

UNPACKING CASTE DISCOURSES IN THE SIKH SCRIPTURE: INSIGHTS FROM THE ADI GRANTH

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Abstract

Background: In this paper, first, we briefly reckon with the presence of caste in present-day Sikhism and acknowledge the massive corpus of literature highlighting the difference between the ritual sanction (or lack thereof) for caste and actual practice today. However, this paper focuses on the former of these two aspects by analyzing the Adi Granth and inferring the attitude of the writers towards the Brahmanical caste hierarchy. It argues that broadly, Sikhism recognizes the existence of caste in society but seeks to subvert it by critiquing its existence and repeatedly asserting the tenets of egalitarianism. However, none of the Gurus mention their own caste in any of these verses. References to the castes of the writers themselves are only seen in the additional verses by Ravidas, Kabir, and others through the stories highlighted in the writings of these authors. These writers assert their stances against caste by recognizing their own lower status and using it to critique the apparent intrinsic superiority of Brahmins in the varna hierarchy. Thus, Sikhism promotes equality irrespective of caste and class and is progressive, at least with respect to its scripture. The Adi Granth is a valuable text in this regard, by helping construct an early history of caste and untouchability in the Sikh context.

Keywords: Caste, Sikhism, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Adi Granth, Untouchability, Equality, Varna Hierarchy.

Introduction

Sikhism is a religion with a rich history that is closely connected to the state of Punjab.¹ Guru Nanak, the first Guru, founded the religion in the 1520s—the last human Guru was Guru Gobind Singh, who transferred the authority of the office of the Guru to the Adi Granth (literally meaning “primal book”)² and the Panth (“community”).³ This declaration of the Adi Granth as his successor and the eternal Guru of the Sikhs⁴ was followed by a complete reading of the text, granting it the title of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, as it is popularly known now.⁵

The Adi Granth consists of 3,000 hymns, written by six of the Sikh Gurus and certain Bhagats (“devotees”).⁶ It is written as a poetic scripture, divided into thirty-one different subsections according to the musical mode (rag) with each page being referred to as an ang.⁷ The hymns of the Bhagats, though separate units, follow the same principles of organization.⁸ The language used in the Adi Granth has been titled the generic “Sant Bhasha,” or saint language but the language is actually a complex mix of dialects from across north and northwestern India written in the “Gurmukhi” script.⁹

With respect to caste, ethnographic studies have shown that it continues to exist in Sikh society today.¹⁰ against this backdrop, while the practice of caste in Sikhism today is well-documented, what is the scriptural outlook towards caste in Sikhism?

For the sake of clarity, two key definitions may be in order.

¹ Gurinder Singh Mann, *The Making Of Sikh Scripture* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

² John Stratton Hawley, *Songs of the Saints of India* (Oxford India Paperbacks, 2004), 64.

³ Mann, *The Making of Sikh Scripture*, 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Surinder S. Jodhka and Jules Naudet, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Caste* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 535-552. See also: Surinder S. Jodhka, "Sikhism and the Caste Question: Dalits and Their Politics in Contemporary Punjab," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38, no. 1-2 (February 2004): 174-176.

Caste may be defined as "a status group based on an ideal of endogamy,"¹¹ with five major dimensions: religion, power, relationship with the state, economy, and culture.¹² This is a contemporary and expansive definition that is the most relevant. It accounts for past frameworks (which focused too much on religion),¹³ takes a novel dimension of power into account, considers a relation to the state as inclusive of affirmative action,¹⁴ includes a materialistic analysis via economic relations (drawing on Ambedkar's argument that caste is a division of labour and labourers), and considers culture beyond religion and ideology.¹⁶ It does all of this without a teleological prescription. The degree to which these dimensions are present may vary contextually. For example, the Brahmanical varna hierarchy as was understood by most is absent in Sikhism in Punjab—yet, to deny the existence of caste altogether would be incorrect, as such a denial arises from a Brahmin-centric notion of caste that focuses all too much on religion as against the importance of land as a source of power beyond ritual purity.

The second and harder task is to define religion. It has been argued that defining religion is not possible and any definition risks being universal or based on a prototype (which has commonly been Christianity). Still, Durkheim's definition may be useful.²⁴ However, to ensure it fits multiple contexts, religion may be defined as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things (things set apart and forbidden) which unite all those who adhere to them into one single moral community.

Sikhism forms a unified community of the Sikhs (congregating in the gurdwara, or "gate to the Guru") with the Sri Guru Granth Sahib as their **sacred** text with normative moral prescriptions, as noted earlier. Hence, it roughly fits the definition I have proposed above. However, critically examining religion is beyond the scope of this paper—hence, using this definition along with a "commonsensical" understanding of religion

is crucial for the sake of readability. Given these, the next section involves a textual analysis of the references to caste in the Adi Granth.

I. What do the Gurus have to say?

Guru Nanak writes that he prefers spending time with the lowest of the low than the apparent greatest of the great humans, for the Lord's blessings shower upon the lowly, and the Lord is the true greatest of the great.²⁸ He preaches recognizing the Lord's light within all, and tells all to not consider social class or status; hereinafter, there are no castes or classes in the world. He mocks the Brahmanical obsession with purity by saying that the Brahmin eating purified food in a purified abode is in fact impure by virtue of him not chanting the Naam ("name") of the Lord. In fact, such a Brahmin's "mouth is to be spat on." Guru Nanak goes as far as to say that in the beginning, there was nothing, not even the Vedas or the Hindu corpus of Gods, until the nirgun ("nameless") and

nirakar ("formless") Lord created everything.³² This is a revolutionary overhaul that places the creation of the world in the hands of the Lord of the Sikhs, contradicting the Vedic origin of the world.

He says that for the Brahmin, the Shabad³³ is equivalent to the Vedas.³⁴ In one of his most provocative hymns, he says Yogis with robes, Jains with hair removed, and Brahmins arguing over scriptures and prescribing rituals all understand nothing without the Shabad—again, those who receive it are sanctified and pure.³⁵ The Lord's praise is his Ganga and Benares, cleansing his soul.³⁶ He also ridicules the sacred thread worn by the

Brahmins—the real sacred thread is of compassion, which cannot be broken, unlike the Brahmin's thread. Another example of Guru Nanak ridiculing Brahmins is his assertion that those who chant the Naam can drink poison, while the sinful Brahmin dies on drinking it. Essentially, Guru Nanak opposes pride, which he views as a source of ruin.

The hymns of the other Gurus build upon these basic ideas of egalitarianism and critiquing Brahmanism. Guru Arjan Dev is vocal in his attack on unfounded Brahmin pride and says that those Brahmins who simply take from others, while denying they have received anything, will repent when they go to the door they ultimately have to go through (i.e. the door leading to the afterlife). This may be a critique of the Brahmin practice of seeking daan ("alms") and their focus on materiality—in Sikhism, earning a living by virtue of one's own hard work is more praiseworthy than living off of alms. Guru Nanak too critiques materiality, saying that the whole world is false and that hunger isn't appeased even by stocking worldly goods.

With respect to egalitarianism, Guru Arjan Dev says that the Lord looks upon all impartially—'filth' arises from sins and being attached to the world, not from birth. All, even the shudras and 'outcast pariahs,' are saved by Him. He says that even an untouchable is better than those who do not enshrine the Lord's name in their heart. He supports the worship of God by all, saying that anyone from any varna can chant the Naam which emancipates them. Along a similar vein, he says that the lowly outcaste can become a Brahmin and the untouchable can become pure with the Gurus.

Guru Ram Das is also concerned with subverting the caste hierarchy—he says that the blessings of the Lord are not restricted to anyone. All who seek the sanctuary of the Lord shall find it, irrespective of caste. Though there may be four castes, the one who meditates on the Lord is blessed. He references Namdev and Ravidas who were of a lower caste yet blessed by the Lord. He also recounts the tale of Bidar, the son of a maid. Krishna ate in Bidar's house, rather than in the King's, without paying attention to caste, because Bidar's devotion was so moving.

A similar theme can be seen in Guru Amar Das's hymns—he says that if everyone is made of the same clay by the same potter, caste-based divisions cannot be rational. For him, the only way for someone to qualify as a Brahmin is to be one with the Lord and to focus all his consciousness on Him.

A curious feature arises on reflection. Why do the Gurus denounce the caste system, while simultaneously referring to untouchables, the four-fold varna hierarchy, and other such symbols? For example, why does Guru Arjan Dev say that one who understands the Naam understands the essence of the Vedas, while the same texts are critiqued in the Adi Granth? Why accept the existence of the four castes and social classes at all?

The Gurus draw on Brahminical iconography and subvert it to critique unfounded notions of Brahmin superiority based on the caste system. The locus of perceived impurity seems to be placed within a knowledge of the Gurmukhi, as against one's position in the caste hierarchy. Those who know the Gurmukhi find their 'filth' washed away. This may have been done intentionally, for a two-fold purpose. First, as a recognition of the world around them—the Gurus lived in a world with caste and could not have denied the reality of the world around them. Hence, they denounced caste while living in the socially stratified world. Thus, the Adi Granth is a prescriptive text, rather than a descriptive one. Secondly, drawing on Brahminical iconography may have added further weight to their critique of Brahminism. To say that the Brahmins are below even the untouchables and that chanting the Naam is enough to understand the essence of the Vedas is highly provocative. To say that the outcastes and untouchables can become pure via Sikhism cements its position as a revolutionary religion presenting a means of escape from the oppressive caste system, while the Brahmins are doomed to remain impure unless they enter its folds. Moreover, the purity alluded to by the Gurus is not as rigid as the Brahmanical caste system—again, simply chanting the name of the Lord is sufficient to gain purity. The contemporary Sikh practices of *sangat* ("congregational worship") and *langar* (eating together from the same source irrespective of identity) reflect this defiance of the purity-pollution dichotomy.

Thus, the purity-pollution dichotomy of Brahminism is subverted and used as a medium to critique its own irrationality. Hence, we can draw the inference that Adi Granth sought to challenge the caste system by functioning within its rigid bounds and providing another means (the Naam, and Sikhism in general) to escape it for the downtrodden.

However, the Sikh Gurus were initially upper-caste Hindus. Nowhere in the Adi Granth do they reference their own caste. The hymns of the Bhagats, particularly Ravidas and Kabir, are powerful in this regard as these Bhagats share the lived experience of being from a lower caste.

II. How do the Bhagats deal with caste?

The incorporation of the hymns of the Bhagats into the Adi Granth is itself a sign of its progressiveness, as their previous religious or caste affiliations were overlooked. This section will briefly consider the outlook of Ravidas and Kabir in particular towards caste within the Adi Granth.

Distinctively, Ravidas pointed out his own lower caste and used it as a vehicle for mobility. He was a chamar (a lower caste of tanners) but used that to promote the value of kirat (“manual labour”) as against the Brahminical trait of unearned wealth. As a form of radical assertion, he would wear the sacred thread and a tie a dhoti (“cloth”) around his waist while continuing his occupation of being a shoe-maker. This fits with the Gurus’ method of adopting Brahmin iconography to critique it that I had highlighted above, albeit more explicitly.

In the Adi Granth, he talks of Begumpura, the sorrowless city with equality, no caste, no class, and no taxes. He refers to himself as the emancipated shoe-maker, expressing his desire to be a citizen of Begumpura. He criticises the purity-pollution dichotomy of Brahminical Hinduism, questioning the ritually prescribed impurity of the leaves of the toddy tree, when the Bhagavad Purana is written on it (rendering it pure). He serenely calls upon his caste throughout, without seeming perturbed by it—for Ravidas, the Lord’s love transcends barriers and devotion is the means to be enveloped within such a love. His devotion was great enough that he became pure, with Brahmins bowing before him, even within what he clearly argued was a flawed system.

Kabir’s hymns are also included in the Adi Granth. He was a julaha, or a weaver, a lower caste. He is vociferous in his critique of the Brahmins (though much of his critique is also directed towards Islam). A similar theme is seen in the Adi Granth, where he says that in the womb, there is no such thing as ancestry or social status—all have originated from God, so how is it that the Brahmin is above the others? He wonders whether the Brahmin’s veins are filled with milk, while his own are filled with blood. He asserts that the only true Brahmin is one who contemplates God. He goes as far as to say that the Brahmins, if they meditate on the Vedas, will drown and die, while he, though a mere julaha, will be saved by chanting the Lord’s name. He urges the Brahmins to sing the Lord’s name, as this Lord was the one who first stated the Vedas. This initially seems contradictory—why refer to the Lord as having said the Vedas while simultaneously criticising them? This is a form of subverting Brahminical iconography by using it, as I had mentioned earlier. Alternatively, it could be a way to preach a prescriptive poem in a manner understandable and likely to incite action by the Brahmins.

Thus, Ravidas and Kabir to follow the basic ideas laid out by Guru Nanak, albeit more radically and with references to their own caste.

Conclusion

In terms of scriptural sanction, clearly, the Adi Granth is a revolutionary text wherein the writers oppose the notions of purity associated with the caste system, untouchability, criticise Brahmins (and their pride and materiality), and promote egalitarianism. The Gurus and Bhagats Ravidas and Kabir concur in this regard, though the latter acknowledge their own caste as well. To link the lack of ritual sanction for caste with its current existence, it is notable that though caste may exist, it is unlike the Hindu formulation of it. The “ideological scaffolding” of Brahminism is weak in Sikh Punjab, and this is in no small part due to the Adi Granth.

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