
CHAPTER 6

Political Awareness Among Dalits And Non Dalits In Mahendergarh

6.1 Introduction

In Indian society virtually the higher echelons of power are dominated by the upper castes. Despite the prominence of a few Dalits who have gained high political positions in our country, the political status of Dalits has changed much less than what the individual successes show.

Discrimination on the grounds of caste is morally, legally and democratically wrong. But caste equality can come about only when Dalits make use of the full array of political weapons available to them to achieve it, that is political activity is essential to the struggle for Dalits' liberation.

Political awareness takes several forms and varies in spirit in different countries and in different constituencies within a country. As stated in the introductory chapter, political participation refers to these acts intended to influence the behaviour and actions of political decision makers and it embraces various activities designed to achieve this end.³⁰ It is intended to influence the choice of political leaders and the choice of public policies. The levels of participation are not uniformly distributed throughout the population. Various studies have shown that political participation is directly related to class or income level, educational qualifications, occupational status, caste and religion³⁰. It has also been associated with a variety of other factors.

Lester, W. Milbrath³⁰ (1965), on the basis of a study of recruitment patterns among local party officials in the United States, has suggested four levels of political participation. The first level consists of "Apathetics" who are literally unaware of the political situation around them. They do not even vote or show any interest in voting. Some studies, however, show that non-voting or non-participation arises from many causes and has many different implications for the political system. Non-voting, in fact, may be a participatory act—an act of protest or in effect a negative decision³⁰. An Indian study of 1972 Assembly elections in Bihar has also indicated this aspect of non-voting³⁰. The second level of participation is formed by those who are involved in "spectator activities".

This corresponds to what Angus Campbell has called "the peripheral voters"³⁰ They may have some interest in politics and some knowledge about it but their participation does not go beyond the activities of voting. The third level is composed of those involved in transitional activities which include attending a political meeting, participating in campaign activities or making a contribution to a political party. The final level consists of those who enter the political arena and participate in "gladiatorial activities" such as standing for and holding public and party offices.

Levels of political participation of Indian electorate have been analyzed by Bashiruddin Ahmad³⁰ (1971). He has taken into account the involvement of the electorate in thirteen political activities which ranges from voting to raising money for a party and/or a candidate. On this basis, he has suggested five levels of participation or group voters, viz. Apathetic, Peripherals, Spectators, Auxiliaries and Politists. The first, second and the fifth levels correspond almost exactly to the same levels used by American scholars (Palmer, 1975). The other two levels form the third group "Transitional activities" of Milbrath. According to Ahmad, 'Spectators' are those

who only vote and have interest and information as well as those who vote with moderate level of motivation and engage in some other activity. Auxiliaries embrace those who vote and engage in one or two other activities with medium levels of interest and information. According to his estimate, nearly 12% of Indian electorate are high Polilists. Auxiliaries and high Politists, according to him, are the groups in the electorate to which special attention will have to be given. "It is these two groups constituting about 29% of the electorate, who together shape and influence political outcomes."³⁰

Political participation is a process of growth of citizenship. The main thrust in Dalits' participation is how far they have assumed the role of citizens beyond their traditional roles and to what extent such a role has been legitimized to the political structure. Participation of the Dalits in politics is so much important that social movements, Dalit movements for Dalits' rights started with a demand for equality in caste based structure. The right is considered to be essential in the present-conditions for entering the caste dominated society of political decision making. The right to vote and reservation in political posts provides an individual with an important indirect opportunity to be the ruler of his own fate.

In India, the nationalist movement, social movements, Dalit movements and the Indian Constitution all have a deep influence on Dalits' political participation. The role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi and Kanshi Ram is worth mentioning in this context. They all put emphasis on bringing Dalits from the caste bondage to active politics.

It is often held that political participation is the index of democracy. The higher the terms of participation, the healthier is the democratic system. Participation is a process which associates

individuals with the political system. In a society where certain groups are traditionally lagging behind the others, where they can be categorized as the weaker section or disadvantaged group wider participation and mobilization at higher levels is necessary for their upliftment and that in turn is healthier for the democratic system.³⁰

Most of the people participate in politics during the election period. But participation through voting is only seasonal and cannot bring out the total significance of political participation.

Participation in between the election period could be much more significant. Although the volume of participation is great in elections, electoral participation is not equal to voting which in addition to voting includes other participation such as attending election meetings, campaigning in the election or collecting funds etc.

The extent of participation has been analyzed here in two parts - in terms of voting participation and in terms of political participation other than voting. Since all acts are but a subset of the same phenomenon, knowing about a person's participation in one activity enables us to assess at least to some extent how far he/she is likely to participate in another activity. Those persons who participate in the most demanding form of participation will probably also participate in the less demanding ways. For example, it may be expected that a person who has taken an active part particularly in campaigning would also cast his/her vote.³⁰

As this chapter attempts to gauge the level of political awareness and political participation of the Dalit respondents numbering 300 from Mahendergarh of Punjab, a number of variables were selected. On the basis of the responses the analysis is given below :

6.2 Level of Political Awareness

(i) Respondents' Interest in Politics

To begin with it is important to know how far the respondents have an interest in politics. Accordingly they were asked to indicate their interest in the political affairs. An effort was made to assess the intensity of political interest of the respondents on the basis of their answers.

Not everybody is interested in politics; the majority of our respondents (61%) expressed that they had no interest in politics. Mostly people get interested in politics only during election times; and lesser number of people take occasional interest apart from elections. In our sample only 39% of the respondents displayed interest in politics.

It may be expected that younger people would have a higher degree of interest in politics. But the researcher has found no uniform pattern of relationship between age and interest in politics. Still it has been noticed in this study that *interest in politics sharply declined from the age group of 60 and above.*

This observation may be interpreted in the light of personal comments of some of the respondents. Some elderly people appeared to have lost their interest in politics possibly due to the fact that they found hardly any resemblance between the professed ideologies and the actual politics of the existing political parties.

But the young people appeared to be more guided by practice than by ideologies and, therefore, they were found to be more interested in politics compared to the aged people. In the context of female respondents the degree of interest was found to be much lower than in the case of the male respondents.

(ii) Knowledge About M.P. and M.L.A. of the Area

To test of the political awareness of respondents they were asked very simple questions. For example, they were asked the names of the candidates in previous Lok Sabha polls, the name of the MP and MLA of their area and their respective party affiliation. It has been observed that only 27.7% of the respondents were well informed on the question of MP, while majority of the respondents did not have any knowledge about this. On the other hand, in case of information about MLA's, majority of the total respondents (71%) were well informed. Only 29 per cent of the respondents did not know the name of their local M.L.A. Similarly, about the BSP candidate of the area, only 32.7 per cent of the overall respondents knew. Thus, it is clear that more respondents knew about the MLA of their area than the M.P. The reasons for this are not far to see; first, the electorate are more directly concerned with the MLA than with MP in terms of development benefits and political patronage. Secondly, the area of an MLA's constituency, is smaller than that of an MP's constituency. The campaigning tends to be concentrated and consequently more intensive in the former than in the latter which in turn accounts for greater knowledge about MLAs than the MPs. Finally, it is normally through the MLAs, that MPs do their campaign, unless of course, a certain candidate for Parliament is so important as his/her umbrella may help the MLA's in their political campaign.³⁰

(iii) Perception Towards Dalit Issues

The Dalit respondents were asked to give their opinion to a basic issue i.e. whether the Dalits should participate actively in politics or not. Interestingly a majority of them (57% overall)

agreed to the idea of participation. Around 20 per cent from both the districts did not think it necessary where as some felt that it depended on the situation. A small percentage did not have any idea. Not much difference was found in the responses from the Mahendergarh. In order to understand the awareness level of the respondents more specifically, they were asked to record their opinion on the question of the Dalits having a separate party. When asked if the Dalits should have a separate party almost all the respondents in both the districts nodded positively. Only a miniscule number felt that there was no need to have any political party separately for them.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is an important player in Indian politics. In addition to having been the ruling party in Uttar Pradesh, it play a crucial role in national politics also. Bahujan Samaj Party claims to be the only political party representing the interests of the Dalits in the state. Regarding the knowledge of the Dalits about the existence of their separate party, it was found that only around 50 per cent of the respondents were aware of it. In Non Dalits, Dalit respondents were better aware of the existence of their separate party than the Dalit respondents from Dalits district. The rest of the respondents did not know anything about the existence of any special political party of the Dalits, which points to their low level of political awareness.

Further it is important to state that all those who knew about the Bahujan Samaj Party as a party of the Dalits, were not found to be satisfied with its working. In fact almost more than two third stated that they were dissatisfied with the working of the so called Dalit party. Only a few respondents were satisfied with its working.

(iv) Voting as an outcome variable of increased political awareness

The first question that faces a citizen at the time of an election is whether he should exercise his franchise or not. For many individuals the act of casting his/her vote is the only

important occasion for political activity. The act of voting may bring to some people satisfaction in the sense that through voting they feel to be part of the political system, and think that their contribution to the system is of vital importance. Many people regard voting to be so important that they would not dream of staying away from the polling stations. There are some people who have no such strong feelings about voting. Their decision could be tilted this way or that way by some minor factors. Many people vote merely because their friends, relatives and family members also exercise their franchise that is, primarily as an imitative activity. Again there are some who think that the time spent at the polling station is sheer wastage.³⁰

The majority of the respondents cast their vote in the last elections. This indicates the respondents' enthusiasm for voting. Only 12 per cent respondents did not cast their vote. Some of the reasons reported by the respondents behind not casting their vote were apathy towards voting and being busy in their other jobs.

In order to know what does the voter have in mind while casting the vote the respondents were asked to recall what they had uppermost in their mind while voting : Party, candidate, caste or religion. The responses are tabulated below.

On the basis of data it seems that 70 out of three hundred (26.5%) respondents had the candidate in mind while voting. Only a small percentage of them i.e. 6.1 percent and 4.9 percent kept the caste and religion in mind respectively. But the large majority of the respondents (62.5%) had the party in mind. This is inevitable because the voters are trained that way. The propaganda is conducted in terms of party more than in term of candidate and religion or caste. It is also convenient for the voters. The voters take less time to find out the symbol of a party at the time of polling. To find out the name is also difficult for many because of illiteracy. But the symbols of parties are prominently printed on the ballot paper and during electioneering the

campaigners make efforts to bring home to the respondents' mind the symbol of the party rather than any other thing.

In studies on political behaviour in India, it has been observed that high status people play an important role in shaping the political attitude of Dalits. Impact on a person during and on the day of voting is necessary to identify.

Upper caste influence on Dalits' voting behaviour is evident from the table given above. 26.5 per cent respondents admitted that they voted as per the wishes of higher castes. 37.1 per cent respondents reportedly cast their vote according to their family wishes. The family head enjoys a high status and exerts a dominant influence on the family. The family head guides the political behaviour of the members. Mostly women are under this category. It has been noted that for married women, the important influential males are their husbands, while for single women, fathers play important role in opinion change.³⁰ It is interesting to note that, in principle, most of the respondents agreed with the proposition that the right to vote should be exercised by Dalits in absolute freedom, but in practice most of respondents admitted that Dalits are influenced mostly by the upper caste members or by their own family members. This gap between professed ideal and actual belief is a great obstacle to the participation of the Dalits in politics.

Though election results are keenly watched and discussed by the people in general but out of our sample only 31.7 per cent of the respondents reported to have shown interest in election results and the rest of the respondents i.e. 68.3 per cent stated that they had no interest in such results.

As stated earlier, though voting is the most viable form of participation there are other important forms of participation as well. It is essential to find out the participation of Dalits in

other political fields because voting turn out alone cannot explore the effective and genuine participation of Dalits as a whole. So, an attempt has been made to examine Dalits' political participation in other fields of the political structure in addition to voting. In order to examine the participation of the respondents in political fields other than voting, they were asked whether they had participated in the election campaign, contested any election, discussed politics, attended political meetings etc. Here, only the actual voters have been taken into consideration that is those who did not exercise their vote have been excluded. It must be kept in mind that the number of respondents who did not vote is extremely small. One may point out in this context that giving election funds is normally done by the influential party elite or the core supporters of an independent candidate and normally the ordinary elector is not involved in this work. This is reflected in Table no. 6.16 & 6.17 as only 28.8% of the active participants answered in affirmative as far as contributing to election funds was concerned. Majority of them did not contribute financially. The percentage of respondents contributing funds for party/candidate is almost the same in both the districts. In fact, many of them were involved in the collection of fund. The Table shows that in both the districts nearly fifty percent of these respondents (80) were involved in raising funds for the party/candidate in both the districts.

(v) Interest in Election Meetings as an outcome variable of political awareness

Election meetings are one of the important modes for approaching the electorate collectively. This is used to inform the electorate about the party, its programme and symbol, as also for introducing the candidates to the electorate. This is also important because it gives an opportunity to the candidate and the party to demonstrate to the rival candidates their strength and the support that they command. It is for this reason that efforts are made to mobilize large

number of people to attend a public meeting. Here again two activities are involved as far as participation in election meeting is concerned. One is that the persons are only attending an election meeting and second is that he or she not only attends the meeting but also plays a role in organizing the election meeting.

When the 80 respondents were questioned regarding participation in election meetings they were almost equally divided with a slightly more percentage of those not participating. The overall percentage being 47.3 of those who participated. The percentage of those participating in election meetings was slightly lower in Dalits but Non Dalits compensated for the lower percentage in Dalits. The corresponding percentage for Non Dalits and Dalits was 51.2 and 43.2 respectively.

Regarding the preparation of election meetings, the majority of the respondents did not take active part. However, around 35 to 37% of the active respondents claimed to be involved in organizing the election meetings.

6.3 Mass Media and its impact on Political Awareness

Apart from studying the problem of political participation an effort was made to assess the influence of different communication modes on the minds of the respondents. In fact, the communication media (both print and electronic) in the past two decades has gained tremendous significance in influencing the attitudinal pattern of the individuals throughout the world.

Beginning with newspapers, films and radio, then with television and presently with satellites and other sophisticated delivery systems, modern communication system has been thrust in to

almost every corner of the world.³⁰ Lerner regards the developments of the mass media as the key in a society's march from a state of traditionalism to that of modernity. ³⁰ It may be expected that a rise in media exposure would be accompanied by a corresponding impact on the attitudinal pattern of the respondents.

i. Interest in Political News:

Three questions regarding political news were - whether they were interested in political news or not, second, what was the source of collecting the news and third, did they discuss the political issues with others. As far as the responses to the query about interest in political news is concerned the table 6.23 reveals that out of total respondents 47 per cent were found to have a high degree of interest in political news whereas 26 per cent were having a moderate interest in this type of news. As many as 26 per cent were found to be totally uninterested in political news. In identifying the source of political news, the respondents gave a variety of answers which is tabulated ahead.

An overall majority of the respondents were dependent on Television and Radio (39.6 and 38.9%) for getting political news. 20% of the respondents were found to be more interested in reading newspapers. 9% of the respondents gathered the news from party members whereas a few (just 3%) stated to be knowing it from party magazine.

ii. Discussion of Political Issues

Conversation is a good pastime of people in India, more so in the rural area. In rural areas gossip and conversation, that is, person to person or face to face dialogue is a very common pattern of communication of ideas, news, information, knowledge, and opinion. Political discussions have a

place of their own in a democracy. Besides, the family, there are friends and community members with whom a voter might discuss the elections. These groups might determine the political attitudes and influence voting decisions, because the individual look to them for guidance. If the responses to the question about discussing political matters with their friends and family members are analysed, the data reveals that only 26.7% of the overall respondents answered in positive. 33.3 per cent of the respondents indulged in political discussions only on special occasions. 40 per cent of the total respondents did not take part in political discussions with the family members or with the other members of the community. Thus it may be inferred that a substantial number of Dalits in the Mahendergarh avoided indulging in political discussions. The corresponding figure of those taking part in political discussions in case of Dalits and Non Dalits are 23.3 per cent and 30 per cent respectively. 34.7 per cent in Dalits and 32 per cent in Non Dalits come in the category of those discussing political issues only on special occasions. These special occasions usually are the times of elections.

iii Party Membership/Preference of Party or Leaders

Political participation takes place at different forms and levels. Voting, as stated earlier, is the most explicit mode of this which is undertaken by all or most of the citizens. However, party membership could be taken as indicative of active participation in politics.³⁰ The membership of all the parties, in India, is more or less liberally granted. Such membership demands merely the payment of a small annual subscription and a written acceptance of the principles of the party concerned. Under the existing rules, government servants and servants of semi governmental organizations are prohibited from becoming members of political parties.³⁰

Regarding the question of membership of any political party, only 37 out of the total 150 respondents from Dalits responded in positive which comes out to be only 24.70 per cent and the rest of the respondents (113) were not having membership of any political party. The corresponding figures for Non Dalits were 47 (31.3%) and 103 (68.7%) respectively. At aggregate level of the Mahendergarh, only 28 per cent respondents were found to be having political membership, whereas the majority (72%) of the respondents did not have membership of any political party. When the respondents having party membership were further asked about holding any party office, it was found that in Dalits district, only one person was secretary of Party at the block level. In Non Dalits district out of the 47 party holders, one was found to be holding the office of secretary of CPM at district level and another was President of CPM at block level. To further probe the interest and level of their involvement the respondents were asked to pick their favourite politician out of a list of some prominent political leaders of state. They were also asked to name the party which addressed the Dalit issues.

iv Perceptions towards Governance

An effort was made to find out the respondents' capability to understand the politics and complications of governance. More than 80 percent of respondents, admitted that government and its working was so complicated that they could not understand what was going on. More respondents (83.3%) in Dalits stated this as compared to respondents (80%) in Non Dalits. The slight edge of those who understood working of the government in the Non Dalits is indicative of the fact that the respondents in Non Dalits were slightly better aware. Because majority of the

respondents did not understand the intricacies of governance, they were not able to talk about the policies or programmes launched by government. However they still had some opinion about the overall working of the government. As a common man is affected on the day to day basis by the services provided by the government and expects a lot from it, the collective opinion of the public is of great importance in a democracy.

The stability and continuation of any government depends on the response and support it gets from the public, the opinion of the respondents was collected regarding the functioning of the government of the day. When the respondents were asked about the working of government 36.3% found it to be bad as there was a lot of corruption in the administration and the pace of development of the Punjab was low. 26 percent respondents reported the working of government to be good. However, a substantial percentage (37.7%) of respondents did not give their opinion because of lack of awareness. Here also there was not much difference in the perception of respondents from the Mahendergarh. When the respondents were asked a straight question regarding the impact of public opinion on government, 64 (21.3%) of the 300 respondents agreed that it had an impact on the government while 130 (43.3%) did not agree with the idea. The rest of the respondents 106 (35.3%) remained neutral. Comparing the respondents of the Mahendergarh, Dalits had a slight edge over Non Dalits in considering public opinion as a factor impacting government.

Thus in the present chapter an effort has been made to understand and probe the level of political participation of the Dalits in Mahendergarh of Punjab, as it is very important that the Dalits, who constitute a marginalized and oppressed section of Indian society participate actively in the political arena. Through the ages, oppressed people in different parts of the world have

fought for their right to participation in the political process. Participation helps the individual to be effective and it associates him with the political system.

By exercising this right an individual feels that he/she has become the master not only of his/her own fate but also of the fate of his/her fellow beings. The higher the rate and level of political participation, the more varied are its forms and the healthier is the democratic system, particularly in a society where certain groups are traditionally behind the others. Our data shows that the interest in politics varies with man's earning capacity. The poor people do not (perhaps cannot afford to) take continuous interest in politics. They are largely apolitical. The well-to-do people are somewhat more interested in politics: indeed a sizeable percentage of them take continuous interest in politics. This is quite understandable. The poor people have to worry more about their immediate needs. They are also uneducated and therefore do not understand the processes of democratic politics. However as far as voting is concerned those who are at the lower level of the society-whether class-wise or caste wise - the majority turns out to vote. In our sample also the majority of the respondents cast their votes though they exercised their right on the advice of family members and influential persons of higher castes. Very few of them exercised their voting right according to their own choice. Most of them were guided by the dictates of the powerful sections of the society. Another similar question as to what they had uppermost in their mind while voting. The large majority of the respondents had the party in mind. This is inevitable because the voters are trained that way. Here it is important to point out that it is so not because they understand the ideology or performance of the party but because they are persuaded to do so. In fact they are made to remember the party symbol. It is on the basis of such training that they exercise the voting right.

Turning to the participation in political activities other than voting, it has to be noted once again that though most of the respondents voted but they did not take an active part in politics.

The low-level of political participation was indicated by the small number of respondents' participation in election campaign and other election activities. The non-response of the Dalit respondents to many questions was indicative of their low level of political knowledge. It has been observed that only a small number of respondents had knowledge about the political parties and knew the names of the MPs and MLAs of their area. It is further observed that majority of the respondents did not understand the government's working and the policies and programmes of the government.

Today Dalits are present almost in all political parties but only as members. The higher positions are captured by the dominant classes in all parties (except the BSP). We found only 3 Dalit respondents out of our total sample of 300 from Mahendergarh holding party offices that also at the block-level. It has been observed that the Congress party and its leaders occupied a pre-eminent position in the minds of the Dalit respondents. The rest of the political parties or their leaders were not considered to be protecting the interests of Dalits. Thus on the whole it may be concluded that though the Dalits have been provided with constitutional safeguards and reservations, the common Dalit masses in Punjab are still not making complete use of the opportunities. Only an elite section of the Dalits is reaping the harvest. The poor, marginalized simple Dalit population still has not become politically aware and active.

They do turn up of in large numbers for voting but lag behind in other activities of political participation.

Table 1: Respondents Interest in Poltics			
Interest in Politics	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Yes	63 (42.0)	54 (36.0)	117 (39.0)
No	87 (58.0)	96 (64.0)	183 (61.0)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Table 2: Knowledge of the name or Party of MLA of the Area			
Knowledge of the name or party of MLA	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Yes	93 (62.0)	120 (36.0)	213 (71.0)
No	57 (38.0)	30 (20.0)	87 (29.0)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Table3 : Knowledge of the name or Party of MP of the Area			
Knowledge of the name or party of MLA	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Yes	34 (22.7)	49 (32.7)	83(27.7)
No	116 (77.3)	101 (67.3)	217 (72.3)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Table 4: Knowledge of the name of BSP Candidate of the Area			
Knowledge of the name or party of MLA	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Yes	83 (55.5)	15 (10.0)	98 (32.7)
No	67 (44.7)	135 (90.0)	202 (67.3)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Table 5: Participation of Dalits and Non Dalits in Politics			
Should Participate	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Yes	83 (55.3)	88 (58.7)	171 (57.0)
No	31(20.7)	25 (16.7)	56 (18.7)
Depends on political situation	23 (15.3)	28 (18.7)	51 (17.0)
No idea	13 (8.7)	9 (6.0)	22 (7.3)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Type of Political Participation	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Only voting	135 (90.0)	129 (86.0)	264 (88.0)
Campaign	43 (28.7)	37 (24.7)	80 (26.7)
Contesting elections	21 (14.0)	18 (12.0)	39 (13.0)
No participation	4 (2.7)	3 (2.0)	7 (2.3)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Voted	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Yes	135 (90.0)	129 (86.0)	264 (88.0)
No	15 (10.0)	21 (14.0)	36 (12.0)
Total	150 (100.0)	150 (100.0)	300 (100.0)

Should Participate	No. of respondents (Dalits)	No. of respondents (Non Dalits)	Total
Party	86 (63.7)	79 (61.2)	165 (62.5)
Candidates	9 (6.7)	35 (27.1)	70 (26.5)
Caste	35 (25.9)	7 (5.4)	16 (6.1)
Religion	5 (3.7)	8 (6.2)	13 (4.9)
Total	135(100.0)	129(100.0)	264 (100.0)

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