

Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh and a travesty of justice



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political class nexus has gone out of its way to facilitate a murder and rape convict is a poor reflection of our society

Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh, the leader of the sect Dera Sacha Sauda, who is a convicted rapist and murderer, was released on parole days before the Haryana Assembly elections. He was released on parole in the run-up to the Punjab Assembly elections in 2022 and the Rajasthan Assembly elections in 2023 as well. Singh has come out on

parole 15 times. Several of these occasions have coincided with some election. In all, Singh has spent more than 250 days of his sentence outside jail.

Convicted for rape and murder

The ostensible reason for his release is that, as a leader of a sect, he commands pockets of support and influence beyond Haryana and Punjab, in Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, in an estimated 30 Assembly constituencies. His political clout aside, the fact that he has been convicted for raping two female disciples and also for murder by a special Central Bureau of Investigation court needs to be reiterated.

It is a travesty that such special treatment is made available to convicts such as him, especially since journalist Ramchander Chhatrapati had put his life in danger by exposing Singh and his crimes. Chhatrapati's newspaper, *Poora Sach* (The Whole Truth), had carried an anonymous letter by a Dera follower, who had accused Singh of rape. In 2002, Chhatrapati was shot dead at his residence. It was only in 2019 that Singh was convicted for his role in the murder. This means that it took nearly 17 years for Chhatrapati's son, Anshul Chhatrapati, to battle several odds to obtain justice. That the bureaucracy-political class nexus has gone out of its way to facilitate a murder and rape convict after all these years of struggle is a poor reflection of our society and raises disturbing questions.

The role of political parties and the ECI

The first question relates to the role of political parties. The incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) regime in Haryana has been unapologetic and brazen about the decision to grant parole. It seems to suggest that due procedure has been followed for the parole to be granted and that is all that matters. While the Congress in the Opposition objected to the grant of parole, the sad reality is that the previous Congress leadership's views on the matter were no different from the views of the current regime. These parties must take their cue from former Prime Ministers, Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh, who showed courage in allowing the rule of law to take its course on the matter of conviction. Parties should not stoop so low as to seek political support through someone who has been convicted of heinous crimes such as murder and rape.

The role of the Election Commission of India (ECI) also comes under scrutiny. Mr. Anshul Chhatrapati had sought the intervention of the ECI, urging it to direct the Haryana government to cancel the parole application. He had insisted that the granting of parole ahead of the Assembly elections would be a violation of democratic values. It is hard to believe that the ECI has not taken note of the curious pattern of paroles given to Singh before specific elections.

The courts had played an important role in bringing justice in cases related to Singh — from taking suo moto cognisance of the letters by anonymous victims to ensuring that the cases were properly heard and punishment meted out. The hope is that the

judiciary will again take a proactive role in preventing this travesty of justice being played out in the form of paroles being handed out liberally to Singh.

My father, Narendra Dabholkar, a rationalist who lost his life in fighting against forces promoting superstition, used to emphasise that the war against superstition, irrational practices, and crimes had to be waged not over decades but over centuries. As Singh's saga — the crimes committed by him and the punishment meted out to him — completes nearly a quarter of a century, we need to show solidarity and wish more power to those in the fight such as Mr. Anshul Chhatrapati.