

Punjabi Deras: Laboratories for State Politics?

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Abstract

Picking up the renewed focus on Punjab's religious groups known as deras in the run-up to the 2022 legislative election in the state, this paper builds upon the anthropological studies on them to prepare ground for potential political investigations. It tries to make sense of their nuanced functions and sustenance through an etic perspective of a secular progressive citizen who is both pessimistic and sceptical of their role in both society and politics, despite being aware of their contribution in articulating the Sikh-dalit consciousness. To explain the material existence and activities of these deras, this paper also borrows two concepts of 'governmentality' and 'imagineering,' and noting the expanse, plurality and comparability of such deras, it presents them as an ideal category for the study of state politics.

Keywords : *Sikhism, Dera, Governmentality, Imagineering, state-politics.*

Instances of Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi's visit to Punjab's Religious Deras like Radha Soamis et al¹ (Express News Service, 2021), is intriguing as it comes five years after the fall of Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS) and Ram Rahim² in August, 2017 but within the closing months of the same legislative term when the events had happened. This reveals the endurance of the Deras as a political and socio-economic force at least in Punjab Politics. The question that however stands is, in what ways is this even possible? Using an etic³ approach, this paper would look into the manner in which the deras cultivate its socio-political relations and the means with which it manages to sustain them. However, before that it would also note the relative absence of deras in the discourses on state-politics and would argue by means of this paper to conclude why focus on the informal politics of the deras is important to understand the emergent politics of Punjab.

The influence of religious outfits and their leaders has parallels in other Indian states like Odisha, and at the Union level through the likes of Ramdev and Ravishankar. However, Punjab and its erstwhile constituent neighbours are unique. Its Dera culture was neither derived from the echelons of a national level set-up if any, nor was its political significance

ever a product of growing stature of state-level political parties and bosses, as was observed throughout in the study of India's state-politics. While socio-anthropological interest has been there in the Punjabi deras⁴, specific political studies on them have been rather rare. Within the state politics discourse itself, the statist bias of Kohli's 'laboratory of democracy'⁵ inhibited focus on their role. Although Ashutosh Kumar with his 'region within region' argument sought to remedy this lacuna, and later in 2014, he himself produced a paper on the role of deras in electoral mobilisation, the baggage of formal politics led him to ignore of the nuanced politics of these deras.⁶

While historical passivity of the Deras towards direct involvement in state-politics, failure of Congress against the SAD-BJP alliance in 2000s despite DSS' overt support, and later the collapse of the power of popular god-men like Ram Rahim and Rampal could explain why the deras were relegated to the margins of political studies, but this also glosses over their relations with and indirect influence over the political classes, their reserves of religious and socio-economic forces, and the factors behind their resilient existence in general despite vulnerabilities. In fact their unitary structure, multi-state reach, and multi-level penetration in the society⁷ makes them an ideal category for comparative studies, and the vibrant history of the Deras⁸ places them at the intersection of societal and electoral politics, and economic and Diaspora relations in the region. In Punjab, their competition and conflict with 'mainstream (upper-caste) Sikhism' in general and Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in particular, also makes Punjab unique as a competitive semi-theocracy (for lack of a better word) with little parallels elsewhere. However, like the SGPC, the Deras too have become both in themselves and a part of (dalit and hindutva) hegemonic project(s) that seeks control over people through its specific approach to faith, and frames socio-economic mechanisms to sustain that influence; all while amalgamating their contemporary agenda with historical legacies and spiritual promises to legitimise it before their adherents and the public at large.⁹

As a result, the political economy of the Deras and SGPC, under the promises of mobility, democratisation and equality, also creates exclusive spaces within the community of its adherents which the privileged within them use to create formal and informal ties with interest-groups and

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political-parties. Hence, the civil society instead becomes an instrument which these outfits use to replace one-social hierarchy with another, causing the ‘autonomy’ of the state to be negotiated through these relations, thus encumbering the state in a dialectical relation with it. The following socio-political changes and iterative internalisation of the related patronage systems then reduces the state into just another societal actor which, from an individual’s (devotee’s) perspective, may not always be the most powerful, and from a macro-perspective, would be found contributing in the reproduction of related hegemonies in concert with other actors. For instance, the extensive welfare schemes and the coercive powers, both physical and otherwise, of these outfits give them a state-like status, especially in areas underserved by the state, but unlike the state, the religious orientation of the dera gives it some control even over the personal sphere of its followers (like marriage, family matters etc.). The excesses of the individual leaders of these deras are thus but a function of their accumulated unchecked powers. Although there is some documentation of the ties between these Dera chiefs with state and national level leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, there is almost no literature on their roles in historical episodes like the period of Punjab militancy etc.¹⁰

Nevertheless, multiple factors help to sustain these relations. These can be constructed into three vicious circles of material, spiritual and political. In the material sense, the Dera chief aggregates people to get access to the economic and political elites. Those elites oblige the Dera chief as they need the influence that the chief wields over these masses. The masses also flock to the chief as the elite support to him assures them of relative safety from harassment of the state and society, and potential aid for their aspirations. To Ronki Ram, this behaviour is rational, ‘people go to the new deras because they are rational. There is more to gain by going there. It is a strategic choice...’ On the other hand, M Rajasekhar (2017) highlights that in the context of Punjab’s failing economy and agriculture, these benefits prompt the chiefs to monopolise control and resources across different dera campuses while others, in hope of carving out their share in the sops, proceed to either split the dera or start their own, leading to an ‘amoeba-like’ mushrooming of such deras, both big and small and for all tastes and classes. Yet, when it comes to the masses, it is more than just material benefits that attracts them. To a great many, broken by their socio-economic woes, they also find ‘escape’ in their rituals, company and spiritual

environment.

In a volatile society that Punjab had been, the deras offer comfort and security, and spiritual fulfilment (with or without material renunciation depending on the nature of the respective dera). However, this breadth of the dera based support then becomes absolute in nature. Though an individual may only subscribe to some of the offerings of a dera, the fact of its constellation of services impressed upon him is sometimes enough to make the dera a definitive part of the individual's reality. When these notions become identifiable with the chief himself, then it creates cult like following around him. Often, the result is unquestioned devotion to the Chief, even in face of undeniable facts, for the latter has now acquired a superior-state beyond the reproach of the moral or legal sanctions of the mortal realm. The continued devotion of women followers to Ram Rahim despite his conviction in the Rape case is a textbook example of the spiritual dimension sustaining the relations. However, in contemporary Punjab with low cost of public expression through internet social media¹¹, this devotion has seen a step-up. Unlike Marx's 'opium of the masses' conception, which saw religious thought as inhibiting to logical faculties, the influence of the contemporary deras is such that logic instead is deployed on all levels of possible discourse to defend or justify the existence and actions of the chief.¹² For instance, by drawing parallels of the chief with Jesus, Nanak etc. the dera seeds the notion into the devotees that the chief's severe criticism is in fact a proof of his saintliness. Such voluntary commitment to the chief and compliance with his almost state-like systems betray a sense of Foucauldian governmentality¹³.

As noted earlier, the deras also form the intersection of caste and electoral politics. Hence, many attacks on these deras often have casteist undertones.¹⁴ The nature of Indian caste politics then allows these social polarisations to affect electoral politics as well, e.g. while DSS' endorsement of the Congress led to reversal of SGPC sponsored Shiromoni Akali Dal (SAD) on several seats in the 2007 election, the Akalis had also made avenging the blasphemous DSS their election plank which consolidated the Jat and upper-caste Sikh votes, securing the BJP-SAD coalition enough seats to install Prakash Singh Badal as CM. Although later the DSS abstained from open endorsement of political parties, the aforesaid ties with individual politicians continue to remain. These informal ties extend the political circle beyond the formal realm.

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Post-liberalisation, the dera led ‘modern, secular, developmental (and welfare) activities’ including post-disaster relief has gained academic attention (Copeman 2009). This gamut of activities symbolises and facilitates the dera chief’s ‘multiple societal entanglements’, and is sustained by the materialization of the ideal of ‘seva’ (service) whereby the devotees pledge and donate everything from money to blood to sustain the above activities to serve the chief. Seva thus also becomes an agent enabling this biopolitics of devotion. McKean (1996) is of the opinion that such seva acts aggregate into an asymmetric exchange, for the devotees try to repay to the chief through seva what can never be repaid.¹⁵ For the chief and his dera, nevertheless, this ensures almost perpetual support for their activities, both divine and material, which the state and the polity can then exploit. Ruling politicians then repay the dera’s support, like in Channi’s case, by directing substantial funds to them for spending as the state’s executive arm for public welfare. The people in general and the devotees in particular find this practice agreeable as the ‘renunciation’ of the chief and lack of obvious kins (wherever applicable) gives the latter an aura of being incorruptible, making him the most fit individual to ensure proper spending in contrast to corrupt government departments. Of recent, this practice of Punjab is now also being replicated in other BJP ruled states. Through the example of Karnataka, Ikegame has characterised it as a ‘sacred-public-private partnership’ (Copeman and Ikegame, 2012a). However, the fallout is that it ‘de-statises’ welfare while giving the deras a state-like status. Thus, on one hand, the dera become complicit in the neo-liberal agenda by facilitating the ‘rollback’ of the state, while on the other hand, the breadth of dera’s governmentality makes it more than just another institution receiving state’s devolved governance.

Coupled with the activities, the lush large campuses of these deras are also crucial in ‘imagineering’¹⁶ the total reach of the chief’s deradom. Through their campuses with a spiritual and welfare themed built environment and spectacles like annual festivals, the deras promote a particular value-set and goals through. Though the dera projects pursue the desired levels of material contributions and power, they also invoke an ideal, a vision of the individual-identity, by giving a broad view into the individual’s physical, economic and even moral development. This allows the dera to provide its devotees with a physical and social construction of the ‘lived reality’ within its properties to maintain the identity of, loyalty to and image of the dera and its chief among its devotees and public at large. It

constitutes, on one hand, both the means to ‘sell’ the dera internally and provide the spiritual-cultural glue to hold together the socio-political coalition supporting it in the society, and on the other hand, a virtual panopticon prison which regulates the behavior of its members through the all-seeing eye of its head godman. Punjab’s religious culture and identity makes this arrangement more effective in uniting the spiritual capital and the socio-political and economic classes, for the dera becomes their common ground, and the chief, their ‘inclusive singularity.’ Cases in point are the likes of Dera Baba Jamal Singh Ji in Amritsar.

Instead of a decline in orthodox Sikhism, the above discussion suggests a general increase in Punjab’s religiosity owing to the growth of both Sikh and non-Sikh derasthere in last two decades. While on one hand the deras have offered means of social-assertion, on the other hand, scholars like Ronki Ram fear that it would insinuate confrontation in society out of perceived ‘religious’ discrimination and a militant need to save these (emerging and existing) ‘religions’ to save themselves. Yet, in whichever context, the central role of the deras in Punjab politics is affirmed. Their plurality in the region also makes them ideal ‘laboratories,’ in function, for the study state politics in Punjab and North-West India, whereas being a corporate religious organisation, they further become amenable for inter-regional comparisons with similar outfits which have mushroomed across rest of India. Yet, to make more sense of the political dynamics of the deras ‘thick’ investigations into their roles in both formal and informal politics remains imperative.’

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Since the manuscript was first submitted, press coverage of the ties between the political class and the deras have seen an unprecedented increase in the wake of the 2022 state-elections in Punjab. A cursory glance over them would help the reader to situate the context of this paper.

² He is at present out on parole which also coincides with the 2022 state-elections in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh (UP). (Livemint, 7 Feb, 2022.)

³ The etic approach in this study highlights the use of (preconceived and pre-existing) concepts and theories that had originated outside (in general), and rather independent of the culture under study. It is appropriate as both Foucault's ideas on diffused power and the study state politics of India were indifferent to the Deras in their conception. Hence, it would help to identify common cross-cultural and even cross-dera traits to uncover a common political phenomenon in North-West India's state politics. Further, the investigator is neither a member of any dera or the sikh-community, nor is this work an instrumental case study probing one particular dera culture, making the emic approach peripheral for this study. However, both the approaches lie in a continuum, and elements of cultural-anthropology, like the hermeneutics of dera members' behaviour, have been also highlighted to strengthen the arguments.

⁴ The works by Ronki Ram and Surinder Singh on Dalit identities in Punjab for instance gives some reference to the role of the deras in the process.

⁵ Kohli laid down the idea of comparative state politics in India through his work 'The State and Poverty in India' (1987) where he notes the context behind his statist orientation,

"Lastly, as the focus here is on the policy consequences of regime variation, the issue of social determinants of regime variations is neglected. This neglect is partly inevitable and partly an analytical choice...the purpose of the study has been served: (1) the focus on state intervention helps reorient Indian empirical materials in an interesting way, leading to new insights linking Indian politics and economy, (2) comparative analysis of Indian states or provinces is a promising research strategy for isolating the significance of political autonomy..." (p.14).

"Marxist frameworks are inadequate for state studies because they tend to reduce politics to societal variables. These prevailing analytical orientations lead to a focus on social determinants...of the political process, while detracting attention from the significant role of the state in controlling, molding, and even transforming social structures and processes. What is therefore needed, the argument continues, is to move away from a society-

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centered frame of reference, and toward a state-oriented world view emphasizing the architectural role of the state in society. While I agree with the thrust of this argument — and that is why I have adopted a state-oriented focus...The case for a statist orientation initially rests on the following assertions: state intervention is an important variable for the study of political and social change; the logic of state action in society cannot be fully explained by reference to social conditions; political actions, especially patterns of state intervention, partly reflect political interests and goals; and political interest and goals are not always synonymous with the interests and goals of social actors.” (p.16.)However, since his publication, the state has gone into a neo-liberal ‘retreat,’ and even if the role of the state may be less discounted, scholars would today agree that by no means can the state alone cover the whole political canvas. Even if granted this issue, Kohli’s himself notes that his approach struggles to explain hermeneutics of social actors, in our case the dera members as electorates,

“The villains and the heroes, the exploiters and the exploited, all have their social roles and apparently understandable reasons for doing what they do. If the motivations of social actors are understood, sooner or later their actions appear to be legitimate. Yet patterned social actions, under the Indian conditions at least, cumulatively tend to perpetuate privileged life-styles for some, while relegating many to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, beholden for the crumbs of valued societal goods. This gap between focusing on the motivations behind social actions on the one hand, and assessing seemingly objective reality against cherished values on the other, posed a constant dilemma for the interpretation of collected information.” (p.7)

By focusing on the deras and the diffused power relations in them, while political aspects like voting behaviour may be explained as a test of loyalty to the deragodman, newer issues may be uncovered, like erosion of secular civil and state spaces due to cooption by deras and its politics, which can throw new light on the similarities and differences in the state-politics of North-West India.

⁶ Kumar in ‘Rethinking State Politics in India: Regions within Regions’ (p.17, 2009) noted that “regions within the states are not merely politico-administrative instituted constructs but are also imagined or constituted, among others, in historical, geographic, economic, sociological or cultural terms, any meaningful comparative study of the regions would naturally straddle the disciplinary boundaries of social sciences. An amalgamation of political sociological and political economy approaches thus would encourage social analysts from different disciplines and not merely from political science to unravel the complexity of the emergent nature of regional politics. Taking up the regions within the states as distinctive analytical category would ensure that

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the smaller pictures/narratives are not lost amidst the larger ones.”

While Kumar’s approach was another paradigm shift in the study of state politics in India, sub-regional territories as such are less universal and effective a category for considering the above referred imagined constituencies pan India. While development inequity and insurgencies do provide a strong basis to study sub-regional politics, they are more useful for the study of larger states with somewhat demarcated communities. In small and more homogenous states like Punjab, other identity-categories like the *deras* become more useful. Thus, Kumar’s other work, “*Deras as sites of electoral mobilisation in Indian Punjab: examining the reasons that political parties flock to the deras.*” (2014) did focus on the *deras vis-à-vis* Punjab Politics. However, despite highlighting the political significance of the *theDeras*, he left many of his proposed questions unanswered, like what held the *deras* from becoming a potent force in the neighbouring regions? Also under the ‘Solving the Puzzle’ section, his reasons for the absence of marginal classes in mainstream Punjab politics avoided both explaining how factors like skewed land relations led to their absence, and accounting for Punjab’s changing occupational patterns post-militancy. This is apart from the fact that after his paper was published; Punjab’s politics soon underwent a sea-change in a lead-up to installation of a Dalit CM, thereby bringing into question his arguments on Punjab’s exceptionalism in resisting ‘plebianisation of politics.’

He also ignores the long history that *deras* have had in shaping Punjab’s dalit identity, as noted by Ronki Ram in his study of Guru Ravidass (Ram, 2011), and the fact the just across the border into Pakistan, the Sufi gurus/pirs have wielded similar strong relations with the political class which again lend themselves for comparative studies with the Indian *deras*. (Wilkinson, 2018)

⁷ GautamDheer (2014) and an editorial from the Tribune (2019) give an overview of the *deras* in Punjab, Haryana and to a lesser degree in Rajasthan where a hindudera chief MahantBalaknath even got himself elected as a Member of Parliament from Alwar on a BJP ticket. Further, the multi-state reach of a *dera* may be evinced by their operations and political-clout in states outside their usual constituencies, e.g. the Haryana (Sirsa) based *DeraSachaSauda* of Ram Rahim has a multi-state reach for it could influence elections even in Punjab (Dheer, 2014), Delhi (Kumar, 2015) and Bihar (Ohri, 2015) (in descending order).

⁸ It goes back upto the sufi and bhakti era, and today many *dera* heads share similar relations and influence on the political leaders as the sufi-pirs had with the Mughal Badshah (emperor). Much anthropological literature exists on the origins and functions of the *Deras* but dedicated political works on their origin and development are few. Although one may attempt to draw the history of the

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deras' influence on Punjab politics by extending Ram's observations, they are more prone to alternative interpretations of the 'narratives', in particular vis-à-vis the Foucaultian ideas discussed later in this paper. A separate study altogether would instead do more justice to it, and using the deras as units for the political study (the core argument of this paper) would be more useful as a constant structural and ideological locus in contrast to any formal State of Punjab, for the latter has remained fluid and changing from a pre-British (Sikh) native state to its present form as a post-insurgency state of the Indian union.

⁹ Although a dera's overarching plan is not to, for instance uplift the dalits, but their organisation and aggregation has led to results conducive for them. As noted in the above point, the deras being made up of a range of conflicting and contradictory forces and constituents each with their own agendas, ways of operating and plans, they far from monolithic and may have their internal dialectics requiring more attention. Thus, the way in which the deras operate and get constrained by the demands and resistance of individuals within and outside the organisation becomes crucial as they in turn influence, among other political things, electoral outcomes.

¹⁰ Upadhyay, A. (2017, September 20). *My RTI reveals Ram Rahim was a bigger VIP for Modisarkar than Sri Sri and Ramdev*. Living Media India Limited. <https://www.dailyo.in/variety/ram-rahim-singh-narendra-modi-government-special-vip-treatment-airport-lounge-bjp-rti/story/1/19613.html>. Accessed: 01.07.2022.

OneIndia (2017, August 26). *When Modi in awe of Ram Rahim tweeted to praise rape convict godman*. <https://www.oneindia.com/india/when-modi-awe-ram-rahim-tweeted-praise-rape-convict-godman-2530277.html>. Accessed: 01.07.2022.

Modi, N. [Narendra Modi]. (2014, October 30). *NarendraModi on [Tweet]*. Twitter. <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/527699386013196289?lang=en>
Though Ashutosh Kumar (p. 340, 2014) argues that the militancy downplayed the differences within the Sikh community, Copeman's (p157, 2012a) example suggests the contrary to be the case. This problem is exacerbated by lack of literature on dera-militant relations and the fact that deras themselves can be classified into Sikh and non-Sikh deras (Ram, 2022).

¹¹ Jacob Copeman in 'The Mimetic Guru: Tracing the Real in Sikh-DeraSachaSauda Relations' (2012) uncovered the '4Chan' way of devotional expression, "The online discussion forums I explore move fluidly between visceral abuse and sophisticated theological debate: meanings and definitions of Sikhism are debated; DSS devotees provide detailed, robust defences. For all the tremendous unreliability justly associated with Internet sources, the web

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has developed into an important arena of debate, reflection and critical engagement in respect of devotional religion and the nature of guru-ship.”

¹² Jacob Copeman (2012) illustrated this fact in his anthropological take on the Sikh-DeraSachaSauda conflict over Ram Rahim being the ‘fake’ guru against the ‘real’ Guru Gobind Singh. After Observing a plethora of comments on the online fora, he noted how ‘anti-DSS tirades are capable of playing into DSS hands,’ as it allowed the DSS devotees to mount a two way retortion whereby on one hand, they posit that their (mainstream) Sikh detractors are the one who are insulting Sikhism by using foul insults, while on other hand, by being the Samaritan Sikhs, pointing out the detractor’s flaws, the DSS devotee proves himself to be the ‘real Sikh’ and by extension, the DSS sect to be the ‘real’ successor of Sikh religion and Ram Rahim, the ‘really real’ guru succeeding Guru Gobind Singh. The argument gets bizarre when despite the conviction of Ram Rahim he is posited as the ‘really real’ guru who may just be ‘faking his fakeness.’ This serves the objective to ensure that in a discourse, outright fake godmen do not get dismissed outright.

¹³ Foucaultian governmentality, in the Indian context, may be regarded as ‘a nexus of institutions, of objects, and of disciplines – especially “population” and “economy” as objects of knowledge and zones for systematic intervention – that took hold in Western European society at some point in the eighteenth-century’ (p. 110, Spencer, 2007). It explains how power gets organised and exercised using a gamut of techniques which leads to the characterization of the state as the ‘conduct of conduct.’ In this paper, the dera itself is supposed to have acquired state like attributes which may often be independent of the concerns of its incumbent chief.

Foucault’s approach is also interesting as unlike the earlier Marxist theorists, he was less focused on oppression, than he was on the foregrounding resistance to power. Feminists and Critical theorists favoured this line of thought as they found in his work a way of thinking about the forms of power relations which belied the conventional types of relations described within theorisations of power vis-a-vis the state, ideology or patriarchy (Thornborrow 2002). Since the deras lack any prima facie set-ups of oppression and have facilitated dalit inclusion and resistance all the while usurping several welfare functions of the state, the Foucauldian ideas show their potential to offer more nuanced insights into the deras’ contradicting attributes. The dera, as Foucault describes the State, might then be constructed as a range of relations that arrange people in a manner to make the political-system work. Power in this sense becomes something acted not possessed, a verb instead of a noun, e.g. The physical presence of the pictures of godmen among their dera followers highlights the relation between them where the token image is but a conduit to the dera’s ‘eye

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of the power' – the godman himself, who can thus regulate the behaviour of his followers like the all-seeing jailor in the panopticon prison.

¹⁴ e.g. In 2007 Ram Rahim drew severe flak from mainstream Sikhs for dressing as Guru Gobind Singh, distributing 'Amrit' to his followers. However, the backlash was also due to its bearing on caste relations. Rahim's actions appeared to endow his Dalit Mazhabi Sikh (and lower middle and middle-class Sikhs and Hindus, and their diaspora which has gained economic prosperity but fails to translate that into socio-political power) followers with the 'Amritdhari' status which would have made them equal to the upper-caste, 'Amritdhari' SGPC affiliated Sikhs, thus drawing a reaction from the latter. Lionel Baxias in 'The Dera Sacha Sauda Controversy and Beyond' (2007) considered the incident to be 'but an epiphenomena [sic] of a larger dynamic of caste-based identity politics and Dalit assertion...(that) could lead to a civil strife in Punjab.' Persistent discrimination by Jat Sikhs against the low castes in rural Punjab is often posited as a key factor in the rise of dera membership in general. Absence of political outfits like BSP, SP etc. to articulate Dalit interests in Punjab further catalysed the growth of the deras as interest articulators.

¹⁵ i.e. the guru always gives more than the disciple or devotee could possibly reciprocate.

¹⁶ 'Imagineers' was the designation for the Disney Land's senior management who combined 'combining imagination with engineering to create the reality of dreams' in the Disney theme parks. Despite the term originating from children's entertainment, Imagineering was a political act, in the Disney lands as it is in the Deras. The 'dreams' brought to 'reality' in there were not shared universal visions, but the dreams of a particular social group advancing a particular political ideology, i.e. Walt Disney and his imagineers.

The Use and Domestication of Computers by Women in the Private Sphere: Exploring the Gender Technology Relation

Debasraba Chattopadhyay

Abstract

Studies on technology and society in India neither throw enough light on the issue of the relation between gender and technology nor do they problematize the private sphere which in common parlance is considered to be the sphere of women. Keeping this lacuna in mind, the present paper explores how women use, domesticate and relate to computers in the private sphere. It throws light on ICT related behaviour of women. It explores the different uses to which women put computers at home. It finds out how and why women assign different gender identities to the computer. It also explores the kind of activities which women perform on the internet. This paper throws light on whether the so-called relation of women to computers at all creates any empowerment for women. It reveals an interesting phenomenon of how the computer is domesticated in the private sphere. It shows how differential use and access to computers by women at home can create stratification along lines of gender. In order to serve its purpose the paper depends on in-depth interviews and narratives of women in Kolkata who are educated, married but not in paid jobs, belonging by definition to a privileged section of the society. These women are neither academically nor professionally associated with this technology. The study shows that women share a relation with computers which is at the same time empowering as well as disempowering. Computers have only in a few cases brought about positive changes in their lives.

Keywords: *domestic sphere, home computer, gender stratification, gender identity.*

Introduction

The literature on Technology Studies in India does not throw enough light on the issue of the relation between gender and technology. Along with this, the domestic or the private sphere too is hardly problematized in Science and Technology Studies in India. Almost all the studies in the area of gender and technologies including those on home computer have been done in Europe and North America. Studies on issues of gender technology relation are not many in India.¹ Only a few studies exist. These are studies