



Social Profile and Experiences of Discrimination among Scheduled Castes in Punjab: An Analysis

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Abstract: The Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitute a significant proportion of Punjab's population and have played a vital role in the state's socio-economic and cultural development. Despite constitutional safeguards, affirmative action policies, and various welfare initiatives, members of the Scheduled Castes continue to encounter multiple forms of social discrimination, exclusion, and inequality. This study examines the social profile and experiences of discrimination among Scheduled Castes in Punjab, with particular emphasis on the intersection of caste, education, occupation, income, and access to social and public institutions. The study explores the persistence of caste-based discrimination in both rural and urban settings and assesses its impact on social mobility, educational attainment, employment opportunities, political participation, and human dignity. Adopting an analytical approach, the study reviews existing literature, constitutional provisions, government policies, and empirical evidence to understand the changing nature of caste relations in Punjab. It argues that although legal protections and socio-economic development have improved the overall status of Scheduled Castes, deeply entrenched social hierarchies and discriminatory practices continue to impede their full inclusion in mainstream society.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Punjab, Social Profile, Caste-Based Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Social Justice, Equality, Human Rights.

Introduction

The caste system is one of the oldest forms of social stratification in India, characterized by a hierarchical division of society based on birth, occupation, and social status. Traditionally, Hindu society was organized into four varnas i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, while certain communities were placed outside this hierarchy and were subjected to social exclusion and discrimination. Over time, the caste system evolved into a complex network of numerous jatis (sub-castes) that regulated social interactions, occupations, marriage, and access to resources. Although caste and untouchability are prevalent throughout the country, they have unique characteristics in each region.¹ However, modernization, urbanization, and constitutional reforms have weakened some aspects of caste-based distinctions, caste continues to influence social, economic, and political life in India. Caste continues to be sustained at an ideological level by Hinduism and at a material level by the prevailing land relations in agrarian India and caste has no potential for a socially progressive role unless its sustaining structures are completely weakened and broken.² Scheduled Castes (SCs) refer to those historically disadvantaged communities that were subjected to untouchability and severe social discrimination under the traditional caste order. The term "Scheduled Castes" was officially adopted under Article 341³ of the Constitution of India, which

¹ Ronki Ram, "Untouchability in India with a Difference: Ad Dharm, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab" 44 *Asian Survey* 895-912 (2004).

² C. P. Bhambhri, "Dialectics of Caste and Casteism" 34 *Economic and Political Weekly* 2619-2620 (1999).

³ The Constitution of India, art., 341.

Scheduled Castes (1) The President may with respect to any State or Union territory, and where it is a State after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of or group within castes, races or tribes which shall for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Castes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be.



empowers the President to specify castes, races, or tribes that require special protection and affirmative action measures. In the Indian context, exclusion revolves around institutions that discriminate, isolate, shame, and deprive subordinate groups on the basis of identities like caste, religion and gender.⁴ Scheduled Castes have been recognized as one of the most marginalized sections of Indian society due to centuries of exclusion from education, land ownership, public institutions, and social opportunities. To address these historical injustices, the Indian Constitution guarantees equality before law, prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, abolishes untouchability under Article 17⁵, and provides reservations in education, public employment, and political representation. Despite significant progress in literacy, employment, and political participation, Scheduled Castes continue to face various forms of social, economic, and cultural discrimination. Consequently, the study of Scheduled Castes remains crucial for understanding issues of social justice, equality, human rights, and inclusive development in contemporary India. The problem of a "change of heart" is not one of waiting upon a wave of moral edification, but rather of changing specific behaviours that have their roots in a variety of attitudes about pollution, hierarchical, gracing, indignity of manual labour, etc.⁶

Caste and Scheduled Castes in Punjab: A Brief Overview

Untouchability in Punjab is unique, as the Brahmanical tradition of social stratification has never taken deep root in the region.⁷ Punjab presents a unique social structure in which caste continues to play a significant role despite the egalitarian teachings of Sikhism and the state's relatively high levels of economic development. Historically, Punjab's society has been organized around caste identities that influence social relations, occupation, land ownership, marriage patterns, and political mobilization. Among the dominant castes, Jat Sikhs have traditionally held substantial economic and political power due to their control over agricultural land and rural institutions. In Punjab, Jat-Sikhs, rather than Brahmins, are the dominant group. Mostly concentrated in villages, Jat-Sikhs are primarily agriculturists and landowners and are widely considered to be the backbone of the Punjab peasantry.⁸ Other caste groups, including Khatri, Aroras, Ramgarhias, and various Scheduled Castes, occupy different positions within the state's social hierarchy. Scheduled Castes constitute a significant proportion of Punjab's population, accounting for approximately 31.9 percent according to the Census of India 2011, the highest percentage among all Indian states. Major Scheduled Caste communities in Punjab include Mazhabi Sikhs, Ravidasias (Ad-Dharmis), Valmiki, Ramdasias, Bazigars, and Balmiki. Historically, these communities faced social exclusion, untouchability, occupational segregation, and limited access to land, education, and public resources. Although constitutional safeguards, reservation policies, and socio-economic development have improved their status, many Scheduled Caste groups continue to experience discrimination and inequality in various spheres of life. In rural Punjab, caste-based disparities are particularly evident in land ownership, residential segregation, access to common resources, and participation in village institutions. Incidents of discrimination have also been reported in educational institutions, religious spaces, and labour markets. At the same time, Scheduled Castes in Punjab have demonstrated significant social and political mobilization through movements such as the Ad-Dharm movement and the emergence of distinct religious and social organizations.

(2) Parliament may by law include in or exclude from the list of Scheduled Castes specified in a notification issued under clause (1) any caste, race or tribe or part of or group within any caste, race or tribe, but save as aforesaid a notification issued under the said clause shall not be varied by any subsequent notification.

⁴ Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman "Caste and Economic Discrimination: Causes, Consequences and Remedies" 42 *Economic and Political Weekly* 4121-4124 (2007).

⁵ The Constitution of India, art. 17. Abolition of untouchability

"Untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

⁶ Marc Galanter, "Untouchability and the Law" 4 *Economic and Political Weekly* 155 (1969).

⁷ *Supra* note 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The increasing educational attainment, political participation, and assertion of Dalit identity have contributed to greater awareness of rights and social justice. Despite notable progress, caste remains an important determinant of social status and opportunities in Punjab.⁹ Therefore, the study of Scheduled Castes in Punjab is essential for understanding the continuing challenges of social exclusion, discrimination, and inequality, as well as the prospects for social justice and inclusive development in the state.

Gender profile of Scheduled Castes in Punjab

Population	India	Punjab
Total Numbers of Population	1210569573	27743388
Total numbers of Scheduled Caste (Percentage)	201378086 (16.6%)	8860179 (31.9%)
Total numbers of Scheduled Caste Male (Percentage)	103535314 (16.6)	4639875 (31.7)
Total numbers of Scheduled Caste Female (Percentage)	97843058 (16.7)	4220304 (32.2)

Scheduled Castes Population in Punjab¹⁰

According to the 2011 Census of India, the country's total population was 1,210,569,573, of which Scheduled Castes (SCs) constituted 16.6 percent. In contrast, Punjab had a total population of 27,743,388, with Scheduled Castes accounting for 31.9 percent of the state's population. Thus, nearly one-third of Punjab's population belongs to the Scheduled Castes, representing a proportion that is almost twice the national average. A similar pattern is evident in the gender-wise distribution of the Scheduled Caste population. At the national level, Scheduled Castes constituted 16.6 percent of the male population and 16.7 percent of the female population. In Punjab, the corresponding figures were 31.7 percent for males and 32.2 percent for females. These statistics indicate that the proportion of Scheduled Castes among both males and females closely mirrors their share in the total population at both the national and state levels. This demonstrates a relatively balanced gender distribution of the Scheduled Caste population in India as a whole and in Punjab in particular.

The Dalit Mazhbis, Rangretas, Ramdasias, and Ravidasias have lower status than Sikhs of other castes, even though Sikhism forbids caste discrimination. Caste hierarchy is also practiced among the Dalit Sikhs. Ramdasias and Ravidasia Sikhs are considered superior to the Mazhbi and Rangreta Sikhs, and although Ramdasias and Ravidasias originated from the Chamars, the former are considered superior to the latter.¹¹

Castes of Scheduled Castes in Punjab

Sr. No.	Caste Name of Scheduled Castes in Punjab	Population According to 2011 Census
1.	Mazhabi, Mazhabi Sikh	2,633,921
2.	Chamar, Jatia Chamar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, Ravidasi, Ramdasias, Ramdasias Sikh, Ravidasia, Ravidasia Sikh	2,078,132

⁹ Paramjit S. Judge, "Interrogating Changing Status in Punjab", in Harish K. Puri (ed.) *Dalits in Regional Context* 100-131 (Rawat Publication, Jaipur, 2004).

¹⁰ Census of India, 2011.

¹¹ *Supra* note 1.



3.	Ad Dharmi	1,017,192
4.	Balmiki, Chuhra, Bhangi	866,953
5.	Mahatam, Rai Sikh	516,695
6.	Bazigar	241,125
7.	Dumna, Mahasha, Doom	202,710
8.	Megh	141,023
9.	Bauria, Bawaria	125,259
10.	Sansi, Bhedkut, Manesh	122,201
11.	Dhanak	89,406
12.	Kabirpanthi, Julaha	84,711
13.	Sikriband	57,555
14.	Pasi	39,111
15.	Od	32,061
16.	Kori, Koli	24,921
17.	Batwal, Barwala	19,979
18.	Khatik	14,482
19.	Sarera	14,419
20.	Sikligar	11,807
21.	Deha, Dhaya, Dhea	10,560
22.	Mochi	8,763
23.	Barar, Burar, Berar	8,451
24.	Sapela	5,872
25.	Bangali	4,690
26.	Nat	3,902
27.	Bhanjra	3,659
28.	Gandhila, Gandil, Gondola	3,513
29.	Sanhal	1,538
30.	Darain	865
31.	Gagra	799
32.	Sansoi	456
33.	Dhogri, Dhangri, Sigg	391

34.	Sanhai	359
35.	Dagi	322
36.	Marija, Marecha	260
37.	Chanal	97
38.	Pherera	80
39.	Perna	68
	Unspecified Castes	471,871

Caste wise Scheduled Castes Population in Punjab¹²

Punjab has 39 Scheduled Caste (Dalit) communities. Among these, Mahatam, Rai Sikh, and Mochi were included in the Scheduled Castes list for the first time in 2007, following the 2001 Census, and were consequently enumerated for the first time in the 2011 Census. In addition, the Government of Punjab has identified thirteen communities as "Depressed Scheduled Castes" for developmental purposes. These include Bangalis, Burar/Berar, Baurias, Bazigars, Bhanjras, Dumna/Dooms, Gandhilas, Khatiks, Kori/Koli, Meghs, Ods, Nats, and Sansis. Furthermore, seven communities have been categorized as "De-notified Tribes" or "Vimukat Jatis." These groups were initially classified as "Ex-criminal Tribes" during the colonial period and were later notified as Scheduled Castes. They include Bangalis, Burar/Berar, Baurias, Gandhilas, Maujas/Marecha, Nats, and Sansis. The population size of these Scheduled Caste communities varies considerably. According to the 2011 Census, the Mazhabi community, with approximately 2.6 million persons, was the largest Scheduled Caste in Punjab, whereas the Perna community, comprising only 68 persons, was the smallest. Besides the 39 notified Scheduled Caste communities, the Census also recorded 471,871 individuals (5.3 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population) under the category of "unspecified castes." This occurred because some respondents identified themselves only as "Harijan" or "Scheduled Caste" without specifying their caste, while in other cases the enumerators were unable to classify them under any of the 39 officially notified Scheduled Caste communities. The Mazhabi (or Mazhabi Sikh) community constitutes the largest Scheduled Caste group in Punjab, accounting for 29.7 percent of the state's Scheduled Caste population in 2011. In other words, nearly three out of every ten Scheduled Caste individuals in Punjab belonged to the Mazhabi community. Historically, they originated from the Chuhra or Bhangi caste and, following their conversion to Sikhism, gradually shifted from their traditional occupations of scavenging and sweeping to agricultural labour. The Chuhra or Bhangi community itself represented 9.8 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population, making it the fourth-largest Scheduled Caste group in the state. Together, the Mazhabi and Chuhra/Bhangi communities accounted for 39.5 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population. The Chamar community ranked as the second-largest Scheduled Caste group, constituting 23.5 percent of the Scheduled Caste population. Collectively, the Mazhabi and Chamar communities represented 53.2 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population, thereby forming the majority of Dalits in Punjab. This demographic concentration has significant implications for the distribution of welfare benefits as well as electoral politics in the state. The Ad-Dharmi community ranked third, accounting for 11.5 percent of the Scheduled Caste population. The Ad-Dharmi sect emerged from the Ad-Dharm Movement initiated by Mangoo Ram during the 1920s, with most of its followers belonging to the Chamar community of the Doaba region. Thus, the Ad-Dharmis may be regarded as an offshoot of the Chamars, while the Mazhabis trace their origins to the Chuhra/Bhangi community.

Taken together, these four major Scheduled Caste communities i.e. Mazhabi, Chuhra/Bhangi, Chamar, and Ad-Dharmi constituted approximately 74.5 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population in Punjab. Moreover, the

¹² Census of India, 2011.



eleven largest Scheduled Caste communities, each accounting for at least one percent of the total Scheduled Caste population, collectively represented 90.7 percent of the state's Scheduled Caste population. These figures clearly demonstrate that, despite the presence of 39 Scheduled Caste communities in Punjab, a relatively small number of communities dominate the demographic composition of the state's Dalit population. The Scheduled Caste population in Punjab registered an average annual growth rate of 2.46 percent during the period from 1971 to 2011, compared with the state's overall annual population growth rate of 1.81 percent during the same period. The Scheduled Caste population increased from 3.34 million in 1971 to 8.86 million in 2011, reflecting an absolute increase of 5.52 million persons. However, this growth cannot be attributed solely to natural increase or migration. Changes in the official list of Scheduled Castes also contributed to the increase. For instance, Mahatam, Rai Sikh, and Mochi were added to the Scheduled Castes list in 2007 and were enumerated for the first time in the 2011 Census, adding nearly 0.53 million persons to the Scheduled Caste population. If this addition is excluded, the annual compound growth rate of the Scheduled Caste population declines from 2.46 percent to approximately 2.31 percent. Therefore, while analysing trends in the Scheduled Caste population, it is essential to account for revisions in the notified list of Scheduled Castes, as additions or deletions may affect the comparability of Census data across different decades.

Experience of Discrimination

The history of discrimination against Dalits in Punjab is closely intertwined with the evolution of the caste system and the unequal social order that developed over centuries in the Indian subcontinent. Although Punjab has often been portrayed as a relatively egalitarian society because of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, who strongly denounced caste discrimination and emphasized the principles of equality, fraternity, and human dignity, caste-based hierarchies continued to shape social relations in practice. Caste discrimination in the Sikh community is different from that in the Brahmanical social order, because relations are not framed through the purity/pollution dichotomy. Rather, power in Punjab is based on land ownership.¹³ During the pre-colonial period, Dalit communities such as the Chuhars, Chamars, Mazhabis, and other marginalized groups were largely confined to hereditary occupations including leather work, sanitation, agricultural labour, and other forms of manual service that were regarded as socially inferior. These occupational divisions resulted in their exclusion from land ownership, education, temples, and positions of social and political influence. Under British colonial rule, caste identities became further institutionalized through systematic census classifications and administrative policies, while land settlement arrangements largely benefited dominant agrarian communities, leaving most Dalits landless and economically dependent.¹⁴ In the early twentieth century, reform movements such as the Ad-Dharm Movement¹⁵, led by Mangoo Ram, emerged in Punjab to challenge caste oppression and promote a distinct Dalit identity, reflecting growing resistance to entrenched social discrimination. Despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability after India's independence and the introduction of affirmative action policies, historical patterns of exclusion have continued to influence contemporary social relations in Punjab. Segregated residential settlements, unequal access to common resources, discrimination in religious and social institutions, and the concentration of Dalits in low-paid and insecure occupations demonstrate that the legacy of historical caste-based discrimination continues to shape the socio-economic conditions of Dalit communities in the state.

Measures for prevention of discrimination

¹³ *Supra* note 1.

¹⁴ Surinder S. Jodhka, *Sikhism and the Caste Question: Dalits and Their Politics in Contemporary Punjab* 38 *Contribution to Indian Sociology* 165-191 (2004).

¹⁵ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Social Vision of the Untouchables* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982).



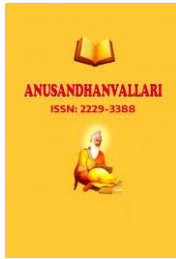
Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and the abolition of untouchability under Article 17¹⁶ of the Constitution of India, discrimination against Scheduled Castes (Dalits) continues to persist in Punjab in both overt and subtle forms. Although Punjab has the highest proportion of Scheduled Caste population among all Indian states, social exclusion and caste-based discrimination remain deeply embedded in many aspects of rural and urban life. Dalits often face unequal access to land ownership, common village resources, religious institutions, and community facilities. In several villages, separate cremation grounds, places of worship, and residential localities continue to reflect caste-based segregation. Incidents of discrimination in social interactions, exclusion from decision-making processes, and unequal treatment in educational institutions and workplaces have also been documented. Economic dependence on dominant landowning castes, coupled with limited access to productive assets, further reinforces their social vulnerability. While affirmative action policies, welfare programmes, and legal safeguards such as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 have contributed to improving educational attainment, political representation, and access to public employment, caste-based violence, social boycotts, and discrimination continue to be reported in different parts of the state. These realities indicate that legal equality has not always translated into substantive social equality. Consequently, addressing discrimination against Dalits in Punjab requires not only effective implementation of existing laws but also sustained efforts to promote social inclusion, equitable access to resources, and transformation of entrenched caste-based attitudes.

Conclusion

Landlessness is one of the most significant socio-economic characteristics of the Scheduled Castes in Punjab. Despite constituting nearly one-third of the state's population, a substantial proportion of Scheduled Caste households own little or no agricultural land and primarily depend on agricultural wage labour, daily wage employment, and other low-income occupations for their livelihood. Historically, unequal land distribution, the caste-based occupational hierarchy, and limited access to productive resources have contributed to the persistent landlessness of Dalit communities in the state. The concentration of agricultural land in the hands of dominant landowning castes has further reinforced economic dependence and social vulnerability among Scheduled Castes. Although land reform measures, constitutional safeguards, and various welfare programmes have sought to improve their socio-economic conditions, access to cultivable land remains highly unequal. Consequently, landlessness continues to be a major factor underlying poverty, economic insecurity, and social exclusion among Scheduled Castes in Punjab, influencing their educational opportunities, employment prospects, and overall quality of life.

The establishment of a common Gurdwara for all castes within a village reflects the egalitarian principles of Sikhism, which emphasize equality, human dignity, and the rejection of caste-based discrimination. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus advocate that all individuals are equal before God, irrespective of caste, creed, or social status, and institutions such as the Sangat and Langar were created to foster social inclusion and collective participation. However, in many villages of Punjab, separate Gurdwaras have emerged along caste lines, reflecting broader social divisions rather than religious doctrine. A common Gurdwara open to all members of the community has the potential to strengthen social harmony, promote inter-caste interaction, and reinforce the constitutional values of equality and fraternity. While the creation of a single Gurdwara cannot by itself eliminate caste-based discrimination, it can serve as an important symbolic and practical step towards reducing social segregation and encouraging greater communal unity. Achieving this objective, however, requires the voluntary participation and mutual cooperation of all sections of society, supported by sustained efforts to promote social awareness and inclusive community practices.

¹⁶ *Supra* note 5.



Employment generation is essential for improving the socio-economic status of Scheduled Castes in Punjab and ensuring their meaningful participation in the state's economic development. Despite constitutional safeguards and reservation policies, a significant proportion of Scheduled Caste households continue to depend on low-paid, informal, and insecure occupations due to limited access to quality education, vocational training, productive assets, and formal employment opportunities. Creating sustainable employment through industrial expansion, skill development programmes, entrepreneurship promotion, and support for small and medium enterprises can help reduce poverty, economic dependence, and social exclusion among these communities. In addition, effective implementation of reservation policies in public employment, greater access to private-sector opportunities, and targeted livelihood initiatives for Scheduled Caste youth and women can contribute to inclusive growth. A comprehensive employment strategy that combines education, skill enhancement, financial inclusion, and equal opportunities is essential for promoting economic empowerment and reducing socio-economic disparities among Scheduled Castes in Punjab.