



Dalit Religioscapes: The Alienation, Assertion, and the Formation of Separate Gurdwaras in Rural Punjab

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Abstract: *The geography of the village in Punjab has historically segregated Dalits, relegating them to the margins. The physical space was dominated by the upper castes, who maintained control over social spaces, central to the everyday practice of caste in Punjab. While the caste system in Punjab did not evolve into extreme forms of social control, thanks to the consistent criticism from reformist sects the major impact of the teachings of theoretical Sikhism helped mitigate this segregation. However, in the later Guru period Sikhs began adopting and practicing the caste system within their circles. To address this, separate scheduled caste social spaces were developed, including Dharamshalas and Gurdwaras exclusively for Dalits. Despite their controversial yet relevant position, these separate Gurdwaras in the villages created new social spaces that allowed marginalized castes to assert themselves and expand into modern social arenas. Dalits not only established distinct religious sites but also embraced new cultural practices, such as forming social organizations, organizing annual marches, and setting up community headquarters, using these effectively in their socio-political activities. The experiences of these social movements demonstrate that Dalits could effectively use Dalit Gurdwaras in the villages as powerful instruments to claim counter social space, challenging and restructuring the highly stratified and hierarchical societal norms.*

Key Words: *Dalit, Gurdwara, Punjab, Caste, Politics*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Dalit Gurdwara has played a significant role in continues Practice of Sikhism as their religion in the wave of Conversion among Dalits in Punjab. Over time, for various reasons, numerous caste-based Gurdwaras have been constructed in the name of Dalit castes and their revered figures. However, this particular aspect of their social life and experience has not received significant scholarly attention. Although extensive scholarship exists on the social and religious aspects of Sikhism and its institutions, much of it has been approached from a perspective that predominantly reflects upper-caste narratives (Virdi, 2000). Renowned scholars like W. H. McLeod, J. S. Grewal, Ganda Singh, Khushwant Singh, Pashaura Singh, Harjot Oberoi, Jagjit Singh, Indu Banga, Gurinder Singh Mann and Louis Fenech have contributed significantly to the literature but primarily from a 'Sikh history approach' that often overlooks the experiences and narratives of Dalit Sikhs (Webster, 2007). In contrast, only a few scholars—such as John C. B. Webster, Mark Juergensmeyer, Ronki Ram, Harish K. Puri, Raj Kumar Hans, Surinder Jodhka, and Paramjeet Judge—have focused on Dalit agencies in Punjab. However, there remains a dearth of comprehensive research specifically addressing the history and significance of Dalit Sikh institutions (Hans, 2008), particularly the separate Gurdwaras that have played a crucial role in the lives of Dalit Sikhs. The establishment of a separate Gurdwara by Dalits in response to the dominance of upper castes in village affairs signifies a decisive act embodying rebellion, assertion, and self-respect (Singh, 2023). An analysis of the role of the separate Gurdwara in transforming the Dalit castes and providing them with a new social space and a center of assertion is central to the concerns of this paper. In this context, the paper examines the existence of the Dalit Gurdwara and its multifaceted role in the lives of Dalit Sikhs in rural Punjab. This paper analyzes the role of the Dalit Gurdwara as a spiritual center, an agency for Dalit affairs, and a center of dialogue for and with the Dalits.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part explores the history of Dalits in Punjab, examining their existence, role, and position within Sikhism. The second section analyzes the role of Gurdwaras in the religion, the marginalization of Dalit castes in Gurdwaras, and traces the reasons for Dalits' alienation from village Gurdwaras. This



context, marked by the rise of casteism among Sikhs, led many Dalits to leave Sikhism and convert to other religions. Those who continued to practice Sikhism sought equal identity by establishing their own Gurdwaras, primarily within the village. The third section explores Dalit engagement and participation in Gurdwaras, focusing on how the presence of Dalit Gurdwaras in their daily lives transforms the lives of Dalit Sikhs. The fourth section examines the role of Dalit Gurdwaras in the social and political lives of Dalits, and the events and organizations associated with them, which help Dalits stand as a counter-community within the village dominant discourse. The concluding section discusses the significance of this study in understanding the Sikh Dalit Institutions in Punjab.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF DALITS IN SIKHISM:

The caste system in India has a long history and profound impact on the social structure, affecting every community and religion. Even newly emerged religions that challenged Hindu hierarchies were influenced by caste practices. Dr. Ambedkar argued that caste's spread across India was not a religious but a cultural phenomenon, rooted in the Indian Peninsula's profound cultural unity (Ambedkar, 1917). He identified endogamy as the essence of caste, with Brahmins—who practiced strict endogamous marriages—as the system's originators. Their model of caste was later emulated by other groups seeking similar elite status (Ambedkar, 1917). In all religions, priestly classes similar to Brahmins were the originators of caste systems, established and maintained through artificial means (Pandey, 2005). These priestly classes influenced other religions, leading them to adopt similar caste structures and associated discriminations.

Punjab offers a unique case study on Dalits due to its distinct social dynamics. It has the highest proportion of Scheduled Castes among Indian states (Kant, 2022). Dalits in Punjab are within a Sikh-majority context, unlike other parts of India where Hindus predominate. Notably, 'low-caste' Sikhs are the only Dalits from a non-Hindu community listed among the Scheduled Castes, a status not granted to their counterparts in other minority communities (Jodhka, 2001). Sikhism offers a critical field for examining caste dynamics. It is often regarded as a proponent of equality and humanism, with Sikh teachings advocating for oneness and challenging caste hierarchies (Jodhka, 2001). The revolutionary principles of Sikhism, such as *Sangat* (congregation) and *Pangat* (community kitchen), welcomed people from diverse backgrounds. During Guru Hargobind's era, Dalits joined Sikhism and attained prominent positions in the Sikh Gurus' courts (Arifi, 1993). Guru Gobind Singh honored Bhai Jaita (a dalit icon), who brought the severed head of Guru Tegh Bahadar, calling him '*Ranghrete Guru ke Bete*' (Ranghrete, the untouchables, are Guru's own sons). Bhai Jaita, a valiant Sikh warrior, was so esteemed that he was declared the '*Panjwan Sahibzada*' (Fifth Son), alongside Guru Gobind Singh's own sons (Sadaknama, 2005).

In the mid-eighteenth century, despite persistent *Mughal* persecution, the Sikhs organized into five warrior *bands* (dals), one of which was entirely composed of Dalit Sikhs led by *Bir Singh Ranghreta* with 1,300 horsemen. This band, however, was sidelined by treacherous Jat commanders. The post-Ranjit Singh era saw the resurgence of Brahmanical values and caste discrimination, particularly under the *Mahant* system (Arifi, 1993). The *Khalsa Dharam Sastar* (1914) illustrated the entrenched caste biases, stating:

Those Sikhs who belong to untouchable groups (like the Mazhabi Sikh or Ramdasia Sikhs) constitute a separate caste. These untouchable castes do not have the right to proceed beyond the fourth step in the Gurdwara Sri Amritsar (Golden Temple).

3. QUEST FOR REPRESENTATION IN SACRED SPACES: AN OVERVIEW:

Access to sacred space in Punjab has been highly contested since the twentieth century. The social world is shaped by the economic, political, social, and religious dimensions of human life. Sacred space, as discussed here, emerges from the various negotiations occurring within these spheres (Lefebvre, 2007). Michel De Certeau describes space as being "*composed of intersections of mobile elements*" and asserts that "*space is a practiced place*" (Certeau, 1988). Edward Soja, offers a pertinent observation about space: "*Space in itself may be primordially given, but the organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience*" (Soja, 1990). In caste-practiced societies, space is exclusively privileged for the upper castes, which conceive and control it. In Punjab villages' demography is designed to ensure that the dominant caste controls the mobility of Dalits. Roads, fields, and sewerage systems are under upper caste control, making the village an environment where all spaces are defined and regulated by the upper caste. Dalits lack formal common social spaces for interaction. Although there are common spaces intended for all villagers, their mobility and usage are strictly controlled by the upper castes.

This paper fundamentally concerns the Dalit Sikh religious spaces within the village. It is crucial to analyze how the religious space of Dalit Sikhs in Punjab has been transformed it to new sites of interaction, assertion, and exclusive identity. Religious space is a physical location imbued with religious significance, where rituals and worship is performed serve as focal points for religious activity and expression (Knott, 2005). The production of religious space



involves both social and symbolic dimensions, shaped by power relations and cultural practices (Lefebvre, 1991). These spaces are not static; their meanings and uses can evolve over time, influenced by socio-political changes and the lived experiences of the communities. Thus, religious spaces are dynamic entities, continually shaped and reshaped by the interactions between human activity, cultural meanings, and spiritual beliefs.

4. THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS SPACE IN PUNJAB: SIKHS AND THE GURDWARAS:

The site of religion holds immense significance in Sikhism. The Gurdwara, literally meaning "*the Guru's door*," has been a cornerstone of Sikh identity throughout history. Words like *Dharamshala*, *Dera*, *Sihan*, *Darbar*, and others have been used to denote places where Sikhs gather to receive spiritual guidance and direction (Kaur, 2022). Since the *post-Guru period*, Sikhs have valiantly defended Gurdwaras, considering them not just religious sites but also crucial hubs of social, political, and cultural life (Sandhu, 2023). Beyond historically significant locations, Sikhs influenced by reform movements in the late 19th century began constructing Gurdwaras in villages. Whenever a Sikh community developed a new village, a Gurdwara would often be established there. Over time, villages have hosted multiple Gurdwaras, reflecting various sects, communities, management committees, and castes within Sikhism.

The Gurdwara has been a central institution in Sikhism, but its significance expanded notably after the 1890s. The *Singh Sabha movement*, a key Sikh reform initiative, fought to free Sikh Gurdwaras from the control of '*Mahants*' and established numerous local Gurdwaras. Leaders of the *Singh Sabha* also challenged untouchability and caste discrimination within the Sikh community (Oberoi, 1994). In the 1920s, the movement called for "*unquestioned entrance to Sikh places of worship*" for all individuals, regardless of caste (Juergensmeyer, 1988: 28).

5. CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN SACRED SPACES: THE PUNJAB STORY:

In the villages of Punjab, religious spaces are predominantly controlled by upper castes, with limited and superficial accommodation for Dalits. Although overt discrimination is not visibly displayed, underlying tensions persist. Historically, Dalits have shared the common village Gurdwara with upper castes, but this arrangement often appeared as if Dalits were merely using a space dominated by upper castes. There is a noticeable absence of Dalit narratives within these religious spaces. Dalit Sikhs allege that their contributions to Sikh history are systematically omitted, hidden, or silenced by the preachers and management committees of the religious shrines (Mattu, 2018). Despite their marginalization within Sikhism, Dalits have been able to develop their own icons, images, and symbols. Their history has been explored, evolved, and constructed through myths and oral narratives that highlight the significant contributions of Dalits to the development of Sikhism. These narratives strategically present Dalit Sikhs as original adherents of the religion (Sabharwal, 2005). The critiques of caste discrimination and the advocacy for equal identity have been the driving forces behind the popularization of these oral traditions. Additionally, the desire for equal status within the village, freedom from constant humiliation, and the discriminatory behavior in religious activities have been major motivators for this movement.

It can be argued that, for Dalit Sikhs in Punjab, Village Gurdwara traditionally served as sites of domination and control. However, this dynamic began to change gradually with the formation of separate Gurdwaras by Dalits started in the late 20th century. The establishment of new religious congregation sites, dominated by Dalits, introduces a profound new dimension to their existence. These sacred spaces redefine their locality and community landmarks in areas where they were previously marginalized within the village. The social significance of these structures is heightened, as religious spaces represent sanctity, purity, and community pride. Control over Gurdwaras is particularly significant in Sikhism, as Sikhs have historically engaged in battles and agitations to uphold their sanctity. This control also holds profound implications for the social dynamics between Dalits and upper-caste Sikhs. Furthermore, Dalits are now positioned to critique caste discrimination within Sikh's religious spaces, offering a critical analysis of religious engagement and its practices.

THE RISE OF CASTEISM: ALIENATING THE FAITHFUL

Louis Dumont emphasizes the caste system's foundation on the notions of purity and pollution. He argues that caste hierarchy is maintained through religious rituals and the concept of ritual purity. Hindu texts and cosmology provide the ideological foundation for these rituals. Violations of purity rules lead to religious sanctions, reinforcing social boundaries (Dumont, 1998). The emergence of caste-based Gurdwaras can be attributed to various factors, including historical discrimination by upper castes. However, this is not the sole reason behind the development of these distinct shrines. Gurdwaras dedicated to *Vishwakarma Ji*, *Nihang Singhs*, and the *Udasi Sect* are examples of such distinct religious sites alongside common village Gurdwaras. Following a similar trend, caste remains significant in Sikhism, leading to the establishment of caste-based Gurdwaras. Many castes, including Dalits, have created their own Gurdwaras (Hans, 2008). It's important to note that while there is generally no formal prohibition on entering these religious spaces,



local conduct often dictate separate practices. Occasionally, members of different communities may visit each other's shrines for special occasions, but regular interaction is less common.

EMERGENCE OF NEW DALIT SPACES: ALIENATION FROM VILLAGE GURDWARAS

The villages of Punjab are fundamentally different from other villages in India. In Hindu-dominated villages, caste hierarchies and differences are often reinforced by religious sanctions. In contrast, Sikhism theoretically supports equality and lacks such religious endorsements of caste (I.P. Singh, 1977). However, in practice, casteism remains deeply rooted in Sikhism, necessitating an important acknowledgment and solution. An important insight from field narratives is that Dalits' shift from village Gurdwaras to their own separate shrines is not driven solely by discrimination. Various dependent factors contribute to this transition, though discrimination remains the primary reason. This paper aims to document the multifaceted aspects of Dalit alienation from village Gurdwaras and the subsequent establishment of separate Dalit Gurdwaras.

Dalits who converted to Sikhism initially retained their icons and idols. During the 20th century, the Chamars of Doaba integrated into Sikhism while maintaining the prominent status of Guru Ravidas, a Dalit whose writings are included in the Guru Granth Sahib alongside other saints. Almost every village in the Doaba region has a separate Gurdwara for Ad Dharmis, which features both the Guru Granth Sahib and a picture of Guru Ravidas (Jodhka, 2001). Sikhism recognizes ten historical Gurus, with the Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal Guru. Consequently, Ravidass is referred to as "Bhakta" rather than "Guru" in village Gurdwaras. This designation has created tensions between Dalit Sikhs and Jat Sikhs, with the conflict over the title contributing to the establishment of separate Dalit Gurdwaras (Ram, 2012).

The establishment of Dalit Gurdwaras is also a response to persistent discrimination. Many Dalits feel that Jat Sikhs treat them poorly in Gurdwaras, similar to the treatment they experience in the farmlands (Ram, 2012). Although Dalits may hold staff positions in Gurdwaras, managerial and administrative roles are predominantly occupied by upper castes. Dalits are largely excluded from Panthic structures of power, which include major Sikh religious, organizational, and political bodies. Key Sikh organizations, such as the *Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC)*, *Shiromani Akali Dal*, and *local Gurdwara managing committees*, remain largely inaccessible to Dalits. An empirical study by Narinderpal Singh in 2007 revealed that only 5 percent of administrative posts within the SGPC were held by Dalit Sikhs. Furthermore, a survey conducted in 2007 found that out of 60 local Gurdwara committees, 48 were headed by Jat Sikhs (Singh, 2007).

Discrimination in village Gurdwaras extends beyond power dynamics and management; it is deeply embedded in the lifestyle and socialization within villages. Upper-caste Sikhs often refer to Dalit Sikhs with derogatory terms like '*Chottian Jattan*' and '*Vehre wale*'. Despite the fundamental teachings of Sikhism emphasizing equality, village Gurdwaras frequently reflects a starkly unequal social order. Dalits are still relegated to sitting separately, often near the entrance of the Gurdwaras (Bhullar, 2007). Balbir Madhopuri vividly describes how interactions in these Gurdwaras undermine Sikhism's principles of equality; with low-caste children frequently facing verbal abuse from Sikh priests (Hans, 2008). Hazara Ram Bodhi recounts that Dalits historically had to bring their own utensils for langar, and if they accidentally used Gurdwara utensils, they were purified by fire. While this practice has ceased, Dalits continue to face various forms of discrimination in many Gurdwaras (Hans, 2008). An interview excerpt from a respondent in Ferozepur district highlights the current experiences of Dalits:

"My family and I are staunch believers in Sikhism and follow only one religion. We visit the village Gurdwara only on special occasions or fortnightly. Dalits are not daily attendees like the Jats. It is not a matter of faith but of our upbringing. It's not that they say anything to us; it's the silent conduct we need to follow."

The establishment of Dalit Gurdwaras is closely linked to the upward mobility of Dalits in Punjab. Many Dalits have improved their economic status by moving away from traditional caste occupations and agriculture, benefiting from affirmative action, hard work, and international opportunities. They have started small-scale businesses, such as carpentry, barbering, blacksmithing, and masonry. Prosperous Dalits have formed various organizations, committees, political parties, community halls, marriage palaces, and their own Gurdwaras, reinforcing their distinct social identity. The migration of many Dalits abroad further highlights their social advancement (Ram, 2012). During fieldwork, several narratives revealed that Dalits with backgrounds in the army, retired officers, local leadership, and NRIs played crucial roles in supporting and establishing Dalit Gurdwaras. These individuals, known as *moharbar bande* (leaders), were instrumental in securing permissions and interacting with government and village panchayat authorities for the



formation of these Gurdwaras. They often sought support from other castes and communities to project the Gurdwara as inclusive and to gain broader acceptance. The respondent from Tarn Taran district narrated the story of the formation of a Dalit Gurdwara in his village:

"This land belongs to the panchayat. While they never explicitly denied us entry to their Gurdwara, their intentions were clear—they did not want us there. We knew that the derogatory treatment would eventually lead to a clash. So, we occupied the land and gathered donations from our community to build our own Gurdwara. The finance and management are entirely in our hands. We sustain and develop it through monthly donations from each household. During the crop season, we receive more donations, occasionally even from the Jats."

THE BIRTH OF SEPARATE DALIT GURDWARAS

The formation of Dalit Gurdwaras represents a significant challenge to caste discrimination at religious sites. By building their own Gurdwaras, Dalits asserted their autonomy and pride, engaging in local-level resistance (Jodhka, 2001). Data from two decades ago indicates that Dalits had separate Gurdwaras in approximately 10,000 of Punjab's 12,780 villages. A survey of 116 villages in one Tehsil of Amritsar district revealed that Dalits had separate Gurdwaras in 68 villages. Another field study of 51 villages across three sub-regions of Punjab found that Dalits had separate Gurdwaras in 41 villages (Dalit Voice, 2003; Puri, 2007; Jodhka, 2002). Ronki Ram noted that the systematic denial of fundamental human rights forced Dalits to establish their own religious centers. Facing persistent discrimination and marginalization, Dalits created these spaces to assert their autonomy and preserve their dignity, fostering a sense of community free from the oppression of mainstream religious institutions (Ram, 2012). In an interview conducted in Tarn Taran, a respondent Karandeep Singh highlighted the historical context and shared their perspective:

'Almost 100 years ago, Sikhs collectively liberated their Gurdwaras from Mahants. Do you recognize the Mahants? They were corrupt priests who acted against Sikh principles and took complete control of Gurdwaras that belonged to the common Sikhs. Then Sikhs engaged in conflicts and established the SGPC to oversee religious affairs according to Sikh tenets. However, upper caste Sikhs now has full authority over the Gurdwaras in our communities. They exercise complete control over Gurdwara management and daily operations. We used to go there for worship before building our own Gurdwara, but they would taunt us, treat us unfairly, and sometimes engage in conflicts over petty issues. It's not that we didn't fight for our rights in the Gurdwara. Guru Ghar is open to all because the Guru has granted us permission. It is the abode of our Guru. The Gurus are not limited to the Jat caste. However, the truth is that our community is economically disadvantaged and lacks political and military power. Hence, we faced obstacles in our quest for equal treatment in their Gurdwara. In response, we boycotted their Gurdwara and eventually built our own space.'

DALIT RITUALS AND PARTICIPATION IN GURDWARAS

Dalit Sikhs have developed their own distinct rituals and practices within their Gurdwaras, reflecting their unique cultural and social identity. These practices often blend traditional Sikh rituals with elements specific to the Dalit community, emphasizing their heritage and struggles against caste-based discrimination.

In many Dalit Gurdwaras, there is a significant emphasis on the teachings and imagery of Guru Ravidas, a revered figure whose writings are included in the Guru Granth Sahib. Guru Ravidas is often referred to as a '*Bhakat*' rather than a '*Guru*' in mainstream Sikh Gurdwaras, but in Dalit Gurdwaras, his status as a spiritual leader is prominently recognized. This serves as a source of inspiration and pride for Dalit Sikhs, highlighting their contributions to the Sikh faith. The respondent in Jalandhar asserted,

'We have faith in Sikhism and Guru Ravidass, as both provide us with power and strength. They hold equal respect in my heart, as their teachings complement each other. My faith transcends the code of conduct and the rules set by committees and priests.'

Dalit Gurdwaras frequently honor local saints and community leaders who have played pivotal roles in advocating for Dalit rights and social justice. These figures are commemorated through rituals, special ceremonies, and community events, reinforcing the connection between religious practice and social activism. While Dalit Gurdwaras celebrate major Sikh festivals such as *Vaisakhi* and *Guru Nanak Gurburab*, they also observe events specific to the Dalit community. These celebrations often include the anniversaries of significant social movements and the birthdays of key



Dalit icons. Prominent among these are the birth anniversaries of *Baba Jeewan Singh*, *Guru Ravidass*, and *Saint Kabir*, which are observed with particular significance.

The langar, or community kitchen, is a central aspect of Sikh practice that emphasizes equality and communal sharing. In Dalit Gurdwaras, special attention is given to ensuring that all participants, regardless of caste, are treated equally. The preparation and serving of food in these langars often involve collective participation from community members, symbolizing unity and mutual support. In Dalit Gurdwaras, there is a conscious effort to ensure active participation of all community members in religious rituals. Unlike the hierarchical practices observed in some mainstream Gurdwaras, where upper-caste individuals may dominate certain roles, Dalit Gurdwaras promote inclusivity. This includes encouraging women and children to take on leadership roles during services and community events. The respondent assertively explains the position of Gurdwara as

'They abuse our children and women to assert their hierarchical superiority. Their youngsters consider themselves superior even to the elders in our community, often addressing them by derogatory nicknames. The separate Gurdwara has given us the platform we deserve. Now, equality flourishes in our centers.'

Sermons in Dalit Gurdwaras often address contemporary social issues such as caste discrimination, economic inequality, and political marginalization. These discussions are framed within the context of Sikh teachings, providing a religious perspective on social justice and encouraging community members to actively engage in efforts to improve their socio-economic conditions. The distinct rituals and practices observed in Dalit Gurdwaras not only reinforce their cultural identity but also serve as powerful tools for social empowerment. By creating spaces where Dalit Sikhs can practice their faith free from discrimination, these Gurdwaras play a crucial role in fostering a sense of dignity, solidarity, and resistance within the community.

THE RELIGIOSITY OF SPACE: THE IMPACT OF DALIT GURDWARAS

Dalit Gurdwaras hold significant importance in the growth and empowerment of the community. These Gurdwaras have a profound psychological impact, as they create a sense of equality specifically for Dalit Sikhs. Within these Gurdwaras, they do not experience any form of discrimination, whether it be explicit or indirect. They feel a sense of freedom and liberation that they may not have experienced in the Jat Gurdwaras. Manjit Singh of Naushehra Pannua raises an important point regarding the significance of feeling comfortable in the Gurdwara in order to establish a connection with the almighty. He emphasizes that

'How can one connect with the almighty if he does not feel comfortable in the Gurdwara?'" The primary reason for visiting the Gurdwara has not been fulfilled without equality.'

DALIT GURDWARAS AS COMMUNITY EPICENTERS: FROM SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Dalit Gurdwara stands as a multifunctional hub, serving as a focal point for Dalits in social, religious, and political contexts. Embedded in the community's daily routine, it hosts crucial life events and becomes the epicenter for Dalit Sikh identity and empowerment. Religion in contemporary Punjab extends its influence into the highly contested sphere of politics. Gurdwaras, as the most powerful ecclesiastical institutions of the Sikh religion, exemplify this dynamic. Virtually every locality in both rural and urban settings of the state features one or more Gurdwaras. Beyond their role as archetypal religious structures, they symbolize an all-encompassing spiritual influence and the extensive reach of Sikh religion, exerting a significant hold on state politics (Ram, 2008). Gurdwara ownership symbolizes religious, social, and political liberties, shaping their relevance and influence. A prevailing perception suggests that whoever holds control over the Gurdwaras also wields influence over politics in Punjab (Singh, 2007).

The Dalit Gurdwara in the Dalit *Vehras* of the village emerges as a significant counter-address platform, providing refuge and empowerment. It becomes a voice for the community, enabling them to address social divisions and shape public discourse. Notably, Dalits, despite having means of counter-address, refrain from imposing penalties on upper castes, highlighting persistent power imbalances. The Dalit Gurdwara is a fusion of Bhakti movement ideas inspired by Guru Ravidass, Sikh martiality influenced by Baba Jeevan Singh, and the practical distinction from village religion envisioned by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The Dalit Gurdwara serves as the nucleus of assertion, shaping the destiny of Dalit identity and solidifying their distinct presence within the mainstream community. Events and initiatives organized by the Dalit Gurdwara provide a platform for them to celebrate their past and history, asserting their existence with pride alongside the upper castes. The respondent assertively responded that



‘From Dalit gods to Dalit icons, the Gurdwara represents them all. Although Ambedkar was never a part of Sikhism, he also has a place in our Gurdwaras. Many icons, figures, and leaders of Sikhism who were not highlighted by the upper castes are given prominence in our Gurdwara’.

The Dalit Gurdwaras play a crucial role in reclaiming and asserting the historical contributions of Dalit Sikhs to Sikhism. In these spaces, Dalit Sikhs emphasize their significant sacrifices and contributions, asserting their rightful place in the Sikh legacy. A Sikh preacher, during a *Katha* (sermon) program in one of these Gurdwaras, stated, *‘The Dalits have many icons in Sikh history. However, dominant narratives often undermine, hide, or even appropriate our ancestors as their own. Having our own place, our own stage, mic, and audience is enough to understand that history has many layers.’* This statement reflects the ongoing effort by Dalit Sikhs to challenge the erasure and distortion of their historical role, advocating for a more inclusive and accurate representation of Sikh history.

In the political sphere, Gurdwara ownership symbolizes religious, social, and political liberties, shaping their relevance and influence. A prevailing perception suggests that whoever holds control over the Gurdwaras also wields influence over politics in Punjab (Singh, 2007). The Gurdwara becomes a central locus for discussions, meetings, and rallies involving political parties. The establishment of a separate Gurdwara empowers Dalit Sikhs to directly engage with Political Representatives, ensuring their voices are heard and demands addressed (Nayyar, 1956). This shift in political interactions signifies a strategic move to secure betterment for Dalits within their own community space. The Dalit Gurdwara emerges not only as a spiritual sanctuary but also as a catalyst for social and political change. It advocates for improved infrastructure, secures grants, and becomes a pivotal platform for negotiating welfare schemes, contributing significantly to the upliftment and positive transformation of the Dalit community within the village. Continued study of caste dynamics in rural societies is crucial for addressing inequalities and fostering social harmony. A member of the Naushera Pannua Panchayat Committee, belonging to the Dalit community, stated,

‘Now, we have a separate space to engage with political representatives. They come to us, interact with their distinct voter base, and listen to and fulfill our demands.’

The politics is all about the numbers and those who have more votes have more right to the political resources. The respondents assertively described that

‘Have you noticed the streets and sewage systems in Dalit areas now? We receive the same funding and support from political parties because they know that our votes are no longer controlled by the upper castes. The Dalit Gurdwara has not only disconnected us from the village’s dominant religious practices but also allowed us to grow independently within the village’.

CONCLUSION:

The establishment of separate religious spaces for Dalits in Punjab represents a significant advancement in their quest for upward mobility and social assertion. As highlighted by Amartya Sen, leveraging caste to advocate for or unify lower castes can be advantageous. This paper has demonstrated that Dalit Gurdwaras, by providing a distinct religious and cultural space, expand opportunities for Dalits within a Jat-dominated social framework. The emergence of Dalit Gurdwaras stands in contrast to the challenges posed by conversions to Christianity or the adoption of Dera culture, which disrupt established community identities in Punjab. For those who remain within Sikhism, these Gurdwaras become crucial platforms for emancipation, offering a space where Dalits can assert their identity and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Despite ongoing dominance by upper castes in religious practices and the imposition of norms, Dalit Gurdwaras operate as independent entities, albeit under occasional scrutiny. While upper castes may attempt to influence these spaces through financial support or supervision, Dalit Gurdwaras maintain their role as centers for cultural assertion, religious expression, and political communication. They provide ex-untouchables with a space they control and manage, free from prejudice. In times of struggle, particularly when confronting upper-caste Sikhs, Dalit Gurdwaras have proven instrumental. They serve not only as sites of resistance but also as platforms for utilizing Dalit symbols and practices to navigate and address the challenges posed by upper-caste dominance. These Gurdwaras, therefore, are more than mere places of worship; they are vital hubs of Dalit activity, empowerment, and community solidarity. This analysis underscores the importance of Dalit Gurdwaras in shaping the socio-religious landscape of Punjab, illustrating how they function as bastions of Dalit identity and resistance, ultimately contributing to the broader struggle for equality and justice within the Sikh community and beyond.



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