

Ravidassia Dharm and Ad-Dharmis of Punjab

A STUDY ON DIFFERENT CONSOLIDATED CASTE IDENTITIES OF AD-DHARM

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Introduction

The question of caste in the state of Punjab is both unique and different from the pan-Indian interpretation of caste system, even though it's hierarchically structured. This interpretation is structured by the presence of Sikhism as well as the existence of a social order based on ownership of land. The doctrinal basis of Sikhism was to forsake the caste system. The enmeshing of caste discrimination with the Sikhi tenets, where a 'Sikh' becomes a 'Jatt Sikh' was its failure to come through as a faith of equality in praxis.

Punjab as a Sikh majority state (63%, according to 2011 Census), has Jatt Sikhs as the major landowning affluent caste. The dominance over land is seen alongside a dominance over the state's politics and religion. On the other hand, largely landless Dalits in the state of Punjab are home to 31.9% of Scheduled Caste population, which is the largest proportion of SC population amongst all states. The relationship of Jatts with that of Dalits has historically been that of landowners and landless labourers respectively, which gets manifested as a form of domination, oppression, ritual and symbolic observances, economic deprivation and political and religious hegemony by the Jatts.

The response to such discrimination has been in the form of politico-religious social movements, namely the Ad-Dharm movement, led by Mangoo Ram Mugowalia in 1920s. The movement was successful in consolidating an identity of Ad-Dharmis, where the 'Ad' denotes 'the original', or indigenous inhabitants of the land. The cultural basis of such an autonomous identity arises from a need to construct models of alternative positive identities against the 'normative' dominant ones. The counter-culture to the Jatts arose through the formation of 'Ad-Dharmi' as a religious category. It is the development of such a Dalit cultural heritage in Punjab as a form of resistance to Jatts that social movements and adoption of popular religious and pragmatic icons should be understood. Through The adoption of Bhakti Sant Ravidass, belonging to the untouchable Chamar caste, in the ritual domain and Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy in the pragmatic domain, Dalits in Punjab make a contiguous assertion of their politics. The concretisation of Dalit identity, in Punjab is especially pronounced in the Doaba region, which comprise of districts of Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Shaheed Bhagat Singh (SBS) Nagar and Kapurthala.

Ravidass Deras may be understood as Dalit religious centres blending the religious and political spheres together. The formation of Dalit Deras could be seen as a product of a failure to accommodate or reconfigure the Dalit groups within the Sikh religion. This results in Dalit mobilization through Deras by the saints and proponents of the Ravidassia faith itself. Dera Sachkhand Ballan appears then as the seat of Ravidassia identity, a symbol of Dalit heritage and cultural distinctness in Punjab. Ravidass, within Deras, comes to be seen as a saint that rejected the Brahmanical social order and defied rules of caste, while at the same time pursuing his occupation on rearing and bleaching leather. This imagery is in line with the Ad-Dharmis see themselves and, for Ronki Ram (2012), may be understood as going beyond Sanskritisation and conversion. The harassment by the Jatts back then and Ravidass' imagery, today, provides a sense of orientation to Ad-Dharmis in Punjab, and elsewhere. The formation of the new religion, Ravidassia Dharm, in January 2010, was a

trigger and response to the assassination of Sant Ramanand of Dera Ballan. The attack, known as the 'Vienna Attack' was seen as a symbolic attack on the Dalit-Ad-Dharmi community: a cowardly act born of jealousy and fear towards the community by the Jatt Sikhs.

The crystallization of Ad-Dharm identity, Dr Ambedkar's immense presence and the newly founded Ravidassia faith act as organising principles in the lives of a subset of Dalits. These developments pose a challenge to the dominant Sikh-Khalsa identity. What ensues from such a face-off between the two identities is a series of conflicts, competition over ritual status, and caste 'imbalances' which occurs when an erstwhile lower caste achieves a political status near that of dominant Jatts. The Jatts and SGPC call it a blasphemy and gross insult to their religion where a living Guru or Sant from Deras share the equal platform as *Guru Granth Sahib*. This is a breach of the injunction where the Granth itself is the last Guru, '*guru maneo granth*'. For them, how could idol and statue worshipping in Deras be permitted which Guru Granth Sahib and Sant Ravidass himself clearly prohibits? Dalits' response has been to counter question: how can the ones (Sikhs) who revere and worship the holy Granth as their guru not see the existence of castes and casteism as perpetuated by its practitioners? Isn't the very presence of caste, hierarchy, inequality and schisms an insult and humiliation for their Granth and religion? Why should Dalits be faced with differential treatment in their Gurudwaras and not be accommodated in the public and political spheres?

Overview

The research is foregrounded in delineating themes of cultural autonomy of Ad-Dharmis of Punjab. The fieldwork focuses on such cultural symbols as alternative or counter to that of Jatts, including the Ad-Dharmis' establishment of a distinct religion. It traces the contours of the Ravidassia religion and traces different forms of self-orientation vis-à-vis the dominant Jatts. Tracing the politics of assertion becomes crucial, while being mediated through religion, economic variables as well as projection of countering through the popular discourse, along with imageries of Ravidass and Dr. Ambedkar. The first section explores Ravidassia Dharm as a distinct cultural symbol through Dera Sachkhand Ballan as its place of origin. The section attempts to trace the meaning of 'Ravidassia' and explores Dera's ideological underpinnings. The second section moves beyond the Dera, to the villages in Doaba. It documents the instances of opposition between Jatts and Ad-Dharmis and explores the political underpinnings of a different identity. It's here that imagery of Dr. Ambedkar is invoked and becomes crucial in understanding the caste politics. The third section explores the narratives of collective memories and histories through anti-Brahmanical perspectives, in creating a semblance of a community which gets tied together through various idioms of belongingness and experiences. Vienna attack becomes significant here which sends out ripples of shock on the surface as well as elements beneath it. It's seen an attack on the 'SC community'. The fourth section explores the narratives of political assertion in the domain of traditional caste occupation in Punjab, how Dalits have broken free from direct dependence on the Jatts. The fifth section traces some political variables, where forms of organization would be invoked to pursue resistance and negotiations with the Jatts and Brahminical forces. The sixth section seeks to trace the consequences of such reified culturally distinct identities and their interaction with other caste clusters through the concept of *bhaichara*. The engagement with the concept underscores the ongoing overt and covert forms of conflict and interactions with Jatts and Ad-Dharmis, what happens

when a befitting response is launched in the domain of religion and politics to assert oneself? The seventh and the last section explores the contestation within the Dalit-Ad-Dharmi caste, through an attempt of exploration of different modes of cultural identity and their divergences and convergences to constitute a homogenous entity. This is pursued through Vienna attack and a further relook at the binaries between Jatts and Ad-Dharmis is sought, in light of the new religion.

Methodology and Methods

Our earlier research questions were formulated tentatively, owing both to the vastness of the field as well as our inexperience of it. The research questions were based on research gaps that we observed during our initial literature review. In the first few days, the ritual and political construction of the space of Dera and the pind outside it directed our questions towards the recurrent themes of different identities, their signification and interaction with each other. A few days into the research, we decided to pragmatically rephrase our research questions based on the information the field was giving out. It was necessitated by the overwhelming and diverse nature of information that we'd been receiving. By focussing on different types of identities encompassing the different caste clusters in the village, we decided to work around the perception and interplay of identities post the declaration of the new Ravidassia religion in 2010.

Research Questions

11. To seek to understand the significance of Dera Ballan and its ideologies across space and time
2. How does the creation of the space of Dera Ballan engender the Ravidassia identity and tie people together into a community?
3. How does the Ravidassia Dharma and its tenets shape the everyday interactions of the Ravidassia community? To trace people's reaction about the religion
- 4 To look at various ways in which people orient, identify and organize themselves politically and culturally
- 5 To look at their interactions with other caste clusters post the formation of the new religion

Dera Sachkhand Ballan was our point of entry into the field, where we first faced the Ravidassia identity. The identity, constructed through the space, as well as its specific ideology seems to be clearly demarcated from the outside. The outside, village Ballan and other nearby villages that we'd been to, gave a sense of the greater political orientation that is prevalent in the Doaba region. The introduction of these new orientations, which need not necessarily intersect with others, came to the fore. One week into the fieldwork in Ballan we decided to move away from the Dera and examine whether its presence is experienced by those not spatially proximate to it. Nurmahal was chosen as our second site of research. Nurmahal also introduced another caste cluster (Valmiki) interacting with Ravidassias and Jatts, where the variable of bhaichara was solidified into our next research

question. The common theme of collective memory ran through our research and complemented the other questions we'd framed.

In the Dera, we enrolled ourselves as part of *sewa* to gain better access into the field. Serving food, washing utensils or cleaning the premises of the temple was to break the ice between people and us, and help us integrate better. Since we were under surveillance all the time, a strict code of conduct was expected from us. Our visibility in the Dera did get us accepted, through people's curiosity and their willing to talk to us. In the village, we tried to establish contacts through the shopkeepers. Everyday visibility and purchase led them to recognising us, and talking at length whenever possible. A characteristic feature of the village owing to its weaker density and strong kinship networks is the spreading of word. Our arrival and presence in the pind would be known by most people, and one person would suggest another person, that's how data could be collected. In all the pinds that we've been to, Ballan, Nurmahal etc, people were cautious of our identities and often mistake us for RSS workers. The introductory letter from the university and our identity cards were demanded as precautionary measures, for they feared that Punjab is the next target for Hindutva politics. It's imperative to mention that some of our important data came from respondents who were politically affiliated to different organisations and parties. The choice of respondents, their positioning, ascriptive statuses and affiliations do reflect the kind of data that's gathered and compiled.

Our research design was based on largely a descriptive approach, with some explorations into a recurring theme. The underlying aim was to making our audiences aware of the specificities of this Dera and to introduce the qualitative aspect of Ravidassia dharm in the context. The methods used were in-depth interview and narrative analysis. The initial interviews would be highly unstructured and sporadic. The information that we received would be diverse and varied too. While compiling fieldnotes at the end of the day, we'd arrange data and carve out common/ recurring themes. For a long period of time, each interview would open new sets of questions that we'd verify and pose to our next respondent. Once our field notes were theorised better, and we were able to draw connections, we started to conduct interviews that were more structured. Narrative analysis was employed too, but with a weaker methodological training, to be able to claim that as a method would not be strictly correct.

A number of our respondents were not willing to have their real names put in the report. In the interest of privacy, we've provided aliases for most of our respondents.

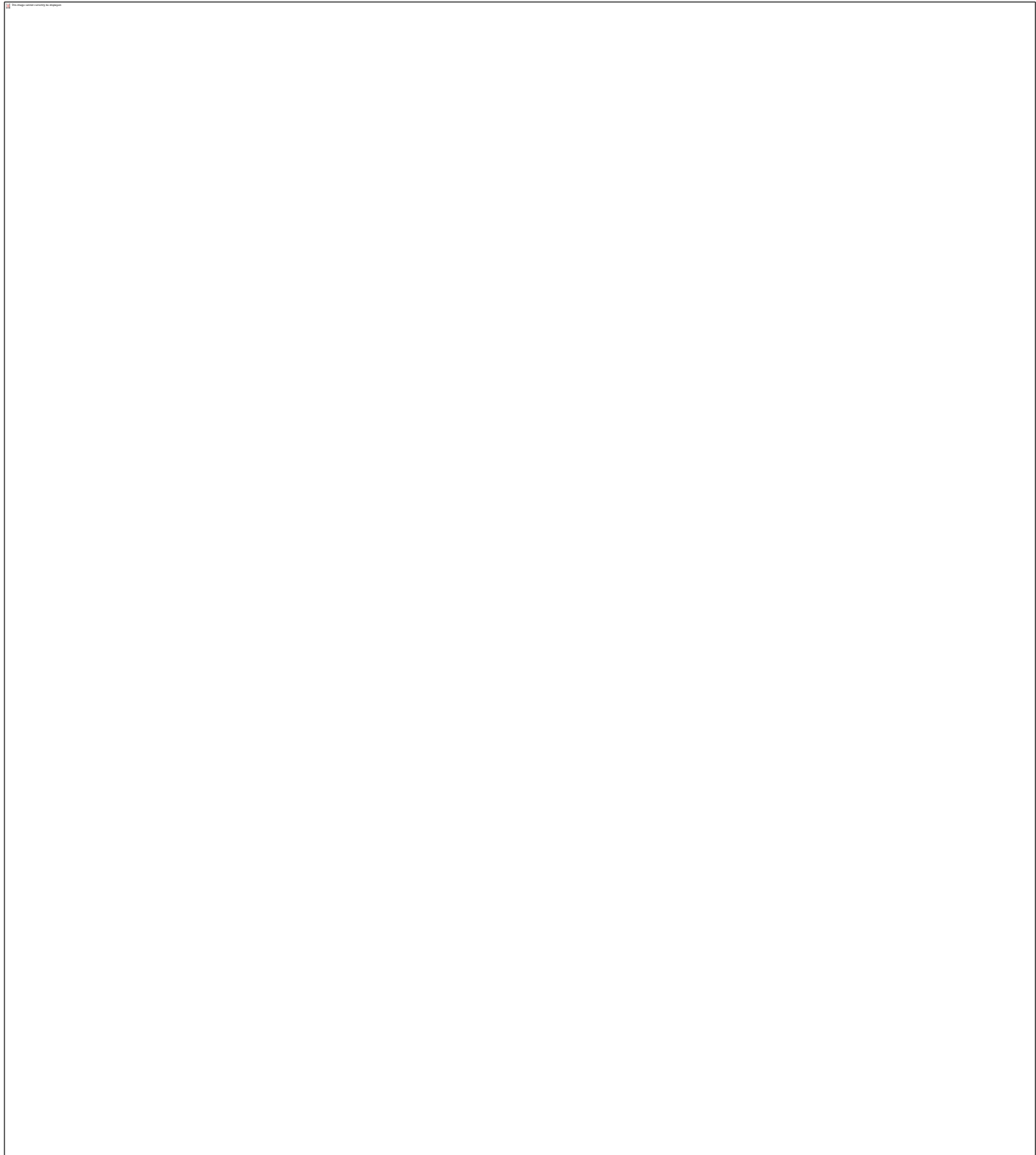
Dera Sachkhand Ballan- Seat of Ravidassia Faith

Dera Sachkhand Ballan, or Dera Ballan, as it has come to be known as the seat of Ravidassia identity, a distinct place of worship from the upper caste Gurudwara in the village, a sect, rather than one aligned with the Sikh *maryada*.

It is named after the second Sant (Chief) of the dera viz. Sant Sarwan Dass. A distinct quality of Deras throughout Punjab is the presence and reverence to a living Guru. The genesis of

his authority could be traced through the charismatic character, skills of oration, preaching of religious texts and socio-political involvement with the community or the village settings at large. The erstwhile deras, or camps, had Sants or babas', who through their healing powers and tantric rituals, gained public confidence and gained followers. The way this position of a Guru has evolved, it encompasses spiritual, pragmatic and ritualistic support to its followers, which the traditional Gurudwara under the SGPC couldn't provide. Therefore, these 'holy men' become the sole mediators between God and the devotees for imparting holistic knowledge and guidance. Our respondents identified themselves as Ravidassia inside the Dera. They spoke about the charisma and divinity of Sarwan Dass, a figure who could perform miracles. Jaswinder, our respondent in her late 60s narrated an incident where her husband, who was on his death-bed came to life with a mere touch of Sarwan Dass. Another respondent narrated how she had had six miscarriages before and was able to give birth to a child only after she sought his blessings. People inside the dera narrated stories of seeing his disassembled body parts on the floor, yet, he would be seen walking almost instantaneously afterwards. Such stories of being in a state beyond life and death and other miracles are translated through the idiom of charisma, that people refer to, which gets intrinsically tied to the making of the sacred space of the Dera. These stories narrated to us construct a self and personality of these (human?) figures through such 'events'. The beliefs in such 'events' of past, their persistence and existence function to ensure the Dera's significance as a sacred and religious site.

In the presence of Dera in Ballan village, Sarwan Dass (1928-1972) as a Guru also emerged as a local deity figure. The successors, in chronological order, are as follows: Sant Hari Dass (1972-1982), Sant Garib Dass (1982-1994) and Sri 108 Sant Niranjan Dass (1994-present). Each successor after Sarwan Dass was chosen as a part of 'routinization of charisma' (Weber 1978). We were told that the method for choosing the next successor was known to the sants alone. As this Dera advanced towards an established institution, with a formalised administrative trust, and was imbricated with the rest of society as well as other deras, the charisma gets formalised within the structures of tradition, successorship and organization of Dera itself.

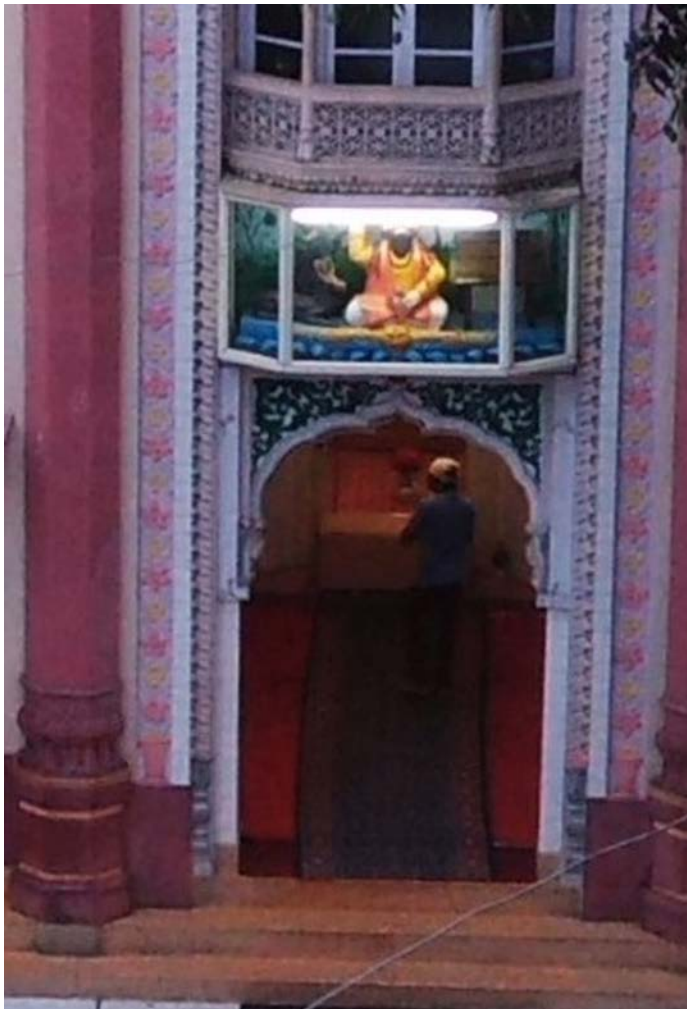


The Dera premises, from our balcony. There's temple in the front, and langer hall at the back.

Entry into the Dera requires an exhaustive security check and frisking by BSF and state security police personnel. Post the Vienna attack in 2009, current Sant/Chief has been given Z-security from the State government.

The symbols of such a sect emanating from the Sikhi tradition must contain its insignia (Nishaan sahib), its salutations, holy/sacred site and sacred text/scriptures. '*Jai Gurudev, Dhan Gurudev*' is greeted in contrast to '*Sat sri akal*' in Sikhism. It's the '*harr*' insignia as against the Sikhi's '*ek onkar*'. The newly compiled *Amritbani*, which replaced *Guru Granth Sahib* is bereft of the ritual sacredness of the latter. The presence of a living Guru takes

precedence over the holy text: it is still in the process of attaining mass legitimacy of a holy scripture. The Mandir inside the Dera has Ravidass' statue sitting atop the entry gate. The inside of the mandir has a larger-than life icon of Sarwan Dass. The place of Ravidass vis-a-vis Sarwan Dass denotes the greater importance of the latter. It's the preponderance of Sarwan Dass, a local Dera figure, which takes a form of deity worship in the Dera: Ravidass features only as a complementary figure. A visit to different Ravidass Deras helped us understand that the imagery of Ravidass would have to coexist with their respective Dera Chiefs'. The phenomenon of such Dalit Deras brings together the presence the local Dera Chief, imagery of Ravidass and a holy scripture.



Zooming in, that's the entrance to the mandir. A smaller statue of Ravidass sits atop of the mandir, and a bigger idol of Sarwan Dass is placed inside. (Photography was prohibited there)

The current chief or the Gaddi Nashin makes his presence at different points of the day, through *darshan* (appearance), where he comes out of his room and sits on the sofa for a while. The general atmosphere of Dera is spiritual and religious, which shapes the moods and motivations of the people inside the Dera. The spirituality is constructed through a space of Dera, which is again being replicated in the imagery of '*Begumpura*', a utopia of a town, where there's no hierarchy, taxation, worries or pain, and caste system. The *naamdaan* ritual is an extension of that spiritual motivation, where the focus is on taking

the name of 'Satgur'. The spiritual mood focuses on work as an ethic, as something that must be pursued with full conviction and resolve, while remembering the Guru at all hours of the day. Devotees following the principles of Sarwan Dass and Ravidass in the ritual domain embody the 'Ravidassia' religious identity. The Dera takes an explicit apolitical stance where they don't affiliate themselves with any political party. In an implicit understanding, people's 'social problems' are not supposed to be discussed inside the dera. It's only for a spiritual and religious experience.

To our question on '*who's a Ravidassia?*', we'd be answered back as 'someone who follows Guru Ravidass and his principles, doesn't necessarily have to be from lower caste'. To understand more about the Ravidassia identity we decided to visit other Ravidass Deras, which would be named after their local Sant, Ravidass' name or mission.

The questions that are raised with this finding are: Can a Ravidassia identity be conceptualised without its distinct material symbols of denotation? If the opposition between symbols of Sikhi are still maintained along with symbols of Ravidassia identity, what kind of hybrid identity does this coexistence represent? Clearly a strict and religious following of Amritbani (the text which replaced Guru Granth Sahib) doesn't make one a Ravidassia. In fact, most Ravidass Deras haven't substituted the latter with former, this observation is part of the complicated politics of Dalit Deras in Punjab.



The coexistence of 'Ek Onkar' and 'Harr' insignia, in a different Ravidassia Dera.

Outside the Dera -The Opening Up of new identities

As one moves out of the Dera, to the nearby Ballan village, there appears to be a shift in the moods and motivations of people. The miraculous personality of Sarwan Dass transforms into a pragmatic one. People narrated his stories of being a splendid orator, who would read out, pursue bhajans of holy scriptures across religious lines. In unison, people of the village spoke about various ways of uplifting the quom (community). His contribution in teaching children from all castes the alphabet by writing on sand. From a charismatic Sant to a pragmatic guru, the transformation in his personality through people's narratives reflects the two ideologies of the two spaces: Dera and the village(s).

The village is divided into mohallas based on caste lines. The distinct mohallas would have Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) posters in the Dalit mohallas, and Akali Dal's and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) in the Jatt mohallas. The houses of in the Jatt Mohallas would have the 'Ek onkar' or the 'Khanda' insignia, whereas the Dalit-Chamar side of the mohallas would have icons of Harr insignia, outside their houses.



An Akali Dal-BJP election poster in the Jatt Mohalla.

It was clear that caste clusters supported and consolidated a political party based on caste lines. Our interactions and interviews in the village with the people revealed a breakthrough in our research. The new identity which they ascribed to was that of '*Chamar*'. The intonation through which it was articulated contained a meaning and significance that was overtly political. They said it with a high-pitched voice, with a sense of defensiveness, defying the stigma attached to it and replacing it with pride. Kabir, our respondent who

showed us around was one of the many people who said it out loud, ***“I am proud to be Chamar”*** (Interview Response, 15th June 2019)

The identity of ‘chamar’ had different connotations altogether, which may or may not intersect with the identity of ‘Ravidassia’, which was a religious and spiritual identity, whereas Chamar is an identity of political assertion and acceptance.

A third figure which emerged was of Dr. Ambedkar who was revered as ‘Baba Saheb or Baba Saheb Ambedkar’. Moving out of Ballan pind, to other pinds mainly Raipur, Nurpur, Kahanpur, Reru and Nurmahal, we found out the strong and unflagging presence of Dr. Ambedkar and his imagery across SC caste clusters. His presence is such that he is worshiped alongside Ravidass. His icons impart an ideological standpoint of differentiation, orientation and assertion against the Jatts. It has its genesis in several movements, caste enlightenment phases and the stronger presence of Dalits in the Doaba region, be it in 1931 as mediator to argue for Ad-Dharm religion before Lord Lothian, his rally in Jalandhar in 1951, or through Republic Party of India or Bahujan Samaj Party.

Few of our respondents from far off pinds who were present in the Dera as sewadars, and sangat(followers)¹ have spoken about the presence of Ambedkar, be it his statue, icons or other symbols being present. A young boy we interviewed in Ballan Dera, wouldn’t know who Ambedkar is, he only identified him by our description of his imagery in his pind, that is, ‘a semi bald man with round & dark spectacles, dressed in a blue suit and a book in his hand’. To which he replied that *“this Paaji has a lot of posters and statues back in my pind”*. Other college and school going youth had much greater knowledge about him and his presence, namely through organizations of *Prabudh Bharat Foundation*. A senior office holder of BSP Leadership reported to us the importance of his Jayanti being celebrated with much fanfare. Every respondent reported in unison, that without Baba Saheb’s principles, teachings and *chetna*, they’d still be working on the fields, being exploited at the hands of Jatt-Jimidars.

Dr. Ambedkar’s omnipresence in Doaba, is so powerful, that it can’t be missed, and is often understated.

Since most of our respondents in Ballan and Nurmahal had an overtly political stance, we were pointed out and corrected about our usage of the term ‘Dalit’, for them the word comes to culturally embody a form of denigration and derogation. It was interpreted as ‘to trample by feet’, ‘to bray and rub to piece’ and ‘something broken’. They asked us to use their caste name, which is ‘Chamar’, or ‘SC population’ or ‘Ad-Dharmis’. The usage of Chamar must be sensitively used with due permission, for it’s a way of designation within the community in Punjab. An interesting parallel could be drawn to one of our respondents in the Dera: a BSF personnel from Meerut, U.P., who was proud of his caste as *Jatav*.

Our question on *‘challenges and changes in the Ravidassia community’* was posed with a counter question, *‘why have you been using the word community? There’s no community as such’*. As researchers this was another breakthrough for our research. Our assumption of a Ravidassia community encompassing, a ‘community’ of a uniformed and homogenous

¹ From Mukeriya, Ambala, Vachint Nagar, Shivdaspur, Naugajja, Nakodar, Beas pind, Jandiala, and pinds near Hoshiarpur and Phagwara etc

identity suffered a fracture here. The community was of an SC community, but it contains various nuances in terms of caste clusters. The distinct sphere of identities of Ad-Dharmis, Ravidassia and Chamar has different connotations. The identities are not in opposition to each other like Jatt versus Chamar, it's differentiated through the separate identity it conveys and signifies. Hence, 'Ravidassia community' and its existence must be contested. For Kabir, a native of the pind Ballan,

"why is Ravidass being forcefully imposed on us? Ravidass' revolutionary teachings must be accessible and acceptable to everyone. And everyone must adopt it. It should not be just given to us, if so, nothing will change ever. Same with Baba Saheb, we celebrate him as our God, would any Jatt or any Savarna from your Delhi have his photograph hung on their walls?" (Interview response, 15th June 2019)

Collective Memory and Alternative Histories

The distinctiveness of Ravidassia, Ad-Dharmi and Chamar identities becomes apparent once one steps out of Dera Ballan. However, these identities, and in fact, others come together in the shared experience of not being a Jatt in Punjab. So, caste clusters now called Scheduled Castes would likely all have suffered discrimination from Jatts in myriad forms. One of these forms is the symbolic violence rooted in the narratives constructed by the dominant Jatts about other castes. These dominant narratives tend to invalidate, erase or otherwise elide the histories that people from these castes would recognise as correct, leaving only a single viewpoint through which everyone is labelled and thought about. The resulting stereotypes, especially about lower castes, can only be countered, if at all, through systematic efforts. Our respondents told us that people from the RSS have been rewriting their histories to suit a Brahmanical viewpoint, the common themes of which we will see shortly. They also argued that Hindu nationalists have been pushing them out of their own temples by replacing their religious icons with Hindu ones. In fact, Hindutva was perceived as such a threat by our respondents that we were frequently thought of as RSS agents and they would insist on looking at our credentials before opening up.

Despite the fact that we were in Punjab, the non-dominant narratives took on a distinctly anti-Brahmanical nature. This is both because of the rising threat of Hindutva as well as the nature of caste in Punjab. Even though the basis of the caste system in Punjab is material, its manifestation is still based on purity-pollution principles borrowed from Brahminism. The 'alternative' histories i.e. those that are recognised by Scheduled Castes find their outlet in oral narratives passed on through elders within *baithaks* and the written works by anti-caste figures such as Dr. Amedkar, Mahatma Phule, Ravidass and so on. The oral histories have a very diffuse spread and a lot of our respondents were all familiar with the same stories. Recently, these narratives have begun to be concretised in the form of messages forwarded on text, Youtube commentaries and so on. Over this section, we will also consider the 2009 Vienna attack since our respondents accorded it great value, especially highlighting how the

Jatts have been attempting to fight the rise of the Chamars, to reduce them to their earlier subservient position.

The origin of those called the SCs has a distinct narrative. A lot of our respondents also saw themselves as *Mul-Niwasi*, which translates as 'original inhabitants'. Our respondents also professed their familiarity with the idea of tracing their roots to the '*Sindhu Ghati Sabhyata*' (Indus Valley Civilisation). Manreet, one of our respondents while showing the precious stone on her ring mentions to not tie this to Brahmanical astrological practices, she says:

this angoothi is part of my Sindhu Sabhyata. I appreciate what the Dalit Intelligentsia of our quom have done for us, and they continue to do so, to take forward our own narratives and knowledge system. But not everything can be bahmanwaad (Brahminical) in nature, can it? There needs to be a space to explore and pursue research in our own culture and civilization, which is not in opposition to Brahminism, because our culture is anterior and much richer to that of them..... Our civilization was a 'sone ki chidiya' before the Aryans plundered it.
(Interview response, 5th July 2019)

Other respondents had observed that the Hindu gods are always pictured with weapons while Bhakti saints like Ravidass and Kabir are both imagined and portrayed as peaceful and non-martial. SM Dahiwale (2005) summarises the claims of several Vedic scholars that the most successful generals of the Aryan invaders were made into gods, thus the presence of the weapons. When we proposed this possibility to our respondents, they responded in the affirmative, loudly. These perspectives strongly echo the Aryan Invasion Theory. It is clearly not relevant that the theory is not accepted anymore, it's the cultural interpretation to perceive oneself in a certain way which is important. The point is that at least some parts of the SC community (insofar as they may be termed as one) propagate the idea of a distant utopian past, irrespective of whether a new one can be created. And these narratives tie together caste clusters that have historically been oppressed by Brahmanical forces.

The influence of giants of anti-Brahmanical thought including Ravidass, Kabir, and social reformers like Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is strong. Ravidass' life history is particularly well-known. The stories of how Brahmins tried to have Ravidass killed. Ravidass' injunction '*harr ke naam bin jhhute sagal pasaare*', translated as: Without the name of God, all religious paraphernalia is useless, is a frontal attack on the hollowness of Brahmanical rituals. This particular *shabad* is part of the daily arti within Dera Ballan. His rejection of the Vedas and Upanishads, which is a theme picked up by Dr Ambedkar too, is well understood within the community.

Babasaheb's imagery and reverence is seen as an overarching force of a pragmatic politician fighting for the rights of Untouchables, he is an anti-Brahmanical icon. He's a mythic figure whose image is placed alongside Ravidass, Valmiki and given the same respect and veneration. An interesting example that our respondent narrated was about how the British were deliberating if power could be delegated to 'Indian' leaders. However, Dr Ambedkar asked them to send representatives to India to collect information on how these leaders treated their fellow 'Indians'. This was the origin of the 'Simon Commission'. In essence, Dr Ambedkar is thought to have sent the Commission to India. Similarly, at the 2nd Round Table

Conference in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi is alleged to have refused to drink water from the same glass as Dr Ambedkar who pointed out that upper caste and lower caste Indians were not in fact brothers, as was being argued by Mahatma Gandhi.

The narratives considered so far are not exclusive to Punjab. The Chamars of Punjab have, however, found themselves existing in opposition to the dominant Jatts and that is where the most painful elisions of history are found. The narrative around lower caste icons being subservient to upper caste ones is seen in how the Jatts refer to Ravidass as merely a *Bhagat* and not *Satguru*. This is despite the fact that Guru Nanak (who was from the Khatri caste) praised Ravidass and treated him as his guru, as per our respondents. Many other instances of the casteism within the Jatt narratives were talked about too. Firstly, three of Guru Gobind Singh's *panj pyaras* belonged to the lower castes. Guru Gobind's act of creating the Khalsa Panth, had, in a stroke, eradicated caste in theory, if not in practice. Thus, the phrase Jatt Sikh is an oxymoron and not in line with the tenets of Sikhism. Secondly, Jatts have long been appropriating lower caste deeds and using it to create a particular image for themselves. The Bhangi regiment was one of the most skilful and successful regiments, called forth by Sikh leaders to win impossible battles. The usage of the term in a purely derogatory manner is a Brahmanical twist. Several of our respondents expressed dismay that the Jatts have won battles on the backs of lower castes, yet continue to call their own selves a martial race. The Jatts are even portrayed as cowardly and prone to abandoning the Sikh Gurus in times of need while lower caste followers would always come through. Finally, the Jatts, who used to be Shudras, took advantage of the egalitarianism of the Sikh religion to rise in rank and stature and now call themselves the highest caste in Punjab. As Ronki Ram (2012) argues, the ownership of land, combined with control over electoral politics in a Sikh social order allowed them to overcome the barrier of varna. But now, the Jatts practice purity-pollution principles just like other savarnas. One of the respondents argued that erstwhile Shudras have been divided. 'We (Jatts, Khatri on one side and Chamars, Chuhras on the other) are all brothers'. Thus, there isn't just outrage at the treatment meted out by the Jatts but a sense of loss as well, about a united past.

The 2009 Vienna attack is an incident that may be read in several different ways, one of which involves looking at it as an attack by radical upper caste Sikhs on lower caste Ad-Dharmi leaders. As a revered and pragmatic man, Sant Ramanand spoke for the upliftment of the community. His murder and the attack on Sant Niranjan Dass were a traumatic event which brought forth a lot of anger. The community was aware that the Jatts were becoming jealous of the power and stature of the community. Our respondents said that the size of the temple in Ballan as well as Kanshi made them feel threatened about the growing strength of the community. Some overtly casteist Jatts also praised the actions of the perpetrators of the assault. However, despite these factors, the outpouring of anger was not directed towards the Sikhs or any caste cluster. The street violence can much more accurately be understood as an assertion of the strength of the Ravidassias and the coming together of related identities (Jodhka, 2009). The fallout of the Vienna attack resulted in widescale rioting, destruction of public property, a 4-day state-wide bandh and so forth. We were told that 'there was fire everywhere' in Nurmahal.

It is not exactly clear how groups other than Ravidassia (since not all Ad-Dharmis would identify as Ravidassia) felt about the attack, however, the response from the Ravidassias

was so strong that it was essential for our respondents to publicly show *sahanubhuti*. The Dera informed us that '*hamari baan phadne wala koi nhi tha*' (there was no one to support us), thus the need for the new Ravidassia religion.

The Abandonment of the Fields



The economic and political conditions of the Ad-Dharmis outlined in this section and the next isn't a strictly empirical analysis, even though it has been supplemented by secondary literature. It is largely based on the reflections of our 'politically involved' respondents. The underlying idea has been to bring out themes of distinct identities and orientations of different caste clusters and their interaction, in the form of resistance and negotiations.

The first instances of abandoning of fields could be traced back to the events of post-1960s. Dr. G.C. Kaul, a professor we interviewed, spoke about a crucial impetus for Dalits to start resisting working on the field, which was the '**voucher system**'. It was Ishar Das, an acquaintance of Dr Ambedkar, who was appointed as the passport commissioner in Shimla, where he was able to make accessible passports to the SC community and send them abroad. It was the person living in abroad who would have to vouch and sponsor a person from India. The visa would be given at the foreign land itself. The voucher system was common to all castes, especially the Jatts who had started to migrate to UK and other places en mass. For the SC community, who had scanty economic means to immigrate legally, it helped create new forms of social and cultural capital, a form of '*chetna*' or consciousness.

This, combined with the above were the affirmative action policies of the government, presence of Ambedkarite movements, and already doing well of the leather trade, was an impetus enough for the Ad-Dharmis to be able of breaking up with the traditional political

economy of the village and abandoning the fields of the Jatt Jimidars in Doaba. Viru, one of our respondent comments:

today I work as a hairdresser in an Air-Conditioned studio, look at that Jatt, he has to plough the field with his tractor in scorching sun. You tell, am I not doing well? Jatts used to be exasperated, most of them still are. I can't tell you how empowered I feel. I'm earning fairly well, and getting this advanced diploma in hairstyling and grooming. If I save up enough and keep working this hard, I'd be able to migrate to South Africa soon, my dream place. (Interview Response, 23rd June 2019)

We questioned Viru about Jatts having an ease to migrate by the virtue of leasing or selling off their lands and property, for which he dejectedly responded to that, it was true, his community doesn't have the direct means to do so or agricultural land that could be sold off. Viru's working condition isn't archetypal of the larger SC community. The Ad-Dharmis today work in vocational centres, manufacturing industries, home-based work, local businesses, teaching or government offices. Our respondents told us that this *jaagrukta* (enlightenment) has not reached the Malwa and Majha regions where Dalits still work the fields of Jatt Jimidars. Correspondingly, the casteism in these regions, as was told to us, was much more severe. As Dalits stopped working in the fields of Doaba, labourers from UP and specially Bihar (Jodhka 2002) stepped in. We once saw a Jatt on his tractor, carrying women and children in his trunk. The loud music emanating from the tractor hinted at their arrival and passing. The women wore saree in a certain way, have orange/red *sindoors* and we heard them speaking Bhojpuri/Brajhasha.

While economic upliftment of the community is a fact, based on our observations, we must be careful not to label the community as being 'economically emancipated'.

A major reason why Dalits lack economic capital to be able to boost their social mobility is the curious Punjab-specific of *Lal Laquir* (Red Line). In rural Punjab, there are no permanent *farde*, or government-sanctioned proof of ownership of land. Land rights are signed over in the presence of witnesses in exchange for money. The 'rightful' owner of the land cannot be ascertained and the possibility of squatter-occupied land exists. Due to this, banks are unwilling to provide loans against such land. As it happens, the land belonging to the Dalits, specifically Ad-Dharmis, falls largely within the Red Line while the Jatt-owned agricultural lands fall outside it. Banks thus refuse loans against properties owned by Ad-Dharmis. There have been various attempts to formalise the land-records, with petitions made to a succession of Chief Ministers, but we were told that they have all failed and there is no end in sight to the situation. Dalits also cannot get access to land outside the Red Line since Jatts almost never sell to Dalits. Even if a Dalit buyer can afford the land, the Jatts would be bound by the stigma associated with selling land to a lower caste person. They would instead, either give it on contract (*theka*) or sell it to another Jatt, likely within the family. In Nurmahal, however, there were a very few cases, where the land was given to a Dalit as

part of the yearly/quarterly *theke*. In Ballan, we were told that none of the land was owned by Dalits.

Due to the lack of opportunities and the risk of being caught in the drug habit, children as young as 10 are aware that going abroad is key to a higher quality of life. This is not a caste-specific phenomenon. Members of all castes imagine a better life abroad and would be willing to adopt any means necessary to go. One of our respondents told us that 'we wish to go abroad, and if we have to hold on to the wheels of the aeroplane to do so, we will'. Toy aeroplanes are a common gift item to Sants and Gurus who bless the devotee to be able to go abroad somehow. Illegal immigration, especially to UK, is especially prevalent. A young boy told us how his father immigrated to Wolverhampton more than 10 years ago and he cannot come visit them since he would not be allowed back into the UK. The boy wishes to join his father after completing his 10+2 education. Another respondent points out an inversion of traditional roles or occupations in foreign lands, he says:

you know Jatts would voluntarily take up jobs as sweepers and cleaners in the UK because it fetched more money. It's almost satirical how 'Punjab da Jatt' became a sweeper there, but he still has the audacity to boast about his expedition to a foreign land when he returns to Punjab. And there (UK), they'd still believe in spatial segregation and discriminate us, even during our Gurudwara visits. I don't understand, even though they'd work us sweepers and us as labourers, but it's still us who they have a problem with. (Interview response, 6th July 2019)

He and others knew of the specific areas in the UK where they would be most easily absorbed. These included Southall, Birmingham, Nottingham, etc. Many Ad-Dharmis apply for construction jobs in West-Asian countries like Dubai, Kuwait, etc. Even though the working conditions are bad, there is a possibility of being able to send money back home. The NRI remittances from Doaba region is one of the reasons of such a successful assertion of Ad-Dharmi or the SC identity.

Political Variables

The key question that our respondents felt was critical to answer is that when SCs are so numerically dominant in Punjab, especially Doaba, why are they so minimally represented within the State apparatus? Our respondents felt that the answer was two-fold: a lack of good leaders from within the community and the upper-caste dominated State apparatus practising a strategy of divide-and-rule to keep the lower castes from unifying.

The fight for political power in Punjab has historically been a straight shoot-out between the Akali Dal representing the Jatt electorate and the Congress banking on the votes of lower castes. With the advent of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Punjab came a consolidation of Ambedkar's thought as well. We were informed that voting in Punjab occurs across caste lines. The BSP, which is one of the few overtly Ambedkarite parties (at least in principle, if not in practice), has received much attention in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. A senior Political leader tells us:

The Ad-Dharm movement gave an impetus of cultural distinctness to the Ad-Dharmis, and the advent of BSP has only enhanced the awakening through political consolidation.... The Akalis or Congress, whoever becomes the CM the Jatt would come to power. The Jatt would rule by the virtue of their land ownership too. When the CM would be a Jatt, so would be the DGP and SSP (in majority cases). Any SC in these positions would have to face pressure from his boss at a higher office, which are again Jatts. The SC officer has power, but he's also powerless at the same time..... With this uncontrollable power (of Jatts) would lead to uncontrollable exploitation and gross breaches to the constitutional and state's apparatuses, with a natural upper caste bias. (Interview response, 6th July 2019)

The poster is for Balwinder Kumar, a BSP candidate. At the top, it says 'ਜੇ ਭੀਮ - ਜੇ ਭਾਰਤ' (Jai Bhim - Jai Bharat). Below this is a row of portraits of various political figures. The main title is 'ਜਲੰਧਰ ਵਾਸੀ ਕਰਨ ਪੁਕਾਰ ਸਾਡਾ ਐੱਮਪੀ ਬਲਵਿੰਦਰ ਕੁਮਾਰ' (Jalandhar residents make a call, our MP Balwinder Kumar). The text below the title lists various political parties and movements that support him: 'ਜਲੰਧਰ ਲੋਕਸਭਾ ਸੀਟ ਤੋਂ ਬਹੁਜਨ ਸਮਾਜ ਪਾਰਟੀ, ਪੰਜਾਬ ਏਕਤਾ ਪਾਰਟੀ, ਲੋਕ ਇਨਸਾਫ ਪਾਰਟੀ, ਨਵਾਂ ਪੰਜਾਬ ਪਾਰਟੀ, ਸੀਪੀਆਈ ਤੇ ਆਰਐੱਮਪੀਆਈ ਦੇ ਗੱਠਜੋੜ ਪੰਜਾਬ ਡੈਮੋਕ੍ਰੇਟਿਕ ਅਲਾਇੰਸ (ਪੀਡੀਏ) ਦੇ ਉਮੀਦਵਾਰ' (Jalandhar Lok Sabha seat from Bahujan Samaj Party, Punjab Ekta Party, Lok Insaaf Party, Nava Punjab Party, CPI(M) and RMP's alliance, the Jalandhar Democratic Alliance (JDA) candidate). Below this is the name 'ਬਲਵਿੰਦਰ ਕੁਮਾਰ' (Balwinder Kumar) and the BSP elephant logo. The text continues with a list of achievements and a portrait of Balwinder Kumar. At the bottom, it says 'BSP SUPPORTERS CANADA' and provides contact information: 'balwinder kumar Pda-Bsp Candidate 83602-21779 98145-75839, 97792-75839'.

The presence of Balwinder Kumar who was projected as a young well-educated leader of the community has been considered instrumental.

The recent focus on allowing younger well-educated leaders to emerge. The desire for younger leaders is such that the community members don't mind which party the leader belongs to, as long as one is competent. So, an ideology of 'biradri over party' based on Kanshi Ram's strategy of *samjhauta* emerges. There is an expectation that as greater numbers of Ad-Dharmi leaders enter politics, across parties, more would be done for the community. That being said, there is a practice of successful leaders from BSP being poached by the Akali Dal and Congress, which is how they 'make their pension'. Making this move is not without consequences though as once risks being labelled a '*qaumi-gaddar*' (betrayal of the community). It is clear that politically there are fissures within the SC community, encompassing different Dalit caste clusters including Ad-Dharmis, Balmikis, Majhabis etc. The different trajectories of how each SC caste cluster reveals a complicated picture, which we couldn't get into. Thus, common experiences of subjugation and casteism at the hands of Jatts and State government's biases, and veneration towards Dr. Ambedkar, fails to homogenise the SC community as a unified political force.

The cases of mistreatment of the Ad-Dharmis at the hands of upper-caste Jatts has brought forth several unofficial organisations such as the Ravidass Tiger Force, Sri Guru Ravidass Youth Federation, Bhim Army, Ambedkar Sena and so on. Bhim Amry chief Chandrashekar Azad is highly regarded and considered an important leader of the community. These organisations keep a track of any cases of discrimination such as someone making casteist remarks and ensure that they are booked under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act. Similarly, we were informed that the police tend to book people from Dalit communities without any evidence leaving them to languish in jail in the absence of adequate legal representation. In such cases, these organisations collect funds, negotiate with the to the person. and state authorities to ensure support. We were highlighted the irony, that the police who were supposed to protect them, ends up working with a bias against them. He narrated a recent case where his men had gone to get a woman arrested of uttering casteist slurs against 'a brother'.

We visited Bootan Mandi in Jalandhar, briefly where we were shown a leather complexes. There, we were told that the lack of a 'leather policy' of the BJP government post coming into power in 2014 had led to a major decline in the business of these skin transporting warehouses. Since the politics of the cow bars people from the Chamar caste to pursue rearing work, our respondents in the warehouse express concern at the business dying away and not being skilled to do any other job besides their traditional caste occupation. The political economy of Hindutva politics has a direct negative impact on people engaged in this occupation, it dismantles their earnings and household economies. Prakash, our respondent narrates:

the members of Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad beat us up when we are seen carrying a dead cow or buffalo. If they're the pallbearers of their religion why can't they devise a way to respectfully bury or cremate their 'mother'? If we don't do this work, the entire country would have to face plague and epidemic. They'll rather let the animal rot and decay..... The skin that comes of is of such a low quality, that it doesn't pass the standard approval of being worthyl. Our

earnings are meagre and it continues to deteriorate. (Interview response, 21st June 2019)



Dead animals' skins in the warehouse.

Faultlines in the Concept of 'bhaichara'

Bhaichara (brotherhood) is a diffuse concept with diverse forms of expression and thereby requires substantial elaboration. Bhaichara refers to a feeling of solidarity between

communities different in some way, in this case, different caste clusters. Thus, we look at bhaichara between Ad-Dharmis and Valmiki as well as between Ad-Dharmis and Jatts. During our fieldwork we were told about the peaceful coexistence between Jatts and Chamars in Ballan. But during our first visit to the pind itself, we were confronted with the **presence of two cremation grounds**, one for the Scheduled Castes (predominantly Ad-Dharmis) and another for everyone else (which included the Jatts, Brahmins, and Other Backward Classes). Our respondent Kabir, narrated to us the controversy about Pippal Dass' cremation place, as mentioned in the second section. Highlighting the immense power and status of Dera Ballan, he said that even Jatts come and '*naak ragad ke jaate hain*' (a phrase not only signifying the acceptance of the attainments of a lower caste guru by upper caste devotees, but likely also the bending of the Jatt community in front of the Chamar community). However, for the rest of the 'SC community', the upper caste cremation ground is not usable. This exchange with our respondent made it clear that bhaichara was, at the very least, not as straightforward as the Dera presented it.

In Ballan, beyond separate mohallas and cremation grounds, the upper caste gurudwara was just visited by the Jatts. This was confirmed by two of the people we met there. The gurudwara was otherwise almost completely deserted at all hours of the day. The sangat at Dera Ballan, on the other hand, swelled by the non-exclusivity of the space, numbering in the thousands every single day. In Nurmahal, we were told that Jatts continued to provide *sewa* at events organised by lower castes through monetary contributions alone. They still refuse to serve with their hands. No such refusals are made by lower castes with other lower caste members. We were told of numerous cases where the Jatts in gurudwaras would refuse to take *kada prashad* from the hands of the Dalits and eat from the common utensils. A garments' shopkeeper, belonging to the Khatri caste, was clearly displeased by Chamars doing well, so much so that he felt they were dominating him. Over the course of our fieldwork across multiple cities, we found similar incidents of segregation and practices of purity-pollution by upper castes. We were also shown newspaper cuttings about these practices in contemporary Punjab.

This then raises a question about why the Dera and Ad-Dharmis even bring up the concept of bhaichara, since it seems to fall apart on any close inspection. We hypothesise that the answer to this question is two-fold. The first has to do with centuries of co-existence, within the same village, between the Chamars and the Jatts. For the Chamars, the experience of casteism has been naturalised and dual *shamshaan ghaats* are the norm. The current situation, in a number of ways, is in fact better than ever before. There is peace. There seems to be a truce, an invisible pact, between the Jatts and the Chamars, where certain lines/boundaries/*maryada* mustn't be crossed. A manifestation of this truce comes out through the rotation of the significant posts of the panch and the sarpanch on caste lines. It could also be true that since Chamars are numerically stronger, the general atmosphere of the pind has been 'peaceful'. The other reason for creating the image of bhaichara is that, for the politically active sections of the Ad-Dharmi community, being able to say that there is a bhaichara with the dominant Jatts, is a matter of asserting the power of their identity. Ravidassias look to Dera Ballan for strength and it is necessary for the Dera to present itself in that way. To acknowledge openly the presence of casteism in the village which is the seat of Ravidassia identity would be a blow to the strength they wish to convey.

Kanshi Ram's adage that the experience of being an SC in Punjab is more accurately one of "humiliation not deprivation" is a well-known one. While in the past (when Jatts were far more dominant than today), displays of humiliation would be violent and symbolic, today, they seem to be symbolic alone (purity-pollution practices). Combined with this is the fact that the Ravidassia (and Ad-Dharmi) identity is probably more powerful than ever before, in political, economic and ritual terms. This has accomplished the denaturalisation of practices such as the separate cremation grounds. Thus, the bitter complaints of our Ad-Dharmi respondents on how the Jatts attempt to show them their place in this way. As Ad-Dharmis no longer accept the 'natural' social order, the Jatts must symbolically humiliate them by preventing lower caste burials in 'their' cremation ground. Thus, the contestation over the status of the cremation ground serves as a metonymic site for larger contestations between the Ad-Dharmis and the Jatts

The bhaichara that exists among caste groups occupying similar social status operates on different principles. For instance, in Nurmahal, Valmiki and Ad-Dharmis would perform sewa with their hands at each other's events without any problems. This relation isn't without its share of friction, although it takes a different form. The Ad-Dharmis hold a dim view of the Valmiki. They feel that the jaagrukta is lacking in them, thus they do not understand the value of education. They are thus portrayed as being uneducated, incapable of rising up and susceptible to selling their votes for money. In response, as Ronki Ram argues in his 2017 article, the Valmiki resent the Ad-Dharmis for cornering the majority of benefits of affirmative-action policies. The schisms across caste clusters are reflected in how each caste community in a city/village tends to have separate gurudwaras for itself. For instance, in Nurmahal, there were separate gurudwaras for the Ravidassias, the Valmiki, the Jatts and perhaps another. The gurudwaras also tend to come up around the same time as a competitive activity. Certainly, the establishment of a separate gurudwara by the lower castes is a way to overcome Jatt control over forms of worship. However, even here the Jatt-dominated government uses ploys to keep the lower castes divided. When one lower caste gurudwara is being built, rather than supporting the right of other castes to claim it too, the government instead disburses funds to the others to make their own gurudwaras. As before, our Ad-Dharmi respondents believe that the state takes whatever measures it can to keep the lower castes from uniting. A call to abandon such schisms is made by Vijay Hans in a popular song which calls for Ravidassia-Valmiki unity.

Ravidassia and its discontents

Ad-Dharm movement formed the foundation of a culturally autonomous and distinct identity for its practitioners, in the form of a religion and Ad-Dharmi identity which is distinct from Hindus. The system of meanings emanating from this event generates models of counter-culture and narrative for various orientations and assertions. It advocated that, 'Untouchables were a qaum, a distinct religious community similar to those of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and that their qaum had existed from time immemorial' (Juergensmeyer 1988: 45). The socio-religious movement suffered a setback during the Poona-Pact of 1935 and further in the post-independence era, where the official transcription registered it as a caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy as against a separate religion. The conversion of religion into caste didn't lead to further assimilation or integration into the ethos of Hinduism. The

rejection was in fact, sought to move closer to Sikhism, yet not be part of it. The social transformation of identities had already engendered an even stronger base for cultural distinctiveness and autonomy. The veneration for Saint Ravidass had furthered the ritualistic need for a distinct symbol of cultural autonomy. Similarly, the overarching imagery of Dr Ambedkar provided the impetus towards collectivising and unifying all SC caste to invent a unique cultural identity.

The different contours of Ravidassia identity has different meanings, which is far from a homogenous experience. Being Ravidassia is a subset of a larger Ad-Dharmi identity. The experience of being a Ravidassia isn't exclusive to lower castes, revering Sant Ravidass and the holy scripture Amritbani. As seen before, in other Dalit Deras, the existence of Ravidass with Guru Granth Sahib, entails that the identity is far from being a uniform one. But affiliation towards/with Ravidass Deras does seem to correspond to the Ravidassia identity. The important thing is to note is the cultural representation and interpretation of religion itself, as distinct from Sikhism. The politically-charged identity, embodied by our respondents who refused to acknowledge the presence of a Ravidassia community, is a distinct one. The two identities may or may not intersect since each of these signify differing domains of orientation, yet directed towards a common identity viz Ad-Dharmi. Ad-Dharm was conceived as a '*sanjha Dharm*' or 'shared religion', which reflects Ravidass' idea of *Begumpura*. By creating the Ravidassia Dharm, the Ad-Dharmi identity was superimposed with the religious identity of Ravidassia. In 2010, the caste was again attempted to be converted to a religion. It carved out a distinct identity from the SC community which speaks for itself, but leaves out other Dalit clusters, preventing a uniform and united Dalit identity in Punjab to arise. A 'community', specifically a Dalit community only gets formed through the collective experience of seeing/hearing/being a Dalit getting assaulted, which happened during the Vienna attack, where the different orientations of being a Chamar, an Ad-Dharmi would come together in solidarity, and maybe in such moments of anguish and loss would identify themselves as and with Ravidassias. It's the same with other caste clusters.

The content of counter-culture, either through different orientations, religiosity or political orientation, the cultural identity is conceived of as a product of humiliation, discrimination and oppression. This simultaneously occurs with projection of ones' selfhood and its corresponding orientation through an empowered, authorized or enabled identity. It is in this sense that parallels could be drawn between Sikhism and Ravidassia Faith and Jatt and Chamar identity, for it's the function of ritual and political orientation, respectively, to stand in opposition to each other. The experience of being a Chamar embodies a Dalit culture and its corresponding identity, which is not only conceived as in opposition with the Jatts, but also beyond it. Through the process of such differentiation it creates and imagines itself to be at par with the Jatts, as refusal to acknowledge and legitimate their dominance and authority and as a separate identity of embodying sets of cultural meanings. For Jodhka (2004), therefore, caste system moves beyond hierarchy, it's conceived through power and identity. The qualitative aspect of understanding power of Jatts and Chamars, is however different, and a subject of a separate research.

Limitations of the study

Due to limited amount of time and different sites/regions to be covered in Doaba itself, we thought it to be best to stick to a smaller sample of people and engage in in-depth interviews. Problems with rapport building with a wider sample would have impinged on the limited time and quality of the research. A more diverse interaction with different caste clusters, viz, Jatts and Valmikiis would have given a more complicated understanding towards more fruitful and rich theorizations.

There has been some sensitive ethnographic data that we'd be unable to write or talk about. Its addition to our current research doesn't change the themes we'd like to problematise and bring out to the fore. Just that its addition would have given a more nuanced, diverse and complex larger understanding of things. We, however, have made sure to make it as nuanced and intricate as possible, perhaps some themes would need more conceptual theorization, which we wish to cover through our final report. To not choose to include the sensitive information here in the report also comes from our ethical constraints and responsibilities we owe to our respondents, their crucial time and hospitality that they've given to us. Moreover, its addition in the report could lead to serious consequences for us and our institutional backing.

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