

Religions and Development Research Programme

New Forms of Religious Transnationalism and Development Initiatives: A Case Study of Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan, Punjab, India

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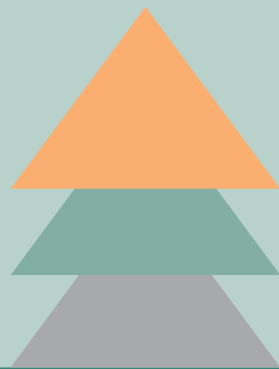
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Religions and Development

Research Programme

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- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

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Key words: DSSDB, Ravidassia, Punjab, transnationalism, Sikhism

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Summary

In the last decade there has been increasing public policy interest in religious transnationalism, understood as religiously-based identity movements, which connects migrants from the South settled in the North to their traditional homelands and beyond through multiple economic, social and political networks. Surprisingly, this interest has largely overlooked examples of new forms of transnational activity 'from below' among migrant communities in the North in which religion/caste-based networks provide the foundations for social and material development in migrants' homelands.

This case study focuses on the Dera Sant Sarwan Dass in Ballan, Punjab (DSSDB) and its leadership of the Ravidassia religious movement. The DSSDB provides a fascinating example of a new form of religious transnationalism that is helping to promote development and identity formation among a caste group that has traditionally belonged to one of the lowest castes in the Indian social structure.

DSSDB was established by *Baba Pipal Dass* in 1902. Drawing his inspiration from the medieval saint of the Bhakti movement, Ravidass (revered by his followers as a Guru), *Baba Pipal Dass* and his successor, *Sant Sarwan Dass*, developed a popular following among the Scheduled Castes (SCs) associated with leather work and weaving in the Doaba region of Punjab (the central districts of Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahr). Today these followers are commonly referred to as Ravidassias.

The Ravidassia movement and the DSSDB itself have been guided by a succession of *sants* who have emphasized education, social development and migration overseas as some of the ways to tackle caste discrimination and disadvantage. As a result, early South Asian migration to Asia, North America and the UK included Ravidassias.

This study evaluated the activities of the DSSDB in depth. It reviewed the historical literature on the role of religion in transforming the lives of marginalised and socially excluded castes in Punjab and the origins of the Dera (DSSDB) itself. It included visits to DSSDB and some of the social facilities it has established in India and religious centres associated with the organization in England. Finally, it involved numerous semi-structured interviews with key informants in Punjab and the UK, particularly the West Midlands.

The links between Ravidassias in the UK and the Doaba region of Punjab have several dimensions. Primarily they are family links.

- However, they also have a religious dimension because of the religious inspiration and support given to Ravidassias by the DSSDB and its *sants* to aspire to more dignified and prosperous lives and to undertake *seva* (selfless service) for the Ravidassia community as a whole.
- The persistence of caste discrimination in the UK against Ravidassias by fellow Punjabis has led them to establish their own places of worship, thereby further consolidating a process of identity formation that began with the founding of the DSSDB.
- On its part, the DSSDB has made considerable efforts to nurture the diasporic links, enabling it to invest in religious buildings (not just in Ballan and nearby locations, but also in Varanasi, the birthplace of Ravidass) and establish social facilities, such as hospitals and schools. Members of the community in the UK have not only donated significant amounts for these purposes, they have also influenced organizational and other characteristics of the DSSDB projects in India that they finance.
- The education and health services provided are aimed primarily at poor users but are open to all regardless of religion or caste, and are deliberately of high quality. These characteristics, the DSSDB's leadership believes, secures recognition by members of other religions and castes (especially higher castes) of both the group's religious principles and its socio-economic progress.

The study illustrates how religious transnational practices have aided community formation among a marginalized and socially excluded group from the South, through the pursuit of a new religious identity, and have enabled it to significantly transform its social, economic and political status in both its homeland and overseas settings. Beyond religious activities, the DSSDB has invested in education and health facilities in its area of origin. Although these facilities make only a limited contribution to the achievement of development objectives in Punjab as a whole, their significance lies in enhancing the social status of the Ravidassia community

Wider implications of the findings include:

- The total contribution of social services funded through transnational remittances may be significant, not only in terms of finance but also because of the associated flows of ideas and practices – social remittances. Further documentation and study of this phenomenon could contribute to improving understanding of governance and the development process in migrants' areas of origin.
- Any attempt to harness migrant remittances for development purposes must be underpinned by a sound understanding of the complex motives and social and political dynamics that characterize transnational links.

Acronyms

BJP	Bhartiya Janata Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
DSSDB	Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan
OBCs	Other Backward Classes
SGRCA-UK	Shri Guru Ravidass Cultural Association, UK
SCs	Scheduled Castes
SGPC	Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, Amritsar
SAD	Shiromani Akali Dal
SGRJAPCT	Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Public Charitable Trust
SSDCT-UK	Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust – UK
SSDCHT	Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust
STs	Scheduled Tribes

Glossary

Ad Dharm	A social movement in the Doaba region that emerged in the 1920s, led by Mangoo Ram of Mugwal
Akal Takht	The building facing the Golden Temple in Amritsar, where decisions affecting the Sikh community as a whole are taken.
<i>amrit bani</i>	The sanctified sweetened water used in the initiation (<i>amrit</i>) ceremony.
Shri Guru	
<i>Ravidass ji</i>	The holy book adopted by the newly declared Ravidass Dharam (religion)
<i>arti</i>	a recitation of certain <i>shabads</i> accompanying the <i>bhog</i> ceremony
<i>bani</i>	utterance or the words (of the gurus).
<i>begampura</i>	term for an ideal state, enunciated by Guru Ravidass
<i>bhagat bani</i>	hymns attributed to several <i>Bhagats</i> in the Sikh scripture, the <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>
<i>bhakat</i>	devotee, follower, sometimes spelled <i>bhagat</i>
<i>Bhakti</i>	devotion, also the name of a religious movement in medieval India
Bhawan	Ravidass <i>mandirs</i> /temples are often named Ravidass Bhawan, especially in the UK
<i>bhog</i>	concluding Sikh religious ceremony.
Brahmin	The highest caste among the Hindus – twice born
Chamar	A scheduled caste in Punjab and India
Chuhra	A scheduled caste in Punjab and India
Dalit	Term now preferred by some for Scheduled Castes
<i>darsan</i>	‘a sight of’, blessing
<i>dera</i>	a gathering/ place of worship centred on a sant
<i>dharam</i>	religion, rightful duty, commitment
<i>dharmasala</i>	a place of social gathering
Ghumiar	A caste of Punjab associated with the traditional occupation of potters
<i>granthi</i>	reader of the <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i>
<i>gurdwara</i>	Sikh place of worship, with the <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i> at its centre
<i>guru</i>	teacher, spiritual guide
<i>Guru Granth</i>	The sacred Sikh scripture. Also referred to as <i>Adi Granth Sahib</i>
Har	<i>qoummi nishan</i> (community flag) of the Ravidassia Dharam
<i>janjghar</i>	marriage centre
Jat	A dominant caste among Sikhs
<i>Jai Gurdev ji</i>	The greeting of Ravidassia Dharam

<i>karma</i>	rebirth (into a particular caste) as a result of actions in a previous life
Kashtriya	A caste, second in the hierarchy after Brahmins, above Vaishya and Shudras
<i>katha</i>	sermon
Khalsa Panth	The Sikh community
<i>kirtan</i>	congregational singing of the hymns
<i>langar</i>	community kitchen attached to every <i>gurdwara</i>
<i>mandir</i>	Ravidass place of worship, sometimes also called <i>bhawan</i> or temple
<i>pandit</i>	scholar, teacher, particularly one skilled in Sanskrit and the Hindu religion and philosophy
<i>parshad</i>	sacred food offered after the <i>bhog</i>
<i>pathshala</i>	traditional school for instruction in scriptures or secular education
<i>quom</i>	nation/community
Ravidass	Revered as a <i>guru</i> by his followers, also known as Ravidas
Ravidassia	Follower of Guru Ravidass
<i>sadhu</i>	spiritual figure, a wandering ascetic.
samaj	society
<i>sampradaya</i>	religious sect
<i>sangat</i>	congregation
<i>sant</i>	a religious teacher who flourished in northern India between 14 th and 17 th centuries; lit. 'one who knows the truth' or 'one who has experienced Ultimate Reality'; today refers to an acclaimed spiritual leader
<i>seva</i>	selfless service devoted to others
Shudra	An untouchable, the fourth caste in Hindu society
Udasi	A sect taking its origin from one of Guru Nanak's sons
<i>umma</i>	community/nation
Vaishya	A caste according to Hindu thought and custom, third in its hierarchy
Varan	Classical division of Hindu society into four: Brahman, Kashtriya, Vaishya and Shudra
<i>Waheguru</i>	Sikh word for God
<i>zamindar</i>	landlord
<i>zaat</i> or <i>jati</i>	Endogenous community, traditionally sharing a hereditary occupation

Note on nomenclature

The name of the mediaeval saint, Ravidas, also mentioned as Rae Das in the historical literature, is commonly spelled Ravi Das. As part of the DSSDB's attempt to provide a uniform framework for its followers, Ravidass has been advocated as the proper spelling for the saint's name. By his followers he is always called Guru Ravidass rather than Bhakat Ravidas, as frequently mentioned in the Bhakti literature and historical sources. In Punjab his followers are generally known as Ravidassis. However, DSSDB's followers are encouraged to identify themselves as Ravidassia(s). This paper follows the DSSDB convention unless it is necessary to distinguish the new religious terminology from the old historical appellation.

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1 Introduction

The Dera Sant Sarwan Dass of Ballan (DSSDB) is a religious organization based in Ballan, district of Jalandhar, in the province of Punjab, India. It emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of a religious reform movement among followers of Guru Ravidass. These followers traditionally belonged to the lowest rung of the Hindu/Sikh caste hierarchy (Scheduled Castes or Dalits), who worked as agricultural labourers, leather workers and weavers.¹ DSSDB followers, unusually for members of India's low caste communities, were able to establish substantial settlements in the United Kingdom, North America and Europe (Singh and Tatla, 2006).

Historically, the DSSDB was part of a broader religious reform movement in Punjab, in which 'religion', especially among low caste groups on the margins of Sikh and Hindu society, was increasingly viewed as a 'social vision' (see Juergensmeyer, 1982) that would enable these communities to improve their welfare. This vision was based on the assertion of a *distinctive* religious identity, separate and different from mainstream Sikhism and Hinduism, and challenged the hegemonic appropriation of Ravidass' scriptures by orthodox Sikhism and Hinduism. This challenge has resulted in the emergence of new religious values associated with the idea of a separate identity, but also the recognition that this identity, in reality, is still mediated in Punjabi society (and the diaspora) by power relations with mainstream Sikhism and Hinduism. The enduring tensions over caste and religion have, arguably, resulted in the 'construction' of 'new' religious ideals and values. It is these ideals and values - of separateness, a new identity, and religion as a social vision (with reference to charity and community welfare) - that will be explored in the work of the DSSDB and its diaspora.²

In the last three decades, it has been suggested that the Ravidassias settled in Europe and North America have transformed the social and religious significance of the DSSDB from an inward-looking caste organization of the downtrodden and oppressed, operating on the margins of Hindu and Sikh society, to a dynamic social organization that is at the centre of many religious and social developments in central Punjab – a region which today has one of the largest proportions of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in India. The DSSDB today controls a charitable hospital in Jalandhar, an eye hospital in Ballan and an English medium model school in Phagwara. 90 per cent of the funding for these projects has come from the Ravidassia diaspora.

These facilities, which are open to all and are not caste exclusive, have had a significant impact on Ravidassia-upper caste relations in the Doaba region of Punjab and have begun to change perceptions of the community (Jodhka, 2004a). It has been suggested that the DSSDB is also increasingly becoming the centre for a new global project that aims to redefine the traditional SC identity as a new Ravidassia identity.

In general, the DSSDB has gained significantly from its close ties with the Ravidassia diaspora, both in terms of cash remittances but also, and perhaps more significantly, through 'social remittances' of knowledge, ideas and new norms and values. The funds that are raised overseas are more than a palliative against state disengagement or social discrimination by higher castes: they also represent an attempt to deepen democracy in Punjab, to assert *equality* and to forge a sense of *pride* in leading developmental initiatives, beyond the traditional portrayals of Punjab's Ravidassias as a community dependent on state handouts and employment quotas.

1.1 Approach and methodology

This paper presents a case study of the DSSDB, a religious organization that undertakes development activities, within its transnational setting. First, it reviews the literature on remittances and development; the role of transnational religious organizations of poor, marginalized and socially excluded³ sections of society among migrants from the South settled in the West; the evolution of the Dalit movement in India, especially Punjab, since the early twentieth century; and the Ravidassia diaspora, in particular in the United Kingdom. These secondary sources were supplemented by extensive interviews with key informants and leading members of the Ravidassia diaspora in the West Midlands, to elaborate an organizational history of the community and examine the religious motives, values and beliefs that underpin the mobilization of financial support for DSSDB's development, religious and political activities in Punjab and elsewhere. Where possible, we sought to establish the amount of funding raised in the West Midlands and the projects for which these funds have been utilized. Additionally, the research explored the influence of 'social remittances' - ideas, values and norms, especially of community-building in a Western setting - on the development trajectory of the DSSDB and its organizational work in Punjab. Working closely with the DSSDB in Punjab, we also attempted to evaluate the development projects it has funded and their impact on poverty reduction, in particular the extent to which poor people, including members of other communities, especially women and children, are able to access the facilities it has constructed.

The research was conducted simultaneously in two field sites. Charlene Simon, an anthropologist and research fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines de New Delhi, who has worked extensively on the DSSDB, undertook fieldwork in Ballan, Ada Kathar and Phagwara, Punjab. Darshan Singh Tatla, a specialist on the Sikh diaspora, carried out fieldwork in the West Midlands and beyond, by undertaking extensive interviews with members of the DSSDB, affiliated organizations and other key individuals. All those interviewed agreed to be identified and quoted. Thus overall, this in-depth case study used a mixed method approach, drawing on relevant international published literature; historical and sociological literature on the Ravidassia/Dalit movement in Punjab and overseas; organizational literature produced by the DSSDB; quantitative data available from the DSSDB on funding; interviews with key informants in the West Midlands and Punjab; official Government of Punjab data; and interviews with key informants in Punjab.

2 Transnationalism, religion and development

Religious transnationalism is here understood as identity-based social movements that are centred on religious identities and connect migrants to their traditional homeland and beyond through multiple forms of economic, social and political networks. These are new forms of religious transnationalism, which can be distinguished from 'older' and more traditional forms by the fact that: (i) they are led by communities and groups of migrants from the South; (ii) they have succeeded in establishing strong organic roots with co-religionists in migrants' homelands and across the countries in which community members have settled; and (iii) they aim to go beyond merely maintaining religious identity, although sometimes these organizations are actively engaged in transnational projects that aim to reconstruct and reinvent religious identities (e.g. *umma* and *quom*, the ideas of a global Muslim or Hindu community or nation); (iv) they are sometimes implicated in radical and revolutionary projects, especially religious radicalism; and (v) they are the transmitters of new forms of social remittances – ideas, values, beliefs – that may support development and poverty reduction and/or reinforce traditional religious and cultural hierarchies.

Today the economic, political and social changes that influence migrants' behaviour, it is suggested, are better understood within the framework of transnationalism. But what is transnationalism? How does it help us to understand the relations between religious groups of migrants from the South settled in the North and their contribution to development in their homelands?

According to a leading theorist of the concept, transnationalism is characterized by "high intensity of exchanges, new modes of transacting, and the multiplicity of activities that require cross-border travel on a sustained basis" (Portes *et al*, 1999, p. 219; see also Khagram and Levitt, 2004, p. 3-4).

Transnationalism understands the lives of traditional migrants from the South living in the North as "a continuous flow of people, goods, money, ideas that transgress national boundaries and in so doing connect physical, social, economic and political spaces" (Mazzucato, 2005, p. 2). These exchanges "involve individuals, their communities and broader structures such as local and national governments" (Portes *et al*, 1999, p.220). Although in the past, ethnic diasporas, often with a specific 'homeland agenda', resembled proto-transnational communities, contemporary transnationalism refers to broader patterns of exchange that are transforming economic, political and social structures. At the heart of this transformation are new and dense social networks that are creating new spaces, imagining new communities, and are peopled by non-state actors and organizations. Portes *et al* have also suggested that different forms of transnationalism can be distinguished by degrees of

institutionalization: 'high institutionalization' refers to the establishment of formal structures to promote and regulate relationships and activities; 'low institutionalization' is characterized by informal practices that remain beyond or against regulation. In parallel with this distinction, they argue that we can also identify transnationalism 'from above' (that which is promoted, for example, by multinational corporations and established transnational organizations) and 'transnationalism from below' (that which remains unregulated, deinstitutionalized and at the margins of national and state structures).

While transnationalism 'from above' has been well researched (Held, 2003), 'transnationalism from below', particularly involving migrant communities of Southern origins, and especially those that define their identity in terms of religion, has only recently become the focus of academic research (Ballard, 2003; Kyle, 2000; Levitt, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). Not unexpectedly, much of this research interest has been stimulated by the new security challenges arising from the growth of religious radicalism following 9/11 (Modood, 2005; Saggat, 2009). It has also been stimulated by policy initiatives in the North, notably Europe, where following mass immigration since 1989, the emphasis has shifted towards improving community cohesion and integration (see Klausen, 2005). However, the focus on radical forms of religious transnationalism emanating from the South - but active among migrants in the North - has tended to overshadow interesting examples of new forms of transnational activity 'from below' among migrant communities in the North, in which religious/caste-based networks provide the foundations for social and material development in migrants' homelands. These groups can be distinguished by the fact that they are:

- Rooted in marginalized, socially excluded and subaltern groups among migrants from the South, who have remained as marginal actors within both their homelands and their host societies because of their low levels of income and social status;
- Driven by religion as a 'social vision', in which the assertion of a distinctive religious-caste identity is used as a basis for assisting the material and social development of members of the group in the homeland;
- Not engaged primarily in conventional forms of religious philanthropy. Rather, their use of religious-caste identity mobilization of resources in the North is undertaken mainly for economic development aimed at enhancing the group's social prestige, thereby enabling it to realize its quest for equality;
- Committed to using religious-caste identity to redefine the public sphere, pursue inclusionary governance and combat religious-caste discrimination in both the host and homeland countries.

To summarize: the paradigmatic shift in the study of migrant groups in the North, from ethnic and racial studies to transnationalism, has opened up opportunities for examining previously neglected, marginalized, socially excluded and low income communities within these groups, especially the ways in which they are now utilizing growing transnational social networks to undermine established hierarchies and promote development. For these communities, religion-caste identities continue to function as 'social visions' for development in their homelands in ways that have been overlooked by the literature on remittances in development or the more pressing policy objectives of states in the North, which are to manage migrants' transnational lives (e.g. controlling immigration, ensuring security and attempting to achieve community cohesion). In addressing these shortcomings of the existing literature, this case study also offers new insights into how these groups are promoting self-development by using their religious-caste identities to mobilize resources in the North.

The last two decades have seen a radical transformation in understanding of the role of migrants from the South settled in the North and their ability to contribute to the economic development of the South. Conventionally, such migrants were viewed within the framework of assimilation or race and ethnic relations within their host societies, where integration into the wider society, economy and politics was the primary driver of policies and the interest of studies focusing on these minorities (Rex and Singh, 2004). Since the end of the Cold War, however, the onset of the current phase of globalization, the emergence of new communications technologies and increased migratory flows from the South, the capacity of migrants to contribute to poverty reduction in their homelands has emerged as a new policy field that has attracted considerable attention by development studies specialists (see Ballard, 2004; Blackwell and Seddon, 2004; Dusenbery and Tatla, 2009; IOM, 2005; Newland and Patrick 2004; SSRRC, ESRC and IOM-OM, 2005; Sidel, 2004; World Bank 2006). This also reflects new approaches in development studies, in which there has been a discernible shift from the *state* to *markets*, and more recently, interest in the potential of non-state actors such as NGOs to influence change. These approaches have also emerged at a time when there has been a fundamental transformation in the economic, political and the social context within which migrants live, work and interact, leading social theorists to suggest that we need to move away from conventional frameworks of integration and social cohesion to ones defined by transnationalism (Portes *et al*, 1999; Vertovec, 2009). Before proceeding to discuss the utility of the concept of transnationalism, it is important to recognize the changes that have defined the new context.

Perhaps foremost of the influences on the role of migrants from the South in the North is the impact of economic liberalization and globalization. In the last decade, there has been increasing academic and policy interest in the role that diaspora migrants' remittances play in the economic development of the South. In 2006, the World Bank estimated that migrant remittances to the South totalled \$167 billion, with possibly an additional 50 per cent transferred through unofficial channels (World Bank, 2006). The size of these flows varies considerably between communities, with the Chinese, Mexicans and Indians being responsible for a large proportion of the transfers. In India, economic liberalization after 1991 has been followed by organized efforts to channel Non-Resident Indian (NRI) investment into the Indian economy by new policy initiatives (Parekh *et al*, 2003). Recognition of the significance of remittances by Indian policy makers has also encouraged the growth of a distinct diasporic Indian identity. With historic settlement in most countries, and large waves of migration since 1989 to North America, Europe, Africa and the Middle East, the Indian diaspora today demonstrates growing self-consciousness, which has been further strengthened by new communications technologies and rapid globalization. At the same time, much of the contemporary fascination with the Indian diaspora arises from the economic potential of overseas Indians and their ability to transform the fortunes of the homeland economy. Since the beginning of economic liberalization, NRIs have played an active role in foreign direct investment in India, and their contribution has been recognized by the Government of India, which has decided to grant them special economic and legal concessions. This decision, it could be argued, reflects a realistic assessment that, with appropriate conditions, the Indian diaspora will follow the trajectory of the Chinese diaspora in providing large capital flows for India's rapid and continued economic development in the twenty-first century.

The literature on the role of migrants' remittance generally, and specifically with reference to India and other South Asian countries, is extensive (see Ballard, 2004; Blackwell and Seddon, 2004; IOM, 2005; Newland and Patrick, 2004; Sidel, 2004; SSRIC, ESRC and IOM-OM, 2005; World Bank 2006). For our purposes the following themes are noteworthy:

- Organizations like the UK Department for International Development have recognized the importance of diaspora remittances and their impact on poverty reduction. This has been accompanied by recognition of the need to build a sound evidence base for emerging policy initiatives in the area (Newland and Patrick, 2004).
- The importance of diaspora village associations in the North in mobilizing resources: these associations have been studied in detail with reference to Mexico, but limited research has been undertaken on their

activities in South Asia, although Singh and Tatla (2006) and Dusenbery and Tatla (2009) make some observations on their role and identify some excellent examples that have achieved national and international recognition for the work that they have undertaken.

- The literature on remittances, in the main, ignores religious philanthropy. Because it tends to be focused on the contributions of individual migrants or organized migrant associations that seek favourable terms for investment from their homeland governments, religious remittances or philanthropy are generally neglected. There has been some interest in this area post- 9/11, especially in connection with the activities of Islamic groups and *hawala* transactions among the British Asian community (see Ballard, n.d.), but in the main the role of the diaspora in funding religious organizations in the South is inadequately understood.
- As noted previously, the literature on migrants' remittances makes few, if any, references to the role of religious organizations and institutions for raising funds for *development*, that is, for purposes *other than* community consolidation through religious philanthropy or engagement with wider processes of governance in the homeland.
- Finally, one of the recurring themes in the literature on migrants' remittances is the question of whether they actually *reduce* poverty. Most studies suggest that remittances *reinforce* existing social inequalities and that their impact on poverty reduction is only noticeable if the rates of out-migration are significant (see Taylor *et al*, 2005). The social class of migrants is therefore a significant factor in determining whether their remittances result in poverty reduction. Literature from India suggests that in the nineteenth century, those at the bottom of the social hierarchy migrated as bonded labourers. However, voluntary migration by members of this category has been relatively limited until recent times (Parekh *et al*, 2003).

The importance of remittances by migrant diasporas, however, is a poor indicator of the growing field of transnational economic activity, in which migrants are emerging as key agents of change. The growth of what Portes *et al* (1999) call 'transnationalism from below', in which migrants, non-state actors and de-regulated fields of economic activity thrive, is stimulating new forms of entrepreneurship that involve increasing numbers of informal cross-country transactions, small to medium sized business ventures and long chains of circular migration. The intensity and regularity of these economic interactions has led to burgeoning transnational economic sectors, in which new networks and relationships are restructuring economic and social relations (Portes *et al*, 1999). Indeed, the emergence of these fields of economic activity amongst migrants in the North has unleashed a new form of economic dynamism that both host states in the North and homeland states in the South are eager to institutionalize.

Alongside the transformation of the economic context in which migrants from the South operate, there has been a discernible change in the political organizations that have traditionally captured migrants' loyalties. Historically these have tended to be class-based, host-nation centred, and anti-racist and anti-immigration controls in their outlook (see Singh and Tatla, 2006, Ch.5). Such organizations were, for instance, important agents of integration in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s, with the Indian Workers' Associations (front organizations of the Communist Parties of India) playing a critical role in areas such as the West Midlands and West London. Yet in recent times these organizations have come to be displaced by new ones that are increasingly distinguished by identity based on religion, caste, locality, region or nationality. Foremost among these have been the proliferating transnational faith-based organizations that connect not only migrants in the host community with their homelands, but also incorporate members settled in other countries. This development has been hastened by two factors.

First, the emergence of new communications technologies, cheap travel and de-regulation has facilitated the emergence of real-time networks that are distinguished by their intensity and everyday interactions. Such networks have always existed, but what makes them 'real' today is that homeland village associations, religious congregations and caste communities can now function as 'transnational organizations', displacing the primary loyalties of migrants to a party, trade union or other civil association.

Second, the active policies of some states in the South to foster dual or multiple citizenship have facilitated new and complex modes of citizenship that are no longer tied to one state, creating flexibility and allowing for migrant strategies of switching between states to maximize opportunities and minimize risks (Ballard, 2003). These forms of citizenship, moreover, enable new forms of legitimate and illegitimate political activities to be undertaken with less supervision and regulation than previously. Increasingly, some of this space is being filled by non-state transnational actors and organizations that occupy an intermediate space but are beyond regulation and responsibility.

Both these factors have intersected with the broader changes to produce new forms of political transnationalism that are distinguished by their modes of operation and their emphasis on identity politics. Most of these forms, particularly those associated with South Asia, are benign. However, as

the case of radical Islamist groups indicates, the effects of their deep 'homeland' roots and aim of restructuring migrants' identities in their host countries and globally may be malign (Samad, 2009).

Finally, the new context within which the migrant communities of the South exist has also changed socially. New ideas, values, beliefs and notions of community development are being redefined and re-assessed as a result of intensive social interaction in real time (Portes *et al*, 1999). The linear process of assimilation into the host society has been displaced by a more complex model that recognizes the 'homeland present' in migrants' everyday lives – in terms of faith, caste, locality or social reproduction, as well as new patterns of consumption and social behaviour. Just as in the case of the political behaviour of and institutions formed by migrants, social changes wrought by transnationalism are creating new forms of social reproduction and new spaces for interaction. Levitt (2005) has drawn our attention to the key role that 'social remittances' now play in migrants' interaction with their homelands. According to her, these involve the impact of diasporic ideas, values, behaviour and social capital on the homeland country.

While Levitt emphasizes social remittances from the North to the South, it is reasonable to argue that this flow is not unidirectional: if anything, as observations of political transnationalism have demonstrated, the influences are probably circular and mutually reinforcing. This is certainly the case when faith-based organizations (FBOs) and institutions are examined. Thus while religious organizations formed by migrants in the North undoubtedly remit ideas about community organization and development, for example, they are also, it is evident, recipients of reverse flows when village priests, *sants* and *babas* (holy men) visit migrant communities in the North, with a significant influence on the subsequent development of the religious communities concerned. It could be argued that this is especially the case for groups and FBOs of subaltern communities, which often do not have a strongly organized religious hierarchy, or where religious boundaries and identities are unclear, contested or under threat from assimilationist pressures or rival religious communities. Certainly among communities of South Asian origin, religious identity plays a major role in community identity construction, although historically it is important to recognize that religion has been differentiated by caste (Ballard, 1994; Singh and Tatla, 2006).

By focusing on the Ravidassia community settled in the United Kingdom, this case study aims to bring out the multi-faceted involvement of such actors in transnational space. It focuses on the small but significant religious centre of a historically marginalized and socially excluded community and provides an insight into the relationships between religious values, ideas about equality and developmental activities. It tries to understand how new technologies of communication and transportation allow migrants to sustain more frequent but less expensive and more intimate relations with their relatives at home, that are qualitatively different than in earlier eras, and how strategies to combat 'inequality' perceived by a religious centre and its followers with transnational connections are translated into development projects. For the followers of the DSSDB, religion has been a salient factor in their lives, and the research demonstrates that they have used it as a resource, not only to make sense of their lives individually and socially, but also to claim an equal footing in public life in India, where the strategy of resorting to religion as a mobilizing force is well-established.

3 Religion, caste and Punjabi society

3.1 Caste in India

India is generally distinguished from other societies by the existence of caste. Derived from Hindu ideas rooted in pollution, purity, and social units of *jatis*, *varnas*, and *dharma*s, its roots can be traced to early Hindu sacred scriptures. Since its origins, this caste system has continuously held sway over the prevailing social structure, both covertly and overtly, in several realms of social intercourse. The essence of caste is *varna*, according to which Hindu society is divided into four orders: Brahman (priest and scholar), Kshatriyas (ruler and soldier), Vaishya (merchant) and Shudra (peasant labourer and servant). In this categorical division, the Brahman, Kashatriya and Vaishya are 'twice born' castes, while the Shudras are 'single' born. Outside these four *varnas* are the 'Untouchables'. This system, as it has evolved on the Indian subcontinent, divides society into more or less permanent groups that are specialized, hierarchically arranged and separated in matters of consumption, marriage, sex and ceremonies related to birth, marriage and death. By equating birth with a particular occupational structure, lower castes were relegated to the most menial and dirty jobs. Thus those dealing with dead animals or the removal of human dirt, for instance, occupied the lowest place in the social hierarchy and any contact with them was considered to be a source of pollution: they were called 'Untouchables'. Moreover, the Hindu scriptural and ideological superstructure, guarded by the highest ranking Brahmins, meant that the lowest strata accepted these degrading occupations as part of their *karma* in previous lives and tried to discharge their prescribed duties.

In contemporary India the number of 'Untouchables', nowadays referred to as Scheduled Castes (SCs) or Scheduled Tribes (STs) because of the affirmative action provisions afforded to them by the Indian constitution, is about 160 million, that is to say, almost one in every six persons. The practice of 'untouchability,' although widely shared by Hindus, varied considerably across different regions of India. It was more rigid in South India, where lower castes were denied entry to Hindu temples, sometimes had to shout or carry other signs while passing Brahmins, and faced severe penalties in the form of social boycotts or public or group humiliation if they transgressed the prescribed limits. This hierarchical order was never without its critics from both within the Hindu tradition itself and outside. For example, the Advaita philosopher Ramanuja⁴ questioned its legitimacy; and between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, various Bhakti saints challenged Hindu scriptural authority. Kabir and Ravidass, who were of low caste origins, and were associated with the Bhakti movement, offered a vigorous challenge to Brahmanic hegemonic discourse on caste, inviting the lower castes to expect religious salvation by proclaiming that God's path is open to all.

Not unexpectedly, caste has attracted a broad range of scholarship, which extends from texts relating to the Vedic religious sources underlying the caste system to contemporary commentaries and studies of the impact of caste practices. Among the areas that have been examined are: the subjugation of 'untouchables' in the pre-colonial era; the role of British colonialism in shaping the caste question by enquiring into the nature of 'Depressed', 'External', 'Exterior', or 'Untouchable' castes and establishing caste as a census category, thus contributing to the 'creation' of caste itself as an essential part of Indian civilization; the rise of caste as a matter for debate in the Indian nationalist struggle, leading to an historic confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi over the Poona Act of 1932, which thereafter provided for affirmative action by the state in favour of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes; the post-colonial debates about 'reservations policies' and the extension of affirmative action provisions (reservations) to 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs); the current debate about how 'reservations' culture has perpetuated and affected caste consciousness and promoted vested interests in backwardness; and the recent decision of the Government of India to reintroduce the enumeration of caste in the 2011 Census after seventy years.⁵

Today there is increasing resistance among the SC/STs/OBCs to upper caste oppression and a desire to re-write their own histories. This rising awareness is the result of democratization and 'reservations policies.' Bayly (1999, p.368) has noted that "although the Indian state by the 1980s was turning towards the Hindutva agenda, the central government had drafted many legislative policies to make the caste question politically and culturally relevant but economically less urgent." The subsequent policies of extending reservations to OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and the establishment of quotas for all representative bodies, such as village *panchayats* (councils), have meant that SCs/STs/OBCs are now fully part of the public arena at all levels, from the village to the national Parliament. This is also seen in the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), launched by a Punjabi Ravidassia, Kanshi Ram, in the 1980s as a new party for Dalits. The BSP made a big dent in Punjab politics, and three BSP members were elected to Parliament in the 1996 elections, all from the Doaba region, including Kanshi Ram himself. Although the subsequent showing of the BSP in Punjab has been unimpressive, it has established a strong base in India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, with Mayavati currently leading the State government.

All-Indian consciousness among Dalits as a result of the 'politicization of caste' varies between Indian provinces, particularly among non-Hindus - Muslims (14 per cent of India's population), Christians (2.7 per cent), Sikhs (1.9 per cent) and Buddhists (0.8 per cent). Ideologically Islam in India eschews caste practices, but increasingly Dalit Muslims are vocal about their continued marginalization even within the Muslim community (Mahajan and Jodhka, 2009). Significant numbers of lower castes have converted to Christianity and contemporary Buddhism is in practice largely a religion of formerly low caste Hindus, especially in Maharashtra, where Mahars were inspired by Ambedkar, who adopted Buddhism in 1956. While Sikhism offers no religious sanction for caste distinctions and discrimination, caste discrimination exists against some social groups amongst Sikhs in Punjab.

Studies of non-Hindu communities also highlight how provisions adopted by the postcolonial Indian state to tackle the issue of 'untouchability' – affirmative action with respect to access to jobs and educational establishments – have an extra dimension to them. Measures meant primarily to eradicate the disadvantages suffered by low caste Hindus have constrained non-Hindu disadvantaged groups while privileging the Hindu social system. For those on the borders of Hindu society, this has affected the boundary-making process, because the initial reservations, as has been noted above, were restricted to ex-Untouchables and Scheduled Tribes. Punjabi society, in which a large number of low caste groups have moved from Hinduism to Sikhism in a search to remove the stigma of untouchability, presents an interesting point of departure and provides an interesting contrast with other Indian states.

3.2 Punjab and caste

The position of caste in contemporary Punjab presents an interesting paradox of regional complexity. According to the 2001 Census, Sikhs constituted a majority (60 per cent), while Hindus formed 37 per cent, and the rest were Muslims (1.7 per cent), Christians (1.3 per cent) or Buddhists. The share of population designated as 'Scheduled Castes' was 28.8 per cent, nearly 7 million out of 22 million Punjabis, compared to an Indian average of 16 per cent. Of all the Indian states, Punjab has the highest proportion of SCs and the SC population has increased more rapidly than the population as a whole. However, the increased numbers of SCs are unevenly spread across Punjab's three regions of Majha, Malwa and the Doaba (see Table A2.1).

Table 1: A breakdown of Punjab's Scheduled Castes

Scheduled caste	1991	% of SCs	2001	% of SCs
Mazhabi	1,765,798	30.7	1,765,798	31.6
Chamar*	1,484,268	25.8	1,839,032	26.2
Ad Dharmi	915,098	15.9	1,045,126	14.9
Balmiki, Churha, Bhangi	640,210	11.1	785,464	11.2
Bazigar	162,804	2.8	208,442	3.0
Dumna, Mahasha, Doom	158,357	2.8	181,810	2.6
Megh	105,157	1.8	124,210	1.7
Sansi, Bhedkut, Manesh	81,062	1.4	105,337	1.5
Bauria, Bawarsia	78,429	1.4	102,232	1.5
Kabirpanthi, Julaha	65,028	1.1	73,705	1.1
Dhanak	57,997	1.0	66,646	1.0
Others**	322,099	5.6	407,665	5.8
Total	5,751,785	100.0	7,028,723	100.0

Source: *Census of India 1991, 2001*.

* Includes Jatia, Charmakar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, and Ravidassi.

** This includes 26 other castes whose numbers each form less than 1 per cent of Scheduled Castes population.

The official list of Punjab SCs consists of 37 separate caste groups (see Tables 1 and A2.2).⁶ Of these, four, namely the Mazhabis, Chamars, Ad Dharmis and Balmiks, account for over 80 per cent. If Balimiks and Mazhabis are considered one group, and Chamars and Ad Dharmis another – as generally done by sociologists – the two groups are almost equal in size. In the first group, Mazhabis are generally rural and consider themselves to be part of Sikh society, while Balmikis are usually urban and believe in Rishi Valmik – they are a different *sampradaya* (sect). Of the second group, Chamars are further divided into four or five sub-groups, among which Ramdassia are Sikhs, while others revere Guru Ravidass. There are also a large number of Ad Dharmis in the Doaba region who were influenced by the Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s (see below). They are generally a better-off section of SCs, especially in Jalandhar city, where they are known to monopolize the leather and tanning trade around the Boota Mandi area. An elegant Ravidass Mandir and a large Ambedkar Centre testify to their wealth and standing in the city. Kabir Panthis and Julahas profess Sikhism, revere Kabir and own much of the surgical industry in Punjab. Of the remaining castes, Bazigars are largely Sikhs, while Dumnas and others have a mixed religious orientation, with some considering themselves to be Sikhs and some Hindus, while others believe in indigenous gods, spirits and living saints. Meghs are

largely urbanites, while Kabirpanthis and Julahas are divided evenly between urban and rural areas (see also Table A2.3). In a significant note appended to the 2001 Census, it is stated that “SCs professing Sikhism account for 59.9 per cent followed by Hinduism (39.6 per cent). The remaining 0.5 per cent are followers of Buddhism. At the individual level, as many as 98.5 per cent of Mazhabis are Sikhs.”⁷

In terms of location, as already noted, Ad Dharmis live in the the Doaba region. Mazhabis are spread all over Punjab, with a concentration in the Majha area and the neighbouring south western Malwa districts. Chamars are the largest group in Ludhiana and are evenly spread amongst the south eastern districts. All Dumnas live in Gurdaspur district, which also has a substantial Christian population. Hoshiarpur district is exceptional in being a Hindu majority district in a Sikh-dominated State (see Table A2.1). Punjabi SCs are predominantly rural communities, with almost three quarters living in the countryside (see Table A2.3). As the majority of the Sikh population also lives in villages, a typical Punjabi village consists of Sikhs and SCs. Amongst Sikhs, Jats form a majority, so any discussion of SCs means that it is necessary to consider the question of Jat Sikhs versus SCs, or more precisely Jats as a landowning ‘dominant’ or ‘upper caste’ class *vis-a-vis* the landless .

SCs are generally on the lowest rung of the employment ladder. Historically, land meant power. Currently, fewer than four per cent of landholdings are held by SCs. Two of the largest of these groups (the Chamars and Mazhabis) have been working as farm labourers for generations. However, with the Green Revolution, the SCs have been moving away from farming to other occupations and trades. Currently less than 10 per cent of SCs work for Jat Sikhs, with most of the latter’s labour requirements supplied by migrant labourers from Bihar (Jodhka, 2002, 2004b, p. 71-73). Although the Green Revolution raised the incomes of all, the SCs gained less much than the Jat farmers (Gill, 2004). Nevertheless many SC families, in both rural and urban areas, have gained mobility and status through affirmative action provisions. Currently, the Punjab government employs nearly 200,000 SCs and OBCs in government and public sector undertakings. Social scientists even talk of a ‘creamy layer’ – an officer class of senior civil servants in the Punjab administration. Thus, the economic conditions of the Punjabi SCs have steadily improved and their dependence on farm labouring is decreasing at a very rapid rate.

3.3 Punjabi Scheduled Caste assertion

As in the rest of India, sociologists have noted a new assertive consciousness among Punjab's SCs. For some years, there was even talk of 'caste-wars' between the 'dominant caste' of Jats and the landless Punjabi SCs. Puri (2003) cited six cases of social boycotts of SCs in three years, including the case of Bhail village in Amritsar district, where there were reports of how a family was not allowed to cremate a dead woman in the common *shamshan ghat* (crematorium). Puri also cited Harinder Singh Khalsa, a member of National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who observed, "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*, 21 August 2001).

Although the level of violence against SCs in Punjab is still comparatively low, there have been more reports of tensions and confrontation in the last decade. With rising literacy and many SCs having attained professional positions, there is an increasing awareness of their comparative standing – a keenly felt position of being regarded as inferior by the intermediate class of Jats. More recently there have been confrontations between Jats and SCs at such places as Talhan (see below), and widespread violence in the wake of the murder of Sant Rama Nand in Vienna in May 2009 (see Section 6).

In general, the history of Jat-SC relations in Punjab has been fraught. At one extreme is the close camaraderie between Jat landlords and their SC labourers, who drink together in the evenings, have mutual social obligations and share a social life; at the other is the antagonistic relationship between Jat and SC men, with the latter regarded as no more than fodder for Jat farms, SC women always at a landlord's command, and SCs repeatedly humiliated and denied meaningful social intercourse. Although current conditions in Punjabi villages lend little credence to accusations of blatant discrimination, forced sexual relations or other excesses, there is a natural tendency to see the past as one of accumulated humiliation and discrimination. The subjective experience of SCs, therefore, is best understood as "humiliation not deprivation", as popularly attributed by Kanshi Ram.

3.4 Forms of contention and conflict in Punjab

In recent years caste conflicts in Punjab have arisen over the control and management of public places. Today, the contention is usually over existing religious places that are perceived to deny equality of opportunity, in terms of the control or management of shared or public institutions. In these circumstances, SC assertion takes the form of building a parallel institution, such as a *gurdwara*, a *janjghar* or a cremation ground. A new *gurdwara* built by SCs is often viewed as a necessary condition for ending Jat domination.

Figure 1: Map of Punjab



Although the above applies to Punjab generally, in the Doaba region (comprising the districts of Jalandhar, Kapurthala, Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahr - see Figure 1), such assertions have also taken the form of creating a *new* religious identity. Such movements are usually led by *deras* headed by particular *sants* (of which the DSSDB is the most recent example), though, as we shall see below, in the past Radhasoami and Ad Dharm were the most notable ones.⁸ Many large villages in this region have Ravidass or Balmiki temples and more recently a few Buddhist *viharas* (monasteries) too, their construction usually facilitated by funds from abroad. Comparatively, there are more *deras* in this region, preaching varieties of religious teaching that draw on both Hindu and Sikh traditions and the teachings of Ravidass, Kabir and Sufi saints, as well as other popular religious beliefs and traditions.

3.5 Sikhism and caste

The Sikh scriptures, which contain the writings of Nanak, his successors, and Kabir, Ravidass, Namdev and Sadna, contain striking criticism of the idea of caste. These writings are collected together in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. For example,

Nanak seeks the company of those who are of low caste among the lowly
Nay rather the lowest of the low
Why should he emulate the great and lofty?
Indeed, where the poor are respected, His grace reigns

Nanak and his successors were unequivocal in declaring that caste was irrelevant:

Worthless is caste and worthless an exalted name:
For all mankind there is but a single refuge

From Nanak onwards, the Sikh tradition undermined much of the textual and ideological framework of the Vedic and Sanskritic scriptural authority relating to the observation and practices of caste. Nanak and his successors forged a theology that incorporated social egalitarianism by inventing social conventions and institutions: the *sangat* – a community of devotees meeting in a *gurdwara* with its doors open to all *varnas* or castes; *langar* – a community kitchen producing food to be eaten together; and *Karah Prasad* – a food offering seen as a religious blessing that devotees, including the low castes, could make. Finally, in 1699, the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, established the institution of *Khalsa* – a brotherhood, with a distinct initiation ceremony that undermined the foundations of the Hindu caste order by requiring an initiate to undergo an *amrit* ceremony to drink from a common bowl.

These practices were aimed directly at ritual purity. The holy injunctions and intentions were clear: there was religious support for neither caste distinctions nor a caste/ birth-based priesthood.

Sikhism was soon embraced by large number of low caste people in Punjab. In particular Jats and those who belonged to the Shudra caste adopted the new faith in large numbers. In the first census enumerated by the British in 1881, Jats constituted nearly two thirds of Sikh society, artisans 12 per cent and SCs ('untouchables') 8 per cent. The Khattris, the caste to which all the Sikh gurus belonged, appeared as a small minority.

Table 2: Sikh castes in 1881

Agricultural castes	%	Trading and business castes	%	Artisan castes	%	Scheduled castes	%
Jats	66.0	Katri	2.2	Tarkhan	6.5	Chamar	5.6
Kamboh	1.7	Arora	2.3	Lohar	1.4	Churha	2.6
				Chhimba	1.0		
				Jheer	1.2		
				Nai	1.2		
				Rajput	1.1		
Total	67.3		4.5		12.4		8.2

Source: Marenco (1976). In 1881 there were 20 other Sikh castes with less than 1 per cent of the population. The total population of Sikhs was 1,706,909.

In theory all Sikhs were members of the Khalsa *panth* (community) but such equality was only asserted in the spiritual domain: caste hierarchy remained prevalent in other dimensions of Sikhs' social life (McLeod, 1975). As noted by Grewal (1997, p. 118), while "ideologically every Sikh was equal in the presence of the *Guru Granth Sahib*, in the *sangat* and the *langar* in the life outside, social differences were legitimised." Oberoi (1994), in an influential thesis, has pointed out that the reformist Singh Sabha movement at the end of nineteenth century 'reinvented Sikhism' by emphasising the *Khalsa* identity, with one of its main planks being that caste distinctions are irrelevant. While the ideal of equality among the Khalsa fraternity attracted an initial influx from the low castes, especially Chamars and Chuhars, often as result of the encouragement given by the colonial state to recruitment into the Indian Army, by the beginning of the 1920s, as the Censuses from 1881 to 1921 show, the

reform movement's appeal to these castes had lost its momentum.. By then, some of Punjab's lower castes were attracted to the appeal of a new religious movement, the Ad Dharm.

3.6 The Ad Dharm movement

The idea of Ad Dharm was articulated in 1925 by Mangoo Ram of Mugowal in Hoshiarpur district of Doaba, following his return from the USA. The material conditions for the social movement were created by colonial rule in Punjab, which accorded political representation in proportion to the size of religious communities and gave their representatives a share of jobs and limited political power. Mangoo Ram systematically set out the Ad Dharm objective: to establish a separate religious identity. A new greeting (*dhan guru dev*), a new *granth* (Ad Parkash) and *mantra* of *Sohang* were adopted. The Ad Dharm report listed ten basic principles, twelve duties and 56 commandments. Mangoo Ram advocated separate registration of the 'Ad Dharm' religion, claiming that it was the original religion of the indigenous people before they were uprooted by the invading Aryans. He sought to integrate existing religious institutions of the low castes, and visited Ravidassia *deras*, including Chak Hakkim and Ballan (Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 87). In the 1931 Census, 418,789 former 'untouchables' (nearly 80 per cent of the low caste population in the districts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur and one tenth of the total SC population of Punjab) recorded themselves as Ad Dharmis. In Jalandhar city, Ad Dharmis came to dominate the Boota Mandi area and have since played a major role in all the political and social activities of the SC community.

Despite its success, the Ad Dharm movement collapsed in the second half of the 1930s because its leaders were unable to adjust to the new patterns of politics defined by the Poona Pact (1932) and the Government of India Act (1935) - the latter formalizing political reservations for 'Untouchables' (SCs). From 1934 onwards, the SCs benefited from reservations in the civil service and politics became the main domain in which communities could assert their rights in the public sphere. The Ad Dharm was immediately faced with the need to change its nature. To allow its members to have access to reservations, it had to move from being a *religious* community to becoming a *political* entity. Its leaders tried to create a political party, but its entry into politics drew to the surface underlying tensions between the different leaders of the movement, among whom factionalism was rife. Moreover, rivalry between the Scheduled Caste Federation and the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab significantly weakened the latter:

The SC Federation had the advantage of being a national organization at a time when national politics in India was beginning to overshadow regional concerns. Even though village Untouchables may not have been very conscious of wider issues or appreciated the value of national organizations, the urban, educated people were sensitive to both, and recognized the importance of having a national spokesman. The Ad Dharm was caught in a bind. It had become too elitist, too political for the interests of the masses of lower caste villagers, but for the sophisticated and growing SC elite the movement was not political enough, and could never be viable on a national scale. So they turned more and more towards Ambedkar (Juergensmeyer, 1982, p. 162).

In addition to political failure, the Ad Dharm movement was caught in a paradox: by presenting itself as a new religion and specifically gravitating towards the Ravidassia community, it gained popularity, but failed to emerge as a popular front of Punjab's Dalits, especially the more numerous Churhas, whose elite founded its own spiritual path under the ancient saint Balmik. Thus the Ad Dharm failed in its unifying mission to such an extent that the term 'Ad Dharmi' is often used as a synonym for 'Chamar'.¹⁹

3.7 Contemporary Sikhism and SCs

Contemporary Sikh social structure has been transformed by the Green revolution. For Puri,

One manifest consequence of the new form of capitalist agriculture that privileged the big landowning entrepreneur was the rise of *Jatvaad*, signifying a Jat swagger based on power and arrogance...The Jats' ownership of most of the agricultural land in post-independence Punjab, their preponderant numerical strength in the Sikh community [about 65 per cent], and their concentration in rural areas [over 70 per cent of the rural population] determined their high status and their influence in the culture of the region. [Puri, 2010, p. xx-xxi]

Puri notes that "most of the Sikh values are Jat values" and further that "the growing emphasis on religious identity and communalization of politics around 'Sikh grievances' and 'Sikh demands' became a route to promotion of the Jats' economic and political power interests, leading to greater coercion of the lower castes in rural areas" (2010, p. xxi). In a further elaboration, Puri finds in the many separate *gurdwaras* erected by SCs a sense of resistance against Jat Sikhs' discrimination against them. Punjabi Dalits' search for alternative cultural spaces 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 Bhaniarawala, etc. or their turning to various other sants, and dargahs of Muslim Pirs" (Puri, 2003, p. 2700).

Ram (2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008) equates the popularity of *deras* in contemporary Punjab mainly to the exclusion of the SCs from Sikh institutions. He sees the “near exodus of dalits from Sikhism towards the alternative socio-spiritual space provided by the *deras*” (Ram, 2007, p. 4066). This in turn, he suggests, has invited “the hostility of clerics of the established mainstream religious order, who see it as a serious challenge to the Sikh-Khalsa identity” (2007, p. 4067). For Ram (2008), the DSSDB is an archetypal SC community struggling for a new religious identity.

An alternative explanation is offered by Hans, who regards SC Sikhs’ identity as a ‘duality’, wherein they do not deny their ‘Sikh’ identity but look toward an additional dimension: ‘dalit’ as a collective and wider shared identity. Hans indicates that the attitude of Punjabi SCs towards Sikhism is that:

They are proud of their both or multiple identities. They seem to be aware that Sikhism had/has played an important role for their ancestors as well as their own lives though there is disenchantment with the turn Sikhism has taken (Hans, 2008, p. 9).

More recent evidence from Jodhka (2000), who undertook a large scale study of social relations between Jat Sikhs and SCs in several villages, shows clear evidence of abuse of power by landowning Jats against SCs and also marked resistance by SCs to this subordination. This was expressed in several ways: through building separate places of worship, abandoning agricultural labouring jobs, and generally dissociating themselves from the subordinate functions that they had previously carried out. He labelled the Jat Sikh discriminatory practices as “prejudice without pollution”, as these have no endorsement or sanction in Sikhism, and proposed a three-fold process of social change among Punjabi SCs: ‘dissociation,’ ‘distancing’ and ‘autonomy’ (Jodhka, 2004b). Sharp occupational changes among the low castes, who were abandoning traditional occupations generally associated with birth, he called ‘dissociation’, which was accompanied by ‘distancing’, as SCs avoided agricultural labour. Their expressions of ‘autonomy’ took the form of establishing separate religious institutions.¹⁰ Thus generally, Jodhka sees the confrontation of Jats and SCs in the countryside as an assertion of autonomy on the part of SCs. He concluded that “the way the caste system is working today in Punjab has nothing to do with hierarchy but is related to power and identity” (2004b, p. 189).

Jodhka interprets the first significant manifestation of SC assertion in Talhan, a village near Jalandhar, in June 2003 as a power struggle. Here the dispute took a characteristic form, of Jat Sikhs’ opposition

to the sharing of a religious shrine with Ad Dharmis (Jodhka and Prakash, 2003). The dispute led to serious tensions and was resolved after considerable diplomacy involving the state authorities and, significantly, the intervention of the British Ravidassia diaspora. Similarly, writing in the aftermath of Vienna incident, Jodhka (2009a, p. 79) observed that while “caste is certainly an important source of social dissension in Punjab and a reason for the Ravidassias to evolve an autonomous religious identity...this phenomenon cannot be seen as developing into an antagonistic relationship with contemporary Sikhism.” He termed the street violence that followed the death of a senior Ravidassia religious leader an ‘assertion’ of Ravidassia political strength and a statement of their united identity rather than a case of ‘caste conflict.’ Indeed, Jodhka cautions that the event has been “misinterpreted by the popular media” (*ibid*).

Finally, a major recent study by Judge and Bal (2009), based on a large sample of 800 SCs from the two districts of Jalandhar and Amritsar, analyses the changing social status of SCs in Punjab. Of 37 Punjab castes, the study selected seven, which were studied by identifying educational and occupational change over the generations, empowerment (defined by participation in formal political institutions such as village panchayats, municipal committees and the state legislative assembly), migration and entrepreneurship. In conclusion the authors point to the “paradox of change among the dalits”.

Contrary to largely held views that the upper castes perpetuate caste inequality through the exercise of power, it has been found that the dalits are asserting their caste identity in the public sphere. They are equally against inter-caste marriages. Some of the dalit castes insist on their identity. If the lowest of the low tend to perpetuate caste, then, it is not plausible to argue that social mobility should be understood in terms of the shift from birth-ascribed status to the achieved status... The politics of identity, emergence of class inequality within the scheduled castes and existence of caste hierarchy are stifling any struggle for the end of the caste (2009, p. 217-18).

This study also cautions against drawing the conclusion that “a separate gurdwara ...is a consequence of exclusion” (*ibid*, p.192). As well as challenging and competing with Jat Sikhs’ version of Sikhism, there are many among the SCs who continue to practise traditional forms of worship, devoting their lives to various saints or *deras*.

4 Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan: religious transnationalism and development initiatives

This section provides a brief history of the DSSDB, a religious shrine which has gained particular prominence in recent decades. It is one of several *deras* in the Doaba region where followers are overwhelmingly Ravidassias. The Dera became the focus of media attention when one of its much revered *sants* was killed in Vienna in May 2009 (see Section 6), but had already gained an eminent position due to its large overseas following, especially in Britain. The support of the Ravidassia diaspora to the Dera has enabled it to expand its activities beyond 'religious services' to several kinds of 'development initiative.' This section provides a brief history of the Dera and some of the activities supported by its overseas followers.

4.1 The Dera

Ballan is located about two kilometres from the main Jalandhar-Pathankot highway (about twelve kilometres from Jalandhar city). As one crosses the bridge over a small canal on the western side of Ballan village, a nucleus of buildings appear, which are locally known as Dera Sant Sarwan Dass of Ballan. The complex is comprised of an original small shrine, a *langar* hall, a dispensary, several other rooms and a yard. The main entrance to the Dera is a four storey residential building for guests who wish to stay overnight. The shrine has seen much expansion in recent years, with the construction of an elegant congregational hall and an eye hospital, largely financed by the Dera's British, European and Northern American followers.

Despite the police check-points at the entrance (established following the events in Vienna in 2009), visitors continue to arrive from morning until late for *darsan* of Sant Niranjana Dass – the current head (*gaddi-nashin*) and fifth in a succession of *sants* since Baba Pipal Dass, who settled in Ballan in 1902. The credit for establishing the Dera and its reputation are mainly attributed to Sant Sarwan Dass, younger son of Baba Pipal Dass (1927 to 1972). He expanded the small cottage built by his father and started preaching the message of Ravidass, which attracted many low castes, mostly SCs from Ballan and the neighbouring region. By the 1950s, Sant Sarwan Dass was well known as a *sant* and DSSDB followers from the locality and Dera Chak Hakima at Phagwara became the nucleus for propagating Guru Ravidass as the saviour of the low castes. As Ram (2009, p. 14) writes:

Under the stewardship of *sant* Sarwan Dass, a true emissary of Guru Ravidass, dissemination of the bani of Guru Ravidass and the proliferation of the Ravidassia faith became one of the most important missions of the Dera...The *sants* of the Dera Ballan

have meticulously kept *sant* Sarwan Dass' legacy of spreading the mission of Guru Ravidass intact...Moreover, they have also generated a sense of cohesive belongingness among the Punjab Dalit diaspora as well.

4.2 DSSDB, Guru Ravidass and the *sampardaya*

In the recent literature published by the DSSDB, there is an emphasis on describing the Dera as part of the Ravidass *sampardaya*, in which Ravidass is described as the founder of a new religious tradition and referred to as Guru Ravidass. The term *sampradaya* describes “an endless transmission from one spiritual master to another in terms of doctrine, as well as social and religious organization based on this particular doctrine, to perpetuate it” (Clémentin-Ojha, 1990, p. 19). As is well-known, Ravidass was one of the protagonists of the mediaeval *bhakti* movement of northern India. Saints of this movement generally belonged to the lower castes: Kabir (Julâhâ), Namdev (Chhîmba) and Ravidass (Chamar). They rejected the idea of untouchability as an imaginary construction that had been imposed by Brahmins and propagated a devotion to God that was open to all castes.

Ravidass is now considered as the founder of their spiritual lineage by the religious heads of DSSDB, irrespective of the difficulty in finding out how and when the cults devoted to Ravidass in Punjab began. In the *Life and Works of Ravidas*, Callewaert and Friedlander (1992) highlight the difficulties in obtaining an accurate history of Ravidass himself, as well as various sects and followers in different regions of India. The many versions of the hymns attributed to Ravidass add a further complication. In books published by the DSSDB, various writers have endeavoured to demonstrate that the *sampradaya* itself was started by Ravidass. In one account, it is held to have been transmitted through Baba Sri Chand, elder son of Guru Nanak, to spiritual masters of the Udasi lineage, and then to the contemporary *sants* of Ballan. The DSSDB *sants* have fixed the birth date of Ravidass in the month of Magh (January-February) of 1377 CE. Of his many writings available in other regions of India, 40 *shabads* (hymns) and a *slok* (couplet) preserved in the Sikh scripture are taken to be the most authentic. In a hymn, Ravidass himself recalls his background as:

People of my caste remove dead animals daily around the city of Banaras.
Because of your name (O Lord) people of even high caste bow before me.
(*Adi Granth*, p. 1293)

Another oft-quoted hymn, *Begampura*, has found as much favour with Ravidass followers as with Sikh theologians. It promotes a political ideal of an egalitarian society:

The regal realm with the sorrowless name
 They call it Begampura (without grief)
 a place with no pain
 No taxes, or cares, none owns property there,
 No wrongdoing, worry, terror or torture.
 Oh my brother, I've come to take it as my own
 My distant home, where everything is right
 That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
 Where none are third or second
 All are one.....
 (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 2004, p. 213).

In Punjab, Ravidass' hymns have been sung as part of the Sikh scripture for over five centuries. Various hagiographic accounts of Ravidass place him alongside Kabir. He is said to have met Guru Nanak in Benaras at Guru Bagh and Mirabai is said to be one of his disciples and Ramanand is cited as his master, though many scholars differ with this assumption. What seems certain is that Ravidass belonged to the Chamar caste and was born near Varanasi. Many historians of the Bhakti movement have narrowed down the Ravidass era to between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries. However, as pointed out by Hawley and Juergensmeyer, an accurate life history is not as important as myth, as history is often "forged by communities that want to shape it" (Hawley and Juergensmeyer, 2004).

The Chamars of Punjab (SCs identified with leather work and weaving) have long adopted Ravidass as a favourite saviour. When and how this process started is difficult to establish. Both Ibbeston (1883) and Briggs (1920) cite evidence of Ravidass followers in late nineteenth century Punjab. Briggs notes that "a considerable amount of legendary matter has arisen concerning him, and in some legends an effort is made to give him a respectable ancestry" (Briggs, 1920, p. 208). Briggs narrates four different legends about 'Rae Das' that portray him as a follower of the high caste Brahman saint, Ramananda, and summarizes Ravidass' life and popularity in Punjab as follows:

Rae Das, who was born in Benares late in the fifteenth century, came under the influence of the great Ramananda and afterwards became the founder of a widespread religious movement. He was a monotheist, following the general lines of his master's teaching, and of even purer faith than Kabir. The influence of his teachings has been sufficiently great to give him the place of a teacher (Brahmachari) in the Bhakat mala

(lives of Vishnu saints). Followers of Rae Das, amongst whom are a great many Chamars, are found all over the Provinces. Many Chamars prefer to be known as Rae Dasis. Members of the sect are very numerous in the Punjab also, especially in Gurgaon, Rohtak, and Delhi Districts, where they are all Chamars. In those areas they have increased considerably in numbers during the last twenty years. In Gujarat they are known as Ravi Dasis (Briggs, 1920, p. 210).

Bharti (2003) lists over sixty *deras* in the Doaba region that are led by various *sants* following this Bhakti tradition, the majority of which preach the Ravidass doctrine. Thus, for example, Sikandarpur and Chabbewal in the district of Hoshiarpur were early Ravidass propagation centres. At Sikandarpur, the first Ravidass Mandir was built, with overseas support. Chabbewal pioneered a Ravidass Dramatic Club which performed dramas in the countryside to propagate the Ravidass' message. Of the Doaba *deras*, most are located in the district of Hoshiarpur, followed by Jalandhar, while another twenty are scattered across other parts of Punjab.

By the 1920s, Ballan and Chak Hakima had made their mark as two *deras* of the Ravidass tradition in the district of Jalandhar. As Juergensmeyer (1988, p. 87) noted, Mangoo Ram, the leader of the Ad Dharm movement, visited *Sant* Hira Dass in Hakim Chak village and Baba Pipal Dass in Ballan to seek their cooperation. *Sant* Hira Dass, besides writing the first comprehensive biography of Ravidass, had travelled widely to Hardwar, Kanshi, Rishikesh and other Hindu holy centres. By 1945, the Ravidass Dera Chak Hakim had become a major mobilization centre for Scheduled Castes and it was the venue for meetings and conferences during the 1950s and early 1960s. The Maharajah of Kapurthala donated twenty acres of land near the Plahi-Phagwara Road to this *dera*. When the Republican Party unit of Punjab organized a 'cycle march' in 1964, 101 volunteers started the march from this *dera* to Delhi. Dera Hakim Chak was also the first *dera* to allow Ambedkarites a religious platform in Punjab. However, by the 1970s, the DSSDB had overtaken Chak Hakim in popularity through the teaching of Sant Sarwan Dass.

4.3 The Sant lineage at Ballan

As noted above, the DSSDB was founded by Baba Pipal Dass, father of Sant Sarwan Dass, when he decided to settle at Ballan in the early years of the twentieth century. The life and legacy of Sant Sarwan Dass is described in several books and pamphlets written in Punjabi, Hindi and English and published by the Dera's own publishing house. This literature usually carries an endorsement or a

blessing by the Ballan *sants*. These hagiographic accounts cite the oral narratives of devotees, with miraculous stories about each *sant*. This assimilation of intimate memories in what is perceived as the history of this particular sect strengthens the identification of devotees with the DSSDB organization. It also provides an important source of authority for DSSDB's *sants*. While each *sant*'s distinct achievements are listed, there is much emphasis on the eminence of Sant Sarwan Dass, who is commemorated through more photographs and institutions being named after him than the other *sants*.

These hagiographic pamphlets start with Baba Pipal Dass, offering life sketches of succeeding *sants*. Baba Pipal Dass, whose former name was Harnam Dass, belonged to village of Gill Patti in the Bathinda district of Punjab. Pipal Dass' wife passed away, leaving him with two young sons. Baba Pipal Dass' religious inclination led him to abandon the village. Accompanied by his younger son, Sarwan Dass, he sought 'truth' by roaming from village to village, on the way offering help to the poor and ill. On his son's insistence, Baba Pipal Dass settled at Ballan village, where he lived in a *kacha* (mud) cottage. Although illiterate, he sent his son to the Udasi *dera* of Sant Karta Nand at Kishangarh to receive proper religious teaching, including the learning of Sanskrit.¹¹

Table 3: The Sants of DSSDB

Sant		Pontificate
Pipal Dass	(b Gill Patti, Bathinda ? -)	? -1927
Sarwan Dass	(b Gill Patti, Bathinda, 1895)	1927-1972
Hari Dass	(b Garha, Jalandhar, 1895)	1972-1982
Garib Dass	(b Jalbhea, Jalandhar, 1925)	1982-1994
Niranjan Dass	(b Alawalpur, 1945)	1994-

Source: Various published accounts by DSSD Ballan

Figure 2: Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan



Source: Mr S.R.Heer, DSSB

Baba Pipal Dass passed away in 1927 and his son succeeded him. During his long leadership, from 1927 to 1972, Sant Sarwan Dass became well known in the Doaba region. A village farmer, Hazara Singh, was so impressed by the *sant* that he donated land for the Dera. Sant Sarwan Dass took a keen interest in village children's education by running a *pathshala* (school). He undertook several tours to Hindu holy places and preached far and wide in the Doaba region. In 1948, accompanied by Giani Bishna Ram, Faqir Singh, Swaran Singh, Niranjana Singh Hothimal, Puran Singh Beas and

Bhagat Singh Madh, he was persuaded by Nama Ram Dihana to meet Dr Ambedkar in Delhi. He also became an accomplished herbalist, offering ayurvedic treatment to the sick. He passed away on June 11, 1972 and was succeeded by Sant Hari Dass and then by Sant Garib Dass in 1982. The latter expanded the Dera and widened its network of followers. A gate was built on the main road leading to Ballan village and named the Sant Sarwan Dass Memorial Gate. Sant Garib Dass, who was a disciple of Sant Sarwan Dass, opened a small dispensary in memory of his master at Dheypur Koopur, Adda Kathar. In 1984, Sant Garib Dass, as part of his mission, expanded the dispensary. In the next four years Sant Garib Dass undertook five visits to the UK and extended his itinerary to North America. These visits enabled the DSSDB to provide pastoral support to its growing body of overseas followers and establish more formal networks in the diaspora.

In July 1994, after the passing of Sant Garib Dass, Sant Niranjana Dass became the fifth head of DSSDB. He has made many improvements to the shrine at Ballan (Fig. 2) by expanding facilities for the *langar* and building a four storey building in which visiting overseas devotees can stay. He has further strengthened the Dera's transnational connections by undertaking visits to his British and other overseas followers. During one of his visits, a charitable trust was registered in Britain, followed by another in Canada. As a result of these efforts and the close cooperation of overseas followers, the present incumbent has completed several projects started by his predecessors and has started some new ones.

Figure 3: Shri Guru Ravidass Satsang Bhawan, Ballan



Source: Mr S.R.Heer, DSSB

On 14 January 2004, Sant Niranjan Dass also inaugurated a new congregational hall, reputed to be the largest in Punjab (220 by 180 feet), with facilities for 15,000 devotees (Fig. 3). Within the hall, the Dera has facilities for broadcasting a weekly programme on the government-controlled Doordarshan television channel. In addition to supervising the addition of several buildings around the main shrine, Sant Niranjan Dass has continued to develop and expand the Dera's connections in the surrounding region.

4.4 Linkages across the region

The DSSDB has inspired the establishment of many *deras* in the Doaba region and beyond. According to reports in the *Begampura Shahar*, twelve *deras* were established in 2005, eight in 2006 and a further seven added in 2007. In addition, some welfare trusts are in the process of being established, mainly through the assistance of overseas Ravidassias. A Guru Ravidass Welfare Trust was registered in Nawanshahar in 2005 under the patronage of Sant Rama Nand. Besides holding regular congregations, it provides embroidery training for rural students, and some 650 girls have taken advantage of its facilities. A Guru Ravidass Mission Parchar Sanstha, Jalandhar, was registered in 2007, which distributes literature relating to Guru Ravidass' life and *bani* (sayings) and organizes religious classes for students, with provision for examinations conducted by the Mission.

The DSSDB, moreover, has sought to extend its patronage and fraternity to other *deras* across Doaba, in other parts of Punjab and a few in other states of India. Bharti (2003) lists the *sants* of several such places which have either been assisted by Ballan *sants* or had some understanding and communication with them, including Swami Gurdip Giri of Kangra (Himachal Pradesh), Sant Bhagwan Dass of Nagar near Phillour (Jalandhar) and Sant Harcharan Dass of Jejon (Hoshiarpur). At Passiwal, near Nangal town in the district of Ropar, Sant Gopala Dass was formally nominated to the Ravidass *mandir* by Sant Garib Dass of Ballan, who organizes eye camps for the needy. Similarly, at Phaglwana village, a Ravidass *mandir* was built with Sant Ballan's assistance.

The DSSDB has also assisted in setting up *Ravidassia sabhas* (associations) across Punjab. Such *sabhas* were opened recently at Chandigarh, Mohali and Panchkula. Significantly, these new *sabhas* are being managed by retired SC IAS or IPS officers.¹² Overseas Ravidassias have played a crucial role in establishing Ravidass temples in the above three cities as well as Patiala.

4.5 DSSDB: ethics, followers and activities

Like other religious shrines in Punjab, the DSSDB organizes three kinds of activities: *simran* (meditation), *satsang* (religious congregation) and *seva* (selfless service). *Seva* is an ethical notion that is shared and understood by all the religious traditions of India. It means the upkeep of a *dera*, personal devotion to *sants* and making donations for the common causes of the community. In turn, the *sant* offers spiritual solace, counsel, solutions to personal problems and occasionally material help. Additionally, the *sant* oversees a number of welfare activities carried out by *sevadars* (those who serve), some of whom are permanent residents at the Dera, including the destitute and others without support. The daily routine of the Dera involves such activities as cooking and serving the *langar*, cleaning, washing and maintaining the Dera; welcoming, caring and arranging accommodation for visitors; and so on. Besides preaching of Guru Ravidass' message through the personal sermons of several *sants*, the material available at the Dera's bookstore includes many kinds of CDs. Thus the DSSDB, like other religious shrines in Punjab, can be seen as a large redistribution centre gathering diverse resources from its followers and distributing them through various philanthropic channels for community development.

In addition to religious preaching, several activities of a 'developmental' kind have been undertaken by the Dera. Indeed, the DSSDB has always been more than a mere religious centre, as its earlier relationship with the Ad Dharm movement demonstrates. Even though it eschewed an explicit political agenda, Sant Sarwan Dass wished to build many aspects of what Juergensmeyer calls *qouamic* (community) aspects of the Ravidassia community. Accordingly, the Sant took a keen interest in building institutions for the community of his followers, which he thought were essential to its sense of self-worth and sense of equality. He was keen to build a fitting memorial to Guru Ravidass at his birthplace in Kanshi, although this ambition remained unfulfilled at that time. He also kept a small dispensary prescribing herbal and ayurvedic remedies and would have liked to expand this facility for the poor, who could not afford expensive medical treatment. Similarly, he was very keen on providing better educational facilities for the poor section of the community, teaching pupils at his *pathshala*. He used to say "without proper education, it is denying them the right to life." In a combined effort with other local *deras*, Sant Sarwan Dass also contributed to establishing the Bhagwan Ravidass Ashram Nirmala Chhanui at Hardwar, and over the years provided help to nearby institutions, including the local High School at Ballan, a primary school at Raipur-Rasulpur, the Shri Guru Ravidass High School,

Jalandhar, the Arts and Crafts Training College, Jalandhar, and the Shri Guru Ravidass Technical College.

4.6 From religious *seva* to development initiatives

Sant Sarwan Dass' successors took up some of the tasks left by their master and added a few more of their own. In these efforts, the successor *sants* were helped by the increasing popularity of the DSSDB across the region. Large donors are encouraged by the *sants*, who regularly honour them for doing *seva*. Such 'worldly' recognition includes appropriate plaques. With an increase in the number of Dera followers, there has been a corresponding increase in *sevadars* and administrators: besides religious personnel, there are several *brahmachârin* (religious students), who have chosen to dedicate their lives to supporting the *sants* of DSSDB and live in the Dera premises.

By the 1980s, the forging of close ties between the DSSDB and overseas Ravidassias meant that more resources became available for developmental works.¹³ By this time a significant Ravidassia diaspora had emerged in the UK, elsewhere in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand. With increasing donations from this diaspora, in 1983 Sant Garib Dass approved the setting up of the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust (SSDCHT) (for a description of the work of the hospital, see Section 4.7). This was registered under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA 1976) with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, which allows it to receive foreign donations. The SSDCHT consists of seven members: besides two donors of land, there are five working or retired civil servants. Among its administrators, Mr S. R. Heer occupies a strategic position as General Secretary. The formation of the trust has meant transparency for new donors, while the presence of a *sant* figure provides assurance that donations will be used for the Ravidassia community's causes:

When someone gives Maharaj Ji a million or just one dollar for building something, they know it is going for right cause, will be used and become an instrumental to raise our community. Before this, to whom could we give our money? I cannot give my money to a Sikh gurdwara, neither to a Radhasoami dera, nor to Nirankaris because they are not going to do anything for me or us! Maharaj Ji is doing something for the community, so people see DSSDB as an outlet to express their frustration, of not being able to do for Ravidassias for a thousand years. Besides, with Maharaj Ji we are sure that the things will get done (Ravidassia representative, interviewed 7 September, 2007, Vancouver).

When the resolution to build a *mandir* at the birthplace of Guru Ravidass was revived, the Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Public Charitable Trust (SGRJAPCT) was also registered, with its head office at Ballan and a branch at Varanasi. Like the SSDCHT, this trust was registered under the FCRA Act (1976) and under section 88A for income tax purposes. The SGRJAPCT has managed the construction of four other religious places: Shri Guru Ravidass Mandir Hadiabad, Phagwara; Baba Pipal Dass Mandir, Bathinda; Shri Guru Ravidass Mandir, Sirsagarh (Haryana); and Shri Guru Ravidass Mandir, Katraj, Pune (Maharashtra).

Both Trusts have received donations from India and abroad. The SSDCHT has managed the development of the hospital at Adda Kathar and also a new eye hospital at Ballan. According to the Secretary of SSDCHT, Mr Heer, foreign contributions have been crucial to DSSDB's developmental projects.

It is true that nothing much will happen without the contribution of foreign donors. There is no doubt without receiving donations from outside you can't afford such projects.

Donations from India are regular but these come only in small denominations (Interview with Mr Heer, 31st August 2009, Adda Kathar, Jalandhar District).

This can be seen from the data available from the SSDCHT accounts for the last few years. More than half of the total funds of the trust have come from overseas donors (see Table 4). Considerable fluctuations in the volume of foreign donations are probably due to the *sants'* visits abroad, as well as the way donations are collected and deposited in the Trust.¹⁴

Table 4: Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust: public donations (Rupees)

Donations received					
Year	Local	Foreign contributions			Total
		Institutional	Individual	FC Total	
2004-05	12 017 400	4 310 453	3 093 268	7 403 721	19 421 121
2005-06	917 601	4 375 630	1 289 100	5 664 730	6 582 331
2006-07	7 413 954	4 729 169	1 993 266	6 722 435	14 136 389
2007-08	3 649 056	5 453 575	877 569	6 331 144	9 980 200
2008-09	2 953 361	1 584 570	1 370 724	2 955 294	5 908 655

Source: Mr Heer, General Secretary, SDDCHT.

The two Trusts have undertaken several religious and developmental projects and have others in hand. These are briefly outlined below. Among the more prestigious projects is an impressive Mandir at Varanasi, as a fitting memorial at the birthplace of Ravidass. Initiated by Sant Sarwan Dass, subsequent *sants* agreed that it should be completed.

4.7 The Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir at Varanasi

According to the hagiography of the DSSDB, Sant Sarwan Dass sent some of his followers in search of the birthplace of Ravidass, in Varanasi. Because a vision of the place appeared to him in a dream, he was able to describe to his followers the exact location they had to find. After a long search, they identified it near Banaran Hindu University, near Seer Goverdhan village. Sant Sarwan Dass had dreamed of a great *mandir*, which would serve as a place of pilgrimage for all the devotees of Ravidass. He sent Sant Hari Dass to the site and the foundation stone of the *mandir* was laid on June 16th 1965. The first phase of the *mandir* was completed in 1972 and statues of Guru Ravidass and Sant Sarwan Dass were installed in it. The second phase of the building was completed by Sant Garib Dass, and with the backing of prosperous overseas Ravidassias, the imagined grandeur of the spiritual home of the DSSDB soon turned into reality (Fig. 4).

At Seer Goverdhanpur, Sant Garib Dass supervised the completion of the first storey of the temple and later added a *klash* at the top of the dome. He also started regular pilgrimages to Kanshi from Ballan, taking followers on a train that was later named the Begampura Express. In June 1994, when the temple in Seer Goverdhanpur was nearly complete, Sant Garib Dass asked overseas followers to attend a special festival in Varanasi. A special aircraft was chartered by 300 followers from the UK for this visit. Keeping in view the expanding network of overseas followers, Sant Garib Dass also launched a weekly journal *Begampura* in 1991 and established a publications office in Jalandhar city.

Figure 4: Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir, Seer Goverdhanpur, Varanasi



Source: Mr S.R. Heer

Figure 5: Shri Guru Ravidass Gate at Lanka Chauraha, Varanasi



Source: Mr S.R.Heer

Since the completion of the *mandir*, work has continued to beautify it. Extensive facilities are being provided to increase the number of pilgrims: a four storey accommodation building has been added recently. A golden *kalsh* was installed by Kanshi Ram, founder of the BSP, followed by a mammoth gate largely financed by the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (UK) (SSDCT-UK) (see Fig. 5). This was duly inaugurated by the President of India, Mr. R. K Narayanan, on 16 July 1998.¹⁵ The Uttar Pradesh government, under the BSP chief minister Ms Mayawati, has capitalized on the growing popularity of the *mandir*, for example by constructing a special *ghat* on the bank of Ganga River and renaming the adjoining bridge Sri Guru Ravidass Setu (bridge).

4.8 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital

As noted in Section 4.3, the origins of the Sant Sarwan Dass hospital go back to 1982 when, to commemorate the memory of Sant Sarwan Dass, Sant Garib Dass established a small dispensary in Dheypur Kapoor, Adda Kathar. The land for the project was donated by Seth Beli Ram and Seth Raj Mal, two followers of the Dera. The dispensary was expanded to an eight-bed hospital in 1984. In 1985, as result of generous donations by the UK Ravidassia *sangat* during Sant Garib Dass' visit to the UK, the Dera was able to convert the dispensary into a hospital. During his subsequent visits, Sant Garib Dass' mission was to mobilize more funds and a new building was inaugurated as the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital on 6th February 1992. Since then there has been continuous expansion of its premises and the purchase of new equipment, such as an auto-analyzer for the laboratory, an ultra-sound scanning system and cardiac monitors for critical heart patients. A UK follower donated an X-ray machine and an ambulance was sent by Ravidassia *sangat* in Wolverhampton. Recent extensions include a new block, ten private rooms, an intensive care unit, an emergency ward and a new out-patients department.

Figure 6: Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Adda Kathar



Source Mr S.R. Heer

The hospital has become one of the major providers of health care in the region, with three operating theatres and a capacity of 150 beds. It now has departments of medicine, general surgery, dentistry, orthopaedics, eyes, ENT, gynaecology and paediatrics, along with an emergency and intensive care unit with over a dozen doctors in attendance. The number of employees exceeds 100 and the current annual outlay is Rs. 15 million. With running costs of nearly Rs 1.2 million per month, the hospital is said to sustain a loss of 25 per cent. Patients' fees cover only part of the running costs, the rest being met from public donations to the DSSDB. According to Mr Heer, charges for medical services are determined by two principles: they should be affordable, and donations should not, if possible, be used for running costs.

At DSSDB's hospitals, fees are nominal compared to those prevailing in the market. For instance, an operation that costs Rs. 5,000 in this hospital may cost Rs. 10,000 at Hoshiarpur, perhaps Rs. 25,000 in Jalandhar, and even more in Ludhiana. The Trust normally keeps the hospital charges about half the rates of those in the market, in some cases it is just one third or even less. The idea is to benefit the people (Interview with Mr Heer, 31 August 2009 Adda Kathar, Jalandhar District).

Some patients are given free medicines and others can be exempted from charges. The power to give such concessions rests with a nominated trustee. If they need extra help, patients have to see the Sant: *"When Sant Niranjana Dass agrees to the concession, he gives some advance money to the hospital in order to meet the cost of the treatment"* (Interview with Mr Heer, 31 August 2009).

A small survey of patients in Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital in August 2009 by Charlene Simon revealed that the DSSDB's hospital plays a much wider role than just helping the poorest population of Doaba. Admission to the hospital is open to all irrespective of caste or social background. Of fourteen patients interviewed, two were Jats, eight from Scheduled Castes, two were Hindus, one a member of an OBC and one a Christian. Such religious/caste diversity was confirmed by the doctors. Dr Rahul Gupta, himself a Hindu, observed that about half the patients come from the SCs, the rest are other social groups.¹⁶ Patients generally lauded the quality of the services of the hospital. One patient remarked *"It's not a question of money; if I come here it is in order to get good health services"* and several patients shared this view. Another patient had come for a facility that was unavailable at nearby hospitals.¹⁷

4.9 Sant Sarwan Dass Model School, Phagwara

A school was founded to celebrate the memory of Sant Sarwan Dass as a teacher. Located in the Hadiabad area of Phagwara, the Sant Sarwan Dass Model School is adjacent to the Shri Guru Ravidass Mandir and both were completed under the guidance of Sant Niranjn Dass. The Mandir is a three storey building that cost over Rs. 6.5 million. It was handed over to the Sants of DSSDB with the symbolic gesture of handing over a gold key weighing one kilogramme, which Mr. Brij Lal, who with his family had donated the land for the School, had brought from Birmingham in the UK where they live (Fig. 8).¹⁸ Mr. Brij Lal is one of the largest donors to the Dera, and the gift of land on which the school stands represents one of the biggest endowments received by the DSSDB. Besides donating approximately 2.5 acres of land for the school, he also gave about 1.5 acres of land for the future development of the Mandir and its surroundings. The cost of the land he donated was about Rs. 30 million at the time, although it is now estimated to be worth three times that. Mr. Brij Lal also donated generously for the construction and purchase of buses for the School. Construction began in 2002 and pupils were admitted in 2004 (Fig. 7). The school is maintained by SSDCHT (see above), with Sant Niranjn Dass as its chairman, while its daily management was overseen by the late Sant Rama Nand.

Figure 7: Sant Sarwan Dass Model School, Phagwara



Source Mr S.R.Heer

Figure 8: Sant Niranjan Dass and Sant Rama Nand on the occasion of receiving donation of land from Brij Lal and his wife Mr Debo.



Source: Mr S.R. Heer

Currently, the school provides classes from nursery to 12th standard and is affiliated to the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education, New Delhi) . The total investment in the school has been nearly Rs. 40 million and it has an annual budget of 8 million rupees. Its infrastructure consists of 36 rooms, an assembly hall, a digital lab, a computer lab, 4 other labs, a library, an exhibition hall and utility rooms, and it employs 40 teachers for 1000 students. The school also operates school buses to collect pupils from their homes.

Like the hospital, administrators regularly evaluate the school's record and ensure access for poor sections of the community. Mrs Jessy, Coordinator of the School, believes pupils' performance is comparable to other private schools in the state. Teachers are reminded of the school's ethos of imparting quality education to children from poor families.¹⁹ Several teachers reported that the majority

of pupils are from poor homes, but noted that this affects their learning. For example, pupils from a poor background initially experience difficulties with the English medium education provided by the school.²⁰

Although the reach and limited number of pupils at this school is unlikely to make much of a dent in the underprovision of educational opportunities for disadvantaged pupils, its senior administrator emphasized the trust's realistic approach:

We don't claim to be able to reduce poverty or to have a great impact on development. Our contribution is small but whatever we can do, we are trying our best to do it. It's better than nothing! (Interview with Mr S. R. Heer by C. Simon, Jalandhar, 31 August 2009).²¹

This pragmatism was also apparent in discussions with staff in the hospital and school.²² The school operates a graded fee structure: only a quarter of pupils pay full fees, others get some concessions and nearly one in eight has free education. Its fees are significantly lower than nearby schools affiliated to the CBSE.²³ During the 2008-09 academic year, the composition of pupils getting fee concessions was as follows: SC (456), OBCs (35) and general (50) and patrons receive progress reports on their adopted pupils. Both the hospital and the school reported that they face problems in recruiting good staff.²⁴ Although the facilities are not very far from the city, this was attributed to the reluctance of professionals to move to rural areas – it was reported that the gynaecology and orthopaedic departments at the hospital, for example, have suffered from recruitment difficulties in recent years.

4.10 Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital, Ballan

The eye hospital (Fig. 9) is the creation of just one overseas donor, the Bangar family. A native of Ballan, Swaran Dass Bangar's family have had a long association with Sant Sarwan Dass. Mr. Bangar received the Sant's blessing when he decided to migrate in 1962 and his wife, Mrs. Resham Bangar, feels a special obligation towards the DSSDB, expressed as:

Our wealth is due to Sant Sarwan Dass Ji's blessing! When my husband decided to go to England, he asked Sant Sarwan Dass Ji to bless him. At that time, Sant Sarwan Dass used to encourage many of his disciples to go abroad. But in the case of my husband, Sant Ji refused and only after asking for the third time, Sant Ji acceded to my husband's request. Then Sant ji told my husband not to accept factory work. ... So only after four months' did my husband find a job with a Jat property-dealer. After working there for two years, my husband established his own business. Now we own fifteen houses in

*England. Our success is due to the grace of Sant Sarwan Dass Ji and that's the reason we are donating as much to the Dera. Without the Sant's blessing, we could never dream of having such a wealthy life! (Interview with Mrs Resham Bangar, C. Simon 12 June 2007, Ballan).*²⁵

Fig. 9: Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital, Ballan



Source: Mr S.R.Heer

Figure 10: Sant Niranjn Dass and Sant Rama Nand on the occasion of receiving a donation from the Bangar family for the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Eye Hospital, Ballan



Inspired by the DSSDB, the Bangar family had been organizing an annual eye camp at Ballan since 1967. However, as the Punjab government banned such camps in 2004, the family decided to build an eye hospital. Thus Swaran Dass Bangar's family donated Rs. 1 crore (nearly £125,000) for an eye hospital in the memory of his father Shri Ditta Ram Ji (Fig. 10).²⁶ The hospital became operational on 15 February 2007 and is well equipped for diagnosing and treating eye ailments. It has a YAG laser and photo emulsification machine and other facilities, and many followers of Sant Niranjn Dass make use of its services when they are in Punjab to visit relatives or for religious festivals:

Currently, over 200 patients of all social backgrounds are seen every day and several operations are performed. According to the senior administrator of the hospital 'even people from abroad get operated in our hospital as operations are undertaken at nominal rate' (Interview with Mr Heer at Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Adda Kathar, 31 August 2009).

5 Ravidassias in Britain and their transnational links

This section provides a brief overview of the emergence of Ravidassias as a distinct social group with religious shrines and political associations. It also describes the formation of special bonds between the British Ravidassia community and the DSSDB, which has led to some welfare schemes aimed at helping the poor section of Punjab's population being funded from abroad.

5.1 Punjabi SCs abroad

Historians have fixed the date of the first substantial migration from Punjab in the 1870s, when Captain Speedy recruited some Punjabis, including Mazhabis, from the Majha region to combat a Chinese insurgency in Perak's tin mines. From the Far East, Punjabis followed well-established routes to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, and from the early twentieth century onwards, they headed to North America. Among them, the most distinguished was Mangoo Ram, who landed in California in 1906. After joining the Ghadar movement, he returned to Punjab in 1925 and organized the Ad Dharm movement. It is likely that a sizeable number of SCs participated in the general migration of Punjabis at the end of the nineteenth and during the early twentieth centuries. McLeod, in his account of Punjabis in New Zealand, provides a caste-wise breakdown of early settlers: between 1912 and 1921, of 212 Punjabis, 24 were SC, of whom all except two were from Doaba.²⁷ In his classic study of Vilayatpur, a Doaba village, Kessinger (1974) provides an interesting insight into early Punjabi migration. Two per cent of SCs and one per cent of Julahas had already gone abroad by 1898. By 1922, 9 per cent of village Julahas were abroad. In the extensive Punjabi migration to East Africa, there were a significant number of SCs, a fact attested to by the existence of a Balmiki *gurdwara* in Nairobi. However, despite the widespread scattering of early Punjabis in some parts of the British Empire, their overall strength was less than 100,000, with almost three quarters settled in the Far East.

5.2 Punjabi SCs in Britain

There is scant evidence of SC migration to Britain during the inter-war period. Prior to 1947, students, soldiers and a small number of Punjabis came as itinerant immigrants. Sikhs and Muslims formed miniscule communities in Coventry, Birmingham and London, while many Bhatra Sikhs became petty traders in the outlying towns of Scotland. However Britain became a major destination for migrants from the 1950s. As the immigration legislation became progressively more restrictive, many hastened to call their families, reversing their original aim of making a fortune and returning. As families started arriving, migrants started to buy houses and children were admitted to local schools, thereby

establishing a reluctant but firm process of permanent settlement. Among these new arrivals, rural Doabians formed a clear majority, because of their small landholdings and earlier overseas connections had fostered a 'culture of migration.' Farmers sold their land to raise the necessary finance, while some landless SCs borrowed from landlords or sought help from relatives. Procuring a passport was made more difficult during the 1950s, when the capital of Indian Punjab shifted from Lahore to Shimla. Juergensmeyer (1988) mentions how Ishwar Dass Pawar, who had become Under-Secretary in 1952, assisted some 500 SCs every year to acquire passports. Piare Lal Badhan also mentions how, while working in the Rashtarpati Bhawan, he helped scores of people to acquire the necessary papers.²⁸

Early histories of Indians in Britain underline the absence of caste distinctions, while Rose *et al* (1969, p. 459) stress how the caste system "could not survive the process of emigration." Indeed, as one early migrant to England commented :

*At that time, nobody was really taking care of caste or religious identity. We all wanted to make money and England gave us this opportunity. We used to work hard, very hard but a great solidarity existed. We used to live in houses sharing beds. We never thought to spend our life in England; we all shared the idea to return to Punjab one day.*²⁹

However, this period was shortlived, as familiar Punjabi identities reasserted themselves. As Singh and Tatla note (2006, p. 41):

...the principal importance of Punjabi SC migration to Britain was that it was rural and provided a caste-based frame of reference to counter the ambiguous boundaries of the Sikh faith dominated by Jats. The fraught caste relations of the Punjabi village were thus transferred to the British factory, the pub and even the school playground. In the development of British Sikh society over the decades these tensions were to play a not inconsiderable part in the struggle for the control of Sikh institutions such as gurdwaras, trade unions and political parties.

Lievesley (1985), Judge (2002), Leslie (2003) and Nesbitt (1994) have emphasized the continued salience of caste among Punjabi communities. Singh and Tatla (2006) provide a detailed breakdown of religious places established by the SCs and argue that the general pattern of SC migration reflected, "though to a lesser degree, the pattern of broader Sikh migration, but in the 1950s and 1960s it developed a dynamic of its own" (Singh and Tatla, 2006, p. 41). Outlining the broad process of differentiation within the Punjabi community, they note:

Often the earlier settlers were the sons of well-educated SCs who sought to escape the stigmatisation of a society dominated by caste. Many of them also replicated the patterns of the *barapinds* (large villages) in localities like Bradford, Bedford, Walsall, and Handsworth; and as with *barapinds*, *strong* ties have evolved with the sending villages and localities, sustaining elaborate transnational exchanges that involve marriages, business and return migration (Singh and Tatla, 2006, p. 41).

The process of caste differentiation took on a familiar pattern. In each major location, the usual first phase was to rent a small disused church for the congregation, ultimately buying and converting it into a *gurdwara*. Thus, a common *gurdwara* was bought with funds collected from all sections of the community and managed for a few years by an elected committee. Establishing a *gurdwara* brought with it the ability to control financial resources and was almost the only means at that early stage to project the standing of a particular social group within the community. However, the domination of Jat Sikhs, whose numbers were greater, was soon resented. For example, the Smethwick Sikh Temple opened in July 1960 with funds contributed by *all* Punjabis living in the area. It was managed by a composite committee of all the castes. Initially, a low caste *Ghumiar* was elected as its President and among the trustees was a Punjabi Hindu. However, the *Ghumiar*s as a social group, who were emerging as notable shopkeepers in the area, felt slighted by Jat Sikhs. To reflect their social position, the community leaders bought another building and opened the Dashmesh Temple in another part of Birmingham. Similarly, SCs felt aggrieved at innuendoes voiced by Jat Sikhs and started searching for a place for a separate congregation.³⁰ The Ramgarhias followed suit by establishing another *gurdwara*. Eventually each caste/social group had its own place of worship, giving rise to a sense of achievement for the group and its leaders. Thus each place of Punjabi worship charts a unique communal history within the wider Punjabi community.

5.3 The Punjabi Ravidassias and other SC Communities in Britain

As described in Section 3, Punjabi SCs consist of several distinct caste groups. A general profile of the Punjabi community in Britain by sub-groups/castes is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: The Punjabi community in Britain

Category	Population	Temples
Sikhs	336,000*	180+
Total Dalit population	60-70,000	33
1. <i>Punjabi Ravidassis</i>	40,000-50,000	21
2. <i>Punjabi Balmikis/Mazhabis</i>	10,000	5
3. <i>Punjabi Buddhists</i>	5,000	4
4. <i>Punjabi Christians</i>	5,000	3
Other religious places		
<i>Baba Balaknath</i>	--	4
<i>Others**</i>	--	3

Sources: *This figure is from the 2001 Census; other data for various communities are intelligent guesses. For some discussion of statistics relating to South Asians in Britain, see Singh and Tatla (2006)

** Ek Niwas, (Wolverhampton), Peer Darbar (Wolverhampton), Dera Gobind Das (Bilston)

The idea of opening a separate Ravidass Temple in Wolverhampton was first mooted in 1962. However deliberations went on for a year before a hall was hired at a junior school on Red Cross Street for weekend congregations. When a proposal to purchase a separate place was put to a committee, several members were opposed to the idea. Others were of Buddhist background and proposed a Buddhist centre, to highlight Ambedkar's vision. This view was opposed by Mihar of Letchworth in a sharp retort when he wrote:

Dr Ambedkar was if anything a Hindu, for he married a Hindu woman at a ripe old age. He embraced Buddhism only in the last six months of his life. Your claim that Buddhism believes in equal respect to all saints is nonsense, there is no God or saints in that religion. Are not Buddhist Chinese fighting their Vietnamese and Tibetan brothers? We can only find salvation in Ravidass (*Des Pardes* June-July 1971).

Ambedkarite Buddhists and Ravidassias have common informal networks and the debate over these issues continued for several years, and indeed, continues in some form to this day. In Wolverhampton, the issue was decided through the initiative of Harbans Lal Mahay and Harcharan Dass Birdi, both of whom had been greatly influenced by the Ad Dharm philosophy of Mangoo Ram. In 1968, they formed a Ravidass Association, and a year later, an old Baptist church was bought and converted into a Ravidass Temple. This became the first Guru Ravidass Temple in Britain, opening its doors in 1969 (Fig. 11).³¹ Currently there are 21 temples in Britain, of which eight are located in the Midlands.

Figure 11: Shri Guru Ravidass Temple, Wolverhampton



Source: Photograph by Darshan Singh Tatla

In Birmingham, Master Santa Singh and Gurmeet Chand Suman felt a separate Ravidass temple was needed. However, this need was yet to be articulated, as most families used the Smethwick *gurdwara*, the management committee of which included SC members, who served as *pathis* (preachers) and other functionaries. However, as the numbers of SCs in Birmingham grew, a case for a separate religious place was made within the *gurdwara*, where an occasional remark by so-called upper-caste Jats came to be interpreted as a rebuke to the low castes.³² After a few years, a hall was hired at Hall Road, Handsworth, for weekend congregational gatherings. Then on 13 July 1969, a building was converted into Guru Ravidass Bhawan at 32 Hall Road, Handsworth. In 1971, a new building was purchased at Union Row, Handsworth, now the site of Ravidass Bhawan (Fig. 12). A Shri Guru Ravidass Cultural Association (SGRCA-UK) of Birmingham was registered as a charity to manage the new shrine.

Figure 12: Guru Ravidass Bhawan, Handsworth, Birmingham



Source: Photograph by Darshan Singh Tatla

In Birmingham, too, a debate took place between Buddhists and Ravidassias about the naming of the new place of worship. Buddhists, who “advocated naming the new place after Ambedkar, were outnumbered and the building was duly named Guru Ravidass Bhawan.”³³ A broadly similar process took place across Britain’s other SC communities. Temples in Bedford, Derby, Coventry, Leicester, and Southall have similar stories. In Bedford, the arrival of Kenyan Sikhs resulted in a new Ramgarhia Gurdwara being established, and in 1972, a Ravidass Mandir was purchased, followed by a Balmiki Mandir. In addition, Buddhist and Punjabi Christian Associations were established.³⁴ Thus currently, for a population of fewer than 10,000 Punjabis, there are five religious places in Bedford, reflecting its caste/religious diversity. A similar process is recalled in Coventry, where almost uniquely, there are now two Ravidass temples because of factionalism amongst community leaders.³⁵ The small group of Balmikis in Coventry has also established a temple.

Finally, there are institutional expressions of the Punjabi folk religious tradition. Baba Balaknath, a mythological figure revered in rural Punjab, has found enough devotees and resources to sustain a major temple in Walsall, while three others are located in Wolverhampton, Coventry and Southall. The Walsall Mandir opened in 1983 and displays a mix of Hindu/Sikh deities, while a large *murti* (image) of Baba Balaknath adorns the walls (Greaves, 1998). Two other places, both in Wolverhampton, cater to Punjabis' belief in miracles and soothsayers: Ek Niwas was established in 1995, followed by Peer Darbar three years later. Local men became *babas* and specialize in telling fortunes, exorcising evil spirits and providing herbal medicines.

Despite institutionalized religious differences, Punjabis share a common language, cultural mores and attachment to their homes in Punjab. They socialize together at marriages and parties, watch *desi* (S Asian) film shows and are keen on *bhangra* (dance and music). In the past they have shown considerable solidarity in organizing protest marches against racial discrimination, led by the Indian Workers' Associations (Singh and Tatla, 2006). All the political parties in Punjab - SAD, the Congress Party, the Republican Party, the BSP and the Communist Party - have had chapters in Britain. By the 1980s, there was considerable public recognition of Punjabi public life: turbanned Sikhs' right to wear a turban at work was more or less accepted, and several men - and a few women - had been elected to both local councils and Parliament. Many are JPs and the Queen's annual honours list regularly includes a few Punjabis. Today three Punjabis sit in the House of Lords, while members of the SCs have been elected mayors of Wolverhampton and Coventry.

A few studies on the interactions among these groups are worth noting. While talking to some old and middle aged Punjabis, Judge (2002, p.3247) found that Jats still referred to caste distinctions, while "the younger generation is not aware of the existence of such sharp division." Judge also noted that rules of endogamy had considerably weakened, citing a case of marriage between a Jat Sikh girl and an Ad Dharmi boy - although the parents on both sides had initially resisted the proposal, they had become reconciled to the marriage. Nesbitt (1994) has devoted considerable attention to the socialization process of Punjabi children in her ethnographic studies of the Balmiki and Bhatra communities, documenting cases of pupils in Coventry who felt slighted by their friends referring to caste in denigrating tones. She has also pointed out how textbook descriptions of the major religions are inadequate to deal with the complexity of Punjabi religious life, especially that of those on the margins. Both Nesbitt and Greaves (2005) draw attention to the fact that the presence of SC

communities challenges the dichotomy of Hindu and Sikh and argue that this reality needs a different approach to teaching schoolchildren, where the 'high religious traditions' are part of the curriculum.

5.4 The British Ravidassias: consolidation and institutionalization

Of the Punjabi SC communities in Britain, the Ravidassias form a clear majority. Taking into consideration Juergensmeyer's suggestion that about 10 per cent of Punjabis are Ravidassis, Lievesley's estimate for the 1980s,³⁶ and community leaders' accounts during various interviews, one can suggest a figure of about 50,000 Ravidassias in Britain, with a probable geographic spread as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: The British Ravidassia community

Region	Numbers	Temple/cities
Greater London	8,000	2: Southall, East London
Erith/Kent	5,000	3: Strood, Gravesend, Erith (Kent)
Midlands	22,000	8: Wolverhampton, Birmingham, Walsall, Willenhall, Coventry (2), Leicester, Derby
North England	4,000	3: Newcastle, Darlaston, Bradford
Mid Counties	8,000	4: Bedford, Hitchin, Letchworth, Luton
South-West England	2,000	1: Southampton
Scotland	1,000	1: Glasgow
Total	50,000	21

Source: These figures are derived from interviews, and Singh and Tatla (2006).

As soon as Ravidass temples were established in Wolverhampton and Birmingham, efforts were made to consolidate the community by creating a national organization. Thus in 1969, a Shri Guru Ravidass Cultural Association (SGRCA-UK) was formed in Birmingham. For some years, a monthly, the *Begampura Times*, was produced from Smethwick and *Ravidass Patrika* was imported from Jalandhar, providing news about the community. The SGRCA-UK was meant to be an overarching national organization, and for some years it did act as one, but it did not command full support from all the Ravidass temples. In 1997 the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust-UK (SSDCT-UK) was registered, and it quickly took on the role of a parallel national body. However, the SGRCA-UK survives and has found a role in coordinating publicity and organizing meetings for political and other

ceremonial occasions. There is an annual celebration to commemorate Guru Ravidass' birthday, to which local councillors, MPs and other dignitaries are invited. Recently, such celebrations were also organized in Parliament.

The Ravidassias have also been active in political issues emanating from India. The temples in Wolverhampton and Birmingham in particular have supported several mobilizations, including protests against caste atrocities during the Janata Party government in New Delhi (1977-80). During the tussle between Jats and SCs for control of a local *gurdwara* in 2003 in the village of Talhan (see Section 3), a new organization, the Sri Guru Ravidass International Human Rights Organization (SGRIHRO), which is registered as a charity in the UK, was established. The SGRIHRO held a protest rally in London and offered support for various caste discrimination legal cases in Punjab and India. In a new kind of solidarity, the SGRIHRO provided financial support to the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Society in Punjab. It is also noteworthy that after the Vienna incident in May 2009, it was the SGRCA-UK which met Sikh organizations to issue a joint statement of reconciliation, while the SGRIHRO took part in a protest march.

As noted above, Ravidassias have also established a complex set of exchanges with Punjabi religious and political leaders. Distinguished statesmen like Mangoo Ram, Jagjivan Ram and the former Indian premier, V.P. Singh, have been invited. Mangoo Ram's arrival in 1973 gave rise to a spate of enthusiasm, with him being honoured by many Ravidass temples despite his delicate health. Currently Ravidassias offer significant support for the BSP and some SC Congress leaders in Punjab.

5.5 The role of Punjabi *sants*

In its drive for a more cohesive Ravidassia community, early Ad Dharmis in Wolverhampton tried to distinguish between certain ceremonies in Ravidass temples and those of the *gurdwaras*. While to begin with there were hardly any differences between them, soon the emphasis shifted towards the recitation of Ravidass *bani* and slight changes were introduced to the standard Sikh prayer. Visiting *ragis* (singers) were asked to recite Ravidass' hymns, while *arti* became part of the *bhog* ceremony. *Granthis* employed at the temples were normally baptized, but the *amrit* ceremony was not offered. However, all major ceremonies such as Akhand Path (a continuous reading of the scriptures) and marriages were performed as per the Sikh tradition.

In the process of consolidating the message of Guru Ravidass, visiting *sants* from Punjab played a major role. They were invited by individual followers or, increasingly, by the management committee of a temple. An early Ravidassia visitor was Sant Jagat Ram, followed by others from the Ravidassia/Balmiki tradition (see Table 7). These visiting *sants* sustained their followers' faith and collected donations for causes in Punjab. Besides blessing followers and their families, and consolidating loyalty towards their respective *deras*, visiting *sants* have confirmed newly adopted conventions of the Ravidass religious tradition in various overseas temples.

Table 7: Visits by Dalit/Ravidass *sants* to Britain

Sant	Dera, Place and (District)
Charan Dass	Dera Sant Baba Ranjhu Dass, Gajjar Mahdood (Hoshiarpur)
Sewa Dass/Sital Dass	Dera Sant Puran Dass, Kalewal Bhagtan (Hoshiarpur)
Jaspal Singh	Dera Baba Banna Ram, Uddra (Hoshiarpur)
Jagat Ram/ Inderjit	Dera Sant Jagat Ram, Sardulapur (Hoshiarpur)
Amar Dass	Dera Sant Narayan Dass, Sherpur Kallar (Hoshiarpur)
Mela Ram	Dera Sant Baja Ram, Mahilpur (Hoshiarpur)
Garib Dass	Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ballan (Jalandhar)
Niranjan Dass/Rama Nand	Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ballan (Jalandhar)
Rurha Ram	Sant Braham Dass, Chisti Sabri, Phillour (Jalandhar)
Mehanga Ram	Kutia Sri Gang Bhawan, Hazara (Jalandhar)
Gobind Dass	Dera Sant Gobind Dass, Phagwara (Kapurthala)
Mohinder Pal	Dera Sant Baba Hans Raj, Pandvan (Phagwara, Kapurthala)
Kishan Nath	Dera Sant Baba Phula Nath, Chaherhu (Kapurthala)
Tehal Dass /Sarwan Dass	Dera Sant Tehal Dass, Salem Tabri (Ludhiana)
Gobind Dass	Dera Sitalpuri –Rahimabad (Ludhiana)

Sources: Respondents' interviews with Tatla and Bharti (2003)

5.6 British Ravidassias and DSSDB: the creation of a special bond

As noted in Section 5, Sant Sarwan Dass had blessed many of his followers from Doaba, who arrived in Britain in the 1960s. These devotees could not immediately repay their gratitude, as it took some years for them to become sufficiently successful. However, by the 1980s some of them had become quite wealthy, and one, Swaran Dass Bangar, a millionaire, was keen to invite the Ballan *sant* to Britain. Thus in 1985, Sant Garib Dass, the head of the DSSDB, was persuaded to visit Britain by Mohan Lal Guddu, with his travel expenses paid by Sarwan Dass Bangar.³⁷ During his first visit, Sant Garib Dass inaugurated the Guru Ravidass Mandir in Wolverhampton, following its re-building. He also laid the foundation for a new building for Handsworth Bhawan, as the old building had been destroyed by a fire.

Between 1985 and 1993, Sant Garib Dass undertook six visits to the UK, with each subsequent visit resulting in a wider mobilization of his followers, who collected funds for the Kanshi Mandir. Knowing the diverse spread of the Dera's followers, the DSSDB in 1991 launched a newspaper *Begampura Shahar*. From 1994, Sant Niranjana Dass, who had succeeded Sant Garib Dass, became an even more regular visitor to Britain and other overseas locations; his itinerary usually started in Europe (Italy first) and then extended to North America. His last visit in May 2009 was disrupted by the incident in Vienna.

It was during Sant Niranjana Dass' visits to the UK that a proposal to establish a trust was approved. Accordingly, in 1997, the Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust (SSDCT-UK) was registered, with 17 members from Britain, under the chairmanship of Sant Niranjana Dass. A successful businessman from Telford, Mr Piare Lal Badhan, became Convenor, while other members are loyal DSSDB followers. The SSDCT-UK has become the largest fund raiser for the Dera, enabling much investment at the Kanshi Mandir and in other developmental initiatives.

The growing partnership between the DSSDB and its overseas followers has seen the beginning of several developmental projects in and around Ballan.³⁸ The Sant, of course, remains a charismatic figure in galvanizing funds through his periodic visits, during which he highlights concerns facing the Ravidassia community. Perhaps more importantly, the presence of the sant helps leading Ravidassias activists to come together, plan and discuss investment, and work in close liaison with the DSSDB's efforts in Punjab.

The DSSDB has many dedicated and selfless followers, not all of whom can be mentioned in this limited case study. Many, like Brij Lal, as we have noted above, have made major contributions to the DSSDB's projects in Punjab. In this section, some other closely associated followers of DSSDB are mentioned.

Swarn Dass Banagar, an estate agent in Gravesend (see Section 4) was informed that in order to accommodate large gatherings of devotees for various religious functions, a plan had been mooted to build a 'spectacular monument' in the form of a congregational hall at the Dera (see Fig. 3). The project for the construction of this huge hall, Shri Guru Ravidass Satsang Bhawan, was adopted by

Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Trust UK. For this purpose, the Bangar family was again inspired to donate family land that it had purchased some time before:

The land measured 20 Kanals and its price was nearly 6.5 million rupees (£90,277). In fact we gave away not only our land but further added 100,000 rupees (£1,400) as donation. A spacious and grand congregation hall was constructed on that land. Sant Rama Nand Ji worked very hard on this and nearly became ill due to overwork. This is a unique building, perhaps the most beautiful of all such congregational halls in India. (Interview with Swaran Dass Bangar by Tatla, Chatham, 15 August 2009)

The Bangar family also donated 125,000 rupees (£1,736) for the Ravidass Mandir at Boota Mandi in Jalandhar city and has further pledged to provide a kilogramme of gold for the dome of the Kanshi Mandir. The whole family has visited Varanasi several times, where they “*try to do seva, providing input into all such activities. We have also added facilities and provided better accommodation for visitors... Compared to Babu Jagjivan Ram’s Mandir on the bank of Ganges River, our contribution is more substantial*” (interview with Swaran Dass Bangar by Tatla, Chatham, 15 August 2009).

Another close follower of the DSSDB is Faqir Singh Birdi, who settled in Southall, West London in 1975. Like Swaran Dass Bangar, he hails from Ballan village. After working for the Indian consular service, he retired from its London office. He attributes his own rise from a low social position to educational opportunities and encouragement by Sant Sarwan Dass. He remembers how the Sant’s advice not only helped him secure admission to the Indian Foreign Service but how others too were motivated to apply for jobs or overseas opportunities. Birdi sees education as key to SCs’ mobility and has advised SSDCT-UK to undertake more educational projects in Punjab. For Birdi, the Vienna tragedy is a sure sign of the community coming into prominence because “*other communities cannot tolerate the rise of the downtrodden.*” (Interview with Faqir Singh Birdi by D. Tatla on 11 September 2009, Southall).

Another very active individual is Piare Lal Badhan, a businessman from Telford, who is Convenor of SSDCT-UK.³⁹ He is particularly proud of his advice that the best means of channelling funds from the UK would be to form a trust – a proposal that was accepted by Sant Niranjana Dass during his visit in 1997. As he was not a close follower nor connected to the DSSDB as such, he had to convince others of his *bona fides* by making a large donation before being nominated to the Trust. His family is now devoted to the DSSDB and has participated in many activities, including the first pilgrimage to Kanshi.

As well as his dedication to the DSSDB, Badhan has donated £10,000 for the construction of a Community Centre at Ambedkar Bhawan in Jalandhar city. Since the Vienna incident, Badhan has made several visits to the city, assisting the local Ravidass temple managers and prosecution of the offenders by hiring suitable defence lawyers.

Mr. Charan Dass Rattu, who was President of Shri Guru Ravidass Temple Wolverhampton in the 1980s, Mr. Nirmal Dass Chander and Mr. Ajit Kumar Kamal, also of Wolverhampton, have played significant roles in raising donations for DSSDB. A recent example was the donation of a critical care ambulance costing about Rs. 1.5 million for SSDCH by funds raised by the *sangat* of Wolverhampton.

Harbans Lal Shounki, another member of the Trust, is settled in Handsworth, Birmingham, and served on the Management Committee of the Ravidass Temple in the 1990s.⁴⁰ A campaigner and publicist for the Ravidassia community and the DSSDB, he is a well-known singer and Bhangra artist. He has accompanied Sant Niranjana Dass on visits across North America and Europe. He recalls his concern for the recognition of Ravidassias as a separate community when suggesting to the Gurdwara Council of Birmingham that the Ravidass Bhawan should be listed as Guru Ravidass Bhawan rather than a 'Ravidass Gurdwara.' Shounki has inspired many people to contribute towards projects launched by the DSSDB, especially the congregational hall, which as noted above, prompted Mr Bangar to donate his land. He also corrected the general impression that a *palki* (gold decorated palanquin) for Ballan was sent by donors all over the UK, pointing out that this was a contribution from Ballan's close followers, while a second *palki* for the Kanshi Mandir was sent the following year with donations from the European *sangat*. Shounki sees the Vienna incident as an opportunity for consolidation of overseas Ravidassias, citing how after it happened, representatives from eighteen countries got together for deliberations and took some 'radical' decisions (Interview with Harbans Lal Shounki by D. Tatla on 8th September 2009, Birmingham).

To the above set of close followers of DSSDB, we need to add Lachman Dass Jassi, who is currently Secretary of Guru Ravidass Bhawan in Birmingham and whose family is closely associated with the DSSDB. The devotion of his family brought him into the management of the Bhawan, as he felt obliged to be part of the 'Ballan community.' Lachman Dass Jassi occupies a prominent position within the Birmingham community and therefore is able to disseminate the message of the DSSDB widely

within the local congregation and beyond (Interview with Lachman Dass Jassi by D. Tatla, 8 September 2009, Birmingham).

5.7 Competition and internal dynamics of Ravidassia community organizations

Although the DSSDB has gained considerable ascendancy and sometimes commands the support of some of the Ravidass temples, it has faced competition from other *sants*, who collect funds for their own projects. Reverence for *sants* amongst Ravidassias extends to many other *deras*, and some families follow more than one *dera*. By monopolizing the construction of a Mandir at Varanasi, which has emerged as a centre of pilgrimage, the DSSDB has attracted considerable funding, but there are many devotees who share reverence for other shrines too.

The majority of temples have retained their autonomy with respect to funding community activities. This can be seen in terms of support for visiting *sants* from other Doaba *deras* and philanthropic projects. Thus, for example, Sant Charan Dass collected funds from Britain and other countries for a water tank facility at Gajjar Mehdood and surrounding villages in the *kandi* area of Hoshiarpur. Similarly, Sant Gobind Dass Dera, in Phagwara, received financial aid from Wolverhampton. Sant Sewa Dass built a *dera* at Kalewal Bhagatan, Hoshiarpur, by soliciting funds from Britain. Through diasporic donations, he also established a Guru Ravidass Mandir in Bhushanpura, Amritsar. Sant Sital Dass' *dera* has also received funds from the diaspora: it owns twelve acres of land and manages the twenty bed Sant Puran Dass Memorial Hospital alongside a Girls Training Centre, in order to assist poor sections of society.

Similarly Sant Sarwan Dass has undertaken philanthropic and development initiatives at Bohan on the Mahilpur Road near Chagran, building a hospital to the memory of Baba Nirmal Dass, his predecessor, who had a close relationship with the DSSDB. The current chief, Sant Sarwan Dass is Chairman and Sant Nirmal Dass is President of the Sadhu Sampraday Society of Punjab – a registered charitable organization with considerable influence in the state. In collaboration with Sant Sewa Dass of Kalewal Bhagta and Sant Sarwan Dass of Ballan, Sant Sital Dass initiated the building of Ravidass Ashram Begampura at Hardwar. He is reputed to have established 24 *deras* in Punjab, including one at Rahimabad Khurd in Samrala Tahsil of Ludhiana district. The present head at

Rahimabad, Sant Gobind Dass, has toured Australia and several other countries and the *dera* has organised eye camps with free medicines for the needy. Similarly, the Guru Ravidass Mission Hospital, Hargobind Nangal, Phagwara, has intimate connections with British Ravidassias and is expanding its facilities at Plahi Road, Phagwara, where a new building is under construction.

The Ravidass Temple in Wolverhampton has a long history of providing financial support for developmental projects in Punjab independently of the Ballan connection. According to Nirmal Dass Mahay, the Secretary, the list of donations is quite long. He spoke of a campaign during the 1970s to establish a Technical College for Ravidassia young men and women in Phagwara. The proposal took shape, with Sarwan Singh Sandhwan from Wolverhampton buying a piece of land on Hoshiarpur Road, Phagwara, from Jagar Singh and Bishan Singh of Rampur Village and then offering it for charitable use. The Ravidass Temple, Wolverhampton, floated a Shri Guru Ravidass Educational Trust UK for this purpose, nominating Ishar Dass Pawar as its chairman in Punjab. However, differences arose and the trust was handed over to Master Sadhu Ram. In order to raise cash for the project, Darshan Singh KP, Chaudhry Sundar Singh and Prithvi Singh Azad also visited Britain and collected £6,500. Eventually the foundation stone for the college was laid by Giani Zail Singh, the then Chief Minister of Punjab. Later Gurbanta Singh was appointed chairman of the Organizing Committee, and more funds were sent from Wolverhampton. Darbara Singh, the Congress leader, and chief minister of Punjab at the time, during a visit to England, offered more land for the project at a concessionary rate. This proposal was taken up, with further finance from Britain, and the college started operations, with much assistance from Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha UK. However, according to Mahay, the experience of the Mandir's managers during this episode was that British funds were not effectively used, due to recipients falling out over their different political affiliations (interview with Nirmal Dass Mahay by D. Tatla, August 3, 2009, Wolverhampton).

It is also known that, for some years, there has been some opposition to SSDCT-UK efforts to channel funds from various temples. At Guru Ravidass Bhawan in Birmingham, there was a serious struggle to re-install a pro-Ballan management committee after some of the Dera's key supporters were thrown out in an election. The SGRCA-UK and supporters of SSDCT-UK fought bitterly during the temple's election of the management committee, amidst purported allegations of 'mismanagement,' 'corruption' and 'irregularities', inviting the scrutiny of the Charity Commission.⁴¹ As the two temples in

Wolverhampton and Birmingham are vital in terms of community resources and have a significant influence on the links with Ballan, elections for the management committees of these temples involve much canvassing and are keenly watched not only in the Midlands, but also by the DSSDB. In practice, relationships between the DSSDB and Ravidass temples in Britain are fragile, as the management committees of the latter change periodically. Regular elections introduce new managers, who may or may not be close followers of Ballan. Moreover, elected managers can be loyal to other *sants* or non-receptive to the DSSDB's overtures.

5.8 DSSDB and competing visions of SC liberation in Britain today

Although remarkably successful, as we have seen above, the DSSDB has been unable to establish a firm hegemony over the Ravidassia population of Britain. In some measure this is due to the factionalism of all Punjabi organizations; it is the result of competing visions and the new opportunities available to members of the community, who may also contest the vision offered by the DSSDB. Individuals and organizations drawn from SC communities adopt different approaches to eliminating caste discrimination and poverty. A Midlands community activist, Dr Charan Singh Bangar, has undertaken a consciously independent initiative through the Sri Guru Ravidass Educational Assistance Trust, which aims to provide financial help to poor students from the Doaba region, promoting educational opportunities among the disadvantaged. Dr. Bangar, a highly educated person, holds strong views on the community's future and sees fundamental flaws in the DSSDB-led initiatives (interview with Dr. Charan Singh Bangar by D. Tatla, 3 August 2009, Birmingham).

Similarly, Davinder Prasad, who belongs to the Balmiki community, set up Caste-Watch after a conference at Guru Ravidass Bhawan in Birmingham in 2003, with the aim of highlighting cases of caste discrimination.⁴² Davinder Prasad, a professional engineer, considers that a 'religious approach' obstructs SC solidarity, weakening a common resolve to end caste discrimination. He also disputes a general assumption that members of the younger generation are less aware of caste and do not face caste-related discrimination. According to Mehmi:

The younger generation is being socialized into the system, where there is a caste system. ..We get feedback from 20-pluses going into universities – now even as this is almost third generation now - but still people ask them about their caste or class, you may be surprised that this is in the new millennium (interview with Harbans Lal Mehmi by Tatla, 15 August 2009, Medway).

Finally, it is also necessary to mention other groups working to eliminate caste discrimination. The Voice of Dalit International (VODI) and the Dalit Solidarity Network (DSN-UK), based in London, are two small volunteer organizations established with help from churches and other charities. VODI aims to “internationalize the discriminatory practices of caste, which is the cause of poverty of over a third of the global poor, otherwise called ‘dalits’ living in the Indian subcontinent, including 0.2 million in the UK” (VODI Annual Report).⁴³ The DSN-UK was established in 2000 and is managed by a professional worker, Meena Verma, from a London office. It is engaged in lobbying the British government, the Foreign Office, DFID and its agencies, charities and private companies to make them aware of the implications of caste for their operations.⁴⁴ In a memorandum submitted to Parliament’s Select Committee on International Development, the DSN-UK drew attention to how development aid is not reaching the poor sections of society for which it is intended. It also commissioned a short report, *Caste Discrimination in the UK*.

5.9 Ravidassia-Sikh relations in Britain after the Vienna incident

Although the process of differentiation between the Ravidassia and Sikh identities has been taking place gradually, the Vienna incident marked a major turning point (see Section Six below). The attack by militant Sikhs on Sant Niranjan Dass and the death of Sant Rama Nand inside the Ravidass Temple in Vienna on 24th May 2009 had widespread ramifications. Unlike Punjab, there was no overt reaction in the UK, except for a protest march organized by some Ravidassias in London. However, news of the violent reaction in Punjab, especially in and around Jalandhar city, where irate Ravidassia community at large, not necessarily followers of the DSSDB alone burnt public properties and set two trains on fire, led to considerable anxiety among the British Punjabi community.

Recognizing the seriousness of the matter, some individuals from the Ravidassia and Sikh communities held two meetings. In the first, in West Bromwich on 19 June 2009, representatives from the Federation of Sikh Organizations and Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha⁴⁵ - considered by some as unrepresentative of the community - adopted a resolution not to allow third parties to interfere and cause further tensions between the two communities. Sri Guru Ravidass Sabha assured those present that no slogans or placards denigrating the Sikh symbols had been authorized by the organizing committee for the visit; and noted some of the provocations that occurred were by individuals not affiliated to the Sabha. The Vienna incident was extensively covered in the Punjabi

media, with the letter columns of *Des Pardes* and the *Punjab Times* reflecting the heated debate that ensued. Perhaps more significantly, the DSSDB recommended the replacement of the *Guru Granth Sahib* with *Amrit Bani of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji* – a new holy book prepared and published by SGRDPCT, adopted at a large congregation of saints and pilgrims collected to celebrate Guru Ravidass birthday at Varanasi in 2010– in Ravidass temples. Though this book has been installed largely in many countries of Europe, part of Canada and of course in some Guru Ghars of India, yet no Ravidass temple in the UK has replaced the *Guru Granth Sahib* with the new holy book. Currently there is an intense discussion about this within the Ravidassia community (see Section Six) and the outcome will undoubtedly determine the future course of Sikh-Ravidassia relations in both Britain and Punjab.

6 Religious transnationalism and development in practice: an evaluation

On 24th May 2009, six Sikh militants armed with guns and daggers attacked the congregation at the Guru Ravidass Temple in Vienna. Their targets were Sant Niranjjan Dass, and his second in command, Sant Rama Nand. While the former survived the assault, the latter succumbed to his injuries. The assailants were believed to be Sikh fundamentalists who were opposed to DSSDB's heterodox practices which, according to them, included irreverence for the *Guru Granth Sahib* (Cf. Lum, 2010). Inevitably the incident triggered disturbances in Punjab by the followers of the DSSDB and other Dalit groups. Public property and some trains were destroyed. In the event, although the Punjab government managed to maintain law and order, the incident was to have profound long-term implications. On 30th January 2010, at the Ravidass Mandir in Seer Goverdhanpur, the birthplace of Guru Ravidass, a large congregation of saints and pilgrims proclaimed the birth of a new religion. The new faith, called Ravidass Dharam, is to have its own religious book (*Amrit Bani Shri Guru Ravidass ji Mahara*), insignia/communal flag (Har), and greeting (*Jai Guru Dev ji*) (*Times of India*, 1st February 2010 –online edition).

For many subaltern groups in India, especially low caste groups, establishing a separate religious identity is a necessary step to realizing social equality. This is particularly so for groups at the boundaries of the main traditions, who have to compete not only with these traditions but who often lack the resources for their enterprise. Seen in this light, the DSSDB provides an interesting example, one which, through transnational networks, has been able to further its goal of establishing a separate religious identity through the promotion of community self-pride, institution building and the pursuit of equality within the wider social structure. Central to this endeavour have been two elements: the piecemeal differentiation from Sikhism that has been hastened by the Vienna incident, which has acted as a critical event, and self-confidence in the process, which derives from DSSDB's leadership of development projects at Ballan and elsewhere in India. These two developments have intersected in a dramatic way. The declaration of the Ravidass Dharam, and with it the *option* for those Ravidassia *sangat* (congregations) that want to replace the *Guru Granth Shaib* with the *Amrit Bani of Shri Guru Ravidass Ji* in Ravidass temples, now marks the final parting of the ways: it is the formal confirmation of a new religious tradition which has long been in the making.⁴⁶

We have already seen how the DSSDB's literature emphasizes that it is the authentic repository for the vision of Guru Ravidass. This emphasis on Ravidass' teaching has characterized the Dera since the time of Sant Sarwan Dass. Nevertheless, despite its specific teaching, the DSSDB was not

created in a vacuum: it is rooted in the specific context of Sikh reformism since the end of the nineteenth century. As Oberoi (1994, p. 24-25) asserts, at that time, even if a tendency to orthodoxy already existed in the Sikh tradition:

The growing hegemony of Khalsa Sikhs did not put an end to religious fluidity within [it]... Large numbers of Sikhs continued to interpret and reinterpret Sikh tradition differently from Khalsa Sikhs, with the result that there was immense diversity within Sikh society for much of the 19th century. The religious diversity within the Sikh Panth made it possible for its adherents to belong to any one of the following traditions: Udâsî, Nirmala, Nanak-panthî, Khalsa, Sahajdhârî, Kukâ, Nirankârî and Sarvarîâ.

However, since its inception, the DSSDB has never been fully recognized as a part of Sikhism by the official Sikh institutions (see Simon, forthcoming). The *sants* of the DSSDB, urged on by their overseas followers, have progressively taken the path of religious differentiation, although this was a consequence of a refusal to accommodate the Dera and its followers' difference, rather than strategic. Two years before his death, Sant Rama Nand stated the links between the DSSDB and Sikhism:

There is no difference between our religion and Sikhism. Actually, the bâni of Guru Ravidass Ji is in the Guru Granth Sahib and we are following all the teachings, which are in this sacred book. However, upper caste Sikhs have always denied the right of the Ravidassias to become members of the managing committees of their gurdwaras. This is the reason why Ravidassias have started to build their own institution. By restoring the prestige of Guru Ravidass and by leading prominent developmental institutions, this Dera is providing to its followers a new source of pride. This dera is thus asserting the capacity of the Ravidassias to lead institutions as impressive as those of the Jats Sikhs. In this sense, it contributes to redefining the Ravidassia identity in a positive way (interview, 16 July 2007, C.Simon, Ballan, emphasis added).

The DSSDB's *sants* have started to adopt a set of beliefs and rituals based on Ravidass' teaching as well as on the DSSDB's *sants sampradaya*, which differentiate their organization from mainstream Sikhism. The Dera has devised a religious insignia: *Har* – in Gurumukhi script, which was registered with the names registration authorities in India and the UK and is now commonly referred to as the *Qoummi Nishan* (communal flag) of the Ravidass *samaj* (society). *Har* has forty rays on its circular edge, with a couplet from Ravidass' *bani*: *Naam tere ki jot lagayi, bhaio ujaro bhawan saglaare* (Your name is the flame of light, it has illuminated all the world).

This process of differentiation has certainly found willing adherents in Britain. As one respondent noted:

We should be proud as Ravidassias. Whenever we go to gurdwara we are called Ravidassia Sikhs, if we go to Hindu temples, they call us Chamars, but we should be proud of what we are. As we revere Guru Ravidass we should call ourselves Ravidassias... I would say that Sant Sarwan Dass Ji at the DSSDB has given us dignity and respect. He and his successors have made us equal to others, we had the Guru Granth Sahib before, but we had none of our own religious tradition, nor had our own guru, now we have Guru Ravidass. This new tradition was given to us by the Ballan sants; they have done so much for us and our community (interview with Swaran Dass Bangar by Tatla, 15 August 2009, Chatham).

However, as we noted in Section 5, the DSSDB has been unable to establish a *hegemonic* position among the Ravidassia population of Britain. Discordant voices remain, ranging from those who advocate continued fraternal relations with Sikhism,⁴⁷ to others who critically question the DSSDB project from *within* the Ravidassia tradition.⁴⁸ These differences, as has been suggested above, are to be expected and underscore the argument that formalization of a new religious identity is a painful and challenging process that is bitterly contested within and without.

The DSSDB's remarkable growth owes much to the energy and vision of Sant Sarwan Dass, who assiduously laid its modern foundations, which were expanded by his successors. However, its expansion into a large and growing physical entity with influence in the region and beyond has essentially resulted from a powerful alliance between the Dera and its followers in Britain. The key element in this transformation has been the resources and ideas exchanged between devotees in the British Midlands and the DSSDB through various intermediaries, especially successive Dera *sants*. These links have transformed this small religious centre into a leading institution with the capacity to devise a new assertive and collective identity for its followers.

Key actors in the process have been individuals such as Swaran Dass Bangar and Faqir Singh Birdi – both hailing from the village of Ballan and with familial devotion to the Dera – who have been pivotal in the support of these initiatives. Others, like Piare Lal Badhan, have brought ideas and organizational skills, such as the need to demonstrate transparency to potential donors. Although conventional methods of gathering funds through personal inspiration remain predominant, the establishment of Trusts in Britain (and Canada) has meant that wider appeals can be launched with confidence. Affluent

diasporic connections, in terms of both command over financial resources and new ideas for community development, have resulted in a slow but sure process of funding some larger projects and has put Ballan ahead of competing *deras*, thereby widening its circle of followers both within Punjab and overseas.

Although the Dera has primarily propagated its religious vision by building more religious institutions at Ballan, it has also engaged in development initiatives. Some of these projects evolved gradually. The idea of a hospital developed from a small dispensary in the memory of Sant Sarwan Dass. Sant Garib Dass, who wanted to replace the dispensary with a more appropriate memorial, received donations from Britain, and eventually the hospital facilities were expanded. Similarly, the Kanshi project came to fruition after more funds were raised by another **newly established Trust**. Likewise, the idea of a school materialized when land and funds were made available. As Mr. Heer explained:

The idea of a school was being discussed for some time but it was a matter of access to funds. The first opportunity arose as a Dera follower offered to build a Ravidass Mandir in Phagwara. As Sant Niranjana Dass had proposed a school from 1994 onwards, another disciple counselled the first one to invest in a school. The second follower, Mr. Brij Lal, donated two and a half acres of land. The school developed like this. It's not like that idea comes to us overnight. It's a gradual process (Interview Mr Heer, 31 August 2009, by C. Simon, Adda Kathar, Jalandhar District).

Donations from Punjab are exclusively dependent upon the Dera's popularity and the appeal of its *sants* to the public. Although foreign donations are now being channelled through a Trust, which is meant to make the appeal for donations wider as well more trustworthy, the charismatic figure of the *sant* remains the main agent for mobilizing funds. Donors are regularly honoured by the *sant*, their names and works are recognized within the community, and they gain *izzat* – a complex of emotionally charged values which translate into honour, respect, reputation, prestige and status in Punjabi culture. These donors usually become part of the Sant's inner circle of advisers – a major source of solace and personal satisfaction for them. The main issue that the organization must face in future is how to make the transfer from dependence on a charismatic figure to more routine institutional arrangements. This might turn out to be a crucial factor in the long-term survival of its developmental projects. The *sant* as a charismatic figure is still the crucial catalyst for followers' motivation and the conception of developmental activities, explained as follows:

If Sant Ji is not motivated enough, then a new idea will not get implemented. Because Sant Ji is committed to the community cause, he tries to implement the ideas of the people (Interview Mr Heer, 31 August 2009, Adda Kathar, Jalandhar District).

How effective are the institutions in meeting their objectives? And what is their future? For DSSDB administrators and its leading followers, the projects are not understood as a means to drastically improve the living standards of the SC inhabitants of the Doaba region. Admissions policies reveal that patients at the hospital and children enrolled in the Sant Sarwan Dass Model School belong to all sections of the society. In India, the offer of education and health services is often divided between two extremes: public provision, which has a bad reputation, and private sector provision, which offers services of high quality that are also very expensive. In between, a few charitable institutions exist in the fields of education and health. However, as stated by one of the doctors of Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital:

In Punjab, there are many charitable hospitals which are charitable just in name. If you look at their fee structures, you realize that they are not charitable at all (Interview with Doctor Hardeep Singh, 31 August 2009, by C. Simon, Jalandhar).

The same observation seems to hold in the field of education. As stated by one of the teachers at the school:

There are lot of differences between that school [Sant Sarwan Dass Model School] and the ones I was working for before. I think that these other private schools, whether they claim to be charitable or not, are just like commercial shop[s]. The individual interest of the chairman is the only aim. They are just there to earn money. But here it's not so. Here the aim is totally different. Here the aim is to give education to poor families, who belong to any caste (interview with Sanjeev Anil (Physics teacher), by C.Simon 2 September 2009, Phagwara).

In such a context, Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust tries to offer good health and education services at the lowest price for everyone who is in need. However, it must be recognized that the facilities associated with DSSDB only make a nominal contribution to the welfare of the most deprived sections of SCs in the Doaba region. The aim of the DSSDB projects appears not only to be the upliftment of poor sections of the community, but also to accomplish a sense of achievement compared to other *deras*, as well as accruing prestige for the SC community. Hence Ravidassia community leaders now feel *proud* that Jats are also patients in *their* hospitals and students in *their*

schools. If Jats are using these facilities, it means, first, the service is high quality and, second, for once, Jats are *dependent* upon them: a neat reversal of roles. Such a turnabout in the fortunes of SCs is undoubtedly psychologically very satisfying and is appealing as a strategy for achieving greater equality. The fact that even Jats are benefiting from their social services is thus perceived by Ravidassias as signifying a kind of social recognition they have gained from the 'upper castes.' Even though these institutions do not necessarily cater for the poorest among SCs, they signify a *levelling effect*: as institutions for engineering equality in a caste-ridden society and as symbols of community pride. These quality institutions thus provide Ravidassias with a new social image that is no longer 'dependent' upon the upper castes but is a reflection of their roles as owners and managers of successful institutions. Overseas Ravidassias, in particular, find that these institutions generate recognition of their upward social mobility in their home settings. For them, perhaps most importantly, these developmental initiatives act as new physical symbols of the Ravidassia community's enhanced social status.

7 Conclusion

Although a religious centre, the DSSDB is engaged in developmental activities with the support and encouragement of its overseas followers. Since the 1920s, the leadership of the Dera has pursued a strategy to overcome everyday caste discrimination and disadvantages suffered by its followers in Punjab and India. The core elements of this strategy have come to be identified with the mission of Guru Ravidass and the pursuit of equality, social mobility and the realization of a separate religious identity, which establish the distinctiveness of the community. It is undoubtedly the case that this complex strategy has been facilitated by religious transnationalism, in which the overseas Ravidassias have played a crucial role in transforming the work of the DSSDB. As a consequence today the DSSDB has completed the process of what Jurgensmeyer in the early 1980s called *de-Sikhization*. The launch of a new religion in January 2010, the Ravidass Dharam, marks the final culmination of this process. Followers of Ravidass Dharam today believe that they are part of a rich religious tradition with a distinctive past and an optimistic future.

Lastly, there is little doubt that transnational connections for marginalized and socially excluded social groups from the South have a significant 'liberating' impact in enabling them to acquire a sense of dignity and equality. Investment in major institutions that can become symbols of community pride can be used to challenge subordination in both homeland and overseas settings. In this way, the Ravidassias have gained community pride and overcome an historic sense of inequality derived from land-labour relations in Punjab. These changed social relations have provided many followers of the DSSDB with the moral and social courage to challenge the culture of exploitation and subordination. In a deeply hierarchical society, this is the first serious step towards genuine social equality.

Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Interviews conducted in Punjab by Charlene Simon

No.	Name	Role/Organisation	Place	Date
1	Mr S. R. Heer	General Secretary, Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust	Jalandhar	31/8/2009
2	Doctor Hardeep Singh	MD Medicine, SSDC Hospital	Jalandhar	31/8/2009
3	Doctor Rahul Gupta	(General Surgery), SSDC Hospital	Jalandhar	31/8/2009
4	Doctor Hardeep Singh	(MD Medicine), SSDC Hospital	Jalandhar	31/8/2009
5	Mrs. Jassy	Coordinator, SSDC School	Phagwara	2/9/2009
6	Mr. Sanjeev Anil	(Physics Teacher), SSDC School	Phagwara	2/9/2009
7	Ms. Surjit Kaur	(English/Social Studies Teacher),	Phagwara	2/9/2009
8	Ms. Rajni Chauhan	(Panjabi Teacher) SSDC School	Phagwara	2/9/2009
9	Mrs. Swarn Bhanger	Medway, UK	Ballan	6/6/2007
10	Mr. Sunil Raju	Toronto, Canada	Toronto	27/9/2007

Interviews conducted in UK by Darshan S.Tatla

1	Mr. Amarjit Singh	Former Social Worker Civil Servant	London	10/9/2009
2	Dr. G. S. Bangar	Chairman, Guru Ravidass Educational Assistance Trust	Birmingham	3/8/2009
3	Mr. Nirmal Dass Mahay	Secretary, Management Committee Shri Guru Ravidass Mandir	Wolverhampton	3/8/2009
4	Mr. Piara Singh	President, Management Committee Ravidass Bhawan, Birmingham	Birmingham	8/9/2009
5	Mr. Harbans Lal Shouunki	Ex-member, Management Committee Committee, Ravidass Bhawan	Birmingham	8/9/2009
6	Mr. Lachman Dass Jassi	Secretary, Management Committee Ravidass Bhawan, Birmingham	Birmingham	8/9/2009

7	Mr. Gian Chand Ghaiwal,	Founder of Balmik Sabha-UK Former Trustee, Shri Balmik Mandir Coventry	Coventry	4/9/2009
8	Dr William Sidhu	Punjabi Christian Diocese	Coventry	4/9/2009
9	Mr Harbans Lal Mehmi and Mr. Chanan Sandhu	President and General Secretary Management Committee Shri Guru Ravidass Temple Medway	Medway	15/8/2009
10	Mr Satpal	Secretary, Management Committee Ravidass Temple, Bedford	Bedford	22/8/2009
11	Mr. Sukhdev Sidhu	Civil Servant, Bedford Council	Bedford	22/8/2009
12	Dr Meena Dhanda	University of Wolverhampton	Wolverhampton	16/9/2009
13	Dr Opinderjit Takhar	University of Wolverhampton	Wolverhampton	16/9/2009
14	Ms. Meena Verma	Dalit Solidarity Network, UK	London	8/9/2009
15	Prof. Eleanor Nesbitt	University of Warwick	Coventry	27/8/2009
16	Mr. Davinder Prasad	Secretary, Caste-Watch	Coventry	4/9/2009
17	Mr. Swaran Dass Bangar	Member, SSDCT-UK leading Philanthropist	Medway	15/8/2009
18	Mr. Piare Lal Badhan	Convenor, SSDCT –UK	Telford	1/8/2009
19	Mr. Faqir Singh Viridi	Former member of Indian Foreign Service and of Management Committee, Guru Ravidass Mandir Southall	Southall	11/9/2009
20	Mr. Malkiat Bahal	BAMCEF activist	London	12/9/2009
21	Mr. Mohan Lal Guddu	Former member of Gur Ravidass Cultural Society, Birmingham and Of Management Committee Guru Ravidass Bhawan, Birmingham	Birmingham	8/5/2009 14/9/2009
22.	Dr. Jasbir Singh Sabar	Ex-Prof. Bhagat Ravidas Chair Guru Nanak Dev University	Amritsar	2/2/2010

Appendix 2: Additional tables

Table A2.1 2001 Punjab's SCs: District-wise Profile

District	Total population	Scheduled Castes	%
Doaba			
Nawanshahar	587,468	237,664	40.61
Jalandhar	1,962,700	739,762	37.69
Hoshiarpur	1,480,736	507,544	34.28
Kapurthala	754,521	225,787	29.92
Malwa			
Mukatsar	777,493	293,539	37.75
Faridkot	550,892	199,257	36.17
Moga	894,854	284,939	31.84
Fatehgarh	538,041	165,036	30.67
Mansa	688,758	208,889	30.33
Bhatinda	1,183,295	354,652	29.97
Sangrur	2,000,173	551,476	27.57
Ludhiana	3,032,831	757,962	24.99
Rupnagar	1,116,108	266,672	23.89
Patiala	1,844,934	425,280	23.05
Firozpur	1,746,107	398,409	22.82
Majha			
Amritsar	3,096,077	891,164	28.78
Gurdaspur	2,104,011	520,691	24.75

Source: *Census of Punjab, 2001*

Table A2.2 Punjab's SCs: The Three Largest Groups

District	SCs	Three Major SCs
Doaba		
Jalandhar	739,762	Ad Dharmi (389,601), Balmiki (192,161), Chamar (53,303)
Hoshiarpur	507,544	Ad Dharmi (363,818), Balmiki (47,538), Chamar (38,429)
Nawanshahar	237,664	Ad Dharmi (203,385), Balmiki (15,493), Chamar (9,375)
Kapurthala	225,787	Balmiki (91,201), Ad Dharmi (73,177), Mazhabi (33,631)
Malwa		
Firozpur	398,409	Mazhabi (153,345), Balmiki (75,624), Sirkiband (39,179)
Bhatinda	354,652	Mazhabi (188,948), Chamar (91,680), Bazigar (14,285)
Mukatsar	293,539	Mazhabi (180,098), Chamar (43,588), Bauria (16,744)
Moga	284,939	Mazhabi (221,029), Chamar (29,918), Bauria (16,799)
Mansa	208,889	Mazhabi (103,047), Chamar (77,181), Bazigar (7,943)
Faridkot	199,257	Mazhabi (134,377), Chamar (23,292), Bauria (23,212)
Ludhiana	757,962	Chamar (476,581), Mazhabi (120,129), Balmiki (74,794)
Sangrur	551,476	Chamar (313,554), Mazhabi (146,656), Balmiki (29,244)
Patiala	425,280	Chamar (198,675), Balmiki (97,166), Bazigar (44,114)
Rupnagar	266,672	Chamar (177,836), Balmiki (51,230), Kabirpanthi (7,534)
Fatehgarh	165,036	Chamar (105,250), Balmiki (30,309), Bazigar (11,677)
Majha		
Amritsar	891,164	Mazhabi (730,851), Sansi (34,207), Balmiki (33,421)
Gurdaspur	520,691	Dumas (146,514), Chamar (131,362), Mazhabi (128,661)

Source: *Census of Punjab 2001***Table A2.3 Rural–urban proportion of SCs, STs and OBCs among Sikhs**

Residence	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Other Backward Castes	Other	Total
Rural	27.35	1.00	22.95	48.70	100.00
Urban	15.17	0.11	18.56	66.16	100.00

Source: Jodhka (2009b), p. 16.

Notes

- ¹ In preference to the common usage of the term Dalit to refer to low caste social movements, this paper will use the term Scheduled Caste (SC) i.e. 'ex-untouchables', who were listed in the schedule of the Indian constitution for affirmative action. The use of the term SC is suggested by Charlene Simon because, according to her, the term Dalit is linked with the Ambedkar movement and DSSDB followers never "use the term to define themselves." Although this is an extremely restricted use of the term, we accept that it is better suited to Punjabi specificities, while in no way marking a radical distinction of kind between the DSSDB and other Dalit movements. Where necessary, the term Dalit will be used to refer to the broader category of subaltern castes (i.e. Other Backward Castes and also broader social movements). The term Ravidassia, on the other hand, denotes religious affiliation as a follower of Guru Ravidass. This paper focuses mainly on the latter as members of the DSSDB. We recognize that this useage might be overly inclusive of other SC groups which do not share the DSSDB's mission, but do so for reasons of simplicity and clarity. Here we are following the convention established by Ram (2009).
- ² The term diaspora is here used not in the sense of a consciously organized SC overseas community – for which our preferred term is transnational networks – but as a common referent for overseas communities. It is, indeed, a moot point whether the overseas SCs constitute a diaspora, are a diaspora-in-the-making, or have any of the traditional characteristics of an ethnic diaspora with a homeland project.
- ³ There is no consensus on an appropriate conceptual language to describe the discourse on mobilization of Dalit groups contesting the public and private sphere in India. Here we follow the convention of Mahajan and Jodhka (2009) and Puri (2004) to use the terms marginalized and socially excluded to refer to these groups' efforts to attain recognition and equality.
- ⁴ Advaita is a sub-school of one school of Hindu philosophy, Vedanta.
- ⁵ Major contributions have been made by Bayly (1999), Dirks (2002), Dumont (1970), Jaffrelot (1994) and Srinivas (1997).
- ⁶ Two more castes were added to this list in 2007; Mochi and Mahatams or Rai Sikhs (see SC Act No. 31, 2007). The number of Rai Sikhs is nearly 800,000, while the number of Mochis is unknown. Depending upon the precise figure, Rai Sikhs would occupy fourth or fifth position below or above Balmikis.
- ⁷ Punjab, Data highlights: The Scheduled Castes. See http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_published/SCSt/dh_sc-punjab.pdf
- ⁹ From 1950 to 1970 the movement lay dormant, as its leaders joined Congress or rallied behind Ambedkar's campaign, while the decisive blow was struck by factionalism between Seth Kishan Das and Master Gurbanta Singh (see Ahir, 1992; Ram, 2004a, 2004b; Saberwal 1976, p. 68).
- ¹⁰ A small survey of the village of Kot Bhai in Mukatsar district, comparing the occupational shift between 1963 and 2007, was reported by Gurdial Singh (2007). He found vast changes among practitioners of traditional occupations.
- ¹¹ The Udasi sect, the founder of which was Baba Sri Chand, Guru Nanak's son, expanded rapidly in the eighteenth century. Its followers were generally Sahajdhari Sikhs. The Guru Granth Sahib was revered in the Udasi deras and as priests, Udasis usually followed the Sanatani version of Sikhism.
- ¹² At Chandigarh, the Ravidass Temple is managed by R. K. Punia, an ex-IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officer, while Panchkula Ravidass Temple is headed by Lachman Dass, a retired IPS (Indian Police Service) officer.
- ¹³ Interview with Mr S. R. Heer, General Secretary, SSDCHT by C. Simon 31 August 2008, Jalandhar. Mr Heer observed of the overseas Ravidassias' economic prosperity: *"In our community, even abroad, people have just started to become rich enough to support the kind of development projects we are leading. It's not like the Radhasoamis and others. We know their hospital is better than ours, but we cannot compare. Their followers are very well-off, it's like the Jats. Even a single*

Jat can afford to build a hospital like us. For us, we need to add donations of so many people before being able to do something!"

- ¹⁴ The figure for 2004-05 suggests that Rs10 million donated by the UK-based Bangar family was, most likely, counted as a local donation.
- ¹⁵ See reports in the Times of India and The Pioneer, 17.7.1998.
- ¹⁶ Interview with Doctor Rahul Gupta (Department of General Surgery), by C. Simon, Jalandhar, 31 August 2009.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Swaran Singh, by C. Simon, Jalandhar, 31 August 2009. Swaran Singh said he had *"come to this hospital for a laparoscopic surgery. Before coming here, I went to government hospital and to another private hospital but this facility was unavailable."*
- ¹⁸ Brij Lal and his wife Debo are settled in Birmingham; while Kartar Chand and Bibi Gejo Devi, along with their son Mr Des Raj and Mrs Kamlesh Kaur, live locally. Brij Lal is a devout follower of the DSSDB.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Sanjeev Anil (Physics teacher), by C. Simon, Phagwara, 2 September 2009. My Anil noted that the *"School is not everything; atmosphere at home influences pupils' capacity to learn."* As another teacher noted: *"This is an English medium school affiliated to CBSE, language we have to speak is English, and all subjects are taught in English. Pupils speak purely in Punjabi at home, so in the lower classes sometimes pupils don't understand whatever the teacher is trying to explain."* Interview with Rajni Chauhan (Panjabi teacher), by C. Simon, Phagwara, 2 September, 2009. Another teacher also observed: *"We try to teach them about cleanliness, moral values and good behaviour again and again, because their family background is not conducive for learning quickly. After school, they are not helped by parents who are usually uneducated, nor they can help in their homework"* Interview with Surjit Kaur (English and Social Studies teacher), by C. Simon, Phagwara, 2 September 2009.
- ²⁰ Interview with Mrs. Jessy, Coordinator of SSDC School, by C. Simon, Phagwara, 2 September, 2009.
- ²¹ Heer further observed, *"In other schools, fee structure varies and all are not of the same standard. Here there are three CBSE schools. For an admission in fourth class at Saint Soldier School, pupils pay Rs 900. In Saint George School, a Christian Missionary School, fees are lower at Rs 500 for the 4th class. During the 2009-10 school year, the school has admitted 186 students from Lower Kindergarten (LKG 5 years +) to Plus Two classes (16+2=18 year olds). From Lower KG to the fourth class, the students have to pay Rs 250 per year, then from 4th to 10th class Rs 350 per annum and Rs 450 for 10+1 or 2 classes."*
- ²² Interview with Dr Rahul Gupta (General Surgery), by C. Simon, Jalandhar, 31 August 2009. Dr Gupta explained: *"Working for Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital adds to my CV because here I deal with as many as 60 patients during a day! In a Ludhiana hospital where I was working before, I was doing no more than twelve to fifteen surgeries per day."* Dr Hardeep Singh (MD Medicine) also confirmed the engaging nature of the work *"Every day we have to face a rush and sometimes we are unable to give to every patient the attention required because of overwork. Here I am looking after one hundred patients per day, if you put indoor and out-patients together. It's huge! Previously I used to look after about thirty patients per day. Still, we try to help them to recover their health at a low cost."* interview by C. Simon Jalandhar, 29 August 2009.
- ²³ Interview with Mr S. R. Heer, by C. Simon, Jalandhar, 2 September 2009.
- ²⁴ Interview with Mr S. R. Heer, by C. Simon, Jalandhar, 31 August 2009.
- ²⁵ Mr Swaran Dass Bangar was honoured by Sant Niranjana Dass as the "most generous donator of DSSDB" for the construction of the Eye Hospital at Ballan.
- ²⁶ Interview with Swaran Dass Bangar by D. Tatla, 15 August 2009, Chatham.
- ²⁷ McLeod (1986, p.65).

- ²⁸ Interview with Piare Lal Badhan, by D. Tatla, 1 August 2009, Telford.
- ²⁹ Interview with Nirmal Chander by C. Simon 16 September 2007, Calgary, Canada.
- ³⁰ As one early migrant told Simon, *"My granddad, my dad and all our family's friends used to meet in Smethwick at Guru Nanak Gurdwara, especially on Sunday, and during the week they were doing seva and so forth over there. Everyone who came from India or abroad to UK, who actually had respect for the Guru Granth Sahib used to go there, regardless of castes. But once that temple was built, somebody established a rule that if you were not a Khalsa Sikh bearing surnames like Singh and Kaur, then you could not vote. Then politically, from an overview what that says is that thank you very much for your help, your money and seva but if you are not a Singh or a Kaur, then you can't vote. That means restriction of political vote, one man, one vote, was actually based on eh, how can I say, I think caste in a sense, since mostly Jats belong to the Khalsa."*
- ³¹ Interview with Nirmal Dass, 3 August 2009 by D. Tatla, Wolverhampton. Part of this history is available in the annual report of Shri Gruru Ravidass Temple 1982-83, made available by Mr. Mahay's courtesy.
- ³² It is said that Master Santa Singh, who used to serve at High Street Gurdwara, Smethwick, was once reprimanded by someone.. This prompted him to campaign with like-minded SCs for a separate religious place. After hiring a hall in Handsworth, they eventually bought an abandoned church at Grove Lane, Handsworth, Birmingham. Interview with Mohan Lal Guddu 15 July 2009 by D. Tatla, Birmingham.
- ³³ Interview with Mohan Lal Guddu 15 July 2009 by D. Tatla, Birmingham.
- ³⁴ Interview with Sukhdev Sidhu, 22 August 2009 by D. Tatla, Bedford.
- ³⁵ Interview with Gian Chand Ghaiwal, 4 September 2009 by D. Tatla, Coventry.
- ³⁶ Lievesley's (1985) estimates for the Ravidassia population in the Midlands, based on 1981 Census estimates, as; West Midlands, 16,555, out of which Birmingham 5,843, Coventry 2,562, Dudley 1,435, Sandwell 2,756, Solihull 127, Walsall 1,447, Wolverhampton 3,305. He also provides estimates for other cities, such as Leicester 250, Derby 600, East London 1,000, Bradford 600, Bedford 500, Luton 500, Southall 15,000.
- ³⁷ Interview with Mohan Lal Guddu 15 July 2009 by D. Tatla, Birmingham.
- ³⁸ Interview with Sunil Raju 27 September 2007, by C. Simon, Toronto, Canada. Mr Raju described the close relationship which developed as: *"Many who migrated to UK were the disciples of Sant Sarwan Dass Ji. So as they were facing caste discrimination in gurdwaras, they wanted to establish a religious place, which has the same kind of reverence for Guru Ravidass Ji as at DSSDB. The saints encouraged them to make a Gur Ravidass temple, where Ravidassias can consider Guru Ravidass Ji as their guru."*
- ³⁹ Interview with Piare Lal Badhan, 1 August 2009, by D. Tatla, Telford Telford.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Harbans Lal Shouunki, 8 September 2009, by D Tatla, Birmingham.
- ⁴¹ See Charity Commission Reports, which asked the temple to appoint 25 trustees and tendered advice regarding elections to the Management Committee. See http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/Our_regulatory_activity/Compliance_reports/fdcase.aspx#4.
- ⁴² The issue of caste discrimination among British Indians was highlighted by BBC Radio Four during the summer of 2004. BBC Radio 4 transcript on The Caste Divide downloaded from www.countercurrents.org 27/06/2005.
- ⁴³ <http://www.voiceofdalitinternational.org/>
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Meena Verma 8 September 2009, by D Tatla, London. See also <http://www.dsnuuk.org/>
- ⁴⁵ See Des Pardes and http://www.panthic.org/data/5068_UK_Meeting.jpg

- ⁴⁶ On 30 January 2010, while celebrating the 633rd anniversary of Guru Ravidass at Varanasi, Sant Niranjan Dass approved a new religious scripture for his followers. This is titled *Amrit Bani Shri Guru Ravidass Ji Maharaj* – a sacred *granth* published by Satguru Ravidass Janam Asthan Mandir, Seer Goverdhanpur at Varanasi. The new *granth* has 177 pages containing 240 *shabads* of Guru Ravidass, including 40 *shabad* and a *slok* taken from the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. A photograph of him adorns the front. According to a DSSDB spokesman, C. R. Suman, 20,000 copies were available for distribution but he stated that “we don’t want to create tensions. Where there could be dissent, we won’t provide the *granth*.” The option of making the *Amrit Bani Shri Guru Ravidass ji Maharaj* for Ravidassia *sangat* in India and abroad also overcame the potential law-and-order problem inherent in making its recommendation compulsory. Interestingly, it also pre-empted any objections from any Ravidassias who did not want to avail themselves of the facility and were comfortable with the *Guru Granth Shaib*.
- ⁴⁷ Paria Singh, current President of Guru Ravidass Bhawan, Birmingham, interview with D. Tatla, 8 September 2009, Birmingham.
- ⁴⁸ Malkiat Baha, interview with D. Tatla, 11 September 2009, London

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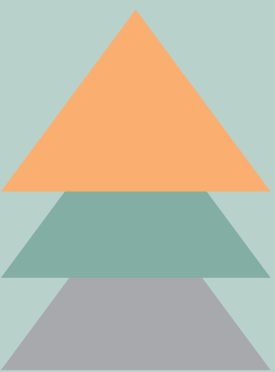
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