

New forms of religious transnationalism and development initiatives

In recent years there has been much discussion about the contribution of migrants' remittances to economic development in their homelands. 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. The size of these flows varies considerably between communities, with overseas Chinese, Mexicans and Indians accounting for the largest proportion. In India, economic liberalization since 1991 has been followed by organized efforts to channel Non-Resident Indian investment into the Indian economy.

Development agencies have recognized the importance of migrants' remittances to development. However, the need to build a sound evidence base is clear, because:

- The impact of remittances on poverty reduction is unclear;
- Financial remittances are accompanied by important 'social remittances' – that is, ideas, values and social practices that are difficult to quantify;
- Religious philanthropy, especially post-9/11, has sometimes been associated with radical groups and *hawala* (unofficial) transactions.
- There is insufficient understanding of *how* and *why* poor and marginalized social groups among migrants from the South mobilize resources in their host lands and how these resources are actually used in their homelands.

A case study of one religious centre and its associated religious movement in Punjab, based on both published and historical sources and new data collection, is set within the wider context of caste and social disadvantage.

Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan, Punjab, India: a case study

In the last decade there has been increasing public policy interest in religious transnationalism – understood as religiously based identity movements – that connects migrants from the South settled in the North to their traditional homelands and beyond through

Figure 1: Dera Sant Sarwan Dass Ballan

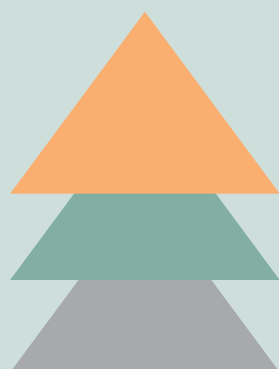


Source: Mr. S.R. Heer, General Secretary, SDDCHT

Revised Policy Brief 10 - 2011

Wider implications of a case study of an Indian transnational religious movement include:

- *In addition to recognizing the total contribution of financial remittances, better understanding of the role of social remittances is needed*
- *Attempts to harness international remittances for development purposes must appreciate the complex motivations and dynamics associated with them*
- *Transnational networks and remittances can provide support for disadvantaged groups within religious traditions (including caste groups) in their quest for dignity and social recognition*
- *New forms of religious transnationalism can help disadvantaged groups develop innovative strategies to achieve social equality and development in their homelands and should be distinguished from contemporary stereotypes that associate transnationalism with the 'war on terror'.*



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 mediaeval 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 emphasised 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 marginalized and socially excluded castes in Punjab and the origins of Dera

(DSSDB) itself. It included visits to DSSDB and the social facilities 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:

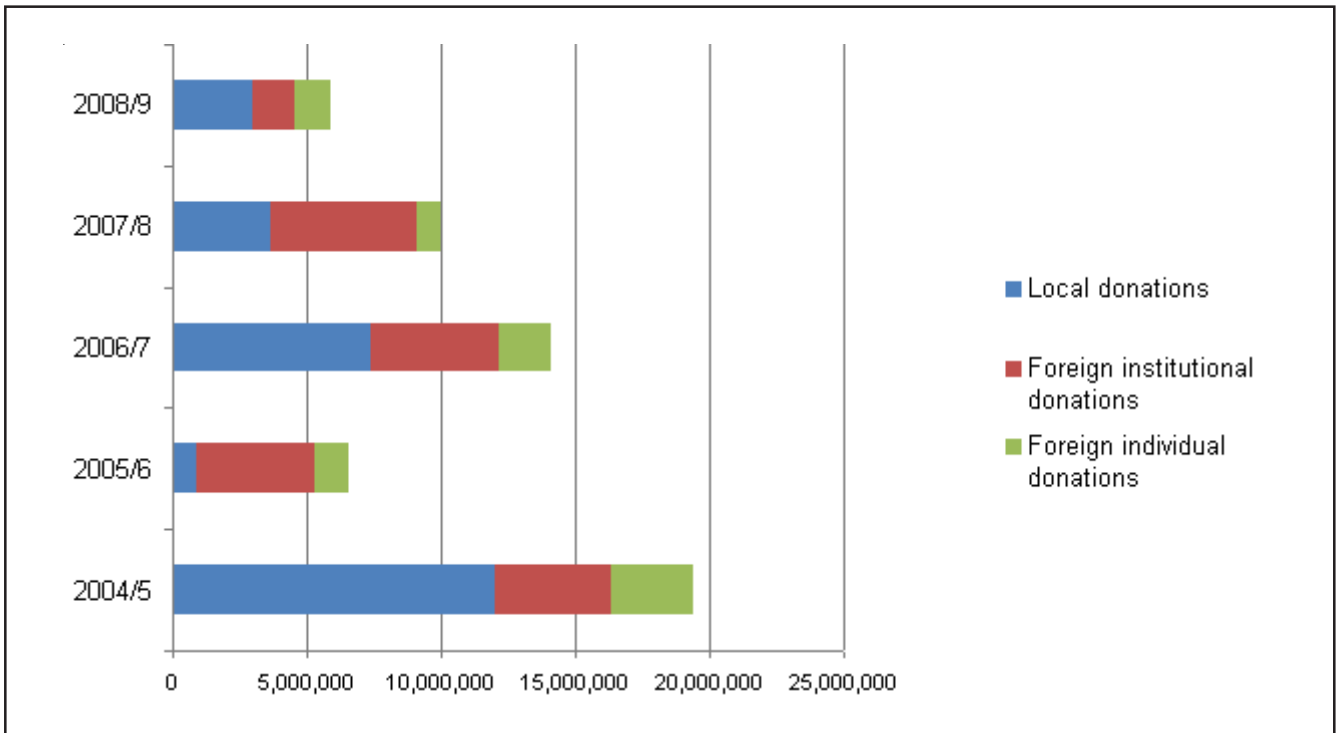
- They also have a religious dimension because of the religious inspiration and support given to them by the DSSDB and its *sants* to aspire to more dignified and prosperous lives and to undertake *seva* (selfless service) for the Ravidassia community as a whole.
- The persistence of caste discrimination 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.

Figure 2: Guru Ravidass Bhawan, Handsworth, Birmingham



Photo by D. S. Tatla

Figure 3: Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital Trust: public donations (Rupees)



Source: SDDCHT: Note that a large proportion of the ‘local contributions’ came from overseas followers, given to the *sants* during visits to Ballan.

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 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.

Figure 4: Sant Sarwan Dass Charitable Hospital, Adda Kathar



Source: Mr S.R. Heer

Figure 4: Sant Sarwan Dass Model School, Phagwara



Source: Mr S.R.Heer

Implications

The findings have wider implications:

- The total contribution of social services funded through transnational remittances may be significant in countries like India, 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 improved understanding 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.
- For many disadvantaged groups in India (and elsewhere), especially low caste groups, establishing a distinct religious identity is seen as a necessary step to achieving recognition and social equality. This is difficult for groups at the boundaries of the main religious traditions, who not only have to compete with the main traditions but also often lack resources or support. Such groups can be assisted by transnational networks and remittances.

- Where religious identities are closely interwoven with other social identities (including caste), the nature and impact of religious philanthropy can take many forms. New forms of religious transnationalism among marginalized and underprivileged social groups can give rise to innovative strategies for achieving social equality and development in their homelands. It is imperative that a distinction is made between such links and contemporary stereotypes about religious transnationalism, which associate it with political radicalism and the 'war on terror'.

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 31st August 2009, Adda Kathar, Jalandhar District).



This document is an output from a project funded by UK Aid from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Further information

Source: Singh, Gurharpal, Charlene Simon and Darshan Singh Tatla (revised edition 2011) *New Forms of Religious Transnationalism and Development Initiatives: A Case Study of Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan, Punjab, India*. Birmingham: Religions and Development Working Paper 52

<http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/index.php?section=47>

See also the DSSDB website <http://sachkhandballan.net/index.php>