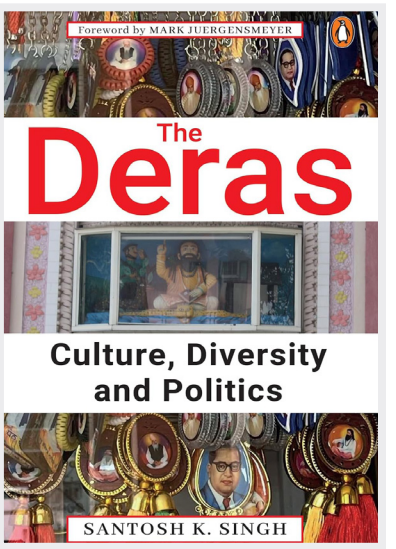
Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 2 pp. 412-415
October 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i2.2837

The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics



Author: Santosh K. Singh
Publisher: Penguin Random House India
Year: 2025

Reviewer: Ameet Kumar[1]

The Deras: Culture, Diversity, and Politics by Santosh K. Singh is an important contribution to the study of *deras* (spiritual centres) tradition and its complex connections with politics, caste, religion, and regional identity in Punjab. The work fits within broader scholarship on caste, Dalit assertion, and religious identity in Punjab. Existing scholarship such as Ram (2004) highlights the importance of Ad Dharm movement led by Babu Mangoo and Ravidass *deras* in challenging caste-based exclusion and fostering collective identity among the marginalised communities (Ram, 2004; 2008; 2011). Additionally, Jodhka (2004) shows the continuing significance of caste within Sikh society and religious institutions (Jodhka, 2004). Recent scholarship has examined *deras* as spaces of Dalit mobilisation and religious identity formation. Singh's study on *dera* highlights the role of transnational networks in shaping Ravidassia identity and supporting social and religious institutions in Punjab (G. Singh, 2012a; 2012b; 2013). Building on these strands of scholarship, Singh (2025) work focuses on the diverse roles of *deras* and their significance for marginalised communities' aspirations for emancipation, cultural assertion, and social negotiation, while also examining their relationship with wider structures of caste and power.

[1]Doctoral Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee, Uttarakhand, India
Email: ameet_k@hs.iitr.ac.in

© 2026 Ameet Kumar. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

Singh's study makes a significant contribution to draw attention to the persistent gap between Sikhism's egalitarianism theological principles and the continued reproduction of caste distinction within the social and religious life of Punjab. It demonstrates how caste inequality affects access to religious places, the formation of community identities, and the emergence of alternative forms of religious authority, rather than seeing religion as a uniform or exclusively spiritual domain. The discussion of Gehuan village, in this context is noteworthy, even though the village has a varied sacred landscape, with religious sites associated with various communities. While the Jatt Sikhs occupy a dominant position in terms of population and land ownership, the Dalits and other marginalised groups remain socially and spatially peripheral. Singh uses this setting to highlight the persistence of caste inequality and the circumstances that led marginalised communities to look for religious spaces through which they can express their dignity, identity, and collective assertion.

Furthermore, Singh argues that the formation of *deras* was due to the inability of mainstream religious institutions in addressing caste inequality. Singh traces this process through the history of Dalit religious assertion, beginning from Ad Dharm movement and the later development of Ravidass *deras*, with Dera Sachkhand Ballan emerging as a particularly significant example. The book presents Ballan not simply as a spiritual centre but as a site where religious identity, Dalit assertion, and political mobilisation converge. Its declaration of Ravidassia Dharma following the 2009 Vienna incident (Sant Ramanand Ji was killed in an attack during a religious gathering in Vienna) and the acceptance of the *Amritbani* illustrate an attempt to establish a distinct religious identity. However, Singh shows that this process has not produced a unified community. Differences among local adherents, diaspora communities, and religious leaders reveal continuing debates over religious symbols, scriptures, and the relationship between Sikh and Ravidassia identities.

This complexity becomes particularly visible in, chapter six "*Myth of a Monolith: The Ravidassia Identity and its Reality*," where Singh dismantles the assumption of a single Ravidassia identity from three opposing viewpoints: L.R. Bailey's Buddhist-Ambedkarite stance, Manohar Lal Mahey's Ravidassia-Ambedkarite synthesis, and Paramjit Kainth's Sikh-Ambedkarite pragmatism. Singh observes that the discomfort felt by SC groups such as Valmikis, Kabirpanthis and others with the idea of a particular tradition being imposed on them, which is seen as a sign of dominance and arrogance, is quite evident on the ground (p. 117). He also shows the failure of Channi experiment (a Dalit political mobilisation effort) exemplifies the numerical strength of Punjab's SC population but its political fragmentation (S. K. Singh, 2023). Moreover, the discussion could have gone further by examining differences and relationships among different Dalit groups; and how such internal divisions shape the question of collective identity and unity in Punjab? The chapter addresses how *deras* like Ballan

empower Dalits globally but struggle to address local socio-economic disparities, revealing the limits of identity-based mobilisation.

Singh's treatment of these debates also raises a broader question about the relationship between religious identity and material forms of mobilisation, particularly around land, employment, education, and socio-economic inequality. The book extends this argument beyond institutional religious spaces by examining pilgrimage, popular culture, and transnational networks. The discussion on the Shri Guru Ravidass *Janam Asthan Mandir* (birthplace of Guru Ravidass) in Varanasi shows how pilgrimage can become a means of strengthening collective identity and connecting Dalit communities across Punjab and the diaspora. The annual Begumpura Express (train that carries devotees from Punjab to Varanasi for the annual Ravidass Jayanti pilgrimage) highlights these transnational connections. While differences exists between *nirguni* (which emphasises the formless divine), and *saguni* (which understands the divine in manifest form) interpretations of Ravidass, as well as between diaspora and local communities demonstrate that such spaces also contain ideological and social tensions. Similarly, the discussion of protest music, posters, and mission singers in chapter seven shows how popular cultural forms become resources for caste assertion and resistance to dominant social identities. These cultural expressions allow marginalised communities to reclaim stigmatised identities while negotiating changing forms of political and religious expression.

Singh's argument that *deras* in Punjab cannot be treated as a homogeneous religious category is one of the book's strength, supported by his assessment of the wider variety of *deras* in Punjab. Their diverse social, political, and spiritual roles, along with their different approaches to caste, religious authority, and community mobilisation, shows the complexity of Punjab's religious landscape. Singh explains how marginalised communities, such as Dalits resist oppression and assert their identity through *deras*. It successfully shows mainstream Sikhism's failings in combating caste discrimination and highlights how *deras* give Dalits dignity and voice. The book also analyses the influence of migration, globalisation, and diaspora in influencing these processes. This study has a few shortcomings, including a strong regional bias, giving the Doaba region prominence while paying less attention to other parts of Punjab. A few other *deras* are also mentioned and one chapter entirely looks at Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS). An important limitation of the book is less engagement with gender, in its analysis of *deras*, caste and religion. Although the book delves deeply into caste, religion, identity, and political mobilisation, the book does not examine how men and women experience, participate in and negotiate *deras* spaces differently. Although these spaces may provide collective empowerment and community mobilisation, they can also produce gendered hierarchies. A more in-depth attention to women's role in religious practices, community activities, their role in leadership and decision-making would have provided a significant gendered dimension to the book's examination

of power and the social change in Punjab. Overall, Singh's work is valuable for academicians working on caste, *deras*, identity politics in Punjab, and socio-cultural movements in South Asia.

References

Jodhka, S.S. (2004). Sikhism and the Caste Question: Dalits and their Politics in Contemporary Punjab. *Contributions to Indian Sociology, 38*(1–2), 165–192.

Ram, R. (2004). Untouchability in India with a Difference: Ad Dharm, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab. *Asian Survey*, *44*(6), 895-912.

Ram, R. (2008). Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India). *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *67*(4), 1341-1364.

Ram, R. (2011). Guru Ravidass: Prophet of Dalit liberation. *Voice of Dalit, 4*(1), 29-48.

Singh, G. (2012a). Religious Transnationalism and Development Initiatives: The Dera Sachkhand Ballan. *Economic and Political Weekly, 47*(1), 53–60.

Singh, G. (2012b). Religious Transnationalism, Ravidasi Identity and the Dera Sant Sarwan Dass, Ballan. *Sikh Formations, 8*(1), 21–36.

Singh, G. (2013). Religious Transnationalism, Development and the Construction of Religious Boundaries: The case of the Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Ravidass Dharm. *Global Networks, 13*(2), 183–199.

Singh, S. Kumar. (2023). Deras, Dalits, and Caste Politics in Punjab: Decoding the Channi Experiment. *Economic and Political Weekly, 58*(19), 26-29.