activists in 1926, when the Adi-Dharma movement was formally launched.

The Adi-Dharma movement was successful in rallying the Chamars of the Doaba sub-region to fight for their rights. It was perhaps the impact of this movement that the Ad Dharmis have left other communities of the Scheduled Castes far behind in terms of education and economic well-being. The following table illustrates this.

At 76.4 per cent, the biggest percentage of Ad Dharmis are literate and hold the highest ranking among the Scheduled Castes. The Chamars (63.7per cent) and the Balmikis (56.1per cent) are placed 2nd and 3rd respectively. The Mazhabis, though the largest community in terms of numbers are at the bottom having a 42.3% of its population as literate.

⁵ Juergensmeyer, M. (1989). *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*.

Names of SCs	Literate without education level	Below Primary	Primary	Middle	Matric/Higher Secondary/Intermediate	Non-technical & Technical diploma etc.	Graduate and above
All SCs	2.4	26.5	31.6	16.8	20.3	0.5	2.0
Ad Dharmi	1.2	19.8	30.7	18.7	25.8	0.7	3.0
Balmiki	2.6	28.3	33.5	17.2	16.8	0.2	1.3
Chamar	1.8	23.5	30.7	17.5	23.1	0.8	2.6
Mazhabi	3.8	34.2	32.5	14.0	14.5	0.3	0.7

(Note: all the figures are in percentage of total population of the state.)

Table 1.2: Educational levels among the Scheduled Castes in Punjab as per Census 2011

Source: Scheduled Castes Sub Plan 2020-21 Tables

An idea of popularity of the Adi-Dharma among the SCs of Punjab can be had from two facts. The first is that nearly five lakh people registered themselves as Adi-Dharmis during the census of 1931. Secondly, in 1937, when the Punjab Legislative Assembly's initial elections were held, the Adi-Dharma supported eight of the independent candidates, fighting election in eight reserved constituencies for the Scheduled Castes. Seven out of these eight candidates got succeeded in the election.

However, all this success of the Ad Dharma was short-lived, as some of its leaders took to mainstream politics. For instance, a locally famous leader of the Ad Dharma Mandal,

Master Gurbanta Singh became the first one to leave the Mandal and join the Indian National Congress. Mangoo Ram himself was one such leader.

Surinder S. Jodhka opines,

“The caste issue was gradually taken over by the emerging pan-Indian movement of the Dalits and it finally merged with it.”⁶

The Journey from the Adi-Dharmis to the Ravidassias: The journey of the *Chamars* from the Adi-Dharmis to the Ravidassis can be understood with respect to the prevailing political developments in the third decade of the 20th century. The well-known Communal Award given on August 04, 1932, by Ramsay Macdonald, the British Prime Minister of the time, according to which seats were allotted in the various Indian legislatures to the different communities was rejected by Mahatma Gandhi as he saw separate electorate provided in the said Award as an effort of the British to separate the untouchables from the whole Hindu community. In Yeravda Central Jail in Poona, he embarked on a death-defying fast as a form of protest. Later, with the active efforts of some Congressmen, an agreement, known as the Poona Pact got signed on September 24, 1932, involving Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, leader of the depressed classes (Basu, 200). According to this pact, depressed classes were given reservation of seats in legislatures under joint electorate and separate electorate was discarded. Resultantly, under the new Joint Electorate, the Dalits were given separate seats but got clubbed with Hindus. Under such a scenario, it was a catch-22 situation for the Adi-Dharma Mandal as it could either continue with the claim of being a separate religious community or accept the official pronouncement of classification and give up benefits of reservation. The Adi-Dharma Mandal decided in favor of the latter. The freedom fight against the British Empire was in full swing at the time, and

⁶Jodhka, S. S. (2009). *The Ravidasis of Punjab: Global Contours of Caste and Religious Strife*.

Economic and Political Weekly, 44(24), p. 81.

the Adi-Dharma movement may have been influenced by the mainstream politics of the day. Those among the Adi-Dharma leadership who had been radically influenced by the ideas of B.R. Ambedkar, showed no hesitation in joining the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Republican Party of India, both established by Ambedkar though at different times. Those with more religious and spiritual leanings turned to Buddhism. Although the Adi-Dharma Mandal used to claim itself to be a religious identity, yet it could not establish itself as one. For any religion to be called so, needs three to four basic conditions. One, its own holy book, second, a pilgrimage place and three its own religious code of conduct or rituals. Since the Adi-Dharma Mandal, except one, did not fulfill these basics, it could not be clubbed in the category of religions. Therefore, after its decline, it simply remained a community group of Hindus for official categorization. The *Chamars* of the Doaba sub-region refused to be clubbed as 'Hindus.'

In the Ravidassia community's history, 1946 marked yet another pivotal year. It was in this year that name of the Adi-Dharma Mandal was changed to The Ravi Das Mandal.⁷ The activists of this Mandal from now onwards focused mainly on religious and social issues. It was perhaps due to their realization that they need to evolve a separate religious system in order to be called a separate religious entity. For this to happen, they first needed a religious Guru, which they found in Sant Ravidas, a *Chamar* by profession and a prominent *Bhagat* related to the Bhakti movement during the 14th century A.D.

⁷ Juergensmeyer, M. (2004). Untouchability, Dalit consciousness, and the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab. *Sage Journal*, 38(03), p. 232.



Image 1.1: A Gathering of Holy Men of Different Faiths, a Mughal era miniature, c.1740-50

Source: Beach, Milo C., Eberhard Fischer, B. N. Goswamy, and Keelan Overton. *Masters of Indian Painting*. Vol. Vols. I, II. Zurich, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 2011. vol. II, pp. 608, 614, ill. fig. 6 (color).

Even though he was from Uttar Pradesh, Sant Ravidas won the favour and acceptance of the Punjab *Chamars* thanks to the inclusion of his hymns in the *Adi Granth*, the Sikh religion's holy book that was compiled in the Punjab during the fifth Sikh pontificate Guru Arjan Dev's guru-ship, and that too in the regional Gurmukhi script.

It is thus clear that the Adi-Dharma movement was quite influential in the Chamar people's efforts to establish a distinctive religious identity. It is however worthwhile to mention here that independent of the Adi-Dharma, a separate Ravidasia religious identity had already started taking shape. Mangoo Ram Muggowal, the establisher of the Adi-Dharma movement often used to visit the Ravidasia Deras of the Doaba sub-region, which had contributed significantly in the 1920s to the cause of a separate religious identity for the Adi-Dharmis. Among these Deras one such Dera was or rather is Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan in Punjab's Jalandhar district, which

Mangoo Ram visited and requested for the former's backing in popularizing Sant Ravidas's religious stature among the Dalit population in Punjab.

According to Ronki Ram,

“The association of the Dera with the Adi-dharma movement further becomes clear from the fact that Sant Sarwan Dass, the then head of the Dera Ballan offered juice to Mangoo Ram to break his fast- unto- death, undertaken as a counter measure to that of Mahatma Gandhi's fast against the communal award in 1932.”⁸

It is an interesting fact that the Adi-Dharmi identity continued to be important for the *Chamars* of the Doaba sub-region even after they got bracketed with the Hindu Scheduled Castes for census enumeration. As per 2011 census report, the Adi-Dharmi population in Punjab was 13.1% of the total population of Punjab; whereas total SC population in Punjab as per this report stands at 31.9% of Punjab's total count of population. It means almost 42% of the total SCs in Punjab even till then, preferred themselves to be called 'Adi-Dharmis'. The following table, showing break-up as a percentage of Punjab's overall Scheduled Caste population illustrates this:

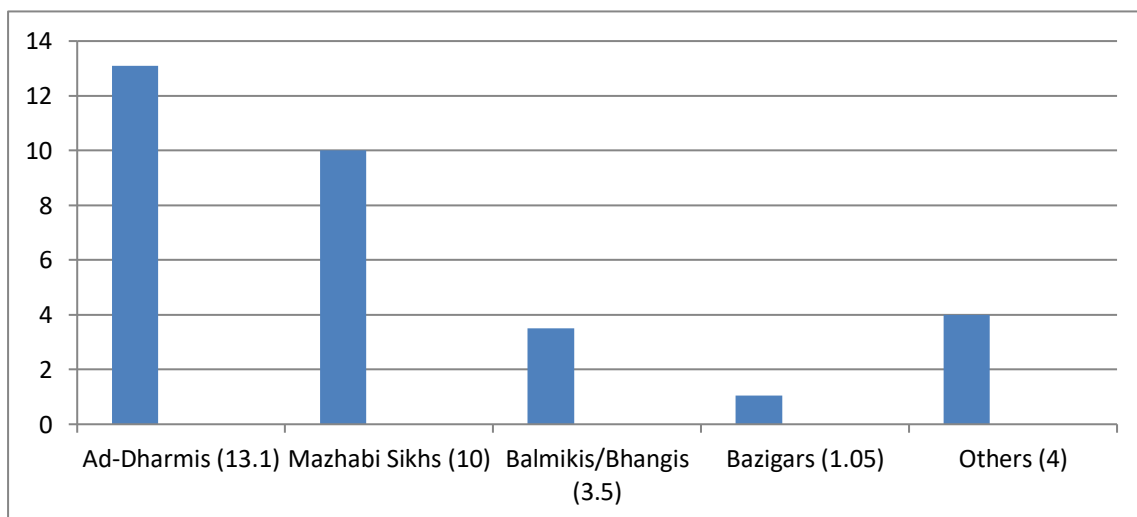


Figure 1.2: Break-up of SC population in Punjab as per Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011

Source: Directorate of Census Operations, Punjab

⁸ Ram, Ronki, (2009) Dera Sachkhand Ballan: Repository of Dalit Consciousness *Deccan Herald*, 1

In spite of the fact that they have been officially classified within the mainstream religions of India, the Scheduled Castes of Punjab have not given up their urge to get out of the fold of Hinduism and carve out an autonomous faith identity of their own. As they follow the ideas of B.R. Ambedkar, they consider Hinduism responsible for their social stigmatization and humiliation. The educated middle class among the SCs has played a significant part in this regard.

Even after India got independence in 1947, the lot of Scheduled Castes in Punjab did not change substantially, although as mentioned earlier, they form almost a one third of Punjab's total population. In this state, the only Indian state dominated by Sikh population, Scheduled Castes, who make up 4.3% of the Scheduled Castes nationwide and over 32% of the state's population, according to official data. Out of the more than 39 officially recognized Scheduled Castes in the state, the Mazhabis, Adi- Dharmis, Valmikis, Ravidasias/Ramdasias, and Bazigars collectively account for around 87% of Punjab's Scheduled Caste population. An interesting fact of the population of Punjab is that its concentration is very high in some specific areas. For an instance, the community's percentage in the Doaba region which consists of four districts namely, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar (formerly Nawan Shahar), Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Kapurthala, is approximately 45%, much higher than the state percentage.⁹ The following next table corroborates this fact. In terms of statistics, the Ravidassias are in the majority in the area. The Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar Lok Sabha seats, which encompass the majority of Doaba, are reserved for SCs due to the Dalit community's overwhelming domination.

⁹ Vasudeva, R. (2018, April 17). HT Explainer: What Makes Doaba Caste Cauldron? *Hindustan Times*.

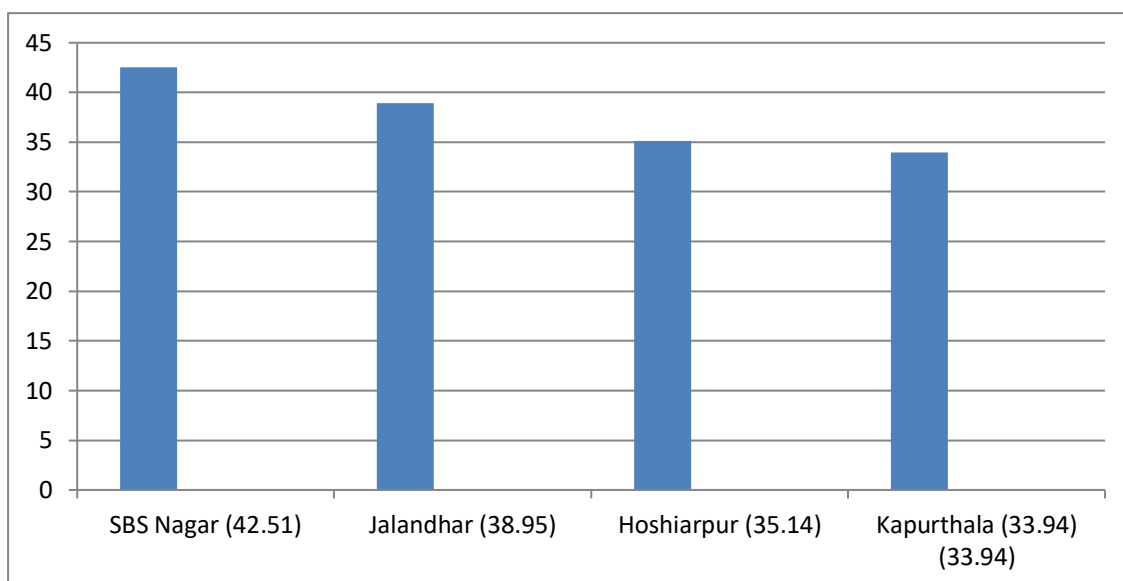


Figure 1.3: Percentage of Scheduled Caste Population in Punjab's Doaba sub-region's four districts according to Census 2011

Source: Directorate of Census Operations, Punjab

Analyzing historically, there had been two different ways before the depressed classes to get out of the fold of Hinduism. The first one was conversion to some other more egalitarian religion and the second to carve out a new religious tradition based on the tenets of denunciation of caste and faith and social equality. The *Chamars* of Doaba chose the latter. As a result of this, the Ravidassia movement came into being. As stated earlier, the Ravidassia Deras in the Punjab had started coming into being during the course of the Adi-Dharma movement itself. Among these Deras, the one at village Ballan in Jalandhar district, known as Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan emerged as a dominant religious institution within a span of few years. This Dera is located roughly 10 kilometers from Punjab's Jalandhar district headquarters. Sant Pippal Dass, who was the first pontificate, was the founder of this Dera, though it is named after Sant Sarwan Dass, Sant Pippal Dass's son and successor. The building of the Dera was constructed by Sant Sarwan Dass on a piece of land, donated by a local landlord. Apart from religious activities, the Dera also plays its part as far as various Dalit issues are concerned.

To quote Surinder S. Jodhka,

“During one of his visits to Delhi, he (Sant Sarwan Dass) also met B.R. Ambedkar, who showed great respect to Sant Sarwan Dass Ji. In one of his letters to Ambedkar, Sant Sarwan Dass described him as a great son of the community”.¹⁰

In August 2019, when a temple supposed to be dedicated to Sant Ravidass in New Delhi’s Tughlakabad area was smashed to earth by the Delhi Development Authority on the directions of the Supreme Court and the Punjab Dalits started protesting against it, Punjab’s Chief Minister at that time, Amarinder Singh formed a five-member committee which met the Dera Ballan head Sant Niranjan Dass and appealed to him to help maintain peace. The latter in turn appealed to the devotees and people of the Ravidassia community to maintain peace during their protest.¹¹ On various occasions, intellectuals, literary persons, religious and political leaders of the Ravidassia community meet in the Dera premises and hold discussions on a variety of emerging issues concerning the cultural, social, religious and political challenges before their community.

As alleged by Dalits, the Sikh Gurdwaras are predominantly controlled by the upper-caste Sikhs. Therefore, the process of establishing separate religious places for the *Chamars* got started. Sant Ravidass became an icon for forming a community of believers. When Sant Sarwan Dass visited Banaras, the birth-place of Sant Ravidass in 1950, he was disappointed not to find any shrine in the former’s name. It was then that he made a determination to construct a temple after Sant Ravidass. After this Dera Ballan purchased land in Seer Govardhanpur, a village on the outskirts of the city of

¹⁰ Jodhka, S. S. (2009). The Ravi Dasis of Punjab: Global Contours of Caste and Religious Strife.

Economic and Political Weekly, 44(24), p. 83.

¹¹ Punjab: CM’s panel meets thrice, visits Dera Sach Khand Ballan. (2019, August 13). *The Indian Express*.

Banaras. The temple's first cornerstone was laid by Sant Sarwan Dass on June 16, 1965. Its initial phase of construction got completed by the year 1972.

To make it easier for the followers of Sant Ravidas, Sant Sarwan Dass hired a Special train called the 'Begampura Express' from the Indian Railways for their return journey from Jalandhar to Banaras on Sant Ravidas's birth anniversary every year. It is noteworthy here that this special train runs till date.

The discrimination which the *Chamars* of Doaba faced at the hands of upper-caste Sikhs while working in European countries was another important factor in the formation of a separate Ravidasia identity. Surinder S. Jodhka, a famous writer on Dalit issues call it, 'The Diaspora Effect.'

He further elaborates,

“The second and perhaps more important and interesting phase in the history of the Ravi Das movement in Punjab begins with the phase of Globalization. Along with other Punjabis, a large number of *Chamars* of the Doaba region had migrated to countries of the western hemisphere during the 1950s and 1960s.”¹²

In an attempt of assertion of their religious rights, they decided to build their own temples there. The first two Guru Ravidas temples came into being in Birmingham and Wolverhampton, the UK in 1956. In due course of time these *Chamars* earned enough money with their hard labor to not only build Guru Ravidas temples in foreign countries, but also donated huge amounts to Dera Ballan and the other Ravidasia Deras in Punjab for their expansion. Dera Sachkhand Ballan has grown exponentially during the past 25 years or so. For instance, the construction- work of the four- storied Residential Bock, meant for the stay of devotees, coming to the Dera from far -off places, which was started by Sant Gharib Dass, has been completed under the direction of the present Dera-head, Sant Niranjan Dass. Apart from it, a *satsang* hall (of the size

¹² Jodhka, S. S. (2009). The Ravi Dasis of Punjab: Global Contours of Caste and Religious Strife. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(24), p. 84

of 220'×180') was got constructed at the Dera by Sant Niranjan Dass for the congregation of the devotees, during religious functions. This hall can accommodate twenty thousand people at a time. Adjacent to this hall is another building meant for partaking of langar by the devotees during religious functions. This hall has a capacity of two thousand devotees eating together. The Congregation Hall is equipped with modern technology for live telecast and audio-video recording of religious songs by various artistes. Apart from expansion of Dera Ballan, the other Deras and Gurdwaras devoted to Sant Ravidas have also flourished in different parts of the Doaba region. One major example of this is the Dera Baba Pritam Dass Ji Jaude, situated at Raipur Rasulpur, a village in the neighborhood of Ballan village, where Dera Sachkhand Ballan is based. According to an estimate there are around two hundred and fifty Ravidassia Deras all over Punjab (Jodhka, 2009).

One more and perhaps the most important watershed moment till date, came in the history of the Ravidassia community in 2009. On 24th of May, 2009, Sant Niranjan Dass, the current Dera-head, along with the then deputy-head at the Dera, Sant Ramanand, went to the Austrian capital Vienna for a religious function. There they were fired at in a Ravidassia gurdwara by some Sikh assailants. Both the Sants got injured in the attack; but Sant Ramanand died from his severe wounds on 25th of May, 2009. When the news of his demise reached back home in Jalandhar, the Dera devotees took to streets to protest against the above-said incident. During these protests which took violent shape, Punjab, especially its Doaba region, suffered a loss of public property worth Rupees 6000-7000 crore. Ronki Ram, a Professor at Punjab University, Chandigarh, measures the impact of the Sant's assassination in the following words:

“The 2009 Vienna attack on the lives of the two highest ranking visiting Ravidassia *Sants* hailing from Indian Punjab is generally perceived by the followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, one of the most popular *Dalit* religious centers and a symbol of *Dalit* assertion in northern India, as an attack on their separate *Dalit* identity.”¹³

¹³ Ram, Ronki (2016). ‘Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab’ *The Journal of Punjab Studies*, 16(01), p. 1

The assassins of the Sant were Sikhs and the main culprit confessed that they had attacked the Sants due to some religious dispute with Dera Ballan. Some media reports had attributed this attack to a tradition of the Dera which allows a living Guru to speak in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, the revered scripture of the Sikhs. It is worthwhile to mention here that Dera Ballan believes in the concept of a physical Guru, which the Sikhs consider as antagonistic to the principles of Sikhism; according to which, after Guru Granth Sahib, no other bodily Guru would ever exist. Under such a scenario, it had perhaps become inevitable for the Ravidassia community to part ways with Sikhism and establish its own religious tradition.

Kristina Myrvold and Knut A. Jacobsen, two scholars on the subject opine,

“In the aftermath of the Vienna attacks, the Ravidassia camp gained the upper hand and was finally able to convince their more conservative peers of the necessity of forming their own religion”.¹⁴

It had thus become evident that it would only be a matter of time for the Ravidassia community to part ways with Sikhism and carve out their own separate religious identity.

Announcement of a new ‘religion’ by the Dera Sachkhand Ballan:

Every year, Dera Ballan commemorates Sant Ravidas's birth anniversary in the Sri Guru Ravidass Janam Sathan Temple at Seer Govardhanpur, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. On this occasion on January 30, 2010, the Dera announced the formation of a new ‘religion’ namely the ‘Ravidassia Dharm’. This decision by the Dera was more emotional than ideological. (Virdi, 2022) As a result of this announcement, a new scripture for the Ravidassia community namely ‘Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji’ was prepared. This religious book took the place of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, in a sizeable number of Guru Ravidas temples. Separate rules for religious conduct for the

¹⁴ Hawley, M. (2013). Knut Jacobsen and Kristina Myrvold (eds.) Sikhs in Europe: Migration,

Identities and Representations, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 6(4), pp. 483–485.

Ravidassias were framed. Shiromani Gurudawara Prabhandhak Committee, the main organization in charge of overseeing the operations with respect to the Sikh gurudwaras of Punjab, objected to this Dera act. To quote Harmeet Shah Singh, a scholar on Dalit issues,

“The birth of a new religion in Punjab has had Sikhs worried the most, as it emerged in their state where the monotheistic faith was founded in the 15th century to break caste and religious distinctions”.

(Harmeet Shah Singh 2010: 2).

Sukhdev Singh Bhaur, the General Secretary of the SGPC in 2010 reacted by saying,

“It’s unfortunate that this has happened. Sikh thought is against any kind of prejudice. I would appeal to them (the Ravidassias) to revisit their decision”.

Before their separation from mainstream Sikhism, the Dera Ballan used to revere and recite the hymns from Guru Granth Sahib. However, after they split from Sikhism, a new religious book was compiled by the Dera, based exclusively on the teachings of Guru Ravidas and the Dera Ballan and other Ravidassia gurudwaras now use this book for spiritual guidance.

The teachings of Sant Ravidas are an outgrowth of the Indian religious renaissance known as the bhakti movement in the 15th century. The following are the lessons Ravidas imparted:

- God's unity, omnipresence, and omnipotence.
- The soul of a person is a tiny piece of God.
- The denial of the idea that people from lower castes cannot find God.
- Man should focus on God during all of his ritualistic activities in order to realize God, which is the purpose of human existence.
- The intellect must be set free from dualism in order to meet with God (moksha)

Membership of the Ravidasia Dharm: According to The Shri Guru Ravidas Mission, for being initiated as a member of the Ravidassia Dharm, one has to abide by the following conditions:

- Ravidassia is someone who adheres to Guru Ravidas's doctrines.
- Being a member of the Ravidassia community or receiving its initiation does not need one to have been born there.
- To observe the Vikram Samvat in order to commemorate Shri Guru Ravidas Jayanti.

Objectives: On 30 January, 2010, Dera Sachkhand Ballan on the occasion of the 633rd birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas announced that the objectives of Ravidassia Dharam are to propagate the hymns and teachings of Satguru Ravidas. Besides, along with those of Maharishi Bhagwan Balmiki, Satguru Namdev, Satguru Kabir, Satguru Trilochan, Satguru Sain and Satguru Sadhna.

Ravidassia Place of Veneration: A *sabha*, *mandir*, *gurudwara*, or *bhawan*, which is frequently interpreted as a temple, is a site of worship for the Ravidassias. It is customary to cover one's head and remove one's shoes when entering the house of worship out of respect for Guru Ravidas. In accordance with Guru Ravidas's doctrines, the *Harr* emblem, which denotes insight, is always flown outside the Sabha. However, the official title boards of the Guru Ravidas Sabhas in Derby, Walsall, Gravesend, Montreal, and Papakura exhibit the *Ek Onkar* and *Khanda* insignia alongside the *Harr*. These *sabhas'* title boards make it very evident that the structures are both Sikh Gurdwaras and Ravidas Temples. Additionally, Derby Sabha is identified as a Sikh temple on its display board. All are welcome to participate in the continuous practice of langar that takes place inside the *sabha*.

Scripture: Inside the Ravidassia gurudwaras, the new sacred book, Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji has been installed. This book has all of Sant Ravidas's *bani* as included in the Guru Granth Sahib. This *bani* is composed by the Sant using the following various

ragas such as, Raga Siri (1), 2. Gauri (5), 3. Asa (6), 4. Gujari (1), 5. Sorath (7), 6. Dhanasari (3), 7. Jaitsari (1), 8. Suhi (3), 9. Bilaval (2), 10. Gaund (2), 11. Ramkali (1), 12. Maru (2), 13. Kedara (1), 14. Bhairau (1), 15. Basant (1), 16. Malhar (3)”

About this book C.R. Suman, a devotee at Dera Ballan writes,

“The book contains 140 hymns, 40 *pade*, and 231 *saloks*. There are 177 pages in the entire book. A version of the holy book Amritbani was installed at the Guru Ravidas temple in Jalandhar, Punjab, on 1 February 2012 on the occasion of birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas.” (Suman, 2014)

Greeting: ‘*Jai Gurdev*’ (victory be with the guru) and ‘*Dhan Gurudev*’ (the guru is great) are the greetings used by the Ravidassias.

Symbols: *Harr* (God) is the religious symbol, used by the Ravidassia gurudwaras. The religious flag, used by the Ravidassia gurudwaras has the insignia ‘*Harr*’ inscribed on the top of it. The bigger circle on this flag has forty rays of sunlight symbolizing the forty hymns composed by Sant Ravidas, as incorporated in the holy Guru Granth Sahib. This bigger circle has a smaller circle inside it which contains the term ‘*Har*’ in Gurmukhi script inside it. There is a flame on its top which symbolizes the *naam* (word) that illuminates the whole world, A couplet of Guru Ravidas is written between the two circles: ‘*Naam tere kee jot lagayi, Bhaio Ujiaaro Bhawan saglaare*’. (Your Name is the flame I light; it has illuminated the entire world)

The *Harr* emblem symbolizes, the very being of Ravidas and his teachings, as ‘Ravi’ means illumination and ‘Das’, servant of God.

Although the Dera is trying its best to get the Ravidassia religion, official recognized by the government of India; it has not succeeded in its efforts till date. The Dera is continuously appealing to the Ravidassia community to register themselves under a separate religion named Ravidassia in the coming census of 2021. A letter written by the current Dera-head to Narendra Modi, the current P.M. to incorporate a separate

column for Ravidassia Dharam in the 2021 has resulted in starting a new socio-religious debate.¹⁵

Dera Ballan vis-i-vis Sikhism and other Ravidasia organizations: Dera Ballan claims that the Ravidasia Dharam was formed after the Ravidassias were excluded from Sikh gurdwaras in Punjab. The Ravidassia Dharam has many features in common with Sikhism and one thing is almost identical i.e., temple worship. The basic difference is that the Dera reverts Sant Ravidas as no less than a guru; whereas Sikhism believes that Guru Granth Sahib is their last guru and they no longer believe in the concept of a living physical guru. As stated above, a sizeable number of the Ravidassias, post Vienna incident, have started reciting hymns from Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji instead of Guru Granth Sahib.

Guru Granth Sahib and Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji: A Comparison:

For Sikhs, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is more than just a piece of religious text. They revere it almost like a physical Guru. Containing the actual words spoken by the Ten Gurus of Sikhism, it is spread over 1430 pages. It is believed by Sikhs that it was Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Sikh guru who bestowed the Guruship upon this scripture in 1708 A.D. Before breathing his last, he decreed: '*Sab Sikhan Ko hukam hai Guru Manyo Granth*'. (All the Sikhs have to regard the Granth Sahib as their next and everlasting Guru)

This scripture is unique in the sense that the fifth Sikh master Guru Arjan Dev Ji not only incorporated the writings of Sikh Gurus, but also the hymns composed by the other contemporary Saints belonging to Hinduism and Islam (including religious figures of the lowest sections of the Hindu society), who were believers in the oneness of God and vehement opponents of superstitions and caste.

¹⁵ Arora, K. (2020, August 11). Dera Ballan Sect Head Writes to Modi, Seeks Separate Ravidassia

Dalit Identity. *The Wire*.

It is to be noted further that the Sikh Masters themselves composed and compiled the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, rather than their adherents and followers, an aspect that has been stressed upon by historian-scholars while discussing the authenticity of the preachings of the various teachers and prophets of the world, as known to mankind today.

While paying respect at a Sikh Gurdwara, one finds that Guru Granth Sahib forms the main part of the *sanctum sanctorum*. The sacred book is placed on a raised platform and covered with *rumala sahib*. A canopy, which is also a decorative and attractive colored material always ceil over the raised platform. The scripture is written in *Gurmukhi* (from the Guru's mouth) script, which is regarded as a modern development of the Vedic Sanskrit.

Forty-one hymns of Bhagat Ravidas have been incorporated in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which are regarded as the most authentic of Ravidas's compositions. Therefore, prior to the Vienna incident of 2009, all the Ravidassia Gurudwaras regarded the Sri Guru Granth Sahib as their religious text.

Opinderjeet Kaur Takhar, a scholar on Dalit issues opine,

“Thus, the shock waves caused by the removal of the Sikh scripture from Dera Sachkhand Ballan after the announcement in 2010 of a separate Ravidassia Dharm, were considerable”

(Takhar, 2014).

Talking about Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji, the scripture belonging to the Ravidassia community, Sant Ramanand of Dera Ballan compiled and edited it. On January 30, 2011, on the regularly-observed birth-anniversary celebrations of Sant Ravidas, Dera Ballan proclaimed completion of the holy book at Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan, Varanasi. Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji was installed inside a memorial of Sant Ravidas at Bootan Mandi in Jalandhar district of Punjab, on February 1, 2012, on the occasion of 2nd anniversary celebrations of the founding of the Ravidassia Dharm.

Sant Ravidas's *bani* can be found in the Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji. The '*Harr*' symbol and a request for the followers to greet one another with '*Jai Gurdev*' can be seen on the title page. Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan and Sant Ravidas are both depicted in

photographs in the book. A collection of Ravidas's teachings and the Ravidassia religion's guiding principles are also included in the book.

Sant Surinder Dass Bawa, a former *sewadar* at Dera Ballan writes,

“In addition to 231 *salokas* and 140 *shabads*, the holy book also has, 40 *pade*, *painti akhri*, *bani haftawar*, *bani pandran tithi*, *dohra*, *sand bani*, *anmolvachan* (*milni de samen*), *laawaan*, *suhagustat*, and *laawaan*”.

(Bawa, 2013)

The book is 177 pages long. Every day in Ravidassia *bhawans*, hymns incorporated in Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji are recited. Though originally written in Punjabi language script known as *Gurmukhi*; later on, translations of this holy text have also been published in other languages too.

The Guru Granth Sahib is a Sikh sacred text. Guru Arjan Dev, the sixth Sikh Master, put it together in 1604. A Ravidasia community holy text called Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji was put together by Sant Ramanand of Dera Ballan. Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji began to replace Guru Grant Sahib in the sanctum sanctorum of Ravidasia Gurudwaras following Dera Ballan's declaration of the Ravidasia Religion in 2010.

The following points may prove helpful in drawing a comparison of both the scriptures:

- Guru Arjan Dev composed the Guru Granth Sahib in 1604; Sant Ramanand composed the Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji, which was published in 2011.
- The six Sikh Gurus— Guru Nanak, Guru Angad Dev, Guru Amar Dass, Guru Ram Dass, Guru Arjan Dev, and Guru Tegh Bahadur—made up the majority of the contributors to Guru Granth Sahib. Within the Guru Granth Sahib are also contained the writings of Bhagats, Bhatts and individuals from different backgrounds who transcended the bounds of religiosity. Amritbani is mainly composed of the writings of Guru Ravidas as enshrined in Guru Granth Sahib as well as other religious sources.

- As far as length of the two scriptures is concerned, whereas Guru Granth Sahib is spread over 1430 pages, Amritbani has 177 pages in all.
- Both the scriptures are written in Gurmukhi script of Punjabi language.
- Devotion to a single, all-powerful God is the identical subject matter of both texts.
- There are 40 *shabads* and 1 *shloka* of Guru Ravidas, incorporated in Guru Granth Sahib; whereas Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji” contains, 140 *shabads*, 40 *pade*, *paintiakhri*, *banihaftawar*, *banipandrantithi*, *baranmaasupdes*, *dohra*, *saandbani*, *anmolvachan (milnidesamen)*, *laawaan*, *suhagustat*, *manglachr*, and 231 *shaloka* of Guru Ravidas.
- Guru Granth Sahib contains 5894 *shabads* in all written by all the contributors, whereas Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji has 140 *shabads* in all written by Guru Ravidas.

Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan vis-à-vis other Ravidassia Deras in Punjab: For a better understanding of Dera Ballan’s role in assertion of the Ravidassias, a quick reference to the other Ravidassia Deras in Punjab may prove helpful.

Dera Sant Pritam Dass Babe Jaure in Raipur Rasoolpur: This Dera is also devoted to Sant Ravidas and is situated in a village named Raipur Rasoolpur in Jalandhar district, which is a neighboring village of Ballan village, where Dera Ballan is based. Sant Nirmal Dass is the present head of the Dera. He was also heading the Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Sampradaye Society Punjab, an umbrella organization of around three hundred Dalit Deras in Punjab. But after his acceptance of the invitation of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) to attend its foundation day programme at Nagpur he was removed from the post of the President of the Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Sampradaye Society Punjab. A meeting of Dalit leaders from across the state was held on October 6, 2017 at Dera Sant Baba Hans Raj Ji Pandwa in Phagwara, where it was unanimously

decided to remove Sant Nirmal Dass from the post of the society.¹⁶The Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Samparadaye Society had blamed Sant Nirmal Dass of secretly pursuing RSS agenda among the Dalits, particularly the Ravidassia community and giving the land of Sri Guru Ravidas Public School, Chuharwali village in Jalandhar district on a lease of 99 years at Rs 10,000 fee annually. With this development, the society has been divided into two groups. Now, Sant Kulwant Ram has been appointed as the President of Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Samparadaye Society. On the other hand, suspended Sant Nirmal Dass Jaure wale has also set up his own group, with Dalit leaders terming him as their President. Both, the groups have been claiming their respective supremacy over the Dalit Deras, an issue that has become the foundation of Dalit of Punjab's Doaba sub-region.

Dera Ballan and the Dera Sant Pritam Dass have many points of dissimilarities, the biggest being that while Dera Ballan has made a new scripture for the Ravidassia community, the Dera Sant Pritam Dass although a Ravidassia Dera, still believes in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the revered book of the Sikhs.

Dera Baba Hans Raj Ji Pandwa: This Ravidassia Dera is situated at a village named Pandwa in Kapurthala district. Although this Dera too is devoted to Sant Ravidas, hundreds of followers of Dera Baba Hans Raj Ji Pandwa paid homage to Shri Guru Granth Sahib and organized a religious gathering in the nearby village of Pandhwa in February 2010, which was well-attended by Dera followers despite the Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar's orders to cut ties with Sikhs. Sant Mahinder Dass Pandhwa, Sant Nirmal Dass Rasulpur, Sant Sarwan Dass Ludhiana, and Sant Tehal Dass of Nangal spoke to the audience as well as the president of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbhandhak Committee, Jathedar Avtar Singh Makkar. The SGPC President, Jathedar Makkar, urged the populace to work for the improvement of society by adhering to the path and

¹⁶ Chaba, A. A. (2017, October 8). RSS invite to Sant Nirmal Das fuels rebellion in his sect. *The Indian Express*.

teachings of Guru Granth Sahib Ji. He said that several anti-Pantheist organizations were operating.

Dera Shri Guru Ravidas Mandir Chakk Hakim: This Ravidasia Dera is situated in a village named Chakk Hakim in Phagwara town of Kapurthala district. The head of this Dera Parshotam Lal was in news in the year 2013, when he moved Punjab and Haryana High Court against the Dera Ballan alleging it of indulging in plagiarism while preparing the scripture Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji for the Ravidasia community in the year 2010. In his petition to the court, Parshotam Lal alleged that some of the verses contained in the above-mentioned scripture did not belong to Guru Ravidas; but had been written by one Sant Hira Dass, who according to the petitioner was the founder of the Dera Chakk Hakim, in his century-old book ‘Shri Ravidas Deep’.¹⁷

He further alleged that, *Mangla Charan, Baran Mah, 46 Shabads and 105 shlokas* had been copied almost ditto from the book Shri Ravidas Deep.

This led to estranged relations between these two Deras.

Dera Sant Baba Braham Dass Ji: This Dera is situated at Philaur, in Jalandhar district. It was founded by Sant Braham Dass and the present Dera head is Sant Roorha Ram. The Dera is running a Middle School, which is providing free of cost education to the poor students. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar visited this Dera on 14 April, 1948.¹⁸ An Eye-treatment Camp is held annually at the Dera in which poor patients are treated and operated upon free of cost.

Dera 108 Sant Seetal Dass Ji: This Dera is situated at a village, named, Bohan in Hoshiarpur district. Its founder was Sant Seetal Dass. The present Dera Head is Sant Sarwan Dass, who is currently the President of Sadhu Sampardae Society (Regd.)

¹⁷ Singh, I. P. (2013, April 25). Dera Ballan accused of plagiarism in preparing holy book “Amritbani” of Guru Ravidass. *Sikh Philosophy Network*.

¹⁸ Bharti, S. N. (2003). *Jagat Guru Ravidass Samapardaye: Sant Te Sadhna Sathal*. Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan. Jalandhar, p. 1

Punjab. The Dera is running a charitable hospital, named, Sant Seetal Dass Memorial Hospital.

Dera 108 Sant Gupta Nand Ji Maharaj: Founded by one Sant Gupta Nand, the Dera is located at a village named, Passiwal in Rupnagar district. The current Dera head is Sant Gopala Nand. This Dera also holds an annual Eye-treatment camp in which poor patients are treated and operated upon free of cost.

Dera 108 Sant Baba Ranjhu Dass Ji: Situated at a village named, Gajjar-Mehdood, in Hoshiarpur district, the Dera was founded by one Sant Ranjhu Dass. The current Dera head is Sant Charan Dass. A free of cost eye-treatment camp is held annually at the Dera. The Dera is housed in a five-storied splendid building. Being situated in the backward Kandi area of Punjab, the said village was facing acute shortage of drinkable water. To overcome this problem, a 617-foot deep bore well was dug and a water-tank was constructed by the current Dera head with financial support from Dera Ballan.

Dera Swami Jagat Giri Ji: Devoted to Sant Ravidas's philosophy of 'Beghampura', the Dera is situated in Pathankot district. It was founded by the current Dera head Sant Gurdeep Giri. The Dera runs four schools in the name of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and one school in the name of Guru Ravidas, thus playing an important part in the field of education.

Dera 108 Sant Baba Mela Ram Ji: This Dera is situated at a village named, Nagar on the Philaur-Aurh-Nawan Shehar road in Jalandhar district. The current Dera head is Sant Bhagwan Dass. Sant Dsarshan Dass, who was the successor of Sant Mela Ram, was very much active in the field of religion and education. He was instrumental in the establishment of Guru Ravidas I.T.I. College, Phagwara in Kapurthala district. Taking into account his services for humanity, the then Punjab government had named the road from Philaur to Nagar as Sant Darshan Dass Marg.

Dera 108 Sant Ratanpuri, Jeijon: The Dera is located in the Shivalik hills at a village named Ratanpuri in Jeijon of Hoshiarpur district. Its founder Sant Ratan Dass was instrumental in the formation of The Sadhu Sampardaye Society (Regd.) Punjab in 1956. He was the first Treasurer of this society. The present Dera head is Sant

Harcharan Dass, who is a qualified B.A.M.S. The Dera is running a school named, Sant Ratan Dass Public School.

Dera 108 Sant Gobind Dass Ji: Devoted to the ideology of Guru Ravidas, this Dera is situated in the western part of Phagwara Township in Kapurthala district. It was founded by one Sant Gobind Dass of Bhungarni village in Hoshiarpur district. The current Dera head is Sant Chaman Dass. The Dera has published two books related to Guru Ravidas, named ‘Gobind Bilas’ and ‘Bani Shri Guru Ravidas Maharaj Ji’. A Shri Guru Ravidas Temple at Wolverhampton in England had been constructed by the Dera.

Dera 108 Sant Puran Dass Ji: Situated at Kalewal Bhagtan village in Hoshiarpur district, this Dera was founded by Sant Puran Dass of the said village. Sant Sewa Dass, successor of Sant Puran Das, participated in the Jalandhar Convention held on 27 October, 1951. The Chief spokesman of this convention was Dr. Ambedkar, who was here to discuss with Dalit leaders, the strategy for General Elections to be then held in 1952¹⁹. After the convention came to an end, Sant Sewa Dass met Dr. Ambedkar.

Later, Sant Sewa Dass contested the General Elections in 1952, from Garhshankar constituency on the election symbol ‘Elephant’ which was then a party symbol of the Scheduled Caste Federation, founded in 1942 by Dr. Ambedkar. After getting defeated in the election, the Sant again met Ambedkar two times at the latter’s residence in New Delhi. A Sant Puran Dass Memorial Hospital is being run by the Dera to provide medical facilities to the masses at nominal rates. Apart from it, a Stitching Center for girls is also being run by the Dera.

Sant Sewa Dass breathed his last on 23 November, 1998. Sant Sital Dass is the present Dera head.

Dera 108 Sant Sitalpuri: Sant Sital Dass, the founder of this Dera belonged to Halluwal village in Hoshiarpur district. He, while wandering about, set up the Dera at Rahimabad Khurd village in Ludhiana district. It is said that the founder Sant was instrumental in setting up 25 Guru Ravidas Deras. The present Dera head is Sant Gobind Dass, who converted the Dera into a five-storied beautiful edifice, called ‘Sitalpuri’. A free of cost eye-treatment camp is held at the Dera annually.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 29

Dera Shri Guru Ravidas Mandir Chakk Hakim: This Dera is based in a village, named Chakk Hakim in Phagwara town of Kapurthala district. Sant Hira Dass was the founder of this Dera. He had written a book named, 'Ravidas Deep', a biographical account of Guru Ravidas and dedicated it to Dr. Ambedkar. It was from this very Dera that a cycle delegation of 101 Republican Party workers was sent to meet the then Prime Minister in New Delhi in 1964 to discuss problems of the Dalits.

It is said that once Sant Hira Dass was jailed by the then Maharaja of Kapurthala princely state, Jagjit Singh. The reason behind this was that the former was minting silver coins to accumulate wealth for the construction of a Guru Ravidas Temple. When in jail, the Sant came to know that Maharaja Jagjit Singh was issueless; he offered some cure for this problem, to which the Maharaja agreed. The Sant prepared some medicine and asked the Maharaja to administer that to his queen. Later the queen gave birth to a son. The Maharaja was so happy that he not only ordered the release from jail of the Sant; but also donated 20 *ghumans* of land to the former for the foundation of a Guru Ravidas gurudwara. It is said the present Dera was constructed on this very land.

The Sant breathed his last in 1935. The present Dera Head is Mahant Parmanand.

Dera 108 Sant Nandigiri Maharaj Ji: Sant Nandigiri, who belonged to Halerh village in Dasuya sub-division of Hoshiarpur district, was the founder of this Dera which is based at Dharampur in Dasuya on the Jalandhar-Pathankot National Highway. Presently the Dera is being run under the Headship of Sant Tappasia Gir.

Dera 108 Sant Baru Dass Ji; Situated in a village named, Tajpur, on the Jalandhar-Nakodar Road in Jalandhar district, this Dera was founded by one Sant Baru Dass of Dhande-Dhindsa village in Jalandhar. He was a renowned physician of his times. Sant Karam Dass, one of the three sons of Sant Baru Dass, is the current Dera head.

Dera 108 Sant Bibi Malawi Devi Ji: Bibi Malawi Devi, the founder of this Dera, which is based at Buta Mandi locality of Jalandhar district, greatly helped in the construction of a roundabout in Jalandhar in the name of Guru Ravidas. This roundabout is situated on the Jalandhar-Nakodar Road. The Sant lady was a part of the

101-member cycle delegation led by the Republican Party of India which went to New Delhi to meet the then Prime Minister in 1963 to discuss problems of the Dalits.²⁰

Dera 108 Sant Tehal Nath Ji: Situated at Nanak Nagri, Chaheru in Phagwara town of Kapurthala district, the Dera was founded by one Sant Phul Nath. Currently, the Dera is being headed by Sant Tehal Nath of Bajuha village in Jalandhar district. A free Eye-treatment camp is held annually at the Dera. Free of cost medicines are provided to the ailing people.

Dera 108 Sant Harbhajan Singh Ji: Founded by one Sant Harbhajan Singh who was a profound devotee of Guru Ravidas, this Dera is located at a village, named Bambeli near Mahilpur in Hoshiarpur district. The present Dera head is Sant Satnam Dass. The Dera is housed in a five-storied beautiful building.

Dera 108 Sant Hira Dass Ji: This Dera is based in a village, named Dandian near Mahilpur in Hoshiarpur district. The Dera belongs to the Naga Sadhus. Its founder was one Sant Hira Dass, who originally belonged to Bikaner in Rajasthan state. Wandering around in pursuit of the truth, he came to this above-mentioned Dandian village and established a *kacha kotha* here which later on got converted into a Dera. The Dera at present is headed by Sant Hira Dass, who belongs to Dandian village. His son Pradeep Dass, who is a member of the Punjab Vaid Mandal, runs a free medicine center inside the Dera.

Dera 108 Sant Baba Mangal Dass Ji: One Sant Baba Mangal Dass was the founder of this Dera which is based in Uchha village in Jalandhar district. The Dera is housed in a five-storied magnificent building, which was constructed under the able leadership of Sant Ram Dass, the founder Sant's disciple and successor.²¹ Sant Harcharan Dass is currently in charge of the Dera.

Dera 108 Sant Mangal Dass Ji: Village Mehla-Gehla in Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar district, earlier known as Nawan Sheher, is the place, where this Dera is situated. The Dera was founded by Sant Mangal Dass, who belonged to the above-said village.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 42

²¹ Ibid, p. 53

Presently the Dera is headed by Sant Sham Dass of Bhakhriana village in Kapurthala district. The Dera grows a variety of vegetables on three acres of land, owned by it.

Dera Sant Pakhar Singh Ji; Sant Pakhar Singh, a resident of Dingrian village in Jalandhar district is the founder as well as the current Head of this Dera.

Dera 108 Sant Gural Dass Ji: This Dera is situated in Taragarh village in Hoshiarpur district. The current Dera head Sant Gural Dass, belonged to Jandu Singha village in Jalandhar district.

The present Dera building was constructed under his able supervision and guidance. This Dera is aligned to Dera Ballan in Jalandhar.

Dera 108 Sant Gurmel Dass Maharaj Ji; Based in Rahimpur locality of Hoshiarpur city, this Dera was founded by one Sant Ganga Ram of Khair-Achharwal village in Hoshiarpur district. The Dera at present is headed by Sant Gurmel Dass of the above-said locality of Hoshiarpur.

Kutia Shri Gang Bhawan: Founded by one Maharaj Ganga Singh of Hazara village in Jalandhar district, this Dera is housed in his private property at the above-said village. Sant Mehnga Ram is the present Dera head. He had donated Rupees one lakh to the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital at Kathar in Jalandhar district, which is run by Dera Ballan.

Dera 108 Sant Baba Chanan Ram Ji: Situated at Shergarh village on the Hoshiarpur-Garhshankar Road in Hoshiarpur district, this Dera was founded by Sant Baba Chanan Ram, who is also the present Dera head. He belongs to Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh.

Dera 108 Sant Hari Dass Ji: Devoted to the philosophy of Guru Ravidas and based in Bajwara village of Hoshiarpur district. this Dera was founded by one Sant Hari Dass. Sant Chaman Dass of the Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh is the current Dera chief. He received granting of *naam* from Sant Garib Dass, the fourth pontificate at Dera Ballan in Jalandhar. Free of cost medicines are provided to the ailing people by the Dera.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Bhulla Ram Ji Maharaj: Founded by one Sant Bhulla Ram, this Dera is situated in Lachowal village in Hoshiarpur district. The current Dera head is

Sant Husan Lal, who belongs to village Nadalon in Hoshiarpur district. He quit the Indian army service to join the Dera. At the Dera, patients are treated free of cost with Ayurvedic medicines.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Madhsudan Dass Ji: This Dera is situated at Khanpur village in Hoshiarpur district. It was established by Sant Madhsudan Dass. Sant Kirpal Dass is currently heading the Dera. The main entrance of the Dera is decorated with pictures of Gurus of various religions, which represents secular ideology of this Dera.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Tehal Dass Ji: Based in Salem Tabri locality of Ludhiana district, this Dera was founded by Sant Tehal Dass, who belonged to Parasrampur village in Jalandhar district. The Dera runs Sant Tehal Dass Memorial Eye Hospital at Apra village in Phillaur Tehsil of Jalandhar district. Free Medical Camps are held at the hospital at frequent intervals. In honor of Sant Tehal Dass, the Ludhiana Municipal Corporation named a locality in Ludhiana city as Sant Tehal Dass Nagar. It is said that Sant Tehal Dass had participated in Ad-Dharam movement, Ghadar movement and Babbar Akali movement. In the field of literature, the Sant authored five books, named:

- Soochna
- Jungle De Nazarey
- Guru Updesh
- Haloona
- Sohang²²
- He encouraged the Dalits of Punjab to register themselves as the Adi-dharmis during the Census of 1931. Seeing his services for the Dalit community, he was made the General Secretary of the Sadhu Sampradaya Society, Punjab.
- Presently, the Dera is led by Sant Sarwan Dass, who is a stout devotee of Dera Ballan.

Dera Babe Jaude: Situated on the Phillaur-Akalpur road at Ravidas Mohalla in Jalandhar district, this Dera was founded by one Sant Prem Dass, who belonged to

²² Ibid, p. 70

village Nurpur in Shahid Bhagat Singh Nagar. Currently the Dera is being headed by Baba Jagar Ram, who belongs to Chakk village in Jalandhar district. He got the bestowal of *naam* from Dera Radha Soami, Beas in Amritsar district.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Prem Dass Ji: Sant Prem Dass, a disciple of Sant Mangal Dass of Dera Uchha was the founder of this Dera, which is based in village Rajpalman in Hoshiarpur district. The Dera was established in the year in 1978. It is strongly devoted to the philosophy of Guru Ravidas.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Sewapuri Lalwan: Lalwan village in the lap of Shivalik hills in Hoshiarpur district is the place, where this Dera was established by Sant Sewa Nand. Sant Parshotmanand, who belongs to Himachal Pradesh, is the current Dera head.

Baba Shri Bhagat Ram Kutia: This Dera is situated at a village, named Kapoor Pind in Jalandhar district. Maharaj Ram Sharan Dass, a stout follower of Dera Ballan is presently heading the Dera. He originally belongs to Uttar Pradesh. The present Dera building had been constructed under his guidance and supervision.

Dea 108 Sant Baba Banna Ram Ji: The founder of this Dera was one Sant Baba Banna Ram of Dhadde Fateh Singh village in Hoshiarpur district. The Dera is aligned to Dera Ballan, which donated Rupees one lakh to the former for the construction of a congregation hall. Currently it is being headed by Sant Jaspal Singh.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Baba Hans Raj Ji: Village Pandwan in Phagwara Sub Division of Kapurthala district is the place where this Dera is based. Its founder was Sant Baba Hans Raj, who belonged to the same village, where the Dera is situated. The current Dera head is Sant Mahinder Pal, under whose guidance and supervision the Dera has got converted into a five-storied building; spread over one and a half *kanals* of land. Rooms have been built for the out-stationed devotees, who come to the Dera to pay obeisance.²³ Apart from Guru Ravidas, the Dera annually celebrates birth-anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev too. The Dera, from time to time, distributes free of cost uniforms to the needy school children.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Baba Inder Dass Ji; Situated at Sham Chaurasi Township in Hoshiarpur district, this Dera was founded by Sant Baba Inder Dass, who belonged to

²³ Ibid, p. 83

Hussainpur Lalowal village in Hoshiarpur district. Sant Harcharan Dass of village Shikhe Samant in Jalandhar district is currently heading the Dera. Free of cost medicines are provided to the ailing masses by the Dera.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Haridass Ji: Founded by one Sant Haridass, this Dera is situated at a distance of one kilometer from the Jalandhar-Nakoda Road in a village named, Boaparai Kalan. The present Dera head is a lady, named, Sant Bibi Krishna Devi.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Narain Dass Ji: Devoted to the ideology of Guru Ravidas, this Dera is based in a village, named, Sherpur Kallar in Hoshiarpur district. It was founded by one Sant Polo Ram. Sant Narain Dass, a grandson of Sant Polo Ram, succeeded the latter. The former was a stout devotee of Dera Ballan. Sant Amar Dass is currently in charge of the Dera. The Dera owns some agricultural land, which caters to its Langar-related requirements. Annually a free eye-treatment camp is organized by the Dera.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Baja Ram Ji: Mahilpur town in Garhshankar Tehsil of Hoshiarpur district is known as the 'Nursery of Football'. It is this very place, where the Dera is situated. Dedicated to the teachings of Guru Ravidas, the Dera was established by one Sant Baja Ram of Haveli village near the above-said Mahilpur. Presently the Dera is being run by Sant Hari Om, a Graduate.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Gurdial Singh Ji: This Dera was established by Sant Niranjana Dass, the current head of Dera Ballan. Located at a village, named, Phuglana in Hoshiarpur district, the Dera is currently headed by Sant Gurdial Singh, a stout devotee of the Dera at Ballan.

Dera Shri 108 Sant Baba Phool Nath Ji: Born at Uppal Jagir village near the historic town of Nur Mahal in Jalandhar district, Sant Baba Phool Nath was the founder of the Dera, which is based at Nanak Nagri, Chaheru near Phagwara town in Kapurthala district. Sant Krishan Nath is currently heading the Dera, under whose guidance and supervision the Dera has got converted into a five-storied building. The Dera helps poor students with uniforms and stationary items, likes books, notebooks etc.

Ravidasia Dharam Parchar Asthan: Sant Surinder Dass Bawa, a former *sewadarat* Dera Ballan laid the foundation of this Dera at a village named Kahanpur near Jalandhar on March 27, 2014 (Kaler, 2015). Presently, this Dera is housed in a double-storied

building having a library and a congregation hall. In order to propagate Guru Rasvidass's hymns an academy named Jagat Guru Ravidas Sangeet Academy is also being run from the premises of the Dera. Amritbani Satguru Ravidas Maharaj Ji is installed in the sanctum sanctorum of this Dera. Sant Surinder Dass Bawa, the Patron of this Dera hold religious functions in the Dera at regular intervals; in which apart from religious preachings, the gatherings are also made aware about various social issues like, female-foeticide, drug addiction, dowry, extravagant marriages, respect of elders etc. The Dera also preaches ideology of Bhim Rao Ambedkar through distributing free books on Ambedkar to the masses, especially the children and the youth. (Bawa, 2022)

Conclusion:

From being a part of the *chatur-varna* order of Hindu society to become a separate caste and religious identity, the Ravidasia community has travelled a long journey over a period of 3500 years. The most notable phase during this long journey was that which belonged to the Adi-dharam movement, when the *Chamars* of Punjab, under the guidance and leadership of Mangoo Ram Muggowal showed their strength, socially as well as politically. The movement was successful in providing the *Chamars*, a somewhat separate social identity of their own. After the failure of this movement, the *Chamars* of Punjab started moving towards the Ravidasia Deras, especially Dera Sachkhand Ballan, which emerged as a dominant religious institution for the Ravidasia community. Prior to 30 January, 2010, when on the occasion of celebrations of Guru Ravidass birth anniversary, the Dera announced a separate 'religion' for the Ravidasias, they more or less had been considered a part of Sikhism as they revered Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikhs' religious text. After the announcement of a separate 'religion' Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji, and not Guru Granth Sahib became a sacred book for the Ravidasias as the former was replaced with the latter in a sizeable number of Ravidasia gurdwaras across Punjab. The Dera Sachkhand Ballan announced a separate code of religious conduct for the Ravidasias which was a paradigm shift in the direction of establishing a distinctive religious identity for the Ravidasia community.

Chapter I

Origin and Evolution of Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan

1.1 Introduction

A newspaper article defines the term ‘Dera’ in the following words:

“A Dera is technically the headquarters of a group of devotees, who follow the teachings of a particular spiritual guru and generally have a living representative of the guru who is equally revered. The representatives of the guru who hold the *gaddi* are normally appointed by their predecessors.”²⁴

According to the above definition, a Dera is a place of worship for the followers of a particular spiritual figure, having a living guru, who is revered in the same way as the spiritual guru to whom this place is devoted. There is a tradition in such Deras according to which the current living guru of the Dera is usually appointed by his predecessor.

In Punjabi language, which is written in Gurmukhi script, the word ‘Dera’ is used in more ways than one. Sometimes it is used to represent a camp; at others it may refer to a place of rest or a place to gather.

Jacob Copeman, a Professor at University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain defines Dera as ‘monasteries or the extended residential sites of religious leaders; frequently just glossed as sect’ (Copeman, 2012, p. 156)

Although the term Dera has been derived from the Persian term, Derah or Dirah, which literally means a camp or an adobe, in colloquial Punjabi language, it is often used in multiple ways. In rural Punjab the term Dera is used in reference to a farmhouse or a group of farmhouses, built away from the main village area. Over the years, when such habitations developed into a separate village or town, the term Dera continued to be used in the same sense. There are many localities in Punjab the names of which start with the word ‘Dera’, for example, Dera Baba Nanak, (a town in Gurdaspur district),

²⁴Pubby, V. (2009, May 26). Deciphering Deras. *The Indian Express*.

Dera Bassi (a town in Patiala district), Dera Baba Jaimal Singh (a village in Amritsar district), Dera Chhinawala (a village in Patiala district). There is even a Sikh gurdwara named Dera Sahib Gurudwara in Lahore, Pakistan.

The Punjabi Gujjars use this term as a habitation, built to keep their cattle and fodder. When someone in Punjab overstays at a particular place, his near and dear ones often take a gibe at him/her saying that he/she has made that place his/her Dera.

Despite the rise of Sikhism, which in normative terms opposes caste-based discrimination and glorifies manual labor, Punjab has seen the emergence of numerous Deras, a sectarian institution that is much older than the Sikh faith and Panth. Many of the Dera movements began as reform movements within Sikhism, but over time they developed into institutions of their own.

A precise figure for the number of Deras associated with various sects, though, cannot be given, it is assumed that Punjab is home to about 9000 Deras. (Chaudhary, 2012) Out of them, twelve have large followings with each having one lac plus followers, and hundreds more are also available, which may be confined to a very small number of villages apiece. As a result, there are countless numbers of Dera Sant Sarwan Dass followers not just in Punjab but also in states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Maharashtra, as well as other countries.

There are a variety of reasons behind the sudden increase of Deras in Punjab. The cause responsible in the first place, is the grudge held by members of India's 'lowest castes,' as they are known, in opposition to the 'upper castes', which they claim deny them the permission to hold positions of responsibility in committees of Gurdwara managements, despite the fact that the majority of the devotees going to Gurudwaras are members of the underprivileged communities of India, such as the SCs and the BCs. Additionally, those from lower castes are not treated equally with those from higher castes inside the gurdwara campuses controlled by Punjab's Jatt Sikhs. A true story demonstrating this discrimination is worth-mentioning here:

“A young man from the *chamara* caste became a baptized Sikh. When he was distributing *prasad* to the devotees present in the gurdwara, a

lady from the Jatt Sikh community refused to take *prasad* from a *chamara* boy.”²⁵

In addition to this, in a separate event that occurred in 2003 at a village, named, Talhan in the Jalandhar district, the Sikhs refused to provide the Dalits a participation in the management of the gurdwara Shahidan.

Second, the fact that each of these Deras has its own physical guru contradicts a fundamental principle of Sikhism, according to which there cannot be a physical guru. The revered Sikh scripture known as Guru Granth Sahib serves as their guru. The followers of these Deras find solace from their stressful and complicated lives by seeking blessings from a physical guru who, apart from explaining the sacred words contained in various sacred text to them offers advice and direction on a variety of topics related to their lives too.

Thirdly, as the underprivileged segments of Indian society become more aware of their humanitarian rights, they are also drawn towards the idea of brotherhood and unity, which they believe can be achieved by creating a shared religious institution called the Dera.

Fourthly, as was already noted, Punjab has a dozen Deras, each with a following of more than one lac people., which greatly attracts opportunistic Indian politicians. All political parties therefore view these Deras as the heart of a sizable vote base for them. As a result, these political parties support these Deras in various ways, which has led to the proliferation of such religious organizations.

Last but not the least, some dishonest individuals feel it simple to become well-known by taking a direct approach. To gain the trust of their followers, they first acquire certain healing abilities through the tantrik and yoga cults. Together, these components spend a portion of the contributions made by followers on charitable endeavors in order to gain public acceptance. This causes their following to grow, which ultimately results in

²⁵Dalla, M. S. (2009). Dera Ballan Sikhi Ton Ulat, Par Iss Da Jawab Sikh Parchar. *Khalsa Fatehnama*, June.

the institutionalization of their adherents into a Dera. Despite some of them being an exception, the Deras in Punjab have stoked caste-based mobilization among the public.

Image 1.4: A view of the *sanctum sanctorum* of Dera Sachkhand Ballan

Source: Jagat Guru Ravidas Sampardaye: Sant Te Sadhna Sathal by Som Nath Bharti



These Deras have contributed significantly to the state's socio-economic development and continue to do so. They are educating the people of Punjab about a variety of social concerns, including female feticide, drug addiction, environmental degradation, dowry, bad things that happen to women, etc. In addition to this, several Deras have been operating philanthropic hospitals and institutions of higher learning for the underprivileged. As a result, they are crucial to the fields of healthcare and education. With the exception of a few of these, none of the Deras have ever been the subject of controversy. As a result, it would not be proper to categorically discount the influence that these Deras may have on the social, economic, and political lives of Punjabis. The name, Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji, Ballan has come to represent Dalit self-expression.

In the words of Ronki Ram,

“Dera Ballan became a paragon of Ravidasia movement in north-west India and it made concerted efforts for the formation of a separate Dalit identity independent of both Hinduism as well as Sikhism. It is in this context that Dera Ballan has emerged as an alternative religious site for the *Dalits*, with its own code of conduct that paved the way for a separate *Dalit* identity.”

(Juergensmeyer, 2011)

The Deras, committed to propagating the ideas of various religious icons, have made a substantial contribution to the growth of caste and sect consciousness among their respective adherents, which can occasionally take dangerous forms and have detrimental repercussions on society.

Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji, Sachkhand Ballan, commonly referred to as Dera Sachkhand Ballan, is located in Ballan village along the Jalandhar-Pathankot-Jammu National Highway, 10 km from Jalandhar. It bears Sant Sarwan Dass's name, who served as the Dera's second pontiff. The dissemination of Guru Ravidas's philosophy is the focus of this Dera. In the words of Mark Juergensmeyer,

“The Dera of Pippal Dass is typical as an expression of the Ravidasia *panth* in this respect, since it has no formal structure, either of organization or of beliefs.”²⁶

²⁶Juergensmeyer, M. (1987). *Religious rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*.

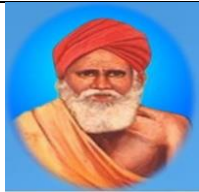




Sr. No.	Name of the Dera head	Period	Image
1.	Sant Pipal Dass	1895-1928	
2.	Sant Sarwan Dass	1928-1972	
3.	Sant Hari Dass	1972-1982	
4.	Sant Garib Dass	1982-1994	
5.	Sant Niranjana Dass	1994-till date (January, 2023)	

Table 1.3: Chronology of the Dera

Source: Dera Sachkhand Ballan (Itihaas) by Sant Ramanand

1.2: Early efforts by Sant Pipal Dass:

In the Bathinda area of Punjab, Sant Pipal Dass took birth in the village of Gill Patti. His family occupation was agriculture. Right from his adulthood he had a religious bent of mind. He felt happy in the company of *Sadhus*. When his life-partner Shobhawati passed away, Pipal Dass along with his five-year old son Sarwan Dass, who later on became Pipal Dass's successor, started his journey to preach Guru Ravidas's mission in the country and abandoned his ancestral village forever. During his journey he

created awareness among the Scheduled Castes regarding cleanliness of their homes, to keep away from drugs and to provide good education to their children. During his country-wide journey, when he reached Punjab, he stayed at Ballan village in Jalandhar district. The People of the village, who already knew about him, extended a warm welcome to him and his son.

During his stay at Ballan village, Sant Pipal Dass inspired the masses to do service of humanity and to be devoted to God. The people of Ballan and the adjoining villages got so much impressed by Sant Pipal Dass's personality that they forced the Sant and his son to permanently reside at Ballan village. It is said that once, Sant Pipal Dass blessed a lady named Mahan Kaur who was issue-less with five sons and a daughter. Later, the Sant's words came true and the lady gave birth to five sons and a daughter at different times.

Before breathing his last in 1928, he appointed his son Sarwan Dass as his *gaddi-nasshin* to do service of the *sangat*.

Sant Sarwan Dass:

Sant Sarwan Dass took birth in 1895 A.D. at a village, named, Gill Patti, district Bathinda in the house of father Sant Pipal Dass and mother Shobhavati. When Sarwan Dass was merely five, his mother passed away. After this as mentioned earlier, his father Sant Pipal Dass abandoned his ancestral village and taking his son along, started his journey to preach Guru Ravidas's mission. After deciding to stay permanently at Ballan village, Sant Pipal Dass sent his son Sarwan Dass to one Sant Harnam Dass²⁷ for the bestowal of *naam*.

When Sant Harnam Dass found that his disciple Sarwan Dass was blessed with qualities like renunciation, high moral character, devotion to God etc. he prophesied that his disciple would one day become a great person, who would illuminate not only his (Sant Harnam Dass's) but his own family's name as well.

After his father got expired, Sarwan Dass took the onus of spreading Guru Ravidas's mission on his own shoulders. The people of Ballan village constructed a *kuchha* room for Sant Sarwan Dass to stay in, where he started recitation of God's name and *satsang*.

²⁷There is a locality in Jalandhar city named, Harnamdasspura, which is said to be named after him.

People from far-off places soon started flocking to the village to listen to Sant Sarwan Dass's sweet voice. Sant Sarwan Dass started taking classes of the village children in the *kuccha* room itself. He used to give a reading lesson from Guru Granth Sahib to his students. He was well-versed in Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavad Geeta etc. Along with educating the village children, he started a *dawakhana*, where he started curing the patients with the help of herbal medicines. He assigned the task of preparing medicines to one of his disciples, Garib Dass who later on became the fourth Dera pontificate. It is to be noted here that this service of providing medicines to the patients free of cost is still prevalent in the Dera.

Seeing his devotion to God, a *zamindar* named Hazara Singh of Ballan village donated one *kanal* of his land to the Sant for the construction for the Dera complex. Sant Sarwan Dass was highly critical of false rituals and blind faiths. He inspired the masses to identify their true essence.

Foundation of Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Sathan Temple at Kashi:

Sant Sarwan Dass often used to introspect that Guru Ravidas, who tolerated the atrocities of the contemporary rulers and made a great sacrifice for the cause of the deprived and the depressed; his real birth-place was yet to be discovered. He made a strong determination to discover Guru Ravidas's birth-place and took the responsibility of doing so on his own shoulders.

After years of hard labor and research, he succeeded in discovering Seer Govardhanpura, a village in Varanasi district of Uttar Pradesh, which was the actual birth-place of Guru Ravidas, in 1965. After this, he decided to construct a big temple to commemorate the Guru's birth. He discussed his plan of construction of the temple with his disciples, Hari Dass, who later on became his successor and Garib Dass. After the plan was chalked out, Hari Dass laid the foundation-stone of the temple on June 14, 1965, with the blessings of Sant Sarwan Dass. The temple with its dome got completed during the life-span of Sant Sarwan Dass. The completion of this project was a great achievement of Sant Sarwan Dass, as later on this place became the Mecca for the followers of Guru Ravidas. Later on, the task of further construction and expansion of the temple was entrusted to Guru Ravidas Janam Sathan Public Charitable Trust, which

got registered on September 30, 1998. Apart from this temple, Sant Sarwan Dass also founded the following institutions:

Guru Ravidas Technical College, Phagwara (Kapurthala district), one room each for Government Primary School, Raipur Rasulpur, an adjoining village to village Ballan and Shri Guru Ravi Dass Dharamshala, village Ballan and two rooms for Bhagwan Ravidas Mandir Nirmala Cantonment Haridwar (U.P.).

Sant Sarwan Dass was a great scholar of Guru Granth Sahib, the hymns of which, he used to explain to the masses in simple language. He was a great poet too. He wrote many poems. There was an urge in Sant Sarwan Dass to uplift the down-trodden. In this respect, his views were quite similar to those of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. When in 1927 the latter came to Lyallpur Khalsa Senior Secondary School, Nakodar road, Jalandhar to discuss with the local Dalit leaders, the problems and issues concerning the poor and the depressed, the organizers of the meeting extended a special invitation to Sant Sarwan Dass. Due to some reasons, the Sant could not attend the meeting; but he sent a written message to be read aloud in the meeting, which said,

“My brave son (Dr. Ambedkar), do continue your crusade for the welfare of the *Dalit* community. Success itself would kiss your feet and people would be proud of you.”²⁸

In order to discuss the issue of overall development of *Dalits*, a conference of The Adi-Dharma Mandal was convened on December 13, 1970, under the guidance and chairmanship of Sant Sarwan Dass in which, a large number of *Dalit* leaders from Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and other areas participated. Prominent among them were: Babu Mangu Ram Muggowal, the establisher of Adi-Dharma movement in Doaba, Anant Ram Badhan, a prominent contemporary *Dalit* leader and Captain Bhagu Ram, a local Dalit leader. One of the primary issues was the renewal of the *quam* identity. The speakers at the conference affirmed that the Scheduled Castes

²⁸Bharti, S. N. (2003). *Jagat Guru Ravidass Sampradaya-Sant Te Sadhna Sathal*. Dera Sant Sarwan

Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan, p. 27

were not only separate from the Sikhs, but constituted a distinct community of their own.²⁹ All the leaders present in the conference stressed upon the need for unity among *Dalits* and advocated the path shown by Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar for socio-economic emancipation of *Dalits*.

Appointment of successor:

Sant Sarwan Dass breathed his last on June 11, 1972. Before this, he appointed his beloved disciple Hari Dass as his successor. It would be worthwhile to mention here that taking into account, Sant Sarwan Dass's service for humanity in general and the *Dalit* classes in particular, the *Dera* under study was named after him.

Sant Hari Dass:

Sant Hari Dass was born to mother Taabi Ji and father Hukam Chand at Garha village in Punjab's Jalandhar district. His first name was Punnu Ram. He was a young lad, when his parents passed-away. To earn his livelihood, he became a painter. The small money he accumulated from his job was spent on his elder sister's marriage. Right from his childhood he was a religious-minded personality. He enjoyed the company of *sadhus*. The people of his locality were the disciples of Sant Pipal Dass, the first among the Dera pontificates. Once Hari Dass, along with the people of his locality went to Ballan village to have a glimpse of Sant Pipal Dass. After reaching the Dera, he came to know from Sarwan Dass, (son of Sant Pipal Dass) that Sant Pipal Dass had gone to a near-by village. Hari Dass went to that village, saw Sant Pipal Dass, touched his feet and requested the Sant to bestow him with *naam*. Sant Pipal Dass told him that after three days he would come to the latter's village, where he (Hari Dass) can meet him. On the third day, Sant Pipal Dass went to Garha village and bestowed Hari Dass with *naam*. After this, Hari Dass came to Ballan village to live with Sant Pipal Dass and his son Sarwan Dass. After Sant Pipal Dass's death, Sarwan Dass became his successor under whose guidance; Hari Dass worked day and night to preach Guru Ravidas's philosophy to different places. He became Chief Advisor of Sant Sarwan Dass. As mentioned earlier, under the direction and blessings of Sant

²⁹Juergensmeyer, M. (1987). *Religious rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*. Ajanta, p. 26

Sarwan Dass, it was Hari Dass who laid the cornerstone for the Guru Ravi Dass Janam Sthan Temple in Seer Govardanpura, Varanasi.

After Sant Sarwan Dass's demise, Hari Dass became his successor. Sant Hari Dass was fiercely against child labor, child marriage and drug addiction. He preached vigorously against such social evils.

Building of the Sachhkhand temple to commemorate Sant Sarwan Dass:

To commemorate his revered Guru, Sant Sarwan Dass, on August 10, 1972, Sant Hari Dass laid the cornerstone of a temple in the village of Ballan. The construction work of this temple started on such a great pace that the temple got inaugurated on June 11, 1973, the death-anniversary of Sant Sarwan Dass.³⁰ A statue of Sant Sarwan Dass was installed inside the temple. After this, the temple came to be known as Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachhkhand Ballan. To overcome the problem of rain or rough weather during *satsang*, Sant Hari Dass laid the foundation of a *satsang* hall on October 31, 1976, which got completed during his life-span. After completion, this building came to be known as Sant Hari Dass *Satsang* hall. Under his guidance, the construction work of the temple at Seer Govardhanpura continued in full swing.

Sant Hari Dass expired on February 6, 1982.

Sant Gharib Dass: After Sant Hari Dass's death, his disciple Sant Gharib Dass succeeded the former as the *gaddi-nashin* of the Dera. Sant Gharib Dass took birth in 1925 at the village, named Jalbhein in Punjab's Jalandhar district. His parents were Nanak Chand (father) and Har Kaur (mother). When his father passed away, he had just turned six months old. As a boy he heard about Dera Ballan from his co-villagers and went there. Once in the Dera, Sant Sarwan Dass, the then Dera head asked Gharib Dass, who was a teenager then, what his name was. He said his name was 'Ghariboo'. At this, Sant Sarwan Dass said that, you are not 'Ghariboo' (poor), but you shall be the sustainer

³⁰ Ram, R. (2009). Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab.

Journal of Punjab Studies, 16(1), p. 13.

of the poor. Right from his boy-hood, Gharib Dass was fond of recitation of *gurbani* and playing *iqtara*. At a young age, he was bestowed with *naam* by Sant Sarwan Dass. After this, he started visiting the Dera regularly. He eventually settled down at the Dera and worked as a dedicated *sewadar* first for Sant Sarwan Dass and afterwards Sant Hari Dass. After Sant Hari Dass's demise in 1982, Sant Gharib Dass took over the charge of the Dera and contributed in various ways in the development of the Dera till his death on July 23, 1994.

Under his headship, the construction-work of Guru Ravidas temple at Seer Govardhanpura went on. On 21st June, 1994, a huge religious function was organized in Varanasi under his guidance.

Construction of Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Kathar (Jalandhar):

Acting as head of the medicine department in the Dera, first under Sant Sarwan Dass and afterwards Sant Hari Dass, Sant Gharib Dass was fully aware of the physical as well as mental ailments of the people. Therefore, in order to provide better medical services to the people of his area, he conceived a plan for the construction of a charitable hospital. He put his conception into reality on October 22, 1982 when he laid the foundation of Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital at Kathar village, on the Jalandhar-Hoshiarpur main road. The hospital was inaugurated on January 1, 1984. An amount of more than Rupees 5 lacs was spent on its construction in the first phase. Presently this three-storied, two hundred plus-bedded hospital is playing a great role in providing medical facilities at 'no profit no loss' basis to the poor and the needy. The hospital is presently managed by the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust. The Dera spends an amount of Rupees seven lacs per month on the maintenance of this hospital. Thus, the construction of this hospital was a great philanthropic work of the visionary Sant Gharib Dass.

Publication of 'Beghampur Sheher', a weekly journal:

Sant Gharib Dass was fully aware of the fact that literature plays a great role in the propagation of any mission. He therefore had in his mind the idea of publication of a journal, in order to spread the philosophy of Guru Ravidas. He put this idea of his into practice by first constructing the building for publication of the journal in 1991, at

Mohalla Sunder Nagar (Jalandhar) and then publishing the first edition of 'Beghampura Shaher', a weekly journal on August 15, 1991.³¹ He later on got this weekly registered on July 14, 1992. Presently this weekly, published in three languages viz. Punjabi, Hindi and English is playing an important role in making the Dalit masses, aware of their problems and creating an awareness among them about their civil and human rights.

Apart from these two big-scale projects, at Guru Ravidas Industrial Training College, Phagwara; district Kapurthala, Sant Gharib Dass also laid the cornerstone for the Sant Sarwan Dass Teaching Block, on April 9, 1988. He also got constructed Mata Kalsan Block and a workshop hall in the same institution. He also laid the cornerstone of the first-ever Guru Ravidas Gurudwara in England on September 1, 1985. On June 11, 1994 he inaugurated the Sant Sarwan Dass Memorial Entrance Gate at Ballan village. On May 24, 1988, he laid the cornerstone of Shri Guru Ravidas Bhawan in Jalandhar. The Sant also got installed a seven-foot-high golden dome atop Guru Ravidas Janam-Sathan temple at Varanasi. Thus, he played a great part in the field of architecture.

Sant Niranjn Dass:

Sant Niranjn Dass is the current Dera-head. He was born at a village named Ramdaspur; district Jalandhar in the house of Rukmani (mother) and Sadhu Ram (father). The entire family of Sadhu Ram was a devotee of Sant Pipal Dass and Sant Sarwan Dass and they visited the Dera at frequent intervals. Niranjn Dass was affectionately called 'Dhilloo' (tardy) by his family members, as he was quite passive in day-to-day affairs. Once his father, while at the Dera, asked Sant Sarwan Dass, the then Dera head, in a lighter vein to keep 'Dhilloo' with him at the Dera. At this, Sant Sarwan Dass asked Sadhu Ram to leave 'Dhilloo' at the Dera and declared that this boy would no longer be a 'Dhilloo' (tardy), but be faster than a '*hawai*' (a kind of an aerial

³¹ Ram, R. (2009). Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab.

Journal of Punjab Studies, 16(1), p. 15.

fire-work). After this, Niranjana Dass who was earlier called 'Dhilloo' came to be nicknamed as 'Hawaigar' (just as a *hawai*).

After Sant Sarwan Dass got expired, Niranjana Dass rendered his services at the Dera under Sant Hari Dass and Sant Gharib Dass. After the demise of the latter, Niranjana Dass became his successor and came to be called as Sant Niranjana Dass. After taking over charge of the Dera, Sant Niranjana Dass continued the construction work and the other services rendered by his predecessors to the masses.

Under his supervision, the *kar-sewa* at Shri Guru Ravidas Janam-Sathan Mandir at Seergovardhanpura went on. For convenience of the devotees a *langar* hall (of the size of 85'× 85') has been constructed.

With the hard efforts put in by his compatriots Ramanand and Surinder Dass under his supervision, a Shri Guru Ravidas Gate at Lanka Chauraha (a place in Varanasi) the road from which leads to Guru Ravidas Janam-Sathan Mandir at Seer Govardhanpura, was got erected. Shri K.R. Narayanan, who was the Indian President at the time, opened this gate on July 16, 1998.³² Shri Suraj Bhan, the then Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Babu Kanshi Ram, the then Supremo of Bahujan Samaj Party, and Shri Kalyan Singh, the then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, were among those present on the occasion.

Sant Niranjana Dass, along with his compatriots, had to face a stiff challenge from the officials of Banaras Hindu University, who were opposing the erection of the gate on the basis of its location. But later on, the controversy was resolved and the gate got erected.

Apart from this, the second phase of the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Kathar, has been completed under Sant Niranjana Dass's supervision.

Construction-work for the four-storied Residential Block, meant for the stay of devotees, coming to Dera Ballan from far-off places, which was started by Sant Gharib Dass, got completed under Sant Niranjana Dass's supervision. A two-room gallery,

³² Bhatia, K. (2023, November 1). Sant Ravidas Mandir-A Golden Temple of Faith in Varanasi. *Kashi Yatri*.

devoted to Sant Gharib Dass (inside the 'Beghampura Shaher' weekly journal building) got inaugurated by the present *gaddi-nashin* on Aug 20, 1997.

He, on Behalf of the Dera donated an amount of Rupees one lac, one thousand to Dr. Ambedkar Bhawan Trust, Jalandhar for the construction of a community center. A *satsang* hall (of the size of 220'×180') for the congregation of the devotees, during religious functions was built adjacent to the Dera under his able supervision.

Construction and inauguration of Sant Sarwan Dass Memorial Eye Hospital:

On November 10, 2004, Sant Niranjana Dass laid the cornerstone for Sant Sarwan Dass Memorial Eye Hospital by the side of a little stream in Ballan village. Swaran Dass Bangar and Bibi Resham Kaur Bangar, two devotees of the Dera contributed an amount of over Rupees one crore for the construction of this hospital.

Sant Sarwan Dass Model School:

Taking a cue from one of the forty hymns of Guru Ravidas in Guru Granth Sahib, wherein the Guru states, that ignorance does good to nobody, rather it destroys the power of the individual, to make a distinction between truth and falsehood, Sant Niranjana Dass had the desire to have an educational institution to provide better education to the poor and the needy at concessional rates. In order to fulfill his desire, Sant Sarwan Dass Model School was founded by him, at Sant Sarwan Dass Nagar in Phagwara, district, Kapurthala on April 16, 2002.³³ The school got inaugurated by the Sant on February 19, 2004. This school is spread over an area of 26 *kanals*. More information about this school and other institutions of the Dera would be provided in the next part of this chapter.

Telecast of a musical program on Guru Ravidas on Doordarshan Kendra Jalandhar:

Sant Niranjana Dass, in order to communicate Guru Ravidas's message of universal peace and brotherhood to the masses, got started a musical program from Doordarshan Kendra Jalandhar. In this program, the *ragis* perform *kirtan* of the *bani* of Guru Ravidas and Sant Ramanand, Sant Niranjana Dass's compatriot (now late Sant Ramanand) till

³³ Bharti, S. N. (2003). *Jagat Guru Ravidass Sampradaya-Sant Te Sadhna Sathal*. Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan., p. 40

his assassination, used to render the interpretation. This program used to be telecast regularly on a fixed day.

1.3: Projects run by the Dera:

Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji, Ballan is not only committed to the propagation of Guru Ravidas's philosophy, but has also under taken a number of projects, which represent the social face of the Dera. A thorough study of these projects would reveal the seriousness of the efforts of the Dera-men to reach out to the most needful, to help them in every way; in order to put into practice, the idea of universal brother-hood and cooperation, as preached by Guru Ravidas through his hymns. The following is the detail of the various projects run by the Dera:

Shri Guru Ravidas Janam-Sathan Mandir (temple) at Seer Goverdhanpura (Varanasi):



Image 1.5: Shri Guru Ravidas Janam-Sathan Mandir (temple) at Seer Govardhanpura (Varanasi)

Source: Jagat Guru Ravidas Sampradaya-Sant Te Sadhna Sathal by Som Nath Bharti

There was an urge in Sant Sarwan Dass, the second pontificate of the Dera to discover Guru Ravidas's birth-place and construct a beautiful temple there in order to

commemorate the Guru's birth. For this purpose, he visited Banaras in 1950.³⁴ In order to achieve his task, he visited many-a-place, but to no avail. When he gave a serious thought to one of Guru Ravidas's hymns as incorporated into the holy Guru Garnt Sahib, where-in the Guru says that the members of his clan reside near Banaras, an idea came to Sant Sarwan Dass's mind that he should undertake the discovery, in and around Banaras, in order to find out the actual birth-place of Guru Ravidas. During his research, he reached a village named Seer govardhanpura, situated near the Banaras Hindu University. In the village, many people were performing *puja* under a tamarind tree, which had gone dry. When the people saw Sant Sarwan Dass, they said to him that they were very lucky that the deity, they had been praying to, had physically appeared before them, in the form of him. They said that they were pleased to have his *darshan*. Sant Sarwan Dass asked them whom they were worshipping. They replied that they were worshipping a *chamara* Guru, who used to sit under that tamarind tree and meditate the name of God. They further told the Sant that the said *chamara* Guru was born in their village and the people of his clan still lived in their village. Thereafter, Sant Sarwan Dass made a tally of the details told to him by the villagers about Guru Ravidas, with those of the hymns of the Guru and found them to be similar. He thus, after cross-checking the facts, concluded that Seergovardhanpura was the actual birth-place of Guru Ravidas. When he returned to the Dera, he discussed his plan of building of the temple in the memory of Guru Ravidas at Seer Govardhanpura, with his compatriots and many disciples of the Dera; who approved of his plan after serious deliberations on the subject. A committee was dispatched to Banaras to conduct a survey of the project under the leadership of Sant Hari Dass, the third pontiff of the Dera. After the survey got completed, under the supervision and direction of Sant Sarwan Dass, Sant Hari Dass laid the temple's corner-stone on June 14, 1965.³⁵ After Sant Hari Dass's return to Punjab, Sant Sarwan Dass sent his pupil, Gharib Dass, who later on became the fourth Dera pontificate, with a huge contingent to carry out the construction work. There were masons, sculptures, carpenters, laborers, in the contingent.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 24

³⁵ Ibid, p. 35

The temple's first floor was built under the pontificate of Sant Sarwan Dass, who passed away in 1972. On December 12, 1974, two statues—one honoring Guru Ravidas and the other Sant Sarwan Dass—were placed within the temple. After this, due to some adverse circumstances, the construction work of the temple had to be suspended temporarily. Later, under Sant Gharib Dass's supervision, seven stories of the temple got constructed. A seven-foot high golden *kalash* was adorned atop the temple which was inaugurated by Babu Kanshi Ram, the then BSP Supremo on April 7, 1994. About this temple John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer, two American scholars write,

“The new edifice in Seer-Govardhanpura is not just another Hindu temple. In fact, there is some debate about whether it should be called Hindu at all; for it is dedicated to the resemblance of a Saint, whose person, perspective and teachings place him in a sense outside the Hindu pale.”³⁶

They further elaborate,

“There is a life-size statue of the bespectacled Sant Sarwan Dass, the Punjabi religious leader, whose Ravidas following contributed to the financial means that made the temple possible and whose far-off *Dera* welcomes pilgrims from Sri Govardhanpur into what seems a pan - Indian community”.³⁷

A *langar* hall has also been constructed inside the temple complex. Presently, this temple is managed by a trust named Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Sathan Public Charitable Trust. A commemorative gate on the road from Lanka Chauraha (a place in Varanasi)

³⁶ Gold, D. (1991). Songs of the Saints of India. John Stratton Hawley, Mark Juergensmeyer. *History of Religions*, 30(3), p. 323.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 324

leading to the temple has been constructed by the trust, which was inaugurated by the then President of India, Shri K.R. Narayanan on July 16, 1998.

Millions of devotees from all over the world throng to the temple to pay obeisance every year at birth-anniversary celebrations of Guru Ravidas. For this purpose, a special train named, 'Beghampura Express' (reserved by the Dera) is being run till date from Jalandhar to Varanasi to carry the devotees to the revered temple.

Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Kathar (Jalandhar):



Image 1.6: Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Kathar (Jalandhar)

Source: Picture, taken by the researcher

Sant Gharib Dass developed the idea for the establishment of a charitable hospital to honor his revered Guru Sant Sarwan Dass and to give the underprivileged and the needy access to healthcare. For this purpose, on October 2, 1982, he lay the cornerstone for a hospital in the village of Kathar, which is located along the Jalandhar-Hoshiarpur Road.

The first design of this hospital was that of a rural hospital.³⁸The initial construction plan was that of an eight-bedded hospital. On January 1st, 1984, the first phase's construction was finished and officially opened. After some time, it was felt that the hospital was too small to accommodate a large number of patients, coming to it for treatment. Thus, the further construction work of this hospital got started and soon it became a sixty-bedded hospital. In 1994, sixty beds too proved to be small. Therefore, Sant Gharib Dass conceived a plan of giving the shape of a three-storied building to the hospital. But on July 23, 1994 he breathed his last. Sant Niranjan Dass, who succeeded Sant Gharib Dass after his death, continued to oversee the development of the hospital building after latter passed away. Forty more beds were added to the hospital. So, it became a hundred-bedded hospital. After this, the construction work of the hospital continued on a war-footing and thereafter it got converted into a two hundred-bedded hospital. Presently this hospital is housed in a three-storied building. The hospital has two hundred plus beds. The hospital has Surgery, Medicine, Child- Care, E.N.T, Eye, Orthopedics wings.

To provide better and modern treatment facilities to the patients, a new block has been built at a cost of Rs. 75 lacs. This block houses the Emergency wing, the I.C.U. department, a large General Ward, ten private rooms, a Canteen and a Rest-Hall for the wards of patients. Another rest-hall has been constructed on the first floor of the hospital building. The hospital is spread over an area of approximately four acres. The hospital has tied up with Sant Baba Bhag Singh Institute of Nursing, Khadiala; district Jalandhar for training of nursing professional students. The current head at the Dera, Sant Niranjan Dass, is the chairman of the registered trust known as Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust, which oversees the hospital. The trust spends an amount of about Rupees 12 lacs every month for the maintenance of the hospital. A large number of economically backward patients take the services of the hospital, as this is run on a

³⁸ Bawa, S. D. (n.d.). *Pawan Amritbani Shri Guru Ravidass Ji*. Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Sathan

no profit-no loss-basis. Thus, this hospital is playing an important part in providing modern and better medical facilities to the most needful and the poor.

Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital:



Image 1.7: Building of Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital, Bal, Jalandhar

Source: Jagat Guru Ravidas Sampradaya-Sant Te Sadhna Sathal by Som Nath Bharti

One Swaran Dass Bangar, a devotee of the Dera was instrumental in organizing free eye-treatment camps at the Dera annually. Once he put forward a proposal for the construction of an eye hospital before the present gaddi-*nashin* Sant Niranjan Dass, which the latter willfully accepted. Therefore, the Sant laid the foundation of the building of an eye hospital on November 10, 2004 near the Dera. Swaran Dass Bangar's family donated an amount of more than Rupees one crore to the Dera for the construction of the hospital.³⁹ Apart from him, many other benevolent families made donations to the tune of corers of Rupees for the same purpose. The construction work of the hospital building got completed on February 14, 2007. The hospital got

³⁹ Ram, R. (2009). Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab.

Journal of Punjab Studies, 16(1), p. 17.

inaugurated by Sant Nirranjan Dass on February 15, 2007. Extremely poor patients are treated free of cost in this hospital and others are provided treatment on nominal rates.

Sant Sarwan Dass Model School Hadiabead, Phagwara, district Kapurthala:



Image 1.8: Building of Sant Sarwan Dass Model School Hadiabead, Phagwara, district Kapurthala

Source: Jagat Guru Ravidas Sampradaya-Sant Te Sadhna Sathal by Som Nath Bharti

Education plays an important part in civilizing a person. It is often said that without education a person is like a beast. Talking cue from one of Guru Ravidas' hymns, wherein the Guru states, that ignorance does good to nobody, rather it destroys the power of the individual, to make a distinction between truth and falsehood, The Sant Sarwan Dass Model School was established on April 16, 2002, at a location called Hadiabad in the Phagwara town of the Kapurthala district on three acres of land that had been donated by one Seth Brij Lal, a follower of the Dera, after Sant Nirranjan Dass had discussed his idea for constructing a school with the representatives of the Sant

Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust and the Ravidasia *sangat*.⁴⁰ The school got inaugurated on February 19, 2004.

The school is affiliated to CBSE, New Delhi. The building of the school houses 29 class rooms, 4 administrative departments, two halls. This school too is managed by Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust. The primary purpose of this institution is to provide first class education facility at cheaper rates to the poor students.

Publication of a trilingual weekly Beghampura Sheher:

A visionary as he was, Sant Gharib Dass, third pontificate of the Dera thought of starting a journal in order to spread the teachings and principals of Guru Ravidas and the works of the Dera to the literate masses. He therefore started the publication of a weekly journal 'Beghampura Sheher' from Sunder Nagar in district Jalandhar. This weekly is presently published in three languages Punjabi, Hindi and English. Late Sant Ramanand, the then Dera deputy head, had been its chief editor till his death on May 25, 2009. Keeping in view the role played by the late Sant Ramanand as its chief editor, the Indian Dalit Sahit Academy awarded him the National Award on December 10, 2004 at a function held in New Delhi.

This weekly journal, apart from providing basic information about the Dera, from time to time to its readers, is playing a significant role in creating consciousness among the Scheduled Castes regarding their rights. This weekly is managed by a registered trust namely Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust.

Telecast of the singing of Guru Ravidas's hymns:

In order to preach Guru Ravidas's ideals to every nook and corner of the world, a special program was telecast on Jalandhar Dordarshan. In this programme, the *ragis* sing the holy hymns of Guru Ravidas and Sant Ramanand till his death, used to provide interpretation of the sung hymns.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 16

Shri Guru Ravidas Mandir, Sirsgarh, Haryana:



Image 1.9: Building of Shri Guru Ravidas Mandir, Sirsgarh, Haryana

Source: Jagat Guru Ravidas Sampradaya-Sant Te Sadhna Sathal by Som Nath Bharti

Sirsgarh is a village situated at a distance of about 25 kilometers from Ambala on the Ambala-Jagadhari Road in Haryana state. On July 24, 2003, Sant Niranjan Dass laid the cornerstone of a Ravidas temple there in the presence of a sizable gathering of Dera adherents from Punjab and Haryana. A hall of the size of 40'×114' was constructed, inside which an idol of Guru Ravidas got installed. North to this temple a *langar* hall was built for which an amount of Rs. 21 Lac was donated by Fakir Chand Mulana, a Rajya Sabha member at that time. For the construction of this temple, a devotee of the Dera, Mr. Gurbux Singh donated five acres of land.

Religious functions organized at the Dera:

The Dera organizes religious functions on February 6 every year on the death anniversary of Sant Hari Dass; on February 7, the Hari Manav Ekta Sant *Sammelan* in the premises of Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Kathar; on June 11, on the death

anniversary of Sant Sarwan Dass, on July 23 on the death anniversary of Sant Garib Dass, on the Baisakhi day and on the death anniversary of Sant Pipal Dass.

Conclusion:

With the failure of mainstream religions in taking along the most under-privileged sections of Indian society, many a Dera flourished across not only Punjab, but India during the first half of the twentieth century. Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan, commonly known as Dera Ballan emerged as a dominant religious institution of the Ravidasia community during the eighth decade of the 20th century. Named after the third pontificate of the Dera, this religious institution launched and successfully accomplished many social projects like charitable hospitals and schools. For the propagation of Guru Ravidas's message and the Dera activities to the masses, the Dera brings out a trilingual (Punjabi, Hindi, English) weekly. Various religious functions are held in the Dera premises on different occasions. During such functions, one can see the presence of a number of political leaders across party spectrum, who eyes the Dera as a major vote-bank of the Ravidasia community.

The Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan have been systematically working on a number of spiritual and community development projects as they inch closer to the ultimate goal of preaching Guru Ravidas's philosophy to every nook and corner of the world. Due to the farsightedness of the Sants of Dera Ballan, the egalitarian teachings of Guru Ravidas and the logical and critical philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar were successfully combined, and as a result, a potent socio-cultural movement for the cultural change and spiritual renewal of the Dalits in the area was born.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 22

Chapter II

Caste Hierarchies in Punjab

2.1: Introduction

In his theoretical investigation of caste and hierarchy in *Homo Hierarchicus*, Louis Dumont builds on his fieldwork with the Pramalai Kallars of South India in 1949 and the Indological literature on caste.⁴² Dumont discusses the sociological views of J.H. Hutton, M.N. Srinivas, McKim Marriott, Emile Durkheim, and Eugene Weber as well as Indian history. Dumont contends that caste is a system of hierarchy based on inequality rather than social stratification, with the question of 'caste' as the central problematic. Dumont makes an effort to grasp caste as a fundamental social fact, as mentioned in his prologue, by moving away from Western, foreign ideas of social class. The core ideas of the pure and impure, which Dumont felt to be the primary intellectual feature of the Indian social structure, were what he intended to 'isolate,' research, and construct new theories on.

Dumont frames the fundamental issues surrounding the person, society, equality, and hierarchy at the outset of his investigation. Dumont illustrates his Maussian and Durkheimian inspirations to examine hierarchy in order to expose greater 'elementary aspects' of society by this opening allusion to the Victorian evolutionary conceptions of the 'unity of mankind.' Furthermore, the first chapter of Dumont's book exemplifies his comparative technique, which he uses to draw theoretical analogies and conclusions throughout the rest of the book rather than doing a narrow historical study of Indian caste. The question he asked the person makes this very clear. According to Dumont, 'traditional' societies place a strong emphasis on the collective man, society as a whole, and how people fit into the established order and hierarchy. The individual is emphasized in 'modern' society as the 'indivisible elementary man.' The development of Dumont's analysis on equality and hierarchy is fundamentally based on the idea of

⁴² Berreman, G. D., & Dumont, L. (1971). *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. *Man*, 6(3), p. 515.

the individual. He contends that hierarchy is fundamental to social existence and arises from an agreement on values and beliefs. Hierarchy illuminates fundamental facets of society in this way because hierarchy encompasses social agents and social categories. (Dumont, 1971: 10). Dumont defines caste as a pan-Indian institution, a system of ideas and values, a formal, comprehensible rational system. (Dumont, 1971: 35)

Most crucially, he describes how caste groups differ from one another and are related to one another through (1) separation of marital and personal concerns, (1) division of labor, (2) division of traditions, and (3) hierarchy rating groupings as comparatively superior or inferior to one another. He contends that the distinction between the pure and impure is a manifestation of the last and most significant feature of hierarchy. In order to further clarify the idea of hierarchy, Dumont makes a distinction between Indian theories of hierarchy and Western notions of hierarchy as progressive subordination. He links Indian hierarchy to religious principles, the four varnas, and the connectedness to the whole, rather than relying on western concepts of linear power and authority. He elaborates on the interactional theories of rank developed by McKim Marriott by saying that hierarchy is the principle by which the elements of a whole are ranked in relation to the whole. (Dumont, 1971: 91)

In his later use of the *jajmani* system as an example, Dumont develops the notion of hierarchy and its connection to the whole. He depicts the *jajmani* system as a hereditary system of relationships, prestation, and counter-prestation rather than as an economic system. He elaborates that the system is based on an implied testimonial to the entire, which is religious in nature, or if one likes better, an affair of paramount values. (Dumont, 1971: 106)

Dumont, however, breaks down the authority between and within caste groups and does not completely discard conceptions of politics and power. He contends that the Brahmins hold religious power while monarchs, judges, and the law of dharma hold temporal authority. Additionally, rather than being strictly linear, the village's unit of authority has complex, multiple forms. (Dumont, 1971: 181)

Last but not least, Dumont discusses the potential for comparing and exporting the concept of caste to other countries. He tells the reader that he made an effort to

comprehend indigenous notions, values, and ideals of social groups and social facts throughout the entire work.

He had also connected caste to Hindu notions of purity and impureness. Dumont reiterates the distinction between social grading and caste, noting that caste is closely related to the relationship between status and power.

Harish K. Puri, a noted scholar on Dalit issues, in one of the articles. while quoting W.H. McLeod (*The Evolution of Sikh Community* 1976), Ethne K. Marenco (*The Transformation of Sikhism* 1976), and Indera Paul Singh (*Caste in a Sikh Village* 1977) argues that there exists a caste hierarchy in Sikhs parallel to that of Hindus.⁴³

Explaining the theory, he elaborates that five points of comparison emerge when we analyze the two parallel caste hierarchies, prevalent in Hinduism and Sikhism:

In the Hindu caste system, the hierarchy of the actual *jatis* is arranged in accordance with the traditional four varnas order, or *varnashrama*, which has scriptural backing.

As Bhim Rao Ambedkar emphasized in one of his conversations with Mahatma Gandhi, it was the principles of Hinduism—not the practices—that you objected to, not the practice of caste. Sikhism rejects caste divisions as having any scriptural support. The idea of the brotherhood of all-equality among all people is emphasized. Not the ideals, but the practice is what needs to be changed.

Second, Brahmins are at the pinnacle of the Caste hierarchy in Hindu society. On the other side, the Jats, who had been elevated to the status of a ruling elite under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, occupied the highest positions among the Sikhs. Generally speaking, Khatri, Aroras, and Lobanas followed them, then the craftsman castes, of which Ahluwalias (kalals) and Ramgarhias (Sikh Carpenter caste) have better prestige. Just like among Hindus, the lowest castes are the lowly or untouchable castes. The perceptions of which castes are considered second, third, and fourth, however, differed depending on the village and the caste a person belonged to.

⁴³ Puri, H. K. (2003a). The Scheduled Castes in the Sikh Community – A Historical Perspective.

Economic and Political Weekly, 38(26), p. 2697.

Thirdly, unlike the Hindu society where that factor is comparatively more prevalent, the framework of caste discrimination in Sikh society was significantly freed from the purity-pollution kind of relationships.

Fourthly, Sikhism does not adhere to the notion that the priestly class is the only group capable of producing and acquiring knowledge. Sikhism does not have a stable class of priests or creators of religious knowledge. The lower castes now make up the majority of *pathis*, *ragis*, and *sewadars*, with a sizable portion coming from the Scheduled Castes; and, perhaps surprisingly, there are fewer from the Jat caste. The Jat Sikhs are more interested in taking control of the SGPC.

Finally, endogamy is a trait shared by the Hindu and Sikh castes. However, certain field studies indicate that compared to Hindus, endogamy was a little weaker and hypergamy a little stronger among the Sikhs.⁴⁴

The following table shows 39 Scheduled Castes of Punjab, listed on the official website of the Department of Social Welfare, Punjab:

S. No.	Caste	S. No.	Caste	S. No.	Caste
1.	Ad-Dharmi	14.	Darain	27.	Od
2.	Barar, Burar or Berar	15.	Deha, Dhaya, Dhea	28.	Pasi
3.	Bangali	16.	Dhogri, Dhangri, Saggi	29.	Parna
4.	Batwal	17.	Gagra	30.	Pherera
5.	Bauria or Bewaria	18.	Gandhila or Gadeil	31.	Raisikh, Mahatam
6.	Bazigar	19.	Kabirpanthi or Julaha	32.	Sanhai
7.	Balmiki, Chuhra or Bhangi	20.	Khatik	33.	Sanhal
8.	Bhanjara	21.	Marija or Marecha	34.	Sansoi
9.	Chamar, Jatia Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi	22.	Kori or Koli	35.	Sansi, Bhedkut or Manesh
10.	Chanal	23.	Mazhabi	36.	Sapala
11.	Dagi	24.	Megh	37.	Sarera
12.	Dhanak	25.	Mochi	38.	Sikligar
13.	Dumna, Mhasha or Doom	26.	Nat	39.	Sirkiband

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 2698

Table 2.1: List of castes among Scheduled Castes of Punjab

Source: Official website of Welfare Department, Government of Punjab

They are deeply divided along layers of endogamous multi-castes people, each with a distinct social identity and a range of economic standing. (Ram, 2017). If we analyze the caste system at the India level, we find that there is a certain hierarchy among the castes in Hindu society. Similar to that, a hierarchy can also be found among the Dalit castes in Punjab. Unlike the castes at the national level, the castes among the SCs in Punjab have a distinctive feature of following different religions. For instance, if we talk about the dominant Adi Dharmi caste, they follow the newly formed sect namely 'Ravidasia Dharm', though many among them still follow Sikh rituals and practices. Similarly, the Ramdassias, the Mazhabis and the Rai Sikhs are followers of Sikhism. Balmikis primarily follow Hinduism. Another distinctive feature of these castes is that their concentration is dense in some specific pockets as compared to the other areas of Punjab. Most of the Adi-Dharmis can be found in Punjab's Doaba sub-region, which includes the districts, namely, SBS Nagar, Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, and Kapurthala. Balmikis are spread over Doaba and Malwa sub-regions. Ramdassias, Mazhabis and the Rai Sikhs have a high density of their population in Majha and Malwa sub-regions.

2.2: Demographic details of SC Population in Punjab: As per statistics of the Census-2011, among all the states of India, Punjab, with regard to Scheduled Castes, has the highest percentage. The Scheduled Caste population of the State totals 88.60 lac people, or 31.94% of the total population, out of the 177.43 lakh people who call the State home.⁴⁵ As a result, 1.3% of India's total population and 4.3% of its Scheduled Caste people reside in Punjab. In comparison to the state's overall growth average of 13.89%, the population of the Scheduled Castes increased by 16.06% every ten years. According to surveys done by the State Urban Development Agency (SUDA) in urban areas in 2004 and the Department of Rural Development and Panchayats in rural areas in 2002, a total of 5.13 lac families, 3.11 lac of which are Scheduled Caste families,

⁴⁵ Scheduled Castes Sub Plan 2020-21. (2022). In *Directorate of Scheduled Castes Sub Plan*, p. 5

live below the poverty line, making up 61.38% of all the families in the State.⁴⁶ The number of operational holdings with SCs is 63,480, according to the Agricultural Census 2010-11, covering an area of 1,16,966 hectares. This represents 6.01% and 3.10%, respectively, of the total land holdings and area of the State. Since they are fewer than 5 hectares in size, the vast majority (85.54%) of these holdings are unviable. It is important to note that the state's Scheduled Caste population resides primarily in rural areas.

As per Census 2011 Report,

“The majority of the SC population (73.33%) live in the rural areas, whereas, 16.67% SC people reside in the urban areas of the State. As far as the distribution of SC population among the districts of the State is concerned, it indicates that percentage of SC population is high in the districts of Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar (41.51%), Sri Muktsar Sahib (41.31%), Firozpur (41.17%), Jalandhar (38.95%), Faridkot (38.91%), Moga (36.50%), Hoshiarpur (35.14%), Kapurthala (33.94%), Tarn Taran (33.71%), Mansa (33.63%), Bathinda (31.44%), Barnala (31.14%) and Fatehgarh Sahib (31.07%)”.

This information demonstrates that the majority of the districts in the state have a Scheduled Caste population of at least one third of their total population. Out of the 11,168 localities in the State that are inhabited, 57 have 100% SC residents, and 4,799 (39.44%) have 40% or more SC residents. 175 of the 117 towns have 10% or more residents from Scheduled Castes, and the majority of these are census towns or small towns. According to census data, SCs have a literacy rate of 64.81%, which is lower than the state's overall literacy rate of 75.84% and the nation's overall literacy rate of 73.00%. The State's 58.39% female literacy rate among SCs was determined to be lower than the State's overall 70.73% rate. On the plus side, it is higher than the SC female

⁴⁶ Gupta, J. P., & Teotia, K. (2006). Key Paper on Urban Local Self-Government Institution in Punjab: History, Structure, Capacity and Emerging Challenges. In *Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development*, pp. 2-3

literacy rate, which stands at 56.46% of the country. The SC male literacy rate, which is 70.66% of the State, is lower than the State's overall male literacy rate, which is 80.44%.

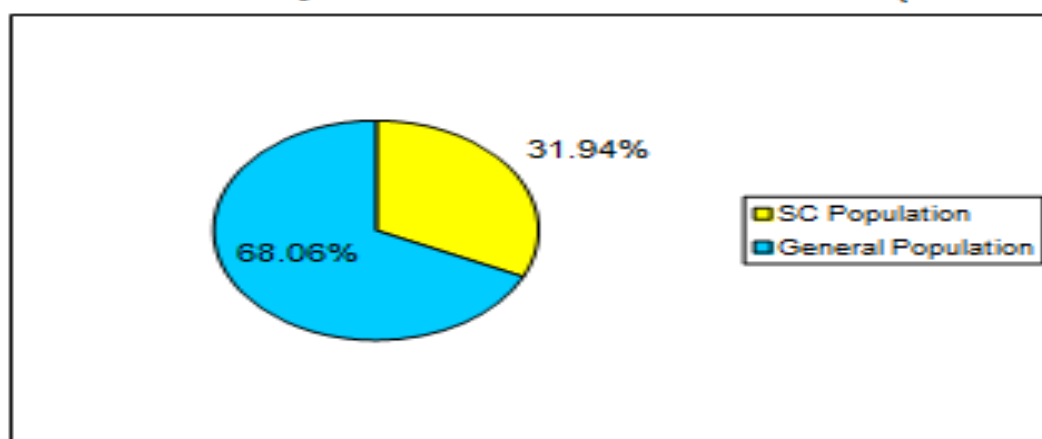
The SC labour force makes up 35.88% of the state's total population, with main workers making up 79.10% and marginal employees 10.80%, respectively. **(All data and figures source: Official website of the Department of Social Justice and Empowerment of Minorities, Government of Punjab)**

The bulk of people in this social group work as farm workers or in other hard, low-paying jobs. The State Government, for its part, works to improve the socio-economic and educational standing of this underprivileged segment of society by giving them the technical skills needed for vocational vocations and connecting their current occupation or activity with the wider activity.

Demographic Details of Scheduled Castes Population in Punjab:

Scheduled Castes Population

Total Population :	277.43 lac
SC Population :	88.60 lac (31.94%)
General Population :	188.83 lac (68.06%)



(Source: Census 2011)

Figure 2.1: Division of Punjab population between SC and General Categories

Detail of district-wise total Population and SC Population:

S. No.	Name of District	Total Population	Scheduled Caste Population	Percentage (col.4 to col.3)
1	Amritsar	1490656	770864	30.95
2	Barnala	595517	191001	31.14
3	Bathinda	1388515	450473	31.44
4	Faridkot	617508	140318	38.91
5	Fatehgarh Sahib	600163	191493	31.07
6	Firozpur	101974	855716	41.17
7	Gurdaspur	1198313	580576	15.16
8	Hoshiarpur	1586615	557504	35.14
9	Jalandhar	1193590	854444	38.95
10	Kapurthala	815168	176707	33.94
11	Ludhiana	3498739	913358	16.39
11	Mansa	769751	158878	33.63
13	Moga	995746	363417	36.50
14	Sri Muktsar Sahib	901896	381554	41.31
15	SBS Nagar	611310	160184	41.51
16	Patiala	1895686	465359	14.54
17	Rupnagar	684617	180905	16.41
18	S.A.S. Nagar	994618	116131	11.73
19	Sangrur	1655169	461609	17.87
20	Taran Tarn	1119617	377468	33.71
	Total	1774338	8860179	31.94

Table 2.2: District-wise Detail of Total Population and SC Population:**Source: Punjab Census 2011 Report**

District-wise Rural and Urban Population of Scheduled Castes:

Sr. No.	District			Scheduled Caste Population					%ag e of SC Popul ation to Total Popul ation
		Rural			Urban			Total	
		Total	Male	Femal e	Total	Male	Femal e	Popula tion	
1	Amritsar	464984	144154	110730	305880	161713	144157	770864	30.95
2	Barnala	133435	70636	61799	58566	30933	17633	191001	31.14
3	Bathinda	311533	169144	151189	118940	67691	61148	450473	31.44
4	Faridkot	171199	90303	80896	69119	36164	31865	140318	38.91
5	Fatehgah Sahib	154570	81690	71880	37913	10191	17731	191493	31.07
6	Firozpur	709911	369036	340886	145804	76415	69379	855716	41.17
7	Gurdaspur	435930	118541	107389	144646	76353	68193	580576	15.16
8	Hoshiarpur	465037	136195	118741	91467	48017	44440	557504	35.14
9	Jalandhar	515341	164466	150876	339101	177658	161444	854444	38.95
10	Kapurthala	111013	110167	101846	64694	33734	30960	176707	33.94
11	Ludhiana	559471	194159	165311	363887	193680	170107	913358	16.39
12	Mansa	117553	114644	101909	41315	11667	19658	158878	33.63
13	Moga	307098	161614	144474	56319	19794	16515	363417	36.50

14	Sri Muktsar Sahib	195179	155136	140043	86375	45337	41031	381554	41.31
15	SBS Nagar	111889	108494	104395	47395	14541	11854	160184	41.51
16	Patiala	348587	183414	165163	116771	61079	55693	465359	14.54
17	Rupnagar	138597	71349	66148	41308	11985	10313	180905	16.41
18.	Sangrur	361376	191713	169653	100133	51508	47715	461609	17.88
19.	Taran Tarn	339558	178817	160741	37910	19898	18011	377468	33.71
	Total	6496986 (73.33)	3396319	3100657 (16.67)	136313	1143546	1119647	886019	31.94

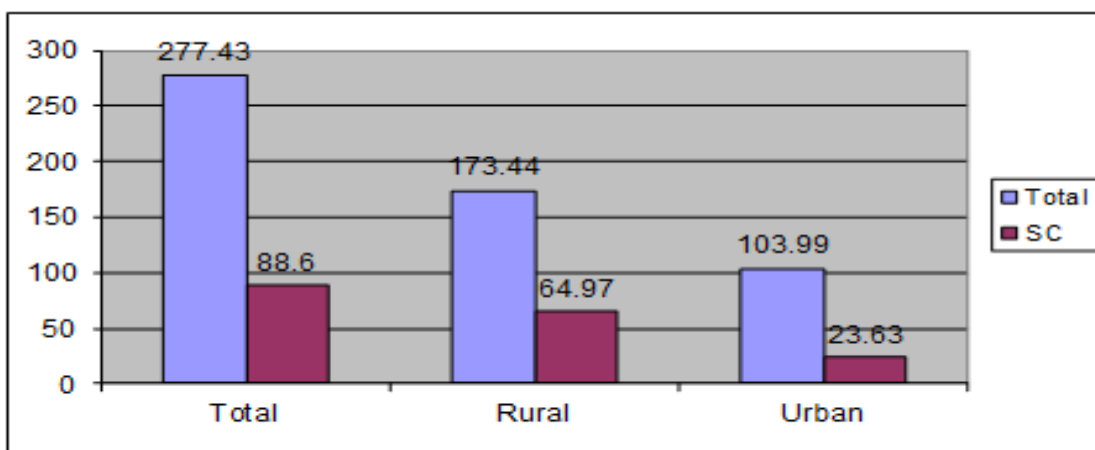
Note: The numbers in brackets show the percentage of the overall SC population.

Table 2.3: District-wise Rural and Urban Population of Scheduled Castes

Source: Punjab Census2011 Report

Total, Rural and Urban SC population

Total	Total 277.43 lac	SCs 88.60 lac
Rural	173.44 (62.52%)	64.97 (73.33%)
Urban	103.99 (37.48%)	23.63 (26.67%)



(Source: Census 2011)

Figure 2.2: Total Rural and Urban SC population

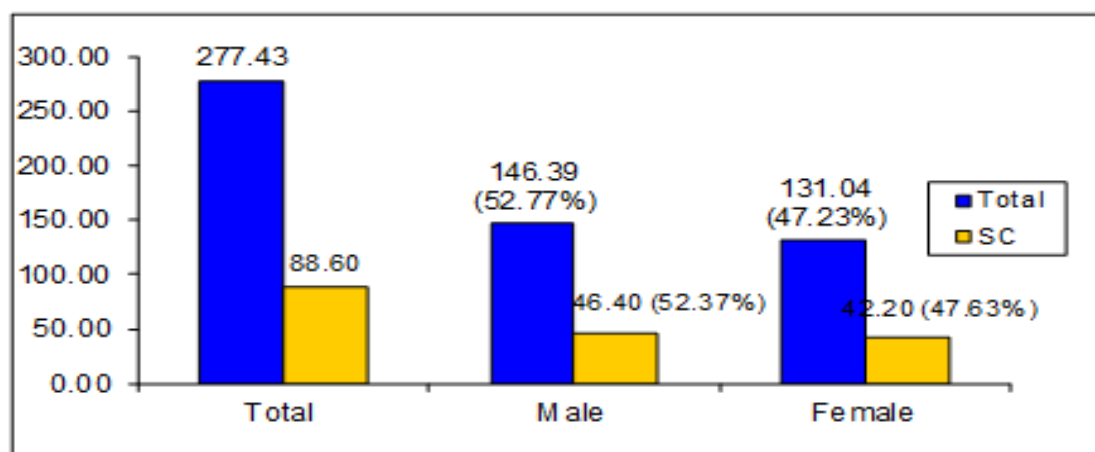
SC Households vis-à-vis total households in Punjab State:

Area	House Condition	Total Households	SC households	%age of Col. 4 to Col. 3
Total		54,09,699	18,66,878	34.51
	Good	16,98,009	6,14,391	13.14
	Livable	13,51,081	10,19,335	43.76
	Dilapidated	3,59,609	1,13,151	59.17
Rural	Total	33,15,631	13,01,197	39.17
	Good	14,97,764	3,91,070	16.18
	Livable	15,68,078	7,51,795	47.94
	Dilapidated	1,49,790	1,58,331	63.39
Urban	Total	10,94,067	5,64,681	16.97
	Good	11,00,145	1,31,311	19.36
	Livable	7,84,003	1,77,540	35.40
	Dilapidated	1,09,819	54,819	49.91

Table 2.4: SC Households vis-à-vis total households in Punjab
Source: Punjab Census Report 2011

Total and sex-wise SC population

	Total	SCs
Total	277.43 lac	88.60 lac
Male	146.39 (52.77%)	46.40 (52.37%)
Female	131.04 (47.23%)	42.20 (47.63%)

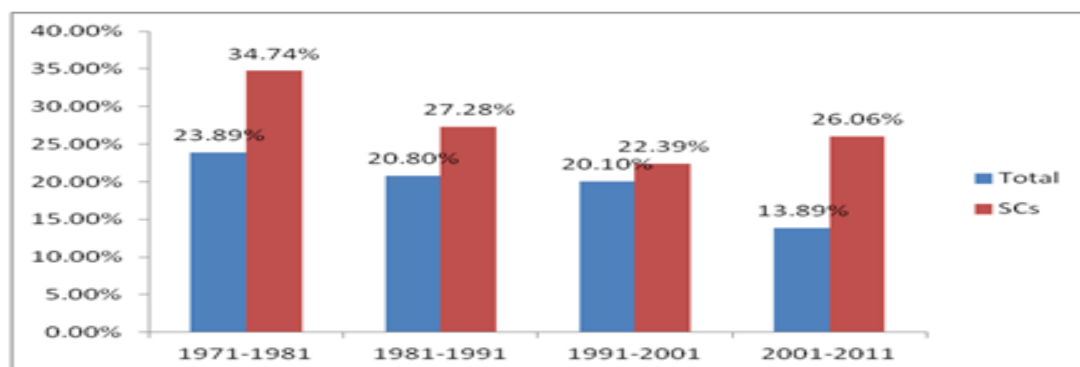


(Source: Census 2011)

Figure 2.3: Total and sex-wise SC population

Decennial growth rate of SC Population

Decade	Total	SCs
1971-1981	23.89%	34.74%
1981-1991	20.80%	27.28%
1991-2001	20.10%	22.39%
2001-2011	13.89%	26.06%

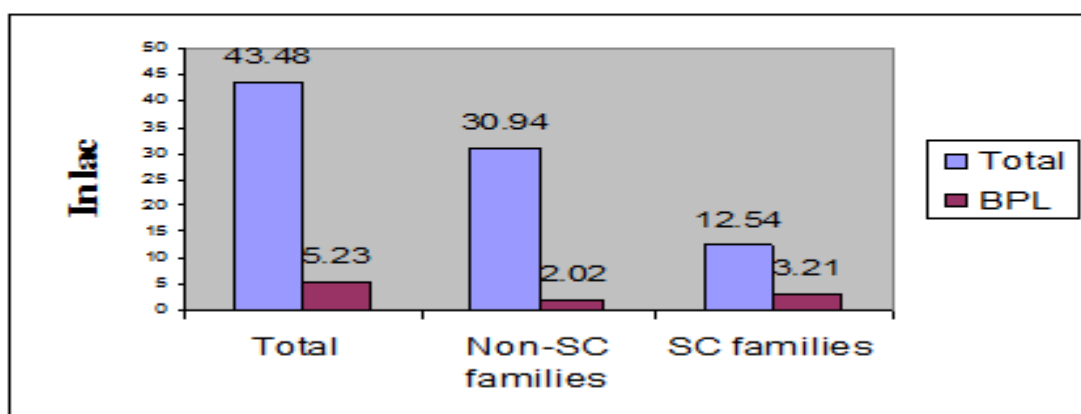


(Source: Census 2011)

Figure 2.4: Decennial growth rate of SC Population

Total families vis-à-vis BPL SC families (In lac)

	Total *	BPL@
Total	43.48*	5.23@
SC families	12.54	3.21 (61.38%)
Non-SC families	30.94	2.02 (38.62%)

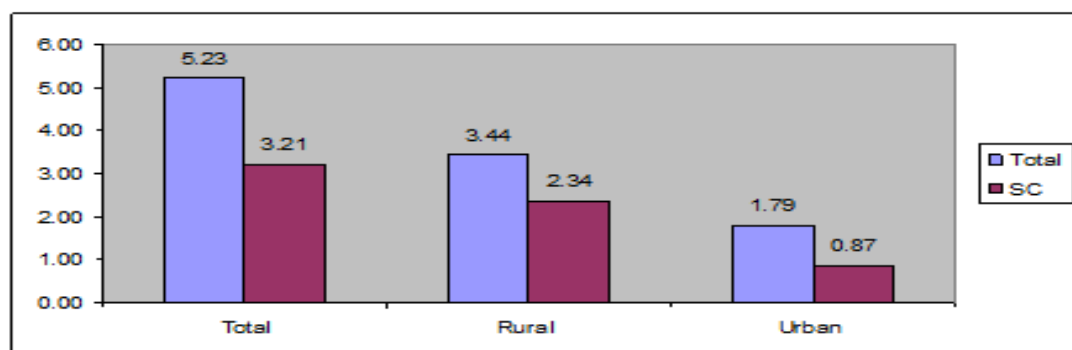


(Source: *Census 2001, @ Rural Development Department 2002 and SUDA 2004, Punjab)

Figure 2.5: Total Families vis-à-vis BPL SC Families

Total, Rural and Urban BPL SC families (in lac)

	Total	SCs
Total	5.23	3.21
Rural	3.44	2.34
Urban	1.79	0.87

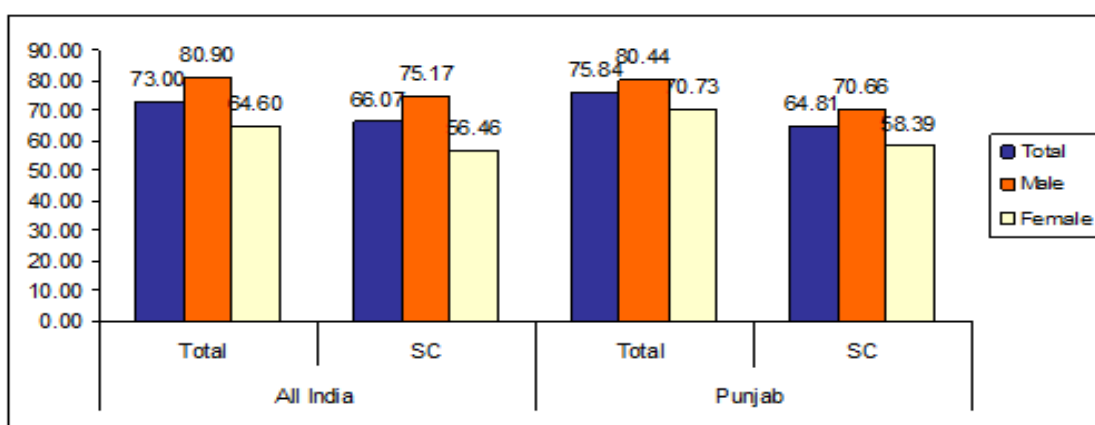


(Source: Rural Development Department 2002 and SUDA 2004, Punjab)

Figure 2.6: Total Rural and Urban BPL SC families (in lac)

Total and sex-wise literacy rate of SC Population (in %age)

	All India		Punjab	
	Total	SCs	Total	SCs
Total	73.00	66.07	75.84	64.81
Male	80.90	75.17	80.44	70.66
Female	64.60	56.46	70.73	58.39

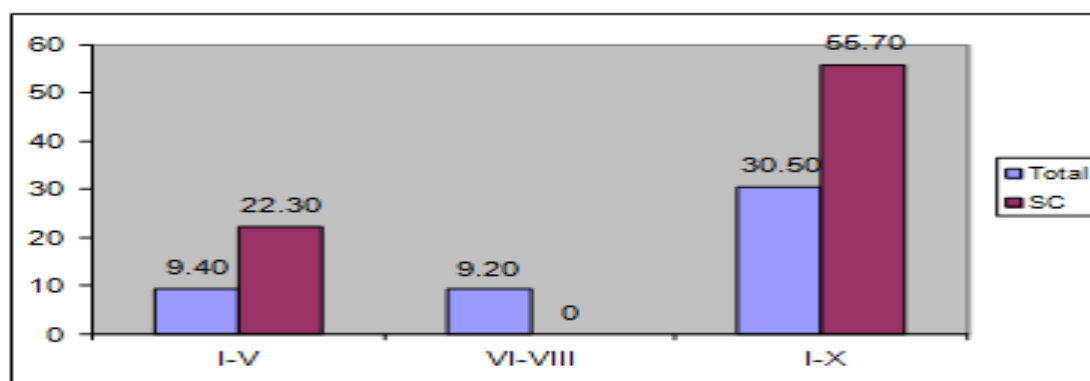


(Source: Census 2011)

Figure 2.7: Total and sex-wise literacy rate of SC Population (in %age)

Dropout rate of SC Students in Punjab as on 30.9.2010 (in %age)

Class	Total	SCs
I-V	9.40	22.30
VI-VIII	9.20	-
I-X	30.50	55.70



(Source: Statistics of School Education 2010-11- HRD Ministry, 2014)

Figure 2.8: Dropout rate of SC Students in Punjab as on 30.9.2010 (in %age)

Number of villages (district-wise) having 40% and more SC Population in Punjab

Sr. No	District	Rural Population						
		Total in habited Villages	Villages having 40% or more SC population	Villages having 50% or more SC population	Villages with 100% SC Population	Percentage (col. 4 to col 3)	Percentage (col. 5 to col. 3)	Percentage (col. 6 to 3)
1.	Amritsar	703	308	146	1	43.81	10.77	0.14
2.	Barnala	117	33	10	0	15.98	7.87	0
3.	Bathinda	179	89	18	0	31.89	10.04	0
4.	Faridkot	163	96	39	0	58.89	13.93	0
5.	Fatehgarh Sahib	441	177	88	0	40.05	19.91	0
6.	Ferozpur	955	517	383	11	54.14	40.10	1.16
7.	Gurdaspur	1515	319	187	4	11.71	11.34	0.16
8.	Hoshiarpur	1385	597	393	5	43.10	18.38	0.36
9.	Jalandhar	911	605	439	4	65.61	47.61	0.43
10.	Kapurthala	611	148	171	11	40.51	18.10	1.80
11.	Ludhiana	885	433	138	5	48.93	16.89	0.56
11.	Mansa	138	71	16	0	30.15	10.91	0
13.	Moga	319	146	58	3	45.77	18.18	0.94
14.	Patiala	895	135	97	0	16.16	10.84	0
15.	Rupnagar	591	156	96	6	16.40	16.14	1.01
16.	S.A.S. Nagar	403	99	51	1	14.57	11.90	0.15

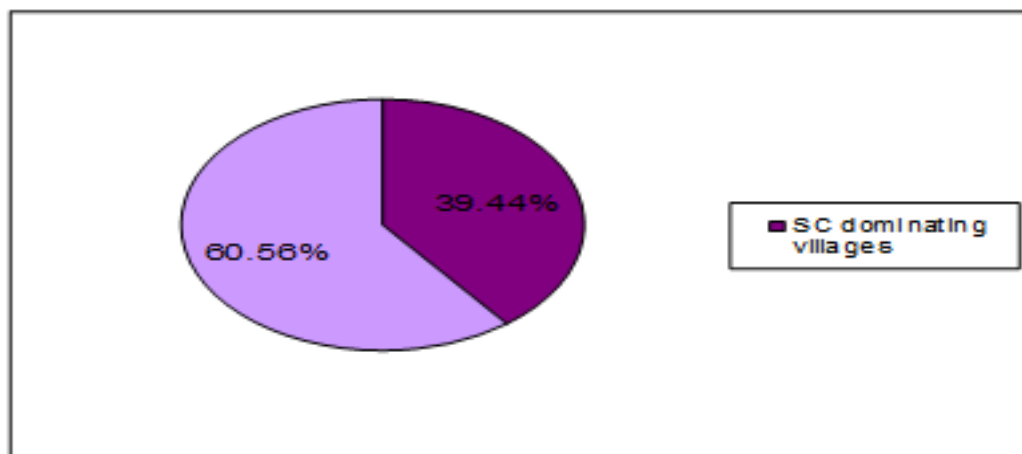
17.	S.B.S Nagar	458	154	178	1	55.46	38.86	0.44
18.	Sangrur	564	130	47	0	13.05	8.33	0
19.	Sri Muktsar Sahib	133	146	77	1	61.66	33.05	0.43
20.	Tarn Taran	479	119	46	1	16.93	9.60	0.41
	Total	11168	4799	1800	57	39.43	13%	0.47%

Table 2.5: Number of villages (district-wise) having 40% and more Scheduled Castes Population in Punjab

Source: Punjab Census, 2011 Report

SC dominating villages

Total inhabited villages :	12168
SC dominating villages :	4799 (39.44%)
(with 40% and more SC population)	
Other inhabited villages :	7369 (60.56%)

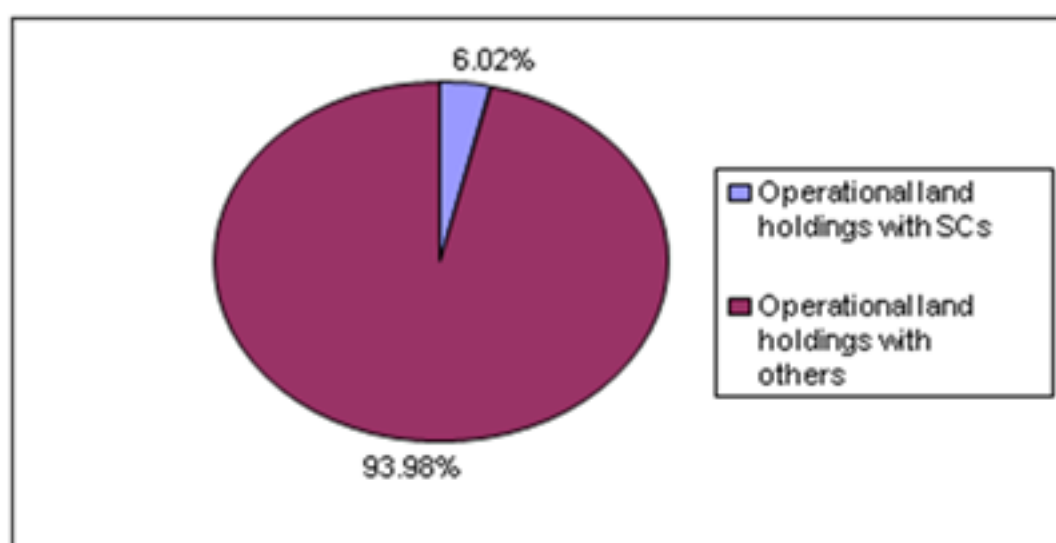


(Source: Census 2011)

Figure 2.9: SC dominating villages

Operational land holdings with SCs

Total Operational land holdings	:	10,53,000
Operational land holdings with SCs	:	63,480 (6.02%)
Operational land holdings with others	:	9,89,520 (93.98%)

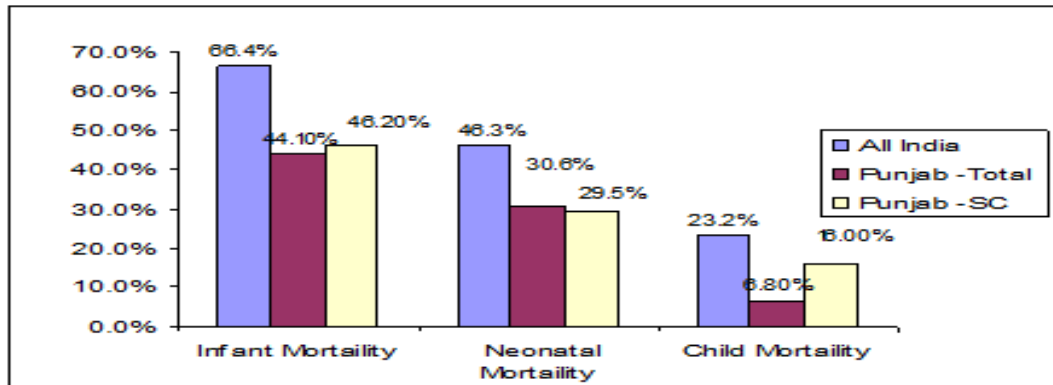


(Source: Agricultural Census 2010-11)

Figure 2.10: Operational Land-holdings with SCs

Mortality rate of SC Children

	All India	Punjab	
		Total	SCs
Infant Mortality	66.4%	44.10%	46.20%
Neonatal Mortality	46.30%	30.60%	29.50%
Child Mortality	23.20%	6.80%	16.00%

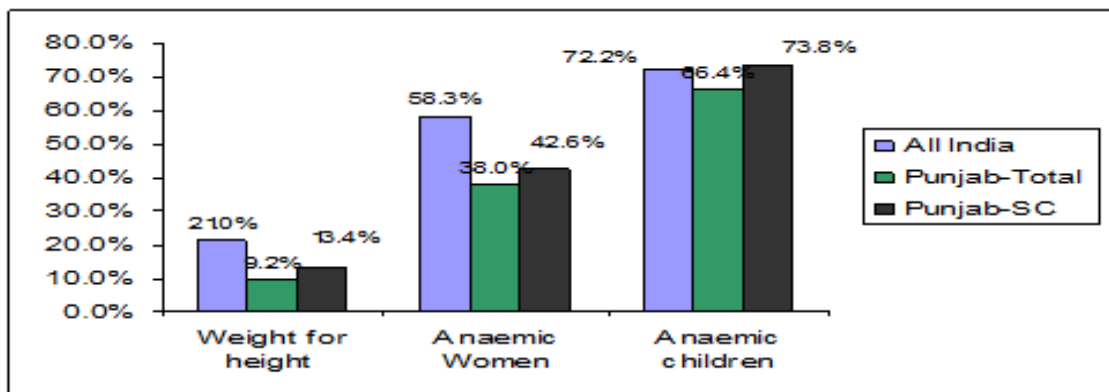


(Source: National Family Health Survey-III- 2005-06)

Figure 2.11: Mortality rate of SC Children

Nutrition deficiency in SCs

	All India	Punjab	
		Total	SCs
Weight for height	21.00%	9.20%	13.40%
Women with anaemia	58.30%	38.00%	42.60%
Anaemic children	72.20%	66.40%	73.80%



(Source: National Family Health Survey-III- 2005-06)

Figure 2.12: Nutrition deficiency in SCs

Caste clusters among SCs of Punjab: Before the analysis of caste hierarchies among the SCs of Punjab is done, it would be worthwhile to have a look at some broader caste clusters among them, as suggested by Professor Ronki Ram⁴⁷:

Sr. No.	Caste Cluster	Included Castes
1.	Mazhabi/Balmiki Cluster	Mazhabi Sikhs, Balmikis
2.	Chamar/Ad Dharmi Cluster	Chamar, Ad-dharmi
3.	Depressed Castes Cluster	Nat, Gandhila, Bauria, Bazigar, Bangali, Barar, Sansi etc.
4.	Peripheral Castes Cluster	Barra, Betta, changar, Kurmi, Nar, Rehar, Ghasi, Kumhar etc.

Table 2.6: Caste Clusters in Punjab

Source: Internal Caste Cleavages among Dalits in Punjab by Ronki Ram

Mazhabi/Balmiki Cluster: This cluster as its name suggests contains two castes namely, Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis. *Chuhra* is a common name for these castes. The Mazhabi Sikhs are those who follow Sikhism and consider one Baba Jeewan Singh alias Bhai Jaita as their Guru. A major section among them is engaged in low-paying agricultural jobs. Among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab, they are the most deprived, despite being high in numerical strength. As for the Balmikis, majority among them are still engaged in their traditional occupations of sweeping and scavenging. They consider Maharishi Valmiki, the author of Ramayana as their Guru. One section among the Balmikis has the tendency to convert to Christianity for their betterment, as they are also deprived economically.

Chamar/Adi-Dharmi Cluster: Like the above-mentioned cluster, this cluster also contains two castes, which are Chamar and Adi-Dharmi. As for the Chamars, it would be worthwhile to mention here that under this broad caste category comes various castes such as Ramdassias, Ravidasias, Raigars etc. Chamrars consider Sant Ravidas, a Chamar (leather worker) by profession, as their Guru. A section among them is still

⁴⁷ Ram, R. (2017). Internal Caste Cleavages among Dalits in Punjab. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(3), p. 55

engaged in traditional occupation of scavenging of dead animal carcasses. It was due to the nature of this occupation, that they were considered the most polluted by the upper castes. But taking benefit of reservation, the educated among them have taken to government jobs. Some like those in the Boota Mandi locality of Jalandhar district of Punjab, do leather business. They are locally called ‘Sethhs’ (rich). It is to be noted here that in terms of their religious affiliations, the Ravidasias are Hindus, although after the announcement by Dera Ballan of a separate Ravidasia ‘religion’ in 2010, they prefer themselves to be called Ravidasias and not Hindus; whereas Ramdassias are Sikhs, though not the baptized ones. These two castes consider themselves superior to all the other SCs. Endogamy is strictly followed by them.

Depressed Castes Cluster: This cluster consists of thirteen Depressed Castes. Among these, seven castes are Vimukta Jatis (De-notified Tribes). As far as De-notified tribes are concerned, their pockets of concentration are spread all over Punjab. The two communities among them with the lowest population are the Nat and the Gandhila. During the Colonial rule in the Punjab, the Vimukta Jatis had been forcibly settled here by the British Masters, although the latter consider the former as thieves and burglars. Therefore, in order to reform these communities and keep them busy, the British engaged them in agriculture and industry.

B.P. Singh, a scholar on the issue writes,

“These communities believe in their ‘martialness’ of their being indigenous people and fighting against the invaders for their sovereignty and honor of the country. This fact also attests to their independence from the caste and the monarch. Their claim for high status now is a result of their forcible settlement in villages where they find themselves situated hierarchically in relation to others.”⁴⁸

Eleven percent of the SC people in Punjab are from depressed castes. Socio-economic condition of these castes is far worse when compared to other Scheduled Castes. A study of these castes reported that the number of those living below the poverty line could be as high as 96 percent of their population. (Jodhka, 2003)

⁴⁸Singh, B.P. (2010), Denotified Tribes or Vimukt Jatis of Punjab, *Indian Anthropologist*, p. 75.

Peripheral Castes Cluster: There are eighteen most backward castes in this cluster. These castes constitute about ten percent of the total SC population in Punjab. The traditional occupations of these castes have gone out of fashion these days. Therefore, most of them are engaged in manual labor. It is due to their very small numerical strength that these castes are not lured by the politicians and therefore remain almost invisible from the caste scene of Punjab.

2.4: Caste Hierarchies in Punjab

When we talk about caste hierarchies, it refers to the grading of various castes. In the Indian context, there are two types of hierarchies among castes. These are:

1. *Varna*-based hierarchy and 2. Caste-based hierarchy

In the first type of hierarchy, each caste is graded within the *Varna* system and then positioned in the hierarchy of the respective *Varna*. Under the second type, various castes are empirically positioned. It is based on the assumption that the caste hierarchy in actuality is different from the ideal caste hierarchy. In order to understand it in a better way, the concept of ‘Dominant caste’ enunciated by M. N. Srinivas, who was unconsciously influenced by the African studies on the dominant clan and the dominant lineage, needs a quick reference. Although this concept is based on Srinivas’s study of a village named Rampura in Karnataka state, he says that dominant caste is existent in other villages of our country too. According to his theory of ‘Dominant Caste’, a dominant caste is the one which is numerically greater and economically and politically more powerful than other castes of a particular region. Apart from it, in order for a caste to be dominant, it should own a sizeable amount of locally available agricultural land. Its ritual status, western education and occupation are other elements of its dominance.⁴⁹ According to this criterion of a dominant caste, Jatt is a dominant caste in Punjab. Paramjit S. Judge, a scholar on Dalit issues says that there are basically two dimensions of caste hierarchy in India. (Judge, 2015) The first is that castes cannot be aggregated and arranged in a hierarchy along a single axis. The reason for this is that the Indian society cannot be characterized in terms of a hierarchical caste system as it would amount to ‘construction of the discourse of dominant Hindu civilizational unity’.

⁴⁹Srinivas, M. (1959). The Dominant Caste in Rampura. *American Anthropologist*, 61(1), new series, pp. 1-16.

The second is distinction between two entities: *Varna* and Caste. Whereas *Varna*, which consists of numerous castes, is fixed, Caste is dynamic.

Although Sikhism, a major religion in Punjab, denounces caste-based inequalities and lays stress on an egalitarian society, it is not free from casteism. Among the land-owning classes, after the most prominent Jatts are the Sainis, the Thakurs, the Lobanas, the Kambojs, the Ahluwalias, the Mehtons and the Rajputs. The Scheduled Castes and the Backward Castes like, Chamars, Mazhabi Sikhs, Balmikis, Lohars, Bazigars etc. constitute land-less classes.

Taking into account, the elements like land-ownership, numerical strength, education level and political stature, the following hierarchy of castes emerges in the present-day Punjab:

On top of the hierarchical table are the peasant castes like the Jatts, Rajputs, Lubanas etc. Following them are Brahmans, Aroras, Khattris, Ahluwalias etc. The next caste group consists of the artisan or service castes like, Lohars, Suniars, Chhembas, Ghumiars, Jheers. Presently most of these castes are not involved in their traditional occupations.

Castes like the Chamars, Mazhabis/Balmikis, Bazigars, and Sansis are at the absolute bottom of this caste structure. These are also called untouchable castes.

It is to be noted here that, vertical hierarchies are there within each of these caste groups. For an instance, within the last caste group mentioned above, Chamars are considered to be superior in terms of education and economic status to the rest in the group.

If we talk about Sikhism, a major religion in Punjab, it decries caste theologically. If we study and analyze the Sikh society, we come to know that castes prevail there as well. Although Ramdassias and Mazhabis are Sikhs by religion, socially they are deemed to be inferior to other upper castes like Jatts, who are in a dominant position in Punjab. In the historical context, Irfan Habib, a historian of international repute, suggests that Jatts themselves, had been assigned the Shudra status in the Hindu fold (Habib, 1976). It was this very reason which prompted them to convert to Sikhism. According to Paramjit S. Judge, a scholar on Dalit issues, the relation between Jatts and Sikhism is dialectical (Judge, 2000). If the Jatts contributed towards the expansion and consolidation of Sikhism, the latter in turn helped the former in improving its social position. The 1931 Census of Punjab data shows an overwhelming percentage (60) of

Jatts in agricultural castes. It is note-worthy here that earlier only Khattris and Aroras were the two castes which enjoyed the upper-caste status in Hind society in Punjab. After conversion of Jatts into Sikhism, caste hierarchy among the Sikhs got somewhat disturbed. As Jatts constituted almost half the population among Sikhs, during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, they were preferentially recruited in the army. This further consolidated the position of Jatts among the Sikhs. When towards the end of the first half of the 19th century, Punjab was annexed to the British Empire; the English rulers continued the policy adopted by the Maharaja. The Canal Colonization Bill passed by the British in 1906 further consolidated position of Jatts as it banned the transfer of land from agricultural tribes to the non-agricultural tribes. Since Jatts were a part of the former, they could purchase land and expand their propriety. It is because of this fact that the Jatts claim the highest caste status among Sikhs, as Indera Paul Singh, the first among sociologists to conduct extensive studies on caste structure in Sikhism, suggests. Alexander Lee suggests,

“In order to choose between ranked and unranked rhetoric, a group must first choose to mobilize. In the case of the colonial census data, this means that the analysis is confined to the set of groups that had already petitioned. These cases are analyzed within the context of a hierarchical logistic regression model, which takes into account the previously made choice to petition. The results show that unranked rhetoric, and the more ‘ethnic’ vision of identity which it implies, is a product of the position of groups within the regional political system. Landowning groups and groups with limited contact with the state bureaucracy tended to emphasize hierarchical themes, much as their ancestors had done in pre-colonial times. Large groups in areas with democratic elections, by contrast, did not emphasize hierarchy, prefiguring the type of non-Sanskritic caste politics that became more common after independence. These results are then illustrated by examples of castes that, depending on political circumstance, either remained committed to hierarchical rhetoric or transitioned away from it.”

(Lee, 2010)

An evaluation of the Punjab government schemes for the upliftment of Scheduled

While evaluating the schemes launched by the Punjab government for welfare of Scheduled castes, it has been found that there are some issues which come in the path of effective implementation of such schemes. These can be broadly categorise as:

Issues with respect to payments

- Delays in payments to beneficiaries can occur due to documentation processes or lack of funds.
- Payments may be made by cheque or cash, but Direct Bank Transfer (DBT) may improve the impact of these schemes.

Issues with respect to lack of education

- Many SCs are unable to benefit from government policies due to lack of education.
- This can lead to a lack of qualified SC candidates for many jobs.

Other issues

- Poor budgetary planning at the state level can lead to a lack of funds being released to implementation departments.
- The meager subsidy of Rs. 10,000 per beneficiary under the Income Generation Activities may not be enough to incentivize the process.
- Deep-rooted corruption even in this age of computer technology is a big obstacle in the path of effective execution of such schemes.

Various Schemes:

- **Pre-Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Caste Students:** This scheme provides financial assistance to SC students, studying in 9th and 10th grades in schools. It aims at progression of SC students from high to secondary level. To evaluate this scheme, a study was conducted by the Research and Development Initiative, an independent agency. The observations of this study indicate that this scheme has been successful to a large extent in achieving its goals. It has decreased financial burden of the parents in terms of their children's studies upto 10th standard. (Verma, Kaur, 2017, p. 118)
- **Post-Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Caste Students:** This scheme aims to provide financial aid to SC students to continue their education after matriculation. Recent trends indicate that various government have failed in

efficient execution of this scheme. The beneficiaries of this scheme often lament that funds come very late; sometimes even after they complete their studies. The Resident Audit Officer and the Local Fund Examiner of UT, Chandigarh found that PU is yet to recover ₹13.53 crore in dues under the PMS scheme. The dues worth ₹366 crore for the PMS scheme 2017-18 to 2019-20 were released by the government of Punjab in 2023-24. Many a time we come across news-items in various newspapers in which there are complaints of students belonging to SC category that their colleges stop them from appearing in their final examinations due to failure on their part to clear their fee-related dues as the students didn't receive their post-matric scholarship in time. Seeing such kinds of obstacles in the implementation of PMS scheme, a lot needs to be done at the government level.

Day by day various scams related to this scholarship scheme are being unearthed. According to a news-item in The Tribune, dated, 23rd November, 2017, an embezzlement of Rs. 58 crore was detected in this scheme by the intelligence agencies of Punjab. Such scams put a big question mark on an effective and honest implementation of such schemes meant for the weaker sections of our society.

- National Fellowship: According to this scheme financial assistance is provided to SC students pursuing research studies for M.Phil, Ph.D., and other equivalent degrees
- National Overseas Scholarship: This scheme helps SC students pursue higher studies abroad
- Direct Lending Scheme: The Punjab Scheduled Castes Land Development & Finance Corporation (PSCLDFC) provides loans to SC and handicapped people in Punjab
- Babu Jagjivan Ram Chhatrawas Yojana: According to this scheme, hostel facilities are provided to SC students in middle schools, colleges, and universities.
- Free Coaching: This scheme helps SC and OBC students prepare for competitive exams and get jobs in the public and private sectors.
- Punjab Ashirwad Scheme: According to this scheme financial support is

extended for an SC girl's marriage. Although it is a good effort on the part of Punjab government; but like the PMS scheme, this scheme also face fund-crunching at times. The parents of girls complaint that they didn't receive the beneficiary amount in time, sometimes they receive it even after the beneficiary girl bears a child.

- Self Employment Scheme for the Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS): This scheme provides cash assistance, loans, and skill development training to manual scavengers.
- Pradhan Mantri Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAGY): Though an initiative of the central government, this scheme is working in Punjab also. This scheme integrates development in 2,500 SC villages in Punjab with a high concentration of SC population.

Conclusion

Caste phenomenon is so deep-rooted in Indian society that various caste clusters exist even within the Scheduled Caste population of Punjab. Officially, the number of castes among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab is thirty-nine. These are spread over different geographical areas of Punjab. As far as educational level and economic progress are concerned, the *Chamars* or the *Adi-Dharmis* sit at the top of the caste hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes. Punjab's villages with a majority of Scheduled Caste residents make up 39.44% of the state's total number of villages. These villages have a population of at least 40% SC. 31.94% of the state's total population, as determined by the 2011 Census, is comprised of SCs in Punjab. These figures indicate that Scheduled Castes constitute a dominant proportion of the total populace of the state. The Decennial growth rate among SCs of Punjab, barring the last recorded decade (2001-2011) suggests that with each passing decade, the growth of population among SCs has decreased, which indicates increasing levels of education and awareness among SCs with regard to keeping their family size small. There is a decrease of 12.35 per cent in Decadal growth rate among SCs of Punjab between 1971-1981 and 1991-2001. The figures relating to total operational land holdings with SCs of Punjab (06.02%) suggest that as far as ownership of cultivable land with SCs of Punjab is concerned, no substantial change has taken place in this regard since independence.

Chapter III

Social Dynamics Among Castes: A Comparison

3.1: Introduction

One cannot imagine the Indian society without castes. Although caste is an ancient entity, it has survived till date, owing to its scriptural sanction by the ancient Hindu *shastras*, which are revered by a huge majority of the Hindus. Even in the present age of liberalization and globalization, people in India are divided along caste lines. Indians take pride in being addressed with their surnames like, 'Sharma Ji', 'Mishra Ji', 'Gill Saab' etc. Somewhere deep inside the mindset that thinks of this nation as Hindu also thinks of it-in fact, venerates it-as culturally upper-caste Hindu. (Krishna, 2016). Under such a scenario, social mobility of the lower castes gets somewhat limited.

In the views of Ambedkar, the basic unit of the Hindu social order is neither the individual nor the family; but the caste.⁵⁰ If a person suffers discrimination, it is not because of his or her conduct, but due to the class he or she belongs to. Hindus believe that the different castes are born from different parts of God Brahma. The main problem is that the grading of caste is associated with the location of the divine body part from which it is believed to have been originated. For example, Brahmin caste is associated with higher grade as it is believed that it originated from the mouth of the God. This resulted in unequal statuses of castes.

Ambedkar analyzed the various definitions of caste as proposed by scholars like, Nesfield, Senart, Ketkar and Risley. While he agreed with some of the points, he expressed disagreement with some others in the definitions. He explained that the root-cause of caste system is not the concept of purity and pollution, and not the restrictions on inter-dining; instead, the critical element of the caste is the prohibition and the absence of inter-marriage between people of different castes.

Ambedkar does not agree with the assumption that it's the Brahmin that created castes. He explains that classes exist in all societies and not just in India. but the difference between Hindu social order and other societies is that in Hindu social order,

⁵⁰ Namishray, M. D. (2003). *Caste and Race: Comparative study of BR Ambedkar and Martin Luther King*, p. 38

divisions of society have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. They decided to be endogamous units. And other castes imitated the endogamous nature of Brahmin caste. The extent of imitation varied from the caste to caste. The castes that are nearest to Brahmin have imitated all the customs of Brahmin that are Sati, forced widowhood and minor girl marriage. Castes that are a little further away imitated only the minor girl marriage custom.

Many a restriction is imposed on the castes which are lower in Hindu caste hierarchy. These are discussed below:

Restriction on Food and Social Intercourse

Restrictions on feeding and social interaction as well as minute regulations on the types of food and beverages that can be consumed were put in place to protect the purity of high castes. Food prepared with ghee, milk, or butter can come from castes below one's own, however food prepared with water can only come from castes above one's own, equivalent, or superior.

When two castes at either end of the hierarchy are involved, social interactions like eating together, living together, etc. are severely restricted by the caste system; the lower caste man kept a minimal space between himself and the high caste man. This custom was instituted because it was believed that filth might be spread by an untouchable's mere shadow. For instance, in Kerala, a Nayadi must maintain a distance of 22 meters from a Nambudri and 13 meters from a Tiyan, who maintains a distance of 10 meters from a Nambudri himself.

Various Sections' Civil and Religious Disabilities and Privileges: Castes were geographically segregated as a distinctive indicator of civic advantages and limitations. The untouchable castes or the most polluted castes were forced to live outside the villages. They couldn't go to some specific areas of the villages. It is historical truth that the Mahras and Mangs were forbidden from entering Poona city's boundaries between the hours of 3 p.m. and 9.00 a.m. during the Marathas' and Peshwas' rule. It was thus because at the time their bodies produced extended shadows that may taint castes that were higher or purer. Historically, members of lower castes were prohibited from using public wells or other water sources. The schools refused to accept their kids. They were not allowed to read or listen to sacred literature. Their entry was restricted in temples. Their dress and life-style could not be at par with that of the higher castes.

A Brahmin demanded that others respect him rather than bowing before anyone who was not a Brahmin.

Lack of Unrestricted Choice of Occupation

A person's vocation was predetermined under the caste system. In other words, those who belong to a caste or a group of related castes are expected to work in a particular line of work.⁵¹ It has occasionally been asserted that the caste system was nothing more than the systematization of occupational differentiation because the relationship between a caste and an occupation had been so obvious. It was not believed that a caste had a right to give up a hereditary occupation. The restriction imposed by other castes added to the moral restraint and social scrutiny of one's caste-fellows as a restraint on the choice of one's employment. As a result, no one who was not born a Brahmin is permitted to work as a priest.

Limitations to Marriage

Additionally, there are stringent prohibitions against inter-caste marriage. In other words, members of a caste are not allowed to wed anyone from outside the caste. In light of this, caste is endogamous. Some academics have asserted that the idea of endogamy is 'the essence of caste system' because it is such a crucial component of the caste system.

Difference and Sanskritization Concepts

Not everyone has agreed with the portrayal of the caste system as a closed structure built on an all-inclusive hierarchy that prevents its members from moving around. A few sociologists and social anthropologists have expressed concerns and offered helpful criticism of this approach. Regarding their distinct concepts of Sanskritization and difference, M.N. Srinivas and Dipankar Gupta can be cited as good examples.

Sanskritization

M.N. Srinivas created the concept of Sanskritization to explain the dynamic nature of the caste system. He elaborates,

⁵¹ Ghurye, G. S. (2018, August 21). Caste in India. *Rajras*.

“The caste system is far from a rigid system in which the position of each component caste is fixed for all time. Movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able in a generation or two to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden.”

(Srinivas 1962: 42).

Sanskritization can therefore be defined as the lower castes' copying of Brahminical customs, manners, and lifestyle. Sanskritization, according to Srinivas, is a method by which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal group, or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, frequently 'twice born' caste (Srinivas 1966: 6). It gives Sanskritization a much larger definition. It is not just restricted to using Brahmins as the sole reference group or to imitating simple religious ceremonies and practices. It also refers to copying ideologies. The phenomenon of economic and political power assumes enormous relevance in his interpretation of how the caste system has changed as a result of the Sanskritization notion. In Srinivas's opinion,

“The mediation of the various models of Sanskritization through the local dominant caste stresses the importance of the later in the process of cultural transmission. Thus, if the locally dominant caste is Brahmin or Lingayat, it will tend to transmit a Brahminical model of Sanskritization, whereas if it is Rajput or Bania it will transmit Kshatriya or Vaisya model. Each locally dominant caste has its own conception of Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaishya models”

(Srinivas 1966: 14).

This remark highlights the caste system's diversity and range of mobility or change. Srinivas uses K.M. Pannikar's historical studies to support his claim and make it more compelling and factually supported. According to Pannikar, the Nandas were the final Kshatriyas to exist in India. Since then, every Kshatriya has been created through the usurpation of authority by the lower castes, which has resulted in the degradation of the Kshatriya role and social status (Pannikar 1955). According to Srinivas, even while all non-dominant castes—particularly those from low or non-twice-born castes—wanted

to become Sanskritized, only those whose political and economic circumstances had improved succeeded. He claims,

“While the sources of mobility lay in the political and economic systems, Sanskritization provided a traditional idiom for the expression of such mobility”⁵²

Sanskritization and upward mobility of SCs: Social mobility is made possible by Sanskritization, which enables people and groups to strive for a higher position in the caste system. In order to gain upward mobility and access to social benefits that are typically reserved for the upper castes, lower-caste groups adopt Brahminical habits, rituals, and language. The desire of marginalised communities to overcome the limitations of their caste identities based on birth is reflected in this aspect of Sanskritization. It shows that India's conventional social structure is undergoing a process of cultural mobility. In his research on the Coorg people in Karnataka, M.N. Srinivas discovered that lower castes gave up certain of their own traditions and activities that the higher castes deemed immoral in order to advance in the caste system. For instance, they abstained from eating meat, consuming alcohol, and offering animals as sacrifices to their gods. In terms of attire, cuisine, and customs, they copied Brahmins. This would allow them to claim higher caste positions within a generation.

The social aspect of Sanskritization is much more important from the view point of change. The low caste individuals are inclined towards Sanskritization because in that way they can elevate their social status and get higher status in caste hierarchy. Economic betterment and Sanskritization is another related issue. The lower caste people have given up un-cleaned occupations to raise their economic status because clean trades are a symbol of social light. Sanskritization can be observed also in the religious field. Like Brahmins many of the lower castes people put on sacred thread. They also go to their temple regularly and perform Arti and Bhajan. They have left prohibited food and un-cleaned occupations. Even they have specialized in performing

⁵² Sahay, G. (2002). Caste Dynamics: Economic and Political. In *Explaining Caste in Indian Society*

(ESO—14, *Society and Stratification*) Indira Gandhi National Open University, p. 4

ceremonies like the Brahmins perform. The living patterns of lower castes have also Sanskritized. Like higher caste they also get Pucca houses built for them. Now they sit along with the higher caste on the cots without any fear or hesitation. They also keep their houses clean and put on dresses like the higher castes do.

Under Sanskritization, the main motive of the lower castes was to catch up with the Brahmins who were westernized, well educated and enjoyed a status of prestige in the society. But they soon realized that mere Sanskritization would not suffice as it could only lead to improvement in their position in the *varna* system. Therefore they decided to go for westernization, which would help them to move up in the social scale without the restriction of *varna*.

Prof. Ronki Ram is of the opinion that Sanskritization has failed to strike a cord among the Dalits of Punjab. He elaborates it by saying further that it doesn't mean that Dalits of Punjab haven't been successful in improving their social status. In fact, they have been very vocal in their assertions for social justice and dignity. (Ram, 2011) They have been pressing for their due share in the local power-structure, which is a clear indicator of a significant surge of social mobility of Dalits in Punjab, though the patterns of this kind of mobility in Punjab, which have emerged independently of the agendas of conversion to neo-Buddhism and Sanskritization are largely yet to be explored.

M N Srinivas, who propounded the concept of Sanskritization had warned that the process of Sanskritization itself does not necessarily enhance the social status of lower castes. Other factors such as economic well-being, political power, education, and literary/historical evidence of belonging to/descending to a particular caste line are also important in aspirations for higher social status.

Most importantly for Dalits, Sanskritization did not guarantee a higher social status and did not lead to an improvement in their daily lives. This indicates that the caste system remained particularly exclusive to Dalits and efforts to improve their social status were rejected and thwarted by higher castes. Even if Sanskritization enabled social mobility through the elevation of the caste hierarchy to a relatively high status, it would change the rank/position of the community within the caste hierarchy, causing gradual inequalities and practices on behalf of the caste. It only reinforces and does not denounce the caste by offering strong criticism of the system as a whole. To understand caste relations through Sanskritization alone is to ignore the role of anti-caste struggles

that did not follow the cultural ritual path of Sanskritization. These anti-caste struggles aim not to imitate or conform to the ‘superior’ socio-cultural values of higher castes, i.e. values and practices that are casteist, discriminatory and exploitative. There were instead, these anti-caste struggles, which seek to destroy the very caste structure. Before going into the details of social dynamics in Punjab, it would be worthwhile to have a glance at caste-wise population in Punjab:

Constitutional categories	Population (%)	Castes
Other Backward Classes (OBC)	31.3%	Sainis, Sunar, Kamboj, Labana, Tarkhan/Ramgarhia, Kumhar/Prajapati, Arain, Gujjar, Teli, Banjara, Lohar, Bhat,[10] Others
Scheduled Castes (Dalits not including Rai Sikh statistics)	31.9%	Mazhabi Sikh-10%, Ramdasia Sikh/Ravidasia (Chamar)/Ad-Dharmi-13.1%, Balmiki/Bhanghi-3.5%, Bazigar - 1.05%, Others - 4%
Others	33%	Jat Sikh - 21%, Brahmin, (Khatri-Arora-Sood, Bania, Kayastha - 12% Rajputs (includes Sikh Rajputs) - 5%
Religious minorities	3.8%	Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains

Table 3.1: Category-wise population of Punjab as per Census 2011

Source: Punjab Census 2011 Report

Although upper castes also make up 33% of Punjab's overall population, the aforementioned table clearly demonstrates the Scheduled Caste population's preponderance. Under such a scenario, clash of all kinds of interests, especially socio-

religious between these two categories is quite obvious, leading to a special kind of social dynamics between the two.

3.2: Changing social dynamics in Punjab

The religious makeup of Punjab significantly changed after it underwent reorganization in 1966, when the Hindi-speaking regions were divided to form the new state of Haryana and some of the mountainous regions were transferred to Himachal Pradesh (Puri, 2003). According to Census 2011, the Sikh population in the state was 57.69% of the total. They made up around 77% of the rural population, which was higher. With a population share of 31.94%, the Scheduled Castes or Dalits made up the largest group among all Indian states. They live in rural areas in excess of 80% of the total. Therefore, Sikh and Dalit people predominate in Punjab's villages.

We should be better able to appreciate the regional distinctiveness of the status and situation of the Scheduled Castes in the state if we have a better understanding of the position of the Scheduled Castes in the Sikh community in particular and the impact of Sikhism on Dalits in Punjab in general. The Dalits (once untouchable castes) in the Punjab appear to have benefited significantly from Sikhism's liberating influence. Together, the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the institutions of *Sangat* and *Langar*, the absence of a caste-based priesthood, and the respect accorded to manual labor worked to forge a society in which distinctions of caste, faith, and rank were meaningless. At the start of the 20th century, the Singh Sabha movement decided to assert a separate and distinct identity to emphasize their boundary demarcation from Hindus, referring to it as *Hum Hindu Nahin*.

The main distinguishing characteristic they referred to was rejection of *Varnashrama* and the purity-pollution syndrome, which were central to Hinduism. To elevate their standing, a huge percentage of the region's untouchable castes joined the Sikh religion. But there was a big disconnect between what the gurus taught and how it was put into practice on a social level. The religious precepts, the tribal cultural traditions of the dominant caste of Jats, and their power interests interacted in a complicated dynamic that shaped the development of the Sikh community. A hierarchy of Sikh castes that is separate from and parallel to the Hindu caste system developed as a result of this. Understanding how casteism has persisted in the Sikh community and the causes behind its persistence is important. Particularly pertinent in this perspective are two events.

To free the Depressed Classes from the constraints of the caste system, Bhim Rao Ambedkar had in 1936 given consideration to the idea of widespread conversion of this group to Sikhism. The circumstances surrounding how and why the project was abandoned and never again pursued, causing Ambedkar to influence his followers to subsequently embrace Buddhism, continue to be thoroughly investigated. The second: It relates to the Sikh struggle, after partition for securing constitutional safeguards for Sikh Scheduled Castes at par with their Hindu counterparts. Scholars viewed it as a part of a larger political game (Nayar, 1966). The then government conceded the demand of the Sikhs, led by Master Tara Singh, a prominent Sikh political leader at that time.⁵³ According to Puri (2003), the pragmatic contemplation for reservation for the Sikh Scheduled Castes extended beyond of the secular sphere. Out of the 140 elected seats in the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 20 seats were set aside for Sikhs from Scheduled Castes via an amendment to the Punjab Sikh Gurdwaras Act 1925 that was made in 1953. With regard to the Notified Sikh Gurdwaras, not managed directly by the SGPC, a provision was made that in the five-member local Managing Committees, one member in each case will be taken from the Scheduled Castes (Kashmir Singh, 1989). Representation to the Scheduled Castes in the management of Sikh shrines institutionalized the recognition of the lower castes in Sikh religion and in the management of religious affairs of the Sikh community.

The landowning class's hold on economic and political power was consolidated during the Green Revolution of the 1960s, which also increased the social divide between them and others who did not own land. There have been significant changes at the village level as a result of Dalit political assertion, social welfare initiatives, and the growth of education among Dalits, but these changes have also increased friction and violence. Up until twenty years ago, the sexual exploitation of Dalit women was thought to be very common but is now more frequently contested. Several field studies on Dalit issues by experts on the current status and condition of Scheduled Castes in the Sikh

⁵³ Puri, H. K. (2003b). The Scheduled Castes in the Sikh Community – A Historical Perspective.

Economic and Political Weekly, 38(26), p. 2699.

community, including those by Indera Pal Singh, Abbi and Kesar Singh, Saberwal, Jodhka, Judge, Jammu, Gill, Sukhdev Singh, and MacMullen, as well as surveys and interviews conducted by Harish Puri, have broadly supported some of the observations made in these studies.

The massive building of independent Gurdwaras by the Ravidasias, Mazhabis, and other caste groups, parallel to those controlled and maintained by the Jats, is a notable sign of the rebellion against the Jat supremacy among the Scheduled Caste Sikhs. Within one Tehsil of the Amritsar district, 116 villages were surveyed by Harish K. Puri and his study team. According to this survey, there were separate cremation grounds for Dalits in 72 villages and separate Gurdwaras for Dalits in 68 villages during 2001. (Puri, 2003)

51 villages from the Majha, Malwa, and Doaba regions of Punjab were the subjects of a study by Surinder S. Jodhka. There, it was stated that nearly 66% of the villages had discrete cremation grounds, belonging to the upper castes and the Dalits, and there were discrete Gurdwaras in forty-one villages" (Jodhka, 2002).

In one of his poems, the well-known Dalit Punjabi poet Lal Singh Dil stated:

*"Mainun pyar kardiye, parjaat kuriye, Saade sakey murde vee ik than
te nahin jalaunde"* ("O' loving me girl of the other caste, (remember)
our kinsmen don't even cremate their dead at one place").

Dalit groups' assertiveness is symbolized by the construction of separate gurdwaras. The Jatts and the S.G.P.C. became enraged as a result. The then SGPC President Kirpal Singh Badungar issued a press release in which he issued the following warning:

"The trend of constructing separate Gurdwaras by Jat and Mazhabi
Singhs in villages of Punjab has witnessed a sharp increase in the recent
years, thus creating a rift among the Sikhs which could have far-
reaching social implications in times to come"⁵⁴

The widespread movement of Sikh Dalits towards a large number of Deras and sects, such as Dera Beas, Dera Sacha Sauda, Piara Singh Bhanjarawala, Dera Noormehlaia, Dera Wadbhag Singh etc., is another significant aspect of the Dalit search for

⁵⁴ Rana, Y. (2002, December 11). Caste-based gurdwaras are mushrooming in Punjab. *The Times of India*.

alternative cultural spaces to overcome the experience of indignity and humiliation. Turning to many other Sants and dargahs of Muslim Pirs is another key component of Dalit search for alternative cultural spaces to transcend the sense of indignity and humiliation. This movement is still going strong today despite being severely condemned by the SGPC and other Sikh organizations. Ajmer Singh, a scholar on the issue writes,

“The rise of a Dalit holy man, Baba Bhaniara, as the head of a Dera and the alleged publication of his own separate holy book for worship, which led to violent clashes reflected the urge to reject the conventional religious spaces. Observers attribute this rebellion of the weak, to the arrogant and crude behavior of the Jats with the lower caste people.”
(Singh, 2003)

A more radical Dalit Sikh, commented, however,

“But all these Deras, spread all over Punjab areas are controlled by the Jats and other upper castes. Everywhere these Sikhs (SC/BC followers) are mere worshippers, high and low *sewadars*. Every religious sphere is managed and manipulated on caste basis”. It was described as “Slow Death of Sikhism”
(Muktsar, 1999)

Another significant dimension of social dynamics between the upper and lower castes is the atrocities committed on Dalits. Going by the data compiled by the Punjab States Scheduled Caste Commission, every year around 2,000 cases of Dalit atrocities/discrimination are reported. Between 2004 and 2019, around 22,000 such cases were reported. Tejinder Kaur, chairperson, Punjab State Scheduled Castes Commission, agrees that the actual number may be much higher as a large number of cases are neither reported to the police nor to the commission.⁵⁵

For instance, according to police data, 132 crimes or atrocities against Scheduled Castes were registered on an average between 2017 and 2019. There were 147 documented instances in total in 2015, 132 in 2016, and 118 in 2017, according to a National Crime Records Bureau report published in October 2019. The Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 was used in 87 cases, according to the 2017 report. Seven Dalits were killed in separate incidents, and three murder attempts were also

⁵⁵ Bharti, V. (2019, November 17). 2,000 cases of atrocities on Dalits reported every year. *The Tribune*.

documented. Atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have escalated in the year 2020, according to a news report in the online edition of 'The New Indian Express' dated 16 September 2021. The National Crimes Record Bureau's report is mentioned in this news. According to this research, there was a 9.4% and a 9.3% respective increase in atrocities committed against SC and ST people in 2020. Nine UTs and 17 of the 28 states recorded comparatively more incidences of atrocities against SCs. They were Jammu and Kashmir, Assam, Bihar, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chandigarh, and Puducherry.

The report further states that Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttarakhand recorded a greater number of atrocities against STs. Madhya Pradesh topped the list with the highest crime rate of 60.8 against SCs, followed by Rajasthan (57.4), Bihar (44.5) and Uttar Pradesh (30.7). Kerala (26.8), Rajasthan (20.3), Telangana (17.4) and Madhya Pradesh (15.7) recorded the highest crime rates against STs. The crime rate is crimes committed against per lakh population of the community in a particular state.⁵⁶

The above-stated data suggests that not much has changed even in the post-liberalization era, as far as relations between the upper and lower castes are concerned. Now we come to the question of inclusion or otherwise of caste column in the 2021 census. India's caste-based census has experienced both highs and lows. The primary castes and subcastes were first documented in the 1891 census, which was conducted under the British administration. In the censuses of 1901 and 1911, the caste of Hindus and Jains as well as the tribe or race of other religions were later noted. Finally, in the 1921, 1931, and 1941 censuses, the caste, tribe, or race of every person counted was recorded. After India earned its independence, the Indian Census Act of 1948 was drafted. The government aimed to reduce caste-based communal distinctions; hence the 1951 census represented a complete departure from the traditional recording of race, tribe, or caste. The most helpful caste or tribe question in the Census Schedule was

⁵⁶ Shakil, S. (2021, September 16). Atrocities against SCs and STs increased in 2020: NCRB report.

The New Indian Express.

whether the person being counted was a member of a Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, any other Backward Class, or whether they were Anglo Indians.

Only data on SCs and STs was gathered in the following censuses in 1961 and 1971. Caste inclusion as a significant issue in the national census has been the subject of a protracted controversy. The Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC), which had not been done in sixty years, was finally carried out in 2011 under the leadership of Manmohan Singh (UPA government). Nevertheless, it faced severe criticism when it was being put into practice, and the precise caste-based enumeration data was never made public. The demand for a caste-based census increased when the Supreme Court made explicit remarks concerning a case challenging the Tamil Nadu government's 69 percent quota scheme in 2018. According to the Court,

"The Tamil Nadu government will not be able to defend a reservation policy that exceeds the 50 percent limit set for total reservation by the Supreme Court's judgement over the Mandal Commission until it conducts a census of people from various castes".

It's interesting to note that the Supreme Court just affirmed Tamil Nadu's 69 percent reservation legislation. In the 2014 case of *Census Commissioner & others vs. R. Krishnamurthy*, the Supreme Court recognized that only SCs and STs are counted in the census and that other castes are not. It remarked,

"What is reflectible is that there is a census of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, but census is not in respect of other castes or on caste basis."

In spite of the Indian caste system attributing its origins to the archaic Hindu Varna system, it is a terrible truth that caste-based divisions also spread to Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, and Sikhs. In India, there are 26% of advance castes, 42.8% OBCs, 22.2% SCs, and 9% STs, as per the Socio Economic and Caste Census of 2011. In contrast, there are 0.8% SCs, 0.5% STs, 39.2% OBCs, and 59.5% of Muslims belong to upper castes.⁵⁷ Thus, restricting the caste census to the Hindu

⁵⁷ Bose, P., Biswas, S., & Sengupta, S. (2023, October 12). The Case for Caste Census in India |

Explained. *The Hindu*.

population alone and denying it to other groups, such as Muslims, is in odds with the fundamental values enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Numerous pro-Muslim groups and organizations make the argument that Muslims should be counted in any caste census, and that any such census should, in theory, include all religions. The proposal requesting the center to conduct the 2021 census based on caste was unanimously approved by the Bihar Legislative Assembly on February 27, 2020, making it the first state assembly to do so. Following that, all of the state's major parties endorsed the caste census, characterizing it as a historic step towards eradicating poverty and elevating the lowly. Later, on January 8, 2021, the Maharashtra Assembly also adopted a resolution requesting that the Centre conduct a caste-based Census in 2021.

The Indian government's reaction towards such a demand can be seen from an affidavit filed by it in the Supreme Court on September 23, 2021, wherein a caste census (apart from the ones regularly conducted for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes) was ruled out by the government as being impossible, administratively difficult, and cumbersome. This affidavit was submitted in response to a writ case that the Maharashtra government filed asking the Union government to issue directives directing it to gather information on the Backward Class of Citizens (BCC) of rural India during the census enumeration of 2021. Additionally, the appeal demanded that the Centre make public the raw caste information on OBCs that was gathered during SECC-2011. Many political parties appealed to the Centre to rethink its decision, including the Bhartiya Janata Party's ally in Bihar, Janata Dal (United), led by Nitish Kumar.

The Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Economically Backward Classes (EBCs), and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) are the main targets of the caste-based census. Many political parties, including Janata Dal (United), Congress, RJD, SP, CPI, and DMK, have advocated for caste censuses, claiming that they are essential for the successful execution of welfare measures for the most disadvantaged members of society as well as the determination of the degree to which they are disadvantaged.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Singh, S. (2023, December 5). Post-poll Maneuvers: SP, RJD, JDU await Congress Caste Response.

The Economic Times.

While the centre has remained mum regarding its final judgement on the Bihar government's appeal, the proposal has drawn a variety of reactions from different social groups. Muslims were urged to be counted in the caste census by the nonpartisan All India Pasmada Muslim Mehaz, which works for Muslims in the underprivileged categories. Muslim groups are classified under the Bihar government's welfare programs as OBC and EBC. They have also requested that all communities and religions receive the benefits of caste censuses.

Vocal supporters of caste-based census claim that the results of the Sachar Committee and the Ranganath Misra Commission made suggestions in this direction. The Rangnath Misra Commission, or National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, stressed reservations for linguistic and religious minorities in India in 2004. According to the Sachar Committee Report, 2005, Hindu SCs and STs have better living standards than Indian Muslims. The research raised awareness among the general public on the relative inequity experienced by Indian Muslims.

These studies make it quite clear that the situation for Muslims is unchanged even now. It is therefore said that any census intended to eradicate socio-economic disparities must likewise account for all religions and castes.

The argument that the goal of voter identification and consolidation is being tried under the pretense of beneficiary identification is the one that frequently opposes the need for a caste-based census.

According to certain reports, the majority of voters in India, instead of casting their vote, vote their caste. Because of this terrible reality, the majority of political decisions in India are motivated by caste. Considering the inequalities in terms of economic resources and educational opportunities in the present-day Indian society and finding a solution for their eradication, caste-based census may actually help the policy makers. Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU), Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies jointly conducted some research studies. In these studies, it was found that in terms of wealth distribution in India, upper caste groups are over-represented in the top segment of Indian population as compared to their population share, while OBC, ST, and SC communities are over represented in the middle and bottom of wealth distribution. The study presented in a paper titled, 'Wealth Ownership and Inequality in India: A Socio-religious Analysis' published in 2018,

concluded that of the total national assets, the highest 41% is owned by upper caste Hindus followed by 31% by OBC groups, whereas the lowest among STs and SCs, each owning 3.7% and 7.6% of the total assets, respectively. (Saurav, 2021)

Therefore, proponents of a caste census argue that caste-based information is necessary if these growing inequities are to be eliminated. Without concrete facts, it is impossible to establish a concrete socio-economic policy. We require precise data on the number of different caste groups and their socio-economic position if the nation's wealth is to be allocated proportionately among various castes. Only after that will we be able to take steps towards solving these problems, which are essential for our country's overall and holistic development.

3.3: Social dynamics between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias

Prior to the assassination of Sant Ramanand, the then deputy head of Dera Ballan, at the Austrian capital Vienna in May, 2009, a majority of the Ravidasias used to follow Sikhism and pay obeisance to Sri Guru Granth Sahib, a religious text of the Sikhs. The social dynamics between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias have undergone a significant change since then.

Sikhism came into the picture as a revolt against the Brahminic system and from the very beginning; it was opposed to caste distinctions, caste system and any other forms of discrimination. The whole basis of Sikhism is fighting against such discriminations. Contrary to this, religious books of Hindus promoted caste system.

Sikhism does not recognize any form of social stratification, hence at first glance, the existence of several castes, including Dalits, within Sikhism seems to be a misnomer. Dalit Sikhs were Hindus before converting to Sikhism, and they did so in the hope of achieving social equality and dignity. However, casteism's curse was difficult to overcome, and social discrimination persisted even in their new religious guise.

Ronki Ram opines,

“Dalit Sikhs often lament that they remain peripheral to structures of power even in Punjab, which is the only Sikh-majority state in the Indian Union, but the recent elevation of Charanjit Singh Channi-a Ramdasia Sikh, to the post of Chief Minister, and thus the first ever Dalit CM of Punjab, has dramatically propelled the issues and political

identity of Dalit Sikhs to the center stage of contemporary Punjab politics.”

(Ram, 2021)

Sikhism was unable to rid itself of caste, despite its egalitarian concept and the valiant, well-intentioned efforts of numerous Sikh reform organizations. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Sikh community included castes such as Ahluwalias, Aroras, Jatts, Bhatras, Chhimbas, Jheers, Khattris, Kambohs, Labanas, Lohars, Mahatam, Mazhabis, Nais, Ramdassias, Ramgarhias, Ranghretas, and Sainis in the censuses of 1881 and 1931. The heart of the ‘caste constituency’ was made up of eleven of these castes: the outcast Dalits Chamar and Chuhra, the agrarians Jat and Kamboh, the mercantile Khatri and Arora, the artisans Tarkhan, Lohar, Nai, and Chhimba, the distiller Kalal. (Ram, 2021)

There is a huge social gap between the Ramdasia, Mazhabi, Ravidasia, Rai, and Sansi Sikhs, Ranghreta (considered as lower castes) and Jat, Khatri, and Arora Sikhs (termed as high castes). It is really terrible that Dalit Sikhs are also placed at the bottom of the Sikh caste ladder, just like their counterparts in the Hindu caste system.

One group of Dalit Sikhs—traditionally leather workers—are the Ravidasias. However, many Ravidasia believe in their own unique religion known as Ravidasia Dharm and do not consider themselves to be a part of either Hinduism or Sikhism. According to certain Dalit scholars, Scheduled Caste Sikhs have a ‘dual identity’ in which they embrace their Dalit identity as well as their Sikh identity, without denying their Sikh heritage. A noted scholar on the issue writes,

“Punjabi Schedules Castes feel proud of their both identities. They seem to be aware of the fact that Sikhism had/has played an important role for their ancestors as well as their own lives though there is disenchantment with the turn Sikhism has taken”

(Hans, 2008: 9)

Surinder S. Jodhka talks about a, ‘three-fold process of social change among the Punjabi Scheduled Castes-disassociation, distancing and autonomy’ (Jodhka, 2004)

While explaining these terms, he argues that abandonment of traditional occupations, associated with birth by the SCs is ‘disassociation’. This disassociation was accompanied by ‘distancing’ as they avoided agricultural labor. When the SCs established their own places of worship, this was ‘autonomy’ Jodhka further argues.

An Evaluation of social relations between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs: The relationship between Ravidasias and Sikhs is complex and nuanced. Ravidasias are a distinct religious group that broke away from Sikhism after the assassination of one of their spiritual leaders in the Austrian capital, Vienna in 2009.

When the 'Ravidasia Dharm' was declared by Dera Ballan in 2010, there were sharp reactions by the Sikh community. The S.G.P.C. strongly condemned this move by the Dera and the then S.G.P.C. President said that Ravidasias are a very part and parcel of Sikhism. National General Secretary of youth wing of Shiromani Akali Dal (Panch Pardhani) reacted by saying that agents of Hindu forces in the Ravidas community have taken such decision to disintegrate followers of Guru Ravidas from Sikh religion. He said that there is no place for communalism and casteism in Sikh religion. He warned of consequences of such steps which would be harmful for the Dalits. He hoped that the awakened Dalits of Punjab would not fall prey to motives of people working against their interests. If one leaves aside Sikhs, even within Chamars, there are some sections which opposed the announcement by Dera Ballan of a separate religion. Sri, Guru Ravidas Sadhu Sampardaye Society - a conglomerate of more than 150 Dalit Deras of Punjab, headed by Sant Baba Nirmal Dass and many other organizations objected to the parting of ways with Sikhism and rejected outright the newly founded Ravidasia Dharam. They argued that Guru Ravidas Ji, whom they are devoted to, is one of the great contributors, whose hymns have been incorporated in Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which is a sacred book of the Sikhs. Speaking in the presence of more than 30 Dera heads, society president Baba Nirmal Dass Jore Wale said: "The decision taken by the Dera Ballan Trust cannot be imposed on the entire Ravidasia community. The newly created scripture 'Amritbani Satguru Ravidas Maharaj-ji' will not be treated as a 'granth'. Besides, no one consulted all stakeholders in the matter before taking the decision." (Singh, 2010).

In an order to understand the social relations between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias, one needs to have an analysis of the two competing discourses. The main point of contention between the two is the issue of a living guru. Whereas Sikhism rejects the concept of a living guru after the tenth Sikh master, the Ravidasia Deras believe in physical gurus, before whom they bow, touch his feet and take his blessings. The Ravidasias' gurudwaras have started replacing their new scripture Amritbani Shri Guru

Ravidas Ji with Guru Granth Sahib, the revered scripture of the Sikhs. This kind of Dalit response against social exclusion emanating from oppressive social structures, coupled with the persistence of acute landlessness among Dalits in the state. (Ram, 2017, p. 74). The Sikhs accuse the Ravidasias of imitation of the former's iconography and symbolism. The alleged *be-adbi* (disrespect) of Sri Guru Granth Sahib by the Ravidasias is yet another point of conflict between the two communities. The Sikhs accused the Ravidasias that in their religious places, the latter worship a human guru, along with Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which the former deem a disrespect to their scripture as the Sikh tenets forbid the concept of any living guru after the 10th Sikh Master Guru Gobind Singh.

According to an empirical study, conducted by a researcher, Narinderpal Singh, 80 percent of the administrative posts of S.G.P.C. the supreme Sikh body for the management of Sikh gurudwaras, are held by Jatt Sikhs, 15 percent by other castes and a meagre 5 percent by Dalit Sikhs. (Ram, 2007, p. 4066-67) Thus there is a huge gap between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias as far as the control of Sikh religious institutions. The Sikh-Ravidasia confrontations on varied issues deem to be an offshoot of the perception of Dalits about the incompatibility between the egalitarian social ethos of Sikhism and the manifestation of social exclusion in the dealings of the dominant Jatt Sikh community in the state. (Ram, 2007, p. 4072) The Dalit Sikhs feel that they are still considered as 'others' by the high-caste Sikhs. They continue to face social exclusion in spite of their conversion to Sikhism. This social exclusion, coupled with their landlessness, force them to move towards various Deras, which promise them, dignity, self-respect and social equality. Though they have encountered strong opposition from the dominant caste, the growing level of Dalit assertion, the advantages of affirmative action, remittances, and economic diversification have given them a strong sense of equality and motivated them to demand a share in the state and local power structures, creating a sort of fault line that is indicative of violent confrontation between the oppressed and the dominant in the state, which has long been hailed as a casteless society.

The Clashes:

Talhan episode: The first-ever note-worthy manifestation of Ravidasia assertion could be seen in the famous 'Talhan episode' during the first decade of the twenty first century. Talhan is the name of a village in Doaba region's Jalandhar district in Punjab. On June 5, 2003 violent clashes took place between the Ravidasias and the Jat Sikhs over the control and management of a local Sufi Saint Shrine, named, Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh Samadh.⁵⁹(Plate: 4)

Conflicts started at the shrine's yearly fair. The majority of those hurt during these incidents belonged to the Dalit community, as did the most of the 10 homes that were destroyed. After seeing the footage of the violence broadcast on cable television networks, Dalits in Jalandhar city quickly took to the streets. A 27-year-old Dalit man named Vijay Kumar Kala was shot and killed by police when Dalits set buses on fire and obstructed traffic on the Jalandhar-Amritsar railway line. For several days, Dalits and police in Jalandhar engaged in violent skirmishes. Talhan had a curfew put in place, but on June 8, 2003, new fighting started. Dalit assertion was very much clear in this case. A group of Dalits marched into a Jat field to harvest fodder, asserting a traditional right that has been denied to them ever since the landlords began an economic blockade two months ago. Kewal Singh, a local Jat leader who played a key role in starting the anti-Dalit blockade, had fodder stacked in his field, and it was set on fire. Violence in Jalandhar replicated this local conflagration as young Dalits defied curfew orders imposed by what they claimed was a Jat-dominated police force and administration. Without a doubt, Punjab had never experienced caste-related violence on this scale.

The issue of governing the aforementioned temple actually got under way in January 2003 when the Dalits were granted permission by a local court to take part in elections for the managing committee of the shrine. Jats vehemently refused to comply with the ruling, and the case was remanded to court. On January 14, 2003, Dalits returned to the shrine to run for office armed with a new court decree. Jats exited this time. The

⁵⁹ Ram, R. (2007). Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh

Society in Punjab. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(40), p. 4072.

⁶⁰ Ibid

committee's 13 members were all Dalits because Jats abstained from voting on that particular day. A meeting was scheduled for January 19 of the aforementioned year in order to achieve a compromise as part of the deal-making strategy. Instead of coming to a compromise, a conflict broke out. As a result, the police officers stationed at the site started striking Dalits with their batons. Dalits claim that they were driven out of the shrine by the then Station House Officer Gurbachan Singh, a Jat himself. Jats deemed the Samadhi Sthal to be a Sikh shrine and asserted that Talhan's Dalits had no legal claim to the building. On that same day, Jats imposed an economic blockade on the Dalits by refusing to purchase their milk, give them feed, or even permit them access to open spaces for defecation.⁶⁰

The former Punjab Chief Minister, Amarinder Singh's administration opted not to become involved for a two-month period. The government and the police refused to follow court decisions or even comply when the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes ordered the prosecution of Jat leaders under the Prevention of Atrocities against SC Act of 1989. Talhan's Dalit oppression was so widely known; thus, it had seemed like a premeditated act on the part of the authorities to do nothing. Santokh Singh, who served as the Punjab government's social security minister at the time, said that the boycott was established by the documentary evidence and referenced the results of an investigation conducted by the department's additional director at the time. Kewal Singh and Bhupinder Singh should be exiled from the hamlet for six months, according to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes' recommendation following further research.

With rallies and even a hunger fast, Dalits attempted to exert pressure, but it was unsuccessful. On May 27, 2003, the Talhan Dalit Action Committee ultimately issued a resolution threatening additional direct action. Despite the fact that the conflict had been peaceful up until this time, the resolution stated that in the event that the Punjab administration rejects our efforts to reach an understanding, we would take direct action, for which preparations are already being made. The Dalit Action Committee announced that it will continue its hunger strike in Jalandhar through the end of May, but that if the district government did not change its partisan and communal attitude,

direct action would be taken. It should be recalled that the Dalit threat was made in response to repeated provocations and after all legal options had been exhausted. This was the background of the Talhan clash on June 5, 2003.

Two scholars on the issue opine,

“As things stand, the confrontation between Dalits, both Sikh and Hindu, on the one hand, and Jats on the other, could take an ugly communal turn. But good aspect of the episode was that the issue got resolved after considerable diplomacy involving state authorities and importantly the intervention of the British Ravidasia diaspora.”

(Jodhka and Prakash, 2003)

Meham Episode: There is an Udasi Dera of Khazan Singh in the said village, dominated by Dalit population. A majority of these Dalits belong to the Balmiki caste, whereas the rest are from the Adi-Dharmi caste. The Jatt Sikhs constitute twenty percent of the total population of the village. All these three communities have their separate religious places in the village, apart from the said Udasi Dera. The Jatt Sikhs of the village forcibly took control of Dera Khazan Singh Udasi, which, for the last many years was managed by the Adi-Dharmis of the village. The Jatt Sikhs’ main opposition was to the offering of liquor and its distribution as *prasad* among the devotees at the Dera as the former considered it be against the Sikh *Rehat Maryada* (religious code). They therefore replaced all the Udasi religious symbols with those of the Khalsa. This led to a conflict between both the communities. The Adi-Dharmis argued that since the Dera had never been a Sikh place of worship; the tradition of offering of liquor at the shrine was in no way a violation of Sikh *Rehat Maryada*. They further pleaded that it was only after 2003, when the Jatt Sikhs placed Guru Granth Sahib on the Dera premises, that the issue of Sikh *Rehat Maryada* was deliberately highlighted. Apart from it, there are graves (*Mazars*) in the precincts of the Dera, which is a Muslim tradition, ruling out the possibility of the shrine being a Sikh gurudwara. A Dalit scholar Des Raj Kali opined that what could have probably prompted the Jat Sikhs of the village to take control of the shrine was the rising prices of land in the area and the huge offerings at the Dera (Kali, 2003). This conflict was brought under control by the police by taking timely action. The matter is sub judice and like Talhan, this Udasi shrine is currently being managed by a receiver, appointed by the government as per the court orders.

Although the nature of Meham conflict is different from that of Talhan, both of them exhibit the same oppressive patterns and forms.⁶¹

The Vienna episode and its aftermath:

Following the assassination of Sant Ramanand (a leader of the Dalit-dominated Dera Sachkhand Ballan) in Vienna, Austria, the Ravidasias and the Sikhs engaged in conflict once more in 2009. The Dera is regarded as the *Mecca* of the Ravidasia community, which fiercely responded to this murder by the accused Sikh radicals.

Sant Ramanand (Plate: 5) was a well-known figure within the Dera. Prior to his death, he was acting as the Dera's deputy to Sant Niranjan Dass, the current *gaddi-nashin*. Through his tireless efforts, he had played a significant role in the dissemination of Guru Ravidas' philosophy to remote locations. His generosity allowed the Dera's message to travel to many different nations. He served as a significant source of motivation for numerous artists, writers, and educators who each made a unique contribution to the dissemination of Guru Ravidas' ideology. Sant Ramanand took birth on February 2, 1952, in his parents' house in the Punjabi village of Ramdasspura in the Jalandhar district. His parents were Mehnga Ram and Jeet Kaur. When Ramanand was a young boy, he was a devout man. His undergraduate studies were completed at Doaba College in Jalandhar. His innate mental inclination made him like being around sadhus. Due to his religious impulses, his parents tried in vain to keep their ward away from the company of sadhus. After trying in vain, his parents sent him to Dera Sant Sarwan Dass in Ballan for religious rites. The Dera's leader at the time was Sant Hari Dass. Sant Ramanand devotedly served his master. When the former discovered that the latter's parents had protested their son's religious responsibilities but had given up due to the latter's determination, the latter was once sent back to the former's home. Ramanand continued to pay frequent visits to the Dera notwithstanding his devotion to the religious duties. When Dera Sant Hari Dass once asked him what his intentions were, Ramanand answered modestly, that he wanted to live his remaining life, sitting at the holy feet of the former.

⁶¹ Ram, R. (2007b). Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(40), p. 4072.

Ramanand was given permission by Sant Hari Dass to remain at the Dera. Ramanand thereafter began serving the Dera with complete devotion. In 1973, the Dera observed the *Makar-Sankranti* festival. Ramanand enthusiastically joined in the festivities and obediently and completely carried out his master's orders. Ramanand afterwards received the gift of naam from Sant Hari Dass. Ramanand continued to provide the same level of devotion to the new Dera leader Sant Garib Dass when Sant Hari Dass passed away. In the assembly, he began singing *kirtan*, a style of devotional song that he had acquired from Sant Hari Dass. Under the direction of Sant Garib Dass and later Sant Niranjana Dass, Ramanand gained popularity as a prominent religious figure in the Dera, leading *kirtan* and *katha* rituals. Ramanand, who at this time had acquired the moniker Sant, served as the current *gaddi-nashin* Sant Niranjana Dass's deputy and actively oversaw a number of Dera projects, including the launch of the 'Begampura Express' train service, which was created specifically to transport Dera adherents to and from Jalandhar Railway Station to Varanasi Railway Station in Uttar Pradesh for the celebration of Guru Ravidas' birthday. Numerous religious songs by him and other singers that were dedicated to Guru Ravidas were made available on cassettes and CDs. He was the author of the prefaces to numerous religious publications. When it came to Guru Ravidas's *bani*, he had all control. When he gave religious lectures, the crowds would be spellbound by the simple allure of his wonderful, humble voice and his command of the subject, taken as discourse.

Sant Ramanand had a passion for literature. In addition to being an excellent *kirtan* performer and event planner at the Dera. As previously mentioned, he wrote prefaces for numerous religious publications. However, he also contributed to the editing of the Punjabi book 'Dera Sach Khand Ballan Jalandhar (itihas)'. He was, up till the time of his death, the chief editor of the periodical, 'Beghampura Shaher' a publication dedicated to spreading Guru Ravidas' philosophy.

The current Dera leader, Sant Niranjana Dass, and his deputy, Sant Ramanand, travelled to Vienna, Austria's capital city, on May 24, 2009, to attend a religious event at the Guru Ravidas Sabha temple. Some anonymous assailants who were in the crowd and were already armed attacked both of the Sants when Sant Ramanand was delivering a holy speech while they were both seated on the dais. The Sants were wounded during this course, and both of them were transferred to a neighboring hospital. The early hours of

May 25, 2009, saw the passing away of Sant Ramanand, who had been shot in the head and had suffered horrible wounds.⁶²

The Dera's members flocked to the streets in anger as the news of Sant Ramanand's passing away quickly spread throughout Punjab, resulting in violent attacks on both public and private property by the Dera followers. The passing away of their cherished and adored Sant left his disciples in a state of profound shock. They struggled to understand how a person of his disposition, who embraced all faiths and sects and had never insulted the communal or religious sensibilities of any other group, had ended up as the main target of assailants. Sant Ramanand was sitting on the dais a bit behind the current Dera chief, Sant Nirranjan Dass,, yet the former suffered more severe wounds. Therefore, it was evident that Sant Ramanand, rather than Sant Nirranjan Dass, was the attackers' primary aim. We'll go into detail about why Sant Ramanand was the assailants' primary target in a moment. The districts of Hoshiarpur, Kapurthala, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar, and Jalandhar (where the Dera is located) which are all included in the Punjab's Doaba region became the focal point of the violent response to the Sant's death. In addition to being the area with great majority of the Dera's adherents and making up 28.8% of Punjab's total population, it is significant to note that the aforementioned four districts have the highest proportion of Scheduled Castes. For eleven days between May 25, 2009, the day Sant Ramanand died, and June 4, 2009, the day he was cremated, Punjab erupted and smoldered. The undisciplined protesters set to fire, buses, trains, buildings owned by the government, and private automobiles. There was severe damage done to both public and private property throughout this course. An unidentified young man from the Scheduled Caste community was killed by police during a shooting.

According to Chandarjeet Banerjee,

“Public property worth Rs.6000-7000 crores got damaged in Punjab while only the industrial sector suffered a loss of Rs. 400-500 crores due to the violent protests by the Dera followers, in two days (May 25-26, 2009). Major industrial towns like Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Phagwara were most affected due to violent street protests. Most of the

⁶² Visiting India Sikh guru dies after gurdwara shooting in Austria. (2009, May 26). *The Economic Times*.

boil and furnace units in these areas were affected due to bandhs suffering a Rs 150 cores loss a day.”⁶³

The Dera Ballan officials in Jalandhar pleaded with their irate followers through print and electronic media to keep peace and quiet and refrain from causing damage to either public or private property, but their pleas were ignored by the protesters. It should be noted that the state police did not actively participate in containing and calming down the demonstrators or upholding law and order during the Dera supporters' violent rallies. It may have been due to political obligations on the part of the state government at the time, which was led by Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal), as a by-election for the Nur Mahal (Jalandhar) assembly constituency was about to take place and by taking harsh action against the protesters, the administration could not have run the danger of upsetting votes from the Scheduled Caste community. As a result, the law-enforcing Punjab police largely watched the violent riots in silence. Only after the central paramilitary forces were put in place was it possible to handle the chaotic situation and bring peace and order back to Punjab.

The deceased Sant's burial was attended by Parkash Singh Badal, who served as the province's chief minister at the time, the former deputy chief minister of Punjab, Sukhbir Singh Badal, the former chief minister of Punjab, Captain Amarinder Singh, and the former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Ms. Mayawati. It's estimated that over a million devotees went to the Dera to grab one last glimpse of their beloved Sant.⁶⁴ Because of how well-liked Sant Ramanand was by the general public, D.S. Guru, the then-Principal Secretary to the then-Chief Minister of Punjab, was chosen to lead the group that travelled to return the deceased Sant's body to his native country. The Sant's body was transported home for free by the then-Punjab administration, who also paid all related expenses. The plane carrying the Sant's body landed at Indira Gandhi

⁶³ Losses in Punjab estimated at Rs 7,000 cr. (2009, May 26). *The Tribune*.

⁶⁴ Sant's Cremation: A Peaceful Affair. (2009, June 4). *The Tribune*.

International Airport in New Delhi early on June 4, 2009, where it was received by a number of M. P.s from Punjab, including Ambika Soni, the then-Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, and Kumari Selja, the then-Union Minister. (Plate: 6)

In this case, it's critical to consider the reason(s) for the assailants' selection of Sant Ramanand as their main target. The solution to this problem can be discovered by looking into the Dera's operations up until Sant Ramanand's demise.

Prior to this, it had been asserted that Sant Ramanad, who had a great voice and was a skilled event-manager and organizer, had made a great impression on the minds of the Dera's followers till his death. On July 23, 1994, Sant Garib Dass, the Dera's fourth pope, died and Sant Ramanand worked as an assistant under the new and the current Dera-head Sant Niranjana Dass. Sant Ramanand performed *kirtan* and delivered religious speeches to the crowd during religious events because Sant Niranjana Dass is a bit of an introvert and tends to be quiet or less vocal during such religious programs hosted at the Dera or elsewhere. The people used to be mesmerized by his sermons because of the harmony and humility in his voice. He played a key role in spreading Guru Ravidas' philosophy and founding new temples in other nations, including Greece, Italy, France etc. Numerous artists and writers were motivated by him to release C.D.s and cassettes and publish books devoted to the Guru Ravidas's concepts. A book about the history of Dera Ballan was edited by him personally. Such tapes, CDs, and books used to be the main draw for Dera adherents at religious events held both at the Dera and outside.

Sant Ramanand's efforts had a significant role in the beginning of the Amritbani Shri Guru Ravidas Ji broadcast on Doordarshan Kendra, Jalandhar. The songs of Guru Ravidas were used to be sung in this program by the Sant and a number of other religious singers, with the Sant providing an interpretation, as he was fully aware of the significant influence that print and electronic media have on the public's minds. He thus, played a significant role in spreading Guru Ravidas's philosophy. Every year, the Dera commemorates Guru Ravidas' birthday in the seven-story Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Sthan Mandir in Seer Govardhanpura, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Numerous thousands of pilgrims from India and throughout the world visit this location to participate in this ceremony. Sant Ramanand developed a proposal to launch a unique train service between Jalandhar and Varanasi specifically for bringing the pilgrims to

Varanasi and returning them to the city of Jalandhar in consideration of the difficulty faced by devotees of Punjab in reaching the distant Varanasi. With the assistance of Northern Railway officials, this project was carried out, and the Begumpura Express train was launched. The Dera devotees travelling between Jalandhar and Varanasi are the only passengers on this train. At the time of the celebrations for Guru Ravidas' birth anniversary, every time when this train takes a halt throughout its lengthy journey, the Dera devotees waiting at the stoppage points, receive the train with great love and offer tea and food to the devotees on board.

Sant Ramanand spearheaded this Dera endeavor, which has grown immensely popular with the Dera's adherents as seen by the tremendous rush each year to reserve slots in the train far in advance. Under the guidance of Sant Niranjana Dass, the construction of Guru Ravidas temples all across the world was made possible in large part by Sant Ramanand. They used to go to countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States of America, Italy, Greece, Austria, France, Germany, Spain, Australia, and Dubai virtually every year to speak to the followers of Guru Ravidas and Dera Ballan. With the aid of Sant Ramanand, the Dera was able to build a spacious *Satsang* (congregation) auditorium with domes that can accommodate more than 15,000 devotees simultaneously.⁶⁵

He was the first to apply computer technology to the Dera with the help of his disciples in order to disseminate Guru Ravidas's teachings. His taped and CD-recorded spiritual teachings were very well-liked by Dera devotees.

On the occasion of the Sant's passing, Seth Sat Paul, a renowned Dera adherent, was quoted as saying,

“It is because of his (Sant Ramanand's) hard work that the Dera has been providing education and medical facility to everybody on minimum charges without any condition. In reality, we have lost a top-class diamond of the community.”

This above discussion about Sant Ramanand has amply proved that he was instrumental to a great extent in carving out a separate Ravidasia identity. The hardcore among the

⁶⁵ Pant, K. (2009, May 30). Mapping Out the Dera. *The Hindustan Times*.

Sikhs could not tolerate it as they consider the Ravidasias very part and parcel of Sikhism. Also, when the Ravidasias assert themselves, it hurts the high caste Sikhs' ego as the former had always been inferior to the latter in terms of social, educational and economic status. The Ravidasias in a way challenged the dominance of Jat Sikhs at the village level.

As Sant Ramanand was pivotal in challenging the hegemony of high caste Sikhs, it was therefore natural for him to be the chief target of radicals among the Sikhs.

The Vienna incident, in some sense, turned out to be a watershed in the history of the region with far-reaching implications for the identity politics of Dalits.⁶⁶ In response to the Vienna incident, a sizeable portion of Dalits declared their own religion as Ravidasia Dharm on January 30, 2010, at Seer Goverdhanpur in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, in honor of Guru Ravidas's 633rd birthday. They then started adhering to their own religious text, *Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji*. Till date (December, 2022) there are 1125 Ravidasia gurdwaras where *Guru Granth Sahib* has been replaced with *Amritbani Guru Ravifdass Ji*.⁶⁷ Around 88,650 Dalits identified as 'Ravidasia' in the 'Religion' column of the 2011 census. (Arora, 2020)

Eleven years later, the Dalits from Punjab's Doaba belt (Jalandhar, Nawanshahr, Hoshiarpur, and Kapurthala districts), also known as Adi-Dharmis or Ravidasia are divided over whether to adhere to *Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji* or the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Jandu Singha, a village in the Punjab's Jalandhar area, currently has two Ravidas gurdwaras as a result of the Vienna episode. Some people intended to substitute *Amritbani* for *Guru Granth Sahib*, while others dissuaded them from doing so. Later, the former built a new *Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji* gurdwara to house the latter's sacred text. It's interesting to note that this effort by Dera Ballan has been met with considerable opposition from the Sri Guru Ravidas Sadhu Samprdaye Society, Punjab, a group that oversees 300 Dalit Deras in the state. The organization emphasized, in its mouthpiece *Adi-Dharm Patrika*, published on July 23, 2020 that *Guru Ravidas's*

⁶⁶ Singh, S. K. (2017). The Caste Question and Songs of Protest in Punjab. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(34), p. 34.

⁶⁷ Interview with Dharampal, Manager at Dera Ballan on December 13, 2022.

followers should list 'Adi-Dharma' as their religion in the 2021 Census. A campaign on this subject by various Dalit factions was gaining momentum on social media.

In response to the declaration of Ravidasia Dharma, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) stated that it welcomed the desire of a major segment of the Ravidasia community to continue practicing Sikhism. The SGPC executive body also made a call for unity, stating that all Sikhs adored Bhagat Ravidas and that his *bani* (verses), which are an essential component of the Guru Granth Sahib, are revered by all Sikhs. Avtar Singh Makkar, the then-head of the SGPC, noted that despite attempts to split the Sikh community, a sizable portion of the Ravidasias had supported the Sikh faith. The bulk of followers, according to Makkar, have been adhering to the Sikh Gurus' teachings, albeit a small number may be engaged in conflict. He declared that they were prepared to engage in discussions with Ravidasia community officials on any topic.

When Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji (Plate: 7) a scripture for the Ravidasia community, was declared by Dera Ballan, there was some initial opposition to it. According to a number of Ravidasia sect organizations operating under the name Vishav Guru Ravidas Mission, the holy book of the Ravidasia Dharam announced by Dera Sachkhand Ballan was not recently published and should be regarded more like a historical work than a Granth. They claim that the book Amrit Bani Guru Ravidas Ji Maharaj, which has been translated into a number of languages, is a compilation of the Sant's writings and the outcome of research done by the Guru Ravidas Chair established at Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar. The meeting's moderator, G. S. Saroe, said,

“The *granth* released by the Dera Ballan is a collection of works done under the GNDU Ravidas Chair and has been published in various languages. SGPC had done a similar task some years ago. This so-called *granth* should be taken as a historical document of importance and be read by all, but not be considered a separate *granth*.”⁶⁸

The views put forth by a radical Sikh outfit, Damdami Taksal Bhindrawale, were endorsed by the Adi-Dharam World Mission, a Dalit organization, which claimed in

⁶⁸ Chaudhry, A. (2010, February 6). 'Amrit Bani a historical text, not a holy book'. *The Indian Express*.

⁶⁹ Ibid

August 2010 that the recently launched Ravidasia Dharm was a plot to drive a wedge between the Adi-Dharma community and the Sikh community. Amrit Bani, the new *granth* of Ravidasia Dharm, was not an original *granth*, according to Kishan Pal Sood, President of Adi Dharam World Mission; rather, it was an excerpt of Guru Ravidas' songs from Guru Granth Sahib.

He goes on to comment,

“Amrit Bani did not include hymns of Bhagat Kabir Ji, Sant Namdev and other holy men while Guru Granth Sahib was a cosmic scripture containing hymns of all, including Guru Ravi Das.”⁶⁹

He denounced the assault on Damdami Taksal cars and its occupants, on August 7, 2010, amid a road blockade by a group of Dalits, asserting that there had been a long history of fraternity between the Sikh community and the Adi-Dharma samaj. On behalf of Dalits, he apologized to Taksal for it.

Sant Samaj and Damdami Taksal Bhindrawale, two hardline Sikh organizations, blocked traffic on NH 1 in Jalandhar, where Dera Ballan is located, on August 12, 2010, in protest of a Dalit attack on a Taksal car and its three occupants on August 7, 2010. The crowd at the protest location had shown their steadfast devotion to Guru Granth Sahib.

According to Saroe, the Dalit organizations also decided to form an 11-person committee to assist the community in comprehending the most recent changes that followed the Dera Ballan's statements. The committee that was formed as a result had meetings scheduled with numerous community organizations that were dispersed over the globe as well as conversations with the Dera Ballan. Speakers at the event raised their dissent against the SGPC for failing to rein in the extreme Sikhs who were responsible for Sant Ramanand's murder in Vienna in 2009. A part of the Sikh groups had pledged financial aid to help have the killers released rather than issuing *hukamnamas* (religious edicts) against them. The feelings of our community have been harmed by such actions. said Saroe.

He also pushed for the title 'Guru.' to be given to Sant Ravidas. The title of Guru had been bestowed upon all the great Saints whose hymns were included in the Guru Granth

Sahib. The same treatment needs to be given to Bhagat Ravidas, as the Sikh organizations insist on calling Ravidas Ji.

The assembly had asked various Ravidasia community organizations not to compromise the sect's harmony.

Conclusion

Social dynamics between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs may be broadly bifurcated as pre-2009 and post-2009 dynamics. Before Sant Ramanand, the then deputy head at Dera Ballan was assassinated on May 24, 2009 at the Austrian capital, Vienna, the Ravidasias used to respect and follow Sri Guru Granth Sahib, scripture of the Sikhs in their gurudwaras. The possible cause behind the Sant's murder was that Dera Ballan believe in the concept of a living guru, which the Sikhs consider antagonistic to the principles of Sikhism, wherein there cannot be any physical guru after the tenth Sikh master Guru Gobind Singh. After Sant Ramanand's killing the Dera, on January 20, 2010, made an announcement on the occasion of Guru Ravidas birth anniversary celebrations, of a separate 'religion' i.e., the Ravidasia Dharam. They made their own religious book, named, Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji and got it installed in the Dera premises and a sizeable number of Ravidasia gurudwaras in Punjab in place of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. This led to some social tension among the Ravidasias and the Sikhs in some of the Punjab villages. The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabhandhak Committee, the supreme body for the administration of Sikh gurudwaras in Punjab, strongly opposed this move of the Dera and urged the Dera authorities to rethink over their decision as the former considered the Ravidasia community, a part and parcel of the Sikh society; but the Dera authorities remained firm on their decision of parting ways with Sikhism. Presently around 1100 Ravidasia gurudwaras have Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji, installed in their sanctum sanctorum. This number may increase in future, keeping in mind the Dera's efforts to awaken the Ravidasia community about the new 'religion' and the scripture and its communication with government of India, urging the latter to notify 'Ravidasia Dharam' in the upcoming General Census registers.

Chapter IV

An Assessment of the Contribution and Impact of Dera Ballan in Assertion of the Ravidasias

4.1 Introduction

The Ravidas Deras, with Guru Ravidas's teachings as their foundation, are reshaping the discourteous culture and identities that have long kept Dalits at a social and economic disadvantage in contemporary India. Dalits' connection to Ravidas's spiritual legacy is emphasized by the Deras. They felt a surge of pride and honor as a result of this. Through the creation of socio-cultural features and memorial structures for Guru Ravidas, the Deras are also generating distinctive cultural spaces for the Dalits. It is claimed that there are sixty Ravidasia Deras, and among the lower castes who have converted to Sikhism, they have a tremendous amount of influence. Both Dera Sachkhand Ballan and Dera Chak Hakim (located close to Phagwara) rose to prominence during the Adi-Dharam period of increasing Dalit consciousness and are two of the most prominent among them (Ram, 2012). They adhere to the teachings of Guru Ravidas, a poet who was born into a lower caste and lived in the 14th century. The term 'Guru' is what the Ravidasia people refer to their religious thinker as.⁷⁰ This bothers Sikhs because their religious history is supposed to end after 10 Gurus, with Guru Gobind Singh being the final one, and they object to the practice of bending down to worship a living Guru. On May 24, 2009, in Vienna, Austria, some Sikh assailants assaulted Sant Niranjana Das, the Chief of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, as well as Sant Ramanand, the Deputy Chief of the organization. Both men were injured in the incident. During the assault, Sant Ramanand was put to death. As a direct consequence of this, massive violence broke out in the states of Punjab and Haryana, resulting in the loss of two lives and the destruction of property valued in thousands of crores. In 2010, the Dera stated that they were breaking away from Sikhism and starting a new religion called the Ravidasia Dharm. In accordance with this, a survey was conducted for the

⁷⁰ Ram, R. (2009b). Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab.

Journal of Punjab Studies, 16(1), p. 20.

present study wherein 200 participants were interviewed. According to the results of the survey, it was found that 61 participants felt that the social relations between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs have been adversely affected after the announcement of Ravidasia Dharm. whereas 132 participants did not feel so, and 7 remained neutral. With respect to this, 176 out of 200 respondents were aware of the fact that the Ravidasia Dharm exists as a sect of a religion. However, only 124 respondents were aware of the name of the Dera which announced the Ravidasia Dharma. The Ravidasias are frequently classified as a Scheduled Caste Hindu community, despite the fact that they adhere to a number of Sikh rituals and refer to their houses of worship as 'gurdwaras' (Kumar, 2018).

Thus, in line with the above, this chapter will focus on the Dera Sachkhand Ballan's role in fostering a more prosperous and cohesive Ravidasia community and building its religious identity. In addition, this section will shed insight on the Dera's overall contribution to the affirmation of the Ravidasia community.

4.2 Contribution of Dera Ballan in Social Upliftment of the Ravidasia Community

Despite the fact that Punjab is home to a number of Ravidas Deras, Dera Sachkhand Ballan is the one that has won over the hearts and minds of the locals. Its rise to popularity can be traced back not only to the organization's commitment to Ravidas, who is honored as a guru and is consistently referred to as Guru Ravidas in Dera Sachkhand Ballan literature but also to the material transformation that the organization has been capable of carrying out as an outcome of the social upliftment that it has attempted to bring about. In line with this, 185 participants also felt that it is appropriate to address Sant Ravidas as 'Guru'. This was the primary factor in the organization's ability to become so prominent. The Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital in Adda Kathar, which is located in the district of Jalandhar, was one of the organization's flagship projects. It was established in 1982 after two local devotees gave the organization land in order to honour Sant Sarwan Dass.

A scholar states,

“The project began as a modest dispensary that eventually grew into an eight-bed hospital.”

(Singh, 2013)

Since that time, there has been a gradual growth of hospital buildings as well as the installation of fresh equipment. Some examples of this new technology include an autoanalyzer and ultrasound scanning equipment for the laboratory and heart monitors for patients, who are suffering from heart conditions. Since it first opened its doors, the hospital has grown to become one of the most important medical facilities in the area. It now has departments of medicine, dentistry, orthopedics, eye surgery, gynecology, pediatrics, and accident and emergency, in addition to intensive care units staffed by more than a dozen doctors each. When compared to market norm prices, the costs imposed by Dera hospitals are incredibly modest. An operation that costs Rs. 5,000 in this hospital, for instance, could cost Rs. 10,000 in Hoshiarpur, possibly Rs. 25,000 in Jalandhar, or even more in Ludhiana. The hospital's rates are typically kept by the trust at a level that is around half of what the market would consider to be normal. In a few instances, it is only one-third or even a lower percentage. The goal is to be of service to the general populace. Everyone, regardless of their caste or other social distinctions, is welcome to receive treatment at the hospital (Ranjan, 2019).

The Sant Sarwan Dass Model School (SSDMS) in Phagwara is managed by the Dera in addition to overseeing the hospital. The school, which currently provides lessons from infancy through the twelfth grade (the final year of secondary school) using the CBSE curriculum, is maintained by the Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan Public Charitable Trust (SGRJAPCT). The school also has a library, an exhibition hall, a computer lab, a meeting room, and utility spaces. In addition, the institution maintains a fleet of buses that are used to transport students to and from their homes.

About the administration of the school, a writer states,

“Administrators from the Dera regularly evaluate the school's track record in granting access to underprivileged parts of the community, much like they do with the hospital. The fee structure of this school is noticeably more affordable when compared to that of other nearby schools that are affiliated with the CBSE.”

(Nagpal, 2019)

Furthermore, one donor from outside of India has provided all of the funding for the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital (SSDCEH) in Ballan. The hospital began treating patients on February 15, 2007, and thanks to the availability of a YAG laser, a photo emulsification machine, and other amenities, it is well-equipped to handle a wide

range of eye diseases. Many surgical operations have also been performed, and patients from various socioeconomic backgrounds have been treated. Because surgeries are performed at a nominal charge, even people from foreign nations have operations in the hospital. Every organization that is overseen by the Dera Sachkhand Ballan makes an effort to live up to the idea of being a reputable charitable organization. Collectively, they have contributed to the instillation of a powerful sense of self-esteem among Ravidasias (Singh, 2012). This sense of self-esteem, according to Narayan (2021), celebrates the Ravidasias' caste identity as well as their capacity to construct and efficiently handle social development projects.

A scholar opines,

“Because of their support, the Dera Sachkhand Ballan has developed into an icon of communal advancement and is now the undisputed leader of the “Ravidasia Dharm”. Naturally, given the magnitude of their contribution, this sense of pride is most apparent among Ravidasias who live outside of India.”

(Singh, 2019)

4.3 Concept of Religious Identity and the Dera’s Role towards Establishing the Ravidasia Identity

The modern and secular discourse provides the Ravidasias with an essential line of defense against the Jat Sikhs' efforts to impose their religion and exert authority over them. The Dera Sachkhand Ballan is effective in deflating the modernity or religion split, moving towards a faith that has a critical portion of secular, egalitarian ideology and a strong statement of constitutionally given rights of the Scheduled castes. In addition, the liberatory potential of secularization cannot be quickly disregarded in a setting in which modern-secular sensibilities are integrated into the Ravidasia dharmic narrative (Ram, 2016). They are able to acquire power from secular societies for the purposes of self-propagation and subsistence, which is especially helpful in situations in which the Dalit groups are engaged in direct contradiction with the dominant regional organizations. The religious structure and liberal subject matter of Dera Sachkhand Ballan's Ravidasia Dharm is an important matter of study that retracts the presumptions of western scholars as well as Indian scholars and emphasizes a much-needed “Dalit perspective” in its place (Ranjan, 2019). This is a crucial part of the Dera Sachkhand

Ballan's Ravidasia Dharma. The Ravidasia community is also a significant illustration of how governmental institutions of secular jurisprudence and practices of secularization can generate conditions that are helpful and powerful for persons who are on the outskirts of society. In addition, the Ravidasia community helps to bring out the disputed character of those dominant religious identities, which are commonly regarded and portrayed as uniform and homogeneous (Ram, 2012).

Minor modifications were made to the conventional Sikh prayer and ceremonies, and the Dera placed a significant focus on reciting the Ravidas *bani*. The evening payer, also known as Ardas, is no longer used in Ravidas Deras or Gurdwaras in favor of the words, '*Jo Bole So Nirbhye—Sri Guru Ravidas Maharaj Ki Jai*' (Fearless is the one who utters, Victory to Shri Guru Ravidas) as opposed to the more well-known phrase '*Jo Bole So Nihal Sat Sri Akal*' (Whoever utters, shall be content; God is the ultimate truth).⁷¹ This is one way in which Ravidas Gurdwaras differ from mainstream Sikh Gurdwaras. This is also in line with the survey results wherein 193 participants agreed that there must be a common single gurudwara in villages and cities. In addition, the emergence of new cultural venues was precipitated by Dera's decision to take a moderate stance between the extremes of assimilation and violent secession.

An authority on the issues opines,

“They (Ravidasias) chose the path of moderation because neither they nor their ancestors were politically motivated enough to follow radical separatism, nor were they willing to take on the path of assimilation because of the fear of losing their own culture into the whirlpool of the upper caste's cultural lifestyles”

(Singh, 2019).

They were compelled to choose the moderate course as a result. In recent years, the Dera has solidified its position as the Adi-Dharma movement's social and theological heir. The particular socio-religious identity of the Dalits, known as Ravidasia, was formed, honed, harnessed, and displayed in large part because of the Dera. Ronki Ram observes,

“The Dera is responsible for cultivating and emphasizing distinct religious symbols (the *Har*), songs (the *bani* of Guru Ravidas), spiritual leaders (Ravidas), slogans (*Ravidas Sakti Amar Rahe*), which translates

⁷¹ Ibid, pp. 20-21

to “the spiritual strength of Ravidas forever”), and cultural identities. The Dera has developed into an “identity anchor point,” particularly for the Ad Dharmi community, for the Dalits.

(Ram, 2017)

Sant Niranjana Dass, the current head of the Dera stated on January 31, 2010,

“The Dera's followers will follow a unique religion called the “Ravidasia Dharam”, which would have its own holy book called the “Amrit Bani Satguru Ravidas Maharaj Ji.” In addition, he devised a catchphrase, which was “Jai Guru Dev. The sole mission of the Dera is to disseminate Guru Ravidas's humanitarian philosophy, as well as the *bani* of Guru Valmiki Ji, Satguru Kabir, Satguru Namdev, Satguru Sen, Satguru Tirlochan, and Satguru Sadhna Ji.”

A scholar comments,

“The Sants of the Dera are raising awareness among the adherents about their affiliation to the divine lineage of Guru Ravidas, who has a significant influence on angelic figures such as Guru Nanak Dev and Meera Bai, which enhances the adherents' social reputation”

(Singh, 2019)

In addition, the Sants are generating awareness about their affiliation with the spiritual lineage of Guru Ravidas. It is also said that Guru Ravidas visited Guru Nanak at least three times and handed over his writings to him. Later, these texts were included into the Guru Granth Sahib, which is revered as a holy text. They were able to conduct study and offer a new view of their past thanks to these useful sources. The Dera gives multiple socio-spiritual identities and cultural spaces to both its followers in general and to the Dalits in particular, which contrasts the development of a distinct cultural legacy for the Dalits within society. (Takhar, 2014)

4.4 An Assessment of the Dera's Overall Contribution towards Assertion of the Ravidasias

The Dera has developed into a tool that is being utilized to raise awareness among Dalits in the state of Punjab. The Sants of the Dera are spreading the concept that Guru Ravidas is the savior of Dalits and are preaching a separate message about the inheritance that Ravidas left behind (Trehan, 2018). The Dera's spiritual space was utilized for both practical religious ceremonies and the promotion of social awareness. Over time, it developed into the hub of Dalit activity and the ‘epicenter of social

protest.’ It is widely believed that the Dera adopted a policy that fell in between radical assimilation (Sanskritization) and radical dissociation (conversion to specific other religions) in order to create a separate Dalit identity. This strategy was known as the ‘middle route.’ Since 2010, the Dera has followed a route that radically separates itself from the more traditional structure, seeing it from social and religious perspective.

A scholar opines,

“Since the 1920s, the Sants of the Dera have been working as an assistant to the representatives of the Dalit people in order to promote cultural awareness, socio-cultural spaces, and identity construction among the Dalits”

(Singh, 2019)

For the sake of claiming their cultural dominance and reconstructing their history, the Sants of the Dera are carving out both physical and social niches in the community. From the perspective of the physical world, the Sants of the Dera have constructed various buildings in remembrance of Guru Ravidas. These buildings are devoted to his objective, which was to create a state of exhilaration, which is known as ‘Behgampura.’ The Dera has been able to exert its en-bloc voting impact on the state government, and as a result, it is well on its way to achieving its goal of constructing a state-sponsored heritage building at Khuralgarh village in the Garhshankar tehsil of Hoshiarpur. This building will be known as the ‘Minar-e-Behgampura.’⁷² Sant Sarwan Dass had a specific interest in the creation of historical structures for the Dalits, which he believed were necessary for the society's efforts to maintain its dignity and sense of self-worth. His most important contribution was the building of a large temple at the site where Guru Ravidas was born.

A research scholar writes,

“This temple would serve as a location of pilgrimage for Ravidas's devotees, much like the Golden Temple, which serves as a place of pilgrimage for Sikhs and Mecca that serves as a place of pilgrimage for Muslims”

(Ranjan, 2019)

⁷² Singh, I. P. (2016, April 4). Govt Poll Vaults with “Dalit Minar.” *The Times of India*.

Guru Ravidas was said to have been born in the village of Seer Goverdhanpur, which is adjacent to the Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. On June 16, 1965, the first stone of the temple's foundation was placed, and it didn't open to the public until June 1994. An accommodation complex with four stories was developed to handle the rising pilgrim population as well as the wide range of amenities being made available. In addition to this, the Dera developed a great number of buildings in the village of Ballan. In January 2004, the building of a brand-new congregation hall that had the capacity to accommodate 25,000 followers was finished. In addition to this, the Dera encourages the establishment of Ravidas Deras among its adherents and also provides financial support to these establishments in Punjab and throughout the rest of India (Tilhon, 2012).

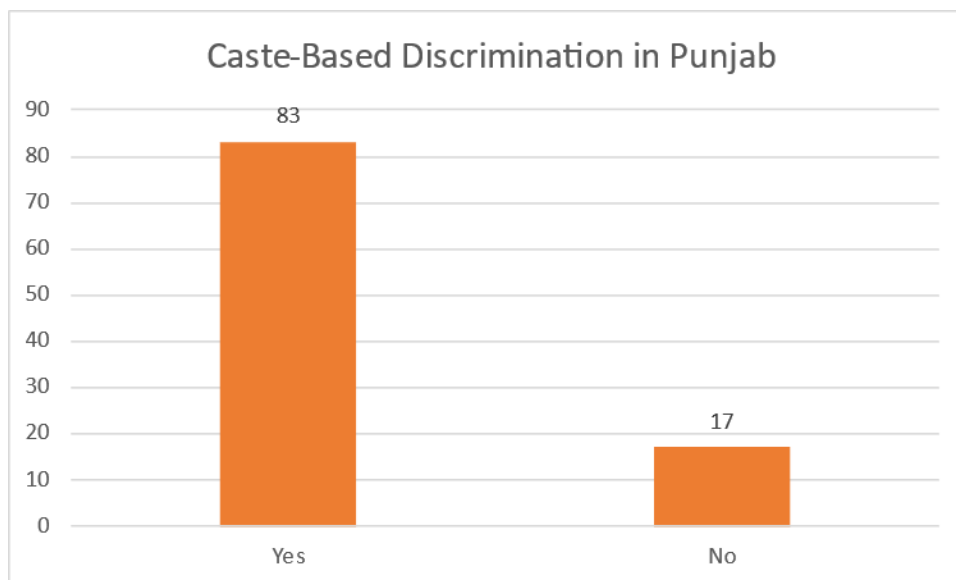
The Dera is also in the process of constructing institutes of human evolution such as clinics and schools with the financial help of its members, particularly those who come from other countries. Because of these transnational ties, Dera has evolved into a major institution that is capable of conceptualizing a new identity that is forceful and communal for its adherents. These types of development activities offer Ravidasias their own distinct religious and cultural venues, which, in their eyes, are on par with the religious and cultural locations that are used by mainstream populations. For them, these structures and places are more than just physical landmarks; rather, they represent the possibility of achieving freedom from the long-standing caste-based exclusion from mainstream socio-religious structures. This is why these locations have become places of contested religious-cultural spaces. These places weave novel socio-religious traditions surrounding them, which openly question the society's beliefs of exclusivity, and they do so as a part of their whole aesthetic (Singh, 2019).

4.5 Data Analysis

A survey was conducted to determine the general public's knowledge of the Dera in question, as well as the impact of the 'Ravidasia Dharm' on social relations between Ravidasias and Sikhs, using a questionnaire distributed to 200 respondents, 50 from each of the four districts of Punjab's Doaba region. The responders were asked seven questions in all. The survey findings are listed below.

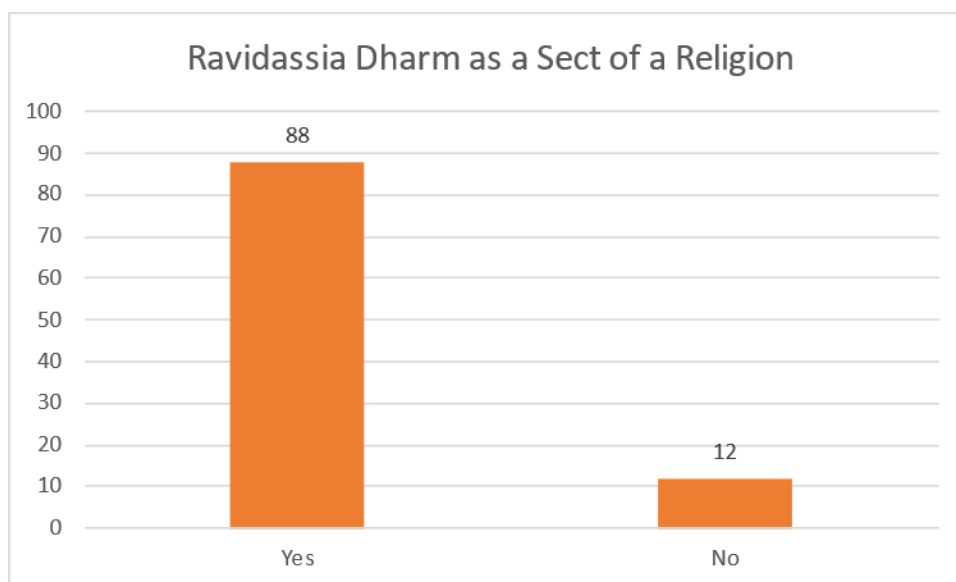
The **first question** was Do you feel that caste-based discrimination is still there in Punjab?

166 (83%) respondents out of 200 responded assertively and 34 (17%) responded negatively.



In the **second question**, it was asked that Do you know that 'RavidasiaDharm' exists as a sect of a religion?

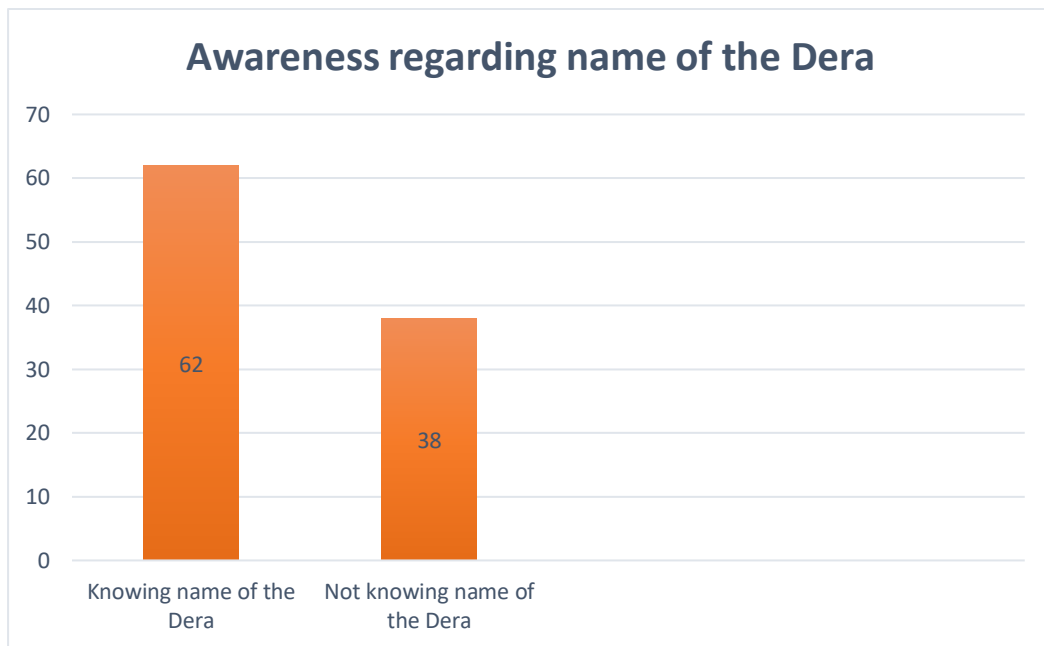
176 (88%) respondents out of 200 said 'yes' and 24 (12) said 'no'.



If yes, then the **third question** was What is the name of the Dera which announced 'RavidasiaDharm'?

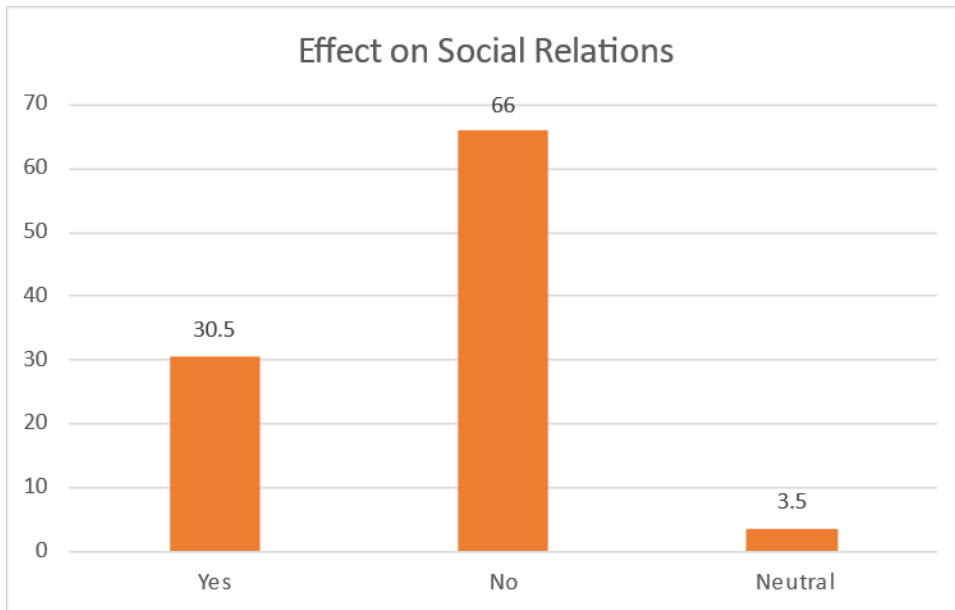
The number of respondents, knowing the name of the Dera was 124 (62%) out of 200 and

Not knowing the name of the Dera was 76 (38%) out of 200.



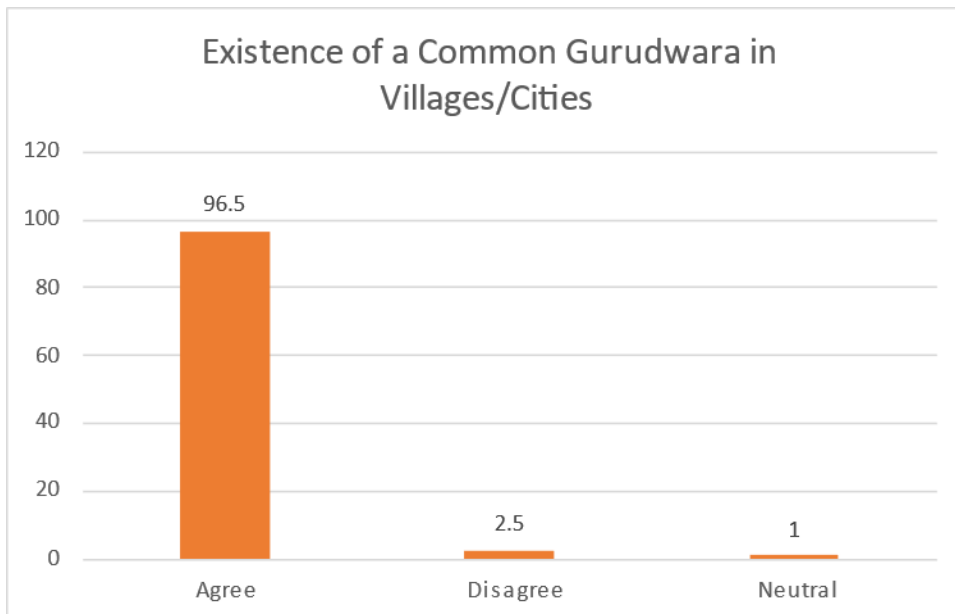
The **fourth question** was Do you feel that the social relations between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs have been adversely affected after the announcement of ‘Ravidasia Dharm’?

61(30.5%) out of 200 responses were positive, 132(66%) responses were negative and 7(3.5%) were neutral.



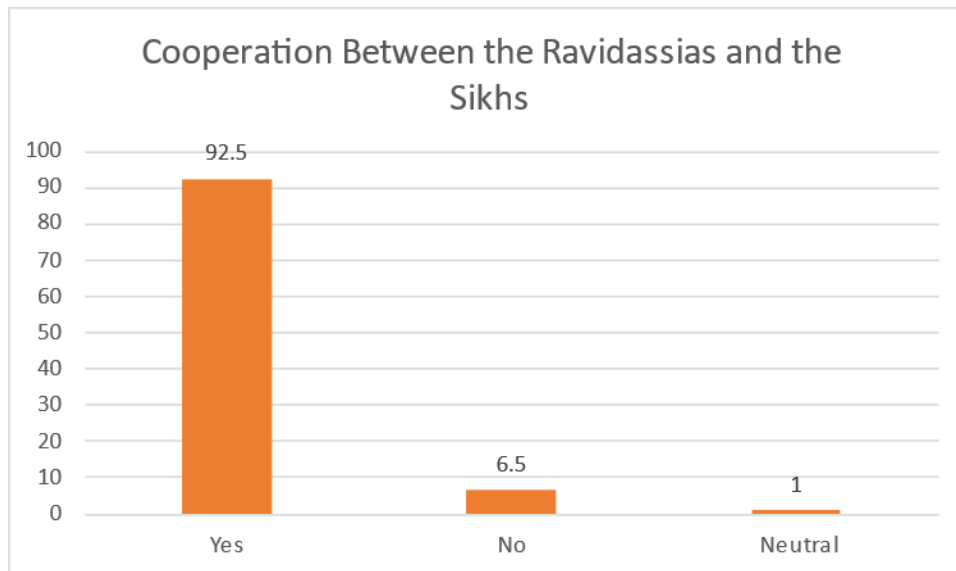
In the **fifth question**, it was asked that Do you agree that there must be a common single gurudwara in villages/cities?

193 (96.5%) respondents agreed with it, 5 (2.5%) respondents disagreed and 2(1%) were neutral



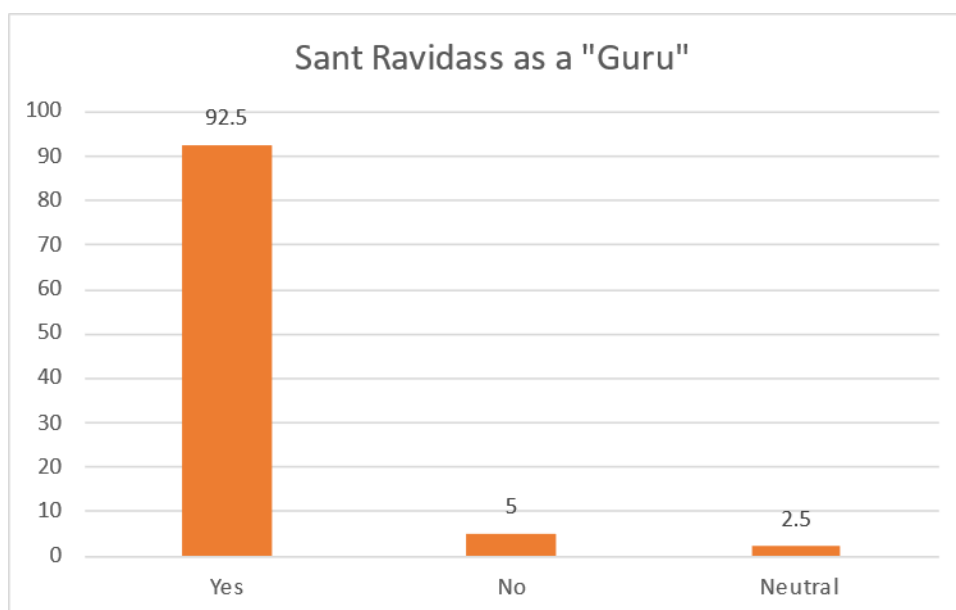
The sixth question was Do you see mutual cooperation and coordination between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs during various socio-religious functions in your locality?

185 (92.5%) out of 200 respondents said 'yes', 13 (6.5%) said 'no' and 2(1%) were neutral.



The **seventh** or the last question was In your opinion is it appropriate to address Sant Ravidas as 'Guru'?

185 (92.5%) respondents out of 200 replied positively, 10 (5%) answered negatively and 5 (2.5%) were neutral.



Conclusion

The Dalits in Punjab are designing, forming, and regulating a network of new socio-cultural features, artifacts, and buildings that give them separate physical and social places to challenge the dominant culture's repression of their historical marginalization in the caste hierarchy. The same can be delineated from the survey results wherein 166 respondents believed that caste-based discrimination still exists in Punjab. They also use these locations to maintain the dominance of their caste over the other Dalit castes in society. The establishments for the development of their identities, the assertion of their history and culture, and the development of social mobilization are these political constructions. They have been inspired to look for new socio-cultural contexts or alternative cultures, both within and outside the social framework connected with mainstream society, as a result of their ongoing exclusion from cultural spaces associated with mainstream society. This is in accordance with the study results wherein it was found that 185 respondents believed that mutual cooperation and coordination between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs during various socio-religious functions exists in their locality.

In line with the above, the Ravidasia belief systems are a multifaceted blend of contemporary values such as fairness, constitutionally protected equal opportunities, and a religious identity that defies the hitherto asserted reductive conceptions of religion, a comprehensive rejection of modernity, and the dominant prototype of Sikh Maryada. For example, equality is one of the modern sensibilities that the Ravidasia belief systems uphold. Other modern values include constitutionally enshrined equal rights. The Dera discourses of transformation, equality, and independence have progressed past these reductionist and outmoded dichotomies. Dera religiosity opposes the power structure of the dominant caste and the dominant religious beliefs by posing itself as an intricate and one-of-a-kind ongoing dialogue for the formation of new influences of dominance and control of religious symbols.

Dera Ballan has been crucial in raising the awareness of Dalits, particularly the many Guru Ravi Dass devotees who are dispersed throughout the globe. The Dera has become a key institution of the Adi-dharma community as a result of its work in a variety of domains, including social service, medicine, education, and other areas.

The Dera has played a significant role in mobilizing the Scheduled Castes. Thanks to the Dera's efforts, Guru Ravi Dass temples have been erected abroad in countries like Italy, France, Greece, etc. The Ravidasia community now has its own holy emblem, which is '*Har*' in Gurumukhi, just like every other religious group in the world does, thanks to the enormous efforts of the Dera Sachhkhand Ballan. A conglomerate of many Guru Ravidas Deras known as The Guru Ravidas Sadhu Sampardaye Society registered this logo on March 6, 1987 under the Copy Right Act, 1957, with registration number A48-807/87. A major factor in inspiring a sense of togetherness and oneness among them and bringing them together on a single plate from has been the Ravidasia community's shared symbol. The 40 rays that surround this sign stand in for the 40 hymns of Guru Ravi Dass that the Adi granth contains and which enlighten the minds of its readers. These lines are: "*Naam tere ki jot lagayee, bhayo ujjaro bhawan saglare*" ("I have lit the lamp of thy name; the entire universe is enlightened") and are inscribed in the inner layer of the emblem. These phrases are taken from one of Guru Ravidas's hymns.⁷³

The Ravidasias are growing more and more conscious of their religious rights every day, as seen by the recent significant growth in the construction of distinctive Guru Ravi Dass temples in Punjab villages. They refer to their Sants as 'Guru' rather than '*Bhagat*,' which is the preferred pronoun of the high-caste Sikhs. The Ravidasia people have begun writing '*Putt chamaran de*' (sons of chamars) on their bicycles and automobiles, following a lead from the *Jatts* of Punjab who have '*Putt Jattan de*' written on their vehicles. Additionally, the Punjabi film and music industries, of late have been using the word '*Jatt*' in movie titles and song lyrics to promote the values of the Punjabi Jatt community. Now that Dalit musicians have entered the music industry, albums like '*Bibe putt chamaran de*' (gentle sons of chamars) and '*Ankhi putt chamaran de*' (self-respecting sons of chamars) are available. These Ravidasia activities aim to overthrow the higher castes' dominance over Punjab's socio-economic

⁷³ Ram, R. (2009b). Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab.

structure. These exemplify the Dalit people's emotions of self-assurance. A clear indicator of the developing Dalit consciousness to carve out a distinct identity for itself is the way the Scheduled Castes, especially the Ravidasia group, rallied and came together in the wake of assassination of Sant Ramanand of Dera Ballan.

Chapter V

The Ravidasia Diaspora: Contribution towards Growth of Dera Ballan and Assertion of the Ravidasia Community

Introduction

The Ravidasia Diaspora of late has been playing an active part in the direction of assertion of the Ravidasia community overseas and back home. The role of Dera Sachkhand Ballan could not be under-estimated in guiding and directing the Ravidasia Diaspora in asserting themselves in the form of establishing separate religious places or forming various caste associations for the well-being of their community. The Ravidasia community associations working in England, USA, Canada, Spain and many other countries of the world have been enthusiastically endeavoring to buck up the community members to get together and agitate for their religious and social rights. Although their efforts did not produce the desired results, they nevertheless played a significant role in inspiring the Ravidasias in the Diasporas and at home to respect themselves and treat themselves with dignity. It is to be noted here that the following of Dera Ballan is restricted to not only Punjab or India; it transcends borders and one can see the Ravidasia people in countries like England, USA, Canada, Greece, Italy, France, Austria, Spain, Germany and many an Arab country. The Ravidasias, settled abroad have contributed substantially towards the growth and progress of the Dera in terms of expansion of the Dera infrastructure and its various social projects like charitable hospitals and schools. It is with the support of the Ravidasia Diaspora settled in the above-mentioned countries that the Guru Ravidas temples have been established there and in many other countries, where the Ravidasias have a substantial population. Paramjit S. Judge, an authority on the issue opines,

“The Dera followers have established their own separate Ravidas gurudwaras different from the mainstream Sikh gurudwaras across the world. The foundation stones of almost all these Ravidasia gurudwaras have been laid by the *Sants* of Dera Ballan”.

(Judge, 2014)

The Dera has been regulating the affairs of many a Ravidasia gurudwara overseas. For this purpose, it has established international trusts such as, Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass

Charitable Trust (United Kingdom), Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (Vancouver, Canada), Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (United States). These trusts are being managed by the non-resident Indian Ravidasias from the Doaba region of Punjab, which constitutes a large diasporic Ravidasia community. (Sahoo, Kruijf, 2016)

5.1 Concept of Religious Transnationalism

Migration, being a member of a minority group, diaspora, and transnationalism are all related to various but related reasons for religious transformation. It is crucial to be very clear about which of these domains we are researching at any particular time if we are to understand and analyze these patterns from a social science perspective.

To quote John Hinnell,

"Diaspora religion of any people who have a sense of living away from the land of the religion, or away from 'the old country'." ⁷⁴

He broadens the term to even encompass instances where 'a minority phenomenon' is represented by religion. Diaspora and religion are related because migration implies diaspora, migrants practice their religions, and as a result, diaspora implies religion. Coupling migration and the resulting minority status with diaspora also unnecessarily combines issues that may be related but possibly distinct. The same is true of 'transnationalism' patterns, a term that is frequently misused to refer to the diaspora. Of course, there are connections between migration and transnationalism, diaspora, and minority status (Vertovec and Cohen, 1999). Related, however, is not to be understood the same. It is feasible to see that specific socio-religious transformation processes are included in each of these abstract categories.

Religious and other socio-cultural influences are particularly potent in the domains of (a) migration and minority status (clearly a dual category that, given the chance to explore, requires additional deconstruction as well), (b) diaspora, and (c)

⁷⁴ Antes, P., Geertz, A. W., & Warne, R. R. (2004a). Religion and Diaspora. In *New Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Vol. 2) Walter De Gruyter, p. 281

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 287

transnationalism. Minorities that are divided by 'race,' 'language,' cultural traditions, and religion are frequently thought of while discussing migration. In a new environment, it can be characterized as the transmission and restoration of social relationships and cultural norms. In this context, the term "diaspora" especially refers to the perceived ties that a post-migration community (including refugee communities) has to both its place of origin and to people from other areas who share a common cultural history.

Richard Marienstras (1989) defined a diaspora as a group having some level of national, cultural, or linguistic awareness and a relationship with a group residing 'elsewhere' that is territorially discontinuous.⁷⁵ Alongside frequent travel and interaction, transnationalism refers to the actual, ongoing knowledge, financial, and resource transfers made by diaspora members to those back home or in other parts of the world by their ethnic group. While diasporas are a component of all transnational communities, not all diasporas contribute to transnationalism, and while diasporas are a product of all forms of movement, not every migration entail 'diasporic consciousness' (Vertovec, 2002).

India is frequently associated with old spiritual traditions, vibrant color, and terrible poverty. Even while the majority of people have only hazy notions of how it operates or how individuals at the extreme bottom of the hierarchy live, it is not far behind in its use of an antiquated caste system. The Indian caste system has been attempted to organize, classify, and make sense of by a variety of researchers, both Indian and European. They have developed several caste theories in an effort to explain caste's essential traits, evolution, and role in upholding Indian society. Others have looked at the various forms of caste prejudice, or in both historical and contemporary India, there is a practice known as casteism in Indian English. (Lum, 2011).

Six Sikh militants stormed the Guru Ravidas Temple in Vienna on May 24, 2009, carrying firearms and daggers. Sant Rama Nand, the assistant to Sant Niranjan Dass, the leader of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, which promotes a marginalized religious tradition based on the cult of Ravidas, was the subject of their particular attacks. Nevertheless,

the former succumbed to his injuries while the latter sustained the assault. The attackers are believed to have been Sikhs who were angered by the Dera Ballan's unusual religious practices, such as devotion to a live master and 'disdain' for the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, among other things. The Vienna event unavoidably led to an extensive unrest among Dera Ballan's supporters and other Dalit groups in Punjab. The episode was to have significant long-term repercussions, even if the Punjab administration was able to keep peace and order in the days that followed. The Ravidas Temple at Seer Goverdhanpur, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, where Ravidas was born, witnessed the formation of a new 'religion' on January 30, 2010, as was covered in the earlier chapters, in front of a sizable crowd of religious leaders and devotees. The brand-new faith, known as Ravidasia Dharm, will have a sacred text of its own (Amrit Bani Shri Guru Ravidas Ji Maharaj), symbol or community flag (*Har*), and salutation (*Jai Guru Dev*). In essence, after about a century of development, the Ravidasia Dharm had reached maturity. (Singh, 2013).

A number of Ravidasia groups in Europe (such as Italy and Spain) have gone on to establish their own distinct houses of worship. As a result, despite different assertions to the contrary, it is a religious formation that developed in the diaspora in response to Ravidasis' exclusion from some Punjabi temples. The Sikh community in general portrays this as a struggle for control over resources and power. Of course, the Ravidasia community portrays the split as a protest against the prestige they have been accorded. There are currently gurudwaras for the Ravidasia community in Koropi, Marathonas, and Menidi in the Attica region, as well as Schimatari in the Boeotia region and Psachna in the Euboea region.

5.2: Overseas Expansion of the Ravidasias

While caste prejudice is most frequently associated with India, it is today recognized as a severe issue in countries like the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States of America, each having a sizable population of individuals with Indian ancestry. In the United Kingdom, The Dalit Solidarity Network was established in 1998 to engage in lobbying and advocacy with the aim to spread awareness of caste prejudice and to start a movement for its abolition. The Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance has additionally

been striving to eradicate caste prejudice in the United Kingdom and across Europe. Such organizations have petitioned the UK government to pass legislation that would address caste-related crime in the same way that it does racial crime. The Equality Act was passed in 2010, after an amendment by House of Lords was incorporated to the Equality Bill.⁷⁶ However, even as this type of lobbying was going on, a Ravidasia spiritual leader was purportedly murdered in Vienna, Austria, as a result of a caste-related incident. Both the murder and what they saw to be caste discrimination were denounced by the Ravidasia community in the United Kingdom.

Before and after the 19th century, the Ravidasias started emigrating from the Punjab, and many of them made their homes in Europe and North America, mainly the United States and Canada. A substantial Ravidasia population also resides in Oceania. The following cities are home to some of the most well-known Ravidasia shrines outside of the United States: Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Bradford, Coventry, Derby, Lancaster, Southall, Southampton, Kent, and Bedford (all in the United Kingdom); Vancouver, Calgary, Brampton, Toronto, Montreal, and New York (all in Canada); and Sacramento, Pittsburg, Seattle, New York, Houston, Selma, Fremont, and Austin (all in the United States). In recent years, Austria, Italy, France, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Greece, and Lebanon have also seen a large influx of Ravidas Temples and Gurdwaras. All these Ravidas Deras have their foundations placed by Sant Niranjan Dass of Dera Ballan. The large number of Ravidas naam leevan sangat (devotees of Guru Ravidas) at these many overseas Ravidas *gurughars* (religious places) are blessed by the Sants of Ballan on a regular basis.

⁷⁶ Hunt, S. (2012). Negotiating Equality in the Equality Act 2010 (United Kingdom): Church-State Relations in a Post-Christian Society. *Journal of Church and State*, 55(4), p. 690.

Some Images of the Ravidasia Gurudwaras abroad:



Image 5.1: Gurdwara Guru Ravidas, Nasinu, Fiji, established in 1939



Image 5.2: Gurdwara Guru Ravidas Bhavan, Birmingham, U.K.



Image 5.3: Gurdwara Guru Ravidas Sabha, Southall, U.K



Image 5.4: Gurdwara Guru Ravidas Temple, Auckland, New Zealand⁷⁷

⁷⁷All images source: Facebook page of Dera Ballan

Continent-wise List of Ravidasia Gurdwaras abroad:

A website of the Ravidasia community gives a list of the Ravidasia gurudwaras abroad as:

Oceania:

- Guru Ravidas Gurdwara (Nasinu Sikh Temple), Nasinu, Fiji (established in 1939)

Australia:

- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Bombay Hills, Auckland, New Zealand (established in 1991)
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Hastings, New Zealand (established in 2007)
- Gurdwara Begampura Sikh Temple, Papakura, New Zealand (established in 2008)
- Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, Campbellfield, Melbourne, Australia (established in 1996)

Europe

- Shri Guru Ravidas Bhavan, Birmingham, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple, Southall, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Community Centre, Handsworth, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple, Wolverhampton, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple – Coventry, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple, Hockley, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple – Foleshill, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara – Bedford, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple – Darlaston, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple – Derby, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Leicester, UK

- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple – Willenhall, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara - Erith Kent, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Mission Temple, London, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara and Community Centre- Hitchin, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara- Newham, London, UK
- Guru Ravidas Sabha, Northampton, UK
- Dera Baba Gobind Dass, Guru Ravidas Sabha, Bilston, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara – Gravesend, UK
- Shri Guru Ravi Dass Sabha – Letchworth, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Bhavan – Luton, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara- Strood, Medway, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara – Southampton, UK
- Shri Guru Ravidas Darbar, Koropi, Athens, Greece
- Shri Guru Ravidas Dham, Bergamo, Italy
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple, Verona, Italy
- Shri Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, Gorlago, Italy
- Shri Guru Ravidas Temple, Vicenza, Italy
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Sabaudia, Italy
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Frankfurt, Germany
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Vienna, Austria
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Den Haag, Holland
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Amsterdam, Holland
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Barcelona, Spain
- Guru Ravidas Dham, Girona, Spain
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Oostende, Belgium
- Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, Paris, France
- Guru Ravidas Temple, Le blanc, France

North America

- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Pittsburgh, California, USA
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Fresno, USA

- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Rio linda, USA
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Union City, USA
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Yuba City, USA
- Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, Selma, USA
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Houston, USA
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, New York, USA:
- Guru Ravidas Gurdwara, Burlington, Canada
- Guru Ravidas Sabha, Brampton, Canada
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Montreal, Canada
- Guru Ravidas Sabha, Edmonton, Canada
- Guru Ravidas Sikh Temple, Vancouver, Canada
- Guru Ravidas Gurdwara and Community Centre, Calgary, Canada”⁷⁸

Statistics for the Ravidasias among Diaspora:

United Kingdon: 70000 (As of 2021)

California (United States): 20000

Canada: 602 (As of 2021)

Apart from these countries, where a specific number of Ravidasia population is available, there are a number of other countries with a sizable population of the Ravidasias, though their exact number is not known. These countries are Spain, Greece, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, France, Holland, Germany, Portugal, U.A.E. Qatar etc.

⁷⁸ List Source: A website of the Ravidassia community, ravidassguru.com

⁷⁹ Kumar, S. (2021). Impact of Dr Ambedkar’s Philosophy on International Activism of the Dalit Diaspora. *Sociological Bulletin*, 7(1), p. 120.

Dalit Organizations among Diaspora:

➤ Dalit Solidarity Network, U.K.:

Dalit Solidarity Network, UK, a group concerned about the ongoing violation of human rights as a result of caste-based discrimination, was founded in 1998.⁷⁹ Dalit Solidarity Network UK, which became an official charity in 2003, is still expanding as a powerful campaigning and advocacy group, tackling the issue of caste discrimination in the United Kingdom and participating actively in the global movement. Individuals, development organizations, labor unions, journalists, and academics are among its members. Meena Varma, the director, and two part-time employees work in the Anti-Slavery International, with its headquarters in London where the team is based. Its Honorary Chair, Jeremy Corbyn, MP, is in charge of a committed team of powerful Trustees and Patrons.

DSN-UK is a member of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), which aims to raise awareness of the concerns on a global scale, particularly at the European Union and UN, in light of the growing campaign to end caste-based discrimination.

➤ The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN):

In order to promote Dalit human rights and increase understanding of Dalit issues both nationally and internationally, this organization was created in March 2000.⁸⁰ International human rights organizations, development organizations, national Dalit solidarity networks from Europe, and national platforms in caste-affected nations make up the IDSN network.

Through engagement with UN, EU, and other multilateral institutions, IDSN has successfully lobbied for action-oriented approaches to address untouchability and other human rights abuses against Dalits and similar communities that experience

⁸⁰ Ibid

discrimination on the basis of work and descent. The network has had a significant impact on the internationalization of caste discrimination as a critical human rights issue.

The work of IDSN is based on donations from its affiliates and members. A significant portion of IDSN's efforts are joint interventions in the UN and the EU. The network generates essential contributions in the form of documentation, tactical interventions, and lobbying activity, and it also supports lobbying at the federal level. Members interacting with one another increases the network's dynamic.

➤ Dalit Solidarity:

To advance equality and justice for Dalits, who have been oppressed by caste for millennia, this non-profit organization was founded in the US as a 501(3) Tax-Exempt organization with EIN 25-1865082 in 2000. It is registered as a charity in Illinois and California, and it is incorporated as a non-profit organization in Pennsylvania. It is a registered charity with the BBB and a member of the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce. A 2022 Top-Rated Award has been given to it by @GreatNonprofits. It received the 2021 Platinum Seal of Transparency from GuideStar. Dalit Solidarity received a Charity Navigator rating of 85 out of 100.

➤ Christian Network Against Caste Discrimination (CNACD):

After the 2013 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity [WPCU], which had caste prejudice as its focus, this organization was established. The network maintains dialogues through its monthly meetings held in the parish, which are presided over by Fr. Gerard Mitchell SJ of St. Anselm's Church in West London. Church leaders, community and volunteer organization representatives, and those who support Dalit concerns all attend meetings. In order to involve more people, and in particular to increase Christian involvement, CNACD held its first international two-day conference in 2014, titled Christian Responsibility to Dalits and Caste Discrimination. In May 2017, CNACD held a follow-up conference with the same theme with the goal of advancing the results of the prior event.

➤ CastewatchUK:

This organization, initiated by VODI (Voice of Dalit International), later on became a community-driven organization that now operates independently and works nationwide for the implementation of UK caste legislation on behalf of all impacted communities, was founded in 2004.⁸¹ Communities from the diaspora moved to the UK in the 1960s and 1970s in search of employment and a better life. They are a component of the sizable Asian population in the UK, which regrettably keeps fracturing along caste lines as it grows. Dalit communities in the UK experience caste discrimination in all spheres of life, including their temples and places of worship, the workplace, marriage, and social interactions; caste bullying and name-calling in the schoolyard; caste taunting, caste inferior/superior attitudes at the university level, for those students who do not 'drop out' prematurely due to caste reasons; and through their places of worship.

➤ Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA):

Formed in 2008 as a voluntary organization to promote an egalitarian society, ACDA is an umbrella organization of a number of groups, working against caste discrimination in the UK.⁸² It published a study, titled, "Hidden Apartheid-Voice of the Community in the year 2009. This study was conducted collaboratively with the help of academicians to use it as an evidence of caste discrimination with an aim of enactment of the Equality Act of 2010. It made a submission on caste discrimination to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD). This was an attempt to urge the British government to bring into force Section 9 (5) (a) of the Equality Act, 2010.

➤ Sri Guru Ravidas Sabha UK, Europe and Abroad:

In order to advance and spread the Ravidasia faith, this charitable organization was established on February 27, 1973. Its goals include: (a) encouraging the community to adhere strictly to Shri Guru Ravidas Ji's teachings and philosophy; and (b) publishing

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Ibid, p. 121

and disseminating literature about the life, teachings, and philosophy of Shri Guru Ravidas Ji and support publications such as the ‘Begumpura Parivar’; holding conferences, seminars and similar events in which many scholars and researchers are involved; and (d) directing young generation to understand and follow customs and traditions of the Ravidasia community.⁸³

5.3: Contribution of the Ravidasia Diaspora in the formation of a Ravidasia religious identity

As previously said, there are Rasvidassias, or Dera Ballan adherents, in every major nation on the planet. Mahiya Ram Mehmi and Mahey were two of the formers who arrived in British Columbia for the first time in 1906. They both contributed to the establishment of the first Canadian Gurdwara, the Khalsa Diwan Society in Vancouver, Canada (Malathi, 2022). Vancouver’s Ravidasia community developed after many people experienced caste-based discrimination from mainstream Sikh gurdwaras. (Sabherwal, 2022)

With respect to the Ravidasia Diaspora in England, Kiyotaka Sato, a Professor at Meiji University, Japan writes,

“Another group of Leicester Sikhs, those from the caste associated with skinning and tanning, regard Ravidas (a *bhagat* in the Sikh tradition), as their ‘Guru’. They separated themselves from the GNG in about 1969. There were about ten members initially. They rented a room in Highfields Community Centre, and worshipped once a month there. They also tried to purchase two houses in Vulcan Road in 1984, but they were unable to do so due to opposition from local residents. However, they successfully purchased land in Harrison Road, now an Indian residential district in the Belgrave area of Leicester, and opened a new Sikh temple in 1993. That year was the 600th Anniversary of the birth of their Guru, Ravidas”.

(Sato, 2010)

⁸³ Ibid, p. 118

In his article, Sato notes that after the Ravidasias arrived in Britain, fellow Sikhs, particularly Jats, and members of the host community frequently discriminated against them due to their caste. The Jats and Chamars frequently engaged in arguments and fights at industries and bars, which occasionally even resulted in murder. Despite the Ravidasias' success in politics and the economy, Jats still viewed them negatively because of their caste. In order to separate themselves from those who had a strong feeling of caste, the Ravidasias had little choice but to form their own Ravidasia organization. Due to racial exclusionism from the host community and caste exclusionism within the Sikh groups, Ravidasias have been made to feel like 'others' in a variety of circumstances. As a result, their struggle against discrimination has resulted in social cohesion among them.

It was estimated that twelve percent of England's Eastern Punjabis originally belonged to Scheduled Castes in Punjab, with a huge proportion of them from the *Chamar* and the Ravidasia social groups of Doaba sub-region. (Ghuman, 2011)

The British Ravidasia Council, an association of the Ravidassia diaspora in England was awarded Certificate of appreciation by the Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom, in recognition of the former's hard work and support in helping promote Census 2011 in the Ravidasia community. (Plate: 8)

By commemorating Guru Ravidas Jayanti in the British Columbia Parliament in Victoria on February 25, 2008, the Ravidasia community in British Columbia (Canada) also made history. It is significant to remember that Ravidas Deras are where all community activities are planned and carried out.

Ravidasias are also widely distributed in Oceania. The second gurdwara in Oceania was built by the Ravidasias from the Indian Punjab's Doaba region at Nasinu on the island of Fiji in 1939. (Kahlon, 2016) The specific number of Ravidasias in New Zealand during the initial wave of immigration was recorded in famous research by W.H. McLeod in his book 'Punjabis in New Zealand.' (McLeod, 1986) They now maintain a presence in every major city on the planet and have also constructed Guru Ravidas Gurdwaras there.

Ravidasia was listed as a distinct religion from Sikhism by the Office for National Statistics in the UK during the 2011 Census. Out of almost 100,000 strongholds in the Ravidasia community, 11058 people identified as Ravidasia in the census. (White, 2012) According to data, 10% of Ravidasia community members identified their religion as Ravidasia, emphatically different from Sikhs and Hindus. All Guru Ravidas Gurdwaras in the United Kingdom are currently practicing Sikhism, and they do pray and execute all rites in front of Sri Guru Granth Sahib. Not even a single Guru Ravidas Gurdwara came out directly in support of this unique identity during the census. (Singh & Fenech, 2014)

In one of her articles, 'The Ravidasia community and identity (IES) in Catalonia, Spain', Kathryn Lum talks about the ex-untouchable Ravidasia community and the caste structure of the Punjabi Sikh minority in Spain. The author details the development of the Ravidasia community in Barcelona and how, through time, they became increasingly institutionally and culturally different from mainstream Sikhism. The Ravidasias' experiences of caste discrimination against them by the Sikhs in Spain are reviewed, and the factors that led them to believe that casteism had become more prevalent in the diaspora are examined. She also discusses the effects of the Vienna murder in 2009, which resulted in the death of the most significant Sant (religious leader) of the Ravidasia sect who was connected to Dera Ballan. The fieldwork she conducted between 2009 and 2010 forms the foundation of the article. This thesis is essentially an ethnographic examination of the Ravidasias, a former untouchable tribe from India's Punjab province. In this study, in specifically, Lum looks at how former untouchables deal with caste guilt as well as how caste operates in daily life. In Catalonia, Spain, she investigates the connections between the Ravidasia group and caste, gender, and young people. The study compares caste and how caste stigma is dealt with in each region, as well as the Ravidasia socio-cultural and religious movement in Catalonia, Spain, and the Punjab, India. The Ravidasia community is an essential case study for the study of caste since it is the greatest demographically significant former untouchable minority in the Punjab and its diaspora. According to Lum, the Ravidasias have grown to be one of India's most economically and socially

assertive Scheduled Caste or SC caste groups in the postwar era, and this assertion is communicated symbolically in the realm of religion. (Lum, 2011)

Her study demonstrates that the Ravidasias are an appropriate example of a transnational group whose status as diaspora has a significant impact on the caste system in their native Punjab. In the course of her investigation, she discovered that a sizable segment of the Ravidasia community worldwide, including the Ravidasia community in Spain, chose to split from Sikhism and create a whole independent religious identity. Her respondents, who have noticed the emergence of new types of caste pride that were absolutely unimaginable just a decade ago, have experienced a significant identity upheaval. The Ravidasia youth have been asserting themselves through music albums. They use social media like YouTube to listen to and share music videos of their favorite songs. One of the most popular songs among the Ravidasia youth, '*Putt chamaran de*' (sons of *chamar*) was sung during the religious ceremony of birthday of Guru Ravidas in Barcelona in 2010; indicating the symbolic significance of such type of songs. In the music videos of such songs, well-built, menacing Ravidasia youth are shown, brandishing swords and guns, giving a clear message that the Ravidasias will no longer get bullied or intimidated by the upper castes. Thus, the *chamar* pride expressed in songs and inwardly for Ravidasia youth in the Spanish Diaspora has shown to be important in altering their self-image and sowing seeds of a new self-belief and embryonic assertiveness. This research by Lum suggests that caste has evolved as both an institution and a social structure in which, those who were once wholly destroyed by the caste system, can strategically use to forge new religious identities, even though caste prejudice and stigma have not lessened even in the Ravidasia diaspora. Catalonia had been a witness to all the caste battles that are routinely experienced back home, as the Ravidasias endeavored to forge their own identity.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Lum, K. (2010). The Ravidassia Community and Identity (IES) in Catalonia, Spain. *Sikh Formations*, 6(1), pp. 31–49.

The assassination of the then deputy-head at Dera Ballan, Sant Ramanand at the Austrian capital Vienna on May 24, 2009, forced the Ravidasia community in Barcelona, Spain, as well as congregations throughout the Ravidassia Diaspora to confront their religious identity and bounds in a striking way. (Jacobsen & Myrvold, 2016) In its place, a more constrained and distinct Ravidasia identity took the place of the idea of being a Sikh or at least a member of the Sikh community.

Opinderjit Kaur Takhar, another scholar on Dalit issues, in one of her articles explains that when you enter a Ravidasia temple for the first time, you might not immediately realize that it is different from a Sikh Gurudwara. The Sri Guru Granth Sahib is housed in a *palki*, and a *Granthi*, a person fluent in the Scripture's language, guards it with reverence as a sign of homage to the everlasting Guru. You will see that there are a few differences from a Sikh Gurdwara, though, if you look more closely. The walls and *palki* in the Ravidasia site of worship are decorated with portraits of the lower caste Sant, Ravidas, who lived in the 14th century and was known to as Guru Ravidas by his disciples.⁸⁵ This element of uncertainty prompts more investigation and brings to light the difficulties of clearly delineated religious boundaries. (Takhar and Jacobs, 2011). Takhar opines,

“Current issues within the Ravidasia community revolve around separating their identity from the Sikhs and declaring a distinct identity as the ‘Ravidasia Dharm’, which is neither Sikh nor Hindu”

(Takhar, 2012)

Confusingly, those disciples of Guru Ravidas who are comfortable with the labels of Ravidasia Sikhs or Dalit Sikhs continue to exist. It thus begs the question of whether it is genuinely possible to regard both Bhagat Ravidas and the Guru Granth Sahib as one's Guru. The present discussion among Ravidasias suggests to imitate their counterparts

⁸⁵ Takhar, O. K. (2014). The Place of Scripture in the Trajectories of a Distinct Religious Identity among Ravidassias in Britain: Guru Granth Sahib or Amritbani Guru Ravidass. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29(1), pp. 105–120.

in India and Europe, where Amritbani Shri Guru Ravidas have taken the place of copies of the Guru Granth Sahib. Although in the United Kingdom, it has not taken place yet, this could be a sign of reprisal from Ravidasias who are happy to be classified as Ravidasia Sikhs. Ravidasias used the 2011 UK Census as a rallying point to push for the creation of a distinct identity for themselves. 11058 Chamar residents identified as Ravidasia in that census.

The Ravidasia halls of worship in England currently hold The Sri Guru Granth Sahib, which is thought to be the most authentic of Sant Ravidas's works and comprises 41 of his hymns. Sant Ravidas belonged to the *Chamars*, a caste of cobblers. Nearly all of his followers also belong to the Dalit community. Because of its associations with untouchability due to the occupation's usage of animal hides, the term 'Chamar' is frequently regarded as pejorative. Ravidasias therefore prefers the word 'Dalit', which means oppressed and crushed, as a true depiction of their socio-economic rank and treatment in Indian culture. Many former Chamars who converted to Sikhism did so in the hopes of achieving equality with other Sikhs since Sikhism advocates for an equitable society that is founded on the values of humanity and brotherhood. The Ravidasias really regret and lament, however, that the untouchability stigma persisted even after their conversion to Sikhism, which sought to achieve caste equality on both a material and a spiritual level. When caste is brought up among Sikhs, many of them will flatly deny the notion that it still exists among them. However, if such is the case, why do Sikhs and Ravidasias feel uneasy with each another? Where and why are people classified as Dalit Sikhs in a society that seems to be caste-free? This obviously goes against the egalitarian core of Sikh religious belief. The intentions of the Sikh Gurus to end caste-based prejudice must be kept in mind as one starts to examine identity formation within the Punjabi Dalit caste of Chamars.

An international Dalit conference was held in Vancouver, Canada, from May 16 to 18, 2003, thanks to the efforts of the Punjabi Dalit Diaspora.⁸⁶ This event was to kick off a

⁸⁶ Kumar, V. (2003). Dalit Movement and Dalit International Conferences. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(27), p. 2799.

North American campaign to encourage multinational corporations, operating in India to give regard to the notion of diverseness with respect to Dalit youth in business partnerships. At the 60th India Independence Day parade in New York on August 19, 2007, the Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha of New York, USA, organized a float honoring Dr. Ambedkar. This event was perhaps the first of its kind in the history of the Ravidasia Diaspora. (Judge, 2014) On February 25, 2008, the Ravidasia Diaspora, who had recently emigrated to British Columbia, Canada, observed Guru Ravidas *Jayanti* in Victoria at the British Columbian Parliament. Similarly, Shri Guru Ravidas International Organization for Human Rights in United Kingdom celebrated Guru Ravidas birth-anniversary in House of Commons in 2007 and in House of Lords in 2008. (Judge, 2014)

In partnership with the Ambedkar National Mission, the Ambedkar Association of North America, and the Dalit American Women's Association, The Dalit American Foundation started a study on caste among South Asian Diaspora. Caste follows South Asians everywhere they go, Valliamall Karunakaran said in a statement that shed insight on the study's findings. Caste discussions unfairly focus solely on the problems of Dalits and never discuss the networks of privilege that sustain upper caste power in the Diasporas. (George, 2021) The Ravidasia temples in Canada have evolved into gathering spots for Dalits.

Kristina Myrvold, an Assistant Professor at Linnaeus University, Sweden explains that in the study of religions and immigrant groups, Sikhs in Europe are often overlooked. While many studies have examined the history, culture, and religious practices of Sikhs in North America and the United Kingdom, relatively few have examined Sikhs in continental Europe. This book closes this gap by giving fresh information and analysis on Sikhs living in eleven European nations and exploring the Sikh community's wider presence throughout both new and established host nations. This book examines significant patterns of settlement, institution building, and cultural transmission among

European Sikhs, with a focus on migration, tradition transmission, identity development, and cultural representations from the viewpoint of local Sikh groups.⁸⁷

Kristina Myrvold and Knut A. Jacobsen in their “Sikhs across Borders: Transnational Practice of European Sikhs” present the first research study to examine patterns of transnational activities among Sikhs in Europe. It focuses specifically on the connections between Sikhs in Europe, Punjab, their ‘home-land,’ and the Sikh community worldwide. The book shows how European Sikhs from the past and present coexist and interact in a variety of social and cultural activities and discourses in local and global arenas.

This book, which is based on recent empirical research, examines how religion still plays a big part in the daily lives of Sikhs in Europe and is crucial to their ability to maintain relationships with both Sikhs in their home country and Sikhs around the globe. Through a variety of transnational practices at the individual, national, and worldwide levels, including weddings, pilgrimage narratives, and the use of the internet and new media, the team of international authors demonstrates how Sikhs are creating new self-representations and identity constructions. Additional transnational behaviors that have been studied include responses to political events in the diaspora as well as religious teaching and learning practices. (Myrvold & Jacobsen, 2012)

Michael H. Fisher, Shompa Lahiri and Shinder Thandi through their work, ‘A South-Asian History of Britain: Four Centuries of Peoples from the Indian Sub-Continent’ throw light on the fact that from the beginning of the seventeenth century, Indians have been coming to Britain, risking their lives in dangerous voyages across the ‘Kala Pani’ (Black waters). Their story is one of the great historical sweeps combined with the intimate drama of individual lives, coming as sailors, servants, wives, merchants, ambassadors, and scholars, sometimes for the sake of betterment or profit, sometimes for adventure, and sometimes for justice. Sometimes they remained anonymous, but in other cases they became famous, such as the Bengali Muslim who called himself ‘John

⁸⁷ Jacobsen, K. A. (2011). *Sikhs in Europe Migration, Identities and Representations* (K. Myrvold, Ed.). Routledge, pp. 5-10.

Morgan,' a renowned animal trainer, or Sake Dean Mahomed (1759–1851), the Royal Family's "shampooing surgeon." Nevertheless, most of them remained anonymous, and after the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857, the South Asian presence in Britain became more clearly defined than before.

'Brown Victorians,' who could be found today in factories and docks, colleges and theatres, legal offices and medical facilities, and ultimately Parliament, were becoming more and more significant in British society. Their significance increased through two world wars and India's (and Pakistan's) independence. The number of South Asians in Britain expanded due to increased immigration starting in the 1950s. As they worked to express their entrepreneurial energy and affirm their religious identity, they encountered bigotry and faced economic difficulties. Even more recently, there has been a renewed interest in the South Asian community, its achievements, legacy, and spirit as a result of the growing radicalism among young Asian British people.

'Sikhs in Britain: The Making of a Community' is another significant work (Singh & Tatla, 2006) which throws light on Ravidasia Sikhs in the United Kingdom. The evolution of British-Sikh identity from the nineteenth century to the present is examined by Gurharpal Singh and Darshan Singh Tatla in this, the first thorough study of the Sikh community in Britain. This offers an extremely interesting alternate perspective on the difficulties faced by the other Asian minorities in assimilating into multicultural Britain at a time when a lot of public discourse is focused on Muslim integration. The authors study the intricate Anglo-Sikh interaction that preceded the first Sikh settlement and the community-building processes around Sikh institutions like gurdwaras using an abundance of fresh source material.

They look into how Sikhs succeed in the workforce, how Sikh families are evolving, and how important it is to pass on their culture to the next generation. They also examine the makeup of British Sikh society. The book also offers a unique portrayal of a community that was once the epicentre of radical immigrant class politics but is now at the forefront of the Sikh diaspora's efforts to establish a distinct Sikh state. This is a vital resource for those curious about how modern British society has developed.

Mathieu Claveyrolas in his 'The 'Land of the Vaish'? Caste Structure and Ideology in Mauritius' explains that Since 1968, Mauritius has maintained its independence. Its foundations lie in the institutions and history of a plantation culture, and the majority

of its residents are descended from indentured servants who were Indians or Hindus. It is a taboo to discuss the "transfer" or "disappearance" of the caste system among Hindu Mauritians, but it is also essential to comprehending Mauritian realities as it delves deeply into the local dynamics between Creoleness and Indianness. According to a poll done among elder generations of Indian laborers who had lived in plantation camps and were still there, the caste system among Hindu Mauritians has either vanished or is no longer ideologically significant although long back ago, the Chamar untouchable Diaspora in Mauritius had formed the Arya Ravived (Ravidasia) Pracharini Sabha in 1935 after a split in Arya Samaj along caste lines.

Dr Opinderjit Kaur Takhar who teaches Religious Studies at The Heathland School, Hounslow, UK. In her 'Sikh Identity: An Exploration of Groups Among Sikhs' advocates that although it is commonly assumed that all Sikhs are the same, but the very existence of different groups who have varying beliefs and practices within the Sikh community shows that a corporate identity for the Sikh community is not possible and serves to alienate a substantial proportion of Sikhs from the overall fold of the Sikh faith. Introducing the beliefs and practices of a range of individual Sikh groups, this book addresses the issue of Sikh identity across the Sikh community as a whole but from the viewpoint of different types of Sikhs. Examining the historical development of Sikhism from the period of Guru Nanak to the present day, the author takes an in-depth look at five groups in the Sikh community - the Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha; the Namdharis; the Ravidasis; the Valmikis; and the Sikh Dharma of the Western hemisphere (associated with the Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization - 3HO). Their history, beliefs and practices are explored, as well as their diverse and shared identities. Concluding that there is no authoritative yardstick with which to assess the issue of Sikh identity, the author highlights Sikhism's links to its Hindu past and suggests a federal Sikh identity with one or two fundamental beliefs at the core and individual groups left to express their own unique beliefs and practices.

'Punjabi Migration, Settlement and Experience in the UK' (Nanda, Rajan & Varghese, 2016) is another work which explains that events in Punjab and the UK have caused tension amongst the Ravidasias who want to 'break away' from Sikhism by declaring themselves, a separate religion with their own unique religious identity. In some of the Ravidasia gurudwaras in the UK, Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji has taken place of Sri

Guru Granth Sahib and the Ravidasias have declared Dera Ballan as their pilgrimage place instead of Golden Temple at Amritsar. The feeling of social exclusion and an increased ability to respond to it on the part of the followers of Ravidas led them to establish their own gurudwaras from 1980s onwards and over a period of time other political and cultural organization came into being which were instrumental in developing greater networks amongst their community in the UK.

The Ravidasias' efforts to organize people around religious symbols in order to pursue justice and a unique religious identity are reflected in the religious organizations in the Diaspora.

In order to conclude, the Ravidasia Diaspora and its contribution to the development of Dera Ballan and the assertion of the Ravidasia Community can never be underestimated. The erstwhile untouchables, who converted to Sikhism in pursuit of equality and life's dignity, feel let down even from afar because their fellow members of the upper caste haven't given them a social standing equivalent to that of the latter. Dera Sachkhand Ballan has become a focal point of the Dalit movement and there are currently cries of protest and unhappiness in response to the current circumstances. The Ravidasia Gurudwaras abroad have contributed immensely in terms of uniting the Ravidasias and the Dalit organizations established offshore have been instrumental in bringing the Ravidasias on one common platform in terms of agitating for their humanitarian rights. Asserting for a distinct religious identity for the Ravidasia community, foreign writers like Kathryn Lumm and Kiyotaka Sato have shed light on the Ravidasia Diaspora's activities in Spain and England. It is despite the fact that the Ravidasia community is currently at a crossroads, weighed down by the complexities of caste and the possibility of a new religious identity. As in the United Kingdom, the Census, England and Wales Order, passed on May 20, 2020, had allowed ONS (Office of National Statistics) to collect data for both Ravidasia religion and ethnic group, the Ravidasia Diaspora have succeeded to a great extent in carving out a separate religious identity, independent of Sikhism. The British Ravidasia Council was awarded Certificate of appreciation by the Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom, in recognition of the former's hard work and support in helping promote Census 2021 in

the Ravidasia community.⁸⁸ Similarly in other countries of the Europe and America, the Ravidasias have established their own separate places of worship, where they meet for religious congregations and to deliberate upon important issues related to the welfare of their community. Many a Dalit organization have been established by the Dalit Diaspora settled in various countries across the world. These organizations serve as an important platform for the Dalits abroad to mobilize themselves and agitate for their social, political and economic rights. It is perhaps the result of efforts put in by such organizations that as mentioned earlier, the British Ravidasia Council, an association of the Ravidssia diaspora in England was awarded Certificate of appreciation by the Office of National Statistics, United Kingdom, in recognition of the former's hard work and support in helping promote Census 2011 in the Ravidasia community. Prior to this, the Office for National Statistics in the UK included Ravidasia as a different religion from Sikhism during the 2011 Census. Out of roughly 100,000 strongholds in the Ravidasia community, 11058 people identified as Ravidasia in the census.

A scholar on the issues, Deepa Bharath observes,

“In California, members of an under-the-radar, minority religious community are stepping into the public eye to advocate for making the state the first in the nation to outlaw caste bias. They are the Ravidasias- followers of Ravidas, a 14th century Indian guru who preached caste and class equality. There are about 20,000 members of the community in California, most of them in the Central Valley.”⁸⁹

Such kind of efforts being put in by the Ravidasia Diaspora for their socio-religious assertion clearly indicate that the stigma of being belonging to an ‘inferior caste’ is not

⁸⁸ Kumar, A. (n.d.). *Census Champion Certificate – BRC*. Ravidassia TV

⁸⁹Bharath, D. (2023, June 1). What California's Ravidassia community believes and why they want caste bias outlawed. *The Indian Express*.

limited to India alone; but it has spread its dirty tentacles across various countries of the world.

Despite this, the Ravidasia community in Punjab and the Diaspora has to go a long way before being called a separate religion. This is due to the fact that the drive for a distinct Ravidasia religion being spearheaded by Dera Ballan is consistent with the ambiguous and unsettled religious history of South Asia. According to Ronki Ram, a political science professor at P.U. Chandigarh, no caste has ever been turned into a religion. This could be true in case of Ravidasia Dharm too as this new 'religion' consists of members belonging to a particular caste i.e., *Chamar* only.⁹⁰

⁹⁰Interview with Dr. Ronki Ram, 08 February, 2023

Conclusion

While tracing history of the Ravidasia community, one comes to know that the Ravidasias (followers of Sant Ravidas, a socio-religious reformer of the 14th-15th centuries) is a major religious community in the Doaba region of Punjab. The announcement of Ravidasia Dharm can be looked at as a root-cause and result of a long-drawn social conflict between the two communities- the Ravidasias and the Sikhs. When one talks about the contextualization of the Ravidasia Dharm, it draws on the legacy of the Adi-Dharma, a Dalit political movement of the 1920s.⁹¹ As the Adi-Dharmiti identity was the core of the Adi-Dharma in 1931, the Ravidasia identity, epitomised by Dera Ballan is central to the Ravidasia Dharm declared in 2010. The main anguish of the Ravidasias was not so much expressed in the declaration of a separate religion as in the substitution of the Sikh scripture by Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji (Takhar, 2014: 105). Though there are disagreements within the Ravidasia Samaj regarding the controversial question of Amritbani's replacement of Sri Guru Granth Sahib, the former's designation as the only Ravidasia sacred text gives considerable weight to the creation of a unique Ravidasia Dharm by the Dera Ballan Sants, who are highly respected within a sizable Ravidasia community, both in modern-day East Punjab and throughout the Ravidasia diaspora. If one closely observes the religious ceremonies, traditions, slogans and symbols formulated and followed by the Ravidasia Deras, especially Dera Ballan, in the manifestation of Ravidasia Dharm, one finds that in a number of ways, they are similar to their counter-parts in Sikhism. The similarities are too strong to be spotted by an outsider.

While talking about the social dynamics among castes in Punjab, a significant aspect is the atrocities committed against Dalits in Punjab: Between 2004 and 2019, around 22,000 such cases were reported as per the state-wise details of atrocities against SCs/STs given by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment.

To free the Depressed Classes from the constraints of the caste system and the atrocities committed against them, Bhim Rao Ambedkar had in 1936 given consideration to the

⁹¹ Ram, R. (2017b). The Genealogy of a Dalit Faith: The Ravidassia Dharm and Caste Conflicts in

Contemporary Punjab. *Sage Journal*, 51(1), p. 75.

idea of widespread conversion of this group to Sikhism. (Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol. 1 compiled by Vasant Moon)

The massive building of independent Gurdwaras by the Ravidasias, Mazhabis, and other caste groups, parallel to those controlled and maintained by the Jats, is a notable sign of the rebellion against the Jat supremacy among the Scheduled Caste Sikhs. Post 2009, social dynamics between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias have changed significantly. (Jodhka, 2010)

The Dera Ballan contributed significantly towards social upliftment of the Ravidasias. Social projects, carried out by Dera Ballan, like opening of charitable hospitals and educational institutions have proven useful, to a large extent in popularizing the Dera among masses in general and the Ravidasia community in particular. The Dera has been instrumental to a great extent in carving out a separate religious identity for the Ravidasias.

“The Dera has developed into an “identity anchor point,” particularly for the Ad Dharmi community, for the Dalits.” opined Charlene Simon.

In terms of the development of Dera Ballan, the role played by the Ravidasia Diaspora has been quite important. It has, since moving abroad, contributed substantially towards the Ravidasia community's assertion of its own social and religious identity. While analysing the role played by the Ravidasia Diaspora, settled in countries across the world, towards growth of Dera Ballan, we come across the fact that the Dera has established international trusts such as, Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (United Kingdom), Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (Vancouver, Canada), Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (United States). Before and after 19th century, the Ravidasias started emigrating from the Punjab, and many of them made their homes in Europe and North America, mainly the United States and Canada. Many an organization, like Dalit Solidarity Network, The International Dalit Solidarity Network are working abroad for the cause of Dalits.

Kiyotaka Sato, a Professor at Meiji University, Japan in his article ‘Divisions among Sikh Communities in Britain and the Role of Caste System: A Case Study of Four Gurdwaras in Multi-Ethnic Leicester’ notes that after the Ravidasias arrived in Britain, fellow Sikhs, particularly Jats, and members of the host community frequently discriminated against them due to their caste. In the UK during the 2011 Census, out

of almost 1,00,000 strongholds in the Ravidasia community, 11,058 people identified themselves as Ravidasia in the Census.

Kathryn Lum, a Spanish scholar, in her study ('The Ravidasia Community and Identity (IES) in Catalonia, Spain') demonstrates that the Ravidasias are an appropriate example of a transnational group whose status as diaspora has a significant impact on the caste system in their native Punjab.

An open letter posted on the Ravidasia web site by the Southall (West London) Sangat clearly states that the Guru Granth Sahib is not the Guru of the Ravidasia community. The letter makes it clear that, if an autonomous religious identity is sought, the Guru Granth Sahib must be replaced by the Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji.

A letter written by the head of Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to include a separate column of 'Ravidasia' in the 2021 Census for the Scheduled Castes (SC) community in Punjab has led to social and political debate.

During the 2011 census, around 88,650 Dalits had registered themselves as 'Ravidasia'. Therefore, social distance between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs is on an increase. Dera Ballan has emerged as a flag-bearer with respect to the Ravidasia movement for a distinct religious identity. The Dera on different occasions have written letters to the government of India, requesting the latter to create a separate column for 'Ravidasia Dharam' within the category of 'Religion' during the 2021 Census operations, which are yet to be carried out. The episodes of Talhan, Meham and Vienna are a testimony to the fact that as far as caste discrimination is concerned, our society still needs to cover a long distance. The feudalistic tendencies show their ugly face time and again. Sikhism, though in theory shuns caste inequalities, ground realities leave much to be desired. Due to this, Deraism, (a term used for mushrooming of Deras in Punjab) is spreading its tentacles fast. Taking advantage of the failure of the leaders of the mainstream religions in carrying the message of their respective religions to the masses, some people (claiming themselves to be holy men) establish their own religious centres, called the Deras. The common masses flock to such Deras in search of peace of mind and finding a solution to their day-to-day sufferings.

The ever increasing trend of building separate Ravidasia gurudwaras in various countries across the world by the diaspora settled there shows that the ugly tentacles of

caste discrimination are not confined to our country only, but have spread to those societies also, which boast of their being more progressive and egalitarian ones.

Various surveys and studies clearly indicate that in the caste hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes of Punjab, the Adi-Dharmi (the Ravidasia community comes from this caste) caste has left all other castes behind in terms of educational and economic progress by taking benefits of reservation policy. Caste-based reservation has been used as a political tool rather than a measure for upliftment of the haves-not by politicians across the political spectrum. Dalits are looked at by them as mere vote-banks. Whenever any kind of political elections are near, politicians of all colours can be seen flocking to various Deras for 'taking blessings of the Dera-heads' to garner votes of the followers of such Deras. Many a Dera in Punjab have become power-houses, owing huge properties, both moveable and immovable. They have built palatial Dera-campuses, spread over hundreds of acres of land. Their annual donations, both from inside and outside of India, run into crores of Rupees. The heads of such Deras travel extensively to foreign countries for the propagation of their sect and accepting religious funds from their followers settled there.

The findings of this study clearly illustrate that Dera Ballan has emerged as the most dominant among all the Ravidasia Deras across India. The announcement of a separate Ravidasia Dharm, independent of Sikhism made this very Dera, the flag-bearer of a Dalit movement towards assertion of the lower castes with respect to social justice and dignity. The trends shown in the sample-survey are a testimony to the fact that even in this modern era of globalization, the demon of caste still shows its ugly face. Although the Ravidasias have forged their associations in India and abroad to safeguard their rights; there are instances of their humiliation by the upper caste Sikhs. This proves beyond doubt that although Sikhism is an egalitarian religion, which staunchly criticizes caste shackles, a portion of its adherents has failed to change its mindset with respect to their fellow Sikhs among the Dalits.

The various social projects, run by the Dera are doing a great service to the targeted community; although these projects need to be expanded in an order to reach out to more masses, the most under-privileged population of our society. The process of Sanskritization has helped the Dalits in their upward social mobility and enabled them to lead a dignified life. Caste-census is a good idea to extend governmental social

welfare schemes to the neediest by knowing their numbers. As far as social dynamics between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias are concerned, a lot needs to be done at the societal front in an order to narrow the ever-widening gap between the two communities. ‘One village, One gurudwara’ campaign, initiated by the S.G.P.C. needs to be re-launched with a new enthusiasm in a order to strengthen social ties between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias. The Ravidasia Diaspora has played a significant part in spreading Guru Ravidas’s philosophy to far-off corners of the world. The fact that the British government recognized the Ravidasia community in the 2021 Census enumerations underlines the increasing impact of the Ravidasia community members in off-shore countries to assert themselves. The new trend in the Punjabi music industry to record songs (both audio and video) with a focus on the word, ‘chamar’ instead of the word, ‘jatt’ show-cases the Ravidasia youth’s daring to challenge the Jatt hegemony. Seeing the scale of efforts, including those for the inclusion of a column for the Ravidasia religion in the yet to be conducted Census operations’ register, undertaken by Dera Ballan to carve out a separate religious identity for the Ravidasia community it can be concluded that this community is in no mood to return to the fold of Sikhism, although efforts are being put in in this direction by various Sikh religious associations.

Implications and Recommendations

The present study shall have the following implications and recommendations:

- As the mushrooming of Deras in Punjab is a serious issue of socio-religious debates, the present study shall help the religious leadership to find out what ails the mainstream religions of the land and how to reform them; so that the common masses need not to flock to Deras, whose number is on increase, all the time.
- The caste-related studies and surveys that are described in this work could be useful in helping our national and state governments create policies that would benefit and uplift the less fortunate members of our society. This will go a long way in the direction of achieving social justice, a major doctrine enshrined in our constitution.

- Researchers and academicians shall benefit from various findings of the present study to explore further in this direction. As ‘Ravidasia Dharam’ is relatively a new term for many an academician and researcher, the research undertaken in the present study shall encourage them to explore further and shed more light on various dimensions of this new sect of religion.
- Theorists may find new theories on caste dynamics in Punjab, taking advantage of the data incorporated in the present study.
- This work will add new inputs and research findings to the literature with regard to Dera culture, Ravidasia Dharam, social dynamics between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs as these concepts are of great academic and research value for social scientists and researchers.
- In order to attain the values of social justice, equality, and an egalitarian society as stipulated in our constitution, our governments at the central and state levels should develop and honestly implement programmes for the betterment of weaker segments of our society.
- Caste-based census operations should be conducted in order to determine the precise number of different castes; this will allow programmes and policies for the socially and educationally disadvantaged castes to be established and implemented in accordance with the data gathered for such castes.
- The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee and various other socio-religious organizations should endeavour for the attainment of ‘one village-one gurudwara’ goal; so that social harmony and mutual brotherhood between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias may be promoted in order to erase caste heartedness. It is pertinent to note here that The Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee have had launched the ‘one village-one gurudwara’ initiative in the year 2018 to promote an egalitarian society, but due to a number of causes it didn’t yield desired results.
- Government organizations and NGOs may play an important part to promote education among the backward castes so that the latter’s educational and economic level may get upgraded.
- Such acts should be made which prohibit politicians from using the followers of various Deras as their vote-banks. Politics and religion must be kept apart.

- Researchers must keep in mind that the ultimate goal of their projects is the welfare of society. Therefore, their research must not be confined to only writing a thesis and getting a Doctoral degree. They must go to the ground zero in order to have a first-hand information of facts and ultimately endeavour, as a good citizen, to promote social harmony and mutual brotherhood among various sections of our society.
- Our governments at various levels must evolve some mechanism to identify a 'creamy layer' among various backward castes and debar such a layer from taking benefits of reservation in order that such benefits may go to the most deserving people of a particular caste.

Limitations and Directions for future research

The present study, like any other research-based study, may have a few limitations, even though it has been carried out in a maximum-possible objective, reasonable and effective way. Hence, in the following points, limitations of the present study, along with some suggestions for directions for future research are discussed:

- Geographically, the current study's focus is only on a single Punjabi sub-region. As the overall percentage of Scheduled Caste population, (which is a major discussion-theme of this study) throughout the entire state of Punjab is nearly 32% of the total population of the state, according to the Census report from 2011, researchers can expand it in the future to add some more areas to it or the entire state.
- Due to thematical constraints, a particular Ravidasia Dera was taken as a special reference in the present study, as Case-study methodology was used. Som Nath Bharti, a writer on Dalit issues, in his work, 'Jagat Guru Ravidas Sampardai: Sant Te Sadhna Sathal' gives a detailed list of nearing 50 Ravidasia Deras in Punjab (Bharti, 2003). While exploring various socio-religious dimensions of the Ravidasia community, the future researchers may bring these Ravidasia Deras in Punjab too within the ambit of their study.
- The present study is limited primarily to two large communities of Punjab, namely, the Ravidasias and the Sikhs. While exploring topics like caste

dynamics of the society in Punjab, the future research may expand its horizon to cover various other communities of a Punjabi society as well.

- The time-frame covered in the undertaken study is from the medieval era till the writing of this thesis. Caste restrictions in the Indian society, talked about in this study, are as old as the Vedic era. Therefore, pre-medieval period can also be taken into consideration for future research on such kind of topics.
- More factors could be identified and added in further studies with regard to mushrooming of Deras in Punjab.
- The study mostly employed quantitative methods for analysis of the findings of the collected data. Therefore, its scope is limited to the 'what' part only and not the 'why' part of the questions related to the social dynamics between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs in the Doaba sub-region of Punjab.
- While conducting interviews with the respondents during the course of research-work, a majority of them objected to taking their photographs or making an audio/video recording of the interview. As a result, sufficient documentary evidence of many of the interviews could not be gathered.
- For future research, more field surveys may be conducted in order to have a first-hand understanding of social dynamics among various communities at the village level. This will add more accuracy to the data, thus collected.
- As a scope for improvement is always there, more additions, based on the nature of further research may be done to the number of caste clusters in Punjab as caste is not a static, but a dynamic phenomenon. The number of castes in the Indian society have had kept on increasing ever since the inception of caste. Traditionally in the Hindu scriptures, it is mentioned that the society was divided into four groups, or *chatur-varna*, on the basis of caste; whereas in the present contexts the number of caste and sub castes in the Indian society may run into thousands. The future researchers may take into consideration various theories put forth by scholars with respect to hierarchy of castes in the Indian society. This may help in better understanding of the society and social dynamics among various communities.

Initiatives taken by the governments for the welfare of Ravidasia community

Our governments at the center and at the state (Punjab) have taken the following initiatives from time to time for the welfare of Ravidasia community:

- Our present Prime Minister allocated a budget of Rupees 50 crore for the beautification and upgradation of the revered birthplace of Guru Ravidas in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, near Seer Govardhanpur. These funds would be used for the development of a langar hall, a park near the temple, and for widening of the road leading to Seer Goverdhanpur.
- A sum of Rupees 40 crore was allocated by the present Modi government to give coaching to SC/ST/OBC students.
- 51% of loans under PM MUDRA Yojana are sanctioned to the people belonging to SC/ST/OBC categories.
- 35% of the beneficiaries under Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana belong to SC/ST and other Dalit categories.
- Under PM Aawas Yojana, 36% of the total houses built have been allocated to the people belonging to SC/ST/OBC categories.
- The Directorate of Scheduled Castes Sub Plan, working under the Department of Social Justice, Empowerment and Minorities, Government of Punjab annually makes the Scheduled Castes Sub Plan, under which various plans are introduced and renewed for the welfare of Scheduled Castes.
- Former Punjab Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal laid the foundation stone of Minar-e-Beghampura, a Guru Ravidas memorial, on April 3, 2016 on 16 acres of land at Khuralgarh, a village in Garhshankar tehsil of Hoshiarpur district, believed to once visited by Guru Ravidas. Due to red-tapeism and lack of political will, this project is incomplete till date.
- Although announced by Charanjit Singh Channi, the former C.M. of Punjab, the foundation-stone of Guru Ravidas Bani Research Centre was laid at Dera Ballan by Bhagwant Mann, the current C.M. of Punjab, along with Arvind Kejriwal, C.M. of Delhi on March 24, 2023. Bhagwant Mann handed over a cheque of Rupees 25 crore to the Dera-head Sant Niranjana Dass for the purpose.

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- Interview with Dharampal, Manager, Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ji Sachkhand Ballan, dated, 31-12-2022
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Plates:

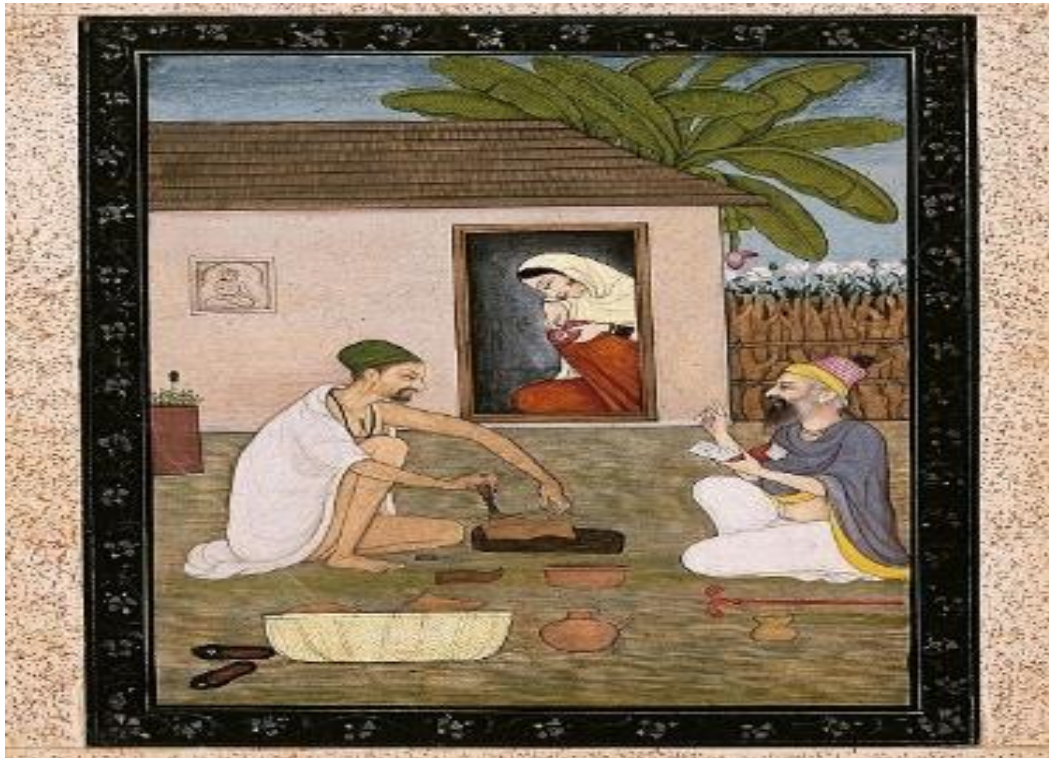
1.



Cover-page of Bhaktamal

(Source: Internet Archives)

2.



Bhagat Ravidas at work as a shoemaker

(Source: Folio from a series featuring Bhakti saints. Master of the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh of Guler, Pahari region, ca.1800–1810. Collection Danielle Porret, Museum Rietberg)

3.



An image of an original photograph of Mangoo Ram Muggowal

(Facebook page of Freedom Fighters of Punjab)

4.



An outer view of Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh Samadh at Talhan

(Source: Native Planet)

5.



Picture of Sant Ramanand, who was murdered in Vienna, Austria on May 25, 2009

(Source: Dera Sachkhand Ballan)

6.



A picture of political leaders, including Parkash Singh Badal, the then C.M. of Punjab attending Sant Ramanand's funeral in 2009

(Source: 'The Tribune' Edition of June 4, 2009)

7.



An image of the title page of Amritbani Guru Ravidas Maharaj Ji

(Source: Sant Surinder Dass Bawa, a former *Sewadar* at Dera Ballan)

8.



An image of the Certificate of appreciation awarded to the British Ravidasia Council

(Source: Census Champion Certificate – BRC by A. Kumar)

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APPENDIX A

Research Questionnaire (Scanned Image of a sample response)

Duly validated by:

1. Dr. Kamla, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, USOL, Panjab university Chandigarh
2. Dr. Supreet, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Lovely Professional University

ਖੋਜ ਪ੍ਰਸ਼ਨ-ਪੱਤ੍ਰਿਕਾ
Research Questionnaire

ਤੁਹਾਡਾ ਨਾਮ: ਸਾਗਰ ਦੱਤ

ਲਿੰਗ: ਪੁਰਖ/ਇਸਤਰੀ/ਟ੍ਰਾਂਸਜੈਂਡਰ

ਐਡਰੈੱਸ: v.p.o ਕੰਗੌੜ, ਤਹਿਸੀਲ ਬੰਗਾ

ਜ਼ਿਲ੍ਹਾ: ਸ. ਤ. ਸ. ਨਗਰ

ਮੋਬਾਈਲ ਨੰਬਰ: 89642-74216

ਕੀ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਸਮਝਦੇ ਹੋ ਕਿ ਅਜੇ ਵੀ ਪੰਜਾਬ ਵਿਚ ਜਾਤ-ਪਾਤ 'ਤੇ ਅਧਾਰਿਤ ਭੇਦ-ਭਾਵ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਹਾਂ

ਕੀ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਪਤਾ ਹੈ ਕਿ 'ਰਵਿਦਾਸੀਆ ਧਰਮ' ਵੀ ਇੱਕ ਧਰਮ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਹਾਂ

ਜੇ ਹਾਂ ਤਾਂ 'ਰਵਿਦਾਸੀਆ ਧਰਮ' ਦਾ ਐਲਾਨ ਕਰਨ ਵਾਲੇ ਡੇਰੇ ਦਾ ਨਾਮ ਕੀ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਡੇਰਾ ਸਚਖੰਡ ਚੱਲਾਂ

ਕੀ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਸਮਝਦੇ ਹੋ ਕਿ 'ਰਵਿਦਾਸੀਆ ਧਰਮ' ਦੇ ਐਲਾਨ ਤੋਂ ਬਾਅਦ ਰਵਿਦਾਸੀਆ ਭਾਈਚਾਰੇ ਅਤੇ ਸਿੱਖਾਂ ਦੇ ਆਪਸੀ ਸਮਾਜਿਕ ਸੰਬੰਧਾਂ 'ਤੇ ਕੋਈ ਉਲਟਾ ਅਸਰ ਪਿਆ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਜੀ ਹਾਂ

ਕੀ ਤੁਹਾਨੂੰ ਲਗਦਾ ਹੈ ਕਿ ਪਿੰਡਾਂ/ਸ਼ਹਿਰਾਂ ਵਿਚ ਅਲੱਗ-ਅਲੱਗ ਜਾਤਾਂ ਦੇ ਗੁਰਦਵਾਰਿਆਂ ਦੀ ਜਗ੍ਹਾ ਇੱਕ ਹੀ ਸਾਂਝਾ ਧਾਰਮਿਕ ਸਥਾਨ ਹੋਣਾ ਚਾਹੀਦਾ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਹਾਂ ਸਾਂਝਾ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਹੋਣਾ ਚਾਹੀਦਾ ਹੈ।

ਪਲਟੋ

1

ਕੀ ਤੁਹਾਡੇ ਪਿੰਡ/ਇਲਾਕੇ ਵਿਚ ਰਵਿਦਾਸੀਆਂ ਅਤੇ ਸਿੱਖਾਂ ਵਿਚ ਸਮਾਜਿਕ-ਧਾਰਮਿਕ ਮੌਕਿਆਂ 'ਤੇ ਆਪਸੀ ਮਿਲਵਰਤਣ ਅਤੇ ਤਾਲਮੇਲ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਹਾਂ

ਤੁਹਾਡੇ ਅਨੁਸਾਰ ਸੰਤ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਜੀ ਨੂੰ 'ਗੁਰੂ' ਸ਼ਬਦ ਨਾਲ ਸੰਬੰਧਨ ਕਰਨਾ ਠੀਕ ਹੈ?

ਉੱਤਰ: ਹਾਂ। ~~ਇਹ~~ ਸੰਤ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਜੀ ਨੂੰ ਗੁਰੂ ਕਹਿਣਾ ਬਿਲਕੁਲ ਉਚਿਤ ਹੈ ਕਿਉਂਕਿ ਜਿਸ ਨੂੰ ਸਾਡੇ ਗੁਰੂ ਦੱਸ ਦੇ ਭਾਈ ਤੇ ਅਸੀਂ ਉਨ ਦੇ ਆਦਰ ਵਿਚ ਗੁਰੂ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਸੰਬੰਧਨ ਕਰ ਸਕਦੇ ਹਾਂ। ਪਰ ਗੁਰੂ ਸ਼ਬਦ ਆਹਿਸ ਵਿਚ ਸੰਤ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਜੀ ਨੂੰ ਤਗਤ ਰਵਿਦਾਸ ਦੇ ਨਾ ਨਾਮ ਦਿੱਤਾ ਜਾਂਦਾ ਹੈ।

ਆਗਸ਼ ਦਫ਼ਤਰ
ਦਸਤਖਤ

APPENDIX B

List of Publications

S. N .	Title of the Paper	Venue/ Journal Name	Date	Vol. & Issue No.	ISS N	Scopus / UGC CARE	Impact Factor
1.	Online Education as an Alternative to Offline Education: Opportunities and Challenges	L.P.U. Phagwara/ Shodh Sarita	26- 09- 2020	07 & 28	2348 - 2397	UGC CARE List-II	
2.	The Unsung Heroes of Ghadar Movement: A Case-study of Jandiala Village	Juni Khyat	Febr uary, 2024	14 & 02	2278 - 4632	UGC CARE List-II	6.6

APPENDIX C

List of Conferences

S. No.	Title of the Paper	Status	Venue	Date
1.	Challenges of New Education Policy	Presented	S.G.G.S. Khalsa College, Mahilpur District: Hoshiarpur	13-05-2022
2.	Role of Women in India's Freedom Struggle: An Analysis	Presented	S.G.G.S. Khalsa College, Mahilpur District: Hoshiarpur	29-04-2023

APPENDIX D

Transcript of Interviews

➤ Interview with S.L. Virdi, Advocate, a Dalit scholar and writer

Q. 1. Is caste-based discrimination still prevalent in Punjab?

A. Caste-based discrimination has increased than before. 'Mapping Dalits' a PhD dissertation by the research scholars of G. N. D. U. Amritsar says that in many villages of Amritsar, there are separate gurudwaras and cremation grounds for Dalits. As compared to other states of India, in Punjab caste discrimination is less physical and more psychological.

Q. 2. What in your view is the role of Dera Ballan in establishment of a separate 'Ravidasia Dharam'?

A. In my opinion, Sant Ramanand (Deputy head of the Dera Ballan till his assassination in Austrian capital Vienna on May 25, 2009) was an educated spiritual leader. He had honored me and my better half with gold medals. He was taking the Ravidasia movement in a right direction. 'Ravidasia Dharam' came into being after Sant Ramanand's demise and it was an emotional decision rather than an ideological one. No caste in the world can establish itself into a religion. In Sikhism, Islam and Hinduism, there exist all the castes and sub-castes. Dr. Ambedkar had once said to his followers that if you don't want to convert to Buddhism, convert to some other religion but do break shackles of Hinduism.

Q. 3. How do you see the future of 'Ravidasia Dharam' keeping in mind efforts of Dera Ballan authorities to get the 'Ravidasia Dharam' registered in the Census operations?

A. Dera Ballan has every right to put efforts in this direction but it is a fact that the Malwa Ravidasias still respect Guru Granth Sahib and not Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji. This movement is only limited to the Doaba region of Punjab. From Doaba region a huge number of Ad-dharmi people have migrated to foreign countries who are playing an important part in this movement of formation of a Ravidasia religious identity. The Scholars of Ravidasia community must come forward to highlight the concept of

‘Beghampura’ as enshrined by Sant Ravidas in his hymns and slowly and steadily try to fade away the label of caste to include people of other castes too in this movement.

Q. 4. Keeping in mind the announcement by Dera Ballan of a separate religion in 2010 and replacement of Guru Granth Sahib with Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji in gurudwaras, do you think relations at the village level between the Sikhs and the Ravidasias have been adversely affected?

A. Yes, relations have been adversely affected. In villages social tension and some clashes between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs over the issue of replacement of Guru Granth Sahib with Amritbani in gurudwaras were reported in police stations and some of the cases went up to the level of courts. As Sikhs are a martial race and are armed; they have the upper hand; some scholars like myself and others interfered and pacified the opponents that in a democracy everyone has religious independence and if a majority of a village people want Amritbani to be installed in the gurudwara of that village, let it be done. Even S.G.P.C. the apex body of Sikh religious affairs had admitted that the Ad-dharmis are Sehajdhari Sikhs, meaning thereby that slowly and steadily they shall become baptized Sikhs and until then let them do what they want to in terms of religious matters.

➤ **Interview with Paramjit Judge, a scholar and writer on Dalit issues:**

Q. 1. Do you think that ‘Ravidasia Dharam’ announced by Dera Ballan in the year 2010 can be termed as a new religion?

A. No, it is not still recorded in official documents unlike in the 1931 Census, where “Ad-dhaarm” was recorded as a separate religion. Later on, after the failure of Ad-dharam movement, the Ad-dharmis had again been included within the fold of Hinduism. The Ramdassias who are Scheduled Castes didn’t accept the new Ravidasia Dharam and there was a conflict.

Q. 2. How do you see social dynamics between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs post 2010?

A. There was some disturbance in relations between these two communities and the Ravidasia assertion took place. There was no mass campaign by the Dera to motivate

the Ravidasias to get 'Ravidasia Dharam' registered as their religion in official documents.

Q. 3. I had read in a newspaper that the current Dera Ballan head Sant Niranjan Dass had written a letter to our P.M. Narendra Modi requesting him to include 'Ravidasia Dharam' in the column of religions during the upcoming Census operations. How do you see these efforts of the Dera?

A. Yes, Dera must make such kind of efforts and start a public campaign but I don't think the present political dispensation led by B.J.P. shall cede to this demand of the Dera as B.J.P. consider all the indigenous communities, even Sikhs as Hindus, what to talk of the Ravidasias.

Q.4. What is the role of Dera Ballan in assertion of the Ravidasias?

A. See, basically there are two things in any assertion. One is the leadership and the second is resource. The resource in this context is Bootan Mandi (a locality in Jalandhar, famous for leather trade) and the leadership and guidance is mostly from Sachkhand Ballan. In the 1920s it was Mangoo Ram Muggowal (founder of Ad-dharam movement). But after him, there was no leader among the S.C.s who could have that level of understanding, which Mangoo Ram possessed. The leadership has to come from other quarters also if this movement has to succeed. There are some Ad-dharmis who have converted to Buddhism and there is a Buddhist monastery in Soondh village on the Mahilpur-S.B.S. Nagar Road. After the Vienna episode in 2009, Bhagwant Rasoolpuri, a Punjabi writer had written a story 'Jarhan' (Roots) on this issue. Sant Ramanand was an active leader but after his murder in the above-mentioned episode, the Ravidasia movement has slowed down considerably and the Ravidasias could not institutionalize themselves into a religion.

Q. 5. I've seen some portraits of Sant Ravidas in which he is shown with small portraits of Bhim Rao Ambedkar and Gautam Buddha to his left and right sides. How do you see it? Do you find any ideological similarity among these three figures?

A. There is nothing like that. There is a wall calendar in which 'Sacha Sauda' episode of Guru Nanak's life is portrayed; where Guru Ravidas Ji is shown one among the Sadhus whom Guru Nanak fed. The Valmiki community of Punjab too has such kind of photographs. All these are kinds of assertion to elevate one's spiritual masters. It is a convention among communities as argued by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in

their book, 'The Invention of Tradition'. The Ravidasia community stand by Ambedkar as the latter was involved in Dalit politics. When it comes to religion, the Ravidasia community is divided. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism and Dalit scholars like Lahori Ram Bali and S.L. Virdi toed the latter's line. All the Ravidasia or Ad-dharmi community didn't embrace Buddhism.

➤ **Interview with Ronki Ram, a Professor at P.U. Chandigarh and writer on Dalit issues:**

Q.1. In your opinion, is caste-based discrimination still prevalent in Punjab?

A. See, it is a matter of how to map the reality. You yourself should try to find out through research what is the reality at ground level.

Q. 2. How do you see the future of 'Ravidasia Dharam' announced by Dera Ballan?

A. See, they (Dera Ballan authorities) have said that anybody can join Ravidasia Dharam and it is a matter of their religious identity. The Ravidasias say that they have a separate identity although Sikhs and Hindus try to include them in their respective folds. They further argue that since discrimination is done with them; therefore, if they have a separate religion of their own, there would be no discrimination.

Q.3. Have social dynamics between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs been adversely affected after the announcement of 'Ravidasia Dharam' in the year 2010?

A. Naturally, it has happened; although many of the Ravidasia Deras refused to install Amritbani in gurudwaras and there are still many gurudwaras, where Guru Granth Sahib is installed in the sanctum sanctorum. The gurudwaras influenced by Dera Ballan have replaced Guru Granth Sahib by Amritbani. They (Dera authorities) argue that if they don't do this (replacement of Guru Granth Sahib by Amritbani in Ravidasia gurudwaras) the Sikhs would object to it as our Sants sit beside Guru Granth Sahib and the Sikhs term it as the violation of Sikh *rehat maryada* (Code of religious conduct). Therefore, the Ravidasias have made their own religious scripture, Amritbani and code of ethics.

Q. 3. Up to what extent the Dera had been successful in assertion of the Ravidasia community?

A. See, the Ravidasia community's assertion is not only owing to Dera Ballan only; they have their own personality, education and the eligibility that they got due to reservation. They follow Guru Ravidas's philosophy. The Dera (Ballan) has institutionalized the Ravidasia community. It is a matter of assertion when the Ravidasias talk about equality and this assertion can be found among the members of some other communities also.

➤ **Interview with Resham Singh Bhatti, Senior Manager, Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Kathar (Jalandhar):**

Q. 1. Kindly tell me something about this hospital.

A. This is a purely charitable hospital having a capacity of 125 beds. All the treatment including surgeries is provided on very nominal rates. For example, for a surgery of gallstones, we only charge I.N.R. 15000, whereas private hospitals charge around I.N.R. 40000-50000 for the same. Similarly for a Cesarean operation, our rates are only I.N.R. 15000, whereas it is quite costlier in private health centers.

Q. 2. What is the number of departments in this hospital?

A. We have all the major departments like, Medicine, Gynecology, E.N.T., Eye etc.

Q. 3. How many Doctors do you have in this hospital?

A. Approximately we have around 15 Doctors. Most of them are specialists in their respective fields.

Q. 4. What is the catchment area of this hospital?

A. Patients from all over Punjab and the neighboring Himachal Pradesh come here for treatment since our rates are very nominal in the area.

➤ **Interview with Surinder Dass Bawa, Head, Shri Guru Ravidas Dharam Parchar Asthan, Kahanpur (Jalandhar):**

Q. 1. In your opinion, where does the mission of 'Ravidasia Dharam' stand today?

A. The mission of 'Ravidasia Dharam' is spreading at a very fast pace throughout the world. After the announcement of Ravidasia religion in the year 2010, Amritbani Guru Ravidas Ji, which has been translated in many languages of the world has been installed at lakhs of religious places. Its English version is available in the universities in America, Canada, England, New Zealand, Australia and many other countries of the European continent. In England, the 'Ravidasia Dharam' column has already been created in the register of census enumeration.

Q. 2. How do you see efforts of Dera Ballan to include 'Ravidasia Dharam' in the column of religions in official documents?

A. Since 2010, many efforts in this direction have been put by Dera Sachkhand Ballan, Shri Guru Ravidas Public Charitable Trust, Varanasi, Ravidasia Dharam Parchar Asthan and some other religious figures of the community. Lakhs of letters in this regard have been sent to the Census Commissioner of India, who refused to accept letters saying they have not enough space in their office to keep such a huge number of letters. The online membership of 'Ravidasia Dharam' runs into crores. I commend the role played by religious figures of our community, followers of 'Ravidasia Dharam' writers, singers, lyricists, poets, *pathis*, *kirtanias* in the spread of 'Ravidasia Dharam' mission.

Q. 3. Do you feel that after the announcement of 'Ravidasia Dharam' social dynamics between the Ravidasias and the Sikhs have been adversely affected?

A. Everybody has the right to respect one's father. The followers of Guru Ravidas are spread throughout India and everyone has the liberty to follow one's religious beliefs and traditions. If we (Ravidasias) respect other religions, followers of other religions must respect us. If any religion spreads, nobody should feel jealous. Wise people of every religion respect other religion. As brotherhood is needed by one and all; therefore, when there are Ravidasia religious functions, people of other religions participate in such functions and vice-versa.