



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

India

India – IND39741 – Dera Sacha Sauda –
Punjab – Haryana – Shiromani Akali Dal –
Madhya Pradesh – Sikh Extremism – Ek
Noor Khalsa Fauj – State Protection

12 January 2012

1. Please provide background information on the activities of the DSS, including how widespread their activities are in India.

Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) is a spiritual and social movement founded in 1948 by Shehenshahji Mastana, a Sikh from Balochistan. According to one source, Mastana believed that Sikhism had strayed from its original path by allowing caste to re-establish itself within the religion. Consequently, Mastana established a dera (temple or ashram) near the town of Sirsa, in what is today the Indian state of Haryana. A report in the *Himal South Asian* states that Mastana founded the dera “with an eye to social reform and spiritual purification – among the Sikhs in particular, but also others in general.” The current leader of DSS, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, has reportedly stated that “[o]ur religion is humanity and to help the needy.” The beliefs of the movement are apparently based on a “combination of all religions” and are referred to by DSS followers as *insaan*. Despite this, DSS is considered by many Sikhs as a breakaway faction of Sikhism, raising the ire of some in the Sikh religious hierarchy and the larger Sikh community.¹

Under the leadership of Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the DSS has expanded its presence and services beyond the Sikh heartland of Punjab and Haryana, building ashrams and providing services in a number of states and cities across India, including Gujarat, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi and Chandigarh.² The DSS website lists some 44 ashrams across India, including in the state of Madhya Pradesh.³ The ashram in Madhya Pradesh is described as being near Shahganj, approximately seventy kilometres southeast of the state capital Bhopal.⁴

The Economist reports that the DSS has grown from a single dera into a mass movement, with “some 400,000 followers”, drawing adherents from low caste members of the Sikh community, as well as Hindus.⁵ *BBC News* states that the majority of DSS followers are Dalits (Untouchables/low-caste Hindus); however it has also attracted “Sikh, Muslim and

¹ Alig, A. & Anwar, A. 2007, ‘Embers of a Sikh fire’, *Himal South Asian*, October

http://www.himalmag.com/2007/october_november/embers_of_a_sikh_fire.html – Accessed 9 October 2007

² Garg, B. 2007 ‘Dera Sacha Sauda and Gurmeet Ram Rahim’, *The Times of India*, 18 May

http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Cities/Chandigarh/Dera_Sacha_Sauda_and_Gurmeet_Ram_Rahim/articleshow/2060431.cms – Accessed 11 July 2011

³ ‘Dera Sacha Sauda Ashrams Across India’ (undated), Dera Sacha Sauda website

<http://derasachasauda.org/en/ashrams-list.html> – Accessed 28 July 2011

⁴ ‘Shah Satnam Ji Suchain Pur Dham Bhudni, Distt. Sihor, Madhya Pradesh’ (undated), Dera Sacha Sauda website

<http://derasachasauda.org/en/ashrams/376-shah-satnam-ji-suchain-pur-dham-bhudni-distt-sihor-madhya-pradesh.html> – Accessed 5 January 2012

⁵ ‘Dangerous tensions in Punjab’ 2007, *The Economist*, 5 July http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9444533 – Accessed 1 August 2007

Christian adherents”.⁶ The DSS itself claims to have over forty million followers worldwide.⁷ No sources were located that indicate the extent of DSS’s popularity in Madhya Pradesh.

The DSS claims to routinely perform “around 70 social welfare activities”. Some of the programs listed on the DSS website include: the operation of a home for leprosy patients; the provision of wheelchairs to the disabled; the provision of financial aid to poor patients; the operation of a blood bank; the provision of financial assistance to poor students; and the provision of free legal aid. Other ‘welfare activities’ also include encouraging people to shun homosexuality; the ‘emancipation’ of prostitutes; the “promotion of vegetarianism”; and “helping young divorcee women getting (sic) married again”.⁸

2. Is there any information on DSS members being attacked by Sikh ‘extremist’ groups? If so, are attacks limited to particular geographic locations in India?

A number of conflicts between DSS members and Sikh groups were recorded between early 2007 and late 2011. The majority of these incidents were confined to the Sikh-dominated states of Punjab and Haryana. A militant Sikh group known as the Ek Noor Khalsa Fauj reportedly has attacked members of DSS in both Punjab and Haryana in recent years. In 2009, *The Tribune* reported that “20 armed assailants of the Ek Noor Khalsa Fauj” attacked DSS members in the Ludhiana district of Shimlapuri. According to the report, “[a]rea residents said the followers of the Ek Noor Khalsa Fauj were armed with swords and other sharp-edged weapons.”⁹ A similar clash between the two groups was reported in March 2011 in the Moga district of Punjab.¹⁰ While at least 12 people were injured in the fighting, no one was killed.¹¹

Most reports of violence or other actions taken against the DSS have involved groups more closely associated with mainstream Sikh political and religious organisations. Such violence only began in 2007, when the DSS leader Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh publicly supported the Congress Party during Punjab state elections. This upset the governing Badal faction of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which draws its support from Punjab’s large orthodox Sikh population. A number of sources suggest that Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh provided SAD with an opportunity to stoke public outrage at the DSS when he appeared in an advertisement dressed as the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh in May 2007.¹² *The Economist* suggests that when Ram Rahim Singh dressed in the clothing of Gobind Singh, the Akali Dal-led government saw an opportunity to reduce the DSS’s political clout; “[r]eligious leaders at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the Sikhs’ holiest shrine...demanded an apology from Mr Singh. They rejected both an expression of ‘regret’ and an ‘apology for humanity’s sake’. On June 27th the state government raised the stakes by authorising the police to arrest Mr Singh for hurting Sikh sentiments. The aim was to stop him entering Punjab from his base in the

⁶ ‘PM urges calm over Sikh protests’ 2007, *BBC News*, 18 May

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/mobile/south_asia/6668299.stm – Accessed 25 November 2009

⁷ ‘About Us’ 2010, Dera Sacha Sauda website <http://derasachasauda.org/en/about-us.html> – Accessed 5 January 2012

⁸ ‘70 Humanitarian Activities’ (undated), Dera Sacha Sauda website <http://derasachasauda.org/en/70-humanitarian-activities.html> – Accessed 5 January 2012

⁹ ‘Bloody brawl at Shimlapuri: 12 hurt as Khalsa Fauj, Dera followers clash’ 2009, *The Tribune*, 24 May <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090525/ldh1.htm> – Accessed 30 June 2009

¹⁰ ‘Tension in village as Sikhs, dera men clash’ 2011, *The Times of India*, 7 March

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-07/india/28665459_1_dera-followers-naam-charcha-dera-programme – Accessed 10 March 2011

¹¹ ‘Punjab town tense after Sikh group-Dera followers clash’ 2011, *ZeeNews.com*, 8 March

http://zeenews.india.com/news/punjab/punjab-town-tense-after-sikh-group-dera-followers-clash_691927.html – Accessed 9 January 2012

¹² ‘Shiromani Gurdwara Pardandhak Committee’ 2010, Sikhi Wiki website, 11 February <http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php/SGPC> – Accessed 4 July 2011

neighbouring state of Haryana, and so to make it harder for him to build up an anti-Akali Dal political movement.”¹³ A *BBC News* report also suggests that the violence was orchestrated in response to Ram Rahim Singh’s overt support for the Congress party.¹⁴ The ensuing violence reportedly lasted for six days and led to the death of at least one person and over 100 injured.¹⁵ Violence was concentrated mainly in the Bathinda district of Punjab, though clashes also occurred in Ludhiana and Moga.¹⁶

Violence between Sikhs and DSS followers once again erupted in June 2008 after a Sikh was killed by one of Gurmeet Singh’s bodyguards in Mumbai. Riots occurred in both Mumbai and Punjab. According to the US Department of State, the Sikh “was killed while protesting against Ram Rahim Singh, head of the Dera Sacha Sauda (a breakaway Sikh faction). Police arrested the bodyguards who had killed the Sikh. Riots by 1,500 members of Mumbai’s Sikh community followed the next day to demand the arrest of Ram Rahim Singh.”¹⁷ In Punjab and Haryana radical Sikh organisations called a bandh (strike), which soon turned violent. According to the *Daily News & Analysis*, “protestors smashed window panes of buses in Mohali, damaged a cinema hall in Amritsar and forced closure of shops in Jalandhar. Most commercial establishments remained closed in Punjab and a few Haryana cities, while public transport was off roads...Sikh demonstrators squatted on railway tracks near Vala village in Amritsar district on Wednesday, following which railway authorities stopped the Amritsar-Delhi Shatabdi, Jan Shatabdi, Sachkhand and the Amritsar-Delhi Super express trains.” *Daily News & Analysis* states that the bandh was supported by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak, the main Sikh body in-charge of Sikh holy sites.¹⁸ In October 2011, fourteen DSS members charged in relation to the shooting death in Mumbai in 2008 were acquitted.¹⁹

There is evidence that police believe that the DSS leader, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh is at risk of serious harm by Sikh extremists; in 2011, police in Punjab charged four people with plotting to assassinate the DSS guru. However, a court in Patiala, Punjab dismissed charges against the four in December 2011. According to one source, one of the accused is a former militant in the Sikh separatist movement, the Khalistan Commando Force (KCF).²⁰ Such is the belief by authorities that Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh is in danger of being assassinated, he is said to receive high-level state protection. According to the *Daily Baskar*, “Ram Rahim Singh...enjoys Z-category security cover from the Haryana government and lives in his heavily fortified headquarters on the outskirts of Sirsa town.”²¹

¹³ ‘Dangerous tensions in Punjab’ 2007, *The Economist*, 5 July http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9444533 – Accessed 1 August 2007

¹⁴ Singh, J. 2007 ‘What is behind Sikh protests?’, *BBC News*, 18 May http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6670569.stm – Accessed 26 November 2009

¹⁵ ‘Punjab limping back to normalcy, isolated protests’ 2007, *The Hindu* website, 19 May <http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/holnus/000200705191801.htm> – Accessed 10 March 2008

¹⁶ Baixas, L. 2007, ‘The Dera Sacha Sauda Controversy and Beyond’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 6, Vol. 42, No. 40, p. 4059

¹⁷ US Department of State 2008, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – India*, 19 September

¹⁸ Bharadwaj, A. 2008, ‘Sikh-Dera showdown shuts Punjab down’, *Daily News & Analysis*, 24 July http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report_sikh-dera-showdown-shuts-punjab-down_1179447 – Accessed 10 February 2010

¹⁹ ‘Dera members acquitted of murder charges’ 2011, *ZeeNews.com*, 18 October http://zeenews.india.com/news/maharashtra/dera-members-acquitted-of-murder-charges_737203.html – Accessed 6 January 2012

²⁰ ‘Four acquitted on charges of plotting to kill Dera chief’ 2011, *New Kerala.com*, 7 December <http://www.newkerala.com/news/2011/worldnews-121520.html> – Accessed 6 January 2012

²¹ ‘Day-to-day hearing in rape case against Dera chief from today’ 2011, *Daily Baskar*, 29 September <http://daily.bhaskar.com/article/HAR-day-to-day-hearing-in-rape-case-against-dera-chief-from-today-2467474.html> – Accessed 5 January 2012

It is not simply mainstream Sikh political parties such as SAD Badal faction that see the DSS and similar deras as a threat; the Akal Takht, “the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs” reportedly “ordered Sikhs to sever all relations... with the ‘Premis’, the followers of Sacha Sauda.”²² In November 2011, the Akal Takht chief Giani Gurbachan Singh condemned Punjab’s former SAD finance minister and nephew of the Chief Minister, Manpreet Singh Badal after he visited the DSS headquarters at Sirsa.²³ No sources have been located that indicate that the Akal Takht authorises or supports harm perpetrated against DSS followers or Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh.

Other organisations that have been associated with anti-DSS actions include the Khalistan Action Committee, Sant Samaj, the All-India Sikh Students Federation (Sant Bhindranwale), and the Sikh Youth Federation. In April 2009, these organisations travelled to the residence of Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal and demanded that he close all DSS deras in Punjab.²⁴ Of these groups, the Sant Samaj is considered to be the most ‘hardline’. In January 2011, Sant Samaj staged a number of sit-ins in Punjab to prevent meetings of DSS followers from taking place.²⁵ No deaths of DSS members have been attributed to members of these groups, including Sant Samaj.

In May 2009, violence erupted in the Punjab following the killing of a Sikh leader in Austria. However, *The Times* reported that the violence was perpetrated by “fundamentalist Jat Sikhs” against members of Dera Sach Khand (DSK), another Sikh movement which is also comprised largely of Dalits.²⁶

No reports were located indicating that DSS members outside of Mumbai, Punjab or Haryana are targeted for harm by Sikhs or any other group. No evidence was located that extremists have harmed DSS members in Madhya Pradesh or that the DSS ashram near Shahganj has been targeted.

3. Is there any evidence of government authorities in India supporting Sikh ‘extremist groups’ in their violence against members of the DSS?

Reformist deras such as DSS and DSK appear to pose a threat to the power and influence of mainstream Sikh political parties and religious bodies in Punjab and Haryana. As discussed in the previous question, there is evidence that the violence of 2007 against DSS members by Sikh groups was perpetrated with the support or approval of the Badal faction of the governing Shiromani Akali Dal party in Punjab.²⁷ However, the governing Badal faction of SAD appears to have since distanced itself from anti-DSS violence.²⁸ Furthermore, there is no

²² Thukral, G. 2007, ‘Keep the faith’, *The Hindustan Times*, 18 June

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/230781.aspx> – Accessed 6 January 2012

²³ ‘Akal Takht slams Manpreet Badal for visiting Dera’ 2011, *ZeetNews.com*, 23 November

http://zeenews.india.com/news/punjab/akal-takht-slams-manpreet-badal-for-visiting-dera_743499.html – Accessed 6 January 2012

²⁴ Sharma, S.P. 2009, ‘Radicals to gherao CM’s house’, *The Tribune*, 25 March

<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090325/punjab.htm> – Accessed 1 August 2011

²⁵ ‘Curfew re-imposed in troubled Punjab town; 51 arrested’ 2011, *The Hindu*, 4 January

<http://www.hindu.com/2011/01/04/stories/2011010450990500.htm> – Accessed 9 January 2012

²⁶ Page, J. 2009, ‘Riots after Sikh guru Sant Rama Nand shot dead in Vienna’, *The Times*, 25 May

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6359288.ece> – Accessed 29 June 2009

²⁷ Singh, J. 2007 ‘What is behind Sikh protests?’, *BBC News*, 18 May

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6670569.stm – Accessed 26 November 2009

²⁸ Mahaprashasta, A. 2009, ‘Akalis, Congress woo Dera Sacha Sauda’, *The Hindu*, 19 April

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2009/04/19/stories/2009041950260400.htm> – Accessed 10 February 2010

sources were located that implicate either the Congress-led Indian federal government or the Bharatiya Janata Dal (BJP) government in Madhya Pradesh in anti-DSS incidents.

According to Gobind Thukral in *The Hindustan Times*, the head of DSS Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh once received the assistance of Punjab's Akali Chief Minister Badal, however the two fell out after Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh publicly supported the opposition Congress party, humiliating Badal and causing many Akalis to 'seek revenge' by attempting to have "the Dera chief replaced by a more pliable person." Gurmeet's imitation of the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh therefore provided the Akalis with an opportunity to manufacture religious outrage for their own political purposes.²⁹ The violence of 2007 discussed in the response to the previous question was the subsequent outcome. However, in 2009, Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta wrote in *The Hindu* that the Akalis in Punjab were seeking to reconcile with the DSS and Gurmeet Ram Raheem Singh, prompting suspicions from Congress leaders.³⁰

No evidence was located that indicates that authorities in Punjab and elsewhere withhold state protection from the DSS leadership or rank and file members. Notable Sikh leaders have been arrested in Punjab and Haryana for making inflammatory speeches against the DSS. In July 2011, authorities issued a warrant for the arrest of Balwant Singh Nandgarh, a Sikh religious leader, after he failed to appear in a judicial court in Fatehabad district of Haryana regarding a case registered against him under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code. The case had been registered following a complaint by a Dera Sacha Sauda supporter that Nandgarh had made "a fiery speech at a religious gathering".³¹ A January 2011 article in *Punjab Newslines* reported that police had arrested Sant Baljit Singh Daduwal, a Sikh preacher, for inflammatory remarks against the DSS leader Sant Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh.³² According to a March 2011 article in *The Times of India*, police were "deployed in strength...to avert any clash between the two sword-brandishing groups."³³ It was claimed in a separate report that police had provided "heavy protection" for the DSS meeting.³⁴

As mentioned in the previous section, police have arrested and charged suspected Sikh extremists who they believe were planning to assassinate DSS guru Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh.³⁵ It was also reported that Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh receives high-level state protection from the Haryana government.³⁶

²⁹ Thukral, G. 2007, 'Keep the faith', *The Hindustan Times*, 18 June

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/230781.aspx> – Accessed 6 January 2012

³⁰ Mahaprashasta, A. 2009, 'Akalis, Congress woo Dera Sacha Sauda', *The Hindu*, 19 April

<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2009/04/19/stories/2009041950260400.htm> – Accessed 10 February 2010

³¹ 'Nandgarh not to appear in Haryana court' 2011, *The Hindustan Times*, 23 July

³² 'Curfew continued in Punjab town after clashes between police and Sikhs' 2011 Punjab Newslines website, 3 January, <http://punjabnewslines.com/content/curfew-continued-punjab-town-after-clashes-between-police-and-sikhs/27450> – Accessed 6 July 2011

³³ 'Tension in village as Sikhs, dera men clash' 2011, *The Times of India*, 7 March

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-07/india/28665459_1_dera-followers-naam-charcha-dera-programme – Accessed 11 July 2011

³⁴ 'Followers hold congregation amid protest' 2011, *The Times of India*, 7 March

http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-03-07/india/28665719_1_naam-charcha-dera-followers-sikh-organizations – Accessed 11 July 2011

³⁵ 'Four acquitted on charges of plotting to kill Dera chief' 2011, *New Kerala.com*, 7 December

<http://www.newkerala.com/news/2011/worldnews-121520.html> – Accessed 6 January 2012

³⁶ 'Day-to-day hearing in rape case against Dera chief from today' 2011, *Daily Baskar*, 29 September

<http://daily.bhaskar.com/article/HAR-day-to-day-hearing-in-rape-case-against-dera-chief-from-today-2467474.html> – Accessed 5 January 2012

The Bharatiya Janata Dal (BJP), the governing party in the state of Madhya Pradesh, is the junior partner in the Punjab coalition government with the Badal faction of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab.³⁷ However, during the anti-DSS violence of 2007, the BJP reportedly rebuked its coalition partner, including the Punjab chief minister Parkash Singh Badal and “threatened to revise their sharing of power with the Akalis”.³⁸

Opposition politicians have, however, accused the BJP of facilitating violence against religious minorities in Madhya Pradesh. In 2007, the leader of the Congress party in Madhya Pradesh argued that since the BJP came to power in that state, “attacks by extremists against Christians and their institutions have risen as part of its saffronisation policy”.³⁹

Elsewhere in India, the BJP (and its parent organisations the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) have been linked to anti-Muslim violence, most notably the 2002 violence following the Godhra train burning in Gujarat that claimed the lives of over 800 Muslims.^{40 41}

³⁷ Singh, J. 2007 ‘What is behind Sikh protests?’, *BBC News*, 18 May
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6670569.stm – Accessed 26 November 2009

³⁸ Thukral, G. 2007, ‘Keep the faith’, *The Hindustan Times*, 18 June
<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/230781.aspx> – Accessed 6 January 2012

³⁹ Carvalho, N. 2007, ‘In Madhya Pradesh government behind anti-Christian attacks’, *AsiaNews.it*, 7 May
<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/In-Madhya-Pradesh-government-behind-anti-Christian-attacks-9740.html> – Accessed 6 January 2012

⁴⁰ ‘Scores killed in India train attack’ 2002, *BBC News*, 27 February
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1843591.stm – Accessed 8 November 2006

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch 2002, *We Have No Orders to Save You: State Participation and Complicity in Communal Violence in Gujarat*, Vol.14, No.3, April, Section I

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