

Shivinder Singh's ties with low-profile sect go beyond spirituality

Fortis co-founder, who plans to serve Radha Soami Satsang Beas, is the nephew of the sect's current guru

New Delhi: When Shivinder Mohan Singh, the 40-year-old co-founder of Fortis Healthcare Ltd, said he would give up his executive role and serve full time at the spiritual sect Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB), many people were surprised. But Singh's decision, given his family's ties to RSSB, shouldn't really be a surprise.

Shivinder is the nephew of the sect's current guru, Gurinder Singh, referred to as *babaji* by followers. The previous guru, Charan Singh, was Shivinder's maternal grandfather. Gurinder is the fifth leader of the sect, which is based out of Beas near Amritsar, since its inception.

In a statement, Shivinder said, "A short while ago, I requested sewa at Radha Soami Beas, headquartered near Amritsar, and I am fortunate to have been accepted. I will move to dera, Beas, post transitioning my executive responsibilities at Fortis."

The dera is Dera Baba Jaimal Singh, the centre of RSSB named after the founder of the sect.

This is not the first time in the past six months that RSSB, a self-described "philosophical organization" founded in 1891, has found itself in the news. Two months ago, one of its most glamorous followers, Bollywood star Shahid Kapur, tied the knot.

Nothing unusual about the wedding except for that it was widely reported that the wedding had been arranged by the guru himself. The bride, Mira Rajput, and her family are also ardent followers of RSSB.

In fact, according to a report in *The Times of India*, the wedding was solemnized in a farmhouse owned by Shivinder.

For a sect that has been around for the better part of a century, RSSB has kept a low profile even though it draws its followers, as is evident from Kapur and Singh, from all walks of life.

"RSSB is not about following any rituals or orthodox system. It is a philosophy where our living guru helps us with the journey of life," says a follower.

Born into a family of followers and married into one, the follower, a middle-aged woman

who asked not to be identified, says that news of “Shivi’s” coming to the dera had been doing the rounds for quite some time. “It’s however only today that the official word was put out.”

The process of integration in RSSB begins with “initiation onto the path” by the guru. The path is widely believed to be a style of meditation.

“The initiate is given a name with which we can connect with the master during our meditation,” says the follower. She refuses to divulge what kind of names are given, but does state that it’s a five-letter name that is supposed to help them connect with the spiritual leader.

A vegetarian diet, no alcohol and compulsory meditation every day are the three things that the RSSB insists on.

“There are several misconceptions about RSSB and people think it’s very strict, but the truth is that we lead a very normal and a very full life,” the follower says.

RSSB discourses are in the form of satsangs, a schedule for which is usually distributed at the start of every year.

The guru preaches only on Sundays; for instance, in September he has given three discourses so far. These satsangs are usually an amalgamation of thoughts and teachings from all religious texts, with the focus being on spirituality and philosophy, according to the follower.

In the 1990s, there was speculation that Shivinder’s father Parvinder Singh, the late chairman and managing director of Ranbaxy Laboratories Ltd, would succeed Charan Singh as the guru of RSSB.

Shivinder and his older brother Malvinder Singh’s messy ascendancy to the top at Ranbaxy after a battle for control of the drug maker following Parvinder’s death in 1999 was facilitated by Gurinder Singh, who acted as a peacemaker.

When asked about the family’s relationship with RSSB, a Fortis official said that the association goes back six generations.

“There are no strings attached to this decision except for service,” the official said.

However, there are significant business links between Fortis and Religare Enterprises Ltd (both promoted by Malvinder and Shivinder Singh) and RSSB. The family of Gurinder

Singh owns a significant stake in Religare Enterprises, according to the latest shareholding pattern of the company available in the public domain.

Despite its high-profile followers and the business interests of the guru's family, the follower cited above insists that "we are a low-profile sect". "There are so many that have come up over the past few years and we are markedly different from them. There are so many followers who give up cushy lives and jobs to do sewa at the dera. There are retired IAS and IPS officers who are present too," she adds.

Sewa is the concept of selfless service pioneered by gurudwaras wherein devotees perform all tasks, from managing kitchen to cleanliness to administrative duties on their own accord.

In the dera headquarters at Beas, sewa follows the same principle. According to the website of the sect, RSSB's sister organization, Maharaj Jagat Singh Medical Relief Society, also operates three rural charitable hospitals, in Beas, Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.

According to Fortis Healthcare, Shivinder will continue as non-executive vice-chairman of the company from January 2016.

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