

# Point of No Return? Or to Re-think and Re-engage?

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**S**o, is this the final point of No Return? Have the Ravidassias finally moved out of the loose folds of Sikhism? By not having the prakash of Sri Guru Granth Sahib ji at the bhog ceremony of the deceased leader of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan sect, has the dera indicated a permanent shift away from the larger Sikh panth/ And can the dera leadership thus collectively and so wholly control the minds of the dera followers who have bowed before Sri Guru Granth Sahib and have identified themselves with the casteless Sikhism? Will they suddenly now turn towards Hinduism? What will they tell the Census 2011 man soon about what to fill in the column of Religion?

And must the SGPC and the other Sikh organisations immediately draw conclusions from this one move, no matter how seemingly decisive?

Eighteen days after Sant Rama Nand was gunned down in Vienna, allegedly by radical Sikhs, what really does the decision of the sect mean if it has indicated a shift in religious practice by not having the prakash of Guru Granth Sahib on the occasion of antim ardas of the slain preacher?

The 109-year-old Dera Sachkhand Ballan follows the teachings of the 14th century Bhakti preacher Ravidas who belonged to a low caste and is regarded as a "bhagat" by the Sikhs though his followers worship him as a guru, a sore point with a section of the Sikhs. The Ravidas community's practice of calling their current chiefs gurus was being resented by these Sikhs since they do not accept bowing before a living guru, that too in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib.

The Indian media, almost full of unconcealed glee, reported that "the dera made a significant departure from its own traditions by not organizing the akhand path" and that "the palanquin, usually bearing Sikhs' holy book, instead held the portrait of Sant Sarwan Dass in whose name the dera was established a century ago."

Forgotten in a split second was the universality and common heritage of the Sikh scriptures and there was not a single comment on the sect's utter disregard towards the message of universal welfare that the scriptures hold aloft. Not one journalist or editor had it coming that here was a sect which, after a singular jolt of a loss of life, was giving up on a heritage of centuries and the only scripture that has helped preserve and disseminate the words of the very man that the sect considers Guru.

It takes dedicated refusal and utter blindness to miss a point that could be subtle only for a non-hybrid buffalo. But then when was Indian journalism last accused of having subtlety as a quality? It smugly reported that the shift in practice was a 'reaction to Vienna incident' and 'a decision of sants of the dera'.

The 40 hymns and a shloka of Guru Ravidass that was read out at the final prayers were the very

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drifting away and how the forces of Brahmanism are working beneath many such conspiracies to weaken the lure and strength of Sikhism.

It is time for the community to take note of how the innumerable deras are being perceived as providing support to the marginalised castes, something that should have come naturally from

the Sikh elite.

There is no denying the rising dalit consciousness in Punjab and Haryana and the massive political clout that the different deras wield in Punjab. The violent episode has also showcased the casteist undertones to social interactions among the Indian Diaspora.

In fact, those disappointed that casteism was not accepted as a form of racism at the recent United Nations conference on racism at Geneva, are hopeful that this incident will help bring international support to their argument.

Many Ravidassias follow a number of Sikh practices and call their places of worship gurdwaras. The Ad Dharm movement started by a Ravidass follower, Mangoo Ram, in the 1920s brought many of the Chamar caste into its fold and it has a number of gurdwaras in the UK and elsewhere in Europe.

As a recent editorial in the Economic and Political Weekly, a respected Left leaning journal in India has brought about, the dalits, especially in the Doaba region, have moved up economically over the past few decades, but have found no improvement in their social position. In other places, the emphasis by the deras on social service and campaigns against alcohol and narcotic abuse has helped garner large numbers of devotees, especially women. The socio-economic growth of the deras has begun to be reflected in an increasing political clout as is obvious by the deference shown to the chiefs by all political parties before the assembly and parliamentary elections.

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

That the SGPC is close to the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal) in Punjab is also a source of discomfiture for these sections. Many within the Sikh community feel that only a genuine effort on the part of Sikh institutions to involve the lower and backward castes will help stem the increasing sense of alienation that these sections feel and the periodic violent outbursts, which are a symptom of this alienation.

By themselves such divergences do not necessarily imply a weakness in the body of research from which they emerge, and can even indicate a vibrant blossoming of ideas. Unfortunately, in the present case, each of these two contradictory accounts seems to be oblivious of the other's claims and interpretations. Implicit in each narrative is a denial of the other's validity. It appears that both accounts fail to live up to the demands of both

falsifiability and coherence by refusing to accommodate or even accept the challenges posed by the other account.

It does appear that the problem is not so much with the depiction of facts per se, as it is with the theoretical apparatus which is employed to collect these facts and make sense of them.

While structural and systemic critiques have failed to integrate the working of democracy in their interpretative framework, studies of democracy and democratic theory have not paid sufficient attention to the structural foundations of underdevelopment. The inability to bridge this chasm weakens the social sciences as "debates" between researchers do not lead to a conversation between them or to the possibility of transcending the given problem. One of the challenges before social sciences is to transcend this contradiction within its own body and work towards a richer and better understanding of the linkages between democracy and underdevelopment.



The bhog of the deceased man in progress. The scriptures are absent. Instead, there is a huge portrait of the dera founder.

