

# Caste Conflict in Sikhism: Vision & Reality

ANURADHA KUMAR

CASTE TENSION IN TALHAN VILLAGE in Punjab's Jalandhar district still simmers although the violence that erupted here and in other parts of Jalandhar earlier in June 2003 has largely abated. But inquiries instituted by opposition parties and preliminary investigation reports of a governmental magisterial enquiry now suggest that Talhan violence could well have been prevented as there were clear warning signs.

The dispute between Jat Sikhs and Dalit Sikhs arose over the management of the cash-rich *samadh* of Baba Nihal Singh, which rakes in four to five crore rupees annually from offerings. The Jat Sikhs, who are a minority in the village, have dominated the committee for several years. But the Dalit Sikhs recently moved court insisting on fresh elections to a new committee.

The Dalit Sikhs are a majority in the village, but here, as elsewhere in Jalandhar, they form largely a prosperous community, thanks to overseas remittances. In Talhan, prosperity is visible in every street. The literacy level in the village is also a high 95 per cent. The rich earning of the *gurdwara* have been put in the construction of the village school and hospital, paving the streets, besides other development work.

According to media reports, tension began to build up as ordinary Dalit Sikhs perceived that the development work done was uneven. The Jat-dominated management committee spent more on their own areas. According to a member of the Dalit Sikh-dominated *panchayat*, even the electricity and water bills of the Jats were paid from *gurdwara* money. The Panchayat on the other hand is often short of funds to undertake development work.

Violence broke out first in January this year after the courts ordered new elections. On January 20, Jat Sikhs of the shrine's management committee passed a resolution calling for a social boycott of the local Dalit Sikhs. The resolution barred interaction with Dalit Sikhs, and instituted a fine of Rs. 10,000 if a Jat Sikh even as much as spoke to a Dalit Sikh. It forbade some Dalit Sikhs from entering Jat-owned fields for fodder and closed some village streets to them.

In February, a team from the Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes also found the boycott of Dalit Sikhs to be true. The team asked the district administration to punish the guilty under sections of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and to provide compensation to victims. But these directives were ignored. The two communities clashed at the annual fair at the *mazaar* of Pir Baba Fateh Shah Quadir on June 5, maintained by the village's only Muslim family which has traditionally had strong bonds with both Jats and Dalit Sikhs of Talhan. The January resolution had sought to bar Dalit Sikhs from entering the shrine - a probable cause for the conflict that spread to other areas in Jalandhar, where mayhem and fear reigned for almost three full days till June 8, 2003.

Talhan constitutes a warning signal the state government can ill-afford to ignore. The alacrity with which violence spread shows the undercurrent of tension that now exists among various communities; that communal harmony in the state, as elsewhere, is now that much more fragile. **Though it is generally believed that**

**Sikhism is not riven by caste, events in Talhan depict the ground reality that exists. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus, religious institutions of *sangat* and *langar*, absence of a caste-based priesthood, and respect for manual labour, all these together sought to create a caste-free Khalsa brotherhood. But there has always been a wide gap between the doctrinal principles and prevailing social practices.**

The Jats have always constituted the elite who dominate rural Punjab. But the Colonial dispensation that began with the British annexation of Punjab in 1849 played an influential role in changing the social structure and caste relations within the Sikh community. The Sikh aristocracy and the army were reconstituted to serve largely Colonial purposes and the Jat Sikhs once again played a prominent role. For the development of the nine canal colonies during 1885-1940, when over 40 lakh acres of freshly developed virgin lands were handed over for ownership and cultivation, the British government ensured that tenants, labourers and other landless men would not, as a rule, be chosen.

The land was allocated to “dominant castes” who were already landholders; outcastes such as Mazhabis, Balmikis and Ramdasias/Ravidasias were barred. Even access to village common land was allowed only to landowning communities. A more significant act was the Punjab Land Alienation Act, 1901, which stipulated that agricultural land could be purchased or acquired only by people belonging to defined agricultural castes.

It was after Independence that members of the east Punjab legislative assembly demanded that all lower castes in the Sikh community who suffered similar disabilities as did the members of the (Hindu) scheduled caste, should be included in the SC list. Even today, in villages across Punjab, lower castes have their own gurdwaras, cremation grounds and community halls. Also, 30 per cent of Punjab’s population, incidentally the largest percentage of Dalit Sikhs in the country, owns a mere 2.54 per cent of agricultural land, and also lags behind in literacy rates. The latest bouts of caste violence will do little to heal such long-existing divisions.

**[Courtesy: *The Telegraph*]**

