

# Dalits and the Emancipatory Sikh Religion

by

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Hinduism has always been hostile to Sikhism, whose Gurus successfully attacked the principle of caste, which is the foundation on which the fabric of Brahminical religion has been reared. The activities of Hinduism have, therefore, been constantly directed to the undermining of Sikhism. ... Hinduism has strangled Buddhism, once a formidable rival to it, and it made serious inroads on the domains of Sikhism.

– A. E. Barstow (1928)<sup>1</sup>

The 'Dalit history' approach, a particularly germane form of social history 'from below', seeks to bring caste conflict out in the open by making it a central theme in the writing of Sikh history. It thus provides a rather different, potentially stimulating, and realistic lens through which to take a closer look at Sikh history as a whole.

– John C. B. Webster<sup>2</sup>

Today's Untouchables are stronger than they have ever been. The progress they have made over the last century is quite remarkable. Many of the discriminations that once affected them have been seriously attenuated. Yet, and perhaps paradoxically, the great majority remain poor, powerless, and indeed without a voice.

– Robert Diliege<sup>3</sup>

Dalits constitute about 30 per cent of Punjab population that happens to be largest proportion in the country, when compared with other provinces, but they occupy the lowest share in the ownership of land (2.34 per cent of the cultivated area). Mazhbis and Ramdasias, the two dalit castes among the Sikhs, particularly the Mazhbis, remain the most deprived. Evidence of untouchability against dalit Sikhs is well established. They have been forced to live in separate settlements, contemptuously called *thbattis* or *chamarblees*, located on the western side and away from the main body of the villages. All the Sikh organisations from Sikh temples to the political party are under the control of the Jatt Sikhs. The Jatt Sikhs refuse to consider them equals even after death, by disallowing cremation of their dead in the main cremation ground of the village. Over the years such harsh caste attitude has forced the dalits to establish separate gurdwaras, marriage places and cremation grounds.<sup>4</sup> This seems to be the biggest paradox of Sikhism which theoretically and theologically has been characterized as 'emancipatory'<sup>5</sup> and even sociologically as 'revolutionary'<sup>6</sup>. In its true egalitarian spirit, Sikhism had succeeded in integrating the lowliest of the low, the former untouchables, the dalits, into its fold. From dalits' perspective the evolution of Sikhism can be seen

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sikhs: An Ethnology*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993 Reprint, p.18.

<sup>2</sup> "The Dalit Sikhs: A History?" in Tony Ballantyne, ed., *Textures of the Sikh Past: New Historical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 150.

<sup>3</sup> *The Untouchables of India*, translated from the French by Nora Scott, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999, p. xiii

<sup>4</sup> Ronki Ram, "Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.42, No.40, October 6-12, 2007, pp. 4066 -67. Also see Surinder S. Jodhka, "Caste and Untouchability in Rural Punjab", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 11 May 2002, pp. 1813-23.

<sup>5</sup> From a scholarly treatment from this angle see Gurnam Singh, "Sikhism's Emancipatory Discourses: Some Critical Perspectives", *Sikh Formations*, 2:2, Dec 2006, 135-151. Also see <http://sikhpectrum.com/072002/khalsa.htm> for S. Lourdunathan's "Khalsa and its Emancipatory Logic", a paper presented at Khalsa Tricentenary Seminar held at Madurai Kamaraj University in March 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Jagjit Singh, *The Sikh Revolution: A Perspective View*, Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1981.

in two phases: a) from seventeenth century to Ranjit Singh's rule, when dalits played remarkable role in Sikh political struggles and religious movements; b) post-Ranjit Singh phase, when Brahmanical values and attitudes resurfaced with caste and untouchability afflicting the Sikh body politic in such a way that there was danger of its re-absorption into Hinduism. Though dominant literary tradition has denied the significance of 'caste' and 'untouchability' in Sikhism, it has also ignored and neglected the dalit contribution to the flourishing of Sikhism in the first phase. The rise in consciousness in the twentieth century has enabled the Dalits to raise questions on the dominant historiographical praxis by attempting to recover the lost ground. The paper would first look at the modern moment, the rise in the dalit consciousness as manifest in Dalit creative writings. In seeking an answer to as to what made the powerful Sikh movement drift the paper would look at the 'brahmanisation' of Sikhism in the nineteenth century with ominous implications for dalits as well as for Sikhism.

## I

Dalit consciousness begins with the cerebral activities and is best reflected in the literary expressions. It is important how in the dalit literary writings, 'being a Sikh' has taken a precedent over 'being a dalit' till the mid-twentieth century. It is only when the caste discrimination and untouchability within Sikhism came to be seen by Dalits from either the socialist angle or from Ambedkar's perspective that a new process of looking at the self begins. Our first three dalit poets had subsumed their dalit identity in the broader 'Sikh' identity.

Bhai Jaita (d. 1705), who was rechristened by Guru Gobind Singh as Jeevan Singh in 1699, happens to be the first dalit poet from Punjab. Earlier, young Gobind Singh was overwhelmed with emotions and had embraced Bhai Jaita when the latter had brought the severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadar under the most violent circumstances from Delhi to Anandpur in 1675 and called him '*Ranghrete Guru ke Betē*' (Ranghrete, the untouchables, are guru's own sons). Jaita had turned out to be a fearless and daring Sikh warrior who had endeared himself so much to the Tenth Guru that he was declared as the '*Panjwan Sahibzada*' (Fifth Son) in addition to his own four *sahibzadas*.<sup>7</sup> He was killed in a fierce battle with Mughal armies in 1705. Even though he is now given some space in the Sikh iconography, it is hardly known or acknowledged that he was also a scholar poet.<sup>8</sup> He had composed a long poem 'Sri Gur Katha' which is an eyewitness account of important events surrounding Guru Gobind Singh.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that this composition has eluded the notice of scholars of Sikh literature and history whose efforts to unearth the literature and materials pertaining to the Sikh tradition is otherwise remarkable.<sup>10</sup> The way Bhai Jaita had been integrated

<sup>7</sup> Recently a renowned Punjabi writer Baldev Singh wrote a long novel *Panjwan Sahibzada* (Chetna Prakashan: Ludhiana, 2005) on Bhai Jaita alias Jeevan Singh.

<sup>8</sup> This space became possible because of the dalit assertion in Punjab. One such dalit Sikh, K. S. Neiyar who had settled in UK, commissioned the writing of history of Mazhbis (erstwhile untouchable Sikhs) to an eminent Punjabi writer and 'historian' Samsher Singh Ashok in 1970s and the result was *Mazhbi Sikhan da Itihas*, Bhai Chatar Singh Jeevan Singh: Amritsar, 2001, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (The first edition was perhaps published in 1980 as per 'introduction' by 'Ashok' dated 2 November 1979). Chapters 5 and 6 (pp.76-89) were devoted to Bhai Jaita/Jeevan Singh where the author also looks into the process of how Ranghretas became Mazhbis. The dalit assertion made the mainstream authors of Sikh tradition have a fresh look at the past and acknowledge the contribution of dalits to the Sikh tradition.

<sup>9</sup> This composition "*Sri Gur Katha* krit Kavi Baba Jeevan Singh (Bhai Jayata)" is published in Naranjan Arifi's *Ranghrehitian da Itihas (Adi kal ton 1850 tak)*, Part I, Amritsar: Literature House 1993, pages 396-424. Baldev Singh also gives this poem at the end of his novel *Panjwan Sahibjada* from 465 to 501 pages.

<sup>10</sup> The researchers of Punjabi literary texts especially the Sikh tradition including Piara Singh Padam, Shamsheer Singh Ashok, Prof Pritam Singh, Gurinder Singh Mann and historians Ganda Singh, W. H. McLeod, J. S. Grewal, Pashaura Singh and others do not mention anywhere Bhai Jaita's *Sri Gur Katha*. It is just possible that it was not easily available. Naranjan Arifi discovered a copy with eldest son of Daya Singh Arif, Kultar Singh about which the latter mentioned how in one of his visits to Assam he was presented the copy by the Ranghreta families who had escaped the head-hunting of Ranghretas by the Jatt power-blocks in the eighteenth century and had been living since then in Assam while practicing gurus' religion. Arifi, op.cit. pp. 394-95.

not only in Sikh religion but also in the family of Guru Gobind Singh, it is understandable any other identity would have been meaningless to him. His identity as Ranghreta has been subsumed by his identity as a Sikh as he says:

*Jayayte taranbar gur, taar diye ranghretde  
Gur p̄ ras ne kar diye, ranghrete gur betde<sup>11</sup>  
(O! Jaite the savior guru has saved the ranghretas  
The pure guru has adopted ranghretas as his sons)*

Our second dalit poet and writer is Ditt Singh Giani (1852-1901).<sup>12</sup> About the age of 17, he shifted to the main Gulabdasi<sup>13</sup> centre at Chathanwala, near Kasur, in Lahore district. It was here that he composed his first two books of poetry; the love-lore *Shirin Farhad* in the established Punjabi genre *kissa* and *Abla Nind*.<sup>14</sup> Not long afterwards, under the influence of Jawahir Singh, formerly a follower of Gulabdasi sect, he joined the Arya Samaj. But after entering into dialogue with Swami Daya Nand on his visit to Lahore in 1877, he was drawn into the Sikh fold by Bhai Gurmukh Singh, then an active figure in the Singh Sabha movement. Ditt Singh's scholarly talents came in handy for the Sikh movement. Lahore Singh Sabha floated a weekly newspaper, the *Khalsa Akhbar* in 1886. He assumed editorship of the paper in 1887 that he continued till his death in 1901.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, he was also appointed as a professor of Punjabi at the Oriental College. To Bhagat Lakshman Singh, erudite Sikh educationist and reformer, "Bhai Ditt Singh Gyani wielded a powerful pen and was a literary giant."<sup>16</sup> He wrote more than fifty books and pamphlets on wide-ranging subjects, from love-lore to Sikh traditions, from history to ethics, from heroes to charlatans as he also produced polemics.<sup>17</sup> Even being a leader in the limelight he could not escape the overt and covert assault of

<sup>11</sup> See Naranjan Arifi, op.cit. p. 409 and Baldev Singh, p. *Panjwan Sahibzada*, p. 481. Translation mine.

<sup>12</sup> Ditt Singh was a poet, journalist, orator, teacher, organizer, scholar and polemicist par excellence. He was born in 1852 in an untouchable Ravidasia caste and was given the name of Ditta Ram. Ditt Singh studied Gurmukhi, prosody, Vedanta and Niti-Sastra, and learnt Urdu. He started his apprenticeship as a preacher and teacher and earned the title of Giani (the knowledgeable) during his teens. For autobiographical notes see Bhai Ditt Singh Gyani, *Mera ate Sadhu Daya Nandji da Sambad* [Dialogue between Dayanand and Me], n.d. p. 4. Also see Dr. Karnail Singh Somal, *Bhai Ditt Singh Gyani: Jeevan, Rachna te Sakhshiat* (Life, Works and Personality of Bhai Ditt Singh Gyani), Amritsar: Singh Brothers, Second edition, 2005, (First ed. 2003), p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> Gulabdasi sect emerged as an intellectually vibrant sect in the nineteenth century Punjab. The founder of the sect was one Gulab Das (1809-1873) born in a Jatt family of Ratola village near Taran Taran in Amritsar district. He served as a horse-soldier in Maharaja Sher Singh's army and after the Sikhs' defeat at the British hands he became a Sadhu, learnt Vedas and soon started his own establishment. He was an accomplished poet who had attained Brahm Gyan (realization of the self and universe). He became an atheist and advocated an epicurean life. He shunned caste and gender differences and discrimination as untouchables and women became integral part of his creed. The first woman Punjabi poet Peero Preman (c1830-1872, former Aiysha, a Muslim prostitute) almost became the co-saint of his establishment. For details see Gian Inder Singh Sevak, *Gulabdasi Sampardaye: Rachna te Vichar* (Gulabdasi Sect: Works and Ideas), Ph.D. Thesis, Guru Nanak Dev University, 1984; Navratan Kapoor, *Sadhu Gulab Das: Jeevan te Rachna*, Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1993; Bikram Singh Ghuman, *Kishan Singh Arif: Jeevan te Rachna*, Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1987, pp. 9-10; For details about Peero Preman see, Santokh Singh Shaharyar, "Punjabi di Pahili Shaira: Peero Preman", *Ajoke Shilalekh*, Jan 1997, pp. 5-8 and Swarajbir, "Antika" (Epilogue) in his *Shairi (A Play)*, Chetna Prakashan, Ludhiana, 2004, pp. 185-97

<sup>14</sup> The first is said to have been composed and completed in 1872. Though it was the first work it was published last of the entire Ditt Singh tome in 1963 by Punjabi Sahit Akademi, Ludhiana as edited by Shamsher Singh Ashok. *Abla Nind* was published in 1905. Somal, op.cit., 102-05

<sup>15</sup> A detailed account of Ditt Singh's contribution to Punjabi journalism is available in chapter 4 "Giani Ditt Singh da Punjabi Patarkari nu Yogdan" [Contribution of Giani Ditt Singh to the Punjabi Journalism] in Narinder Singh Kapoor, *Giani Ditt Singh: Jiwan te Rachna* (Punjabi), Patiala, 1987, pp. 98-124

<sup>16</sup> Bhagat Lakshman Singh, *Autobiography*, edited by Ganda Singh, Calcutta: Sikh Cultural Centre, 1965, p. 140.

<sup>17</sup> Somal lists 54 publications. Op. cit., 179-81.

untouchability from his fellow and follower Sikhs.<sup>18</sup> And it seems despite being reminded that he belonged to an untouchable family he was suffused with Sikh consciousnesses.

Our third such dalit poet Sadhu Daya Singh Arif (1894-1946) was born in a landless Mazhbi<sup>19</sup> Sikh family of Ferozepur district. Contrary to the material as well as cultural condition, Daya Singh developed a keen interest in learning letters as a child for which his father Santa Singh threw him out of family on former's persistence against several warnings by the latter.<sup>20</sup> Living independently, Daya Singh was absorbed in reading and contemplation. After learning Gurmukhi and studying the Adi Granth, he learnt Urdu from a local teacher in his village *madrassa* Maulvi Ibrahim and Persian from Sunder Singh Patwari and Master Munshi Ram Khatri. The desire to learn about Islam led him to the local Sufi scholar Shadi Khan who laid a condition of accepting Islam if he wanted to learn the *Quran*. Daya Singh agreed on the condition that he would do so after the education if he finds Islam superior to Sikhism in principles and ideas. The result was that Daya Singh emerged as a sound scholar of Arabic, Persian and the *Quran*. Learning Sanskrit from Baba Sawan Das who lived at Dharamkot was not very difficult as the Sanskritist was bowled over by Daya Singh's knowledge in religious studies. He studied Vedanta from Baba Sawan Das' younger brother Baba Prabhati Das who had studied Vedas at Kashi for 10 years.<sup>21</sup> After gaining insights into the theological aspects of religion, he turned to the secular literature of Punjab especially the *kissas*.<sup>22</sup> Passionate readings of series of works on traditional Punjabi love-lore seem to have ignited his creative potential. His first poetical work *Fanab-dar-Makan* was published when he was 20.<sup>23</sup> The work which made Daya Singh a household name through the width and breadth of Punjab was *Zindagi Bilas* completed when he turned 22. It is in this work where his vast religious, spiritual and secular knowledge is manifest. It is moving didactic poetry that caught imagination of masses which became the most read or heard poetic creation next only to Waris Shah's 'Heer'.<sup>24</sup> Sadhu Daya Singh wrote his next major published poetic work *Sputtar Bilas* in 1922. Written in the same genre, this is also a didactic work of great aesthetic value addressed as it is to his eldest son Kultar Singh. This is also said to have been printed in hundreds of thousands of copies.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> One early biography, perhaps the first one, of Ditt Singh was written from the angle of abolishing caste and untouchability from among the Sikhs. See Daljeet Singh, *Singh Sabha da Modhi arthat Jeevan Britant Giani Ditt Singh Ji* (The Founder of the Singh Sabha or the Life Description of Giani Ditt Singhji), Amritsar: Shromani Khalsa Bradari Prabhandak Committee, n.d. (c1951 from the Foreword).

<sup>19</sup> Mazhbi literally means 'of religious' or 'faithful'. The Hindu or Muslim *Chuhra*s (scavengers) who had accepted Sikhism came to be known as Mazhbis. They were also known as Ranghretas. See Ehtne K Marengo, *The Transformation of Sikh Society*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 130-31; Pratap Singh Giani, *Jat-Pat te Chhoot-Chhaat sambandhi Gurmat Sidhant* (Sikh Principles about Caste and Untouchability), Amritsar, 1933, pp. 171-72; Karam Singh Historian, "Ranghrete jan Mazhbi Singh" [July 1929] in *Karam Singh Historian di Itihasak Khoj* (Historical Research of Karam Singh Historian), edited by Hira Singh Dard, Part 3, Amritsar 2005, pp 5-8; Naranjan Arifi goes into details of the usage of these terms in his *Ranghretian da Itihas*, pp.191-206.

<sup>20</sup> Atam Hamrahi, *Sadhu Daya Singh Arif*, Patiala: Publication Bureau of Punjabi University, 1990, pp. 4-6

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 7-11.

<sup>22</sup> He devoured Kishan Singh Arif's *Heer*, *Puran Bhagat* of Pandit Maan Singh Kalidas of Gujranwala, *Yusuf Zuleikha* by Maulvi Abdul Sattar and Daulat Ram's *Roop Basant*. According to the testimony of his son Kultar Singh and his favourite disciple Bhai Rala Singh, the legends of *Puran Bhagat* and *Yusuf-Zuleikha* greatly inspired him to write poetry and this is how he preferred the genre of *kissa*. *Ibid.* pp. 11-12.

<sup>23</sup> This was written in the *sadh bhasha*, the language of *sadhus*, and emphasised the mortality of human existence. Due to somewhat difficult language and style of composition he was advised by Baba Sawan Das to revise it and write in simple language. He was so much bursting with creative energy that he altogether wrote another *kissa* *Fanah da Makan*, first published in 1915, which soon became popular throughout the Punjab. See Hamrahi, op. cit. p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Even in as late as 1980s the publishers of Bhai Pratap Singh Pritam Singh Press said that two Gurmukhi editions of either 3300 or 4400 were published every year. They were also selling 1100 copies of the Devnagri edition every two years while the same number was still sold in Persian letters every four years. Atam Hamrahi & Surjit Chander, "Sadhu Daya Singh Arif: Jeevan te Rachna" in *Arif Rachnavali: Sadhu Daya Singh Arif di Prapat Prakashit Rachna*, edited by Atam Hamrahi & Surjit Chander, Amritsar: Bhai Chatar Singh Jeevan Singh, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Daya Singh succeeds in reinforcing the moral thrust of the medieval spiritual saints in a fast changing objective reality when there was a rise in the acquisitive tendencies irrespective of the means adopted. His introverted self made him seek answers in the subjective human makeup rather than in the objective material conditions. He was well grounded in the philosophy of Advaita-Vedanta.<sup>26</sup> He moves from particular to the general, quintessential human life. Daya Singh's poetry is free from any kind of sectarianism and is thoroughly secular in the prevailing communal environment. He not only produces good poetry but emerges as an intellectual of his age. But soon after he turned to composing poetic material for the Sikh traditions, legends and anecdotes which he would render as a *kavishar*<sup>27</sup> in a *jatha* (band) that he had formed for this purpose. This was also his material need; after settling down as a family person, with five sons and a daughter, to run the family unit he found the vocation that he was best at, composing and singing at religious and other popular festivals. He excelled in this art as well; travelling across Punjab with his band earned him so much popularity that he was invited by Sikhs settled in Malaya and other parts of South-East Asia in 1929. After his coming back to Punjab, he is said to have played some role in the political developments as a representative of Mazhbi Sikhs. At the time of 1937 formation of provincial ministries, the untouchables were to be enlisted separately in the voters' lists but Sadhu Daya Singh along with other Mazhbi Sikh leaders had refused this separation saying they were Sikhs and there was no 'caste' in Sikhism.<sup>28</sup>

Gurdas Ram Aalam (1912-1989), who was born in a poor Dalit family of Bundala village in Jalandhar district, happens to be the first Punjabi poet with dalit consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Aalam was not able to go to school and learnt basic Gurmukhi letters from his friends. Even though illiterate, Aalam had emerged as one of popular folk-poets of stage before the Partition.<sup>30</sup> All the four books of his poems were full of social and economic issues of the deprived and oppressed caste-communities. On political and social issues, Aalam wrote like a revolutionary. No wonder, even Pash (who has become symbol of Punjabi revolutionary poetry) considered Aalam the first revolutionary poet of Punjab.<sup>31</sup> A few lines from his poem '*Achchut*' where the untouchable cries about his chronic ailment to which the Pandit, Maulavi, Bhai (Sikh preacher), pastor and Congressman prescribe for him their respective religious and political solutions and finally the poet offers his:<sup>32</sup>

O! the untouchable, open your eyes and see  
 I will write a prescription that I have stolen  
 Possess three things: strength, unity and education  
 And don't bother about anyone else  
 Faith here is made of SHOES and religion of STAVES  
 Caste too is of SHOES, of force  
 None is high nor is one low here  
 Untouchability is nothing but your weakness  
 You are as human as others are  
 Differences are because of vested interests

<sup>26</sup> See Debiprasad Chattopahyaya, *Indian Philosophy: A Popular Introduction*, New Delhi, 1964, pp. 93-100

<sup>27</sup> *Kavishars* were the traditional composers and folk-singers rendering legends, mainly pertaining to Sikh traditions.

<sup>28</sup> See Pandit Bakshi Ram, *Mera Jeevan Sangharash* [My life Struggle], Jalandhar: Punjab Pradesh Balmik Sabha, n.d. p. 78. Perhaps he was just stating the doctrinal position of Sikhism as a true devotee could have done, if pressed to take position, despite the social reality being otherwise, which would be discussed in the following pages.

<sup>29</sup> A collection of his entire poetry which was earlier published in four books has been recently published by Manavadi Rachna Manch, Punjab as *Aalam-Kav*, Kapurthala, 1994 (1<sup>st</sup> Ed), 1999 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

<sup>30</sup> Tarsem Lal Sagar, "Aalam-Kav de Sarokar" in *Aalam-Kav*, Kapurthala, 1999, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Prem Gorkhi, "Aalam: Punajb da Mudhla Inqlabi Shair" in *Aalam-Kav*, Kapurthala, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Aalam-Kav*, Kapurthala, 1999, p. 42. Translation mine.

Temples and mosques are traps, O! Alam  
Fools like you are trapped

In his poem 'Ulahma' (Complain) he gives a call to his 'dalit brother':<sup>33</sup>

Rise, O Dalit brother, why are you wasting your time  
Only you have to do your work, whether today or tomorrow  
Your neighbours have moved ahead while you are happy left behind  
You are human like them, if you are one, be ashamed

Alam had his poems 'Inqlabi Aagu' (Revolutionary Leader) on Bhagat Ravi Das, 'Dr Ambedkar', 'Mandi' (Market) and several others which directly address the dalit issues.

Hazara Singh Mushtaq (1917-1981) was different from his predecessor dalit poets. He was an ardent nationalist, flag-bearer of Indian National Congress and was also jailed a few times during the late-colonial rule for his nationalism. Of his seven books published,<sup>34</sup> *Kissa Mazhbi Sikh Jodha* (1955) directly reflected his dalit concerns. Though he does not chide 'Independence' in the context of the poor dalits like Alam, he expresses his disillusionment with the post-Independence developments, brings in socialist ideology to disparage the social and economic disparities, and calls the dalits for a revolutionary rise in his 1977 *Noori Gazal*.<sup>35</sup>

The revolutionary rise that Punjab witnessed in the form of Naxalism<sup>36</sup> in the late 1960s produced two dalit poets with revolutionary as well as dalit consciousness. These were Sant Ram Udasi (1939-1986) and Lal Singh Dil (1943-2007). Sant Ram Udasi was born in a dalit Mazhbi Sikh landless labour family. He grew up with a strong dalit consciousness and had tried to see dignity in Sikh religion, but soon he experienced how caste discrimination and untouchability present in the Sikh religion. During 1970s he emerged as one of the powerful radical poets and published three books of poetry, viz. *Lahu Bhije Bol* (Blood-soaked Word), *Saintan* (Gestures) and *Chounukriyan* (the Four-edged).<sup>37</sup> Another dalit Naxalite poet Lal Singh Dil was born in a Ramdasia Sikh (Chamār) family in 1943. He was training to be a basic school teacher when Naxalbari sucked him in. In the dream of a society free of caste and class, Dil saw a new dawn for the oppressed. Dil was a sensitive poet and his poetry was true to life and the experience of poverty, injustice and oppression was so real and told so well that he was hailed as the bard of the Naxalite movement in Punjab. A great poet he was undoubtedly, and his collection of poetry *Satluj di Hava* (1971), *Babut Saare Suraj* (1982), and *Sathar* (1997)<sup>38</sup> as well as his autobiography, *Dastaan* (1998)<sup>39</sup>, enjoy an exalted place in Punjabi letters. It is remarkable that Dil's Dalit consciousness and identity was free from feelings of hatred, vengeance and malice.<sup>40</sup> Dil has come to be acknowledged as the one of the few best poets of last half a

<sup>33</sup> *Aalam-Kav*, Kapurthala, 1999, p. 177. Translation mine.

<sup>34</sup> Other books were *Chamatkare*, 1949; *Merian Gazlan*, 1962; *Desh Pujari*, 1962; *Chitvani*, 1974; *Vatan di Pukar*, 1974; and *Noori Ghazal*, 1977.

<sup>35</sup> Parshotam Das Tandon, *Hazara Singh Mushtaq: Jiwan te Rachna*, Patiala: Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, 1993, pp. 23-24.

<sup>36</sup> For a scholarly account of Naxalite movement in Punjab see Paramjit S. Judge, *Insurrection to Agitation: The Naxalite Movement in Punjab*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1992.

<sup>37</sup> All his earlier published works and the unpublished were brought together as edited by Rajinder Singh in *Sant Ram Udasi: Jeevan te Samuchi Rachna* (Sant Ram Udasi: Life and Complete Work), Chetna Prakashan, Ludhiana, 1996. Two more reprints have already appeared in 2000 and 2002. The second print carries a long article by the editor about some controversies surrounding Udasi.

<sup>38</sup> All the three poetry books were published in one volume entitled *Nag Lok* by Chetna Prakashan of Ludhiana in 1998 and reprinted in 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Published by Chetna Prakashan, Ludhiana.

<sup>40</sup> Sarabjit Singh, "Dalit Pachhan ate Samkali Punjabi Kavita" in Satinder Singh Nur edited *Sahit vich Dalit Chetna*, New Delhi: Sahit Akademi, 2004, p. 74.

century.<sup>41</sup> Both of them were arrested, incarcerated and tortured, more tortured because they came from dalit families while their tormentors belonged to the dominant high castes.

The two powerful revolutionary dalit poets were an upsurge on the Punjabi literary stage which had remained dominated by the upper-caste, upper-class litterateurs and they became a major source for the bursting of dalit literary energy in 1990s. If their poetry was looking for a revolutionary class change, it had the vivacity of dalit identity which was capable of challenging the hegemonic discourses. Sukhdev Singh Sirsa puts this change in perspective:

The question of dalit identity has given a new ideological context to the contemporary Punjabi literature. The new Punjabi poetry has given a new expression to the dalit concerns of existential and social identity. This new perspective disentangles itself from the class-conflict approach to the understanding of dalit identity in the *varna* system and looks at the changing dalit philosophy. Hence, this poetry does not only reject the established assumptions and hypotheses but also produces an alternative.<sup>42</sup>

Contemporary poets include Balbir Madhopuri, Siri Ram Arsh, Sulakhan Mit, Gurmeet Kalarmajri, Madan Vira, Manjit Kaur, Bhagwan Dhillon, Buta Singh Ashant, Manmohan, Mohan Tyagi, Mohan Matialvi, Jaipal, Iqbal Gharu, Harnek Kaler, Sadhu Singh Shudrak. They are no-more shy in accepting their dalit identity as the dalit political assertion in the past few decades empowered them to re-read historical traditions and situate themselves by providing a pride of space in the otherwise historical trajectory denied to them. This is obvious from the following lines of two contemporary dalit poets.<sup>43</sup>

Manmohan raises his voice:

It is said to me  
The colour of my poem is black  
Flat features  
Tattered dress  
Full of patches  
Asymmetrical rhythm....  
Sorrow appears before pleasure does  
Pains peaks before peace....  
Tell me now  
If I don't write poems like this  
What should I do?

Listen what Balbir Madhopuri has to offer in his 'Bhakhda Patā' (*Smouldering Netherworld*):

For smoked skinned people like me  
I do want  
My poems  
Should be part of that anthology  
That contains  
Stories of Eklavaya and Banda Bahadur  
Struggle of Pir Buddhu Shah  
Sensitivity of Pablo Neruda

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<sup>41</sup> Several Punjabi literary magazines have brought out special numbers on him, even when he was alive. For an instance, the *Nazaria* edited by S. Tarsem from Malerkotla, well respected quarterly devoted its 8<sup>th</sup> Issue of Oct-Dec 2005 to Lal Singh Dil that runs into 184 pages carrying biographical to critical essays as well as memoirs of litterateurs who knew him.

<sup>42</sup> "Dalit Punjabi Kavita: Itihasak Paripekh" in *Hashia* (The Representative Quarterly of literature, Culture and History of socially excluded and economically backward People), I, 1 (Jan-March 1908), p. 27 (my translation)

<sup>43</sup> Both the poems are from Gurmit Kallarmajri, ed. *Agaz*, Bhadson (Patiala), 2006. (my translation)

It is interesting that while the first three eminent dalit poets foreground their Sikh identity, the rest of the poets assert their dalit identity but do not necessarily deny their Sikh identity. They are proud of their both or multiple identities. They seem to be aware that Sikhism had/has played important role in their ancestors' as well as their lives though there is disenchantment with the turn Sikhism has taken. This should take us to that turn to see the contours of the Sikh movement.

## II

The regional history of Punjab in general and of Sikh tradition in particular seems to be richest in the Indian subcontinent. The Punjab attracted the scholarly attention for a variety of reasons but also because of the rise, growth and survival of Sikh religion despite having been under the danger of being absorbed by Hinduism. If Kahn Singh Nabha had to assert in his polemical treatise *Hum Hindu Nahin* [We are not Hindus] in 1898 as an answer to a publication by a Sanatan Sikh, Thakur Das, entitled *Sikh Hindu Hain* (Sikhs are Hindus), Khushwant Singh in 1953 was still apprehensive of its survival beyond the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> Also being a 'religion of the book' from within the Indian tradition, it has been able to multiply books about itself whether produced by its followers or by others. A strong and sturdy body of knowledge about Sikh religion, history, polity and society has been produced in the last fifty years. Religion being an emotive issue this knowledge has not been free of controversies and contestation. Besides academic historians, social scientists, and litterateurs a large number of scientists, doctors, engineers, bureaucrats, retired army officials and others have entered the fray and enriched the knowledge on Sikhism. Yet another factor that has contributed to the vast built of literature on various facets of Punjabi life and Sikh religion is the strong Punjabi and Sikh diaspora especially in the west.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Khushwant Singh, *The Sikhs*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1953. He concluded his work with these alarming words: "If the present pace of amalgamation continues, there is little doubt that before the century has run its course Sikh religion will have become a branch of Hinduism and the Sikhs a part of the Hindu social system." p. 185.

<sup>45</sup> Very largely it is due to the presence of Punjabi Sikhs in North America, UK, Australia and New Zealand that western scholarship turned towards Sikh Studies. In 1976, a conference was held in Berkeley discussing 'the future of Sikh studies'. The result was the *Sikh Studies: Comparative Perspectives on a Changing Tradition* edited by Mark Juergensmeyer and others in 1979. That dramatically stimulated interest in the Sikh studies in the west. Meanwhile, Sikh militancy in Punjab and the Air-India crash gave further fillip to the Sikh studies in the west. The 1987 Toronto conference on the theme resulted in *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* edited by Joseph T O'Connell. The scholarly works of two students, namely, Harjot Oberoi and Pashaura Singh, of W. H. McLeod who taught in Canada from 1988 to 1992, created a controversy and brought McLeod under attack by a network of Sikh scholars in India and North America. *Advanced Studies in Sikhism* was published in 1989 as edited by Jasbir Singh Mann and Harbans Singh Saraon from Irvine in California by the Sikh Community of North America through the Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh. The second book in the series of this contestation, *Fundamental Issues in of Sikh Studies* (edited by Kharak Singh et al.) was directly published by the Institute of Sikh Studies in 1992, while the third *Recent Researches in Sikhism* edited by Jasbir Singh Mann and Kharak Singh in 1992. In 1993 Trilochan Singh published a lengthy critique of McLeod as Ernest Trumpp and W. H. McLeod as Scholars of Sikh History while the next year appeared a collective criticism of Pashaura Singh's book as *Planned Attack on Adi Sri Granth Sahib: Academics or Blasphemy* edited by Bachittar Singh Giani. A critique of Harjot Oberoi's *Construction of Religious Boundaries* appeared in 1995 as *Invasion of Religious Boundaries* as edited by Jasbir Singh Mann and others. Meanwhile, on the other side *Studying the Sikh: Issues fro North America* edited by John Stratton Hawley and Gurinder Singh Mann appeared in 1993 carrying papers read at the conference held at conference on Sikh studies at the Columbia University in 1889. For a comprehensive account of these developments see J. S. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi: Manohar, 1998, pp. 9-19. The latest scholarly collection taking stock of Sikh studies is Tony Ballantyne edited *Textures of the Sikh Past: New Historical Perspectives* (2007) which is the result of a symposium 'New Directions in Sikh and Punjab Studies' held at the University of Otago, New Zealand.

As the sociological and other empirical studies<sup>46</sup> have highlighted the presence of 'caste' and 'untouchability' among Sikhs, it is no-more possible to avoid or hide this 'embarrassing question' from the historical discourses as had been the case in the last 50 years' production of historical knowledge. W. H. McLeod, who has been engaged in the study of Sikh religion for half a century, recently admitted such a tendency:

To understand Sikh history and religion adequately, one must first grasp the true nature of Sikh society. It is here that caste becomes significant. To understand Sikh society, one must comprehend the nature of caste as it affects the Panth. An understanding of the future development of the Sikh religion makes an understanding of caste as practised by Sikhs absolutely imperative. Social scientists already recognize this, although some of their books or articles may skate round it or omit all mention completely. For those of us who are historians, it is likewise imperative. Without it our understanding of both the Panth and its religion must inevitably be flawed.<sup>47</sup>

As most of the literature on Sikh history and religion has failed to take account of dalits, John C. B. Webster's formulation on the 'dalit history approach' as a pioneer in the field is quite instructive. Ever since he wrote his book entitled *The Dalit Christians: A History*<sup>48</sup> in 1992 he has been deepening his thought on the concept and has recently come to see its validity for the Sikh history in an important article.<sup>49</sup> To him:

The Dalit history approach is based on two assumptions. The first is that of Dalit agency. In this case, Dalit Sikhs move to centre-stage to become the chief actors in and shapers of their own history; the historian will therefore focus upon them, their views, their struggles, their actions. The second is that a conflict model of society, with caste as not the only but the most important contradiction in Indian society, provides the most appropriate paradigm for understanding their history.<sup>50</sup>

There is no work on Sikh history and tradition in English which has been produced from the dalit history approach. Major historical works by W. H. McLeod, J. S. Grewal, Ganda Singh, Khushwant Singh, Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, Jagjit Singh, Indu Banga, Gurinder Singh Mann, Jeevan Deol, Arvindpal Singh Mandair and Louis Fenech reflect what Webster call the 'Sikh history approach'<sup>51</sup>. Only a few books available, not necessarily by the 'professional historians', written in Punjabi could

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<sup>46</sup> Surinder S Jodhka, 'Dissociation, Distancing and Autonomy: Caste and Untouchability in Rural Punjab' in Harish K Puri (ed), *Dalits in Regional Context*, Rawat, New Delhi, 2004; Paramjit Judge, 'Religion, Caste, and Communalism in Punjab', *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 51, No 2, 2002; Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables*, Ajanta: Delhi, 1988; Ethne K Marenco, *The Transformation of Sikh Society*, Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1976; Harish K Puri, 'Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 26, June 28-July 4, (2003): pp 2693-2701; Indera Pal Singh, 'Caste in a Sikh Village' in Harjinder Singh (ed), *Caste among Non-Hindus in India*, National Publishing House, Delhi, 1977; Rashpal Walia, 'The Problem of Untouchability among Sikhs in Punjab with Special Reference to Mazhabi Sikhs', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1993.

<sup>47</sup> W. H. McLeod, "Sikhs and Caste", Tony Ballantyne, ed., *Textures of the Sikh Past: New Historical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 106.

<sup>48</sup> Published by Delhi's ICPCCK. The second edition was out in 1994.

<sup>49</sup> John C. B. Webster, "The Dalit Sikhs : A History?", Tony Ballantyne, ed., *Textures of the Sikh Past: New Historical Perspectives*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 132-154.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 138. He rightly points out that the pioneer work on the Punjab employing the dalit history approach was Mark Juergensmeyer in his *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1982. Though the book deals primarily with the Dalit anti-untouchability 'Ad Dharm' movement and does not deal with dalit Sikhs but provides a potential model. His model seems to have been inspired Ronki Ram to probe the issue for the Sikhs in the recent past. See his articles "Limits of Untouchability, Dalit Assertion and Caste Violence in Punjab", in Harish K. Puri, ed., *Dalits in Regional Context*, Jaipur: Rawat, 2004, pp. 132-189; "The Dalit Sikhs", *Dalit International Newsletter*, Waterford USA, Vol. 9, No.3 October 2004; "Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.42, No.40, October 6-12, 2007, pp. 4066-74.

<sup>51</sup> Webster, op. cit., p. 133.

be seen as written from the 'Dalit Sikh approach'.<sup>52</sup> While denouncing the established histories as nothing but high-caste histories, S. L. Virdi emphasises the need of dalit history when he says:

India needs such a history that generates revolutionary consciousness for a social change as history plays very significant role. The society assumes such character and shape as moulded by its history. From this perspective dalit history can play an important role. The 'revolution' for Indian society has another name only in the 'dalit history'.<sup>53</sup>

While Shamsher Singh Ashok wrote his History of Mazhbis as commissioned by a dalit Sikh K. S. Neiyyer, settled in London,<sup>54</sup> Naranjan Arifi who was a dalit officer in a central government department wrote a bulky first volume of the 'History of Ranghretas' after a great deal of research. He gives us a comprehensive account of Ranghretas/Mazhbis joining the Sikh fold as early as during the period of the Sixth Guru, Hargobind (1606-1645). Arifi very diligently filters the dalit information from the Sikh writings available since the mid-eighteenth century. In this volume he brings very fascinating details about Ranghretas till mid-nineteenth century by giving them names and voices by highlighting their individual and collective participation in the growth of Khalsa. They had offered numerically critical support in the Guru Gobind Singh's battles. So much so that by the mid-eighteenth century when amidst sustained persecutions by the Mughals, the Sikhs organised themselves into five *dals* (warrior bands) one of these was composed entirely of Mazhabi/Ranghreta *dal* under the command of Bir Singh Ranghreta who had a force of 1300-horsemen. The 'dalit reinterpretation' of the eighteenth century argues in detail how the rising power of Bir Singh Ranghreta who had become an influential commander was put a stop to by the treachery of the Jatt commanders. According to Naranjan Arfi the Sikhs had succeeded in establishing their independence by early 1760s and some of the commanders aspired for their individual rules in different parts, which Bir Singh was opposed to. Bir Singh insisted following Guru's injunction that the power shall lie in the Panth (the Khalsa collectivity). Charat Singh, father of Ranjit Singh and Baba Aala Singh, founder of Patiala State, hatched a conspiracy to invite Bir Singh from Peshawar to Amritsar, treacherously disarmed Bir Singh's soldiers that they should not pay obeisance at the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) with arms and then slaughtering them inside the sacred place in batches of five in which they were advised to move. They also wounded Bir Singh in such a way that taken as dead, his body was put in a wooden box and thrown into river Beas.<sup>55</sup> Thereafter Mazhabis were not allowed any commanding position but their military prowess was used under different *Misals*<sup>56</sup> as subordinates.

Though substantially diminished in their power yet the dalit Sikhs continued as soldiers and fighters. They were still in such a position during Ranjit Singh's rule to get constructed '*Mazhbi Singhan da Bunga*'<sup>57</sup> quite close to '*Ramgarhia Bunga*', near 'Dukh Bhanjan Beri' in Harimandir Sahib (Golden

<sup>52</sup> Some of these are: Giani Udham Singh, *Guru ka Beta: Itihas Shahid Baba Jeevan Singh*, Amritsar: Jeevan Lehar, 1968; Hari Singh Nirbhay, *Mazhabi Sikhian di Jaddo-jahad*, Amritsar: Baba Jeevan Singh Mazhabi Dal, 1975; Shamsher Singh Ashok, *Mazhabi Sikhian da Itihas* (History of Mazhbi Sikhs), Amritsar, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. 2001; Naranjan Arifi's *Ranghretian da Itihas (Adi kal ton 1850 tak)*, Part I, Amritsar: Literature House 1993. For general history of dalits of Punjab in the twentieth century see Dr S. L. Virdi, *Punjab da Dalit Itihas* (1901 ton 2000) [Dalit History of Punjab], Phagwara: Dalit Sahit Academy, Punjab, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> *Punjab da Dalit Itihas*, pp. xxxi-xxxii (my translation)

<sup>54</sup> *Infra*, note 16

<sup>55</sup> *Ranghretian da Itihas (Adi kal ton 1850 tak)*, Part I, Amritsar: Literature House, 1993, pp. 432-458.

<sup>56</sup> This seems to have been derived from the Arabic word 'Misal' which means alike or equal. J. D. Cunningham (1812-1851) explains further, "Notwithstanding this usual derivation of the term, it may be remembered that the Arabic term 'Musluhut' means armed men and warlike people. 'Misal', moreover, means in India, a file of papers, or indeed anything serried or placed in ranks." See his *History of the Sikhs*, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1997 (first published in 1849), p. 96 & n. 1. The Sikh warrior bands after the first five '*Khalsa Dals*' came to be reorganised into twelve confederacies by mid-eighteenth century. For a descriptive account of these '*misals*' see Sohan Singh Seetal, *The Sikh Misals and the Punjab*, Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop, 1981.

<sup>57</sup> Bunga was a lodging place.

Temple) Complex in 1826 by raising twenty-one thousand rupees. Later on it was demolished and incorporated in the ‘Guru Ramdas Langar’ building. Mazhbis had their *bunga* at Taran Taran Darbar Sahib as well.<sup>58</sup> The kind of status and prestige the dalits came to raise for themselves in the tumultuous times of the eighteenth century was quite enviable for any upper-caste Sikhs. Hence, concerted efforts were made to reduce them after the establishment of Ranjit Singh’s rule. Thereafter, one sees a gradual hold of brahmanical Sanatan Sikhs over religious institutions of Sikhs that they had come to purge the egalitarian traditions of gurus from the Sikh religion by the last quarter of the nineteenth century in such a way that what started emerging as printed record then, thanks to the just emerged press, was taken for the entire history of Sikhs which, in fact, had clearly been an ‘invented tradition’.<sup>59</sup>

If the Sikh tradition started failing the dalits’ warrior skills, they found some opportunities in the British imperial services. The 1857 Revolt offered them an opportunity to be enrolled in great number in the British Indian Army and the Mazhabis formed the First Pioneer Sikh Regiment. And soon there were three such ‘pioneer units’ and they were also deployed in China, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. Despite the generally favourable commentary on their quality, low-caste units were gradually reduced in size and number between 1870 and 1914-18. Besides the fact of relatively peace times, “they were the unwilling victims of the theory of the “martial races”<sup>60</sup> which had become a dominant discourse in the British administrative circles. They came to be recruited once again heavily during World War I but were later ‘retrenched’ and gradually reduced in numbers until in 1932 the last unit was disbanded. The greater intensity and scale of combat in World War II had the effect of drawing even larger number of dalits into the conflict. Over 10,000 Mahars and 33,000 Mazhbi and Ramdasia Sikhs were taken into the combatant forces. On the basis of these figures Stephen Cohen makes an interesting inference that “High intensity demands greater number, and lower castes eventually get an opportunity to serve in the military which is denied to them during peacetime.”<sup>61</sup> They continued to be treated as underdogs even in their units where officers generally came from the upper-castes breaking the confidence of dalits. In his testimony, a Mazhbi Sikh MP put the caste position in perspective in 1964:

We are discriminated against both in and out of the army; there are no Mazhabi generals or even colonels. ... I would not want the Mazhabi Sikh unit to be broken up, or the Jats mixed in with us or we with the Jats. It is good to have separate units of Scheduled Caste Sikhs together, this way we can show our martial qualities to the Jats and to the rest even better.<sup>62</sup>

What had happened to that Sikhism that had provided a dignified space to the lower castes and especially to the dalit communities that the dalit MP had to lament their treatment by the dominant Sikh castes? What had happened was the ‘caste’ and ‘untouchability’ had come to afflict the Sikhs, and afflict them badly in the nineteenth-twentieth centuries. There was a slow rise of Sanatan Sikhism<sup>63</sup>, a fine admixture of Brahmanism and Sikhism, in the early nineteenth century which by

<sup>58</sup> Shamsher Singh Ashok, *Mazhabi Sikhian da Itihas* (History of Mazhabi Sikhs), Amritsar, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed. 2001, passim but for Bunga’s information page 171; for detailed accounts see Naranjan Arifi, *op.cit.*, pages 429-65.

<sup>59</sup> This becomes clear from the controversy on the removal of idols from the Golden Temple in 1905. While the Tat Khalsa under the Singh Sabha movement was trying to save Sikhism from this brahmanical onslaught and gradual control of the key Sikh institutions—the removal of idols happened to be a major step—the Arya Smajists launched a sustained attack on Sikh reformers in the press especially in *The Tribune* that was under their control. For interesting details see Amarjit Kaur Basra, “The Punjab Press and the Golden Temple Controversy (1905): An Issue of Sikh Identity”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 24, No. 4/6(April-June 1996), pp. 41-61.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen P Cohen, “The Untouchable Soldier: Caste, Politics, and the Indian Army”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 28, 3, 1969, p. 456.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 458.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.* p. 463.

<sup>63</sup> In Harjot Oberoi’s opinion “The social universe of Sanatan Sikhism can best be summed up under the Brahmanical paradigm of varnasmadharma. According to this well-known model there are four varnas or castes

the close of the century had assumed a vicious form. This is best reflected in an authoritative manual *Khalsa Dharam Sastar* (1914) of Sanatan Sikhism as quoted below:

From Braman to Nai, including Chhippe and Jhivara, all those belong to the fourfold caste system are not allowed to partake food cooked or touched by outcastes. This implies that just as the four Hindu castes can be polluted by the untouchables, similarly in the Sikh Khalsa religion all persons belonging to the four castes can be polluted too. Those Sikhs who belong to the untouchable groups (like the Mazhabi, Rahita and Ramdasias Sikhs) constitute a separate caste. These untouchable castes do not have the right to proceed beyond the fourth step in Sri Amritsar [at the Golden Temple]. Members of the high castes should take care not to mix with persons belonging to the lower castes. If someone seeks to do so he forfeits his claim of belonging to the high castes.<sup>64</sup>

But such attitudes had already started showing reverse returns. I have some accounts from the Sikh/Akali papers in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Sikh Dalits started moving either to Arya Samaj or to Christianity forcing the Sikh reformers to step up efforts to stem the tide. Singh Sabhas had initiated the process and yet the casteist attitudes were so deep-seated to make any difference. The Sikh Press started pushing the cause forcefully. In the editorial entitled “*Isaai hon de Kāran*” [Reasons for becoming Christian] of *Punjab Darpan* of 10<sup>th</sup> October 1917, the Sikhs were warned to mend their ways:

In the last eight months 1600 hundred Hindus have become Christians... For this mission, the pastors have relinquished professorships in the Mission colleges as they have also abandoned the comforts of Churches. Compare this with the Sikh community; there are thousands of those baptized Sikhs rendering Gurbani with musical instruments that are called Mazhbis, Ramdasias or Bishth. But high caste Sikhs always oppress these who simply labour for their sustenance... Because these illiterate Sikhs hate them more than they hate Muslims, it is necessary to inspire the Sikh Sardars, Numberdars and Zaildars in the villages to embrace their brethren-in-faith rather than making them the enemies of their religion by rebuking them all the times.<sup>65</sup>

The growing anxiety about the virus of untouchability among the educated Sikhs is reflected in most of the community oriented newspapers and magazines. One Sewa Singh BA wrote a letter to *Khalsa* in 1923 under the title ‘One most necessary Duty: for the attention of Chief Khalsa Diwan’ in which he drew attention towards the problem of ‘untouchability’.<sup>66</sup> While referring to Arya Samaj he urged the Diwan to shoulder ‘the improvement of untouchable castes’. We get a graphic picture of the concern in Jagat Singh Pardesi’s news filed from Khashab in Shahpur district (West Punjab). He writes:

Rahitias, Mazhabis and Ramdasias in northern Sargodha have become pray to our practicing untouchability. The rest are also not allowed to drink water from wells...it is strange that the Sikhs allow Muslims to draw water from the wells but these *amritdhari* Sikhs with 5 Ks are thrown out. Moving from village to village the writer on asking the Sikh brothers the reason of their hatred answered that (i) their ancestors smoke *bukkas* (tobacco pipes) and ate carrion. (ii) These people carry our garbage on their heads as also they carry away the dead animals. That’s why we hate them...<sup>67</sup>

The *Khalsa* of 24<sup>th</sup> June 1923 published a report on a *divan* (assembly) about *shudhi* (purification) at Jallianwala bagh held on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1923 which was devoted only to discuss the agenda of removal of untouchability. Teja Singh Samundari presided over the session. The report says:

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and four asramas or stages of human life. Each individual is required to abide by the standards of his respective varna and asrama, as codified in customary treatises. Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*, Oxford, OUP, 1994, pp. 105-6.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 106. Nai is a barber, Chhippa is a dyer or tailor while Jhivar is water-carrier.

<sup>65</sup> *Punjab Darpan*, 10 October 1917. (my translation)

<sup>66</sup> *Khalsa*, 21 Feb 1923.

<sup>67</sup> *Khalsa* # 96, 2 May 1923. Rahitias were the Sikhs coming from untouchable castes but who strictly followed the Sikh code of conduct called ‘*rahit*’ issued by the *Panth* from time to time. (my translation)

Sardar Dalip Singh, the Secretary of Divan, while introducing the purpose of the divan said that even now Guru Gobind Singh's baptised Sikhs who are called Ramdasias, Mazhbis and Chuharas, are thrown out of *langars* (community kitchen) and their Prasad is not accepted in the *gurdwaras*. That's why today's divan is organised to find out remedy of this malaise....

Later on Bhai Mehtab Singh 'Bir' lamented how due to our indifference hundreds of our so-called untouchable brothers are being swallowed by other religions. He told that twenty-five Rahitias became Aryas in 1903 and after that 10,000 Rahitias joined the Arya Samaj.<sup>68</sup>

The *Khalsa* of 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1923 reported 'A Divan in Gurdaspur' held on 27<sup>th</sup> June of the same year when thousands of Mazhbis had marched as led by Pastor Gordon Sahib to a big ground to listen to the Christian discourses. Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) had despatched its own band of missionaries to the site to counter the Christians. Interestingly one high caste Sikh, Sardar Khazan Singh was facilitating the Mazhbi Sikhs towards conversion. On observing the Christian enthusiasm, the SGPC monitors sent an SOS telegram to the headquarters. Accordingly Mehtab Singh, Teja Singh, Bhag Singh, Secretary SGPC, and Bhai Labh Singh, Granthi Darbar Sahib swooped on the Christian conference. They forced time to speak from the organisers and promised the assembled Mazhbis to remove their objections. The next day Gurmukh Singh Musafir extracted time to address the gathering but the audience soon started leaving the venue. The report concludes with a lament:

Dear Khalsaji, this is the reason of Mazhbis' moving to Christianity. The untouchability that has drowned Hinduism for such a result and you also don't allow your brothers to touch your wells. Let us learn a lesson and not allow them to be devoured by these vultures...If you want freedom for yourself, free the others.<sup>69</sup>

The Sikhs by that time got so lost in the struggle to liberate gurdwaras that the agenda to liberating the minds from brahminical attitudes was set aside. Moreover, the minds were not ready to accept social equality in reality, otherwise who would work for them for free. No wonder, the helpless situation on this count made Bhai Pratap Singh, the Head Granthi of Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) to write a treatise on the issue.<sup>70</sup> Besides looking into the theological and practical high points against untouchability in the Sikh tradition, Giani summarises the efforts of SGPC for the removal of untouchability between 1921 and 1933.

What becomes clear is that the efforts to remove untouchability by the Sikh reformers were not just the result of inner calls. A number of factors resulting from objective conditions were making them think if they had to survive as respectable option for the much harangued Dalits. One of these factors was Dr Ambedkar's powerful moves to see a dignified life for Dalits. In 1936, when Dr Ambedkar was trying to see the religious alternative for Dalits of India in Sikhism, the Akali papers became more sensitive to the issue. Sardar Amar Singh, Secretary, Shri Guru Singh Sabha Shillong (Assam) wrote two articles on 'The Need of Sikhi Preaching among the Untouchables and Some Suggestions for that' in the *Khalsa Sewak* of 17<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1936.<sup>71</sup> Master Mota Singh wrote a scathing article 'Khalsa Brotherhood and Gurdwara Elections: Existence of Caste as the bigger cause of Community's Death'. On the scenes of elections he wrote rather with anger:

There was vanity, jealousy and ego clashes all around. Vote-seeking agents did not have anything to sell except the commodity of caste. Caste names as Saini, Jutt, Rore (for Aroras), Tarkhan (carpenter),

<sup>68</sup> *Khalsa* # 96, 24 June 1923. (my translation)

<sup>69</sup> *Khalsa* # 96, 2 July 1923. (my translation and emphasis)

<sup>70</sup> Bhai Pratap Singh, *Jaat Paat te Chhut-Chhaat sambandhi Gurmata Sidhant* [Gurus' Principles about Caste System and Untouchability], Amritsar: SGPC, 1933.

<sup>71</sup> *Khalsa Sewak*, 17 and 22 March 1936.

Chamar etc were being used quite derogatorily. How can you expect a social and community reform from Shrimoni Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee whose recruitment is on the caste lines?<sup>72</sup>

In the editorial of *Khalsa Sewak* of 7<sup>th</sup> March 1936, it is mentioned that it is known that Dr. Baba Sahib Ambedkar had been writing letters to SGPC but the Committee was not replying with any satisfaction. It wrote with sarcasm that “With all this the Sikhs are so indifferent that they would not lag behind boasting of their reforms on paper, it is just a show, but in practice not a single step forward has been made.”<sup>73</sup> The charge was not without substance. All the big talks were just being used for the vested interests of the powerful power brokers. The *Khalsa Sewak* reported in its 26 March 1936 edition that a conference was organised at village Bham in Gurdaspur district under the aegis of Baba Jeeon Singh Dal where SGPC members had reached and seventy people were baptised. Among several lectures against untouchability, Bhai Teja Singh Akarpuri also spoke forcefully. After the conference, a dalit boy was asked to serve a glass of milk to Teja Singh. He got very angry and said that “I have been insulted for being served milk in Chuhra’s glass.” The fellow retorted: “You say something and do something else.” Teja Singh immediately fled the scene.<sup>74</sup>

The discussion in this section fairly highlights the gravity of the situation among Sikhs as far as the question of untouchability is concerned and even in the moderating twentieth century. It has been a structural malaise whether determined by economy or society; the power relations defined the relations of domination and subjugation. The command over resources had been so dear to the high castes and upper classes that they did not want to give any relaxation to the people at their mercy. Demoralising the Dalits by constant insults, humiliations and deprivation ensured almost free labour supply. The Sikh mind was not ready for the egalitarianism to act as an agent of change to thwart its own class interests. So, in the face of mounting pressures in the first half of the twentieth century, half-hearted measures at the level of rhetoric were shown to be taken but in reality the situation remained as grim for Dalits as it was in the nineteenth century.

As ‘caste’ and its resultant inhuman practice ‘untouchability’ have been the cardinal principle of Brahmanical ideology, and the central pillar of social order any individual, organisation or ideology, questioning it was always seen as enemy and all efforts were made to finish the challenge. Barstow put it pithily:

Hinduism, to its wonderfully assimilative character, had thus reabsorbed a good part of Sikhism, as it had absorbed Buddhism before it, notwithstanding that much of these religions is opposed to caste and the supremacy of the Brahmins.<sup>75</sup>

Bhagat Lakshman Singh (1863-1944), a Sikh scholar, who was the newly convert to Sikhism believed that the Sikh creed was ‘Hinduised’ after the establishment of Sikh rule. The high caste Hindus had made advances for reconciliation with the new power and a compromise was effected by which the Sikhs abandoned their ‘revolutionary programme’. Sikhism began to lose its distinct identity.<sup>76</sup> He especially talks of the Brahmins’ ‘peculiar aptitude for adapting themselves to changed conditions’. In the days of Buddhism they had become its Bhikshus (Buddhist monks) only to leave when Buddhism declined.

In more recent times in our own province, when political power passed into the hands of the Sikhs, they did not find it difficult to discard their temples and idols, their *yagyopavit* and other paraphernalia,

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<sup>72</sup> *Khalsa Sewak*, 3 March 1936. (my translation)

<sup>73</sup> *Khalsa Sewak*, 7 March 1936. (my translation)

<sup>74</sup> *Khalsa Sewak*, 26 March 1936. (my translation)

<sup>75</sup> Barstow, *The Sikhs*, 1928, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> J. S. Grewal, *Contesting Interpretations of the Sikh Tradition*, Delhi: Manohar, 1998, p.71.

wore *Keshas* [uncut hair] and *dastārs* (turbans) and became custodians of Sikh places of worship and interpreters of Sikh scriptures.<sup>77</sup>

Khushwant Singh is also objective on this central question:

Sikhism did not succeed in breaking the caste system.... The untouchable converted to Sikhism remained an outcaste for purposes of matrimonial alliances... and Sikhs of higher castes refused to eat with untouchable Sikhs and in villages separate wells were provided for them. Within a hundred years of Guru Gobind Singh's death, ritual in Sikh gurdwaras was almost like that in Hindu temples, and more often than not was presided over by priests who were usually Hindu rather than Sikh. Sikhs began to wear caste marks; Sikh weddings and funerals followed Hindu patterns; ashes of the dead were carried to the Ganges and offerings were made to ancestors.<sup>78</sup>

The dalit voices are more clear and vociferous about 'caste' and 'untouchability' in Sikhism. Pandit Bakshi Ram who was born in a *Balmiki* family towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century recalls in his autobiography how untouchability was rampant and how because of this the dalits could neither seek education nor were acceptable for a public service. It was only on his father's approaching the Lahore court that schools were opened for dalits in 1905. He narrates two incidents from his village how the dalit Sikhs were treated by the dominant Jatt Sikhs. Once, a Rahitia (dalit Sikh) boy on drawing water from the school well was beaten up by the Jatt boys. Another time, when the Rahitia marriage party used the village pond for cleaning their backs in the morning they were thoroughly beaten up by the Jatts.<sup>79</sup> "Untouchability has become deep-rooted in the Jatt-dominated villages. Isn't practicing caste and untouchability against *gurmat* (Gurus' message)? In fact, the Guru says "Khalsa is my image as I reside in the Khalsa".<sup>80</sup> Saying that how after Independence the Jatts have come to completely control the politics and economy in Punjab and oppose the dalits' demands he argues:

If Jatt Sikhs demand higher prices for their produce don't the labourers have right to demand higher wages? And if the latter struggle for their right the former boycott them. Isn't it a height of injustice? If Akalis have their *morchas* (pickets) for their demands why can't dalits exercise their right to raise their demands?<sup>81</sup>

Balbir Madhopuri "gives a graphic account of the situation of the Dalit community living on the periphery of the village called 'Chamarali' vis-à-vis the interaction with the upper caste 'Jatt' community. The scene of the distribution of 'Prashad' in the Gurdwara made a mockery of all the subtle teachings and the tall claims of the practice of equality among the Sikhs in a Punjab village. The author has exactly reproduced the piercing degrading remarks laced with un-uttered abuses hurled at the low caste children by the Sikh priest."<sup>82</sup>

Prem Gorkhi, Punjabi short-story writer, who graduated from a day-labourer to peon to a 'respectable journalist', has bitter experiences. He says:

I have seen that if Punjabi writers are intimate friends they also carry deep casteist ideas within... I have close relations from high to the low...they respect as well...I go to everyone's house, eat and sleep there...but over taking sides on any vital issue, the cobra within would spread its fangs.... There is no drastic change in the caste situation from what it was a hundred year ago...only the ways of untouchability have changed. Today if you eat in the same plate, you also kill the same person—and

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<sup>77</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 192.

<sup>78</sup> *The Sikhs*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>79</sup> *Mera Jeevan Sangarsh*, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96. (my translation)

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99. (my translation)

<sup>82</sup> Baal Updesh Anand, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

whom you call dalit today is not a century-old thoughtless, egoless, without identity. He has reached a stage to decide for himself what is of good to him.<sup>83</sup>

Gurnam Aqida, Punjabi writer, is forthright about the hegemony of Jatts though he says it with pun:

Jatts control the organisations and institutions which decide about the fate of society. They dominate the bureaucracy. They have replaced the traditional minstrels, the *Mirasīs*, in the field of singing; the traditional thieves, the *Sabnis*; the Jatts have replaced even the famous woman brigand Phoolan Devi in pillages. The Jatts are responsible for dalitism in villages, they are the police officers, professors and principles and even the ruling politicians. So much so, that a crime committed by them becomes an entertainment.<sup>84</sup>

Hazara Ram Bodhi, former General Secretary of Punjab Unit of Republican Party of India and editor of *Bhim Patrika*, says

Caste discrimination in Punjab is of dangerous nature. While in other provinces, dalits face physical torture but here torment is psychological. A normal person is reduced to a pigmy because of caste. Psychological oppression is unbearable.... 'Caste' is so important in Sikhism that there are caste-based gurdwaras. Nihangs are different, Ravidasias, Mazhbis and Julaha (weavers) Sikhs are different; the question of inter-marriages in Sikhism does not arise. The minds are full of differences. Even when the sapling of *Sikhi* [Sikh religion] was watered by dalit perspiration, they had to carry their own utensils to the gurdwara *langar* earlier. And if by mistake a dalit would eat in gurdwara utensils, they were purified in fire. Now it is over. But in several gurdwaras dalits cannot cook.<sup>85</sup>

### III

If Sikhism, which was the finest religious force and movement with ideas of emancipation for the downtrodden especially for the outcaste untouchables after Buddhism, was failing in its mission what alternative courses were open to dalits of Punjab? Finding solutions within the religious paradigm, one course that was tried with great success was the Ad Dharam movement in 1920s. Asserting that dalits and adivasis were the original inhabitants of the subcontinent, it drew its inspiration from Saint Valmiki, Ravidas, Kabir and Namdev. The movement aimed at securing a respectable place for dalits through cultural transformation, spiritual regeneration and political assertion, rather than seeking patronage from above. Its founder, Mangoo Ram Mugowalia's appeal that the Dalits were the real inhabitants of this land made an enormous psychological impact on the untouchables of Punjab. The appeal inspired them to come out of their slumber and fight for their freedom and liberty. It laid stress on distinct Dalit identity independent of Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians. Within a short time it became a Dalit mass struggle for their separate Dalit identity. In the 1931 Census, 418,789 dalits recorded themselves as Ad Dharmis. Though after the Independence it slowly petered down but its success lies in the fact that those who continued identifying themselves as Ad Dharmis have made far greater progress in all fields as compared to those dalits who continued following the established religions including Sikhism.<sup>86</sup> The non-religious

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<sup>83</sup> Prem Gorkhi, "Dhukhdi Dhooni Pharolani Payee" [Searching from Smoldering Ambers] written as a letter to the editor, Prem Prakash, published in the 'Caste-Community special Issue' of *Lakeer* (a literary quarterly), # 52, Jan-March 1995, pp. 23-29. (my translation)

<sup>84</sup> *Kakh Kande*, pp. 55-56. (my translation)

<sup>85</sup> "Peedat Manukh Dalit hai" (the Oppressed humans are Dalits): an Interview with Hazara Ram Bodhi by Sara in 'Dalit Consciousness-Thinking special Issue' of *Sarokar* (Quarterly of Punjabi language, Literature and Culture), # 19 (July-Sep 2004), p. 77. (my translation)

<sup>86</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer in his *Religion as Social Vision: The Movement against Untouchability in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Punjab*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1982, reissued in India as *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of Untouchables*, Ajanta: Delhi, 1988; Ronki Ram, "Untouchability, Dalit Consciousness, and the Ad Dharm Movement in Punjab", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 38, 3, 2004, pp. 323-49; "Untouchability in

course open to the emancipation was a socialist revolution. The communists had a few successful movements in Punjab since 1920s but never addressed the dalit question explicitly. The only exception happens to be young revolutionary Bhagat Singh who wrote a lengthy article “*Achhut da Sawal*” [The Question of Untouchability] in 1928 when he was 20 years’ old. Pointing out at the current competition between different religions to pull the untouchable in their respective folds for just political ends and vested interests, he gives a clarion call to dalits to unite:

We clearly say! ‘Rise’. O real servants and brothers- otherwise called untouchable, Rise. See, your history. You were the real army of Guru Gobind Singh. Shivaji became unforgotten because of you. Your sacrifices are written in golden letters... You stand on your feet by organising yourself and challenge the entire social set-up. Then see, who would deny your rights. Don’t become others’ fodder and don’t look up to others... You are the root of the country, the real power. Rise! O sleeping lions; start rebellion or social revolution.<sup>87</sup>

But we hardly see Bhagat Singh’s approach followed after him. Assuming that the end of class rule would automatically resolve the cultural issues, the communists failed to see the significance and relevance of caste and untouchability. Even the best dalit poets and activists in the Naxalite movements had to undergo the casteist insults as we found in the pages above.

It is beyond doubt that Sikhism emerged as an emancipator for the lowest of the low. Nanak, the first Guru, was clear on this as he says:

*Neechan andar neech jati, Neechi hun ati neech  
Nanak tin ke sang sath, Vadian siyon kya rees  
Jitbe neech sanmalian, Titbe nadr teri bakhshish*

(I am the lowest of the low castes; low, absolutely low;  
I am with the lowest in companionship, not with the so-called high.  
Blessing of God is where the lowly are cared for.)<sup>88</sup>

The same spirit was maintained by his successors and we have seen above how dalits came to play an important role in Guru Gobind Singh’s battles and throughout the eighteenth century till they came to be once again subjugated and excluded economically, socially, politically and even religiously in the nineteenth century. Sikh religion carried a great promise and succeeded in igniting dalits’ imaginations and aspirations in practice but with the rise of Jatts as political and economic power, the powerful emancipatory message of the gurus have come to be drowned, and it looks, beyond recovery as far as dalits are concerned. What dalits of Punjab gained in religion, socially lost it in the long run because of denial of their participation in the economic power by the dominant castes. But despite this setback with diminishing returns in the last hundred-fifty years, the Sikh dalits have not ceased to entertain hope in the religion. As slowly they improve their life conditions they are ready to reclaim their lost past, the past when they enjoyed social equality and dignified space in the religious institutions. This aspiration is best voiced by Naranjan Arifi, the dalit Sikh historian:

Only those people can construct their histories who remember their history. In other words, those who forget their history cannot create history. It is rightly said; if you want to kill a people destroy their history.

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India with a Difference: Ad Dharam, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab”, *Asian Survey*, 44, 6, pp. 895-912.

<sup>87</sup> This article was published in the June 1928 issue of *Kirti* under the pen-name of ‘*Vidrohi*’ [the Rebel]. See Jagmohan Singh, ed., *Shahid Bhagat Singh ate uhna de Sathian dian Likhtān* [Writings of Bhagat Singh and his Comrades], Ludhiana: Chetna Parkashan, (pp. 217-221) 221. (my translation)

<sup>88</sup> As cited in Harish K Puri, ‘Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 38, No. 26, June 28-July 4, (2003): p. 2694

This is what has been done to Ranghretas... The two-volume work is intended to raise the psychological strength and self-respect among all the inheritors of Sikhism.<sup>89</sup>



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<sup>89</sup> *Ranghretian da Itihas (Adi kal ton 1850 tak)*, Part I, Amritsar: Literature House 1993, pp. 4 & 11