

**Refugee Review Tribunal  
AUSTRALIA**

**RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE**

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**Question**

**1. Please provide any information that can be found relating to violence between the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS), Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) – in Punjab during 2007.**

**RESPONSE**

**1. Please provide any information that can be found relating to violence between the Dera Sacha Sauda (DSS), Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) – in Punjab during 2007.**

Detailed information relating to the Dera Sacha Sauda is provided in a number of previous RRT Research Responses including, most relevantly here:

- RRT *Research Response IND34112* of 22 December 2008, which provides information regarding evidence of tensions between the Dera Sacha Sauda and other groups (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND34112*, 22 December – Attachment 1).
- RRT *Research Response IND33034* of 13 March 2008, which provides information on political conflict since the February 2007 state elections in Punjab (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND33034*, 13 March – Attachment 2).

Information relating specifically to Bajrang Dal, Shiv Sena and Shiromani Akali Dal follows.

**Dera Sacha Sauda and Bajrang Dal**

A search of the sources consulted found no specific reference to conflict during 2007 between Bajrang Dal members and followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda.

The UK Home Office's *Country of Origin Information Report – India* of January 2008 provides the following mention of Bajrang Dal:

**Bajrang Dal**

The youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Banned between December 1992 and June 1993, Bajrang Dal was originally formed in the 1980s to counter “Sikh terrorism”, but has since then shifted to militant activism against the Muslim and Christian minorities (UK Home Office 2008, *Country of Origin Information Report – India*, January, Annex D – Attachment 3).

The US Department of State's most recent report on religious freedom in India states that Bajrang Dal was implicated in a number of attacks against non-Hindu groups during 2007, but does not report actions by Bajrang Dal against the Dera Sacha Sauda (US Department of State 2008, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – India*, September – Attachment 4).

**Dera Sacha Sauda and Shiv Sena**

A search of the sources consulted found no specific mention of conflict during 2007 between Shiv Sena and followers of the Dera Sacha Sauda.

The UK Home Office's *Country of Origin Information Report – India* of January 2008 provides the following information on Shiv Sena:

**Shiv Sena (Shiva's Army)**

A member of the NDA and more hard-line than the BJP, Shiv Sena is based in Mumbai (Bombay), the capital of Maharashtra State. An important ally of the BJP. Shiv Sena is described as an ultra-nationalistic Hindu party based in Maharashtra state with a powerful presence in Mumbai, headed by one of India's most controversial and militant right-wing leaders, Bal Thackeray (UK Home Office 2008, *Country of Origin Information Report – India*, January, Annex B – Attachment 3).

Information provided by the Election Commission of India indicates that Shiv Sena contested eight seats in the 2007 election to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab, but did not win a seat in that election (Election Commission of India 2007, 'Statistical Report on General Election, 2007 to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab', Election Commission of India website [http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/SE\\_2007/Stat\\_rep\\_2007\\_PB.pdf](http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/SE_2007/Stat_rep_2007_PB.pdf) – Accessed 20 February 2009 – Attachment 5).

**Dera Sacha Sauda and Shiromani Akali Dal**

The UK Home Office's *Country of Origin Information Report – India* of January 2008 provides the following information on Shiromani Akali Dal:

**Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)**

A moderate Sikh party controlled by the dominant Jat Sikh farming community of Punjab. Supports greater federalism and is a strong ally of the BJP. Main leader is Prakash Singh Badal (UK Home Office 2008, *Country of Origin Information Report – India*, January, Annex B – Attachment 3).

In the 2007 election to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab, the SAD contested 93 of the 116 seats in the Assembly, and won 48 seats (Election Commission of India 2007, 'Statistical Report on General Election, 2007 to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab', Election Commission of India website [http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/SE\\_21007/Stat\\_rep\\_2007\\_PB.pdf](http://www.eci.gov.in/StatisticalReports/SE_21007/Stat_rep_2007_PB.pdf) – Accessed 20 February 2009 – Attachment 5).

An article published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in October 2007 provides an overview of the “controversy” which began when the Dera Sacha Sauda leadership in Punjab “issued a directive to its followers in Punjab... to cast ‘each and every vote’ in favour of the Congress candidates in the 2007 PLA elections”. According to the article:

Before the February 2007 PLA elections, the seven-member “Political Affairs Wing” (PAW) of the Dera Sacha Sauda sect, for the first time in the history of the sect founded in 1948 by a partition refugee from Baluchistan, Shyam Mastana, issued a directive to its followers in Punjab, especially well represented in the south-western districts of the state, to cast “each and every vote” in favour of the Congress candidates in the 2007 PLA elections. Despite the Congress’ overall electoral defeat in the polls, this played a significant role in the Congress’ victory in several constituencies of the Malwa region, a traditional bastion of the Akali Dal. Actually, without the near wiping out of the Congress from urban Hindu constituencies by the BJP, the Akali Dal (Badal) could hardly have won the elections. Since then, the Akalis strongly resented the Deras, violence had already erupted one month before the controversy, when a Sacha Sauda memorial was ravaged on April 23. The reasons for the Dera’s support of the Congress remain unclear. One thing is that Gurmeet Singh’s daughter is related by wedding to Bhatinda’s Congress legislator, Harminder Singh Jassi, and Amarinder Singh’s advisor, Bharat Inder Singh Chahal. According to others, Gurmeet Singh would have exchanged his support for the Congress to obtain its protection against a possible indictment for the murder of Ram Chandra “Chhatrapati”, a Sirsa-based journalist who was investigating alleged Sacha Sauda criminality, and the CBI’s probing allegations that he was involved in such illegal practices as sexual enslavement of women premises. Other conspiracy-lovers suspected the Congress to have intentionally fomented sectarian trouble with a view to destabilise the Badal government, hence embarrassing its relationship with its ally, the BJP (Baixas, Lionel 2007, ‘The Dera Sacha Sauda Controversy and Beyond’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 40, October 6, pp. 4059-4065, at p. 4063 – Attachment 6).

An article dated 28 February 2007 from the *Indo-Asian News Service* reports that the Dera Sacha Sauda had been criticised by the Governing alliance in Punjab for having “behaved like a political party” and for its “interference” in the recent election. According to the article:

The Shiromani Akali Dal-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance Wednesday openly came out against a religious sect – Dera Sacha Sauda – for meddling in political affairs in Punjab.

Addressing reporters here Wednesday after a joint meeting of new legislators of the alliance, Akali Dal president Parkash Singh Badal and BJP leader Arun Jaitley said the loss of seats for the Akalis in the Malwa belt was owing to the directions given by the sect to its followers to vote for Congress candidates.

“The Dera Sacha Sauda spoilt our game in the Malwa belt. They behaved like a political party. I don’t want to get into any further controversy over this issue,” Badal said.

The religious sect has nearly two million followers in Punjab, half of them in the Malwa belt - the region in southern Punjab known for agriculture and cotton growing.

Despite the loss of seats, the Akalis and BJP still do not want to annoy the religious sect chief,

Ram Rahim. The sect is headquartered at Sirsa in adjoining Haryana.

The religious sect gave a call to its followers to support the Congress as a close relative of the sect chief was given a Congress ticket from Bathinda. The candidate himself also won the election.

Akali leaders said that their party lost 15-20 seats because of the interference of the sect.

Jaitley and BJP MP Navjot Singh Sidhu had flown to Sirsa during the Punjab assembly election campaign to resolve the issue with the sect chief ('Akalis-BJP blame religious sect for poor show in Malwa' 2007, *Indo-Asian News Service*, 28 February – Attachment 7).

An article dated 18 May 2007 in the *Times of India* reported that "[p]ost elections, there have been complaints of Akalis harassing dera men" ('Dera Sacha Sauda and Gurmeet Ram Rahim' 2007, *The Times of India*, 18 May <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/msid-2060431,prtpage-1.cms> – Accessed 14 December 2007 – Attachment 8).

An article dated 2 July 2007 in the *Indian Express* reported allegations that "the Akalis are trying to terrorise Dera Sacha Sauda followers into disassociating themselves from the sect". According to the article:

Punjab's Leader of the Opposition Rajinder Kaur Bhattal on Monday alleged that the Akalis are trying to terrorise Dera Sacha Sauda followers into disassociating themselves from the sect. "The situation is far worse than what people would imagine," she told *The Indian Express*, adding, "the plight of the Dera followers is reminiscent of what happened to Kashmiri Pundits who, on being persecuted, approached Guru Teg Bahadur for protection." Bhattal, a former Chief Minister, said Dera followers or premises, were being summoned to village gurdwaras where they were being coerced to swear that they had nothing to do with Sacha Sauda. The oath over, they were presented with siropas. When asked to name the areas where such incidents had taken place, Bhattal mentioned Talwandi Sabo Assembly constituency in Bhatinda district. She said Bhatinda and Mansa districts of Malwa region were the worst-hit.

Post-election, Malwa became the natural political battle-ground in Punjab following the surprise victory of the Congress in the traditional Akali stronghold. The Congress performance was seen as an outcome of Dera Sacha Sauda's directive to premises' to vote for the party. Dera followers have a sizeable presence in Malwa ('Dera followers being terrorised: Bhattal' 2007, *Indian Express*, 2 July – Attachment 9).

RRT *Research Response IND34112* provides information regarding the SAD-led Punjab state government's response to the anti-Dera protests in mid-2007, as follows:

#### **Role of the SAD in mid-2007 Protests**

Various reports were located regarding the role played by the ruling SAD-BJP coalition in Punjab in relation to the clashes between Sikh groups and Dera followers in May and June 2007. An article published by *Himal South Asian* in October 2007 reports that in responding to the conflict, the SAD, which controls the *Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee* (SGPC), the "most prominent Sikh religious body", was caught between its obligations to the Sikh community, and the numerical strength of the Dera:

Although it is the Dera's social work that has been key in drawing millions of followers in recent decades, its numerical strength has given the Dera significant political clout, particularly in Punjab and Haryana. This has also made the organisation the centre of intense speculation. More than most, Punjab cannot afford to exclude religion from politics, and state politics are dominated by Sikhs. Punjab's

biggest party is the Shiromani Akali Dal, which has significant influence over Sikh religious organisations, including nearly eight decades of control over the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), the most prominent Sikh religious body.

As such, when violence erupted this past spring, the SAD-led Punjab government had little space in which to turn: the state government could not suppress the Dera, given its numbers; nor could it turn its back on the mainstream Sikh community, which had come out onto the streets in the tens of thousands. Meanwhile, the SAD's coalition partner, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was also experiencing difficulties, with memories still fresh over the large-scale killings of Hindus in Punjab during the 1980s. BJP worries over the possibility that Hindus would again be victimised if violence were to spiral have had the party favour a solution that would rein in both the Dera and the Sikh community at large (Alig, Asif Anwar & Anwar, Abid 2007, 'Embers of a Sikh fire', *Himal South Asian*, October [http://www.himalmag.com/2007/october\\_november/embers\\_of\\_a\\_sikh\\_fire.html](http://www.himalmag.com/2007/october_november/embers_of_a_sikh_fire.html) – Accessed 9 October 2007 – Attachment 10).

An article published by the *Hindustan Times* on 19 May 2007 reported that the actions of Sikh organisations against the Dera Sacha Sauda in May 2007 were facilitated by inaction on the part of the Punjab government:

The Sikhs who took to the streets were mainly those owing allegiance to radical Sikh organisations like Damdami Taksal which still continues to preach separatist ideology Dal Khalsa and other hardline groups.

...Helped by the indifference of the Akali Dal government led by Parkash Singh Badal in controlling the situation from going out of hand in the beginning itself, these radical elements enjoyed a free run all over the state, especially in the cotton-rich Malwa belt of south Punjab (Sarin, Jaideep 2007, 'Most in Punjab had nothing to do with faith frenzy', *Hindustan Times*, 19 May [http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/FullcoverageStoryPage.aspx?id=5a68d750-e1e4-468f-bad4-b9346b0b208fPunjabontheboil\\_Special&&Headline=Most+in+Punjab+had+nothing+to+do+with+faith+frenzy](http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/FullcoverageStoryPage.aspx?id=5a68d750-e1e4-468f-bad4-b9346b0b208fPunjabontheboil_Special&&Headline=Most+in+Punjab+had+nothing+to+do+with+faith+frenzy) – Accessed 9 December 2008 – Attachment 11).

An article published in *The Tribune* on 21 June 2007 reported claims by Punjab Congress party MLA and opposition leader Rajinder Kaur Bhattal that the ruling SAD administration had failed to act to protect Dera members in May 2007, and was targeting persons who did not vote for the SAD at the February 2007 state election:

...leader of the opposition Rajinder Kaur Bhattal alleged that Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal had failed in his constitutional duty to ensure that every citizen got the fundamental right to practise any religion.

She said the way premis (followers of the Sirsa-based Dera Sacha Sauda) were being hounded out of the social fabric was wrong. As many as 74 deras of the sect had closed down as Badal had failed to protect them while he was allowing all pro-SAD deras like the one headed by a former SGPC chief, Bibi Jagir Kaur, to continue. Those who had issued public threats to dera chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh and also other sects were not booked, she said.

...Though the dera chief had apologised, the government had taken no concrete steps to ensure the protection of life and property of dera followers, she alleged.

...Charging the government with politicising the Sikh- Dera Sacha Sauda conflict, Bhattal claimed that those who did not vote for the Shiromani Akali Dal in the February assembly poll were being targeted by the government and were booked in fabricated cases. This “Akalisation” of Punjab would not be tolerated, she added (‘Cong MLAs stage walkout’ 2007, *The Tribune*, 21 June <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070621/punjab1.htm> – Accessed 8 December 2008 – Attachment 12).

Reports were located of stronger claims that the SAD was directly involved in the large-scale protests against the Dera Sacha Sauda which occurred in Punjab in mid-2007. An article published on the *Economist* website on 5 July 2007 indicated that the SAD was instrumental in encouraging protests against the Dera Sacha Sauda in May 2007:

Sikhs’ main political party, the Akali Dal, which won the elections, encouraged protests against the Dera. The violence followed what mainstream Sikhs saw as an act of heresy by the Dera’s charismatic leader, Ram Rahim Singh. He dressed up as Gobind Singh, the Sikhs’ most revered 17th century guru. The Akali Dal government seized on the event, hoping to reduce the Dera’s political clout in important constituencies (‘Dangerous tensions in Punjab’ 2007, *The Economist*, 5 July – Attachment 13).

An article published by *The Times of India* on 5 July 2007 reports on claims made by the Dera Sacha Sauda that the Punjab government was implicated in the violence against Dera members in May 2007:

The Dera Sacha Sauda has accused the Punjab government of unleashing a reign of terror against its followers in the state for supporting the Congress in the 2007 assembly elections. In a memorandum, which was given to Punjab governor S F Rodrigues by the women’s wing of Dera on Tuesday, the sect has alleged that since the followers supported the Congress, “it was apparently decided by the Punjab government to settle scores with the guru and his premis.”

The Dera has further alleged that the government cashed in on the Dera issue by instigating and directing all the Sikhs against the sect (Mullick, Rohit 2007, ‘Punjab govt settling scores: Dera’, *The Times of India*, 5 July – Attachment 14).

A report published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in October 2007 provides a broad appraisal of the manner in which the Parkash Singh Badal-led SAD-BJP administration in Punjab handled the conflict over the Dera Sacha Sauda in May 2007, stating that despite early inaction, the government “now appears to have calmed the overall law and order situation”:

...the political dimension of the controversy – linked to the fact that the Dera Sacha Sauda had supported the Congress during the February 2007 Punjab legislative assembly (PLA) elections – made people fear that it could degenerate into a violent conflict. Nevertheless, the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal)-Bharatiya Janata Party-led government somewhat managed to diffuse the tension mainly thanks to the overall control of the Parkash Singh Badal-led Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD-B) over the various components of the Sikh political system.

...Chief Minister Badal appeared initially rather inconsistent. He intervened only after May 17 when violence had already broken out and streets were taken on by crowds of angry seeking wearing swords and spears.

...Despite some initial inconsistencies in the early handling of the crisis and some attempted violence against Gurmeet Singh, Badal-led government now appears to

have calmed the overall law and order situation. Later Prakash Singh Badal claimed that “no one will be allowed to disturb the hard-earned atmosphere of peace and communal harmony and the government will deal firmly with anyone trying to take law in its hands”. Badal appealed to all Punjabis to rise above communal or ideological differences and preserve and safeguard communal harmony in the state (Baixas, Lionel 2007, ‘The Dera Sacha Sauda Controversy and Beyond’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 6, Vol. 42, No. 40, pp. 4059-4065, at pp. 4059 and 4064 – Attachment 6). (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND34112*, 22 December – Attachment 1).

RRT *Research Response IND33034*, prepared in March 2008, provides further information regarding the political situation in Punjab in 2007, including the situation for Congress party supporters (RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND33034*, 13 March – Attachment 2).

## List of Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

#### **Government Information & Reports**

Government of India <http://www.india.gov.in/howdo/index.php>

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

#### **Non-Government Organisations**

Asian Human Rights Commission website <http://www.ahrchk.net/index.php>

Asian Centre For Human Rights website <http://www.achrweb.org/>

Amnesty International website <http://www.amnesty.org/>

Human Rights Watch website <http://www.hrw.org/>

#### **International News and Politics**

*BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

*Times of India* website [www.timesofindia.com](http://www.timesofindia.com)

*The Economist* website <http://www.economist.com/>

#### **Topic Specific Links**

Dera Sacha Sauda website <http://www.derasachasauda.in/>

#### **Search Engines**

Copernic search engine

### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIAC Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Research & Information database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

MRT-RRT Library Catalogue

## List of Attachments

1. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND34112*, 22 December.
2. RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND33034*, 13 March.

3. UK Home Office 2008, *Country of Origin Information Report – India*, January.
4. US Department of State 2008, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2008 – India*, September.
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11. Sarin, Jaideep 2007, 'Most in Punjab had nothing to do with faith frenzy', *Hindustan Times*, 19 May [http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/FullcoverageStoryPage.aspx?id=5a68d750-e1e4-468f-bad4-b9346b0b208fPunjabontheboil\\_Special&&Headline=Most+in+Punjab+had+nothing+to+do+with+faith+frenzy](http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/FullcoverageStoryPage.aspx?id=5a68d750-e1e4-468f-bad4-b9346b0b208fPunjabontheboil_Special&&Headline=Most+in+Punjab+had+nothing+to+do+with+faith+frenzy) – Accessed 9 December 2008.
12. 'Cong MLAs stage walkout' 2007, *The Tribune*, 21 June <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070621/punjab1.htm> – Accessed 8 December 2008.
13. 'Dangerous tensions in Punjab' 2007, *The Economist*, 5 July. (CISNET India CX182065)
14. Mullick, Rohit 2007, 'Punjab govt settling scores: Dera', *The Times of India*, 5 July. (FACTIVA)