

## **Living and Defining Caste: The Life and Writing of *Giani Ditt Singh / Sant Ditta Ram***

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This essay explores the protean stances on the idea of caste among the Sikh reformers of the Lahore Singh Sabha in the late nineteenth century through reading the life and writing of Sant Ditta Ram, later *Giani Ditt Singh*. Though Ditt Singh was from a Ravidasi background, and his career reflected his desire to overcome the debilitations associated with it, he could not advocate an unequivocal stand on caste. Looking at his changing discourse on caste the essay discusses his different readings of the institution and the reasons for such vacillations. In the context of the contemporary debate on caste among Sikhs, and as *dalit* assertion takes place in the Indian Punjab, the ideas of a *dalit* Sikh will illuminate the period of history when caste and community identities were being reformulated.

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In this essay I will explore how the idea of caste came to be formulated by Sikh reformers of the Lahore Singh Sabha in the late nineteenth century Punjab by reading the life and select writings of a stalwart among them, *Giani Ditt Singh*, formerly Sant Ditta Ram of the Gulabdasi *dera*. Ditt Singh is a particularly apposite figure to study the protean stands of the Singh Sabha on caste as he was a 'Rahtia' or a 'Ravidasia,' polite terms that nevertheless carried the stigma of a Sikh 'untouchable' Chamar. An unambiguous stance on the meaning/s of caste (or its irrelevance) would surely have better served him and the Tat (pure) Khalsa community that the Sabha and Ditt Singh were invested in constituting. However, as the essay will demonstrate, his marked ambivalence on caste, sometimes repudiating it, and at others insisting on its centrality to social life, reflected deeper anxieties on the issue – whether in constituting community, denigrating popular culture, or in imagining the opportunities and energies its absence may release.

As the Punjabi reformers of different hues initiated and participated in the project of creating modern subjectivities unmarked by the taints of caste,<sup>1</sup> the question of caste came to be incessantly debated, among others, by the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha. For the Sikh reformers culling a Khalsa identity, freeing the Sikhs from what came to be perceived as the debilitating influences of the 'boa constrictor' of Hinduism became a project in itself.<sup>2</sup> Caste in its myriad manifestations came to be associated with Hinduism's deleterious effects, even as they imagined and discursively sought to produce a casteless Sikh past of the time of the Gurus. As the project of forging Sikhs into a

Khalsa identity gained momentum, and every custom and ritual came to be examined for its appropriateness towards this endeavor, practices came to be slotted as Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. Yet variable stands on caste persisted, exemplified here in Ditt Singh, and doing away with the institution became more difficult than has been hitherto recognized. Harjot Oberoi, W.H. McLeod, and Tony Ballantyne have all suggested the successful efforts of the Singh Sabha in achieving the Tat Khalsa identity, which included the need to free Sikhism from the stranglehold of caste.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we need to pause and reexamine the certitudes of this historiography by looking at a figure germane to Sikh reformism.

Sociologists have debated for a long time the polysemic significations of the term caste – its association with occupation, ritual purity, bodily substance, social privilege and the like.<sup>4</sup> The term will be used in all these senses here. Historians have been particularly concerned with questions of the persistence of the institution from earlier times,<sup>5</sup> or its specific transmutations in the colonial period.<sup>6</sup> Thus the moral valence that the term ‘*dharma*’ may have – say when Ditt Singh as a Gulabdasi *faqir* in the earliest phase of his career rejected *varnashramadharmā* – may be different from what caste came to mean in a public sphere formed by Orientalist knowledge projects, colonial governmentality, and reformist reformulations. But how did these varied understandings impinge on quotidian life? How did individuals like Ditt Singh who straddled pre-colonial and colonial times, understand and express the changing connotations of the institution? The variability of his position on caste as of others like him caught in the vortex of destabilizing change, are a product of their times, implicated in and constitutive of their efforts at self-fashioning and disciplining society, in debates that swirled in the public sphere. Such vacillation persisted despite the trajectory of Ditt Singh’s life that indicates his personal quest and attraction for public forums which would downplay, if not obliterate the reach of caste. While it was difficult for the upper castes to forgo the privileges granted by that status – after all the universal modernity of the middle class in India was often shaped by upper caste men<sup>7</sup> – there was no given clarity in the positions espoused by the ‘*dalits*’ either. The peculiarly colonial idea of immutability of caste, the attractions of upward mobility and its deployment for community identities as undertaken by Ditt Singh, or alternative potentialities of the institution are delineated in this essay, discussed through the case of this remarkable individual.

In the wake of the resurgence of the debate on caste within Sikhism in the context of assertion of *dalit* identity in Punjab, Ditt Singh’s variable stand on the issue will illuminate the historical period when this legacy was redefined. This may lend a perspective on the persistence of the institution of caste within Sikhism, despite a salient desire to fight it. The indeterminacy and lack of fixity on caste and community identity, from the writings of one primarily associated with the development of identity politics, shows the complexity of the issue at hand. This essay will begin with a survey of the historiographical understanding of the historical role of caste within Sikhism. This will be

followed by a glimpse of Ditt Singh's life, stressing the significance of his Gulabdasi background, his move into the Arya Samaj, and finally his association with the Lahore Singh Sabha. The last section will take up some of his writings to examine his varying stands on caste and the contexts in which his arguments were constituted and expressed.

### **The Question of Caste in Sikhism**

W.H. McLeod as a historian constantly engaged with the question of caste in the course of his enormous contribution to Sikh Studies. This is visible in his important effort at analyzing Sikh sacred scripture and the anecdotal accounts of the first Guru's life (*janam-sakhis*) to study the life and teachings of Guru Nanak, placing him within the larger north Indian Sant movement.<sup>8</sup> McLeod underlines the theoretical rejection of vertical caste hierarchies in Nanak's teachings, drawing attention to his egalitarian vision of emancipation available to all castes without any disability attached to being born low caste. This was in consonance with other *sants*, men of God often low-born, who preached against the rules of *varnashramadharma*, the broad category of the *varna* divisions and stages of life, that placed the Brahman on top of the social heap, Shudra at the bottom, and the untouchable outside its ambit. These *sants* also ridiculed the idiom of purity and pollution in caste practice that rates as superior one who is least soiled with bodily waste and its management. At the same time, McLeod draws attention to the continued horizontal operation of caste, in the sense in which rules of caste endogamy were adhered to even in the lives of the Gurus, as they all married within their ascribed caste *gotras*. McLeod observes the persistence of this aspect of caste rules particularly among the Khatri of the Punjab, the social category to which all the Gurus belonged.<sup>9</sup>

Significant from the point of view of the fashioning of the Tat Khalsa, or the pure Khalsa identity, is McLeod's work on the prescriptive literature of the Sikhs. The *Rahitnamas* are the corpus of literature produced in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries that pronounce on the 'code of conduct' of the Khalsa.<sup>10</sup> The importance of *rahit* literature, for the purpose of understanding its deployment by the vociferous advocates of the Lahore Singh Sabha is twofold. Firstly, the *rahit*, its study and what was attributed to it became the basis for laying the rules for 'correct' Sikh/Khalsa conduct – appearance and personal grooming, costume, rituals and other social and behavioral indicators – that would mark the Sikhs as a separate community. As McLeod shows, the Sabha intellectuals deliberated on and sieved this literature, picking up elements that *they* attributed to the tenth Guru's period, in consonance with his vision as *they* saw it, while rejecting anything that smacked of being 'Hindu'. They tended to overlook the specific circumstances of the *rahit's* evolution over time. Secondly, the eighteenth century, the time of the composition of some of this literature, became the 'heroic' age of the Khalsa for the pamphleteers and public men of the Singh Sabha, adept at investing the writing of history – a community's existence and survival in its

difficult past – to mould community identity.<sup>11</sup> The struggle of the Sikhs against the Mughals and Afghans was seen to potentially possess emotive power that could be exploited to forge a separate identity. Bhai Vir Singh, the famous Sikh literary figure, successfully welds together history with new literary forms like the novel, to develop a sense of community. Often using the eighteenth century as a backdrop to create moral fables featuring Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as distinct types, Vir Singh uses the didactic novel to spell out the characteristics of the Khalsa Sikhs.<sup>12</sup>

Studying the six *Rahitnamas* of the eighteenth century, McLeod comments on the cultural background of the ‘Hindu’ world against which the *rahit* was formulated.<sup>13</sup> The attitude towards the institution of caste could vary in this prescriptive literature from its virtually complete acceptance in daily social conduct in say the Chhibber Brahmin Chaupa Singh’s *Rahitnama* to the more circumspect *Rahitnama* of Daya Singh that discountenances caste.<sup>14</sup> Recently, Purnima Dhavan has shown the simultaneous growth of *rahit* literature along with that of the *Gurbilas* in the eighteenth century. While the former attempted to draw boundaries around Khalsa social conduct, the latter used the devotional idiom and *Pauranic* myths to figuratively partake in the court of the tenth Guru and its warrior tradition. Thus diversity, Dhavan notes, was intrinsically a part of the Sikh world of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

From this bricolage world, where one could be a Sikh or/and a Khalsa, a kesdhari,<sup>16</sup> or a *sahajdhari*,<sup>17</sup> or indeed an Udasi, Nirmala, Akali, Nihang, Nirankari, Namdhari, Sarvariya, or even Hindu-Sikh – the Lahore Sabha, according to Harjot Oberoi, from the late nineteenth century embarked on the project of homogenizing the Sikhs and defining Sikhism. While Oberoi stresses distinction between the uniformity promoted by the Tat Khalsa (Lahore group), and the pluralist *sanatan* positions among other reformist groups (for example, Amritsar Singh Sabha), McLeod shows the contemporary historian’s tendency to overplay the differences between the two.<sup>18</sup> Ditt Singh, an early member of the Lahore group, I suggest, represented an equivocating figure, sometimes working for an exclusive Sikh identity and at others pushing for Hindus and Sikhs to jointly abjure ‘Muslim’ practices. He was keen to establish the Sikhs as a third community of the Punjab, distinct from the Hindus, yet found it difficult to theoretically and socially work out this separation, producing literature ambivalent on both caste and community identity.

This prevarication on caste among the reformers of the Singh Sabha (and of the Arya Samaj) in relation to reforms for/of women has been discussed in my earlier work. In *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, I demonstrate how preserving the privileges of high caste, brought into question by the public debate initiated by the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha on caste was to be mitigated by regulating women’s lives through redefining their roles in society, home, and marriage. In this paper, I turn to the voice of a low caste Sikh reformer to underscore the heterogeneous positions on the question of caste as it came to be discussed in the 1890s.

The apparent success of the Tat Khalsa advocates in homogenizing Sikh identity has been challenged by the unstable and complex relationship of the *dalit* Sikhs (the scavenger Chuhra /Mazhabi, and the leather-working Chamar – Ravidasi/Rahtia) to it. In a state where *dalits* constitute up to 28.3 per cent of the population, (the highest in a state in India),<sup>19</sup> their assertion has led to tensions in the present Punjab and in the diaspora. This erupted, for example, in the attack on two visiting Ravidasi leaders in Vienna, Austria, by a group of Sikhs in May 2009.<sup>20</sup> The tensions also spilled out on Punjab's streets in the summer of 2007 when the Dera Sacha Sauda's Guru Gurmit Ram Rahim Singh attempted an imitation of the tenth Guru's initiation ceremony for his own followers.<sup>21</sup> This un-spooling of caste-based identity politics, albeit a product of social churning in modern Punjab, has also to be understood in historical light. Though the Singh Sabha in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was dominated by the 'upper castes' of Khatri and Aroras, who were traders, merchants, shop-keepers and professionals, their legatees in homogenizing Sikh identity and controlling its religious and political organs of power were the Akalis, who represented the rural and landowning Jats. The assertion of identity on the part of the *dalit* Sikhs, those who earlier worked on the lands of the Jat *zamindars* and provided other menial services, has been at the heart of this conflict.

Historically, the low castes freewheeled between the different religious conglomerations of Punjab, themselves fairly fluid, on the one hand, and adhered to their own heroic and saintly figures like Lalbeg, Balashah or Balmiki.<sup>22</sup> The colonial state, with its Orientalist notions of religion that refused to recognize the piety displayed by the Balashahis or the Lalbegis as constitutive of religion, tended to club them with the dominant communities.<sup>23</sup> The attraction of conversion to Christianity under the aegis of the missionaries in the Punjab led to a reaction among indigenous reformers who initiated programs of low caste 'uplift'. This move received fillip once the reformers became conscious of displaying enhanced community numbers and imbibed the logic of majorities/minorities, leading to concerted efforts to 'purify' (*shuddhi*) and entice the low castes to join mainstream Hindu/Arya and Sikh ranks.

Caste mobility and change of occupation through conversion to Islam or Sikhism was already available in Punjabi society. Conversion to Sikhism could lead to change in status and nomenclature – Chuhra to Mazhabi (who then gave up scavenging) or Chamar to Ravidasi (who sometimes gave up working on leather and took up weaving)<sup>24</sup> – as will be demonstrated for Ditt Singh. Additionally, there were sects on the margins of society that admitted low castes and untouchables into their ranks, like the Udasis, and the Gulabdasis of the Punjab, and offered avenues of gaining respect through donning the garb of the *sadhu/faqir*, along with access to literacy and education.<sup>25</sup> Later, as shown by Juergensmeyer, the Ad-Dharm movement under its inspirational leader Mangoo Ram, offered yet another alternative to the low castes in the Punjab in the 1920s. Ditt Singh, a Rahtia, struggled to free himself personally of constraints that shadowed him because of his caste, and intellectually in

working out agendas that would reflect the egalitarian principles that the Gurus stood for.

### **In Public Life: Ditt Singh's Quest for Respectability**

We know little about Ditt Singh's personal life, though in recent years there has been a spurt of interest in him fuelled partly by an eagerness to reclaim him as a *dalit* hero.<sup>26</sup> His biographers repeatedly speak of his lowly birth giving an impression that the question ought to have bothered him, as it does them,<sup>27</sup> for how could someone from a Chamar background not have been affected by its debilitations? In the argument presented here I also index the part his caste played in determining his career, whether initially with the Gulabdasis, or later in the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha. The issue of caste became shrill from the late nineteenth century onwards as the reformist Aryas and the Sabhaites attempted a theoretical reformulation of the institution. In the charged atmosphere of the time, when the proselytizing missionaries initiated conversions to Christianity of the Punjabi peoples (for instance, the stories of the genesis of the Amritsar Singh Sabha, and the Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar, are about the anxieties putative conversions produced),<sup>28</sup> the reformers in imitative ceremonies introduced the 'conversion' of low castes to twice-born status in the case of the Aryas, and to the Khalsa in that of the Sabhaites. The convergence of the issues of conversion and caste in these vitiated times created a resonance on the question of caste that played itself out in sharp polemics and mimetic actions among the varied players in public life. There can be little doubt that Ditt Singh the polemicist must have been painfully aware of his own origins at such a time.

The fact that there is no unanimity even on the date of birth of Ditt Singh is a reflection of the paucity of personal information on him. While different authors agree that he was born on 21 April, and the year of his birth is proffered variously as 1850, 1852, or 1853.<sup>29</sup> However, all his biographers are agreed on a few basic facts of his life. His father was 'Sant' Diwan Singh, a Ravidasi weaver, who was religious minded and well versed in the philosophies of Nyaya and Vedanta. He is also said to be an admirer (or member) of the Gulabdasi sect. It seems Diwan Singh's own religious inclinations influenced the choices he made for his son, whom he first taught himself, and then around the age of 8-9 years, sent him to village Tiur, in Ambala district, to be educated by Sant Gurbakhsh Singh, a Gulabdasi, who instructed him in Gurmukhi, prosody, Niti-Shastra, and Vedanta. Additionally, one Lala Dayanand of the same village taught Ditta Ram Urdu and Persian. At the age of 16-17 years, he moved into the main establishment of the Gulabdasis at Chathianwala, near Lahore, where Sant Desa Singh was his preceptor.<sup>30</sup>

Information on the religious life of his father, and his own precocious career is also available in Ditt Singh's controversial booklet *Sadhu Dayanand Nal Mera Sambad (My Conversations with Sadhu Dayanand)* on his putative discussions with Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj,

when the latter visited the Punjab in 1877 and established a Samaj there.<sup>31</sup> Ditt Singh writes:

I was born in the house of a *sant* who preac  
So from a young age I too began to settle disputations.<sup>32</sup>

The Gulabdasi background of Ditt Singh is significant for many reasons. It is important to note that his father was influenced by the teachings and the philosophical leanings of the Gulabdasis that veered towards the metaphysical monist musings of the Vedanta. As I have discussed in 'Panths and Piety', Gulab Das, the founder of the sect, had been educated by the Udasi and Nirmala teachers, and among the practices that he borrowed from the Udasis was to keep his establishment open to all castes, besides the attention to life of the mind and dissemination of knowledge that he owed to both the sects. Gulab Das also spent time with the *faqirs* of the Bulleh Shahi order, an irreverent and popular Sufi order that was established in the eighteenth century. The Gulabdasis were indubitably one of the most exciting sects of the middle years of the nineteenth century. Not only were they willing to impart knowledge to one willing to receive it, they were fond of debate, discussion and controversy, putting forth their point of view in unequivocal and provocative manner. They also spouted radical ideas, which included preaching against the *varnashramadharma*, and allowing religious initiation to women, the most famous case being that of the Muslim courtesan Peero.<sup>33</sup> Coming from a low caste and a profession of disrepute, Peero repeatedly underlined the unique characteristics of her sect that disregarded caste fastidiousness and was open to all religions.

The radical, intellectually stimulating and the uninhibited lifestyle of the Gulabdasis must have appealed to Diwan Singh.<sup>34</sup> As noted, Diwan Singh came from the upwardly mobile section of the Chamar community, the Ravidasis, who had taken to weaving, a clean profession, giving up the impurity associated with leather. According to Denzil Ibbetson, the colonialist administrator-ethnographer of the Punjab, in the eastern districts of the province, where Ditt Singh's birth and early upbringing occurred, most of the Julahas or weavers had origins among the Chamars. However, the 'Julaha does not work in impure leather, he eats no carrion, he touches no carcasses.... In a word, the Chamar is a menial, the Julaha an artisan'.<sup>35</sup> For a spiritually inclined person like Diwan Singh, the Gulabdasis opened up opportunities for further learning and better status for himself and his son, without necessarily having to undertake the onerous asceticism associated with an order like the Udasis. The fact that Gulab Das' followers came from different castes, including Jats, Khatri, Kumhars, Ravidasis,<sup>36</sup> must have added to their appeal, offering interaction unencumbered by the strictures of caste. For example, Jawahir Singh Kapoor, a Khatri '*guru bhai*' of Ditt Singh, whose career paralleled his own, became a life-long friend; he was the likely inspiration in Ditt Singh move from the Gulabdasi establishment to the Arya Samaj, and then the Singh Sabha.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the Gulabdasis offered a genuine environment of intellectual creativity in the early years of colonial rule, before communal diatribes vitiated public life towards the end of the century. Besides Gulab Das, who had been a prolific writer of more than twenty books which were philosophical in nature, almost all his disciples wrote, and their works are available in hand-written manuscripts or lithographed pamphlets.<sup>38</sup> Many wrote in a philosophical vein, for instance Bawa Des Raj (probably the same as Ditta Ram's teacher Desa Singh), Mayya Das, or Sham Das 'Asif', but others expressed themselves in different modes. Peero penned verses speaking of her mystical yearning, but also wrote a surprisingly autobiographical narrative, along with celebratory songs for *holi* festivities.<sup>39</sup> Others composed for a burgeoning market for printed pamphlets that exploited the Punjab's popular stories, the *qissas*, and other indigenous genres. The more successful of these was Kishan Singh 'Arif', who wrote more than fifty *qissas* on characters of Punjabi folklore like *Hir-Ranjha*, *Raja Rasalu*, *Puran Bhagat* and *Dulla Bhatti*.<sup>40</sup>

Ditta Ram started his writing career in a similar vein, his first work, as noted earlier was the *qissa* of *Shirin Farhad* (1872), and the second had *Abla Nind* (1876) verses on wiles and vices of women.<sup>41</sup> Ditta Ram captures the stimulating atmosphere of the Gulabdasi *dera* in his closing verses of *Shirin Farhad*, the moment in traditional writing when the author re-enters his narrative, having earlier closed the tale being related. Here he calls himself Ditta Ram 'faqir' (mendicant), who sat in the *baradari* (airy pavilion) of Satguru Das Gulab, while around him friends were engrossed in various activities. Though we do not have to read these lines literally, they do capture the ambience of the *dera* and its literati rather well:

Some sit to read lexicon or poetry, some sing the Ramayan friends.  
Some read chapters of *unani* medicine, some put energy in singing friends.  
Some read of the unity of God with interest, relating it with love to friends.  
Some start to speak of lovers, turning pages of *qissas* friends....<sup>42</sup>

A similar mention of Chathe Nagar (Chathianwala), the main establishment of the Gulabdasi sect, and the *baradari* and the *talab* (pond) is also made in the closing verses of Ditta Ram's *Abla Nind*.<sup>43</sup>





This is a picture of Ditta Ram available in the hand-written manuscript of his *Shirin Farhad*. According to Ashok, it depicts the author at the age of twenty-one. Note the style of clothes and the *baradari* the author is seated in. His name Dittaramji is etched just above his turban.

Source: Shamsheer Singh Ashok (ed.), *Shirin Farhad* (Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahit Academy, n.d).

What is apparent from the above is that Ditta Ram participated fully in the cultural atmosphere of the Gulabdasi establishment. He imbibed their monist philosophy, and was immersed in their world of learning and imparting knowledge: reveling in composing poetry, indulging in Punjabi popular literary practices, absorbing Bhakti and Sufi ethos, and engaging in religious discourses and disputations. Yet, even as he seemed firmly ensconced in this pluralist space, he opted out, becoming embroiled with the Arya Samaj and the new politics that came in its wake. Why did this happen?

The reasons for such a move are easy to discern. The death of the charismatic founder of the *dera* in 1873 may have left it bereft of a personality who could keep all disciples together. Many left soon after to create local centers of their own,<sup>44</sup> and others' literary careers took wing, though many remained loyal to the *dera* and to Gulab Das' memory. However, the more significant reason must be seen to be the effect of Swami Dayanand's visit to the Punjab. Kenneth Jones speaks of his fifteen-month stay in the province, from April 1877 to July 1878, as one of sensational lectures, debates and controversies. A number of Arya Samajes were established in various parts of the Punjab, and the younger generation was inspired by his teachings that emphasized the need to reform the society.<sup>45</sup> Among the new ideas promulgated by Dayanand was an insistence on the reconfiguration of caste. He envisaged a society where education, talent and the virtues of a person would determine caste, rather than birth.<sup>46</sup> Though this idea is unevenly present in his opus *Satyarth Prakash*, it had the potential for genuine transformation, despite the notion of hierarchy remaining entrenched.<sup>47</sup> Among the arguments proffered by Dayanand to make his case was that of the need to change caste if a person demonstrated commensurate abilities: 'Even if a lowborn man were to possess qualifications ... of a superior *Class*, he should be recognized as such; and if a man highborn though he be, were to act like a man of inferior *Class*, he should be relegated to it'.<sup>48</sup> Dayanand reinforced his logic by giving mythological examples of caste mobility: sage Javal of an

unknown caste became a Brahman; Matang, an outcaste, became a Brahman; and Vishwamitra, changed his Kshatriya status for that of a Brahman.

We can only guess at the effect such remarkable ideas had on an 'outcaste' like Ditt Singh, though this point cannot be overstretched. His friend and fellow Gulabdasi, Jawahir Singh Kapoor, a high caste, too was attracted to the Arya Samaj and the new associational politics it represented, serving it as a secretary for some years. Yet, it is important to underline the manner in which Ditt Singh absorbed and repeatedly deployed the logic of caste status spelt out in the *Satyarth Prakash*. It had obvious echoes for him, a learned 'outcaste', who embarked early in life on a career of writing and lecturing, but had to battle the prejudices of society. Even though he moved out of the Arya Samaj, he never gave up the potentially revolutionary aspect of Dayanand's argument. Moreover, soon thereafter, the Arya Samaj kick started a program of *shuddhi* using Dayanand's logic, at least intermittently, to justify its conversions of the low castes who had found succor in religious traditions other than Hinduism. Thus the argument worked out by Dayanand stayed in public life to an important extent. Ditt Singh's disquisition on caste from various perspectives is available in his *Nakli Sikh Prabodh (The Awakening of False Sikh/s)*, produced in his Singh Sabha days and published in 1893. At one point in the work he endorses caste as an institution as it had existed in the 'early' days. Having established that the four *varnas* were based on the occupations, he states:

The system benefited the Hindu *qaum* because every *qaum* or *varan* stood firm in their task. The reason for progress was also that if a Brahman did the work of a Chhatri, he was called a Chhatri, if he did the work of a Vaish he was called a Vaish, of a Shudar, he was called a Shudar, *and if the Shudar did the job of a Brahman, he became a Brahman*. So Krishnaji in Gita had called one's *karam* one's *varan*. Like Ved Vyas though born of the stomach of a fisherwoman was called a Pandit Brahman, Vashisht born of a prostitute was called a Brahman and Vishvamitra though born a Brahman, because he kept weapons was called a Chhatri royal sage.<sup>49</sup> (Emphasis added)

To give another example of the use of the same logic to register his frustration at the persistence of caste in society, Ditt Singh writes in the *Khalsa Akhbar* of 15 July 1898, a newspaper he edited over a number of years: '...an illiterate man who calls his caste Brahman, is addressed as Panditji, but if a man of another *varan*, however well-versed in Shastras is never seen as a Pandit, but people are bothered by the question that a Vaish or a Shudar does not have the right to hear the Veda ...'<sup>50</sup>

The strength of this argument that accounted for the years Ditt Singh spent in gathering and disseminating knowledge can be gauged for him if we also take a look at the nature of caste prejudice he faced and the public humiliations he had to swallow. We know for instance that when Bhai Takht Singh, the founder of the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepur, invited Singh to this

school set up in 1893 to educate Sikh girls, the local Singh Sabha refused to share their meal with him because of his caste. Takht Singh, who personally found Ditt Singh inspirational, had to take him to his house and serve him a meal there.<sup>51</sup> Similar bias was displayed by the priests of the Golden Temple who would not open the precincts of the temple to outcaste devotees till later in the afternoon, well after all others had left. The consecrated food, *karah prasad*, prepared by the lower castes was also not accepted at the temple. It seems people like Ditt Singh too were not exempt from such treatment.<sup>52</sup>

Thus while the Gulabdasis created an enclave where caste affiliations were rejected, they themselves were increasingly relegated into a marginal community by the end of the 1870s, devoted to philosophical questions and intellectual pursuits. The new public life began to engage the emerging elite on issues that now had a wider resonance in society. What the Arya Samaj offered to Ditt Singh was a bold restatement on caste that could be carried into public life, not just a flouting of established customs to be practiced within a small arena among people devoted to esoteric values. The new argument was debated with force and conviction in the new fora of the public sphere - the newspapers, journals, associations, public lectures.

Ditt Singh's break with the Arya Samaj occurred only in 1888, over the vocal critiques of the Sikh Gurus by the Arya leaders.<sup>53</sup> By then, Ditt Singh had probably already joined or come to be associated with the Lahore Singh Sabha, set up in 1879 under the leadership of Gurmukh Singh. His new associates encouraged him to clear the Punjabi language '*Giani*' examination in 1886 and he subsequently joined the Oriental College, Lahore, as a Professor of Punjabi.<sup>54</sup> Ditt Singh's membership of both the organizations simultaneously was neither contradictory, nor controversial, as he went about creating a niche for himself in public life. So long as Sikhism was viewed as reformed Hinduism, it did not lead to problems - only when the Arya leaders began to condemn Sikhism as idolatrous, and began attacking the Sikh Gurus, that the situation became intolerable, and the break came.<sup>55</sup> This point might be worth reiterating because some of Ditt Singh's biographers, for instance Amar Singh, try to prove that he was never a member of the Arya Samaj.<sup>56</sup> Others have dated the pamphlet to 1877. This was after Ditt Singh's polemical *Sadhu Dayanand Nal Mera Sambad*, where he describes three disputations between the Swami and himself, in each of which apparently the Swami was worsted by Ditt Singh's better knowledge of the Vedas and the Indian philosophical traditions. In fact, this was the year that the Swami was in Lahore, thus effectively showing break of Ditt Singh with the Arya Samaj in the year of its establishment!<sup>57</sup> This pamphlet, in my opinion, ought to be dated after the break, for it would have been impossible for Ditt Singh to continue within the Samaj after the ridicule he poured on the Swami, considering the Swami's status within the Samaj.



This picture depicts Ditt Singh at the time of his appointment as a Professor in Punjabi at the Oriental College, Lahore. While the style of turban is similar to that portrayed in the earlier picture, he wears a formal western style graduating gown, and has a fuller flowing beard.

Source: Shamsheer Singh Ashok (ed.), *Shirin Farhad* (Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahit Academy, n.d).

The mid-1880s was a time of turmoil for Ditt Singh, a period that pushed him into clarifying his positions on a number of issues. On the Singh Sabha front, this was the time when the Lahore group threw a challenge to the Amritsar ‘conservatives,’ condemning their *sanatani* beliefs. The practice of worshipping living *gurus* came to be critiqued along with the question of maintaining caste rules. As Oberoi points out, the Amritsar group’s approval of an exegesis of the *Granth* that endorsed *sanatani* world view was also disapproved of.<sup>58</sup> The ex-communication of Gurmukh Singh from Sikhism under the seal of the Golden Temple followed, at the behest of the Amritsar group.<sup>59</sup> Ditt Singh even had to face a court case for his farce *Supan Natak* (*Dream Drama*) that he published in the *Khalsa Akhbar*, which lampooned the Amritsar group.<sup>60</sup> The issue of caste was covertly present in these proceedings. Gurmukh Singh, though a Chandhar Jat, was seen as the son of a *langari*, a cook, and Ditt Singh as an ‘outcaste’.<sup>61</sup> The attacks of the Aryas on Sikhs also began to be vociferous around this time.

Simultaneously, it seems the Gulabdasis took out a ‘notice’ against Ditt Singh, the man who attacked ‘gurudom’, for being a *guru* to villagers in Abhaipur, Ambala, where he apparently maintained a small hermitage. The notice ran as follows:

We’ve heard that Bhai Ditt Singh, when a *faqir* of the Gulabdasi persuasion for a long time, in Abhaipur of tehsil Kharar, zila Ambala, had built (is building?) a hut and a small garden, and calls himself a *guru* in the villages of the Lamba-Chhamba, and gets himself worshipped and accepts votive offerings of the people.<sup>62</sup>

Though none of his biographers mention when this particular *nindya patar* (defamation letter) of the Gulabdasis came out, the question it raises points to the controversy around the tradition of living *gurus*. Ditt Singh did not deny

the charge, explaining the charge of ‘his brothers’, as proving how respected he was from a young age in many towns and villages of Punjab! Here Ditt Singh seems to suggest that this occurred in his early career, at a time prior to his going to Chathianwala. He further maintains that his preaching in those days was against the worship of idols, graves, *pirs*, and superstitions, and generally in line with his ideology as a Sabhaite. However, Ditt Singh’s defense of his actions still does not answer when this charge was made against him, nor is his argument convincing. Though the Gulabdasis were advocates of Vedantic monism, the worship of graves and tombs did become an aspect of their cult: a tomb was built on the graves of Gulab Das and Peero at Chathianwala which became an important site of the sect’s piety.<sup>63</sup> Ditt Singh was somewhat restrained in his response to the Gulabdasi ‘brothers’, with whom he may have maintained cordial relations. At the same time, he used this occasion to ridicule the Arya Samajis, taking a dig at the Swami. Referring to his early experiments with different ascetic and spiritual practices, Ditt Singh observed that while he himself was already a respected preacher, Dayanand was still looking for an intellectual tradition to follow.<sup>64</sup>

The convergence of all these issues indicates overlapping affiliations that Ditt Singh concurrently maintained, even till the mid 1880s – Gulabdasi, Arya Samaji, and the Sabhaite. The turn of events from the second half of the 1880s, however, forced his hand, and he felt obliged to choose one of the groups and he chose the Khalsa identity being worked out by the Lahore group over others. However, the point that needs to be underscored is that it was possible till then, even for a man in the colonial public sphere to belong to and appropriate more than one tradition. Perhaps, this was easier for someone like Ditt Singh who received an orthodox education, and was introduced to western institutions somewhat later in life.<sup>65</sup> The rigid compartmentalization of religious communities and their essential beliefs was something he learnt later. And if he did manage to tutor himself in divisive communal politics, he never deployed that lesson in totality. Ditt Singh displayed changeable stances in works that ostensibly presented an unencumbered ideology of the Singh Sabha, as the next section will show. In some ways this early grooming in multiple intellectual and religious traditions stood Ditt Singh in good stead even as an advocate of the Singh Sabha reforms, for he used his vast knowledge to refute charges, make accusations, and take on the role of an untiring scribe and spokesman of the Lahore Sabha. By the time of his early death in September 1901, Ditt Singh came to be seen as a vigorous ideologue for the reformed Khalsa identity, and continues to be regarded as such. What such straitjacketing hides is his multi-layered personality. This section has followed his life trajectory, demonstrating the personal conflicts he faced as he negotiated caste prejudices. Yet there was no straightforward rejection of caste in Ditt Singh’s writing. What one finds instead is an endorsement of the institution at times, and its rejection at others, or its persistence in re-worked forms. The next section will look at some of Ditt Singh’s writings to highlight his complex position on caste and understand its implications.

### Caste in Ditt Singh's Writings

The eclectic career of Ditt Singh was reflected in the literature he produced. His writing spanned forays into popular Punjabi literary culture, polemical diatribes against 'other' religious communities, and caste practices. He wrote biographies of Sikh Gurus and martyrs, and condemned practices unbecoming of the Khalsa.<sup>66</sup> His contribution to Punjabi journalism was noteworthy as the editor of the *Khalsa Akhbar*, a position he occupied from virtually its inception in the mid-1880s till his death, with a gap of few years when it was discontinued. Ditt Singh was adept at writing verse, a legacy of his Gulabdasi days, though he used prose particularly in his journalistic writings. Ditt Singh mostly wrote in Punjabi in Gurmukhi script, but he was equally at home in Braj, Urdu and Persian.<sup>67</sup> The multiple innovations in the use of language in the Punjab of the nineteenth century will not detain us here,<sup>68</sup> however, Ditt Singh's choice of language and genres point to his comfort with the literary and pluralistic cultures of pre-colonial Punjab. His discerning use of language also reveal his engagement with the agendas of reform – questions of language, caste and the definition of religious communities – and the appropriate vehicle to carry these forward. It is for this reason that Ditt Singh is sometimes seen as a forerunner of Bhai Vir Singh, in his unflagging endeavor for reforms through the medium of writing, and in his use of history and language, in the defining of Khalsa identity.<sup>69</sup> In a sense, the trials, errors and successes of Ditt Singh initiated a more cogent Sikh reform that followed. Here I will show how caste appeared in various forms in his writings, and the different ways in which he understood the institution. The variable use of caste reflected both the deep-rooted nature of the institution in society, and the difficulties experienced in working out a theoretical argument against its prevalence among the Sikhs. Arguing for the irrelevance of caste from a Gulabdasi enclave where *varnashramadharma* could be disregarded, to taking the idea to a larger social arena was a task imbricated in contradictions and pitfalls, as Ditt Singh's shifting stands on the question reveals.

To explicate Singh's protean stances on caste, I will use two of his substantial pamphlets. These are the *Nakli Sikh Prabodh* mentioned earlier, and *Sultan Puara* (Trouble over Sultan).<sup>70</sup> Both were published in the 1890s, and were reprinted a number of times - *Nakli Sikh* at least three times in the life time of Ditt Singh,<sup>71</sup> and *Sultan Puara* remained popular even after his death, his son having it reprinted. *Nakli Sikh* was probably written first, as Ditt Singh later elaborated in separate pamphlets some of the themes lampooning popular cultural practices of Punjabi Sikhs (and Hindus) that he introduces here - *Sultan Puara*, *Gugga Gapaura*, and *Miran Manaut* (against the worship of Sakhi Sarvar, Gugga Pir and Miran Pir respectively). *Nakli Sikh* is more complex of the two, because of the number of issues he tackles in its pages. Ditt Singh wrote this pamphlet to establish the separate identity of Sikh religion and community, asserting that from the time of the early Gurus onwards, their conscious effort was to create a distinct religion in Punjab – *sab ton juda jhanda gadan da si* (to plant a separate banner).<sup>72</sup> Ditt Singh,

insidiously, conflates Sikh religion with its Khalsa variant from the time of Nanak, the first Guru, thereby pushing back in time the Sabha disapprobation of *sahajdhari* identity, though he later wrote of the tenth Guru's initiating the Khalsa in Anandpur. However, the referents in his language remain impregnated with multiple possibilities – note the use of the term *avatar* (incarnation) to describe Nanak in the quote below, alluding to the Pauranic mythological significations:

He accepted suffering on his body.  
Within the Khalsa Panth was Guru Nanak, the *avtar*.<sup>73</sup>

In this tract Ditt Singh tells Sikhs that they could learn from other religious communities, that is, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, of how distinct identities can flourish. Simultaneously, he attempts to create separate rituals for the Sikhs, critiquing the myriad 'Hindu' practices that the Sikhs apparently followed – birth and death rituals, wearing Hindu garments (*dhoti* instead of *kachhehra* or drawers), and keeping Hindu somatic symbols like the sacred thread (*janeyu*), and the topknot (*choti*), instead of unshorn hair and the turban. Ditt Singh also initiates weaning the Sikhs away from popular practices like visiting the tombs of Sufi *pirs*. In this conscious step at culling out a Sikh identity from a *mélange* of practices, Ditt Singh also discusses caste, both in a conscious and 'correct' manner, according to the new Sabhaite insistence on its irrelevance in Sikhism, but also in an unconscious and complex way that assumes caste to be endemic in society. Though there were other pamphlets that Singh wrote to pronounce on Sikh traditions – *Gurmat Arti Prabodh*, *Durga Prabodh*, *Darpok Singh Daler Singh* – none match in the plethora of issues he picks here, making this booklet something of a torchbearer in laying the blueprint for Sikh reform.

In *Sultan Puara* Ditt Singh has a more straightforward task – to demonstrate to Sikhs the foolhardiness of worshipping a 'Muslim' saint, Sakhi Sarvar. In the spirit of competitive one-upmanship between popular religion and Sikh practices, Ditt Singh trivializes the miracle-making powers attributed to Sarvar, and offers as consolation for giving up Sarvar the parallel myths and rituals of the Sikh religion. Though Ditt Singh speaks of the glory of the Khalsa religion, the pamphlet is clearly addressed to both Hindus and Sikhs, and seeks to remove them both from the reach of a Muslim *pir*.<sup>74</sup> The 'othering' of Muslims is rather crude, a far cry from the embarrassment with the excesses of anti-Muslim tirade of the eighteenth century *Rahitnamas* that McLeod has discerned in the writings of Kahn Singh Nabha later on.<sup>75</sup>

The pamphlet is also important for the sub-regional identities within the Punjab that Ditt Singh alludes to, identifying people with their local customs. This is significant for it uncovers a manner of apprehending people other than their religious or caste identities. In the process, Ditt Singh underlines the appeal of Sarvar across Punjab, but also unveils the ambition of the reformist agenda for a pan-regional adherence. Most of all, the pamphlet is of interest for addressing people of different castes to abjure the worship of Sarvar, in the

first instance by recuperating their caste identities, lost in the melee of Sarvar fairs, and the medley of beliefs and rituals that form the core piety towards the *pir*. In other words, in *Sultan Puara* Ditt Singh adopts a circuitous path via caste to the Khalsa ideal of 'castelessness'. The intermingling of castes in the cultic practices of the Sarvarias, and the belief that the *pir* disapproved of the custom of untouchability (*chhut*) were in fact raised to condemn Sarvar – 'the *pir* does not approve of untouchability, we go like brothers'.<sup>76</sup> This liminal state of castelessness during the pilgrimage of the saint, is shown to be repugnant precisely because it violates codes of caste behavior:

Becoming *pir* - brothers they all go to the court of Sarvar.  
Sinking caste in the well they have made the (Muslim) *bharai*<sup>77</sup>  
their *pir*.<sup>78</sup>

Caste was then to be recovered and reinstated as the ideal state, and it remains ambiguous here to what extent it could be discarded after adopting the Khalsa practices.

It might be useful at this juncture to see where Ditt Singh iterates the position that in Sikhism there was no caste. Two points need to be emphasized. Firstly, the statement against the practice of caste invariably occurs when he speaks of the Gurus and the importance they placed on this matter that is at a moment when he was consciously stating a theoretical position on Sikhism. Secondly, the idea of caste incorporated both the notion of *varna* (*baran*), the classical four castes of Brahmanical Hinduism, and the idea of untouchability (*chhut-chhat*) associated with everyday social behaviour. The notions of purity/pollution pertained to the complex of cooking (*chaunka*) and the rules of commensality. Speaking of the erasing of caste by the tenth Guru, Ditt Singh writes – *char baran ik baran sajaye amrit chakh sabh bhrat banaye* (four *varnas* were constituted as one, they were made brothers by tasting *amrit*). He further notes of the Khalsa thus created – *chhut-chhat ki rasam na karte, nahin kahu se ranchak darte* (they do not follow the rituals of untouchability, nor are they afraid of anyone).<sup>79</sup> Earlier, he had made a similar observation for the third Guru Amar Das who advised his followers to give up rigid principles of untouchability.<sup>80</sup>

Ditt Singh's most important and oft quoted statement, because of its lyrical style, was made in the *Nakli Sikh* where he addresses the different occupational castes of the Punjab and admonishes them for adhering to their traditional caste statuses despite taking *amrit*, or initiation into the Khalsa. Illuminating the significance of initiation, Ditt Singh elaborates on how this ceremony incorporates a person in the qualities of the tenth Guru: he should now say that he is born in Patna Sahib as the Guru was, lives in Anandpur, like the Guru did, that the tenth Guru is his father, the Guru's (third) wife, Sahib Kaur his mother, and that their caste is Singh or Khalsa. However, people in disregard of such injunctions, continue with their old names, ways and castes:

What manner of a Sikh are you brother? I am Arora, and he a Nai.



O'Sikh! what is your caste? I am from the clan of Nama, of  
Chhimba brotherhood.  
What (manner) of milk is yours? We Singhs are stout Jats.  
Whose house have you been born? I am a Mehra who supplies  
water.<sup>81</sup>

In this mien Ditt Singh speaks of various castes/occupational and endogamous groups – Aroras, Chhimbas, Jats, Mehras, Ahluwalias, Tarkhans, Brahmans, Khatri, Sahnis, Rangretas, Ravidasis, Suniaras, Rahtias, Lubanas, Bhallas, Trehans and Bedis – for example. It is noteworthy that he addresses higher castes of Brahmans, Khatri, Aroras, along with 'untouchables', Ravidasis and Rahtias, various artisan castes, and other service providers, along with the Khatri castes of the first three Gurus – Bedis, Trehans and Bhallas – the *Bawas* who sought to defend their caste and status privileges against the onslaughts of the Lahore Sabhaites. This was perhaps his most comprehensive statement that endorsed if not a casteless position, the advocacy of one caste for all the Khalsa, and hence equality of status. However, Ditt Singh was far from consistent in maintaining this position.

Having noted Ditt Singh's statements abrogating caste, it is important to review the many occasions when he evokes caste, and associates it with either duties that were required of a specific group, or appeared intrinsic to its somatic-social makeup. Speaking of Hindus, and the lessons the Sikhs could learn from them via the epic *Ramayana*, viz., that despite the personal quest of Ram to get Sita back from her abductor Ravan, an undertaking in which no benefit was to accrue to them, the Hindus still make it a point to remember their God. They periodically perform his story, or greet each other with a respectful 'Ram Ram,' unlike Sikhs who have forgotten all the good their Gurus had done. Ditt Singh also notes that Ravan was a good Brahman, not a base person, and that Ram had to fight him in order to fulfill the duties of a Kshatriya king (*Chhatri raja*).<sup>82</sup> Similarly in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna taught Arjun his *Chhatri dharam* by encouraging him to take up arms.<sup>83</sup> In relating these tales Singh assumes a moral righteousness associated with following appropriate caste prescriptions. The idea of taking the morally right path, a duty to which one is born, or one that circumstances place a person in, was a favorite of Singh, on which he sermonizes again in his pamphlet *Pratigya Palan* (Fulfilling Vows).<sup>84</sup> Since the notion explored was one of ensuring one's duties (*dharm*), he uses the rich mythology of the epics and the Puranas along with tales of the lives of the Gurus and other exemplary figures, including celebrated Sufi *shaikhs*. In this anecdotal and mythological performative mode, Ditt Singh puts to use his training as a Gulabdasi discourses. In fact, its pluralist cultural ethos constantly surfaced and exceeded the brief required for fashioning a Tat Khalsa identity.

If the idea that castes are bound to specific moral duties is seen above, what emerges in *Sultan Puara* are castes tied to their occupational duties, and to pride related to birth status. It is interesting to note that Ditt Singh speaks of broad *jatis*, in the sense of local occupational groups. He remonstrates through

the character of a reformed Sikh (*Guru ka Singh*), reminding the various castes who go for Sarvar's pilgrimage that their association with Muslims was making them break/defile their caste taboos. So a Brahman/*misar* is reminded of his priestly duties, the value of Hindu places of pilgrimage (*Ganga, Parag*), of Hindu gods (Ram, Laxman, Krishandev) and symbols (*janeyu*).<sup>85</sup> A Jat as a landlord is told of his high status in the village (*nambardar*) or a leader (*sardar*) and how unbecoming it is for him to keep company of Muslims and Chamars. Turning to a Chamar (*Chamiar*), Ditt Singh makes fun of his desire to mimic the Brahman and the Jat in joining the pilgrimage – *bhedan nun bhi lage zukam, jiste karda nahin aram* (do sheep too catch a cold and that is why you do not rest?)<sup>86</sup> Unlike the higher castes, the Chamar has to earn his livelihood (presumably through manual work), or else his wife and family would go hungry and curse him. At other places, Ditt Singh addresses a Khatri, reminding him of his high status, a Mehra (water-carrier) and a Tarkhan (carpenter), dissuading all from joining the pilgrimage. He is particularly harsh on Kirars (largely Arora moneylenders), whom he criticizes for dressing in 'Muslim' clothes, and even conducting their religious ceremonies at Nigaha at the shrine of Sarvar, forgetting about their temples and pilgrimage centers.

The attractions of visiting Sufi shrines were to be countered by placing people more firmly within 'their' specific religious and social practices. What is also surprising in Ditt Singh's advice to various castes is the manner in which he seeks to 'retrieve' and pin caste and community prejudice in relation to Chamars and Muslims. Here the notion of caste as organic in nature that marks and differentiates the somatic substances of different bodies is at play, the extension of which is the idea of untouchability (*chhua-chhut*). Significantly, the Muslim is made the target of this bodily repugnance along with the Chamar, both within and outside an overarching caste hierarchy.

This cluster of ideas again comes through when the reformer Ditt Singh attempts unraveling the myths associated with Sarvar, one of which relates to Sarvar protecting cattle (*dangar*) from a tiger's attack by a single swish of his sword. To show the ordinariness of this supposedly saintly miracle Ditt Singh relates an incident when a Chamar/Chamreta accomplished a similar feat. The followers of Sarvar are portrayed as horrified at this comparison between a highborn saint, a Sayyid, and a Chamreta! However, the reformer Singh stands their argument on its head by asking the Brahman if he was 'higher' than a Muslim in caste hierarchy, and then goes on to speak of the revulsion inherent in worshipping a Muslim saint:

The Musaman is called a *mlechh*, when does a Brahman eat at his house?

And if he does he should be called a murderer, and ostracized from *dharma* and *karma*.

The Chamar does not kill a cow, but takes the skin off a dead one.

So we call him low, and do not sit near him.

But these Musalman butchers kill a living cow.

So they are our enemies, we will never benefit by associating with them.<sup>87</sup>

How does one disaggregate a tangle of prejudices embedded in these lines? A striking reversal of cultural role assigned to Sarvar is transforming him from a Krishna-like cow-protector to a universal Muslim cow-slayer, and therefore the recipient of the odious title *mlechh*, rather than recognized as a venerable Saiyyad!<sup>88</sup> The saint, with his benefactions to animals and humans, his rich mythology of bringing the dead alive,<sup>89</sup> is reduced in Ditt Singh's literalist writing to not only an ordinary mortal, but one who represents the other Muslim, the target here of unabashed hate. In this pamphlet, Ditt Singh uses the epithet *miyan*<sup>90</sup> even more than *mlechh* to show contempt towards Muslims. While the epithet (*mlechh*) ostensibly places the Muslim outside the framework of the Brahmanical caste system, however, its use in this instance seems to fix him as the lowest in the graded hierarchy of the caste system with the same logic that puts the untouchable outside caste, *but only in relation to it*. Thus there is the simultaneous incorporation/expropriation of the Muslim in a framework of hierarchy, the same that includes/excludes the untouchable. Moreover, here clearly the rules of *chhua chhut* are followed by the Khalsa, the reforming Ditt Singh, who distinguishes himself from the Sarvar pilgrims precisely through maintaining this aspect of caste practice. If the Khalsa in other situations are expected to give up caste praxis, here its regimen must apply even more sharply to them when in contact with a Muslim – *main han Singh aap tu miyan, tere baithe neer na piyan* (I am a Singh and you a *miyan*, I can not drink water in your presence).<sup>91</sup> However, unlike the Chamar, who is also dissuaded from joining the Sarvar pilgrimage, and is therefore seen as part and parcel of the Hindu-Sikh 'community', the Muslim is clearly identified as the enemy (*vairi*). In *Nakli Sikh* too the same point is reiterated.<sup>92</sup> Or even when the various *pirs* of the Punjab popular among women, as for example Miran, are taken on by Ditt Singh, he says the same: 'what colours are abloom, a *miyan* in the house of Sikhs!<sup>93</sup>

However, it must be emphasized that in other contexts and on a different register, Ditt Singh could also consciously 'own' Muslims as belonging to the culture of 'Hindustan', or on many occasions the religious identity of a person did not come into play. In a changed context the Muslims appear intrinsically as a part of the Indian landscape, naturally a part of its culture. This underscores the effort that was required to disentangle and mark as 'Hindu' or 'Muslim' a common heritage, even though the idea of religiously etched identities was not completely novel in the Punjab. Thus, at one juncture, in *Nakli Sikh* Ditt Singh sees the Christian doctrines and traditions as the 'other', which did not belong to a north Indian ethos. Speaking of the 'conditions of the Christians' (*Isaian da Haal*), Singh says that according to the Gospels (*anjil*) Jesus was extremely restless and unhappy before his impending execution. He speaks of Jesus being hanged rather than crucified, which perhaps points to Ditt Singh's limited interaction with the missionaries. However, he contrasts what he sees as the pitiable state of Jesus with that of

Mansur, who in popular Punjabi parlance went to the gallows smiling, and Shams Tabrez, who evidently did not utter a cry when his skin was torn off him and filled with hay by the king of Multan, or indeed the ninth Guru Tegh Bahadur, who bravely faced his beheading on the orders of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.<sup>94</sup> The appearance of the Sikh Guru on the same register of personal valor as the ‘martyr of love’ Mansur, and Shams Tabrez is noteworthy. Even more intriguing is the Punjabi ownership of Mansur-al-Hallaj, a ninth century mystic of Baghdad, albeit who is said to have traveled to north-west India in his peregrinations; and Shams Tabrez, said to be the preceptor of Jalaludin Rumi, the thirteenth century mystic from Turkey. Both these figures appear repeatedly in the folklore of the Punjab, in localized myths, and Ditt Singh in *Pratigya Palan* too made an exemplum of their lives, elaborating on the martyrdom associated with both.<sup>95</sup>

What also appears perplexing, considering his own caste background, is Ditt Singh’s derision of the Chamars. Not only does he advise the Brahmans and Jats from staying aloof from them, he also evokes norms of untouchability to underscore the pollution encountered in such contact. And these instances discussed by him of distancing from the low castes can be multiplied. A particularly interesting example is his ridiculing of the *bhanda*s and *mirasis*, actors of local farces (*swangs*), who entertained their patrons occasionally by dressing in different caste costumes. The *Mirasis* were otherwise also the genealogists, musicians and bards of the Punjab. Noting how they often turned out sartorially as rich *Khatri*s (*sahukars*), wearing turbans, *dhotis*, caste marks (*tilak*) and carrying pens and account books (*bahis*), but when the performance was over they reverted to their traditional base status – *mangte Mirasi* (beggar *Mirasis*), he underlined that the inherent nature of a person did not change, that is in reality a *Dum-Mirasi* stayed as such, and did not/could not become a high caste.<sup>96</sup> The point here was about the constancy of the inherited caste status, for Ditt Singh uses the common nomenclature – *Dum* and *Mirasis* – the Hindu and Muslim bards, terms often used in unison in the Punjab, which underplayed the significance of ‘religious’ identity, emphasizing one of caste.<sup>97</sup> In *Sultan Puara* again, when the reforming Sikh offers to all castes the possibility of becoming the *Khalsa* and so giving up their given caste status, Ditt Singh makes a special case for the *Chuhra*s and *Chamars*, that *even they* can become *Singhs*.<sup>98</sup>

How does one square this with either a theoretical position that Sikhs, particularly the *Khalsa*, disapproved of caste, or with Ditt Singh’s own *Ravidasi* upbringing? We can argue that caste prejudices were so deeply internalized, that despite the rationale against caste practices provided by the *Gulabdasis*, the *Arya Samajis*, or the *Singh Sabhaites*, and his own careful statements on the issue, Ditt Singh still spoke in caste terms, and imbibed and perpetuated oppressive and humiliating behavior towards the low castes. Alternatively, we can suggest that he homed on to the best way to create a cleavage between the *Hindus* and *Sikhs* on the one hand, and the *Muslims* on the other, by re-invoking and re-focusing caste prejudices by projecting them to the *Muslims*, though this strategy had deleterious repercussions on the low

castes as well. By recouping caste identities he could attempt to break practices like saint worship that were unacceptable to the Sabhaites. A third possibility is, however, suggested by Ditt Singh himself at various times in his pamphlets. This was the miraculous transmutation that occurred on becoming a Khalsa. The initiation into the Khalsa, which was now projected by the Sabhaites as the normative Sikh identity, ensured that everyone became of the caste status of the Guru, a Chhatri/Khatri/Kshatriya. Incidentally, this also shows that in the Punjab, the Khatri, otherwise a caste associated with shop keeping, trading, and the professions, were regularly conflated with the Kshatriya status as we will see. Thus, the Khalsa initiation became both the simplest route to upward mobility and its advocacy could be the surest way to make this identity attractive to all Sikhs. Ditt Singh on initiation had given up his earlier status, he could assert, and such a transformation was available to all. He subtly enunciates such an interpretation of the initiation ceremony, the taking of *amrit*, in both the tracts under discussion.

In *Sultan Puara* Ditt Singh invites all to take the *amrit*, give up previous caste and become a brave Chhatri:

The power of this *amrit* let me tell you of it.  
On tasting it all become brothers, giving up their old castes.  
You become a brave Singh, Chhatri son of the Guru.  
Breaking with (worshipping of) graves, cremation grounds,  
Gugga, Miran and *pirs*.

A similar sentiment is expressed in *Nakli Sikh*, where Ditt Singh explicates the meaning of taking on the Khalsa identity as becoming brave Chhatris.<sup>99</sup>

It can be argued that Ditt Singh was advocating a metaphorical transition to 'Chhatriness', the imbibing of the martial qualities of the Kshatriya, rather than any literal transformation of the caste of a person. In every instance where he speaks of becoming a Chhatri, he does so while delineating military values of valour and prowess at war. In *Sultan Puara* he even brings the contemporary participation of the Sikhs in the British Indian army that apparently fought bravely in China, Burma, Kabul, Qandahar, and Egypt, to draw attention to the power of *amrit* and appropriate these victories to the cause of Khalsa identity.<sup>100</sup> Of course, as maintained by Richard Fox, there was a significant congruence between the British attempts at recruiting Khalsa Sikhs in the army, their admiration of the warrior qualities of the Khalsa, and the Sabha endeavor to render Sikhs Khalsa and martial.<sup>101</sup>

Two further points may be made in relation to this martial transmutation. Firstly, a note must be made of the idiom of miracle in which the initiation into the Khalsa was invariably presented in the nineteenth century Sabha literature. One only has to read Bhai Vir Singh's *Sundri* to appreciate the projection of the miraculous power of the initiation *amrit*, instantaneously transforming individuals into paragons of valor. In a period when the miraculous was purportedly unraveling under the assault of the rational and the humdrum, as Ditt Singh himself undertook in relation to Sarvar's magical powers, the

miracle of the *amrit* remained an exception in Sikh literature. So while the Chuhras, Chamars or Mirasis must remain as such, those who turned Khalsa could hope for change. The message was not about a society without the framework of caste, as one of elevating one's position within it by becoming the Khalsa. This worked, unsurprisingly, in tandem with the Arya Samaj's notion of caste in proportion to talent. The reformers of the time dared not imagine a society without the institution of caste.

Secondly, Ditt Singh was not alone in understanding Khalsa initiation as ushering a change of status. In fact, he may have been endorsing a view that had a wider, and an older currency. His contemporary, Giani Gian Singh, a prolific scholar of Nirmala persuasion, wrote in his influential *Tawarikh Guru Khalsa* about the meaning of initiation as 'From today you belong to the Sodhi lineage of the Khatri caste<sup>102</sup> of the Khalsa. Your name is Singh and your abode Anandpur....'<sup>103</sup> In other words, entering the ranks of the Khalsa was often depicted as bringing one in proximity to the tenth Guru, and an incorporation within his caste. Also, it was the Khatri, with their purported Kshatriya antecedents, who were ascribed the militaristic values imbibed by the Khalsa. Despite suffering humiliations for his caste in his personal life, it is possible that Ditt Singh held fast to the belief that his initiation into the Khalsa changed his status, and this may explain at least in some small measure his contempt for the low castes.

Yet another manner in which the issue of caste cropped up was on the question of the *biradari*, caste brotherhoods/lineages, which played an important role in life-cycle ceremonies, and defined at the local level the social status of families. The question was a tangled one, for if marriages were endogamous, that is took place within prescribed caste categories, then the issue of caste and *biradari* took precedence over that of Sikh identity. This problem also then linked up with the relationship between Sikh 'community' and the Hindu 'community'. Ditt Singh was cognizant of the problem, and made an effort to tackle it. For instance, the Singh Sabha reformers urged the Khalsa Sikhs to marry their daughters to the Khalsas, theoretically of any caste, but realized that this was not always possible and the caste norms were invariably followed. The response to this dilemma was the advice to make sons-in-law 'Singhs':

Get engaged to each other, and become the true brothers of the community.  
Do not give a daughter to one who is not a Singh, do not do this for any reason.  
On giving a daughter make a Singh, and increase the *panth* of the Guru.<sup>104</sup>

But the problem was more intractable, as it was impossible to disentangle the 'community' affiliation between friends, relatives and caste brotherhoods. In a fairly perceptive moment Ditt Singh hit the nub of the problem when he had the '*nakli*' Sikh proclaim:

Commensality and relations, are tangled with each-other.  
 There is no enmity between us, so why should we make a  
 separate *qaum*.  
 The Hindu religion is dear to us, it is our great support.<sup>105</sup>

In response to how Sikhs should define their relationship with Hindus, Ditt Singh once again gives contradictory prescriptions and ties himself up in knots. On the one hand, he tells his readers to look at the relationship between the Hindus and the Sikhs as that between Judaism and Christianity – the one having originated from the other (*apne aap nun Hindu qaum vichon hi banya hoye samajh*),<sup>106</sup> but conscious of differences and having established itself as separate.<sup>107</sup> Guru Gobind Singh must then be seen as the true *avatar*, and the *Guru Granth* as their separate book. In this spirit Ditt Singh seemingly concedes the popular assumption that the Sikh Granth was no more than an exegesis of the Vedas, put in a simple language because of the difficulty of understanding Sanskrit! Rather, he had no intention of turning the Sikhs away from either Hinduism or the Vedas – *Hindu dharam ar Ved nun samjho apni dhal* (view the Hindu religion and Vedas as your shield).<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, within the space of two pages, he changes track, and declares that the Hindu and Sikh faiths were mutually destructive – *ik duje de ghati*.<sup>109</sup> Relying on the significance of the five bodily symbols that increasingly for the Sabhaites defined the essence of the Khalsa, Ditt Singh gives the scenario of a Khalsa going to Gaya (in Bihar) to undertake ancestor related rituals (*pind bharan*) as likely to shed all his bodily symbols to fulfill these. Similarly a Hindu would have to give up his topknot, *dhoti* and the sacred thread on becoming a Khalsa. In other words, it was best to see the Sikhs as a third *panth*, or community, different from the Hindus and the Turks.<sup>110</sup>

### Conclusion

The last quarter of the nineteenth century in the Punjab was a time of transition. In hindsight we tend to assume the pace of change faster than it was, and progressing in a linear trajectory than probably was the case. There were people, institutions and cultures that were caught in the middle, at times uncomprehending the change, at others as midwives ushering in a new era. Ditt Singh combined in his person both an agency of change, and a welter of cultural practices he sought to later shed from his person and from the community whose separate identity he discursively tried to project. The constitution of public life, the meaning, performance and reception of religious discourses, the very stuff of religious controversies and debates, got transformed in these years. Having been at the forefront of controversies and debates as a Gulabdasi preacher – whether on the message of the Vedanta, the sagacity of *varnashramadharm* – or in popular eye because of participating as a young *qissakar* in the effervescent charm of the love of Shirin and Farhad,

‘Sant’ Ditta Ram or Ditta Ram ‘Faqir’, enjoyed a place in the public life of colonial Punjab, but one that carried the flavor of an older Punjab.

As he found his feet in the late 1880s as ‘*Giani*’ Ditt Singh, the controversies and debates around him changed, and he participated in the new environment. After almost a decade or more of staying within overlapping associations and identities, he threw his weight behind the Lahore Singh Sabha’s attempt at forging a sharper and a clearer Sikh/Khalsa identity. This required him and other pioneers of his ilk to undertake the labyrinthine and difficult task of fitting cultures to the merits of the identities being constructed. It would be wrong to assume that this self-fashioning emerged out of a vacuum. Yet it is also clear that enormous sifting and defining of cultures had to be undertaken in order to ‘plant the banner of Sikhism,’ to use Singh’s words, as a distinct community. This meant commenting on who the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were. This was not easy, and Ditt Singh sometimes grouped Hindus and Sikhs together, othering the Muslims, and at others, tried to spell out the differences between the Hindus and the Sikhs.

A rethinking on the question of caste was the order of the day and the Sabhaites and the Arya Samajis, both in their own ways, initiated this process. Ditt Singh’s Ravidasi background perhaps invested his contribution to this effort with an urgency and edge that other stalwarts’ writing on the matter may not have experienced. But to assume that it also gave him clarity on the issue would be wrong. The deep-rooted nature of the institution, a plethora of available interpretations, the attractions of upward mobility, and the strategy of using its divisive and derisive power to make cleavages between communities, could all be exploited at different points of time depending on the need of the occasion. Thus, in the corpus of Ditt Singh’s writing, we find ambiguity, vacillation and fickleness in maintaining a single, coherent line of reform. Perhaps his belonging to the time he did – with its changeability and instability – may explain partially Ditt Singh’s protean stances. Perhaps the rich and pluralistic cultural ambience he had imbibed early in his life gave him an intellectual and cultural breadth that was difficult to shed or narrow down to the extent the new identity making required. Nevertheless, he sowed the seeds of many a line of argument that would be later developed by his fellow reformers.

Ditt Singh’s niche in history will also be determined by what his followers attribute to him, and he is being resurrected today as a *dalit* hero who condemned the idea of caste. Those among the *dalits* who are specifically seeking-out his legacy, are more keen to portray the personal obstacles he may have surmounted to reach a position of public leadership and respectability. Careful calibrations of his shifting stands on caste would interest them a little less. However, given the continuing frisson on the question of caste and its relevance to identity politics in the Indian Punjab, we may wish to understand Ditt Singh’s equivocation on the issue. We might reflect on why despite many banishments and mutations, the issue of caste remains alive within Sikhism.



**Notes**

1. As modern middle class identities were shaped there came to be an embarrassment with the idea of caste. See Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Restructuring Class in Colonial Punjab* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 2. On delegitimizing of caste for middle class identity see Sanjay Joshi, 'Introduction', to his *The Middle Class in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. xxxix-xl.
2. Tony Ballantyne, 'Resisting the "Boa Constrictor" of Hinduism: The Khalsa and the Raj,' *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, 6 (2), 1999, pp. 195-216.
3. Harjot Oberoi comments on the success of the Tat Khalsa in defining Sikh identity and separation from what he calls the *sanatan* paradigm. See his *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). Unless otherwise pointed out all subsequent references to Oberoi are from this work. W.H. McLeod has consistently noted the issue of caste in the making of Sikh identity, but has discussed caste as a persistent social problem, rather than one stemming from ambiguity of stand. See his *Who is a Sikh: The Problem of Sikh Identity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) pp. 62-81. Ballantyne emphasizes the continuing diversity of Sikhs and has brought the perspective of the Sikh diaspora. However, he does not note the ambiguity on the issue of caste, and in fact quotes Ditt Singh to iterate the Lahore Sabha's apparently unambiguous stance on caste. See his *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), pp. 57-58.
4. For a succinct discussion of various perspectives see Ishita Banerjee-Dube (ed.), 'Introduction: Questions of Caste,' in *Caste in History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. xv-lxiv.
5. Susan Bayly, 'Introduction,' to her *Caste, Society and Politics in India: From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1999]), pp. 1-24.
6. Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
7. Joshi, *The Middle Class*, pp. xxxvi-xliv.
8. W.H. McLeod, *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion* (Delhi: Oxford University Press 1996) [1968]. Karine Schomer & W.H. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1987).

9. W.H. McLeod, 'Caste in the Sikh Panth,' in his *The Evolution of the Sikh Community: Five Essays*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996 [1976]), pp. 83-104. More recently, his 'Sikhs and Caste,' in Tony Ballantyne, ed. *Textures of the Sikh Past: New Historical Perspectives* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp. 104-31.
10. Among McLeod's contributions on the subject is his *Sikhs of the Khalsa: A History of the Khalsa Rahit* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
11. See Louis Fenech, *Martyrdom in the Sikh Tradition: Playing the Game of Love* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005 [2000]).
12. Bhai Vir Singh, *Sundri* (Punjabi), (New Delhi: Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, 1983 [1898]).
13. McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, p. 52.
14. *Ibid.*, p.130.
15. Purnima Dhavan, *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
16. One of the five ks – *kes* or unshorn hair, is mandatory for the Khalsa Sikhs, the others being in parlance of the Sabhaites, *kachh* (long drawers), *kara* (steel bangle), *kirpan* (small sword), and *kangha* (comb). The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh is said to have instituted the Khalsa, exhorting the Sikhs to turn Khalsa by taking the baptism of the double edged sword (*khande ki pahul*), and to maintain certain bodily and behavioral practices, or the *rahit*. However, according to McLeod (*The Sikhs of the Khalsa*), exactly what these practices were is not clear, the early *rahit* not even mentioning all five, or the same five ks. The Singh Sabha sought to create uniformity on such somatic symbolism.
17. The Sabhaites interpreted *sahajdhari* as those gradually turning Khalsa. However, the term could also refer to the Sikhs who believed in ineffable bliss (*sahaj*) as the highest spiritual goal.
18. McLeod, *The Sikhs of the Khalsa*, p. 164.
19. K.S. Singh (ed.), *People of India – Punjab* – vol. XXXVII (Delhi: Manohar, 2003), pp. xxvi; xliv.
20. 'It was Waiting to Happen', *Hindustan Times* (New Delhi: 28 May 2009).

21. Lionel Baixas, 'The Dera Sacha Sauda Controversy and Beyond', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (henceforth *EPW*), 6 October 2007, pp. 4059-74.
22. John C.B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002) pp. 16-17.
23. Instructions to census officers in 1931 in the Punjab asked them to enumerate as Hindu all Chuhras who were not Muslims or Christians and did not return any other religion. See Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of the Untouchables* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1988) p. 73.
24. Denzil Ibbetson notes in his 1881 Census report, 'The scavenger on becoming a Musalman will refuse to remove night soil, and on becoming a Sikh will take to tanning or leather-working. The tanner and leather-worker on becoming a Musalman will give up tanning, and on taking the Sikh *pahul* will turn his hand to the loom, and so forth'. *Panjab Castes* (Patiala: Languages Department Punjab, 1970 [rpt.]) p. 268.
25. On the Gulabdasis and Udasis see Anshu Malhotra, 'Panths and Piety in the Nineteenth Century: The Gulabdasis of Punjab', in *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture and Practice*, ed., Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 189-220.
26. The preface of Pritam Singh's eight-volume collection of Ditt Singh's writings makes this interest in *dalit* literature clear. He speaks of Ditt Singh's rise from a downtrodden society (*dabbe-kuchle dalit samaj*), and introduces himself as the author of *Dalit Rattman di Mala (A Necklace of Dalit Gems)*. See *Panth Rattan Bhai Ditt Singh Giani – Rachnavali, Bhag I* (Punjabi), (Mohali: published by author, 2005), pp. 1-3. Gurditt Singh, a biographer of Ditt Singh, also mentions his humble origins, noting prejudice against him because of his 'poor caste' (*garib jati*). See *Giani Ditt Singh: Jiwan Ate Rachna* (Punjabi), (Chandigarh: Dharam Prachar Committee (SGPC), 1998), p. 4.
27. See, for instance, *Giani Amar Singh, Jiwan Charitter Singh Sabha Lehar de Ughe Sanchalak Giani Ditt Singh Ji* (Punjabi), (Amritsar: Gulab Singh Malak Firm, 1962).
28. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh*, p. 70; Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and Women's Education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar,' *EPW*, April, 1986.
29. Shamsheer Singh Ashok in his preface to Ditta Ram's *Shirin Farhad*, proffers 1850 as the year of his birth based on oral information. Ashok also suggests that Ditta Ram was born in village Jhalian Kalan, rather than

Anandpur Kalaur, Patiala, that the rest agree on. See Sant Ditta Ram (*urf Giani Ditt Singh*), *Shirin Farhad* (Punjabi), (Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahit Academy, n.d.). The year 1852 is suggested by Amar Singh in *Jiwan Charitter*, and Narinder Singh Kapoor, *Giani Ditt Singh: Jiwan te Rachna* (Punjabi), (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1987). The year 1853 is noted by Harbans Singh, *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1996), vol. I, pp. 589-90; Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab* (Delhi: Manohar, 1989), p. 329.

30. If this information were correct, it would indicate that Ditta Ram arrived at Chathianwala in the lifetime of the founder of the sect Gulab Das (d. 1873). His first piece of writing, the *qissa* of *Shirin Farhad*, was dedicated to Gulab Das.

31. *Sadhu Dayanand Nal Mera Sambad* (Punjabi), in Gurditt Singh, *Giani Ditt Singh*, pp. 43-82. In this Ditt Singh sketchily mentions his early life. It is important to remember the polemical nature of this work, and his words should not be taken at face value, as some writers have done.

32. *Ibid.*, p.45.

33. On Peero see Anshu Malhotra, 'Telling Her Tale? Unravelling a Life in Conflict in Peero's *Ik Sau Sath Kafian (One Hundred and Sixty Kafis)*', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 46, no.2, 2009, pp. 541-78.

34. Ashok refers to the Gulabdasis as 'free thinking' (*azad khayaliye*), pointing to their disregard for social taboos. He notes the immense popularity of what he calls the 'Sufi type' Gulabdasis among the Punjabis and Sikhs, their ideas spreading like a 'dust storm'. See his preface to Ditta Ram, *Shirin Farhad*, p. 5.

35. Ibbetson, *Panjab Castes*, p.302.

36. Gulab Das was a Jat, and he 'adopted' a successor to his *gaddi* (seat) from the Kumhar or Potter caste. Giani Gian Singh, *Sri Guru Panth Prakash* (Punjabi), (Patiala: Bhasha Vibhag, 1990 [1880]), pp. 1292-95.

37. For Jawahir Singh Kapoor see *The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism*, pp. 372-73.

38. On Gulab Das' writings and philosophy see Gian Inder Sewak, *Gulabdasi Sampradaye: Rachna Ate Vichar* (Punjabi), Unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1984) pp.169-71.

39. *Ibid.*, pp.200-1.

40. Ibid., pp. 236-38.
41. Ibid., pp. 229-30. Three of Ditta Ram's writings, *Shirin Farhad*, *Abla Nind* and *Mansambodhan* are attributed to his pre-Singh Sabha phase.
42. Pritam Singh, *Panth Ratan*, vol. I, p. 54. The original reads as:
- Koi kosh te kavi nun parhan baithe, koi baith Ramayan gan  
beli.  
Koi tib te bab nun dekhde je, koi gaune te jor paun beli.  
Parhan ik tauhid nun shauq beli, baithe ulfatan nal sunaun  
beli ...  
Koi ashqan di gal tor denda, khol qissyan de varqan beli.*
43. Ibid., p. 101. All translations from Punjabi of Ditt Singh's writings in this essay are mine. I visited Chathianwala, now in Pakistan, on 25 May 2008. An elderly person corroborated the architectural details of the *dera*. While the tomb where Gulab Das and Peero lie buried is now dilapidated, he told of the earlier existence of a beautiful pond (*sarovar*) with a bridge across it, which is now destroyed.
44. Sewak, *Gulabdasi Sampradaye*, p. 115. Sewak speaks of centers opening up in Ferozepur, Patiala, Ropar, Ambala, Jalandhar, Karnal, Amritsar, Kasur, Pothohar, Sialkot, Sindh and Balochistan.
45. Jones, *Arya Dharm*, pp. 36-37.
46. Ibid., p. 33.
47. Dayanand's vacillation between caste by birth and by talent is examined in Anshu Malhotra: 'The Body as a Metaphor for the Nation: Caste, Masculinity and Femininity in the *Satyarth Prakash* of Dayanand Sarasvati', in Avril A. Powell and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (eds.), *Rhetoric and Reality: Gender and the Colonial Experience in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 121-53.
48. Ibid., p.135. This quotation is from Chiranjiva Bharadwaja's translation of the *Satyarth Prakash* called *Light of Truth* (New Delhi: Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 2003 [rpt.]), p. 98.
49. Giani Ditt Singh, *Nakli Sikh Prabodh*, in Pritam Singh, *Panth Ratan Bhai Ditt Singh Giani, Rachnavali – Bhag 8* (Mohali, 2007), p. 146.
50. Quoted in Narinder S. Kapoor, *Giani Ditt Singh*, p. 114.

51. M.M. Amol, *Bhai Takht Singh da Jiwan te Panth Seva* (Punjabi manuscript), 1938, pp. 12-5. I thank Mahima Manchanda for bringing this work to my notice.
52. Amar Singh, *Jiwan Charitter*, pp. 74-75; Kapoor, *Giani Ditt Singh*, p. 17.
53. Jones, *Arya Dharm*, pp. 135-39.
54. See Harbans Singh (ed.), *Encyclopaedia*, pp. 589-90. The honorific 'Giani' before Ditt Singh's name may not signify his passing this examination. According to Ditt Singh he was called *Giani* because he started preaching at a young age. *Sadhu Dayanand Nal Mera Sambad*, p. 45.
55. Jones, *Arya Dharm*, pp. 135-39.
56. Amar Singh, *Jiwan Charitter*, p. 54.
57. The 'defeat' of the Swami is underlined by Gurditt Singh, *Giani Ditt Singh*, p. 4. Ashok also dates the pamphlet to 1877, *Shirin Farhad*, p. 8.
58. See also, Amar Singh, *Jiwan Charitter*, pp. 61-69.
59. See the note on Gurmukh Singh in Harbans Singh (ed.), *Encyclopaedia*, vol. II, pp. 185-87.
60. See the note on Ditt Singh in Harbans Singh (ed.), *Encyclopaedia*, vol. I, pp. 589-90.
61. Amar Singh, *Jiwan Charitter*, p. 59.
62. Gurditt Singh, *Giani Ditt Singh*, p.46. According to Amar Singh, Ditt Singh in his Gulabdasi days practiced Udasi/Gulabdasi asceticism that required him to smear his body with ashes and meditate in graveyards and cremation grounds, practices that later became the target of his wrath. See *Jiwan Charitter*, p. 15.
63. Gian Singh, *Panth Prakash*, p. 1293.
64. On Dayanand's life and thought see J.T.F. Jordens, *Dayananda Saraswati: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).
65. The point about interaction with western education and institutions of the Lahore reformers is made too blithely. McLeod, for example, writes about the Lahore Sabhaites that they 'essentially thought in western terms...' *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, p. 159.

66. Ditt Singh is credited with more than forty books/pamphlets.
67. Kapoor makes the point that Ditt Singh used Braj for philosophical issues and Punjabi for his exhortative works. *Giani Ditt Singh*, pp. 131-32. Ashok also comments on Ditt Singh's use of Bhasha (Braj) in works like *Supan Natak*, *Abla Nind*, *Guru Nanak Prabodh* and *Mansambodhan*, and notes his comfort with Persian and Urdu in *qissas*. *Shirin Farhad*, p. 9.
68. On the politics of language in Punjab see Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
69. Kapoor, *Giani Ditt Singh*, p.145.
70. Bhai Ditt Singh *Giani*, *Sultan Puara* (6th edition, n.p., n.d.).
71. Pritam Singh, *Panth Ratan*, vol. 8, p. 98.
72. *Nakli Sikh*, p. 133.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
74. *Dharamsal te thakurdware pichhe kite sare, paun mundian de ja janeyu Sarvar de darbare* (dharamsalas and temples have been abandoned, boys are made to wear the sacred thread in the court of Sarvar). *Sultan Puara*, p. 2.
75. McLeod, *Who is a Sikh*, p.50; *idem*, *The Sikhs of the Khalsa*, pp. 169-70.
76. *Sultan Puara*, p. 6.
77. *Bharais* were the 'priests' of Sarvar, and took parties of pilgrims to the shrine at Nigaha near Dera Ghazi Khan in north-west Punjab. Ibbetson, *Panjab Castes*, p. 229.
78. *Sultan Puara*, p. 3. In Ditt Singh's words:
- Pir bhai ban ke eh sare chale Sarvar de darbare.  
Zat pat nun khu dubaiya bharai nun cha pir banaiya.*
79. *Nakli Sikh*, pp. 164-65.
80. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
81. *Ibid.*, pp.172-74. Ditt Singh puts it evocatively:
- Kaun Sikh hunde ho bhai? Main Arora ih hai Nai.*

*Teri Sikha ki hai jaat? Nama bansi Chhimba bhrat.  
Tera dudh kaun hai pyare? Asi Singh han Jat karare.  
Tera janam kina de ghar da? Main han Mehra pani bharda.*

82. Ibid., pp. 105-8.

83. Ibid., p. 109.

84. Bhai Ditt Singh Giani, *Pratigya Palan* (Punjabi), (Lahore: Khalsa Press, 1896).

85. *Sultan Puara*, pp. 10-11.

86. Ibid., p. 16.

87. Ibid., pp. 9-10. The original is as under:

*Musalman mlechh kahave, kad Bahman usde ghar khave.  
Jo khave soi hatyara, dharam karam te gaya nikara.  
Uh Chamiar gau nahin mare, mari hoi da cham utare.  
Tante neech asi us kehnde, jis de pas mul na behnde.  
Par eh Musalman hatiyare, gau jin vdi nun far mare.  
Jiste eh sade han vairi, inde nal mile nahin khairi.*

88. There were other myths that associated Sarvar with ‘Hindu’ deities Bhairon and Hanuman, also discussed in Ditt Singh’s pamphlet. On the cultural reach of Sarvar in colonial Punjab see Harjot Oberoi, ‘The Worship of Sakhi Sarvar: Illness, Healing and Popular Culture in the Punjab’, *Studies in History*, vol. 3, no.1, 1987, pp. 29-55.

89. The saint was said to have brought his dead mare, Bakki, alive – another myth Ditt Singh tried to demystify. The saint was also supplicated for boons of sons, and is said to have restored to life the dead son of Dani Jatti. Ditt Singh advertised in this pamphlet and in the *Khalsa Akhbar* that Dani’s progeny gave up the worship of Sarvar under the influence of Singh Sabha preaching. For a discussion of this episode see Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities*, p.176.

90. Though the term *mlechh* has received scholarly attention, the epithet *miyan* has not been considered. When this term becomes opprobrious is difficult to say. I have noticed its usage in the writing of the Gulabdasi Peero. Ditt Singh also uses terms ‘Turak’ and ‘Musalman’ for Muslims.

91. *Sultan Puara*, p. 46.

92. *Nakli Sikh*, pp. 167-69.



93. Ibid., p. 188.
94. Ibid., pp. 114-15.
95. *Pratigya Palan*, pp. 33-37.
96. *Nakli Sikh*, p. 171.
97. Ibbetson, *Panjab Castes*, p. 234.
98. *Sultan Puara*, p. 72.
99. *Nakli Sikh*, pp. 148, 158.
100. *Sultan Puara*, p. 71.
101. Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
102. All the Gurus from the fourth Guru onwards were Sodhi Khattris.
103. Gian Singh, quoted in McLeod, *Sikhs of the Khalsa*, p. 45.
104. *Nakli Sikh*, p. 164.
105. Ibid., p. 212.
106. Ibid., p. 210.
107. Ibid., pp. 208-10.
108. Ibid., p. 208.
109. Ibid., p. 213.
110. Ibid., p. 221.

