Deras and Evangelicals*

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At first sight, it seems completely inexplicable: a man convicted of rape of his own young followers in at least two cases and believed to have committed many more; also accused of murder in a case yet to be decided and forced castration of 400 men; who openly flaunts incredible wealth and shamelessly promotes his own family; a tech-savvy "rock star baba" with a penchant for wearing outlandish costumes and heavy jewellery, who is the multi-role hero of several films he has produced—this man presents himself as the religious and spiritual leader of tens of millions. And the bulk of his following continues to take him at his word, venerating him as a saint, lapping up his extreme behaviour, seeing the cases against him as attempts to frame him, and willing to die or turn violent for his sake.

How do we explain the extraordinary popularity of the bizarrely flamboyant Guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh Insan of the Dera Sacha Sauda, and the deep loyalty he still seems to command? In many ways, this represents an extreme version of what is now a widespread sociocultural phenomenon not just in India but across the world: the rapid rise of millennial religious forces that are oriented to the needs and aspirations of the most downtrodden and marginalised segments of society. The emergence and expansion of these sects is a response to the social and economic exclusion experienced by their followers within older and more established organised religions, but it is also an outcome of at least some material improvement in their conditions and their associated political assertion.

The many deras in north India, for example, clearly came up in response to the exclusionary caste practices of established religions. The surprising and unfortunate resilience of caste within Hindu groups is well known. But, in addition, despite its supposedly "Hindu" origins, the caste system's tentacles have extended their grasp across all the major religions of the Indian subcontinent, such that caste-based hierarchies and discrimination (including continued endogamy, or marrying within the caste, and even refusal of people of higher castes to eat with members of lower castes) persist not only among Hindus, but also Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and other denominations.

Ironically, Sikhism, which began with an egalitarian ethos that reacted against caste and in its early phases was explicitly oriented to eliminating such practices, experienced a cementing of such caste distinctions, especially over the past two centuries. Practices of extreme discrimination, including social and economic boycott by upper castes against lower caste "transgressors" of rigid caste disciplines, have occurred even very recently. In Punjab and Haryana, the States where these deras proliferate, the tensions have arisen particularly between the dominant Jat caste (whether Sikh or Hindu) and Dalit communities, who have become major participants in such deras. The religious practices of Jat Sikhs (organised by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) tend in practice to be deeply exclusionary, with separate gurdwaras and cremation grounds for Dalit Sikhs and many other forms of daily discrimination.

There has been a complex interplay between such cultural-religious practices and political economy processes. Dalits in Punjab (where they constitute around one-third of the population) and Haryana have historically been deprived of land, with even their homestead land often the property of upper castes. They had no choice but to work as agricultural labourers for the landed castes, especially Jats. But over the years since the Green Revolution, the combination of mechanisation of agriculture and influx of migrant workers from other regions made such work harder to come by. There was thus a significant amount of out-migration (especially from Punjab) to other countries. This mobility, and the increased remittance incomes it generated, reduced the economic dependence of Dalit households on local landed groups and also made them more socially and politically assertive. This, in turn, was met with a backlash from upper castes, expressed also in sociocultural terms as heightened discrimination. Growing involvement in some of the deras that provided more substantive social equality became a way for Dalit communities to deal with this.

While deras have a long history— sometimes of centuries in this region—the recent rise of some has been spectacular. In Punjab alone, there are estimated to be more than 9,000 deras, but only a few of them have become really substantial in size, with mass followings of millions of devotees. The Dera Sacha Sauda is one of these, but there are also Radha Soami, Nirankari, Bhaniarawala, Namdhari, Sachkhand Ballan, Divya Jyoti Sansthan and others.

Inclusionary

The chief attraction of these deras, especially for Dalits and marginalised groups, is that they are independent but inclusionary sects outside the organised control of mainstream Hindu and Sikh religions, offering non-sectarian spaces to their followers. The Dera Sacha Sauda, for instance, does not ask its followers to renounce any previous religious affiliations since it believes that all gods are one, and their current guru, Ram Rahim, himself frequently appeared in front of images of gods from many different religions. This fundamentally syncretistic approach was not entirely harmonious with other religions, however. They have been periodically oppositional to more established religious forces, such as the 2007 episode when there was violence after Ram Rahim appeared dressed as the 10th Sikh guru, which was sacrilege for the orthodoxy.

These deras are mostly inclusionary, explicitly rejecting caste identities. Sacha Sauda asks all its followers (whom they call “premis”) to adopt the last name “Insan” (human), thereby removing the possibility of caste identification. It has also taken up issues of other groups that are discriminated against: organising mass weddings of former sex workers, facilitating widow remarriage, and filing a case in the Supreme Court for the legal rights of transgender people.

Many women are attracted by the dera’s emphasis on abstinence: followers should renounce alcohol and drugs (both addictions being huge problems in Punjab and Haryana), turn vegetarian and avoid extramarital sex. (The fact that at least one of these restrictions was not adhered to by the leader himself is simply rejected by most followers.)

In addition to these social reform measures, these deras tend to be hugely aspirational, with hopes of socio-economic betterment of followers encouraged by dramatic accounts of miracles, instances of which become part of the folklore of the followers.

The massive camps or physical spaces that house the ashrams are sites of security, social equality and togetherness and inclusion for bhakts, and the grandiose architecture and various entertainment centres within add to the sense of being a self-contained community.

This also enables such religious orders to become big economic enterprises, employing large numbers of workers. The Sacha Sauda complex in Sirsa, Haryana, is a mini-city that contains several factories, a movie theatre, many restaurants, schools, training institutes, a multi-speciality hospital, petrol pumps and much else. The dera has ventured into food processing and other consumer goods industries, trading on its reputation and relying on its following to be both the producers and the market. Four of the films produced by Gurmeet Ram Rahim became blockbusters, reaping revenues well beyond the average Bollywood movie (the fifth one, recently released, may well do the same, despite everything). So, the dera was not just a space for spiritual satisfaction, entertainment and social inclusion but also a significant source of employment.

In such a context, it is easy for followers to turn a blind eye to or be in a state of denial about transgressions of the leader and believe that he has been framed by those who oppose the dera for other reasons, for there is simply too much at stake for them to accept the truth. Similarly, no politician can afford to ignore the deras—so the mainstream parties have paid obeisance to the guru and at various times have managed to garner the support of this large vote bank. While it earlier had links with the Congress party, since around 2012, and especially in the last few years, Sacha Sauda has backed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But its leadership has expected something in return—specifically, the dropping of cases against Ram Rahim—and so the recent events are being seen by followers as a betrayal, despite the softly-softly approach of the Haryana Chief Minister during the recent violence sparked by the court judgment.

Within the region, the perception is that this particular battle has been won by the Jat Sikhs, but the war will go on, even if at present the discontent among the dera's followers is only simmering. For the BJP, this relationship is now a double-edged sword: the risk of alienating Dalits, whom they are assiduously courting for the next general election, has to be set against the risk of upsetting Jat Sikhs who are equally important in terms of numbers.

Parallel in Pentecostalism

All this may seem very local or national in flavour, despite the Dera Sacha Sauda's claim of having 60 million followers across the world. But the rise of millennial sects and religious tendencies in other regions point to a broader trend of which this may be a part. Specifically, Pentecostalism, which has become the fastest growing form of Christianity, throws up many parallels. From Los Angeles to Sydney, from Brazil to South Korea, from Nigeria to Guatemala, Pentecostalism has witnessed a dramatic rise and spread, especially in the last two decades. It is now estimated to have around

half a billion followers across the world, second only to Roman Catholicism, which it may soon overtake.

It is an evangelical form of “charismatic Christianity” that relies largely on oral tradition and direct transmission of the “gospel”, rather than on established liturgy and texts. Its growth has been organic, based on pre-existing social relationships as networks, as those who join it tell others about what they have gained. For, Pentecostalism is all about experience: healing, life-changing experiences, including miracles. As with Gurmeet Ram Rahim, Pentecostal rituals are more about singing, dancing and celebrating than about some externally imposed orthodox spiritual principles. A typical service will contain some rock music, some chanting in local or even unknown tongues and some faith-healing, often culminating in a kind of communal ecstasy.

Once again, this is a religion that appeals to marginalised and excluded groups and gives them a sense of being included in a caring community. Early Pentecostals in the United States (where the religion first emerged in the early 20th century) were mostly poor domestic workers, sanitation workers and daily-wage workers without job security.

Today’s Pentecostals are disproportionately likely to be young, poor and women, mostly living in Africa, Asia or Latin America. Because Pentecostalism lacks the dogma and hierarchical organisation of established Christian churches, it is more flexible, lacks barriers to entry, and functions as a web of small-scale initiatives broadly adhering to common principles, which are more locally adaptable. Individual congregations function more or less autonomously, and this splintering actually gives the tendency greater dynamism.

Like the deras, the Pentecostal churches also get indirectly involved in electoral politics, supporting particular political parties in different places and times. Like the deras, they also have fickle political allegiances, changing according to convenience or promise.

They also rely on charismatic celebrity preachers who can fill large stadiums with enthusiastic followers and increasingly spread their message through social media. They also rely on bling to attract and satisfy, on mega events and giant screens, bright lights and excitement, a combination of entertainment and emotion to deliver the spiritual experience. They also offer an escape from the drudgery, squalor and tedium of daily existence, not only through the experiences they offer but by the employment they generate.

The rise of such similar religious tendencies in different parts of the world cannot be an accident. It, surely, reflects specific features of our time: the inequalities and insecurities generated by economic globalisation that create both frustration and resentment; socially exclusionary practices that are reinforced by material processes; popular alienation from governments and formal political forces that do not appear to be either accountable or just; feelings of powerlessness in the face of apparently inexorable tendencies that destroy livelihoods and hollow out communities. This makes people search for a sense of social solidarity that is essential for human existence, which is stronger because it is combined with some supposedly spiritual content.

Unfortunately, these religious tendencies—in India and elsewhere—only help people to try and deal with the consequences of these big socio-economic processes rather than address the causes of the problems. And, therefore, the conflicts that they either encapsulate or try to suppress are not over either.

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