



7. Dalits – On the Margins of Development

Dalit¹ communities are among the poorest and most deprived sections not only in Punjab, but throughout India. Today, in spite of massive efforts, mainly through policies such as reservations and subsidies, Dalit communities have still not fully entered the political, economic and social mainstream.

Punjab has the highest proportion of Scheduled Castes within its population. The spread of religions such as Islam and Christianity, the birth and spread of Sikhism, the rise of social and political movements in the state, especially peasant movements—all these were driven, at some point or the other, by the deprivation, discrimination and subjugation experienced by Dalits.

The Dalits in Punjab are certainly not as poor or as deprived as their counterparts in other parts of the country. In fact, they are relatively prosperous. However, the status of the Dalits has not registered notable changes and is bereft of social, economic and political opportunities. Dalits are still deprived of ownership of crucial assets like land, capital, etc., and access to basic social infrastructure.

Several social and religious movements in the state, spanning the last few centuries, have had a major impact on the Dalit population. In fact, this trend

continues even today. Peasant movements, as well as the Naxalite movement, contributed to strengthening the position of Dalits, gave them better bargaining powers and a more substantial position in the politics and consciousness of Punjab.

In the following sections, the status of Dalits in Punjab is examined. The impact of social and religious movements on Dalits, the role of peasant movements and their impact on Dalit labour is also studied, as are comparisons between the Dalits of Punjab and Dalits in other states.

Movements and the Status of Dalits

In Punjab, the last two centuries have seen social movements that have directly or indirectly affected the status of Dalits. These movements have led to some alleviation in the plight of the Dalits and resulted in the breaking of various social barriers. Certain changes have been brought in the discrimination that Dalits have faced. Some of the important movements and their impact are chronicled below.

Impact of Sikh Religion

The growth of the Sikh religion has played a very important role in changing the status of Dalits. Sikhism was a protest movement against upper castes discrimination and thus became popular in

¹ It is necessary to mention here that while the term 'Dalit' in the Ambedkarian framework includes Scheduled Castes primarily, a broader concept of Dalit would include the economically, socially and politically underprivileged section.



the larger community. With the passage of time, Sikhism started being identified with social justice. Started by Guru Nanak, Sikhism sought to do away with the rigid caste system. It included concepts such as '*langar*', which tried to remove social divisions through common meals. Many Dalits were attracted to Sikhism as it gave them an opportunity to escape from crippling social stigmas. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikh religion (1666-1708) vigorously furthered the cause of the Dalits through the establishment of the Khalsa army. In the Khalsa, the backward and oppressed were given a place of honour. However, the efforts of the Gurus did not succeed in completely changing the social structure. The simple, egalitarian order that had been laid down soon became diluted and various rituals emerged which worked to the disadvantage of lower castes, particularly the Dalits.

The Singh Sabha Movement and the Akali Movement created a fresh awakening among Sikhs and challenged the authority of the Brahmin priests. A dispute erupted which resulted in the priests handing over the control of the Golden Temple to the people. Thereafter, many Sikhs belonging to Scheduled Caste communities such as Bhaids, Granthis and Ragis have become Sikh priests or helpers (Sewadars) in the Gurudwaras.² This brought about a radical transformation in the self-image of lower castes. The first popularly elected Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee³ (SGPC) was formed in 1921 to which all baptised Sikhs were eligible for elections, including Scheduled Castes.⁴

The emergence of Sikhism minimised the intensity of untouchability in Punjab. The Sikh gurus took bold steps to root out untouchability. At the time of baptism, or initiation into the Sikh order, Sikhs

get five freedoms, four of which relate to untouchability:

- Deliverance from the prejudices of all previous religious customs, and practices.
- Freedom from the influence of previous caste or family.
- Freedom from the stigma attached to previous calling or hereditary professions.
- Deliverance from all previous rituals, prejudices and inhibitions.

However, while Sikhism sought to break caste barriers, in reality land-owning classes like the Jat Sikhs, as well as non-Sikhs, seldom allowed Dalits equal status in villages. Any attempt by them to assert their rights was met with a show of force.

Impact of the Ad Dharam Movement

The Ad Dharam Movement, under the direction and leadership of Mangu Ram, also sought to uplift Scheduled Castes. There were several positive results. One, the boot-making business of the charmakars received a boost with the inflow of government army contracts. Second, their social mobility was heightened with the rise of new educational opportunities provided by the Arya Samaj. Mangu Ram, a Dalit, identified the Ad Dharam movement with Qaumiya (communal pride), Mazhabi (religion) and Majlis (organisation). He suggested that untouchables should think of themselves as a community – a Quam – similar to Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. He stated that they were the original inhabitants of India and their religion was Ad Dharam.

The Ad Dharam Movement failed to transform upper caste attitudes. Outside their own enclaves, Dalits continued to face discrimination and oppression. However, the prosperity that resulted from the leather trade and migration abroad as well

² These are different types of priests and people who serve in Sikh temples (Gurudwaras).

³ This is a supreme body of Sikhs organised to manage and maintain gurudwaras and their wealth and property

⁴ See Gobinder Singh, p. 82



as the emergence of Dalit administrators, businessmen and teachers created a vocal, urban middle section among Ad Dharmis.

Impact of Christianity

In Punjab, Christianity enjoyed considerable importance for about 60 years. Conversions to Christianity began in the mid-1870s, mainly amongst the Balmiki etc., who were at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy, overwhelmingly illiterate, backward and socially deprived. The Christian initiative in education increased the availability of Western education to lower castes and gave them greater opportunities for social mobility. Conversion to Christianity was often a matter of concern for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religious leaders, although in rural Punjab, mass conversions to Christianity diminished from the mid-1920s. After Independence the Christian community was more or less ignored politically.

Impact of Arya Samaj

The Arya Samaj programme for upliftment of untouchables was an important part of the teachings of its founder Swami Dayanand Saraswati. His aim was to persuade upper caste Hindus to accept untouchables as equals. By becoming Aryas/ Mahashas or Arya Bhagats, untouchables could gain access to the Vedas. They participated in religious activities, an important consequence being the education of untouchable children. However, these efforts still did not destroy the caste status of Dalits; inter-dining remained limited to occasional feasts on religious occasions; there were no inter-marriages; occupational mobility was limited; the Hindu attitude towards 'Shudh Aryas' was one of apathy; untouchability continued to be practised and acts of discrimination and exclusion continued.

Other Movements

Radhasoami

Baba Jaimal Singh set up the Beas Dera of the Radhasoami sect in 1891. The fourth master,

Maharaja Charan Singh was determined to end untouchability and the Radhasoami movement abolished untouchability and proclaimed equality among all Satsangis. They, however, do not intermarry, and in spite of their best efforts caste-based distinctions are still practised among Radhasoamis.

The Unionists

The National Unionist Party was formed in 1923. Its primary objective was to help backward communities, including Scheduled Castes. The Unionist Party also helped the depressed castes to get government lands on easy terms of payment.

The Bahujan Samaj Party

In April 1984, Kanshi Ram created the Bahujan Samaj Party. The party adopted Ambedkar's ideology, and soon became the political voice of the Dalits in Punjab. Kanshi Ram took an openly anti-Brahmin, anti-upper caste, anti-Gandhi and anti-Communist stand. In 1985 the BSP polled 2.2 percent of the valid votes; thereby damaging the Congress, CPI and CPI (M) parties. It won its first political victory by winning the Phillaur reserved constituency. Thus began a phase of Dalit political assertion in Punjab.

Social Profile of the Scheduled Castes

There are 37 Scheduled Castes in Punjab. Major Scheduled Caste groups are Mazhabis, Charmakars (including Ramdasias), Ad Dharmis, Balmiki, Bazigars, Dumna (Mahasha), Megh, Sansi, Bauria, Kabirpanthi (Julaha) and Dhanak. These eight castes in order of composition make up 92 percent of the Scheduled Caste population. As per the 1991 Census, the percentage of the eight numerically preponderant Scheduled Castes are shown in Table 7.1.

Ad Dharmis and Ramdasias belong to the same social strata. Similarly, Balmikis and Mazhabis belong to the same group. Balmikis are characterised as Hindus and Mazhabis are those who are converted to Sikhism. Similarly, the Ramdasias are Charmakars converted to Sikhism.



Table 7.1: **Population of Major Scheduled Castes in Punjab, 1991**

Name of the Scheduled Caste	Population in 1991	Percentage of Population to All Scheduled Castes
Ad Dharmi	915098	15.9
Bauria, Bawaria	78429	1.4
Bazigar	162804	2.8
Charmakar (including Jatia Charmakar Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, Ravidasi)	1484268	25.8
Balmiki etc.	640210	11.1
Dhanak	57997	1.0
Dumna, Mahasha, Doom	158357	2.8
Kabirpanthi, Julaha	65028	1.1
Mazhabi	1765798	30.7
Megh	105157	1.8
Sansi, Bhedkut, Manesh	81062	1.4

Source: Tables on Scheduled Castes from Census of India 1991, available on CD-ROM, Registrar General of India, New Delhi.

Thus both the Charmakars and Balmiki category together constitute over 80 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population and individually over 40 percent each. This establishes the important point that the Scheduled Castes are not a homogeneous but a heterogeneous category. Scheduled Castes, as a percentage of the total population in the state, were 24.7 percent during 1971, which increased to 26.9 percent in 1981 and further increased to 28.3 percent by 1991.

The Ad Dharmis are concentrated in the Doaba region; Mazhabis in Majha and Malwa region; Ramdasias in Malwa region and Balmikis in the Doaba and Malwa region. Mazhabis and Ramdasias primarily follow the Sikh religion. Although the Ad-Dharmis tried to establish a separate religious identity, they continue to practise Sikh rituals (*Anand Karaj* in their marriages); only the Balmikis follow the Hindu religion. Thus an overwhelming number of Scheduled Castes are Sikh.

In Punjab, low caste Sikhs were included in the list of Scheduled Castes, although this status was not granted to deprived sections of other minority communities, such as Muslims, Christians,

Buddhists and Jains. In the 1961 Census, an overwhelming number of Scheduled Castes (98.56 percent) were recorded as Hindus and the remaining 1.44 percent were entered as Sikhs (cf. Singh 1985, p. 10). However, among Sikhs, Scheduled Castes constituted 29.2 percent. The social composition of United Punjab before Partition consisted of 50.86 percent Muslims, 36.35 percent Hindus and only 12 percent Sikhs (Sharma, 1985, p. 178). After Punjab was carved out as a separate state in 1966, Sikhs emerged as a majority community.

Scheduled Caste Sikhs were not quite enthusiastic about the emergence of Punjab as a separate state, because they were apprehensive of the hegemonic position of the Jat Sikhs. They feared that they would be placed in a vulnerable status within rural Punjab (Nayar, 1966; pp. 50-51).

Hindus constituted the majority in urban Punjab while Sikhs were preponderant in rural areas. For example, 76.46% in Jalandhar and 76 percent in Gurdaspur were Hindus. On the other hand, Sikhs were 89 percent of the total rural population in Amritsar and 87 percent in rural Bathinda⁵. Urban Punjab is preponderantly dominated by the trading castes (Khatri and Aroras, both Hindus and Sikhs).

⁵ Data pertains to Census of 1961



In rural Punjab the dominant groups were Jat Sikhs. Scheduled Castes remained perpetually subordinate to these two groups.

The Sikh Light Infantry, a regiment of the Indian Army, consists of the Sikhs belonging to Scheduled Castes and this regiment is widely known for its courage and valour in the battlefield.

A large percentage of Scheduled Caste communities from Punjab, particularly from Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur districts, have migrated abroad, especially to U.K. and Canada. Their ties with their homes remain strong and such linkages have profoundly changed living patterns of the area.

Dalits – A Profile

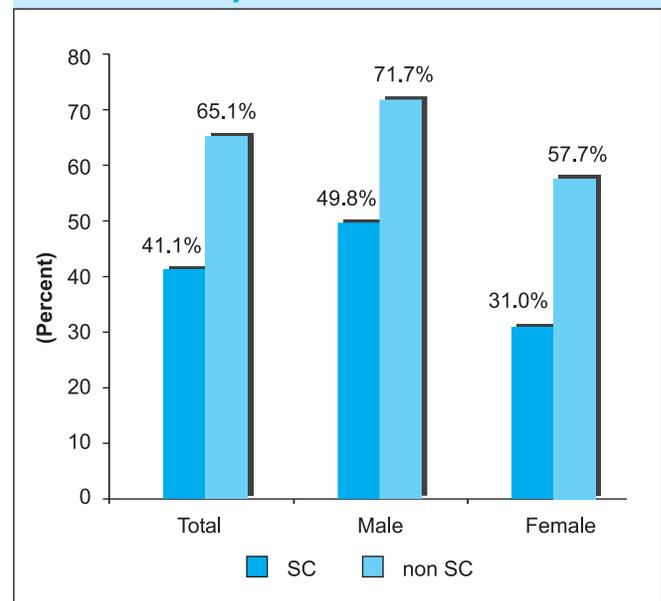
Education

There has been a consistent rise in literacy rates of Scheduled Castes in Punjab. It was recorded at 23.9 percent in 1981, and increased to 41 percent in 1991. The literacy rate of males was 31 percent in 1981, which then increased to almost 50 percent by 1991. Female literacy, which was just 15.7 percent during 1981, increased to 31 percent by 1991. Although there has been an increase in total literacy rates, a gap persists in the literacy rate of Scheduled Castes and that of the general population.

The literacy rate of Scheduled Castes was 41 percent in 1991, as compared to a literacy rate of 58.5 percent in the general population. The gap between the literacy rate of Scheduled Castes and non-SC population is even greater. Figure 7.1 compares the two literacy rates. There is a gap of 24 percent between the literacy rate of Scheduled Castes and that of the non-SC population in Punjab.

Within Scheduled Castes, there is considerable gap between female and male literacy, a gap of nearly 19 percent. The literacy differential amongst Scheduled Castes becomes even sharper if it is compared across sex and district and shows considerable deprivation of even basic literacy. A

Figure 7.1: Literacy Rates among SCs and non-SCs in Punjab, 1991



Source: Tables on Scheduled Castes from Census of India 1991, available on CD-ROM, Registrar General of India, New Delhi

look at Table 7.2 shows that female literacy amongst Scheduled Castes was abysmally low in 1991 (below 20 percent) in Sangrur, Faridkot, Firozpur, Bathinda. Contrast this with the overall male literacy of above 80 percent in Hoshiarpur and we get an idea of the huge difference between different populations in Punjab (the difference would be even sharper if comparisons were drawn with the non-SC population). The Ad Dharmis had the highest literacy rate in 1991, in fact better than the Punjab average, while the Mazhabis, the largest group amongst Scheduled Castes, had a literacy of just 26 percent (Table 7.3). Such wide variation among large communities demands that deprived sections are immediately identified and their access to basic education is urgently promoted.

The literacy rate amongst Scheduled Castes is the highest in Doaba, followed by the Majha region and lowest in the Malwa region. The literacy rate is lowest in the districts of Bathinda, Firozpur, Faridkot and Sangrur. These districts can be characterised as educationally backward and female literacy is at its lowest here. The Malwa region needs active



Table 7.2: **Population and Literacy amongst Scheduled Castes in Punjab, 1991**

District	Total Population of Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Castes as % age of total population	Percentage literacy of Scheduled Castes		
			Total	Male	Female
Amritsar	701444	28.01	33.71	42.12	23.91
Bathinda	456596	29.27	20.68	27.42	12.84
Faridkot	589898	34.08	24.27	31.59	15.77
Ferozpur	350461	21.79	24.40	32.49	15.08
Gurdaspur	433827	24.69	47.60	56.89	37.10
Hoshiarpur	484876	33.32	63.82	74.48	51.90
Jalandhar	792098	39.08	56.61	65.52	46.50
Kapurthala	190484	29.46	47.82	56.84	37.63
Ludhiana	611399	24.74	50.48	59.52	39.83
Patiala	447607	23.60	38.53	48.38	27.14
Rup Nagar	224982	24.57	57.38	68.09	44.86
Sangrur	458856	26.83	27.15	35.82	17.02
Punjab	5742528	28.31	41.09	49.82	31.03

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab, 2000, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Punjab, Chandigarh

Table 7.3: **Literacy Rate amongst Scheduled Castes in Punjab in 1991**

Caste	All	Male	Female
Ad Dharmi	62.48	72.42	51.25
Balmiki, etc.	40.03	48.53	30.49
Bazigar	26.31	37.57	14.05
Charmakar, Jatia Charmakar, Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, Ravidasi	47.93	57.71	36.44
Dumna, Mahasha, Doom	46.80	56.95	35.29
Mazhabi	26.26	33.34	18.04
Megh	46.09	54.44	36.67
Sansi, Bhedkut, Manesh	25.64	34.90	15.57

Source: Derived from Scheduled Caste tables from Census of India 1991, available on CD from Registrar General of India, New Delhi

policy intervention, particularly in the four districts mentioned above.

It is encouraging that the enrolment rate in schools (as ascertained by children registered) represents a proportional representation of Scheduled Castes and general population as per their population share in Punjab. Scheduled Caste students appear to be gaining increased access to school education, giving hope that gaps with other communities would be reduced by the time of the next census.

Enrolment data over the last 20 years from 1979 to 1999 provides interesting conclusions. Throughout

the period under consideration, the number of students from Scheduled Caste communities was proportional to their share of the population. In fact, over the years their numbers in government primary education institutions has risen as a share of total children enrolled. The share of Scheduled Caste students was 28 percent in 1979, which rose to 34 percent in 1989 and stands at 44 percent in 1999. Much of this increase is due to students from other communities preferring non-government, private and other educational institutions. Along with an increase in share there is also an increase in enrolment, which rose by 33 percent from 1989 to 1999.⁶

⁶ Enrolment numbers of students and SC students are from the Director, Public Instructions, Government of Punjab and different volumes of Statistical Abstract, Directorate of Economic and Statistics, Government of Punjab.



The increase in number of SC students in primary government schools, and movement of children from other communities away from government schools put increased responsibility on government schools to improve the quality of education that children of Scheduled Caste communities are receiving or will receive in Punjab.

The other significant feature is that dropout rates among Scheduled Caste girls are declining, and more are opting for higher education.

Among Scheduled Castes, the 13 Vimukta Jatis (denotified tribes) are considered the most subjugated. While at the state level, 62 percent of Scheduled Castes families live below the poverty line, 85 to 97 percent of Vimukta Jatis live below the poverty line. Their average literacy level is 20.40 percent as against 41.09 percent among general Scheduled Castes (Census 1981). From this community, child enrolment in school is very low and the incidence of child labour is very high. Nearly half of their child population is employed as child

labour. Vimukta Jatis need special attention from state programmes.

Livelihoods

In a state dominated by agriculture, ownership of land is the crucial base from which emanate social status, political power and diversification of livelihoods.

In the Census of 1991, enumeration of employment showed that of all cultivators⁷ (and we can assume that this categorisation of census comes closest to ownership of land holding or those with access to cultivable land), Scheduled Castes constituted only 4.3 percent. Of all Scheduled Caste main workers ascertained by the Census in 1991, 59.8 percent worked as agricultural labourers, while only 29.9 percent of non-SC workers were agricultural labourers.

In terms of ownership of land holdings, the Agriculture Census undertaken in Punjab in 1990-91 shows that while Scheduled Castes comprise 28 percent of

Table 7.4: **Sector-wise Share of Employment of SC and non-SC Community in Punjab in 1991**

(in percentage)

Sector of Employment	Share in non-SC Employment		Share in SC Employment	
	Employment of non SC main Workers	Of all workers in the sector, share of non-SC	Employment of SC main Workers	Of all workers in the sector, share of SC
Cultivators	41.8	95.7	4.8	4.3
Agriculture Labour	9.9	29.9	59.8	70.1
Agriculture Allied	0.8	71.7	0.8	28.3
Mining and Quarrying	0.0	70.6	0.0	29.4
Households Manufacturing	1.2	62.7	1.8	37.3
Non Household Manufacturing	12.0	79.3	8.1	20.7
Construction	2.4	67.1	3.0	32.9
Trade and Commerce	12.8	87.1	4.9	12.9
Transport and Communication	3.9	73.8	3.6	26.2
Other services	15.3	75.0	13.2	25.0

Source: Derived from Scheduled Caste and Economic Tables from Census of India 1991, available on CD from Registrar General of India, New Delhi

⁷ Census category of cultivator states "For purposes of the Census, a person is working as a cultivator, if he or she is engaged either as employer, single worker, or family worker in cultivation of land owned or held from government, or held from private persons or institutions for payment in money, kind or share. Cultivation includes supervision, or direction of cultivation ". This does not include people who have hired out their land completely and do not supervise or direct cultivation themselves.



the state's population, they owned 4.83 percent of all operational holdings, and just 2.36 percent of the total land area owned. The average land holding of a Scheduled Caste land holder was 1.75 hectares, while the average for a non-SC was 3.7 hectares. Small changes occurred in this ownership structure between 1985-86 and 1990-91.

Manufacturing is the other dynamic economic sector in Punjab. Figures show that in some progressive growth sectors such as manufacturing (non-household), and trade and commerce, the Scheduled Caste share in employment is far less than their proportion of the population.

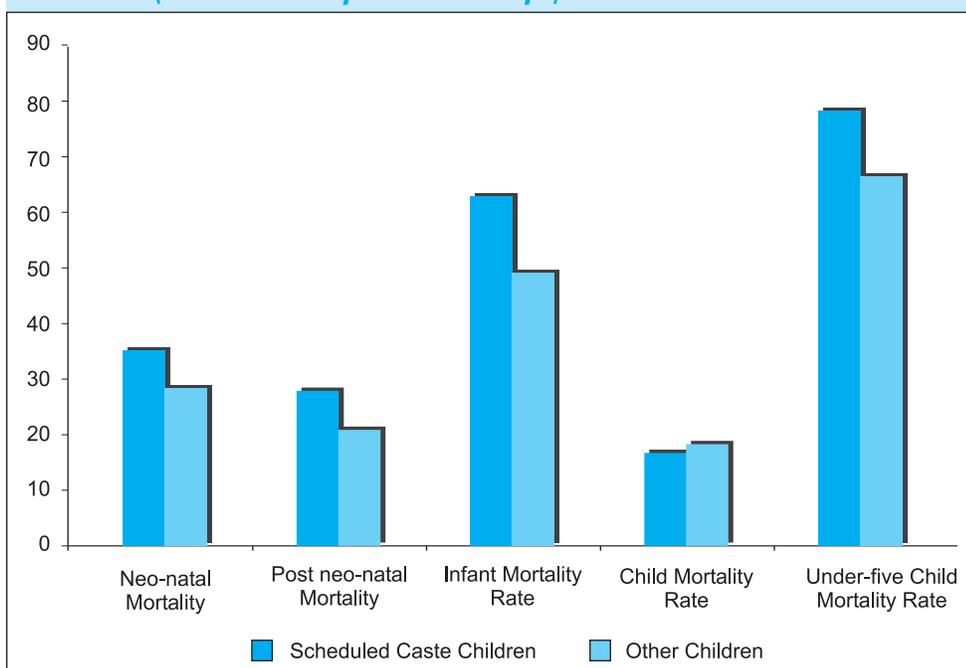
Apart from agricultural labour, three percent of Scheduled Caste 'main workers' work in the construction industry. We can safely assume that almost all would work as labourers or rise to the level of a supervisor of labour activities. Similarly, in transport and trading, most workers are employed as labourers.

Health

Socially disaggregated data is not easily available in the health sector. Information on mothers and children is available through the two National Family Health Surveys of 1993-94 and 1998-99. What little data there is indicates that in output indicators such as mortality rates, nutritional conditions, etc., Scheduled Castes do far worse than other social groups. However, in terms of access to health facilities, and impact of preventive care, Scheduled Castes, as well as non-SC communities, seem to be somewhat at the same level. The question is why, with similar access to health services, does one community fail to enjoy good health.

Infant Mortality Rate was estimated at 62.5 for Scheduled Castes in 1993-94, but was much lower, 48.9, for others. There was also a substantial difference in the number of children covered by immunisation in 1993-94—54.9 percent children among SCs were fully immunised in 1993-94, whereas 64 percent of other children were fully

Figure 7.2: Comparison of Child Mortality Rates, 1993-94 (National Family Health Survey I)





Box 7.1: Policy of Job Reservation: Effective since 1974

- 25% in direct recruitment in Class I, II, III & IV posts
- 14% in promotion to Class I, and II posts
- 20% in promotion to Class III and IV posts

vaccinated. That a quarter of SC children were not vaccinated at all in 1993-94 is worrying. Figure 7.2 compares different mortality rates amongst children of Scheduled Caste and other communities. There is substantial differential in these rates, which are fairly high in post-natal, neo-natal and infant mortality stages, and tend to narrow after this stage.

Nutrition levels of mothers and children is an important indicator of health. In 1998-99⁸, 47 percent of mothers belonging to Scheduled Castes were either mildly, moderately or severely anaemic, while the same for non-Scheduled Caste mothers was 38 percent. Similarly, in children under four years of age, 82 percent Scheduled Caste children were anaemic, while 70 percent other children were anaemic. Differentials in this indicator are explained in terms of access to nutritious food, a direct impact of wages and control over agricultural produce.

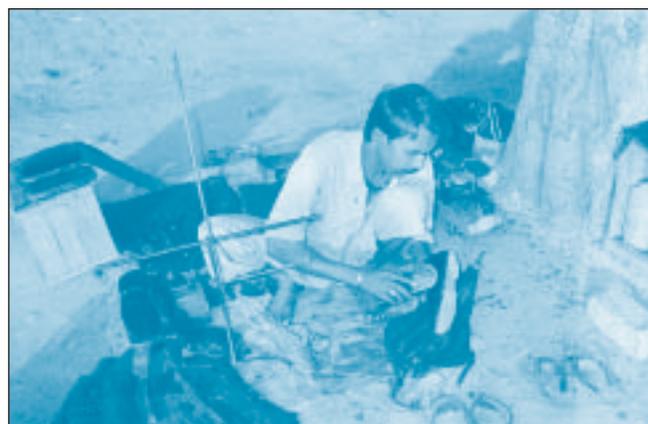
In reproductive health, while there are differentials in the use and access of reproductive health facilities between Scheduled Caste mothers and others, these differences are much less than the differences in education or livelihood. Fifteen percent of Scheduled Caste mothers had not received any tetanus injections in 1993-94, while this percentage for mothers from other communities was 13 percent.

The NFHS survey in 1993-94 also shows that the general status of ante natal care is high, and the differential between Scheduled Caste and others

is very low. About 12 percent of mothers from both groups did not go for any antenatal care. There is a marked difference in the type of antenatal care accessed—58.9 percent Scheduled Castes went to 'health professionals' other than doctors; 48.8 percent 'others' went to health professionals other than doctors; 37.3 percent 'others' went to doctors while only 26.4 percent Scheduled Castes went to doctors. Institutional delivery, combining both government and private was only 19 percent in the case of Scheduled Castes and 27 percent for 'others'. Eighty-seven percent Scheduled Castes and 93 percent 'others' went to a health facility when taken ill.

Social Status of Dalits

The social status of the Dalits in Punjab is not simply the result of poor literacy, employment and health. Rather, it grows from the centuries-old social, economic and political discrimination. Thus the



Dalits in traditional occupations

Courtesy / IIC

⁸ Preliminary report of National Family Health Survey 1998-99, Population Foundation of India, Mumbai



Dalit condition cannot simply be improved by administrative decrees or policies, although these can play a crucial role in providing space, dignity and some equal opportunity in government jobs and political posts.

Sikh bodies demanded reservations for untouchable Sikhs such as Mazhabis, Ramdasias, Kabirpanthis, as those given to their counterparts.⁹ According to Darshan Lal, the major problem Scheduled Castes face today is that political power is not in their hands and they are dependent on dominant castes like Jat Sikhs for fodder, fuel and

toilet facilities. They are also dependent on the use of *shamlat* lands for cultivation and as cremation grounds as well as the use of ponds in *shamlat* lands for discharge of polluted waters. A major problem is that 'polluted' water flowing from the drains of the Scheduled Castes are not allowed to accumulate in ponds located in *Shamlat* lands or in the village panchayat lands. This is only a single instance of the many discriminations in daily life that a Dalit must still endure.

The case studies in Box 7.2-7.4 highlight the various forms of discrimination faced by the Dalits.



Box 7.2: Case Study 1: Village Langedi, District Jalandhar

In village Langedi, a 'reserved constituency'; the prominent caste groups are the Jats, Jat Sikhs, Ad Dharmis and the Balmikis. Sixty percent of the populace belongs to Scheduled Castes. The numbers notwithstanding, the social structure and division of land is such that the upper caste Jat Sikhs and non-Sikhs are the dominant group. The Jat Sikh, followed by the Jat non-Sikhs, own most of the land. The Scheduled Castes in the village work as landless labourers. There is a dependence on the owners for work and for wages. In addition, the Scheduled Castes own cattle and for fodder, have to depend on the

whims and fancies of the Jat owners. In the absence of basic civic facilities such as toilets, the Scheduled Castes have to go to the fields of the owners for their ablutions. In recent times, Scheduled Caste groups have been facing stiff competition from the migrant labour force, who due to their willingness to work at cheaper rates are preferred to the local Scheduled Caste labourers. The upper castes are loathe to retain the latter, with monetary and caste considerations ruling their decisions. At present there are only 4-5 households who work as landless labourers, as against 50 migrant workers.



Box 7.3: Case Study 2: Dalits in the Shivalik Region

Dalits of the Shivalik region are comparatively poorer than those living in other parts of Punjab. So they not only face caste-based problems but also poverty related difficulties. They work as agricultural labourers and also undertake forest-dependent activities like bann (rope) making. Various programmes (IWDP and JFM) have been initiated for them. However, the benefits of the programme have been hijacked by the upper caste landowners. In addition to the common

discriminatory practices faced by all Dalits in the state, here they also face barriers in participating in political processes. The representation of Dalits in the VDC (Village Development Committee) and HRMS (Hills Resource Management Society) is very low, most of the members belong to the upper castes. Even where Dalit names are included they have hardly any say. Hence issues of the Dalits largely go unnoticed and unattended.

⁹ Jose Kananaikul, Indian Social Institute, 1982, pp. 29-35.

Village Kalma

In village Kalma, block Banga, there are 1000 households which have 3000 votes. The Sainis are in majority with 1700 votes followed by the Dalits with 1200 votes. There are only 30-35 Jats, Sikhs or otherwise residing in the village who are the dominant caste group. The Dalits face a lot of discrimination in access to infrastructural facilities, but the severest form of discrimination exists in the inaccessibility to the same Gurudwara frequented by the upper castes. There are 5 different Gurudwaras in the village for the different castes. The lower castes cannot enter the Gurudwara of the upper castes. In the Scheduled Caste Gurudwara, apart from observing the anniversaries of other Gurus, they specially perform the anniversary of Guru Ravi Das, a champion of Dalit rights. The Jat Sikhs do not celebrate this occasion. The Scheduled Castes are also forced to have a signboard, the Nishan Saheb, at the instance of SGPC.

Village Jethu Majra

The village consists of 100 Scheduled Caste households, 100 Jat Sikh households and 50 Jogi households. Most of the Scheduled Caste households work in the agricultural lands of the Jats. One of the major issues in the village is related to the flow of polluted water from the drains of the Scheduled Castes, into the lands of the Jats. There are innumerable fights on this issue and recently the fights between the caste groups have resulted in firing and injuring some of the Scheduled Castes. It was reported that 14 cases were going on against Scheduled Castes in the local police station over the flow of drain water to Jat lands. This, in spite of the permission given by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission permitting the flow of polluted water of the Scheduled Castes' drains to the *shamlat* land. In the year 1999, 60 persons armed with weapons fired at the Scheduled Castes. The drains constructed by the Scheduled Castes were also destroyed. In order to avoid tension a police post was established in this village on 26 December 1999.

Conclusion

It is on the labour of the Scheduled Castes that Punjab's agricultural and industrial strength has been built. Historically discriminated against, and amongst the poorest in this region, the last three centuries have witnessed many social, religious and now even political movements that have given expression to this community and brought them confidence, recognition, some measure of equality and a voice. Dalits are increasingly moving into the mainstream of Punjabi life, but still face innumerable problems.

Their poor economic and social asset base, poor education level, and lack of participation in major political and social processes requires the state to intervene in a positive and effective manner. Dalits are far more dependent than others on state-sponsored services in education and health. With the increasing privatisation of these services, better

quality government schools and health centres are extremely necessary in order that the existing gaps between Dalits and those capable of accessing private schools and hospitals do not increase further.

The state has undertaken a number of efforts aimed at direct development of Dalits. The results have also been encouraging, such as increased school enrolment. A greater degree of livelihood diversification is needed among the Dalits, and landless Dalits should not have to depend so entirely on agricultural and casual labour. Dalits should be able to diversify into the service sector. Government institutions in credit such as NABARD, scheduled commercial banks, entrepreneur development programmes, health facilities and economic development agencies, have to ensure that Dalits are treated with sensitivity and provided with that one provision which they have been denied for centuries—justice.



