

Politics of the Marginalized: A Study of Dalit Participation in Punjab

Jagdeep Kumar

Research Scholar

Centre for the Study of Social

Exclusion and Inclusive Policy

Punjab University Chandigarh

Abstract

The complex dynamics of Dalit political engagement in Punjab, the Indian state with the most significant percentage of Scheduled Caste residents, are examined in this essay. Dalits are still underrepresented in decision-making positions and politically marginalized despite their size; with a focus on significant activities like the Ad Dharm movement and the emergence of Dalit-centric religious deras, the book charts the historical development of Dalit assertion in Punjab. It examines critically how mainstream political parties, including the Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal, and Aam Aadmi Party, interact with Dalit voters, frequently through token efforts rather than real empowerment. The impact of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the constraints of Dalit-led political mobilization in the state are also assessed in the report. Dalit political agency is hampered by structural problems such as caste division, economic reliance, landlessness, and proxy leadership in Panchayati Raj institutions. The study exposes the symbolic vs substantive representation of Dalits through case studies such as the brief tenure of Charanjit Singh Channi as Chief Minister and the electoral function of religious deras. In order to guarantee significant and long-lasting political empowerment in Punjab, the paper's conclusion highlights the necessity of transformative policies and united Dalit movements.

Key Words: Dalit Politics, Punjab, Political Participation, Marginalized Communities

Introduction

All social groups, especially those who have been historically marginalized, must participate inclusively for democracy to flourish. Dalits, also known as Scheduled Castes, are one of these groups in India that have long faced social prejudice, economic hardship, and structural exclusion. It has frequently been suggested that political engagement is an essential tool for addressing these systemic injustices. Even while Dalits all over India have made significant progress in claiming their political identity and taking part in democratic processes, Punjab's situation poses a special conundrum. According to the 2011 Indian Census, Punjab

has the highest percentage of Dalits of any Indian state, making up around 32% of the total population.¹ Dalits continue to be glaringly underrepresented in institutional governance, bureaucracy, and political leadership despite their numerical superiority.² Token representation, cooperation from major political parties, and division along religious and subcaste lines are frequent characteristics of their participation in state politics.³ Without encouraging authentic leadership from within the community, mainstream political actors such as the Indian National Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal, and more recently, the Aam Aadmi Party, have primarily leveraged Dalit voters as an electoral base.⁴ Divides within the community, such as those between Ravidassias, Valmikis, and Mazhabi Sikhs, further weaken collective political bargaining. Furthermore, additional complexity in Dalit mobilization is brought about by religious conversions to Sikhism or Christianity as well as the expanding power of socio-religious deras like Dera Sacha Sauda and Dera Sachkhand Ballan.⁵

By tracking its historical origins, examining current election patterns, and highlighting the ideological and structural barriers that prevent true empowerment, this article seeks to investigate the development of Dalit political participation in Punjab. It also looks at possible avenues for Dalit political involvement in Punjab that are inclusive, grassroots-focused, and transformative.

Historical Background of Dalit in Punjab

Punjab's Dalit history is characterized by unique sociolect-religious paths that set them apart from Dalits in other regions of India. Caste relations in Punjab have been significantly impacted by the region's agrarian economy and the predominance of Sikhism. In Punjab, Dalits, particularly Chamars (Ravidassias), Mazhabi Sikhs, and Valmikis, have historically been at the bottom of the caste system and have been forced into manual scavenging, leather work, and agricultural labor.⁶ Even though the religion of Sikhism promotes equality and condemns discrimination based on caste, caste-based customs have persisted in Sikh society, especially when it comes to leadership positions, community institutions, and gurdwara access.⁷ The growth of Dalit assertion movements, particularly the Ad Dharma Movement of the 1920s and 1930s, was a direct result of religious reform's inability to bring about social liberation. Mangu Ram Mugowalia founded the movement, which criticized both Sikh and Hindu caste systems and stressed Dalit identity as "Ad Dharmis."⁸ This marked a significant shift in the Dalit community's political consciousness in Punjab.

Following independence, Punjab's Dalits have remained economically dependent on dominant caste groups, including the Jat Sikhs, and mainly landless despite constitutional protections and reservation laws⁹. Their ability to make political statements has been hampered by their socioeconomic weaknesses. Punjab lacked a cohesive Dalit political front, in contrast to areas like Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra, where Dalit-led movements like the Bahujan Samaj Party flourished. Instead, socio-religious deras like Dera Sacha Sauda and Dera Sachkhand Ballan (Ravidassia tradition) developed into hubs of social and spiritual solidarity among Dalits, especially among the Mazhabi Sikh and Ravidassia groups.¹⁰ Although their significance has been more symbolic than structurally transformative, these deras have also started to exert significant political influence, particularly during elections.

Therefore, a paradox shapes the Dalit's historical background in Punjab: despite their numerical significance and spiritual assertiveness, they continue to experience social, economic, and political marginalization. This history makes understanding the difficulties and nuances of Dalit political engagement in modern-day Punjab easier.

Political Representation and Participation

Even though they make up the most significant percentage of Dalits in any Indian state, almost 32% of Punjab's population, they still have disproportionately little political participation. Although 34 of the 117 seats in the Punjab Legislative Assembly are set aside for members of Scheduled Castes, Dalit leaders hardly ever hold high positions of leadership in mainstream political organizations.¹¹ Rather than being truly empowered, Dalit politicians are frequently reduced to symbolic roles with little real power, which reflects a system of political cooperation.

Dalit political assertion is still overshadowed by the dominance of Jat Sikhs, who make up almost 20% of the population.¹² While Dalit votes have been a vital electoral basis for mainstream parties like the Indian National Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), and more recently, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), they have rarely fostered genuine Dalit leadership.¹³

Instead of considering grassroots influence or an ideological commitment to Dalit rights, leaders are frequently selected based on their allegiance to upper-caste leadership. Dalit voters now profit from short-term advantages rather than long-term structural inclusion as a result of clientele politics.¹⁴ The development of a cohesive Dalit political front is further hampered by internal division among Dalit communities, such as between Mazhabi Sikhs,

Ravidassias, Valmikis, and others. Due to their propensity to support disparate political parties or ideologies, each group's combined bargaining power is diminished.¹⁵ Dalit politics have taken on a new dimension with the rise of sociolect-religious deras like Dera Sacha Sauda and Dera Sachkhand Ballan. Although they mobilize Dalit voters in large numbers and frequently act as power brokers during elections, these organizations prioritize symbolic empowerment over the development of autonomous Dalit political institutions.¹⁶

Religion, Caste, and Identity Politics

Dalit political behaviour is greatly influenced by the intricate web of religion, caste, and identity politics that exists in Punjab. In reality, caste hierarchies are ingrained in both rural and urban Sikh society despite Sikhism's theoretical support for egalitarian principles and condemnation of discrimination based on caste.¹⁸ Dalits, especially Ravidassias and Mazhabi Sikhs, are frequently excluded from gurdwaras, religious leadership, and local decision-making.¹⁹ As a result, Dalit Sikhs now feel increasingly alienated, and different religious identities have emerged as a form of self-assertion and resistance.

In Punjab, efforts to establish Dalit-focused political organizations, like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), have not been very successful. Although the BSP saw some electoral success in the 1990s, its lack of cadre, internal strife, and inadequate organizational structure prevented it from maintaining its momentum.¹⁷ As a result, Dalit political engagement in Punjab is still mostly reactive and dispersed rather than motivated by a unified goal of rights-based mobilization and empowerment. Dalit political behaviour is greatly influenced by the intricate web of religion, caste, and identity politics that exists in Punjab. In reality, caste hierarchies are ingrained in both rural and urban Sikh society despite Sikhism's theoretical support for egalitarian principles and condemnation of discrimination based on caste.¹⁸ Dalits, especially Ravidassias and Mazhabi Sikhs, are frequently excluded from gurdwaras, religious leadership, and local decision-making.¹⁹ As a result, Dalit Sikhs now feel increasingly alienated, and different religious identities have emerged as a form of self-assertion and resistance.

The reaffirmation of Ravidassia identity has been a noteworthy result of this identity assertion; this movement reached its zenith in 2010 when Dera Sachkhand Ballan formally declared the Ravidassia religion after its leader, Sant Ramanand, was brutally assassinated in Vienna.²⁰ This signalled the necessity for independent religious and sociopolitical venues by Dalit communities and represented a fundamental break in Dalit-Sikh relations. It also

emphasized how religion can strengthen oppressed communities and yet be a source of exclusion.

Additionally, deras like Dera Sacha Sauda, Dera Sachkhand Ballan, and others have become alternative places of worship that provide Dalits with respect, spiritual comfort, and a sense of community.²¹ By organizing a sizable Dalit voter base and frequently siding with mainstream political parties during elections, these deras have also grown in political clout. Their engagement has been chiefly non-programmatic, nevertheless emphasizing spiritual loyalty over structural empowerment or transformation.²²

In Punjab, intra-Dalit fragmentation has also created identity politics, with Mazhabi Sikhs, Ravidassias, Valmikis, and Balmikis following distinct caste and religious trajectories that are frequently impacted by their regional distribution and work histories.²³ Because of these internal conflicts, it is now more difficult for mainstream political parties to split and manipulate the Dalit vote bank through patronage networks, electoral pledges, and symbolic gestures.

Challenges to Political Empowerment of Dalits in Punjab

Dalits in Punjab still confront significant obstacles to real political empowerment despite their growing political consciousness and numerical strength. These difficulties stem from a combination of internal division, institutional exclusion, historical marginalization, and calculated co-adaptation by major political parties and dominant caste groups.

The dominance of upper-caste Jat Sikhs in Punjab's socio-political and economic systems is one of the biggest challenges. Despite making up only 20% of the state's population, Jats hold significant authority in the areas of land, politics, religion, and bureaucracy, which leaves Dalits with little negotiating leverage.²⁴ Dalit candidates are frequently put up by political parties in reserved seats, but they are not elevated to positions of leadership in the party, government, or policy-making bodies.²⁵ This upholds a model of representation that is tokenism, in which Dalits are visible but silent.

The internal conflicts among the Dalit community present a second significant obstacle. Ravidassias, Balmikis, Valmikis, and Mazhabi Sikhs are only a few of the communities that make up Punjab's Dalits; each has its own religious customs, socioeconomic standing, and geographic concentration.²⁶ Attempts to create a cohesive Dalit political agenda are weakened by the frequent political manipulation of these divisions.²⁷ Furthermore, although being a

source of cultural empowerment, the impact of religious deras like Dera Sachkhand Ballan and Dera Sacha Sauda has resulted in personality-centric, non-programmatic mobilization that lacks a coherent political philosophy or systemic reform agenda.²⁸ These terms are frequently used to rally Dalit support during elections, but the results are fleeting and do not result in long-term policy change or structural empowerment.

The absence of Dalit-focused political groups with robust grassroots networks is another significant problem. Once a powerful force in Punjab, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) lost ground to factionalism, inadequate cadre development, and an excessive reliance on charismatic leaders who lacked institutional depth.²⁹ Without powerful, independent forums, Dalit political voices are often absorbed into broader party narratives and seldom represent the goals of the underprivileged. Economic and educational disadvantages also limit Dalit participation in political processes beyond voting, especially for those who are landless. Leadership development and civic involvement are hampered by a lack of access to high-quality education, unemployment, and ongoing caste-based prejudice.³⁰ Dependency on powerful caste patronage networks and a lack of political bargaining power are further consequences of this socioeconomic isolation.

Changing Trends and New Possibilities

The previous paradigms of marginalization and passive electoral behaviour have been challenged by new opportunities and shifting trends in Dalit political participation in Punjab in recent years. Dalits in Punjab, who have hitherto been restricted to voting blocs for major parties like the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal, are increasingly claiming their political identity in ways that go beyond symbolic representation. A deliberate turn in party politics toward Dalit appeasement was signified by the rise of individuals like Charanjit Singh Channi, Punjab's first Dalit Chief Minister, in 2021. However, this development also brought up important issues like tokenism and long-term empowerment. At the same time, the Dalit political agency in Punjab is being redefined thanks to the growing influence of social media, youth activism, and Dalit intellectual organizations. To oppose upper-caste domination and promote intra-Dalit variety, especially amongst Chamars and Mazhabi Sikhs, new regional Dalit-led parties and grassroots groups are looking for alternate platforms.³¹

Even the transformation of Dalit political involvement has been greatly aided by education and awareness. Dalits are growing more politically aware as a result of easier access

to higher education and rising literacy rates, especially among the younger generation. Higher levels of election engagement, including active campaigning, leadership positions in local governments, and the establishment of community-based groups, are the results of this political awakening.³²

The emergence of educated Dalit youth might upend established hierarchies of power and broaden grassroots political representation. The increasing political participation of Dalit women is another significant development. Dalit women have historically been marginalized in Punjab and throughout India due to gendered discrimination as well as caste. Nonetheless, Dalit women activists, legislators, and social workers have become more well-known throughout the last ten years. These ladies are working for women's rights in Dalit communities, organizing locally, and promoting improved health and educational facilities. The growing political importance of Dalit women in the area was reflected in the increased representation of Dalit women candidates in the 2017 Punjab Assembly elections.³³

Furthermore, it is impossible to undervalue the influence of digital platforms and social media. Digital platforms are being used more and more by Dalit communities—particularly the younger generation—to draw attention to caste oppression, rally support for Dalit concerns, and call for political accountability. Dalits in Punjab have overwhelmingly supported campaigns against caste-based violence and hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter, which have expanded beyond local communities to national and international forums. Dalit voices, which are frequently ignored by mainstream media, have an alternate platform on social media.³⁴

Furthermore, the Dalit diaspora's political potential is becoming more and more apparent. A large number of Punjabi Dalits, particularly Mazhabi Sikhs, have made their homes overseas, mostly in the USA, UK, and Canada. Punjab's political trends are significantly influenced by this expanding Dalit diaspora. As cultural and economic forces, their transnational networks have the power to shape political narratives and generate demands for changes to Punjab's socio-political structure. Even with these encouraging developments, there are still major obstacles to overcome. Achieving long-term empowerment requires collaborative Dalit leadership that brings disparate groups together and promotes ideological coherence.³⁵ Furthermore, rather than implementing systemic change, mainstream political parties still use patronage politics and symbolic gestures to sway Dalit voters. However, the

growing wave of Dalit political activism and assertion suggests that Punjab may eventually experience true political emancipation.

Conclusion

Social stratification, political marginalization, and historical exclusion have all influenced the complicated and multidimensional growth of Dalit political engagement in Punjab. Dalits have always been underrepresented in positions of authority, both in the legislative and executive offices, while making up a sizable share of the state's population. However, this underrepresentation is not a permanent state. The potential for a more inclusive and representational political landscape in Punjab is indicated by the shifting sociopolitical dynamics and growing political assertiveness among Dalits. The complex and multifaceted development of Dalit political activism in Punjab has been impacted by social stratification, political marginalization, and historical exclusion. Despite constituting a significant portion of the state's population, Dalits have historically been underrepresented in positions of power, including the legislative and executive branches. This underrepresentation is not a permanent situation, though. The changing socio-political dynamics and increasing political assertiveness among Dalits suggest that Punjab may see a more inclusive and representational political landscape.

However, there are still major obstacles to overcome. Genuine empowerment is nevertheless hampered by the fragmentation of Dalit identity, the continuation of caste-based patronage politics, and the hegemony of mainstream political parties that frequently treat Dalits more as vote banks than collaborators in government. Long-term transformation requires a unified Dalit political front that transcends these differences and presents a different vision of inclusive governance. Punjab's Dalit political empowerment has a bright future, but it will take consistent work to create inclusive political structures, bolster leadership, and remove obstacles based on caste. Dalits in Punjab have the power to change the political landscape and secure their proper position in the state's decision-making processes if they continue their agitation, exercise strategic leadership, and stand together as a group.

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