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Sikh Religion and Contentions around Caste

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Abstract: Caste has been a contentious subject in Sikhism. While the Sikh theological canons have vehemently opposed its practice, it continues to be present among the Sikhs, including its discriminatory culture. The obvious response of the Sikh leaders and scholars has been to ask for 'a moral self-criticism'. The issue thus becomes praxeological, a matter of aligning 'practice with the theory'. This is a simplistic response. Such a narrative also does not allow us to raise relevant questions about the contemporary framings of caste as a hegemonic construct. It also does not permit us to engage with its diverse empirics among the Sikhs and its other contextual dynamics. The paper argues that to move forward, we need to critically explore the currently popular notions of caste, most of which are drawn from orientalist and colonial constructs. They present India as being a land of Hindus and the practice of caste being its essential feature. The Indian nationalists enthusiastically endorsed such a framing because they found it useful for making claims about India's cultural unity. Drawing from a large volume of historical and empirical writings, the paper identifies problems with such a narrative of caste which sees it as a purely religious practice. It further argues for a need to look at the materiality of caste. Religious prescripts, such as Manusriti, function as '*ideological signals*' that promote and legitimize it. In contrast, the ideological signals provided by the Gurus and the Sikh religious canons are unambiguously opposed to such ascription-based hierarchies.

Keywords: caste; Sikhism; ascription; humiliation; hierarchy; ideological signals

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Citation: Jodhka, Surinder S. 2024. Sikh Religion and Contentions around Caste. *Religions* 15: 1219. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101219

Academic Editor: James Lochtefeld

Received: 26 August 2024
Revised: 2 October 2024
Accepted: 3 October 2024
Published: 8 October 2024

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> *Call everyone noble, none is lowborn: there is only one potter, God, who has fashioned everyone alike. God's is the one light that pervades all creation*[1].
>
> *When someone says "I am a Jat", his chest expands. But when we say "Chamar", we contract to nothing*[2]

1. Introduction

Why should we talk about caste among the Sikhs? If caste is about *varna* hierarchy, sanctified by the Hindu religious doctrine and institutionalized through a Brahmin-centric order of ritual practice and untouchability, then it is a narrative of another world. Unlike the Hindu temples, Sikh Gurudwaras are open to all, and no one is prohibited from joining the religious congregation. There are rich and poor among the Sikhs, but there is no ritual hierarchy. Sikhs do not have a priestly class, like the Brahmins in Hinduism. The Sikh Gurus also chose to convey their message in the language popular with the lay people[3]. The anti-caste message of Sikh Gurus is actively and consciously woven into its theology. The Sikh scripture includes writings of saints and poets who would be regarded as 'untouchables' in Hindu society. Their *shabads* (words/writings), included in the Guru Granth, are as sacred for the Sikhs as those of the Gurus themselves. The five beloveds (*panj piaras*), chosen by the tenth Guru at the time of the formation of Khalsa in 1699, came from diverse sections of the prevailing hierarchical social order. The rise of Sikhism, many believe, was a 'political revolt' against the prevailing social order based on hierarchy and humiliation. As J.S. Grewal writes:

> Gurū Nānak recognizes caste distinctions, social differentiation, and untouchability in his environment and feels uncomfortable with them. He believes that the

> earthly advantages of the high caste, their social status, and their lineage are of no account with God; they are irrelevant for liberation, if not actually obstacles. . .. Since God is the creator of all and is present in everyone, all human beings are equal and should be regarded as equal. Gurū Nānak identifies himself with the lowest of the low. . .
>
> (Grewal 2017, p. 235).

Sikhism also institutionalized practices that actively defy cultures of prejudice against the poor and marginalized. The religiously institutionalized practices of *langar* and *pangat* ensure that everyone sits together and eats from the same kitchen without knowledge of who serves the food and who cooks it[4]. The ordinary members of the community may carry the identity of their *zaat* (endogamous group, jati or caste) and *baradari* (extended kinship), but as members of the Sikh faith, they are all equal.

The Contentions: While it is widely recognized that Sikh *Gurus* were 'beyond all doubt, vigorous and practical denouncers of caste' (McLeod 1976, p. 87), it is hard to deny the presence and practice of caste among the Sikhs. Recent popular and academic writings on Sikhism too recognize the presence of caste among the Sikhs, in Punjab/India and in the diaspora (see Jodhka and Myrvold 2015). Several major compilations on the Sikh religion and community provide due space for discussions on caste. For example, the *Brill's Encyclopedia of Sikhism* carries eight entries on different aspects of caste among the Sikhs in its first volume (Jacobsen et al. 2017). Likewise, *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (Singh and Fenech 2014) includes a chapter focussed exclusively on the 'manifestation of caste in the Sikh Panth' (Jodhka 2014, pp. 583–93). Moreover, its Index shows that mention of 'caste' appears more than 80 times across different chapters of the volume.

The reality of caste-based social exclusion within the community is also officially recognized by the contemporary Sikh leadership. For example, the Sikh representatives in the committee constituted to frame a Constitution for independent India publicly acknowledged the presence of "untouchable" caste groups among the Sikhs and insisted that they be included in the list of Scheduled Castes (SCs) being prepared for assigning special quotas (Reservations) in the representative bodies, government jobs, and state-funded educational institutions. Even the General House of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), the elected body of the Sikhs that manages important Sikh Gurdwaras of Punjab, has a specified number of seats reserved for the SC Sikhs.

More importantly, caste, in some form or other, is present in the social and political life of the Sikhs nearly everywhere. From kinship practices and marriage alliances to the patterns of settlements and electoral politics, differences and divisions of caste matter quite prominently in contemporary Punjab. These divisions also manifest themselves in the Sikh religious life in the form of caste-specific Gurdwaras. It is true not only about the villages and towns of Punjab but also of the cities of Europe and North America (see Singh and Tatla 2006; Jacobsen and Myrvold 2011; Jodhka 2015).

This paper attempts to provide a brief overview of the prevailing contentions around the question of caste among the Sikhs as they have been framed and discussed in social science writings. The objective is not to provide a comprehensive review of the existing literature but to identify broad trends and questions in the field. Given that a large majority of the Sikhs continue to live in Punjab or have had their origin in the region[5], scholarship and contentions on the subject overlap with the social science research and writings on the Punjabi society broadly.

2. Sikhism as a Religion 'without Caste'

As indicated above, in terms of its popular representations and ideological self-image, Sikhism is a religion without caste. Beyond its moral custodians and advocates, even for an average devout Sikh, caste has no legitimate place in the faith tradition. Its presence, if any, is simply an anomalous practice, a violation of what the Gurus preached. Absence of caste is what distinguished the Sikhs from the Hindus, claimed the modern-day Sikhs reformers during the early 20th century. While caste was a foundational value for Hinduism, the

Sikh Gurus destroyed all superstitions about *varna* and *jati*. All Sikhs are directed to follow a common ethical code and treat everyone equally. The following text of H. S. Singha provides a useful summary of this 'insider's' view:

> The Sikhs are a casteless society.. . . It is unfortunate that in spite of the theological stipulations against caste system, some Sikhs are still carried away by it (Singha 2005, p. 42)

There is certainly an element of truth in Singha's claim about Sikh theology carrying an anti-caste message. The Gurus actively denounced hierarchies of all kinds and advocated equality of human beings in the religious sphere as well as in social life. For the Gurus, the divine was present everywhere, and, thus, everyone could access it, irrespective of their identity. Guru Nanak actively denounced Brahmanical ritualism and exclusionary norms that restricted access to religious knowledge for spiritual liberation

An important aspect of Nanak's philosophy was his condemnation of the Hindu practice of *sanyas* (renunciation). He emphasized the significance of cultivating devotion and divine qualities, while living a family life and working to earn a livelihood. Such a proposition also implied a non-separation of the 'spiritual' from the 'everyday'. The Guru's emphasis on congregational worship (*sangat*) and eating together (*pangat/langar*) implied that devotion to God was best practiced through communal worshipping, overcoming social hierarchies and divisions of identities. Thus, Nanak's insistence on the need for truthful living while being with fellow human beings as a house-holder—a shift from the Brahmanical obsession with the "other-worldly" (see (Dumont [1971] 1998, pp. 184–85; Srivastava 1999)) to "this worldly" religious practice—implied a rejection and reworking of deeply entrenched customs and institutions that supported the hierarchical order of caste. Running away to the forest individually did not solve anything, Nanak insisted.

From *Vertical* Hierarchy to *Horizontal Zaats*? However, some scholars have argued that though the message of the Sikh Gurus about human equality was decidedly unambiguous, there is no evidence that they questioned the value of kinship boundaries and the institutions of family, marriage, and *zaat-biradaris.* All the Gurus belonged to the Khatri caste. They 'arranged marriages for their children in strict accordance with traditional caste prescriptions' (McLeod 1976, p. 88).

How could we reconcile their emphasis on equality in social and religious life and an unqualified acceptance of kinship boundaries? McLeod attempts an interesting answer and explanation for this. He argues that although the 'Sikh Gurus were. . . denunciators of caste', they 'were not concerned with the institution of caste as such, merely with the belief that it possesses soteriological significance':

> . . . Caste can remain, but not the doctrine that that one's access to salvation depends on one's caste ranking. The way of salvation is open to all regardless of caste. Stripped of its religious content it can retain the status of a harmless social convention. . .
>
> . . . A reasonable conclusion appears to be that whereas they were vigorously opposed to the *vertical* distinction of caste they were content to accept it in terms of its *horizontal* linkages (McLeod 1976, p. 88. Emphasis in original).

While this sounds like an interesting argument, McLeod does not tell us what remains of caste as a value in the absence of verticality. More importantly, how did the larger reality of caste work in the region, and how has it been changing over time? These questions have been centre-stage in anthropological and sociological writings on the region.

3. The Historical Contex: Caste in the Colonial Anthropology of Punjab

Systematic empirical observations on caste in Punjab and among its communities begin with the British colonial accounts of the region. Besides initiating comprehensive enumerations of the local population through the census during the second half of the 19th century, they also commissioned reports and micro studies that produced detailed descriptive accounts of its relational structures and its functioning on the ground. These reports covered a wide range of issues, with religion, caste, and agrarian processes figuring

prominently among them. Some of these reports and census data continue to be used even today by historians and social scientists. The last census that enumerated all caste communities of the subcontinent was carried out in 1931, which remains a useful source of quantitative estimates of different caste groups in terms of their proportions in the Punjabi and Sikh demographics. Some of their qualitative observations about the Punjabi and Sikh society also appear quite astute and judicious. They seem to be relevant even to the present-day contexts.

As the British moved into Punjab during the second half of the 19th century[6], they began to deploy the same administrative strategies that they had mastered in the subcontinent. Though Punjab appeared different, they were quick to see the presence of caste-like divisions across all communities of the region, the Hindus, the Sikhs, and the Muslims. However, they also acknowledged its distinctive character. The Punjabi way of life was not a mere extension of the Hindu culture. One of them described Punjab as a 'notable exception to the rigid hierarchies present in other parts of India'[7]. Another British bureaucrat wrote the following:

> Nowhere else in Hindu India does caste sit so lightly or approach so nearly to the social classes of Europe (Anderson 1913, p. 26).

A more detailed account of the specificities of the region can be seen in the observations of Denzil Ibbetson in his report of the 1881 *Census of Punjab*[8]. He begins the opening chapter of the report by questioning the three popular assumptions about the 'Indian caste system':

(i) that 'the institution of caste was peculiar of Hinduism alone';
(ii) that it consists of a fourfold classification of people (the *varna* categories); and
(iii) that it had been 'perpetual and immutable, transmitted from generation to generation, without the possibility of any change' (Ibbetson 1916, p. 2).

He goes on to argue that in the case of Punjab:

> . . . caste is a social far more than a religious institution; that it has no necessary connection whatever with Hinduism. . .; and that conversion from Hinduism to Islam has necessarily the slightest effect upon caste. . . (ibid., pp. 1–2)

Furthermore, debunking the idea of the immutable nature of the *varna* system and the notions of status hierarchies emanating from it, he writes that in the case of Punjab:

> . . .. there are Brahmans who are looked upon as outcasts by those who under the fourfold classification would be classed as Sudras; that there is no such thing as a Vaisya. . . a Kshatriya, and if there is, no two people are agreed as to where we should look for him; and that Sudra has no present significance save as a convenient term of abuse to apply to somebody else whom you consider lower than yourself. . . (ibid., p. 3).

Another British official commenting on the Brahmins of southern Punjab writes the following:

> There was scarcely a Brahmin there who had even the slightest knowledge of the Hindu books or was acquainted with their names[9].

Corroborating this, historian Prem Chowdhry writes that the Brahmins of the region 'were not a priestly class but were mostly landowners, and consequently followed the dominant social custom of the region, in preference to the Sanskritic mode of other Brahmins. . .' (Chowdhry 2017, p. 121). We find a similar observation about the marginal status of Brahmins in the rural landscapes of western Punjab. Writing about his village in the early 20th century, Prakash Tandon claims that:

> With us brahmins were an underprivileged class and exercised little or no influence on the community.
>
> Our brahmins did not as a rule even have the role of teachers, because until the British opened regular schools, teaching was done by Muslim mullahs in

> the mosques or by Sikh granthis . . . in the Gurudwaras. Our brahmins were rarely erudite; in fact, many of them were barely literate, possessing only a perfunctory knowledge of rituals and knowing just the necessary mantras by heart (Tandon [1961] 1988, p. 76).

The later ethnographic accounts produced by professional anthropologists also confirm these claims about the insignificance of the Brahmin in the regional eco-system of Punjabi society. Focussing mostly on rural life, they also offer a more nuanced account of the ground realities of caste in the region.

4. Ethnographies of Caste in Rural Punjab

Studying the social life of the Indian village became a fashion among anthropologists during the 1950s and 1960s. These 'village studies' were carried-out across different regions of newly independent India. An anthropologist typically chose a single village for fieldwork where s/he stayed over a long period of time, spanning up to two years, to be able to map every aspect of the life of the local communities. They were mostly trained in Western universities, and they aimed to produce a field-view of the 'Indian society', different from the popular notions of India produced by Indologists from reading select Sanskritic ancient texts (Srinivas 1955; Jodhka 1998).

While the above-mentioned colonial reports questioned the presence of *varna*-type hierarchies where the Brahmin occupied the superior-most position, the ground reality was even more complex. The exception to the Brahmin being at the top of social hierarchy was not unique to the Punjabi village. Studies from several other regions of the subcontinent also reported the presence of similar divergence from the textual model of caste hierarchy. The structure of rural life, including its caste system, was invariably woven around the agrarian economy and control over land (Wiser 1936; Raheja 1989; Djurfeldt and Lindberg 1975; Gould 1964; Fuller 1989; Mayer 2023). A good example of this was the presence of the *jajmani* system, also known as *sepedari* system, in parts of Punjab (Gill 2019). Perhaps one of the best descriptions of it is provided by Prakash Tandon in his above-cited *Punjabi Century*. Describing the social organization of his 'Hindu village' of Western Punjab, he writes the following:

> Khatris and Aroras were the two props of our . . . society, and around them was built the structure of the service castes . . .. All the service castes were hereditary. Some of them worked on the *jajmani* system whereby each family was hereditarily attached to a group of *jajmans*—families to whom they ministered. (Tandon [1961] 1988, pp. 75–77).

Scholars such as W.H. Wiser (1936) suggest that the *jajmani* worked as a system of reciprocal ties. This was not the case anywhere, including Punjab. 'Reciprocity' implies an absence of domination or exploitation, which was surely not the case in rural/agrarian Punjab (Bhattacharya 1985). In his study of Vilayatpur, a village in the Jalandhar district, Tom Kessinger too found that the local structure of caste hierarchy was deeply enmeshed with agrarian class relations. In his village, the landowning caste of Sahota Jats was the dominant land-owning group. Their control over land made them the focal point of the village economy and its social organization. They entered into

> . . .. a network of dyadic relationships with tenants, labourers, servants, and artisans. . . These relationships were asymmetrical; the artisans, servants, and others were always dependent on the. . . Sahotas. . .. (Kesinger 1974, pp. 55–56)

Some other accounts of mid-20th century Punjabi/Sikh villages provide an even more complicated picture. Some prefer using the term 'tribe', or use it interchangeably with caste, to describe the dominant social group, the Jat agriculturalists (See, for example, Habib 1976; Ibbetson 1916). American anthropologist Marian Smith, who did her fieldwork in the region during 1948–49, writes the following:

> The population of East and West Punjab is divided among a relatively small number of what are variously called castes or tribes. Since these are in many cases distinguished from the Jati by the people themselves, and since they are frequently said to have originated from tribal groups, authorities on the Punjab generally prefer the word tribe. . .. The most numerous and important tribes in the neighbourhoods of Amritsar and Lahore are the Jats and Rajputs. . . . Members of these tribes may be of any religious persuasion; there are Hindu Jats, Muslim Jats and Sikh Jats (Smith 1953, p. 1292).

While she found many similarities among the tribe–castes of Punjab, their religious identities also mattered. The Sikhs 'tended to limit ritual to a small part of their religion and no ritual boundaries are spoken of' (ibid., p. 1291). Arguing in a similar vein, Joyce Pettigrew, who conducted her fieldwork on factional politics among the Jat Sikhs during the 1960s in rural Ludhiana goes to the extent of claiming that the 'social organization and values system' of Jat Sikhs of rural Punjab differed radically from 'that of Hindu India'.

> The prevailing form of social co-operation and the type of political solidarity bear no reference to 'caste' and to rules of purity and pollution (Pettigrew 1975, p. 4).

However, not being obsessed with notions of ritual purity or the presence of 'cooperation and political solidarity' among the dominant Jats did not imply an absence of 'status' or caste as a structure of social life. For Pettigrew, the foundational unit in rural Punjab was that of 'family', and the values pertaining to it, such as honour, prestige, respect, and reputation (ibid., p. xv). Interestingly, she also reported that the landowning Jats dominated and exploited the local Dalits, those from the Mazhbi caste (who identify themselves as Sikhs).

> . . .through control of economic resources. . .. Jats misused mazhbi women when they got the opportunity., and they had been known to beat their Mazhbi labourers, though this was not a common occurrence. They could and did cause hardship to the Mazhbis if it was in their interest (ibid., p. 44).

Some others contested Pettigrew's claim even about the absence of caste-based hierarchy in rural Punjab. Paul Hershman, who carried out his fieldwork in a village near Jalandhar, writes the following:

> Pettigrew appears to argue from the premise of Sikh theology that there is no caste among the Sikhs, but this is manifestly not the case when one considers the relationships. . .. There are most certainly many caste divisions within the Sikh fold (Hershman 1981, p. 21).

Hershman's critique of Pettigrew seems valid. Though the structure of hierarchy significantly differed in Punjab, caste divisions clearly existed and so did the notions of 'purity' and 'impurity', including among the Sikhs. Punjabi villages have always had a significant proportion of their population marked as 'untouchables'[10], and the locally dominant caste groups tended to treat them with a sense of disgust. (Nayar 1966; I. P. Singh 1975; H. Singh 1977; Saberwal 1976).

Drawing from his fieldwork in the village of Amritsar district during the 1950s, I. P. Singh (1975, 1977) provides a vivid account of how caste divisions worked among the Sikhs. The Sikhs of his village were divided into two clearly marked groups, the 'touchable Sardars', and those who were considered as 'untouchables'. Most prominent group of the latter category in his village was that of the Mazhbis. The first group included the Jats, Kambohs, Tarkhans, Kumhars, Sunars, and Nais. Though there existed a sense of hierarchy amongst them, and the landowning agriculturist Jats considered themselves as being above everyone else, they did not show any feelings of avoidance or prejudice towards them. The 'Sardars' would all visit each other's houses, inter-dine, and would invite each other for marriages and celebrations. They also collected their drinking water from the common well in the village.

The Mazhbis and other untouchable castes made for nearly half of the village population. They lived away from the village. They fetched their drinking water from a separate well, exclusively meant for their use. When the Mazhbis were invited for marriages by the Sardars, or for the village feasts, they were made to sit in separate queues. They would also be fed after everyone else had eaten. The landowning Jats occasionally visited the houses of their Mazhbi labourers as they needed them for work in their fields. However, they did so as a gesture of patronage.

According to I. P. Singh, there were also occasions when 'purity' did not matter so much. This happened during the drinking sessions. The Mazhbis were the traditional brewers of the cheap country liquor. The 'Sardars' not only purchased it from them, but, occasionally, they also drank together.

> We saw them drinking from the same glass which was passed from one to the other. However, in their homes they usually drink only among their own caste members. On festivals like Lohri and Holi, when villagers indulge in heavy drinking, no caste distinctions are observed (I. P. Singh 1977, p. 76).

I. P. Singh also did not find untouchability being practiced in the local Gurdwara. The village had only one Gurdwara, constructed by the dominant Jats, and it was open to everyone. Its caretaker (*granthi*) came from a relatively "low" caste of Cheemba[11]. He did not show any kind of discrimination against the Dalit castes.

5. The Colonial Rule, Reforms, and Reframing of Caste

The British conquest of Punjab in 1849 turned out to be an important turning point for the region and its communities. They introduced new modes of governance, which had far-reaching implications for the society, culture, and politics of the region. Even though they described the region as being different, they did not see the human subjectivities of Punjab as being any different from other parts of the Raj. They envisioned the local populations of the subcontinent only through communitarian collectives, such as religion and caste (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). When they initiated representational processes for the native populations, they 'encouraged members of each community to present their case in communitarian terms' (Grewal 1989, p. 195). The simultaneous introduction of enumeration of 'communities' through census produced newer anxieties about demographics. Numbers began to be 'equated with strength, particularly for employment under the government' (Grewal 1994, p. 131), and later even for political representation.

These administrative narratives around social aggregation on communitarian grounds began to produce identity effects (Fox 1985). This process was further accentuated by the growing activities of the Christian missionaries in the region, who had arrived in Punjab along with the colonial rulers. Given their proximity to the new rulers, the missionaries expected that those from the dominant social groups would be eager to convert to Christianity, but those who showed up were mostly from the untouchable castes. Though the missionaries did not turn them back, it did make them anxious about the reaction it may generate among the dominant sections. They were not wrong in their assessment. When *The Tribune* newspaper published an article on the 19th of October 1892 arguing how conversions may soon turn Punjab into a Christian region, 'a tremor of fear ran through the upper caste Hindu and Sikh elite' (Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 181). The census data also showed that from 1881 to 1911, the Hindu population in Punjab saw a decline of 5 percent, from 41 percent in 1881 to 36 percent in 1911 (Jones 1976, p. 324). Besides an increase in the Christian population, the numbers of those identifying themselves as Sikhs also went up marginally. A significant reason for this could be that this was the first census in which Sikhs could self-identify as members of the community. In the previous census enumerations, a person could not identify as Sikh unless he had uncut hair and eschewed tobacco. Given the demographic concerns and the desire to increase community numbers, it is not surprising that there was the push for this more relaxed boundary.

The colonial education and administrative policies also opened up new avenues of employment for the local population. Not only did the British classify and divide their subjects

on ascriptive grounds, but they also attributed qualities to them. For example, they marked out certain caste communities in the region as Martial Races for preferential recruitment in the colonial army (Roy 2013). They also initiated important agrarian reforms and invested in the development of irrigation infrastructure in the region in the form of canalization in its farmlands (Ali 1988). They introduced newer forms of land revenue systems, which changed the traditional entitlements over agricultural land into formalized ownership rights. These ownership rights were mostly given only to those identified as agrarian caste communities. Rural Dalits and those identified with trade and commerce rarely qualified for claims over agricultural land. The new land revenue policies introduced by the colonial rulers required the cultivators to pay their land taxes in cash, which encouraged them to shift to the cultivation of cash crops. Such a shift also increased the cultivators' need for credit, which they had to often borrow from the local moneylenders. The cultivators and moneylenders were invariably from different caste groups. The most prominent among the cultivators were the Jats with different religious persuasions, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. The moneylenders and traders were invariably Hindus of Bania, Mahajan, Khatri, and Arora castes.

Growing indebtedness of the Punjabi cultivators often also resulted in them losing their land to the local moneylending castes, which also became a source of social conflict. These simmering tensions worried the British rulers (Darling [1925] 1977), as they also recruited their soldiers mostly from the agrarian castes of the region. They soon enacted legislation called The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 to protect the cultivating castes from the moneylenders. The Act divided the Punjabi castes into 'agriculturalists' and non-agriculturalists and disallowed the sale and transfer of land from the former to latter. Interestingly, along with those identified as trading castes, the local Dalit castes too were clubbed with the non-agriculturalists.

The colonial policies thus worked towards reinforcing the prevailing divisions of castes in the Punjabi. They also produced a new set of political actors and ethnic entrepreneurs. The newly emergent middle-class elite across the three communities of the region—the Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs—also initiated processes of social and religious reforms. They raised questions of religious identity and championed the interests of their communities. In the process, they also re-imagined their identities and what distinguished them from the neighbouring communities[12].

It was in this context that the Arya Samaj gained traction among the urban upper-caste Hindus of Punjab. The Samaj came with 'a progressive ideology based on traditional values' (Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 38). Besides condemning the missionaries, it also called upon the Hindus to go back to the ancient Vedic religion and shun the practice untouchability. They initiated a ritual, called *Shuddhi*, to bring the untouchables back into Hinduism and opened up schools to educate them. However, while they criticized the Brahmin orthodoxy and untouchability, their notion of *Shuddhi* became an affirmation of the idea of ritual purity (Pimpley and Sharma 1985). Thus, caste prejudice and ideological baggage did not go away even among its followers.

Activities of the Samaj also provoked the Sikh elite, who initiated their own reform movements. They had already begun to assert their distinctive identity, independent of Hinduism. The Sikh reformers repositioned caste as a symbolic structure that distinguished them from the Hindus. Invoking the popular view of caste as having its origin in the Hindu religious texts whose practice was a matter of faith, the reformers argued that the rejection of caste by the Sikh Gurus was evidence of the fact that Sikhism as a religious system was different from Hinduism (see Nesbitt 2005; Malhotra 2002, 2020).

The Sikh reforms evolved into a powerful struggle for the liberation of Sikh historical Gurdwaras from the Mahants and the formation of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) to manage the historical Gurdwaras as well as the Akali Dal (a political party to foreground the issues of the Sikhs). The SGPC came into existence in November 1920, and a month later, Akali Dal was formed as 'a task force' of the SGPC. The caste question emerged as one of the core issues of the movement against the Mahants, who

did not allow the untouchable Dalits to enter some of these Gurdwaras, including the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The Sikh Akalis wanted an 'unquestioned entrance to Sikh places of worship' for all (Juergensmeyer 1988, p. 28; also see Narang 2022). After the formation of SGPC, the reformist leadership made conscious efforts to recruit "low-caste" Sikhs as religious functionaries in the Gurdwaras and perform the duties of *pathis*, *ragis*, and *sewadars* (Puri 2004, p. 207).

Thus, the Punjabi Sikh society saw an interesting process of re-imagining identities and community boundaries. The category 'caste' became an important point of contention, a marker of the boundary between Sikhs and Hindus.

These processes of reform and reframing did not stay confined to the self-narratives of the urban Sikh elite. Their impact went far and wide. Anthropologist I. P. Singh reported that his field village saw radical 'de-Brahmanisation' of the local Sikh ritual sphere. Until the early 20th century, a Hindu Brahmin conducted ritual for the "upper"-caste Sikhs in the village following Hindu traditional mores. After the "reforms", the Sikhs moved away from the Brahmins and started inviting the local *granthi* to conduct their rituals according to the Sikh *mariyada*. The local *garanthi* had been formally trained into these Sikh rituals at the Sikh Missionary College in Amritsar, set-up by the Sikh reformers.

6. The Post-Colonial Churnings

The Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 was the most tragic moment in the contemporary history of the region, particularly for those living in Punjab. Nearly all the Sikhs spread across the district of western Punjab, which became part of Pakistan, were forced to move to the Indian side of the newly drawn international border. Though India chose to be a secular state formally, a large majority of the Muslim population from the eastern territories of Punjab (that became part of India) were also forced to move to the Pakistani side of the border. The Partition was not merely a matter of political reorganization of Punjab or a demographic process of migrations and resettlements. It also had significant implications for local communities and their relational structures.

Caste acquired a new significance in the emerging political scenario on the Indian side. As India became a constitutional democracy, it initiated the process of writing and adopting a Constitution for itself, which was done by a committee with representatives from all sections of Indian society, including the Sikhs. Besides other things, the Indian Constitution made provision for quotas or reservations for the historically deprived caste communities—mostly those treated as untouchables—which were listed in a separate schedule. They came to be known as the Scheduled Castes (SCs)[13].

As discussed above, the reformist Sikh elite had claimed all along that the institution of caste had no legitimate place in the Sikh religion and that the practicing Sikhs were all equal. However, such a position did not quite concur with the prevailing ground realities in Punjab. Recognizing this, the Sikh representatives in the Constituent Assembly insisted that the Punjabi "untouchable" communities that identified themselves as Sikhs be also included in the list of SCs[14]. The Sikh representatives feared that if such a provision was not provided, all the Sikhs from these communities might choose to abandon their religion and identify themselves as Hindus (Nayar 1966, p. 238).

After a considerable process of lobbying, they managed to get four Sikh caste-communities listed in the Punjab list of SCs[15]. The untouchable caste-communities 'excluded from the schedule showed little reluctance in abandoning the Khalsa (Sikh) tradition and declaring themselves Hindus to claim benefits' (Singh 1966, p. 304). As mentioned above, such recognition of caste-based differences within Sikhism also paved the way for a quota for them in the elected body that manages the historical Sikh Gurdwaras, the SGPC. Of the 170 seats where members are elected through elections, 20 are reserved for the SC Sikhs (K. Singh 2014; Jodhka 2004)[16].

Communities, Caste, and Electoral Politics: Besides quotas, the electoral process has also been an important source of change and churning. While the marginalized caste groups, particularly the SCs found elections as a mode of self-representation and for making

citizenship claims, the locally dominant groups used it as a channel of mobility to positions of power in the regional political system. Regionally dominant caste groups also gained economically through state-funded programmes for agricultural development, such as the Green Revolution. Since the Jats owned most of the agricultural land in Punjab, they benefited the most. With a few exceptions, state chief ministers of Punjab have all been Sikh Jats. They have also occupied positions of leadership in most of the political parties active in the state.

However, the caste effects of democracy and development have been complex. Although the Jats emerged as the most powerful caste community in the regional political economy and the Sikh religious affairs, the Dalit communities also benefited. The turn towards capital-intensive farming not only increased productivity of land, but it also changed the social organization of the agrarian economy. The older structures of dependency and tied-labour gave way to formalized arrangements between landowners and landless labourers, almost all of whom came from the SC communities. These processes also opened up spaces for the latter to demand higher wages and better working conditions.

During the early decades of the Green Revolution, the demand for labour also saw a significant increase. Migrant labour from less-developed states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh came as a relief for the Jat farmers. The local Dalits too saw in this an opportunity to move away from agrarian employment, which also implied moving out of relations of dependency. They shifted to odd jobs in the local informal economy, within the rural setting, or in the nearby towns. Many among them also began to abandon their traditional caste occupations, some of which had also been made redundant by the growing use of machines (see Jodhka 2002, 2004; Judge and Bal 2009).

During my survey of 51 villages carried out during 1999–2000, I found that this growing sense of autonomy among the SCs also began to change the local landscape of religiosity. The Sikh SC communities, such as Mazhbis and Ramdasias, started constructing separate Gurdwaras of their own. Though the Ravidasis and Chamars are officially listed as Hindus, ritually they were closer to Sikhism, and their separate Gurdwaras are often known as Ravidasi Mandirs. This trend was most pronounced in the Doaba region of Punjab but was not absent in other parts of Punjab (Jodhka 2002).

The history of the Dalit religious autonomy in the Doaba also has another context, which goes back to the early decades of the 20th century and the rise of the Ad Dharam movement. The history of this movement is closely tied to the British rule in Punjab. After they conquered the region, the British set up a military cantonment in Jalandhar, which increased the demand for leather boots. The local Chamars, who specialized in dealing with leather as part of their caste occupation, were the direct beneficiaries. The economic mobility it brought to them also encouraged them to expand their businesses. They moved to the local towns and cities. Some even went to far-off places, such as Kolkata, and worked in leather tanneries. Others went further, traveling overseas, even to North America. Mangoo Ram was one of them.

Having worked in the United States for a few years, he returned to Punjab and initiated a movement against the prevailing hierarchies of caste. As with most of his contemporaries, he too believed that the main cause of their low status was the sanctity given to it by the Hindu religion. However, instead of converting to another faith, he chose to mobilize his people to press for the recognition of their way of life as a separate religion, the Ad Dharam. The British conceded to his demand, and when the census of 1931 was carried out, they were listed as a separate *kaum*/religion. Though the movement soon dissipated (see Juergensmeyer 1988; Jodhka 2009), their sense of being a distinctive religious community persisted. It re-surfaced in the 1980s in the form of a distinct Ravidasi religious identity. The Ravidasi Deras, which spread across the state and beyond, emerged as the most significant marker of their distinctive identity assertion [17].

The changes produced by the Green Revolution, which reduced their dependency on local landowning castes, further extended this process. It provided them with a sense of autonomy and political agency, resulting in growing cases of caste conflict between

the locally dominant castes and the labouring Dalits (Jodhka 2006). With their growing autonomy from the locally dominant caste, they also began to make claims over the common resources of the village, which had hitherto been an exclusive monopoly of the dominant caste. A typical example of this was a case of caste conflict in Talhan village, near Jalandhar, in 2003. The point of contention was the Dalit's demand for representation in the management of a common religious shrine.

Talhan is a multi-caste village, where Dalits make up more than half of the total population. However, agriculture in the village is mostly owned by Jats. Different caste groups have their separate Gurdwaras. The village also has a shrine which did not belong to any specific caste. It was built in memory of a Sikh artisan who died while fixing a wheel in a newly dug well to work as a source of drinking water for the village. Since he died while working for the village, he was declared a martyr (*shahid*), and the villagers erected a small structure (*smadh*) in his memory at the place where he was cremated. Over the years, the *smadh* began to attract devotees. With devotees came money. It gradually turned into a proper religious shrine, and the Sikh holy book was also placed close to the *smadh*. The locally dominant Jats, who controlled the village *panchayat*, appointed a committee to look after the shrine. It had representatives from different caste groups of the village except for the Dalits.

As its popularity grew, the flow of donations it attracted also grew. With growing resources at its command, the influence of its managing committee grew. It could use the resources for developing local infrastructure. Seeing its resources and influence grow, the local Dalits demanded that they too be represented in the managing committee. However, the Jats refused. The Dalits filed a case in the local court and organized a demonstration in Jalandhar to put pressure on the district administration for official intervention. Their protests continued for nearly six months, and eventually, the local Dalits were accommodated in the committee (Jodhka and Louis 2003).

Though it did not radically alter the local power equations, the significance of Talhan protest lies in the fact that it became the turning point for Dalit assertions elsewhere in Punjab. In the years that followed, reports of local level conflicts began to appear from different parts of the state. Though the form varied, their nature and contentions were very similar. Everywhere, they asked for their share in the common resources of the village, while those from the dominant castes resisted (Jodhka 2006).

Classificatory Clusters: Following the official classificatory systems of the Indian state and popular political narratives around the subject, the caste landscape of the Sikhs can be divided into three broad categories, the Dalits (SCs), the "Backward" (OBCs), and the "upper" castes. Perhaps the best way to discuss this would be to begin with the social profile of caste in Punjab[18], for which we have some quantitative data available. Punjab has a total of 39 caste communities listed as Scheduled Castes. They together make for nearly 31.8 percent of the total population of the state, nearly double the national average. Nearly two-thirds of the SC population in Punjab identify themselves with the Sikh religion[19]. Even among those who officially identify themselves as Hindus, a significant proportion have very little to do with the religion they officially identify with[20].

Furthermore, all those who are listed as SCs have not necessarily had the experience of untouchability. A good example of this are the Rai Sikhs (Mahatams), who were added to the state SC list in 2005 and whose inclusion raised the proportion of the SCs in Punjab by nearly 5 percentage points. Although they may be considered as historically marginalized, they did not experience the humiliation of being treated as untouchables. They are included in the SCs list because, unlike most other states of the Indian Union, Punjab does not have a separate list for Scheduled Tribes (STs).

Besides the SCs, Punjab also has a large number of caste communities (nearly 70 communities) listed as "backward" or the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), as the category came to be reframed by Indian government in 1990[21]. They include a wide range of caste groups, like the Ramgarhias (formally listed as Tarkhans and Lohars), Labanas, Kambojs,

Jhinwars, and Gujjars. Together, they make up around 31 percent of the total population of Punjab. Quite like the SCs, a majority of them are likely to identify themselves as Sikhs.

The third cluster of caste groups are those who could be described as the "privileged". The most prominent among these are the Khatris and Aroras[22] (mostly urban) and the Jats (mostly rural). Though all the Sikh Gurus came from Khatri castes, their position as urban "upper" castes in the Sikh establishment has increasingly become marginal. This is partly because they are not very large in numbers, and more importantly, a majority of them tend to identify themselves as Hindus. The dominant social group in contemporary Sikhism is that of the Jats. Making up nearly one-third of the total Sikh population, they would be the largest caste group among the Sikhs. Moreover, they have been the traditional ruling elites in the region[23]. They tend to dominate the Sikh political life nearly at all levels. They own most of the agricultural land and occupy positions of domination in rural Punjab. Given their numbers and economic strength, as mentioned earlier, they occupy prominent positions within the Sikhs' religious and political institutions, such as the SGPC and Akali Dal.

Much of the available social sciences and historical writings on the Sikhs and Punjab has also tended to focus on the Jats. As discussed above, these scholarly writings tend to emphasise their positions of domination in the regional context, the Sikh religious institutions, and in the rural life (Ibbetson 1916; Smith 1953; Pettigrew 1975; Kaur 1986; Habib 1976). References to caste also appear prominently in writings on Sikhs living outside the Indian Punjab (Banerjee 2003, 2010). Of late, many scholars have been working on how the popular Sikh persona has come to be shaped by the masculine cultural identity of the mobile Jat. This has also been emphasised by those working on Punjabi music and popular culture as well as by the feminist scholarship on Sikh patriarchy (Jakobsh 2003; Mooney 2011, 2020; Kaur 2022; Thusoo and Deshwal 2022; Abbi 2020, 2021; Mitra 2020). The writings on Sikh migrations to the West too tend to foreground the Jat experience (Singh and Tatla 2006; Talbot and Thandi 2004), though there have been some notable exceptions (Nesbitt 1981; Takhar 2005, 2014).

7. Moving Forward

As is evident from the discussion above, raising questions of caste while working on aspects of Sikh society has come to be accepted as a normal course. However, despite such a recognition, the subject of caste continues to occupy a rather marginal and contentious position within Sikh studies. Many would still deny its active present in the everyday life of the Sikhs. Its invocations produce discomfiture. The subject invokes a sense of moral guilt within the community and its scholars, most of whom are themselves likely to be practicing Sikhs. The obvious reason for this is the vehement opposition to its practice in the Sikh theological canons.

How could we move forward? The easy answer to such a question would be to say that we need to recognize the need for reforming Sikh social life and work to completely eradicate all remnants of caste prejudice that still survive within the community by going back to the message of the Gurus. However, this kind of a response reduces the question of 'caste among the Sikhs' simply to a matter of aligning 'practice with the theory'. Not only is such a narrative very simplistic, but it also does not allow us to raise relevant questions about the reality of caste and how it has come to be framed as a hegemonic construct. It also does not permit us to engage with the diverse empirics of caste and their contextual dynamics.

In order to move forward, we need to not only recognise its presence in the Sikh social life but also raise questions about its popular framings and the underlying assumptions and claims that are made about the nature of historical pasts of different regions and communities of the subcontinent.

As I have argued elsewhere (Jodhka 2015, 2016, 2022), the textbook view of caste presents it as a uniquely Indian system of social hierarchy, inscribed in the Hindu religious texts. Though its practice presumably goes back to the Vedic or even pre-Vedic period,

its most authoritative exposition is presumably provided by Manu in the *Manusmriti*, composed sometime in the first or second century of the Common Era. As per Manu's dictum, Hindu society is neatly segregated into four or five hierarchically ranked *varnas*. Corresponding to their religiously ascribed ritual status, locally specific *jati* groups emerged with clearly marked-out boundaries of kinship system and settlement systems. They also pursued occupations ritually prescribed for them. From attitudes towards different parts of the human body and the status of women to patterns of spatial segregations and economic processes, nearly everything was structured around the foundational values of purity and impurity. Sanctified by tradition, the system worked on its own, without any form of external imposition by holders of state power.

By implication, such a framing of caste also views it primarily as a religious value, the structural logic of which lay in the Hindu religious philosophy. However, caste emerged as an all-encompassing institution. It shaped nearly everything in the Indian/Hindu mind and the Hindu social life. Such a religion-centric view of India also constructed its social and economic life as being harmoniously integrated, internally cohesive, eternally stable. The change presumably began only after its encounter with Western modernity, albeit through colonial rule. The post-colonial state has continued to pursue this process of change through its policies of development and modernization (see Jodhka 2016).

Such a framing of caste has wider implications for the Sikhs. If caste is an exceptionally Hindu religious practice, any presence of caste-like divisions among the non-Hindu communities of the subcontinent ipso-facto becomes evidence of their Hindu ancestry. To put it differently, it contends that the non-Hindus of the sub-continent have either converted out of Hinduism (such as the Indian Muslims or the Indian Christians), or their faith systems are branches and variations of Hinduism. In the process, it also produces an imagination of the Indian subcontinent as being a unified and singular cultural system whose foundational values are best described in the *Manusmriti*.

As is well-known, this singular imagination of the region was constructed and popularised by a section of the European orientalists in active collaboration with the native Brahmins (Inden 1990). Such a narrative acquired prominence when the British colonial rulers used these writings to develop their own theories about Indian things (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). The Indian nationalists too found such a singular view of India's past politically useful in articulating their claims of an Indian nationhood. It helped them argue that the diversities of religion, language, and region were mere variations of an underlying unified (Hindu) culture (see Jodhka 2004, 2023).

A wide range of historical and critical scholarship (Frykenberg 1989; Fuller 1989; Thapar 1989) has shown that such a singular view of India's past and its social institutions such as caste is founded on untenable assumptions. Hinduism has not been a cohesive and monolithic faith system that is accepted by all. More importantly, not everyone living in the subcontinent ever identified with the Brahminic religious ethos or identity. As Romilla Thapar (1989) has shown, even in so-called ancient India, a wide range of non-Brahminic and *Shramanic* faith traditions existed parallelly. Some of them, such as Buddhism, vehemently contested Brahminic religiosity, including the notion of *varna* hierarchy.

Thus, moving ahead would require us to move towards a more grounded view of caste and the pasts of the subcontinent. This is already being done. A wide range of available historical and ethnographic scholarship produced by social scientists over the past 70 years clearly shows how the lived-realities of caste were regionally diverse. They were embedded in regional histories, power dynamics, and local economic processes. They contest the fallacious orientalist claims about its singularity and immutability. This is also clearly evident from the brief overview of some select empirical studies of Punjab that I have provided in this paper. The ground realities of caste among the Sikhs have been shaped by the historical processes specific to the community and its regional moorings. The patterns of its practice have varied even within Punjab, across its sub-regions, and also between rural and urban contexts (See McLeod 1976).

The empirics of caste are shaped by a variety of processes, with ideology, or religious ideology, being one of them but often not the most critical one. Structures of hierarchy, and of inequality in general, are also shaped by material processes specific to the given social and historical contexts. Though the narrative of caste has come to be associated with India and Hinduism, caste-like structures have existed and continue to exist in most, if not all, parts of the world today. Quite like other 'durable' structures of inequality (Tilly 1999), ascription-based hierarchies of caste are produced and reproduced through a combination of processes. They are better-understood using comparative conceptual frames such as 'ethnic closure' (Weber 1968; Wimmer 2013; Jodhka 2016).

Finally, in the context of caste, the Brahmanical Hindu ideology has indeed been a very crucial fact. However, by itself, a text like *Manusmriti* neither describes the empirics of caste, nor does it explain its origin or persistence. What it does is to provide an ideational prescript for 'Brahminic sociality' where hierarchy, social division and distancing, avoidance of the "impure", and active discrimination are advocated and legitimised. In contrast, the *ideological signals* provided by the Gurus and the Sikh religious system are unambiguously against caste (See Hans 2016). They decry the Brahminic sociality and highlight the inherent inhumanity of such a practice. However, like all ideological systems, the Sikh religious canon could not be expected to shape human realities in every way and for all the times to come.

It is also important to recognize the specific context of contemporary ideas and ideals of equality and castelessness. They have come to be visualised through the language of citizenship, emanating from the post-enlightenment normative of constitutional democracies, which have been institutionalized through the political communities of nation-states. Yet, contemporary realities of inequality, including caste, are not entirely dissimilar to what existed in the past. The challenge before us, therefore, is not to examine the value or validity of the Gurus' message but to recognize its potential as a source of politically imagining a human future free of violence, hierarchy, and institutionalised humiliation. They could also help us to develop viable alternatives to the Eurocentric frames of modernity.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The paper is based on a broad overview of the existing literature. Its scope is largely conceptual.

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

Notes

1 Nanak: AG 62, as in (Nesbitt 2005, p. 106).

2 A Scheduled Caste student in Punjab during a conversation with (Aggarwal 1983, p. 24).

3 Given that the Sikh holy Granth includes writings of a good number of their contemporaries from different parts of subcontinent, the flavour and dialect of the language has a significant diversity, even though the holy Granth is entirely crafted in Punjabi, in the Gurubani script. (Mann 2001; P. Singh 2014).

4 Most of the major Sikh Gurudwaras have a kitchen attached to them where food is served free to the visitors. The practice requires everyone to sit together and eat from the same source (see Hawley 2014).

5 In 2011, the Indian Sikhs made for 20.8 million, a little less than 2% of the total population of the country. Nearly three-fourths of them lived in Punjab, where they make for around 60% of the total population (see Jodhka 2009). Though they are present in nearly every state of India, a large majority of the Indian Sikhs living outside Punjab are concentrated in the North Indian states of Haryana, Delhi, and Rajasthan. Nearly 2 million Sikhs live outside India, mostly in Europe and North America (see Jodhka 2009; Jodhka and Myrvold 2015).

6 Punjab was among the last territories of the subcontinent to be annexed by the British.

7 O'Malley, cited in (Nayar 1966, p. 200).

8 The first Census of Punjab was carried out in 1868. However, it was compiled merely as a data report, with "no record of the experience of the past or suggestions for guidance in the future" (Ibbetson 1916, p. iv).

[9] W.M. Rattigan, A Digest of the Civil Law for the Punjab Chiefly based upon the Customary Law as Present Ascertained. Cited in (Chowdhry 2017, p. 121).

[10] According to the 2011 Census, Punjab had 31.94 percent of its population listed as Scheduled Caste, highest across all the states of India. However, this figure is misleading because not all the communities included in the list have experience untouchability. Given that Punjab does not have a separate list Scheduled Tribes, they too are clubbed with the SCs. If they were to be listed separately, they would make for nearly 7 to 8 percent of the state population.

[11] Officially listed among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

[12] As is well-known to the students of Sikh studies, the nature such a reimagining of community identities has been a subject of deep contention among the students of Sikhism, but nearly everyone agrees that the shift did take place. For a comprehensive and critical summary of the academic debates around this period see (Oberoi 1994; Singh 2023; Murphy 2000).

[13] Besides the historically deprived or untouchable caste groups, the Constitution also provided quotas to tribal communities, listed in a separate list as Scheduled Tribes, the STs. Punjab does not have a separate list of STs.

[14] After initial resistance from the national leaders such Vallabhbhai Patel, four Sikh castes were added to the SC list of Punjab. These were Mazhbis, Ramdasias, Bazigars and Sikligars. The list was expanded to include all the untouchable castes who identified themselves as Sikhs. This was done in response to an agitation launched by Master Tara Singh in 1953 (Puri 2004, pp. 212–13).

[15] Those from the other religious minorities could not get their Dalits included in the list of Scheduled Castes. Even the Ambedkarite Neo-Buddhists had to wait until 1991 for their inclusion in the SC list.

[16] The SCs make for 31.8 percent of the total population of Punjab.

[17] Ravidasi Deras are different from Ravidasi Mandirs. While Mandirs are local structures of worship, like the local Gurdwaras or temples, the Deras have a larger structure and wider following. They invariably also have an association with a living guru (Ram 2004, 2008; Judge 2010; Singh and Singh 2017; Singh 2019; Kumar 2014).

[18] A large majority of Sikhs continue to live in Punjab. Even those living in the diaspora, or elsewhere in India are likely to have their origin in the Punjab or the pre-Partition united Punjab.

[19] See I.P. Singh, 'How parties juggle class, caste & community in Punjab'. *The Times of India*. 1 June 2024. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/how-parties-juggle-class-caste-community-in-punjab/articleshow/110608327.cms (accessed on 1 September 2024). Of the total population of Punjab, 19.4 percent were listed as Sikh Scheduled Castes and the remaining 19.4 percent as Hindu Scheduled Castes.

[20] A majority of Ravidasis and Ad Dharmis, who are listed as Hindu SCs see themselves as following a separate religion. Likewise, many of the Balmikis continue to have their own sense of religious faith, which is closer to Sufi Islam, and more recently to Christianity. They identify with Hinduism primarily for the sake of availing themselves of quotas/reservations. Their official identification with Hinduism is primarily for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Castes for claiming benefits of quotas (see Lee 2021).

[21] This reframing was done following the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report for extension of quotas to another set of communities that were identified as "socially and educationally backward".

[22] Besides, there are also Sikhs from castes such as the Banias, Mahajans and even Brahmins (mostly living in Jammu and Kashmir). Their numbers are however limited.

[23] It was during the 'rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799–1839) that the Jat Sikhs emerged as a major part of the nobility or ruling class' (Puri 2004, p. 196).

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