Caste within Caste: Predicament of Political Solidarity among Scheduled Castes in Contemporary Punjab

Ronki Ram
Institute for Development and Communication (IDC), Chandigarh

Punjab has the highest number of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in comparison to other states in India, and therefore much higher than the national average for SC populations. However, despite being included within the singular constitutional category of SCs, this is not a monolithic population, being further divided into thirty-nine marginalised communities of varied subcastes scattered over three spatio-cultural regions and furthermore into various socio-religious denominations including a profusion of deras (alternative religious centres). This heterogeneity among SCs in Punjab has prevented the emergence of political unity amongst them and de facto pushed them towards various political parties and organisations, which opportunistically benefited from these readymade vote banks but failed to champion their interests. In particular, the electoral experiment to win political power by founding exclusive SCs-based political parties starkly failed to forge unity between these multifarious lowest caste subgroups. This paper aims at exploring how caste heterogeneity failed to forge unity among the various marginalised communities in Punjab.

Introduction

Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Punjab constitutes 31.94 percent of its total population which is largest in comparison to their counterparts in all other states of India and twice the overall national share (16.64 percent) of SCs population.[1] This share varies from 32.07 percent to 42.51 percent in many of the districts of Punjab. In majority of the districts in Punjab, SCs population is one third or more.[2] The share of SCs population in the State is more distinct in its rural sector (73.33 percent against 26.67 percent of urban SCs population). Out of total 12,168 inhabited villages in Punjab, 57 have 100 percent SCs population and in other 4,799 (39.44 percent) villages, their share is 40 percent or more.[3] Consequently, Punjab has 25 percent share in reservation against 15 percent SCs reservation at the national level. However, the extraordinary numerical strength of the SCs of Punjab does not reflect in the electoral performance of their exclusively caste-based political parties, e.g. Scheduled Caste Federation, Republican Party of India, and Bahujan Samaj Party. One of the reasons behind this dismal electoral performance is the division of SCs into numerous sub-castes scattered across varied regions,[4] religions,[5] *deras*,[6] sects[7], and cults[8] that kept them faction-ridden and further lead to the emergence of various distinct social, religious and regional identities amongst them and fatal implications for the progression of a single unified SC cultural identity – prerequisite for intra-

SC political solidarity. Another possible reason is the transformative impact of Islam, Khalsa Panth and Arya Samaj on enfeebling the Brahminical influence in Punjab, unlike in the Hindi belt, and thereby hobbling the efforts of leaders of various lowest castes to build their own collective political base in the state (Dubey, 2001: 292; Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970: 15**;** Puri, 2003: 2693). Though the Ad Dharm movement in the mid-1920s had tried to forge unity among the lowest castes, the paradoxical ailment – from the perspective of these movements – of an preexisting caste-based social hierarchy between these very castes crippled such efforts (Deliege, 1999; Juergensmeyer, 1988; Moffatt, 1979). Another factor was the co-optation of various popular SCs leaders with positions of prominence within mainstream political parties (Gundimeda, 2016:207; Jaffrelot, 2007), which contributed to the forestallment of the full realisation of the electoral scope of exclusively SCs political parties.[9]

Like elsewhere, the SCs of Punjab are not a homogeneous category. On the contrary, as cogently articulated by Robert Deliege, 'they are divided into hundreds of castes and subcastes' by the same logic of graded caste hierarchy that separated them from the various categories of upper castes as per the Brahminical social order epitomised by the Varna system – the four-fold hierarchical division of the Hindu society in Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras (Deliege, 1999: x and 22; Sharma, 1978: 294-303). In the Varna social hierarchy, where obedience flows in a bottom-up ascending order and command runs in a top-down descending order, the last Varna (Shudras) is considered to be lowest on scale of social status. Though SCs are often included within the larger *Shudra* category, they differ from the latter in terms of their social ranking and place of residence (Deliege,1999: 8; Manoharan, 2020: 136-49**)**. As far as social ranking is concerned, SCs were placed further down the line, even lower than the Shudras (various artisan caste like carpenters, blacksmiths, tailors, masons, goldsmiths, barbers etc).[10] They were not included at all within the Varna social order and contemptuously called *Avarnas* (beyond Varna, lowest of low). Even Avarnas suffer from internal heterogeneity. Christophe Jaffrelot in his critical analysis of the Independent Labour Party and the Scheduled Federation of India, founded by Ambedkar during his lifetime, further elaborated in detail the thesis of caste heterogeneity within SCs by underlining that these two political parties though primarily aimed at protecting and promoting the interests of SCs were in fact focused mainly on Mahars, one of the various sub-castes combined within the larger category of SCs of Maharashtra (Jaffrelot, 2003: 103-104).

Historically, designateed as *ati* Shudras[11] – lowest of the low/ex-Untouchables – who were condemned to perfom so-called unclean jobs, generally reside in segregated Dalit[12] localities (*chamalee*/*vehraa*/*tathi*/*cheri*) away from the mainstream villages (*pind/urr*) inhabited by higher castes including the Shudras (Ram, 2016:33-34; Jodhka, 2012: 81-82). Even in cities, they mostly live in separate neighbourhoods – Balmiki colony, Harijan Basti, and Chamar mohalla – and also face social exclusion in 'rental housing markets, labour markets, and higher education' (for details see: Suzuki, 2023: 198; for further details see: Bayly, 1999: 225-26; Ciotti, 2007: 325-326; Dupont, 2004;

Ganguly, 2018: 50-57; Gooptu, 1996: 280-81; Gorringe, 2016: 165; Jodhka, 2016: 234-236; Kamble, 2002:171-204**;** Lee, 2017: 470-490; Madheswaran & Attewell, 2007; Prasad, 2000: 22; Thorat, *et al.* 2015; Vithathil & Singh, 2012). Though both Shudras (relatively 'clean' and not classified as untouchables) and ati-Shudras (so-called polluted/ex-Untouchables) were engaged in manual labour, they were distinguished from each other in terms of the degree of alleged filth/pollution attached to their respective manual work (Gumperz, 1958: 670; Jodhka, 1998: 320; Judge 2012: 266). Since anti-Shudras were engaged in the so-called unclean/dirty/polluting manual labour, their touch was allegedly considered polluting, which consequently turned them untouchables in the past (Deliege, 1993: 533-549; Prashad, 2000: 27 & 84; Ram, 2016: 33-34; Sabharwal, 2022: 232). Thus, as per the tradition of *varnavyavastha*[13], ati-Shudras were considered even lower than the Shudras (artisan castes), and were debased into several historically abominable social categories known by varied nomenclatures such as *anaryas, antyajas, asprishyas, ati-shudras, avarnas* (beyond varna), *chandalas, dasas, dasus, dheds, Nichi Jati, panchamas, pariahs, bhangis, and namashudras* (for details see Deliege, 1999: 13-18; Isaacs, 1964: 34;). SCs in Punjab were also known by various native derogatory titles like *maell khaney log* (dirt-eating people), *chumm* (leather people) *dhed* (scum dweller), *jooth* (living on left-over) and *vaddhi-tukki jat* (broken castes) (Puri 2008: 321). In other parts of the country, they were/are also known by similar derogatory nomenclatures (for details see: Deliege, 1999:13-18; Bellwinkel-Schempp, 2007:2177-2178; Bellwinkel-Schempp, 1998: 187 & 202).

Legal categories of Depressed Classes (DCs) and SCs, coined by the British administration, and the patronage category of *Harijans* (children of god), popularised by M.K. Gandhi, are yet another set of nomenclatures attached to ex-untouchables (Atwal, 2019: 44-45; Deliege, 1999: 15; Dhanda, 2015: 37; Khare, 1984: 120; Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 2000:99-104). The legal category of SCs (first incorporated into the Government of India Act of 1935) became the standard term for the general depiction of ex-untouchables in public discourse since India's independence. The ex-untouchables are not only confined to Hinduism. After their conversion to other religions, supposed to be free from caste hierarchies, the ghost of caste discrimination continued to afflict them even in their new avatars. Those who embraced Islam condemned to be known as *Mochi, Musalli, Kutana, and Paoli.* The converted ones to Christianity were/are distinctively called *Masihs* and those who entered the fold of Arya Samaj became *Chaudhary* and *Mahashas*. Those who converted to Sikh faith came to be known as Mazhabi, Ranghreta, Ramdassia, Ravidassia, Rai and Sansi Sikhs.

In the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, some more lowest-caste-related terms namely Achhuts, Ad Dharmis, and Dalits were coined, partially in response to the Hindi and Marathi translation of the census category "Depressed Classes" and partially in response to the efforts by some of the Hindu social reforms movements to introduce caste reforms in the society (Basu, 2017: 33; Ram, 2004: 331-334; Rawat, 2015: 335-355). Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) coined the terms Achhuts[14] and Dalits.[15] The category of Dalit was further

developed in a lowest caste movement by the Dalit Panthers, a radical group founded by some ex-untouchables in Bombay in 1972, who were inspired by the Black Panther Party of the United States" (Ram, 2016a: 374; Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2013: 55 and 64). For them it signified a bright future for the former untouchables. Eleanor Zelliot argued that the term 'Dalit' 'was not only to be interpreted as "the oppressed", but also as the "the proud, the defiant"', who are eager to become rulers rather than be ruled by the upper/dominant castes (Zelliot, 2001: v). Though the term Dalit gained priority over all other terms of lower caste categories mentioned above, it was the legal category of 'SCs' that has gained legitimacy within the administrative domain of Independent India.

'Ad Dharm' category came into existence during the early twentieth century. With the initiation of the process of limited democracy in India, lowest castes also became active in some states to strive for their long due share in the structures of power. This gave rise to the emergence of various lowest-caste movements under the generic title of *Adi* (indigenous/native) movements – Adi-Andhra, Adi-Dravida and Adi-Karnataka in South, and Adi Hindu and Ad Dharm in Northwest India. Though the Adi movements were quite successful in highlighting the cause of the lowest castes in some parts of the colonial India, the struggle led by them could not become an all-India phenomenon. In Punjab, the Adi movement, popularly known as Ad Dharm (Juergensmeyer, 1988), however, gave birth to a new term "Ad Dharmi" to identify varied ex-untouchables castes who considered themselves the original inhabitants of this region having their separate religion – Ad Dharm. Ad Dharm (native religion) was officially recognised by the British Administration in 1931. Eventually, it got metamorphosed into another caste term – *Ad Dharmi* – and came to be identified exclusively with the Chamar castes – one of the thirty-nine SC castes in Punjab.

Unlike the upper three Varnas, the Shudras and Ati-Shudras are sharply divided into various castes: *Tarkhans* (carpenters), *lohars* (blacksmiths), *ghumiars* (potters), *nais* (barbers), *chembas* (tailors) and *jhewars* (water-carriers) within the Shudras; and Chamars (cobblers), Chuhras (sweepers) and *Julahs* (weavers) within the Ati-Shudra, to name a few. Shudras and Ati-Shudras are endogamous. *Tarkhans* marry only with *tarkhans* and *jhewars* with *jhewars*. So are the Chamar and Chuhras. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas do not have different castes like that of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras. Though caste hierarchy meanders through varied caste categories (Appadurai, 1988:36-49), the *dvijas* – twice born upper castes within the first three varnas of Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), and Vaishyas (traders) – unlike Shudras and ati-Shudras, do not exhibit different sub-castes (Judge, 2015: 55-56; cf. Gumperz, 1958: 670; Jodhka, 1998: 320). It would not be an exaggeration to mention here that in the case of the dvijas, 'varna' and 'caste' coalesced into a single category what conveniently called 'upper castes'. Even, if at all, some form of caste hierarchy does exist within each of them, it is not much known to outsiders (Judge, 2015: 55-56).

There is no obvious intrinsic caste hierarchy within the upper castes except the existence of different gotras among them (filial form of caste). But gotras

are not castes in the strict sense of the term. They are some sort of clan-based social classifications with reference to the genealogy of mother and father. Each caste has its own comprehensive list of respective gotras including the varied SCs castes. Unlike the presence of intra-castes homogeneity within the upper castes, SC communities are highly segmented along endogamous multi-castes layers (Judge, 2003: 2991; cf. Bathran, 2016: 31**).** Thus, sharply divided into various castes and subcastes, almost everyone among the lowest of the low locates herself/himself above someone else (Jodhka and Kumar, 2007: 21) and follows endogamous and exogamous social norms of caste hierarchy, which is catastrophic for the purpose of political solidarity among them.

The presence of caste hierarchy among the lowest castes, however, is not only a Punjab specific phenomenon, it has also extended itself across the entire country. Based on his intensive ethnographic study, conducted in a village in Tamilnadu, Michael Moffatt built a unique case of replication and consensus model of caste hierarchy among the lowest castes parallel to general caste hierarchy (Moffatt, 1979: 5-8; see also: Jodhka, 2012: 86-88; Moffatt, 1979a: 244-60; Moffatt, 1975: 111-22; Rao, 2001: 74-96). He further argued that though lowest castes question their subordinated status in the *varnavyavastha*, they seldom challenge it as a whole. Moreover, they maintain among themselves a set of hierarchical social rules and norms virtually identical to those of the higher castes' social order – what he aptly called a consensus model (for details see: Moffatt, 1979: 7-8 148, 215, 298).

Though not fully agreeing with Moffatt's model of consensus and replication of the general caste hierarchy by lowest castes in toto, Robert Deliege was of the firm view that lowest castes 'divided into numerous castes and subcastes,' are much more differentiated than hierarchised that 'has exacerbated the plight of the Untouchables, who have been largely unable to unite in order to take advantage of their demographic strength and translate their movements into an efficient socio-political expression' (Deliege, 1999: x & 57-66; see also: Deliege, 1992: 162-63). In addition to the above-mentioned seminal ethnographic studies on caste divisions among the lowest castes, G.S. Bhatt, Lancy Lobo, Manubhai Makwana, Paramjit Judge, S. Dube, S. Patwardhan, Satish Sharma, Surinder Jodhka, and Vijay Prasad, to name a few, have also documented in detail caste differentiation among them (Bhatt, 1954:27-42; Dube, 1955:41-42; Jodhka, 2007:20-23; Judge, 2015; Judge, 2003; Lobo, 1991; Patwardhan, 1973:7; Prasad, 2000: Chps. 1-5; Sharma, 1985: 14-70). In his critique of the term Dalit as an overall homogeneous category, A.M. Shah further explicated caste differentiation among lowest castes by arguing that 'there are dalits among the dalits' and they 'have reproduced among themselves a hierarchy on the model of the caste hierarchy in general' (Shah, 2002: 1318; see also: Shah, 1982: 1-33; cf. Bag and Jagadala, 2018:227-31).

II
Caste within Caste

Divided into 39 sub-castes,[16] SCs in Punjab have been engaged in a continuous

intra-caste struggle since the early twentieth century (for details see: Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970: 8-14; Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 2000: 99-117; Sabharwal, 2022: 239-241; Suzuki, 2023: 205-211). Mazhabi (29.73%), Chamar (23.45%), Ad-Dharmi (11.48%), and Balmiki (9.78%) – the four most populous castes among them – constitute 74.44% of the total SC population in Punjab. The rest of the 35 sub-castes constitute less than one third (25.56%) of the total SC population in the state. They are further sharply divided along religious and occupational fault lines, and do not cultivate any common cultural identity. For a better understanding of the complex caste heterogeneity among the SCs of Punjab, they can be categorised into four distinct caste clusters: Chuhra, Chamar, Vimukt Jatis, and Peripheral castes (discussed below).

In term of religion, Ramdasias, Mazhabis, Rai Sikhs, and Sansis follow Sikh religion. Ad Dharmis, Balmikis, and Chamars mostly follow Hinduism. Some of the Ad Dharmis, Chamars, and Ravidassias, followers of Guru Ravidass, have founded their separate Dalit religion (Ravidassia Dharm) in 2010,[17] and place themselves on the top of the SCs caste hierarchy. In terms of regional differentiation, SCs are scattered over the three spatial regions in Punjab, each having its own distinctive cultural moorings. Mazhabis are mainly settled in Majha and Malwa region. Ramdasias and Rai Sikhs are largely concentrated in Malwa, and Balmikis are found both in the Doaba and Malwa regions (Gosal 2004: 26-39; Judge 2015: 60; cf. Shah 2002: 1317-18).

In terms of political affiliations, SCs in Punjab are also highly heterogeneous. Chamars and Balmiks are traditionally considered closer to Congress whereas Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Rai Sikhs and Sansis to the Akali Dal (Judge, 2015: 60-62; Judge, 2012: 274; cf. Bellwinkel-Schempp, 1998:202-203). However, political affiliations remain mercurial. They keep on shifting political allegiances in accordance with the grammar of electoral politics. But what has remained stable with the SCs in Punjab over the last many decades is their division on account of religious, social economic, and political considerations (Jodhka, 2007: 20; Judge, 2003:2990-91; Shah, 2002: 1317-18; cf. Bellwinkel-Schempp, 1998: 202).

The lowest castes among Sikhs are commonly called dalit Sikhs/Mazhabi (Webster, 2007: 132-154; Ram, 2004a 5-7; Ram, 2017: 283-289). They comprise Mazhabi, Ramdassia, Rangreta, Ravidassia, Sansi and Rai-Sikh castes. All castes within the dalit/Mazhabi Sikh category are broadly assembled within two major segments – Mazhabis/Rangretas, and Ravidassia/Ramdassias. Mazhabis and Rangretas are former members of the Chuhra caste who converted to Sikhism. Ramdassias are usually Julahas (weavers) who are believed to have converted to Sikhism during the time of the fourth Guru of the Sikh faith, Guru Ram Dass (Ibbetson, 1883 rpt 1970: 300). Though Ravidassias, one of the two most numerous dalit communities in East Punjab, are generally included within the dalit Sikh castes, they often assert their separate identity independent of both Hindus and Sikhs (for details see Ram, 2009: 1-8). Dalit Sikhs embraced the teaching of the Sikh Gurus in the hope of gaining dignity and social equality, but even in their new religious avatar, social exclusion continued to bedevil them. They often allege that they are inconsequential to the local structures of

power (Ram, 2010: 265-295).

III
Heterogeneity & Hierarchy among Marginal Communities

Balmikis

Balmikis are an amalgamation of caste and religious identities, which evolved in the beginning of the twentieth century (Atwal 2019: 43-44; Prashad, 2000:91-99; Sabharwal, 2022: 231-233&239-241; Suzuki, 2023:205-207). They are primarily Hindus (for details see: Atwal, 2019: 43-50; Ram, 1991; Briggs, 1953; Ciotti, 2007: 327-28**;** Das, 2007; Gill, 2019: 5-6; Juergensmeyer, 1988: 169; Lee, 2015: 1-17; Prashad, 2000: 67-68; Suzuki, 2023: 205-211; Temple, 1884: Chp 17). They mainly worship 'Bhagwan Valmik,' a revered spiritual figure and composer of the *Ramayana* (Ram n.d., 13; Suzuki, 2023: 197). Known by several names such as *Bansphor, Basor*, *Bhangi*, *Dhanuk, Dom, Domar, Halalkhor, Hela, Jamadar, Khak-rob, Khatik, Lalbegi, Malas, Mang, Mehtar, Paki, and Thotti*, to name the most prominent, Balmikis are primarily settled in cities (for details see: Briggs, 1920: 57; Briggs, 1953; Das, 2007; Deliege, 1990: 17; Kumar Dev, 2004; Lee, 2015: 6; Prasad, 2000 25-30; Sabharwal, 2022: 231-232; Sharma, 1995: 200; cf. Berreman, 1963: 216). Though stereotyped as 'exclusively scavengers or sweepers' (Prashad, 2000:25; cf. Juergensmeyer, 1988: 169), they were known for their expertise in varied agricultural operations and most of the other menial village functions (Briggs, 1920:57; Cox, 2002: 116; Prashad, 2000:25-26; Sabharwal, 2022: 231). However, the colonial modernity and the Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1901 (Ciotti, 2007: 326; Barrier, 1966: Chps 1-3; Gooptu, 1996: 280-81; Islam, 1995: 271-291; Prashad, 2000: 89-93) pushed many of them to Delhi in the 1930s to supplement the Mehtars[18] in the critically important, though socially stigmatized, workforce of *safai karamcharis* – i.e. sanitation workers (Ciotti, 2007: 326; Barrier, 1966: Chps 1-3; Gill, 2024: 117; Gooptu, 1996: 280-81; Islam, 1995: 271-291; Prashad, 2000: 1-24 & 89-93). In this new environment, though they had to perform the work of sweeping and scavenging akin to that of the Mehtars, these newly arrived Chuhra migrants from Punjab strove to differentiate themselves from the local Mehtars by assuming a new caste identity of 'Balmikis' (Prashad, 2000: 25; see also Prashad, 1995: 1-30; Sabharwal, 2022: 239; Suzuki, 2023: 205-207). The newly formed Balmiki identity not only helped them to delineate a caste identity distinct from that of the Mehtars, but also carve out a fresh higher ranking within the already complex SCs social hierarchy.

Mazhabis

Mazhabis[19], like Balmikis[20] have their roots in the umbrella Chuhra (sweeper) caste, which constitutes 39.51 percent of the total SC population of Punjab. Highly stigmatized and placed at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy within the SCs of Punjab, Chuhras were traditionally tied with the so-called most

degrading occupations of sweepings and scavenging and faced 'discrimination even from other so-called low caste groups' (Sabharwal, 2022: 231; see also: Gill, 2019: 5; Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970: 294; Juergensmeyer, 1988: 169; Lee, 2015: 1-17). They do not form a single seamless community, and some of them dissociate from Hinduism and align with Christianity, Buddhism and Ambedkar mission (Suzuki, 2023: 209-210) drilling further divisions amongst them. Those among them who embraced Sikhism came to known as are Mazhabis/Ranghretas. While defining Mazhabi Sikhs**,** Denzil Ibbetson writes "Of course a Mazbi will often have been returned as Chuhra by caste and Sikh by religion … Mazbi means nothing more than a member of the scavenger class converted to Sikhism" (Ibbetson, 1883 rpt. 1970: 294). They were good soldiers and some of the British Army's regiments in comprised Mazhabis entirely. Though Mazhabi and Ranghreta Sikhs are considered similar, Denzil Ibbetson differentiates them:

> [t]he Ranghretas are a class of Mazbi apparently found only in Ambala, Ludhiana and the neighborhood, who consider themselves superior to the rest ... but it appears that Ranghretas have very generally abandoned scavengering [sic] for leather work, and this would at once account for their rise in the social scale (Ibbetson 1883 rpt. 1970: 294).

However, Niranjan Arifi traces the origin of Mazhabis and Ranghretas to the inter-caste marriages among the Hindus of all castes across the *varṇa* (fourfold division of Hindu Society) hierarchy. In his views, Ranghretas are the descendants of different castes intermingling. Born to parents of different castes, they were given new caste titles (Arifi, 1999: 177-200). Similarly, Shamsher Singh Ashok, a Dalit Sikh historian, is of the opinion that Ranghreta Sikhs are superior to Chamars in that the former abandoned eating animal carcass (Ashok, 2000). He further argues that Ranghreta Sikhs also differentiate themselves from Chamars by completely distancing themselves from the Brahminical ceremonies of birth and death (Ashok 2001: 53-54). Their dissociation from scavenging and entry into the Khalsa *fauj* and later in the British army, as soldiers of exclusive Mazhabi regiments, brought considerable change in their social status vs-a-vs other SCs (Cohen, 1969: 460).

Also called Ranghretas, Mazhabis considered themselves higher than not only Balmikis, traditionally scavengers of night soil, but also Chamars and other lowest castes in Punjab (for details see: Arifi, 1999: 177-200; Ashok, 2001: 53-54; and Ibbetson, 1883, rpt. 1970: 294). In fact, they hey considered themselves at the top of caste hierarchy among the SCs in the state. They were able to attain significantly in terms of upward social mobility during the period of ninth and tenth Gurus. Guru Gobind Singh had bestowed the title of *Ranghreta Guru Ka Beta* on Bhai Jaita – a young low caste Rangreta who brought to Anandpur Sahib the severed head of the ninth Guru after his martyrdom in Delhi. The tenth Guru also renamed him Jivan Singh and declared him as his *panjwan sahibzada* (fifth son).

Mazhabis and Ranghreta Sikhs proved their mettle in various battles fought since their inclusion in the Khalsa army of Guru Gobind Singh, including those of Banda Bahadur (a great Sikh warrior who was initiated in the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh), and the five *dals* (warrior bands) and twelve *misls* before the establishment of the Khalsa Raj of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1849). One of the five warrior bands headed by Bir Singh Ranghreta was composed exclusively of Mazhabi/Ranghreta Sikhs. Throughout the eighteenth century, the Mazhabi Sikh militia played a very crucial role in the Khalsa army. The soldiers in the Khalsa army were called Akali Nihangs/*Guru di fauj* (army of the Guru). Most of the Nihangs (Dhillon, 2017: 341-350; Judge, 2014: 372-381) came from the marginalised communities and were known for their martial skills. Even Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) used to be careful of them. Though initially he used their power in capturing several places including Srinagar (Kashmir), where many Mazhabi Sikhs settled permanently, but eventually he reduced their influence, probably under the pressure from the Jat Sikh aristocracy that could not digest Mazhabi Sikhs wielding commanding positions in his army (Hans, 2008; Hans, 2009). Thus, it was during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh that Sikh caste hierarchy started emerging within the Sikh Panth. Undermining the influence of Mazhabi and Ranghreta Sikhs, separate companies of the Mazhabi Sikhs were formed and attached with the high-caste battalions (Cohen, 1969: 455). Sikh identity from then onwards began yielding to dormant but strong caste tendencies among the Jat Sikhs (Omvedt, 2008: 22).

After the annexation of the Punjab in 1849, Mazhabi Sikhs entered the British army, by way of recruitment into the newly formed 'First Pioneer Sikh Regiment'. This was expedited by the need of the British to neutralise the mutineers in Delhi in 1857. After successfully quelling the Mutiny, two more Pioneer Sikh Regiments consisting of Mazhabi Sikhs were formed. These Pioneer Sikh Regiments actively participated in military operations in both India and abroad (Cohen, 1969: 455-56). During World War I more dalit Sikhs found space in the Pioneer Sikh Regiments, which were later merged into the Sapper and Miner units. Subsequently, during World War II, even larger numbers of Mazhabi and Ramdassia Sikh soldiers were recruited in the British Indian army. In 1944 these dalit Sikhs regiments were converted into the Sikh Light Infantry (SLI) which remains an exclusively dalit Sikh regiment even today – a case in point of vivid caste diversity. However, despite attaining significant level of upward social mobility within egalitarian tradition of the Khalsa social order, the pre-Khalsa taint of their lowest Hindu caste legacy refused to retreat completely. A case of caste diversity and discrimination came into limelight when the mortal remains of Padam Shri awardee Bhai Nirmal Singh Khalsa – one of the most prominent Mazhabi Sikh *Hazuri ragis* (those who perform kirtan at the Darbar Sahib) who was fallen victim to Covid-19 – were not allowed to be cremated at his ancestral village (Sethi, 2020).

Ravidassias

Ravidassias asseter their separate identity and consider them superior to all other SCs in the state. Many them assert that they are neither Sikhs nor Hindus, and consider themselves followers of a separate dalit religion, Ravidassia Dharm (Ram, 2016a: 371-83). Ravidassias, the followers of Guru Ravidass – the most popular *Nirguni* Sant (holy persons who believe in the formless God) of the north India Bhakti movement – are often confused with dalit Sikhs. Although, some of the Ravidassia dalits wear a beard and unshorn hair, like the initiated Sikhs, and worship the sacred scriptures – Sri Guru Granth Sahib (hereafter S*GSS*), they still do not identify themselves as dalit Sikhs. They are very particular about their distinct religious tradition and often emphasize their separate identity – Ravidassia. They believe in the teachings and *bani* (spiritual poetry) of Sant Ravidass whom they regard as Guru (Takhar, 2011: 165-184; Takhar, 2014: 105-120; Simon, 2010:51-62).

Distinct Ravidassia identity emerged during the Ad Dharm movement. The Ad Dharm movement was the only movement of its kind in the Northwestern part of India that aimed at procuring a dignified space for the lower castes by building a distinct socio-cultural and political identity for the lower castes through religious regeneration, spiritual empowerment, cultural transformation, and political assertion (Ram, 2004: 324). The main objective of the Ad Dharm movement was to carve out a separate identity for those who were socially excluded (Ram, 2004b: 900-901). It was during this movement that the image of Ravidass, who was already well known among the lower castes of Punjab, was systematically projected in order to concretize the newly-conceived lower caste cultural space in the Punjab region. His struggle against the system of untouchability, anchored in an enlightened vision of *Begampura* – a city free from all sorts of fears, sorrows, sufferings, restrictions and scarcities – at a time when no one could dare to speak for the socially excluded sections of the society, made him a messianic figure of the lower castes (Ram, 2012: 666-667; Ram, 2021: 1-2; and Ram, 2021a: 1-2). In modern times, the Ad Dharm movement has tactically cashed in on his mass appeal by using his pictures as its emblem, reciting his bani, and narration of legends about him as illustrations of power, pride, and glory of oppressed segments of society (Ram, 2009: 3; and Ram, 2012: 667). Ravidassias established their own Ravidass *Sabhas* (Ravidass societies) and separate gurdwaras. However, in official records, they are still bracketed with Chamars. Since Chamars are counted among the Hindus in the census records, so are the Ravidassias. But in sociological terms, they are a group apart and different both from Hindus and Sikhs (cf. Takhar, 2011: 165-84). They also believe in human guru-ship – in Sikhism, human guru-ship ceased to exist after the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh, declared the *SGGS* to be the eleventh guru.

Even though strong links exist between the Sikh religion and the Ravidassia sect, the latter has been declared a separate dalit religion (Ravidassia Dharm) on 30 January 2010 by the Sants of Dera Sachkhand Ballan.[21] The announcement was made in response to the assault on the topmost *sants/gaddi nashins* (heads) of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, who were on a sermon tour in Austria. This unfortunate event happened during a religious ceremony at a Ravidass Temple

in Vienna on May 24, 2009. The attack left one dead and many injured including the current *gaddi-nashin* of Dera Ballan, Sant Niranjan Dass. The person who was killed was none other than the deputy chief of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, Sant Ramanand, popularly known as the soul of the Ravidass mission (Ram, 2008: 1341-1364) and mesmerizing *Kirtaniya* (devotional singer) of the hymns of Guru Ravidass. The followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan, mostly dalits, perceived the episode as a direct attack on their emerging distinct Ravidassia identity.[22] Within hours, this event resulted in a massive backlash, causing a huge loss to public and private property back home in Punjab. The situation was finally brought under control by imposing a state curfew. This violent episode finally culminated in the announcement of a separate Ravidassia Dharm (Ram, 2012: 696-700).

The patron saint of the Ravidassia Dharm is Guru Ravidass. His forty *shabads* (hymns) and one *shaloka* (couplet)[23] are included in *SGGS* and are considered the most authentic of his *bani*. But the fact remains that, despite the existence of similarities between the Sikhs' and Ravidassias' religions, the latter have a separate religious code of conduct tightly woven around the *bani* of Guru Ravidass. Ravidassias are often heard complaining that irrespective of the popular Sikh belief that the 'bani is Guru and Guru is bani,' Guru Ravidass is not considered a Guru. He is accepted only as *bhagat*/*bhakta* (devotee) by the upper/dominant caste Sikhs and his followers, as they often allege, the two are not considered equal by them. Peter Friedlander argues that Ravidass occupies a unique position "among the bhagats of *Guru* Granth in that he is the only bhagat whose presence in the *Guru Granth* has led to the development of distinct movement based on his teachings" (Friedlander, 2017: 323). The caste-based discrimination against dalit Sikhs by the upper/dominant caste Sikhs is perhaps one of the most prominent reasons that forced them to construct their separate religion and religious places, popularly called deras – a clear case in point of a vibrant Sikh religious diversity (Ram, 2009: 6).

Ramdassias

Ramdassia Sikhs, originally Chamars, are usually *Julahas* (weavers) who are believed to have converted to Sikhism during the time of the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das. They are still included within the larger caste category of Chamar within the East Punjab Scheduled Castes list. Though there is a wide distinction between the Ramdassias, typical weavers, and the Ravidassias, typical leather workers, "yet they are connected by certain sections of leather working classes who have taken to weaving and thus risen in their social scale," argues Denzil Ibbetson (Ibbetson 1883. rpt. 1970: 296). The distinction between them is primarily linked with their diverse occupations. While making a sharp distinction between these two occupationally distinct classes of the single main caste of Chamar, Denzil Ibbetson cogently argues that:

> [t]he Ramdassias are confused with Raidasi or Rabdasi Chamars. The formers are true Sikhs and take the Pahul. The latter are Hindus,

> or if Sikhs, only NanakPanthi Sikhs and do not take the Pahul; and are followers of Bhagat Rav Das or Rab Das, himself a Chamar. They are apparently as true Hindus as any Chamar can be, and are wrongly called Sikhs by confusion with Ramdassias (Ibbetson, 1883 rpt. 1970: 300).

Though Ramdassias and Ravidassias are clubbed together, Ramdassias considered themselves superior partly because of their occupation of weaving as against the so-called lower status profession of leather working, and partly because of their adoption of the Sikh religion. It is important to mention here that they were provided with reserved posts in the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) in 1925, much before the provision of the official reservation for scheduled castes (Bambiha, 2011: 42-43). Ramdassias have built their separate deras/gurdwaras, especially in the Doaba region of Punjab. Ramdassia deras at villages Johlans in Jalandhar, and Thakarwal at Hoshiarpur are among the most popular Ramdassia Sikh deras in Punjab (Ram, 2017a: 55).

Ramdassias are known by various names in different districts of Punjab: 'Khalsa' in Anandpur Sahib, Ropar and Fatehgarh Sahib; '*Rahtias'* (devout followers of Sikh code of conduct) in Ferozepur, Moga, Muktsar, Faridkot, Faridkot, Bathinda, Mansa, Sangrur, and Barnala; '*Baune Sikhs'* (weaver Sikhs) in Patiala, Dhuri and Nabha (Ram, 2017a: 53-54). In the Doaba region of Punjab, Julahas are mostly called Ramdassias. The majority of Ramdassias are Sahajdhari Sikhs (liberal in observation of Sikh code of conduct). Like Jat Sikhs, many of them do not strictly follow the Sikh *rahit* (code of conduct). Babu Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, representing the lower classes, was a clean-shaven Ramdassia Sikh of the Ropar district of Punjab. Many Ramdassia Sikhs, like him, are still clean-shaven. Though lackadaisical in the observance of the Sikh code of conduct, Ramdassia Sikhs with their distinct identity add even further to the visibility of diversity within the Sikh religion.

Rai Sikhs

Rai Sikhs, formerly Mahatam Hindus, were considered almost equivalent to untouchable castes. Though they themselves claim a numerical strength of two million, the Census of India 2011 listed them at only 850,000 (Kumar, 2015, 104). Rai Sikhs are members of the Mahatam (lit. praiseworthy) ethnic group. Mahatams were originally Hindus. Those who embraced the teachings of Sikh Gurus became Rai Sikhs. Some of them also embraced Islam. The Rai Sikhs are strictly endogamous and practice clan exogamy. They are mainly concentrated in the low-lying river land bordering the districts of Ferozepur, Fazilka and Amritsar of Punjab. They are also found in some parts of Kapurthala, Jalandhar and Ludhiana districts. In the pre-Independent India, they lived in the Sheikhpura, Montgomery, Bahawalpur and Karachi regions of Pakistan. They mostly lived on riverbanks and in forests, which provided ample scope for

hunting and illicit distilling. They also used to earn their livelihood while making *rassi* (rope) and *sirki* (mat) from *sarr* (the wild grass), which they harvested from river shrubs (Kumar, 2015: 96). Their distinct occupation of making *rassi* and *sirki* led them to be popularly called *Rassiwat*/rope-makers and *Sirkiband*/mat-makers (Rose, 1919: 50; Bhatti and Singh, 2001: 21). Because of their indulgence in the illicit liquor trade and petty crime, the British administration declared them a criminal tribe in 1918 (Major, 1999: 682; see also Bareta, 2008; Singh, 2010). Their criminal status deprived them of land allotment in the canal colonies and recruitment in the armed forces. They were absolved of such severe deprivations and embarrassments after India's independence.

In terms of social hierarchy, Rai Sikhs, the erstwhile Mahatams, were considered almost equal to formerly untouchable castes (Singh, 2000). The colonial administration first included them in the list of Depressed Classes in 1931 and subsequently brought them under the British Government of India (Schedule Caste) order 1936. However, the Kaka Kalekar Commission, which was constituted by the Government of India to ascertain the number of socially and economically backward classes, declared them "Most Backward Class in 1953-54" (Kumar, 2015: 97). But after their long struggle to be designated as Schedule Caste, the Constitution (Schedule Caste) order (Amendment) Act (2007) was passed that included Rai Sikhs in the Punjab list of Scheduled Castes at Sr. No. 39 (Times of India, Aug 17, 2007).

Politically they are very active, but they are not permanently affiliated with any political party in the state. They cast their votes in line with their changing perceptions of their conglomerate vis-à-vis the manifestos of different political parties. There are estimated to be 516,000 Rai Sikhs in East Punjab, which is 1.82 percent of the population, ranking third among 39 Scheduled Castes. Rai Sikhs have a strong presence in the 35 Assembly and seven Lok Sabha segments of the Punjab, and they have been pressing for their own reserved seats in the state legislative assembly and in parliament.

Sansi Sikhs

Sansi Sikhs, like Rai Sikhs, before their conversion to Sikhism, were also primarily Hindus. Traditionally shepherds and hunters and considered lower in status than the Mazhabis (Singh, 1975: 276), Sansis are divided into two main clans named after their two mythical ancestors, *Mahala* and *Beehdoo*. They also call themselves *Bhatus* or *Bhantus*. Their nomadic lifestyle is considered the main cause of their social exclusion and backwardness in terms of their social and educational parameters that degraded them to a lower caste. The British government condemned them as robbers and thieves and declared them a criminal tribe in 1873 (Major, 1999: 670), which was nullified only after India's independence (Puri, 2008: 322-323). Traditionally vagrants, they served Jats as their hereditary genealogists, and in return used to receive some grain at each harvest. Though they take immense pride in claiming Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1799-1839) to be of the Sansi tribe (Bhatti, 2010: 114), in terms of social status

they are considered even lower than the Mazhabis (Singh, 1975: 276). Though a lower caste, they trace their origins to the Bhati Rajputs of Rajasthan. After their defeat by Alla-ud-din Khilji of the Delhi Sultanate in 1303 CE, they were allegedly forced into a nomadic lifestyle.

Vimukt Jatis & Depressed Castes

Vimukt Jaits are the denotified tribal communities (Singh, 2010), which were declared Criminal Tribes by the British administration under its notorious Criminal Tribes Act 1871 (Major, 1999: 657-688; also see, Chahal, n.d.). After India's independence, they were relieved of the colonial stigma of criminal tribes by the Denotified Act of 31 August 1952. DSCs and Vimukt Jatis are the most marginalised communities among the SCs of Punjab. However, their common denominator factor of extreme marginality does not preclude them from being highly segmented across caste lines. All of them are strictly endogamous and observe high-low levels of status among themselves (Singh, 2010a: 73). Among the 39 SCs of Punjab, seven are *Vimkut Jatis*/Denotified Tribes[24] and thirteen Depressed Scheduled Castes[25] (hereafter DSCs). Rai Sikhs (5.83%) are also included in this cluster.[26] Thus thirteen DSCs, four *Vimkut Jatis*, and Rai Sikhs together formed a cluster of eighteen SCs castes, which constitutes 16.53% of the total SCs population in the State.

Peripheral/Invisible Castes

This caste cluster consists of eighteen most peripheral and almost invisible SCs castes[27] consisting of less than 10% of the total SCs population in the State. The numerical strength of some of them, like Chanal, Perna and Pherera castes, is less than 100 persons. Except the Dhanak caste (1.01 percent), the numerical strength of all other castes is less than 1%. Many of them have moved to cities and got engaged in informal private sector manufacturing units as manual labourers. Given their miniscule strength of population and outmodedness of their occupations (like transportation of timber by rivers in case of Darains; toys and fan making of reed by Dehas; weaving by Dhanaks and Kabirpanthis/Julahas; snake catching etc. by the Sapelas; and mat making from grass reeds in case of Sikligars)[28] and the goods they used to produce, almost all of people belonging to these castes are not only invisible but also erased from the common parlance about caste discourse in the State. These castes appear only as titles and figures in the Census records. Thus, these eighteen castes just inflate the total numbers of SCs castes in Punjab, but in terms of political configuration do not matter at all.

IV
Dilemma of Political Solidarity

The presence of various castes and sub-caste among the SCs of Punjab precluded the emergence of political solidarity amongst them. Like their counterparts in

South India, they too replicate general caste hierarchy and are sharply divided on varied fault lines that pitted them against each other. Like Malas and the Adi-Andhras in Andhra Pradesh, Ad Dharmis and Chamars are ahead of all the other SCs castes and remained the main beneficiary of the state reservation policies in education, government jobs and legislature (Puri, 2004: 4; Gundimeda, 2016: 202-3). Their being in the forefront of the education sector, remarked Ciotti, helped them in attaining higher levels both in self and community empowerment (cf. Ciotti, 2006: 899-916; Ciotti, 2010: Chp 4). In a similar vein, Badri Narayan articulated how secularisation of jobs among the Chamars prompted them to migrate to cities that eventually facilitated the formation of Dalit counter public in North India (Narayan, 2011). In a field-based study, conducted in Jalandhar city of Punjab, Yadav and Sharma highlighted how some members of the Chamar community who established their strong hold over the leather business, surgical industry, and sports goods (Yadav and Sharma, n.d. 10 & 34-35; cf. Jodhka, 2010: 41-48.), and while others who monoplised permanent government jobs both at the clerical and officer cadres, have been able to achieve upward social mobility vis-à-vis the other SCs sub-castes in the region.

Many of Ad Dharmi and Chamar SC sub-castes in Punjab have also migrated to Europe, North America, and the Middle Eastern countries that further contributed tremendously towards their upward social mobility. They have not only excelled in business and multiple skilled labour professions but also established their separate caste identity through a strong networking of social organizations, international Dalit conferences, Ravidass Sabhas and Ravidass religious/pilgrimage sites, popularly called Deras. They take pride in publicly flaunting their distinct social and religious identity markers and keen interests to promote their community cultural heritage. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kanshi Ram wove them together, especially employees, in a meticulously chiseled 'All India Backward (SC, ST, OBC) and Minority Communities' Employees' Federation' (BAMCEF), followed by the '*Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti'* – committee of the exploited and Dalits for struggle – (DS-4), and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), to inspire and prepare them to attain political power in their own hands (Gupta, 2014: 477-484). However, the presence of sharp caste divisions within SCs of Punjab forced Kanshi Ram to shift his political base to Uttar Pradesh, wherein again his main support base was confined to 'the numerically big and powerful Chamars' caste (Dubey, 2001: 304).

The Chuhra castes cluster, equally preponderant in numbers but highly marginalised, often blames Chamar caste cluster for its entrenched backwardness and neglect while cornering a major proportion of government jobs through the reservation policy: One of the main factors that widen the wedge between the Chuhra and Chamar caste clusters. Consequently, provision of reservation within reservation was made in Punjab in 1975 bifurcating the 25 percent reservation in government jobs in Punjab into two equal shares of 12.5 percent each between Balmikis and Mazhabis on the one hand, and the rest of the thirty-seven SCs castes on the other. It further compounded caste division within SCs in Punjab, particularly among the most marginalised SC

communities of Balmiki, Mazhabi Sikhs on the one hand, and socially upward mobile Chamar, Ad-Dharmis on the other. Linkages between reservation categorisation and lowest castes heterogeneity have also been found in other states as well: Haryana, Andhara Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu (for details see: Gundimeda, 2016: 202-32; Babu, 2016: 233-47; Pathak, 2024; cf. Thakur and Ghosh, 2024).

The Depressed Classes and SCs categories were originally constructed by the British (Atwal, 2019: 44-45; Charsley, 1996: 1-23; Gundimeda, 2016: 203) on extant socio-economic realities and therefore necessarily clubbed together what were otherwise very diverse groups. However, the reservation policies enacted in India after independence were not primarily based on socio-economic realities, but on castes per se. This has led to severe dissonance within the SC populations despite the fact they all were socially excluded, economically marginalised and politically neglected. Even though the raison d'etre of reservation policies was, and remains, the elimination of inequality, caste-based discrimination, and the end goal of eliminating caste distinctions entirely, they unwittingly strengthen, perpetuate, and coagulate caste self-identification and affiliation – a resultant situation that is entirely antithetical to the original envisioned one. Reservation within reservation in Punjab is a case in point. It has strengthened caste differentiation not only between the SCs and upper castes, but also within SCs, as aptly theorised by Michael Moffatt about lowest castes' social hierarchy in a South Indian village. It has generated fresh caste divisions both within the four main lowest castes (Mazhabis, Chamars, Ad Dharmis, and Balmikis) in Punjab and between them and the rest of the thirty-five less numerical and sharply divided SC sub-castes, thereby precluding the formation of an effective inter-caste political solidarity.

The Chamar-Ad Dharmi and Balmiki-Mazhabi sub-caste clusters are not only divided with reference to contentious policy of reservation within reservation, but also deeply segmented in terms of their religious affiliations underlined with separate sects, gurus, pilgrimage centers, shrines, iconography and sacred scriptures. The shrines of Ravidassias are called 'Deras,' whereas Balmikis called their religious places *Anant* (Adi Dharm Temple). Ravidassias accost each other with *Jai Santan Di* and summarise their religious ceremonies while uttering 'Jo Bole So Nirbhay, Sri Guru Ravidass Maharaj Ki Jai'; the Balmikis' prototype of the same is 'Jai Valmiki' and 'Jo Bole So Nirbhay, Srishtikarta Valmiki Dayavaan Ki Jai'. If Dera Sachkhand Ballan at Jalandhar, Guru Ravidas Temple Khuralgarh Sahib – also called Tap Asthan Shri Guru Ravidas, Ithihask Dharamsthan Shri Khuralgarh Sahib, and *Charan Choh Ganga Sri Guru Ravidas Ji* – at village Kharali in Garhshankar tehsil of district Hoshiarpur (Punjab), and Sri Guru Ravidass Janam Asthan Temple at Seer Goverdhanpur at Varanasi have become the most sought after pilgrimage centers for Chamars and Ad-Dharmis, the Valmiki Tirath Dham at Amritsar carries the same spiritual value for Balmikis and Mazhabis. What sacred scripture 'Amritbani Sri Guru Ravidass Ji Maharaj' is to Ravidassias; *Yog Vashisht* is to Balmikis. If Guru Ravidass is Shiromani (patron) Sant (preceptor)

of Ravidassias, Maharishi Valmiki is the Adi-Guru for the Balmikis and Baba Jiwan Singh for the Mazhabis (cf. Prashad, 2000:90).

To supplement their political capital, the mainstream political parties often exploit the above-mentioned cleavages between the Chamar and Chuhra clusters. Both the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) supported the Balmikis and Mazhabis against the Chamars and Ad-Dharmis on the contentious cleavage of reservation within reservation. The political support extended to a particular cluster often sharpens the inter-cluster division among the SCs in Punjab with serious implications for an overall Dalit solidarity for the larger community interests. Chamars/Ad-Dharmis' failure to get the support of the Balmiks and Mazhabis during the struggle of the historic Ad Dharm movement and the latter's indifference towards the *Talhan*, *Meham* (Ram, 2007: 4071-72) and Vienna (Ram, 2009: 1-2) skirmishes are a few instances of open division between Chuhra and Chamar caste clusters. A heated verbal duel between the Balmiki-Mazhabi and Ad-Dharmi-Chamar factions of the INC during its Chandigarh conclave over the allotment of a Rajya Sabha (Upper House) seat to Shamsher Singh Dullo (an Ad Dharmi) against Hans Raj Hans (a Balmiki) is a case of sharp heterogeneity among the SCs of Punjab.[29] The latest case of caste differentiation among the SCs of Punjab is the contention between Balmiki/Mazhabi Sikh and Ramdassia/Ravidassia communities over the allotment of Congress party ticket for the Jalandhar parliament seat for the 18th Lok Sabha election 2024 (Gopal, 2024). Dalit solidarity in Punjab is also often threatened by the cleavages thrown by the denotified tribes who vehemently contest their inclusion in the Scheduled Castes list of Punjab (Singh, 2010: XIX). They contested their inclusion within the larger constitutional category of SCs, which they thought deprives them of their due share in the state affirmative policies precisely because of their steep backwardness vis-à-vis the other better organised and numerically large communities within the SCs of Punjab – the main beneficiaries of the state reservation policies.

The recent Supreme Court's landmark verdict in the case of *The State of Punjab and Ors. vs Davinder Singh and Ors.* (2024), relating to a 49 years old circular for 50 per cent quota within quota for Balmikis and Mazhabi Sikhs in Punjab issued by Giani Zail Singh during his tenure of Chief-ministership in the Congress government in 1975, has endorsed sub-classification within the historically deprived sections (SCs &STs) of society, which until this very verdict were considered to be a single homogeneous group (Yadav and Dhawan, 2024; Vasdev, 2024). This nearly five-decade old case went through various legal loops and turns (for detail see Mustafa, 2024; Vishwanath & Karpuram, 2024; and Vasdev, 2024) before it was finally settled in favour of more marginalised SC communities in the country endorsing the stand by some of the states in India for reservation within reservation on the basis of heterogeneity factor within SCs and STs. In the seven-judge judicial judgement by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court, the highest court of India, six ruled in favour of heterogeneity within SCs and STs communities, whereas one, Justice Bela Trivedi, in her powerful dissenting opinion, strongly endorsed that SCs and STs are internally homogeneous groups (Mustafa, 2024). Critically

reflecting on the binary of homogeneity-heterogeneity within the historically excluded sections of society, Faizan Mustafa, an academic and a legal luminary perceptively argued:

> Constitutionally speaking, it (the Supreme Court's verdict) may be based on correct interpretation of the Constitution, but in all likelihood, it would be presented by the social justice lobby as a device to tinker with the existing reservation policies. The sub-categorisation, in spite of its laudable objective of substantive equality, due to inherent flaws, may not really achieve it (Mustafa, 2024, text within the parentheses is added).

Explicating further the concept of 'substantive equality', Chief Justice of India (CJI), D Y Chandrachud, stated that it underlined 'the principle that the law must account for the different backgrounds and historical injustices faced by persons or groups' (Vishwanath & Karpuram, 2024). The CJI continued that:

> The Constitution …today advances a more substantive reading of the equality provision, expanding the sphere and the scope of reservation to ensure that the benfits trickle down to those who need it the most (The State of Punjab Vs Davinder Singh, 2024).

Despite the centrality of the concept of substantive equality in the recent SC verdict regarding the case of State of Punjab *vs* Davinder Singh (2024) in favour of reservation within reservation for the empowerment of the more marginalised communities within SCs and STs, it has witnessed a sharp division between those who demanded law-mandated equality in the distribution of the benefits of reservation, acting upon the heterogeneous reality of socially excluded sections of society. But those who opposed 'quota within quota' (Janyala, 2024) were of the opinion that such a policy will weaken the cause of political solidarity among various SC communities for the disadvantage of all of them (Yadav, Dhawan, and Mogha, 2024). Another equally critical view, however, states emphatically that:

> [T]he ground reality is that the social life and political expression of diverse SC *jatis* is already fragmented and fractured. In fact, the only way to create unity within and between categories is by creating broad, consociational arrangements. This can be done if voices from the relatively less disadvantaged communities within Dalits would acknowledge the agency of the most disadvantaged SC communities who have won a hard-fought legal fight. Unfortunately, the insinuation of social division at this stage echoes the anti-reservationist rhetoric of the 'upper' caste elite (Yadav, Dhawan, and Mogha, 2024).

Some referred to contended conspiracies among one set of political parties, which fabricate the bogey of en bloc SC support to specific, and rival, political parties. Whatever may be the case, the issue of quota within quota reflects on the larger question of equitable addressing the homogeneity-heterogeneity binary among SCs on the one hand, and the dilemma of political solidarity among them on the other.

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Notes

[1] All the SCs castes population figures mentioned in this study are taken from Census of India (2011).

[2] 42.51 percent in Saheed Bhagat Singh Nagar, 42.31 percent in Sri Muktsar Sahib and 42.17 percent in Firozpur). In the descending order 38. 95 percent in Jalandhar, 38.92 percent in Faridkot, 36.50 percent in Moga, 35.14 percent in Hoshiarpur, 33.94 percent in Kapurthala, 33.71 percent in Tarn Taran, 33.63 percent in Mansa, 32.44 percent in Bathinda, 32.24 percent in Barnala and 32.07 percent in Fatehgarh Sahib.

[3] www.welfarepunjab.gov.in.

[4] Doaba (between Beas and Sutlej rivers), Majha (between Beas and Ravi rivers), and Malwa (south of the Sutlej River, also known as Cis-Sutlej during the British period).

[5] SCs in Punjab are affiliated with Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and recently formed Ravidassia Dharm.

[6] Free from the structural bindings of institutionsalised religions, Deras are alternative religious centres.

[7] For details see: Gillin, 1910: 236-50; Marty, 1960: 125-34; Ownby, 2008: 12-29; Shah, 2006: 209-48; Wilson, 1959: 3-15.

[8] For details see: Beckford, 1981; Campbell, 1977: 375-88; Levine, 1981: 34-49; Olson, 2006: 97-106; Richardson, 1993: 348-56; Robbins, 1988.

[9] I am indebted to Pramod Kumar and Pritam Singh for helping me formulate this viewpoint.

[10] In some States the demarcation of some castes into SCs (Ati Shudras) and Backward Castes (BCs) is problematic. For an instance, at one point of time Mochi and Rai Sikhs castes were listed in the category of BCs but later on shifted to SCs category.

[11] *Ati* literary means extreme. This term was coined by 19th century social activist Jyotirao Phule (Phule, 1873, rpt. 2002).

[12] Literally grounded, oppressed or broken people, who have historically been placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy.
[13] Social hierarchical order of four varnas: Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (soldier), Vaishya (trader), and Shudra (artisan).
[14] *Ati* literary means extreme. Thus *Achhut* means extremely discriminated people. This term was coined by 19th century social activist Jyotirao Phule.
[15] The term 'Dalit' was also used by *Dayanand Dalit Udhar Mandal* (Hoshiarpur) and *Achhut Udhar Mandal* (Lahore) in Punjab in 1920s (Ram, 2004: 331-333).
[16]As per Notified Scheduled Caste List of Punjab State Punjab https://pbscfc.punjab.gov.in/?q=node/21 accessed on May 28, 2024.
[17] Some of the Ravidassias declared a separate Dalit religion (Ravidassia Dharm) on 30 January 2010 (Ram, 2012: 696-700).
[18] Mehtars were 'more a community of sweepers than a discrete caste community' (Prashad, 2000:21)
[19] Also spelled as Majhbi or Mazahabi.
[20] Also spelled as Valmiki.
[21] The most popular Ravidassia dera, also known as Dera Shri 108 Sant Sarwan Dass ji or simply Dera Ballan, is situated on the Jalandhar-Pathankot road about twelve kilometers away from Jalandhar city of East Punjab.
[22] Based on author's interviews with some of followers of Dera Sachkhand Ballan during the last week of May 2009.
[23] However, as far as the veracity of authorship of the *shloka* is concerned, a difference of opinions prevails among the scholars. Sahib Singh and Jasbir Singh Sabar, eminent scholars of Sikh scripture, are of the opinion that the *shloka* in question was of Kabir – listed in the Kabir bani, *Shloka* 242, at page 1377 of the SGGS – whereas Bhai Jodh Singh, Dharampal Singhal and John Stratton Hawley, equally celebrated academic on this subject, considered that it was authored by Ravidass (Singh, 2000: 49; Hawley, 1988: 12; Singhal, 1986, 75; see also Singh, 1999: 20-25). The *Shloka* 242 was also included in the Bani of Ravidass compiled and published by Dera Ballan, (Arsh, 2012: 196; Jassi & Suman, 2001:327).
[24] Bangala (0.05 percent), Barad (0.10 percent), Bauria (1.41 percent), Bazigar Bhanjra (2.76 percent), Gandhila/Gandil Gondola (0.04 percent), Nat (0.04 percent) and Sansi (1.38 percent). Three Vimukt Jaits, which were not included in the DSCs category are of Nat (0.04 percent), Gandhila (0.04 percent) and Barad (0.10 percent).
[25] Bazigars (2.72 percent), Dumnas/Mahasha/Doom (2.29 percent), Meghs (1.59 percent), Baurias/Bawarias (1.41 percent), Sansi/Bhedkut/Manesh (1.38 percent), Pasi (0.44 percent), Od (0.36 percent), Kori, Koli (0.28 percent), Sarera (0.16 percent), Khatik (0.16 percent), Sikligar (0.13 percent), Barar/Burar/Berar/Barad (0.10 percent), Bangali/Bangala (0.05 percent), and Banjra (0.04 percent). Out of these thirteen Vimukt Jatis four (Bangala, Bauria, Bazigar Bhanjra, and Sansi (1.38 percent) are also clubbed with the Denotified

Tribes/Vimukt Jaits (Singh 2010: xI). However, within the DSCs category Bazigar and Bhanjra are listed as separate castes.

[26] They are one of the Criminal Tribes declared under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 (Major,1999: 682-686). Recently declared as a SCs caste, they were not included within the categories of Denotified Tribes/*Vimkut Jatis* and DSCs.

[27]Batwal/Barwala, Chanal, Dagi, Darain, Deha/Dhaya/Dhea, Dhanak, Dhogri/Dhangri/Siggi, Gagra, Kabirpanthi/Julaha, Marija/Marecha, Perna, Pherera, Sanhai, Sanhal, Sansoi, Sapela, Sikriband and Mochi.

[28] For details see Jodhka, 2000: 400-401.

[29] 'Dalit wars: It is Ravidassia versus Valmikis in Punjab' http://newseastwest.com/it-is-ravidassia-versus-valmikis-in-punjab/ **(**accessed on September 18, 2023).

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