

FROM SOCIAL EXCLUSION TO POLITICAL ASSERTION: DALIT MARGINALIZATION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PUNJAB

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Abstract

India's democratic system is widely acknowledged for its constitutional foundations, electoral vitality, and institutional continuity. Yet the persistence of caste-based inequalities continues to challenge the depth and substance of democratic inclusion. Among the most historically marginalized communities are the Scheduled Castes (Dalits), whose experiences of exclusion, socio-economic deprivation, and political under-representation remain central to debates on Indian democracy. This paper examines the historical evolution of Dalit marginalization and analyzes the complex dynamics of their political participation in India, with special reference to Punjab. It argues that while constitutional safeguards, affirmative action policies, and democratic institutions have enabled formal mechanisms of inclusion, structural inequalities, caste hierarchies, economic constraints, and intra-community fragmentation continue to shape the limits of Dalit political empowerment. By situating Dalit political participation within broader theoretical frameworks of democracy, citizenship, and representation, the study highlights the tension between formal political equality and lived social realities. Punjab, characterized by one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Castes in India, presents a paradoxical case where demographic strength does not automatically translate into proportional political power. The paper concludes that Dalit political participation represents not merely procedural engagement but a critical mechanism of identity assertion, resistance, and struggles for substantive equality.

Keywords: Dalits, Political Participation, Democracy

1. Introduction

India occupies a distinctive position in the contemporary political world as the largest functioning democracy, characterized by remarkable social diversity, constitutional continuity, and institutional resilience. Since independence, democratic governance has largely

remained stable, notwithstanding the exceptional yet deeply consequential interruption during the Emergency period (1975–1977), which briefly suspended core democratic freedoms. The endurance of electoral democracy in India reflects not only procedural regularity but also the adaptability of constitutional institutions in

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managing complex socio-political transformations. The normative foundations of the Indian state — anchored in secularism, social justice, and democratic equality — have played a critical role in shaping its political trajectory. The incorporation of the term “Socialist” into the Preamble, alongside the guiding principles enshrined in the Directive Principles of State Policy (Articles 38, 39, 41, 42, 43, 43A, and 47), underscored the state's commitment to welfare-oriented governance and distributive justice. Similarly, the evolving federal structure, reflected in the expansion from 14 to 28 states, illustrates the constitutional system's capacity to accommodate regional aspirations and plural identities without undermining national unity.

India's democratic framework has also sought to address representational imbalances through institutional reforms. Gender disparities in political representation, for instance, prompted the introduction of reservation policies aimed at enhancing women's participation. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments institutionalized reservations for women in local governance through Articles 243D and 243T, while the more recent Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (2023) represents a significant attempt to extend such measures to higher legislative bodies (Jan, 2024). These initiatives collectively reflect an expanding recognition that democratic legitimacy requires not only universal franchise but also equitable representation.

Complementing these structural mechanisms, the Indian judiciary has emerged as a crucial guardian of constitutional democracy. Judicial interventions have reinforced democratic norms, safeguarded

civil liberties, and constrained potential executive excesses. Landmark decisions such as *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* strengthened federal principles and limited arbitrary use of constitutional provisions, while *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* significantly broadened the interpretation of Article 21, embedding substantive due process within Indian constitutional jurisprudence (Kanojiya, 2024). Through such rulings, the judiciary has contributed to the preservation of democratic accountability and rule of law.

Equally vital to democratic functioning is the integrity of electoral processes. The Election Commission of India, as an autonomous constitutional authority, plays a central role in ensuring free and fair elections, thereby sustaining public trust in democratic institutions. Its mandate to uphold impartiality, transparency, and procedural fairness reinforces the foundational principle that political participation must remain universally accessible and meaningfully protected.

Despite these institutional safeguards, however, the promise of Indian democracy continues to confront structural challenges rooted in historical inequalities. Marginalized communities — particularly Dalits and women — frequently encounter barriers that limit their substantive participation and political influence. This tension between formal democratic equality and entrenched social hierarchies raises critical questions about the depth and inclusiveness of democratic citizenship. A democracy's effectiveness cannot be evaluated solely through institutional design; it must also be assessed

through the lived experiences of those historically excluded from power.

The Scheduled Castes, commonly referred to as Dalits, exemplify this paradox of constitutional inclusion alongside persistent marginalization. Historical patterns of untouchability, socio-economic deprivation, and symbolic exclusion have profoundly shaped Dalit engagement with political processes. Their trajectory toward political participation has been neither linear nor uniform but marked by sustained struggles for recognition, representation, and dignity. Political participation, for Dalits, therefore, represents far more than electoral involvement — it functions as a critical mechanism of identity assertion, social resistance, and claims-making within democratic structures.

Punjab provides an analytically significant context for examining these dynamics. Notwithstanding its distinction as a state with one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Castes in India, political power has historically remained concentrated among dominant agrarian groups, particularly the Jat Sikh community. This demographic–political disjuncture complicates conventional assumptions regarding representation and numerical strength. Dalit political mobilization in Punjab has frequently been mediated by internal caste divisions, shifting party affiliations, and alternative institutional spaces such as religious Deras, reflecting the complex interplay of identity, power, and political strategy.

2. Research Methodology

This paper emerges from sustained academic engagement with questions of caste, democracy, and political participation, informed by the

author's broader research on Dalit political processes in Punjab. The researcher has used secondary sources such as research papers, books etc. in order to answer the question regarding Dalit Participation in politics. By situating Dalit political participation within historical, theoretical, and institutional frameworks, the study seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts toward a more critical understanding of how structural inequalities, regional power configurations, and identity fragmentations shape democratic inclusion. In doing so, the paper argues that Dalit political participation must be interpreted not merely as a measure of electoral involvement but as an evolving site of negotiation between constitutional promises and socio-political realities.

3. Conceptualizing Political Participation and Democratic Inclusion

Historical experience demonstrates that Dalits have endured systemic discrimination, socio-economic exploitation, and exclusion from structures of power for centuries. Their incorporation into democratic politics has therefore been neither automatic nor uniform, but shaped by prolonged struggles for dignity, recognition, and representation. Political participation, in this context, cannot be reduced to routine electoral engagement; rather, it must be understood as a historically contingent process through which marginalized communities seek to negotiate visibility and influence within unequal social orders.

Punjab presents a particularly illustrative case of these dynamics. Despite possessing one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Castes in India,

the state's political landscape has historically been dominated by agrarian elites, most notably the Jat Sikh community. This disjunction between demographic presence and political dominance underscores the limitations of numerical strength in societies structured by entrenched hierarchies. Dalit political assertion in Punjab has consequently taken diverse forms, including engagement with mainstream political parties, mobilization through caste-based organizations, and participation in religious institutions such as Deras, which often function as alternative spaces of identity consolidation and social negotiation.

Understanding these processes necessitates conceptual clarity regarding political participation itself. In its narrowest sense, political participation is commonly equated with voting behavior — the act of selecting representatives through electoral mechanisms. However, contemporary political sociology emphasizes a broader and more analytically useful definition. Participation encompasses a wide spectrum of activities, including political mobilization, protest, information-seeking, organizational involvement, campaign engagement, and various forms of civic expression. Such expanded interpretations recognize that citizen involvement in political life extends beyond formal electoral moments to continuous interactions with institutions, actors, and public discourse.

This broader understanding aligns closely with the theoretical frameworks of participatory and inclusive democracy. Participatory democracy challenges the concentration of political power within elite structures by advocating greater citizen engagement in decision-making processes.

Inclusive democracy, in turn, foregrounds the necessity of integrating historically marginalized groups into governance systems, ensuring that formal equality translates into substantive access and influence. For Dalits, these theoretical perspectives carry profound implications, as political participation becomes both a democratic entitlement and a mechanism for contesting structural exclusion (Ramchandraiah, 2018).

Yet, the trajectory of Dalit participation in Indian politics reveals persistent constraints. While constitutional safeguards — particularly reservations in legislative bodies — have facilitated representational inclusion, structural barriers continue to impede substantive political empowerment. Economic vulnerability, unequal access to resources, social stigma, and entrenched caste biases frequently restrict opportunities for leadership, policy influence, and sustained mobilization. As Jaffreot (2003) observes, the rise of lower caste politics in India has not eradicated hierarchical inequalities but has instead produced complex and uneven patterns of political incorporation.

The conceptualization of political participation within democratic theory further illuminates these tensions. Deth (2001) emphasizes that democracy and participation are intrinsically linked, with citizen engagement constituting a necessary condition for democratic legitimacy. Verba and Nie (1972) define participation as activities undertaken by private citizens aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel or their actions, while Milbrath and Goel (1977) similarly stress efforts to affect governmental processes. Myron Weiner's

expansive formulation incorporates voluntary actions employing both conventional and unconventional methods to shape public affairs (as cited in Guha, 1996). Collectively, these perspectives underscore that participation represents an active exercise of political agency rather than passive institutional membership.

In contemporary contexts, technological transformations have further complicated participatory landscapes. The proliferation of digital communication platforms has enabled new modes of political expression, where acts such as online commentary, symbolic endorsement, and virtual mobilization increasingly shape public discourse. While such developments potentially democratize access to political communication, they also generate new inequalities, ambiguities, and contestations. Political participation thus emerges as an evolving and multifaceted phenomenon requiring continuous scholarly examination.

4. Caste, Social Hierarchy, and Historical Exclusion

The persistence of caste inequalities in India is deeply rooted in the country's complex historical and social structures. Caste has historically functioned as a foundational principle of social organization, shaping patterns of status, occupation, and social interaction. Rather than being merely a cultural marker, caste represents an institutionalized system of hierarchy embedded within religious, economic, and political domains. Shah (2014) conceptualizes caste as a system grounded in notions of ritual purity and impurity, where hierarchical ordering regulates social relations and access to resources.

Judge (2014) further characterizes caste as a birth-ascribed status system implying structural permanence, endogamy, and inherited social position.

Classical textual traditions provide important insights into the ideological foundations of caste. Scriptural references, particularly within the Manusmriti and the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, articulate the fourfold Varna framework consisting of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras (Shah, 2002). However, communities historically categorized as untouchables occupied positions outside this classificatory order, subjected to exclusionary practices justified through ritualistic and occupational logics. Their marginalization was not merely symbolic but structurally enforced through restrictions on spatial mobility, occupational choice, and social interaction.

Over time, terminological shifts have reflected evolving political and social discourses. The category of “untouchables” gradually gave way to alternative nomenclatures, including “Harijans,” popularized by M.K. Gandhi, and later “Scheduled Castes,” institutionalized through colonial administrative classifications. The emergence of the term “Bahujan” during the twentieth century, particularly through mobilizational platforms such as BAMCEF, further illustrates the dynamic rearticulation of identity within political contexts (Kumar, 2014). These shifts underscore that caste identities are neither static nor purely descriptive but embedded within struggles over recognition, representation, and power.

Despite constitutional guarantees and socio-

economic transformations, caste-based disparities continue to structure political and social realities. National demographic patterns indicate that Scheduled Castes constitute approximately 16.6 percent of India's population, yet regional variations reveal significant disparities. Punjab, for instance, presents a distinctive demographic configuration, with Scheduled Castes comprising nearly one-third of the state's population. This demographic concentration situates Dalits as a numerically significant community within Punjab's socio-economic landscape.

However, demographic strength has not automatically translated into proportional political dominance. Scholarly analyses by Ram (2017), Jodhka, and Judge highlight enduring patterns of social exclusion, economic vulnerability, and fragmented political mobilization among Dalit communities in Punjab. While processes of industrialization and urbanization are often associated with declining caste rigidities, empirical observations complicate such assumptions. Census data indicate that a substantial proportion of Punjab's Scheduled Caste population resides in rural areas, where caste-based inequalities remain deeply embedded (D'Souza, 2014).

Dalits continue to encounter multiple forms of discrimination, including social exclusion, economic marginalization, and restricted access to public goods. Incidents of violence, social boycotts, and denial of basic resources illustrate the persistence of structural inequalities (The Indian Express, September 25, 2019). Strategies adopted by Dalit communities — including

religious conversion, political mobilization, and social reform initiatives — reflect ongoing efforts to challenge caste stigma. Yet, such efforts frequently encounter systemic constraints that limit transformative outcomes.

Gender further complicates these dynamics. Dalit women experience intersecting forms of marginalization shaped by caste and patriarchy. Empirical studies reveal persistent economic vulnerabilities, including high levels of indebtedness among Dalit women laborers (The Tribune, March 18, 2020). These patterns underscore that caste-based inequalities are neither uniform nor unidimensional but intersect with class, gender, and regional structures.

Punjab's electoral politics further illustrate the complexities of Dalit political participation. Electoral outcomes frequently reveal shifting alignments, heterogeneous affiliations, and fragmented mobilization patterns. The 2017 Punjab Assembly elections, for instance, witnessed significant changes in party performance across reserved constituencies, reflecting evolving political preferences among Dalit voters (Hindustan Times, March 13, 2017). However, representational gains at the electoral level do not necessarily resolve deeper structural inequalities.

The limited tenure of Dalit leadership at the highest executive levels reinforces this paradox. Despite Punjab's substantial Scheduled Caste population, political authority has largely remained concentrated among dominant caste groups. Patterns of leadership selection, ticket distribution, and intra-community competition highlight the enduring influence of caste

structures within democratic institutions. Internal divisions among Scheduled Castes, particularly between major sub-castes, further complicate collective political assertion (Mohan, 2018).

The internal social composition of Scheduled Castes in Punjab further complicates patterns of political mobilization and representation. Scholarly analyses indicate that political affiliations among Scheduled Castes have historically remained heterogeneous, with substantial segments aligning with mainstream political parties rather than consolidated caste-based formations. Ram (2017) identifies significant demographic concentrations among major Dalit sub-castes, noting that Chamars, Ad-Dharmis, Balmikis, and Mazhabis together constitute a dominant proportion of the Scheduled Caste population. Such internal diversity, however, has not necessarily translated into collective political cohesion.

Fragmented caste identities within the Dalit community represent a critical structural constraint. The presence of multiple sub-castes, each with distinct historical experiences, socio-economic positions, and symbolic hierarchies, frequently generates competing rather than unified political strategies. Judge (2003) argues that hierarchical differentiations among Dalit groups impede the development of cohesive platforms for articulating collective interests. Internal divisions often encourage localized identity consolidation, thereby limiting broader solidarities necessary for sustained political mobilization.

Empirical observations in Punjab illustrate these dynamics vividly. Sub-caste affiliations

frequently shape political alignments, leadership networks, and representational claims. While certain groups, particularly Chamars, have demonstrated relatively higher levels of political assertion, such mobilization has not consistently fostered pan-Dalit unity. Instead, differential access to resources, education, and institutional networks has often reinforced internal stratifications. These patterns underscore that Dalit political participation cannot be understood as a homogeneous phenomenon but must be situated within layered structures of caste differentiation.

The consequences of such fragmentation extend beyond community-level politics. Dominant caste groups, particularly Jat Sikhs, continue to exert significant influence over land ownership, economic resources, and political institutions. Judge (2015) suggests that internal divisions among subordinate caste groups indirectly sustain dominant caste hegemony by constraining collective challenges to entrenched power structures. Fragmented mobilization weakens bargaining power, reduces the capacity for unified electoral strategies, and limits the emergence of leadership capable of reshaping political hierarchies.

These dynamics reveal a paradox central to Dalit politics in Punjab: demographic significance coexists with constrained political dominance. Internal differentiation, while reflective of social diversity, often operates as a structural limitation within competitive democratic arenas. Consequently, Dalit political participation must be examined not only through institutional frameworks but also through intra-community

relations that shape opportunities for collective action and representation.

5. Social Reform, Colonial Modernity, and the Rise of Dalit Consciousness

The nineteenth century marked a critical phase in the transformation of India's socio-political landscape, characterized by the emergence of social and religious reform movements that challenged deeply embedded hierarchies. These reform initiatives arose in response to pervasive social practices such as sati, child marriage, gender inequality, and caste-based exclusion. Although reform agendas varied, they collectively contributed to the gradual reconfiguration of social thought, public discourse, and political consciousness.

Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Jyotirao Phule articulated influential critiques of social inequality, albeit through distinct ideological frameworks. Roy's Brahmo Samaj, founded in 1828, represented one of the earliest organized efforts toward religious and social reform. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals and liberal humanism, the movement advocated monotheism, opposed caste distinctions, and emphasized ethical universalism (Anwar, 2018). Beyond theological reform, the Brahmo Samaj actively contested practices such as sati, polygamy, child marriage, and untouchability, positioning social equality as integral to religious renewal (Waghmare, 2017).

Jyotirao Phule's interventions similarly constituted a decisive challenge to Brahmanical dominance, though grounded in a more explicitly anti-caste orientation. Through the establishment of the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873, Phule foregrounded

education as a transformative instrument for subordinated communities. Rejecting ritual hierarchies, Phule emphasized the emancipatory potential of knowledge, arguing that social inequality persisted through ideological and institutional mechanisms that normalized caste privilege (Kumar, 2019). Education, within this framework, functioned not merely as social uplift but as a means of political awakening and rights-consciousness.

Colonial rule played a paradoxical yet significant role in these transformations. British administrative policies, missionary interventions, and the expansion of modern education contributed to the emergence of new social categories and intellectual discourses. Christian missionaries, alongside colonial educational initiatives, facilitated access to literacy and institutional learning among marginalized groups, enabling the rise of an indigenous intelligentsia capable of articulating critiques of caste oppression. While colonial policies were often driven by strategic and administrative considerations, their unintended consequences included the destabilization of certain traditional hierarchies and the creation of new arenas for political articulation.

Within this evolving context, Ambedkarite politics marked a watershed moment in Dalit assertion. B.R. Ambedkar's engagement with colonial commissions, particularly his appearance before the Southborough Commission in 1919, foregrounded political representation as essential to democratic inclusion (Vundru, 2013). Ambedkar's interventions reframed Dalit marginalization as a question of structural injustice rather than social backwardness,

emphasizing rights, citizenship, and institutional safeguards.

Ambedkar's subsequent mobilizational initiatives further catalyzed Dalit political consciousness. The formation of the Bahishkrit Hitakarni Sabha in 1924 and the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 symbolized direct challenges to caste-based exclusion. The assertion of Dalit rights to public water resources represented not merely a localized protest but a profound repudiation of ritual hierarchies. The symbolic burning of Manusmriti during this period reflected an ideological confrontation with Brahmanical authority, marking a critical moment in Dalit political awakening (Omvedt, 2002).

Ambedkar's later advocacy for religious conversion underscored the search for dignity beyond oppressive social structures. The mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956 represented both a political and cultural rupture, facilitating new identity formations across regions including Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra. Parallel institutional efforts, particularly through the Scheduled Castes Federation, sought to consolidate Dalit political agency within representative frameworks.

Regional developments in Punjab further illustrate the interplay between reform, identity, and political assertion. The Ad-Dharm movement, emerging prominently in the Doaba region during the 1920s, articulated a distinct Dalit religious and social identity. Led by figures such as Mangoo Ram, the movement rejected assimilative frameworks and emphasized autonomous recognition (Ram, 2004; Jodhka & Kumar, 2010). The temporary recognition of Ad-Dharmis as a

separate religious category in the 1931 Census highlights the movement's symbolic significance. However, broader constitutional and political developments, including the Government of India Act (1935), reconfigured identity incentives, contributing to the movement's decline. The transition from political to religious emphasis, reflected in institutional transformations such as the Ravidas Mandal, underscores the fluidity of Dalit assertion strategies within changing political contexts.

Taken together, these reform movements, colonial interventions, and Ambedkarite mobilizations represent critical moments in the emergence of Dalit consciousness. They illustrate that Dalit political participation cannot be understood as a post-independence phenomenon alone but must be situated within longer historical trajectories of resistance, negotiation, and identity formation. Political assertion thus emerges as a historically constructed response to systemic exclusion rather than a derivative outcome of constitutional inclusion.

6. Constitutionalism, Legal Safeguards, and Dalit Political Incorporation

The attainment of independence in 1947 confronted India with the formidable task of constructing a political order capable of reconciling social diversity, historical inequalities, and developmental aspirations. The framing of the Constitution by the Constituent Assembly represented a foundational moment in this nation-building project, reflecting an ambitious commitment to democratic governance, social justice, and institutional accountability. Conscious of the deep-rooted structures of exclusion

embedded within Indian society, the Constitution sought not merely to establish political institutions but to transform social relations through normative and legal interventions.

The architecture of fundamental rights, enforceable through Article 32, provided a justiciable framework for protecting individual liberties and safeguarding citizens against arbitrary state action. Complementing these provisions, the Directive Principles of State Policy articulated the ethical vision of a welfare-oriented state, emphasizing distributive justice, social equality, and economic democracy. Although non-justiciable, the Directive Principles underscored the state's obligation to address structural inequities and promote substantive social transformation.

Within this broader constitutional vision, specific provisions were designed to dismantle caste-based discrimination and facilitate the inclusion of historically marginalized communities, particularly the Scheduled Castes. Article 17's categorical abolition of untouchability represented a radical normative break from entrenched social practices, while Article 15(4) empowered the state to enact affirmative measures for socially and educationally backward classes. Article 46 further directed state policy toward advancing the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes, framing social justice as a constitutional imperative. Mechanisms of political representation, institutionalized through Articles 330 and 332, sought to enhance Dalit participation within legislative bodies, while Article 338 established oversight institutions to monitor safeguards and address grievances (Basu, 2013).

These constitutional provisions collectively signified an unprecedented attempt to reconcile democratic equality with historical disadvantage. However, the translation of normative commitments into lived realities has remained uneven. Legislative enactments aimed at operationalizing constitutional principles illustrate both institutional progress and structural limitations. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, for instance, introduced stringent legal mechanisms to address caste-based violence and discrimination, including provisions for special courts and enhanced penalties. Yet empirical studies reveal persistent challenges, including underreporting of cases, procedural delays, and inconsistencies in enforcement (Kamble, 2012).

Similarly, the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955), enacted to reinforce the constitutional abolition of untouchability, has encountered implementation deficits, particularly in rural contexts where caste-based practices remain deeply embedded (Sharma, 2016). The persistence of manual scavenging despite prohibitory legislation further underscores the resilience of structural inequalities and socio-cultural barriers (Human Rights Watch, 2014). While legal frameworks articulate progressive ideals, their efficacy is mediated by administrative capacity, political will, and entrenched social attitudes.

Educational reforms provide another illustrative domain. The Right to Education Act (2009) significantly expanded formal access to schooling for marginalized communities, contributing to increased enrollment among Dalit children.

However, scholars caution that quantitative gains in access do not necessarily guarantee qualitative improvements in educational experiences. Issues of segregation, discrimination, and uneven institutional resources continue to shape outcomes (Bhatty, 2014). These dynamics highlight the limitations of legalistic approaches in addressing deeply embedded social hierarchies.

The persistence of caste-based inequalities despite constitutional and legislative interventions has prompted critical scholarly reflection. Analysts argue that structural constraints, including socio-economic disparities, bureaucratic inertia, and limited institutional accountability, restrict transformative outcomes (Narula, 1999). Contemporary assessments further emphasize the intertwined nature of caste and poverty, suggesting that economic vulnerability both reflects and reinforces social exclusion (Minority Rights Group, 2024). Consequently, legal safeguards, while indispensable, remain insufficient without broader socio-political transformation.

Parallel to constitutional developments, the emergence of Dalit political parties represents a significant dimension of post-independence political incorporation. Inspired by Ambedkarite thought, Dalit political formations sought to institutionalize marginalized voices within representative structures. The Republican Party of India (RPI), established in 1956, aimed to articulate Dalit interests through a platform centered on social justice, representation, and economic empowerment. However, internal factionalism and organizational fragmentation

constrained its political effectiveness (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Punjab's regional political landscape reflects similar complexities. Early efforts at Dalit political consolidation through the Scheduled Castes Federation and subsequent formations encountered structural challenges, including limited electoral success and fragmented mobilization. The emergence of Kanshi Ram's BAMCEF in the late twentieth century marked a transformative moment, reframing Dalit politics through broader coalition-building strategies. The evolution of BAMCEF into DS4 and eventually the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) signified attempts to transcend narrow caste identities and construct a more expansive political constituency (Singh, 2022).

The BSP's electoral successes, particularly in Uttar Pradesh under Mayawati's leadership, demonstrated the transformative potential of marginalized caste mobilization within democratic frameworks (Jaffrelot, 2003). Yet regional variations persisted, with Dalit political consolidation in Punjab remaining constrained by internal caste divisions, shifting alliances, and dominance of established political actors. Scholars note that Dalit political parties, while symbolically significant, confront enduring challenges including resource asymmetries, organizational cohesion, and co-optation by mainstream formations (Pai, 2002).

Taken together, constitutional safeguards, legislative measures, and political mobilization efforts reveal the layered character of Dalit political incorporation in India. Formal mechanisms of inclusion coexist with structural

inequalities, producing complex and uneven trajectories of empowerment. Understanding Dalit political participation therefore requires moving beyond institutional design to examine the socio-historical and structural conditions that mediate access to power and representation.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights a persistent tension within Indian democracy: the gap between constitutional guarantees of equality and the social realities shaped by caste hierarchy. While India's democratic framework provides formal mechanisms of representation and rights, the experiences of Dalit communities demonstrate that procedural inclusion does not automatically produce substantive political empowerment. Political participation must therefore be understood in terms of actual agency and influence, not merely institutional presence.

The findings show that Dalit political participation remains deeply conditioned by structural inequalities. Constitutional safeguards have expanded opportunities for representation, yet their transformative impact is uneven and dependent on implementation, access to resources, and broader socio-political contexts. Caste continues to shape leadership pathways, political mobilization, and the distribution of power.

Punjab illustrates these contradictions with particular clarity. Despite a significant Scheduled Caste population, political dominance remains concentrated among historically advantaged groups. This demographic-political disconnect underscores that numerical strength alone does not ensure political power. Internal fragmentation,

socio-economic disparities, and limited access to institutional resources continue to constrain collective assertion.

The study also emphasizes that Dalit participation extends beyond electoral politics. Community networks, social movements, and religious institutions often serve as alternative arenas of political expression, reflecting adaptive strategies within structurally unequal environments. These patterns reveal that Dalit political engagement is dynamic, though constrained.

Overall, the analysis reinforces the distinction between formal and substantive democracy. Democratic deepening requires not only constitutional protections but also the reduction of structural inequalities that limit effective citizenship. The trajectory of Dalit political participation thus remains central to understanding both the achievements and unfinished challenges of Indian democracy.

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