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## Understanding Change in the Lives of Dalits of East Punjab since 1947\*

Our struggle is not for wealth or for power but for freedom. Our struggle is for the reclamation of Human Personality! – B.R. Ambedkar

There was a time when we were treated like animals. Now we live like human beings. It is all because of Ambedkar. – Namdeo Dhasal

Not many are aware that the Scheduled Castes (SCs) constituted a very substantial segment of population in Punjab state – 28.9 per cent, as per Census 2001. This is the highest level of concentration in any one state of India. The present study is related to the nature of change in the lives of the Dalits (Scheduled Castes) of Punjab since the Independence of India and the Partition of Punjab in 1947. It covers the change in the external conditions of their living i.e. demographic, economic, political and social and the also the change in the subjective dimension or their perception. The subjective dimension referred to the way persons belonging to the Scheduled Caste communities viewed themselves and the manner in which they were viewed and treated by the others at the two ends of this time span i.e. at the beginning of the 1950s and at present.

The focus in this study is more on the ground reality of the change and the dynamics of change; on what people knew as reality in their everyday lives i.e. the common sense knowledge. For that purpose the author went about observing their lives, (i) talking and listening at some length to a large number of Dalits of different castes, age-groups and areas; many in their homes; participating in their celebrations; (ii) securing access to their recollections, experiences and observations, particularly from the elderly ones including written responses to broad questions from a number of seasoned Dalit leaders;<sup>1</sup> (iii) studying the autobiographical and literary writings of Dalits and the situation of the Scheduled Castes depicted in Punjabi fiction and folklore. An attempt has been made to take note of the distinction between “physical facts” and “mental facts”.<sup>2</sup> The first part of the article attempts to present a recall to our minds of a broad picture of the conditions of life of the Scheduled Castes around the time India became Independent. Part II relates to an overview of the character of change that has taken place in the material conditions of their lives and their perception of social change. Looking a little closely at the commonplace things helped in a better sense of perspective and understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> Prominent among them being Lahori Ram Bali of Jalandhar, an old and seasoned Ambedkarite and editor of *Bheem Patrika*; Attarjit Singh of Bathinda, a well known Punjabi short story writer, Jai Singh based in Phillaur, the Chief of Dalit Dasta Virodhi Andolan; Satnam Singh Kainth, former Member of Parliament (BSP) and now President of Bahujan Samaj Morcha; Harinder Singh Khalsa, former Diplomat, Former MP and former member of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, based in Ludjhiana, and Com. Swaran Singh Nagoke, Secretary Dehati Mazdoor Sabha Amritsar.

<sup>2</sup> The author has benefited from a reading of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Mann, *Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin Books, 1967.

## Part 1 – The Character of Dalit Life around 1947

After reading *Borders and Boundaries* by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin and then Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, it occurred to the author that one needed to look for the fate of the Dalits, then called Harijans or "untouchables", during the Partition violence. That was a part of reality that had remained unnoticed in the available studies. In fact, as Butalia observed, "the fact that Harijans were, to some extent, rendered invisible in Partition violence had led to another kind of invisibility; that of history itself" [Butalia 1998: 223-258, *passim*].

The first story recounted here, the only one of its kind available to us, in Butalia's book is of a Harijan girl, Maya Rani of Dinanagar in Gurdaspur district, whom Butalia interviewed some 40 years after the event in Batala town of that district. Maya was a child witness to the killings and looting, first of the Hindus and Sikhs by Muslims of the place in mid- August 1947 when the rumours prevailed that the district of Gurdaspur had become a part of Pakistan. It was a 'disputed' district as to whether it was a majority Muslim or majority non-Muslim district. A few days later, when the news spread that the area remained within India, she witnessed widespread killings of the Muslims by the "others".

Maya was among a group of about 11 girls of her age who viewed the anarchy and mayhem as an 'opportunity'. They jumped over roofs into the deserted or burning Muslim houses, searching, collecting and bringing home all kinds of available goods. These included a variety of household goods, "great big utensils – including *patilas*, *parats* and *hamams* – bales of cloth, clothes, *razais* (quilts), *atta* (wheat flour), even *desi ghee* and almonds. The girls continued the adventurous pillage for several days.

"There were 11 of us, girls; we all made our dowries with the stuff we collected", she told Butalia.

Weren't you frightened? Butalia asked her.

"No, we weren't frightened," stated Maya, "everyone tried to scare us, even our parents. But all children of *that area*, none of us was scared. . . . Our parents were worried, saying we would get killed. But we thought, who is going to take us away, who is going to kill us? We call ourselves Harijans. Hindus, Christians, no one can take us away. . . . there was no danger for us. *Because we were Harijans*. Whether it had become Pakistan or Hindustan, it made no difference to us."

As per Butalia's observation, "Maya was quite clear that they and their parents – the Harijans – did not see themselves as Hindus or Christians (or indeed any one else). Rather they had their own, distinct identity; that in the mainstream Hindu society their *customary invisibility* was based on their being outside the pale of caste Hindu society. ...*Harijans were rendered invisible in Partition violence.*" (*emphasis mine*)

Perhaps there was another factor. In a society where the worth of a person was measured by the size of the land owned by one's family, the outcastes without land or any other kind of property – "nothing to be looted, nothing to lose" – seemed to enjoy "*a bizarre kind of immunity*" during such violent times. The few references to the *Kamins* in the memoranda submitted by groups, and the proceedings relating to the Partition, provided eloquent evidence of the prevalent rationale for "*rejecting their personhood* but claiming their labour"

It may be pertinent to refer, in that regard, to the testimony given by Sardar Harnam Singh before the Punjab Boundary Commission, pleading for the claim of the Sikhs to demarcate the central Punjab districts as a Sikh "Homeland". The Sikhs, he argued, were the true "sons of the soil" i.e. peasant proprietors – or at least, occupancy tenants. Most of the Muslims, on the other hand, were a population of "fakirs, beggars, weavers, herdsmen, cobblers, *kumhars* or potters, *musallis*, carpenters, oilmen, bards, barbers, blacksmiths, washer men, butchers, and *mirasis* – people who are described in the settlement reports as landless people and menials" [Sadullah et al 1983: 125; Brass 2003:96, 101] Paul Brass underlined that whereas the Sikh spokesman counted the low caste Mazhabis [and other low caste Sikhs] as a part of their own total, he wanted that the Muslim *Kamins* "should not be counted in the total Muslim population. If these 'non-persons' were excluded, the Muslims in the existing Muslim majority districts, (as per 1941 Census) "would be reduced to a minority" [Brass 2003:96].

M. A. Jinnah was reported to have made a suggestion that the *Kamins* (who were regarded neither Muslim nor Hindu/Sikh) may be divided 50-50 between India and Pakistan. After all both the dominions required scavengers, sweepers and leather workers [cf. Madhopuri 2002:175]. Ambedkar and Nehru had to personally intervene to secure the release of the Scheduled Caste people who were prohibited from leaving Pakistan for India by the Government of Pakistan through an order under a special Essential Services Ordinance.<sup>3</sup> That was in line with the prevailing rationale for "*rejecting their personhood* but claiming their labour" [Butalia: *op.cit.*]

The arrangements made for relief and rehabilitation of about 250,000 (50,000 families) of the "untouchable" refugees pointed to similar kind of problems. Ambedkar complained to Prime Minister Nehru that "the Scheduled Caste evacuees were not able to take shelter in refugee camps" and not getting relief [Dec. 18, 1947, cf. Ahir 1992: 227]. Rajeshwari Nehru wrote to Pandit Nehru, drawing his attention to the rules regarding rehabilitation which left the "Harijan refugees" out of reckoning. According to the rules, compensatory land was available only to the agriculturists i.e. those who had owned land. The Harijans were agriculturists; but only tillers, and not land-owners[ 228-30]. Lal Singh Dil, one of the foremost Dalit Punjabi poets, recorded his resentment that following the Partition, "Sikhs grabbed all the land; Not even a patch of *Shamlat* (Commons) land was left in the village"[Dil 1998;24].

The second story the author wished to share with the readers is his personal recollection though its meaning was impressed on my mind much later in life. This was around 1948, when I was about 10 years of age. I can vividly recall a Harijan woman scavenger, who used to come daily to clean our dry latrine located on the roof of the two-story house at Jaito Mandi, a part of the then native state of Nabha. The lady must have been quite young and my memories of her are of a rather dark and fairly healthy lady, perhaps in her late twenties, who was fond of talking some sweet nothings with us children 9–10 years old at that time. As occasionally we children were running up and down the stairs, playing some games, she would usually enter the *deodhi* (porch) shouting from outside, "*Kaka ji, Beeba ji, parey reho ji, (mere nal lagg ke) bhitt na jayoji*" (O good lads! gentle lads! keep at a distance please, lest you are polluted [by contact, touch]. In her voice one suspected trepidation. Once earlier she was rebuked profusely for not taking care to keep at a distance from the children. Perhaps more painful to her was the fact that she was a witness to the thrashing I had received from my mother for getting polluted and polluting the kitchen by my entry. It was hell that broke loose in our home; a nightmare for me. That lady had

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<sup>3</sup> Ambedkar told his audience at Jalandhar in 1951, "Pakistan did not bother so much if the Hindus left; but who would do the dirty work of the scavengers, sweepers, the Bhangis and other despised castes, if the Untouchables left Pakistan? I requested Pandit Nehru to take immediate action and strive for the removal of the ban on their migration". Text of his speech in D C Ahir, *Dr. Ambedkar and Punjab*, Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1992. p. 21

cried and begged of my mother not to hurt me, and apologized for her alleged “carelessness”. That may have been the reason for her daily cry to keep the children away from her. I remember it as an instance of a marked acceptance and internalization of the polluting character of her touch and low status, as her fate. It could be that she considered that to be totally unjustified, yet upheld it as a fact of life that she and others like her must live with.

### **The Life, as it was lived at that time**

The author’s exchanges with the Dalits about the life as it was lived at that time made him acutely conscious of the fact that looking back in time was, for all of them, an extremely painful experience – one of re-living the physical suffering, shame, ignorance, indignity and anger. Lal Singh Dil, a prominent Punjabi poet, stated candidly, “I cannot recall even one incident of the past which I felt happy about” [1998:38].

A tour of the *Vehra*, *Thathi* or *Chamarhli*, back in time, where these people lived, brought you to a crowded colony wrapped in a mixture of stinks – from *hadda rodi*’s putrefying skeletons of dead animals, raw skins spread out for drying and cleaning; overflowing open drains that brought the sewers of the village to their low-lying *basti*, rotting manure on the *rooris* and much more [Singh, Ditt. :43-54; Hira 2004:101-105; Gill nd. ]308]. The one *kucha kotha* (mud shelter) per family was raised on *Mauroosi* i.e. *shamlat* (village commons) land that belonged to the village. The family did not own the land; building a brick structure on that land was out of question. Custom and law prescribed obligatory *begaar* (unpaid customary labour) services for all the untouchable or low caste men and women. That law was repealed only in 1957, a few years after the then Union Law Minister B. R. Ambedkar, managed to get another law repealed – the Alienation of Land Act of 1900 – which excluded the ‘non-agricultural castes’ from buying agricultural land.

The established rules of untouchability prescribed everything – the occupation, the person’s name, the manner in which one was to be addressed by others (expletives, curses and all) and the way the SCs were required to address the others: their dress, social and physical distance from the others, the place and posture for walking, the posture for standing and sitting in the presence of the upper caste people, the kind of food accessible to them and a whole range of social taboos. Poverty was an essential component of that life. One present day class 1 officer of the Union Government recalled that in their home the meat of a dead buffalo was dried and then cooked for several days and the fat stored in tins for cooking. “*Mail khaney lok*” (dirt-eating people) was an epithet we were known by”, because they were often invited to collect dirt mixed remnants of sugarcane juice at the *gur* or jaggery making still [Madhopuri 2002 :75] Personal cleanliness was not a high priority. Soap cake, as a Mazhabi leader of Dehati Mazdoor Sabha<sup>4</sup> disclosed, became an item of purchase towards the end of 1960s when the Green Revolution placed “cash in our hands for the first time”. The time of a brief break from labour was the time for picking lice from the hair and the clothes and of self-deprecating abuse. The repertoire of threats, stares and gestures, folk sayings and names *Kutti zat*, *kamzat*, *Kujat*, *Kutir*, *Bhitt*, *Chumm*, *Dhed*, *Vaddhi-Tukki Zat*, *Jooth* and reference to human excreta, were regular reminders of their beings as filth.

Their recollections of social exchange or conversation had a significant element of lying and swearing which seemed a normal part of learning in their homes and colonies. Low self-esteem and self-hate found expression in curses, violence and variety of, what others described as,

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<sup>4</sup> Comrade Swaran Singh Nagoke, tape-recorded Interview, Amritsar August 21, 2002.

“unsocial behaviour”. The *Jajmani* system that maintained a custom-bound generational relationship of attached labour at the beck and call of the Zamindar patron, was somewhat redeemed by an ambivalent kind of master-subject belongingness. “Dignity”, of course, had relevance only for the Zamindars.

But there were obvious ambiguities and contradictions. The mid-wives who helped in all deliveries of the high caste women were all Dalit. So the exceptional physical contact with the mother and the new-born was accepted as normal. Ironically, the maternal and infant mortality was the highest in the community of these mid-wives. As described in Gurcharan Singh Rao’s novel *Mashaalchi*, “*Sade Surtu da athwan munda masan magar lagaya ai . . . ‘pehle sarey siley vich ye marde rahey*” (our Surtu’s eighth one survived with difficulty; all the earlier ones died during delivery or soon after) [Rao 1986:27], the largely anaemic mothers commonly shared their pain. That kind of grief was peculiar to the untouchable families. Ignorance drove the sick and the weak to the corridors of the quacks and sorcerers to satiate the evil spirits whose annoyance was commonly believed to be the cause of all kinds of sickness and suffering. The strictly imposed pollution yardstick did not, however, protect Dalit women from sexual exploitation or rape by a Jat. Pre-marital adventure of a Zamindar’s young son was a part of folklore.<sup>5</sup> One 25 year old Mazhabi student of the author’s university told him that the children in their families grew up with the knowledge of the violation of one or the other of their women relatives; hysterical shrieks, a hush-hush silence, shame, sulk and fear. “Just stay silent; this is our fate”, the elders would advise; “nothing will come out of complaint to the police”. Strong protest could sometime facilitate a *Razinama* (compromise) with some material compensation to the victim’s family.<sup>6</sup> The women of the Jat-Zamindar household, as it appeared in Punjabi fiction, generally blamed Dalit women for enticing their masculine males through some *Jadoo-tona* (black magic). The uncommon fair skin of a Dalit new-born commonly invited the Chinese whispers about the probable father of the bastard child. Bhagtu, the Mazhabi attached labourer, in *Mashaalchi*, was rebuked by the *Zaildar* for the alleged arrogance of his school going son Kattu. Begging forgiveness, Bhagatu pleaded:

Sardarji! Such boys can only be your progeny; must have entered the women’s wombs when they went to work in the field. Had they been ours they could not have breathed in your presence! . . . Have you ever seen us opening our mouths in front of you . . . so old have we grown in age!! [125-26]

“Notified Criminal Tribes” was a legally demarcated category under British colonial construction that included members of at least seven of the presently listed Scheduled Castes in Punjab. Alongside the creation of the “loyal” and “martial” castes, as Nicholas Dirks pointed to, there was a construction of its obverse, i.e. not loyal, not trustworthy and thus dangerous “predatory castes” [Dirks 2002: 176-77; Kumar 2004: 1081;1086]. All of these “Notified Criminal Tribes” were from the lowest castes. It was in 1952 that an order for de-notification and abolition of the above categorization was issued and these caste communities came to be known as “Vimukta Jatis”.

Except in schools established by the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha, sending a Dalit child to school during those days was for most untouchable rural families commonly not thinkable.

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<sup>5</sup> The author checked up with his colleagues from rural background. It was confirmed that up to the end of 1970s the non-Dalit young boys in the villages routinely bragged about their sexual access to one or the other Harijan girl in the village. See also Juergensmeyer, “Cultures of Deprivation”, in Harish K. Puri (ed.) *Dalits in Regional Context*, Rawat Publishers, Jaipur, 2003, p.49.

<sup>6</sup> H S Sachdev, in one of his interview sessions with the author.

Viewed as an affront to the status of upper castes, the Harijan child invited the wrath of the school teacher and the village elders. Lal Singh Dil, recalled his experience of contempt and ridicule during the early Sixties: "If the school was meant mainly to remind you of your low-caste status every day, there was little meaning in going to school" [ Dil 1998: 26].

## **Part II – Change in the Conditions of Life**

During the half a century and more after independence one witnessed the working of a complex and multi-dimensional process of change. A major difference was made by the demographic change following the Partition and the later reorganization of Punjab state. Dil recorded in his autobiography *Daastaan*, "*Musalmanan de jaan naal shudran dian bahwan bhajj gayyan*" (the going away of the Muslims left the Shudras disabled, *lit.*, with their arms broken). The large scale presence of the poor Muslim artisans in the villages of the Punjab seemed to have been a factor of social and moral support for the "untouchables" in a situation of routine oppression by Jat landowners. He recalled the opening of a shop in his village by his people; it was made possible because of presence and support of the Muslims. Another incident in his village was remembered; when the two groups of the socially oppressed – the Muslims and the untouchables – had together fought a battle with a gang of the landlords, making the latter run for cover [*ibid.* 24,38]. The process of rehabilitation of the refugees and consolidation of holdings after Partition added to the social clout of the Sikh Jat landlords and rendered the *Kamins* weaker and more subdued.

The social and political dominance of the Jat Sikh became more formidable with the reorganization of Punjab state in 1966 and the beginning of Green Revolution. While Punjab became a Sikh majority state ( 62 per cent of total population), Sikhism came to be marked by arrogance of the caste-class of Jat landlords. In the first serious anthropological study of a Sikh village, Indera Paul Singh discovered that "most of the Sikh values are jat values and jats assert that they occupy the highest position among the Sikh castes" [Singh 1977: 70]. It was no longer possible to sustain the impression that the Sikh community was free from the canker of caste hierarchy and caste discrimination. In fact, the first successful political struggle of Shiromani Akali Dal after Independence related to the legal recognition that like the Hindu Scheduled Castes the Sikhs had their own low castes – Mazhabi, Ramdasia, Kabirpanthi, Sikligar etc. – which must be included in the list of the Scheduled Castes[Puri 2003: 2669]. A recent discussion among Punjabi writers underlined the recognition of an existing reality: "Caste is entrenched in our sub-conscious" [Singh 2005: 38-40]. The Jat landlord 's power and kinship connections in the state bureaucracy were able to defeat the government's policy of land reforms. *Jattvaad*, signifying a Jat hauteur or crude arrogance of power, became for the rural Dalits the keyword of their oppression and humiliation [Singh, Ajmer 2003: 292-300]. On the other hand, however, the concentration and rise in the proportion of the Scheduled Castes made a difference. In the united (pre-Partition) Punjab province (when Muslims constituted a majority of 53 per cent and Hindus and Sikhs were only 30 per cent and 14 percent respectively), the "Exterior Castes", according to Census of 1931, constituted about 5 per cent of the population [Census 1931, Hutton 1969 A -199] . The Partition of 1947 and then the reorganization of Punjab in 1966 altered the caste configuration. By 1991 the Scheduled Caste population in the truncated Punjab state had gone up to 28.3 per cent, rising to 28.9 per cent in 2001. The rural population was composed of mainly Sikh Jat and the Scheduled Castes. The fact, that in more than 3000 villages proportion of SC population was over 40 per cent and in some villages like Talhan having as high as 65 percent, became for Dalits a measure of strength. It also underlined the potential for resistance and conflict.

A series of post-Independence developments together contributed to a noticeable transformation in the status and living conditions of the Scheduled Castes of Punjab. The Constitutional and legal measures for social justice, particularly those relating to abolition of “untouchability” – making its practice in any form a crime punishable by law – proved to be significant. These included measures such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955 and a most comprehensive Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989; the abolition of *begaar* and the repeal of laws like the Land Alienation Act 1901. Reservations, affirmative actions for social welfare by the government, the operation of the democratic system through universal adult franchise and regular elections made a difference for the better. Looking at the scenario at present, most of the Dalits the author talked to, felt : *Par wadda farak chonan ne paya – Lokan nun nazdeek liyanda* (But the big difference was made by the elections; that brought the people closer).<sup>7</sup> Another kind of difference was made by changes in the economy – such as the Green Revolution – and also by urbanization, spread of education facilities, new avenues of employment etc., and by the beginning of the human rights movement. No less significant was the impact of the organized political and cultural assertion among them and the rising influence of Ambedkar as the messiah of Scheduled Castes. No aspect of Dalit life remained untouched.

The impact of the changes was uneven between regions, the rural and the urban segments, between the people of one SC community and another and between the men and women. The situation in urban areas was vastly different and better today for them than in the rural areas. The Ad Dharmi and the Megh communities in the Doaba region were more urbanized, more upwardly mobile, more self-confident and politically assertive than the Balmikis, Mazhabis and Sansis. Ambedkar had advised his people to move to urban areas as there was no hope for them in villages which he regarded as “dens of ignorance”. That, however, did not happen; the urban population of the SCs in Punjab in 2001 was only 20.7 per cent. About 80 per cent of them, still lived in the villages.

As of now, the belief in untouchability had practically come to an end in the Punjab; more certainly in the urban areas. Studies conducted by a number of scholars<sup>8</sup>, and the author’s specific inquiries and observations at various levels confirmed that the question of ritual pollution and purification ceased to be an issue. None ever heard, during the last two decades or so, of any upper caste person rushing to purify himself because of suspected pollution by physical contact with an outcaste. There were practically no instances of separate cups or utensils. None would dare to offer left-over food to the Dalits. Dalit respondents routinely appreciated the change of times and that “the previous isolation and segregation has also narrowed down”. One noticed the presence of a fairly large number of SCs among the Sikh religious priests and religious singers (*Raagis*) and even in *langars* and Kitchens at Gurdwaras. “*Mazhabi Sikhan da Laangri lagna aam hai* (recruitment of Mazhabi Sikhs as servers of food at Langar is common)”.<sup>9</sup>

A conscious effort was made by a large number of Scheduled Castes to move away from such traditional occupations as carried an alleged stigma. According to a recent (2002) field study of 51 villages by Jodhka, covering the state’s three regions of Punjab, not more than 20 per cent of them were presently involved in their traditional occupations. It was described as a phenomenon of “Dissociation, Distancing and Autonomy”. [Jodhka 2004: 71-73] Only about 15 per cent of

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<sup>7</sup> Comrade Swaran Singh, Bali, Kainth, Attarjit Singh, Amandeep Singh and many more in interviews.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Inder Paul Singh, “Caste in a Sikh Village”, in Harjinder Singh (ed.) *Caste Among Non-Hindus in India*, Delhi: National Publishing House, 1977, pp.76-77; Jodhka, *op.cit.*, Paramjit Singh Judge, “Interrogating Caste Status of Dalits in Punjab” in Puri, *op. cit.* pp. 100-131, *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Comrade Swaran Singh, Recorded Interview, Amritsar August 21, 2002

them worked now as agricultural labourers. The secretary of the Amritsar District Khet Mazdoor Sabha – himself a Mazhabi – was convinced that “no dalit now stayed to work with a Zamindar if he was not treated well”. Most Dalits appeared to hail the fact that a very large number of them had shifted to other callings such as trade, goldsmithy, shopping, construction-work or working as, carpenters, masons, hawkers etc. A good number of them in villages of Amritsar district were into dairy farming and selling of milk. The work of Dalit women as domestic helps in upper caste homes, including kitchens, came to be viewed as more or less normal in a village community. There was appreciation for the deliberate effort for personal cleanliness and hygienic living. As the author observed at several wedding parties of the “upper castes”, nobody seemed to bother that most of the waiters serving food (including cooks in many cases) were from the Scheduled Castes. That meant a less noticed severing of the link between caste and its material base.

According to present estimates, over 200,000 Dalits in Punjab were in jobs in government departments and public sector undertakings such as banks, LIC, FCI, Municipal bodies etc. That included IAS, IPS and PCS officers, doctors, engineers etc., and many in business and trade. Jalandhar alone may well boast of over 100 SC millionaire industrialists and traders. The undermining of the material base of caste altered the meaning of caste and caste-consciousness.

An input from a cross section of SCs showed that over 90 per cent of the SCs had a brick house today. *“Kacha kotha ghatt hi labhda hai”* (Mud house is scarcely noticed). Nearly half of the Dalit families had houses within the village proper and they were keen to emphasise, *“Kujh be-zaminey Jattan de ghar Kacche, vich Mazhbian de pakke”* (some houses of landless Jats were made of mud and in between some houses of Mazhabis were pucca, made of bricks).

There was a widely shared grievance regarding very poor performance by the state in providing educational facilities to SC children. In 1961 the SC female literacy was just about 2 per cent. It rose to only 31 per cent by 1991, with a high of 51.8 per cent in district Hoshiarpur. [Report NCSCST 1997-98] More significant, however, was transformation in the attitude of Dalits towards education. *“Prahai kar ke Zat Badalni”* (acquiring education to alter caste status) – education as “the key to liberation from caste backwardness” – became a distinctive feature of Dalit aspirations. *“Putt dab ke parh lai, daliddar chukk ho joo; Jattan di gulami na karni pao”* (Son, work hard for education, we would be lifted out of the wretchedness You will not have to work as a slave to the Jatts) was a commonly repeated advice of the parents. As reflected both in literature and the interviews with them, making sacrifice and working harder for that purpose became, for the parents and children, an honourable struggle.

A big difference was made by the emigration of SC youngmen to foreign countries from the mid-Sixties, particularly from Doaba districts of Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahar. It was believed that one out of every three families had at least one member working abroad. Remittances from Dalit NRIs contributed to a conspicuous change in the self-image and the aspirations of their families. Construction of big houses was one way of announcing their success. Big Qualis-Toyota, Sumo cars, TVs, refrigerators, motorcycles, gold ornaments and branded clothes and shoes became statements of success. Events like the honouring of the first Punjabi Dalit Millionaire at the International Dalit Conference at Vancouver 2003, contribution of rupees one crore (10 million) by one Dalit NRI to Sant Sarwan Das Dera of Sachkhand Ballan, near Jalandhar for construction of an Eye Hospital, [Begumpura Shahar June 20, 2005] the building of 21 Ravidas Temples in UK alone, or putting up gold sheeting on the domes of their temples, emerged as a measure of their upward mobility and pride. By far the largest number of such NRIs, belonged to Ad Dharmi Chamar community.

“*Sade vee din badal rahe ney*” (our days are also changing {for the better}) was often conveyed in public and private, often with a glow of well-being that exuded optimism and hope. In fact, their social mobility appeared striking in the face of decline in the fortunes of a large section of the small Jat land-owners i.e. their socially dominant “other”. The holdings of the small farmers became smaller; many of them were burdened with heavy debts leading to a disturbing spate of suicides. Underlining the emergent prosperity of the SCs vis-à-vis the Jat landowners, a keenly observing retired development officer told the author that in Kartarpur, Alawalpur, Bhogpur, Adampur, Mukerian, Saroya development blocks, where he had worked for several years, “*Jatt taan nukkre laggey hoye han*” (Jatts are now located on the margins).<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, as Andre Beteille observed about the Scheduled Castes in general, “Their presence in Indian society can no longer be ignored”. The “most conspicuous evidence” of transformation of Dalits related to what he described as their “increased visibility” in the social and political domains {cf. Jodhka 2000;367}. In fact, the urge for registering their presence in public space – flaunting the importance of their votes in different elections – loud participation in political protests and demonstrations, large scale gatherings and processions to celebrate the birthdays of Ambedkar, Ravidas, Balmiki and Kabir; installation of statues of Ambedkar, Balmiki, Ravidas and Kabir; the struggle for naming colonies, roads, universities, colleges, etc., after their heroes, became a prominent aspect of their identity assertion.

One of the significant gains of democracy in India was, as some of the social scientists noted, that the excluded and the marginalized sections of society were able to take advantage of it, in order “to gain a voice, a foothold, a sign of status, a measure of effective power” [Alam 2004: 48]. The author was a witness to the exuberant echoes of Kanshi Ram’s rhetoric of “Dalits as rulers”, when an SC minister in Punjab government talked of vision of “*Chamaran da Raj*” (the Rule by Chamars) at a public meeting at Jalandhar. Notwithstanding reservations about such extravagant rhetoric, a large section of Dalit elite regarded the Constitution of India drafted by Babasaheb Ambedkar as the instrument for constructing a new political order in their favour. When the NDA government led by A.B. Vajpayee appointed a Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution in the year 2000, no distinct social segment felt as outraged as the Scheduled Castes. Scores of organisations of Dalits in Punjab organized seminars and demonstrations to defend “Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Constitution”, against the suspected anti-Dalit design of BJP.

Accordingly, one noticed a striking shift in their attitudes of mind regarding their rights and needs of resistance to protect those rights. They refused to accept the upper-caste dominance as *Karma* or fate, or the “other”- touted lowness of their status. The dominance of the Jat-zamindar, routinely described as *Jattvaad* in the villages, was viewed as a consequence of their ownership of practically all the agricultural land. “Give us just about two to three acres for each family and you’ll see how we thrash the Jat’s upper caste arrogance”, was a kind of sentiment frequently heard by the author. Earlier, the resistance of the lower caste people against insult or unwelcome commands by the Jats meant inviting trouble. Therefore, their preferred course used to be concealment of anger and reaction, telling of lies and an affected show of submission or deference. Now the younger generation of the Scheduled Castes let it be known that caste insult would meet with instant retaliation. Comments such as, “The SCs wanted to behave as the Jats do”, or *Ik din ehnan ney Jattan nun Kuttna shuru kar dena hai*” (one day they will start beating the Jatts) [Judge 2003a: 82,86], were commonly heard. In deed that kind of a situation was witnessed in the village Talhan in 2004. The Jat’s sense of hurt against the challenge to their traditional sense of superiority and dominance was palpable. The difference between the older generation and the new generation of Scheduled Castes in that regard came out prominently in

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<sup>10</sup> Ardaman Singh Dhillon, Amritsar, 1.9. 2003

practically all creative literature by the Dalit writers [ Hira : 170-202]. And, it was interesting to note the rise of a fairly large number of Dalits as creative writers in Punjabi language. A recent survey made by the quarterly magazine *Lakeer* listed by name, 45 of the notable Punjabi writers as belonging to the Scheduled Castes [*Lakeer* 95: 35].

However, the picture of the social transformation and the existing reality of social life with reference to the Scheduled Castes was rather complex and highly differentiated for different sections and *Jati* segments. There was, on the one hand, a fairly visible section of the urbanized and educated – many of them second and third generation literates—and economically well-to-do, who were some time described as “Dalit bourgeoisie. Their problem related to the existing forms of exclusion and discrimination in their offices and social gatherings – continued reference to their low caste status by their non-SC colleagues, or contempt expressed through a body language, if not through words. Harinder Singh Khalsa appeared to express the feelings of most of the upwardly mobile or educated among the SCs in that the upper castes people had

“carefully chosen the untouchability of the mind as a weapon to fend them off – ‘these lower castes’. They find it hard to reconcile to the fact that a Scheduled Caste can be more intelligent, more intellectual, having better hygienic sense and generally leading a much higher level of life “. <sup>11</sup>

The Dalit boys referred to the recent upsurge of popular songs of Jat superiority like “*Putt Jattan de bulaonde Bakkarey*” ( Sons of Jats raise shouts of superiority ), as attempts to humiliate them. In Punjabi fiction, Jat characters were routinely portrayed as bragging “*Asin Jat Hunde aan, asin Zamindar hunde aan, asin koi nikki-sukki jaat nahin*” (We are Jats; We are landlords; we are no small - mean caste) [Ankhi 2005:41]. Kanshi Ram, the founder president of the Backward and Minority community Employees Federation (BAMCEF) and later the Bahujan Samaj Party ( BSP), understood the depth that feeling to articulate their primary concern: “Our problem is “Humiliation, not Deprivation”[Chandra 2000:36-40] That became the key source of political mobilization for his party. However, as recently noticed Dalit boys were beginning to flaunt their Dalit or Jati identity. After the prolonged confrontation of the Ad Dharmis with the Jat Zamindars of Village Talhan in Jalandhar District, one noticed young Ad Dharmis showing off the painted words “ *Putt Chamaran de*” ( Sons of Chamars) on the back of their motorcycles and scooters.

Conversely, there was widespread resentment against the class of the rich or educated Dalits for turning their backs on the rest of their less fortunate people. Lahori Ram Bali, perhaps the most senior Ambedkarite in Punjab, decried the “negative role” of that class of Dalits for imitating the upper castes and vulgar display of their newly acquired wealth. Instead of performing simple marriages and other social affairs as they did earlier, they “started wasting money on (lavish) marriages – feasts given on death anniversaries and other rites and rituals”. <sup>12</sup> A study of the SCs in district Hoshiarpur reported that “With few exceptions, the educated were seen to be more inclined towards PNDT (Pre-natal Determination Tests)” and resorting to female foeticide, in more or less the same way as many among the better-off sections of the upper castes did [Sharma and Aggarwal 2004:271,268]. Another study pointed to their tendency to emulate the upper castes, not only in terms of asserting masculinity and tightening their control over their women but also in terms of violence against women. [Kumar and Dagar 2004]

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<sup>11</sup> Written response to a Questionnaire.

<sup>12</sup> Lahori Ram Bali, written response to author’s questions.

A vast majority of rural Scheduled Castes were, on the other hand, focused on the day-to-day economic hardships. According to one estimate, SCs constituted more than 50 per cent of the total people "below-poverty line". Among the SCs, about 66 per cent belonged to that category [Singh RB 2003:72]. They were the major sufferers of the decline in government spending in education and public health during recent years. A very high rate of drop-out of SC children from schools was only one indication. One noticed considerable incidence among them of belief in spirits and ghosts in the districts of Amritsar and Gurdaspur. Faith healing practices and preaching was reportedly a major reason for conversion of Mazhabis to Christianity in some of the villages.<sup>13</sup> Swaran Singh (who has been working with his rural and poor Dalits of the labouring class for a long time) talked about what seemed to be the most disturbing phenomenon to the families of rural Dalits.

"Because of non availability of employment, the young boys were jobless . . . even after education. Children wander about without anything to do; have taken to intoxicants. . . . Intoxication of smack is prevalent among those with money; our children use things containing chewing tobacco . . . , five rupees for a glass of hemp juice; this has spread so much, there is no limit. Earlier, home made liquor was available; one could buy a bottle for five rupees. Now that is not available. In some homes the addicts beat their working women for money to buy intoxicants. (Interview *op.cit*)

Rising incidence of caste atrocities was another development. A survey of press reports on atrocities on Dalits between 1998 and 2003 brought up over a dozen cases of rape, gang rape, stripping naked, stripping and walking Dalit women naked through the village [Puri 2003:2699-2701]. A noticeable incidence of stripping women pointed to a penchant for robbing their dignity. Cases of social boycott of Dalits have also been rather frequently reported during the last decade. Punjab's Dalit Dasta Virodhi Andolan prepared an inventory of Dalit bonded labourers and fought for their liberation. Most of these were cases of men and women at brick kilns who took a loan on interest which they were never able to repay through labour wage. "Physical torture and rape of women was for them a form of punishment for non-payment [Peter 2004]<sup>14</sup> It was observed that "Before the 1980s you rarely heard of registration of a case of rape of a dalit woman." Dalits did not have the courage to lodge a complaint; the police were never inclined to register their complaints and media took no notice. At present, public demonstrations, *dharnas*, and efforts to draw the attention of the media and political leaders were common, first for getting cases registered and then for arrest of the culprits.

Determined resistance of Dalits against discrimination, was a most noticeable phenomenon now. One marker of that was the proliferation of separate religious temples and Gurdwaras by the Ravidasia, Kabirpanthi, Mazhabi and Balmikis, and also separate cremation grounds. "Until the end of 1960s all cremated their dead at one place". Now a very large proportion of villages had separate cremation grounds. In a long series of articles in *Nawan Zamana*, Des Raj Kali analysed incidents of caste clash centred on newly contested claims on ownership of such religious places as had been for ages considered as belonging to the village as a whole[Kali 2003]. The assertion by the SCs in that regard appeared to signify a struggle for their own spaces of autonomy. A thumbing of their nose at the "other" or at the symbols of the dominant caste, and often a palpable readiness for confrontation, seemed to be one of the marks of their transformation, particularly among the young men.<sup>15</sup> Many a rural Jat found it difficult to come to

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<sup>13</sup> Unpublished Report 2006 of a Survey conducted by RB Singh in districts Amritsar and Gurdaspur.

<sup>14</sup> Written response, Jai Singh, Head of the NGO. n.d. And Interview, Tarsem Peter, *Nawan Zamana*, October 3, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Prominently visible during the Talhan agitation 2004

terms with the shift in social equations in the village. They were the land owners and they dominated both the Congress and the Akali parties in the state. "Since leadership was with the Jats, the poor Jats were never able to overcome their illusion of their superior caste, even though their conditions of living may be worse than those of the lower castes. That was the reason that the main contradiction emerged between Jats and Dalits".[Judge 2005:26] In effect the people of both categories tended to assert their caste identity more than earlier.

The issue of identity appeared to have become more salient for Dalits than the issues of redistribution and of access to opportunities and social justice. The consciousness of identity, on the other hand, took varied forms. Instead of a Dalit identity, the discrete *Jati* consciousness strengthened an internal caste hierarchy. Kanshi Ram's BSP in Punjab remained mainly an Ad Dharmi-Chamar organisation, practically excluding other segments. One could notice a milder form of untouchability in the relations of Ad Dharmi and Kabirpanthi with the Mazhabi and the Balmiki. The Mazhabis of village Heraan in Ludhiana district who had, eight years earlier, constructed a separate Gurdwara in collaboration with the Ramdasia (another Scheduled Caste of the village), resolved in 2002 to construct another, exclusively Mazhabi Sikh temple because they were incensed over humiliation of their women by Ramdasia women. [Puri 2003:2700]

Another aspect of identity-based aspirations related to increasing inclination towards following the religious route to status. Particular *Jatis* were also seen to be engaged in a process of inventing and strengthening distinct *jati*-based religio-cultural markers, giving themselves distinct religious symbols, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, *jaikaras* (religious cries) and salutations. Large sections of the Scheduled Castes sought solace in joining sects like the Radha Soami, the Sacha Sauda *dera* of Sirsa (Haryana), *dera* Wad Bhag Singh, Nirankaris, Namdharis, *dera* of Sachkhand Ballan and many others. An interim list of Ravidasi Sants and *deras* in Punjab prepared by a researcher mentioned 64 such *deras* at the last count. [Bharti 2004, II 1-112]; A Radhasoami Balmiki regarded his identity to be different from that of other Balmikis, and status higher. The Ambedkarites, such as L.R. Bali, ridiculed the shift towards religion as obscurantism and also a hurdle in structuring of Dalit solidarity.

Looking at the present in comparison to the past, the Scheduled Castes of Punjab recognized the change in their lives to be significant, even "remarkable". Many of them referred to a sense of liberation from the scourge of untouchability and exclusion, and their visibility in public spaces. But overall, there was in a vast majority of SCs a lack of sense of empowerment. The mental baggage of the past seemed to loom large. Instead of the desired annihilation of caste, the salience of hierarchy among the Scheduled Castes appeared to reflect almost a Brahminical pattern. Dalit writers routinely condemned the reservation-benefited class for cultivating an upper caste mentality towards their own people. There was a wide lag between material change and the change in the habits of mind of the SC and non-SCs. But nothing has come as a greater blow to the meagre hopes of the poor and backward SCs than the accelerated withdrawal of the state from its obligations in the social sector and its declining capability for good governance. "*Saadi tek sarkar te si, oh ne palla jhaarta, tan asi kithey jaana*" (Our hopes were on the government; if the government washes its hands off and runs away from its obligations where do we go). The dialectics of empowerment and oppression has therefore created a variety of contradictions.

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