

The Balmiki Movement in Colonial Punjab: A study of Jalandhar

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The Balmiki community is one of the significant scheduled caste communities of Punjab. Balmiki means the followers of Bhagwan Balmik. There are various stories regarding the identity of Balmik. Some historians believed that the Balmik worshipped by the scavengers is the same as the author of the Ramayana though many other stories are also propagated regarding Balmik.¹ Some people also try to connect Lalbeg with Balmik. Inquiries made in eastern Punjab show that correlation of *Lalbhek* (*Lal* red and *Bhek* attire) who was a red-coated disciple of Balmik. The conversion of the Hindi name into a Persian one and the invention of a foreign origin would be a natural result of Muslim influence. The scavengers residing in the Muslim dominated districts call themselves Labegis, those belonging to or coming from Hindu districts give their faith as Balmiki.² They, like some other untouchable castes in the late 19th and 20th centuries, had a form of Hindu religion but side by side were incorporated in it some element of Muslim religion also. In the recent past, their religion was a mixture of the tenets of the Hindu and Muslim religions, as is clear from the perusal of the books and census reports of Punjab.³

Jalandhar is a district thickly populated by the Dalit and here, Ali Mohalla is a locality thickly populated by the Balmikis of Jalandhar. They are a courageous and laborious community amongst the Dalit of Jalandhar. The historical background of this locality is traced even before the partition of India. Historically, it was a locality established in the middle of the Muslim dominated area of the *Basti*⁴ of Jalandhar and the Hindu dominated region of the traditional walled city. This locality was initially known as Kalyana Mohalla, as the Kalyana sub caste was dominant. Presently, this locality is populated by the majority of the Gill and Kalyana sub-castes.⁵ The other significant sub-castes at Ali Mohalla Jalandhar are Nahar, Mattu, Hans, Khosla, Bhatti, Sondhi, Sabharwal, and Sahota. In 1901, some courageous Balmikis of different parts of Punjab decided to organize a conference of the community at Ali Mohalla, Jalandhar and they send invitations to their community members all over the state. The significant participants of this conference were Babu Ganddu Dass of Jalandhar, Mahatma Garib Dass of Sham Chaurasi (Hoshiarpur), Pandit Kirpa Ram of Dasuya (Hoshiarpur), Pandit Dittu Ram of Kandhola Kallan (Jalandhar), Nathhu Ram of Mithapur (Ludhiana), Khanaya Lal of Ambala, Sadhu Jodha Ram of Multan Cantonment and Sant Gonda Dass of Sarai Noor of Taran Taran (Amritsar). In this meeting, Badu Ganddu

Dass was elected the President. They unanimously decided to use the word Balmiki for the community instead of the previous word *Chuhra*. They also passed the resolution to construct new Balmiki temples all over the state and also replaced some previous religious ceremonies influenced by Islam.⁶

Now with the inspirations of Babu Ganddu Das, Balmiki Sabha Jalandhar was founded. Mahatma Faqir Chand was appointed its founder President and Shadi Ram Commander was appointed its General Secretary. The other significant members of this Sabha were Bhagat Bhhurra Ram, Chaudhary Dogar Mal, Chaudhari Muni Lal, Chaudhari Milkhi Ram, Chaudhari Shadi Ram, Chaudhary Labbhu Ram, Chaudhari Uddho Ram, Mahatma Faqir Chand, Chaudhari Ruldu Ram, Chaudhari Lally Ram, Chaudhari Chanan Ram, Chaudhari Basau Ram, Chaudhari Rollu Ram, Master Chetu Ram, Mistri Malva Ram, Puran Chand, Sain Dass, Bhola Ram, Ghaiya Ram, Atma Ram, Umra Ram, Attu Ram, Malu Ram, and Fateh Chand.⁷ This Sabha got constructed the Balmiki Temple at Ali Mohalla Jalandhar in 1901. This temple was given the name of *Balmik Darbar*. Another significant temple of the community was constructed in Basti Sheikh after the partition with the efforts of Babu Balmukand, Chaudhary Malva Ram, and Piyara Singh, a Primary School was also founded in the premises of this temple. Similar Balmik Sabhas were also founded in the different towns of Punjab with the efforts of enlightened community leaders.

The Balmik Sabhas founded in the different parts of the state enlightened the community members and in the 1931 census, they enrolled themselves for the first time as Balmikis instead of the previous name of the *Chuhra*.⁸ The Balmikis of Punjab has realized that all the significant communities of Punjab had attained their political rights whereas only they were still to get it.⁹ Even the significant leaders of the Indian National Congress and Indian Muslim League were trying to agree to divide the Dalit community into their two respective parts equally.¹⁰ It was opposed by the leaders of Balmiki Sabha with an argument that the Dalit are not the slaves of any community and the British government should look after the protection of their respective political rights. The conferences were arranged in Ludhiana, Lahore, and Lyallpur to unite the Dalit of Punjab.

¹ Census of India, 1911, Vol. XIV, Punjab, Part – I, p. 131

² Census of India, 1911, Vol. XIV, Punjab, Part – I, p. 133

³ Shyamlal, Caste and Political Mobilization: The Bhangis, Jaipur: Panchsheel Prakashan, 1981, p. 27

⁴ The Muslim localities in the South-West part of the Jalandhar City were called *Bastis*.

⁵ Interview with Pehlwan Rolu Ram at New Dana Mandi, Jalandhar

⁶ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi), Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), p. 34.

⁷ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi), Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), p. 35.

⁸ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi), Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), pp. 52.

⁹ An Interview with Ms. Mona Gill at Deol Nagar, Jalandhar

¹⁰ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi), Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), pp. 55.

This agitation leads to the foundation of Ad Dharm Mandal to work for the political rights of the Dalit. In this movement, the Ad Dharmis, the Balmikis, the Kabirpanthis, and the followers of Bhagat Namdev jointly came on one platform to attain their political as well as due social rights. The Balmikis were already organized under their respective Balmiki Sabhas in the different parts of the State. The significant Balmiki leader Chunni Lal also joined this Ad Dharm Mandal which resulted in the close attachment of the Balmikis with this Ad Dharm Mandal. Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia was elected the President of this Ad Dharm Mandal, who was an Ad Dharmi, whereas Shiv Charan¹¹, Thakur Dass and Chunni Lal were the other significant leaders of this movement. They also started a newspaper namely *Adi Danka* and appointed Shiv Charan its editor. Over time somehow the differences emerged amongst the leaders of the Mandal and Babu Chunni Lal Thapar, the then Vice President of Ad Dharm Mandal, got himself separated from this organization. It weakened the power of Ad Dharm Mandal and simultaneously, the Balmikis started the agitation on their own.

The Balmikis of Punjab got an opportunity to attain political power when their community leader Bansi Lal of Lahore won the election after defeating Rai Bahadur Sewak Ram with the support of the Indian National Congress. At the end of 1930, Chunni Lal Thapar arranged a conference of the community leaders at Basti Sheikh Jalandhar and he also invited Bansi Lal M. L. A. as the guest of honour where he was influenced so much and even declared himself the member of Balmiki Ad Dharm Mandal. The Balmiki Ad Dharm Mandal was formed with its President Chaudhary Bansi Lal M. L. A. and General Secretary Babu Chunni Lal. The head office of this Mandal was founded at Lahore. Chaudhary Bansi Lal raised the demands of the Balmiki community in the Legislative Assembly which were also supported by the leaders of the Muslim League. Though there were two Mandals in Punjab but their aim remained the same, as to get maximum rights for the Dalit of Punjab.

In 1931, the Census of India was made in which the Dalit decided to enroll themselves as Ad Dharmi. They faced many problems as in the villages they were threatened by the social embargo by the dominant Jat community and in the cities, they were even suppressed by the Hindu majority. Many Balmikis also sacrificed to get themselves enrolled as Ad Dharmi in which Jhagru Ram and Ralla Ram, who was killed by the Jats of village Smalsar, are worthy of mention. The Round Table Conferences resulted in the Communal Award in 1932 but it was openly opposed by Mahatma Gandhi as he considered it an effort of the British to divide the Hindu unity. In this Communal Award, the Dalit of Punjab got no seat reserved for them as the Dalit leaders of Punjab failed to influence the Lothian Committee regarding their significant population and unity in Punjab.¹² Mahatma Gandhi declared his fast unto death; similarly, Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia and Babu Chunni Lal Thapar also declared their fast unto death at Shimla in favour of the Communal Award and demand for the correction in favour of the Dalit of Punjab to give them some seats reserved for the Dalit. It eventually resulted in Poona

Pact endorsed under the Government of India Act 1935, under which the Dalit of Punjab got eight seats reserved for them.

The Balmiki Movement continued in the different parts of Punjab with utmost zeal. In 1933, a conference was arranged at Mohalla Sanghran near Ali Mohalla, Jalandhar by Punjab Pradesh Balmiki Sabha. In this conference, Chaudhary Dogar Ram was elected as President and Pandit Bakshi Ram was elected as General Secretary. They started a movement to get the control of Ram Tirath Ashram at Amritsar and finally they succeeded in this task, and it was considered as their significant achievement.

The new constituencies were also formed concerning the Government of India Act 1935. The Balmikis in the different parts of Punjab enrolled their votes and were even prepared to contest the following election. Sir Fazal Hussain made a new political party namely the Unionist Party which includes the members of all the castes and religions of Punjab. Babu Mangoo Ram Mugowalia with his Ad Dharm Mandal joined this party so the Balmiki leaders were in search of another option. They thought to join hands with Indian National Congress but as the party had opposed them in the course of Communal Award, so now, they decided to contest the election as independent candidates. They declared Chaudhary Bansi Lal their candidate from Amritsar-Sialkot, Babu Chunni Lal from Jalandhar, Master Lal Chand from Ludhiana-Ferozapore, Babu Balmukand from Karnal, and Pandit Bakshi Ram from Ambala-Shimla. The papers of Chaudhary Bansi Lal and Pandit Bakshi Ram were rejected. All other candidates of Balmikis were defeated in the election. The Balmikis analyzed their defeat in the election and they summoned a meeting at Jalandhar to discuss their causes of defeat. Now they came closer to the Indian National Congress and gradually started considering Congress as their party. This closeness to Indian National Congress got some benefits for them as they got 2.5% vacancies reserved for them and also some educational relaxations for their children.¹³

At Jalandhar, the Balmikis also started an agitation to get the due rights of their community serving in the Municipality. This agitation continued for the whole year of 1939. This agitation was started by Babu Chunni Lal and Babu Balmukand. They faced many problems but honestly lead the agitation. The Balmikis at Ali Mohalla organized a Balmiki Raksha Dal and sent a memorandum to the government regarding their justified demands. The head of Jalandhar Municipality was Qazi Bashir Ahmed and his strong opponent was Gulham Muhammad. The Balmiki leaders were very close to Gulham Muhammad and he supported Balmiki Raksha Dal to get their demands fulfilled. The leaders of this movement of the Balmikis were Babu Chunni Lal Thapar and Balmukand. The leaders announced a strike which continued for some days. The Chief Minister of Punjab, Sir Sikandar Hayat Khan, was to visit Jalandhar and all the local officials were busy in the arrangements. The Deputy Commissioner of Jalandhar summoned the significant leaders of Balmiki Raksha Dal and threatened them to withdraw their strike at an earliest or get ready to face the consequences. This attitude of the state officials weakened the morale of the agitators and they called

¹¹ Shiv Charan, later on, became popular as Swami Shudranand.
¹² Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, *Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi)*, Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), pp. 62.

¹³ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, *Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi)*, Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), pp. 85.

upon a meeting at Balmiki Temple Ali Mohalla where the senior Congress leader of Jalandhar Pandit Mool Chand also joined them. It boosted their morale and they decided to continue the strike and got the support of the Indian National Congress in this agitation. The local administrators arranged some labourers from the adjoining areas of Jalandhar to work due to the strike of the Balmikis. The Balmikis resisted the local administration very bravely and ultimately the administration agreed to accept their demands. It was a big agitation of the Balmikis of Punjab and they succeeded in it. It also brought them much more close to the Indian National Congress.

In the Punjab Legislative Assembly elections of 1947, Indian National Congress announced Chaudhary Sant Ram as their candidate from Jalandhar. He was also supported by the Punjab Balmik Sabha. He won this election and the Balmikis got political representation in Punjab. Similarly, Indian National Congress also announced Professor Yashwant Rai; the candidate supported by Punjab Balmik Sabha, their candidate from Parliamentary constituency, and also got him success in the elections. The Balmikis of Punjab got the entry in Punjab politics ten years later in comparison to the Ad Dharmis of Punjab.¹⁴

The Balmikis of Punjab also played a significant role at the time of the partition of Punjab. The British formed a Commission to resolve the boundary disputes between India and Pakistan in different parts of the country. Its first meeting took place at Delhi on 14th July 1947 where the issues regarding Assam were discussed and the members cast their vote in favour of Pakistan. The second major issue of dispute in Punjab was that the two Muslim members of the Commission namely Justice Muhammad Shamir and Justice Deen Muhammad proposed to fix river Sutlej as the boundary of Pakistani Punjab whereas the Hindu and Sikh members of the Commission Justice Mehr Chand Mahajan and Justice Teja Singh proposed to mark river Ravi as the boundary of Indian Punjab. Now after a very hot discussion, the right of fixation of the boundary came into the hands of the Dalit members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly. The then President of the Muslim League, Nawab Mamdot was keenly interested to get his Mamdot tehsil of Ferozepur to Pakistan. He even tried to bribe the Dalit leaders of the region with a huge amount but ultimately the Dalit leaders unanimously supported to fix village Vagha as the boundary between India and Pakistan which was also accepted. The Dalit of Punjab, who considered both Sikh Jats and Muslims interrelated communities were surprised to see that the Sikh Jats were plundering the Muslim of the region in the course of partition. The Dalit had an affectionate attitude towards the Muslim, as they had a cooperative attitude towards the Dalit. The Dalit even helped the Muslim to reach Pakistan safely.¹⁵ After the partition, the government even blamed the Dalit for plundering the Muslims and searched their houses. This exploitative attitude of the government was opposed by the Balmik Sabha Punjab and they pressurized the government to stop this unjustified action.

So in this way, one may analyze that the Balmikis played a significant role throughout the colonial period to highlight their

justified demands in front of the administration and even succeeded to get many of them fulfilled. Moreover, the Balmikis also participated wholeheartedly in the Indian National Movement and contributed to the making of Modern India.

¹⁴ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi), Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), pp. 94.

¹⁵ Pandit Bakshi Ram & Karnail Singh Sahota, Balmik Sabha Da Itihas (Punjabi), Chandigarh: Bhartiya Balmik Sabha (Regd.), pp. 99.