POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE DALITS IN PUNJAB: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NAWANSHEHAR AND PATIALA DISTRICTS

ABSTRACT
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Key Words: Political Participation, Social Exclusion, Dalit Assertion, Sanskritisation

The present study was undertaken to assess the Political participation of Dalits in Punjab, focusing on Nawanshehar and Patiala districts. It being an empirical study was based on primary data collected through intensive field work. Interviews were conducted with Dalit masses of the two districts—Nawanshehar and Patiala (150 from each) in Punjab, though the main focus was on understanding the political participation of the Dalits.

The major findings of study are as under: The Dalits in the two districts selected for the study (Nawanshehar and Patiala) constitute 40.46 per cent and 23.07 per cent respectively of the total population of the districts. The overall socio-economic status of the Dalits is found to be low, as is evident from the profile of our sample of three hundred Dalit respondents from the two districts.

The level of political awareness is found to be very low among the Dalits. There was no perceptible difference between the level of political consciousness among respondents in the two districts. The level of awareness was judged by asking questions like the names of political parties, leaders of Dalits, political news etc. The low-level of political participation was indicated by the small number of respondents’ participation in election campaign and other election activities. Even though Bahujan Samaj Party claims itself to be the party of the Dalits, it was observed that the Congress party and its leaders occupied a pre-eminent position in the minds of the Dalit respondents.

Thus the study reveals that the Dalits in Punjab still constitute a low social economic and political position. Though they do not experience social and religious exclusion of extreme kind, and few of them have availed of the opportunities in education and employment, yet majority of the Dalits are still not getting benefits. Their level of political awareness is low, because of illiteracy and poverty. In the name of political participation—voting is the only activity in which majority of the Dalits are participating. Their participation in other activities of political participation is low. Reservation in education, employment and political decision making bodies (Panchayats and Legislatures) has not resulted in an active political participation of the Dalits. There is absence of any strong leadership and the Bahujan Samaj Party has failed to organize Dalit as a political force.