



**Religion, Caste, and Politics in Punjab: Late  
19<sup>th</sup> Century to 1980s**  
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**Abstract**

Theoretically Sikhism does not believe in caste hierarchy and Punjab, being a Sikh dominant state, is considered less-casteist than the other Indian states. But increasing numbers of Deras and caste based Gurudwara pose a question to the anti-caste and egalitarian image of Sikhism. Of course, caste does not function with the same rigid normative amongst the Sikhs as it does amongst the Hindus. In this paper an attempt will be made to understand everyday violence Dalits face in the name of caste in Punjab. I will look at the socio-political conditions of Dalits in late nineteenth century under which they took the extreme step to convert to Christianity. I make an effort to analyze how Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha emerged in the late nineteenth century. I also make efforts to understand the politics of *Shudhi* (reconversion) movement which both the Hindus and Sikhs exercised to bring back the lower castes converted to Christianity. The paper is divided into eight parts which discuss the questions such as how did Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha get divided on the issue of Dalits conversion? What were the reasons for the emergence of the Ad Dharm? Why did Sikh's demand for Punjabi Suba? How did the Green Revolution affect Dalits? Why did they begin to migrate to urban areas? How did the Dalits get involved in the Naxalite movement during the 1970s and how did the upper caste Naxalites use them for their own benefits? How did caste become an international phenomenon?

**Keywords:** Dalit, Conversion, Religion, Caste, Politics

## Introduction

“Katta maal ni, vatta vateva ni,  
Reru rookh ni, chuhra manukh ni.”  
(Buffalo calf is not useful, weight is not  
important, Reru is not a tree, Chuhra is not a  
human being.)<sup>1</sup>

This is a very popular proverb which clearly reflects the popular image of the Chuhra in Punjab. Though Sikhism does not believe in caste but the proverb cited above points to the caste-ridden Punjabi psyche. If we make an effort to explain the proverb word by word it goes like this: *Katta maal ni* (a buffalo calf is not a valuable animal) since in the ancient Punjab *Katta* was not used for the agricultural or any other work. It was a useless animal. That was the reason it used to be murdered after a few months of its birth. *Vatta vateva ni* (weight is not an important thing for a believer in God), weight matters basically for the business caste such as Bania. Weight signifies the lust for wealth. *Vatta vateva ni* has historical implications. As if we look into the life history of the first Sikh Guru- Nanak Dev, we find that when his father gave him some money and asked to do some business for survival, he offered food to the hungry *sanyasis* (ascetics) instead of doing business with the money given to him by his father. For Nanak ji, service to needy people was more important than to multiply the money by investing it. For Sikhs '*Vatta vateva ni*' means *Vatta* is not an important thing.

'*Reru rookh ni*' (Reru is not a tree) Reru is a tree which does not have leaves. Being leafless, it does not give shade. So without shade, it does not worth to be called a tree. Since a Chuhra does sweep and clean the dirt of the upper castes. That is why he is not considered a human being (*Chuhra manukh ni*) because the work of cleaning does not suit to the Hindu notion of purity. The proverb contains contradictions in itself. On the one hand, it declares that '*Vatta vateva ni*' means *Vatta* is not an important thing for the people who believe in humanity. On the other, it declares that the people who work as

sweepers/cleaners are not human beings. The contradiction within the proverb exposes hypocrisy of popular Punjabi imagination.

The time has changed and the things presumed to be useless, as reflected in the proverb, have become important. Now *Katta* is used in the cart. *Vatta* has become important for everyone since these days not only the Banias but everyone does some business and *Reru* is used for furniture. However, there is no change in people's attitude towards Chuhras as they are still meted with inhuman treatment both by the Hindus and the Sikhs. The Sikh egalitarian and anti-caste philosophy did not bring any change in the condition of Chuhras in Punjab.

As Sikh-gurus preached in favour of the equality of all human beings, they attracted a large number of followers from the lower castes as Gulam Ali Khan writes "the whole country of the Punjab up to the Attock River, and this side of Multan... is in the possession of this sect. Their leaders of high dignity are mostly from the lower classes, such carpenters, shoemakers and Jats (Grewal, 214)." The Mazhabis, the so called Chuhars in Hindu society, were the major followers of the Sikh-Gurus. Whenever there was a need for sacrifice, the Mazhabis came forward and did sacrifice. Their trust and devotion to Sikh-Gurus can be noted from the sacrifice of Bhai Jaita. When Guru Teg Bahadur had been beheaded by the Muslim *hakumat* (government) and the Sikhs had been challenged to take his dead body lying at Chandni Chowk in Delhi. Two Mazhabis Sada Nanda and his son Bhai Jaita accepted the challenge and brought the head of Guru Teg Bahadur to Anandpur Sahib where he had been crminated properly (Arifi, 279). The Mazhabis made immense sacrifice for the honour of the Sikhs but their sacrifice did not bring any change in their socio-economic condition and they continued to be treated as untouchables.

With the annexation of Punjab by the British Raj in 1849 the socio-political scenario began to change. The British Raj inducted the untouchables into the Indian Army. A good

strength of Mazhabis, who were working with Indian Army, showed some interests in Christianity as Webster writes, “In 1859, some Mazhabi Sikh sepoy in the 24<sup>th</sup> Punjab Native Infantry became interested in Christianity after acquiring some Christian tracts and books in sack of Delhi. They approached their officers to learn more. These officers responded to the request and invited a missionary who began an inquirers’ class. Some of the sepoy were baptized (Webster, 118-119).’ This was the beginning of the conversion in the Army. But so far as civilians’ conversion in Punjab is concerned that happened in 1873, a Chuhra with the name of Ditt was baptized in Sialkot (Juergensmeyer, 181). In both the cases, the people belonging to the Chuhra community were baptized.

The Chuhra are at bottom of caste hierarchy in Indian social order, they are considered the lowest of the low among the untouchables. In search of respect and to heal the wound inflicted on their psyche by the upper caste, they resorted to conversion as a part of protest against the Hindus and the Sikhs. The conversion was neither first nor last as they kept converting over ages. For example, in the reign of the Muslim dominance, they became the Musallis, during the Sikh dominance they became the Mazhabis and in the Hindu dominance they are known as the Chuhra. So they could not become the Hindu, Muslim or Sikh (in terms of equality) and were subjected to demeaning categorization as the Chuhra, Musallis and Mazhabis respectively.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the untouchables’ conversion to Christianity had become a challenge to the Hindus and the Sikhs. As Webster writes: “The 1911 census reported 1,63,994 Indian Christians in Punjab, over forty times the 1881 total. A decade later it had almost doubled again (3,15,031). These gains were due almost entirely to Chuhra conversions (Webster, 121).” Untouchables’ conversion to Christianity was not confined to Punjab rather it became a pan Indian phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian literature confirms the untouchables’ conversion especially the

fiction like *Malapalli* (1921), *Chomana Dudi* (1933), *Untouchable* (1935) and *Kanthapura* (1938). The Hindu leaders like Dayanand Saraswati found the Hindu religion and culture under the threat of western religion and culture. He founded Arya Samaj in 1875 in Bombay which had a positive response neither in Bombay nor in other south Indian states. In 1877 he founded a branch of Arya Samaj in Lahore which became a centre of Hindu activism.

The merchant class/Baniya responded to the Arya Samaj very enthusiastically and in a very few years its branches were opened all over Punjab. Most of the people who joined the Arya Samaj were from the merchant class. In this regard Jaffrelot writes: “in 1891, more than half the 9,105 male members of the movement belonged to the Khatri and Arora merchant castes (Jaffrelot, 98).” “In 1891 the average literacy rate of the three major merchant castes (Khatri, Arora, Baniya) was 22.14 per cent, as against a provincial average for all castes of 3.27 per cent of all literates in the Punjab (Fox, 472).” The merchant class, being the intelligentsia, understood that the British Raj would not last long and they began to imagine that they could be the rulers after the British Raj.

### **Hindu-Sikh Relation**

The Sikhs were not educationally and economically advanced like the merchant class in Punjab till the 1870s. But by the 1870s they had realized their disadvantage in terms of education, language and identity. It was during this period when some incidents happened like Kukas’ killing by the British Raj in 1873 and some Sikh students of Missionary school Amritsar showed their interest in conversion to Christianity. Under such socio-political atmosphere the Sikhs established the Singh Sabha in 1873. Its basic purpose was to spread Sikhism and to address the issues of Sikhs on a common platform.

Untouchables’ conversion to Christianity was a common problem for both the Hindus and Sikhs. Religious boundaries between the Hindus and the Sikhs were not as much widened as

today. That was the reason why the Singh Sabha and the Arya Samaj initially cooperated with each-other to bring the converts back to Hinduism. But later on, the Arya Samajis began to criticize Sikh Gurus. In this connection, Guru Dutt said, "... it is difficult to say whether the Sikhs have any religion or not, but surely, they have no knowledge of any kind... if Swami Dayanand Saraswati Maharaj called Guru Nanak a great fraud, what did it matter? (Jones, 461)" Arya Samajis like Lala Thakar Das claimed that *Sikh Hindu Hain* (Sikhs are Hindus) (Das, 1987) and Sardar Kahan Singh responded *Ham Hindu Nahi* (We are not Hindus) (Singh, 2006). The Hindu- Sikh tension has been reflected by Surinder Singh Narula in his novel *Pio-Puttar* (1946). The major reason for the tension between the Singh Sabha and Arya Samaj was the conversion of the lower caste Sikhs by the Arya Samajis. Under such circumstances the Sikhs broke the alliance with the Arya Samaj. By the 1900 the Hindus and the Sikhs had become the staunch rival of each other<sup>3</sup>.

The major reason for the Hindus and the Sikhs response to untouchables' conversion was the communal representation policy under which Muslims got separate representation in legislative assemblies in 1909. In the beginning of the twentieth century the lower castes had begun to raise their voice through All India Depressed Classes Federation. Since the Indian National Congress had refused to take up the issues of the lower castes by saying that the Congress was a political body and did not concern with social issues. But as soon as the Depressed Classes Federation passed a resolution to demand separate electorate rights for the lower castes in 1917. Immediately the Indian National Congress responded to the demand and passed a resolution to remove all the disabilities of the depressed classes (Ambedkar 7-8).

By 1919 Gandhi had emerged on the Indian political horizon and during the non-cooperation movement (1919-1922) he took the command of the Indian National Congress. Understanding the increasing importance of untouchable

Gandhi began to address their issues and in 1920 he wrote: "Swaraj is unattainable without the removal of the sin of untouchability as it is without Hindu-Muslim unity (Zelliot, 153)." In 1921 he further wrote: "I do not want reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should be reborn as an untouchable (153)." Gandhi's idea of swaraj has been reflected by Joseph Macwan in his novel *The Step Child* (1988). A partial reference to Gandhi's efforts to remove untouchability has been made by Amrita Pritam in the novel *Doctor Dev* (1948). The novel also gives a reference of tension among the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh over the issue untouchables' conversion.

Ambedkar began to address the issues of Dalits around 1919 when he requested to the Southborough Committee for separate representative for the untouchables (Rodrigues, 9). To organize the untouchables on the common platform, Ambedkar started Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha in Bombay in 1924. He organized a Dalit conference at Mahad in 1927 where with his followers burnt the Manusmriti. He had been recognized as the representative of the Dalits and "appointed as a member of the Legislative Assembly of Bombay Province in 1927 for five years (the appointment was renewed in 1932 for further five years) (10)."

By the 1920s Dalit movements had emerged in south Indian states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In Kerala the Vaikam Satyagrah (1924-25) was started by the untouchables of Travancore for the right to use the road linked to the Shiv temple at Vaikam. Gandhi supported and participated in the movement but it did not bring any fruit since the temple authorities did not accept Gandhi's demand. Ramasamy Periyar started the Self-Respect movement against the caste system in Tamil Nadu in 1925. So, the Dalit voices had emerged on the Indian political horizon by the mid of the 1920s.

### **Educational Development and the Emergence of Ad Dharm in Punjab**

Arya Samaj followed the Christian policy to bring the converts back to Hinduism. Like Christian missionaries Arya Samaj began to lure the untouchables with material benefits. The opening of Vedic schools and colleges all over Punjab was a part of the Arya Samaj's strategy to attract the untouchables to Hinduism. A group of untouchables like Vasant Rai, Swami Shudranand, Thakar Das and Mangoo Ram got benefitted from the Arya Samaj education policy. But they were those untouchables whose families had a sound economic position on account of the leather business in Doaba sub-region of Punjab. In Doaba the leather business began to flourish because of the constant demand of the leather products by the cantonment opened at Jalandhar by the British Raj. The Chamars who used to skin the dead animals captured the opportunity and by the 1920s some of them had emerged the major leather businessmen. It was the second generation of the emerging leather businessmen who got the benefit of Arya Samaj education policy.

Mangoo Ram was one of such beneficiaries. He spent almost sixteen years (1909-1925) in the USA and worked with Gadar Party. He came back to India in 1925 and did not find any change in the miserable condition of the untouchables. Understanding the emerging Indian political scenario, he decided to work for his own people. He, with the help of other educated untouchables like Vasant Rai, Swami Shudranand, and Thakar Das organized a Dalit conference at his village Mugowal on 11-12 June 1926 in Hoshiarpur (Ram, 65). In the conference the leaders declared that untouchables were the aborigines of India and their religion was Ad Dharm. The Hindus came from outside and by hook or crook they grabbed the power and became the rulers of India. In this conference Dalit leaders announced that "the untouchable constitutes a quam, a distinct religious community similar to those of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs and that quam had existed from the time immemorial (Juergensmeyer, 45)." Since some of the



Dalits had emerged as leather businessmen in Jalandhar, expecting the financial help, it had been made headquarter of the Ad Dharm's activity. Basically the movement had been patronized by the emerging untouchable leather businessmen. To naturalize the Ad Dharm ideology a weekly newspaper *Adi Danka* (Voice of the Adi people) had been started. The paper had been patronized by the Boota Mandi leather businessmen as well as by the untouchables who had migrated to European countries like England and America. The movement became so popular that even Bhagat Singh wrote an essay '*Achhut Da Sawal*' (1928) in which he supported the effort:

But this cannot happen until the untouchable communities could organise themselves on a common platform. We considered that it is a great job that untouchables have organised themselves and like the Muslims, who have the same strength, they have demanded the equal rights. Either destroy all the religious issues or give them their rights (Virdi 108).

The Ad Dharm gained popularity only among the Chamars and other untouchable communities like Chuhras, Sansi, Bajigar and Dom did not join due to the existing caste and class hierarchy among them. The greatest achievement of the movement is that in the census of 1931 the British Raj recognized the untouchables as Ad Dharmis (Juergensmeyer, 27-28). Other major incident that happened in Indian politics in 1932 was the separate electorate rights given to untouchables by the British Raj. Gandhi protested and started a fast unto death against the rights given to the untouchables. Mangoo Ram, the Ad Dharm leader started a counter fast by saying that "Gandhi, if you are prepared to die for your Hindus, then I am prepared to die for these untouchables (129)." Mangoo Ram's fast did not bring any result since Ambedkar had to compromise with Gandhi. However Mangoo Ram began to be recognized as the major untouchable leader in Punjab. Consequently, all the political parties like Congress, Unionist and Akali started making efforts to lure the Ad Dharm leaders in Punjab. The Ad

Dharm leaders could not keep themselves detached from the political allurements and became the victims of their own political ambitions and personal interests. They forgot their purpose which aimed at a separate identity for the untouchables like the other religious groups such as the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim.

All major leaders of the Ad Dharm joined various political parties with the hope that they could better serve their community being the part of the political power. Mangoo Ram joined the Unionist Party and contested election in 1945-46. He won the election and in 1946 he closed the Ad Dharm office in Jalandhar. The movement was revived in 1970 by a passionate Dalit youngman-- Mangu Ram Jaspal who worked in England and faced caste discriminatory practices there. Though he made efforts to bring all Dalit communities on a common platform for the movement but Ad Dharm came to be recognized as the Chamar movement. Caste and class hierarchies among the untouchables remained major hurdles for the unity of untouchables on the Ad Dharm platform.

### **Punjabi Suba: Politics of Language**

The word is ideological phenomena par excellence. A word is purest and most sensitive medium of social discourse .

(Volosinov 13-14)

During the partition a huge crowd of the Hindus migrated to Indian Punjab and after independence there were 65 and 35 per cent of the Hindus and the Sikhs in the state (Singh, 90). The Indian government introduced Hindi as the first and Punjabi as the second language of Punjab. The Sikhs already had dispute with the Hindus over the issues of language and religion. The Sikhs were dissatisfied with the government policies. That was the reason they announced the demand for the Punjabi suba in 1948 (96). Sikhs had realized that language is not only a medium of expression but also a mode of cultural dominance.

The Sikh scholar like Kushwant Singh wrote in favour of a Sikh state: "The only chance of the survival of the Sikhs as separate community is to create a state in which they form a compact group, where the teaching of Gurmukhi and the Sikh religion is compulsory, and where there is an atmosphere of respect for the traditions of their Khalsa forefathers (Singh, 1999, 305)." The Sikhs organized the masses on the language and culture issue and after a long struggle finally in 1966 the Sikhs got Punjabi suba.

### **Green Revolution: Power, Politics and Dalits**

The Jatt community was the major followers of the Sikhism but due to their lack of education they were at periphery. Jatts constituted the major chunk of the British Raj since almost half of the soldiers of Indian Army were from them. The importance of the Jatts had been carefully recognized by the British. Aitchison College was founded in Lahore in 1886 to provide education for the sons of leading landlords (Talbot, 57). Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, under which non-agrarian castes had been excluded from landownership, was another favour to them by the British Raj.

The British Raj constructed canal colonies where most of the soldiers who worked in Indian Army had been given land for cultivation. The Jatts took the benefits of the British education policy, Land Alienation Act, land distribution as well as canalization. By the 1920s a group of rich farmers had begun to emerge in rural Punjab. Gurdwara Reform movement (1920-1925) was organized by the Akalis to remove the Mahants from the Gurdwaras. Major contributors in the movement were rural Sikhs who came mostly from the Jatt community. It was during the struggle against Mahants that Shiromani Akali Dal and Shromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) emerged on the Sikh political horizon.

By the 1930s and 40s there was tremendous increase in the agricultural production and farmers were in need of mandi to sell their surplus production. Surinder Singh Narula's novel

*Pio-Puttar* reflects this changing scenario when the petty Banias from the nearby villages began to migrate to the *mandis*.

By the 1950s agricultural production had increased remarkably and the big landlords had emerged as the rural elites in Punjab. There was an invisible rivalry between the Sikh farmers and the Sikh business class. Right from the beginning the Sikhism had been dominated by the business class. But during the Green Revolution as soon as the farmers, especially the Jatts, got economic strength, the religious dominance got changed. In 1962 Akali Dal got divided into two groups: one led by Master Tara Singh and another by Sant Fate Singh. Master Tara Singh had hold over the city merchant class while Sant Fate Singh being a Jatt had hold over the rural Sikh population. In the SGPC election of 1965 as well as in the assembly election of 1967 Master Tara Singh group was defeated. Master Tara Singh's defeat was the beginning of the farmers' control over the power structure.

The green revolution directly affected the Jatts-Dalits relationship. Since Dalits were the landless labourers, they entirely dependent on the landlords. The farmers had begun to use the modern technique of farming which brought a change in relation of production between the labourers and the landlords. On one side, with the use of modern technique the production increased tremendously and on the other, the mechanization brought an end to traditional relation production like Siri-landlord and Jajmani system. There were Dalit communities like the Chuhra who used to be the shepherds and basically depended on the sheep and goat rearing. But the *samlat*, common land of the village, where Dalits used to graze their sheep and goat herd, had begun to be used by the upper castes. In such situation it became almost impossible for Dalits to continue with the traditional work of sheep and goats rearing and they were forced to become agricultural labourers.

Though the demand for the labour work increased but the relation between the local labourers (Dalits) and landlords got

tensed due to the demand for increase in wages. The 1970s noticed many cases of conflicts between the Dalits and landlords in Punjab (Virdi, 143). To cope up with the increasing demand of labour in farming the landlords began to hire the cheap labour from the states like U.P. and Bihar. Though it was a seasonal practice but it replaced the Dalits. The increasing atrocities and the migration of the labourers from the other states compelled the local Dalits to migrate to urban areas. Dalits migration created a labour market for the city dwellers and from farm labourers they became the servants, cleaners, safaiwalas, vendors and kamwali in the cities.

During the green revolution the convent and private schools began to mushroom in Punjab. The upper caste students migrated to the elite institutes and the government schools became the school of the Chuhars and Chamars in Punjab. The emergence of convent and private schools created class hierarchy in the field of education, especially in terms of scope and careers of the students. The government educated Dalits found it difficult to compete with the convent or private school educated upper castes. Right from the beginning education in India is the privilege of the upper castes and emergence of convent or private schools has strengthened this tradition.

### **Marxist Romance and Dalit Involvement in Punjab**

Marxism in Punjab spread with the efforts made by the Ghadar Party from its inception in 1913. Ghadar Party founded Kirti Kisan Party in 1925 to address the issues of the peasants and labourers in Punjab. "The Ghadar Party in 1925 established a Workers and Peasant Party (Kirti Kisan Party) in the Punjab. Its organ, the *Kirti*, a purely communistic production, was subsidized by the Ghadar Party in America (Singh, 2012)." Though the party began to speak for the unity of the working class such as the peasants and the labourers, it did not address the contradictions. The relation between the peasants and labourers were antagonistic since one group (peasants) had the land while the other (labourer) was landless. The party wanted to unite the Dalits for the political purpose. In 1927 Kirti Kisan

Party made a seductive announcement to attract the labourers: (1) "all means of production should be nationalized. (2) Land should be taken from the landlords, without compensation and it should be divided among the cultivators (Josh, 246)." Before India's independence the party tried to attract the labourers by such attractive declarations.

By the 1940s the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) had emerged on the Indian political horizon and began to represent the issues of the peasants and the labourers. The basic purpose of the AIKS was to defend the interests of the peasants especially the Jatts in Punjab. AIKS passed a resolution in 1947: "All agricultural labourers must have a minimum wage. All other tillers of the soil must get proprietary rights in it under their direct cultivation, and the cultivatable waste land must be distributed among the poor peasants and agricultural labourers (Rasul, 147)." The resolution speaks volumes about the caste hierarchy since the AIKS was dominated by the upper castes who could not accept the Dalit labourers as the tillers or producers. That is the reason they fixed minimum wages and waste land for labourers and cultivatable land and property rights for the upper caste tillers.

In 1960s Naxalite movement emerged in Punjab. The basic reason was the dissatisfaction among the masses, especially among the Jatts, with government's land distribution policy. After partition most of the evacuee land had been captured by the big landlords with the support of the government. Lal Singh Dil, a prominent Dalite Naxalite poet, confirms the land grabbing by the upper castes: "After 1947 this religion (Islam) got disappeared. The lands have been captured by the Sikhs. After the exile of Muslims Dalits lost whatever rights they had. There was not even a single piece of common land after the exile of the Muslims (Dil, 26)." The land had been registered in the name of servants and later on they had been forced to transfer such land in the name of landlords (176).

The Dalits were attracted to Naxalism and Marxism not because both preached equality and fraternity but they propagated the romantic idea of state's control over all economic resources. Dalits used to work as labourers in the fields of the Jatts who were the major organizers of the Naxalite movement in Punjab. Dalits joined Naxalite movement under the influence of utopian ideals as well as because of pressure of the Jatts. Sant Ram Udasi and Lal Singh Dil, both Dalit poets sacrificed a lot for the Naxalite movement in Punjab but their sacrifice did not bring any change in the situation of Dalits in Punjab. They had been humiliated and tortured by the police (Rahi, 118).

Lal Singh Dil also narrates almost the same experience: "Today a new policeman beat me up and said, "let us give you land, Chamaro (Dil, 115)." Most of the Dalit participants in Naxalite movement have been tortured and killed by the police. Some of them have been trapped in false cases. Lal Singh Dil has to escape to Uttar Pradesh since Punjab police wanted to trap him in the false murder case. These are few Dalit narratives available to us but there were many Dalit Naxalites who could not write the narrative of their sufferings.

People usually say that Naxalite movement could not succeed in Punjab but what about the evacuee land for which the struggle had been started? Since the government did not properly implement land distribution policy, most of the land had been grabbed by the upper castes. I. D. Pawar in his autobiography "My Struggle in Life" exposes the corruption of land grabbing by the influential people in Punjab (Pawar, 136). Dalits got cheated under the influence of the Marxist ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity. Their sacrifice went waste and they only got humiliation, torture and sufferings.

### **Caste Migrated to Europe**

With the migration of the Dalits to European countries caste struggle also accompanied to these lands. Punjabi Dalits began to migrate to Europe in the early twentieth century. Basically

the Chamars captured the opportunity of emerging leather business in Butta Mandi near Jalandhar. Some of them emerged as the major leather businessmen in Jalandhar. With the economic development they began to follow the upper castes who already had settled in European countries. Mangoo Ram the founder of the Ad Dharm movement worked sixteen years (1909-1925) in the USA. Since in the early twentieth century, it had been almost a dream for a Dalit to think to immigrate to European countries. Mangoo Ram became a role model for the Dalits and following him many Dalits migrated to England and America and got settled there. The upper caste officers used to discriminate with the Dalits for providing passport to them. However, after independence around 1950s, a Dalit officer was appointed in the passport office. He helped his fellows to get a passport and migrate to European countries (Juergensmeyer, 246).

As a result of Ishwar Das Pawar's help a good number of Dalits got chance to settle down in Europe. In Punjab migration to European countries became a trend among the Dalits as most of the Dalit migrants were from the Ravidasia or Mazhabi communities and they were the followers of Sikhism. In the beginning, they contributed as much as any other upper caste for the construction of Gurudwaras. Their donation had been accepted happily but their demand for the representation in Gurudwara management body had been denied by saying that they were the lower castes. S.L. Virdi, Kathryn Lum and Paul Ghuman confirm such discrimination against the Dalits:

This association (Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha Newyork) came into existence when the Gurdwara management committee did not allow (the Dalits) to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Ravi Das. In 1988 they hired a basement and celebrated the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas (Virdi,240).

However, an incident that occurred during the 2002 Janamdin or the birth anniversary of Guru Ravidas was



decisive in leading to the emergence of a separate Gurdawara and sharpened community consciousness on the part of Spanish Chamar. ... As related to me by a number of Ravidasias, during the celebration a young boy, instigated by his elders, took the portrait of Guru Ravidas and placed it on the floor --- a sacrilegious act designed to cause maximum affront to the dignity of Chamars (Lum 195).

This woman was in a local Gurdwara taking part in the Sunday service and worship. After the bhog ceremony *parsad* is distributed and this woman offered her services, as the lay people normally do . . . She was stopped and told that she cannot perform this duty because she is Chamari i.e. [belong to an untouchable caste who were traditionally leather workers and are considered to be polluting] (Ghuman 58).

In Punjab Dalits were dependent on the upper castes for their livelihood but in European countries they were free from such socio-economic pressure of the upper castes. Their experience in these democratic countries made them realize that they are equal to any other human beings. Being economically sound and politically aware, they were not ready to tolerate any discriminatory practice. That was the reason they had already begun to establish their own religious institutions such as Shree Guru Ravidas Sabha in New York, Maharishi Valmiki Sabha Yuba City, Shree Guru Ravidas Youth Association Canada, Shree Guru Ravidas Sabha Toronto and many more in other European countries (Virdi, 240-278). The emergence of Dalit organizations has widened the gap between the Dalits and the upper castes. The major problem with the upper castes is that they are unable to accept the emerging identity of the Dalits. In Punjab Dalits used to work as farmhands or labourers but here in European countries some of them are much better than the upper castes. The upper caste psyche finds it difficult to acknowledge the new identity of the Dalits. The tension between the Sikhs and the Dalits has increased to such an extent

that Sant Ramanand, the Deputy of Dera Sach Khand Ballan was murdered by the Sikhs on 24 May, 2009 at Vienna in Austria (Times of India, 2009). Caste has become an international phenomenon and Dalits in European countries such as the U.K. have been trying to bring a law against the caste discriminatory practices. They have started Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA) as well as Caste Watch (websites) to bring the caste discriminatory practices to the knowledge of the British government.

### **Conclusion**

In Punjab the Dalits' struggle against the caste discrimination began with the Chuhra conversion to Christianity around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Arya Samaj and the Singh Sabha had started Shudhi Sabha for the reconversion of the Dalits into their respective religions. In the 1920s Ad Dharm emerged as a Dalit movement for a separate Dalit identity. Gurdwara Reform movement (1920-1925) made efforts for the entry of the Dalit Sikhs into Gurdwaras. Amrita Pritam raises the issue of lower caste people's conversion in her novel *Doctor Dev*. This tension between various religions on the issue of Dalits' conversion was raised by Amrita Pritam in her novel *Doctor Dev*.

After independence the Sikhs began to demand Punjabi Suba. There was a long struggle for the Suba but the demand was fulfilled only in 1966. On the question of Punjabi Suba in 1966 the state (Punjab) had been divided into Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab. During the Green Revolution in the (1960s) religious and political power got transferred from the merchant class to the rural farmers. The Green Revolution widened the economic gap between the Dalits and the Jatts. The migration of the Dalits to urban spaces is the result of tension which has emerged between the landless Dalit labourers and the landholding upper castes. The Green Revolution has transformed the landless Dalit labourers into the urban working class.

### Endnotes

1. I came to know about the proverb during my doctoral research when I spoke to Gurdial Singh, a prominent Punjabi novelist, who informed how the proverb still popular amongst the Punjabis.
2. Dalit conversion to Christianity became one of the major concerns amongst the nationalists towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.
3. Towards the end of the 19th century religious identity became a major issue between the Hindus and the Sikhs. For details see Oberoi, Harjot. *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

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