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The Ravidassia in Italy: History, Geography, and Identity Politics of the Largest Punjabi Dalit Diaspora in the EU

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Abstract

This article discusses caste dynamics within the Punjabi diaspora in Italy—the largest in the EU—by focusing on the case of the Ravidassia community and describing its evolving relations with the local Sikh community. Previous research on Punjabi migration to Italy mainly focused on issues of labor exploitation, intermediation, and Sikh identity, often conflating the entire Punjabi population with its majoritarian—but far from exclusive—Sikh-Jatt component, thereby overlooking its internal heterogeneity of caste, religion, and class. Despite the growing number of Ravidassia-Chamar migrants in Italy—evidenced by the proliferation of Ravidassia temples and associations across the country—their migratory experiences, employment patterns, socioreligious practices, and inter-caste relationships remained unexplored. This article offers, for the first time, an overview of the history, geography, and identity politics of the Ravidassia in Italy. Drawing on data collected with Punjabi migrants during multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, it illustrates the alternative strategies adopted by the Ravidassia to assert their identity in this diasporic context, focusing on cases in which their relations with the Sikh manifested their complex nature. It concludes by discussing the advantages and drawbacks of each strategy, in light of the history of power relations between the Ravidassia and the Sikh.

Keywords: caste; Italy; Ravidassia; Sikh; Punjabi diaspora



Academic Editor: Opinderjit
Kaur Takhar

Received: 1 June 2025

Revised: 25 June 2025

Accepted: 14 July 2025

Published: 17 July 2025

Citation: Laudini, Annamaria. 2025. The Ravidassia in Italy: History, Geography, and Identity Politics of the Largest Punjabi Dalit Diaspora in the EU. *Religions* 16: 922. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16070922>

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1. Introduction

With 170,880 Indian nationals officially censused in 2024¹, the majority of which are from Punjab², Italy hosts today the largest Punjabi diaspora in the EU³. Although precise data on the caste composition of Punjabis in Italy is unavailable, the recent proliferation of Ravidassia temples and associations in regions as geographically distant as Puglia and Lombardia indicates a growing presence of the community, predominantly comprising individuals from the *Chamar*⁴ Dalit or Scheduled Caste⁵. Despite being the second-largest group among Punjabis in Italy after the more well-known Sikhs—who are primarily, though not exclusively, from upper-caste groups such as *Jatt*, *Saini*, and *Lubana*—the Ravidassia remain largely unknown to the Italian audience and overlooked in both public discourse and academic research. The lack of recognition of their religious identity leads to their associations and marriages being recorded mistakenly as Hindu in official documents, and to their experiences being ignored or conflated with those of the majoritarian Sikh population.

In the town where I did most of my fieldwork, an Italian social worker—fluent in Punjabi and closely engaged with the population through more than two decades of work as a cultural mediator—responded to my question about caste among Punjabi migrants by stating: “In Italy, there are definitely no Dalits.”⁶ This remark not only reflects the broader

lack of awareness regarding the Punjabi community's social composition but also suggests that the living conditions of the *Chamar* in Italy do not align with the commonly held image of Dalits, associated in public imagination with extreme poverty and social marginalization. In fact, despite being classified as a Scheduled Caste, the *Chamar* are among the most upwardly mobile Dalit groups in India. Two interrelated factors—international migration and self-assertion through religious movements such as the *Ad-dharm* in the 1920s and the Ravidassia today—have played a crucial role in their upward mobility. These should be thus examined together, as both religious movements have drawn substantial support from the international diaspora, and in turn have contributed to the establishment of transnational networks among Chamars abroad.

Given that a significant portion of Punjabis in Italy do not identify with Sikhism but instead with a range of alternative religious and caste identities—the Ravidassia being the most common⁷—the question arises as to why even those who regularly interact with Punjabi migrants, such as the aforementioned social worker, as well as employers, colleagues, labor unionists, teachers, civil servants, and neighbors, often fail to accurately recognize their identity. For instance, during the recent inauguration of a Ravidassia temple in Italy, which I attended, I interviewed the invited municipal councilor and mayor. When I asked about their knowledge of the community, it became clear that they believed they were attending a Hindu religious event⁸. Members of the Ravidassia community similarly reported that in workplaces, schools, government offices, and everyday interactions, Italians commonly assume they are either Hindu or Sikh. Both media outlets—including newspaper articles, documentaries, and films—and academic scholarship played a role in creating the stereotype of all Punjabis in Italy being Hindu⁹ or Sikh. Much of the existing research on Punjabi migration to Italy has in fact neglected issues of socio-religious identity, being primarily focused on denouncing migrants' labor conditions in the highly exploitative primary sector (Blasetti 2019; Omizzolo 2018, 2019) and on issues of intermediation (Azzeruoli 2014; Azzeruoli and Perrotta 2015; Bertolani 2003), or on the Punjabis settled in the northern regions of Italy (Azzeruoli 2016; Bertolani 2018b; Compiani and Quassoli 2005; Lum 2012a), where the Sikh attracted much attention due to their involvement in the local dairy industry and to the establishment of large gurudwaras, such as the one in Novellara (RE), inaugurated officially in 2000 and, still today, the biggest in the country and the second in Europe. As a result, alternative religious and caste identities among Punjabis remained marginal to both public discourse and scholarly inquiry¹⁰.

While difficult to estimate exactly when the first Ravidassia settled in Italy, my fieldwork indicates that they started migrating in the 1990s, following the earlier arrival of the Sikh, whose migration flows to the EU and Italy started becoming consistent in the 1980s. During that period, the Sikh were able to obtain asylum due to the political persecution they faced in India in the aftermath of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination by her Sikh bodyguard in 1984. In the subsequent years, the established family and community networks, and the strategy of applying for a circus visa—less regulated than the work visa and thus easier to obtain (Bertolani 2015)—facilitated the migration of ever larger numbers of Punjabis to Italy through family reunification and transnational intermediaries, and their internal diversification by caste, gender, class, and religion.

The recent economic mobility and assertiveness of the Ravidassia—reflected in their improved class status and in the expansion of their religious and transnational networks¹¹—has been met with some resistance from the Sikh community. According to many Ravidassia interviewees, this manifests in the attempts by some Sikh to boycott or exploit their efforts, allegedly due to “jealousy” (*irkha*) over their socio-economic advancement and to a continued and widespread “desire to dominate”. In the following sections, a series of contentious incidents observed during fieldwork and reported by

Ravidassia interviewees are presented to critically examine the widely held claim—often expressed with pride by members of the Sikh community—that they do not engage in caste or religious discrimination.

This article thus seeks to challenge the notion of a monolithic Sikh identity among Punjabis in Italy by analyzing the rise and growing strength of the Ravidassia community. Through ethnographic research conducted in both Ravidassia and Sikh temples in multiple locations, the article offers the first account of the history, geography, and identity politics of the Ravidassia in Italy, shedding light on their lived caste experiences and inter-group relationships. It begins by introducing the Ravidassia religion and its predecessor, the *Ad-dharm* movement, explaining their connections with caste emancipatory struggles and their position in the contemporary socio-religious landscape of Punjab. Drawing on original field data, the article then traces the development of the Ravidassia community in Italy, describing its history, geography, and the alternative strategies of *dissociation* and *integration* enacted in relation to the dominant Sikh presence. Through the narratives of key community figures and the in-depth examination of a contentious dispute over a Ravidassia temple governance, this study shows how power relations are articulated and negotiated through everyday religious and social practices, and how the performance of specific identity politics affects intra- and intergroup relations in this diasporic setting.

2. Methods

This article is based on research carried out as part of my doctoral dissertation between 2022 and 2025 among Punjabi migrants in Italy. I collected interviews and field notes through participant observation in multiple Ravidassia (5) and Sikh (8) temples in Italy, which I attended during both ordinary (Sunday liturgy) and special events¹², for a total of 45 day visits and two periods of immersive ethnographic fieldwork (total 5 months). In 2023 and 2025 I also conducted fieldwork in Punjab (total 3 months), visiting Sikh and Ravidassia temples and historical sites¹³, joining the Ravidassia *Begumpura express* pilgrimage to Varanasi (Bochkovskaya 2016) and staying in the villages of origin (6) of selected migrants who had participated in my research in Italy. In both the Sikh and the Ravidassia communities, I gathered information from a large variety of people, reached through random, purposive, and snowball sampling, including *granthis* (priests), *pradhans* (temple presidents), temple secretaries, *sevadaars* (volunteers), and devotees of all ages. I conducted most interviews in person, some repeatedly over time, and eight by telephone. I also monitored temples' online activities, following their social media (Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp groups), where news and relevant issues were shared in videos, posters, chats, and audionotes.

In my first visit to a Ravidassia temple (February 2022) and throughout the following ones, several members of the Ravidassia community enthusiastically supported my research, acting as gatekeepers and assistants by introducing me to their social networks, informing me on upcoming and past events, hosting me at their homes during field visits, providing me with contextual and insider information, and helping me conduct interviews in Punjabi. My gender identity as a young woman helped me foster connections with women, while my Italian nationality and my position as an independent researcher ensured that, being an outsider to both communities, I could access with equal ease Sikh and Ravidassia places of worship and homes, as well as being admitted to predominantly male gatherings like those held by temple committees. I could gain the trust of the *granthis* and other committee members thanks to my demonstrated commitment to the study of Punjabi history and culture and knowledge of the language.

My access was, in fact, strongly facilitated by my conversational fluency in Punjabi. My Italian nationality inevitably put me in an imbalanced position towards the members of

a minority migrant population in Italy. To prevent people taking part in the study because of potential feelings of obligation towards an Italian citizen, or in view of obtaining benefits that I was unable to provide (such as money, jobs, documents, legal advice), I explicitly clarified my role and the purpose of my research at every new interaction. I tried to impact positively the community by helping individuals navigate Italian bureaucracy, advocating for their rights in writing and in public demonstrations, and launching an EU-funded, free of cost Italian language course in the main site of my fieldwork.

I used online social networks to further clarify my role as a researcher, share findings, and reduce the risk of being mistaken for a social worker, proselytist, labor unionist, or government employee (as sometimes happened during random interactions). In the videos, photos, and articles I published on a Facebook page dedicated to my research project, I introduced myself in Punjabi to explain the reasons for my engagement in the field to a wider audience. Often, during religious events, my presence as the only Italian visitor attracted the interest of the extant press, which interviewed me for various Punjabi TV channels. As soon as these videos circulated and the news spread among Punjabis that I was conducting a research on the Ravidassia community, I received invitations from associations in Italy and abroad to participate in their events. Whenever possible, I accepted these as precious opportunities to expand my analysis and network to different contexts and diversify the sample.

All the opinions discussed in this article were expressed by individuals who provided explicit verbal informed consent to being interviewed and to their data being used for publication. I audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated in English formal interviews, and recorded verbatim quotes from conversations in my field diaries. I pseudonymized, omitted, or altered personal and place names—irrelevant for the argument—to protect participants' confidentiality.

3. The Ad-Dharm and Ravidassia Movements as Responses to Caste Inequalities in Punjab

The official establishment of the Ravidassia religion as separate from Sikhism was catalyzed, in 2009, by the death of Sant Ramanand Ji—a prominent *Chamar* figure committed to, and active in, the upliftment and mobilization of the community. Sant Ramanand Ji was killed by Sikh fundamentalists while preaching in a diasporic temple in Europe, in what came to be remembered as “the Vienna attack”. The following year, on the 30th of January 2010, the leaders of Dera Ballan¹⁴ (where the murdered Sant was based) declared the Ravidassia a separate religion from Sikhism (Takhar 2014). However, the Ravidassia movement itself is embedded in a much longer historical trajectory. Its roots lie in the long-lasting experience of exclusion and discrimination faced by the *Chamar* and other Dalit castes in Punjab, despite the “myth” of a casteless Sikh society (Hans 2016; Jodhka 2006; Jodhka 2023; Judge 2015; Ram 2004, 2007; S. Singh 2024).

Due to their traditional association with leather¹⁵ work, the *Chamar* were considered polluting in Brahmanical ideology, placed at the bottom of the social rank, and treated as untouchables¹⁶. With the advent of Sikhism, however, the *Chamar* and other Dalits saw the chance of emancipating from their historical oppression. Since the beginning, in fact, the Sikh gurus promoted egalitarian principles and practices, speaking and acting against the hierarchies that had dominated Punjab during Hindu and Muslim rule: this new faith became “a rallying cry for the untouchables and members of “lower castes” that they be allowed a respectable social existence” (Hans 2016, p. 131). Yet, over time the lower castes' hopes were frustrated as Sikhism did not manage to erase the deeply seated inequalities that had existed for centuries; instead, another hierarchy developed in Sikh society, with the rise of *Jatt* as the dominant caste (Judge 2015; Mcleod 2007).

The *Jatt*, a landowning farmers' caste classified as General Caste in Punjab, began converting to Sikhism in the seventeenth century, and nowadays constitute a large part of the Sikh population (Jodhka 2023)¹⁷. *Jatt* socio-economic dominance in Punjab was consolidated under British colonial rule through military recruitment, through the construction of a martial racial identity in conjunction with the idealization of the "noble peasant" (Mooney 2013), and, crucially, through the 1900 Punjab Land Alienation Act, which institutionalized *Jatt* as the "agriculturalist caste," granting them privileged land ownership rights over other groups (Hans 2016; Jodhka 2006; Judge 2015). The later Green Revolution, which increased the value of land, further reinforced *Jatt* control over economic resources, enabling them to extend their dominance over political, religious, and cultural institutions, from village *panchayat* councils to political parties like the Shiromani Akali Dal, farmers' associations like the Bharatiya Kisan Union, religious bodies like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee and the Akal Takht. Meanwhile, commercial cultural productions have naturalized the conflation of Punjabi identity with *Jatt* hegemonic masculinity (Gill 2012; Kaur 2022), against which the *Chamar* are now proposing their "songs of protest" (S. K. Singh 2017).

Despite being more numerous¹⁸ than in any other Indian state, thus, the Dalits of Punjab have not been immune from caste discrimination, even as some—particularly the *Chamar*—achieved notable upward mobility, also thanks to their involvement in international migration (Judge 2002; Takhar 2011; Taylor 2014). In the early twentieth century, Dalits' mobility aspirations were channeled by the *Ad-dharm* movement, the precursor of today's Ravidassia religion. The movement started in the early 1920s from a group of highly educated, wealthy *Chamars* thriving in the leather business¹⁹, in the Doaban cities of Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Kapurthala. Among them, a key figure was Mangu Ram, son of a leather trader, who returned to Punjab in 1925 after sixteen years in the USA and, in 1926, became the founder and leader of the movement. This was conceived as a "social vision" from its inception (Juergensmeyer 1982): drawing from an ancient devotional tradition preserved through local shrines and pilgrimage centers²⁰, it took the figure of Ravidass as its emblem and elevated him into a unifying symbol of resistance against caste oppression (Ram 2023).

In line with other Adi movements in India, the *Ad-dharm* promoted the idea that Dalits were a *qaum*, i.e., an ethnically distinct people, originally inhabiting the land, whose identity had been violently suppressed by Aryan invaders (Juergensmeyer 1982). In pursuit of this ethnicized vision of Dalit identity and to consolidate a political-religious movement, *Ad-dharm* activists sought to detach Dalits from Hindu, Sikh, and Christian affiliations by urging them to register as "Ad-dharmi" in the 1931 census²¹. Since the *Ad-dharm* activists opposed the Hindus—who were leading the anti-British nationalist movement—they found support in the colonial administration, who accepted to enlist the newly founded religion in the census. However, they also found resistance from established religious communities who, fearing to lose Dalit electoral support, promoted reformist inclusion strategies to re-attract them into their ranks. Over time, internal leadership conflicts and external assimilationist pressures led to the *Ad-dharm* movement's dissolution. However, the term endures among many Dalit groups, who continue to use "Ad-dharmi" in place of "Chamar" or "Dalit" to define their identity.

Currently, in various countries of the global Punjabi diaspora, research has provided evidence of persisting discrimination by the upper castes against Dalits, which led the latter to establish their own temples and associations, as shown in the UK (Dhanda 2017; Jaoul 2021; Judge 2002; Nesbitt 1990; Takhar 2011), Spain (Lum 2011), France (Kirpalani et al. 2016), and Greece (Christopoulou 2013). The *Ad-dharm* strategy of self-assertion through the census has been replicated recently in the UK by the British Ravidassia Council: according to

one of its managers²², this association was the first to achieve the inclusion of the Ravidassia as ethnic and religious group in the UK census—thereby promoting its statistical and official recognition in one of its largest diasporic settings. In 2011, 11,058 individuals in the UK self-identified as Ravidassia. In 2021, the number amounted to 9,672. Of these, 100 identified as Ravidassia only as an ethnic group, 8,172 only as a religious group, and 1,400 as both²³.

Despite significant strides towards unity and international recognition, internal divisions and external pressures—echoing those that led to the dissolution of the *Ad-dharm* movement in the past century—continue to challenge the global Ravidassia community today: the movement appears torn “between those who do not want to split from the age-old linkages with the Sikh *maryada*²⁴, and those who want to travel on a separate path” (S. K. Singh 2017, p. 37). The separatist identity politics of Dera Ballan, for instance, elicits considerable support from the diaspora, yet faces significant resistance from local *Chamar*, other Dalit groups, and rival *deras* (S. K. Singh 2025; Ranjan 2019). Similar tensions have been documented among the Ravidassia in Spain (Lum 2011) and in the UK (Takhar 2014), and emerged consistently throughout my fieldwork in Italy. These internal fractures, as I will show through the analysis of a concrete case in Italy, create openings for other groups to assert dominance through assimilationist strategies.

4. History and Geography of the Ravidassia Community in Italy

Among the Ravidassia I interviewed, the earliest arrived in Italy in 1983, and the latest in 2024. In the first years of settlement, men usually found jobs in agriculture, animal husbandry, or in the circus; later, depending on the opportunities offered by their surroundings, some managed to access different sectors, such as industry, transports, and logistics, as warehouse and factory workers, employees, or truck drivers; others found work as caregivers for the elderly, which facilitated their regularization and helped them learn Italian, thus expanding their chances in the job market and allowing them to reunite their families from Punjab. Among the women I interviewed, the majority were either responsible for housework, or employed in the agriculture, service, or industry sectors.

The employment patterns of the Ravidassia in Italy vary across regions depending on the local economy: generally, in the northern regions the majority work in factories, dairy industry, and logistics, whereas in the central and southern regions their main occupations are in agriculture, gardening, food processing, and animal husbandry (e.g., in horses, buffaloes, and cow stables). In some areas, labor market niches emerged, such as in central Italy, where many Ravidassia work as bakers, and in Veneto, where many are employed in leather and iron factories. The different employment opportunities across regions are reflected in different economic achievements: in the North and in some central areas, the higher and more stable income guaranteed by factory work allowed the Ravidassia to launch their own businesses, build larger temples, and invest in the education of the second generations—many of whom are studying in university and seeking a professional career. In contrast, the highly exploitative, low-paid, and precarious labor conditions met in the primary sector in the center-South of Italy complicate the Ravidassia’s mobility chances: here, second generations often drop out of school to work and sustain the family income, made volatile and insufficient by irregular contracts and fluctuating labor demands; those who aim at a profession find so many obstacles in the bureaucratic apparatus and in the discriminatory attitude of employers, that they attempt a second internal migration to urban areas or to the North, envisioned as lands of opportunity compared to the scarce chances in the local job market.

The North–South disparities in socioeconomic development and welfare provision across Italian regions also result in different types of interactions of the Ravidassia with public infrastructures and with the Italian population: some major temples in the North

are visited by schools and participate in events aimed at promoting awareness of diverse religions and cultures; their managers speak Italian fluently and have good relationships with the local municipalities, which annually grant them permits to conduct public celebrations, such as the *shoba yatra* (a street parade during which prayers, music, and dance are performed across town and a variety of Punjabi foods are offered to visitors). In contrast, many temples in the central and southern regions struggle to obtain permits, and have more complex interactions with the municipality, also because temple managers are less proficient in Italian and in navigating the legal bureaucracy, and public administration is less efficient than in the North; here, most temples are rented rather than owned (although some are currently in the process of buying land), and appear more informal and temporary than the ones in the North.

Throughout my research, I located a total of 18 Ravidassia temples (also called “gurughar”, “darbar”, “dham”, or “gurudwara”) in Italy, 10 of which in the northern regions, and 8 in the central and southern ones²⁵. However, this number is due to change rapidly, since, in the meantime, in 8 other localities (2 in Lombardia, 1 in Emilia Romagna, 1 in Marche, 1 in Toscana, 2 in Campania, 1 in Calabria) Ravidassia associations have been formed and registered, and are in the process of finding a site, raising funds, and obtaining permits to open their temples. The project of grouping all the Ravidassia associations in Italy into a national-level organization to seek official recognition from the State—similar to the existing Sikh, Hindu, and Buddhist ones—is being led by the temple of Vicenza, one of the largest in Italy. Table 1 provides information about the Ravidassia temples in Italy that I collected in the interviews with their presidents, secretaries or committee members (regional and provincial location, tenancy type, year opened, estimated average number of visitors, book hosted in the temple). The average number of visitors refers to regular Sundays, and was estimated to be at least ten times higher on special events.

Table 1. Details of the Ravidassia temples in Italy (author’s elaboration from interview data).

Region	Province	Tenancy	Year Opened	Average Visitors	Book
Veneto	Vicenza	own	2004	300	Amritbani
Veneto	Verona	own	2009	200	Guru Granth Sahib
Veneto	Treviso	own	2010	50	Amritbani
Lombardia	Brescia	own	2019	100	Amritbani
Lombardia	Brescia	-	-	-	Guru Granth Sahib
Lombardia	Bergamo	own	2002	400	Amritbani
Lombardia	Bergamo	-	2008	-	Guru Granth Sahib
Lombardia	Cremona	own	2018	100	Amritbani
Lombardia	Mantova	own	2008	200	Amritbani
Emilia-Romagna	Piacenza	own	2018	150	Amritbani
Toscana	Arezzo	own	2018	50	Amritbani
Marche	Macerata	rent	2012	50	Amritbani
Umbria	Terni	own	2007	200	Amritbani
Lazio	Roma	rent	2012	300	Amritbani
Lazio	Roma	rent	2002	200	Guru Granth Sahib
Lazio	Latina	rent	2009	200	Amritbani
Campania	Salerno	rent	2016	100	Amritbani
Puglia	Bari	rent	2011	100	Amritbani

5. Dissociation: Self-Assertion Through the Establishment of Separate Ravidassia Temples

The first Ravidassia temple that opened in Italy was in 2002 in Lombardia, and—according to one of its managers²⁶—it was the first not only in Italy but in the whole EU. Today, it is visited on average by 400 devotees on Sundays, but attendance peaks at 6000 on special occasions, such as Ravidass' *gurpurab* (birth anniversary), which features two days of celebrations involving devotees, international singers, Italian public figures (e.g., mayors, labor unionists), and representatives of other temples. In central Italy, the first temple was established in the province of Rome (2002), followed by the province of Terni (2007) and Latina (2009); in the South, the first was in the province of Bari (2011). Since the Ravidassia religion lacks official recognition by the state, temples operate as non-profit cultural associations, managing their own funding, administration, and accounts.

In structure, aesthetics, and rituals, Ravidassia temples in Italy partly resemble Sikh gurudwaras; however, the pictures hanging on their walls speak of resistance to caste oppression and Dalit pride; usually, the image of Ravidass is accompanied by that of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar ("father" of the Indian Constitution and Dalit leader, worshiped by the Ravidassia almost at par with a guru), by that of Guru Nanak²⁷, and of Dalit icons such as Valmiki²⁸, Sant Ramanand Ji (considered a *shaheed*, martyr), the Ravidassia victims of the post-Vienna riots, and the current head of Dera Ballan Sant Niranjana Dass. Ritual life similarly centers on Dalit history, with commemorations including the birthdays of Ravidass, Ambedkar, and political leaders like Bahujan Samaj Party²⁹ founder Kanshi Ram. Annual bus pilgrimages to Vienna are organized to mark the anniversary of the 2009 attack.

Before the Ravidassia separated and established their own temples in Italy, they used to share their places of worship with the Sikh. However, as many first-generation *Chamar* reported, they often felt unequally treated due to their caste within these mixed committees; discrimination manifested in that *Chamar* members were not allowed to take decisions in the temple, nor to perform rites, and were relegated to the most humble tasks: "They put us to do the cleaning only" as a temple president remarked³⁰. Ravidass, whom they considered a guru, was referred to as *bhagat* (saint), reduced to a status lower than the Sikh gurus; donation money was collected from everyone but used by managers for their own agenda. As Sunny, a Ravidassia who arrived in Italy in 1994, explained³¹:

"We had so much, but they took everything from us. . . Earlier, we used to gather and collect donations all together. But we offered much more than them, and when they saw the chance to profit, they kicked us out saying 'You are Chamar, this place is for us'."

Sandeep, a 50-year-old Ravidassia settled in Italy since the early 2000s, recalled how in the first years, when Ravidassia temples had not yet opened, he used to attend the liturgy in the local Sikh gurudwara; until one day he found the picture of Ravidass placed outside the prayer hall, next to the shoe rack; he and the other *Chamar* devotees experienced this as a sign of disrespect towards them and their guru, and grew further convinced of the need to separate and found their own temple³². An analogous experience was reported by Kamaljeet, the president of a Ravidassia temple in central Italy³³:

"I will tell you honestly: the reason why we moved out [from the mixed gurudwara] is that, when we put the poster of Guru Ravidass there, the next day they removed it. But they removed only ours and kept all the other ones. So it was as if they were telling us 'You cannot do what you want here'."

Similarly, Deepak, 30-year-old Ravidassia serving as secretary in a temple in the North³⁴, claimed that:

“They used to laugh at us when we did our Nagar Kirtan with the image of Ravidass, telling us we were lower. So we moved away from them, we decided it was better to separate. Even if they don’t say it out loud, in their heart they continue to look down upon us and discriminate us”.

During fieldwork in the Ravidassia temple I regularly attended, one day the community was summoned for an urgent meeting. Around fifty male devotees gathered to address a recent action by a local Sikh gurdwara, which had organized a Nagar Kirtan. The promotional poster for the event portrayed Ravidass wearing a turban and referred to him as *bhagat*. This depiction was perceived by the Ravidassia as an act of appropriation aimed at attracting greater attendance (and thus donations) from the local *Chamar*, while simultaneously diminishing the status of Ravidass, who is usually depicted without a turban and honored by his followers with the title *Guru*. The temple committee interpreted this poster as a provocation toward the Ravidassia community, prompting a strong response. As one of the participants in the meeting, in Italy since 1992, commented³⁵: “If one of us had removed Guru Nanak’s turban and posted the picture online, they would be already here with sticks to beat us”. After hours of animated debate, the committee decided to collectively record a video to demand a formal apology from the president of the Sikh gurdwara, which was then posted on TikTok. However, rather than apologizing, the Sikh president responded a few days later with another TikTok video stating: “Whether we say *bhagat* or *guru*, we still give respect.”

The same narrative of respect and equality was expressed by all the Sikh presidents and *granthis* I interviewed in Italy whenever I inquired about the reasons behind the separation of Sikh and Ravidassia. They dismissed the Vienna attack as a “*political move*” or the act of a few evil men who wanted to create conflicts, and downplayed the controversy between groups to a minor religious disagreement. They avoided any reference to caste issues and claimed that the Ravidassia had always been welcome in gurudwaras, since Sikhism makes no difference between human beings.

In contrast to these narratives stand the repeated lived experiences of caste discrimination reported by the Ravidassia, which led most of them in Italy to adopt a strategy of *dissociation*, forming separate community groups and establishing independent temples. These spaces were often initiated with informal gatherings in private homes or rented venues for special occasions and later formalized with the support of visiting sants from Punjab and from the UK.

Transnational networks play a key role in the communication of Ravidassia events and in the dissemination of information relevant to the community; for instance, members of the UK-based television network Kanshi TV and representatives of the Global Ravidassia Foundation are always found at special gatherings in the temples and in public events like the *shoba yatra*, during which they engage in live broadcasting, reporting, and promoting community activities. These communication channels also publish news highlighting the notable achievements of Ravidassia individuals and the advancement of the community in general, such as Ravidassia students who graduate in university with high merits, women who distinguish themselves for getting employed in traditional male sectors like truck driving, laws against caste-discrimination being approved in some diasporic country, and statues, roads, and celebrations being dedicated to the memory of Ambedkar in India and abroad.

Ravidassia temples in Italy are typically housed in repurposed buildings—such as dismissed warehouses, gyms, stables, or factories—which volunteers renovate and adapt for prayer and communal meals (*langar*). It is common for temples to be situated in close proximity to Sikh gurudwaras, sometimes directly across the street. While this reflects the general spatial concentration of Punjabi migrants in Italy—described as a “leopard

stain” distribution (Bertolani et al. 2011)—it also serves as a visible assertion of distinction: the physical closeness of the temples, in fact, requires visitors to make a deliberate choice, emphasizing symbolic separation over geographic convenience.

After the 2009 Vienna attack, the need to take distance from the Sikh became even more pressing, as many Ravidassia believed that Sikh associations in Italy had supported—financially and ideologically—the killing of their Sant in Vienna. As reported by aforementioned Kamaljeet:

“We know that each Sikh gurudwara in Italy sent 500 Euro to those who killed our Sant, thinking it was a right thing to do. So, to avoid fighting, we separated and kept our peace. They did not kick us out: we decided to take distance from them. In the end, all we want is just a place to pray and meditate at the end of the week; we can do it also by ourselves”.

Until 2010, all the Ravidassia temples in Italy hosted the *Guru Granth Sahib*³⁶; but after the conflicts with the Sikh that occurred both in Punjab and in the diaspora in the aftermath of the Vienna attack, in 2011 most temples in Italy substituted the *Guru Granth Sahib* with the *Amritbani* (a collection of Ravidass’ hymns), in line with the politics of Dera Ballan. Today, only four out of eighteen Ravidassia temples in Italy host the *Guru Granth Sahib* and are registered members of the national Sikh association of Italy³⁷. Due to their reduced contact with other Ravidassia temples, these were also more challenging to access.

The Ravidassia interviewees quoted above marked their separation from the Sikh also linguistically, by describing a *we* in opposition to a *them*, in line with the strategy of “dissociation, distancing and autonomy” previously observed in Punjab among the *Chamar* (Jodhka 2002, p. 1822). This separatist stance, however, is not uncontroversially agreed upon by all the Ravidassia in Italy: some of the elder *Chamar*, when asked to define their religious identity, still speak of themselves as Ravidassia-Sikh; some temple managers, which refused to adopt the *Amritbani*, claim to be “against all divisions, working towards equality”³⁸; among the youth, many take part in both Sikh and Ravidassia events, wear symbols of both traditions, and consume music and movies explicitly celebrating *Jatt-Sikh* identity, without perceiving these as contradictions; their syncretism of faiths and refusal of caste identity politics contrasts the separatist politics promoted by Dera Ballan and its followers (whom the moderate call *kattar*, radical) and reflects an alternative path to self-assertion, which, in the following section, I define *integration*.

6. Integration: Attempts at Articulating a “Communal Harmony” Between Sikh and Ravidassia

After having visited several temples in Italy with an explicit Ravidassia identity, I heard of a unique one where the Sikh and the Ravidassia gathered and prayed together. On the occasion of the *gurpurab*, the *granthi*, an *amritdhari*³⁹ *Chamar*, invited me to join the celebration, where over a thousand visitors were expected. I arrived in the morning; the parking lot had been decorated with colorful strings, rustling in the wind. At the entrance, the president, also a *Chamar*, in proud posture and orange turban, welcomed me and introduced me to the rest of the committee. The temple hall was filled with bright garlands and fairy lights, pink and white flowers paved the way to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, covered by precious drapes; to the left of it, a small *nishan* (metal pole) carried the Ravidassia emblem “Har”. On the walls hung canvases of Guru Nanak as a young man and vignettes illustrating mythical episodes of Ravidass’ life: his imprisonment, his interrogation before the king, his liberation and worship by the king himself after the recognition of his superior spirituality. In the audience, turbans alternated to *rumals*⁴⁰, while women covered their heads with the *chunni*⁴¹ of traditional Punjabi suits. In the *langar*, everybody ate together.

As the president explained, the *Guru Granth Sahib* was hosted because “Everyone’s blood is red, we consider gurus all those mentioned in the *Guru Granth*, we make no distinctions”. The *granthi*, joining the conversation, added: “They call him *bhagat*, we call him *Guru*, and we demand that here he is called *Guru*. That’s all”⁴². As the *granthi* explained later⁴³, however, he had deeper practical and ideological reasons for refusing to switch to the Amritbani:

“In this area we [the Chamar] were not the majority, we were only 10–15%, that is why I chose a middle way. If I had put here the Amritbani, we would not have been in a position to continue, because we were minoritarian, and the members of the other Ravidassia communities were coming here only for the *gurpurab* [...] But I also think that they [the other Ravidassia communities] should not have separated. They should have said [to the Sikh] ‘No, the *Guru Granth* is also ours. You are not the owner of the *Guru Granth*’”

On the one hand, the lower share of *Chamar* in the local population represented a risk for the very existence of the Ravidassia temple; on the other hand, the *granthi* acted in accordance with what he called “the philosophy of the *Guru Granth*, of Ravidass, of *Begumpura*: *sarab saanjhi vaalta*, all in common, everybody is equal”. The *granthi* thus committed to, and, according to him, managed “for so many years to maintain communal harmony. There was no quarrel, no fight, no inter-caste conflict”. This, however, required him to do some compromises: at the beginning of his office, orthodox Sikhs in the temple complained that he was not wearing the 5 Ks⁴⁴ and therefore should not be allowed to teach the *Guru Granth Sahib*⁴⁵. He thus went to India and took *amrit*, becoming officially a member of the Sikh *Khalsa*. This happened in 2009, the year in which the controversy between the Ravidassia and the Sikh had taken a violent turn. Upon returning to Italy, he found that his conversion had once and for all alienated him the support of the other Ravidassia temples in Italy. Upon visiting one of them, he was told by its president: “Why have you come here? By tying the turban, you have killed our Sant”.

When I visited the temple on the occasion of the *gurpurab*, the *granthi*’s effort to keep together the Sikh and the Ravidassia manifested in the blend of chanting sung throughout the liturgy: the traditional Sikh *jaikara* (slogan) “*Waheguru ji ka Khalsa*” followed the hymn of victory to Ravidass, “*Jo bole so nirpeh, Satguru Ravidass Maharaj ki jai!*”. Passages of the *Guru Granth Sahib* were read, but mainly those in which Ravidass figured. The *granthi*’s further reinstated his conciliatory stance in his preaching, during which he emphasized the unity and equality of all humans beyond creed and caste and insisted that “all the gurus should be celebrated and worshipped equally”.

The presidents of almost all the Sikh *gurudwaras* in the region were present at the event. In the ongoing money collection to purchase land for a new temple site, in fact, each of them had contributed with a donation. The presidents were called on stage and honored with the giving of a *sarop* (scarf) and a commemorative plaque. Only a few were missing from the list of contributors; yet, their absence was telling: none of the presidents of the other Ravidassia temples in Italy were there. This was even more significant since the *gurpurab* is the most important event of the year for the Ravidassia. Noticing this, that day I left the temple convinced that the *granthi*’s mission to promote “communal harmony” may not have been fully accomplished, given that his supporters were only the Sikh. Less than a year later, my doubts were confirmed: the attempt at keeping together the two traditions was paid at a high price by the *granthi* himself, defamed and deposed by a group of Sikh leaders (*Jatt* presidents of nearby *gurudwaras*) who, with the complicity of the president, took over the control of the temple, removing the *granthi* and most elements of Ravidassia identity in it, except the name. The *gurpurab* organized the following year was

paired with the Sikh celebration of *Vaisakhi* and was prominently Sikh in rituals, symbols, and attendance.

7. Assimilation: The Fight over an Established Ravidassia Temple

The aforementioned *granthi* declared that he had "...only one dream: that before dying, I will see the temple owned by us. All this time, I fought for my community [Chamar], because, although now I am a member of the *Khalsa*, a Guru Ravidass Darbar is a big thing for me. I fought for His [Ravidass'] name"⁴⁶. In order to purchase a new building for the temple, after many years of rent, the *granthi*, accompanied by the president, went for one year door to door in the region—and even to other temples in Italy and in the UK—to raise funds. When the total 150,000 Euro needed was collected, the president signed the contract in his name on behalf of the temple association, disregarding the *granthi's* opposition. Soon after, the president started to accuse the *granthi* of not being fit for his role, on the pretext that he wore an undergarment that contravened the dress code of the 5 Ks⁴⁷. Defending himself citing the health issues that forced him to wear such cloth did not suffice: the *granthi* was further accused to have misused his *kirpan*, to have faked his *amrit*, to have spoken bad words in the presence of the *Guru Granth*, to have commented on female devotees' bodies, and so on.

All the accusations to the *granthi* centered on demonstrating that he was not a true Sikh. To put an end to these rumors, circulated in the temple and on social media, he decided to go to India and acquire an official certificate from the gurudwara where he was first initiated, to prove that he was not—as they accused him—"a defaulter in religion". In India, the Sikh committee reassured him that he had not committed any moral mistake, provided him with a certificate, and let him go with blessings. Upon returning to Italy, however, he was received with hostility by the president, who ordered him to vacate his room and announced him that he would not be allowed to perform the *Akhand Path*⁴⁸ on the upcoming inauguration of the new temple, because "those who paid for it don't want you to recite it". The *granthi* tried to defend himself, but the arguments escalated and, when he realized that the president "was being played by other people, other committees" and was determined to remove him, he retired in silence. He explained:

"I was like a stone at their entrance, so they had to remove me. Actually, they entered via the president. They targeted me through him. Because, you see, I was in good terms with all communities, with other gurudwaras, but I always kept some distance. I would not share the private information of the temple. There was a limit I never crossed: I would not let them [the Sikh] enter the management of the temple. But now the president has called them to take over. He himself is a *Chamar*, but power, fame, and ego won: all he can think is 'I am *pradhan*, *pradhan*!'"

For the inauguration of the new temple, a big celebration was organized; a Ravidassia friend sent me the promotional poster of the event a few weeks before, inviting me to join. From other towns, Ravidassia devotees organized coaches to travel to the site and participate. They expected to find the *granthi*, whom they knew for a long time, but when they reached the premise, they did not find what they expected: the *granthi* was absent, and the whole event, including the decorations, symbols, colors, prayers, and chanting, were strictly related to Sikh identity. Not even a picture of Ravidass was shown; unknown turbaned men were reading from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, and the "Har" had been obscured by the *khanda*⁴⁹. Disappointed, the same evening, the woman who had helped organize the trip to the new temple expressed her feelings on social media⁵⁰ writing: "Today we organized a group and went to the event, but when we discovered that [the *granthi*] was not there we felt very bad, as we saw him doing seva for so many years. We all stand with him". In the following days and in the course of our subsequent three-hour interview, the

granthi received calls from dozens of families who expressed their support and showed their loyalty to him by refusing to visit the temple after his removal. He commented saying:

“That money came from the pocket of so many people. Everyone donated because they had trust in me, I never betrayed them. They trusted me, but now that they are seeing that other people are sitting in our place, they complain. But they should do more than complain on social media: they should stand with me!”

As reported by the secretary of the temple⁵¹, a few days after the inauguration of the new site, a gang of men, armed with sticks and metal rods, allegedly sent by the president of a nearby Sikh gurudwara, stormed into the old temple and started a riot against the supporters of the *granthi*, some of whom were Sikh-*Jatt* themselves but had decided to take his side in the dispute. The *granthi*, who in previous interviews had always kept a neutral position in response to my questions about caste, adopting the narrative of communal harmony, after this event became more critical. In a following interview⁵², he affirmed that the reason for his removal had been that

“They [the *Jatt*] want to impose their *maryada*. They want to keep us under control. They want to govern us. They want to tell us ‘You are like sheep. Do this, go this way, go that way. You cannot command; you cannot take your own decision: you are our slaves’”.

The Sikh leaders’ actions to take indirectly control of the temple, by physically and psychologically harassing and excluding committee members and supporters, by defaming and removing the *granthi*⁵³, and by obscuring the Ravidassia identity, can be interpreted as a strategy of *assimilation*. This is how the events were understood by many Ravidassia devotees, as shows the following complaint by Sia, a *Chamar* woman who used to regularly attend the temple: “What happened to our temple? *Sikhaan kabzah kar liya!* (The Sikh have conquered/occupied/stolen it)”.

Assimilationist moves need not always be so overt; they can also take more subtle forms. For instance, the dominant castes may—more or less intentionally—depict Punjabi identity in public discourse as equal with Sikh-*Jatt*, thereby silencing other minorities. I observed an example of this during a legal consultation between a Punjabi migrant, an Italian lawyer, and a Sikh cultural mediator⁵⁴. When the Italian lawyer, who had no knowledge of Punjabi culture, asked the migrant to indicate his “ethnicity” in an official document, he did not understand the question; the cultural mediator thus intervened asking him, in Punjabi: “Bhaji (brother), you are Punjabi, right? You are not Hindu, right?”. To his negative response, the cultural mediator turned to the lawyer saying: “Just write «Sikh» under «ethnic group»”.

This attempt at ethnicization of Sikh identity in official documents mirrors the ethnicization of Dalit identity promoted by the *Ad-dharm* and (British) Ravidassia movements, who sought recognition through the census and through the institutionalization of a separate religion. However, while the former do it in view of assimilating and subsuming minoritarian and marginalized identities, the latter do it to emancipate themselves and to affirm their unique identity. In this way of presenting themselves as a homogeneous ethnic group, however, the Ravidassia may also risk silencing and marginalizing other Dalit non-*Chamar* subjectivities, thereby inadvertently reproducing the Sikh exclusionary identity politics that motivated the emergence of the Ravidassia movement in the first place.

8. Conclusions

Analyzing the history of the Sikh community in Italy, Gallo (2012) interpreted the institutionalization of gurudwaras in semi-urban and rural contexts as a fundamental move marking the shift of Sikh migrants from conditions of illegality and bonded labor to more regular, integrated, and stable living conditions. In the case of the Ravidassia community outlined, the territorialization of the community through the purchase of the temple site also emerged as an important milestone in its process of self-assertion, not only vis-à-vis the Italian population, but—even more importantly—in relation to the established Sikh community. If taking distance from the Sikh and gathering in separate places of worship can be regarded as the first phase of the history of the Ravidassia in Italy, the purchase of buildings and the registration of these as Ravidassia temples marks a second phase, during which the Ravidassia not only manifest their discontent with Sikh practices of caste discrimination and exclusion, but also signal their improved socioeconomic condition and claim equal status to their historical oppressors.

The response of the Sikh is ambivalent and depends on the local context—i.e., on the proportion of *Chamar* versus *Jatt* in the area, on occupational and residential differences among them—but also on the specific identity politics adopted by the Ravidassia. In particular, the Sikh tend to not interfere in those temples in which the Ravidassia have followed a strategy of dissociation, installing the *Amritbani* and developing their own associations, rituals, and symbols; instead, in those where the Ravidassia chose to integrate the two traditions, keeping the *Guru Granth Sahib* and registering as members of the Sikh national association, the Sikh feel more entitled to impose their rules and conditions, when not—as in the case presented here—to assume control of the temple governance.

Further, the Ravidassia who identify in both traditions are induced to provide their financial support to either sides; however, given that Sikh gurudwaras in Italy largely outnumber Ravidassia temples, this in practice means that donations for Sikh temples and events are collected more often and from a larger number of people than those collected for the Ravidassia temples. Indeed, a complaint common to all the Ravidassia interviewed was that “we [the Ravidassia] visit their [Sikh] gurudwaras and donate money to them whenever they need—but they rarely, if ever, do the same for us”. The Ravidassia practice of integration thus can have the counterproductive effect of limiting the material base for the emancipatory struggle of its own community.

Considering these aspects, the Ravidassia who adopt the politics of integration, based on the pronouncement of being entitled to reading and preaching the *Guru Granth Sahib* as much as any other human, although expressing a resistant stance towards exclusionary attitudes, in practice are exposed to higher risks of being assimilated or exploited. Having weakened their ties with the more numerous and explicitly separatist Ravidassia fringes—which perceive their attempts at integration as a betrayal and accuse them of being *dogla* (double-faced)—further adds to their vulnerability, since they cannot count, in cases of conflict, on the support of their caste members. On the other hand, the separatist politics adopted by the more radical factions is experienced by many devotees as a contradiction of the very principles of equality, inclusivity, and tolerance which the *Ad-dharm* and Ravidassia movements invoked against old and new discriminatory practices. The current tensions experienced by the Ravidassia in Italy are better summarized by the words of the president of an association in the South, who explained⁵⁵:

“My guru is simple, he has no weapons, he has only words. The people of my community are confused, they can’t tell who is good and who is bad. Many go there [to the Sikh gurudwara] because they don’t know the guru yet; as long as you don’t listen to Ravidass’ words, you keep wandering around, hither and

thither; you can wander your entire life without finding a way. But once you understand the meaning of his words, then you stop; I, myself, have stopped”.

Funding: This research received no external funding besides the author’s Ph.D. scholarship.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of the European University Institute (protocol code 20230221, 16/06/2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. All personal and place names were pseudonymised, altered, or omitted to protect participants’ confidentiality.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank all the participants in this study for their trust and time in sharing their knowledge, stories, and opinions with me. I am grateful to Harvinder Singh for his precious advice, to Sunil and Lucky for providing contacts to the temples in the North of Italy, and to Ajay for generously and enthusiastically facilitating my research activities throughout the years. Thanks also to my Punjabi teacher Anshu Saluja for her classes and to the EUI for supporting my research. Finally, I want to thank Azizjon Bagadirov for his reviews on the various drafts of this article and for his constant encouragement and support.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Data elaborated from ISTAT (the Italian Institute of Statistics), available at <http://stra-dati.istat.it/> (accessed on 13 July 2025).
- ² Previous studies estimate that Punjabis constitute over 80% of the total Indian population and that an extra 10% should be added to account for irregular migrants (Bertolani 2015, 2018a; Garha 2020; Lum 2012a; Saha 2013).
- ³ Although, according to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (<https://www.mea.gov.in/population-of-overseas-indians.htm> accessed on 13 July 2025) the total number of Overseas Indians in Italy is lower than in Germany (206.503 against 260.864), however the population in Italy is more predominantly of Punjabi origin. Indeed, in a recent study of rural migration from Punjab (Sharma et al. 2023), Italy emerged as the fourth most preferred destination country for emigration (by 5.54% of respondents), much more than Germany (1.81%).
- ⁴ The word *Chamar* is used in this article as equivalent to Ravidassia, in accordance with the practice of my interlocutors, who defined themselves comfortably using both terms interchangeably. It is in no way intended as a derogatory term.
- ⁵ These categories in India group all the historically disadvantaged castes that have been subjected to severe discrimination and exclusion (untouchability).
- ⁶ Interview 1, March 2024.
- ⁷ During my research in Italy I occasionally met Punjabi migrants from other Dalit castes, such as *Mazhbi*, *Valmiki*, *Bazigarh*, and *Sain*; however, they were small numbers and, to my knowledge, they have not formed associations or temples in Italy.
- ⁸ Field notes, May 2025.
- ⁹ Specifically, the misconception of Punjabis as Hindu fuelled the stereotype, among Italian employers, that they are particularly apt at working in the dairy farms because they would allegedly consider the cow sacred (Azzerruoli 2016; Tanghetti 2020).
- ¹⁰ A notable exception is the research report ‘Indian Diversities in Italy: Italian Case Study’ (Lum 2012b), where the caste heterogeneity of the Punjabi population in Italy is recognized, together with the growing presence of the Ravidassia community and its reported discrimination by the upper caste Punjabis in the country. At the time of the publication, the author found a total of eight Ravidassia temples in Italy (and four more associations which were about to establish their temples). As I illustrate below, over the last ten years these figures more than doubled, pointing to the increasing size and power of this socioreligious community and calling for renewed attention on these issues.
- ¹¹ Some, based in the UK but active throughout Europe, are the: British Ravidassia council (<https://ravidassia.tv/> accessed on 13 July 2025), British Ravidassia Heritage Foundation (<https://www.brhfoundation.com/> accessed on 13 July 2025), Global Ravidassia Welfare Organization Europe (<https://www.globalravidassia.org/> accessed on 13 July 2025), Kanshi TV (<https://www.kanshitv.co.uk/> accessed on 13 July 2025), Shri Guru Ravidass Mission International (<https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/en/charity-search/-/charity-details/5020527/charity-overview> accessed on 13 July 2025).

These include—among others—Ravidass jayanti, Nagar Kirtan, shoba yatra, Ambedkar jayanti, Guru Nanak jayanti, Vaisakhi, Lorhi, special meetings, pilgrimages, and temple inaugurations.

Harmandir Sahib Amritsar, Dera Sach Khand Ballan Jalandhar, Shri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Varanasi, Boota Mandi, temple and historical shrine Shri Khuralgarh Sahib, Ad-dharmi temple Shri Charan Choh Ganga Sachkhand Kharali.

Located in the outskirts of Jalandhar city, Dera (Sach Khand) Ballan is considered the headquarter of the Ravidassia religion, and is at the forefront of the community's politics, involved in charity and transnational support networks and main organizer and sponsor of the annual pilgrimage to Varanasi on the special train *Begumpura express*, celebrating the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidass. This event attracts large crowds from all over India and the global diaspora, and testifies to the growing numerical and economical strength of the Ravidassia community (Bochkovskaya 2016; S. K. Singh 2025).

The term for leather in Punjabi is *chamri*, which is thought to be the root etymology of the word *Chamar*.

A vivid literary account of the discrimination and exclusion suffered by *Chamars* in Punjab can be found in the autobiographical novel *Changiya Rukh* (Madhopuri 2010), and in the works of the poet Lal Singh Dil (Ram 2024).

Although these are tentative figures, since the last Census in India including caste dates back to 1931, some estimate that *Jatts* constitute 30% of the total population of Punjab, thus making the largest single caste group in the state (I. Singh 2022).

Scheduled Castes constitute 32% of the total population of Punjab according to the 2011 Census. Of these, 23.4% are Ravidassia-Chamar.

As described in (Juergensmeyer 1982), Chamars and Muslims competed for the control of the leather trade. In the suburban area of Jalandhar called Boota mandi (boot market), after the Partition and the departure of Muslims from Punjab, the business became a monopoly of the Chamar, who further prospered through it.

Deras and *jatheras* (family shrines) are considered sites of resistance and counter-hegemonic discourse and practice for Dalits in Punjab (Ram 2007, 2008; S. Singh 2019, 2024; S. K. Singh 2025).

In the 1931 Census, 420,000 registered as *Ad-dharmi* by religion; in later census rounds, Ad-dharmi figures as one of the Scheduled Castes (Bochkovskaya 2025).

Videocall interview, February 2023.

Data available for download at the following link: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/census2021dictionary/variablesbytopic/ethnicgroupnationalidentitylanguageandreligionvariables/census2021/ravidassiaidentity> (accessed on 13 July 2025).

Tradition/code of conduct.

In comparison (according to the website <https://www.worldgurudwaras.com/location/italy/> accessed on 13 July 2025), the total number of Sikh gurudwaras in Italy is 60. The Unione Sikh Italia (<https://unionesikh.it/> accessed on 13 July 2025), an organization founded in 2021 to promote Sikh religion and its legal recognition by the State, lists 57 associations in Italy among its registered members.

Telephone interview, April 2025.

The founder of Sikhism, considered by the Ravidassia a disciple of Ravidass and worshipped for his egalitarian stance against the caste system.

The mythical poet, composer of the Ramayana, belonging to the Dalit *Chuhra* caste of sweepers.

A political party aimed at emancipation and empowerment of Dalit and all oppressed classes of India, founded in 1984.

Field notes, June 2024.

Interview, February 2025.

Interview 2, March 2024.

Interview 1, May 2025.

Interview, April 2024.

Field notes, March 2024.

The sacred book of Sikhism, worshipped as the last living guru.

This pattern is reversed in the UK, where the Ravidassia temples hosting the *Amritbani* are minoritarian, as confirmed by the secretary of the British Ravidassia council during our interview (February 2023). For an overview of the identity politics of the Ravidassia and other Punjabi groups in the UK, see Takhar (2011).

Interview with a temple president, June 2025.

Official members of the *Khalsa* (the fraternity of Sikhs) initiated through the ceremony of taking *amrit*.

The handkerchief used by Ravidassia to cover the head in sign of respect inside the temple.

The long scarf typically used by women in South Asia to cover their heads to signal respect and modesty.

Field notes, April 2024.

Interview 1, October 2024.

The 5 Ks (*Kesh*, *Kangha*, *Kara*, *Kachera*, *Kirpan*) are the symbols worn by *amritdhari* Sikhs.

In a study in the UK in the post-Vienna period (Takhar 2014) this was the main reason put forward by the Sikh in British temples to justify excluding the *Chamar* from management and priesthood.

- 46 Interview 2, October 2024.
- 47 Precisely, the *granthi* was accused of having violated the rule for the wearing of the *Kachera*, an undergarment secured and tied with a drawstring, by using an underwear with an elastic band instead. To add to the offense, the president posted online photos of the incriminated undergarment, exposing the *granthi* to public ridicule.
- 48 The continuous uninterrupted recitation of the *Guru Granth Sahib* that is dedicated to various propitious activities, such as, in this case, the inauguration of a gurudwara.
- 49 The double-edged sword which became the modern emblem of Sikhism in the early 20th century.
- 50 Field notes, October 2024.
- 51 Interview 2, May 2025.
- 52 Interview 3, October 2024.
- 53 In a later telephone interview (May 2025), the president of the temple cited the *granthi's* alleged misappropriation of temple funds as reason for his dismissal—an accusation firmly refuted by the *granthi* himself, the (ex-)secretary, and my Ravidassia interlocutors, who instead pointed to the *granthi's* modest and austere lifestyle. Further evidence against these accusations comes from the observation that the *granthi* was afterwards quickly offered several positions in other Ravidassia temples in Italy and abroad.
- 54 Field notes, December 2024.
- 55 Interview, April 2025.

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