

A MINORITY WITHIN A MINORITY: THE RAVIDASSIA SIKHS

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On the 24th of May, 2009, six men armed with daggers and a gun entered the *Shri Guru Ravidass Gurdwara* (Sikh temple) in Vienna, and started shooting, aiming at the two visiting sants (holy men) from India who were giving a sermon at the time. The ensuing bloodshed resulted in the death of Sant Ramanand Ji, who died of gun wounds, and the serious injury of Sant Niranjan Dass Ji, the spiritual head of *Dera Sachkhand Ballan*, a religious centre in the Punjab devoted to Guru Ravidass Ji, a fourteenth century untouchable saint. Thirty devotees were injured, eleven of them seriously. Hours after news of the death Sant Ramanand Ji spread, the Punjab erupted in violence, a state curfew was imposed, and the army was called in to restore order. Who were these men, and what motivated them to kill? And why did this terrible incidence of violence occur in a temple run by a low-caste group of Sikhs known as Ravidassias? This article will attempt to explain the context and history behind an attack that has shocked and confused many.

The attack on Sant Niranjan Dass Ji and Sant Ramanand Ji did not just spontaneously occur, but rather is the outcome of longstanding and long simmering tension between orthodox Sikhs and lower caste Sikhs of the Chamar caste (a caste that has historically worked with leather), in the Punjab, a state located in northern India. The state of Punjab is unique in India, because it is the only state that boasts a Sikh majority. It is also unique in having the highest percentage of Dalits or untouchables of any state in India - 30% state-wide, a percentage that

reaches 40% in some areas. Sikhism is a minority faith in India, practiced by some 24 million people worldwide. It was founded in 1469 in the Punjab, in response to and protest against many of the rituals and institutions of Hinduism, the dominant faith tradition of India. In particular, the ten Gurus of Sikhism preached against untouchability and the caste system, and encouraged inter-dining (though not intermarriage), by instituting the religious practice of *langar*, in which all devotees, regardless of caste or religion, eat side by side to symbolize equality. However, despite the reforming efforts of the Sikh gurus, the casteist mentality that permeated Punjabi society continued unabated and also influenced the development of the new faith. Punjabi Sikhs, like Punjabi Hindus, remain divided along cast lines, and the vast majority of marriages are carried out according to caste norms. In contemporary Sikhism, the most important religious institutions are within the hands of Jat Sikhs, a dominant caste composed of agriculturalists and landowners. Socially, most Punjabi villages remain segregated along caste lines, with even separate cemeteries for lower and upper caste Sikhs. In response to their exclusion and lack of full participation in Sikh religious institutions and in Punjab society in general, lower caste Sikhs have founded their own temples (gurdwaras), and have gravitated in large numbers towards *deras*, or religious centres, devoted to Guru Ravidass Ji. For lower caste Sikhs, Ravidass Ji is equally as important as the ten Sikh Gurus are to orthodox Sikhs, for Ravidass Ji, a fellow “untouchable”, was the first person from their caste to rise to a position of spiritual leadership despite his humble origins. Indeed, forty-one of his *bani*, or religious poems, are included in the Sikh holy book. With the rise in economic power of the Chamar caste, these *deras* and Ravidassia gurdwaras throughout Punjab as well as overseas have grown in number and size. In recent years, beyond establishing their own Sikh temples, Ravidassias have increasingly been asserting an independent, heterodox religious identity, with their own religious symbol, flag, and religious chant (known as Jai Kara), which all differ from orthodox Sikh norms. In addition, many Ravidassias follow the *sants* (saints) of *deras* devoted to Guru Ravidass Ji as human gurus, which is strictly forbidden by orthodox Sikhism (Sikhs believe that according to the orders of the tenth and final Guru, the guruship passed to the

Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji, who is now Eternal Guru). The unorthodox religious identity and practices of the Ravidassias are deeply offensive to a section of the orthodox Sikh community, who see in them *beadbi*, or “disrespect” towards the Sikh holy book. In particular, they are incensed when dera saints sit at the level of the Guru Granth Sahib Ji (Sikh holy book), and are bowed before, a privilege, which in their eyes, is reserved exclusively for the eternal Guru, the Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Ravidassias, in response, allege that upper caste Sikhs (particularly Jats) treat Sikhism as if it were their own, do not acknowledge the contribution of lower caste saints to the Sikh tradition, and do not accord due respect to Guru Ravidass Ji, reflected in their refusal to call him Guru (for orthodox Sikhs Ravidass Ji is called a *bhagat*, or student, but not a Guru). Furthermore, Ravidassias argue that they have the right to freedom of religious expression. In the aftermath of this tragic incident, an increasing number of Ravidassias are affirming that “we are not Sikhs”.

Thus, when a group of armed men broke into the Ravidassia Gurdwara in Vienna during the European tour of the two most important spiritual leaders of the Ravidassia movement, religious, cultural and economic factors were at play. Religiously, Ravidassia religious practices are seen to be an affront to the *Rabit Maryada*, or the Sikh code of conduct, that is enforced by the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee), the highest governing body of Sikhism. Ravidassias were therefore being punished for their religious non-conformity. Culturally, Ravidassia attempts at asserting an independent religious identity threatens the symbolic dominance of Sikhism and its symbols. In establishing separate religious institutions, low-caste Sikhs are also simultaneously asserting a separate cultural identity that reflects their growing confidence as a group. Although perhaps less evident, the Ravidassia movement also has economic implications. Each time that a Ravidassia community in the Punjab or abroad decides to set up its own autonomous gurdwara, the mainstream gurdwara in that locality loses devotees and consequently the substantial donations that they bring. In the diaspora context, donations are even more lucrative. Ravidassia gurdwaras do not send a part of their proceeds to the SGPC, as

other gurdwaras do. Thus, although religious motives are predominant in the orthodox Sikh/Ravidassia dispute, the growing economic and social strength of the Ravidassia movement is also a key. Although it is not uncommon for orthodox Sikhs to deny the importance of caste in Sikhism, the multiplication of Ravidassia deras, along with Ravidassia gurdwaras, reveals a more complex reality, in which a long-discriminated and stigmatized caste group has chosen a religious strategy for their social and cultural assertion. It is through worship of Guru Ravidass Ji and the religious symbols of the Ravidassia movement that many members of the Chamar caste are seeking social equality and respect in the Punjab.

