

Internal Classification of Scheduled Castes: The Punjab Story

SURINDER S JODHKA, AVINASH KUMAR

Much before the question of quotas within quotas in jobs reserved for the scheduled castes acquired prominence in Andhra Pradesh, Punjab had introduced a twofold classification of its sc population. When the Andhra case went to court, Punjab had to rework its policy. It is useful to closely examine the Punjab case to see if the internal classification of scs for quotas in jobs has served a purpose.

On the recommendations of the Ramachandra Rao Commission, the government of Andhra Pradesh decided in June 1997 to classify its scheduled caste (sc) population into A, B, C and D categories and fixed a specific quota of seats against each of the caste categories roughly matching the proportion of their numbers in the total population. This was done in response to the powerful Dandora movement by the madigas demanding a rationalisation of the quota system. However, the state government's directive was struck down by a single judge bench of the high court of Andhra Pradesh in 1998. The Andhra Pradesh government persisted with its decision and proposed to turn it into an Act, which was duly passed by the state assembly in the year 2000. The act was also challenged in the high court but this time a five-member bench found nothing unconstitutional in sub-classification of the scheduled castes of Andhra Pradesh and rejected the appeal against it. However, when the case went to the Supreme Court, the court took a negative view on the act and struck it down in 2005. Implications of this judgment were however not confined to the state of Andhra Pradesh alone.

Much before the question of "quotas within quotas" for the scheduled castes became a controversial subject in Andhra Pradesh, the government of Punjab had introduced a twofold classification of its scheduled caste population. It was on May 5, 1975, that the state government sent a letter to the offices of its various departments directing them to offer "50 per cent of all the vacancies of the quota reserved for scheduled castes ... to balmikis and mazhabi Sikhs, if available, as a first preference from amongst the scheduled caste candidates".¹ In a subsequent official directive, it was further clarified that the proposed classification of quotas applied

"in direct recruitments only and not in promotion cases".² Learning from the Punjab experience, the state government of Haryana too decided in 1994 to divide its scheduled caste population in two blocks, A and B, limiting 50 per cent of all the seats for the chamars (block B) and offering 50 per cent of the seats to non-chamars (block A) on preferential basis.

This arrangement worked well until 2005 when the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the two state governments about the "illegality" of the provision in response to a writ petition by Gaje Singh, a chamar from the region. The petitioner cited the Supreme Court judgments against the sub-classification of scheduled castes in the case of Andhra Pradesh. Though, the Punjab state government quickly worked a way out of it and turned the official order of 1975 into an Act in view of the political urgency in context of the forthcoming elections to the state assembly, the legal tangle is far from resolved.

The Punjab Case

Of all the states of the Indian union, Punjab has the highest proportion of scs. The sc population in Punjab has also been growing at a rate much higher than the rest of the population. In 1971 the proportion was 24.7 per cent. It went up to 26.9 per cent in 1981 and further to 28.3 per cent in 1991. However, in the following decade it grew at slower rate and was 28.85 per cent in 2001. Punjab also has a much larger proportion of seats reserved for the scs (25 per cent against 15 per cent at the national level).

Like elsewhere, the scs of Punjab are divided into different communities with distinct social identities and experiences of economic development. According to the official list Punjab has a total 37 scs. However, a large majority of them can be clubbed into two or three clusters. The first cluster of mazhabi Sikhs and the balmikis/bhangis constitute a total of 41.9 per cent (30.75 and 11.15 per cent respectively) of the total scheduled castes population. Similarly, the second caste cluster made up of the ad dharmis (15.74 per cent) and chamars/ravidasis/ramdasi Sikhs (25.85 per cent) together constitutes another 41.59 per cent. The remaining 33 caste groups

constitute only 16.51 per cent of the total scheduled castes population of Punjab.³

For various historical reasons, those from the second cluster of Punjabi scs have been much more mobile and politically active than the rest.⁴ It was among the chamars of the doaba sub-region that the famous ad dharam movement appeared during the 1920s. Not only did the movement give visibility to the community, it also emphasised the need to educate children and encouraged entrepreneurship among its followers, who were almost entirely made up of the local chamars [Juergensmeyer 1988]. The ravidasis and ramdasis, who too are originally from the same community, have also done much better than the balmikis and mazhabi Sikhs in the field of education and in securing quality jobs under the quota system. Notwithstanding the growing appeal of the term dalit for self-description across caste communities and the continued use of the category scheduled castes by state agencies and popular media, the internal differences among different communities continue to be as important as they would ever have been.

Quotas and the Political Process

The contemporary state of Punjab was carved out of post-Partition united Punjab in 1966 on the insistence of the Akalis. The Akalis who claimed to represent the political aspirations of the Sikhs had launched a movement for reorganisation of the province within the framework that had been evolved by the central government on linguistic reorganisation of other provinces of India. However, given the manner in which the language question had been communalised in Punjab, the demand for a separate Punjabi speaking state, a Punjabi Suba, was ipso facto also a communal demand for a Sikh majority state [for details see Nayar 1966; Jodhka 2006]. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was vehemently opposed to the Akali demand. However, the central government eventually gave in to the Akali demand and the state was reorganised in 1966 by taking out areas where majority of population reported themselves as Hindi speakers. Though much smaller in size, post-1966 Punjab had nearly 60 per cent Sikh population.

Notwithstanding the Akalis claim of representing all Sikhs, there have always been sharp political differences within the Sikh community. Caste has remained an important factor that shapes the internal power structure of the Sikh community. The Akali Dals have all been dominated by the Sikh upper castes, the khatris and the jats. On the other end, the dalits among them, who constitute anywhere between 25 per cent and 30 per cent of the total Sikh population, have remained on the margins of "community affairs". In fact the dalits among Sikhs showed little enthusiasm for a separate Punjabi Suba fearing increased domination of the upper caste jats in the local rural setting.

The Sikh Akali leadership which had earlier worked from within the Congress Party also began to pursue an autonomous political agenda during the post-independence period. They were extremely successful with the elections of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and aspired to rule the state of Punjab. However, the Congress continued to command allegiance of a fairly good proportion of Sikhs, particularly those from non-dominant caste groups, the urban traders and the "backward" and "dalit" caste groups. It was to consolidate this vote bank within the dalit communities that the state government of Punjab under the leadership of the then chief minister Giani Zail Singh decided in 1975 to introduce a classification among the scs of Punjab for jobs reserved under the quota system. It may be relevant to mention here that irrespective of the political party in power, Punjab chief ministers have all come from the dominant landowning caste of jats. The only exception was Zail Singh who was from a "backward" caste group. As mentioned above, of the 25 per cent jobs reserved for the scs, 50 per cent (or 12.5 per cent of the total) were to be offered to mazhabi Sikhs and balmikis on priority basis.

The mazhabi Sikhs with nearly 31 per cent of the sc population of Punjab are the single largest group of dalits in the state. Compared to the dalit caste groups of the chamar cluster, the mazhabis have always been far more enthusiastic about the Sikh religion and Akali politics. This would have obviously meant an advantage to the

Akalis over the Congress Party. As a senior bureaucrat from the social welfare department of the Punjab government told us in a personal interview:

...nearly all the chamars and ad dharmis voted for the Congress Party and similarly the mazhabis voted for the Akalis. Mazhabi Sikhs are generally proud Sikhs which made them a natural ally of the Akalis. Giani Zail Singh wanted to break this alliance and that was perhaps the political reason why the quota classification was introduced.

Similarly, the balmikis with a substantial presence in urban Punjab could go along with the "Hindu" politics of the Jan Sangh in a communally charged politics. It is in this context that one ought to see the quota politics of the Congress Party during the 1970s. Even today the balmikis and the mazhabis look back at Giani Zail Singh as a messiah. As one of their recent leaflet applauds him, he was someone who:

...was an exceptional human being. As the chief minister of Punjab he tried to understand and feel the pains and aspirations of the balmiki-mazhabi Samaj from the depth of his heart. Unlike other political leaders he did not merely deliver speeches and seek applause from the audience but also did something positive by allocating 50 per cent of the SC quota for us in 1975 (from a leaflet of adi dharam Samaj 2006).

As a political strategy, the classification of communities for the quota would have indeed been unpopular with the other major cluster of dalits in Punjab. However, the proportion of Sikhs among them has been relatively small and the danger of it consolidating with the communitarian politics of Akalis was limited.

Quotas and Identity

History of active dalit politics in Punjab is fairly old and goes back to the early years of the 20th century. It was in the 1920s that the ad dharam movement was initiated in Punjab by Mangoo Ram among the chamars of the doaba sub-region. The ad dharam movement of Punjab has been one of the most successful of dalits mobilisations in the entire subcontinent. Not only did it succeed in mobilising a large number of local dalits against the caste system and for a separate religious identity [see for example Juergensmeyer 1988], it also succeeded in spreading the message of education among them. Today the ad

dharmis are perhaps the most progressive community among the scheduled castes of Punjab. The other sections of chamars have also been politically quite active. The well known dalit leader Kanshi Ram, for example, hailed from a Sikh ramdasi family of Ropar district.

In contrast, the chuhrah cluster of the dalit castes (balmikis and mazhabi Sikhs) has been far less mobile. In the rural setting mazhabi Sikhs have been closely associated with agriculture, mostly as wage labourers or "tied" servants of the big landlords. However, rarely did they own any agricultural land and only a few cultivated land as tenants in Punjab. As the official data shows, less than 5 per cent of all the dalits are listed as cultivators and given their status, the proportion of mazhabi Sikhs among them would be even lower.

In terms of their geographical spread they are concentrated more in the Malwa sub-region of Punjab where the hold of big landowners has traditionally been much stronger and job opportunities outside agriculture far lesser than the more urbanised doaba region where a large majority of dalits are ad dharmis or chamars. Though some of the mobile mazhabi Sikhs have also moved to urban centres where they are employed as government servants or have become a part of the urban working class, a large majority of urban chuhras are known as balmikis. In terms of occupation they are mostly involved with the traditional calling of their caste, scavenging. Their migration to urban areas would have invariably been in response to the growing demand for scavengers in the municipality and middle class localities.

While employment was available rather easily, their urbanisation did not necessarily bring any kind of social mobility even when some of them could earn well with regular salaries and pensions. In fact, proportionately the number of urban balmikis engaged in scavenging work would have only gone up with migration from the village where only a small proportion of them worked as scavengers. Their local identities too were that of 'kammi' or 'sepi', meaning regular farm workers, who were known for their secular occupations, even though status was invariably determined by their position in the caste hierarchy.

Writing on the history of the community in the region, Prasad makes a similar point about the urban migration of Punjabi chuhras to Delhi during the colonial period. He writes:

Tied to an occupation, the chuhras found it hard to get jobs in other spheres of life, least of all things that paid more than the glorified skills of refuse removal. While the British hired certain oppressed castes into the railways and into the construction trade, the chuhras and allied dalits had to perforce work in the municipality as refuse removal. ...Over time, the link between the caste and its occupation became far more pervasive than it ever was in the past [Prasad 2000:45].

Given all these limitations on the mobility of balmikis and mazhabhi Sikhs historically, their achievements in education would have also been limited. The assurance of employment in the municipality as scavengers would have only discouraged the balmiki families from pushing their children towards education. As a leader of the balmiki community told us in an interview in Ludhiana:

Surprisingly those who get jobs in the government sector at a relatively senior level from our community invariably come from rural areas. Among the urban balmikis there has traditionally been no aptitude for education.

This point was further corroborated by Ram Rattan Ravan, an important leader of the balmiki community:

The Municipal Act has worked against our community. It blocked our development and kept us attached to the traditional occupation of scavenging. Our people started getting secure jobs without any education and therefore they did not feel the need of making any effort to get themselves or their children educated. In the city of Ludhiana where we have several colleges and a university and all possible facilities for education, only two students from the balmiki community could qualify to be doctors in more than 30 years. This mentality of depending on the municipality service was rampant in our community and therefore was the biggest challenge for us. Our struggle is not only against the other communities but also against our own traditions.

In contrast, the chamars had an inherent advantage over the chuhras because of their traditional involvement with leather work and a certain degree of autonomy. This fact is repeatedly emphasised by balmikis. A retired officer of Punjab

government and an ideologue of the balmiki movement, R.L Sabberwal, for example told us in an interview:

The chamars have had an advantage over us. Their involvement with leather work and shoe making naturally made them entrepreneurs and traders. They were quick to exploit the new opportunities as they came with urbanisation and reservation. We have had no such tradition. Our occupation kept us backward.

However, over the years things have begun to change for the balmikis as well. Secure employment as scavengers in the urban municipality is increasingly becoming a thing of the past. The newly emerging scavenging contractor pays very low wages. With no education or specialised skills, the balmiki youth does not have many options. Even those who get educated are invariably the first generation of the educated in their families. It is not easy for them to compete with the relatively more mobile chamars and ad dharmis for the government jobs in reserved quotas.

Balmiki/Mazhabi Agitation

It is in this context that when the termination of the classification of quotas was ordered on July 25, 2006, by the Punjab and Haryana High Courts there was a sudden sense of anger and agitation among the balmikis and mazhabis of Punjab. They were quick to organise themselves and formed a group called the 'Balmiki and Mazhabi Sikh Reservation Bachao Morcha' in a meeting called on July 30, 2006, in Jalandhar. The morcha gave a call of Punjab bandh for August 4, 2006, against the high court ruling and demanded restoration of 12.5 per cent reservation for the balmiki and mazhabi Sikh in government jobs as per the 1975 notification. In addition they also emphasised on the need of extending their demand for a similar share of seats in admissions to educational institutions. In fact, they insisted that without a separate quota in educational institutions, job reservations made no sense. "We simply do not have candidates for better jobs because our children find it hard to get admissions in the institutions of higher education", was the repeated argument.

According to *The Tribune* of August 5, 2006, the bandh was quite successful and life in major cities of Punjab was completely

paralysed for the day. The newspaper reported:

Members of the balmiki community led by their leaders held demonstrations in different localities in protest against the decision of the Punjab and Haryana High Court to cancel 12.5 per cent reservations for balmikis and mazhabi Sikhs in government jobs. They blamed the government for not adroitly presenting the case due to which the reservations were cancelled. They demanded the restoration of 12.5 per cent reservations not only in government jobs for them but also in educational institutions.

They urged the state government to bring a legislation in the coming session of the state assembly for making equal distribution of reservation between balmiki/ mazhabi Sikhs and ad dharmi Samaj to avoid any confrontation in future.

The bandh was followed by a gherao of the members of the legislative assembly on August 18. In order to consolidate and mobilise the “community”, the morcha also began a “foot-march” from the town of Sangrur on September 10, 2006. The marchers were to reach Amritsar in nine days covering much of Punjab.

Given that elections to the state assembly were so near, the balmiki-mazhabi movement obviously made the Congress government jittery. They quickly framed a legislation to convert the “1975 directive” into an “act” and presented it to the state assembly on the last day of its session, i.e., on September 17, 2006. The draft bill was unanimously passed by the legislature assembly and it became an Act on October 5, 2006, after being approved by the governor.

Though passing of the Act could for the time being circumvent the high court judgment on quota classification, it failed to satisfy the balmiki and mazhabi Sikhs because the said Act had no provision for extending the quota to admissions to educational institutions. Leaders of the morcha attributed this to the continued domination of chamars in the Congress politics and state bureaucracy. “Of the 105 or so IAS officers from the scheduled caste category in the state of Punjab only three belong to the balmiki-mazhabi community”, pointed out Ram Rattan Ravan. He also mentioned the fact that at the time of the framing of the Act even the social welfare minister was from the chamar/ravidasi community. “Though the then chief minister Amarinder Singh promised

us on October 10 in Patiala that he will soon issue an ordinance and extend the quotas to seats in educational institutions, he did not do anything”, he continued.

In the meanwhile legal validity of the Act of 2006 was challenged in the Punjab and Haryana High Court by one Hardip Singh on October 10, 2006. Even though it did not issue a “stay order” on the Act, the court accepted the appeal for hearing and has also issued notices to various departments of the Punjab government about the disputed status of all the new appointments made under the Act, leaving the balmiki-mazhabi struggle for quota in educational institutions in limbo.

Conclusion

The ongoing debate and disputes on the question of extending the quota to Other Backward Classes (OBC) students to central government funded institutes of higher education has made it a politically difficult question. The nature and intent of the mobilisation on the part of medical students opposed to the OBC quotas and the extensive media coverage accorded this have tended to polarise popular opinion on the subject of reservations. In the given context, it seems one could either be “for” or “against” the idea of reservations, generally speaking. It even makes it difficult to distinguish the OBC reservations from the reservations for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes which have had a very different political and sociological context.

Such a polarisation of public opinion is not only politically unfortunate, but it also makes it difficult to critically examine some of the more contentious issues on the subject in a dispassionate manner. The question of reservation certainly cannot be collapsed into a single and undifferentiated subject. The sociological and political context of SC and ST reservations has been very different from that of the issue of OBC reservations and the policy related issues concerning the former are also different from the latter.

The question of internal classification was recognised to be an important issue long back in 1975 in the state of Punjab, much before it became an issue with the more depressed dalit groups in other parts of the country. Interestingly, it also worked without any problems for nearly 30 years

in Punjab. Though we do not have any data for Punjab but figures given by the Gurnam Singh Commission for Haryana appear quite revealing. The share of the more depressed category of SCs of the category “B” (which included the local balmikis and mazhabis) in the class I jobs went up from 17.6 per cent before the introduction of classification to 46.4 per cent in the recruitments made after the classification. The difference was even more striking in the case of class II jobs where it went up from less than 8 per cent to 48 per cent. Similarly in case of the class III jobs, the share of the more depressed SCs went up from 10 per cent to nearly 49 per cent.⁵

The experience of internal classification of the scheduled castes in Punjab and Haryana is certainly much more than instances of competitive vote bank politics. The value of the Punjab case also lies in the fact that it has been in operation for more than 30 years and does ask for a close and sympathetic examination, and perhaps extension to other regions of the country.

Email: ssjodhka@yahoo.com

NOTES

- 1 Official directive, government of Punjab were collected from the office of the department of social welfare, government of Punjab, Chandigarh.
- 2 Ibid. The official directives also did not apply to the reservation of seats for admissions in educational institutions.
- 3 All these figures are based on 1991 Census and were collected from the office of the department of social welfare, government of Punjab, Chandigarh.
- 4 See Juergensmeyer 1988, Jodhka 2004, Puri 2004, Ram 2004, Judge 2004.
- 5 As quoted in *Adhikar Yatra* (2006), a leaflet by Adi Dharam Samaj, and organisation of the Punjab valmikis.

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