

Ethnic Polarization in Punjab and the Role of AKali Dal

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Abstract

Pluralism is one of the most essential features of the present day societies. India is a classic example of a plural society with multi layered ethnic identities like language, religion, caste, tribe, etc. that cut across each other. The polarization of communities based on these identities is a continuous process in India. It is against this background that the present paper attempt to analyse the phases in which polarization process had taken place and is being taking place within the Sikh community in Punjab and the role of the Akali Dal in stimulating and supporting such process. The polarization process in Punjab which started in the pre independence period between Hindus, Muslim and Sikhs continued even in the post independence era between Hindus and Sikhs which resulted in the creation of the state of Punjab. However such polarization did not benefit the Akali Dal, a regional party in Punjab, as it failed to achieve electoral majority in Punjab single handedly, nor did it bring to a closure to the further process of ethnic polarization in Punjab. As a matter of fact a new form of polarization started within the Sikh community on the basis of caste where the dalits raise their voice of dissent and opposition against the Jat Sikhs.

Key Words: Ethnic polarization, Akali Dal, Dalits

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed the escalation of community mobilisation all over the world. Pluralism seemed to be an inexorable condition of the contemporary societies where a demand have been raised by various ethnic and religious groups for recognition of their rights often defined in terms of 'group right'. However, it is significant to point out here that most of these ethnic or group identities are hybrid and multi-layered in nature. It is within these multifarious circumstances that I have tried to locate the basic arguments of this paper which postulates that the idea of creating a homogenous community or group in a multi ethnic state of India is pretence. India is a classic example of a society with multi layered ethnic identities like language, religion, caste, tribe cutting across each other. In India each ethnic community have definite inherent contradiction and further sub- divisions on the basis of caste, class etc. Infact there are communities who have a tendency to imagine themselves as the possessor of plural religious identities. The dialectics of polarization is that it is a continuous process. Ethnic and religious polarization on the basis of one set of identities is not an end to the polarization process in India. Indeed it initiated further new levels of polarization within that community also. The paper argues that the polarization

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process in Punjab took place and is still taking place in phases. The first phase was polarization in the pre independence period between Hindus, Muslim and Sikhs that culminated in the partition. The second phase started in the post independence period between Hindus and Sikhs when a demand for a separate Sikh state was made. And the third stage is the polarization within the Sikh community where the dalits are raising their voice of dissent and opposition against the Jat Sikhs. It is against this background that the current paper tries to interrogate the claims of the Akali Dal, a regional party in Punjab that had used religious and cultural symbols as a means for reinforcing and mobilising the Sikh community. The Akali Dal in Punjab made a demand for the creation of a separate *Punjabi Suba* on the basis of religion and language with the hope that in such a Sikh majority state it will have monopoly over the political power. However such polarization did not benefit them because they got a separate state where they have to share power with the Punjabi speaking and Hindi speaking Hindus. While the creation of Punjab in 1966 resolved one set of demands of the Akali Dal, it did not bring to a close the process of ethnic polarization in Punjab. As a matter of fact, it further aggravated this system of division because of the heterogeneous nature of the Sikh community. A new form of polarization within the Sikh community started on the basis of caste. This division within the Sikh community soon became apparent when conflicts emerged between Jat Sikh landlords and the Mazhabi and ramdasias Sikhs i.e. scheduled caste Sikhs who were predominantly landless agricultural labour. These subdivisions, which themselves are again internally differentiated, within the Sikh community of late have started raising their voice against their own fellow group members for the protection of their rights and liberties. Thus, the polarization process between the Hindus and Sikhs initiated in the pre-independence period and duly carried on by the Akali Dal in the post independence period is still continuing and creating further clefts in the society. The construction and nurturing of such cleavages earlier on religious, cultural and now on casteist line in Punjab by Akali Dal had led to a state of turmoil. In the electoral arena the polarisation process created a lot of political instability followed by an era of violence. The only possible solution seemed to be following a "politics of accommodation". Analysis of these are broadly speaking the basic objectives of this paper and I have tried to show that no permanent resolution to the problems of Punjab can be attained until the political dynamics are altered to produce a stable single or governing coalition united in a desire to promote the interests of the people of Punjab. Mitigating such conflicts and evolving a common path of economic development which can benefit everybody in Punjab is the aim of this paper. The paper is divided into three units. The first unit investigates the development of ethnic and religious polarization in Punjab covering first and second phases of the process and the role of Akali Dal in such a polarization process. The unit II deals with the role Akali Dal in coalition working in Punjab.

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The Unit III analyses the third and the current phase of polarization process taking place within the Sikh community between the Dalit and the Jat Sikh. The Unit IV gives a brief conclusion.

Unit - I

Religious and Ethnic Polarization in Punjab: Stage I and State II – Akali Dal and the Demand for Punjabi Suba

Religious polarization of Hindus and Muslims in pre-independence days in Punjab led to the partition of Punjab. In the post independence period polarization process was initiated on the basis of ethnicity and ethnic groups. An ethnic group refer to a group of individuals who have among themselves some common 'objective characteristics' (Deutsch 1966:17). According to Fredrick Barth, "an ethnic group is viewed as a self defined group based on subjective factors, which are chosen by the members from their past history or present existing condition. The cultural traits so selected provide for the creation and maintenance of a socio-cultural boundary vis-à-vis other ethnic groups with whom they interact" (Barth 1969:15). An ethnic group transform itself into a 'self- conscious community' (Cassinelli, 1969: 16) when it constructs clearly defined boundaries on the basis of the subjective factors like language, culture, territory, dress etc. "An ethnic community that mobilizes its group members for attaining political power becomes a nation or nationality" (Azkin, 1964: 36). Paul R. Brass argued that "the term nation or nationality can be applied to an ethnic group whose political goals do not necessarily include separate sovereignty. The nation constructing process in multi cultural societies always begins with a single central symbol, which may be either language, or religion, or colour or any other cultural or ethnic marker, whichever serves simultaneously to separate one group from another and is at the same time politically convenient" (Brass, 1974: 411). According to Sudha Pai, "ethno-nationalism, therefore, is the search for and expression within the nation state of a particular ethnic, cultural, religious or regional identity, and can take many forms ranging from demands for minority rights, regional autonomy, to wars for national liberation. In Punjab it has taken the form of Sikh religious assertion with demands for redefining federalism with some separatist tendencies" (Pai, 2000: 129).The underlying basis of the Sikh political aspirations in Punjab has been accompanied by the process of boundary definition and boundary maintenance and selective adoption of aspects of Sikh history, culture and religion as special marks of true Sikh community.

A self conscious ethnic group does not come into being until there is a socially mobilized population to whom the myth of group solidarity can be

communicated. In Punjab the seeds of ethnic polarization were sown in the pre-independence period. While prior to the British period, Sikhism was primarily viewed as one of the many Hinduism's revisionist cult, it was during the British period that Sikhs started organizing themselves as a self-conscious group as varied from the Hindus. It was during this phase that the polarization process gained momentum. The Sikhs started articulating themselves as a coherent and socially autonomous ethnic group having a distinct religious identity. The proselytization process that was initiated by the Missionaries during the British period in India led to the emergence of self-protective movements by the Arya Samajists in India. The Arya Samajist glorified Hinduism by rejecting the conservative brahminical rituals and Hindu traditions. In their attempt to do so they alienated the Sikhs in Punjab (who were their initial supporters) when they dismissed Guru Nanak's teaching also and declared Sikhism as a part of Hinduism. Sikh elitist class measured this to be a threat to their very survival as a distinct group and started the Singh Sabha movement whose principal endeavour was to sketch out a comprehensible boundary between Hindus and the Sikhs. Singh Sabha activists advocated the Sikhs to adopt different pointers like exterior mark of beard and turban, use of Punjabi language in Gurumukhi script in order to differentiate themselves from the Hindus. Singh Sabhas went ahead with developing distinct religious rituals for the Sikhs because till that time the Hindu Brahmin pandits used to perform the pujas for the Sikhs. Consequently the Anand Marriage Act was passed in 1909, followed by Sikh Gurdwara Act of 1925 which transferred the power of control over the gurdwaras from the hand of Hindu Mahants to an elected Sikh body, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabhandak Committee (SGPC). The SGPC was declared as "a government within the government of the Punjab" (Singh, 1966: 215).

While SGPC, the religious parliament of Sikhs provided the community political arena, the Akali Dal being political arm of SGPC, moved towards the articulation and achievement of political advantage for Sikh community in independent India. The Akali Dal since its emergence followed a dual set of tactics-agitational and parliamentary. In the post Independent period Hindus constituted 61 percent and Sikhs constituted 35 percent of the population in united Punjab which gave fillip to the process of further polarization in Punjab. It fashioned the way for the emergence of conflict between a promptly organized rural Sikh community and an urbanized Hindu community. Therefore, in the independent India in 1950, Akali Dal formally launched its first agitation for the creation of *Punjabi Suba* under the leadership of Master Tara Singh who had a strong control over both Akali Dal and SGPC. Initially the claim for the formation of such state was made on the basis of religion. However the Indian Government was not ready to concede to the Akali Dal's demand of creation of *Punjabi Suba* on religious basis. Consequently, the

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Akali Dal altered its stance and in 1953 while presenting its demand before the States re-organisation Commission for the creation of *Punjabi Suba*, the language was made the basis by emphasizing on Punjabi in Gurmukhi script. But the Commission discarded it on the ground that the Punjabi dialect is not different from Hindi dialect and that the demand for a separate state was opposed by the Hindi speaking Hindus. Infact the Punjabi speaking Hindus also declared that they did not speak Punjabi. Sardar Hukum Singh observed, "While other got states for their languages, we lost even our language" (Brass, 1974: 320). The repudiation of their claim by the commission forced the Akali Dal to launch Punjabi Suba Slogan Agitation in 1955 which forced the Indian Government to work out a regional formula according to which Punjab and PEPSU together would form two zones. However after the few weeks of initial euphoria, this formula also failed to solve the problem which led to re-launching of the Punjabi Suba movement with vigour by the Akali Dal in 1960 under the leadership of Sant Fateh Singh, who was moderate in his outlook as against Master Tara Singh. Soon cleavages began to emerge between the two stalwarts of Akali Dal and Sant Fateh Singh launched his new Akali Dal in 1962. The Indian government agreed to enter into an agreement with Sant Fateh Singh and appointed boundary commission for linguistic reorganization of state. On the recommendation of the commission the central government accepted "that the Punjab would be trifurcated in such a way that the Hindi speaking plains districts would go to the new state of Haryana, the hill districts to Himachal Pradesh, and the remaining Punjabi speaking areas to the new Punjabi Suba." (Brass, 1974). On 1st November 1966 Punjab was created where Sikhs constituted around 60% of the population. The Sikh achieved a separate Sikh majority state of Punjab where they must share power with both Punjabi speaking and Hindi speaking Hindus. Thus "the Punjabi Suba movement consolidated the process of religion based linguistic differentiation by imaging Punjab as a homeland for the Sikhs" (Kumar, 2012, pp. 111-126).

Unit - II

Akali Dal and Politics of Coalition Building in Punjab: 1960 to Present Day

The vigorous fight for *Punjabi Suba* did not fetch the Akali Dal the amount of political authority it has expected in a Sikh majority state. Despite the fact that the percentage of Sikh population was approximately 60% in the newly formed state of Punjab, yet in the contemporary Punjab political scenario apart from Akali Dal, the Congress, Jana Sangh/BJP and the communist party continued to play an important role. While before the creation of *Punjabi Suba* Akali Dal used to secure around "13% of votes in the assembly elections, in the post 1966 period the vote share of Akali Dal varied from 20 to 32%" (Mahajan &

Jodhka, 2012, p. 47). The reasons branded for this is factionalism and the emergence of splinter groups within Akali Dal and secondly the heterogeneous nature of Sikh community. The Akali Dal in Punjab failed to gather the support of Scheduled castes within the Sikh community in their favour. The Scheduled Castes in Punjab, according to Mark Jurgensmeyer, have developed their own 'cultures of deprivation' (Jurgensmeyer, 1979, p. 255). Thus a complete polarization of parties in Punjab was restrained due to the presence of a large number of Hindu residents and the reasonably unattached Scheduled castes as third power. In such a situation communal coalition building was the only strategy that the parties in Punjab adopted to remain in power. Such coalition building strategy was followed by Congress party by appealing to all ethnic communities for support and was also followed by the BJP and Akali Dal by entering into pre or post electoral alliance on the basis of a common minimum programme.

The coalition era in Punjab (1967 to 1971 and 1977 to 1980) exhibited a distinctive pattern of political development. From a multi party coalition system, it moved towards the two party coalition systems. The first coalition ministry formed in Punjab under Sardar Gurnam Singh was a multi party coalition comprising of heterogeneous groups i.e. Akali Dal, Jana Sangh, CPI, CPI-M, and Republican Party. The next coalition ministry which was formed after the mid term elections in 1969; first under the Chief ministership of Gurnam Singh was basically a coalition between Akali Dal and Jana Sangh, with leftist parties extending only conditional support from outside without actually joining the ministry. A third model of coalition system came into existence after the assembly elections in June 1977 under the Chief ministership of Badal, which can be termed a majority party coalition government. Although Akali Dal bagged an absolute majority in the Assembly, it decided to have a coalition ministry with the Janata Party to ensure communal harmony in the state. While the coalition ministry formed in 1967 emerged on the basis of a post electoral alliance between Akali Dal and Jana Sangh, the latter two coalition governments emerged as a result of pre electoral alliance between Akali Dal and Jana Sangh (Anand, 1976).

However none of the coalition governments formed during this period could complete its full term. The intra party conflicts and inter party conflicts were the two main reasons for the failure of the successive coalition governments. The main reason for the collapse of the first coalition ministry formed in 1967 was the intra party conflict within the Akali Dal, that led to the formation of rival Akali Dal (Hudiyara) and Punjab Janata Party under the leadership of Lachhman Singh Gill. The second coalition ministry collapsed due to the inter party conflict between the Akali Dal and Jana Sangh on the question of an option to adopt Hindi as primary language in private schools

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and on the question of merger of Chandigarh with Punjab. The intra party differences within the Akali Dal during this period led to the removal of Gurnam Singh from the post of Chief Ministership and installation of Badal as the new CM, with the support of the Congress, which also did not last for long due to inter party conflict between the Akali Dal and the Congress and intra-party conflict within the Akali Dal. The third coalition ministry formed in 1977 collapsed due to both the intra party factionalism within the Akali Dal on the question of Akali-Sant-Nirankari clash, between Badal on one side and Tohra-Talwandi on the other side; and inter party differences between Akali Dal and Janata party over the issue of extending support to either Moraji Desai or Charan Singh in their struggle to capture the Prime Ministerial post.

However this did not mean that the coalition governments in Punjab in 1960s and 1970s had not done any commendable work during their different phases of functioning. The best achievement had been that the Akali-Jana Sangh cooperation had eased out pains of adjustment between the Sikhs and the Hindus on the language policy which was long overdue. The Akali Dal demonstrated a spirit of accommodation over the language issue by allowing the choice of medium of instruction in privately managed schools to be left at their discretion. The Jana Sangh also changed its attitude by accepting Punjabi as the official language of Punjab and as a medium of communication with the central government. Communal peace was maintained for most of the time.

The period from 1996 onwards witnessed important changes in Punjab's electoral politics. During this period, the Akali Dal changed itself from an exclusive Sikh party into an inclusive all communities' party. Party amended its constitution at its Moga conference in early 1996 to permit the entry of non Sikhs. Captain Kanwaljit in 1996 during Moga conference said, "The domination of religion and gurdwaras over Akali politics is over. The Akali Dal is becoming a regional party with economic agenda." In the 1997 elections focus of the Akali Dal had shifted from panthic identity to Punjabi identity. Freedom from corruption, Hindu- Sikh unity, free electricity and water to the farmers, crop insurance, and abolition of octroi were some of the major promises of the alliance. Prakash Singh Badal the chief ministerial candidate of the alliance promised to the people of Punjab both "Ramrajya and governance on the line of the Sikh king Ranjit Singh" (Frontline, 1997, pp. 36-38). Accordingly the 1997 elections saw the victory of SAD-BJP alliance. However when the new alliance came to power it had a neither policy initiative nor comprehensive plan at hand to deal with serious issues of livelihood. As a result the alliance lost 2002 assembly elections which saw the Congress return to power. While the Congress, after coming to power, promised to reverse the worsening economic situation in Punjab in 2002, but in reality

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party did nothing to resuscitate the farm economy. Consequently 2007 elections saw the re-emergence of the SAD-BJP alliance. In the 2007 assembly elections Congress adopted Akalis panthic agenda hoping it would ensure Congress to win over Akali vote bank. But in reality it alienated the Hindus. Hindus voted for the Akali Dal's urban based ally the BJP. The alliance again returned back to power in 2012. The factors responsible for Akalis win in 2012 can be broadly identified as the mass support base of Badal's and the use of corporate tactics by Sukhbir Singh Badal.. However the Akali Dal since 2012 onwards had often now and then used religious issues to stimulate Sikhs religious passions. For e.g. on the eve of January 2012 elections, Badals inaugurated a number of religious memorials. Akali Dal acceded to the radical's demands for raising a memorial in the Golden temple complex at Amritsar and bestowing the title of Zinda Shaheed on Balwant Singh Rajoana, the main assassin of the former CM Beant Singh, who had restored peace in the terrorist hit Punjab. But the SAD must realize that the use of these religious issues can again create a rift between the Hindus and Sikh community in Punjab.

Unit - III

Stage – III Caste Based Polarization in Punjab: Jat – Dalit Sikh Confrontations

In the third stage a caste based polarization process become apparent within the Sikh community in Punjab. "As per Census-2011, the State of Punjab, has the highest percentage of Scheduled Caste population amongst all the States of the Country. The Scheduled Caste population in Punjab is 88.60 lac which is 31.94% of the total population (277.43 lac) of the State. Punjab accounts for 2.3% of the total population and 4.3% Scheduled Caste population of India" (<http://welfarepunjab.gov.in/SCpopulation.html>). The Dalits are randomly spread out in the three regions of the state. The Dalit population in Punjab is largely concentrated in the Phillaur, Nawanshahr, Hoshiarpur and Jalandhar districts of Doaba region as against the Majha and Malwa region which are the areas of Akali Sikh domination. Beyond the Doab region, the Dalits are primarily located in Ludhiana, Faridkot and Muktsar district. The Dalits within Sikh community are fundamentally divided into two sections. The first sections consist of Mazhabhis, Rangretas and the Balmikis/Bhangis whose profession is scavenging and cleaning. They represent 41.9% of the total SC population of Punjab. "Mazhabhis and Rangretas were the *Chuhras* who converted to Sikhism" (Ibbeston, 1883, p. 294). The erstwhile section of the dalit Sikhs consisted primarily of the *Chamars* (including the Ramdasias, Ravidasis and Ad-Dharmis) who are mainly leather workers. With a total of 37 scheduled caste sub-groups, the SC in Punjab form a heterogeneous category.

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Although the SCs within Sikh community form a major chunk of the Punjab population, the Brahminical practice of societal stratification on the basis of caste was ineffective in Punjab. Indeed, Punjab has been well known for its tolerant observance of religious customs in comparison to caste. Infact, the rigorous purity pollution prototypes of Brahminical tradition were never prevalent in Punjab. The reasons for this was the “presence of reformist religions in Punjab - Islam, Sikhism and Christianity with their reforming zeal and their ever increasing rivalry in matters of proselytization that not only had a demoralizing effect on the caste-rigidities and on the institution of the untouchability but also positively helped in improving the status of the depressed classes” (Gupta, 1985, pp. 121-22). Gupta continues “neither the Muslims who numbered slightly more than the half the total population nor the Sikhs who were about one-eighth of the population believed in the *Chutt Chat*. Hinduism, whose adherents formed less than two-fifths of the total population, was under a severe attack from within by the *Arya Samajis*, *Brahmos*, *Radhasaomi*, *Ramdassia* and *Raidassias* etc. and thus could not be that assertive in its principles of exclusiveness” (Gupta, 1985, pp. 121-22). Conflicts on the basis caste system were nonexistent due to the lesser existence of Brahmans in Punjab. According to Denzil Ibbeston, “the roots of Brahmanical influence in Punjab were weak and that by religion the then Punjab was more “*Mohammedan*” than Hindu and that instead of the rigorous ritual purity norms of the caste hierarchy, the people are bound by the social and the tribal customs far more than by any rules of the religion” (Ibbeston, 1916, pp. 14-15).

Besides this, the Sikhism was certainly regarded as a most strident attack on casteism in the medieval period. The Guru Granth Sahib for example contains the writings by many saints including Guru Ravi Das, a chamar. Guru Nanak also initiated the practice of langar- collective feasts where people from various castes dined together and thus helped blunt caste antagonism. The last Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, initiated bapitism and gave the new adherents the common suffix of Singh and Kaur, further dealing a blow to identification by caste name.

However, the caste system within Sikhism in Punjab becomes apparent with the considerable admission of Jats into Sikhism. The Jats who otherwise belonged to the lower strata in the Brahminical social stratification, were the first one to adopt Sikhism as it liberated them from their low status within the Hindu religion. The Jats emerged as a powerful landed community under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The Punjab Land Alienation Act 1901 further privileged the position of the Jats, the agricultural caste, by denying access to landholdings to non-agricultural castes such as Tarkhans and the scheduled castes. The creation of the state of Punjab in 1966 in which the

Sikhs constituted the majority of the population, the formation of Akali Dal dominated by the Jat Sikhs and the Green revolution which further strengthened the economic position of the landed Jat community of Punjab added to the economic and political clout of the Jat Sikhs, thereby widening social inequalities.

The caste system among the Sikhs in Punjab is fundamentally rooted on the concept power and privilege. While untouchability was never a serious problem in Punjab, however the SC population in Punjab has been susceptible to domination via the agrarian structure of the village which are dominated by the landed Jat Sikh community. According to Ronki Ram, "the centre of power in Punjab revolves around the axle of land" (Ram, 2004, p. 147) . The Jat Sikhs in Punjab who are primarily agriculturists and landowners form the backbone of the Punjab peasantry. "Even though the SCs in Punjab constitute the high proportion of the population in comparison to the All India average of 16.32 percent, yet their share in ownership of land is negligible. They cultivate only 0.4% of all the land holdings occupying 0.72% of the total cultivated area of the state" (Ram, 2004, p. 148). Their state of being landlessness forced them to depend on the landowning castes in absence of alternative jobs. They were discriminated by the Jat Sikhs due to the peculiar economic structure of the village. Many of the lower castes, like Chamars and Chuhras, converted to Sikhism in the hope of social equality yet the spectre of untouchability still continue to disturb them.

While casteism is very much prevalent within the Sikh community in Punjab through the economic structure of the village economy, even in the religious terms among the Sikhs a caste less society failed to make its way in Punjab. Until the formation of SGPC, the Khatri priests used to control the Sikh religious institutions. After the formation of SGPC power got transferred to the hands of the Jat Sikhs. Dalit Sikhs often particularly in the rural areas did not get equal treatment in the Gurdwaras of the upper caste Jat Sikhs "The upper castes Sikhs are a separate identity and like the upper caste Hindus they also follow the ideology of a graded human society. The Sikhs may take food with the Dalit Sikhs in Gurdwaras, but they have no bond of fraternity with them."(Singh 2002:333) To quote him further, "the impact of Hinduism and caste is visible on the adherents of Guru Nanak and they monopolised Sikhism and could not accord an equal social status to the lower caste Sikhs in Punjab" (ibid). "Mazhabis were forbidden to enter the Golden temple for worship; their offering of *Karah Prasad* was not accepted and the Sikhs denied them access to public well and other utilities" (Pratap Singh cited in Puri, 2003, p. 2967). In number of instances, dalits are deprived of access to not only the gurdwaras but also of the Guru Granth Sahib for religious ceremonies including marriage and antim ardas.

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The observances of caste prejudices have forced the Dalit Sikhs to “search for alternative cultural spaces which is rooted more in the route of religio-cultural identity assertion, similar to ethnic identity assertion, than solidarity around a political ideology and political party” (Puri, 2004, p. 15). The beginning of Dalit consciousness can be traced back in the early 1920s with the emergence of *Ad Dharam* or anti caste movement in the colonial Punjab. The *Ad Dharam* movement derived motivation from the Bhakti movements of Ravidas, Kabir and teachings of Balmiki. The Ad Dharam movement intended to empower the Dalits with primarily three powers: “communal pride (qaumiat), religion (mazhab) and organisation (Majlis)” (Juergensmeyer, 1988, p. 45). The hub of the *Ad Dharam* movement was the Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts of the Doaba region.

All this led to the emergence of the small economically sound urban elite primarily among the Chamars who were the vanguard of the new "dalit assertiveness" in the 1980's and the 1990's who turned their support base towards BSP. But the Dalits as a community failed to create a discrete political identity in the electoral politics of Punjab. The main reason attributed to this can be the economic disparities within the two major Dalit Sikh groups i.e. Chamars and Mazhabis. Besides this, “In Punjab, the participation of the lower castes has remained confined to mere ‘presence’ in the party forums or in the state legislature and the actual political power, irrespective of the party in power, has remained firmly with the numerically strong land- owning Jat Sikh community”(Judge, 2012, pp. 17-25). The Akali Dal (dominated by Jat Sikhs) along with BJP and the Congress party primarily dominated the electoral politics of Punjab. The Akali Dal, which claimed to represent the entire Sikh community, never gave substantial representation to the Dalits in Punjab because it is essentially controlled by the Jat Sikhs. “As and when particular formations of the Akali Dal raised development concerns they focused on such matters as better prices for agricultural produce, irrigation facilities and regional autonomy. These matters affected the fate of the more dominant castes – the Jats – in the region. In an attempt to break the consolidation of Sikh votes in favour of the Akali Dal, it was the Congress Party that raised the issue of the Mazhabis receiving the benefits of good education and public posts available through the system of reserved seats”(Mahajan & Jodhka, 2012, p. 52). Comparatively the Congress party has given more representation to the dalit Sikh leaders like Giani Zail Singh and Buta Singh. Region wise if we analyse the voting pattern of the Dalits, it is found that the Dalits in the Malwa region traditionally followed their employers or landed gentry, who were the staunch SAD followers. Dalits in the Majha region, with 25 Assembly seats either go with the SAD or the Congress. Dalits in the Doaba region are considered as the Congress vote bank.

Thus, disappointed with the electoral politics, the Dalits in Punjab have taken recourse to cultural assertion. The Dalit Sikhs in Punjab subsequently have geared up to construct a separate Dalit cultural identity as different from Jat Sikh identity. In doing so, Dalits have selectively adopted certain cultural traits or pointers that differentiate them from the Jat Sikhs in Punjab. The Dalit Sikhs demand for equitable social and cultural status within the Sikh community have taken the form of large scale construction of separate Gurdwaras, parallel to the one controlled by the Jats, and taking recourse to Deras. Some of these deras like the Sants of Ballan have “developed their own religious symbols, flags, prayers, dress, salutations, and rituals of worship. The architecture of Dera Ballan is also unique in its outlook. It resembles both a temple and a gurudwara at the same time. The Guru Granth Sahib is placed in the Dera, but unlike a gurudwara, the idols of Guru Ravidass and the late heads of Dera Ballan are also installed in its premises and are worshipped along with the Guru Granth Sahib” (Ram, 2008, pp. 1343-1357). The cultural symbols of the pride of the Ad-Dharmis are even more visible and not limited only to construction of the separate gurudwaras. “The Ad-Dharmis have developed their own symbols – a flag of *Majith* color and with symbols of *Har* and *Suhang*. They acknowledge each other by ‘*Jai Gurdev*’ (by the name of Ravidass) instead of ‘*Sat Sri Akal*’ (more commonly used by Jat Sikhs)” (Sharma 2012:27-49). Besides this there has been a construction of a new sect called Bhaniarawala sect led by a dalit Sikh who created new ‘*granth*’ for his Mazhabi Sikh followers. Thus the Dalit Sikhs in Punjab have also developed separate symbols in order to emphasize their identity as different from the dominant Jat Sikh identity.

The Deras of the Dalit Sikhs in Punjab have worked for the creation of cultural orientations and social consciousness among Dalits. These Deras in the recent years have acquired strategic political overtones and the supports of these deras have become important for political parties to win the elections. The dera followers are said to vote en bloc for the political party as determined by their respective Dera chief. In the Malwa belt Dera Sacha Sauda plays a crucial role in the elections. Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Doaba with 40% Dalit population plays a pivotal role in the elections. However, this newly acquired power and assertion among Dalit communities was accountable for recurrent caste linked clashes and violence in rural Punjab. Such clashes got manifested in the form of violent conflicts in Talhan and Sacha Sauda between the dalits and main upholders of the Sikhism-the Jats. These conflicts not only illustrate the case of dalit assertion and resistance against alienation and discrimination; the occurrence of these conflicts also makes clear that equality is still a distant dream even for the scheduled castes of Punjab, a region considered to be an exception’ to the caste system in India

Unit - IV

Conclusion

Thus the preceding analysis suggests that the vigorous process of ethnic polarization in Punjab is a continuous phenomenon. The polarization process which got started in the pre-independence period in Punjab is continuing even within the present social structure of Punjab and is thus creating rifts within the social structure in Punjab. The first stage of polarization process between the Hindus and Muslims led to the partition of Punjab. The second stage of polarization process between Punjabi Hindus and Sikhs led to the formation of separate state of Punjab. The Akali Dal that emerged as a dominant Sikh party in Punjab in 1925 initially demanded the formation of a separate state of Punjab on the basis of religion which was later modified on the basis of language. The extensive fight for *Punjabi Suba* did not fetch the Akali Dal the amount of political authority it has expected in a Sikh majority state. The Akali Dal has not succeeded in drawing boundaries between the Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab based upon religious symbols. Rather these boundaries have remained blurred, and internal differentiation in the Sikh community itself has increased. This was latter realised by the moderate section of the Akali Dal led by Badal who denounced extremism and emphasised on Punjabi and Hindu-Sikh unity. Both Hindus and Sikh leaders realised that the stretching of ethnic issues too far can lead to extremism and creation of a condition of chaos. Accordingly AD altered its stance and followed an all inclusive developmental policy for the betterment of both the communities in Punjab.

Secondly, the Akali Dal which tended to speak in the name of the community overlooked the internal differences that existed within the heterogeneous Sikh community. Consequently, a third stage of polarization is taking place within the Sikh community on the basis of caste. The Dalits Sikhs who till now were submissive have started asserting their rights against their Jat Sikh masters. The Akali Dal which claim to be a party representing the interest of the Sikh community has failed in its endeavour to address the needs and demands of the dalit Sikh communities in Punjab. The Dalits Sikhs demands for an equitable share in societal and state power structure have met with stiff resistance by the dominant Jat Sikh caste. The Dalits Sikhs owing to their dissatisfaction with the various political parties in Punjab have limited themselves to the 'cultural assertion' rather than 'political assertion' as a group. Cultural assertions by different sections of Dalits in Punjab have taken place in the form of deliberately designing of separate symbols like construction of gurdwaras and deras in order to assert their group identity as distinct from the Jat Sikh identity. However such polarization has produced a kind of imbalance which led to violent conflicts between the hitherto dominant

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Jat Sikh and the different section of the Dalits in the state. Unless and until an harmonious and a long-lasting solution to this prevailing Jat-Dalit confrontation is found, Punjab is ordained to be engrossed into grave crisis, divisions and problems. Thus it is imperative for Akali Dal to follow a policy of accommodating the demands of not only the Hindus but also the Dalit Sikh community in Punjab. Mitigation of conflicts and evolving a common path of economic development which can benefit everybody should be the aim of the Akali Dal in Punjab.

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