

CULTURAL POLITICS AND FRAGMENTED

DALIT INDETTY IN PUNJAB

The Dalit question in Punjab is characterized by three sets of ironies revolving around the quasi-incommensurable gap between ‘social’ and ‘political’ dimensions. First and foremost, with a 32 percentage of Dalit population Punjab has the distinction of being highest concentration of Dalits with no assertive Dalit politics at par with states like Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Secondly, despite having an avant-garde early Dalit political movement in the form of Mangu Ram led Ad-Dharm movement in 1920s, the Dalit discourse never witnessed a consolidation in the state. Thirdly, their socio-economic aspects and consequent aspirations are manifested primarily through cultural assertions giving precedence to ‘cultural politics’ over other political aspects of the community.

As per census 2011 and other government data, Dalits in Punjab constitute 32% of total population which is close to double to the national average. Among them, an overwhelming section, 73%, is spatially located in rural area while 26% is located in urban area. Also, the community constitutes 62% of the total ‘BPL’ family in the state, owns a mere 6% of operational land holding that is mainly non-agrarian despite constituting more than 40% of the population in 40% of total villages and close to 25-30% in the rest.

It was as early as in 1920s that Mangu Ram led Ad-Dharm movement in Doaba region heralded an assertive Dalit politics that signified a transformative potential for acting as agents of egalitarian change by articulating the voice of the marginalized. The Ad-Dharm movement merged later with other political outfits like ‘Ambedkar Schedule Caste Front’ and thereupon transformed into Republican Party of India and subsequently faded away without ever bringing the non-Chamar/Ravidas/Ramdas Dalits like Balmikis and Mazhabi Hindus in its fold.



Officially, there are 37 Dalit castes in Punjab, a majority of whom could broadly be divided into two categories, constituting around 82% of community population, with distinct socio-economic and sub-regional characteristics. The first category is constituted of two prominent Dalit castes, namely Mazhabi Sikhs and Hindu Balmikis, who trace their origin to Chuhra caste. The second category of Dalits is comprised of Adi-Dharmis/Chamars/ Ravidasi and Ramdasi-Sikhs, who originally belong to Chamar caste. BSP founder Kanshi Ram belonged to Ramdasi-Sikh caste from Roopnagar district falling in Doaba region. Sub-regionally, the former are predominantly located in Malwa and Majha region while the later are more concentrated into Doaba region. In terms of the urban-rural dimension, the overwhelming majority of Mazhabi Sikhs and a significant section of balmikis are located in rural areas engaged as farm labourers in the fields of landed Jatt-Sikhs, while a majority of Chamar and a significant number of Balmikis are found in urban centres wherein while the former have witnessed occupational diversities on account of their early exposure to economic opportunities, the later are primarily confined to scavenging and cleaning jobs.

These divergent intra-Dalit socio-political dynamics in Punjab translated into fragmented politico-cultural articulations by various Dalit sub-castes wherein the cultural aspects constituted the political response. Way back in early 1970s in the wake of fusing religio-agrarian identity of Sikhs started posing a serious challenge to the political dominance of Congress, the party responded by appointing a non-Jatt Sikh, Giani Zail Singh, carpenter by caste, as the Chief Minister of state, who driven by the twin aims of uplifting the most backward Mazhabi-Sikh and Balmiki Dalits and ensuring a social cleavage in the politics of unified Sikh identity played from the vantage point of the upper caste Jatt-Sikhs, came up with a 1975 government notification of reserving half of Schedule Caste quota of 25% in state government jobs exclusively for these two Dalit castes. As a congress leader he aimed to win over the two Dalit cases as there were speculation that the emerging primacy of

religious political framework may consolidate the Mazhabi-Sikhs to the fold of Akalis and Balmikis to that of Jan-Sangh. Similarly, by mid-1980s, with the emergence of BSP, the Chamar/Adi-Dharmis/Ravidasi/Ramdasi-Sikhs, shifted significantly to its fold by deserting Congress- a pattern continued till 1997 when BSP as a potential Dalit party in Punjab declined on account of its Chamar caste centric outlook, factionalism, splits and failure to respond to the political aspiration of Mazhabi-Sikh and Balmiki Dalits.

Thus, the failure of the emergence of a unified Dalit politics despite having assertive social movements on the ground leads to the primacy of caste-centric 'cultural-politics' among various Dalit groups who despite the egalitarian rhetoric compete with each other rather than striving for solidarity and alliance. Interestingly, the cultural politics of Dalit caste groups mediates through the institutions of various Deras who challenge the cultural hegemony of Jatt-Sikhs who control institutions like SGPC. These cultural assertions of various Dalit groups, via religious symbols are primarily caste centric wherein one finds the cult of saint Ravidas catapulted by the efforts of Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Doaba that has huge following among the Chamar Dalits, the ongoing construction of spectacular Valmiki temple at Amritsar to which the Balmiki Dalits are enamored with, the building of separate Gurudwars by Mazhabi-Sikh Dalits in the villages and their recourse to various Deras like Sacha Sauda. This primacy of religious metaphor in cultural assertion is also reflected in fusing Ambedkar with saint Ravidas by Chamar Dalits who are also competing with the cultural hegemony of Jatt-Sikh being the romanticized identity as the representative of Punjabi-self in music industry. The emergence of Punjabi-pop groups singing the verses of Saint Ravidas or the euphoric popularity of 'Chamar-Rap' by Ginni Mahi, points to the caste centric cultural politics informing the Dalit groups in Punjab.



In this fragmented Dalit discourse, the role of respective Deras, the caste centric appeal of various political parties and the intra-caste dynamics would emerge as the potential determinants of electoral articulations by various Dalit caste groups. The fact that, Akalis are appealing to Balmikis by taking Balmiki Yatra throughout the state and allocating sumptuous funds for the construction of Valmiki temple at Amrtisar, the Congress promising allocation of land for the Mazhabi Dalits, BJP recent appointment of a Dalit as its state chief and AAP declaration of Dalit being a deputy C.M in recent rally at Jalandhar, endorses the existing fragmented Dalit political articulation mediated through the primacy of caste-centric cultural assertions.

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