

Caste in Punjab: Political Marginalization and Cultural Assertion of Scheduled Castes in Punjab

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Despite being a highly stratified society characterized by caste and class divisions and a state with highest scheduled caste population, Punjab is seldom considered for studying its caste system or a case study of *dalit* assertion. The objective of this paper is threefold - to examine the caste system in Punjab, to discuss the issue of political marginalisation among scheduled castes and finally to analyze the current phase of assertion among the two largest scheduled castes groups in Punjab – the *Ad-Dharmis* and the *Mazhabhis*. The paper argues that in the absence of a strong political force to represent the interest of scheduled castes, cultural activism has become an important strategy of assertion leading to greater conflicts in the state. The current phase of cultural assertion of the scheduled castes in Punjab, as witnessed in the emergence of *deras*, large scale construction of separate *gurudwaras* and increasing cases of caste and community related violence, could be regarded as end products of social exclusion, lack of long term economic advancement and political marginalization of the scheduled caste community in the state.

Part One: Caste in Punjab – An Overview

In 2009, the Chairman of the National Commission of Scheduled Castes, Buta Singh, alleged that “despite constant monitoring, dalit atrocities were increasing day by day in several parts of the country and the Punjab state could be in fifth position for dalit atrocities among all the states of the country (Baines, 2009). The increasing cases of caste atrocities against the scheduled castes in Punjab and the recent and more publicized cases of *Talhan* and *Sacha Sauda*, illustrates that caste continues to be an important force in the social, economic and political life of Punjab. Yet little or no attention is given to understand the nature and working of its caste system and emergence of dalit consciousness. Given this background, this section of the paper attempts to understand the peculiar characteristics of the caste system as it operates in the state.

As compared to rest of India, the caste hierarchy in Punjab is considered to be relatively weak. The reasons for this need to be attributed to the “presence of reformist religions in Punjab - Islam, Sikhism and Christianity with their reforming zeal and their ever increasing rivalry in matters of proselytization that not only had a demoralizing effect on the caste-rigidities and on the institution of the untouchability but also positively helped in improving the status of the depressed classes” (Gupta, 1985:121-22). Gupta continues

“..neither the Muslims who numbered slightly more than the half the total population nor the Sikhs who were about one-eighth of the population believed in the *Chutt Chat*. Hinduism, whose adherents formed less than two-fifths of the total population, was under a severe attack from within by the *Arya Samajis, Brahmos, Radhasaomi, Ramdassia* and *Raidassias* etc. and thus could not be that assertive in its principles of exclusiveness” (ibid:121-22). The early Christian initiatives in education provided greater opportunities for social mobility to the lower castes. The presence of Sikhism, a religion opposed to Brahminical orthodoxy and caste system, made Punjab different from southern and western Indian states where a steep hierarchy between the Brahmans and the untouchables had led to an emergence of an oppressive caste system and Non-Brahman movements. In contrast to the caste exclusivism and the practice of untouchability prevalent among the Hindus, the new institutions initiated by the Sikh gurus, such as *sangat* (congregation) and *langar* (community kitchen) which involves the practice of cooking and eating together, sitting in a row irrespective of caste distinctions, were radical statements against the Brahminical system of caste hierarchy (Jodhka, 2001:41-46). Caste based tensions in Punjab were further relaxed by the relatively lower presence of Brahmans in Punjab. Writing during the first caste survey in 1881, Denzil Ibbeston, discovered that the roots of Brahmanical influence in Punjab were weak and that by religion “the then Punjab was more “*Mohammedan*” than Hindu and that instead of the rigorous ritual purity norms of the caste-hierarchy, the people are bound by the social and the tribal customs far more than by any rules of the religion” (Ibbeston, 1916:14-15). Economically too, the scheduled castes in Punjab were better off than the scheduled castes in other states as neither were they confined to menial occupations nor did they indulge in occupational practices like that of scavenging. They took a very important part in agricultural occupations, and were in considerable demands as the tenants (Chabra, 1955: Pp 187-9). The jostling during agricultural operations not only made anemic the social institutions that encouraged the sense of exclusivism but also helped in the development of a spirit of comradeship. Thus as an institution, caste played far less important part in the social life of the people of the Punjab than in other parts of India (Gupta,1985).

However, although lesser in extent, one could easily observe the typical features of the caste system in Punjab that made scheduled castes suffer the same social disabilities as their counterparts in other Indian states. Despite the doctrinal stand of the Sikh gurus against caste hierarchy, caste distinctions continued to exist in Punjab. The following excerpt from William Franklin (Franklin, 1803:2823) is an eloquent testimony to the existence of caste among the Sikhs. He states

The Sikhs allow foreigners of every description to join their standard, to sit in their company . . . , but excepting in the instance of the jauts (Jats), they will not consent to the inter-caste marriages nor will they eat or drink from the hands of the alien

except he be a Brahmin and for this caste they always profess the highest veneration.

The early emergence of the social and political mobilizations based around communal, caste and religious identities among various groups - Muslims (*Ahmadiya* movement), Hindus (*Arya Samaj*), Scheduled castes (*Ad-Dharm* and conversions to Christianity), Sikhs (*Singh Sabha* movement) played an important role in making people conscious of the existing differentiation and existence of caste divisions in society.

The origin of caste in Punjab and within Sikhism needs to be understood in the context of the large scale entry of Jats into Sikhism that not only rescued them from their low status but also turned them into a powerful community. The Jats (with 30-35 percent of the total population of the state) not only constitute the single largest group in the state but also the majority of the Sikh population. Traditionally considered as a low-caste group, the Jats entered into the fold of Sikhism during the time of Guru Arjun in great numbers and rose to position of a land-owning aristocracy during the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The numerical preponderance of the Jats in the Sikh religion and their hold over the landownership structure and politics of the state placed them at the top position within Sikhism.

The fortunes of the Jats were quickly revived by the British due to them providing invaluable support in the defeat of the Indian Mutiny (1857-58), subsequently leading to a substantial increase in the recruitment of Jats in the British Indian Army (Ibbeston, 1883; Fox, 1987; Harnik Deol, 2000). The Punjab Land Alienation Act 1901 further privileged the position of the Jats, the agricultural caste, by denying access to landholdings to non-agricultural castes such as Tarkhans and the scheduled castes. The launch of the Singh Sabha movement, the re-organization of Punjab in 1966 which led to the establishment of a Punjabi-speaking state, with Sikhs forming the majority population, consolidated the social and political domination of the Jats. The green revolution and the subsequent transformation of Akali leadership structure added to the economic and political clout of the Jat Sikhs, thereby widening social inequalities. Rapid social mobilization, economic development, party competition and factionalism, have, however also led political divisions within the Jat community (Ashutosh Kumar, 2005:115) diminishing the “political role of other castes groups among the Sikhs namely upper castes, Khatri, Aroras, Ahluwalias; artisan castes, like the Tarkhans or the Ramgarhias or the Rais and the Lohars, Chimbhas, Lannas, Kumahars and the dalit castes like the Chamars, Chuhars or Valmikis also called Mazhabhis and Ramdasias, thus creating internal cleavages within the Sikh community” (Singh, 1984: 42).

Next to Jats in the hierarchy are the urban trading castes, the high-caste Hindu elite-consisting of Khatri, Aroras and Baniyas, who control much of the urban trade and industry in the state and economically are quite well off. In contrast and constituting 29 percent of the total population of the state and with

37 sub-groups, the Scheduled Castes (hereafter SCs) in the state are at the lowest end of its society. The scheduled castes remain in a subordinated position to the Jats and the trading castes. Similar to other states, they “continue to reside in segregated houses in separate district localities –in the villages of Amritsar district dalit locality is called ‘*thathi*’, whereas in Jullundhur district it is called *Chamarhli*” (Judge, 2004:100-31).

Presently the Scheduled Castes (also known as dalits) in Punjab and within Sikhism, dalits are divided into two segments. The first segment includes dalits whose profession is scavenging and cleaning and are called as *Mazhabhis* and *Rangretas*. *Mazhabhis* and *Rangretas* were the *Chuhras* who converted to Sikhism (Ibbeston, 1883:294). The other segment of the dalit Sikhs consisted primarily of the *Chamars*. The Ad-Dharmis are predominant among Chamars and are mainly leather workers. Chamars (including the *Ramdasiyas* and Ad-Dharmis) and *Mazhabhis* (including *Chuhras* and *Balmikis*) together constitute nearly three-fourths of the total scheduled caste population in Punjab. Consisting of 37 scheduled caste sub-groups, these SCs form a heterogeneous category. The *Mazhabhis* are numerically the largest scheduled caste group, having a population of about 2,220,945, constituting 31.6 percent of the total scheduled caste population, followed by Chamars who constitute 26.2 percent of the total scheduled caste population with Ad-Dharmis as the largest group among them comprising 14.9 percent of the total Chamar population (2001 census). The literacy data shows that the SCs of Punjab have made significant headway during the 1991–2001 decade. The overall literacy rate, which was 41.1 per cent at 1991 census, has gone up by 15 percentage points to 56.2 per cent according to the 2001 Census. The Ad Dharmis have the highest literacy rate at 76.4 per cent and occupy the top position among the SCs. The *Mazhabhis*, who are numerically the largest community, have the lowest literacy rate at 42.3 per cent.

According to Jodhka, “the scheduled caste population of the region has been comparatively vulnerable in the economic structure of the village. Their ownership of agricultural land is among the lowest in the country” (Jodhka, 2002:1815). The work participation rate of the SC population in Punjab is 37 per cent which is lower than the 40.4 per cent aggregated at the national level for all SCs (2001 Census). They mainly work as agricultural laborers (38.4 percent) and only 3.9 percent of them have returned as cultivators (2001 Census). About 55.2 per cent of the *Mazhabhis* constitute ‘Agricultural Laborers’ followed by ‘Other Workers’ (39 per cent). In contrast, 68.7 per cent of the Ad Dharmi returned the category of ‘Other Workers’, followed by ‘Agricultural Laborers’ (22.8 per cent). The dalit population now also consists of the migrant laborers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa who started coming in the aftermath of the green revolution and have now mostly settled down and acquired voting rights (Singh 1984: 44).

Part Two: Political Marginalization of the Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis

The overall emerging pattern of India suggests that wherever the SCs found a viable alternative they prefer it to the Congress Party. The Bahujan Samaj Party (hereafter BSP) has become their first choice all over India and in its absence the Left Front and regional parties are preferred in the states where they have dominance. However, Punjab, in this sense, is unique as all the options, that is, the BSP and Left Front are available to the scheduled caste groups, but the Congress still continues to be their first choice and their preference for the BSP still carries the status of a third force. In this section we try to conceptualize scheduled caste operations in the politics of the state. Three distinct phases of electoral politics have been identified to understand the phenomenon of political marginalization of the scheduled castes in Punjab politics by studying the political behavior of the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis in the electoral politics.

Phase One: Congress Dominance (1947-1980)

Mobilization of the scheduled castes of Punjab by different reform movements during the early 20th century made them very early conscious of their political rights. The active opposition by the scheduled castes to the Akali demand for a separate Punjabi Suba clearly reflects their high level of political sense. The first autonomous political formation of the scheduled castes of Punjab had emerged in the form of the Ad-Dharm movement that was later merged with Ambedkar Scheduled Caste Front and subsequently transformed into the Republican Party of India (RPI). While parties like the RPI attempted to mobilize the support of these groups, they could not succeed in eliciting support owing to lack of strong leadership and divisions among the leadership over the strategy to be followed.

The period between 1947-1980 is characterized as a phase of low political consciousness and participation in politics by the Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis in Punjab due to the initial period of accommodation and co-option within the dominant Congress party. The radical populist policies adopted by the Indian National Congress, soon after independence, such as '*Garibi Hatao*' and the 20-point programme for "total rural regeneration" (Pandey, 1974), were largely aimed at creating a new social base among the poor, landless, the scheduled caste groups and the Muslim minority, in order to counter and challenge the rich peasantry and the middle castes represented by the agrarian parties and agrarian group. In wake of these policies, the Congress Party emerged for these groups as the only secular, neutral party, especially as the Shiromani Akali Dal (hereafter SAD) and various Akali splinters were identified with the rural Sikhs, and the Jan Sangh served the cause of the urban Hindus. The co-option of major Ad-Dharmis leaders into the Congress Party, adoption of Gandhian and modern secular ideologies, removal of untouchability and provision for reserved constituencies enabled the Congress Party to build a support base among the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis.

At the same time the rapid rise of the middle castes due to mobilization by their leaders resulting from the economic gains from green revolution and

increasing conflicts between the scheduled caste laborers and the rising militant middle castes, drifted them away from the Akalis. The middle castes in mid the 1960s entered into politics by forming the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) and supporting the Akalis. The massive mobilization by the farmers, who mainly happened to be Jats, the domination of Akali leadership by Jats, the increasing caste conflicts between the Jats and the laborers, who were primarily Mazhabhis, made them support the Congress. The Congress, on the other hand, recognizing the fact that Mazhabhis has been far more enthusiastic about Sikh religion and politics, worked out strategies to gather Mazhabhi support. The emergence of Sikh separatism served the Congress Party well and it appointed Giani Zail Singh, of non-Jat background and of a lower caste group, as its leader. The Congress state government under the leadership of Giani Zail Singh introduced a classification among the scheduled castes for jobs reserved under the quota system. The concessions were granted to the four major Sikh scheduled castes - Ramdassias, *Kabirpanthis*, Mazhabhis and *Sikligars*. These four Sikh castes, recognized as main scheduled caste groups, constituted about 85 percent of all the backward castes (Nayyar, 1966). Of the 25 per cent jobs reserved for the SCs, 50 per cent (or 12.5 per cent of the total) were to be offered to Mazhabhi Sikhs and Balmikis on a priority basis (Jodhka and Kumar, 2007: 21) thereby consolidating Mazhabhi support to the Congress.

To further understand the reasons for scheduled caste support to the Congress, Nayyar elaborates two hypotheses. The first is the hypothesis of the Congress strategy of changing coalitions. During the 1952 general elections the Congress Party firmly opposed the demand for Punjabi Suba and was able to win considerable Hindu and SC support. Prior to the 1957 general elections, the Congress Party had conceded the regional formula to the Akali Dal and allowed the Dal to merge politically into the Congress Party; in this manner it was able to secure a large majority of support from that part of the Sikh community which was under the influence of the Akali Dal, but in the process it lost a large part of the Hindu vote. Before the 1962 general election, however, the Congress party firmly opposed the Akali demand for Punjabi Suba and refused to be intimidated by Akali agitations and consequently was able to count on the Hindu and SC votes to a greater extent than would have been possible if it had made further concessions to the Akali Dal (Nayyar, 1966:300-301). The strategy of changing coalitions helped Congress to be a representative of all the social and economic groups of the state's population and cut the support base of all other political parties.

Nayyar's second hypothesis, known as the hypothesis of the minority support, argues that Congress gets the votes of all those groups which fear domination by an opposing group. Thus in a Sikh-majority constituency, it is likely to get the votes of the Hindus and SCs who would like to see an Akali or Communist Sikh candidate elected. On the other hand, in a Hindu-majority constituency in the Punjabi-speaking region, the Congress party is likely to get the votes of Sikhs and SCs who would not like to see a Jan Sangh candidate elected. Thus the Congress Party turned out to be the beneficiary of the

situation in which groups do not like the Congress Party so much as distrust the other political parties and the groups they represent (Nayyar, 1966: 460).

The participation of the Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis in the Communist movement remained low because being less educated, and less politically conscious than the average, they found it difficult to understand the rather abstract political philosophy devoid of cultural and religious symbols. Further, the Communist Party in Punjab has its origins in Sikhism, especially within the Akali Dal and Singh Sabha movements and those who agitated for the Gurudwara reforms in early decades of the century. Hence from the very beginning the Communist strength in Punjab came from the 'middle class' small landowners who were by and large Jats. Table 1 below provides information on Party electoral performances upto 1980 and illustrates the dominance of the Congress Party and its eventual decline.

Table I: Punjab Assembly Elections Party-wise Performance

Percent of votes polled							
Party	1952	1957	1962	1967	1971	1977	1980
INC	36.7	47.5	43.7	37.7	39.2	42.8	33.6
SAD	12.4		11.9		29.4	27.6	31.4
BJP	5.6	8.6	9.7	9.8	9.0	5.0	-
JD				20.5	1.7		
CPI	3.9	13.6	7.1	5.3	4.8	6.5	6.6
CPM				3.2	3.1	3.3	3.5
Janata Party	1.2		3.9	0.5	0.9	0.0	15.0
BSP	7.5	1.3	0.9	0.5	0.5		
Independents	23.9	23.7	17.2	15.8	8.9	12.3	9.6

Source: www.eci.gov.in

Phase Two: The Rise of BSP and Decline of Congress (1985-1997)

Even though through its populist policies the Congress were able to capture and integrate the support of the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis within its patronage and protection system, yet due to the dominant position of the backward castes and a cultivating peasantry, the benefits of Congress policies remained limited. In fact, implementation of the policies related to land reforms created more tensions as the beneficiaries in most of the areas were the landowners who were primarily Jats rather than the scheduled castes, whether tenants or laborers, leading to a growing disillusionment with the existing system amongst the latter.

A number of parallel developments and significant changes among the scheduled castes in the 1980s affected the pattern of mobilization to be followed by both the groups in the arena of electoral politics. The rural economy of Punjab underwent structural transformation with the introduction of the green revolution leading to far reaching structural and occupational changes in Punjab. The State Development Report of Punjab (PSDR 2002:

152) provides a vivid description of the structural changes in Punjab as a result of the green revolution:

*kutch*a houses were progressively converted into *pucca* houses; the proportion of *kutch*a houses which was 33.28 per cent in 1981, sharply declined to 12.40 per cent in 1993-94. All the villages were electrified and road links were developed in almost all the villages. The government hastened to provide irrigation facilities (by providing subsidy for tube wells and free electricity since 1997). Irrigation covers 94 per cent of the total cropped area. Simultaneously, credit facilities for farm mechanization and other inputs were extended.

In terms of occupational structure, the green revolution led to a shift in the employment structure of the state from agrarian to non-farm sector. The shift is described in the same report as follows:

with the onset of green revolution technology, crop production activities became economically attractive, which created an active land market for selling and leasing land. Secondly, progress of agriculture under the green revolution technology created additional employment opportunities in the non-farm sector. This encouraged many marginal farmers either to sell their land or lease it, to earn higher incomes from non-farming jobs. The period was therefore marked by a shift in employment structure from the farm to non-farm sector (PSDR, 2002: 152).

The rural non- farm sector accounted for “25.8 percent of the total rural main workers, highest in India and grew at a rate of 3.2 percent per year during the 1980’s as against only 2.8 percent at the national level” (Sukhpal Singh, 2000: 1889).

Not only was the green revolution accompanied by drastic structural and occupational shifts but it also transformed the social structure within agriculture, weakening the old patron and client relationships. The higher wages gave scheduled castes a little better status and they later started moving from rural villages to towns for employment. The process of transformation of the agrarian social structure as a result of green revolution is explained by Jodhka in the following way:

Apart from an increase in agricultural productivity brought about by the growing use of new seeds, chemical fertilizers and machines the green revolution also transformed the social structure of the agriculture. As elsewhere, it led to the development of the capitalist social relations of production. It transformed the old structures and ties between the landowners and the landless. The commercialization of the agriculture led to a near complete

disintegration of jajmani ties and many of those employed in their traditional caste occupations moved to agricultural labor. (Jodhka, 2004: 64-99)

The changes taking place in the institution of caste and untouchability in the rural Punjab could be best explained by what Jodhka calls as “disassociation, distancing and autonomy” (Jodhka, 2004). With large proportion of dalits dissociating and distancing themselves from the traditional occupations and agrarian economy, this created a situation where scheduled castes “began to assert for equal rights and a share from the resources that belong commonly to the village and had so far been in the exclusive control of the locally dominant caste groups or individual households” (Jodhka and Louis 2003; Jodhka 2004).

The impact of the green revolution differed across three different regions of Punjab. The *Doaba* region was foremost in this trend, followed by *Majha* and, only a part of the *Malwa* region. The Ad-Dharmis, being concentrated in the Doaba region, were the first ones to take the advantage of the green revolution. Field work by Judge suggests as many as 21.75 percent of the scheduled castes from the Doaba region moved to non-agricultural occupations (Judge 1997: 58). The economic change created an elite class among the Ad-Dharmis who later demanded better status and more share in structures of political power at various levels. The Mazhabhis being unskilled and belonging to *Majha* and *Malwa* regions, that remain backward in taking the benefits of green revolution, were not able to take advantage of the green revolution to the extent the Ad-Dharmis were able to. Yet the green revolution sharpened the assertion on the part of the Mazhabhis due to the increasing spate of conflicts resulting from the exploitation by Sikh Jats of Mazhabhis labor.

Another important change during this period was in the field of education. The scheduled castes literacy rates increased from 23.9 percent in 1981 to 41 percent in 1991 according to the 2001 Census. As discussed earlier, among both the scheduled caste groups, the Ad-Dharmis were first to experience the changes in the field of education and employment. The most literate in the 1980 were the Ad-Dharmis (40 percent) as compared to the general scheduled castes literacy rates (24 percent) followed by the Balmikis (22 percent) while the Mazhabhis, the most numerous among the scheduled castes in Punjab had a literacy rate of only 13 percent (Chandra, 2007). This led to the emergence of small urban elite, primarily among the Chamars, as it was mainly the Ad-Dharmis who were first to gain in education in the post independence period and avail the benefits of the reservation policy. The above developments led not only to the emergence of a white-collar middle class amongst them but led to a small number of entrepreneurs emerging amongst them. Some of them prospered in the traditional leather businesses. These developments provided a room for the emergence of the BSP and decay, in fact, collapse of the Congress system in Punjab, as has also happened in many other states of north India (Stone, 1988: 1018-30).

It was during this period of rapid democratization of the political system and the growth of identity consciousness among the scheduled castes that

Kanshi Ram formed the BSP in 1984. The BSP made its impact on the state politics in the very first election it fought in 1985. While in the Doaba region the Ad-Dharmis switched their loyalties primarily from the Congress to the BSP, in the Majha region of Amritsar, the shift in Mazhabhi support from Congress in favor of the Akali Dal facilitated it to win a large number of the rural seats. The single most important reason that made the Ad-Dharmis support the BSP in its early years of formation was the lack of representation that they found in every political party in the Punjab for the most important positions. This factor also emerges clearly in the writings of Kanchan Chandra, who in her work on the rise of the BSP in Hoshiarpur states that since positions of power in the Punjab Congress organization and governments were monopolized by the upper and the intermediate castes, emerging scheduled castes elites saw very little chance of obtaining office themselves by joining the Congress Party. The Akali Dal, exclusively a Sikh party, did not offer any better prospects. The withdrawal of the Mazhabhi support from the Congress Party also needs to be seen in the context of violent attacks on Sikhs after the assassination of the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The subsequent unification of the faction-ridden Akali Dal, especially following the assassination of Sant Longowal in August 1985, on the eve of the elections, also led them to vote in large numbers for the Akalis.

In 1985, the BSP secured only 2.2 percent of valid votes which damaged the Congress, CPI and CPI (M) parties (Punjab Human Development Report, 2004: 145) and thereby facilitating the Akali Dal to win several seats by cutting the solid vote base of the dalits. In the continuing elections to the legislative assembly and to Parliament in 1992, the Congress claims to be a broad communal and class coalitions were further eroded by the presence of the BSP, which made substantial gains into its traditional support base among the Ad-Dharmis and other backward castes. Appealing to the SCs, the BSP did exceptionally well in the Doaba area -Jullundhur, Kapurthala and Hoshiarpur districts (Singh, 1992:994). Even though the Congress was remarkably successful in terms of assembly and parliamentary seats, its success was based on a very narrow support base as the Akalis did not participate in these elections. The BSP was able to attract a substantial number of dalit voters, who had traditionally been voting for the Congress, and its candidates won in as many as nine of the assembly constituencies (Kumar, 2004). This could be regarded as an early phase of the growth of the BSP, during which it fought an election alone, thereby establishing a social and regional base.

Yet the realization on the part of the BSP that as a party, its base was largely limited to the scheduled castes and that too mainly the Chamars and Ad-Dharmis among them and that it could not capture the power on its own led BSP to enter into a system of alliances with the main parties. The SAD being aware of the fact that in case the BSP made an electoral adjustment with the Congress in Punjab it would become a hard task for the SAD-BJP alliance to win the electoral battle against the Congress, negotiated an alliance with the BSP. This alliance marks an important shift in the electoral politics of Punjab (Singh, 2002). The necessity to enter into an alliance made political parties

drift away from the religious towards performance and development issues. The shift was evident in the two-day SAD conference held on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), on February 24-25, 1996. At this conference, the Akali Dal (B), while committing to maintaining peace and harmony in the state at any cost and affirming full faith in the democratic and constitutional methods, emphasized the establishment of 'Halemi Raj' a holy expression used by Guru Arjun Dev. This meant a just dispensation in which no person, community or country would predominate over others and where SAD would try to transform itself into a party representing all sections of Punjabis, irrespective of their caste, creed and religion, instead of being a body of only the Sikhs (Verma, 1999:3520).

The declaration supporting the Akali Dal (Badal) to broaden its base worked well for the Akalis. Out of the total 117 assembly seats, the Akali Dal (Badal) candidates won in as many as 75 seats and its partner BJP won another 18. The Congress, which had as many as 87 seats in the outgoing assembly, could only win in 14 seats, securing a mere 26.6 per cent of the total votes polled. The BSP's share of seats collapsed from 9 in 1992 to 1 in 1997 and its share of the vote declined from 16.2 percent to 7.5 percent (Singh, 1998:405). This also aligned with the BSP performance in the 1996 parliamentary elections. Wallace stated "The BSP-Akali alliance proved to be effective with eight constituencies won by the Akalis. Especially notable is the Akali win with BSP support in Faridkot, and particularly Jullundhar. In turn, the BSP relied on Akali support for its three victories such as in Jat-dominated Phillaur" (Wallace, 1997: 2965). Unable to strike a deal with the Akali Dal (B) or the Congress (I), the BSP fought the 1997 assembly elections in alliance with Akali Dal (Mann). Recognizing the growing importance of the BJP, the Badal government entered into an alliance with BJP. The victory for the SAD-BJP alliance had been possible because it received support from all the sections of society. The CSDS data exit polls confirm that not only 66.8 percent of the Sikhs, but even the 44.1 percent of the Hindus also voted for the SAD-BJP alliance. The dalits seemed to be badly divided. Only 23.4 percent of the dalits voted for the Akali Dal (Mann-BSP) combine while 28.2 percent voted for the SAD-BJP alliance. With 27.9 percent of the dalits voting for the Congress, its support remained low even among the Hindus and the Sikhs (Kumar, 1997: 39-40).

From the 1997 state assembly elections onwards, the BSP declined in Punjab. This decline of BSP could be attributed to the continuing deep divisions and splits within the party over issues of power sharing and alliances with the main parties, and also much criticism was received by the Ad-Dharmis for their alliance with the Akali Dal. The failure of the leadership to find a genuine ally in the social and political spheres led to great disillusionment among both the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis of Punjab, as their newly formed identity and stirring political consciousness could enable them to move away from the groups that dominated them earlier. Despite initial successes in the early years of its initiation, the BSP leadership in Punjab could not evolve an integrated ideology that could unite the different

dalit castes in the state under one umbrella. The unevenness in the literacy rates of the SCs, with Ad-Dharmis and Chamars being the most educated, meant office positions came to be largely dominated by them and this failed to mobilize the poorest of the scheduled castes groups such as the Mazhabhis. In such a situation the Mazhabhis and Balmikis felt threatened by increasing influence of the Ad-Dharmis. In addition, the BSP failed to capture the regional, cultural and economic specificities of Punjab. The purity-pollution issue and *Manuvad* that are BSP's main ideological planks do not find expression in the socio-cultural domain of Punjab in its fundamental form, as say it exists in Utter Pradesh (Kumar, 2007:73). The failure of the BSP to capitalize on the most important Talhan caste conflict issue in Punjab at the time and its failure to intervene in cases involving caste conflicts led to gradual abandonment of the Ad-Dharmit support to the party.

Yet, emergence and then decline of BSP had important consequences for the electoral politics in Punjab. First, its emergence led to a shift in the state party system from a stable bi-party system to coalition politics and building coalitions with the third force involving either CPI/BSP/BJP have become inevitable for major parties like the Congress and Akali Dal. Second, the growing assertiveness on the part of the scheduled castes compelled even political formations like Akali Dal to shift its agenda from the politico-religious to general socio-economic issues. Third, the decline of the BSP has introduced a new phase in the Punjab politics, where the identification of the scheduled castes with any specific political party, unlike other Indian states, is absent and they (both Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis) are divided between the Congress and Akalis and its factions.

Phase III: From 2002 onwards till present

The decline of the BSP marks the beginning of a third phase in the electoral politics with scheduled castes voting either for the Congress or the SAD. The trend is visible from the 2002 Assembly Elections onwards. While the support of the scheduled castes to the Akali-BJP alliance led to a resounding victory by the alliance, their disillusionment with the alliance led to its defeat in the 2002 elections. Most of the flamboyant promises made by the Akali Dal came unstuck and their non-fulfillment disappointed the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis. Non-implementation of the free power policy, including for the SCs, increasing atrocities against the SCs, failure to provide houses to SCs and those living below the poverty line, despite the fact that an amount of around Rs 60 crore was earmarked in the 1997-98 budget for construction of 12,000 houses in all the 17 districts of the state, led to their growing discontent with the Akali-BJP alliance, leading to a victory of the INC-CPI alliance in the 2002 assembly elections.

The erosion of BSP's vote bank due to fragmentation and leadership's opportunistic politics helped the Congress (I) to resurrect its base among the Ad-Dharmit group. In fact, some important functionaries of the BSP, after its decline and including the state president of the party, switched over their

loyalties to the Congress Party. The scheduled caste operation in politics during the state assembly elections of the 2007 was far more visible than any other election.

In the 2007 assembly elections, the Congress performed badly in the Doaba region and could win only 3 out of 26 seats, while the SAD-BJP combine won 20 out of 25 seats contested (Kumar, 2007:270). In the Jullundhur district, a district that constitutes a large proportion of the Ad-Dharmi population, the SAD-BJP succeeded in eliciting their support, cutting into the base of BSP and the Congress. The SAD-BJP combine won 9 out of 10 seats in the district. In order to appeal to the scheduled caste groups (mainly Mazhabhis) the SAD reconstituted the political affairs committee and also gave them tickets this time in large numbers. Through its Kirti Samaj Wing, the SAD also mobilized the support of other backward castes (OBCs) (Kumar: 270). While the strategy of SAD bought it positive results, the BSP suffered because of new parties formed by the various splinter groups such as Bahujan Samaj Morcha, Bahujan Samaj Party (Ambedkar), Bahujan Kranti Dal. Some of these factions joined the left parties to set up a third front that split the dalit vote even further.

The withdrawal of the Chuhra support to the Congress has to be seen in the context of the controversy regarding classification of quotas. The termination in classification of quotas ordered by the Punjab court in July 2006, led to a massive protest by the Chuhras. They organized themselves under a group called the 'Balmiki and Mazhabhi Sikh Reservation Bachao Morcha' to protest against the High Court ruling and demanded restoration of the 12.5 per cent reservation for the Balmiki and Mazhabhi Sikhs in government jobs as per the 1975 notification. In addition, they also emphasized extending the reservation to educational institutions regarding admissions to them (Jodhka and Kumar, 2007:22). Noting the fact that the elections to the state assembly were due just in couple of months time, the Congress government responded quickly to their demand by drafting a bill that was unanimously passed by the Legislative Assembly and it became an Act on October 5, 2006. The Act however failed to satisfy the aspirations of the Mazhabhi and Balmiki groups as it failed to provide a quota in admission to the educational institutions. Leaders of the agitation regarded this to be a consequence of the continued domination of Chamars in Congress politics and the state bureaucracy, which became additional reasons for the loss of Mazhabhi support to the Congress. The loss of Congress in Doaba and Majha, the traditional support areas of Congress scheduled caste support could also attributed largely to Amarinder Singh's concentration on Jat Sikh politics and on the use of Sikh symbols. Table 2 below shows how parties have in the last three Assembly Elections and how crucial it was for two main parties to build alliances.

Table 2: Punjab Assembly Elections Party-wise Performance

	1997	Vote	2002	Vote	2007	Vote
Party	Contested/	Vote	Contested	Vote	(Contested/	Vote

	Won	(%)	/Won	(%)	Won	(%)
INC	105/14	26.5	105/62	35.81	116/44	40.9
SAD	92/41	37.6	92/41	31.08	93/49	37.09
IND	92/75	10.8		11.27	43/5	6.82
BJP	22/18	8.3	23/3	5.67	23/19	8.28
CPI	15/2	2.9	11/2	2.15	25/0	0.76
CPM	25/0	1.7	13/0	0.36	14/0	0.28
SAD(M)	30/1	3.1	84/0	4.65	37/0	0.52

Source: CSDS, Delhi Data Unit

Part Three: Cultural Assertion among the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis

Apart from electoral politics, mobilizations at the grassroots levels have been an important channel of empowerment among the dalits all over the country. While in some of the states such as Tamil Nadu the major trend has been the shift from grassroots level movements to formal political participation in elections, in Punjab the route has been the reverse as when all the efforts to forge a political identity failed, dalits resorted to grassroots assertion to ascertain their autonomous position. In Punjab as elsewhere, the assertion has not only been through participation the local level institutions such as Panchayats, but also through use of cultural and religious symbols.

With political marginalization and improved social consciousness the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis have started demanding the social status that has pushed them to *Deras* and others forms of cultural assertion. This has brought them into direct conflict with the non-scheduled caste groups, primarily Sikh Jats in the state. The cases of the Talhan conflict and the Dera Sacha Sauda controversy represent just few such examples of cultural assertion. It is argued that Dalit Sikhs' desertion of the Panth and their entry into various non-Sikh Deras is directly related to the overall control of Sikh Jats on the various Panthic organizations. Since all the important Sikh/Panthic organizations are under the control of the Jats and they are adamant not to share their management with dalits, dalits were forced to build their own separate religious organizations or to take refuge in non-Sikh Deras in the state (Ronki Ram, 2007).

However, the phenomenon is not new and has been in operation since the decline of the Ad-Dharm movement with scheduled castes taking cultural route and joining Ravidass deras. Commenting on the early existence of Deras, Singh writes "the history of the Deras in Punjab is older than the Sikh Panth. The Deras in Punjab, before the Sikh Panth belonged to the Muslim Peers and Yog Nath's Deras. With the emergence of the Sikh Panth, some prominent Sikh and non-Sikh Deras came into existence, such as Udasi Deras, Dera Baba Ram Thaman, Namdhari, and Nanaksar. Most Deras came into existence in the twentieth century and they are still popular today, such as Radha Soami, Sacha Sauda, Nirankari, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and Dera Bhanirawalla" (Singh, 2009). However what is important to understand is that these Deras in recent

years have acquired strategic political overtones and the support of these deras have become important for political parties to win the elections.

My fieldwork in Punjab, in both Jullundhur and Amritsar district, reflected a high sense of cultural assertion among both the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis. Both the caste groups have developed their own cultural symbols—seen in the construction of their own gurudwaras and joining with non-Sikh Deras to declare their assertiveness for equal rights and dignity. The sense of cultural assertion was particularly noticeable among the Ad-Dharmis as the Ravidass movement has emerged as a strong and autonomous movement and an icon of their newly emerging identity. The majority of Ad-Dharmi respondents, irrespective of age, gender and education status, claimed to be members of the Ravidass Deras. While for the poorest of the Ad-Dharmis, the image Ravidass envisioned for an egalitarian model of the state and for ensuring human rights and civil liberties is the most important, for the younger generation organizing and participation in the Guru Ravidass Jayantis have become a matter of pride. Most of the illiterate sections in the area mentioned Ravidass's famous city of "Begumpura" (literally means the city free of sorrows) – the main reason for increasing Ravidass's popularity among them. The respondents also mentioned the important role played by Dera Sach Khand Ballan, an important Ravidass Dera, in popularizing the image of Ravidass and propagating a social egalitarian ideology. The importance of Ravidass Deras and Dera Sach Khand Ballan in developing an autonomous religious and cultural identity of the Ad-Dharmis is also confirmed and explained in the recent writings by Ronki Ram (2007) as follows:

Ravidas Deras played a significant role in the formation of a separate dalit identity in Punjab. Based on poetry, teachings, and legends about the life of Ravidas, the emerging dalit identity in the state represents a kind of middle path between assimilation, on the one hand, and radical separatism, on the other.

He further states

the movement of the Ad-Dharmis to the Ravidas deras reflects the fast changing socio-cultural scene of Punjab where the once powerful and revolutionary Sikh religion is failing to meet the needs of the oppressed who discovered the right remedy to cure their wounded psyche in the Ballan experiment.

Dera Ballan became a paragon of the Ravidass movement in northwest India. It made concerted efforts for the construction of a separate Dalit identity, independent of both Hinduism and Sikhism, the two main religions of Punjab. The Sants of Ballan developed their own religious symbols, flags, prayers, dress, salutations, and rituals of worship. The architecture of Dera Ballan is also unique in its outlook. It resembles both a temple and a gurudwara at the same time. The Guru Granth Sahib is placed in the Dera, but unlike a

gurudwara, the idols of Guru Ravidass and the late heads of Dera Ballan are also installed in its premises and are worshipped along with the Guru Granth Sahib (Ronki Ram, 2008:1343-1357).

Another important symbol of assertion noticed during the field work among the Ad-Dharmis has been their association with identity of Dr. Ambedkar. It was not uncommon to find pictures of Dr. Ambedkar in the houses visited during the field trips. Most of the respondents also reported the importance of the Ambedkar slogan on 'educate, agitate and organize'. In recent years the Ambedkar ideology has been propagated by local newspapers like *Bheem Patrika*, whose editor happens to be Lahori Ram Balley, a prominent Ambedkarite and leader of RPI. Most of the Ad-Dharmi youth reported to have formed the Ambedkar Youth Mandal, the Ambedkar Welfare Society and the Ambedkar Club to promote the political and social ideas of Ambedkar.

The construction of large scale gurudwaras has become another important symbol of scheduled caste assertion in Punjab. The field work in Talhan village suggests the presence of three gurudwaras at that point of time. Similarly the urban locality of Boota Mandi had four gurudwaras with fifth being under construction. It is however important to understand while all major caste groups visited each other's gurudwaras, the construction of separate gurudwaras could be regarded as an index of assertion as in Ad-Dharmi gurudwaras, Ad-Dharmis were seen to propagate the Ravidass vani (also a part of the Guru Granth Sahib). The cultural symbols of the pride of the Ad-Dharmis are even more visible and not limited only to construction of the separate gurudwaras. During my fieldwork most of the Ad-Dharmis also mentioned that they have developed their own symbols – a flag of *Majith* color and with symbols of *Har* and *Suhang*. They acknowledge each other by '*Jai Gurdev*' (by the name of Ravidass) instead of '*Sat Sri Akal*' (more commonly used by Jat Sikhs). In another episode during the field work, cultural assertion among Ad-Dharmis came to be reflected when in Jullundhur and Hoshiarpur, activists of Shri Guru Ravidass Sabhas led by Mr. Bhagwan Singh Chouhan, a BSP candidate and Mr. Onkar Singh Jamat, general secretary of the Punjab unit of the BSP, staged a *dharna* and blocked the traffic at Singriwala on the Hoshiarpur - Jullundhur state highway against the wrong portrayal of Guru Ravidass in chapter No. 4 of class VII book published by the Punjab School Education Board. They demanded that the government rectify the mistake as soon as possible or the non-compliance with these demands will hasten the process of violent agitation by the Ad-Dharmis. The government had to finally give in to the demands of the Ad-Dharmis considering the fact that elections were due in Punjab and the Ad-Dharmis constitute a strategic vote bank of the Congress. The emergence of the Deras has acquired strategic political overtones and they also function as centres for networking, attracting dalit administrators and politicians.

Similar to the Ad-Dharmis the Mazhabhis in the Amritsar district have also constructed their own gurudwaras to display their own identity, although the cultural assertion of Mazhabhis through any organizational structure or flow of

literature is limited. Unlike the Ad-Dharmis, they continue to be economically backward and the process of Ambedkarism is yet to be fully developed among them. Yet the Mazhabhis proudly declare themselves as “We are the Chuhras of Punjab” and are able to gather quickly to retaliate if the feelings of the community are injured. Some of the Mazhabhis reported during field work that “They (Ad-Dharmis) conceal their identity by calling themselves Ad-Dharmit; but we proudly declare ourselves as the Chuhras of Punjab.” (Field Survey, 2006). In Amritsar, younger Mazhabhi Dalits of one village formed a youth association in the name of a legendary disciple of the tenth Sikh Guru, Bhai Jeevan Singh (who belonged to their caste). The office bearers of this association were able to secure a special grant of Rs 250,000 from the state government for building infrastructure in the dalit localities and for renovation of their gurudwaras.

By joining non-Sikh Deras, constructing their own gurudwaras the SCs are stating their independence from mainstream Sikh society. This has contributed further to a series of violent conflicts as the recent cultural assertion by them have come to be interpreted by the Jats as a challenge to their long established supremacy in the state and also to their Sikh Khalsa identity.

Conclusion

The above analysis has attempted to understand the nature of caste and scheduled caste politics in Punjab. It does so by studying three factors – social exclusion as manifested in the caste system, political marginalization and the resultant cultural assertion of the scheduled castes in Punjab, with specific reference to Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis in the state.

The above analysis clearly shows that even though known as the region without caste, the social and occupational structure of Punjab continues to be compartmentalized along caste lines. However the structure of the caste hierarchy in Punjab continues to be different from the rest of India. The presence of Sikhism and Islam and the relatively less presence and influence of Brahmans in the region not only weakened the notions of purity and pollution but also made the caste system less oppressive as compared to the rest of India. Rapid social mobilization, economic development following the green revolution, the religious reform movement among the Sikhs in the 1920s led to the emergence of a powerful Jat community creating internal cleavages within Sikh society. In addition, the emergence of social religious reform movements among the Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims and Christians and autonomous political mobilization of the scheduled castes in the form of Ad-Dharm movement had the impact of making people aware of the importance of their numbers.

Discerning the three distinct phases of Punjab electoral politics, the above discussion clearly suggests that the scheduled castes have been witness to phases of integration and separation from the dominant political formations and the societal groups they represent. While a small elite middle class has emerged among the Ad-Dharmis, the strong presence of the Congress in

Punjab and the consequent assimilation of the Ad-Dharmi electorate within Congress, have affected their pattern of mobilization. The BSP's forays into the State have so far had little successes. The emergence of BSP into a party primarily interested in competitive electoral politics with little interests in the struggles at grassroot levels severely limited the transformational potential of the BSP. Its inability to capitalize on the most important issues such as the case of Talhan caste conflict led to the loss of support base among the Chamars. In addition, its coalition with the Akali Dal, emergence of factions and splinter groups within the party led to disillusionment among the Ad-Dharmis who withdrew their support from the BSP to support the Congress. The Mazhabhis continue to support the SAD on account of two reasons (a) the growing dominance of the Ad-Dharmis and Chamars in the Congress and the BSP and (b) at individual level 98.5 percent of the Mazhabhis continue to regard themselves as Sikhs.

The disenchantment with the three major parties –SAD, Congress and BSP has led them to turn to a cultural route in seeking a respectable social identity for themselves, matching their economic status. In the vacuum created by the political forces, joining various Deras, construction of separate gurudwaras, advocating the *vani* of their own gurus have become new instruments for articulating their grievances. The recent violent clashes between the followers of *Dera Sacha Sauda* (established in 1948 with its headquarters in Sirsa, Haryana) and different groups of Akalis as well as a spate of other social conflicts between Jats and dalits in the state seem to have acquired significant importance in the current political history of Punjab. Moreover, the frequent politicization of the Deras makes the issue further complicated. The persistent attempts made by the various Sikh organizations during the recent Akalis-Dera clashes to win over their *disgruntled* dalit Sikh followers are a clear case in point.

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