

Article

Sikh Diasporic Approaches in Anti-Caste Activism

Jasleen Singh

Department of American Culture, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, USA; jaslsing@umich.edu

Abstract: This chapter looks at how Sikh ethical principles are informing how Sikh diasporic activists approach contemporary social justice issues around caste abolition. The chapter is divided into three different sections that look at the history of castes within the North American Sikh diaspora, especially in the late 19th c. but with some reference to contemporary history. Later, I utilized my interviews with Sikh activists who have supported recent legislation in Seattle and California around caste discrimination. Finally, the chapter discusses the work of a Sikh queer collective, a group I have worked with over a period of two years, to examine how notions of queerness and anti-caste politics within Sikh principles might be a path forward towards caste abolition.

Keywords: Sikh ethics; anti-caste activism; Dalit; diasporic Sikh activism

1. Introduction

Despite legal provisions against the abolition of untouchability in the 1950s, caste-based distinction and social isolation are common experiences of Dalits in India and across South Asian communities in the diaspora. The term “Dalit” is a contemporary term used to describe and unify people who have been outcasted by birth, and it is also the term that has come to unite caste-oppressed communities from across the world from various religious backgrounds to address issues of caste violence. Over the years, intersectionality scholars have emphasized the need for the social movements literature to move beyond a single-identity and focus to one that recognizes social movements to be a coalition of different backgrounds and experiences (Adam 2017; Purkayastha 2012). This paper is a contribution to this literature on diasporic social justice movements that seeks to examine the work of diasporic Sikhs in their efforts to support anti-caste activism in the United States and across transnational circuits of global connections. Through a collective analysis of interviews and online materials, this paper looks at the history of caste among Sikhs in Punjab and within the North American Sikh diaspora, especially in the late 19th century with some reference to contemporary times, to provide a broad context around how caste manifests within the Sikh community. Later, through my interviews with the Sikh activists who supported the most recent legislation in Seattle and California against caste-discrimination and those who have worked within the Sikh queer collective, we are enlightened about the role Sikh principles play within caste abolition that does not rely on an identity-based framework to build alliance with caste-oppressed communities. Instead, through Sikh ethical practice, anti-caste Sikh activists chose to be self-critical of their positionality within caste hierarchy and disidentified with privileges given to them by virtue of belonging to dominant caste communities. By questioning traditional utilitarian ideals of land and caste-associated bodies, the work of dominant caste members within the Sikh queer collective helps unearth notions of queerness and anti-caste politics within the Sikh principles that could potentially be a path forward towards caste abolition. This work is hand-in-glove with current efforts of anti-caste organizations to build awareness and capacity within dominant caste groups to acknowledge caste violence and dismantle the cultural hierarchy from within their social networks (Soundararajan and Varatharajah 2015). This article is part of my larger dissertation around Sikh ethics that uses an interdisciplinary



Citation: Singh, Jasleen. 2024. Sikh Diasporic Approaches in Anti-Caste Activism. *Religions* 15: 1013. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15081013>

Academic Editor: Opinderjit Kaur Takhar

Received: 12 June 2024

Revised: 25 July 2024

Accepted: 16 August 2024

Published: 20 August 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

method of data collection and analysis. Interviewees were selected by the author based on their specific knowledge and involved in anti-caste work in North America.

2. History of Caste in Punjab and the North American Punjabi Diaspora

In Punjabi culture, while this connection to land is celebrated and hypervisible for the Jatt community, it is severed for the Dalit community.¹ Jatt zamindars continue to prevent Dalit community members from using the common village land, called the *shamilat*, that is otherwise allotted to them to cultivate or collect fodder. Dalit families are forced to live on the outskirts of the village, with fewer amenities, and separate schools, wells, and Gurdawaras.² Sexual and verbal abuse at the hands of landlords are an intrinsic part of Dalit women's daily life who pay a heavy price for fetching firewood for cooking or fodder for their animals (Singh 2017). Laws and cultural practices continue to stonewall Dalit socio-economic mobility and have left them at the mercy of landholding Jatt zamindars for labor (Hans 2016; Kumar 2020). Under the Punjab's Village Common Lands Act of 1961, Dalits and those from the Scheduled Castes are only allowed to lease the village's common land for up to three years through auctions that are held every year by local administration. Dalit families borrow enormous loans to lease the land that they could temporarily farm on. They then pay a significant interest per month from the little profits they make from their seasonal harvests. Earnings made from the harvest are often used towards repaying the debt, only to later lease the land again for future cultivation. Dalit farmers are often stuck in the vicious cycle of debt and releasing for many years before they are able to make any savings for themselves. These savings could never be used to invest in the land they have arduously cultivated for years, unless a non-Dalit proxy buyer is arranged for the purchase. This intimate connection to land through life, labor, and death, denied along caste boundaries, is often spoken of in Dalit histories (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016), memoirs (Madhopuri 2010), music (Thusoo and Deshwal 2021), and social activism and movement (Ram 2012). This is partly due to colonial legalization of caste-based distinctions that was facilitated by the characterization of the East as culturally 'Vedic' in origin in comparison to the civilized West.

During colonial rule, the Protestant church empowered the right of European men to 'discover' and rule the new land by instilling a sense of superiority amongst its 'people of God'. Weed calls this phenomenon the "epistemology of whiteness" that was aimed to tame the 'heathens' through both military and intellectual intervention (Weed 2017). Signifying the Vedic origins of the pan-Indian cultures in order to construct caste identities was necessary for the British to characterize these cultures as being both fundamentally religious and barbaric against the civilizing missions of the Protestant church. Race and caste identities were employed by the colonial administrative, religious, and intellectual powers to essentialize communities that had complex social structures.

Nicholas Dirks describes in his book *Caste of Mind* the politicization of caste by both the colonial authorities and their modern constituencies. While caste remained a fluid system of relations within the South Asian subcontinent into the 1870s, imperial surveys continued to make caste a central subject within its anthropological and cartographical research. Caste was used as a single "principle modality of Indian society" by British orientalist, administrators, and missionaries, and Indian reformers who used caste to characterize and organize India's diverse socialites, rituals, familial structures, communities, and public and political lives (Dirks 2001, p. 5). This deployment of caste as a 'traditional evidence' within colonial ethnographies helped reconstruct orientalist knowledge of Indian society as one that is bound to its Vedic culture and thereby backward or uncivilized. This justified the colonial rule in India through both its civilizing missions of Christian enlightenment and their management of the land systems in Punjab.

The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 is a key example of how caste was reconfigured as a racial category within colonial laws in order to sediment the regional control of the British alongside other prevailing communities. Under colonial law, the transfer and ownership of land in Punjab was limited to specific communities who were recognized

as “agricultural tribes”. Unlike the Jatts, untouchable farm laborers were not considered as an “agricultural caste” and were therefore prohibited from purchasing the land that they cultivated for generations (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). Colonial laws continue to define the communities along caste boundaries that led to disparities in land ownership, employment, socio-economic privileges, and cultural dignity. Today, Jatts that make up 25% of the population continue to own over 90% of the land in Punjab, while only 2% of the land is owned by Dalits or caste-oppressed communities. Many deny Jatt as a caste identity in Punjab by calling it an ethnic or cultural identity. However, the term continues to operate along the race paradigm that essentializes castes through ideals of caste purity, endogamy, and violence towards non-Jatt and “lower caste” communities. George MacMum, who was the major proponent of the martial race theory that had implicated Sikhs and the Punjabi Jatts to join the imperial British army, wrote in his book, *The martial races of India*, that “the martial races were largely the product of original white (Aryan) races. The White invaders in the day of their early supremacy started the caste system, as a protection, it is believed, against the devastating effects on morals and ethics of miscegenation with Dravidians and aboriginal peoples” (Dirks 2001, p. 180). His narrative demonstrates the co-constructed nature of both caste and racial identity in order to scaffold the colonial interests of the British in India through vile racist projects that were aimed to essentialize group identity, character, and divisions. Whereby, on the one hand baptized Sikhs and elite Punjabis were classified as the martial races, the South Asians at the Madras Presidency were seen to possess the racial character of the “criminal caste”. Caste was constituted to facilitate the economic, socio-political, and militaristic interests of the colonial administrators, many of which continue to have salience within today’s rising Hindutva movement that claims racial superiority of upper-caste Hindus over Dalits and non-Hindu communities.

While the Dalits in the diaspora do not experience the same intensity of caste violence as those in Punjab, they continue to fear the consequence of “coming out” or sharing their caste identity with other members of the community. Maihya Ram Mehmi, who migrated to Vancouver Island in Canada in 1906, was reported to be the first recorded Dalit from the Chamar community who had immigrated to the Pacific coast, later laying the foundation for Dalit migration to the North Americas. Today, an estimated 25,000 Dalits reside in the Lower Mainland of Victoria, which is the largest and oldest Dalit population in North America.³ Mehmi’s own descendant, Anita Lal narrated her and her family’s experience with caste invisibilization, ostracization, and violence in consequence of belonging to the Chamar community.⁴ Anita Lal and Sasha Sabherwal, in their research of Dalit history in British Columbia, documented the experiences of several South Asians working in the mills during the early 1900s who were largely divided along caste lines despite experiencing racial hostility from White workers.

Unlike many of the Jatt migrants, Mehmi had taken a large loan in order to make the passage to Canada. Upon arriving in Victoria, he worked as a lumber mill worker and sent money home to help sponsor his family to join him. Early reports of caste discrimination suggest that Mehmi and other Chamar workers in the Paldi’s lumber mill were made to eat in their rooms and not in the main dining hall with the other men. They were also prevented from taking shifts at the cookhouse due to being considered as ‘dirty’ and of lower caste. Mehmi’s family had helped build the Second Avenue Gurdwara in 1908, which was the first gurdwara in North America. While initially it acted as a communal space, its members soon began to alienate the Chamar community from the kitchen and communal spaces. Mehmi’s family and other women resisted the exclusion and claimed the gurdwaras as their space. Anita Lal, who is the descendant of Mehmi, shared how her great aunt and other women tried to reclaim their space at the gurdwaras and how she had become the head of the kitchen before they decided to move on and create a separate gurdwara for themselves (Talitha 2022).

Satinder Mehmi, who married Maiya Ram Mehmi’s great grandson, migrated to Canada in the 1970s and shared her experience of caste upon her migration:

I did not know my caste until I came to Canada, nobody in India treated me as less-than anyone else. When we came here, it was Chamar-this, and Jat-that. Oh my gosh. Back where I grew up, in the army barracks, nobody knew who's who, nobody had the courage to talk about those things. I was so shocked when I came here to find out that in the gurdwara, people talked about caste like it was so important. In India, we knew who we were and heard stories from our parents, but we weren't treated badly. (Lal and Sabherwal 2022, p. 220)

Decades later, Tarsem Lal who married Mehmi's great granddaughter, Piare Lal, also migrated to Canada and settled in Quesnel, British Columbia, in the 1970s. Instead of finding a welcoming community at the gurdwara, they faced exclusion and were not allowed to help cook or serve Langar. Due to constant friction between dominant- and lower-caste Sikhs, the community decided to build their own gurdwara in 1982. Tarsem Lal's cousin, Darshan Khera, was one of the founding members of the gurdwara who pooled funds with other members of the Chamar community to buy land and establish the Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha in Vancouver.

By the 1970s, the community of Dalits began organizing to create their own community spaces to assert their autonomy while simultaneously resisting the hegemony of the Jatts. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who belonged to the Dalit community and was the chief architect of the Indian constitution, became a leading figure within the Dalit movement across the world. He used the language of human rights to communicate Dalit desire for dignity and self-determination. Within the Dalit movement, Ambedkar's vision for justice coincided with the anti-race and indigenous rights movements of the 1980s, leading many activists to frame their claims to rights along the racial equality discourse. This included the early works of Dr. Laxmi Berwa, who in the 1975 organized a protest in Washington D.C. around caste atrocities in India and highlighted the parallels between the efforts of Dr. Ambedkar and Dr. King in their demands for caste and racial equality across the two nations (Kurien 2022). Prema Kurien argues in her article "The racial Paradigm and Dalit Anti-Caste Activism" that during the 1980s the global mobilization against the South African apartheid, together with the rise of international human rights organizations, allowed Dalit activists based in the United States to frame untouchability and the position of Dalits in similar terms to that of Black Americans and Black South Africans. Their framing brought the attention of international human rights organizations to caste atrocities in India, including the 2001 U.N. World Convention against Racism in Durban, South Africa (Bob 2007). While some Dalit activists continue to use caste-race analogy to talk about the anti-oppressive goals of Dr. King and Dr. Ambedkar, many contest the similarities that are often assumed between the two systems of oppression and the histories of violence faced by the two communities.

Many Dalit activists today continue to advocate for anti-caste politics by rejecting racial difference as the basis of Dalit political struggle. These anti-caste politics were employed in the most recent legal action against Cisco Systems, a multinational technology company that had failed to address caste violence within its management at its Silicon Valley, US, headquarters. At the California court hearing, Dalit activists highlighted the limitations of using the race-based framework to understand the cultural specificity of caste violence within the South Asian diaspora. While the anti-caste legislation has allowed the Dalit communities to seek some restorative claim to bodily and material security, it continues to isolate the Dalit community from the larger American, British, and South Asian diaspora. Without making caste into another aspect of race, it was now being made into a 'foreign' entity that was specific to the immigrant communities. Both the parties in favor of and in opposition to the bill began insinuating 'caste' as an 'infestation' that was specific to the immigrant communities that were now being brought over to the western shores. Within the current context, caste and 'infestation' became synonymous identifiers on the basis of which the South Asian communities were now being understood within the country, specifically in the Hindu American community, many of whom had voted against the

caste protection bill both in the California and the Seattle legislature. Below are some of the comments made by the public at the hearing in Seattle.

This bill intends to malign our (Hindu) community.

Casteism is dying in India, and it is now being imported in the US. Also, the second generation don't even know what caste is.

Caste system is like COVID-19, it is like a virus. When the virus hits your body, your body gives up. Both caste and virus kill the body.

Seattle Hearing, 2023

Within western multiculturalism, caste operates as an essentialist category that possesses both a material and a spiritual essence (I will elaborate on this later). While I do not intend to dismiss the struggles of caste-oppressed communities, I question the identity politics that are at the heart of the anti-caste and anti-race laws of the US and UK Equality Act, both of which aim to keep caste-oppressed communities in a perpetual state of differentiation and exclusion. It may suffice to say that, while Dalits are mostly left to their own devices to seek caste protection under 'anti-caste' and 'anti-race' laws, some members of the Sikh communities have taken an altogether different approach that is based less on an equity framework and more on the enactment of a displaced Sikh psyche, a form of multiple consciousness that destabilizes identity and caste-privilege through internalization of Sikh ethical values.

3. Addressing Caste within the Sikh Community

On 21 February 2023, Seattle became the first city in the US to abolish caste-based discrimination. During the hearing, several members of the public came to give their statements, many of whom also identified as Sikhs. After the hearing, I had the chance to speak to two Sikhs on two separate occasions about their statements. In order to protect their identity, the full or real names of these activists have been omitted or replaced with a pseudonym. Dr. Jasmit Singh is a Sikh researcher and mentor, and Manmit Singh is a scholar and a queer and trans activist.

What motivated you to be there and give your testimony at the anti-caste legislation in Seattle?

Jasmit: I had to speak up. There was an opportunity, I had to do my part so other people's voices had to be heard. That is what our Guru Sahib would have done. Getting involved happened over a couple of weeks. Kshama Sawant was a member of the Council. She has taken on difficult tasks over the years. She brought all of us together. A lot of Sikhs were there, to show our presence, we were not afraid to take on the bullies. Most of the Sikhs spoke to the bullies about the fact that we were there to support the legislation. It was important to show the people that they shouldn't try to do something so people felt unsafe. We told them that you have the right to be here, but don't do that in an uncivil manner.

Manmit: At that time, I worked with Equality Labs and that wasn't my first hearing. I have been going to Santa Clara, CSU, etc. I was one of the folks who showed up in support of that legislation with both the organizing efforts leading up to the day and also the day of to give that testimony. So that is what brought me out that day. What motivated me to give that testimony and in terms of how I started my testimony with "Waheguru ji ka khalsa Waheguru ji ki fateh", in terms of how my showing up is informed through Sikhi and I want my existence there to be accredited to my Guru. I wanted to intentionally start off with 'fateh', as I took that space and made the commitment both for myself and on behalf of folks in the panth to stand up in support of the legislation.

While both participants identified themselves as part of the caste-privilege community, their commitment towards the acknowledgment of caste violence and support of the

anti-caste legislation in Seattle was attributed to the Sikh ethical practices of their Gurus. The anti-caste memory and history of the Sikh Gurus, who themselves belonged to the *Katri* or the merchant class, act as a springboard to catapult present-day Sikhs to take up the issue of caste violence within their communities. Much like Manmit Singh who works with the Equality Lab, a Dalit organization representing caste-oppressed communities, Dr. Jasmit Singh is part of the Khalsa Gurmat Center in Washington that leans on Sikh principles to educate Sikh youth about various social justice issues, including racism, homelessness, and women's rights.

What Sikh principles and ethical values animate your work around caste?

Jasmit: 'Ik pita and ikas ke hum barak' (there is one father, of whom we're all kin) these ideals teach us that we're originating from the same light; we have to recognize that commonality around us. Our faith in humanity must stem from compassion. It's important to recognize that my wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of others around me. Sikh or a non-Sikh does not matter. Our world view as a Sikh depends on how to serve humanity...we must question our assumptions about caste. Questions help us inform ourselves. 'Khade de paul'—standing up for social justice issues should not be about convenience or only when it impacts my community.

Manmit: The reason I really strongly show up as a Sikh to do this work is because showing up is with the hope that the Sikh panth would also move and realize this is what Sikhi is. The Sikh panth has deviated and forgotten Sikhi... Every time you turn on the radio this Jatt pride is everywhere and it's heartbreaking, because the very establishment of Sikhi is in commitment to caste abolition: where Guru Nanak Sahib at the age of nine was rejecting the sacred thread. Guru Nanak was questioning the ideas of purity and pollution and questioning Brahmanism and Brahmanical patriarchy. They were questioning ritualism; all of this is part of caste violence. The practice of Langar is created to get people to sit together, coming from different castes and different faiths, which caste people wouldn't do because of ideas of 'purity and pollution'. The practice of untouchability that is ongoing. The institution of langar, along with the institution of sarowar, to get people to bathe together in the same waters to eradicate the ideas of purity-pollution. Even the Khalsa panth was established to get people to commit their allegiance to the Guru, and by doing so lose their other commitments, to their kin, families, and caste. And while Guru Sahib fought so hard and did so much to continuously uphold caste abolition, yet caste continues to be the state of the Panth. For instance, it was in the UK that Sikhs had blocked caste protection. It's been 500 years and plus since the establishment of Sikhi and yet we're having the same conversations that Guru Nanak Sahib was fighting against.

I've been sitting with Guru Arjas Sahib's bani about Halimi Raj, where he said:

'Hun hukam hoya meherwan da, peh koi na kise janda, sabh sukhali uthiye hune hola halimi raj jio'. Halimi raj is the rule of the powerless. I like to translate it as a "queer nation" all those who are 'othered', all those who are 'queered', all those who are lowest of the low.

This is what Sikhi is, it's about establishing political sovereignty as the sovereignty of those whose sovereignty is not acknowledged. That's what the Khalsa Raj is supposed to be. At every point in time Guru Sahib has cemented Sikhi as a practice of being able to live together in a non-oppressive and an anti-oppressive world. It's a vision of caste abolition. It's the lowest of the low, it is them who are centered.

'Nicha andar neech jaat, Nichi hau at neech, Nanak tin kae sang saath vadean seon kya rees. Tithey nich samanlean othey nadar teri bakshish'.

Guru sides with the lowest of the low. Where has our panth lost that?

How do we go to the gurdwaras and go home blasting Jatt music? Continue to be complicit in the exploitation of caste-oppressed and Dalit folks through caste pride and land ownership. There is so much violence that we, as a panth, are upholding. Our Guru Sahib's visions, where have we lost them? This directive to establish Begampura, this directive to establish Halimi raj which is such a radical articulation of sovereignty is so unprecedented. Those are ethics and political visions of how to 'show up'!

As both Dr. Jasmit Singh and Manmit Singh identified as Sikhs, their actions stem from the *re*-membrance of the anti-oppressive history of the Sikh Gurus. While the Sikh Gurus belonged to higher-caste patriarchal communities, their activities, as Jasmit and Manmit rightly pointed out, could not happen from a place of hierarchy and difference, but had to take place from a point of disidentification with their caste privilege. Here, José Muñoz's concept of disidentification is useful to help us understand how might Sikh ethical practices enable those outside the mainstream to negotiate caste and gender oppression within the Sikh and South Asian society. By bringing attention to the conceptual history of the ethical practices of the Sikh Gurus, such as Guru Nanak's rejection of the *sacred thread*, the practice of *Khade de paul*, *Langar*, and *use of the Sarowar* alongside their own ethical positioning, Sikhs explicitly disidentify with the current practice of caste and gendered violence without becoming an outcast to the community. These Sikh ethical practices enable alternate forms of socialites to exist within the community that run counter to present forms of knowledge of the self and the world. These practices are the cornerstone to what Guru Arjan calls for as the *Halimi Raj* that understands as the 'queer nation' or sovereignties. This imaginative and political act of creating space that is freeing for those whose freedom and divinity are constantly undermined is what both Jasmit and Manmit proclaim to be an urgent need within the Sikh and the Khalsa community.⁵ This reorientation of the self to the active process of remembering the Sikh ethical practices of the Sikh Gurus is an act of political consciousness that stretches beyond the Protestant Christian understanding of the Sikh tradition as a privatized religion and belief, as *Sikhism*.

Manmit later clarified their understanding of the Khalsa. According to Manmit, *Khalsa* is commonly understood as 'being pure', but the term also finds its roots in the word "khalisā" which in Arabic refers to a land whose revenue goes directly to the emperor instead of the collector. According to Manmit, after Guru Gobind Singh abolished the Masand System, Khalsa Raj was established where the allegiance of Sikhs lay directly to their Guru. This anecdote helps clarify how Manmit thinks of Sikh consciousness, as being a psycho-social *remembrance* of Sikh ethical practice that not only enables a redefinition of the self but also the social, political, and economic conditions of life that have debilitating effects on others. Manmit concluded by saying...

"Carrying out my allegiance to the Guru is a very powerful commitment that goes beyond being a spiritual one. It is a political, social, economic commitment to the Guru, and to the Guru's directive at building begumpura, Halimi Raj, Khalsa raj that is defined by property abolition, caste abolition projects that now have been stripped down."

Following the passage of the Seattle anti-caste legislation, *Jakara*, a grassroots Sikh organization, had also been doing outreach within the Sikh community for the support of the SB403 legislative bill that would prohibit caste-based discrimination in California. Soon after the hearing, Navdeep Kaur, a member of *Jakara* helped organize its 24th annual *Lalkaar* conference at the University of California, Davis, that was centered around the idea of *Building Begumpura*. The conference was open to youth ages 18–35 and aimed to confront casteism within the Sikh community using *Gurmat* or Sikh ethical values, such as the idea of *Begumpura* (a sorrowless city) that was first introduced by Bhagat and Guru Ravidas. The conference was held over the weekend, where the youth workshopped in small groups to understand the current manifestations of the caste system and its prevalence within music, arts, popular culture, education, employment, marriages, gurdwaras (place of worship), etc.

Later, during the *Gurbani translation and reflection* workshop, in small groups, the youth translated the texts written by Guru Nanak, Guru Amar das, and Bhagat Kabir that are registered within the Sikh spiritual text, the Guru Granth Sahib. As part of the reflection process, Sikh youth were expected to engage with the ideas of intersectionality and how caste intersects with other oppressive systems, such as sexism, homophobia, capitalism, etc. They were then asked to consider how caste pride that has been popularized through identity politics has also enabled caste dominance and violence within the community. This conversation was facilitated through themes generated by Guru Amar das's text below:

ਜਿਤ ਕਾ ਗਰਬੁ ਨ ਕਿਰ ਮੁਰਖ ਗਵਾਰਾ ॥ ਇਸੁ ਗਰਬ ਤੇ ਚਲਿਹ ਬਹੁਤੁ ਿਵਕਾਰਾ ॥੧॥ ਰਗਉ ॥

That roughly translated to: Don't harbor caste pride, oh fool, as this pride enables many evil deeds, pause.

The youth collectively workshopped to reflect on the above text alongside their understanding of caste as an identity or a form of self-representation. Some of the questions also asked the participant to reflect on Sikh ethical values by asking: "What are the ideals our Gurus have set us up with? And where are we failing as Sikhs?"

"What sticks out about student responses about caste to me (Navdeep) was, how people process caste in a cultural way. Like, being in song and popular culture and it's not about being castist or it's not to oppress someone else. To them, it's about their pride and it's not trying to let someone else down. But that is the key difference between caste equity and caste abolition, because we then also have 'chamaran de munde' in songs just like 'jatta de munde', and that's about caste pride too, and that's ok".

Sikh students continue to see caste as a cultural identity rather than a means to an end that is also in service to uphold a violent social system. And while Jatt pride and Chamar pride may seem equivalent to each other, Sumati Thusoo and Shivangi Deshwal in their analysis of 'Chamar Pop' note the stark difference between the two. That is, while Jatt singers flaunt wealth and socio-political status as the basis of Jatt identity, Chamar artists use the music genre to speak of their caste as a source of pride and aspiration for socio-economic mobility and independence. While both communities use the music genre as a representational tool, the two are using the means for two very different ends.

However, the very limitations of identity politics stem from its reliance on the importance of the *self* against the world, through acts of self-pride, self-preservation, self-determination, and self-propagation. Identity-based caste politics seem contrary to the values of the Sikh Gurus, who register caste pride as yet another extension of one's ego. This then leads to the question: how might one lean on Sikh ethical practice to interrogate caste while also belonging to dominant-caste or caste-oppressed communities? Is caste equity the only way forward towards caste abolition? These are important questions not only for the Sikhs living in the diaspora but also for the global community of civic actors around the world that are working to address issues of race, caste, religion, gendered, sexuality, and dis/ability violence through identity-based politics, where one remains in a perpetuate state of representation of those categories within the state.

So, how *does* one participate in a caste-abolition work without simplifying or erasing difference and perpetuating caste violence?

Through my many conversations and observations of caste within Sikh spaces, it became evident how important it was for the dominant-caste Sikhs to begin to acknowledge the violence that has been central to the making of both caste-dominant and caste-oppressed communities. So much so, that in the process of learning about the Dalit, Ravidassia community, one cannot miss the violent process of exclusion that has been central to the cultural history of the Jatt Sikh community. Much like the Dalit Sikh history that is neither spoken of nor imagined within mainstream gurdwaras, Dalit Sikh bodies are also excluded from those very spaces. The politics of identity-making are evident within the Ravidassia community through the presence of photos of Bhagat Ravidas and Dr. Amedkar, and the *har-nishaan* insignia marking the religious institution is neither acknowledged

nor taken seriously within the cultural practices of the Jatt Sikh community. Sikhs continue to carry the inherited colonial understanding of themselves—as a ‘religion’ with uniform doctrine, beliefs, and practices that have semblances to other ‘world religions’ (Mandair 2022, p. 8). This colonial project of reformation of dominant-caste Sikh cultural practices into present forms of knowledge and articulation of ‘Sikhism’, perpetually erases Sikhi’s diverse cultural basis, sites of engagement, and ethical standpoints. By interrogating dominant cultural practices through the standpoint of caste-oppressed communities and their active engagement with Sikh philosophical and ethical concepts, can we then begin to clear the ground for some positive change in the world, with a genuine effort towards caste abolition.

4. Clearing the Space: Embodying De-Privileged Sites of Freedom

At the start of my research, I had the opportunity to work with a small virtual group of caste-privileged queer Sikhs who wanted to unpack and examine caste while trying to work on caste abolition within Sikh and queer Sikh spaces. The group bridged an important gap within the community around the issue of caste, as it brought together caste-privileged Sikhs to talk about caste not in some ornate sense of self-pride, but as a violent social order and practice of identity-making. The space served as a place of learning, dialogue, and deconstruction for dominant-caste Sikhs to interrogate some of its deep seeded values within the community. Many joined the group from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and India, providing an avenue for diasporic Sikhs to express their frustration at how little they knew about caste, yet it seemed to control so many aspects of their lives, such as who they can be friends with, where they can go worship, who they can marry or be in a relationship with, etc.

“After COVID-19, the virtual platform made sense in terms of providing access to those who could not travel yet wanted to connect and address the issue of casteism within our community”, said Dr. Savita, one of the key organizers of the group.

The group met virtually every other week over Zoom to reflect on their caste privilege alongside their marginalities as Sikhs, immigrants, queer, and gendered bodies. Various intersectionalities were finally being held together across the global circuits of the net. And while scholars within Sikh studies have looked at these identities in isolation, this group enabled members to reflect on their identities and lived experiences through complex intersections of power. Their identities as trans and queer Sikhs enabled a specific reading practice that interrogated both heteropatriarchal and caste-specific interpretations of the Sikh text and its history, using liberatory queer politics that centered anti-oppressive frameworks within Sikh philosophy. This process of reflection has been deeply therapeutic in ways of both looking into the Sikh tradition and also finding its connections with other communities of color, like that of the Black and Indigenous communities of the Americas and South Asia that are also trying to recognize their political consciousness and post-colonial ways of being in the world.

The collective goals of the group were the following: (1) create a “sangāt” or a community where dominant-caste queer and trans Sikhs would come together to discuss ways to transcend their caste identity and oppression; (2) make queer and trans experiences central to anti-caste work within the Sikh community; (3) understand ways in which Sikhi enables anti-caste and queer work within the community; and (4) stand in solidarity with caste-oppressed communities and Dalit Sikhs through caregiving, accountability, and responsibility.

In order to build a dialogue space that was safe and accessible, “sangāt principles”, or community principles, were developed. These principles helped instill collective consciousness among members by setting up ground rules and ethical practices that emphasized active listening, space-making, respecting and learning from queer and caste-oppressed communities, recognizing access and inaccessibility to resources, and providing material solidarity towards caste abolition. Sangāt principles helped reorient the self-consciousness of its members towards the collective process of learning, meaning-making,

and capacity building. This collective form of learning was adapted across various objectives of the group that aimed to educate both its members and the larger Sikh and South Asian diaspora about the history and prevalence of caste oppression. The group members learned about the prevalence of caste violence within various institutions of power, like South Asian marriage, capital inheritance, food systems, cultural knowledge, etc. They later developed education material for the larger Sikh and South Asian community to educate them about how dominant caste values continue to operate within prevailing cultural practices, such as yoga and vegetarianism. This educational material is still being developed and reviewed by the members of the group in order to prepare them for publication.

The group discussed its vision for caste abolition based on the ideals of *Begum pura*, a term that is present within the Guru Granth Sahib and was first introduced by Bhagat Ravidas, who is also known as Guru Ravidas within the Ravidassia community. Bhagat Ravidas spoke of *Begum pura* as a sorrowless, anti-exploitative, fearless, and taxless city. Even today, the term continues to hold a utopian vision for those doing anti-caste work within the Sikh and South Asian communities. The use of the term *Begum pura* as a cultural signifier for social justice both within caste oppressive and caste-oppressed communities represents its rootedness within the shared cultural histories of the Sikh and the Ravidassia communities.

Within the group, *Begum pura* represented the goal of caste abolition and queer and trans liberation, as members leaned on Sikh ethical values to critique some of the most prevalent gender-oppressive, homophobic, and caste-dominant practices within the Sikh and South Asian community. The ideals of *Begum pura*, although aspirational, offer an intrinsic model of liberation that is grounded in Sikh ethical and social practices that decenter the individual through the divine oneness in the everyday lived experiences of the *hukam*. Thereby, *Begum pura* is a critique of neo-liberal values that are underpinned by the ideals of human exceptionalism, individualism, and the perpetual consumption and ecocide of the world, as the 'other'.

5. *Begum Pura*, a Site of Freedom for the Body and Land

Our initial meetings would consist of free-flowing ideas and discussions amongst members about the materiality of caste identification and oppression. One issue that was on everyone's mind was the *Anand Karaj* and its institutional preservation of caste and class capital through generational wealth within the Sikh and Punjabi community. The group vociferously questioned the heteronormative caste-specific practices within *Anand Karaj*, a ceremony that was only reconfigured as 'marriage' by the Singh Sabha reformers in the 1800s upon their encounter and exchange with Western colonial knowledge systems. The practices of endogamy and prohibition of same-sex marriage remain endemic within South Asian and Punjabi communities despite public outcry against those practices and most recent legal prohibitions against such forms of discrimination⁶. Heteronormative nuptials within caste boundaries lead to an accumulation of both land and social capital that continue to privilege dominant-caste communities over landless caste-oppressed communities. This intergenerational accumulation and inheritance of wealth and social capital signals the presence of caste is often conflated with class. However, what is especially acute about caste-based oppression is its incessant intergenerational violence that would not disappear with economic stability or class mobility.

The group members later discussed the possibility of practicing land disinheritance from their families in solidarity with Dalits and their demand for land redistribution.⁷ Some of the group members took the liberty to ask, "*Can there be Jatt pride without material domination?*"⁸ The space allowed the group to look into the question of land and its association with one's self-identity. Land was imagined not from the perspective of an upper-caste landowner, for whom it is a form of generational wealth or private property, or the state that authorizes or denies access to land based on identity and marketability. Land is seen as alive in itself and being a source of communal living.

Nikita Sud in her research speaks of land as multi-dimensional and imbued with various meanings instead of one of ownership or rights. While land may seem static, it moves in and out of being a commodity, as a living entity, with relationships to a vast degree of changing elements. In her work, Sud speaks of the “social life of land” in its complex relationships with humans and nonhuman actors both under its surface and above it. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the various meanings and uses of land and its relationships with both human and nonhuman actors. One of the important relationships to land is that of Dalit laborers and Adivasis. Sud speaks about how land can have both material and symbolic meaning. For the indigenous Dangria Kondh community, for example, land represents Niyam Raja, a deity who resides in the hills of Niyamgiri, while also being their source of livelihood (Sud 2020). While land may signify power for upper-caste communities, for Dalits farmers, land symbolizes life that nourishes multiple families out of malnutrition and hunger. Dalit families that are displaced from ‘common land’ every year want to return back to it so they can escape violence and humiliation from dominant caste members. It is important that land in its multidimensional cultures, meanings, and life are acknowledged by both state and local governing bodies. This can be an act of *freeing* both land and body off of its specific meanings, social location, and technological acts of regulation.

Our discussions within the group led us to wonder “how might land be deterritorialized through Dalit and Adivasi conceptuality of territory and place” and “what might land distribution look like in Begumpura?”⁹ If territoriality can be understood as an act of binding land to a specific meaning, use, community, and regulatory framework as understood by Sud, then deterritoriality would imply the negation of such regulatory frameworks and political and social boundary-making through specific cultural practices. Here, her notion of multi-dimensionality reveals the variability of both land and cultures that are co-related to each other. Due to land’s inherent fluidity across cultures and communities, it cannot be captured or defined by a specific use-framework. Communal forms of labor within the Dalit communities and the biocentric relationship of the Adivasis to the land are but a few ways to understand land outside of the modern utilitarian model. By anchoring the Dalit and Muslim laboring cultures and scheduled tribes back to the land of Punjab can we then see the emergence of diverse socialites, histories, and relationships with the land—a perspective that is often buried under the mounting pressures of the agricultural classes. The act of deterritorializing, or the freeing of the land therefore relies on the freeing of human consciousness from the dictation of identity that differentiates the ‘agricultural caste’ from both the land and the landless.

If the deterritorialization of land frees the land of its bounded meaning, it then also frees the life that originates from it—frees it from social bondage, starvation, and taxation. It allows diverse land relations and bodies to foster and be central in the processes of care-giving, culture-making, and community building. While *Begum Pura* is an aspirational concept, it is also an enactment of a deterritorialized body in its creative spirit of being free from pain (ਦੁਖੁ ਅੰਦੋਹੁ ਨਹੀ ਤਿਹਿ ਠਾਉ ॥) and error (ਖਉਫੁ ਨ ਖਤਾ ਨ ਤਰਸੁ ਜਵਾਲੁ ॥੧॥). These fleeting moments of joy, fearlessness, and humility are often experienced when accepting the creative process of one’s social and psychic (dis)location within life.

Sikhs who gathered at the Seattle Council, defending and witnessing the historical judgment against caste discrimination, perhaps did experience this brief moment of joy and fearlessness through the abdication and dislocation of their caste privilege. Such an enactment of freedom was also experienced by caste-privileged queer members of the group, who experimented with new ways of thinking and actualizing Sikh concepts, by imbuing those concepts with a creative spirit that is reflective of the anti-oppressive history of the Sikh tradition.

Manmit Singh, who also attended the Seattle hearing, was also part of the Sikh anti-caste caste privileged queer group. In a personal interview, they discussed their own motivations behind creating a space for dominant-caste queer Sikhs to interrogate their caste location and privilege. According to Manmit, it was important to create a space for dominant-

caste members to do the labor of unpacking the specificity of caste violence within Sikh and Punjabi culture and use Sikh and *gurmata* philosophy to do caste abolition work.

Dr. Rita Dhamoon, who is another organizer of the group, described this process of learning and self-interrogation as “seva”, or the act of service towards the abolition of the Brahmanical heteropatriarchal culture and caste ideology within current cultural practices. This concept of seva was performed with care for the collective consciousness. In this spirit of care and ‘seva’, members interrogated their caste locations and privilege and created educational tools to help others reflect on their complacency and responsibility towards caste-oppressed communities.

Another Sikh principle that has been central to the work within the group was the concept of *miri-piri*, which was developed by the sixth Guru, Hargobind, within the Sikh tradition. The concept of *miri-piri* brings the spiritual and the political aspects of life together through psycho-social capacity-building, in order to resist violence and oppression when necessary. While the group members interrogated their own complicity in caste violence, they also created space for such knowledge to be shared with others within and outside the group. Rita said in an interview that “while the group was about learning, it was also about taking action. We wanted to do something more to provide what Manmit Singh would call ‘material solidarity’ to caste-oppressed communities. And that was challenging because there were some people who wanted to talk about their trauma around caste issues and queerness and they didn’t participate, because we were more interested in the material and political solidarity. Like, we wanted to know how do we get to the abolition of caste? So part of it was to then think about how this group could be engaged in education directed towards caste abolition”.

The process of self-interrogation is the necessary first step to begin clearing the space for a form of (self) awareness that makes the violent process of caste-based cultural exclusion, as part of our *self-making*, visible to ourselves. This includes closely examining caste violence across various institutional practices, such as the running of our local gurdwaras, Sikh and Punjabi marriages ceremonies, naming practices, food culture, inheritance, social policy, etc. This would allow members to see the social-construct-ness of institutions that are otherwise seen as divinely ordained and therefore beyond critique or reformation. Naomi Goldenberg, a scholar of religious studies, also notes in her essay, “Queer theory meets critical religion”, how gender, queerness, and religion have never been natural or stable categories. She urges queer and feminist theorists to interrogate both the category of religion and religious ideals alongside their very reliance on specific sexual and gendered ideals that help buttress their specific construction. This process of critique will not only begin to expose the constructed nature of religious ideologies but also its foundational ontotheological assumptions about God that separate the self from the world through the use of ‘I’-identities. By acknowledging the complacency of dominant caste members in maintaining caste-specific practices within Sikh institutions, Sikhs can become self-aware and challenge the specific biases and actions that are at the heart of debilitation and violence against caste-oppressed communities.

A lot can be learned from the teachings of the Sikh Gurus who stated that, while self-signification is a source of disease, it also contains within itself its own cure. Facilitated by *naam*, this ego can be silenced and become a site of alterity that is cognizant of its connection with the oneness of all life, ‘ik oankar’. The use of the Sikh ethical practice and the *naam* (or name of the infinite oneness) are central in bringing together to conscious awareness the ‘I’ and the ‘not I’, as it displaces the language of self-naming with the language of the divine oneness within multiplicity. The Sikh syllable ‘ik onkar’, within the group, therefore, did not stand for a theological concept that is bound to a specific monotheistic declaration of God; instead, it manifests as a creative process through the very act of disruption that was taking place within the self-consciousness of the caste-privileged members. Rightly noted by members of the group, *Ik onkar* is “a disruption of the system of caste hierarchy and oppression” through the psycho-social acceptance of difference as one’s *hukam* or the order of life¹⁰.

Rita in our interview talked about her own understanding of Sikh ethical practice and the self-transformation that took place in consequence of her participation in the group. Her self-reflective work within the group prompted her to later volunteer for the Ambedkar Symposium in Vancouver, and host the Chetna organization of Canada at the University of Victoria for an afternoon. “Part of what these activist spaces do” she explained, “is foster confidence in how to engage with Sikhi, foster knowledge to build the capacity that allowed me to do the engagement work at the Amedkar Symposium”.¹¹ Sikh concepts of *hukam*, *ik-onkar*, *langar* invite new ways of understanding and experiencing the body that are constantly encountering and negotiating the unrecognizable difference in the world alongside their own (supposed) identity. They offer new perspectives into our lived experiences by opening our consciousness to diverse ways of life and thinking. This is what Mandair calls a *diasporized* Sikh consciousness in order to open it to the acceptance of differences and the actualizing of oneness within our own lived experiences. Rita’s attempt to break away from their self-privileging consciousness, open themselves to the lived realities of Dalits, engage with the Sikh principles within the caste-privileged queer group, and later extend themselves to support organizations like Chetna and the Ambedkarite society in doing anti-caste work speaks to the dislocation of a Sikh psyche that centers Sikh concepts in making sense of their own complex lived realities and intervene in the specific socio-cultural field of dominant thought.

Sikh concepts of *hukam* and *ik-onkar* are derived from a language of de-individuation that breaks the centrality of human consciousness and its moral grip over life through the recognition of *being part of* (and not the source) the divine imperative that is within the nature of all existence (Mandair 2022, p. 81).

Anti-caste work, therefore, requires the movement of our consciousness that does not work from a place of *difference from* but *in hukam with* all material and immaterial life. Part of the setback Sikhs experience while working with the Dalit and Ravidassia communities is their own lack of acceptance of difference within the mainstream understanding of *Sikhi*. The continual attempt to characterize the Ravidassia community as a ‘deviant’ form of Sikhs presumes an inherent self-unity within Sikh cultural practices that violently expunges parts of Dalit history and culture (i.e., deras, iconography, non-vegetarianism) as seemingly foreign to the cohesive understanding of modern Sikhism (Ram 2009). While caste violence takes so many different forms, talking about caste from a place of privilege, such as “what is different about them”, continues to perpetuate violence and isolate Dalit communities. Such that, over the last decade, more and more Ravidassia communities in India and the diaspora, the UK more specifically, are choosing not to identify as Sikhs.

In the 2021 UK census, members of the Ravidassia community rallied to have its members choose the ‘other’ within the religion category and not Sikh. Opinderjit Thakar who is a scholar of Religious Studies has noted in her work the separation between the two communities that has grown out of the violence and stigma many of the Dalit Sikhs have faced over the years, and that has now culminated into their own socio-cultural spaces and religious identity. The Ravidassia community reached a breaking point in 2009, when the Guru Ravidas Gurdawara in Vienna, Austria, was attacked by six gunmen, killing one of the head preachers of the dera Sanch Khand Baland, Sant Niranjan Dass, and injuring Sant Ramanand Dass. Since no clear motive was identified, caste was presumed as the source of violence, leading many Dalit Sikhs in Punjab to come to the streets in protest of their loss and expression of their grievances towards caste-based violence. According to Thakar, the attack was one of the major catalysts for the Ravidassia community in the UK to explore their autonomy from the Jatt-centered Sikh cultural practices (Gorrington et al. 2017). While the Guru Granth Sahib continues to be present within Ravidassia and mainstream Sikh spaces, the two possess different aesthetic and material histories.

Many Ravidassia places of worship now call themselves ‘Sabhas’ and ‘Bhavans’ as opposed to ‘Gurdwaras’, and have the emblem *Har nishaan* at the center of the flag that identifies their religious institution, separate from that of the Sikhs. In many places of worship in the UK, the Guru Granth Sahib is replaced by Guru Ravidas’s *Amritbani*, while in

the US the two are present and recited side-by-side. The debate within the two communities continues to be raged over whether the Guru Granth Sahib should be part of the Ravidassia identity and cultural practices, or if the Guru Granth Sahib should be replaced by the *Amritbani Guru Ravidass* within all Ravidassia places of worship.¹² While some claim that the Ravidassia community is a distinct faith and therefore justified to center the teachings of their Guru, Guru Ravidass, others have argued that since the Guru Granth Sahib was the primary source of Guru Ravidass' teachings and is a *sarb sanji bani*, it should be accessible to all, including the Ravidassia community.

What is often deliberately ignored in these debates is the very diversity that is not only at the heart of Guru Granth's compilation—which is written in over 12 languages, including Sanskrit, Braj, Bangru, Awadhi, Persian, Bengali, Arabic, etc., and includes the works of 14 Hindu bhagats and Muslim saints—but also in the diverse contemplative and interpretive practices of its communities and people. Instead of levying charges on the Ravidassia community for doing *beadbi*, or being disrespectful to the sentiments of mainstream Sikhs, it is important to accept that diverse cultural practices can come out of the same source of light, and that no specific interpretive practice should have a determining influence over others. This process of reflecting on the philosophical concepts of the Sikh Gurus can open us to accept non discursive forms of life both during the time of the Sikh Gurus and in present times.

Guru Granth continues to be a site of not one but countless 'imagined communities' who base their physical and spiritual liberation on the principles of sovereignty and multiplicity that are central to the Sikh text. The principle of sovereignty includes, but is not limited to, concepts of *ik-onkar*, *hukam*, *halimi raj*, *begumpura*, and while these principles have been central to the Ravidassia Sikh community, some of whom tie their cultural history and vision of *begumpura* to the acceptance of diversity within the Sikh Panth, this has sadly not been realized by the larger mainstream Sikh community who continues to base its cultural identity on uniformity and exclusion.

However, if Sikhs believe in the sovereignty of the *shabad-guru* or Sikh ethical values over the sovereignty of their own rationality, then they must surrender to the divine imperative within the nature of all existence. By self-surrendering to the principles of *hukam*, one can connect to the world in new and creative ways in a manner that does not distance us from others or isolate us from their pain and suffering. Instead, it moves us towards a state of affective relation with them. This would include making central within the Sikh psyche the pain and invisibility of those experiencing caste violence, gendered and sexual difference, racialization, class marginalization, ageism and disability, the colonial experiences of the Indigenous communities, and the race and gendered exploitation of Blacks, Latin Americans, Palestinians, Muslims, Rohingyas, and countless other oppressed groups from around the world. Their pain must move Sikhs in a direction that liberates them, even momentarily, from their own debilitated position as subjects to the hegemony of the state, ethno-religious structures, and other ego-mediated sovereignties. Furthermore, by interrogating dominant caste perspectives and practices within the current existential and cultural milieu, Sikhs can begin to take the necessary steps that are needed to make caste abolition a reality.

According to Guru Nanak, if the cure to egocentrism lies within ego itself, then our expanded relations with the world—its innumerable life forms, plurality of cultures, practices, languages and intensities of desires, affect and relations—can help redefine Sikh identity through its internal plurality and relations with the multiplicity of bodies, caste and castelessness, sexualities, experiences, ethnicities, religions, beliefs, and political systems. The task for the Sikh community is then to learn to live with this internal diversity in a manner that does not revert back to the language of difference, or worse, justifies violence on the basis of that difference. Instead, the community learns to utilize Sikh concepts to accept and connect with multiple subjectivities, experiences, and marginalities much in line with Guru Nanak's experience of the divine oneness.

Funding: This research was supported by the Department of American Cultural and Rackham Graduate Merit Fellowship and Rackham Humanities Fellowship at the University of Michigan.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (protocol code HUM00198371 and date of approval: 14 December 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data collected during interview is not publicly unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the organizers of the Anti-caste caste-privileged Sikh queer group for allowing me to use the materials created during our group discussions for my dissertation research. I also would like to thank the guest editor, Opinderjit Kaur Thakar, for allowing me to contribute to this journal on the issue of caste.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interests.

Notes

- ¹ Dalits are members of various lower castes, some of whom have been traditionally referred to as untouchables within the Hindu society. Since their migration to Punjab, their treatment as untouchables continued despite legal provisions against the practice of untouchability and their mass conversions out of Hinduism.
- ² While Dalit Sikhs are not stopped from entering gurdwaras in their village, many have experienced discrimination that has forced them to create separate gurdwaras to avoid humiliation. In several interviews conducted by Dr. Surinder Jodhkar, Dalit Sikhs in villages across Punjab reveal their experience of humiliation upon entering gurdwaras that were built by upper-caste communities. In Firozpur, upper-caste Sikhs would not appreciate Dalit Sikhs participating in religious activities of the local gurdwara. In a separate village in Muktsar, Dalits were not allowed to prepare langar and were asked to sit in a separate queue for langar. Some Dalits were asked to sit outside the main door and were served only after upper-caste Jatts had finished eating. See, Surinder Jodhka's *Caste in Contemporary India* (2015).
- ³ See, Talitha, Riya. "Punjabi, Sikh, and Dalit: On Migration, Activism, and Caste Abolition in Canada". *South Asian American Digital Archive*. 20 January 2022.
- ⁴ It is important to note that Chamar is often used as a derogatory slur by Jatts and upper-caste communities. We have used this term to acknowledge its reclamation by the Chamar community, many of whom in the US and Canada identify more with this regional term rather than terms like *Dalit*.
- ⁵ Singh's understanding of the Khalsa is attributed to Naindeep Singh's lecture on Sikh sovereignty during a retreat called 'Paat-shani Khoj', organized by *Jakara* in March 2023.
- ⁶ It is important to note that Sikhism was constructed as a 'religious' tradition by colonial thinkers who sought its specific roots in Punjab and Punjabi feudal culture. This allowed the ills of casteism and gendered practices to fester under the protection of 'religious freedom'. Under liberal secularism, legal provisions were granted under 'religious laws' allowing communities to perpetuate caste- and gender-based discrimination on issues of marriage and family life. As a result, racial, gender, sexual, and caste discrimination continues to be central points of division between religious institutions across many, if not all, 'faith-based' communities.
- ⁷ Giving the rise of Hindu nationalism and the growing usurpation of Punjab's land by government interest groups, the concept of disinheritance may need to be examined carefully along with their consequences. While I am unable to delve deeper in the concept of disinheritance within this article, it is important to note that disinheritance may look differently to different people. Given the dire socio-economic conditions of farmers and their families in Punjab, disinheritance may not be a viable option for families in financial debt. In which case, it may be interesting to explore various ways in which ownership over land could be substituted for more sustainable relationships with the land. For example, Baba Sewa Singh's project at Khadur Sahib of creating mini forests within Punjabi farmers' most capitalized plot of agricultural land is a great way to consider ideas of disinheritance as part of one's obligation to give 'land back to nature' without losing one's connection to land.
- ⁸ Meeting notes dated 26 September 2021.
- ⁹ Meeting notes dated 26 September 2021
- ¹⁰ Meeting notes from 27 July 2022.
- ¹¹ Interview held 27 April 2023.
- ¹² The first call to recognize the Ravidassia Dharm as a distinct religion was made by the leaders of Dera Sach Kand Ballan in Jalandhar, Punjab on 30 January 2010.

References

- Adam, Erin M. 2017. Intersectional Coalitions: The Paradoxes of Rights-Based Movement Building in LGBTQ and Immigrant Communities. *Law & Society Review* 51: 132–67.
- Bob, Clifford. 2007. 'Dalit Rights Are Human Rights': Caste Discrimination, International Activism, and the Construction of a New Human Rights Issue. *Human Rights Quarterly* 29: 167–93. [CrossRef]
- Dirks, Nicholas B. 2001. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gorringe, Hugo, Surinder S. Jodhka, and Opinderjit Kaur Takhar. 2017. Caste: Experiences in South Asia and Beyond. *Contemporary South Asia* 25: 230–37. [CrossRef]
- Hans, Raj Kumar. 2016. Making Sense of Dalit Sikh History. In *Dalit Studies*. Edited by Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 131–51. [CrossRef]
- Kumar, Awanish. 2020. B R Ambedkar on Caste and Land Relations in India. *Review of Agrarian Studies* 10: 37–56.
- Kurien, Prema A. 2022. The Racial Paradigm and Dalit Anti-Caste Activism in the United States. *Social Problems* 70: 1–18. [CrossRef]
- Lal, Anita, and Sasha Sabherwal. 2022. Dalit Diversity: Contours of Caste in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia. In *A Social History of South Asians in British Columbia*, 1st ed. Abbotsford: South Asian Studies Institute, University of the Fraser Valley.
- Madhopuri, Balbir. 2010. *Changiya Rukh: An Autobiography*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Mandair, Arvind-Pal. 2022. *Sikh Philosophy: Exploring Gurmata Concepts in a Decolonizing World*. First published in Great Britain. Bloomsbury Introductions to World Philosophies. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Purkayastha, Bandana. 2012. Intersectionality in a Transnational World. *Gender and Society* 26: 55–66. [CrossRef]
- Ram, Ronki. 2009. Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab. *JPS* 16: 2.
- Ram, Ronki. 2012. Beyond Conversion and Sanskritisation: Articulating an Alternative Dalit Agenda in East Punjab. *Modern Asian Studies* 46: 639–702. [CrossRef]
- Rawat, Ramnarayan S., and K. Satyanarayana, eds. 2016. *Dalit Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Singh, Navsharan. 2017. Writing Dalit Women in Political Economy of Agrarian Crisis and Resistance in Punjab. *Sikh Formations* 13: 30–47. [CrossRef]
- Soundararajan, Thenmozhi, and Sinthujan Varatharajah. 2015. Caste Privilege 101: A Primer for the Privileged. *The Aerogram. Com*. Available online: <http://theaerogram.com/caste-privilege-101-primer-privileged/> (accessed on 1 June 2024).
- Sud, Nikita. 2020. The Unfixed State of Unfixed Land. *Development and Change* 51: 1175–98. [CrossRef]
- Talitha, Riya. 2022. Punjabi, Sikh, and Dalit. Text. South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). January 20. Available online: <https://www.saada.org/tides/article/punjabi-sikh-and-dalit> (accessed on 1 June 2024).
- Thusoo, Sumati, and Shivangi Deshwal. 2021. Exploring the Formation of Jat Masculinity in Contemporary Punjabi Music. *Economic & Political Weekly*. 57. Available online: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/exploring-formation-jat-masculinity-contemporary> (accessed on 1 June 2024).
- Weed, Eric Arden. 2017. *The Religion of White Supremacy in the United States*. Religion and Race. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.