Religion, Caste, and Social Inequality: The Case of Deras in Contemporary Punjab

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This article examines the rise of Deras in Punjab as a response to persistent social inequality, particularly caste-based exclusion experienced by Dalit communities. The study aims to explore how Deras function as alternative socio-religious institutions that address gaps left by conventional religious and social structures. Employing a qualitative-analytical approach based on secondary sources, the article investigates the socio-economic, cultural, and political roles of Deras in contemporary Punjab. The central argument is that Deras are not merely sites of socio-cultural or political assertion; they represent a strategic and organized response to entrenched social inequality, grounded in historical and philosophical traditions that emphasize anti-caste values and social dignity. The findings illustrate that the persistence of caste-based discrimination within mainstream socio-religious institutions has significantly contributed to the growing influence of Deras. These institutions provide marginalized communities with alternative spaces for inclusion, identity reconstruction, and informal social security. This paper seeks to reframe Deras as institutional responses to social exclusion rather than as peripheral religious movements, thereby extending debates on caste, religion, and subaltern assertion in Punjab. The study concludes that the proliferation of Deras reflects the limitations of formal egalitarianism and underscores the need to critically re-examine dominant socio-religious structures in addressing social inequality.

Keywords: Social inequality; Deras; Dalit assertion; Social exclusion; Subaltern agency; Caste and religion; Punjab

Introduction

The state of Punjab stands out in the Indian subcontinent for its unique socio-cultural and religious features. Primarily, it is the cradle of Sikhism and is notable for being a Sikh-majority state (Singh, 2023). Secondly, it is famed as the "food bowl" of India. Thirdly, it is renowned for the warrior spirit and sacrifices of its people. Fourthly, Punjab is notable for having the largest percentage of Dalits, officially designated as Scheduled Castes (SCs). In spite of its rich socio-cultural and religious heritage, the Sikh-dominated society continues to retain some Brahmanical features, challenging the egalitarian agenda of Sikhism. As a result, the Sikh-majority society experiences social

hierarchies and inequality. Formally, Sikhism rejects any form of unequal treatment of individuals (Singh, 2023). However, in reality, followers of Sikhism are divided into numerous sub-categories, such as Jat Sikhs, Khatri Sikhs, Ramghariya Sikhs, Mehra Sikhs, Mazbhi Sikhs, Ramdassiya Sikhs, Sainsi Sikhs, and Rai Sikhs (Ram, 2016), many of whom adhere to caste hierarchies, which contradict the original principles of Sikhism. Despite the relentless efforts of Sikh Gurus, particularly Guru Gobind Singh, who opposed caste and established the Khalsa Panth to promote equality, many villages continue to maintain separate cremation grounds and Gurudwaras based on caste (Sharma, 2009; Kumar, 2014; Singh, 2023). This has led some Sikhs, traditionally part of the Sikh community, to lose faith in the attainment of social equality, a fundamental principle of Sikhism. Furthermore, the Jat Sikhs, who form the majority of Sikh followers and control most of the land in the state, continue to uphold caste hierarchies and discriminate against Dalits (Kumar, 2014; Rathi, 2017).

A social hierarchy has thus emerged that does not align with the original philosophy of Sikhism. Sikh institutions, such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), also known as the Parliament of Sikhs, are predominantly controlled by the land-owning class, where Dalits feel underrepresented. Efforts to dismantle caste hierarchies, particularly in rural areas, remain insufficient. As a result, a significant number of Dalit Sikhs are losing hope and turning to alternative religious and cultural spaces (Singh & Singh, 2017; Singh, 2024). For these marginalized communities, a truly casteless and egalitarian society remains largely a myth. These non-egalitarian and discriminatory practices push many Dalits to seek environments where they can experience social equality, dignity, and identity, ultimately creating a social vacuum. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar believed that social equality is a prerequisite for establishing an egalitarian society (Kotasthane, 2018), and he ardently sought to ensure this through the Indian Constitution. The architects of the Constitution incorporated several provisions aimed at delivering social, economic, and political justice to marginalized communities that had faced caste-based inequalities for centuries. For instance, Article 14 of the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on social background and guarantees the right to equality before the law (Bakshi, 2020). Similarly, Article 15 forbids discrimination based on caste, race, religion, gender, place of birth, and other factors (Pandey, 2024). Furthermore, Article 17 ensures the elimination of untouchability and prohibits its practice in any part of the country (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2008).

To safeguard political justice for those affected by social prejudice, the framers of the Constitution also provided for reservations through various provisions, including Articles 330, 332, and 335 (Bakshi, 2020). Despite these efforts, individuals in caste-based societies often continue to feel disrespected, undignified, and excluded from socio-cultural and religious spheres. Consequently, many seek alternative spaces where they can experience equality,

dignity, respect, and opportunities to reconstruct their identities. This is evident among the Dalits of Punjab, for whom Deras have provided such spaces. The Deras effectively embrace the principles of an egalitarian society and maintain a strict zero-tolerance policy toward social discrimination—not only based on caste and religion but also with regard to gender. A significant number of Deras' followers were previously subjected to exploitation by dominant caste groups (Lal, 2009). The egalitarian and welfare-oriented ethos of the Deras, along with their non-discriminatory practices, makes them particularly appealing to marginalized communities, especially Dalits (Upmanyu, 2017). Therefore, Deras can be understood not only as sites for identity reconstruction, social protest, and political assertion but also as facilitators of social equality. The primary objective of this study is to examine the growing influence of Deras and the philosophical and organizational strategies that attract marginalized populations. The study employs a qualitative-analytical approach using secondary sources, including editorials and expert opinions from national and international contexts, to obtain robust and scientifically grounded observations.

Social Exclusion and Subaltern Perspectives in the Study of Deras

The rise and proliferation of Deras in Punjab can be understood through the combined perspectives of Social Exclusion Theory and Subaltern Theory. Social Exclusion Theory conceptualizes inequality as a multidimensional process in which marginalized groups are systematically denied access to economic resources, social institutions, political power, and symbolic recognition (Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994). In the Punjabi context, despite the egalitarian ideals inherent in Sikhism, caste-based hierarchies continue to persist, resulting in the exclusion of Dalit communities from religious authority, land ownership, and leadership positions within mainstream institutions (Jodhka, 2012; Ram, 2007). From the perspective of social exclusion, Deras serve as alternative institutional spaces that emerge in response to the inability of dominant religious and social structures to provide substantive inclusion. They offer marginalized communities access to dignity, collective identity, welfare support, and leadership opportunities that remain largely inaccessible within orthodox religious frameworks (Jodhka & Ram, 2018). The ongoing growth of Deras thus reflects persistent structural exclusion rather than merely religious diversification.

Subaltern Theory further enhances this analysis by framing Deras as sites of subaltern agency and counter-hegemonic practice. Drawing on Gramscian insights and postcolonial scholarship, subaltern perspectives highlight the capacity of oppressed groups to articulate alternative narratives of power, identity, and morality (Gramsci, 1971; Guha, 1982). In this context, Deras function as subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), enabling Dalit communities to reclaim voice, visibility, and collective self-respect through religious symbolism, leadership structures, and cultural practices that challenge dominant caste hierarchies (Ram, 2014). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of religious

inequality and his advocacy for the annihilation of caste illuminate why marginalized communities seek alternative religious spaces when mainstream institutions fail to deliver social justice (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Deras align with Ambedkar's emphasis on self-respect, collective assertion, and the rejection of hierarchical religious authority, even as they represent context-specific forms of social mobilization rather than formal conversion movements. Simultaneously, Ambedkarite thought encourages critical scrutiny of Deras, cautioning against the reproduction of internal hierarchies or charismatic authoritarianism that may undermine democratic and egalitarian principles. Thus, this framework provides a nuanced understanding of Deras—not merely as religious alternatives but as dynamic spaces where social exclusion, identity reconstruction, and struggles for justice intersect in contemporary Punjab.

Genesis of *Deras* in Punjab

The term *Dera* is derived from Persian and carries multiple connotations. It is a reformed form of the original Persian word *derah/dirah*, which means tent, camp, abode, house, or habitation (Atri, 2022; Lal, 2009; Singh & Singh, 2017; The Sikh Encyclopaedia, 2021). Traditionally, Deras have served as centers for Sufis, Jogis, and Peers, where religious teachings and discourses are delivered (Singh & Singh, 2017). Deras, understood as shrines managed by a living sacrosanct individual, predate Sikhism in Punjab (Atri, 2022; Rathi, 2017; Singh & Singh, 2017). The historical roots of Deras can be traced to the Sufis, Yogis, and saints of the Bhakti movement. The residential shrines of these figures, also known as Khanqahs, were intended to provide relief and support to the people, particularly marginalized communities (Singh & Singh, 2017). Deras are also intertwined with Sikhism; for instance, Baba Shri Chand, the son of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, established the Udasi Sampardai, an offshoot of Sikhism (Lal, 2009). Over time, numerous Sampardais or Deras emerged, often retaining distinctions from mainstream Sikhism, although their founders were typically from Sikh families (Singh & Singh, 2017). Some of these Deras arose during the era of the Sikh Gurus, while others consciously maintained differences.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a new wave of Deras emerged in Punjab, based on the teachings of either Sikhism or Sant Mat (Singh, 2009; Singh & Singh, 2017). Prominent examples from this period include Dera Radha Swami, Nirankari, Sacha Sauda, Sachkhand Ballan, and Bhaniarawalla (Singh, 2009). Approximately one in every three individuals in Punjab belongs to the Dalit category. Due to persistent neglect by mainstream religious institutions and state agencies—including the police, judiciary, and local administration—socially vulnerable groups, particularly Dalits, have increasingly sought alternative social and cultural spaces such as Deras. Deras offer followers equality, regardless of social background, and provide a dignified and respectful environment conducive to identity reconstruction. Their inclusive approach accommodates individuals from various castes and religions in a

disciplined and organized manner. Nevertheless, research indicates that the majority of Dera followers belong to marginalized communities, particularly Dalits (Atri, 2022; Kumar, 2014; Lal, 2009; Ram, 2008, 2013, 2016a, 2016b).

Dalit Consciousness and Emergence of *Deras* as their Preferred Spaces

Punjab has witnessed significant changes in its social, economic, and political landscape, particularly concerning Dalit communities. Despite these shifts, Dalits continue to face challenges across multiple socio-economic parameters, including education, health, economic conditions, ownership of resources, and human development index (HDI) indicators. However, over the past few decades, Dalits have experienced notable improvements in literacy, rising from 16.12% in 1971 to 64.81% in 2011 (Lal, 2020). This increase in literacy has contributed to the emergence of an intellectual class among Dalits, which fosters socio-economic and political aspirations and drives collective assertion across various domains (Kumar, 2018). Consequently, Dalits are engaging across multiple platforms and employing alternative strategies to achieve dignity and equality in all aspects of life. Socially, they seek respect and recognition through alternative spaces while constructing distinct socio-cultural and religious identities (Ram, 2004; Singh, 2016; Singh, 2019a). The Ad-Dharm movement marked the beginning of this process of identity construction and the struggle for self-respect and pride among Dalits (Ram, 2004). This process further intensified with the rise of Ravidass Deras and Ad-Dharmi Jatheras. A notable example is the establishment of Dera Baba Bhure Shah Sappanwala in Shri Muktsar Sahib (Punjab), which exemplifies the creation of a distinct socio-cultural identity among Dalits (Singh & Singh, 2017).

Economically, Dalits have been asserting themselves through land rights movements, particularly in the Malwa region of Punjab (Jagga, 2019; Lal, 2020; Manchanda, 2020; Moudgil, 2019). They aim to move beyond the limitations of farm labor and claim rights to cultivate common village lands (*Shaamlaats*) reserved for them. Women have actively participated in these movements, facing challenges and, in many instances, securing land rights (Manchanda, 2020). Some activists have even faced threats to their lives during these struggles (Sandhu, 2016; Sandhu, 2019). In the political sphere, Deras have provided strategic spaces for Dalits to assert themselves. Research indicates that Deras serve as alternative venues where Dalits can politically mobilize, reconstruct their identities, and pursue a respectable and dignified lifestyle (Ram, 2008; Singh & Singh, 2017). The rise of Sachkhand Ballan in the Doaba region exemplifies political assertion by Dalits. As a result, political leaders from multiple parties seek the blessings of Dera heads to appeal to the votes of Dera disciples. Through this process, Dalits not only recognize their numerical strength but also perceive themselves as politically significant. Although many prominent Deras in Punjab are led by higher-caste Babas, Gurus, or Sants, their inclusive practices allow marginalized communities to participate fully. This

openness encourages Dalits and other disadvantaged groups to engage with these organizations, fostering a sense of belonging within a broader social and cultural system.

Popular *Deras* in Punjab

Deras are ceremonial centers led by a spiritual Guru, a living guide who provides direction to a large number of followers (Lal, 2009). This model of Guru-led organizations is also evident among Sikh offshoots. According to a report in *The Indian Express*, there are more than 9,000 Deras operating in Punjab (Chaudhry, 2012; Ram, 2016; Singh & Singh, 2017). Among these, prominent Deras such as Radha Swami (Beas), Nirankaries, Nurmehal, Namdharies, Sachkhand Ballan, Nanaksar Kaleran, and Darbara Singh Lopo have extensive followings (Gupta & Verma, 2017; Singh & Singh, 2017). During Satsangs or other programs, gatherings at some of these Deras can reach several hundred thousand participants. Devotees of Guru-led Deras are not only found across Punjab but also throughout India and abroad. Several Deras have established branches in multiple countries; one notable Dera from Punjab, for example, has branches in over 90 countries, with disciples even among English-speaking populations (Rana, 2024).

The management of these Deras maintains large followings in a well-organized and disciplined manner, ensuring that devotees feel respected, dignified, and treated as equals. In addition, many Deras incorporate principles and traditions from Sikhism to maintain their extensive followings. They also draw on the egalitarian ideas of other religions to broaden their appeal and cultivate support across diverse sections of society.

The Dera's Quest and Contribution to Promoting Social Equality

Currently, certain aspects of Sikh society have indirectly fuelled the growth of Deras. One such factor is the dominance of the landholding class, which retains some Brahmanical features that continue to influence social structures. Consequently, a hierarchical system persists, preventing marginalized groups from being treated equally. The existence of caste-based practices in Gurudwaras and funeral rites, particularly in rural areas, provides clear examples of social inequality and caste divisions in Punjab (Sharma, 2009). In such a context, where individuals experience inequality, disrespect, and social exclusion, it is natural for them to seek alternative spaces in which they feel dignified, respected, and socially equal. A second contributing factor is the efforts of Dera management. Deras operate according to a well-defined roadmap that has helped them gain widespread popularity. By addressing social gaps that marginalized communities have experienced for centuries, Dera management engages in a form of social engineering that consolidates and maintains large followings.

Deras have undertaken initiatives that mainstream institutions and leaders have historically failed to provide for socially neglected groups. As a result, marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, see Deras as spaces where they can overcome long-standing social stigma and assert distinct social, cultural, and religious identities. Notably, Dalit leadership within political parties has often been unable to achieve what Deras have accomplished, as political leaders are frequently perceived as prioritizing personal or party interests over community welfare. This may also explain why Dalits have shown limited interest in forming a separate political front in Punjab. Organizationally, Deras demonstrate considerable strengths and strategic planning that support large numbers of followers. Dera Radha Soami Beas, for example, is widely regarded as a model of organizational efficiency. It maintains extensive seating arrangements (sometimes accommodating hundreds of thousands), housing, and communal dining facilities in a disciplined and orderly manner. Additionally, the Dera has established smaller branches in both urban and rural areas, and special transportation arrangements, such as trains for inter-state followers, facilitate participation. By offering a combination of social support, structured organization, and inclusive practices, Deras attract followers not only from Dalit communities but also from non-Dalit backgrounds.

Deras derive their philosophical roots from a variety of sources, including Sufi saints, exponents of the Bhakti movement, and eminent social reformers across different eras (Kumar, 2014; Singh, 2019b). Their teachings are not confined to any single religion, which contributes to a more liberal and inclusive approach compared to established faiths. The preachers and leaders of Deras often incorporate the ideas and quotations of figures such as Sheikh Farid, Guru Nanak, Bhagat Kabir, Baba Namdev, Sant Ravidass, Sultan Bahu, Bulleh Shah, Meera Bai, Jesus Christ, and others in their discourses to inspire and guide adherents. Many Deras also draw on Sikh traditions, including the Langar system (communal dining), and some explicitly incorporate the philosophy of the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib* in their gatherings. At the same time, Deras adopt egalitarian principles from multiple religions, as well as the anti-caste agendas of various social reform movements. Through these approaches, they consolidate support among certain social groups, particularly those historically marginalized or affected by social biases.

Traditionally, the majority of Deras are non-sectarian in nature. Even when they attain the status of a sect, they do not require adherents to participate in an exclusive system. The identity associated with a Dera is often considered an "add-on" identity, allowing individuals to remain part of their original religion while still receiving the *naam* or blessings of the Guru, Sant, Baba, or Dera head. Disciples of a particular Dera are free to visit multiple Deras or participate in activities at other centers, and a devotee may follow more than one Guru simultaneously (Jodhka, 2017). In practice, the conduct of Deras is considerably more liberal than that of mainstream religions. This flexibility, which combines

faith with choice and imposes minimal restrictions, contributes to the growing number of Dera followers.

The Deras, which attract large followings, are fundamentally non-discriminatory in nature. Their doors are open to all individuals, regardless of social, economic, or religious background (Ram, 2023). Dera management treats every devotee equally, and blessings or *naam-daan* are offered uniformly to all. This principle of equality is a central factor that draws many people to these institutions. Some Deras also encourage women to serve as agents or preachers during religious ceremonies. Additionally, a significant number of lower-caste individuals have been appointed as preachers, further reflecting the inclusive and egalitarian nature of these institutions. The non-discriminatory practices of Deras attract a large number of followers, particularly from marginalized communities. As a result, their disciples are not limited to any specific religion, and the number of followers continues to grow due to the effective management and conduct of the Deras. Deras explicitly prohibit caste, gender, and religion-based discrimination, reflecting principles deeply rooted in Bhakti traditions, which historically resisted the use of caste-based slurs or social hierarchies (Singh, 2017). Most prominent Deras uphold individual dignity, without favoring any religion or caste. They provide guidance and spiritual direction that is equal for all, promoting mutual respect and personal dignity over caste, gender, community, or religious considerations. For many Dalits, affiliation with a Dera represents a source of pride and self-esteem (Singh, 2016).

Surprisingly, devotees of popular Deras often exhibit a strong sense of belonging. Prof. Jodhka, who has conducted extensive research on Deras, observed that once a devotee enters a Dera, they experience a profound sense of security and community (Jodhka, 2017; Sagar, 2017). This sense of belonging is particularly significant in contemporary society, where social insecurities are increasingly prevalent. Disciples of a particular Dera often assert a distinct identity associated with that institution, where they feel secure and valued (Ram, 2008, 2009, 2016a). During times of social, economic, political, or other crises, followers unite to provide overwhelming support to the Deras. Devotees also develop strong emotional attachments to the Dera heads or chiefs, as was evident during the conviction of the chief of Dera Sacha Sauda. Deras exist in both Sikh and non-Sikh forms. Sikh Deras are primarily followed by devotees who adhere to the philosophy of the Sikh Gurus and often observe the *Sikh Rehat Maryada* (Sikh Code of Conduct). Most Sikh Deras are led by living sacrosanct personalities, reflecting core Sikh beliefs (Singh, 2023). In contrast, prominent non-Sikh Deras do not follow the *Rehat Maryada* but instead draw upon multiple egalitarian religious traditions, including elements of Sikhism. The diversity of Dera forms, practices, and philosophies contributes to their widespread appeal and fascination among devotees.

The Dera culture represents an alternative approach for marginalized communities to achieve political significance and construct a distinct social

identity. Many Deras have become politically influential due to their substantial vote banks. Consequently, political leaders at both the central and state levels frequently visit Deras to seek their blessings (Lal, 2009; Atri, 2022). Furthermore, Dera followers, particularly Dalits, often use these institutions as sites for political assertion and identity formation (Ram, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2013, 2016a; Singh & Singh, 2017; Singh, 2019a, 2024). Dera Sachkhand Ballan serves as a prime example of Dalit assertion, inspiring other Dalit devotees to express themselves through Dera affiliation. Today, these ventures are regarded as effective avenues for assertion, identity reconstruction, and Dalit emancipation. Several prominent Deras, such as Radha Swami Satsang Beas and Sacha Sauda, have established their own health and educational infrastructures, providing subsidies and support to marginalized populations (Kumar, 2014; Singh & Singh, 2017). Additionally, Deras often provide free meals (Langer) and promote commitments against socially constructed phenomena such as caste- and gender-based discrimination. These objectives attract deprived populations, uniting them in large numbers (Upmanyu, 2017). Recently, a local Punjabi newspaper reported that a prominent Dera management openly offered assistance to village Panchayats in building schools through formal applications.

The majority of established Deras encourage their devotees to abstain from alcohol and avoid synthetic drugs. Some Deras also promote adherence to strict vegetarian diets. This code of conduct attracts many families struggling with domestic violence, substance abuse, and related social challenges, as women often encourage their husbands or male family members to visit a Dera. Once the men are motivated, it becomes easier for women to bring them to a particular Dera, where they are encouraged to take *naamdaan* from a Baba, Sant, Guru, or Chief. Taking naam requires devotees to pledge abstinence from alcohol and drugs, as well as to follow a disciplined lifestyle. This emphasis on moral and social reform may explain the popularity of Deras, particularly in rural Punjab (Jhodka, 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Deras such as Radha Swami Satsang Beas and Sant Nirankari Mission played a significant role in serving humanity. The chiefs of these Deras provided support to both state and central governments and instructed their regional centers to function as COVID care facilities (Singh & Singh, 2017; Press Trust of India, 2020; Bhardwaj, 2020). Additionally, they distributed food and other essential items to support the welfare of communities. Such efforts enhanced their popularity during critical situations. Beyond pandemic relief, Deras also initiated awareness programs on issues such as blood and organ donation, AIDS prevention, female foeticide, and drug addiction, further contributing to their social influence.

Environmental degradation has become a major concern at the global level. Some Deras in Punjab and neighboring states have initiated various programs to protect the environment, manage water resources, and promote tree plantation (Kumar, 2014; Singh & Singh, 2017). Several Deras have even

installed water-treatment plants, demonstrating their commitment to environmental protection through multiple initiatives. These efforts are also commendable because they raise public awareness about environmental issues and mobilize large groups of people for the noble cause of conservation. The environmental initiatives of these Deras not only strengthen their numerical support but also attract state patronage.

In northern India, particularly in Punjab, some Deras have emerged as political powerhouses. They command extensive followings and possess strong economic foundations. During elections, high-level political leaders and bureaucrats often visit these Deras to pay tribute to their heads and seek blessings, signaling political affiliations. This reflects the nexus between politico-bureaucratic elites and the Deras, which seeks to leverage the large vote banks of these institutions (Lal, 2009; Atri, 2022). Observations suggest that Dera chiefs indirectly assist political parties in securing votes. In return, political parties and senior leaders help Deras expand their influence both nationally and internationally (Lal, 2009; Singh, 2024). This dynamic demonstrates that Deras are not only firmly established in the social sphere but also possess significant political roots, which further attracts individuals from diverse backgrounds to unite under the identity of a Dera.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the rise and consolidation of Deras in Punjab should be understood as a structurally grounded response to enduring caste-based social exclusion, rather than as a purely religious phenomenon. Drawing on Social Exclusion Theory, the analysis reveals that mainstream socio-religious institutions have historically failed to ensure substantive inclusion, dignity, and equal participation for marginalized communities, particularly Dalits. This social vacuum has enabled Deras to emerge as alternative institutional spaces that provide social recognition, collective identity, and access to both material and symbolic resources. Viewed through a subaltern lens, Deras serve as sites of agency where historically marginalized groups actively negotiate and reconstitute social hierarchies. Ambedkarite thought further illuminates their normative focus on dignity, equality, and resistance to caste oppression. The findings indicate that Deras resonate strongly in contemporary Punjab, where aspirations for egalitarianism, fraternity, and social security have intensified. By offering education, health services, welfare support, and moral authority rooted in anti-caste values, Deras address needs inadequately met by dominant religious and state institutions. Their appeal across social groups reflects the growing demand for inclusive and dignified social spaces in the region.

From a policy perspective, the continued expansion of Deras signals deeper institutional shortcomings rather than merely religious diversification. State and religious institutions must move beyond symbolic commitments to equality and adopt structurally inclusive approaches that dismantle caste-based barriers in

religious governance, access to resources, and leadership. Policies promoting social inclusion should engage constructively with community-based institutions while ensuring democratic accountability and preventing the reproduction of internal hierarchies. Strengthening inclusive education, social security, and participatory governance mechanisms is essential to address the root causes of exclusion that sustain parallel institutional formations such as Deras. In conclusion, the rise of Deras in Punjab reflects a broader struggle for social justice, dignity, and recognition. Addressing this phenomenon requires not only policy reform but also a critical rethinking of entrenched social structures that continue to reproduce inequality under the guise of formal egalitarianism.

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