

Gurinder Singh Dhillon — the music & film-loving Radha Soami head at heart of Fortis crisis

Gurinder Singh Dhillon leads the Radha Soami Satsang Beas, which boasts of a 20-million-strong following across 90 nations.

[Nandita Singh](#) 15 November, 2019

Gurinder Singh Dhillon — the music & film-loving Radha Soami head at...



Malvinder Singh (left), Gurinder Singh Dhillon (center), Shivinder Singh (right) | ThePrint

Text Size:

New Delhi: Geeta Devi, 55, doesn't realise it, but she speaks of spiritual enlightenment in the language of science.

"It's like a network of wires, you see. Only once they're all connected, and electricity flows through them unbroken, can the lightbulb come on."

She smiles as she says this, adding, "It'll take some time for you to understand it, it's not something that can really be explained in words."

We're walking away from the canopied shade of a large enclosure, where hundreds of devotees are still in various stages of self-recollection, some with their heads bowed,

others sitting in seemingly profound stillness.

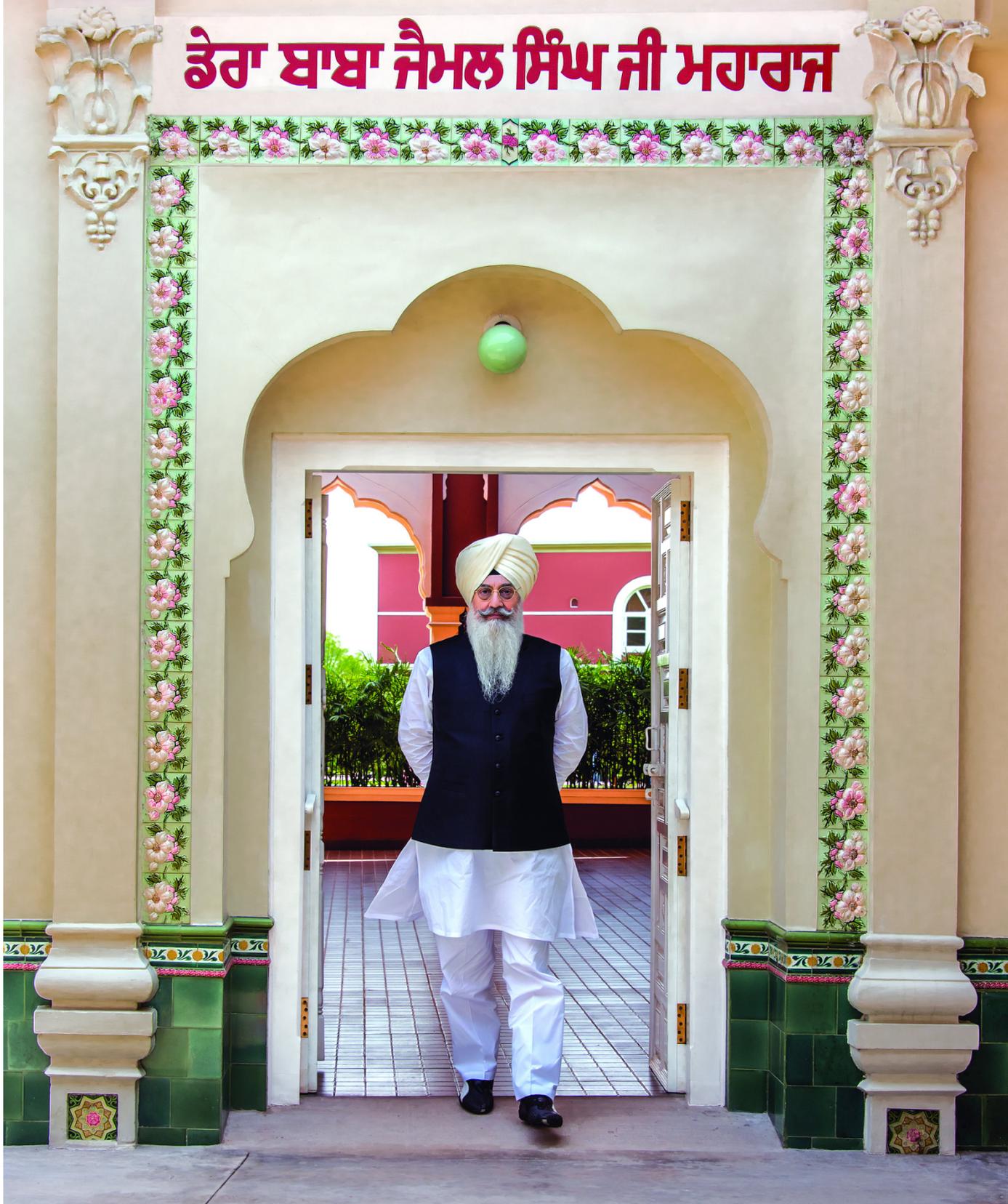
In the 60-minute *satsang* (sermon) we have just heard, devotion, discipline and a desire to connect with the “one, true guru” is offered as the “only path to understanding the realities of this world”.

Materialism, fickle personal attachments, and capital-driven calendars of “eating, sleeping and accumulating personal wealth” are presented as modern-day obstacles to comprehending the true purpose of our lives.

But outside the cocoon of the Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB) ashram in Bhati, Chhatarpur, the spiritual organisation’s moral messaging is becoming increasingly hard to believe.

The century-old spiritual organisation’s head, 64-year-old Gurinder Singh Dhillon, is at the centre of one of India’s most high-profile business fiascos this year.

ਡੇਰਾ ਬਾਬਾ ਜੈਮਲ ਸਿੰਘ ਜੀ ਮਹਾਰਾਜ



Baba Gurinder Singh Dhillon | Radha Soami Satsang Beas | www.rssb.org

In October, former billionaire brothers Malvinder and Shivinder Singh, now on the verge of bankruptcy, were arrested by the

Delhi Police economic offences wing (EOW) for allegedly causing a loss of Rs 2,397 crore to Religare Finvest Ltd (RFL), a subsidiary of Religare Enterprises.

Eight months prior to that, Malvinder, the embattled business tycoon and former Ranbaxy, Religare and Fortis promoter, had filed a criminal complaint against his younger brother Shivinder, [claiming](#) that he conspired with a number of close associates to siphon off Rs 2,700 crore from their family's holding company (RHC Holdings).

The money, Malvinder alleged, was transferred into the bank accounts of "Guruji" Dhillon and his associates in the form of loans made through a complicated network of smaller corporations, and used, in part, to expand the sect's real-estate empire.

This [allegedly](#) included the purchase of 2,60,000 sq ft of prime real estate in Delhi (near Select Citywalk Mall), 80,000 sq ft of property in Ahmedabad, 500,000 sq ft in Noida, three farmhouses in Asola, and 8,71,200 sq ft in Gurgaon, Live Mint reported.

The tale only gets murkier, with Malvinder alleging that Shivinder had an ambition to one day head the powerful RSSB. Both brothers were Friday [held in contempt by the Supreme Court](#), in another case involving the sale of Ranbaxy to Japan's Daiichi Sankyo.

The decision came as the Japanese firm challenged the sale of a majority stake in Fortis Hospitals to Malaysia's IHH Healthcare as part of its efforts to recover \$500 million in dues from the Singhs. The court had last year directed status quo on the deal, but the Japanese firm claimed in court that "certain transactions between IHH and Fortis violated the court's directions".

Also read: [Cases that took Malvinder, Shivinder Singh from Forbes billionaires' list to police custody](#)

The spiritual relative

How is a spiritual guru related to all this? Dhillon is cousin to the Singhs' mother, and assumed a father-like role for the boys after their own passed away in the late 1990s.

The well-connected Babaji succeeded the Singh brothers' maternal grandfather (his uncle) to become the guru of the popular sect in 1990. He was informed about the succession after a long flight, a close associate says, while he was dressed in jeans.

After the allegations surfaced, Dhillon denied owing any money to RHC Holdings, even after the Delhi High Court ordered him and 54 other associates, including his family, to cough up Rs 6,000 crore as repayment.

But now, while maintaining his debt-free innocence, Dhillon has finally owned up to financial transactions between him and the Ranbaxy brothers.

In a 12 November affidavit, the RSSB chief [finally said](#) the Singh brothers had approached him in 2010 to buy more rights in REL. To do this, Dhillon says, the brothers spent a reported Rs 440 crore through RHC on his behalf, adding that he “would not be made liable to repay any amount or interest”.

Also read: [*Shivinder vs Malvinder: Everyone in India loves a Billionaire Brother Blowout*](#)

Powerful followers

Today, from L.K Advani in the BJP, to Rahul Gandhi in the Congress, Dhillon is guru to a long, and powerful, list of high-profile politicians, celebrities and industrialists.

Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh and his Delhi counterpart Arvind Kejriwal met Dhillon multiple times in the run-up to their respective state assembly elections, and the guru is known to share a close relationship with the Badal family of Punjab.

In 2016, ahead of the Punjab assembly polls, Dhillon’s brother-in-law Parminder Singh Sekhon was appointed

adviser to the then CM Parkash Singh Badal by the SAD-BJP government. He was accorded the status of minister.

Back at the RSSB ashram in Bhati, when asked if she has heard of the recent controversy, Devi grows agitated, almost angry. "I haven't heard of this and have nothing to say. Just know that there isn't anyone like Radha Soami or Guruji, he is *paramatma*, he is God," she says.

The red-tiled pavements are wide and spotless, the trees sparse and planted in geometrically precise rows within parking lots the size of football fields

If one didn't know they were entering a spiritual commune, it could easily be mistaken for a sprawling sports complex, equipped with a local dispensary, residential accommodation, a helipad, and over 150 acres of open-air living. And this isn't even their headquarters — the titular Beas property is a flourishing city.

Also read: [Why godmen seem to get away with murder in Punjab and Haryana](#)

A very 'tight-knit multinational conglomerate'

The RSSB wasn't always sitting on a real-estate goldmine. In fact, it was scarcely more than a hut a century ago.

When Baba Jaimal Singh (1839-1903) met Agra-based Swami Shiv Dayal Singh, he had found a vessel for his spiritually inclined soul. Inspired to live the honest life of a *satsangi*, he joined the British army as an act of service, eventually retiring to set up the Baba Jaimal Singh dera in 1891.

At the time, it was a small, nondescript mud hut on the bank of the Beas, roughly 45 kilometres from Amritsar.

By October 1957, the RSSB was registered as a non-profit society under the Societies Registration Act, morphing into a self-sustained 300-acre city over the next five decades, with “neatly laid houses, hostels, and halls that can accommodate nearly 18,000 people, several kilometres of black-topped roads, 24×7 water supply, an 80,000 sq ft shopping mall, a hospital, and its own sewage-disposal system”, N.

Sundaresha Subramanian [reported](#) for *The Economic Times* last year, after a brief stay at the commune.

Nearly half the land in Beas is used for the purpose of food cultivation — massive amounts of wheat, vegetables, and seasonal fruits are grown by the *sewadars* to feed believers that flock the dera for sustenance in the hundreds of thousands.

“When 300,000 people come for lunch, nearly a million *chapatis* are served,” a book titled *Equilibrium of Love*, written

by RSSB secretary J.C. Sethi, said.

The operational cost and manpower required to run an enterprise of this scale is staggering — to the point where “much engineering research has gone into introducing mechanised production methods (of chapatis)”.

In Beas, this takes the form of six dough-kneading machines that can each produce 128 kg of dough (enough to make 1,550 *rotis*) in three-and-a-half minutes.

“When Babaji showed us around Beas and it’s functioning, I remarked to Babaji that the scale of this is unprecedented, it’s like you’re running a multinational,” Sheetal Vinod Talwar, a renowned film producer who was once close to Dhillon, says.

“He laughed, and said ‘No, no, at least in a multinational you can fire people, here I can’t let go of anyone because it’s all volunteer-based’.”

Talwar subsequently distanced himself from the Dhillon family. Talwar had supposedly paid \$1.2 million towards Dhillon’s medical care abroad. When his lawyers started proceedings to seek repayment, Dhillon’s associates allegedly threatened his life.

Today, the sect boasts of a following of 20 million people across the globe, which is just 1.6 million short of the entire population of Sri Lanka, or about half a million more than

Romania's. When Babaji is present for a *satsang*, [traffic advisories](#) need to be issued.

According to a [report](#) drawn from the RSSB's financial statements for 2018, the society reported a revenue of Rs 406 crore, of which Rs 366 crore was from donations. However, at Rs 419.8 crore, its expenditure put the RSSB at a seeming deficit of Rs 13.8 crore.

"RSSB financial matters have nothing to do with the personal, family matters of the Singh brothers or Babaji," secretary Sethi says, declining to comment on any other part of the organisation.

"We are an open book. Our financial returns are filed with the authorities every year," V.K. Gulati, who heads the society's financial department, [was quoted as saying](#) in a report in *The Economic Times* last July.

At the ashrams, photography and any kind of recording is strictly prohibited. Phones and bags have to be mandatorily deposited at the start of each *satsang*, and if you're caught taking photographs anywhere else on the property, the act is met with hostile suspicion and intrusive interrogation.

During a visit to the Bhati ashram, the phone of this reporter, who was unaware of this rule at the time, was snatched from her hand when she took a photo of *sewadars* washing utensils

in the kitchen.

Questions followed — from the head of the canteen Mr Bansal, organisational volunteers, and then again at the *sewa samiti* office, where five male *sewadars* went through the phone's gallery to make sure there was no other visual documentation of the premises.

"Check our website, or buy our books, you'll find everything you need there" was the standard response of at least a dozen *sewadars* as well as the RSSB management.

"We've been told not to talk to the press, ever, or upload anything on Facebook or WhatsApp," Sonia Arora, a tutor and Delhi-based *sewadar*, says. "If someone does, it's not considered to be right.

"People don't always have good intentions," Arora adds.

"They'll misrepresent things or come with a certain agenda."

Also read: [*The billionaires and the baba: How Fortis Healthcare founders burnt through \\$2 billion*](#)

Staying out of the headlines

This isn't the first time the RSSB has come under public scrutiny for suspected illegal activity. For years, the rapid

expansion of its real-estate empire has been at the centre of land-grabbing allegations, with the Delhi Forest Department officially filing an affidavit before the National Green Tribunal in 2014.

In the [350-page affidavit](#), the RSSB is described as an “illegal occupant” squatting on 174.98 acres of forest land in Asola Mines, Chhatarpur — where the Bhati ashram is. Further, the Delhi Forest Department believes that the *dera*, along with spiritual slums that sprung up next to it, are damaging the ecology of the Delhi ridge, the lungs of a city throttled by pollution.

The RSSB denies all allegations, stating that the land was bought by them, and they were willing to furnish the paperwork when asked.

Illegal land use allegations also hit them in Paror, Kangra, [through a PIL](#) filed before the Himachal Pradesh High Court.

But these alleged criminal dealings flew under the radar — media follow-ups in English were sparse, and it had no apparent impact on the standing of the RSSB.

The spiritual organisation almost only made the news in matters related to devotee and Bollywood star Shahid Kapoor’s marriage to Mira Rajput, and any praise the actor has had for his faith.

Rajput wasn't on anybody's radar before 2015 — the media wasn't quite expecting the announcement that Shahid's marriage had been arranged with a quiet, self-contained English literature graduate from Lady Shri Ram College, 13 years his junior.



Mira Rajput and Shahid Kapur | Wiki Commons

Other than their affluence, an ardent belief in the teachings of Radha Soami Satsang Beas is the only apparent thing they had in common — the two are even reported to have met at a *satsang*.

And it's not only matters of [holy matrimony or birthday celebrations](#) that Shahid Kapoor entrusts the RSSB with. Even career decisions, like signing *Padmavaat*, [were reportedly taken](#) in close consultation with Dhillon.

A marriage was also arranged between former Religare MD Sunil Godhwani's daughter Simrin and Dhillon's son Gurkeerat Singh, but fell through after the engagement.

Godhwani, the RSSB's "money man", has also been arrested in the Religare fraud case. He is [reported](#) to have grown up in the Beas *dera*, making him a close friend of the family since childhood.

In the world of politics, heavyweights like Advani, whom a close family associate describes as "the BJP's key contact" in the RSSB, even [skipped](#) the party's 2014 general-election victory celebrations to attend a satsang in Beas.

However, the yesteryear politician is no longer the powerhouse he used to be in the BJP. "With the current dispensation, the reality is that they don't have the clout that they enjoyed under the patronage of the Congress, or even the previous BJP government," says the family associate.

"The RSSB isn't seen to be a space where they (today's BJP) wants to, or even needs to, spend their energy. Sure, (RSS chief) Mohan Bhagwat went to Beas to meet Babaji, which

was seen as an attempt to reach out, but largely, that hasn't cut any ice both ways," the associate adds.

"The Punjab results also haven't helped, because they backed the Congress over the BJP. So the Modi government really isn't seeing the relevance of the sect in being able to drive numbers."

Tejendra Khanna, the former lieutenant governor of Delhi, is also the former chairman of Ranbaxy Laboratories Ltd, which was sold by the Singh brothers in 2008 for a little over \$2 billion in personal profit.

Khanna's close business association with the Singh brothers through Ranbaxy also overlapped with his own deep-rooted belief in the teachings of the Radha Soami sect. "His father, K.L. Khanna, was after all the secretary of the Satsang at Beas," *Business Standard* reported in 2013.

As the success stories of Fortis Healthcare Ltd and Religare Enterprises Ltd (REL) unravel, what appears to be at the faultline of the Singhs' fall from grace is this very interconnected network of influential kin that initially helped them, and the RSSB, grow.

"I'm strongly inclined to believe the reports in the Indian financial press that Malivinder and Shivinder trusted Gurinder (Dhillon) as a father figure and spiritual adviser. But also, a

business adviser," says Brian Hines, an American who was a member of the sect's US community for 35 years.

"Babaji's influence over the affairs of Religare was ubiquitous — he pulled most of the strings," the family associate adds.

"The relationship between Malvinder, Shivinder, Sunny (Sunil Godhwani) and Babaji wasn't a secret at all, they would constantly be together and very visibly so. In fact, everyone would say 'Religare is Babaji's'," says the associate.

"Mala and Shivi were the previous master's grandsons and nephews of Babaji, so it really was a close-knit business family in every way... I mean, a Religare helicopter would go to Beas to pick him up."

Understanding the 'God in Human Form'

Across sceptics and believers, Dhillon's contagious charisma remains undoubted.

Dhillon, who hails from a family of Punjabi landowners and was a businessman in Spain before ascending to RSSB's spiritual throne, has the ability to command the attention and affection of over 5 lakh people at once.

"He's more than charismatic," says Talwar. "He's erudite, intelligent, intellectually phenomenal, with a great, self-deprecating sense of humour. Honestly, he was a joy to be

around.

“We’re not even believers,” he adds. “I’m not spiritually inclined at all, but spending time with him was a pleasure and an education... He’s fun-loving, loves his music, loves talking economics, politics, philosophy, loves watching films, is incredibly well-read, and just, well, really a great conversationalist.”

However, while Dhillon might be exceptionally friendly in close quarters, a former friend of the family points to a “certain dichotomy between what he says and the kind of structures and systems he’s put in place to present a certain image”.

“Babaji has always said, ‘You people are stupid, coming here and listening to me alone at a *satsang* isn’t the way, because I’m not God,’” the friend says.

But at the same time, he also created rituals that enhance his God-like status, or rather, “God in human form”, the friend adds. “In Beas, whenever he’s holding a *satsang*, he’ll get into a car to bless people on his way.

“He’ll walk through the *sewa* area, standing in the centre as the *sewadars* chant and sing hymns around him,” the friend says. “So he’s not actually mitigating the myth, even if he’s making a point to appear like he’s verbally trying to dispel it.”

Even in Hine’s experience at the commune, the “RSSB is a

highly top-down organisation". "The guru makes decisions and lower-level people implement them under his close supervision," he says.

The *sewadars* describe Babaji as being "someone who talks in a way that everyone can relate to... but whom you can't access easily", a believer in Delhi who did not want to be named says.

For this *satsangi*, the RSSB "gives you a sense of belonging outside the oppressive structures of class, caste and gender".

"Anyone can enter, and for people that didn't find a sense of respect in society, it's akin to the feeling of coming home," the believer adds.

"It feeds people, gives them homes, and doesn't promote the beliefs of any one religion — it quotes the *Bhagavad Gita* just as much as it quotes the *Quran* and the *Bible* and the *Guru Granth Sahib*," says Arora. "The *satsangs* even refer to poets, writers, philosophers, and other teachers."

When Sudhir Kakar, Indian psychoanalyst and author, went for a Radha Soami satsang, he [wrote](#) of "a choir of fifty thousand feel(ing) like an elemental sound of nature".

"Distance and differences — of status, age and sex — disappear in an exhilarating feeling (temporary to be sure) that individual boundaries can indeed be transcended and were perhaps illusory in the first place," he adds in his book,

Shamans, Mystics and Doctors.

For Kakar, the appeal of the *baba* "may be linked to the search for and yearning for a father figure at the time of deep personal crises".

"As a part of therapy, the *satsangis* tried more and more to identify with the guru and in the process to forcefully project all positive qualities that lay within them," he writes in his book. "Thus, in psychoanalytic terms, one may look for an explanation in the process of idealisation and identification."

"As in all religions, the true believers are fanatical," adds Hines. "I know, because I get so many comments on my blog posts telling me I must stop writing about Gurinder because he is God and can do wrong. I ignore them, of course. I'm sure journalists get the same sort of angry insults."

Also read: [*Kalki Bhagavan, guru who started as LIC clerk & now has 'undisclosed income' of Rs 500 cr*](#)

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