

# WHY CASTE DIFFERS IN PUNJAB POLITICS?

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## **Introduction**

In this paper, I seek to provide an analytical overview of why caste dynamics is different in Punjab politics, and how Deras have surfaced as institutions with immense political sway in this context. This is done through a close examination of key scholarship dealing with caste in Punjab, which provides a better understanding of the particularist nature of caste in politics.

To this end, I trace the rise of Jat Sikhs in the social order of Sikhism in Punjab and then compare this with Dalit Sikh efforts at attaining vertical mobility. I argue that analogous attempts to gain mobility have resulted in limited gains in social capital for the Dalits. Considering the reasons for this paradox, I then outline the response to this paradox in the form of Deras.

## **How Jats rose to the top of the hierarchy**

As Jodhka (2004) notes, the tenets of Sikhism denounced caste practices. This lack of ritual sanction implies that the Jats, considered Shudras in the Varna system (Ram, 2007), were not judged for their perceived impurity upon converting to Sikhism; in fact, the Gurus willingly raised Jats to positions of authority in the newly-developing religion owing to their indifference to the Brahmanical hierarchy (Puri, 2003).

Despite a formal denunciation of caste, the Gurus and thus Sikhism still existed in a world with caste hierarchies (Jodhka, 2004). Thus, in the agrarian economy of Punjab, a social order arose due to “material and political considerations” given the derecognition of the varna system, with land ownership as the primary, but not only, determinant of social status. The Jats have established a hegemonic control over land in Punjab, deriving not only their economic prosperity, but also their sociopolitical dominance from it (Ram, 2012).

They established this control due to support from the colonial government; the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1900 restricted the transfer of land to the agricultural castes, which excluded the Dalit Sikhs (Puri, 2003). Due to a lack of alternative employment opportunities, the Dalits were forced to become labourers for them (Ram, 2012), which entrenched a power dynamic in the form of the *jajmani* system (Jodhka, 2004). Thus, historical political backing and hegemonic control over socially valuable economic resources like land granted the Jats a high status.

### **Analogous efforts by the Dalit Sikhs**

At the same time, some collateral gains from colonial development policies enabled occupational mobility for the lower castes, who escaped the *jajmani* system entrenched in agriculture by migrating to canal colonies as workers (Puri, 2003). This mobility became pronounced in post-colonial Punjab, through the Green Revolution in the 1960s. With the commercialisation of agriculture under the Green Revolution, the gulf between the agriculturists and the labourers increased (Ram, 2007). Mechanisation and the influx of migrant labour from neighbouring states reduced dependence on local labourers (Ram, 2007). However, around this period, a newly formed Dalit middle class began to penetrate the service sector and saw economic prosperity (Ram, 2007). They often migrated abroad, and gained exposure to secular values and education that shaped Dalit consciousness in the state, leading to demands for increasing wages (Ram, 2007) and a share in sociocultural spaces in the community. This mirrors the Jats' climbing the socio-economic ladder through land ownership.

Additionally, the inclusion of lower-caste Sikhs in the scheduled castes has meant greater representation in government positions, which has accentuated their political influence (Ram, 2012). This shows state support for the Dalit Sikhs – analogous to colonial state support for the Jats, but based on egalitarian principles (Ram, 2012).

### **Why has the extent of vertical mobility been different for Dalit Sikhs?**

However, as Jodhka (2004) points out, caste inequalities persist in Sikhism in Punjab. Why has the extent of vertical mobility been different for the Dalits?

Firstly, as Ram (2012) highlights, Dalits often face social boycotts from the dominant castes on demanding a share in common resources. Secondly, despite economic prosperity, Dalits hold a disproportionately low share in agricultural land in Punjab even today (Department of Planning, Government of Punjab, 2020). Given the importance of land as a symbol of prestige, this often translates into a lower position in the social hierarchy despite politico-economic prosperity (Ram, 2012). Within this entrenched value system, further perpetuated by the Jat Sikhs, what recourse do the Dalit Sikhs seek?

Conversion is not a viable solution – the spectre of caste hangs over the Dalits despite their religion (Ram, 2012), evidenced by the remnant notions of their supposed impurity that chase them, leading to avoidance behaviour and their landlessness that disenfranchise them in Sikhism (Jodhka, 2004). Additionally, Sanskritization – emulating the practices of the upper caste to attain purity and thus vertical mobility – does not work either, as it is not possible to 'emulate' land ownership, which functions as the primary indicator of social status in Sikhism in Punjab (Ram, 2012).

### **What have the Dalit Sikhs done in response?**

Consequently, the infeasibility of traditional solutions to caste inequality and “the systematic denial of their fundamental human rights has forced Dalits to establish their own separate religious centres...known as Deras” (Ram, 2012, p. 652). This assertion of an alternate identity can be traced back to the *Ad-Dharm* movement, which argued that the *Ad-Dharm* religion is a belief system that was destroyed by the Aryans, but is now on the brink of revival (Ram, 2012). The movement has now reappeared in the form of the Ravidassia religion (Ram, 2012). Deras are the physical manifestation of this movement with unique “identity markers” that differentiate this religion from Hinduism and Sikhism (Ram, 2012, p. 701).

The *Ravidassia/Ad-Dharm* religion is considered the native religion of the Dalit Sikhs, and is based on the teachings of Guru Ravidas, a Dalit Sikh himself – hence, if Dalits themselves join the folds of this religion, it cannot be termed as ‘conversion’ (Ram, 2012).

Apart from its appeal to egalitarianism, it fosters a sense of pride in the Dalit identity. Symbols of the higher caste are adopted to rebel — Guru Ravidas wore the sacred thread of the Brahmins, but steadfastly hung on to his hereditary occupation of shoemaking, thus “attribut[ing] dignity to manual labour”, a source of Dalit pride that persists today (Ram, 2012, p. 672).

Thus, Deras and the *Ravidassia* religion form a key component of the lives of many Dalit Sikhs, implying their significant influence on politics given their numerical preponderance. The presence of Deras provides great scope for future research on how the particularist nature of caste in Punjab could lead to novel theories and strategies, in both theorizing and in the field of electoral politics respectively.

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