



## **From Vision to Practice: Ambedkar's Philosophy and Dalit Rights in Punjab**

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### **Abstract**

The philosophical legacy of B.R. Ambedkar continues to shape contemporary discourses on social justice, equality, and human rights, particularly within the Dalit community. In Punjab, where caste-based hierarchies intersect with religious and socio-political identities, Ambedkar's vision has played a pivotal role in reimagining Dalit rights from mere constitutional provisions to lived realities. This paper explores how Ambedkar's philosophy—centered on liberty, equality, fraternity, and annihilation of caste—has been adopted and adapted in Punjab's unique socio-cultural context. It examines the translation of Ambedkar's vision into grassroots movements, the assertion of Dalit identity through cultural practices, and the role of political mobilization in advancing social and economic empowerment. Further, it highlights the challenges of persistent caste discrimination, intra-community divides, and the limitations of state interventions in realizing Ambedkarite ideals. By focusing on Punjab, the study emphasizes how Ambedkar's thought transcends regional boundaries, becoming a unifying framework for marginalized communities seeking dignity and justice. The discussion underscores that the transformation from Ambedkar's vision to practice in Punjab is both inspiring and incomplete, reflecting the continuing struggle for substantive equality. Thus, this work situates Ambedkar's philosophy not only as a guiding principle but also as an active instrument in the Dalit rights movement of Punjab.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Dalit Rights, Punjab, Social Justice

### **Introduction**

The caste system in India represents one of the most enduring forms of social stratification, with Dalits historically referred to as “untouchables” occupying the lowest rungs in this hierarchy. This social order has not only dictated the inter-personal and communal relations among castes but has deeply structured access to economic, social, political, and cultural resources and opportunities. Despite legal abolition of “untouchability” and constitutional



## International Journal of Research and Technology (IJRT)

International Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Online Journal

ISSN (Print): 2321-7510 | ISSN (Online): 2321-7529

| An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Journal |

guarantees, Dalits still encounter widespread marginalisation, discrimination, and human rights violations. These manifest in restricted access to education, land, employment, and justice, intersecting with poverty and social stigma. In a constitutional democracy that formally affirms equality, this enduring marginalization raises critical questions about the gap between ideals and lived realities (Socio Legal Information Centre, n.d.)<sup>1</sup>. Punjab, a state often praised for its socio-economic indicators such as relatively high literacy, agricultural productivity, and economic growth presents a paradox in this regard. It is among the Indian states with one of the highest proportions of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in its population—roughly one-third or more according to recent estimates. Yet, despite this demographic strength, Dalits in Punjab continue to face entrenched inequalities in land ownership, political representation, access to housing, and social dignity. Landlessness among Dalits, exclusion from village common lands (shamlaat), caste-based social boycott, and discrimination in schools and public spaces are frequently reported. Thus, while Punjab may shine in aggregate state-level metrics, the distribution and inclusivity of progress remain highly uneven.

The vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is central to understanding the normative benchmark against which such disparities should be judged. Ambedkar saw the eradication of caste, the abolition of untouchability, equality before law, and full participation of Dalits in all spheres of life not as charitable goals but as foundational imperatives of Indian democracy. His role in drafting and shaping the Indian Constitution embedded safeguards—through Fundamental Rights (such as Articles 14, 15), special provisions, reservations, and legal protections—to translate these ideals into practice. Ambedkar's philosophy demands not merely the formal presence of rights but their actualisation in the everyday lives of the most marginalised. However, current evidence suggests a significant gap between Ambedkar's constitutional vision and the lived experiences of Dalits in Punjab. Scholars studying caste-based discrimination throughout India find that Dalits suffer from lower income, poorer health, restricted land access, and persistent social exclusion—even when legal remedies are available. In Punjab too, despite reserved seats in political institutions and legal statutes, many Dalits remain excluded from decision-making, land ownership, and socio-economic

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<sup>1</sup>Socio Legal Information Centre. (n.d.). *Dalit rights initiative*. Socio Legal Information Centre.





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work and review meetings, the Commission expressed concern about gaps in welfare delivery, poor enforcement of protective mechanisms, and the need for “urgent corrective steps” in the state — a formal acknowledgement of systemic problems rather than isolated incidents.

Several high-profile qualitative cases from 2022–2024 illustrate how discrimination and exclusion operate on the ground in Punjab. In March 2023 a Dalit MBBS intern at an SGPC-run medical college in Amritsar allegedly faced casteist slurs and harassment; her death was treated by family and civil-society groups as linked to caste harassment, and FIRs were filed under provisions including the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (Sabrang India, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. Media and monitoring groups highlighted this incident as symptomatic of institutional failure within a medical college setting where reporting and redressal mechanisms were alleged to have been inadequate. Social sanction and village-level ostracism remain important instruments of control. Multiple recent reports document Dalit families being socially ostracised and forced to flee villages after inter-caste marriages, or facing vandalism and boycotts that effectively dispossess them of social rights and security. For example, in 2025 a Dalit family in Muktsar district reported being ousted from their village after an intra-village inter-caste marriage; their home was reportedly vandalised and they lived in exile — a clear illustration of how informal community sanctions persist despite legal protections for marriage and personal liberty.

Landlessness and denial of access to common (Shamlat/Panchayati) land are recurring structural issues in Punjab that constrain Dalit economic agency. Recent investigations and grassroots mobilisations (e.g., Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee) show sustained struggles by landless Dalits to claim Panchayati/shamlat land and surplus land allocations; these struggles often put them in conflict with dominant caste landholders and illustrate the structural dimensions of caste exclusion that laws alone have not remedied. International reviews and country human-rights reporting reinforce the domestic evidence. The U.S. State Department’s 2023 Country Report on Human Rights Practices for India documented numerous media reports of societal violence against Dalits and recorded the high number of crimes against Scheduled Castes reported to police nationwide, underscoring that caste-based violence remains a human-rights concern receiving international attention.

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<sup>3</sup> Sabrang India. (2023). *Dalit MBBS female intern allegedly died by suicide due to caste discrimination*.



### **Ambedkar's Philosophy on Equality and Human Rights**

B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy is deeply rooted in his critique of caste and untouchability, and his insistence that Indian democracy must rest not merely on political forms but on social transformation. For Ambedkar, caste was not simply a social custom but a system that permeated law, religion, economy, politics, and everyday life. He contended that untouchability violated the core human dignity of Dalits, making them second-class citizens even under legal equality. Ambedkar held that the caste system enforced a hereditary hierarchy that prevented social mobility, trapped Dalits in oppressive social and economic roles, and denied them basic human dignity. As he famously wrote in *Annihilation of Caste*, caste is not just a division of labour but a division of labourers, creating a rigid stratification that degrades human beings and undermines individual liberty. He insisted that education, critical thinking, and structural reform were essential to dismantle caste hierarchies. Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, which abolishes untouchability and makes its practice punishable, embodies precisely this kind of abolitionist imperative (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2024)<sup>4</sup>.

Ambedkar believed that the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity (borrowed in part from the French Revolution) were not just rhetorical flourishes but interdependent pillars essential to democracy. He argued that liberty without equality leads to the domination of the many by the few; equality without liberty stifles individual initiative; and without fraternity, both liberty and equality lose their social grounding. In his speeches before the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar emphasized that fraternity — seen as social solidarity and mutual respect across caste lines — was indispensable to realizing justice and human rights.

### **Constitutional Provisions Shaped by Ambedkar to Safeguard Dalits**

As the principal architect of the Indian Constitution, B.R. Ambedkar ensured that several provisions were incorporated to directly address caste-based injustices and safeguard the rights of Dalits. Among these, Article 17 abolished untouchability and made any disability arising from its practice punishable by law. Article 15 prohibited discrimination on the grounds of caste while allowing the State, through special provisions such as Article 15(4), to undertake affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Similarly, Article 16 guaranteed equality of opportunity in matters of public employment, including reservation

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<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Law and Justice. (2024). *The Constitution of India*.



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provisions under Article 16(4). Within the Directive Principles of State Policy, Article 46 directed the State to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, particularly SCs and STs, and to protect them from social injustice and exploitation. Additionally, Article 338 provided for the appointment of a Special Officer for SCs and STs to monitor safeguards, while Article 340 enabled the creation of a commission for backward classes. These constitutional safeguards were not merely symbolic; they reflected Ambedkar's vision of combining legal enforcement with social transformation to secure justice and equality for Dalits.

### **Relevance of Ambedkarite Thought for Contemporary Human Rights**

Ambedkar's philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary dialogues about human rights in India. His insistence that rights must be materially realized—not just legally declared—speaks directly to ongoing debates over policy implementation, social inclusion, and caste-based discrimination. The idea of *constitutional morality*, which he advanced, requires that public conscience, institutional norms, and legal practice align with constitutional guarantees such as equality and non-discrimination. Ambedkar's thought further contributes normative justification for affirmative action: the reservation system, special educational measures, and targeted welfare schemes can be seen as necessary to redress historical injustices, not as aspirational add-ons. His conception of social democracy demands that social structure, habits, and institutions change, not just laws. That means educational access, land reform, social attitudes, and institutional bias must be continuously addressed if Dalit rights are to move from vision to practice (Mohan, 2020)<sup>5</sup>.

### **Dalit Rights in the Indian Constitutional and Legal Framework**

India has one of the most elaborate constitutional and legal frameworks aimed at protecting Dalits (Scheduled Castes, SCs) from discrimination and violence. This framework comprises fundamental rights, directive principles, protective laws (especially the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act), judicial interpretations (Supreme Court rulings), and reservations (affirmative action). However, significant challenges persist in implementation that prevent these rights from being fully realized.

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<sup>5</sup> Mohan, C. R. (2020). *Non-alignment: A historical legacy in India's foreign policy*. In S. D. Kapur (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*. Oxford University Press.



(a) Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy

The Constitution of India provides several Fundamental Rights under Part III (Articles 12–35) that are directly enforceable in courts and act as safeguards against caste-based discrimination while ensuring equality before the law. Among the most significant is Article 14, which guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of laws to all citizens. Article 15 prohibits the State from discriminating on grounds including caste, while also permitting special provisions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and other backward classes under clause (4) (Legislative Department, 2024)<sup>6</sup>. Further, through the 93rd Amendment, Article 15(5) enables reservations in educational institutions, including private unaided institutions, for socially and educationally backward classes, SCs, and STs. Article 16 ensures equality of opportunity in matters of public employment and allows reservations in favour of backward classes to address historical disadvantages. Additionally, Article 17 abolishes untouchability and makes its practice a punishable offence, representing a major step toward eradicating caste-based oppression. Together, these rights reflect the constitutional commitment to equality, justice, and the upliftment of marginalized communities. The **Directive Principles of State Policy** (Part IV) are provisions that guide the State to enact policies to promote social justice, reduce inequalities, and safeguard the interests of weaker sections (including SCs and STs). While DPSPs are not directly enforceable in courts, the Constitution expects the State to make laws consistent with them.

(b) Protective Laws & Reservation Policies

**The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989** (PoA Act) is designed specifically to prevent atrocities and hate crimes against Dalits and STs, provide rehabilitation, enhance enforcement via special courts, and provide stronger punishments. Under the SC/ST PoA, offences that explicitly target SC/ST persons (e.g. abuse, humiliation, public insult, forcing to do certain occupations, etc.) are criminalised, and special courts are mandated for speedy trials. Constitutional amendments (e.g., Article 15(4), Article 16(4), and after the 93rd Constitutional Amendment, Article 15(5)) provide for reservation in education and public employment to address structural disadvantage for SCs/STs and other backward classes. The landmark case *Ashoka Kumar Thakur vs. Union of India* (2008) upheld the validity of 27% reservation for OBCs (Other Backward Classes) in

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<sup>6</sup> Legislative Department. (2024). *The Constitution of India*.



central educational institutions under Article 15(5), while clarifying the “creamy layer” exclusion and limits on reservation to maintain constitutional balance. Recently, a very important decision is *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024), in which the Supreme Court held that State governments may create **sub-classifications** within the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and STs for reservation purposes under Articles 15 and 16, allowing more targeted benefits for the more disadvantaged among SCs/STs. This is a significant refinement in reservation jurisprudence, as earlier SC/ST was treated largely as a homogenous group (Law School Policy Review, 2024)<sup>7</sup>.

### **Judicial Interpretations Strengthening Dalit Rights**

The Supreme Court has played a pivotal role in strengthening Dalit rights by interpreting constitutional provisions, refining affirmative action policies, and ensuring accountability of the State. In the landmark case of *Ashoka Kumar Thakur vs. Union of India* (2008), the Court upheld the constitutionality of the 93rd Amendment, clarified that reservation policies must exclude the creamy layer, and emphasized that reservations in private unaided educational institutions have certain limitations. Earlier, in *Indra Sawhney & Others vs. Union of India* (1992), also known as the Mandal case, the Court laid down criteria for determining backwardness, set a 50% ceiling on reservations in public employment, and introduced the creamy layer concept for OBCs, while reinforcing that reservations for socially and educationally backward classes are valid under Articles 14, 15, and 16. More recently, in *State of Punjab v. Davinder Singh* (2024), the Court allowed sub-classification within Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for reservation purposes, thereby acknowledging the diverse social and economic realities within Dalit communities. Collectively, these judicial interpretations have refined the framework of affirmative action, reinforced the protection of rights under Fundamental Rights, and compelled legislative and executive bodies to uphold constitutional morality.

### **Challenges in Implementation**

Challenges in the implementation of protections for Dalit rights continue to persist despite strong constitutional guarantees and judicial interventions. One of the most pressing issues is the low conviction rate under the Atrocities Act, with many cases failing due to weak

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<sup>7</sup> Law School Policy Review. (2024). *State of Punjab V. Davinder Singh: opening the floodgates to a new realm of contested Federalism*.



evidence, victims withdrawing under pressure, or trials not reaching completion. Another major challenge lies in the inadequate number of special courts mandated to handle atrocity cases, as several districts still lack fully functional courts, leading to delays and pending cases. Procedural hurdles further complicate matters, as victims often face resistance in registering FIRs, are asked to produce caste certificates before cases are filed, and encounter long-drawn investigations and trials. Alongside these obstacles, lack of awareness about legal rights and fear of social and economic retaliation prevent many Dalits from pursuing justice, even when they are aware of their entitlements. Institutional and resource-related shortcomings also weaken enforcement, as police, prosecutors, and the judiciary often lack proper training, sensitivity, and resources to deal with caste atrocity cases effectively. In addition, monitoring committees and special protection cells, which are meant to safeguard the rights of victims, often remain under-staffed, inactive, or ineffective, further reducing the overall impact of legal and policy frameworks.

### **Dalits in Punjab: Social, Economic, and Political Context**

Dalits constitute a substantial portion of Punjab's population. According to the 2011 Census, Scheduled Castes (SCs) make up about **31.94% to 32%** of Punjab's total population, which is among the highest share in India. A very large proportion of the Dalit population lives in rural areas—around **70-73%** are rural residents, with only about **26-30%** living in urban areas (India Today, 2022)<sup>8</sup>. Within districts, there are many villages in which SCs form a majority or very high percentage of the population. Despite their large numbers, Dalits in Punjab own very little land and suffer economic marginalization tied to landlessness and lack of access to productive resources. According to the Agriculture Census of 2015-16, Dalits own only **3.5%** of private farmland in Punjab, despite being ~32% of the population. Among SC rural households, very few own agricultural land. A report from *Frontline* notes that **94.2%** of SC households in rural Punjab do not own any land for cultivation, compared with ~36-37% among non-SCs (or socially advanced classes). The majority of SC households work as agricultural labourers rather than landowners; marginal holdings or leased land, when available, are often small and of less productive quality. Common or "shamlat" / village common lands are legally reserved in part for SCs under Punjab laws (Punjab Village Common Lands (Regulation) Rules, 1964), which stipulate that one-third of village common

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<sup>8</sup> India Today. (2022). *Understanding the Dalit demography of Punjab, caste by caste.*



land is reserved for SCs. However, many Dalits face hurdles in claiming these due to auction procedures, collusion of landlords, administrative neglect, or because reserved shamlat land is usurped by non-SCs. Protests by Dalit groups like the Zameen Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) illustrate these struggles: e.g., in Sangrur district, approximately 4,000 Dalit families cultivate shamlat land, but many wait for rightful possession and face legal/admin barriers.

**Social Discrimination: Caste-based Segregation, Violence, and Everyday Exclusion**

Dalits in Punjab experience a variety of social discriminations including spatially segregated living, exclusion in housing and communal amenities, social boycotts, casteist slurs, and discrimination in public and religious spaces. Segregation in villages is often spatial: Dalit hamlets in many villages are located on less desirable lands, prone to flooding or poor drainage, with inferior infrastructure. Discrimination in public/social life is also common. Daily indignities such as exclusion from Gurudwaras (Sikh temples) or separate use of water sources have been documented in media reports and civil society accounts. Violent incidents and caste atrocities (verbal abuse, physical assault) continue to occur, though underreported in many cases. While some may receive legal attention, many others remain within informal social sanctions and unresolved grievances.

### **Political Representation and Empowerment of Dalits in Punjab**

Politically, Dalits in Punjab have formal representation: of the 117 assembly seats, **34 seats** are reserved for SC candidates. However, representation within those reserved seats tends to cluster around certain Dalit sub-castes. For example, in Punjab, the Mazhabi Sikhs and Balmikis, though forming a large segment of the SC community (together representing ~40% of SCs), occupy relatively fewer of the reserved constituencies. Dalit political influence beyond reserved seats is limited by dominance of upper caste political elites, dynastic politics, and caste affiliations in mainstream parties. At the leadership level, Charanjit Singh Channi became the first Dalit Chief Minister of Punjab in 2021 (Down to Earth, 2022)<sup>9</sup>. His appointment was significant symbolically but has been critiqued by Dalit groups who argue that it has not led to substantial structural change or empowerment in terms of land rights, social inclusion, or justice in caste atrocities.<sup>14</sup> Voting behaviour among Dalits shows that community concerns often shift support among major parties (Congress, AAP, BJP etc.)

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<sup>9</sup> Down to Earth. (2022). *Punjab Assembly Elections 2022: Dalit votes matter, but what about their issues.*



depending on perceived responsiveness to Dalit welfare, local leadership, and promises of programmes.

In Punjab, caste-based atrocities continue to affect the daily lives and rights of Dalit communities, with several notable examples highlighting different forms of discrimination and violence. One such case involved a Dalit family in Ena Khera village, Muktsar district, who were forced to flee their home after a son married a woman from another caste within the same village. Following the inter-caste marriage, the family reported that their house was vandalized and looted, and they have lived outside the village ever since. This incident underscores the persistent social sanctions and violent backlash associated with caste endogamy in rural areas. Another example concerns landless Dalits in Sangrur, who, under the banner of the Zameen Prapati Sangharsh Committee, attempted to occupy residential plots promised to them under the Punjab Land Reforms Act, 1972. Despite legal entitlements, the state has largely failed to deliver these plots. During one such assertion of land rights, around 350 activists were detained, many for several days, highlighting both the deprivation of land rights and the punitive measures often faced by Dalits seeking justice.

A broader structural issue is evident in the misuse of Panchayati land and administrative negligence. Investigations in Sangrur and other districts reveal that Panchayati land is frequently leased to proxy bidders instead of being allocated to Dalit households. Additionally, administrative complicity often perpetuates these injustices, including explicit denial of wage opportunities and, in some villages, withholding MGNREGA work once demands regarding Panchayati land are raised. These cases collectively illustrate the multi-layered nature of caste-based discrimination in Punjab, ranging from social ostracism and violence to economic deprivation and institutional neglect (GroundXero, 2025)<sup>10</sup>.

### **Structural Discrimination in Education, Employment, and Land Ownership**

Structural discrimination against Dalits in Punjab manifests across education, employment, and land ownership, reinforcing cycles of inequality and marginalization. Educational deprivation is particularly pronounced among Dalit women. A survey of nearly 1,000 Dalit women labor households across four districts revealed that over 70% of the women were illiterate, and none had completed graduation. Among those who were literate, most had only primary-level education. This limited access to education, coupled with reports of caste-based

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<sup>10</sup> GroundXero. (2025). *Investigation of the issue of Panchayati land by landless dalit in Punjab by PUDR.*



discrimination in workplaces, highlights how educational inequalities deepen social and economic vulnerabilities. Employment discrimination further compounds these challenges. In southern Punjab, particularly in the Malwa region, Dalit workers under schemes like MGNREGA often receive wages well below the legally mandated minimum daily rate, with some receiving only half or less of what is due. Such practices reflect not only institutional neglect but also active discrimination in wage enforcement, restricting economic mobility and reinforcing social hierarchies.

Land ownership is another area where structural inequities are stark. More than 85% of Scheduled Castes in Punjab do not own agricultural land, surviving largely as landless laborers. Where land ownership exists, holdings are typically small, marginal, and low in productivity. Access to Panchayati common lands, or “Shamlat,” is similarly constrained, with Dalits facing bureaucratic barriers, auction irregularities, high lease rates, and proxy bidding when attempting to claim these lands. These restrictions on land not only limit economic security but also undermine social dignity and reduce bargaining power, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and marginalization (Frontline, 2019)<sup>11</sup>.

### **Role of Dominant Castes in Perpetuating Inequalities**

In Punjab, dominant castes play a significant role in perpetuating social and economic inequalities, particularly against Dalits. Agricultural castes, such as the Jat Sikhs, control the majority of private land and often dominate local political, social, and economic institutions, including panchayats and village leadership bodies. This concentration of power translates into unequal access to resources, manipulation of land policy, and disproportionate social influence. In numerous instances, including disputes over reserved lands or statutory ordinances, dominant caste interests have blocked or undermined the legal rights of Dalits, as seen in practices like proxy leasing or ignoring reservations for Panchayati common lands. Beyond economic and political control, dominant castes also enforce social hierarchies through daily mechanisms such as ostracism, boycotts, and exclusion from communal spaces and amenities, including water sources, roads, temples, and other public institutions. These social sanctions are effective tools for maintaining caste discrimination, often occurring without any legal consequences for the perpetrators. Incidents like the inter-caste marriage

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<sup>11</sup> Frontline. (2019, September 7). *The Shamlat lands of Punjab*. The Hindu.



case in Ena Khera illustrate how dominant caste families can mobilize collective coercion, reinforcing social subordination and limiting Dalit assertion.

### **Contradiction Between Ambedkar's Constitutional Safeguards and Ground Realities**

Despite the comprehensive constitutional safeguards envisaged by Ambedkar, a significant gap remains between legal provisions and the lived realities of Dalits in Punjab. Article 17 abolishes untouchability, and various laws exist to prevent atrocities and enforce equality, yet violence, discrimination, exclusion, and deprivation persist. Incidents such as the Ena Khera case, involving vandalism and forced eviction over an inter-caste marriage, directly contradict Articles 15 and 17, highlighting how constitutional guarantees often remain aspirational rather than effective (Times of India, 2025)<sup>12</sup>.

Failures in state mechanisms further exacerbate these inequalities. Dalit workers under schemes like MGNREGA frequently do not receive minimum wages, reflecting a breach of socio-economic protections that Ambedkar sought to ensure. Similarly, despite legal provisions for land reform and redistribution, many Dalits remain landless, with Panchayati and surplus ceiling lands failing to reach intended beneficiaries due to bureaucratic delays, misuse, or deliberate evasion. Educational deprivation, especially among women, combined with employment discrimination and limited participation in local governance, demonstrates that legal rights alone do not automatically translate into material or social equality. Ambedkar envisioned not only formal legal equality but also substantive equality, encompassing access to education, economic resources, and social respect. These realities indicate that, despite reservations, legal protections, and constitutional safeguards, Dalits in Punjab continue to experience systematic violations of their human rights.

### **Ambedkarite Movements and Dalit Assertion in Punjab**

Ambedkar's philosophy has not only shaped constitutional and legal protections, but has also inspired potent social, religious, cultural, and political movements among Dalits in Punjab. These movements assert identity, dignity, and agency in ways that challenge caste hierarchies.

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<sup>12</sup> Times of India. (2025, August 17). *Punjab shocker: Dalit family ousted from village after inter-caste marriage; home vandalised.*



**(a) Role of Ambedkarite Organizations and Movements in Punjab**

One of the visible manifestations of Ambedkarite activism in Punjab is the role played by political parties and civil society groups consciously invoking Ambedkar's legacy to mobilize Dalits. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), for example, has been promoting what has been termed "Ambedkarite culture" in the Doaba region — a major Dalit belt in Punjab — primarily through public celebrations of Ambedkar's birth anniversary, village-level events, and efforts to awaken Dalit voters to assert their rights rather than simply vote by traditional loyalties. These efforts have focused not only on political mobilization but also on reminding the Dalit community of Ambedkar's vision of dignity, equality, and social justice. Another form of Ambedkarite organization is the spread of "Deras" (social/religious, often community centres) and smaller local associations that combine welfare, education, resource sharing, and political consciousness. Examples include Ambedkarite Buddhists, and groups like Ambedkar Sena Mool Niwasi operating across Punjab, which preach Ambedkar's philosophy and seek to build social solidarity and awareness among Dalits. These organizations often play dual roles: they are religious/cultural and also political (The Tribune, 2018)<sup>13</sup>. By organizing public functions, religious celebrations, festivals of Guru Ravidass, dissemination of Ambedkarite literature, and also contesting political influence, they forge identity and claim space. They also provide institutional support — for example schools, places of worship, or social services — which both serve material needs and reinforce the message of self-respect and autonomy. For many Dalits in rural Punjab, these movements provide a counter-narrative to dominant caste structures.

**(b) Ravidassia and Ad Dharm Movements**

Punjab has a long tradition of Dalit religious assertion, notably through the Ad Dharm Movement and the more recent formalization of the Ravidassia identity. The Ad Dharm Movement was initiated in the 1920s by Babu Mangu Ram Muggowalia in Punjab (especially in Hoshiarpur, Doaba region). The movement sought a distinct identity for Dalits, separate from Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and others. It drew on the bhakti tradition (Ravidas, Kabir, Namdev, Balmiki), emphasised cultural regeneration, education, political assertion, and spiritual autonomy. In the 1931 census, some 418,789 persons self-identified as "Adi

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<sup>13</sup> The Tribune. (2018, December 6). '8,000 Punjab Buddhists, majority loyal to Ambedkar'. *The Tribune*.



Dharmis”. The movement successfully contested reserved seats in early elections and played a foundational role in forging Dalit political identity in Punjab (Ronki, 2004)<sup>14</sup>.

The Ravidassia Movement / Dera Sachkhand Ballan has become especially prominent in recent decades. Originally a Dera (a religious fellowship) based in Ballan near Jalandhar, it grounded itself in the teachings of Guru Ravidas and gradually evolved into a separate religious identity (Ravidassia Dharm) formally declared in 2010. The Ravidassia community combines devotional reverence for Ravidas with socio-religious assertion and Ambedkarite themes of dignity, anti-caste, and equality. For example, festivals of Guru Ravidas, the celebration of Ravidas Jayanti, and construction of Ravidass deras and shrines serve both spiritual and symbolic functions of identity, resistance and community pride. These religious assertions are not simply spiritual; they are sociopolitical. The shift from syncretic identity (Dalits being counted under Hindu/Sikh/Hindu categories) to declaring Ravidassia / Ad-Dharma identities indicates a desire for formal recognition, symbolic autonomy, and escape from internal discrimination within larger religious traditions. Campaigns for separate registration in census forms, for control of places of worship (deras, gurdwaras), for use of holy text "Amrit Bani" as the scripture, and public visibility (statues, symbols) have all become central to assertion.

### **Impact of Ambedkar’s Thought on Dalit Activism, Identity, and Cultural Politics**

Ambedkar’s thought has had a profound impact on Dalit activism, identity formation, and cultural politics in Punjab. His philosophy provides both a moral foundation and symbolic framework for asserting dignity, rights, and social equality. Among Dalits, embracing Ambedkar’s image, philosophy, and rituals—such as celebrating his birth anniversary, organizing public lectures, and displaying his portrait—has become a marker of self-respect and collective identity. In regions like Doaba, large-scale events around April 14, Ambedkar’s birth, are organized by political and social groups as expressions of Dalit pride and assertion. Cultural heritage also plays a key role in identity-building. The construction and restoration of heritage sites, such as jathera shrines and dera footings tied to Dalit history, provide visible symbols of community pride and unity. These projects reclaim public space and create

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<sup>14</sup> Ronki, R. (2004). *Untouchability, Dalit consciousness, and the Ad Dharm movement in Punjab*. Contributions to Indian Sociology, 38(3), 323–349.



tangible markers of cultural identity, strengthening social cohesion and self-recognition among Dalit communities.

Political awakening and electoral behavior have also been influenced by Ambedkarite thought. Dalit voters in Punjab increasingly engage with political processes through the lens of Ambedkarite affiliation and religious identity, such as Ravidassia and Ad Dharm movements. This awareness fosters critical evaluation of mainstream parties that are perceived to use Dalit votes symbolically, while failing to address substantive issues, and encourages greater engagement with parties and movements that prioritize Dalit rights. Religious and social reform are often intertwined in Dalit activism. Movements such as Ravidassia and Ad Dharm demonstrate how religious institutions—deras, rituals, and scriptures—can become platforms for equality, education, health services, and social welfare, free from upper-caste control. These initiatives reflect Ambedkar's belief that social institutions can serve as sites of reform alongside legal and political avenues.

At the same time, Dalit assertion in Punjab is marked by internal heterogeneity and tensions. Differences among sub-castes, such as Mazhabi, Balmiki, and Ramdassia/Ravidassia, in terms of economic status, education, diaspora connections, and willingness to assert religious separateness, shape the trajectory of Ambedkarite movements. Some groups are better positioned to assert themselves socially and culturally, while others lag behind. Disagreements over religious affiliation, symbolic choices, use of scriptures, and political alliances further influence how Ambedkarite identity and activism unfold on the ground (The Indian Express, 2022)<sup>15</sup>.

### **Bridging the Gap: From Vision to Practice**

While the Indian Constitution enshrines the rights of Dalits, the gap between legal provisions and ground realities remains significant. In Punjab, despite a substantial Dalit population, systemic barriers continue to impede their social, economic, and political advancement. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy reforms, educational initiatives, grassroots activism, and the integration of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy into contemporary strategies for Dalit empowerment. Despite the existence of legal safeguards, several policy shortcomings and governance issues continue to impede the

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<sup>15</sup> The Indian Express. (2022, August 12). *Why Punjab's Dalits are a divided house over SC sub-categorisation verdict.*



effective protection and promotion of Dalit rights in Punjab. Laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, often face weak enforcement, with Dalits encountering bureaucratic delays, lack of awareness, and, at times, institutional biases that obstruct access to justice. Reservation policies, designed to provide equitable opportunities, are also hindered by corruption, mismanagement, and insufficient monitoring, resulting in deserving Dalit candidates being overlooked or denied opportunities. Political representation remains another challenge. Although Dalits form a significant portion of Punjab's population, their presence in political institutions is disproportionately low, limiting advocacy for their issues at the policymaking level. Additionally, government schemes intended for Dalit welfare often suffer from inadequate funding and poor allocation of resources, leading to underutilization of programs meant to improve social, economic, and educational outcomes. Together, these policy and governance deficiencies continue to restrict Dalit empowerment, perpetuating structural inequalities despite the framework of legal protections.

### **Role of Education, Social Awareness, and Grassroots Activism**

Education, social awareness, and grassroots activism play a crucial role in bridging the gap between constitutional guarantees and the lived realities of Dalits in Punjab. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar highlighted education as a key instrument for social transformation, and initiatives in Punjab aimed at improving Dalit literacy and providing scholarships have shown encouraging results. However, persistent challenges, including caste-based discrimination in educational institutions, inadequate infrastructure, and financial constraints, continue to limit the full impact of these efforts (The Wire, 2020)<sup>16</sup>. Social awareness campaigns are equally important in empowering Dalits to claim their rights and access legal protections. Non-governmental organizations and community groups in Punjab have actively conducted workshops, seminars, and outreach programs to educate Dalits about their constitutional entitlements and the resources available to them. These efforts help build knowledge, confidence, and the capacity to challenge discrimination effectively. Grassroots activism further strengthens these efforts by mobilizing local communities to advocate for their rights. Through sustained local movements and organized efforts, Dalits have increased political participation, gained improved access to social and economic resources, and fostered a

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<sup>16</sup> The Wire. (2020, August 17). *Punjab post-matric scholarship scam: Dalit students most affected*.



stronger sense of community and collective identity. Together, education, social awareness, and grassroots activism serve as essential mechanisms for translating legal and constitutional provisions into tangible improvements in the lives of Dalits.

### **Importance of Ambedkar's Philosophy in Framing Future Strategies**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy provides a comprehensive framework for guiding future strategies aimed at Dalit empowerment. His emphasis on social justice and equality lays the foundation for policies designed to dismantle caste-based discrimination and promote inclusive development. Ambedkar's advocacy for legal reforms highlights the need to create and enforce laws that protect Dalit rights and ensure accountability for violations. Equally important is his vision of economic independence, which stresses access to land, employment, and financial services as essential for achieving self-reliance and breaking cycles of poverty. Political participation is another cornerstone of Ambedkar's thought, encouraging Dalits to actively engage in governance to ensure their voices are heard and their interests represented. By integrating Ambedkar's principles into contemporary policies and programs, governments, civil society, and communities can more effectively address the structural roots of Dalit marginalization and work toward substantive equality.

### **Recommendations for Strengthening Human Rights Protections in Punjab**

To effectively bridge the gap between constitutional vision and social realities, several measures are essential for strengthening human rights protections for Dalits in Punjab. The enforcement of protective laws, such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, must be prioritized through the establishment of special courts, specialized training for law enforcement personnel, and awareness campaigns to ensure Dalits understand and can exercise their legal rights (Times of India, 2024)<sup>17</sup>. Expanding educational opportunities is equally important, including increased investment in schools, scholarships for Dalit children, and mentorship programs to guide them through academic and professional pathways. Political representation should be enhanced by implementing policies that encourage Dalit participation in governance, such as reserved seats in local bodies and support for Dalit candidates during elections. Effective resource allocation is also critical, ensuring that welfare schemes reach intended beneficiaries through transparent monitoring and accountability

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<sup>17</sup> Times of India. (2024, March 15). *Chandigarh UT designates special courts for SC/ST Act cases*. Times of India.



## **International Journal of Research and Technology (IJRT)**

**International Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Online Journal**

**ISSN (Print): 2321-7510 | ISSN (Online): 2321-7529**

**| An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Journal |**

mechanisms. Social awareness campaigns can educate both Dalits and non-Dalits about the importance of equality, social justice, and the harms of caste-based discrimination, fostering a more inclusive society.

Support for grassroots organizations is vital, providing funding and resources to enable local movements to scale their efforts and reach more communities. Additionally, integrating Ambedkar's philosophy into policy frameworks ensures that principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity guide development agendas, placing Dalit empowerment at the center of societal progress. Finally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be established to regularly assess the effectiveness of policies and programs, allowing for necessary adjustments to achieve desired outcomes. By addressing these areas, Punjab can move closer to realizing a just and equitable society for Dalits, effectively bridging the gap between vision and practice, and ensuring lasting empowerment and protection of their rights.

### **Conclusion**

The journey from Ambedkar's constitutional vision to the everyday realities of Dalits in Punjab highlights both the transformative potential of law and its persistent limitations. While Ambedkar placed liberty, equality, and fraternity at the heart of Indian democracy, the lived experience of Dalits reveals deep fractures between normative ideals and social practice. Punjab, despite its relatively high economic growth and sizeable Dalit population, continues to mirror entrenched inequalities in land ownership, education, employment, and political participation. The structural dominance of upper and middle castes, combined with bureaucratic inefficiencies and weak enforcement of protective laws, has left Dalits vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and exclusion. Yet, the narrative is not one of despair alone. The mobilization of Dalits through grassroots struggles, Ambedkarite movements, and assertion of cultural and religious identities demonstrates resilience and agency. Movements like the Ad Dharm and Ravidassia assertions, along with organizations such as Ambedkar Sena Mool Niwasi, provide crucial platforms for dignity, solidarity, and counter-narratives to caste oppression. These initiatives remind us that Ambedkar's philosophy was never limited to constitutional text but was rooted in social transformation driven from below. They also show that Dalit empowerment cannot rely solely on state structures but must combine state responsibility with community activism.



Education emerges as a critical tool in this struggle, aligning with Ambedkar's own insistence on learning as the path to liberation. While scholarships, literacy drives, and awareness campaigns have produced encouraging results, systemic discrimination, inadequate infrastructure, and financial constraints still limit their reach. Similarly, legal frameworks such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act embody robust protections but remain undermined by low conviction rates, delays, and institutional apathy. Bridging these gaps requires not only better enforcement but also cultural change that challenges the normalization of caste discrimination in social life. Looking forward, an integrated strategy is needed—one that draws upon Ambedkar's vision while addressing the contemporary complexities of Punjab. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, ensuring transparent allocation of welfare schemes, expanding educational and economic opportunities, and enhancing Dalit representation in governance are urgent priorities. Equally important is the cultivation of social solidarity through campaigns that challenge caste hierarchies and foster fraternity across communities. Ultimately, realizing Ambedkar's vision in Punjab requires moving beyond symbolic recognition toward substantive equality. It calls for a reordering of social, economic, and political relations so that Dalits are not merely beneficiaries of protective measures but equal participants in shaping the state's future. Only through such structural and cultural transformation can Punjab bridge the chasm between constitutional promise and lived reality, ensuring dignity and justice for its Dalit citizens.

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## International Journal of Research and Technology (IJRT)

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