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## The Scheduled Castes in the Sikh Community – A Historical Perspective

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East Punjab is a Sikh majority state. After its re-organisation in 1966, (when the Hindi speaking areas were separated to constitute the new state of Haryana and some of the hill areas were transferred to Himachal Pradesh), the religious composition of the state was radically altered. The Sikhs constituted 63 per cent of the state's population at present. Their share in the rural population is higher; about 72 per cent. The Dalits or the Scheduled Castes have a high proportion of population in the state, 28.3 percent in 1991 which is projected to have increased to over 30 percent in 2001, the highest among the states in India. Over 80 per cent of them lived in the rural areas. Punjab's villages are, therefore, predominantly Sikh and Dalit. An understanding of the status of the Scheduled Castes in the Sikh community in particular, and the impact of Sikhism on dalits in Punjab in general, should help us in appreciation of the regional specificity of the status and conditions of life of the Scheduled Castes in the state as also the limitations of the book view of caste.

Sikhism appears to have exercised a significant liberating influence on the dalits (former untouchable castes) in the Punjab. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the religious institutions of *sangat* and *langar*, the absence of a caste-based priesthood, and the respect for manual labour, all these together aimed at creating a community in which distinctions of caste, creed and status were not relevant. When the Singh Sabha leadership chose to assert a separate and distinct identity to underline their boundary demarcation from the Hindus – *Hum Hindu Nahin* – at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the key differentiating factor they referred to, was rejection of *Varnashram* and purity-pollution syndrome which were central to Hinduism. The people of the untouchable castes in the region converted to Sikh religion in large numbers with a view to improve their status. Their gain was not small. However, there was a wide gap between the teachings and social practice.

The evolution of the Sikh community proceeded through a complex dynamics of interaction between the religious principles, the tribal cultural patterns of the dominant caste of Jats and their power interests. This resulted in the evolution of a Sikh caste hierarchy, distinct from and parallel to that of the Hindu caste system. It is important to understand the form in which casteism has continued to survive in the Sikh community and the reasons thereof. Two episodes may be of particular relevance in this context. Babasaheb Ambedkar had in 1936 seriously considered *en masse* conversion of the "Depressed Classes" to Sikhism with a view to liberate them from the shackles of "manuvadi" caste system. It remains to be adequately probed how and why the project came to be dropped and never pursued thereafter; persuading Ambedkar to lead his

people to convert to Buddhism instead, after a period of 20 years. The other relates to Sikh political struggle for constitutional recognition of the Sikh Scheduled Castes after the independence of India. This amounted to seeking the grant of the same constitutional status and special safeguards for the Sikh Scheduled Castes as were provided for the Hindu Scheduled Castes. This paper aims at exploring the trade off between the doctrinal principles of Sikh religion and the ruling social and political interests in the context of the changes in society and economy of Punjab.

## I

### Caste as Colonial Construction

After the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, when the British administrators and anthropologists started looking closely at the social hierarchy in the province they discovered that the Punjab represented “a notable exception” to the caste system in India. It appeared that the continual influx of foreign people of diverse stocks made the people of this region extraordinarily mixed. Buddha Prakash depicted, in a way, the special quality of the region, when he described it as “The Socio-Cultural Panmixia of Punjab”. He also noticed that this region was “practically abandoned” by the orthodoxy (Brahmins), most of whom had quite early shifted to the Indo-Gangetic region (Buddha Prakash 1976:8). The British administrators noticed, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that, by religion, Punjab “is more Muhammedan than Hindu”, and that “Islam in the Punjab is as a rule, free from fanaticism”. In the western part of Punjab where there was a larger concentration of Muslims and the society was organised on tribal basis, it was found that “caste hardly exists”. Part of the reason for such a characteristic of Muslim social life in the region was the Sufi influence which was brought from Persia by “the early Sultans of Ghor” (Imperial Gazetteer of India -1, 1908: 48-50). Historians noticed a significant mobilisation among the artisan castes/classes during the period of Turkish rule. The teachings of the Bhakti poets, particularly the ridicule of the Brahmin by Kabir and Ravidas, were perhaps as much an evidence of a challenge to the structure of social deference, as a reflection of a shifting structure of social hierarchy. However, in the central Punjab, broadly the area of present Punjab, it was the emergence of Sikh Panth which was believed to have made a definitive influence with respect to caste. Arnold Toynbee took note of evidence that the Hindu society had, by the time of the Turkish invasions, started to break down under “the morbid social growth” of caste system, resulting in revolts of the proletariat led by Kabir and Nanak. According to J. S. Grewal, “Toynbee sees the rise of Sikhism, thus, as an act of secession on the part of the internal proletariat of the Hindu Society in its disintegrating stage” (Grewal 1972:141).

The rejection of the caste system by Guru Nanak, the first Guru of the Sikhs, appeared categorical. One of the widely quoted of his *sabads* is : *Fakar jati phakar nau, Sabhana jia ika chhau* Worthless is caste and worthless an exalted name; For all mankind there is but single refuge). Another composition goes as under:

*Neechan andar neech jati, Neechi hun ati neech*

*Nanak tin ke sang sath, Vadian siyon kya rees  
Jithe neech sanmalian, Tithe 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).

Guru Nanak's primary quest is for salvation; union with God. In front of God; caste is irrelevant. God bestows greatness irrespective of caste. One's association with one's caste or pride of caste is a positive hurdle. "There is no caste in next world". Apparently Guru Nanak's rejection of caste, as also his conception of equality, are in terms of religious criterion. As Grewal explained "Guru Nanak does not conceive of equality in social and economic terms". However, its social implications were evident. "Just as every human being was equal before God so every individual who accepted the path of Guru Nanak was equal before the Guru and all his followers were equal before one another" (ibid.: 8).

A major impact was made through the institutions of *sangat* and *langar*, equality in religious gatherings, and in eating of food together. Another innovation was the practice of offering *karah prasad* by any one including the low caste, which is then deposited in a single dish, and out of which thereafter, a portion of the holy prasad is distributed to each one in the gathering. According to W. H. McLeod, this custom was observed as early as the time of the Fifth Guru. "This ensures that high castes consume food received in effect from the hands of the lower castes or even outcastes and that they do so from a common dish" (McLeod 1975:87). Further, at the time Guru Gobind Singh established the institution of Khalsa Brotherhood in 1699, a distinct ceremony of baptism ridiculed caste distinctions. Three of the first five initiates (*Panj Piare*) came from the lower castes. (though none from the outcastes) It was required that all the candidates drink from a common bowl of *amrit* (sweetened sacred water). All these rituals gave a striking blow to the notion of ritual purity, in contrast to the ritual rigidity in the Hindu religious places. Violations were not ruled out. But the holy injunctions and intentions were clear. There was neither a religious support for caste distinctions, nor for caste/birth based priesthood. As for wearing of arms, caste made no difference.

After the Tenth Guru, as per his command, there was to be no living guru. Hereafter the holy book containing the Word of the Gurus – Guru Granth Sahib – was to be followed as the Guru: "*ye whose hearts are pure, seek Him in the Word*". The Granth also included the compositions of a number of saints such as Sheikh Farid and the Bhagats, such as Kabir, a *julaha* (weaver) and Ravidas, a *chamar* (leather worker), both considered to be from the outcastes. Their compositions in fact appeared to be more radical in condemnation and rejection of caste. Their sayings as part of the holy scripture of the Sikh Panth appeared to have given to even the out-castes a welcome feeling of affinity with and honour in belonging to the new religion.

More fundamental, however, was the question of survival of caste and of what treatment the members of the lower castes or the out-castes entering the Sikh Panth

received at the hands of the dominant section of the people composing the Panth. All the ten Gurus came from the Khatri families and in the early years the Khatri were prominent among the followers and they exercised influence in the Panth. One who entered the Panth, entered with his caste intact. He was neither required nor expected to discard caste-belonging. All the Gurus married their sons and daughters in Khatri families. The followers were not expected to not follow the customary practice of endogamy. They were considered equal in several respects and yet were separate in kinship. There is no evidence, however that the outcastes in general ceased to be outcastes after joining the Panth.

The large scale entry of the Jats by the time of the Sixth Guru, tended to alter the caste equation in the Panth. The Jats constituted the rural elite who dominated the rural Punjab. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Jat constituency was preponderant among the constituent groups in the Panth (McLeod 1975: 10). The precise proportion became clear only when the British conducted the 1881 Census, which took stock of the caste variable. At that time it was found that among 1,706,909 persons who returned themselves as Sikh, about 64 percent were Jats. The proportion has, more or less remained in the range of 60-66 percent.

The Jats were the sturdy owners and cultivators of land. Their pride of manual labour – *dabb ke vaah , te rajj ke khah* (till the land deep and eat to your fill) – tended to erase the distinction between non-manual and manual labour which was a significant marker of the high-pure and the polluting-low in the Hindu caste system. In the varna order, the Jats (cultivator jati) were classed as Shudra. Guru Nanak, after his settlement at Kartarpur, following his Udasis (travels), is known to have taken to the cultivation of land. In his teachings, God came to be conceptualised as *Sacha Wud kirsan* (The True Great Cultivator) ( M-1, Sri,13(19). Guru Angad is believed to have earned his living by making ropes through twisting dry grass. *Kirat Karo* (do labour) was a part of the three fold holy injunction: *Kirat Karo, Vand Chhako, Naam Japo*. (do labour, eat by sharing and recite God's name).

Irfan Habib traced the Jats to the pastoral people first noticed in Punjab during 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and suggested that they may have been attracted to the Gurus because of their inherited egalitarian traditions. The Jats were known for their indifference to Brahminical social stratification and the Gurus “willingly raised Jats to positions of high authority in the New Panth”. “The inevitable result was development along lines dictated by the influence of Jat cultural patterns” (McLeod 1975:10). Whereas the Hindu Varna order was altered, it did not end caste distinction. More significantly, the change did not seem to effect the attitude and treatment towards the outcastes. The burden of tradition appeared to have been heavy among the rising number of the followers of Sikh faith. The Sikh Misals (militias) were organised along caste lines (Marengo 1977:38). We do not know the number of the outcastes who entered the Panth at that stage. It is clear, however, that their number was small until large-scale conversion to Sikhism which began towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

During the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839), Sikh Jats emerged as a major part of the nobility or the ruling class. In the overall population of his vast kingdom the Sikhs formed 6-7 per cent of the total population of his Kingdom. Muslims constituted about 70 per cent of the total, and the Hindus 24 per cent. But in the area of their greatest concentration, the districts of Lahore and Amritsar, the Sikhs formed around one third of the population (Grewal 1994:113) The Sikh Jats constituted a major part of Ranjit Singh's army; they constituted nearly 30 percent of the total nobility and they were the major recipients of jagirs. The largest share of religious grants went to the Sikhs (Sagar1993: 9). Social status was determined by the size of one's landholding. Ideologically, as Grewal noted, the doctrine of Guru-Panth had given place to that of Guru-Granth, in recognition of the prevalent social inequality. "Every Sikh was equal in the presence of the Granth Sahib, in the *sangat* and the *langar*, but in the life outside, social differences were legitimised" (Grewal 1994:118). The contemporary literature noticed a wide gap between the Sikh nobility and the common Sikhs. Slavery was prevalent in the society, and so was beggary. "Poor parents used to sell their children. At times grown up girls were sold" (Sagar 1993:95). Some of the contemporary British observers thought that the difference between the Sikh nobles and the Sikh poor was greater than similar differences elsewhere in India (Grewal 1994: 116). According to Giani Partap Singh, former Jathedar of Akal Takht, an uninhibited prevalence of caste hierarchy and discrimination against the untouchables was reflected in denial of access to villages, public wells and Gurdwaras (Pratap Singh 1933:146). Religious morality is not known to be safe in the context of power and wealth. "With the rise of Sikh power the Panth exhausted its dynamic character" (Sagar 1993 :118-119).

## II

### Creating Merit and Complexity

The "British colonial embrace", following the annexation of Punjab in 1849, had "an overriding significance" in the shaping of a new kind of Sikhism and in changing the social structure and caste relations in the Sikh community. Understanding the hatred of the men of substance for the new rulers, the administrators of "Punjab Tradition" went about constituting "natural leaders", who would be loyal to the British while holding sway over the peasantry. After the disbanding of the Sikh soldiery, confiscation of the estates of most prominent chiefs, "lowering and crushing" the priestly class of Sodhis and Bedis, and reconstitution of the Sikh aristocracy and the Army (by the end of 'mutiny', Sikhs constituted 28% of the army in Punjab) had paid dividends to the British during the Indian rebellion of 1857. The British administrators in Punjab understood that those who stood firmly loyal and served as "breakwaters of the storm" – "natural leaders" of the community – "deserved support and encouragement" (Narang 1998: 16-24, *passim*).

The course taken in pursuit of the objectives included not only a construction of Sikh as Singh but also a new construction of caste for a civil order based on privilege and exclusion. This construction flowed from the lessons the British chose to learn from the

Great Rebellion of 1857. Nicholas Dirks, in his recent work, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, 2002, indicates how through a colonial ethnology and “colonisation of the archive”, caste emerged as the dominant trope for the British in making sense of India and how India should be ruled. Caste had become a specifically colonial form of (that is substitute for) civil society that both justified and maintained an orientalist vision” (Dirks 2002: 60).

The re-organisation of the British Indian Army after 1858 was based on a theory of “martial races“. Dirks cites from the recruiting handbooks of the Indian Army that the ‘Martial Races’ were distinguished by loyalty, military fidelity and “manly independence”, in contrast to the other groups (races) which were effeminate, cowardly or inclined to crime (Dirks 2002:179). George MacMunn, who became a quartermaster general in the Indian army in 1920 noted in his book , *The Martial Races of India*, that it was only in India that “we speak of the martial races as a thing apart. . . . because the mass of the people have neither martial aptitude nor physical courage” (cited in ibid. 180). MacMunn presented the ruling idea among the British administrators, that the martial races were “largely the product of the original white (Aryan) races ”who invented the caste system, as a “protection” for the purity of races, ”against the devastating effect on morals and ethics”, through mixing of blood with aboriginal peoples. Like H.H. Risley earlier and Louis Dumont later, he stressed on the need to appreciate the caste rigidity as a primary source of keeping the Indian society intact against forces of disintegration for a thousand years under the Muslim invaders. Accordingly, caste was upheld as “a regulatory form of civil society appropriate for India under the circumstances of its limited political and social development” (ibid. 180).

The Sikhs were recognised as one of the most prominent martial races of India for the loyal support of a section of the elite in suppressing the rebellion. However, though Sikhism was noted to have drawn its adherents from all classes, it were the Jats who carried such weight in the formation of the (Sikh) national character” that the Sikh, “whatever his origin, may now be considered as practically identical with” the Punjabi Jat (Bingley 1985:112). It was recognised that in the matter of caste, the Sikh, like the orthodox Hindu, “holds aloof from the unclean classes, and even the Mazhabi Sikhs are excluded from the religious shrines and are left to the religious administration of Granthies of their own caste” (ibid. 72). Recognition of that regulatory form of hierarchy as crucial for ruling India, not tinkering with it, became a part of colonial wisdom and statecraft.

One of the significant instances of that regulatory principle as the basis of policy related to the development of the 9 canal colonies during 1885-1940, which involved allocation of over 4,000,000 acres of freshly developed virgin lands for ownership and cultivation. Given its commitment to the “sound principle” – “*not to upset the existing social and economic order*” – the British government ensured that “tenants, labourers and other landless men *should not, as a rule be chosen*”. The land was allocated to the “dominant castes”, as per the scale of already existing landholding status. (Imran Ali 1989:95, emphasis added) In the customary scheme, the outcastes such as Mazhabis (Churah Sikh), Balmikis and Ramdasias (Chamar Sikh)/ Ravidasias were not allowed to own land. In fact even the access to village commons – shamlaat land – could be shared

only among the hereditary landowning communities. “Consequently”, as Ambedkar told the Rajya Sabha in 1954, “the ‘untouchables’ or kamins were not entitled to build their houses in a ‘pucca’ form on the land on which they stayed. They are always afraid lest the zamindars of Punjab may, at any time, turn them out” (Moon :1997 Vol.15 : 927). Another instance, more significant in its import, was the Punjab Land Alienation Act 1901. According to this law (which was enacted primarily to save the indebted farmers from the rapacious money-lenders of the Khatri, Arora or Brahmin castes), the agricultural land could be purchased or acquired only by people belonging to the defined “agricultural castes”. All those belonging to the lower castes, not included among the “agricultural tribes”, were debarred from owning land even if a few had the means to purchase land for cultivation. (It was only after independence that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as the Law Minister, moved to repeal the Act in 1952 to remove the invidious disability). This extraordinary privileging of the Jat agriculturalist (80 percent of whom turned to Sikhism in central Punjab districts by 1921) contributed further to their caste domination and arrogance of privilege.

A difference was, on the other hand, made to the status of the Mazhabis by opening their recruitment in separate regiments of the Imperial Army. They were first raised as a 12000 men strong Mazhabi Corps for the seige of Delhi during the 1857 revolt against the British East India Company. In 1911 there were 1,626 Mazhabi Sikhs soldiers (in fact reduced to 16 percent of their number in 1857), out of a total of 10,866 Sikhs in the Imperial Army; the number of Jats being 6,626 (Marenco 1976; 260). Since the Mazhabis had earlier raised their status by discarding the traditional occupations like scavenging and sweeping, they were considered suitable enough for recruitment as soldiers. Apparently, the British considered the Mazhabis to be good soldiers. “They (Mazhabis) make capital soldiers”, it was noted, and that “some of our Pioneer regiments are wholly composed of Mazhabis” (Rose 1970:75). Bingley recorded, that “As a Mazhabi Sikh, despised as chuhra or sweeper, at once becomes valiant and valued soldier, and, imbued with the spirit of his martial faith, loses all memory of his former degrading calling” (Bingley :117). The latter part was, of course, an over statement. Mazhabis constituted exclusively Mazhabi regiments – the Sikh Pioneers 23, 32, and 34, later named ‘Sikh Light Infantry’ – separate and distinguished from the exclusively Jat – Sikh regiments. No Sikh Jat or any other caste man could be recruited in the Sikh Light Infantry. Conversely, in the Sikh regiments, as an old retired Brigadier explained to the author, “not even a Labana Sikh could be recruited to the Sikh Regiments”. The fear of pollution of the high castes could compromise their loyalty. However, association with the Army gave a boost to the Mazhabi’s sense of dignity, marking them out in distinction to the other untouchable castes.

It was, however, the collateral gain from some of the developmental measures undertaken in the Punjab which promoted noticeable change in the status and living conditions of the then untouchable castes people through occupational and social mobility. One of these was the large scale migration for labour during the development of the Canal Colonies prompting change from traditional occupations. After the Jats and the Arians, the Chuhras and Chamars constituted the largest groups of migrants to the Colonies. Among the total migrants to the Chenab Colony, for example, there were

41,944 Chuhras and 26,934 Chamars besides 1,502 Mazhabis (Marenco 1976:261). The migrations to the irrigation projects or Canal Colonies were based on corporate decisions through the caste panchayats, and became the basis for corporate caste mobility and a rise in status.

A small number of Mazhabis retired soldiers were also allotted land in two Mazhabi settlements. It was found that more than half of these allottees became landowners and tenants and another 13 per cent worked as landless labourers. In a few selected areas, such Mazhabis came to be classed among the 'agricultural castes'. Their recruitment as soldiers in the Imperial Army had already helped in their corporate rise in status, as against Hindus chuhras. It was believed that "for the most part, their advance in Sikh society was due to the special favour they held with the British, on whose side they had fought during the Sepoy Mutiny" (ibid: 285).

Among the immigrant Chamars, only 26% continued with their traditional occupation: others worked as field labourers, weavers, agricultural tenants and labourers. The number of "General Labour" required for work on the canals which was 371,940 in 1891 increased to 832,689 in 1901. Most of these came from the 'outcastes'. Findings of H.A. Rose show that "In 1901 the Chuhras and Chamars in Punjab were quite often working as general labourers rather than as sweepers or scavengers or leatherworkers" (ibid.: 254).

Establishment of these colonies and trade centres also contributed to development of new towns and mandis in adjoining towns. A section of the outcaste, largely chamars, moved to towns, working in mandis or in the municipal service. As against corporate mobility, individual members of the Untouchable Castes moved to cities and towns in pursuit of earning in cash, changed their occupations, became skilled workers or in some cases graduated to professional classes. In such cases the upward social mobility was a result of individual choice and initiative (ibid.:288-89). The introduction of the market economy and wages in cash for labour in the urban areas made a tremendous difference to their living and self perception. There were improvements in the provision for education and new opportunities for jobs to fill government service positions. The establishment of factories provided opportunities for skilled and unskilled labour, as also managerial jobs to the Untouchable Castes. The 1911 Census recorded 13,200 Chamar Sikhs and 2,150 Chuhra Sikhs working in traditional industries like leather manufacturing (Joginder Singh 1997:40). The social dynamics of economic change promoted both corporate and individual mobilisation, occupational change and change in the material conditions of caste relations in the Sikh community.

Ethne Marenco believed that the British rulers deplored the caste system in general and looked upon the socio-economic change as an instrument for weakening the edifice of caste oppression. One may agree that these changes, to use Andre Beteille's picturesque phrase, "loosened the soil in which caste had been rooted for centuries" (Beteille 2002). However, in the "contradictory bequest" of colonial rule in Punjab, the British underwriting of the centrality of caste in both continuity and change, had a far

reaching impact. One may refer to a note recorded by M.L. Middleton, ICS, in the Census 1911 Report for Punjab and Delhi (Vol.15, Part I, P.343):

These castes have been largely manufactured and almost entirely preserved as separate castes by the British Government. Our land records and official documents have added iron bands to the old rigidity of caste. We pigeonholed everyone by castes, and if we could not find a true caste for them, we labelled them with the name of the hereditary occupation. We deplore the caste system and its effects on social and economic problems, but we are largely responsible for the system we deplore” (Cited from Pratap Singh 1933 :178-179).

Perhaps, more far reaching in its impact was the underwriting of new conception of ‘merit’ attached to the class/caste owning large landed property, belonging to military (martial race) strata and ‘pride’ of unflinching loyalty to the British. In most of the pleas for privileges or share in representation made by the leading sections of the Sikh community to the British Government, the ‘merit’ was spelled out, broadly, as under:

We own a very large portion of land in the province and pay more than one third of the revenue of the state. The record of our military services is unparalleled in the history of British India. Our claim, therefore, for special consideration, is justified by our stake in the country, by our solidarity and sacrifices which we have made for the state.

(Chief Khalsa Diwan memorandum to the Simon Commission, cited from Narang 1998:119)

In another memorandum, reacting to the Communal Award, the Chief Khalsa Diwan argued that;

Establishment of Muslim majority may lead to transferring the large interests of the landowning classes to their tenants (*Kamins*) and others who have no stake and pay no direct taxes. (cited from Narang 1998: 125).

Such internalisation of special merit tended to underline the well deserved and natural social domination of the Jat Zamindar in their relations with the lower castes in their local village situations. It was this logic which the British appreciated and institutionalised.

Pradoxically, this conception of merit also involved a perversion of Sikhism. The early Sikhism was a faith of the poor and the low castes. It is the low caste and the outcaste who had a stake in a faith and fellowship that rejected distinctions of caste. “Sikh religion was an enterprise of raising up the lowly” (Hans 1986:6). Kabir’s *bani* in the Adi Granth ridiculed Brahmins knowledge as against that of the so-called low caste *julaha* .

*Tu bahman main kasi ka julaha, Bujhhu mera gyana*

*Tum tau jache bhupat raje, hari sion mor dhiana*

How could those who were concerned chiefly about power and closeness to the rulers (raje) for begging and material benefit expect to gain knowledge or be close to God ? (Ibid. 13-15).

### III

## Consolidation of Caste Power

When the Singh Sabha movement – the most powerful movement for reform in the Sikh community – was launched during the 1880s, one of the “classic” expositions was made by Bhai Kahn Singh in his “*Hum Hindu Nahin*” (we (Sikhs) are not Hindus). One of the major arguments, as referred to above, was the total rejection of caste in Sikh religion. But that was explained, “with references from the Sikh religious-books “. Just about the time of publication of that book, one of the most prominent ideologues of the Lahore Singh Sabha was Giani Ditt Singh. Ditt Singh, came from an untouchable caste and had become a baptised Sikh, changing his name from Ditt Ram to Ditt Singh. He was influenced by the Arya Samaj which had launched a vigorous movement for the end of untouchability in the Hindu community of Punjab and later joined the Singh Sabha. Having had the most intimate experience of the reality of a Sikh village life, he was distressed that a baptised *amritdhari* Sikh was identified primarily by his caste and treated accordingly. In his book entitled *Naqli Sikh Prabodh*, he castigated the so-called high caste Sikhs as *Naqli* Sikhs (counterfeit Sikhs). “Caste, at that time, was a dominant feature of social life in Sikh society. Those baptised as Singhs from low castes were treated as untouchables. Every individual was spoken of by his caste” (Badungar 2002:11). However, it was the political logic of *Hum Hindu Nahin*, which swayed the minds of the Sikh political class. Judge points to the dialectics of Sikhism becoming a key factor in elevation of Jats to a higher caste status and the social and political domination of the Jats in Sikh community contributing to the consolidation and expansion of Sikhism. “Each reinforced the other. It is this dialectics of social change that significantly contributed to the emergence of communalism in Punjab” (Judge 2002: 179).

The social universe of the Sikhs at that time was defined by, what was described as ‘Sanatan Sikh tradition’ – primarily a priestly religion. Giani Pratap Singh, later the Head Priest at the Golden Temple, noted that the Mazhabis were forbidden to enter the Golden Temple for worship; their offering of *karah prasad* was not accepted and the Sikhs denied them access to public wells and other utilities (Pratap Singh 1933:146-47, 156-57). When a group of Rahtia Sikhs tried to enter the Temple in the summer of the year 1900, “the manager of the sacred establishment, Sardar Jawala Singh, ordered their arrest. The reformist Sikhs who accompanied them were abused and finally beaten up. . . Because one of the defining characteristics of a sacred precinct, in the eyes of the Sanatan Sikhs, was its ritual purity” (cf. Oberoi:1994:107).

Harjot Oberoi cites from an “authoritative manual” – *Khalsa Dharam Sastra* of 1914 – which laid down that the members of the untouchable groups (like the Mazhabi, Rahtia and Ramdasia Sikhs) did not have the right to go beyond the fourth step in the Golden Temple and the members of the fourfold varnas including Nai, chippe (sic), Jhivar, (sudra sub castes) were instructed not to mix with persons belonging to the untouchable castes. Those who were guilty of breaking caste rules were classified as *patit* and shunned by civil society”. (ibid.106-107) The organisation of Khalsa Brotherhood was very active in converting the untouchable castes to Sikhism through ritual baptism. The matters came to a head when a group of newly baptised Sikhs from the low castes went to the Golden Temple to make their offering of *karah prasad* at the beginning of the Gurdwara Reform Movement in 1920. According to Pratap Singh, thousands of enthusiasts, including professors and students of Khalsa College Amritsar, joined in a clash with the Pujaris (Priests) who had refused to accept the offering, forcing the latter to flee. However, it did not seem to bring any noticeable change. Overall the Singh Sabha Movement devoted more attention to bringing more and more numbers of the low castes into the Khalsa Sikh fold and opening of schools and colleges. “Though removal of untouchability was also a part of this movement, but the amount of attention which was paid to the opening of schools and colleges, was not given to this aspect” (Pratap Singh 1933: 145). Thereafter, the engagements relating to the Akali struggle for liberation of Gurdwaras 1920-25, “did not leave the time for removal of untouchability” (Ibid. :151). It was not surprising. For the Jats, who composed 70 percent of the Akalis, and other high castes, caste equality or removal of untouchability was contrary to their disposition for social domination and hierarchy.

After the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) was constituted in 1926, care was taken to co-opt three members from the low caste communities. By 1933 there were over 200 persons belonging to the low castes who were recruited as religious priests, pathis, ragis and sewadars. Giani Pratap Singh cited a number of resolutions (gurmatas) adopted by the SGPC from 1926 to 1933, expressing “shock” and “regret” over the prevalence of discrimination against *amritdhari* low castes, and instructing or “praying” the upper caste Sikhs not to deny to the Sikhs of the lower castes, access to temples and wells. Notice was taken of reports of concerted obstruction in the recruitment of Mazhabis to the army and instructions were issued against such obstruction. However, as he wrote with regret, “because of the foolishness of common people and the activism of some selfish people, this (practice of untouchability) is present until the present” (*Ibid.* :178).

The growth of communal competition and politics in Punjab since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century made removal of untouchability, and conversion or reconversion (*Shuddhi*) politically significant to the political classes of each religious community. It facilitated a phenomenal and fast rise in the population of the Sikh community and assertion of distinct identity. However, this became, in fact a masked struggle for protecting and strengthening the special rights and domination of the high castes, both within the community and in the domain of political power in the province (Judge 2002b).

## A Parallel Caste Hierarchy

Sikhism did not lead to the creation of an egalitarian community or end of caste hierarchy and discrimination. But the caste pattern had undergone a change. Scholars have pointed to the construction of a Sikh caste hierarchy, parallel to that of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Prominent among these are W.H. McLeod (*The Evolution of Sikh Community* 1976), Ethne K. Marengo (*The Transformation of Sikhism* 1976), and Indera Paul Singh (“Caste in a Sikh Village” 1977). The emergent comparative picture may be described as under:

1. In the Hindu caste system, the hierarchy of the actually functioning jatis is ordered with reference to the *varnashram* – the traditional four varnas order – attributable to scriptural sanction. As Ambedkar underlined in one of his exchanges with Gandhi, in Hinduism it was not the practice you disapproved of, but the ideals. In Sikhism, there is no scriptural sanction for caste distinctions. The emphasis has been on the brotherhood of all under one God – equality among all human beings. The problem is with the practice, not the ideals.
2. Brahmins are at the top in Hindu Caste hierarchy. Among the Sikhs, on the other hand, Jats who had graduated to the position of a ruling class under Maharaja Ranjit Singh, came on the top of the hierarchy. Generally speaking, Khatri, Aroras and Labanas came after them, followed by the artisan castes among whom Ramgarhias (Sikh Carpenter caste) enjoy higher status than Ahluwalias (*kalals*). The menial or untouchable castes are at the bottom, just as among the Hindus. However, the perceptions regarding which caste is placed second, third and fourth varied both by the village and the caste one belonged to.
3. The structure of caste discrimination in the Sikh community was considerably liberated from the purity-pollution frame of relations, as against the Hindu community in which that consideration is relatively more prominent.
4. Sikhism altered the principle that knowledge is acquired and produced only by priestly class (such as Brahmins). There is no permanent class of priests or producers of religious knowledge in Sikhism. Even the initial advantage enjoyed by the Bedis and Sodhis on that score was obliterated after the Gurdwara Reform Movement. Priests and ragis and sewadars (as employees) now largely come from the lower castes, including a noticeable number from the Scheduled Castes; and, it may be surprising, fewer from the Jat caste. Jat Sikhs would rather control the SGPC.
5. Castes are endogamous both in the Hindu and Sikh caste systems. But going by the field studies, (mentioned below) the endogamy was a little weaker, and hypergamy a little stronger among the Sikhs than the Hindus.

## IV

### Ambedkar's move for *en masse* conversion of Depressed Classes to Sikhism

There has been a lack of clarity about why Ambedkar's resolution for conversion of India's Scheduled Castes to Sikhism in 1936 was quietly dropped. Sikhism was considered to be the best of the available options for moving out of the oppressive stranglehold of Hinduism. Understanding the reasons for rejection of this option and his conversion to Buddhism instead, 20 years later, is important to making sense of the position of the people of the lowest castes in the Sikh community. A part of the suggestive explanation comes from Ambedkar's biographer Dhananjay Keer, M. S. Gore and L. R. Bally. Perhaps another significant part of the explanation lies in a disclosure made by Sardar Kapur Singh in his *Saachi Sakhi*.

On 13 October 1935 Ambedkar made a solemn statement at the Yeola Conference of Depressed Classes that whereas unfortunately he was born a Hindu untouchable, "I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu". This was rightly described as "a thunderbolt", for it rocked political parties and social institutions in India. It was not simply a question of Ambedkar's personal choice because of spiritual or religious reasons. He exhorted his followers to change their religion *en masse*: "you have nothing to lose except your chains and everything to gain by changing your religion". This made it a political question. The leading figures from all other religions, approached Ambedkar separately, inviting him to convert to their religion, promising different rewards.

After serious thinking and consultations with a large number of people, Ambedkar had decided by June 1936 to embrace Sikhism along with his followers. This had the approval of the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha and of Shankracharya Dr. Kurtakoti. Conversion to Sikhism was, as Ambedkar argued, the best choice from the standpoint of the Hindus (Keer1971, 3rd edition:279-80). After participating in the Sikh Missionary Conference at Amritsar in April Ambedkar sent his son, Yashwant Rao, and nephew to the Golden Temple in May, where they stayed for one month and a half, to observe the situation and meet with leaders of the community. On September 18 a group of 13 followers was deputed to visit Amritsar to meet the 'Sikh Mission'. There was already an understanding that the Sikh Mission was going to start a college in Bombay in the interest of those Depressed Classes who would convert to Sikhism.

One of the reasons for the change in Ambedkar's programme may have related to his anxiety about the "chinks in the untouchable unity". According to M. S. Gore "Ambedkar had always been conscious of the Mang community's coolness towards his movement. Ambedkar responded by leaving the final decision on conversion to the future" (Gore1993: 145). Keer tends to suggest that the reason for postponing the idea of conversions related to his anxiety about the fate of the Depressed Classes' share in political power after conversion to Sikhism (Keer: 286-289). Bally, who has been a leading Ambedkarite activist, writer and editor of *Bhim Patrika*, provided another explanation. According to him, the untouchables of Punjab had conveyed to Dr. Ambedkar their suffering of atrocities at the hands of the dominant community of Jat

Sikhs and appealed to him to ensure that the untouchables never become Sikhs (Bally 1997 ;155; Ahir 1992:12).

However, a part of the reason why they failed to hit it off may well be related to a rethinking and opposition to the move among the Sikh political class. It was inevitable that the leading men would consider the fate of their leadership and position in the SGPC and Gurdwaras, after the 6 crores (60 Million) untouchables became Sikhs. Such is the evidence offered by Sardar Kapur Singh in his well known but controversial book, *Saachi Sakhi* . According to him there was an apprehension that once the tall leader Ambedkar became a Sikh with all his followers, none from the existing leaders like Baldev Singh may be nominated to the Viceroy's Executive Council as a representative of the Sikh community. Master Tara Singh and his supporters had to consider his position and that of other leaders in the Sikh community and the Shiromani Akali Dal , the SGPC and control of Gurdwaras. Kapur Singh recounted a story told by Inder Singh Karwal, an Advocate and Akali leader to a small gathering of advocates in the Bar Room of Punjab High Court at Chandigarh in September 1964. He stated that when, because of differences between Akali leaders and Dr. Ambedkar, the 6 crore untouchables publicly dropped the idea of adopting Sikh religion, he asked his neighbour in Lahore, Harnam Singh Jhalla, MA, LL.B, Advocate, (Judge of the High Court), who was at that time a prominent Akali Leader, the real reason or cause of this "tragedy". Then Harnam Singh replied "O you don't have an understanding of these matters. By Making 6 crore of untouchables, Sikhs, should we hand over the Darbar Sahib to Chuhras"?. "This way", says Kapur Singh, "6 crores of Rangretas – Guru Ka-Betas, who had come to the door of the Guru were pushed out; the same way as Guru Tegh Bahadur was not allowed to enter Harimandir Sahib (Golden Temple)". But, according to him, the actual truth of the matter is even "more crude and despicable". His argument is that when the "Akali Party" understood the full implications of 6 crores untouchable entering the Sikh community, they unanimously devised a strategy to deal with this "emergency". Then "they unanimously decided that Dr. Ambedkar and his follower untouchables must be dissuaded and stopped from becoming Sikhs for all time". Master Tara Singh, whose leadership of the Sikh community was threatened by Ambedkar's entry, sent Sardar Sujjan Singh to Bombay, "with specific instructions" to tell Dr. Ambedkar 'clearly' the mind of the Akali leaders, so that he dropped the idea (Singh, Kapur 1979 : 72-75). Kapur Singh's *Saachi Sakhi* is a polemical writing and not so well regarded as a credible source book. It is cited mainly because of the plausibility of his explanation. The logic of power and personal political interest of leaders may more often be a more decisive factor than ideology.

## V

### Struggle for Legal Recognition of Sikh Scheduled Castes

After the independence of India one of the major demands put forward unanimously by all the 22 Sikh members of the East Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1948 related to securing for the former untouchable castes converted to Sikhism the same recognition and rights as would have been available to them if they had not become

Sikhs. In the Memorandum given to the Advisory Committee on Fundamental Rights, Minorities etc. of the Constituent Assembly of India it was pleaded that the lower castes in the Sikh community – namely, Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Kabirpanthis, Baurias, Sareras and Sikligars – who suffered the same disabilities as the members of the (Hindu) Scheduled Castes, should be included in the list of the Scheduled Castes. Moving the report of the committee in the Constituent Assembly, its Chairman Vallabhbhai Patel explained:

Really as a matter of fact, these converts are not Scheduled castes or ought not to be Scheduled Castes; because, in Sikh religion there is no such thing as untouchability or any classification or difference of classes. . . .

And so when these proposals were brought to us, in fact, I urged upon them strongly not to lower their religion to such a pitch as to really fall to a level where for a mess of pottage you really give up the substance of religion. But they did not agree.

The committee recommended the acceptance of the plea made by the leaders of the Sikh community to include Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Bazigars and Sikligars in the list of the Scheduled castes. Patel, further explained :

I concede that this is a concession. It is not a good thing in the interest of the Sikhs themselves. But till the Sikhs are convinced that this is wrong, I would allow them the latitude (Rao 1965, Vol. IV , 594-603, *passim*).

In 1953, after the demand for Punjabi Suba had been raised, Master Tara Singh and Shiromani Akali Dal asked for inclusion of all the ‘untouchable castes’ converted to Sikhism in the list of Scheduled Castes. Observers viewed it as “a part of larger political game” Nayar1966: 239-240). That only four major castes (covering 85 % of all Sikh untouchable/backward classes) were included in the list was condemned as highly discriminatory – “a conspiracy to crush our religion”. Master Tara Singh threatened to go on a fast unto death if all the “*Acchuts* who had become Sikhs were not given the same rights as were given to Hindu *Achhuts*’ (Jaswant Singh 1972; 243). He led a march of 25 Sikhs to Delhi on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1953,. The government conceded the demand and Master Tara Singh hailed the victory: “*morcha fateh ho gaya*” (the battle was won) (*ibid.* 253). It was no problem that the Sikhs who were distinguished from Hindus (*Hum Hindu Nahin*), largely because they did not believe in Hindu caste system, now considered that such a distinction between the two religious communities was itself a discrimination against the Sikhs. The Sikh leaders “promoted constitutional provisions for the Sikh society which were an insult to Guru Nanak’s egalitarian principles. . . . It may sound ironical, but this was the main contribution of the Akali leaders to the framing of India’s constitution: Reverting the Sikhs to the caste hierarchy of Hindu society by giving up the first principle that sets them apart as a distinct religious community” (Kumar 1997 :410, 412).

## Reservation for Scheduled Castes in Management of Religious Shrines

The “practical consideration” for reservation for the Sikh Scheduled castes was not confined to the secular domain. By an amendment made in 1953 to the (Punjab) Sikh Gurdwaras Act 1925, a provision was made for reservation of 20 seats for the Scheduled Castes Sikhs out of a total of 140 elected seats in the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). Further, a convention was adopted that the Junior Vice-President in the Executive Committee of the SGPC would be chosen from the Scheduled Castes. In the case of Notified Sikh Gurdwaras, not managed directly by the SGPC Board, it was provided that in the 5-member local Managing Committees, one member in each case will be chosen from the Scheduled Castes (Kashmir Singh 1989 : 176, 182 and 188). Representation to the Scheduled Castes in the management of Sikh shrines appeared to follow an affirmative principle. It also institutionalised the recognition of the lower castes in Sikh religion and in the management of religious affairs of the Sikh community. Paramjit Singh Judge, who is making a detailed study of the tape-recorded speeches delivered by Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, brings to light one of the Sant’s important observations. He said, “All castes are present among the Sikhs. This makes the Sikhs a separate religion/nation” (Judge 2002 189-190).

## VI

### Present Status of Dalits in the Sikh Community

The Green revolution added to the economic and political clout of the landowning class in general, while further widening the social inequality. Things could have improved had the land reforms been allowed. The political clout of the richer landowning Jat Sikhs ensured that the policy was squarely defeated. The Jat control of leadership in Shiromani Akali Dal since 1962 added to the fear and apprehension in the lower caste Sikhs. Whereas much change under the impact of dalit political assertion, social welfare measures and spread of education is visible, it has also led to more tension and conflict. The sexual exploitation of dalit women, which was considered more or less common until ten years ago is more often challenged.

A number of field studies (by Indera Pal Singh, Abbi and Kesar Singh, Saberwal, Jodhka, Judge, Jammu, Gill, Sukhdev Singh, and MacMullen,) and surveys and interviews conducted by the author, broadly corroborate some of the observations relating to the present status and conditions of life of the Scheduled Castes in the Sikh community.

Indera Pal Singh, in the first anthropological study of a Sikh village, found that “Most of the Sikh values are Jat values and the Jats assert that they occupy the highest position among the Siks castes” (Indera Pal Singh 1977:70). Ownership of land was, according to him the chief criterion for determining the status of various people in Indian villages and “it becomes more important in Sikh villages as most of its adherents are agriculturalists” (ibid.). This gets reflected at the village level in various ways. A Chamar respondent gave a very simple explanation for lack of support for the communists among the low castes : “They (the communists) are our class enemies”. The Communist Party

was regarded as a party of the Jat Sikhs (Juergensmeyer1982: 198). One of the most frequently encountered expressions among dalits is “When some one says “I am a Jat”, his chest expands. But when we say “Chamar”, we contract to nothing” (cited Jodhka 2000: 381).

Markedly different from the practice in Hindu religious temples, there is a noticeable number of Mazhabi and Ramdasi granthies (priests: professional readers of the holy scripture) among the Sikhs. Such a transformation started quite early, as Giani Pratap Singh referred to in 1933. There is no overt restriction on the entry of the lowest caste people to the Gurdwaras. However, whereas 80 to 90 percent of the Sikhs, in general, believed that there was no discrimination, at least 30-35 per cent of the Scheduled Caste Sikhs felt a sense of humiliation, that the upper caste Sikhs did not like their presence in their Gurdwaras. Respondents among the latter cited instances of contempt or ridicule, instructions to sit at the end of the rows, to come for the langar at the end; to keep out of the service of cooking or serving food at the langar and occasionally not allowed to carry the Granth Sahib from the Jat Gurdwara to a dalit home for Akhand Path etc. etc. In a recent interview with Ajit Singh Poohla, the chief of Taruna Dal of the Nihangs, most of whose adherents came from the lower castes, he explained “There is no (caste) discrimination. Mazhabis and Chamars performed sewa of looking after the horses and milch cattle. “Of course, you understand, they do not work in the kitchen or serve food in *langar*. . . . It is part of *duniadari*. Nihangs are no exception”. You cannot ignore the sentiments of the *Sangat*, he suggested (Judge and Sekhon , March 4, 2001).

A more significant marker of the resistance against a sense of discrimination among the Scheduled Caste Sikhs is the large scale construction of separate Gurdwaras by the Mazhabis, Ravidasias Kabirpanthis and other caste groups, parallel to the ones controlled by the Jats. In our survey of 116 villages in one Tehsil of Amritsar district 68 villages (during 2001) had separate Gurdwaras of the dalits and there were separate cremation grounds for dalits in 72 villages. Jodhka, in his study of 51 villages, spread over all the three regions, reported that dalits had separate gurdwaras in as many as 41 villages and “ Nearly two-thirds of the villages had separate cremation grounds for upper castes and dalits” (Jodhka 2002: EPW :1818, 1819). This kind of divide has been sensitively voiced by a famous dalit Punjabi poet Lal Singh Dil :

*Mainun pyar kardiye, parjaat kuriye*  
*Saade sakey murde vee ik thaan te nahin jalaunde*  
(O’ loving me girl of the other caste, (remember) our kinsmen don’t even cremate their dead at one place)

The construction of separate Gurdwaras was so normal a practice that, Jodhka concluded: such constructions have “never been met with resistance either from the dominant castes in the village or from the religious establishment of the Sikh community” (*ibid*: 1818). The contention may, however, be qualified. A number of cases of resistance and conflict have been reported from Punjab’s villages during the last few years. Such construction of a separate Gurdwara was invariably symbolic of the assertion of the dalit communities, which became a cause for resentment among the Jat

zamindars and the SGPC. For example, the Mazhabis of village Heran in Ludhiana district who had 8 years ago constructed a separate Gurdwara in collaboration with the Ramdasias of the village, resolved last year (2002) to construct another one exclusively their own. They were reportedly incensed over the incidents of humiliation of Mazhabi women by the Ramdasia women who had threatened violence if the former entered their Gurdwara. The practice of untouchability by the upper caste women against dalit women was found to be higher in every respect (Jodhka 2002 Mimeo). In this case, it was division of high-low among the dalit jatis. The Inspectors sent by the SGPC to dissuade the Mazhabis from constructing their Gurdwara failed. Reacting to the resistance by the others and the pressure put by the SGPC, the Mazhabis warned that, "if not allowed to construct our own Gurdwara, we would convert to Islam". Inspectors relented (Bhatia 2002). This was only one of several similar cases – perhaps an indication of mobility of Mazhabis. Kirpal Singh Badungar, the chief of the SGPC, warned in a press statement:

The trend of constructing separate Gurdwaras by Jat and Mazhabi Singhs in villages of Punjab has witnessed a sharp increase in the recent years, thus creating a rift among the Sikhs which could have far reaching social implications in times to come" (*Times of India*, December 9, 2002).

Ravi Dasi Temples in some cases, had pictures of "Guru Ravi Das" and occasionally also of Babasaheb Ambedkar installed within the precincts. The presence of an idol of Guru Ravidas, close to the Guru Granth Sahib, which is considered improper according to Sikh tenets, became, for example, a cause for Jat-dalit tension in Basti Jodhewal of Ludhiana. (*The Indian Express*, November 11, 2001).

Another significant dimension of dalit search for alternative cultural spaces to overcome the experience of indignity and humiliation is reflected in large scale movement of Sikh dalits towards a large number of Deras and sects such as Radhasoami, Sacha Sauda, Dera Wadbhag Singh, Piara Singh Bhanjarawala etc., or their turning to various other Sants, and dargahs of Muslim Pirs. This was highly resented by the SGPC and other Sikh organisations. The rise of a dalit holy man, Baba Bhanjara, as the head of a *Dera* and the alleged publication of his own separate holy book for worship, which led to violent clashes reflected the urge to reject the conventional religious spaces. Observers attribute this rebellion of the weak, to the arrogant and crude behaviour of the Jats with the lower caste people (Ajmer Singh 2003 :292-97). A radical Dalit Sikh, observed, however, "But all these Deras, spread all over Punjab areas are controlled by the Jats and other upper castes. . . . Everywhere these Sikhs (SC/BC followers) are mere worshippers, high and low *sewadars*. Every religious sphere is managed and manipulated on caste basis". It was described as "Slow Death of Sikhism" (Muktsar: *Dalit Voice* 1999, June 16-30).

A rising incidence of atrocities on the dalits in Sikh villages is another dimension of the caste divide within the community. A survey of the press reports of atrocities on dalits in the Punjab during the last five years (Puri 2003) brought up over a dozen cases of rape, gang rape, stripping naked, stripping and walking dalit women by Jat Zamindars in the village, invariably with covert support from policemen, in order to punish the

dalits for non-payment of loans taken by male members and to avenge felt insults. The believed underlying purpose, stated or unstated, comes out to be “teaching lesson to the dalits”. Social boycott of the dalits in the village is another method which has, of late, been reported more frequently than earlier, leading inevitably to intervention by district administration for *razinama* (compromise). Six serious cases of that kind have been reported during the last 3 years. Despite the very stringent provisions under 'The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) 1989' and directions given to the State governments and police, convictions are rare. The details of the public nature of the caste atrocities are illustrative. One such case of the local power dynamics may well be related.

On January 4, 2000 the Jat Zamindars of the village Bhail, near Taran Tarn, Amritsar did not allow a Mazhabi Sikh Hazara Singh to cremate his 22 year old daughter in the village. The helpless 60 year old father was forced to lug the dead body on a trolley and dump it inside the river 3 miles away.

The Provocation, as reported, was that In Bhail, a “Jat-ruled village” near the Beas 24 km. from Tarn Taran, 1000 strong Mazhabi Sikh community decided to take out a Gurburb procession despite ‘prohibition’ by the Jats. This year the lowly Sikhs mustered Rs. 10000 for the holy purpose. “This seemed to be an open challenge to the Jat supremacy”.

“Retaliation was swift. Armed with sticks, a party of Jat Sikhs encircled the village for three days and prevented the Mazhabis from entering their fields even for daily Gurburb procession in the village against the wishes of the ruling community.

A farmer Kartar Singh declared with contempt, “It is all their mistake. We are superior to them”. A Jat Sikh woman adds, “The Mazhabis never had enough money to organise such a function. I don’t know how they did it this time”

The police intervened to effect a *razinama* (compromise). No complaint was lodged because the police viewed it as *partybazi* (groupism). The Mazhabis say they were forced by the police : “We are oppressed by both the police and the Zamindars, Both are one.”

More than a month thereafter, when one Mazhabi Sikh woman Pritam Kaur died, her son was prohibited from cremating her at the village cremation ground. According to the latest report the Mazhabis have been asked to create their separate site for cremation. (Bal 2000, *The Indian Express*, February 15)

Harinder Singh Khalsa, a member of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, observed, evidently with some pain, “Punjab has no untouchability, probably because of Sikhism, but I am ashamed to say that in committing atrocities on Dalits, we do not lag behind “(*Indian Express*, August 21, 2000).

An understanding of the distinctive pattern of caste hierarchy in Sikhism which points to a new pattern of competing hierarchies, parallel to that of the Hindus, calls for deeper insight into the dynamics of political power and economic relations both at the local and regional levels. Not looking closely at the ground level social reality may leave the impression that overall the Sikh community represents a homogeneity of castes rather than division (e.g. Gurharpal Singh 2000: 85). In the explanations rooted in the primacy of ideology or culture, on the other hand, the survival of casteism (“it is very clear and open truth that the Sikh society is as casteist and racist as the Hindu society”), is sometime regarded as a consequence of incomplete liberation of Sikhism from the stranglehold of Brahminism, emphasising greater distancing of Sikhs from the Hindus (Muktsar 1999: *Dalit Voice*). Interactions with the dalits in Punjab, however, reveal a pervasive tendency to view the interests of economic and political domination as the force behind caste-based humiliation, rather than ideology as the primary reality. Yet it did not mean proximity to Marxian framework of class conflict. Their solidarity and resistance against social oppression is rooted in a discreet caste category. There is need to further interrogate caste in varied settings of religion and region.

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