

## **Dalit Politics in Punjab: Culture, Identity and Assertion**

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### **Abstract**

*Dalit politics in Punjab reflects a complex interplay of caste, culture, religion, and socio-economic structures. Despite the egalitarian principles of Sikhism, Dalits especially Mazhabi Sikhs, Ravidasias, and Balmikis have faced persistent exclusion from religious and social institutions. The evolution of Dalit identity in Punjab has been shaped by historical movements like Adi Dharma, colonial interventions, migration, and economic marginalization. Cultural assertion through separate religious spaces, literature, music, and symbolic commemorations has emerged as a powerful mode of resistance. Political mobilization has seen fluctuating fortunes, with parties like the BSP briefly gaining traction before declining, while the Congress has alternated between symbolic gestures and structural neglect. Youth activism, digital platforms, and diaspora support have further fueled a renewed consciousness. The assertion of dignity and identity today is multidimensional expressed through everyday resistance, community organization, and cultural innovation challenging dominant caste narratives in both rural and urban Punjab.*

### **Keywords**

Dalit politics, Punjab, caste identity, cultural resistance, Dalit assertion, Political assertion

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## Introduction

The story of India's democratic evolution is incomplete without acknowledging the contribution and struggle of its marginalized communities, especially the Dalits. Historically subordinated within the rigid framework of caste hierarchy, Dalits formerly referred to as "Untouchables" have long endured social ostracism, economic deprivation, and political invisibility. However, with the advent of modern democratic institutions, constitutional safeguards, and social movements, the contours of Dalit identity and political participation have undergone significant transformation. While these shifts are visible across the Indian landscape, the case of Punjab presents a unique and somewhat paradoxical scenario. Punjab, often lauded for its progressive religious identity anchored in Sikh egalitarianism and its economic prosperity due to the Green Revolution, stands out as the Indian state with the highest proportion of Scheduled Caste (SC) population. As per the 2011 Census, Dalits comprise nearly 32% of Punjab's total population, a significantly higher percentage than the national average of approximately 16.6% (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011)<sup>3</sup>. In certain districts of the Doaba region such as Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur, Nawanshahr (SBS Nagar), and Kapurthala this percentage crosses 40%, making Dalits not just a political constituency but also a cultural majority in specific localities. Such a demographic weight should ideally translate into political empowerment and cultural assertion. However, the actual picture is far more complex.

Despite their numerical strength, Dalits in Punjab remain politically fragmented, socially discriminated against, and economically subordinated. The paradox lies in the coexistence of a strong demographic presence with a relatively weak political voice. This disjuncture raises important concerns about the dynamics of Dalit politics in Punjab. It becomes essential to understand why political assertion has not corresponded with demographic advantage in a state where Dalits constitute nearly one-third of the population. Equally important is the need to explore the cultural mechanisms through which Dalit communities articulate their identities. The influence of socio-religious movements, the role of local leadership, the nature of electoral strategies, and the impact of migration patterns must all be considered in shaping the contemporary Dalit political experience in Punjab. Addressing these issues requires moving beyond narrow frameworks of electoral statistics or party participation. Dalit politics must be

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<sup>3</sup> Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). *Census of India 2011: Primary Census Abstract – Punjab*. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.

approached as a multi-dimensional phenomenon grounded in culture, identity, and assertion. This comprehensive perspective offers a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways in which Dalits in Punjab negotiate power, claim public space, and resist historical injustices through not only political parties or vote-bank formations, but also through spiritual movements, cultural productions, and grassroots mobilizations.

The politics of identity has acquired an especially vital role in the case of Dalits in Punjab, where caste distinctions persist despite the formal egalitarian ethos of Sikhism. While Sikh teachings emphasize the rejection of caste hierarchy, the lived reality of many Dalit Sikhs especially the **Mazhabi Sikhs** and **Ravidasias** is one of exclusion from gurdwaras, unequal participation in religious rituals, and continued social segregation. This contradiction between theological ideals and everyday discrimination has led to the emergence of separate religious and cultural spaces, such as **Ravidass Deras**, that cater specifically to the spiritual and political needs of Dalit communities. These deras not only serve as centers of worship but also as hubs of social assertion, education, and political mobilization. Additionally, the rise of Dalit cultural expressions such as **Punjabi Dalit literature**, **Dalit autobiographies**, **folk music**, and **popular media** has played a crucial role in forging a distinct Dalit identity that is both rooted in tradition and oriented towards transformation. Writers like **Des Raj Kali**, **Gurmeh Singh Dhillon**, **Lal Singh Dil** and Sarup Sialvi and movements like the **Ravidasia assertion in Doaba**, have contributed immensely to the articulation of a Dalit consciousness that challenges dominant narratives and seeks dignity, respect, and representation (Juergensmeyer, 1988)<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, the political awakening in the Doaba region, fueled in part by the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)** under the leadership of **Kanshi Ram**, brought Dalit issues to the forefront in Punjab's electoral politics during the 1990s. Although the BSP's influence has waned in the decades since, it left behind a legacy of political consciousness that continues to shape Dalit electoral behavior and identity assertion. At the same time, the role of mainstream parties such as the Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in co-opting or sidelining Dalit voices reflects the ongoing challenges of achieving genuine representation and empowerment. The objective of this article is to critically examine the political trajectory of Dalits in Punjab through the interconnected themes of culture, identity, and assertion. It aims to trace the historical roots of Dalit identity and political mobilization in the region,

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<sup>4</sup> Juergensmeyer, M. (1988). *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*. Oxford University Press.

highlighting how colonial legacies, socio-religious reform movements, and post-Partition transformations have shaped Dalit consciousness. A key focus is placed on the role of religion, caste differentiation, and the rise of deras such as Dera Sachkhand Ballan in constructing a distinct spiritual and social identity for Dalits, often outside the mainstream Sikh framework. The study further analyzes various socio-political movements, both within electoral politics and grassroots activism that have sought to challenge caste hierarchies and empower Dalit communities. Central to this exploration is the interrogation of cultural tools literature, music, and folk traditions that Dalits have used as powerful mediums of resistance and self-assertion. Finally, the article identifies the persistent structural and institutional barriers, including economic marginalization, leadership fragmentation, and tokenistic political representation, that continue to hinder the consolidation of Dalit political power in Punjab, despite their numerical strength (Jodhka, 2014)<sup>5</sup>.

### Historical Background

To understand the contemporary dynamics of Dalit politics in Punjab, it is vital to examine its historical foundations. The present assertion of Dalit identity and culture has deep roots in a long history of marginalization, socio-religious reform, resistance, and gradual transformation. Punjab's caste dynamics though seemingly softened by the egalitarian ethos of Sikhism and various reformist movements continue to be shaped by entrenched social hierarchies that have historically constrained Dalit mobility and empowerment. Punjab is often perceived as a relatively casteless society, largely due to the egalitarian teachings of Guru Nanak and the other Sikh Gurus. Sikhism, in its core philosophy, denounces caste distinctions and promotes universal equality through institutions like *langar* (community kitchen), *sangat* (congregation), and a collective identity under the Khalsa. However, despite these progressive ideals, caste discrimination persisted within Sikh society. Dalit Sikhs, particularly the *Mazhabi Sikhs* and *Ramdasias/Ravidasias* continued to face exclusion from religious rituals, dominant caste-managed gurdwaras, and village power structures. This contradiction between doctrine and practice became a defining factor in the evolution of Dalit identity in Punjab (Puri, 2003)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Jodhka, S. S. (2014). Dalits in Business: Self-Employed Scheduled Castes in Northwest India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49(11), 52–60.

<sup>6</sup> Puri, H. K. (2003). **Scheduled Castes in Sikh Community: A Historical Perspective**. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(26), 2693–2701.

Jat Sikhs, the dominant landowning caste, maintained control over agrarian resources and religious institutions such as the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC). Their dominance contributed to the systemic marginalization of Dalits within Sikhism. Over time, Dalits began carving out separate socio-religious spaces. They built independent gurdwaras, adopted distinct religious symbols, and aligned with socio-spiritual deras such as *Dera Sachkhand Ballan*, which became a vital center for the Ravidasia community. These expressions of autonomy marked the beginning of a distinct Dalit consciousness in Punjab. In the pre-colonial period, Dalits in Punjab occupied the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy. They were engaged in stigmatized occupations such as leatherwork, scavenging, and manual labor. Living in segregated settlements on the outskirts of villages, they faced untouchability and were denied access to public institutions and education. Social mobility was nearly impossible, and landlessness kept them economically dependent on dominant caste groups.

The arrival of British colonial rule in the 19th century brought about a complex transformation. On one hand, the British codified caste identities through census operations and administrative classification, thereby solidifying caste boundaries. On the other hand, colonial policies opened new opportunities for some Dalits through education, military service, and urban employment. The British Indian Army, for example, recruited Mazhabi Sikhs in significant numbers, offering them limited upward mobility and a sense of respectability. Simultaneously, Christian missionary activity established schools and institutions that provided education to some Dalit children. Although conversion to Christianity offered an escape from caste-based discrimination, such conversions remained limited in Punjab compared to other regions like southern India. Yet, these openings planted early seeds of social mobility and a new consciousness among Dalit communities. However, colonial land settlement policies reinforced structural inequalities. The *zamindari* system and agrarian reforms consolidated land in the hands of dominant castes, especially Jat Sikhs. Dalits remained landless agricultural laborers, a status that continued into the post-independence era. Landlessness became a key factor in their socio-economic marginalization (Jeffrey, 2001)<sup>7</sup>.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw several reform movements that impacted Dalit communities. The *Adi Dharma* movement, initiated by Baba Balu and formalized by Mangoo Ram Mugowalia, sought to create a separate religious identity for Dalits. It emphasized self-

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey, C. (2001). British law and caste identity manipulation in colonial India: The Punjab Alienation of Land Act. *Modern Asian Studies*, 35(3), 579-602.

respect, education, and political unity, especially among the Chamars of the Doaba region. It laid the foundation for political mobilization by promoting cultural pride and distinct community symbols. Other movements had limited and often ambivalent impacts. The *Arya Samaj* attempted to integrate Dalits through *shuddhi* (purification) campaigns, but its efforts were patronizing and failed to dismantle caste hierarchies. The *Singh Sabha* movement, though aimed at reviving Sikh purity, remained dominated by upper-caste leadership and failed to address the entrenched discrimination against Dalit Sikhs.

The Partition of 1947 was a major turning point. The displacement of Muslims from East Punjab and the influx of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan led to demographic upheaval. While upper-caste refugees received land and rehabilitation support, Dalits were often left out of compensation schemes. Their already marginal economic position deteriorated further, as competition for jobs and land intensified and dominant castes consolidated their power. Post-independence land reforms, aimed at redistributing land to the landless, saw limited success in Punjab. Jat Sikh landowners continued to dominate the agrarian economy, while Dalits remained largely dependent as laborers. Even where land was granted to Dalits, it was often of poor quality and lacked basic facilities like irrigation.

Despite these structural challenges, the Doaba region witnessed a remarkable shift due to Dalit migration to Western countries such as the UK, Canada, and the US. This *NRI* migration brought remittances, educational opportunities, and political consciousness. Dalit families who migrated abroad contributed to the development of their communities by investing in schools, gurdwaras, and deras. These transnational links empowered Dalits culturally and politically, strengthening their identity and assertion in Punjab. Thus, the historical trajectory of Dalit politics in Punjab is one of resistance against systemic exclusion and the creative assertion of identity through religion, migration, and community-building. These foundations continue to influence Dalit political agency in the present day.

### Dalit Identity in Punjab

The concept of identity is a very complex subject that is being discussed by a number of scholars on various fronts-social, economical as well as political in the present scenario. Some characterize identity to more personal attributes, traits, likings, dislikings, capability, personality, potential, intelligence, economic status etc. and some with reference to some social



groups (Nahar & Hans, 2023)<sup>8</sup>. Dalit identity in Punjab is a complex and evolving construct, shaped by centuries of exclusion and resistance, and now actively expressed through a blend of religion, culture, literature, and community organization. While numerical strength has not always translated into political power for Dalits in Punjab, the realm of culture has become a powerful domain of assertion. Through religious practices, folk traditions, music, literature, and the growing influence of religious deras, Dalits have carved out alternative spaces of identity that resist upper-caste domination and foster a collective consciousness. However, this identity is not monolithic; it is layered with internal tensions based on sub-caste divisions, religious affiliations, and regional variations (Singh, 2024)<sup>9</sup>. One of the most significant aspects of Dalit identity in Punjab is the assertion of spiritual autonomy. For communities historically denied access to dominant religious institutions and spaces such as gurdwaras managed by upper-caste Sikhs the development of distinct religious practices has been a crucial mode of resistance. Central to this assertion is the **Ravidasia movement**, named after **Guru Ravidas**, a 15th-century Bhakti saint of the Chamar caste, who preached social equality, devotion, and human dignity.

The **Ravidasia identity** emerged as a powerful religious and cultural force in the **Doaba region**, where the Chamar population is particularly strong. The community reveres Guru Ravidas as its spiritual anchor and has developed an independent religious identity, particularly after the 2009 **Vienna temple attack** in which two religious leaders of **Dera Sachkhand Ballan** were attacked. This incident led to a formal separation of Ravidasias from mainstream Sikhism, and the community began publishing its own scripture, the **Amritbani Guru Ravidass Ji**. The establishment of separate Ravidas temples, distinct rituals, and a unique religious calendar are clear markers of this spiritual assertion. Beyond the Ravidasias, other Dalit communities in Punjab such as **Mazhabi Sikhs** and **Balmikis** also exhibit distinct religious identities. While Mazhabi Sikhs align themselves with Sikhism, they often face caste-based exclusion from religious institutions. Balmikis, historically involved in sanitation work, follow their own religious traditions and venerate **Valmiki**, the author of the Ramayana. The creation of **Valmiki temples** and the celebration of **Valmiki Jayanti** are important elements of Balmiki cultural assertion. These religious practices are not just about faith; they are about community dignity, visibility, and autonomy. By reclaiming spiritual space, Dalit communities

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<sup>8</sup> Nahar, E., & Hans, P. K. (2023). *Dalit identity in India: A study of shaping and reshaping process in the state of Punjab*. Chanakya Publication & Distributors.

<sup>9</sup> Singh, S. S. (2024). Deras, identity, and caste cleavages in the Sikh-dominated society of Punjab. *Religions*, 15(9), Article 1039.

in Punjab are actively resisting the historical narrative of inferiority and exclusion (Ram, 2009)<sup>10</sup>.

The assertion of Dalit identity in Punjab has found vibrant expression in the realm of **language, folk music, and literature**. These cultural forms serve not only as tools of protest but also as mediums of community pride and self-representation. In recent decades, **Punjabi Dalit literature** has emerged as a powerful genre. Authors like **Des Raj Kali, Lal Singh Dil, Gurmel Singh Dhillon**, and **Swarajbir** have written poetry, fiction, and autobiographies that depict the lived realities of Dalit life touching upon themes of discrimination, poverty, landlessness, and spiritual yearning. **Lal Singh Dil**, often referred to as the “Dalit Dushyant Kumar” of Punjab, combined Marxist ideology with Dalit identity in his poetry, capturing the alienation and resistance of Dalit laborers. His verse, though melancholic, is marked by a deep sense of rebellion and self-respect.

Autobiographical writing has also become a strong medium for Dalit self-expression. Narratives like **Balbir Madhopuri's "Chhangiya Rukh" (The Broken Tree)** detail the psychological and material challenges of growing up Dalit in rural Punjab (Bochkovskaya, 2020)<sup>11</sup>. These works reclaim the Dalit voice from the margins and present it in first-person, unfiltered and authentic. **Folk music** a deeply embedded form of expression in Punjabi culture has also been harnessed by Dalit singers and lyricists. Artists like **Ginni Mahi**, who identifies as a Dalit and Ravidassia, use **popular Punjabi musical forms (like tumbi beats and bhangra rhythms)** to sing about **Ambedkarite ideals**, caste pride, and equality. Her songs such as “Fan Baba Sahib Di” and “Danger Chamar” are not just entertainment; they are cultural manifestos challenging the casteist status quo. By using Punjabi the language of the region as the medium of expression, Dalit artists and writers ensure that their cultural assertion reaches the masses. This linguistic and musical assertion bridges the gap between the Dalit community and the broader Punjabi public, even as it challenges dominant caste norms.

In Punjab, **religious deras** have emerged as influential socio-religious institutions, especially for marginalized communities. While many deras exist across caste lines, a significant number are associated with Dalit communities and cater specifically to their spiritual and cultural needs. Among them, the **Dera Sachkhand Ballan**, based in **Ballan village** near Jalandhar, is

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<sup>10</sup> Ram, R. (2009). *Ravidass, Dera Sachkhand Ballan and the Question of Dalit Identity in Punjab*. Journal of Punjab Studies, 16(1).

<sup>11</sup> Bochkovskaya, A. V. (2020). *Hamārā camārō kā bargad: A chapter from Chāngiā rukh / Against the Night—Balbir Madhopuri's Punjabi Dalit autobiography*. ResearchGate.



the most prominent. Aligned with the Ravidasia community, this dera has played a central role in crafting a collective Dalit religious identity. It offers not just spiritual guidance but also educational and social services, and frequently mobilizes the community for political action. The dera gained national attention after the Vienna incident of 2009, which became a turning point in Ravidasia identity politics. Other important deras include **Dera Baba Lal Badshah**, **Dera Bhaniarawala**, and several Valmiki deras, which command large followings. These deras often run parallel religious structures temples, rituals, festivals and are mostly managed by Dalit leadership. In contrast to upper-caste-dominated religious institutions, these deras offer platforms for Dalit voices and leadership. Deras also function as **centers of cultural assertion**, hosting events, publishing texts, supporting local literature, and fostering community pride. However, their growing socio-political influence has also made them targets of criticism from both mainstream religious authorities and political parties wary of their independent power. Nevertheless, for many Dalits, these deras represent a break from traditional exclusion and an affirmation of dignity and self-respect. While Dalit identity in Punjab has grown more visible and assertive, it is not without internal tensions. The Dalit population in Punjab is not a homogenous group; it comprises **multiple castes and sub-castes**, including **Chamars (Ravidasias)**, **Mazhabi Sikhs**, **Balmikis**, and **others**, each with distinct histories, occupations, and cultural practices.

For instance, **Chamars**, traditionally leather workers, have achieved relative upward mobility in the Doaba region, partly due to education, migration, and overseas remittances. They are the primary followers of the Ravidasia faith and have led much of the Dalit cultural and political mobilization in Punjab. In contrast, **Mazhabi Sikhs** are mostly concentrated in the Malwa and Majha regions and have not experienced the same level of socio-economic progress. Similarly, **Balmikis**, who venerate Valmiki as their guru, maintain a separate religious and cultural identity. They have often felt alienated from both Sikh and Ravidasia spaces, and their temples and community institutions reflect a distinct self-perception (Forward Press, 2021)<sup>12</sup>. These differences sometimes result in competition for leadership, representation, and resources. Political parties have often exploited these divisions by giving selective patronage to one group over another. For instance, while Chamars may find representation in mainstream politics, Mazhabi Sikhs are more likely to be recruited for security forces or labor roles. The fragmentation of Dalit identity has made collective mobilization difficult, limiting the

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<sup>12</sup> Forward Press. (2021, October). *The sociopolitical fault lines that run through Punjab's SC community*. Forward Press.

community's ability to exert political pressure as a unified bloc. However, efforts are ongoing to bridge these divides, particularly among youth activists and organizations that emphasize **Ambedkarite unity** and **Bahujan consciousness**. The shared experience of caste oppression and the common aspiration for dignity continue to provide a potential foundation for a more unified Dalit identity.

#### Political Mobilization and Assertion

Despite their substantial demographic presence, Dalits in Punjab have historically faced significant obstacles in achieving political representation and empowerment. Yet, over time, they have made notable efforts to assert their rights and interests through various forms of political mobilization ranging from grassroots movements to participation in state and national elections. The seeds of Dalit political consciousness in Punjab were sown during the colonial period, particularly with the emergence of the **Adi Dharma movement** in the early 20th century. Founded by **Baba Balu** and later developed under the leadership of **Mangoo Ram Mugowalia**, the Adi Dharma movement rejected both Hinduism and Sikhism as oppressive religious structures and sought to assert a separate, dignified identity for Dalits. The movement advocated for the rights of the "Adi Dharmis" or the "original people" of India, emphasizing self-respect, education, and community organization. It also engaged in electoral politics under the **All India Ad Dharm Mandal**, contesting elections to legislative councils during the 1930s (Mukta, 2022)<sup>13</sup>.

This early political activity was significant for several reasons. First, it introduced the concept of a separate Dalit political identity in Punjab, challenging the dominant caste narratives and laying the foundation for an autonomous political voice. Second, it fostered grassroots-level organization, particularly in the Doaba region, where Dalits began mobilizing around shared experiences of exclusion and aspirations for dignity. Third, it laid the ideological groundwork for future Dalit-led political formations, eventually paving the way for the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Punjab. However, despite these early advances, Dalit politics in the post-independence period remained largely fragmented. The political dominance of upper-caste-led parties most notably the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal curtailed opportunities for genuine Dalit leadership. Instead of empowering independent Dalit voices, these parties often co-opted Dalit politicians as symbolic or token figures, offering them minimal influence

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<sup>13</sup> Mukta, P. (2022). The Limits of Conversion: Caste, Labor, and the Question of Emancipation in Colonial Panjab. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 81(2), 405–427.

over actual decision-making processes. As a result, the political presence of Dalits was more representational than transformative.

The turning point in Dalit political mobilization in Punjab came with the rise of the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)**, led by **Kanshi Ram**, a native of **Ropar (Rupnagar)** district in Punjab. Kanshi Ram, born in a Ramdasia Sikh family, was deeply influenced by the teachings of **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** and the **Ambedkarite movement**. After experiencing caste discrimination in his professional life, he committed himself to organizing the **Bahujan Samaj** a collective term for Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and minorities into a political force. In the **1980s and 1990s**, Kanshi Ram's BSP found fertile ground in the **Doaba region** of Punjab, where Dalits, especially the Chamar/Ravidasia communities, had a relatively higher degree of education, land ownership (though limited), and overseas migration. The community's exposure to modern ideas and economic resources enabled them to respond positively to Kanshi Ram's call for **self-respect and political assertion**.

The BSP's performance in Punjab peaked in the **1992 Assembly elections**, where it won **9 seats** and emerged as a significant political force. Its appeal lay in its **assertive ideological stance**, its ability to mobilize Dalit youth, and its projection of a **Dalit-centric political vision** independent of upper-caste patronage. The BSP also invested heavily in building **community symbols**, such as memorials to Ambedkar and Ravidas, which further deepened its emotional and cultural connection with the Dalit electorate. However, several factors contributed to the decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Punjab after the mid-1990s (Sharma & Jodhka, 2023)<sup>14</sup>. One of the key reasons was internal factionalism and a weak organizational structure, which hindered the party's ability to maintain a cohesive and effective presence across the state. Additionally, inconsistent leadership at the state level led to a lack of strategic direction and public trust. Kanshi Ram's increasing focus on national politics particularly in Uttar Pradesh meant that Punjab, despite being his home state, did not receive sustained attention or resources. Over time, many influential Dalit leaders associated with the BSP were co-opted by mainstream parties such as the Congress and Akali Dal, further weakening the party's independent appeal. Moreover, the BSP struggled to expand its support base beyond the Chamar community, limiting its reach among other Dalit sub-castes like the Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis. Despite its electoral decline, the BSP left a significant legacy in Punjab by fostering political consciousness and cultural pride among Dalits. It introduced a powerful

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<sup>14</sup> Sharma, J., & Jodhka, S. S. (2023). Caste, Religion and Identity: Dalits in Punjab. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 15(2), 1–13.

vocabulary of assertion and self-respect that continues to shape Dalit political discourse and identity in the state.

In addition to the BSP, several local and caste-based political outfits have emerged in Punjab, often drawing support from specific Dalit sub-castes or regional identities. While these formations typically lack the broad ideological foundation and pan-Dalit appeal of the BSP, they function as important vehicles for localized assertion and community representation. Among them, the Punjab Ravidasia Dharam Sabha plays a significant role in temple politics and community organization, particularly among the Ravidasia sect. Similarly, Valmiki-Ambedkarite organizations, such as the All India Valmiki Mahasabha, focus on advancing the social, cultural, and political interests of the Balmiki community. Mazhabi Sikh organizations have also gained prominence, especially in the rural areas of Malwa and Majha, where they have actively demanded separate quotas and greater recognition in both religious and political institutions. Additionally, independent Dalit candidates and small regional groupings often contest local elections, such as municipal bodies or panchayats, operating outside the framework of mainstream political parties. While these groups may not command significant statewide influence, they play a crucial role in articulating local grievances, promoting sub-caste-based identities, and asserting community-specific demands within the larger socio-political framework of Punjab. While these groups have helped in **community mobilization** and **grassroots representation**, they have also contributed to the **fragmentation of Dalit politics**. Intra-Dalit rivalries, based on caste (Chamar vs. Mazhabi vs. Balmiki), have often undermined the possibility of a **unified political platform**. Moreover, the **lack of sustained leadership** and limited resources restrict the ability of these groups to challenge dominant parties at the state level. Mainstream political parties in Punjab have long recognized the **electoral importance of Dalit votes** but have generally stopped short of offering **genuine representation**. Instead, Dalits have often been **used as vote-banks** rather than **empowered stakeholders**.

Historically, the Congress has been the preferred party of Dalits in Punjab, especially in rural areas. It has consistently fielded Dalit candidates and established **Scheduled Caste cells** to engage with community issues. Leaders like **Charanjit Singh Channi**, who became Punjab's first Dalit Chief Minister in 2021, symbolized a milestone in Dalit political visibility. However, many observers noted that his elevation was **more symbolic than structural**, lacking a long-term commitment to Dalit leadership development. The Congress's long-standing reliance on **upper-caste leadership**, internal factionalism, and opportunistic alliances have alienated parts

of the Dalit electorate over time. Additionally, the party has often failed to take a strong stance on **caste-based discrimination** or land redistribution, which remain central issues for Dalit communities (Sandhu, 2022)<sup>15</sup>.

Traditionally seen as a **Jat Sikh-dominated party**, the SAD has attempted to broaden its appeal to Dalits by forming **alliances with Ravidasia deras**, creating SC wings, and offering political positions to Dalit leaders. However, these efforts have often been viewed as **tokenistic**. The SAD's religious dominance over the **SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee)** has also contributed to **caste-based exclusion** within Sikh institutions, which further alienates Dalits, particularly the Ravidasias and Mazhabi Sikhs. The party's close relationship with **Dera Sachkhand Ballan** was strategic, especially after the Vienna incident, but its long-standing structural bias against non-Jat Sikhs has limited its ability to retain Dalit support on a consistent basis. The **AAP's emergence** in Punjab politics has created new political dynamics. With its anti-corruption plank, focus on governance, and promise of **people-centric politics**, AAP gained considerable support across caste lines, including among Dalits. In the **2022 Assembly elections**, AAP secured a landslide victory and, like Congress earlier, projected itself as a party of the people. However, **AAP's internal structure** remains dominated by upper-caste and urban leadership, and it has yet to **institutionalize Dalit representation** at senior levels. Its **disconnect from grassroots Dalit movements** and lack of historical engagement with caste politics make it vulnerable to criticism despite its populist appeal.

Punjab's electoral map is significantly shaped by caste demographics, and Dalits have historically played the role of **swing voters**. However, **fragmentation within Dalit castes**, **regional variations**, and **strategic voting** have often diluted their collective electoral strength. The Doaba region, especially districts like Jalandhar, Nawanshahr, Hoshiarpur, and Kapurthala, has a high concentration of Chamars and Ravidasias. Once a stronghold of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), this area has witnessed political shifts in recent years, with parties like the Congress and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) gaining ground by focusing on development and social justice issues (Singh, 2019)<sup>16</sup>. Voting patterns in the region are also significantly influenced by the presence and guidance of local religious deras, which hold considerable sway over community decisions. In contrast, the regions of Malwa and Majha have a larger population of

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<sup>15</sup> Sandhu, K. (2022, January 2). Analysis | Appointment of Charanjit Singh Channi as CM brings SCs back into focus in political arena. *The Hindu*.

<sup>16</sup> Singh, N. (2019). *Dalits, Their Support Base and the Bahujan Samaj Party: A Case Study of the Doaba Region*. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 11(42)



Mazhabi Sikhs. Voter behavior here tends to be shaped by the perceived strength of local candidates, specific promises made by political parties, and, at times, religious affiliations. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and Congress both actively compete for influence in these areas, often forming alliances with religious groups or fielding local leaders from within the Dalit communities to gain credibility and support. Overall, Dalits in Punjab do not vote as a monolithic bloc. Political parties frequently exploit internal divisions among Dalit sub-castes to mobilize support. The lack of a unified Dalit leadership, the absence of a cohesive statewide political platform, and the prominent role of religious institutions such as deras have made Dalit votes both highly coveted and easily fragmented.

#### Socio-Economic Assertion and Challenges

The socio-economic landscape of Dalits in Punjab presents a complex and evolving narrative. Despite constitutional safeguards, affirmative action policies, and instances of upward mobility, Dalits in Punjab continue to face persistent inequalities and structural discrimination. Education has long been considered a critical avenue for Dalit empowerment. In Punjab, reservation policies in educational institutions have facilitated increased access to formal education for Dalit students. The relatively higher literacy rates among Dalits in Punjab compared to other states reflect this. The Doaba region, in particular, stands out for its concentration of Dalit educational achievement. This has produced a visible middle class among Dalits, especially those belonging to the Chamar caste. However, upward mobility through education is not evenly distributed. While urban Dalits and those from better-off sub-castes have made significant progress, rural Dalits and marginalized sub-groups like Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis remain disadvantaged. Many still face challenges such as lack of quality primary education, caste discrimination in schools, and the absence of role models or support systems.

Migration, particularly to Western countries, has also played a transformative role. Dalits from Doaba have migrated in large numbers to the UK, Canada, and the US, seeking better economic prospects and social dignity. The diaspora has not only uplifted the economic conditions of their families back home but also influenced local aspirations and politics. The remittances and exposure to egalitarian societies have emboldened Dalits to assert their rights more openly. However, this phenomenon too has created internal stratifications within Dalit communities between those who have access to migration networks and those who do not. An emerging trend in Punjab is the rise of Dalit entrepreneurship, which marks a departure from the traditional economic roles assigned to Dalits under the caste hierarchy. Many Dalits, especially



those with links to NRIs, have started businesses ranging from small-scale manufacturing and transport services to hospitality and IT-related services (Prasad, Babu, & Kapur, 2014)<sup>17</sup>.

In the Doaba region, several Dalits own hotels, travel agencies, and educational institutions, funded in part by diaspora capital. This entrepreneurial spirit represents a significant shift in the socio-economic positioning of Dalits. It challenges stereotypes of Dalit dependency and helplessness. Furthermore, successful Dalit entrepreneurs often become community benefactors, sponsoring educational programs, religious events, and social causes. In this way, economic assertion translates into cultural and political influence. However, the reach of Dalit entrepreneurship remains limited. Structural barriers like lack of access to credit, discrimination by banks and government officials, and entrenched biases in consumer behavior persist. Caste-based networks dominate the business world in Punjab, and Dalit entrepreneurs often struggle to break into established markets.

Land ownership is a vital determinant of socio-economic status in rural Punjab. Despite forming about 32% of the population, Dalits own less than 3% of agricultural land in the state. This landlessness is a legacy of historical oppression, colonial land settlements, and post-Partition policies that disproportionately favored dominant castes. The lack of land ownership continues to keep Dalits economically vulnerable and socially subordinate. Most rural Dalits are either agricultural laborers or dependent on non-farm employment. While government schemes have attempted to redistribute land and provide homestead plots to Dalits, the implementation has been half-hearted and marred by corruption and bureaucratic apathy. In recent years, land lease conflicts and grassroots mobilization over common village land (Shamlat land) have highlighted the growing awareness among Dalits of their rights. Protests demanding fair lease rights to Dalits under the Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Act have drawn national attention. Yet, dominant castes frequently use violence, threats, and administrative manipulation to suppress Dalit land rights. Moreover, Dalit women face compounded disadvantages, being marginalized by both caste and gender. They often work in the most exploitative sectors such as manual scavenging, cleaning, and domestic work without legal protections or union support.

Despite visible gains in education, migration, and entrepreneurship, Dalits in Punjab continue to face pervasive discrimination in everyday life. In rural areas, Dalits are frequently denied

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<sup>17</sup> Prasad, C. B., Babu, D. S., & Kapur, D. (2014). *Defying the odds: The rise of Dalit entrepreneurs*. New Delhi: Random House India.

access to temples, barber shops, and cremation grounds. Separate colonies for Dalits are still the norm in many villages, reinforcing spatial segregation. Even in urban spaces and among the educated, caste continues to operate in subtle yet powerful ways. Dalit students and employees report facing exclusion, ridicule, and tokenism in universities, government offices, and corporate environments. Inter-caste marriages are rare and often violently opposed, despite the progressive veneer of Sikhism or constitutional ideals (Kaur, 2004)<sup>18</sup>.

Religious deras often dominated by Dalit followers have become important sites of socio-cultural assertion, but they are also sites of friction, as seen in the tensions between Ravidasias and mainstream Sikh institutions. The 2009 Vienna temple attack on Ravidassia leaders and the subsequent assertion of a distinct Ravidassia religion exemplify how spiritual assertion can emerge from and simultaneously intensify social exclusion. Furthermore, the Dalit movement in Punjab suffers from internal fragmentation. Caste sub-divisions, regional rivalries, and competition for limited resources often dilute collective action. Elite Dalits, especially those with NRI connections, are sometimes viewed as disconnected from the struggles of the rural poor.

### **Culture as a Tool of Resistance**

The cultural sphere has emerged as one of the most dynamic and visible arenas of Dalit assertion in Punjab. While traditional modes of political mobilization and socio-economic uplift have certainly played a critical role in the assertion of Dalit identity, it is within the cultural domain that Dalits have found profound means to resist marginalization, articulate their experiences, and shape a collective consciousness. In recent decades, Dalit literature, music, commemorative practices, and social media platforms have all contributed to this cultural resistance, enabling both symbolic empowerment and practical visibility. Literature has served as a vital vehicle for articulating the Dalit experience in Punjab. The emergence of Dalit Punjabi literature marks a significant break from upper-caste dominated literary canons. Writers such as Lal Singh Dil, Gurdas Ram Alam, Bhagwan Das, and Des Raj Kali have not only foregrounded the pain, humiliation, and resistance of Dalit lives but have also questioned the Brahmanical and casteist foundations of mainstream Punjabi literature (Kaur, 2022)<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Kaur, N. (2004, May 21). Social boycotts, segregation. *Frontline*.

<sup>19</sup> Kaur, R. (2022). Disrupting caste hegemony in Punjab: A reading of the Punjabi Dalit poetry of the pre-Independence period. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*.

Autobiographical narratives have become particularly potent forms of resistance. For instance, Lal Singh Dil's poetry and memoirs reflect the emotional and psychological toll of caste-based discrimination, while also emphasizing resilience and defiance. These works reclaim the narrative space from dominant voices and serve to humanize Dalit suffering while amplifying their agency. Dalit autobiographies do not merely recount personal suffering; they are also testimonies of collective historical experiences that continue to define caste relations in contemporary Punjab. One of the most striking developments in Dalit cultural assertion in Punjab is the rise of popular music especially in the form of Dalit pop and Punjabi rap. Music videos celebrating Dalit identity, often featuring imagery of Ambedkar, Guru Ravidas, and scenes of defiance against caste oppression, have become commonplace on platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Artists like Ginni Mahi and other emerging performers have blended folk traditions with modern beats to reclaim Dalit pride and visibility.

Music serves not only as entertainment but also as a counter-discursive tool. Through catchy tunes and accessible lyrics, it educates, inspires, and unites Dalit youth. It provides an alternative space for representation in a society where mainstream cinema and television still underrepresent or misrepresent Dalits. The blending of musical innovation with social commentary transforms popular music into a weapon of resistance. Cultural performances in the form of street plays, poetry recitals (Kavi Darbars), and community gatherings also serve as platforms for raising awareness about caste injustices and commemorating moments of collective resistance. These cultural expressions help build a shared sense of identity, especially among the younger generations who are otherwise distanced from older modes of struggle. Another significant dimension of cultural resistance is the ritualized and symbolic celebration of Dalit icons. Public processions, community feasts, and festivals commemorating the birthdays of Guru Ravidas, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and other leaders have become essential to Dalit cultural assertion in Punjab. These events not only affirm cultural pride but also function as political statements (Deccan Herald, 2024)<sup>20</sup>.

In cities and towns of Punjab especially in the Doaba region large-scale celebrations are organized annually, drawing thousands of participants. Statues, memorial parks, and community centers named after Dalit icons further establish spatial and symbolic claims to visibility and dignity. The visual culture around these icons such as posters, calendars, and murals circulates widely and reinforces a shared cultural memory among Dalits. These acts of

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<sup>20</sup> Deccan Herald. (2024, July 28). *From Chamkila's pop to Arivu's rap, Dalit resistance gets wings through music*. Deccan Herald.

commemoration are not just rituals; they are deliberate acts of rewriting history from a Dalit perspective. They challenge the dominant historical narratives that exclude or minimize the contributions of Dalit leaders and provide a counter-narrative rooted in empowerment and resistance. In the digital age, social media has become a revolutionary tool for cultural assertion. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter have enabled Dalit individuals and collectives to bypass traditional gatekeepers of knowledge and representation. Through blogs, vlogs, music videos, memes, and live discussions, Dalits are able to disseminate their cultural productions widely and build transnational solidarities.

The popularity of pages and channels dedicated to Dalit issues has surged, especially among the youth. These platforms enable real-time sharing of cultural events, documentation of caste atrocities, and promotion of Dalit art and music. The internet has given rise to a vibrant and decentralized cultural movement that is rooted in local struggles but connected to global anti-caste and anti-racism movements. Moreover, media activism through platforms like Dalit Camera and Ambedkarite collectives has played a pivotal role in documenting the everyday experiences of Dalits and amplifying their voices. These digital archives of resistance ensure that Dalit cultural contributions are not forgotten or erased but instead become integral parts of public discourse.

### **Intersections of Caste, Class, and Religion**

The Dalit experience in Punjab is shaped not merely by caste-based exclusion but by a complex interplay of caste, class, and religion. While Sikhism doctrinally rejects caste hierarchies, the lived reality in rural Punjab is far from egalitarian. Dalits, who form the bulk of the landless laborer population, remain at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. This structural marginality links their caste identity with class exploitation. In Punjab's agrarian economy, caste and class often overlap, with land ownership skewed heavily in favor of dominant castes, especially the Jat Sikhs. Most Dalits in rural areas are either landless or possess minuscule plots of unproductive land. They are largely dependent on wage labor, particularly in agriculture, which creates a deeply exploitative dependency on Jat Sikh landowners. Despite being numerically significant, Dalits have limited economic bargaining power, and their attempts at upward mobility frequently meet resistance (*The Hindu Centre*, 2022)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Hindu Centre*. (2022, August 25). *The various strands of Dalit assertion in Punjab*. *The Arena*.

Efforts by Dalits to assert their economic rights such as demanding higher wages or access to common village resources like shamlat land have often resulted in caste-based violence and social boycott. These rural tensions highlight how economic disparities reinforce caste hierarchies, and how any assertion by Dalits is perceived as a challenge to the established social order. The relationship between Dalits and Jat Sikhs has been marked by both conflict and limited collaboration. On one hand, there are instances of socio-political alliance, particularly during elections when dominant parties attempt to mobilize Dalit votes. On the other, structural inequalities and caste prejudices continue to result in frequent caste-related clashes. Social exclusion persists in everyday forms, including separate cremation grounds, denial of temple entry, and unequal participation in village panchayats.

Attempts at Dalit assertion whether through protests, electoral representation, or cultural expression are often met with resistance from dominant caste groups. Yet, collaboration is also visible in urban spaces and among younger generations, where educational and occupational opportunities sometimes blur traditional caste boundaries. However, such spaces remain limited in rural Punjab, where caste continues to dictate social and economic relations. Religious identity in Punjab adds another layer of complexity. While Dalits have historically been integrated into Sikhism as Mazhabi Sikhs and Ramdasias, many have also turned toward independent spiritual traditions to assert dignity and equality. The rise of the Ravidasia identity, and the split from mainstream Sikhism especially after the 2009 Vienna incident highlight a growing sense of religious autonomy among Dalits. The establishment of separate Ravidasia gurdwaras and the assertion of distinct religious symbols are a form of protest against casteism within Sikhism.

Incidents like the Bargari sacrilege (2015) and the desecration of Guru Ravidas idols have sparked large-scale Dalit mobilizations. These protests are not just reactions to immediate provocations but symbols of deeper resistance to historical oppression and religious marginalization. Dalit-led agitations over the demolition of the Ravidas temple in Delhi or the assertion during the Ramdasias-Ravidasias movements demonstrate a fusion of religious pride and political identity, affirming that religion, for Dalits in Punjab, is both a site of oppression and a means of liberation (*Firstpost*, 2015)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Firstpost. (2015, October 21). *Explained: The Guru Granth Sahib serial desecrations that have sparked protests across Punjab*.

## Contemporary Trends and Future Prospects

In recent years, Dalit politics in Punjab has been undergoing a significant transformation. The shift from traditional forms of mobilization centered on caste-based organizations and religious reform movements towards more modern, issue-based, and youth-led activism marks a new phase in Dalit assertion. This evolution is shaped by the increasing role of educated youth, the proliferation of digital platforms, and the changing dynamics of electoral politics. At the same time, several structural and political challenges persist, hindering the full realization of Dalit aspirations.

A notable trend in recent years has been the rise of Dalit youth activism, particularly within educational institutions. Organizations such as the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA), though more prominent in southern and central Indian universities, have inspired similar movements and consciousness in Punjab. These student-led organizations are not confined to issues of reservation or campus discrimination alone but are actively engaging in broader debates on social justice, cultural assertion, and institutional reform. In Punjab, Dalit students, particularly from the Doaba region, have shown remarkable academic advancement. This has translated into an assertive youth culture that challenges both the caste hierarchy and the marginalization within mainstream Sikh or Punjabi identity (Times of India, 2014)<sup>23</sup>. Many Dalit students and young activists are increasingly embracing Ambedkarite ideology, promoting rational thought, constitutional values, and anti-caste politics.

This youth-driven assertiveness is also visible in literature, music, and popular culture. Dalit youth are using poetry, rap, short films, and theatre to articulate their experiences and reclaim public spaces. Such cultural interventions are crucial because they shape narratives of resistance and foster a collective identity beyond victimhood. The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the terrain of Dalit politics in Punjab. With the increasing penetration of smartphones, affordable internet, and the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, Dalit communities are able to bypass mainstream media filters and directly communicate their grievances, aspirations, and achievements.

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<sup>23</sup> The Times of India. (2014, June 4). *PU students hold protest against Dalit rapes in UP*. The Times of India.



Platforms such as Dalit Camera, Ambedkarite Today, and other locally run pages and YouTube channels have emerged as crucial vehicles for political education, social mobilization, and consciousness-raising. These platforms are instrumental in highlighting caste-based atrocities, promoting Ambedkarite ideology, commemorating icons like Guru Ravidas and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and debunking dominant caste narratives. Digital platforms also allow Dalit activists to connect across regions, fostering a pan-Indian and even global sense of Dalit solidarity. For instance, campaigns around events like the Bhim Army's mobilizations, the Ravidas Temple demolition protests in Delhi, or the anti-CAA movement, were widely shared and discussed in Punjab's Dalit circles. However, digital activism also faces challenges such as surveillance, online harassment, and digital illiteracy among older and rural Dalit populations. Nevertheless, it remains a potent tool for political expression and consciousness-building (Ahuja, 2018)<sup>24</sup>.

Despite these positive developments, Dalit politics in Punjab continues to face serious obstacles. The most significant among them is the fragmentation of the Dalit vote. Punjab has the highest proportion of Dalits in any Indian state (about 32%), yet their political clout remains diluted due to internal divisions based on caste sub-groups (e.g., Mazhabi, Ramdasia, Valmiki, etc.), regional identities (Doaba vs. Malwa vs. Majha), and religious affiliations (Sikh Dalits vs. Christian Dalits vs. Ravidasia Dalits). The political class, particularly mainstream parties like the Congress, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), and Shiromani Akali Dal, has often exploited these divisions to prevent the consolidation of Dalit political identity. Dalit leaders are frequently given symbolic roles without real power, amounting to tokenism. For example, while a Dalit may be appointed as a Deputy CM or state party chief, they rarely exercise meaningful authority over policy or resource allocation. Moreover, the collapse of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Punjab, which once served as a platform for Dalit assertion in the 1990s under Kanshi Ram's influence, has left a leadership vacuum. Efforts to revive the BSP or create new Dalit-centric parties like the Lok Insaaf Party have had limited success, primarily due to organizational weakness, lack of grassroots networks, and vote-splitting. The absence of a unified ideological platform that can cut across sub-caste and religious divisions remains a major hindrance. Additionally, the migration of skilled and educated Dalits abroad, particularly from Doaba, has somewhat reduced the intensity of ground-level activism in the state.

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<sup>24</sup> Ahuja, A. (2018, April 23). Digital Dalits: Is social media a game changer for Dalit politics? *ThePrint*.

Despite these challenges, there is significant potential for Dalit politics to regain momentum through coalition-building and renewed focus on social justice movements. One of the most promising trends is the growing realization among marginalized communities be it Dalits, OBCs, Muslims, or economically weaker sections of other castes that intersectional alliances are essential to counter casteist, majoritarian, and neoliberal forces. The emergence of issue-based coalitions around land rights, labor rights, and educational access can help unify diverse sections under the banner of social justice. For instance, Dalit farm laborers have recently allied with small and marginal Jat Sikh farmers to resist corporate encroachment and protest against land acquisition. The Kisan Andolan (2020–21) also saw considerable participation from Dalit agricultural workers and landless peasants, despite the movement being primarily Jat-dominated. This convergence suggests the possibility of reimagining Dalit politics beyond identity alone, towards economic justice and democratic participation. Moreover, Dalit women are increasingly becoming visible in the struggle not only as beneficiaries but as leaders. Their role in grassroots movements, self-help groups, and educational advocacy needs to be harnessed to create a more inclusive and representative political platform. Political parties, if they wish to seriously engage Dalit voters, must go beyond symbolic gestures. They need to invest in leadership development, provide meaningful representation, and address core issues such as education, health, employment, and dignity. Civil society organizations and academia also have a role to play in mentoring new Dalit leaders and amplifying their voices.

## Conclusion

Dalit politics in Punjab, when viewed through the lenses of culture, identity, and assertion, reveals a multifaceted and evolving struggle. This article has attempted to show that beyond the conventional electoral arithmetic and caste-based vote bank analysis, the Dalit political experience in Punjab is deeply rooted in cultural expression, identity reconstitution, and socio-political assertion. Despite constituting the largest proportion of Scheduled Castes among Indian states approximately 32% Dalits in Punjab continue to face political marginalization and socio-economic inequalities. This paradox of numerical strength juxtaposed against inadequate representation and systemic exclusion underscores the critical need to understand Dalit politics in a broader socio-cultural framework.

Throughout history, Dalits in Punjab have been caught in the contradictions of a religious identity that ostensibly rejects caste (Sikhism) and a social reality that entrenches it. The spiritual teachings of the Gurus and the anti-caste discourse in Sikh philosophy did not translate

into social equality on the ground. As a result, Dalits especially Mazhabi Sikhs and Ramdasias sought alternative spiritual and cultural expressions to reclaim their dignity. The Ravidasia movement, the rise of deras like Dera Sachkhand Ballan, and the embrace of symbolic and cultural tools such as folk music, literature, and public iconography have been instrumental in redefining Dalit identity in Punjab. Culture, in this context, is not merely a site of expression but a form of resistance. Dalit poetry, music, and narratives have confronted dominant caste hegemony while articulating pride in their heritage and resilience. Whether through the vibrant protest songs of Dalit singers or the autobiographical literature in Punjabi that narrates experiences of exclusion and aspiration, cultural production has emerged as a parallel domain of assertion. The commemoration of icons like Guru Ravidas and B.R. Ambedkar in festivals, murals, and social media campaigns has further reinforced a sense of collective belonging and political consciousness.

Electoral mobilization has also seen a dynamic trajectory. The legacy of Kanshi Ram and the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Punjab particularly in the Doaba region offered a glimpse of transformative Dalit assertion. Yet, the fragmentation of Dalit political efforts, co-optation by mainstream parties (Congress, SAD, AAP), and the lack of a unified leadership have diluted the potential impact of Dalit votes. The tokenistic representation of Dalits in party hierarchies and the sporadic emergence of local caste-based factions have further complicated the path toward genuine political empowerment. Another key issue lies in the intersection of caste with class and religion. Dalits in rural Punjab are disproportionately landless and dependent on dominant castes especially Jat Sikhs for employment and wages. While urban migration, educational mobility, and overseas diaspora connections (especially in Doaba) have enabled some upward movement, systemic inequalities persist. The struggle over land, access to resources, and social dignity remains central to the Dalit experience in Punjab.

The tension between religious belonging and social exclusion has also led to identity renegotiations. The Ravidasia community's declaration of a separate religious identity after the 2009 Vienna incident is emblematic of the rift within Sikhism and the assertion of a distinct Dalit spirituality. This split, along with periodic protests such as the ones following the Bargari sacrilege and demands for Dalit representation in SGPC, highlight the unresolved religious and political tensions in Punjab's caste matrix. Looking to the future, there are both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, Dalit youth and student organizations such as the Ambedkar Students' Association (ASA) and Bhagat Singh Ambedkar Students' Organization (BAPSA)

are emerging as vibrant spaces of critical engagement and political activism. The use of digital platforms for community mobilization, sharing historical narratives, and building solidarities across regions shows the potential of a digitally empowered Dalit consciousness. On the other hand, the internal divisions within Dalit communities based on sect, region, or political affiliation pose a serious challenge to building a unified movement. Furthermore, mainstream political parties often engage in symbolic inclusion while failing to address the structural roots of Dalit exclusion. This calls for a reimagining of Dalit politics that moves beyond tokenism toward transformative change. Coalition-building with other marginalized groups, sustained emphasis on education and land rights, and the nurturing of autonomous Dalit leadership are crucial for altering the status quo.

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