

Understanding Obstacles to Dalit Mobilization and Political Assertion during the 2017 Punjab Elections

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With the highest density of Scheduled Caste population in India, Punjab provides a political conundrum as far as *Dalit* assertion in state assembly elections is concerned. Introduction to this paper analyses the centrality of identity politics that have come to occupy discourses on Indian democracy. The paper then proceeds with a historical exploration of the peculiar nature of caste in Punjab, which provides the context to analyze the absence of political assertion of Dalits. The third part scrutinizes the internal cleavages within the SC population and how these have hindered cultural assertion translating into a political force. Despite sub-caste divisions, Dalits as a whole remain a crucial vote bank in Punjab and a critical analysis of mobilization strategies of political parties, including *deras*, rallies, electoral promises and religious-cultural tools, provides us with an insight into how the vote bank operates. The outcome of 2017 Punjab election demonstrate and reflect certain trends as far as the Punjab electorate in general, and Dalits in particular are concerned. The concluding section provides a comparative analysis of political participation and representation of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab and evaluates prospects for an ‘upsurge from below’ in Punjab.

Introduction

Free and fair elections may be regarded as the warm blood pulsating within the veins of a breathing, growing democracy. They are an act of persuasion, charisma, of relaying a vision, the acceptance of which adds an adjective to the kind of political system one is associated with. Democracy may be a concept that gained acceptance in the modern era, but in its essence it could be regarded as post-modernist in the sense that it seeks to convey a pluralist understanding of the diverse yet equal people forming its foundation. Democracy in India, ideally, sought to integrate multiculturalism to give space to multiple identities embedded in varying cultural experiences and practices of its heterogeneous population. While religion, ethnicity and race are widely understood within the multicultural framework, a category peculiar to India is that of Caste. The Indian Constitution is, in fact, a perceptive document, which instead of blindly ‘borrowing’ from the West embedded its ideology within the Indian framework, thereby ensuring policies and group-differentiated rights given the prevalence of religious minorities, caste stratification as well as tribal communities in the country (Bajpai, 2015).

While the Constitution, as the hallowed law of the land, created the necessary conditions to pave way for an equal yet pluralist society, it is primarily the legislative bodies that are responsible for bringing to reality the vision of the fundamental law of the land. The act of electing representatives is thereby a critical one, aided by regular elections that enjoy considerable legitimacy. Electoral politics in India is an arena of fierce competition that has not stayed away from the predominance of group identity as a source of mobilization in the country. Since the 1990's, with the end of one-party dominance at the Centre level, rise of regional political parties has been accompanied by sharpening social cleavages. Despite its rational, modern roots, elections in India often witness recurrence of traditional identities - especially religion and caste. Minority politics, in the name of caste, religion, ethnicity, language etc is fundamental when it comes to the churning of participatory democracy in India. However, the Indian Constitution is rather ambivalent when it comes to describing who constitute the minority in the country. It refers to 'religious and linguistic minorities,' who though enjoy equal political rights, are assured autonomy only in regard to socio-cultural rights.

The acceptance of such, largely group rights, led to the cementing of the minority-majority framework within the political discourse in India (Bhargava, 2000: 39). This dominant framework plays a crucial role in India's 'dance of democracy.' Popular, fair elections, Bhargava believes, play the salient role of balancing the majority-minority framework through a preference based model when the division between majority and minority depends on the issue at hand. However, countries like India are inhabited by identity based groups, who come with certain 'culturally inherited' desires which are 'relatively stable.' In such a context if the identity based majority dominates the basic structure and organization, the minorities may be treated as 'permanent aliens,' leading to a majority-minority syndrome.¹ In such a case, constitutional safeguards are of vital importance. Another important way to help the framework work effectively is equal citizenship and assuring representation to minorities to promote 'politics of inclusion' (Hasan, 2011).

Political institutions require a representative character to sustain and strengthen democracy. The Constitution made certain arrangements for some minorities, for example Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have been provided reservation in both the Parliament and State legislatures. There has also been a marked change in the social profile of the voters with Dalits², backward castes and other minorities coming out to exercise their right to vote in huge numbers (Rajendra & Palshikar, 2006). Furthermore, the growing significance of regional parties and coalition era of politics from 1990's till 2014 made political parties more representative as far as their social composition was concerned. While procedural democracy in India has thrived and garnered much appreciation around the world, there have been certain doubts about the substantive part. Substantive democracy requires not merely fair and regular elections, but also deepening of the democratic process to provide adequate representation to all the social groups in the State.

Different parties in the country and respective states seek to cater to the plurality of group interests, which has provided the marginalized sections of population an opportunity to assert their identity through electoral politics. Social and political mobilization is therefore essential in the Indian scenario as far as fortunes of parties in elections are concerned. This process of organization and mobilization is neither top-down or static in its approach, but both inter-relational as well as dynamic. As argued by Pushpendra, the decline of the 'Congress system' witnessed Scheduled Castes entering a 'new phase in their political consciousness' wherein Congress was no longer seen as a natural ally (Pushpendra, 2001). Competitive party politics and the rise of the 'Bahujan discourse' (Guru, 2001) threw up new opportunities of political assertion for Scheduled Castes. Though the Supreme Court of India, in a landmark 2017 judgement,³ declared elections to be a 'secular exercise' by a 4:3 majority, thereby prohibiting all candidates from using caste, creed, language or community as a tool for seeking vote in elections, Indira Jaising contends that the judgment does not label an appeal intending 'to correct a historical or constitutional wrong or was intended to preserve and protect fundamental entitlements under the Indian Constitution' as a corrupt practice.⁴

Politics has a paradoxical role to play as far as managing competing interests of groups is concerned (Weiner, 1997: 251). On one hand, it may worsen group relations by trying to assert group rights of one, and attacking the others. On the other hand, politics provides a credible, non-violent path for a group to improve its social status and economic well-being by means of political assertion of its identity. India has been variously labelled as practicing quasi-federalism, bargaining federalism or cooperative federalism. Despite the variations in descriptions, the fact remains that penetration of democracy is importantly linked to the politics of India's federal units. A critical point Weiner makes in this regard is the fact that future of majority-minority relations in India depend largely on the 'viability of state governments.' Inability to govern at the state level will lead to greater concentration of power at the Centre, thereby fueling violent conflicts and use of coercion to handle state governance. Thus an effective state leadership and federal politics is quintessential for reassuring minorities and empowering them within the democratic framework.

Intersectionalities in Punjab and the Divided 'Dalit'

Punjab and caste hierarchy have a rather peculiar relationship. Punjab being a frontier state has witnessed a regular influx of outsiders and a barrage of invasions. Due to this unique experience, historically the hegemony of Brahmins on Punjab's caste structure was emphatically limited. In the colonial period, the population of erstwhile Punjab was dominated by Muslims, followed by Hindus and then Sikhs. Denzil Ibbeston, in his work on society and caste groups in Punjab as part of the 1881 census observed that by religion, the then Punjab was more 'Mohammedan', than Hindu. Furthermore the *Jat* tribes attached more importance to tribal customs than religious considerations (Ibbeston, 1916:14-15). The state also witnessed a robust *Bhakti* and reform tradition. In fact due to

the culture of 'Sants,' there was scepticism surrounding Brahmanical knowledge of God⁵ (Puri, 2004: 6). Thus, from Kabir to Ravidas, Punjab was fortunate to have a constant questioning of the status quo as established by the Hindu Varna system.

The presence of Islam and Christianity offered the lower castes an opportunity for social mobility by means of conversion. Further, the educational opportunities thrown up under the missionaries opened up new avenues for the lower castes. The presence of alternatives as well as a zeal for reform, witnessed popularity of socio-religious organizations like the Singh Sabha Movement, Arya Samaj, etc. which played a prominent role in reforming society in Punjab. In fact, Juergensmeyer in his work credits the efforts undertaken by Arya Samaj in the domain of education that led to the development of a cadre of capable leaders among Dalits who went on to play crucial role in the birth of the *Ad-Dharm* movement of 1925 (Juergensmeyer, 1982: 35-38). The flourishing of Sikhism, a religion founded by Nanak on the idea of equality, played a prominent role in opposing growth of Brahmanical influence as well. The ideas of 'Sangat' (congregation) and 'langar' (Community kitchen) in Sikhism were a blow to the rigid distancing of lower castes as perpetuated by Brahmin orthodoxy.

Apart from ideological reasons, there were also social underpinnings to the unconventional nature of caste in Punjab. Judge writes how most Sikh as well as Hindu castes of Punjab, except the *Khatris* and *Aroras*, formed a part of the lowest rungs of Hindu caste hierarchy. In fact all Jat Sikh and non-Jat Sikh castes were a part of the *Shudra* and *Ati-shudra* categories, thereby the attraction towards Sikhism which could offer them new social status (Judge, 2002: 177). Jodhka makes a compelling argument when he underlines the absence of 'Brahmanism' resting on the dichotomy of purity and pollution. This further led to hierarchy based on performance of manual and non-manual labor being eroded in the context of Punjab. The agrarian nature of economy depended on manual labour. While Jat Sikhs were primarily the land owners, the need for labour to work on fields, which mainly came from lower castes, meant that a caste system founded on 'Chutt-Chaat' (untouchability) was untenable.

However, the *sui generis* nature of Punjab's caste order does not mean that there is no discrimination or set social order. Unlike the traditional Varna hierarchy, Punjab's caste structure is defined by the idea of 'dominant caste' as put forth by M.N. Srinivas (Srinivas, 1959). Going against the norms of 'Spheres of Justice',⁶ 'dominant caste' in Punjab, Jat, successfully combines its numerical strength with control over economic resource, that is, land into power in other domains - social, political, religious etc (Judge, 2010: 35).⁷ Social exclusion was based on control of land from which Dalits were deprived. The roots of this situation lay in colonial times with the rise of Jat Sikhs as British army's dependable 'martial race' in the post 1857 revolt and the passing of the Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1901 which favored agricultural communities such as the Jat Sikhs. In fact such was the degree of land dispossession of Dalits that they were not allowed to use the village common land (*shamlaat*) and the land on which their houses were built outside the village, also belonged to the Jats (Ram,

2011: 384-85). The economic stronghold of Jat Sikhs curtailed the influence of Brahmins. At the same time, they were able to oppress the Dalits in the rural, land dependent economy.

Politics in Punjab had been dominated by the urban, Khatri Sikhs since colonial times. The intermingling of traditional and rational authority in democratic India caused the 'politicization of caste'.⁸ However, the Jat Sikhs were fast gaining political ambitions especially in the Akali movement for a separate state of Punjab. In fact, for this reason Dalits were hesitant toward the idea of creation of a new state, with the premonition of Jat Sikhs assuming control of Punjabi *suba* (Jodhka, 2006: 21). Jodhka points out that constituting one-fourth of the electorate in Punjab, the political hegemony of Jats remains virtually unchallenged with Giani Zail Singh being the last non-Jat to be chief minister of Punjab. He further points out how the leading parties of the state - both Congress and Akali Dal are Jat controlled and dominated (Jodhka, 2012). The emergence of AAP on the electoral horizons of Punjab was seen as a counter-challenge to Jat dominated politics. However, the party despite its agenda for transformation has Jat Sikhs as its main faces in Punjab elections - H.S. Phoolka, Bhagwant Mann, Kanwar Sandhu and even Delhi MLA, Gurpreet Ghuggi. Akali Dal's tag line '*Punjab Punjabiya da,*' in political facts could translate into '*Punjab Jatta da*'.

Electoral politics at the Federal level started on the transformative track of inclusive political representation from the 1970's. Punjab, as a state poses some difficult yet interesting questions as far as electoral politics and political mobilization of Scheduled Castes/Dalits are concerned. Punjab has the highest density of SC population, at 31.9% according to the 2011 Census data. Politics and more importantly democracy (the backbone of which are free and fair elections) are seen as a method for self-correction in a society (Krastev, 2012). Caste divided societies inherently have fissures to spark conflicts and electoral politics becomes a means of mediating them. Politics in a caste stratified society often provides means of transfer of power from the upper to the lower castes. However, the rise of middle peasant/dominant castes has ruptured the complete transfer of this power (Yadav & Palshikar, 2008). Therefore, 'dominant middle castes become both the harbingers of democracy and the bottlenecks in the progress of democracy' (Yadav & Palshikar, 2008). The rise of Jat Sikhs in Punjab is symptomatic of this phenomenon.

The only other group enjoying numerical strength to counter the Jat Sikh hegemony are the Dalits in Punjab. However, they are divided into 39 subcategories,⁹ not only for administrative purposes but even in real social relations and unity, thereby negating the very logic of numerical strength. The history of Punjab is one wrought with intersectionalities of religion, region, class and caste. The complexity created by the overlapping nature of these social identities has often proven to be a deterrent to 'Dalit' becoming a united political force. The division along sub-caste and religious lines has led to different groups rallying behind different parties for different causes. Thus, Ram points out that Dalits in Punjab have never been able to translate 'extraordinary numerical strength...in the electoral performance of their own political parties like

Scheduled Castes Federation/Republican Party of India/Bahujan Samaj' (Ram, 2017: 54). Ram further claims that the lack of Brahman domination in the state could not foster a vibrant SC leadership to mould its own party and most of the SC sub-groups have been accommodated in one or the other mainstream party.

SCs in Punjab are internally divided into self-contained groups that are constantly competing for status in the social pecking order. In broad terms, SCs in Punjab may be categorised into 'Chamars' and 'Churhas' which have further internal bifurcations. Within Chamars there are the *Ravidassias* and *Ad-dharmis* who since 2010 have their own *Ravidassia Dharm*.¹⁰ The Chamars, considered the most resourceful of SC subgroups, (Ram, 2017: 391) are mainly concentrated in the *Doaba* area. They took major advantage of educational opportunities, government employment etc. thereby forming the ranks of the elite Dalit middle class in Punjab. Furthermore, being engaged in leather work, many were able to form their businesses nurturing the leather hub of *Boota Mandi* on the outskirts of Jalandhar. Chamars also dominate emigration to Middle East, Europe and North America. The Churhas comprise of the *Mazhabis* and *Balmikis*. The Balmikis are sweepers/scavengers who revere Sant-poet Maharishi Valmiki. Ram points out how Ambedkar identity has been amalgamated with the Valmiki roots, 'aimed at disseminating education and critical consciousness among Balmikis' (Ram, 2017: 55). The Churhas who took to Sikhism are called *Mazhabis* and are mainly found in the *Majha* and *Malwa* regions of Punjab. They are one of the most deprived sections of the SC population in Punjab and many of the community are still engaged in low paid agriculture labour (*Siris*) in Malwa (Ram, 2017: 55). The Gurdaspur belt witnessed conversion of Churhas to Christianity. However, neither path could provide an improvement in their social status in a caste bound society (Ram, 2012).

Caste Identities and Electoral choices (1947-2012)

Identity politics in Punjab is a conundrum in itself. This may be analyzed at two levels as far as the majority-minority religious framework is concerned. However, it is important to remember that this divide is more a manifestation of perceptions of communities than factual. Firstly, Sikhs, who make up 1.7% of the total Indian population, are a majority (57.7% according to the 2011 Census) in Punjab (Kumar, 2017: 44). On the other hand, Hindus who are a majority in most parts of the country are a minority in the state (38.5%). The religious configuration has also impacted the political parties in the state. Brass points out this majority-minority conundrum in terms of electoral politics in Punjab. He argues that while Akali Dal is a Sikh dominated party in a Sikh majority state, overall it is a minority party. Congress on the other hand being a majority party had attracted both Hindus and Sikhs (Brass, 1998:179) Thus, an alliance with the Hindu Jan Sangh/BJP for the Akalis made sense to moderate religious polarization and win mass appeal. The second level is the presence of hierarchies within caste groups of both the religions and the competition among them. The cleavages within the SC groups in Punjab have reverberated in their political

affiliations as well. Dalits in Punjab have been placed within a vibrant socio-political movement. The 20th century saw the rise of Ad-Dharm movement under Mangoo Ram which led to widespread mobilization of Dalits against the tyrannies of the caste system, including creation of an alternative religious identity (Juergensmeyer, 1982). Despite the overwhelming presence of a largely dispossessed SC populace, most sub-castes from Churha and Chamar categories have allegiance towards one or the other mainstream party.¹¹ Therefore it becomes necessary to undertake a brief historical analysis of the electoral choices by various sub-castes within the SCs in assembly elections in Punjab.

From 1947 to the mid 1960's the Congress dominance engulfed Punjab, as with the rest of the country. However, Congress rule did not remain unchallenged. The first issue to take independent India by storm was that of language. Linguistic chauvinism sparked movements in many states, including Punjab, where the Akalis led the revolt from August 1950. The claim for a Punjabi speaking suba, was rejected by the State Reorganisation Commission in 1956 fearing emergence of separatist tendencies in the state. The idea of a minority religion dominated border state rang alarm bells for Nehru in the partition scarred India (Singh, 2014). According to Kumar, this resulted in the Punjabi suba movement which lay at the heart of 'religion based linguistic differentiation' (Kumar, 2011: 290-91). The Congress itself encouraged competition between Tara Singh and Fateh Singh led factions (Brass, 1998). The overwhelming dominance of Congress and the lack of a viable moderate political alternative led to low political consciousness among the Dalit groups. Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis in Punjab (who together form a major portion of the SC population)¹² went through an initial period of accommodation and co-option within the dominant Congress party (Sharma, 2012). The 1960's marked a watershed moment in Punjab's history. The advent of the Green Revolution had a multidimensional impact on the state, changing the structure of the political class as well as caste dimensions.

The agriculture sector boom helped the landowning Jat Sikhs to consolidate their political power. Power in the Akali arena too shifted from Khatri Sikhs (Master Tara Singh) to Sant Fateh Singh, the first Jat leader of Akali Dal (Kumar, 2011: 293) who successfully shifted the discourse of separation relying on religious identity to that of cultural variation and idea of 'Punjabiyaat'. The decade long struggle by Akalis for a separate suba ended in 1966 with the carving out of states of Punjab and Haryana, along with Himachal Pradesh as a separate Union Territory and eventually becoming a state. However, Congress still retained support with the SCs and the '*Bhapas*,¹³ (Kumar, 2017: 293). To counter support towards Congress certain Sikh castes and groups (such as urban khatri Sikhs, Mazhabhis), Akalis raised the slogan of 'Panth in danger' to win over votes of Sikhs who formed nearly 60% of the total population of new Punjab. The 1960's were also the era of Naxalite movement in Punjab with revolutionary zeal inspiring an entire generation of Punjab's youth. However, the Communist ideology failed to seduce the Dalits who, despite the parallels in their situation and Naxalite ideology, preferred mainstream parties. In the 1967 and 1969 elections Akalis formed short lived coalition governments with the Jan

Sangh. Jodhka points out how the biggest of the Dalit groups, the Mazhabi Sikhs were won over by Akalis given their Panthic plank, the Chamars and Ad-Dharmis looked to Congress whereas the Balmikis have been allied with Jan Sangh (Jodhka, 2009: 55). This division along party lines tilts electoral politics in favor of the consolidated Jat Sikh group comprising nearly 21% of the population. Regardless of these divisions, Dalits in Punjab happen to be crucial voters who play a major role in determining who comes to power.

The two decades from 1970-1990 were a phase of upheavals in the country as well as in the state of Punjab. Indira Gandhi's '*Garibi Hatao*' launched the Congress into power across the country, including Punjab with Giani Zail Singh at the helm. With a non-Jat, Ramgarhia Chief Minister at the helm, Congress hoped to capture the votes of Dalit communities such as Mazhabis and Balmikis by offering sub-reservation of 12.5% for the two communities within the 25% quota for SCs. These communities mainly populated the regions of Malwa and Majha. The reservation policies had a limited success in generating support as far as Congress' popularity was concerned. The Punjab government undertook certain programs for SCs and backward classes such as land ceiling antagonizing the Jat landlords (Brass, 1998: 187). On the other hand, the policies did not go far enough to substantially benefit the landless and marginal farmers of backward communities. The Mazhabis, primarily involved in agriculture as tenants, while benefiting from reservation in employment, were disenchanted with the land policies. The Balmikis too, remained constrained as far as taking advantage of policies of reservation was concerned. The Chamars of Doaba, despite the sub quota have led in literacy and government employment, further exasperating tensions among castes within the SC mould. In 1973, during the time of Zail Singh, *Anandpur Sahib Resolution* (ASR) was conceived outlining regional interests, which failed to receive adequate attention of Congress. 1977 heralded the era of political turbulence with the Akali Dal making crucial electoral inroads in both the general and assembly elections in Punjab. Furthermore, as noted by Brass, the Akalis bolstered by rural Jat support led a sustained agitation against the emergency rule.

The rise of extremism may be seen as a political chess game keeping in mind both the religious and caste set up of the state. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale was variously labelled as a 'charismatic preacher,' 'violent separatist' or a 'political' pawn. As the Khalistan movement fired an entire generation of Punjab's youth, the rise of Bhindranwale and his impact on Punjab still has political commentators divided. Brass points to the encouragement given by Congress to Bhindranwale whose emphasis on panthic and Sikh unity was envisaged as means to drive rural Jats as well as Sikh Scheduled castes towards the Grand Old Party in the state (Brass, 1998: 197-98). However as terrorism in Punjab raised its ugly head with the killings of Hindus, the Congress now wanted to curtail its Frankenstein. As Bhindranwale and Akali Dal Longowal drew closer, the demands envisioned in the ASR were revived with the launching of *Dharam Youdh Morcha* in 1981. The 1983 Panchayat elections were a blow to Congress with rural Punjab, Jats and Scheduled Castes influenced by Sikh revivalism voting for the Akali-Bhindranwale combine (Singh, 1983: 1822).

There were continuous protests in Punjab in the form of *nahar-roko*, *rail-roko*, *kaam-roko*, eventually led to the dissolving of Legislative Assembly and promulgation of President's rule (Deol, 2000: 103).

The violence and the bloodshed continued leading up to the call for a 'mass non-cooperation' by Akalis on 3rd June 1984. This culminated into Operation Bluestar, as the 'government feared outbreak of a Sikh uprising and decided to launch a full scale attack on Darbar Sahib'. Khushwant Singh notes that government's ill-conceived assault on Golden Temple also opened a rift between 'Hindus who supported it and Sikhs who had not' (Singh, 1962: 378). The anti-Sikh violence in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination left the Punjabis disillusioned with Congress, especially Sikh segments of the population including the Dalit groups that identified themselves with Sikhism. The 1980's witnessed the dawn of Bahujan Samaj Party whose founder, Kanshi Ram was a *Ramdasia* from Rupnagar (Ropar), Punjab. Ramdasias are followers of Guru Ramdas who belonged to the *Julaha* (weaver) caste. Though considered within the *Chamar group*, the Ramdasias converted to Sikhism and follow the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh religious scripture. BSP had a resounding start, winning nine assembly seats in Punjab in 1992, but its tally fell to just one seat in 1997. However, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) which had trumped the 1985 Assembly election boycotted them in 1992. With the militants and Akali Dal condemning the electoral process, there was heightened fear and violence. The principal beneficiary of the boycott was BSP, which became the main Opposition. This may also be seen as means of countering the Jat Sikh dominance in formal political sphere as well as the extremist elements, creating internal cleavages within the Sikh community. In the last three assembly elections, the party failed to secure even a single seat pointing to its failure in mobilizing Dalit groups. The absence of conventional exploitation and untouchability in the state, along with yawning caste differences within SCs hindered the development of a unified Dalit front on the political scene. Most of its candidates have been losing their security deposits.

The CSDS Lokniti data on the 2012 Assembly elections (CSDS Lokniti, 2012) compares the caste wise voting patterns of 2007 and 2012 state assembly elections. It brings to light the dynamism in the vote choices of Dalit groups. While 53% of Hindu Dalits voted for Congress in 2007, it was down to 37% in 2012. On the other hand, support for the SAD-BJP combine rose from 29% to 33%. Similarly in case of Sikh Dalits, the Congress vote share declined by 1% whereas SAD-BJP gained 4% over the electoral span. The BSP gained from 11% to 23% for Hindu Dalits whereas it fell from 13% to 5% in context of Dalit Sikhs. Given the entrenched religious and caste affiliations of the two dominant parties, Brass's observation of Dalits as the 'critical floating element' in Punjab's elections continues to hold truth (Brass, 1998: 198). The BSP's tumultuous fortunes kept it at a distant third post 1992 success. However, in the 2014 General Elections, saw the entry of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP),¹⁴ a party emerging from the new social movement against corruption in Delhi and plying on 'info-activism' politics (Sen, 2016). This marked a change in the tide with the new challenger securing 21% of the SC votes polled according to the NES-

Lokniti data (Kumar, 2014) and with SAD and BSP only managing to get 19% and 4% of the votes respectively. Despite, the Dalit vote getting scattered due to internal segregation, it still has the potential to attain the 'Guru Killi' or Master Key to political power which for Kanshi Ram, following in the footsteps of Ambedkar,¹⁵ held the basis for social and economic transformation (Jafferlot, 2003: 393). The fortunes of political parties can thus be decisively changed by the Dalit vote bank. It is not surprising therefore, that the various communities within the SC fold are actively wooed by all the major contenders - new as well as old.

Dalit Mobilization in the Punjab Assembly Election 2017

Mobilizations of Dalits in Punjab has revolved around many creative avenues. 'Social engineering' by various parties has fluctuated over the years leading to a politics as tumultuous as the history of Punjab itself. Development has become a buzzword in Indian electoral politics. The dawn of the 'Modi wave' was seen as putting issues of growth and economic development at the center stage. In the context of Punjab many developmental issues became the epicenter of the 2017 assembly election. Given the rise in youth unemployment, agricultural decline, flight of industry, drug menace etc. this election was touted to be centered on issues of governance (Kumar, 2017) and enticing the youth of Punjab. However, whilst this focus may be true, it has not pushed identity politics into the background. In fact, development too has come to assume different meanings for different segments of Punjabi population, thereby opening more avenues for mobilization of Dalits based on a development discourse.

This differential understanding of development may be understood by analyzing varying issues that were particularly highlighted by political parties in their campaigns. Thus, deconstruction of the idea of development and what it stands for needs analysis. The 2012 state assembly elections proved the relative alienation of Jat Sikhs from the ruling Akali Dal given a fall of nearly 8% in the share of votes from the community (CSDS Lokniti, 2012). While the Akalis pulled off the feat of winning a consecutive election in the traditionally anti-incumbency Punjab, the vote fall signaled unrest in the rural Jat vote bank towards the party. This sense of disillusionment continues, with the severe losses in agriculture impacting incomes of the Jat Sikh community. Akali Dal's Manifesto eulogizing past successes, '*jo keha so kar vikhaya*' (fulfilled what was promised), failed to impress the community marred by successive losses from crops of cotton, basmati, peas and potatoes. Akali Dal realised the changed situation, so their focus shifted to wooing the Dalit vote bank through a number of populist schemes, such as giving 5 kg sugar at the rate of Rs 10 per kg and 2 kg ghee for Rs 25 per kg, increasing the amount of *Shagun* given to Dalit girls from Rs. 15,000 to 51,000, land to Dalit farmers etc. While benefits like debt waiver, free power, education and creation of jobs, have also been talked about, it was the new backward castes oriented policies which were showcased prominently.

With a wide range of schemes targeting the Dalits, the Akali Dal hoped to win favor in Doaba which has the maximum presence of Dalit population in Punjab. Similarly, much to the annoyance of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), SAD entered into an agreement with *Dera Sacha Sauda* which dominates in Malwa¹⁶, a region that had voted AAP to power in 4 parliamentary seats in their first outing during the 2014 general election. Dera Sacha Sauda, a socio-religious body has amassed a huge following among the backward castes of Punjab, particularly in Malwa, giving its leader Guru Ram Rahim Singh considerable political clout. In 2007, the Akalis attacked the dera chief for dressing up like the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, thus disrespecting him. The *Akal Takht*, the Sikhs' highest temporal seat issued a *hukamnama* (edict) calling for a boycott against the dera. In 2017 as the Akalis sought the support of Dera Sacha Sauda, Guru Ram Rahim was pardoned by Akal Takht leading to an outcry among the Sikh leadership who claimed the pardon to be 'politically motivated.' The backlash led to the revocation of pardon causing a major loss of face to the Badal-led Akali Dal that has a huge sway over the SGPC. The year 2015 witnessed numerous incidents of the desecration of *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh Holy Scripture, across Punjab with the first one in Bargari village, Faridkot. There were widespread protests by the Sikh community cutting across caste and class lines leading to numerous political resignations. There were violent clashes between the protesters and police at Behbal Kalan village. Two persons lost their lives in police firing, further aggravating tensions in the state. The brutal action of police was seen as indifference by the Akali government towards the sentiments of protesting Sikhs. The party that had, time and again, claimed to be protector of the 'Panth' was losing faith in the eyes of the Sikh community, the repercussions of which were sure to be felt during the impending Assembly elections. The growing antagonism of the Sikh traditionalists towards the Badal government may have pushed them to seek sanctuary with Dera Sacha Sauda for electoral support. However, attempts to woo the dera Chief only added to miseries of the incumbent Akali government.

The Congress Party and Dalits in Punjab have seen many vicissitudes in their relationship. During 1970's while Chamars were seen as loyal supporters, former Punjab Chief Minister Zail Singh played a trump card of sub-classification of quotas to woo the Mazhabi and Balmiki communities (Jodhka, 2009: 55-56). However, the rise of terrorism and violence brought about a tumultuous period in electoral politics. The Congress has always relied on a fragile alliance of Hindus, urban Sikhs and Scheduled Castes for support. In the 2017 State Assembly elections, the Congress sought to target the incumbent Akali government on lopsided and stagnant development, an issue inflicting the entire Punjab electorate. The roping in of poll strategist Prashant Kishor further streamlined the campaign towards promoting the Congress led by Capt. Amarinder Singh as the hope for youth, to have a corruption and nepotism free Punjab. 'Coffee with Captain' being endorsed as image of changing Punjab under the 'People's Maharaja' (Singh, 2017). While Akalis were on a back-foot with regard to the drug menace, Congress and AAP were eager to rally voters

around this issue. Given the huge anti-incumbency and general pro-Dalit image, along with a plethora of promises from debt waiver to a Special Task Force on drugs, the Congress was set to benefit from people's resentment. The unpredictable musical chairs of Navjot Singh Sidhu after his resignation from BJP also rested in favor of Congress.

The Aam Aadmi Party was expected to be game changer with regard to the 2017 election in Punjab and by making serious political inroads gave the Congress and Akali Dal a sweat. Despite being labelled non-Punjabi time and again, the party vigorously fought to make space in Punjab after its debacle in Haryana. Projecting itself as the alternative Punjab that many Punjabis had long desired, Dalits became an important choice for AAP to rally behind, given their political and economic marginalization. AAP came out with a special 'Dalit Manifesto' with its 19 points agenda with a host of schemes and the promise of a Dalit Deputy Chief Minister. AAP focused on Malwa where it had already proved its mettle in the 2014 General Election. Despite Dera Sacha Sauda going the Akali way, AAP hoped the loss of cotton crop leading to suicides by debt ridden farmers, and general frustration with the two mainstream parties would help it to secure a large proportion of the 69 seats available, making it the king maker region. This region, having a large Dalit population and containing some of the poorest districts, especially in southern Malwa, became the center of AAP's electoral strategy (The Economic Times, 2017). The AAP also won massive popularity among the Punjabi diaspora with their potential to play an important political role. The Punjabi diaspora's interaction is not only limited to remittances or socio-cultural and familial ties. The 2017 election saw an overwhelming support by the Punjabi diaspora for AAP because its brand of 'clean politics' exhorted by the party was well received by Punjabis settled abroad. The region of Doaba, having a large percentage of the Dalit diaspora saw huge mobilization and support both in terms of financial donations and for rallying.

The dominance of Jats in the SGPC led to widespread burgeoning of Sikh and non-Sikh deras (Ram, 2008), which are vigorously wooed by various political parties. Ravidass, regarded as a 'Bhakti Radical' by Omvedt, played a pioneering role in developing Dalit consciousness. The emergence of Ravidass deras in 20th century Punjab opened up an autonomous cultural space for Dalits that evolved into places of identity assertion. Ronki Ram points out the distinct identity of Ravidassias are often confused with Dalit Sikhs (Ram, 2009). There have been attempts 'to co-opt Ravidass for electoral gains, like Ambedkar, leading to condemnation of this process as 'Brahmanisation of Ravidass' (Ram, 2009: 11) by Dalit activists. Dera Sachkhand Ballan with its headquarters at Jalandhar is one of the most influential Ravidassi deras. Combining various doctrinal features, the Ravidassis continued to assert their separateness from mainstream Sikhism and Hinduism. However, the 'eclectic religious affiliations' of Ravidassis did not cause trouble even at the height of the Khalistan movement and it is only during the 21st century that tensions started brewing.

The Talhan incident of 2003¹⁷ followed by the murder of Chief of Sachkhand Ballan, Ramanand Ji in Vienna in 2009, saw widespread violence in the state. Keeping in step with the role of deras in mobilizing electoral consciousness, Congress catalyzed its relationship with Dera Sachkhand Ballan, which holds sway over the Ravidasis in Punjab, especially in the sub-region of Doaba. Incidents of violence against Dalits in Sangrur and Mansa in 2016¹⁸ further saw Capt. Amarinder Singh pointing to the danger of Punjab becoming a 'crime state' under Badals. However, this did not contribute towards manufacturing a united Dalit consciousness as every dera panders to a specific section of society, often creating competition for political favors among deras as well. The deras have become sites of political negotiations led by the dera chiefs, who more often than not, belong to the upper echelons of Punjabi society, whether Jat Sikh or Khatri. The deras have thus become flashpoints for an electoral tug of war between parties. However, the extent to which this religious alternative helped in 'psychic emancipation' has been questioned by scholars (Ram, 2008:1360).

The means of mobilization also blur the boundaries between political and cultural, with assertion of Dalit identity coming in via mediums such as music.¹⁹ A state where the Ad-Dharm movement sought reform through hymns of Ravidas, the 2017 state assembly elections have witnessed music becoming a way of mobilizing Dalits. Socio-cultural avenues become places of mobilization, a public space acquiring new political dimensions. The '*Bootan Mandi Mela*' celebrated as Ravidas's Gurburab since 1937 sees congregation of Dalit singers who take pride in the '*Chamar*' identity.²⁰ With Hans Raj Hans's return to BJP, Bant Singh and his firebrand Leftism were seeking a new route with the AAP. The redefinition of Dalit identity in the form of '*Danger Chamar*' in the songs of Gini Mahi provide a tool for socio-political resistance and assertion through creating a space for Dalits in mainstream Punjab politics. Music as a way of igniting identity assertion against dominance of Jat Sikhs provides certain caste communities to collaborate and 'act in concert' so as to change power relations persisting in the state. The parties therefore employed numerous cultural mediums to attract voters. AAP with its agenda of CRY (corruption, revenge and youth)²¹ aggressively utilized social media and popular culture to win over the electorate of Punjab. In fact Bant Singh, the Dalit face of AAP and himself a Mazhabi Sikh drew global attention due to his songs igniting passion for assertion among the SC population of Punjab. In one of his songs during the campaigning he crooned '*Gall sach nu aakhan di, tur gayi vich desh de saare. Jathe bandho jao, saari dunia paye pukaare. Jhaaru waale ban jao, saari dunia pai pukaare*'. (The truth travels the world, cannot be stopped. Let us all get united for the truth. All should become 'jhaaru wallah' and vote for AAP. The world is calling) in a bid to proclaim AAP as the party for Dalits in Punjab.

Punjab Assembly Election Verdict 2017- 'Experience over Experiment'

Table 1: Party wise distribution of seats and vote share

Political Parties	Seats Won	Vote Share
Bharatiya Janta Party	3	5.4%
Indian National Congress	77	38.5%
Shiromani Akali Dal	15	25.2%
Aam Aadmi Party	20	23.7%
Lok Insaaf Party	2	1.2%

Source: Retrieved from Election Commission of India (ECI)

The State Assembly elections of Punjab in February 2017 were perceived as being transformative and their outcome in terms of seats won and vote share are given in Table 1. The Punjab since 1992 has witnessed a stable turnout, and this year it was 77.4%, a respectable turnout, though slightly lower than last year. The bi-party competition had an infant, activist, non-Punjabi party in the form of AAP that was galvanizing copious support in the state. Their social media campaign was a massive hit among the youth and the party was trying to social engineer a coalition across sections of population from Dalits, farmers, urban poor, marketing a corruption free, governance high Punjab. The electoral results however dashed hopes of the buoyant Aam Aadmi Party. Though the reinvigorated Congress under Captain Amarinder Singh was expected to garner the maximum seats, the extent of its victory was unprecedented. Winning nearly two-third of the seats in the Assembly, Punjab was the only ray of hope for the Congress Party facing a drubbing in the other four states.²² While Congress has roots among groups of Dalit population, the foremost question that arises is the failure of AAP to mobilize SCs despite an all-star campaign and its impressive performance in the 2014 general elections where it won seats in 4 districts of Malwa with a credible 24.4% vote share in its very first outing. Malwa is the region which dominates in the distribution of seats across the three sub regions of Punjab.

In fact, some of AAP's mistakes have precedents in the electoral history of Punjab. The Bahujan Samaj Party, in its first election of 1992 performed well, winning 9 seats in the assembly elections. However, they could not build on the victory and celebrations proved to be premature, especially considering that unlike in the state of Uttar Pradesh, the party has been relegated to a negligible position, managing to draw merely 1.5% of the vote share in the 2017 assembly elections. Despite Akalis boycotting the 1992 elections, a term in the Legislative Assembly offered a golden opportunity to BSP to gain a firm foothold among the Dalits of Punjab or build a Congress like rainbow coalition, which was not adequately utilized by the party. Chandra believes the over-representation of *Chamar* elites when they are a minority among the SC community of Punjab was one of the crucial reasons why BSP could not consolidate its early gains (Chandra, 2004:191). Kanshi Ram's evocative personality built around the narrative of Dalit empowerment is reminiscent in the charisma associated with the activist Kejriwal. However, there were severe limits to which the leader

could enhance their respective parties' fortunes in the state. AAP was hoping to fill the vacuum left by the BSP as far as Dalits of Punjab were concerned. However, its attempts to persuade the SC groups did not go beyond the superficial. The promise of a Dalit Deputy CM, even when the post of CM itself had not been finalized, remained inconsequential, especially given the fact that Congress, in the form of Amarinder Singh, and Akalis with Badals, had influential faces as leaders of the state.

AAP also repeated the Congress debacle of 2007, concentrating its maximum energies on Malwa as the electoral results showed. Hoping to redo the 2014 sweep in the region, AAP made Malwa the focal point of its strategy. With Dera Sacha Sauda deciding to favor the Akalis, this decision proved to dent AAP's performance.²³ As can be seen in Table 2 below, out of the 69 seats in Malwa, AAP managed to win only 18 seats (accounting for 90% of 20 seats won by the party), with Congress taking the lion's share with 36 seats. AAP also performed well in the reserved seats of the Malwa regions, but its abysmal performance in Doaba and Majha drowned its political hopes. The party faced a major debacle in Doaba, managing to win only 2 seats in the region and of the 8 reserved seats in the area, AAP didn't win any, underlining its lack of grassroots presence there. The party failed to win even a single seat in the Majha area of Punjab.

Table 2- Seats won by Parties in the three main regions of Punjab²⁴

Political Parties	Doaba (23)	Malwa (69)	Majha (25)
Indian National Congress	15	40	22
Aam Aadmi Party	2	18	0
SAD-BJP	6	9	3
Others	0	2	0

Source: Election Commission of India

Given the large majority of *Chamars* and *Ad-Dharmis* in the Doaba region, it is imperative to analyze why AAP was not able to connect with the Dalit segments of the population. The Doaba region is more urbanized and the Chamar population, having the highest literacy rates among SC groups, is geared towards exploiting professional opportunities. Although chipping off some of the Akali vote bank AAP could not capitalize on the urban, Hindu electorate, including the Dalits who have similar aspirations. Its NRI led campaign, '*Chalo Punjab*' movement gained a lot of media attention but could not convince the region numerically dominated by Dalits, to swing AAP's way. All of the above points to a major disconnect the party had with the electorate in the state as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Analysis of caste wise preference of political parties in Punjab²⁵

	Party Voted for Assembly Election 2017					Total
	Congress	BJP	Akali	AAP+	Others	
01: Upper caste	292 46.8% 24.2%	68 10.9% 40.5%	86 13.8% 10.8%	142 22.8% 18.2%	36 5.8% 19.6%	624 100.0% 19.9%
02: OBC	54 36.7% 4.5%	14 9.5% 8.3%	17 11.6% 2.1%	34 23.1% 4.4%	28 19.0% 15.2%	147 100.0% 4.7%
03: Chamar	78 48.4% 6.5%	3 1.9% 1.8%	36 22.4% 4.5%	39 24.2% 5.0%	5 3.1% 2.7%	161 100.0% 5.1%
04: Other SC	83 39.0% 6.9%	32 15.0% 19.0%	35 16.4% 4.4%	50 23.5% 6.4%	13 6.1% 7.1%	213 100.0% 6.8%
05: Muslim	31 41.3% 2.6%	2 2.7% 1.2%	37 49.3% 4.7%	5 6.7% .6%		75 100.0% 2.4%
06: Jat Sikh	264 29.7% 21.9%	17 1.9% 10.1%	310 34.9% 39.1%	282 31.8% 36.2%	15 1.7% 8.2%	888 100.0% 28.4%
07: Khatri Sikh	32 26.0% 2.7%	9 7.3% 5.4%	26 21.1% 3.3%	31 25.2% 4.0%	25 20.3% 13.6%	123 100.0% 3.9%
08: Dalit Sikh	221 42.9% 18.3%	13 2.5% 7.7%	160 31.1% 20.2%	110 21.4% 14.1%	11 2.1% 6.0%	515 100.0% 16.5%
09: OBC Sikh	103 35.0%	10 3.4%	76 25.9%	69 23.5%	36 12.2%	294 100.0%

	8.5%	6.0%	9.6%	8.9%	19.6%	9.4%
10: Others	48		10	17	15	90
	53.3%		11.1%	18.9%	16.7%	100.0%
	4.0%		1.3%	2.2%	8.2%	2.9%
Total	1206	168	793	779	184	3130
	38.5%	5.4%	25.3%	24.9%	5.9%	100.0%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Punjab CSDS-ABP News Post Poll tracker 2017

Even in Malwa, AAP's wins were concentrated only in areas where it emerged victorious during the 2014 and could not further extend its support base. The Aam Aadmi Party's alleged close ties to the Khalistani extremist elements turned out to be a major stumbling block in converting sentiments into votes. The Maur twin blasts on January 31 in Bathinda were a flashback into the violence ridden decade of militancy. Kejriwal staying at the house of a former militant only seemed to reaffirm the belief. This further reiterated the 'outsider' discourse against AAP, alleging the party to be unaware of the turmoil in Punjab and possibly taking it back to its extremist phase if it gained power. Further, given the absence of conventional 'purity-pollution' exclusion and exploitation in Punjab, region and regional identity become crucial mobilizing grounds for SCs across fault lines. Kumar in his analysis of the 2017 verdict points out AAP's domination by non-Punjabi leadership led to skepticism among the voters. The splits and expulsions within the party, especially the removal of Punjab convener, Sucha Singh Chotepur, further pointed to the severe disconnect with the Punjabi electorate. The failure to adequately analyze the electorate at hand, led AAP to believe that it had Punjab in the bag.

The case of Akali Dal's failure also requires some critical observations as far as the electoral outcome in Punjab is concerned. The SAD-BJP alliance was able to win both 2007 and 2012 assembly elections, a rare incidence in a state that has high anti-incumbency sentiments. Akali Dal has a long history and in its tryst with electoral politics in Punjab it has undergone numerous mutations and transformations. Since colonial times, the Party has witnessed a change in their agenda and leadership transforming from an urban, Khatri-Sikh led outfit to a rural, Jat Sikh one, closely aligned with the powerful religious body, the SGPC. The amalgamation of a religious, regional and linguistic identity created a broad base for the Akali Dal, helping it move towards becoming a 'catch all party' but downplaying or exaggerating one or the other criteria of identity. Identity politics in Punjab, thus, is an extremely complex phenomenon, going beyond the conventional caste-community divisions prevalent in other parts of the country. The interplay of Sikh nationalism, preservation of regional autonomy and agrarian class orientation adds numerous dimensions to Akali Dal.

Though loss of this election may have been was a consequence of dire state of Punjab's fledging economy, the Akalis refused to acknowledged the problem

of drugs and charges of nepotism and corruption. Prosperity associated with the 'Green Revolution' Punjab was not merely stagnating but declining given the massive farmer debt. The Akali Dal had over the years managed to widen its electoral base from its core support among Sikhs and the landed bourgeoisie to include Dalits, Hindus etc. In fact despite its neo liberal interests, the widespread social welfare measures that ended up adding to state's fiscal deficit, were immensely popular (Singh, 2014: 68). However, the 2017 Assembly elections saw a decline in its support throughout its core as well as in the extended vote base. The sacrilege of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the slow pace at which action was taken angered those supporters who believed in Akalis panthic politics. In fact it was the 'Hindu-Haryanavi' Kejriwal who could channel these grievances and he voiced these concerns successfully at the Muktsar *Maghi Mela* (Oberoi, 2017). The attempt at creating a social rainbow by wooing Dalits, especially in Malwa turned out to be disastrous. The leader of Dera Sacha Sauda, Guru Ram Rahim Singh pardoned by the Akal Takht under Badal pressure weakened the image of the first family of Punjab as it sent across a message that even securing Malwa, considered their bastion required support of a dera Chief despised by the Sikh community.²⁶ Dalits on the other hand looked to Congress, rather than SAD which was perceived as the bastion of the rural, dominant caste peasantry, rightly or wrongly.

Importantly, the results were not as apocalyptic for SAD as many political analysts predicted. Though the Akalis still managed to win support of Jat Sikhs, as can be seen from Table 3, there has been a decline in their popularity since 2007. While CSDS post poll survey of 2007 recorded 50.0% of Jats backing SAD, the same declined to 48.4% in 2012 and to 34.9% in 2017. While the 'first past the post' system of Indian democracy caused that vote share not to translate into actual seats, it does highlight the continuing relevance of SAD among its core supporters. In fact, as pointed out by Singh, Akali Dal enjoys the rare distinction of being one of the few parties with autonomous origins, organizational base and legacy and a history of safeguarding minority interests when Indian democracy was under threat as for example during the Emergency. Beginning as an opposition party, with varied coalitions with Jan Sangh, Left, BSP and back to BJP and winning two consecutive Assembly elections, the Akali Dal's political saga has been an ever evolving one (Singh, 2014). One of the key lessons from the 2017 State Assembly elections, as Yogendra Yadav pointed out was the preference of the electorate of Punjab for 'experience over experiment'.²⁷ This explanation also applies to the Dalit mobilization in the state and their voting patterns. Despite claims that the 2017 elections result would a harbinger of change, the winning party and importance attached to issues at hand, were recurrent of past trends. The Dalit votes too followed a similar pattern. For example, although Doaba was one of the few places where the Bahujan Samaj Party had some standing, it also moved back to the cushy arms of the Congress (Gupta, 2017). The loss for Akalis does not mean a decline in the political dominance of the Jat Sikhs. In fact an analysis by the Trivedi Centre proves that the caste composition of members of *Vidhan Sabha* (Legislative Assembly) remains more or less the same (Trivedi Centre for Political Data,

2017). However, AAP in this context does add to the diversity in the assembly by having 9 of its MLAs from SC castes and two from Other Backward Castes. The Jat Sikhs through dominant representation in the two main parties - Akalis and Congress - continue to constitute a major segment of the Punjab assembly. Thus, while Dalits in Punjab are voting in large numbers, given their caste cleavages, along with socio-economic differences, means that instead of forming a consolidated block based on caste identity, they look for accommodation within mainstream parties.

In search of Allies - Dalit Assertion and impact on Punjab

In his work Jaffrelot has analyzed how North India has lagged behind the South and the West as far as politicization of the lower castes is concerned (Jaffrelot, 2003: 5-6). This is due to numerous reasons, such as a society based on a well-defined Varna system, existence of a healthy number of upper and middle castes and even the nature of land revenue systems devised in North India. However, even with regard to the North-Indian 'Hindi belt', the case of Punjab presents a peculiar problem. The rise of the 'Dominant Caste' in Punjab has completely eclipsed the coming up of the idea of 'Bahujan'. Bahujan Samaj Party, based on the ideals of Kanshi Ram, a Ramdasia Sikh, in the early phase of post-militancy, emerged both as a movement and a Party in Punjab, building a base especially among government employed Scheduled Castes and then expanding in areas which had witnessed Leftist struggles in the past such as Doaba. The Party became a force to reckon with in Uttar Pradesh, but its experience in the two states has been completely different. Guru et al have argued that in the case of Uttar Pradesh, it sought to break the vertical patron-client relationships and create new solidarities on the basis of identity. They further explain how caste is still the basis of a vote bank, but unlike earlier times when Dalits formed the vote banks of mainstream parties, today Dalits and in some cases other lower castes, form the core-constituency of Dalit parties and take pride in having their 'own government' in power (Guru et al, 2012). This was true even in cases of fragmentation of Dalit groups, wherein by supporting a party like BSP, they sought pride in their identity. Despite encouraging performance in the early 1990s, the BSP has not been able to recreate its U.P. experience in Punjab. While the BSP has a base available, it has not been able to nurture adequate leadership in Punjab, especially with the High Command having its bastion in Uttar Pradesh. Even its better performing candidates, especially from the Dalit-dense region of Doaba, have migrated to other parties including AAP, dealing a heavy blow to BSP fortunes. Thus both BSP and AAP may be seen as outside parties. The BSP, despite its founder Kanshi Ram belonging to the state, failed to wage a movement against Casteism in Punjab or produce an indigenous leader to mobilize Dalits across religious and regional divides (Narayan, 2014). Similarly, AAP in Punjab was marred with constant factionalism with Punjabi faces such as Phoolka not emerging as mass leaders, while Bhagwant Mann was plagued by accusations of drinking at rallies and meetings.

Furthermore, the cultural identity of '*Punjabiya*' over and above the bonds of caste has led to creation of an inclusive, heterogeneous regional identity (Singh, 2014: 66). The amalgamation of traditional Punjabi values travel across religion, caste, generations and even borders with the out-migration of Punjabis. This cultural tie accords a special position to electoral politics in Punjab. BSP and AAP suffer from this lack of understanding of *Punjabiya*. The idea of an outside party gaining power seems threatening to the notions of '*Sikhi*' (values enshrined in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib along with norms set under *Sikh Rahit Maryada*) and '*Panjabiya*,' held dearly by the Punjabi populace (Jodhka & Myrvold, 2014: 68-69). Both religion and caste interplay with this notion of *Punjabiya* in a globalized world, thereby making it a futile task to analyze Dalit political assertion only through the lens of caste. Thus political mobilization of Scheduled Castes in Punjab narrowly conceived in terms of sub-classification of caste and region is not conducive towards formulating broad alliances with other Dalit struggles around the country. While there are obvious signs of oppression and socio-economic neglect with Dalits opening up alternative public spaces in the form of Deras or Gurdwaras, Dalits have not been 'hounded as prey.' The issues inflicting Dalit politics across the country, more often than not, fail to find resonance in Punjab due the varying caste dynamics in the state.

However, the present assembly elections in the two North Indian states paint a fascinating picture. The fact that Uttar Pradesh and Punjab elections coincided provides a platform for an in depth analysis. While on the face of it, the electoral results could not have been on more extreme ends, as far as Dalit mobilization and voting is concerned, certain parallels emerge. State assembly elections in Punjab therefore present a baffling puzzle as far as political mobilization of Dalits is concerned. The colossal victory of BJP was based on electrifying sections of the population that had been marginalized from electoral politics. The belief that Mayawati is the leader of the entire Dalit populace was shattered. Mayawati's Dalit politics in fact turned out to be myopic focusing only on the Jatavs, while ignoring the non-Jatavati-Dalits who constitute a majority of the SC population. As pointed out by Verma the electoral coup managed by the BJP was quiet spectacular with its vote share among non-Jatavati Dalits going up from 3% in the 2007 elections to nearly 40% in 2017. BJP also managed to seduce a large proportion of Muslim voters from the Samajwadi Party and BSP. This was possible because instead of treating Muslims as a monolithic segment, BJP was able to connect with the Dalit Muslims belonging to the Arzal class, which had not found representation in the SP or BSP.²⁸

The fact that caste or identity based parties faced one of their worst performances since the 'Mandalisation' of politics raises the question whether caste and identity are becoming redundant, with the marginalized groups moving towards issue based politics. While such a hypothesis seems agreeable, the picture is not as straightforward. Identity politics may not be declining but in fact transforming. Identity is not a monolith concept, but a complex layering of numerous imaginations. Punjab appropriately conveys the multiple converging circles that constitute identity. Furthermore, Uttar Pradesh too is

witnessing the highlighting of hierarchies within the SCs in the state. The 'third democratic upsurge' in Uttar Pradesh has witnessed voters moving from the prism of 'identity to aspirational politics' (Verma, 2016). Uttar Pradesh in fact, seems to be following in Punjab's footsteps as far as recent elections are concerned, with the mainstream party moving towards talking about politics of development.

However, unlike UP, Punjab has missed out on a crucial step of 'upsurge from below'. Emergence of an electoral force requires a broad convergence of interests to forge the foundations of unity. There has not been a single party or leader who has galvanized Dalits across sub-regions and religion in Punjab. While Dalits in Punjab have realized their agency - instead of being portrayed as objects of marginality, coming up with their own spaces of socio-cultural interaction and action - the same is yet to translate in the sphere of electoral politics. Foundations for a political transformation require a social change wherein the various sub-groups of SC population of Punjab are able to empathize with concerns of one another, thereby creating a consolidated Dalit base aimed at political assertion and representation. At the same time, there is also a need to keep in mind other demographic and political changes that can have a spillover effect on Dalit political empowerment in Punjab. The upheavals are in three critical social categories of religion, caste and class, impacting the very nature of electoral politics in the state.

Politics in Punjab has been closely tied to the axis of religion. According to the 2011 Census, Sikhs have seen a fall in their percentage of Punjab's population to 57.7% as compared to 59.9% in 2001. This can be attributed to two major inter-related reasons. The first is the fall in decadal growth which was as low as 8.4% in 2011, attributed to adoption of family planning due to relative prosperity of Sikhs, or an attempt to not divide the already small land holdings given that demographically, Sikhs in Punjab belong to rural, agrarian category. The second reason is the high out-migration of Sikhs and high in-migration of Hindus, including migrant workers, to Punjab. Caste in Punjab is seen as closely tied to class especially in the rural settings, with 'dominant caste' Jats as landowners and Dalits as laborers traditionally reflected this configuration. While this caste-class linkage was broken earlier in the urban areas due to education, reservation in employment and emigration abroad, the persistence of the agricultural crisis is doing the same in rural areas. Oberoi notes that the majority of small and marginal farmers in Punjab are from the 'high' Jat caste but negative returns from agriculture pushed these farmers towards indebtedness and suicide. (Oberoi, 1996: 264) Furthermore due to acute caste consciousness, the Jats, despite their desperation, don't generally perform labor as it would mean working with Dalits.

The altering of these primary social categories suggests that there may be a decline in the influence of Sikhism as an umbrella concept, requiring a rebalancing of alliances. Especially with the rise of deras as alternative sites of spirituality offering an equal status, Sikh Dalits may look to them for socio-political guidance. As noted by Ram in the context of Ravidas deras, 'the ecstasy and reason of the song of the utopia of Begumpura, as envisaged by Guru

Ravidass in the early modern period, perfectly fits with the analytical resonances of the Prabuddha Bharat of Dr. Ambedkar' (Ram, 2012: 691). On the other hand, given the crisis in agriculture which is still the majority occupation for Sikhs, there could be emergence of conditions which may witness extremism raising its head in the state again. Alternatively given the desperate state of small and marginal Jat farmers, this may force them to seek an alternative to the big two parties of the state. Looking to the future, this may provide ample opportunities to the Left, BSP and AAP to strategize a coalition of Dalit and marginal Jat farmers on the basis of class commonality. Punjab may well be on the cusp of another phase in its turbulent tryst with electoral politics, one in which Dalits in Punjab can actively engage and shape, allowing for social deepening of democracy in Punjab.

Notes

¹ Rajeev Bhargava differentiates between majority-minority framework and syndrome. The framework is based on competing preferences of groups which may at different times be in majority or minority depending on the topic at hand. However, unlike majority-minority framework, syndrome is based on egalitarianism and devoid of a sense of alienation between the two groups.

² The terms Dalit or Dalits are used in this paper to refer to communities considered as Scheduled Castes in Punjab. Furthermore the use of terms like 'Chamar,' 'Mazhabi,' 'Balmiki' are to point out the various sub-categories within the Dalit community and in no way used in a derogatory or disrespectful manner.

³In the '*Abhiram Singh v/s C.D. Comachen (dead) by Lrs and Ors*' (2/01/2017), the Supreme Court said that election is a secular exercise and thereby its way and process should be followed, while interpreting Section 123 (3) of the Representation of the People Act, 195. Seeking vote in the name of religion by the candidate will be dealt under Section 123(3) of the Representation of People's Act, the Supreme Court ruled. It also prohibited the use of the caste, creed, language or community as a tool for seeking vote in elections.

⁴As discussed in the editorial in Indian Express.

Available at (<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/stuck-between-4-and-3-4468496/>)

⁵ Harish K Puri discusses the example of Sant Kabir, who came from Shudra household of weavers, and in his *dohas* (couplets) questioned the Brahman claims of being repository of knowledge. Kabir says, '*Tu bahman main kasika julaha, bhujju mere gyana, Tim to raje bhupatirajhe Hari seon mere dhyana*'. (Oh! You Brahmin how can you understand the knowledge of a weaver of Kashi, you have been looking up to (or begging at the doors of the kings, while I am one with my God?)'

⁶ 'Spheres of Justice' refers to the influential work of Michael Walzer (1983). His idea of complex equality is built on the principles of pluralist distribution of

social goods. Walzer contends that each sphere must reflect a certain principle of allocation of social goods so as to ensure distributive Justice in the society.

⁷ For a caste to be dominant, M.N. Srinivas put forth three main characteristics after a study of his village Rampura. The first feature is the dominance caste wields in the form of economic and political power. The study revealed ownership of arable land to be one of the determining factors catering to this power. The introduction of irrigation further strengthened the position of landowning classes around the country. The second feature is a high stature in the caste hierarchy. In the case of Jats or many other dominant castes such as Okkaligas of Rampura for Srinivas, while traditionally they did not enjoy high placement in caste, their economic preponderance helped them improve their social status. Last but not the least, the numerical strength of the caste helps it achieve dominance. This strength of numbers especially comes to play a prominent part in achieving political power in democratic electoral framework.

⁸ The term was coined by Rajni Kothari in his seminal work 'Caste in Indian Politics' (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1970). He points out the paradoxical relationship between Caste and Electoral Politics. On one hand, while there is secularization of Caste breaking up traditional rigid features and social order, invoking particularistic loyalties in small groups, on the other, it enters politics through consciousness and then gets politicized, thereby becoming one of the critical means of socio-political mobilization.

⁹ As mentioned in the notified Scheduled Caste list of Punjab on the Punjab Scheduled Caste Land Development and Finance Corporation website (http://pscfc.gov.in/pscfc_castesList.html)

¹⁰ Dera Sachkhand Ballan, one of the most influential deras among Ad-Dharmis located in Jalandhar, announced the new religion at the temple of Sri Guru Ravidass, Seer Govardhanpur in Varanasi following the murder of their dera deputy, Sant Ramanand Dass in Vienna in 2009.

¹¹ According to Agricultural Census 2010-11, the number of operational holdings with SCs are 63,480 spreading over an area of 1,26,966 hectares comprising 6.02% and 3.20% of the total land holdings and area of the State, respectively. Majority (85.54%) of these holdings are unviable being less than the size of 5 hectares. Furthermore, as per the 2011 Census, the majority of the SC people (73.33%) live in the rural areas. As per the 2011 Census, the literacy rate among SCs is 64.81% as compared to total literacy rate of 75.84% for the State and 73.00% for the country as a whole.

¹² Mazhabis form 31.6% of the total SC population while Ad-Dharmis are 14.9%, Chamars 26.2, Balmikis 11.2 as per the 2011 Census.

¹³ The *Bhapas* are Khatri or Arora Sikhs who migrated from Pakistan and have differences both culturally and linguistically. They belong to the merchant class and are urban traders or entrepreneurs. According to Kohli, they comprise 10% of the Sikh population (taken from Atul Kohli (1990), *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge University Press).

¹⁴ The Aam Aadmi Party rose from the Anna Hazare led 'India against Corruption' campaign which brought Delhi on the streets and Jantar Mantar in

2011. Arvind Kejriwal, one of the members of the IAC team with the support of co-activists, Prashant Bhushan and Yogendra Yadav formed the Aam Aadmi Party in November 2012. The new party won favor in Delhi winning 28 out of 70 seats in its first outing in the 2013 Delhi Assembly elections and a whopping majority of 67 seats in the 2015 election. However, AAP has been wrought by constant factionalism, splits, sting operations and accusations of dictatorial attitude of Kejriwal. After a stellar performance in Punjab in 2014 General Elections, winning 4 parliamentary seats, the party decided to contest in the 2017 Punjab Assembly elections.

¹⁵Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was an advocate of lower castes acquiring political power to fight the evils of the caste system. Even prior to independence, through the Ramsay McDonald Award in 1932, Ambedkar wished to attain separate electorates for Dalits so as to provide adequate political space to them. Gandhi's fast unto death against the Communal Award led to the Poona Pact between the two leaders, creating way for reservation for Dalits in Legislative bodies as included in the Indian Constitution.

¹⁶ Punjab is divided into 3 areas of Doaba, Majha and Malwa. While Malwa dominates in the number of seats - 69 in all - many parties like Congress in 2007 have made the mistake of focusing entirely on Malwa and losing due to a lackluster performance in the other two sub-regions. (See: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/not-malwa-doaba-majha-were-kingmaker-in-last-two-punjab-elections/story-DocJK3XnWB2bbqBljvTSKN.html>)

¹⁷ Conflict between Ad-dharmis and Jats in Talhan village emanated from the former demanding representation in the management of a local religious shrine. The shrine was dedicated to Baba Nihal Singh, a Sikh from the artisan caste of Ramgarhia and who lived in a neighboring village called Dakoha. He had died constructing a water wheel for the villagers. Harnam Singh, who used to be an aide of Nihal Singh, took care of the smadh all his life and kept the flame burning. When Harnam Singh died, another samadhi was built close to the earlier structure. Over the years these samadhis began to attract devotees, who also brought offerings, mostly in the form of cash. These two small structures were slowly converted into a shrine. In due course another structure came up in the middle of these two samadhis where the Sikh holy book, Guru Granth, was kept and it began to be read as per the Sikh rituals. To mark the death anniversary of Shahid Baba Nihal Singh, his devotees from Talhan and neighboring villages started organizing an annual fair ('mela') at the shrine. The caste conflict between Jats and Ad-Dharmis ignited over membership to the committee managing the shrine and related affairs (<https://www.countercurrents.org/Dalit-louis240703.htm>).

¹⁸ Bootlegging gang rivalry resulted in the murder and chopping off of left leg of a Dalit youth, Sukchain Singh Pali, in Mansa by upper caste residents of his village. The assailants were related to Niranjn Singh, driver of Akali supremo Prakash Singh Badal further leading to tension in the area and criticism by other parties. A CBI enquiry was demanded by the Congress. The incident highlighted two major problems gripping Punjab - that of addiction and caste violence. The

incident was a reminder of the brutal murder of Bheem Tank, a dalit youth at his farmhouse near Abohar at the behest of prime accused, liquor baron Shiv Lal Doda. (<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/mansa-incident-murdered-sukchain-singh-pali-dalit-youths-chopped-limb-found-3079163/>)

¹⁹ The idea of music as linked to identity and thereby inherently political in nature has been seen across the world with examples such as reggae or rap as a symbol of African-American assertion, New Song Movement in Latin American region or the punk rock music against Putin in Russia. The same may be connected to issues of caste identity and assertion in context of India. I am working on the idea of Music as a tool for Dalit assertion for my PhD.

²⁰ Bootan Mandi is located in Jalandhar, a huge center for Dalits, especially Chamars of Doaba area of Punjab. A large percentage of Chamars who were traditionally leather workers are Ravidasis and Bootan Mandi becomes the site for a mammoth annual mela/fair to commemorate Guru Ravidas Gurburab/ birth anniversary. *Shobha Yatra*, a huge procession is the main attraction with singing, dancing, performances, *langars* being organized. The mela is symbolic of the socio-cultural assertion of Chamars in the region, providing a platform for political parties to win support.

²¹ The term was used by Shekhar Gupta (2017).

²² While INC could not stop the 'Modi Wave' in Uttar Pradesh, despite its alliance with the Samajwadi Party, it also could not come up with huge tallies in Manipur or Goa. The loss of former CM, Harish Rawat in Uttarakhand points to the crisis unfolding for the Indian National Congress.

²³ According to data of a pre-poll study conducted by Lokniti-CSDS for the 2017 Punjab Assembly elections, 13% respondents said they would vote in accordance with instructions given by their deras.

²⁴ Data as calculated from results given the Election Commission of India

²⁵ This table presents cross tabulation of data collected by the CSDS-ABP Post Poll Survey 2017 regarding party preference caste community wise. The table segregates data acquired from a total of 3130 questionnaires that presents percentage of a caste group that chose a particular party and secondly how much share the particular community constitutes in the total vote share for that party.

²⁶ The *Akal Takht* is one of the five seats of power of Sikh religion located at Harimandar Sahib, Amritsar. The Akal Takht *hukamnama* is an Order from the seat of power and used to enforce numerous rules including excommunicating those who are accused of blasphemy. A *hukamnama* was issued against Dera Sacha Sauda chief, Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh in 2007 after he appeared in attire 'resembling' that of Guru Gobind Singh. In 2016, former Jathedar Gurbachan Singh pardoned the dera chief, only to revoke it due to protests.

²⁷ The same point was made during an NDTV program hosted by Prannoy Roy 'And the Winner is' analyzing Punjab elections, on which Yadav was a panelist.

²⁸ These observations were made during a lecture delivered by Dr. A.K. Verma as part of National Consultation on Priorities for Punjab Governance and Development organized by Research Promotion Cell, Punjab University in collaboration with Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh. I am extremely grateful to Dr. A.K. Verma, Prof. A.S. Narang and Prof.

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