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**Social cleavages, Deras and politics in Eastern
Punjab: A study of Dera Sacha Sauda**

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Abstract. The vicious conflicts erupted between the followers of Gurmit Ram Rahim Singh, the head of Dera Sacha Sauda, and fundamentalist Sikhs reveals that the violence not only deepen social cleavages but also enhances the cleavages in Sikh dominated society in Eastern Punjab. The paper's argument is that the social cleavages in the political society of Punjab give birth to religious sects (Deras) which in turn feed on them in a vicious circle. Dera as an idea and institution is itself cleavages based which gives impetus to political articulation of a given subdued culture to come forth as a challenge to the mainstream socio-cultural and religious discourse. The Deras formed distinct religious symbols, cultural traits, daily code of conduct, rituals and prayers for their followers which dreaming them an egalitarian utopian society or social space. However, by doing so the Deras are enhancing the cleavages in the society instead the elimination of the cleavages. The Dera Sacha Sauda is taken as reference for the study.

Keywords. Dera, Sacha Sauda, Cleavage, Politics, Punjab, Sikh, Society.

JEL. Z12, Z13, Y40.

1. Introduction

Since the ages the Deras¹ have taken a critical space in the socio-cultural and religio-spiritual life of people in Punjab (Singh, 2009: 33; see also Lal, 2009: 226). Nowadays, the Deras have entered into the different arenas of civil society and electoral politics of the state (Kumar, 2014, Baixas, 2007, Ram, 2012a, 2004, Singh & Singh, 2017, Singh, 2019). The increasing inability of the state government to undertake the social welfare services is providing the space to Deras in the politics to fulfill the demands and interests of people, particularly of marginalized sections. The rising publicity of Deras and Babas could be noticed from growing numbers of their followers and their recognition in multifarious developmental activities such as healthcare, education, environment, and social security (Singh & Singh, 2017). Although, the Deras are recognized for their religious and spiritual activities but it is also believed that Deras are providing a platform for their social mobilization and political assertion (Ram, 2007, p.4068, 2008, pp.1345-56, 2012, p.690; see also Sharma, 2009, pp.40-42; Baixas, 2007: p.4059, Kumar, 2014, p.336). During the last century, the marginalized people involved in different socio-cultural and religio-

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spiritual movements, which were become an endemic feature of Punjabi society, for their social change. These movements provided them distinct identities which marked them socially distinct and politically assertive groups in the society. Similarly, Sacha Sauda movement/Dera (henceforth DSS) is playing a critical role in the social mobilization of marginalized sections in the society. DSS's symbols, principles, cultural traits, daily codes of conduct, rituals and prayers are providing a new social space and identity to its followers. They imagine themselves as a new social group in the society through this newly formed social space. They also utilize the space of DSS (tangible and intangible) to articulate and address their grievances, social mobilization and political assertion. Although the Dera formed the religio-cultural identities for their social change but these identities further deepen the existing socio-political cleavages in the society of Punjab. The first part of the paper is focus on social cleavages and rise of Deras in Punjab. Second part provides the brief history of DSS. Third part deals with the DSS's role in identity construction which deepens social cleavages in the society. The fourth part is concluding remarks on overall discussion.

2. Social cleavages and rise of Deras in Punjab

Comparative political sociologists define a social cleavage is a conflict and division that can arise out of relationship in the social structure between groups of a political community (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967: 6; Heywood, 2005: 45; Stoll, 2004: 15; Mair, 2006: 272-273). Social cleavages in a society are born out of asymmetrical and an unequal distribution of political influence, economic power, and social status. Generally, social cleavages recognized particular social bonds, be they racial, religious, economic, gender, or cultural, as politically significant to treat a group(s) as major or minor political actor(s) in the society (Heywood, 2005: 45-46). Social cleavage theory reveals that there is significant influence on the perception of links between social structure and politics in a society (Hasan, 2004: 20). The contemporary Indian society is divided on the basis of religions, languages, races, regions, castes, classes, gender, physical disability, cultural artifacts, sub-cultural beliefs, political philosophy and ideologies (Ahuja, 2011: 16; see also Doshi, 2008: 114). These artifacts or decisive factors divided the people into politically imperative and hierarchical groups as superior or inferior categories in the society. Although India has no state religion but the numerical strength of Hindus and democratic political system of the country provide enough space to them to control over the institutions of the state and civil society. It scared the minority religious communities and further contributed to the growth of fundamentalism among them. This radicalized the fundamentalism on both sides—Hindu vs. Muslim, Hindu vs. Sikhs, Hindu vs. Christians—deepen the religious cleavages in the society.

Caste is another pan-Indian and pan-South Asia phenomenon that not only divides Hindus but also the Sikhs, Christians and Muslims which do

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

not have Dharma-Karma philosophy to justify and support the caste system (Judge, 2015: 56). Caste is a hereditary endogamous group fastened with traditional profession, observing commensally prohibitions and constraints on social interaction (Kothari, 1999: 61; see also Ahuja, 2001: 18). It has been the basic element in the practice of social exclusion in India (Judge, 2014: vii). Hindu caste system is often linked with Varna system which divided the society into four Varnas i.e. Brahmans (priest), Kshatriyas (nobles), Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (tiller of the soil and slaves) (Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998: 5). It excluded the shudras from socio-cultural, economic and political spheres of life. The Hindu social order having a base in Brahmnical discourse which legitimize the principles and practices of hierarchy, exploitation and oppression (Kumar, 2005: 516; see also Singh, 2016: 359). In the post-Independent of India several constitutional measures have been adopted to reduce social inequalities, disability, discrimination and exclusion of Dalits. But the ghost of caste based exclusion is continuously haunting to them.

The escape from the specter of caste based inequality and discrimination lower castes people converted into different religions which have egalitarian philosophy, like Islam, Sikhism and Christianity, but they constantly remained at lower stratum of different communities. They persistently faced the problem of inequality and discrimination. It is widely believed that when the people come into Sikh faith they entered with their castes. In his *Vaaran* (verses) Bhai Gurdas, the contemporary of Sikh Gurus, mentioned the names of some castes in the Sikh panth such as Khatri (Sehgal, Ohri, Uppal, Julka, Bhalla, Kohli, Passi, Khullar, Vohra, Vij, Kapur, Chaddha, Behl, Marwaha, Mehra, Soni, Jhanji, Sodhi, Beri, Nanda, Tuli, Puri), Jats (Randhawa, Dhillon, Khera, Pannu), Brahman (Tiwari and Bhardwaj), Aroras, Lohars, Nais, Chhimbas, Machhics, Dhobis, Kumhars, Teli, Goldsmith, Chandals (Quoted from Grewal, 1996: 30-31). During colonial period, Punjab censuses from 1881 to 1921 recorded more than 25 castes within Sikh community (Bingley, 1970: 40). Of these most important are Jats, Brahmans, Rajputs, Khatri, Aroras, Labanas, Mahtons, Sainis, Kambojs, Kalas, Tarkhans, Nais, Chhimbas, Jhinwars, Ramdasias, and Mazhabis.

An egalitarian ideology of Sikh Gurus, religious and socio-cultural rituals and traditions, religious institutions '*sangat*' and '*pangat*', absence of caste based priesthood, to wear the sword and respect of manual labour, all were together aimed at creating caste free society i.e. Khalsa (Puri, 2003: 2693; see also Singh, 2016: 359). Therefore, mostly Dalit and Backward castes embraced Sikhism in the hope of gaining social equality and dignity (Ram, 2007: 4066). Mazhabi Sikhs and Ramdasias are two major dalit castes, along with several other minor Dalit castes (Rangreta, Ravidasia, Rai Sikh, Sansi, Bauria, Shiklighar, and Bazighar), which came into Sikh faith and panth (Puri, 2003: 2694; see also Ram, 2017: 54). Unfortunately, the Sikh panth could not prolong the practicability of the egalitarian practices. The so-called Untouchables of Hindu society, after conversion to Sikhism,

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

consistently facing caste based discrimination (Singh, 2016: 359) and untouchability continuously practicing against them (Ram, 2007: 4066). The evidence of untouchability is clearly reflected from Khalsa Dharam Sastra of 1914 (Oberoi, 1994: 106). Moreover, the Untouchables were denied to access the public wells, mainstream space of villages, janjghar (marriage centres), cremation grounds and Gurdwaras. This has forced to them to establish their separate Gurdwaras, janjghar (marriage centres), cremation grounds (Ram, 2007: 4067). It also has been noticed that Dalits in Punjab are divided into various castes and communities. Along with Hindu community, dalits are segregated in Sikh, Muslims, Christian, Buddhist, Ravidassia communities.

From the last fifty years a new agrarian economy based caste system has emerged in the Sikh social fabric that divides the Sikhs into two groups i.e. agriculturalists (Jats) and non-agriculturalists (non-Jats) (Singh, 2014: 258). Explicitly, Jat Sikhs started to treat non-agriculturalist castes like Brahmans, Khattris and Aroras as second class Sikhs. They openly spoke to these non-agricultural castes as 'Bhapa Sikhs', even ex-chief minister Partap Singh Karon also used the same word for them (Singh, 2009: 437). In the post-partition period, the Sikh leadership transformed from the hands of trader castes to the landed castes in the Punjabi Sikh community. It shaped the Sikh panth to agrarian based patriarchal society. Where the male child is preferred as descendant of the land although the Gurus gave equal importance to women. In the panth Dalit Sikhs are not only at lowest in the caste hierarchy but Khattris and Brahmans, who are on top in Hindu caste hierarchy, are considered also lowest than Jat Sikhs.

In the panth Sikhs can be divided into different *sampardaye* (sects) such as Udasis, Ichhadhari, Bhikhidhari, Almast, Balahasna, Sewapanthi, Bhakti panthi, Suthrashahi, Sangat Sahibye, Bhagt Bhagwaniye, Mihaan Shahiye, Bhagt Milliye, JitMilliye, Bhuman Shahiye, Ram Thamaniye, Devi Sikhs, Nanak Panthis, Sultanis, Niranjani, Gulabdasiye, Nirankaris, Radha Soamis, Sache Saudye wale, Divya Joyti Jagrati Sansthan Noormahaliye, Bandai Khalsa (Bandapanthis), Bhanianranwale, Loaponwale, Amritdharis, Nirmalas, Ramraias, Dhirmalias, Akalis, Nihags, Namdharis (Kukas), Minas, Handalis, Massandis, Nanaksaries, Dhandhariwale, Pehowa wale (Bingley, 1970: 85-93; see also Ibbetson, 1970: 228-229; McLeod, 1984: 121-133; Ram, 2007: 4067; Judge, 2010: 351; Singh, 2004: 103; Singh & Singh, 2017: 50-51).

Along with these castes and sects based divisions, the Sikhs are also divided on the basis of linguistic, regional and cultural cleavages such as Malwai Sikhs, Doabian Sikhs, Lahoriye Sikhs or Majha Sikhs. Sikhs live within Bari Doab, the landscape between Ravi and Beas rivers, especially in the neighborhood of Amritsar and Lahore is known as Majha Sikhs also known as *Bhaou*. They have different dialect and religiously fanatical. Majha might be considered the cradle of Sikhism. Majha's Sikhs consider themselves superior to the rest of Sikhs because of they could easily boast

of Lahore, the political capital of Punjab, and Amritsar, the holy city of Sikhs (Oberoi, 1994: 42-43).

The above said discussion shows that over the period of time several cleavages have emerged in Sikh panth which has made a multi-fractured Sikh society. In this context, it is not easy for the Dalits, other backward castes and economically and politically marginalized people to get respectable space in Sikh panth. Their incessant humiliation at the hands of landowner upper caste is coercing them to search for an alternative socio-cultural space in the society. It is well reflected in their shift towards Deras (Singh & Singh, 2017: 52). Thus, Dalits of the state move towards Deras to search an alternative, respectable and egalitarian space. Deras, however, by their spiritual philosophy, socio-spiritual symbols and social services promise them to endow with democratic space which exerts as balm on the lesions of hitherto socially excluded sections. Therefore, it is widely believed that Deras are emerging as platform for socio-cultural and political assertion of Dalits and marginalized sections of the society.

Dera as sectarian institution is not new entity in Punjab. It is much older than the Sikh *Panth*. Deras in Punjab, before the Sikh faith, belonged to *Sufi Pirs, Yogi Naths, and Sants* of *Bhakti* movement (Singh, 2009: 33). In Punjab the popularity of Sufi Sants or Pirs and their *khanqahs* (shrines) can be seen through their veneration across the communities such as Muslim, Sikh and Hindu. In Punjab Sufi movement began with Sheikh Al-Hujwari, Baba Sheikh Farid Shakarganj, Shah Hussain, Sultan Bahu, Bulleh Shah (Dhillon, 2001: 32-33). The major function of *khanqah* was to provide relief to people of all communities, particularly the lower strata of different communities. Several *khanqahs* were constructed to facilities the lower castes of Hindu populace in rural areas. *Khanqahs* with modest hospitality and generosity offered spiritual guidance, psychological support and counseling that was free and open to all people. This role of *khanqahs* challenged the establishment of stratified social structure either Hindu or Muslim societies. Soon *khanqahs* became epi-centers of socio-cultural and theological activities of people from all ethnic, genders and religious backgrounds (Schimmel, 1975: 231; see also Singh, 2016: 28-32; Singh & Singh, 2017: 149-150). Similarly, Farina Mir has explored that the practice of saint veneration, particularly of Muslim Pirs, was "a locus of a kind of sociality in which people participated irrespective of the religious, class or *zat* affiliations". Sufi shrines of Sakhi Sarvar Sultan, Sheikh Farid, Bulhe Shah, Sheikh Fattha, Khwaja Khizr, and Five Pirs (*Panj Pir*) were the manifestation of the shared devoutness of Punjabis. Major Aubrey O'Brien (1911: 519), a court appointed trustee of a Muslim shrine, commented on the popularity of the Sakhi Sarvar shrine "The greatest shrine in the Western Punjab is that of Sakhi Sarvar....Men, women and children, Sikhs, Hindus and Mohammedans alike, come from all the districts in the Punjab". In the same way Sir Denzil Ibbetson (1970: 101) observed the popularity of these shrines in following terms: "On the borderlands where these great faiths meet...the various observances and beliefs which

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

distinguish the followers of the several faiths in their purity are so strangely blended and intermingled that it is often impossible... to decide in what category the people shall be classed". He also described the many Saints who had disciples in Punjab as 'generally Mohamedan', but adds that they were worshipped by Hindus and Muslims alike with the 'most absolute impartiality'. Harjot Oberoi (1992: 366) pointed out that "in nineteenth century Sikhs were deeply involved in the worship of miracle saints and undertook regular pilgrimages to their shrines. Sakhi Sarvar, among these saints, also known as *Lakhdatta/Lalanwala/Rohianwala* was worshiped by Sikhs". Punjab Census Report of 1911 proved the popularity of Sakhi Sarvar among Sikhs. During this Census 79, 085 Sikhs recorded that they were followers of Sakhi Sarvar (*ibid.*). The worship of five Pirs/Sants, Pir Budhu Shah, Baba Hazrat Sheikh, Gugga Pir is also common among the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims.

In the contemporary Punjab the veneration of two Sufi Saints, Sheikh Farid and Sheikh Fatta, has become extremely popular among people across the castes and creed. They have earned a respectable space in the society because of their affiliations with either Sikh Gurus or Guru Granth Sahib (Singh, 2016: 33-35). Several shrines dedicated to local Sufi Saints/*Pirs* are located across the rural and urban landscape of Punjab. Mostly the priests of the shrines are belonged to Sikh and Hindu communities (*ibid.*). The new custodians try to build the legitimacy of these shrines through memories of their links with Sufi shrines or centres which are now located in Pakistan (Snehi, 2013: 9) and Iran-Iraq.

The shrines of Saints of Bhakti movement are another type of Deras which existed even before the Sikh Panth. In the northern India, however, the movement was not so much distinct than Sufi movement in terms of their teachings. Some of the prominent Saints of the movement were Bhagat Ravidass, Kabir, Namdev, Ramanand, Trilochan, Sain, Dadu Dayal, Surdas, Mira Bai, and Tulsidas. Later on, their followers developed the separate *panth* (sect) on their name such as Kabir panthi, Ravidassia panth, Dadu panthi, and Dariya panthi. Their shrines are known as *Bhawan, Mandir* or *Dera*. Their teachings and rituals developed a culture which is pro to subjugated sections of the society i.e. women and Untouchables. Their teachings are distinguished by an inward, loving devotion to a divine principle, and socially egalitarianism opposed to the qualitative distinctions of the Hindu caste system, and to those between Hindu and Muslim.

Some prominent Sikh sects, which came into existence with the emergence of Sikh faith, are called *sampardai* in Sikh idioms. The first such sect was the Udasis, "an order of ascetics founded by a son of Guru Nanak Dev" (Lal, 2009: 226). Udasis functioned as an aspect within the Sikh faith and acted as the missionary wing of Sikhism (Singh, 2002: 75). During the time of Sikh Gurus different sects or Deras cropped up which also have some ideological differences with them. Some of these *Sampardais* did not come into being within the Sikh Panth, though the founders of some of

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

them originally belonged to Sikh families, such as *Minas, Dhirmalias, Ramraiya, Handalis, and Massandis* (Ram, 2007: 4067). Basically, all these *Sampardais* or Deras were the result of the disgruntled and unsuccessful endeavour of the “counterfeit” pretenders to the title of Guru or originated actually in opposition to Sikhism (Bingley, 1970: 85-93; see also Grewal, 1996: 39-46; Marenco, 1976: 28-30). Besides this, there were several Deras that cropped up at different intervals on the long and tortuous consolidation of the Sikh religion. Some of the most prominent among them were Almast, Bala Hasna, Bandai Khalsa (Bandapanthi), Nanakpanthi, Sewapanthi, Bhaktipanthi, Suthrashahi, Sangat Sahibiye, Bhagat Bhagwaniye, Mihan Shahiye, BhaktMalliye, JitMalliye, Nirmalas, the Nihangs, Namdhari, Bhuman Shahiye and Baba Ram Thaman (Ram, 2007: 4067; see also McLeod, 1984: 121-133; Singh, 2002: 78). Thus, in Sikh Panth two types of Deras existed, first which maintained their association with mainstream Sikh faith though they try to retain their somewhat distinct identity. Second category of *sampardais* was a product of rupture with mainstream Sikhism.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century some prominent Deras emerged in Punjab which followed either Sant Mat discourse or the teachings of Sikhism. Most popular Deras are Gulabdassi, Nanaksar Kaleran, Radha Soami, Sacha Sauda, Nirankari, Sant Darbara Singh Lopon, Divya Jyoti Jagran Sansthan (Noormehal), Dera Sant Bhaniaranwala, Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Sachkhand (Ballan), Dera Sant Man Singh Pehowa Wale (Singh, 2009:33). These contemporary Deras got strength in the society due to failure of Sikh religious institutions to coalesce the lower caste people into mainstream and the malfunctioning of the state government to address their problems. The Deras have been noted as centre of Dalit mobilization which distinguishes them from earlier Deras (Ram, 2007: 4067). Furthermore, several small or local Deras have emerged into the rural and urban settings of Punjab. In 2009, there were more than 9000 Sikh as well as non-Sikh Deras in the 12,000 villages of Punjab (ibid). This number could have increased further. Caste based social exclusion of Dalits is understood an important catapult for the growth of Deras in Punjab. Their incessant humiliation at the hands of landowner upper caste, which has also dominated the Gurdwaras’ space, is coercing them to search for an alternative socio-cultural space in the society. It is well reflected in their shift towards Deras (Thukral, 2009: 9).

3. Genesis of Dera Sacha Sauda

DSS literally means ‘The True Deal’, is a Sirsa based socio-spiritual organization. It was established by Khaima Mal on 29th April 1948, who was popularly known as Shah Mastana (Kaushal, 1998: 149). In the search of true Guru he reached at Radha Soami Dera at Beas, in Amritsar, Punjab. He embraced Baba Sawan Singh as his guru and took *Naam* (the mastic words that praise and invoked the God) from him (ibid: 147). Later on, he became very close to his Master Sawan Singh. Due to his *mastana* (fanatical)

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

style, Baba Sawan Singh rewarded him the title "*Shah Mastana*". After, the death of Baba Sawan Singh, he established independent centre on the name of his Guru as 'Sacha Sauda Dera Param Sant Sawan Singh' or 'Sacha Sauda—Dera Param Sant Sawan Shah', on 29th April 1948 (Kaushal, 1998: 148).

Shah Mastana determined three basic principles of the Dera: "first, only vegetarian food is allowed, second, drinking of liquor is forbidden, and third, illicit sex is not allowed"². He also gave a *Naara* (slogan) "*Dhan Dhan Satguru Tera Hi Asra*", (only God is worth praising, the Supreme Being, and we are solely dependent on Him and only He can help us everywhere in all eventualities). He emphasized on the equality among people by denouncing the prevailing social divisions in society either based on castes or religions. He preached the message of equality and asked the people to sit together. He said that there is no difference among people (Singh, 2012). Their blood colour is same and everyone is the child of God. There is no inequality in the house of God. Our caste is humanity.

Soon after his death, on 18th April 1960, cleavages took place among followers on the issue of successorship, because Mastana did not nominate his successor through a written will. Consequently the followers were segregated into two major factions: "one supported Satnam Singh while the second was in favour of Gurbaksh Singh" (Kaushal, 1998: 149). Finally, Satnam Singh's faction acquired the *gurugaddi* (headship) of DSS, on 26th August 1960. The second group, however, was established a separate Dera at village Jagmalwali, Tehsil Dabwali, District Sirsa of Haryana. Later on, one more centre was emerged/separated from DSS i.e. Dera Mastana Shah Balochistani, Ludhiana, headed by Mastana's nephew Mangu Mal (ibid).

Shah Satnam Singh did several satsang in different parts of the country to spread the spiritual discourse of his master. Since 1960 to 1990, he preached about 2250 satsang at cities and villages of different states of India such as Haryana, Rajasthan, Delhi, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh (Kumar: 81). It reveals that Sacha Sauda movement under his leadership was limited to northern-western states of India.

He purchased a large scale of land for the construction of new buildings to accommodate the fast growing number of devotees. Numbers of Deras were constructed by Shah Satnam such as at Banwara, Uttar Pradesh, Malout, Punjab, and Budharwali, Rajasthan (Kumar: 402). Shah Satnam Singh also carried out some social reforms that were limited, particularly, among his followers. At that time, there were many malpractices and superstitions practiced in the society such as female feticide, dowry, untouchability, child marriage, drug addiction etc. He carried out the assigned duties with greatest dedication for a period of 27 years. On 23rd September 1990, he announced Gurmeet Singh as his successor in the presence of thousands followers at the Dera. There are several stories behind his taking over the Dera. There was no chance to emergence of a new faction because Shah Satnam openly announced Gurmeet Singh's name in sangat.³ He departed from this world on 13th of December 1990.

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Under the headship of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh⁴ the Dera has grown into several folds. An official website of the Dera shows that the following have increased to over 50 million and incessantly growing.⁵ He constructed a new campus of the Dera i.e. 'Shah Satnam Ji Dham' (abode) in 1992 on Sirsa- Bhadra-Chopta road, 5 km ahead of the old Dera. This new complex has a huge Sachkhand hall (of 500 ft. x 400 ft =200000 sq. ft.), a two storeyed canteen, a printing press, a huge *Langar Ghar* (community kitchen), a housing complex of about 200 quarters and many more rooms for 'Sadhus', Gufa or Terawas (the dwelling place of Gurmeet Singh), Kashish restaurant, shopping mall, Mahi cinema, Multi-speciality hospital, royal palatial houses for every member of the *shahi* family, cricket stadium, MSG *Khed pind*, various factories of MSG products, MSG five stars resort, a petrol pump, market in front of the Dera. The Dera has about 700 acres of land both agricultural and residential.⁶ Sacha Sauda faith had 38 Deras and several *Naam Charcha Ghars* in different states of India viz. Punjab, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan, and Chandigarh.⁷ DSS also has followers and *Naam Charcha Ghars* in abroad the countries like USA, UK, UAE, Canada, and Australia.⁸ During the first two Masters's time the movement was confined to the northern states of Indian. Now, it has become pan-Indian movement and also has transnational connections.

According to his guidance the followers are running 133 humanitarian activities. The key humanitarian activities are as following: free medical treatment to poor patients, construction of houses for the poor, giving financial help for marriage of destitute girls, donation of blood and eyes, solving the cases of disputes without litigation, to serve the humanity during the natural disasters, women empowerment, self-esteem skin donation, rehabilitation of prostitutes (Insan:13)⁹. DSS has registered many world records in the field of humanitarian activities that astonished the people all over the world.

Along with the expansion of spiritual programme and welfare activities, he remained in various controversies. Several allegations of rape, murder, beating, kidnapping, to make an impotent to Sadhus, and mimicry of the Sikhs' Tent Master Guru Gobind Singh were levelled against Gurmeet Singh and his aides. He has been convicted on 25th August 2017 in rape cases of sadhvises and sentenced for 20 years' rigorous imprisonment by Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court 28th August 2017. On 11th January 2019 special CBI court convicted him and his three aides in the murder case, under Section 302 and 120 B of Indian Penal Code, of press reporter Ram Chandra Chatterpati. They sentenced for life imprisonment. Moreover, he is remained in controversy due to his role as pop-singer, film star/hero, dressing codes, royal life and political connections. As a result of his peculiar behaviour he does not suit into the prevailing spiritual structure of Indian religio-spiritual system. The Western sartorial and music codes are not acceptable into orthodox eastern spirituality. It

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

illuminates several critical features of public representation of religion in India society. The representation of a religion or Godman is very important in Indian society (Copeman, 2012: 156). Thus, people criticised him due to remaining in controversies.

DSS is celebrated some imperative events such as regular Satsangs are organised at headquarter in Sirsa on second and last Sunday of every month. Daily and regular prayers are offered through the recitals of religious songs from the Holy Scriptures at every DSS. Two very large-scale spiritual gatherings, i.e. *bhandaras*, are organised at DSS, Sirsa, as annual features. First, on the birth anniversary of Shah Mastana that is celebrate on the full moon day of Kartik of every year. Second, function that is celebrates the birth anniversary of Shah Satnam Singh on 25th of January. DSS, however, through their spiritual ideas, symbols, rituals, and prayers provided them a new socio-cultural identity. Such identity is not mitigating the prevailing social cleavages but is enhancing the cleavages in Sikh dominated Punjabi society. The following section is an attempt to prove the above said argument

4. Dera Sacha Sauda and social cleavages in Punjab

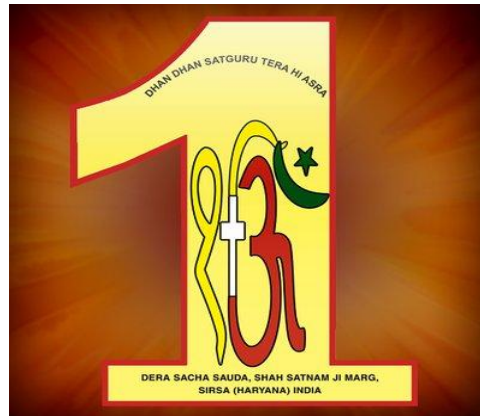
In Punjab, Deras are trying to form a new autonomous cultural and religious space by providing separate identities, symbols, social traditions and rites, principles, salutations, religious texts, shrines, slogans, prayers, dress codes and legends, to its followers. Deras are systematically concretizing the newly predict socio-cultural space to solve the plights of their followers (Ram, 2008: 1342), who are invariably subjugated sections. All this aimed at constructing the contested culture and relocating the glorious but lost cultural heritage. That's why the marginalized sections preferred to these newly constructed identities and social spaces. Within such socio-cultural spaces, they tried to re-imagine and re-construct their history, culture and heritage through the cultural-religious paradigm (Ram, 2012b: 45). Deras are trying to bringing forth the significance of the idea of contested cultural space for the emancipation and empowerment of marginalized sections in Punjab.

DSS is one of the most famous Deras which is constructing the distinct identity of their followers through symbols, rituals, prayers, slogans, shrines and religious texts. The Dera's structured new social space is allowed the followers to re-imagine and re-locating themselves in socio-cultural and political spheres of the society. DSS is performing a vital role in shaping, sharpening, harnessing and highlighting the followers' separate socio-religious identity i.e. Insa. The Dera fosters and accentuate the distinct religious symbol (One), bani (hymns of three heads of the Dera), religious places (*Naamcharcha ghar*), Gurus (Shah Mastana, Shah Satnam and Gurmeet Ram Rahim), slogan/Naara (*Dhan Dhan Satguru Tera Hi Asra*). Even, they salute to each other by saying 'Dhan Dhan Satguru Tera Hi Asra'. During the Jaam-E-Insa ceremony at Salabatpura, in Punjab, the

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

Dera head recommend forty-seven principles which directed the followers into diverse socio-cultural and religious fields. Such as, one of the forty-seven principles urge the younger followers to waking up in the morning and touch the feet of your elders by pronouncing the *naara* and in reciprocate the elder will bless their children with love and proclaiming the *naara*. During the field study, it was observed that the radical followers of DSS are strictly following the rituals which are provided by their spiritual Master at different time. There is a schedule for the followers how to start and finish a day. The Dera has been quite successful in bringing forth the significance of the idea of distinct cultural space for the emancipation and empowerment of marginalised sections (64 percent respondents belonged to SCs and BCs)¹⁰ in Punjab.

The religious insignia of DSS is 'One' (oneness). This insignia, also known as Koumi Nishan of the Sacha Sauda followers/Sacha Sauda samaj (society), clearly distinguishes them from other religions. As the religious symbol of the Sikh gurudwaras is the khanda (a two-edged sword over a quoits with two crossed sabers below the quoits). Similarly, the insignia 'One' is composed of numerical One with light yellow colour on it. Within the One, on the top there is slogan of the Dera i.e. 'Dhan Dhan Satguru Tera Hi Asra' and on below address of the Dera viz. 'Dera Sacha Sauda Shah Satnam Ji Marag, Sirsa (Haryana) are inscribed in Roman script, in the middle of it the symbols of Sikh, Hindu, Christian and Islam (Ek Onkar, Om, Cross and Star and Moon) are depicted. It represents the unity of mankind and respect of all religions in the world or the movement is confluence of all religions.



Pic. 1¹¹. *Insignia of Dera Sacha Sauda*

The followers of DSS proudly hoist insignia One, Insa, atop their religious places, houses and on vehicles during processions on the occasions of birth anniversaries Babas of the Dera. They also carry the lockets of the insignia. The insignia One, Insa, has become a password of the separate identity. It has been used to show the solidarity within the Sacha Sauda community.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

DSS's followers also have set of prayers which are known as Ardas (a formal prayer). The format of the Dera's *ardas* is also different than the Sikhism. It comprises the words of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh. It is part of worship service, daily rituals and rites of passages by the Dera's followers. They have three times Ardas viz. morning time, evening time, and before to take meal. Morning Ardas is

Hye Malik!
Din Bhar Ch Mere to Koi Ajeha Karm na Hove
Jo App ji di Najar ch Gunah Hove.
Hak Halal Di Kami Kar K Khawan.
Kisi Da Dil Na Dukhawan,
Sab Nal Nirsawarath Prem Karan.
Jina Ho Sake Turdyan Firdyan Simran Karan. Saché Satguru Ji
Har Pal App Ji Di Yad Bani Rahe Ji.

(O' God! On the whole day, I shall not do any act which is known as crime in your eyes. Eat the honest income. Not to hurt the heart of any one, and love to all selflessly. Recite the name of God to how much possible. True God, Your remembrance always remain.)

Evening time Ardas

Hye Malik!
Din Bhar ch Mere to Anjane vich Koi Gallti Hoi Hai ta Muaf Karna
Ate Ajehi Rehmat Bakshna Ke Saundyan Jagdyan
App Ji Di Daya Mehar Nu Paunde Raheye Ji.

(O' God! During the day, unintentionally any mistake happened than forgive me and shower your blessings during sleeping and awakening.)

Before Meal Ardass:

Hye Malik!
Tenu Laj Hai, Hun Boht Ho Gya.
Tu Daya-Mehar, Rehmat Kar.
Tere Pyar Mohubat
De Rah vich sanu koi taklif na ave.
Tu Ajehi Rehmat Baksh Ate
Sab nu Sumat De,
Sumat Kis Taranh Deni Hai,
Eh Tu Sab Jannda Hai.
Jis nu Jiven Deni Hai
Oven De, Eh Teri Marzi.

[Saryan Ne Ek Minute Simran Kar K Eh Ardass Karni Hai. Es to Badd Fir Ek Minute Simran Karna Hai ate Fir Hi Khana Khna Hai Ji]

(Oh God! You have Pudency, now have enough; sprinkling your compassion and blessings. No problem should to come into the path of love towards you. You should give such blessings and intellects, how to

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

give intellect, that's you know well. Give them as your wishes). [The pray should do after one minute recitation of Naam. Again one minute Naam should recite and subsequently the food should eat.] These are not simple ardass (prayers) but are way of life, how they start and end the day. How they think about the world, particularly about 'Others', non-followers of the Dera. How they think about the God.

DSS followers have also distinct rituals related to marriage. After the May 2007, when the Dera head Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh did mimicry of Guru Gobind Singh, controversy rose between his followers and radical Sikhs. The radical Sikh organizations asked for social boycott of the Dera followers. As a result the radical Sikhs of different villages stopped to give Guru Granth Sahib to the Dera followers to carry out their social ceremonies and rituals like marriage and death. Subsequently, they invented a new method for marriage i.e. *Dil jodh mala* (exchange of garland). According to the ceremony marriages are carrying out at the campus of DSS and among the followers out the campus. In the campus, brides and grooms with accompany of their families exchanged the *Dil Jodh Mala* in the presence of the Dera head. On the last weekend of every month, when the major *satsang* (congregation) is scheduled, families of brides and grooms with their respective state level 25 members registered the names of brides and grooms in the marriage bureau office. The marriage bureau also organized personal level talk between the prospective partners. The marriage bureau also registers the names of the young male and female followers and tries to assist them to find out suitable partner either within the caste or outside the caste and community. Widows' re-marriage and rehabilitation of prostitutions into mainstream by wedding are also promoted at the Dera with the help the young male followers. However, outside the campus, the follower bride and groom exchanged such garlands either in the front of picture of the baba or in the presence of block level or state level committees' members. They provide them marriage certificate which helps them in marriage registration. Under this program successful marriages are taking place amongst rich and poor, and different social sections/castes/communities. Although ideologically the Dera encouraged the inter-caste and inter-community marriages among the followers but during the field study it was observed that only a few inter-caste marriages were took place in the presence of the Dera's head for the purpose of exhibition. No one is ready to married their children outside their caste and communities.

Similarly, ceremonies related to death are constructed by the Dera. On the death of a follower, they raised *Naara* (slogan) '*Dhan Dhan Satguru Tera Hi Asra*' and chanted the *Naam*. They either cremate or donate the parts or the entire dead body. They performed *Naamcharcha* (a congregation where the God praised in the form of shabadh with music) for the peace to soul, like Sikhs perform 'Path Bhog and Kirtan' and Hindu do 'Hawan'. The Dera is also instructing the followers to take the ashes of their relatives at the Dera, Sirsa, instead of Hardwar and Kiratpur Sahib. They used the

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

ashes to grow plants because the high level of phosphorus in it. It fastens the relationship between the followers and the Dera. An expired person's family members have bond with the newly planted trees where the ashes were used. Through such efforts they are trying to use the social space to fasten the attachment of the followers with the geographical/physical space of the Dera. It is in-favour of the interest of the Dera for its growth and development.

Employing the surname 'Insan' is also a mark of their distinct identity from the Sikhs (who use Singh and Kaur) and Hindus (who use Kumar, Ram, Lal, Dev, Rani and Devi). On 13th May 2007 at Dera Salabatpura, the headquarter of Sacha Sauda in Punjab, the present Dera head Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh organized a congregation where he dressed up like Guru Gobind Singh and prepared 'Jaam-E-Insan' (nectar). He offered initially Jaam-E-Insan to Seven Premis/followers than drink himself. He did similarly as Guru Gobind Singh, Tenth Master of Sikhs, acted in 13th April 1699. On this occasion, he also provided forty-seven principles to the followers on the name of unity of all religions and the universal religion of Humanity which simultaneously offered distinct religious identity i.e. Insan. Although, he claimed that it is not a religious conversion but an affirmation to be true to one's own religion. One of the forty-seven principles directed the people do not discriminate among themselves on the basis of caste. Your caste is humanity (Insan). And use the surname 'Insan' instead of Sandhu, Sidhu, Gill, Sharma, Verma, Arora etc. Later on, under the pressure of the managing committee and Upper castes' sewadars (volunteers) Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan allowed the followers to use their surname Sandhu-Insan, Gill-Insan, Sidhu-Insan, Sharma-Insan, Verma-Insan etc. It shows that an endeavor of the Ram Rahim to mitigate the caste system was not only failed but it also enhances and deepens the caste based cleavages in the Sikh dominated society in Punjab. Before this event, a caste's people were divided into various gortas (sub-castes) now a got's people are divided into two factions, one is old and second is new Insan. For instance, people of Jat Sikh's Sandhu are divided into two factions one Sandhu, who follows the principles of Sikhism, and another is Sandhu-Insa, who follows strictly the principles of the Dera Sacha Sauda. However, the castes which found to be in Hindu and Sikh societies can be divided into four segments. Such as people of Kamboj caste are segregated into four groups first those who follows Sikhism are called themselves Sikh and, second, those who carry Insa identity of the Dera along with Sikhism are recognized themselves Sikh-Insa. Similarly, the third section is the Kambojs who follows Hinduism are known as Hindu Kamboj and, forth section's Kambojs are who follow the Hinduism along with the Dera's rituals can be identified as Hindu-Insa. The Sikh Kambojs don't prefer to maintain their social relationship with either Kambojs Sikh-Insa or Hindu Kamboj or Kamboj Hindu-Insa. The Sikh Kambojs considered themselves superior than the rest categories. A new sub-category is emerged among all the castes in Sikh panth that is Premi-Sikh or Insa Sikh (the Sikhs who

S. Singh, JSAS, 6(1), 2019, p.47-65.

Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences

follow the DSS along with Sikhism). They have the lowest position than Dalits in Sikh society. It can be represented as cleavage within cleavages. It created a new caste hierarchy within a caste on the basis of religions and Deras/sects. Such work/action of the Dera's head further deepens the social cleavages in the Punjabi society instead to mitigate the cleavages. With such action of the Dera head the society's social space is deteriorating and the *bhaicharak sanjah* (fraternity) is annihilating. Still the Sikhs have abhorrence towards the Dera head and his followers.

Caste based discrimination is still practiced among the followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda. Generally an endogamy model of marriage is followed by the followers. They prefer to marry their children within the caste. One senior member of DSS management committee reveals that it is impossible for the higher caste children, particularly for girls, to adjust in a lower caste and poor family. Moreover, the allotment of *sewa* (free service) to the volunteers is also done on the basis of their caste. Mostly, the *sewa* related to manual labour is allotted to the Dalits and Backward castes. During the field study, in the compound of DSS, observation was made and by interviewing of the followers, it was revealed that among the labour *sewadars* 95 percent were Dalit and Backward castes people. On the question of unhygienic washroom/toilets of the followers, one senior member of the management committee replied that "we will ask the Banghi caste's *sewadars* to clean the toilets because the upper caste *sewadars* refuse to perform this *sewa*." ¹² Although ideologically the membership of DSS management committee is not strictly confined to a particular caste and open for all but caste based exclusion is practiced there. Upper caste/s viz Jat Sikh and Baniyas are dominating the management committee of the Dera. Dalits and Backward castes' presence in the committee is insignificant. Such exclusionary steps have been undertaken because the Upper castes persistently uphold their dominance and to maintain the exclusion of marginals.

In his utopian society, the head of DSS tried to urge the followers to provide a respectable space to women and kinnars. He started a new tradition, i.e. 'crown of the lineage', to promote the matrilineal inheritance (parallel to the mainstream patriarchal inheritance). He encouraged the boy, if he has another male sibling, to relocate to his wife's parental place with everyone's consent and look after her parents. Similarly, he also made an endeavor to provide respectable place to eunuchs, the most discriminated and least respectable segment, in the society. He addressed them as 'Sukh Dua Samaj' (the people who pray for the society) to integrate them with social mainstream. Some of DSS spokespersons claimed that he worked hard to provide special status to eunuchs that are 'third gender'. The picture 2 shows the GRRS interaction with some eunuchs.



Picture 2¹³.

Furthermore, he has also been started a remarkable system whereby the childless couples are blessed with children. The children were offered by follower families who have more children. They claimed hundreds of such children have already transferred to childless couples. The Dera has set up a special welfare army that is 'Shah Satnam Ji Green 'S' Welfare Force' to perform the welfare activities. More than 45000 persons have registered in this team. The cleanliness campaigns, natural disaster relief work, and social welfare works are done with the help of this army. It is creating a new identity of DSS followers i.e. spirituality for humanity. Moreover, in the politico-administrative arena of the state, the Dera's followers are trying to construct the identity their block bhangidass equal to the jathedar of Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), who is second-in-command in his respective constituency during Akali government. So that their routine works could easily be done at governmental offices (Singh & Singh, 2017: 53-54). Ultimately, the all actions and directions provided by the head of DSS to his followers are offering new socio-religious and political identity to them.

5. Conclusion

The paper establishes that the Dalits and marginalized sections in Punjab often prefer to the Deras for their social emancipation and empowerment, spiritual nourishment, and political upliftment. In return to this, the Deras form a web of new socio-cultural traits, artefacts, and monuments which provide them distinct social and physical spaces and identities to resist and challenged the suppression of mainstream culture which historically placed them at the lowest position in the society. However, their religio-cultural identities further deepen the existing socio-political cleavages in the society. It created cleavage within cleavage. The paper shows that Dera Sacha Sauda is forming a new identity of their followers, who are invariably the marginalized people, in different arenas i.e. socio-cultural, religious, politics and social welfare. Such actions of the Dera further generated and deepen the cleavages in Punjab, particularly in Sikh society. It created a caste within caste, a gotra within gotra, a religion within religion, and marginalization within marginalization in the society. The marginalized sections want to improve their social position through the Dera but it further nastiest their social position in the society.

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Notes

- ¹ The word Dera has, originally, been derived from Persian word *Derah* or *Dirah*. Literally, it means a camp, abode, monastery or convent (Nabha, 2004, p. 421, Singh, 1997, p. 553). In general sense, Dera is inhabited place of a *Sant*, *Mahant*, *Baba*, or *Guru* where he preaches either the spiritual discourse of the parent religion with adding few distinct concepts, or sometimes confluence of all religions, or *Sant Mat* (Saint Discourse) or also executes the healing powers (for more detail see Singh & Singh, 2017).
- ² Accessed on 11-02-2014. [Retrieved from].
- ³ Interview with Dr. Pawan Insa editor of Sach Kahoon and spokesperson of the Dera Sacha Sauda, on 27th June 2015, in Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa.
- ⁴ Sant Dr. Gurmit Ram Rahim Singh's original name is Grmeet Singh. He adopted the title Ram Rahim, after the succession of Shah Satnam Singh, in about 1992 or 1993 to give the message of secularity and equality of all religion. Interview with Dr. Pawan Insa editor of Sach Kahoon and spokesperson of the Dera Sacha Sauda, on 27th June 2015, in Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa.
- ⁵ Accessed on 11-02-2014. [Retrieved from].
- ⁶ DSS has about 700 acres land in the villages Beggu, Baje Ke and Nejiadela. Interview with Rakesh Kumar Patwari of village Nejiadela of Sirsa on 7th January 2019 at Sirsa, Haryana.
- ⁷ Accessed on 25th July 2014. [Retrieved from].
- ⁸ Interview with Dr. Pawan Insa editor of Sach Kahoon and spokesperson of the Dera Sacha Sauda, on 27th June 2015, in Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa.
- ⁹ Accessed on 25th July 2014. [Retrieved from].
- ¹⁰ A random survey was done at DSS campus to check the socio-economic background of the followers. It was found that about 64 percent respondents were from Schedule Castes and Backward Castes.
- ¹¹ The picture of the insignia One is accessed on 14 January 2019. [Retrieved from].
- ¹² Interview with Kuldeep Kumar, Chhayawan Samiti, on 29 June 2015.
- ¹³ The picture 2 is accessed [Retrieved from].

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