

# Ad Dharm

In the 1920s, a new religious movement emerged in the → Punjab called Ad Dharm (Original Religion). Though based on religious concepts that are common to the Hindu tradition, the founders were insistent that they were creating a new religion, one free from the prejudices of upper-caste Hinduism. In describing this new religion, the Indian census reports of 1930 describe it as a “religious revolt of the Untouchables.”

The early 20th century was a time of change throughout India as the colonial government, defensive in the face of rising anti-British sentiment, was open to new alliances from marginalized and underclass segments of society. At the same time, the emerging Indian National Congress desperately needed lower-caste support. Both groups vied with each other to provide incentives, and new Scheduled Caste (SC) movements emerged in response.

Punjab presented a particularly volatile form of social politics due to a roughly equal distribution of upper-caste Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. Each group comprised a fourth of the population, with Scheduled Castes of whatever religious identification providing the crucial remaining quarter. The innovation of provincial elections in 1920 exacerbated the rivalry and spawned new political parties: the Unionist, spokesman of Muslim landed interests, and the Sikhs’ Akali Dal. Foreign missionaries spreading Christianity were entering the last phase of their mass expansions, and the urban Hindu reform movement, the → Arya Samaj, turned its attention increasingly to the problems of numbers, the census, and elections for legislative councils.

Politics were in the air. Cadres of the revolutionary movement – the Gadar Party, formed by expatriate Indians in California who returned to Punjab and violent anti-British Sikh activists, the Babbar Akalis – roamed through the villages. The Congress noncooperation movement had begun, and → Gandhi’s tour of the Punjab in 1921 received enthusiastic crowds. The nationalist newspapers, *The Punjabee* and *The Tribune*, nurtured a growing nationalist elite. It was a time for political opportunity and change, one especially ripe for ambitious members of Punjab’s Scheduled Castes.

## Mangoo Ram and the Founding Circle

In the early 1920s, a handful of educated young SC activists began meeting together in Jalandhar to discuss the possibilities of political organization. At the heart of the group were Vasant Rai, Thakar Chand, and Swami Shudranand (also known as Vasant Singh, Thakar Das, and Shiv Charan). These three came from central Punjab’s newly affluent leatherworking caste, the Chamars, whose tanning and boot-making businesses had boomed with government army contracts. With their relative wealth came new educational opportunities – thanks in part to schooling provided by the Arya Samaj.

The Arya Samaj had provided young SC activists with ideas of social equality not only by allowing them to attend its schools but also by creating service organizations such as the Dayanand Dalit Udhar in Hoshiarpur and the Achut Udhar in Lahore. These movements for the uplift of Untouchables spawned even more radical movements, in part because of a growing disillusionment with the paternalistic attitudes of the groups’ upper-caste benefactors. The Jat Pat Thorak Mandal (Society for the Abolition of Caste), for example, was organized within the Arya Samaj in 1922 by Sant Ram, bachelor of arts, but split from it in 1924. Punjab’s new Muslim movement, the Ahmadiyya sect, is also said to have encouraged SC members to leave the Arya Samaj.

Swami Shudranand, influenced both by radical Arya Samajis and by Ahmadiyyas, gave a firebrand speech in a Chamar neighborhood of Jalandhar city in 1925, calling for mobilization and action. Following the speech, the first group of activists came together to begin discussing what might be done. Other meetings followed – one lasted for four days and ended only when upper-caste men in the area attacked the participants for utilizing the village pond.

The most significant new member to be recruited into these conversations was a young Chamar who had recently returned from travels abroad and had become something of a folk hero: Mangoo Ram. On returning he had created a small school near his home in village Mugowal,

Hoshiarpur district, and it was there that the Ad Dharm movement had its first official meeting on Jun 11 and 12, 1926. Mangoo Ram was elected president of the organization, a title he never relinquished throughout the movement's history, and to a large extent the Ad Dharm movement reflected his values and aspirations.

Mangoo Ram was in some ways characteristic of his generation of activist Chamars: bright, young, educated, and financially independent. His father had developed a flourishing trade in raw hides for the leather market. Despite these assets, however, Mangoo Ram was still regarded by upper-caste society as an Untouchable. When he attended elementary school, he was not allowed inside the building. He had to squat in the doorway to listen to the teacher's lessons. Even so, he graduated with the second highest marks. He decided to look elsewhere for opportunities and did what few of his caste fellows were able to do at that time: journey abroad.

When Mangoo Ram was 23 years old, his father arranged through a labor contractor to have him work in the United States and send money home. Part of the money for the passage was paid up front, the rest to be reimbursed to the labor contractor when Mangoo Ram began working. In 1909, he arrived in California and was sent to the fruit orchards of Fresno and other parts of the state's central valley. It was in California that Mangoo Ram became associated with a newly created movement for India's independence, the Gadar Party. He accompanied a boatload of weapons sent by the party from San Diego to India, where it was to be used in what was hoped to be a revolutionary uprising. The rebellion was foiled, however, by British agents, and Mangoo Ram's boat was captured in the Philippines. He escaped, and by 1925 he had managed to work his way back to India where he received Arya Samaj support to open a school for SC children in his home village. It was this school, and Mangoo Ram's revolutionary leadership, that would be the base for the radical new political religion, Ad Dharm.

## The Ideology of a Political Religion

In their initial meetings, Mangoo Ram and his colleagues surveyed their potential bases of influence and concluded that they had only three resources: *qaumiat* (communal pride), *mazhab* (religion),

and *majlis* (organization). These were embryonic sources of power, however: the organization had to be created, the communal pride had to be brought to consciousness, and the religious ideas had to be articulated in such a way as to reveal their social strength.

The group labored over creating an ideological theme on which they could build a political organization. The social politics of the Punjab suggested that the Untouchables should think of themselves as a community – a *qaum* – similar to Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. The rise of *ādi* (original) movements around India at the time suggested a historical feature of this community: that it was a modern manifestation of the original people of India. This idea, which would later be treated at length by Dr B.R. → Ambedkar, was particularly appealing to the Punjabi activists after news of archeological discoveries at Harappa in western Punjab in 1921 and the historical speculation regarding the role of Punjab as the portal for ancient Aryan conquests over the original people of the region. The wording on a poster announcing one of the first meetings of Ad Dharm summarizes their ideological position (author's translation):

We are the original people of this country, and our religion is Ad Dharm. The Hindu *qaum* came from outside and enslaved us... Brothers, the time has come: wake up, the government is listening to our cries.

Their myth of origin postulated that the birthplace of ancient civilization was India – once a utopian land where all inhabitants dwelt in amicable equality. The story went on to say that one branch, however, split off and migrated to the region we know as Europe.

From there, as Aryans, they returned to India to conquer the true inheritors of the original civilization “with so much cruelty and injustice” as the wording in the founding document that these *ādi* people – now treated as Untouchables – “forgot their own identity.” From there this mythic account of history paused only briefly to denounce Manu, the legendary codifier of Hindu law, before advancing to the present period, where it showed how the Aryans – upper-caste Hindus in general and members of the Arya Samaj in particular – continued to subjugate those *ādi* people who had descended from the original inhabitants of India. The Arya Samaj's efforts to reconvert Untouchables to Hinduism and provide social

service organizations for them were singled out as examples of ways in which the Aryans were continuing to try to “seduce” the SC members and set traps to snare them “like falling into the clutches of elephants’ teeth,” as the founding document described it. Mangoo Ram made clear, however, that Ad Dharm as a religion was not exclusive to Scheduled Castes. It was a religious community similar to Hindus. It was not the expression of a particular caste but the manifestation of what it regarded as the original egalitarian society of India. For that reason, the movement’s first report proudly listed 20 Brahmins and two Jains among its membership.

The theology of Ad Dharm was straightforward. There was a creator god, Ādi Purkh (“Original Being”), whose wisdom was communicated through the great saints of medieval India, including → Kabir, member of the weaver caste, and → Ravidās, a Chamar, who became the patron saint of Ad Dharm. Since Ravidās had already been highly revered within SC communities, this amounted to an appropriation of traditional lower-caste religiosity. Nonetheless, the Ad Dharm leaders urged their followers to practice their reverence for Ravidās in as disciplined and faithful manner as Hindus worshipped their gods and Sikhs revered their *gurūs*: they were to meditate regularly, pay obeisance to the *guru*, and lead a chaste and disciplined life.

Other aspects of religious identity were invented as well. The Ad Dharmis’ salutation to one another was *jai guru dev* (victory to the divine *guru*), to which the appropriate response was *dhan guru dev* (blessed be the divine *guru*). The followers were to adopt the upanishadic phrase *so’ham* (I am that) as a *mantra*, presumably because it implied the basic unity and equality of the world. They were also urged to wear the color red, either as turbans or as armbands, in part because upper-caste Rajputs in the area near Rajasthan refused to allow lower-caste members to wear such a regal color. With this portfolio of distinctive theological ideas and an array of external symbols of religious identity, therefore, Ad Dharm was ready to present itself as a movement representing a great and significant *qaum*.

### Schisms, Census, and an Epic Fast

Three events marked stages in the early history of the movement. The first was a series of internal

schisms and leadership disputes, followed by the grand mobilization to have Ad Dharmis registered in large numbers for the government’s census of 1931, and finally a counterfast in opposition to Gandhi. Although vastly different, each of these demonstrated how Ad Dharm was trying to carve out a distinctive niche within Punjab society.

The early leadership squabbles were basically over strategy – whether to compromise with the Arya Samaj and other moderate elements of the wider society or to take a harder, more separatist line. Mangoo Ram, the old Gadar revolutionary, maintained a strident stance. Others were not so sure. With the rise of → nationalism throughout India, the Ad Dharmis’ refusal to support the moderate service organizations set up by the Congress movement appeared to some as collusion with the colonial government. The Arya Samaj had been making new overtures to Ad Dharm leaders, offering them an expanded role in the movement if they would return, and in 1929, several were lured back. The exodus included the Ad Dharm founders: Thakar Chand, Vasant Rai, and Swami Shudranand. In 1930 another group left the Ad Dharm to establish a rival All-India Ad Dharm Mandal, with headquarters in Lyallpur, in western Punjab. The Lyallpur group survived for only three years, disbanding in 1933 to merge with Dr Ambedkar’s national movement. Though buffeted, the Jalandhar office of Ad Dharm under Mangoo Ram’s leadership survived, resisting the temptation to compromise with the wider society’s politics and to accept even implicitly their prevailing social assumptions about caste and the stigma of → untouchability.

Taking the hard line turned out to be an important stand in the second critical event in the movement’s early years: the census of 1931. The census was important not only as a demonstration of the movement’s strength and legitimacy but also as a basis for mobilization. In central Punjab, where the Ad Dharm was based, the numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs were almost equal, and Untouchables were relatively evenly distributed among the three communities. But Untouchables were marginal to the religious life of upper castes, and if they could be persuaded that their true religious identity was something else – Ad Dharm, for example – this new religion would hold considerable electoral power. Before 1931, census takers had been instructed to use the category “Hindu” for any Untouchable respondents who were uncertain how to answer the question

about religious affiliation. In 1909 when census commissioner Edward Gait issued a circular suggesting that the “depressed classes” ought to be listed separately from Hindus, the response from the upper castes bordered on panic. The circular was rescinded, but in 1930, when the government’s census commissioner accepted Ad Dharm’s petition to have its name listed as an option on the list of religions, the upper-caste fears were revived.

Sikhs took the census threat from the Ad Dharm more seriously than Hindus. “The Hindus treated the Sikhs badly, by taking some of their people into Hindu census rolls, so the Sikhs took it out on us,” one old Ad Dharmi told me. Several angry Sikhs interrupted an Ad Dharm rally in Nankana Sahib, destroyed the kitchen where meals were being prepared, threw hot rice at the participants, and beat up several Ad Dharm followers. Other Ad Dharmis were also attacked – some say several were killed – but the effort to have Scheduled Castes record their religion as Ad Dharm persisted. A song was composed for the occasion (author’s translation):

Leave the bickering behind,  
And tie your turban red;  
We do not have to record  
Any *qaum* other than our own,  
So, Ad Dharmi, be strong.

The final tally of Ad Dharmis reported in the 1931 Punjab census was 418,789. In certain areas of the Punjab, Mangoo Ram and his colleagues had reason to feel victorious: over 80% of lower castes in Jalandhar district declared themselves members of Ad Dharm, as did about a tenth of the number of lower-caste people elsewhere throughout the state. There were two epicenters of Ad Dharm support: the Doab area, including Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts and the state of Kapurthala, and the area in western Punjab around Lyallpur, including districts Sheikhpura, Multan, and Montgomery – many of these canal colonies to which lower-caste people from the Doab area had migrated. In these districts, Chamars were the largest group among the Scheduled Castes. In Amritsar and Lahore districts, the largest SC group were Chuhras – sweepers – who apparently saw the Ad Dharm as a largely Chamar affair. Non-Chamar lower castes in the mountain areas of Kangra and the northwestern areas of Shahpur and Gujarat, however, offered the Ad Dharm a modicum of support (18% in the case of Kangra).

Throughout the Punjab, the number of people returning their religion as Ad Dharm was roughly equal to the number of Christians, also largely from Scheduled Castes. Mangoo Ram pointed out that Christianity had been trying to convert Untouchables in the Punjab for over 50 years, and the Ad Dharm had succeeded as well in only five. Moreover, he said, the census had proved that Untouchable castes were capable of mobilizing for their own benefits and of organizing in ways that permitted them to compete in the wider sociopolitical arena.

These efforts to create an independent political base for Untouchables were threatened, however, by other political forces in the Punjab that saw the participation of Untouchables as numerically and ideological vital to their existence. The Arya Samaj was one such force, as mentioned above; the Independence movement was another.

Since Congress was dominated by upper-caste Hindus, leaders of the Ad Dharm thought that an → independent India controlled by them would not be a significant improvement over → British rule. In some cases, this indifference to the Independence movement bordered on hostility. According to one SC Congress supporter, a group of Ad Dharmis attacked a salt *satyāgraha* in Jalandhar in 1930: they vandalized the heavy salt kilns, beat up several of the Congress men, and stole several pots and kettles. Earlier, in 1928, Ad Dharm leaders had rejected Motilal Nehru’s call for the abolition of separate electorates. When the issue was raised again at the Round Table Conference in London, Mangoo Ram sent telegrams to the government pledging the Ad Dharm’s support for Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the Untouchables’ representative at the conference.

At the Round Table Conference, Gandhi had adopted a position opposite to that of the Untouchables. In Gandhi’s view, independent India should become a land of caste equality that would incorporate all communities within it without discrimination – but he radically differed from Untouchable leaders over how this utopia would be achieved. Gandhi advocated a united front of all castes as the way to bring about this transformation; but Ambedkar and Mangoo Ram thought that Untouchables first had to establish a separate political base from which they could demand respect.

Nothing illustrated these differences of strategies more than the response to the British suggestion

of communal representation as the way to provide Untouchables with a voice in India's legislative assemblies. The Untouchable leaders embraced the idea. Gandhi rejected it, claiming it was an effort to legitimize the institution of untouchability. He vowed to go on an "epic fast" in opposition. On Sep 20, 1932, the fast began, accompanied by a great deal of publicity. Mangoo Ram went on a counterfast of his own. He also went to Simla to raise his demands directly to the British government's summer headquarters; he wrote a letter to King George opposing Gandhi; and he threatened massive disturbances throughout the Punjab.

On Sep 26, 1932, the Poona Pact provided a compromise that both Ambedkar and Gandhi could accept. The Untouchables would forfeit their claim to separate electorates provided they were given reserved seats in open electorates. The pact did not guarantee the number of seats that would be allotted in the Punjab, however, so Mangoo Ram continued his fast and threats of disturbances until he felt that an appropriate figure was reached. The rift between the liberal Gandhians and radical Untouchables was not healed however, since each continued to perceive the other as an obstacle to achieving intercaste harmony. Gandhi thought that the Untouchables' militant separatism was reinforcing the concept of caste, and the Untouchables thought that Gandhi was trying to whitewash existing differences and to deny Untouchables their legitimate base of power. Both perceptions were to some extent correct.

## Politics and the Decline of Ad Dharm

Eventually the radical Untouchable position was eroded, not by the moral suasion of Gandhian liberals but by the exigencies of politics. By the mid-1930s, there had been a political shift away from the direct interaction of communal organizations to the creation of political parties and the competition of electoral politics. The extreme separatist position persisted but was increasingly identified with the creation of new communal states along the lines of the Muslim proposal, which came to be known as Pakistan. Discussions were held in the Sikh Akali Dal about demanding a separate Sikh state as well – which some called "Sikhistan" or "Jatistan," a state for Jat Sikhs – and some SC

activists talked about also proposing "Achutistan" (i.e. Land of the Untouchables).

In June, 1946, Mangoo Ram closed the Jalandhar office of the Ad Dharm. The Ad Dharm leaders told Dr Ambedkar that the Ad Dharm Mandal had decided to change its name to the Ravidas Mandal and to leave the politics to Dr Ambedkar and his All-India Schedule Caste Federation. Ambedkar's organization thanked Mangoo Ram for his decision to confine the activities of the Ad Dharm Mandal to social and religious matters and to entrust the Ambedkar organization with the political work. Eventually the building became a high school for SC children named in honor of Sant Ravidās, the patron saint of Ad Dharm. The name Ad Dharm continued to live on as the caste name adopted by Chamars in many parts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts.

The Ad Dharm movement had been a composite of two kinds of activity – religious and political. Both of those activities continued. When the movement disbanded in 1946, the efforts to mobilize Punjab Untouchables around Ravidās and other symbols of cultural unity continued. A thriving Ravidās *āśram* near Jalandhar expanded, Punjabi activists were instrumental in locating the birthplace of Ravidās near Banares and building a temple on the spot, and a new generation of leaders were involved in linking the devotion of Ravidās to the social identity of Chamars and other Scheduled Castes.

The political momentum that Ad Dharm initiated also continued. Old Ad Dharmis became active in other organizations. Seth Kishan Das helped to found the Punjab branch of Dr Ambedkar's Republican Party. Sadhu Ram became involved in the Scheduled Caste Federation and then joined the Congress Party. Master Gurvanta Singh also became a leader in the Congress Party, serving in the cabinet of Chief Minister Pratap Singh Kairon. Eventually even Mangoo Ram turned toward the Congress Party, accepting, as he told me, that "without Congress we could no longer do anything." He served in the Punjab legislative assembly until 1952, where he attempted to secure legislation providing for land redistribution, increased government jobs for the lower castes, and the establishment of public holidays on the birth dates of lower-caste *gurus*.

Although the Ad Dharm organization ceased to exist, Mangoo Ram felt that it played an important role in the development of SC identity and

political power in the Punjab. He summed up its contributions to the SC community in this comment to me: “We gave them a better life and made them into a qaum. We gave them gurus to believe in and something to hope for.”

## Ad Dharm Anew

In 1970 the Ad Dharm movement was revived. On Dec 13, a rally at the Ravidās āśram in village Ballan near Jalandhar proclaimed the renewal of the Ad Dharm organization. Mangoo Ram was brought out of retirement for the occasion, and a series of conferences called for a renewal of efforts aimed at creating cultural identity and supporting social activism on behalf of the Scheduled Castes. A new magazine was launched: *Ravidas Patrika*.

Like the leadership of the original Ad Dharm, the organizers of the revived movement were educated, financially secure activists who felt that their community deserved better social recognition and political clout than it had heretofore received. In addition to the financial successes of the community’s traditional occupation, the leather trade, the new money came from two sources: a new middle class and expatriate communities. A suburban SC community had begun to flourish in larger Punjab cities, comprised of administrators, businessmen, teachers, and others who had become successful in the middle-class occupations increasingly available to members of lower castes, thanks in part to government reservations in schools and jobs. The new *Ravidas Patrika*, for example, was housed in the comfortable suburban home of its editor, Mangu Ram Jaspal, in Jalandhar’s suburb Model Town.

But Jaspal had not achieved his financial success in Jalandhar: he earned it in Wolverhampton, England. There he was part of the other source of support for the new Ad Dharm: a thriving Punjabi SC community that had established its own Ravidās temples, often in abandoned Anglican churches. The pride that the community felt in developing the symbols of their culture in England became linked with a pride in the history of SC social activism in Punjab. Mangoo Ram was invited to tour Wolverhampton and was feted as an early pioneer of their cause. It was fitting, therefore, that expatriate Punjabi Chamars wanted to return to Punjab to revive the movement that they regarded as instrumental in their community’s social development.

Yet the revived movement did not develop in quite the same way as had the old Ad Dharm, though it did do much to provide financial support for emerging Ravidās temples in Banares and Punjab. The social politics of the Punjab in the early 1970s were not like they were in the 1920s, when political power was based in modern organizations that were grounded in religious communities, like the Hindus’ Arya Samaj. By the end of the 1970s, however, a new religious politics had begun to emerge in the Punjab – the Khalistan movement – and a decade later, movements for Hindu nationalism arose throughout India. These were not, however, opportunities for Untouchables in the same way that the religious politics of the 1920s had been.

For one thing, the new religious politics was more violent. The extremism of the Khalistani movement in the 1980s sobered most lower-caste activists. Urban members of the Chamar caste tried to avoid siding with either the rebels – largely young rural Jats – or the police, many of whom were recruited from Scheduled Castes. Members of sweeper castes in Sikh-dominated rural areas of Amritsar and Gurdaspur districts would sometimes side with the rebels – especially if they were pressured into doing so. Known as Mazhabi (Faithful) Sikhs, they at times felt called upon to prove their loyalty to the Sikh tradition. Such appeals were said to have been made to Beant Singh, the bodyguard of Indira Gandhi, who came from a Mazhabi family in Gurdaspur and was persuaded to participate in her assassination. A Mazhabi Sikh military unit was among those that rebelled following Operation Blue Star in 1984.

In the 1990s, social politics changed again as the Khalistan movement was under siege and Hindu nationalism was on the rise elsewhere in India. Though this movement also had a violent side – sometimes aimed at keeping the Scheduled Castes in line – some activists saw the time as again ripe for asserting the social and political independence of SC communities. A Punjabi Chamar, Kanshi Ram, founded the Bahujan Samaj Party, based in part on his attempt to organize middle-class administrative workers and government employees from SC background in Delhi-based Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF). The Bahujan Samaj enjoyed considerable electoral success in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab, in part through strategic alliances with other parties.

The forms of social and political activism generated by the Ad Dharm movement continued into the 21st century, albeit through other names and sometimes other means. The movement was remembered as having helped to raise the consciousness of lower-caste people throughout the Punjab and instill an awareness of the possibilities of social change. It also demonstrated the efficacy of religion as an instrument in social transformation. It helped the members of Scheduled Castes to come to terms with the cultural, as well as economic and political, aspects of their oppression and to assert the distinctiveness of their community and tradition. It also helped them reconceive the social whole and to think optimistically about their role within society – a more sophisticated ideological position than the grievance politics of most forms of self-interested protest. In this way, the religious imagination of Ad Dharm allowed its Punjabi adherents not only to assert what they disdained but also to articulate a vision of what they and all of society should become.

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MARK JUERGENSMEYER