

# Analyzing the Voting Behavior of Urban and Rural Localities of Punjab on the Basis of their Castes and its Role in Society

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## ABSTRACT

Despite being a highly stratified society characterized by caste and class divisions and a state with highest scheduled caste population, Punjab is seldom considered for studying its caste system or a case study of dalit assertion. The objective of this paper is threefold - to examine the caste system in Punjab, to discuss the issue of political marginalisation among scheduled castes and finally to analyze the current phase of assertion among the two largest scheduled castes groups in Punjab – the Ad-Dharmis and the Mazhabhis. The paper argues that in the absence of a strong political force to represent the interest of scheduled castes, cultural activism has become an important strategy of assertion leading to greater conflicts in the state.

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## 1. Introduction

The periodic general elections occupy a place of primacy, as democracy is a form of Fox 'Populai. The elections and franchising are regarded as the most obvious means of influence as it enables the general public to select political leaders to rule them and represent their opinion. The citizens get involved themselves in political participatory in various forms and ways, like interacting with the government officials and corresponding through media and there by the general public involve themselves in a variety of formal and informal methods of political discussions and articulate their view-point on the manner and method of functioning of the government. Different aspects influence the behaviour of the people and determine their faculties that they vote in favour of a particular candidate or party whom the people think of deserving and worthy enough to be elected their representatives. Thus the voting choice of electorate in regard to parties, and the individual preferences of electorate in selecting political leadership may be viewed as the conversion of the public opinion into specific political decision (Russel J. Dalton, 1988:127).

The elections are quite important because the electorate make crucial decisions affecting the nation. The electoral outcome in reality determines as to who will manage the affairs of government and make a suitable public policies. The selection of leaders could be regarded as a political process through which the people with ability are recruited to assume political power. It is also true that the political elite may not always act as they promise but the choice of elites provides a form of popular control of policy outcomes (David Easton, 1953: 125)

In Western democratic societies, voting occupies a position of vital importance in nationwide elections. It is because, in the entire society the authority of voting is strengthened because of using same procedures for social choice in many of large and small public and private institutions. This dominating prominence has led to the export of voting in elections to countries where voting procedure has not historically possessed the same social authority as in the

West particularly in the developing countries. This may give raise to situations in which the procedure exists but the element of choice does not In this context, election is formally defined as a form of procedure, recognized by the rules of an organization where by all or some of the members of the organization choose a smaller number of persons or one person to hold office of authority in the organization (W.J.M. Mackenzie, 1968:2)

## 2. Review of literature

India is the largest democratic country in the world. The Indian electoral system and voting behaviour of the participants naturally attracted the attention of the both Indian and foreign scholars. This resulted in rigorous studies to understand and evaluate the factors that influence the voters. In other words the relation between social and economic issues and political preference of voters had been studied rigorously. As a result a good number of books and research articles were published analyzing the electoral behaviour of the voters. Institution like CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) devoted much of the time and energy to study the voting behaviour with sophisticated tools and enriched the literature. However, there is no agreement on the factors which influence voting behaviour or political preference. A careful review of literature reviews that sixteen factors were identified by researchers as factors that influence electoral behaviour. They are caste, Rudolph and Rudolph (1967), Ram Sagar Singh (1969), Ramashray Roy (1970), Chibber, P.K. (1999), Zoya Hasan (2001), LciaMichelutti (2004), Muneshwar Yadav (2004), Sandeep Shastri and Harish Ramaswamy (2004), Verma, A. K. (2004), Chandra, Kanchan (2004), Sandeep Shastri and Padmavathi, B. S. (2009), Rahul Verma (2009). **VOTING**

Voting is a means of aggregating individual preferences into collective decisions. It is not the sole means: market mechanisms do perform the same function, as the processes of informal interaction in many social and political groups. This aggregating of individual preferences by voting raises a variety of issues (David L. Sills, 1968: 387). Voting is a method by which people express their wishful or preferential approval on candidates for public office or on public issues. The right to

vote is called suffrage and franchise. In a democratic system the people have constitutional right to vote for candidates who rule over them, make the laws and control the government. People do vote on proposed constitutional amendments or changes. In some states and countries the people may vote directly on public issues through the initiative and referendum and may remove officials through recall.

In a democracy, as many political scientists have called, voting is a duty as well as a right of the people. Informed and interested citizens as they argue, play important role for survival of a democratic form of government. Most modern democracies have universal suffrage, that is, they grant the vote to all adult citizens. The whole body of eligible voters makes up the 'electorate' (New Standard Encyclopedia, 1984: VI44). Voting is an activity that indicates and estimates the degree of involvement and participation of people in the democratic process which varies from voter to voter. The method of voting activity may appear to be a simple act of putting a cross at some place in the ballot paper. But, when it is considered a vital view as a process of decision making, it turns out to be a complex phenomenon. The inescapable impact of variable influences, including those of social pressures, economic advantages, psychological suggestions (recommendation) and above all, the impact of election campaign have made the process of this decision making process, an extensively complicated activity (Aloo J. Dastoor, 1980 : 47 - 48).

### 3. Voting Behaviour

The term 'voting behaviour' is not a new concept. It connotes more than examining voting records, compilation of voting statistics and compilation of electoral reforms (Apple, Paul H., 1949: 168). In course of time the cited concept has acquired a \ new dimension as well as a broader comprehensive meaning. It is now treated as subfield and considered to be a sub-area of political behaviour. Modern political scientists are deeply engrossed to analyse psychological process of individual voting in relation to perceptions, emotions and motivations, and their relation to political action as well as of institutional patterns, such as the communication process and their impact on elections. That is, in other sense the voting behaviour comes under the rubric of political behaviour. The terms 'political behaviour' and 'voting behaviour' as analysed by psychologists do suggest aspects of behaviour study, which are essentially vary in conceptual sense of political science. The difference between the studies on the voting behaviour or political behaviour and other studies is that the former studies reflect not the principles of behaviour or content of behaviour but rather the context, in which the individual behaviour is examined in the elections (Eldersveld Samuel, J. 1972: 267). The studies on voting behaviour differ from the other types of studies in political science predominantly in three aspects. First, the voting behaviour is an area of political science, where theory can be systematically developed and quantitatively measured and tested. Secondly, the findings from the studies of voting behaviour are more definite and accurate than those of any other type of research in political science. Thirdly, the theory building has reached a stage of sophistication in the research of voting behaviour (Hickman Charles, 1935:1-2). In essence voting behaviour

indicates the voter's choices, preferences, alternatives, agreements, concerns, ideologies, programmes and so on in respect of the various questions or issues on which the various elections may be contested and fought. There have been several ways, methods or techniques of knowing, showing, indicating and establishing the votes given by the voters (Jangam, R.T. 1982).

Voting behaviour the most important issue is to investigate and find out when the voter thus decide exactly and for whom he is going to vote. These aspects depend upon several factors such as the voter's mind, various influences to which he is subjected to, his own perception of political phenomena, opinion on the Government, political parties of his and candidate's and above all, his own evaluation of the value of vote and the voting activity. All these factors make up the decision of the voters. The timing of decision regarding whom to vote also depends upon the political commitment of the voters and their identification either with political parties or with candidates (Aloo J. Dastoor, 1980:47).

Voting behaviour can be meant to be a vital and crucial aspect of political behaviour of a person. Through this political behaviour the voter makes various uses of power for various purposes in various contexts. Of these various aspects or phases of the political behaviour of a person for various uses or power, voting behaviour may be said to be the most important aspect or phase. For, it is this behaviour which determines periodically, continually or frequently the taking or giving of power in the various sense of the term on various scales. In these sense voting behaviour may be said to be a very basic feature of the electoral process and initiates the play of power, which is the sole means or where will all persons operate various political processes.

### 4. Caste In Punjab

the Chairman of the National Commission of Scheduled Castes, Buta Singh, alleged that "despite constant monitoring, dalit atrocities were increasing day by day in several parts of the country and the Punjab state could be in fifth position for dalit atrocities among all the states of the country (Baines, 2009). The increasing cases of caste atrocities against the scheduled castes in Punjab and the recent and more publicized cases of Talhan and Sacha Sauda, illustrates that caste continues to be an important force in the social, economic and political life of Punjab. Yet little or no attention is given to understand the nature and working of its caste system and emergence of dalit consciousness. Given this background, this section of the paper attempts to understand the peculiar characteristics of the caste system as it operates in the state. As compared to rest of India, the caste hierarchy in Punjab is considered to be relatively weak. The reasons for this need to be attributed to 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, 1985:121-22). 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" (ibid:121-22). The early Christian initiatives in education provided greater opportunities for social mobility to the lower castes. The presence of Sikhism, a religion opposed to Brahminical orthodoxy and caste system, made Punjab different from southern and western Indian states where a steep hierarchy between the Brahmans and the untouchables had led to an emergence of an oppressive caste system and Non-Brahman movements. In contrast to the caste exclusivism and the practice of untouchability prevalent among the Hindus, the new institutions initiated by the Sikh gurus, such as sangat (congregation) and langar (community kitchen) which involves the practice of cooking and eating together, sitting in a row irrespective of caste distinctions, were radical statements against the Brahminical system of caste hierarchy (Jodhka, 2001:41-46). Caste based tensions in Punjab were further relaxed by the relatively lower presence of Brahmans in Punjab. Writing during the first caste survey in 1881, Denzillbbeston, discovered that the roots of Brahminical 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, 1916:14-15). Economically too, the scheduled castes in Punjab were better off than the scheduled castes in other states as neither were they confined to menial occupations nor did they indulge in occupational practices like that of scavenging.

## 5. Conclusion

The above analysis has attempted to understand the nature of caste and scheduled caste politics in Punjab. It does so by studying three factors – social exclusion as manifested in the caste system, political marginalization and the resultant cultural assertion of the scheduled castes in Punjab, with specific reference to Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis in the state. The above analysis clearly shows that even though known as the region without caste, the social and occupational structure of Punjab continues to be compartmentalized along caste lines. However the structure of the caste hierarchy in Punjab continues to be different from the rest of India. The presence of Sikhism and Islam and the relatively less presence and influence of Brahmans in the region not only weakened the notions of purity and pollution but also made the caste system less oppressive as compared to the rest of India. Rapid social mobilization, economic development following the green revolution, the religious reform movement among the Sikhs in the 1920s led to the emergence of a powerful Jat community creating internal cleavages within Sikh society.

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