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Balmiki Muhallas: Mapping Dalit social mobility, identity formation and activism in Punjab

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Abstract
Spatiality has played a critical role in defining the socio-religious and political identity of Dalits in India. Traditionally, spatiality had become the main source for their historical exclusion, social segregation and political deprivation. However, the present paper seeks to explain the significance of Dalit spatiality and its changing role especially in the formation and assertion of Balmiki identity in Punjab. In fact, Dalit spatiality has emerged an alternative site for their social mobilization and resistance. In order to explain this phenomenon, the present paper has been divided into two main sections. In the first section, the role of spatiality in the formation of socio-religious identity of Balmikis has been discussed in detailed manner. It also captures the new mode of identity articulation by vulnerable section while contested the mainstream path of their social mobility. Second section provides the glimpses of religious procession, congregation and activisms inside the Balmiki *muhallas* (caste neighborhoods) to make sense about their socio-cultural mobilization in the state.

Keywords: Balmiki, Dalit, Muhalla, Social Mobilisation, Assertion

Introduction
Balmikis, who are pejoratively called Chuhras in Punjab are living in a segregated muhallas (caste neighbourhoods) in Amritsar. Notably, the history of community's settlement is as old as the city itself. According to the demographic data of the nineteenth century, the city was largely dominated by as 'Muslim' population [1]. However, with the passage of time especially after 1947 partition of Punjab, "Hindus" and "Sikhs" dominated the inner zones (*katras*) of the walled city. Chuhras were lived outside the inner zones (*katras*) of the Hindus and Sikhs in Amritsar. In this context, Anand Gauba, informs that gradually other Balmiki settlements, such as *Darwaza Khakroban* near *Chaunk Pasian*, mushroomed on the fringes of the old settlement (Gauba 1988: p.262). And with the expansion of the city, community somehow managed to live along the wall (Datta 1967: p.114).
According to the oral tradition of the community, the practice of untouchability was the major reason for their segregation. In this context, a local leader and activist of the community has informed the author that 'We listened the stories from our elders that they historically lived outside the old gates of the Amritsar city because of our untouchable status. Our people were usually entered into the city through the main gates in the morning to clean and collect the night soil from the homes of the upper-caste Hindus and Sikhs. This is the reason according to Yograj that 'almost all the homes of the Balmiki are situated at the main entrances of the gates' in Amritsar [2]. Moreover, in the mainstream literature and perceptions, *muhallas* of Balmikis and their identity are often perceived as devoid of social mobility and considered as a submissive site of despair, dependence and helplessness. Therefore, Balmikis are generally characterized as 'dole community' (Prashad 1995: pp.25-26). Contrary to these dominant views, the present paper has aimed to contest this dominant construction and argues that spatiality has become a new site for Balmiki's social mobility and cultural assertion in Punjab.

[1]Information has been retrieved from the Gazetteers of the Amritsar District, 1892-93, p.149
[2]Information is based on an oral history narrated by Yograj, a local Balmiki leader. It was held on14 March, 2021 Lahori Gate, Amritsar.

Spatiality, Social Segregation and Cultural Defiance of Balmikis in Punjab

Lahori gate, Khajana gate, Bhagtawala, Hakimawala, Khai mohalla, and *Gawal mandi* in Amritsar have a sizable population of Balmiki community. According to Vishav Luthra, 'all these spaces exclusively belong to our community'. In this context, Juergensmeyer has argued that Balmiki is a 'naturally self-contained community' since there is no other Scheduled Castes that immediately share the neighbourhood with them (Juergensmeyer 2009: p.174). In fact, other Dalit communities like the Ravidassia and Kabirpanthis have never preferred to live with them [3]. Such type of segregation according to Marcuse is a 'process by which a population group is forced, i.e. involuntarily to cluster in a defined spatial area, in a ghetto' (Marcuse 2005: p.16).

In Punjab, Dalit colonies/territories are scornfully called *chamarlees*, *thathees* or *vehras* in Doaba, Malwa and Majha regions of Punjab, respectively. It has been christened differently by different Dalit writers: *jati muhallas, bastis or vastis, Apne-Apne Pinjare, Dalitwaadas, sudra waadas, hulgeris, maharwaadas, chamar tolas and harijanwaadas* (Guru 2011: p.41; Ilaiah 2005: pp.114-117; Namishray 2006; Rawat 2013: p.1059). However, in subaltern scholarship on South Asia, the overwhelming emphasis has been on India's rural society, a trend that has led to the relative neglect of urban subalternity (Guha 1983). There has been general reticence on the part of subaltern scholars to afford equivalent weight to the urban, as to the rural subaltern. In this context, Dalits like Balmikis and their urban location has become significant. Urban spatiality is a crucial factor in the social production and maintenance of Balmiki's socio-religious and political identity in Punjab. Vishav Luthra said that 'upper-caste Hindus and Sikhs have always maintained distance while eating and meeting us. It is due to the engagement of our people with degrading social professions like cleaning and scavenging. In fact, they usually avoid to enter in our *muhallas* and *galis* (lanes) because they feel strange stink and suffocation therefore prefer to meet outside' [4].

Here, caste functions as Lee argued as a 'spatial-sensory order' (Lee 2017: pp.470-490). Notably, the Brahminical ideology has played a crucial role in social contruction and exclusion of caste identity. It premises that the places inhabited by the subordinate castes should not only be set apart but should look, smell and feel differently from those of the rest of society. In a range of genres of Sanskrit texts, specific classes of people are said to have belonged to specific places and not to others. For example, the *Candal*, the paradigmatic 'untouchable' of Brahmanical (and Buddhist and Jain) tradition, is said to dwell next to the cremation ground exterior to the town or village and not to reside in the town or village (Aktor 2010: pp.31-63).

Similarly, by historicizing the social experience of Dalits, in his 1948 study, *The Untouchables*, Ambedkar asked the key historical question, 'why do the untouchables live outside the village?' For Ambedkar, as far as Dalit territory is concerned, 'it is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside the barbed wire into a sort of a cage' (Ambedkar 1948: pp.21-22). Interestingly, building on the idea that jati-mohalla is significant and departing from Partha Chatterjee's framework of civil and political society; Gopal Guru has suggested a new conceptual framework, cognizant of spatial modality, of *bahishkrut* (actual, polluting India) and *puruskrut bharat* (ideal, pure India) for studying subaltern struggles in modern India (Guru 2016: p.34). In fact, Dalits and their peripheries were/are also derided and mocked at in the popular discourses and songs of the upper/dominant castes (Ram 2016: p.35). Furthermore, Dalit spatiality has mainly perceived as a site of deprivation, humiliation and exclusion in dominant writings.

Contrary to dominant views, the autobiographical account and ethnographic details about the Balmikis has invoked the social experience in jati muhallas as the constitutive feature of the social mobility and assertion in Punjab. In his memoir, Bakshi Ram has mentioned that the 'muhallas were the crucial space where 'we organize meetings, lectures, protest rallies and distribute pamphlets (Ram n.d.: p.68) [5]. He also emphasizes the formative experience of jati muhallas in producing Dalit *jati chetna* (consciousness) in the twentieth century. It was the site of their 'social mobilization' and 'protest' against the inhuman treatment launched by the regime of caste against the Dalits.

Muhallas are also regarded as a mode of a proud social space where Balmiki children acquired education and political consciousness. It also captures the core sentiment of his work: the celebration of community whose members actively participated in Ad Dharm movement, Balmiki Sabhas, politics and cultural events between the 1930s and the 1950s. Therefore, Scholars like Ronki Ram and many other, have treated the notion of spatiality/territory as an important site to critically analyse the phenomenon of Dalit assertion in India (Ram 2024: pp.8-22). The political and cultural consciousness among Balmikis has been inculcated through their Balmki Sabhas (caste association) and sweeper unions in Punjab. In this context, Farquhar writes that Sabha was a symbol of 'retaliation against the most inhuman and degrading treatment meted out by Hindus and Mussalmans' and played a pivotal role in forging 'unity' and inculcating a spirit of 'self-respect' (Farquhar 1915: p.370).

Noticeably, Prashad has noted that Balmikis in urban areas have kept alive certain oppositional traditions, such as union militancy and the anti-Hindu customs (Prashad 2000: pp.110-111). Interestingly, despite the degrading nature of their work, the poverty of their living conditions, and the 'imported' character of their labor, there were occasions when Balmikis went on strike in protest against changes to their work regime or in pursuit of higher wages and better working conditions-in effect, holding the city to ransom through its very streets.

According to Amit Bhim, 'the time has changed and our community has become more conscious about their social-political and economic rights'. In this context, sweeper unions and Balmiki sabhas have played a significant role. Such organizations have provided political unity and cultural solidarity among community members in order to protect their dignity and self-respect. Dipesh Chakrabarty's well-known essay on these themes, wherein the popular act of subaltern defiance, a 'refusal to become an ideal citizens of bourgeois order', anchored in a cultural opposition

[3]Information is based on the field observation in the muhallas (caste neighborhoods) of the Balmikis in Amritsar.

[4]Information is based on the discussion which was held on 14 March, 2021 with Vishav Luthra from Khazana Gate, Amritsar.

[5]Pandit Bakshi Ram, (n.d), *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh*, (Jalandhar: Punjab Pradesh Balmik Sabha), p.68.

between pure interiors and polluted exteriors. (Chakrabarty 2002: p.77).

After 1980s, Balmiki have strengthened themselves economically and politically under the sweeper unions and sabhas. Ankush Gill has mentioned that 'community has become conscious regarding the issues of equal wages, welfare policies for sanitation workers and also launched protest, strike, *dharna* and *gherao* against the discriminatory policies and acts of the state administration in Punjab. In fact, sabhas and unions are the major organizations of Balmiki to inculcate the spirit of unity and resistance against the rigid and discriminatory policies of the state and its agencies [6].

Therefore, caste and religion in the context of Balmiki has provided solidarity in urban context. Spatiality of jati muhallas has played a key role in the mode of resistance and assertion of the Balmikis. It is a critical site to analyse the process of making Dalit consciousness and their social mobility in Punjab. The following section is based on the socio-cultural activities of the Balmikis especially religious processions and activism in the muhallas in order to assert and strengthen their cultural and political identity.

Muhallas and Balmikis: A site of Dalit Religious procession and activism in Punjab

For Ankush and Vishav, the long historical exclusion and segregation have produced a sense of separate cultural identity and community solidarity among Balmikis. It is the fact that upper/dominant castes have rarely shared their rituals, ceremonies, and various other community festivities with the Dalits particularly the Balmikis (based on field observations). In this context, Ilaiah has mentioned that their communicative languages, festivals, songs, satires, heroes, gods and goddesses, parameters of morality and immorality, eating habits, beliefs and faiths are also dissimilar [7].

Moreover, they started publishing pamphlets, books and articles on the life and philosophy of Valmiki in order to contest the notion that Valmiki was a Hindu Brahmin. Consequently, by the mid-twentieth century an educated class of Balmiki activists and leaders had emerged against the Arya Samaj and its agenda of Hinduization of Dalits in Punjab. They questioned untouchability and developed alternative theories of caste. After having been attracted to the Arya Samaj fold, educated Dalits realized that this reformist organization of the Hindu elites followed its own class agenda which was not compatible with their concern for emancipation. In order to make conscious about their religious identity, Balmiki Sabha had organized various *Jathas* (groups) of the activists particularly 'sangeet party' (musical tropes). It aims to develop the songwriters and musicians, who write religious songs, often in praise of Valmiki.

In Punjab, community celebrates the *Valmiki Pargat Diwas* (birth anniversary of Valmiki) with great enthusiasm. It is generally falls in the month of October or November. But the preparation for celebrating this occasion is always started some days before the Valmiki Jayanti [8]. Out of his vivid memory, Ashok Bhatti narrates that 'during 1970 and 1980s 'we formed the *bhajan mandalis* and organized a religious procession in the streets and roads of the Amritsar city. He also remembered that 'we were taking a procession through the street and bazaar of the city. During these days, sangeet mandali is likely to visit in the muhallas and sings the devotional songs particularly dedicated to guru Valmiki. In fact, Bhatti himself sings the several religious hymns dedicated to guru Valmiki and other Dalit sants on the various religious occasions organized by Dalits in the city [9].

In earlier times, 'Balmikis used to abstain from work on this occasion, and celebrated special day through lighting the thousands of multi-coloured electric bulbs outside their homes and muhallas' as remembered by Amit Bhim [10]. Now, the Punjab state has reserved the state holiday on the occasion of the Valmiki Jayanti. On this day, Balmikis wore new clothes, clean their homes and localities and decorated Valmiki shrines with flowers, and colourful lights [11]. In the morning, religious hymns and prayers particularly dedicated to guru Valmiki has been performed at the central premise of the Valmiki temple. In the afternoon, meetings of the Balmiki sabha's members according to Yograj have been organized to discuss about the social, political and religious matters of the community. It is generally held at the central Valmiki temple of lahori gate and attended by various members of the community. In fact, sometimes political leaders affiliated to different political parties have paid their visit and announced donations for the construction of new building or other political support in order to get the support of the community members.

Notably, before the day of Valmiki Jayanti, Balmikis organized a religious procession in each and every city of Punjab. Balmiki procession in Amritsar was quite massive, with car, motorcycle in front, more than 100 tractor trailers loaded with community members, other vehicles carrying loudspeakers broadcasting slogans and music at a deafening volume and displaying portraits of guru Valmiki and Ambedkar. Besides, thousands of people on foot (mostly men) shouted slogans, sometimes vociferously and in a highly excited mood [12]. Interestingly, in many instances, the street was more a site of the emerging political hegemony of the Indian middle class than of autonomous subaltern protest, reminding us of Gramsci's dictum that subaltern groups are 'always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up' (Gramsci 1971: p.55).

For Balmikis, streets have its own importance to articulate their social identity and cultural formation. The street itself was lined with stalls selling framed pictures of guru Valmiki and Ambedkar of varying sizes and tables or ground-clothes were laden with a vast number of Dalit literary pamphlets, printed on inexpensive paper by private Dalit presses and sold for free as well as very nominal prices. Along the way,

[6]Information is based on the participation and interaction of the author in the agitation protests launched by the community members in the different parts of the city.

[7]Ilaiah, *Why I am*, pp.5-35.

[8]Information is based on the participant observation in the religious occasions and processions of the community.

[9] Information is based on an interview with Ashok Bhatti. It was held on 22 March, 2022 in Amritsar.

[10]Information is based on an interview with Amit Bhim; an Ambedkarite activist from Balmiki community. It was held on 17 March, 2022, Hathi Gate, Amritsar.

[11]Information is based on an observation and participation in the religious occasion of Valmiki jayanti at the central Valmiki temple, Amritsar.

[12]Information is based on participant observation in the religious procession organized by the community on the occasion of Valmiki Jayanti (birth anniversary) in Amritsar.

the local Balmiki and other Dalit associations had their stalls that distributed water, tea, snacks and packed food to the participants [13].

However, route of the procession was decided by the community leaders and activists. It aims to cover the entire localities of Balmiki and Dalits muhallas. 'This procession was moved from one Balmiki mohallas to another, in order to connect the people of the community and finally ended at the Hall gate of the city' regards Yograj [14]. It also covers the localities of upper caste Hindus and Sikhs. For the Balmikis, procession is the symbol of their presence and power on the city space. Interestingly, the procession along street in upper-caste localities reveals another important level of the performance as Balmikis are exclusively permitted to control over the public street, while the dominant castes are forced into the position of the silent audience who must observe but cannot perform. In this context, Massey recognizes that territories are 'inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning of symbolism' (Massey 1994: p.3), But, Brighenti has defined it as a habitués of action and above all, of reaction (Brighenti 2006: p.67).

Yograj remembers the old times, 'when upper-caste people usually dislike this procession and usually avoid participating in it'. In fact, to get the approval of the administration for the procession routes was a difficult task. But now, time has changed, 'our people are getting more conscious about their social and cultural rights and seems very energetic to organize such procession and festivals in the city. All the other arrangements of the procession have been taken by the Balmiki leaders and activists [15]. In this sense, the 'street' itself became the object of a power struggle between the Balmikis and the dominant upper-caste Hindu communities of society. Notably, street is also a site of community's assertion instead a space of emerging nationalist hegemony as argued by Guha. For him, 'it is a place where India's nationalist leadership sought to discipline as well as to educate and mobilize the masses (Arnold 2019: pp-36-57).

Thus, the real radical nature of a procession along such upper-caste streets lies in the re-positioning of the upper-caste community as a powerless audience whose hegemony over the street has been effectively, if only momentarily, broken. Interestingly, non-Dalit leaders along with Balmikis sometimes stopped and paid their tribute to the Valmiki's portrait which was surrounded by garlands, flower, petals and incense. The homage with joined hands was done in the manner of religious devotion. Slogans such as *Valmiki Shakti Amar Rahe (*the spiritual power of Valmiki live forever) and *Jo Bole So Nirbhay*, *Bhagwan Valmiki di Jai* (Fearless is the one who utters: Victory to Lord Valmiki) were also expressed this deep commitment. The reference to *nirbhay* is not symptomatic of the historical oppression of the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, but also it is reflective of their determined willingness to confront it head on (Ram 2008: p.1358).

Moreover, the activism of the Balmikis in muhallas are getting a new shape and vision under the influence of Ambedkarism. The young generation of the Balmiki has become more organized and adopted the ideology of Ambedkar to define their social and political struggle against the regime of caste and discrimination. It infuses new awakening among Balmikis and set the path for their social mobilization from the jatti muhallas. On Ambedkar Jayanti, Ankush Gill recites the poetry of Gurdas Alam [16]. (1912-1989); a revolutionary Dalit poet from Balmiki community. Out of Alam's several revolutionary poems, Ankush has selected, *Ulama* (Complaint) for his Dalit audience. In *Ulama*, Alam visualizes Ambedkar to be the only leader who can empower Dalits regards Ankush. Moreover, Alam's poetry has become more significant because it tries to expose the plight of Dalits and also the historical reasons behind their exploitation. Apart from it, he highlights how the upper-caste resourceful people particularly Jats and other dominant communities humiliate and torture Dalits. And most importantly, his poetry demands for the protest launched by the subaltern people in order to get liberation from the oppressive caste structure of the society.

Therefore, for Ankush and many other Balmiki activists, Ambedkar has become the common source of inspiration and pride. In fact, Ambedkar is portrayed as a messiah of Dalits and is worshipped like a God. 'We can't forget the sacrifice of Baba Saheb, who has sacrificed his entire life for the self-respect and dignity of their people' said Ashok Bhatti while narrating the social and political significance of Dalit leadership and their vision. Interestingly, one can observe the images of B.R. Ambedkar along with guru Valmiki inside the homes of middle class, educated Balmikis. They used to tell the stories of life and sacrifice of Ambedkar for the upliftment of the marginalized Dalits in the country. In fact, old leaders like D.D. Kalyani and R.C. Sangar still remembers the historical visit of B.R. Ambedkar and shares their memories with great enthusiasm. For them, Ambedkar and his ideas are providing hope for the social and political empowerment of the millions of Dalits in the country.

In our meetings, we always discuss the relevance of the Baba Saheb's ideas for the social and political upliftment of the marginalized communities like Balmikis in Punjab. Apart from it, leaders like Kalyani and Sangar were actively participated in the social and political protests launched by the sweeper unions in Amritsar. In this context, Sangar has mentioned that 'we had participated in several protest march and went to jail over the issue of unequal wages given to sweepers and other discriminatory policies of the state government and its agencies in Punjab.

The central agenda of 'the Ambedkar Association is to follow the path of 'Educate, agitate and unite' as given by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar' regards Ankush Gill. It has been achieved through the political struggle in order to get equal socio-political and economic rights and self-respect for the downtrodden people of the society. He said that the major radical transformation in the activities of the organization was held after the suicide of Dalit research scholar, Rohith

[13]Information is based on the participation observation in the religious procession of the community.

[14]Information is based on the discussion with Yograj about the preparation and organization of the religious procession in the city. It was held on April 13, 2022, Lahori Gate, Amritsar.

[15]Information is provided by Yograj; local leader of the Balmiki community.

[16]Alam was born in a Balmiki (Chuhra) family of Bundala village in Jalandhar district. He is considered as the first revolutionary poet of Punjab.

Vemula [17]. This incident had made us more conscious about the structural violence of caste and the victimization of Dalit students in the higher education of India. As a result, we have organized a small branch of Ambedkar Student Federation inside the Guru Nanak Dev University campus. On several occasions, the members of the organization have launched protest on the issues like fee hikes; ensure the reservation rule for SC students in various departments should be followed by the university authority. Moreover, it is the responsibility of the organization to inform the Dalit students about the fellowship programs launched by the Central and State government for the SC students.

Apart from it, the young Balmiki activists like Ankush Gill and Vishav Luthra are deeply concerned to protect the image and ideology of Baba Saheb Ambedkar amid the launch of communal politics by the BJP in the country. In this context, Ankush states that, 'Baba Saheb was not the supporter of BJP's communal and divisive politics instead he was very much against such ideas'. All the political parties either Congress or BJP according to Vishav are misusing the image of Ambedkar for their own electoral benefits in the entire country. But they have failed to deconstruct his ideas and contribution which is progressive and stood for the upliftment of the millions of the downtrodden people of the country.

In order to consolidate the ideology of Ambedkar, the members of the association are organizing a *Moolniwasi Jaggo* from 11 to 14 April in every year. For Ankush, 'it aims to inculcate the message of Mahatma Phule and Baba Saheb Ambedkar to fight against the caste in order to protect their self-respect in the society' [18]. Notably, before Ambedkar Jayanti (birth anniversary), the members of the association organize *Jaago* and moves in the Balmiki mohallas. For this purpose, 'we also formed the '*bhajan mandalis (*musical troupes*)* and also organizes processions in the streets and roads of the Amritsar city regards Ankush. They sing several songs in the praise of Ambedkar and other Dalit protagonists and their contribution to Dalit samaj. During the procession Ankush recited a song-*Vela aa Gaya hai jagan te jagaun Da/ Aap Padhna te Duje nu Padhaun Da* (the time has come to be conscious and make others too/It is the time to educate yourself and others) (based on participation observation).

Apart from the processions, seminar, essay and quiz competitions have also been organized which is completely dedicated to Dr. B.R.Ambedkar and other Dalit protagonists. In this context, the celebration of Ambedkar jayanti in the Balmiki muhallas and central streets of the city has its own significance. On this special occasion, streets have been decorated and special lectures have been organized by the members of the associations. Sometimes, it has been organized in the central Valmiki temple at Lahori gate, Amritsar. Special arrangements like the portraits and printed quotations of Ambedkar and other Dalit protagonists of the non-Brahmin movement such as E.V.R. Periyar 'Naicker', Jyotiba Phule and Sahuji Maharaj have been installed to remember the contribution of such Dalit visionary leaders for the upliftment of the dispossessed Dalits.

In fact, intellectuals and activists like D.D. Kalyani and R.C. Sangar came to give their radical speech around the life and contribution of Ambedkar. Along with scholars and intellectuals, poets are also invited to recite their poetry on this occasion. In such speeches and poetic expressions, ideology of social struggle and self-respect has never lost its significance. Orators on the main stage delivering their thoughts on Ambedkar are always conscious about the enigma and the enthusiasm of Baba Saheb's followers while expressing their ideas about him and the movement. In the similar vein, emotions of the Balmikis have come out through the slogans which shows their deep commitment, the most popular being 'jab tak suraj chand rahega, Baba [19] tera naam rahega' (Until the sun/moon will shine, Baba your name will remain') (based on participant observation).

Moreover, Balmiki writers like D.D. Kalyani [20] and R.C. Sangar have exposed their private book collections. Book stalls usually sold ideological booklets in Punjabi and Hindi, as well as posters, stickers, badges and other gadgets such as key rings decorated with the figure of B.R. Ambedkar and other Dalit protagonists. Most of these booklets are rooted in the lives and teachings of such historical figures as the Buddha, B.R. Ambedkar, Ravidas, Kabir, Phule and Pariyar. Many of them also contain caste histories, social criticism and look at Dalit politics and the political struggles of their leaders like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. For instance, in most of his pamphlets and magazine articles, Kalyani provides the historical perspective to understand the political struggle of Ambedkar for the uplitment of the millions of the subalterns and also highlights the betrayal of Congress and its leadership especially Gandhi in Poona pact. Similarly, in order to appropriate the image and inculcate the spirit of Ambedkarism among Balmikis, R.C. Sangar has argued that Ambedkar belongs of *safai kamgaar samaj* and has given endless services to sweeper class for their social-political and economic development (Sangar 2017: pp.1-2).

However, the occasion of Ambedkar jayanti represents an opportunity to participate in the performance and serve his community by distributing Dalit literary pamphlets. In this context, Ankush Gill attests that 'we distribute some booklets to children and people who are interested in order to create awareness. He also mentioned that 'sometimes we even distribute these booklets for free so that more people can read their history and protagonists [21]. In this context, Badri Narayan has states that 'these Dalit pamphlets are printed on inexpensive paper, costing anywhere between Rs. 1 and Rs. 25, have neither attractive appearance and print quality nor glossy paper, like the books published by

[17]Rohith Chkravarti Vemula was and PhD research scholar at the University of Hydrabad. He committed suicide on 17 Januray, 2016, when university authority has stopped his fellowship. His death sparked protests and outrage across India and gained widespread media attention as a case of state sponsored discrimination against Dalits in Indian universities.

[18]Information is based on the discussion with Ankush Gill. It was held on 16 March, 2022, Lahori Gate, Amritsar.

[19]Baba is Ambedkar's affectionate title, meaning 'grand-father' according to Ankush Gill.

[20]D.D. Kalyani is the popular name among the old Balmiki Ambedkarite writer and activist in Punjab. He was associated with *Moolniwas*i association and very popular among Dalits because of his radical speeches.

[21]Information is based on an interview with Ankush Gill. It was held on the 14 April, 2022, central Valmiki temple, Lahori Gate, Amritsar.

established publishing houses (Narayan 2010: p.2).
Interestingly, unlike literature aimed at pleasure and entertainment, or even social reform, Dalit pamphlet literature is written for the purpose of a new kind of unofficial, political education for the Dalit community. Here, a Dalit audience may read about their community's historical decent from the original inhabitants of India and their past golden age, which ended in a fall from glory by the violent Aryan invasions. Such literature published by small presses narrate social and cultural histories of the Dalit community and contributes to and alternative political education for Dalit readers, activists and scholars. It also aims to counter the dominant history and historiography and constitutes a phenomenon of counter-Dalit history.

Conclusion

The jati muhallas or Dalit spatiality has played a significant role in the formation and assertion of Balmiki's socio-cultural and political identity in Punjab. Situated in urban areas, Balmikis has changed the traditional perception of their spatiality and transformed it into a site of their social mobilisation. However, mainstream literature on subaltern communities in the context of South Asia, particularly in India, is silent on this emerging trend in Dalit studies. In the present paper, vibrant socio-cultural life world of the Balmikis has provided an alternative avenue to explain the recent patterns in the formation and assertion of Dalit communities. Here, muhallas have become the source of their pride and cultural assertion. It contested the dominant views and recovers the dynamic role of their muhallas and its diverse socio-religious tradition in Punjab.
Along with religious shrines, the religious processions have played a significant role in the formation, consolidation and assertion of Balmiki identity in Punjab. Valmiki Jayanti is been celebrated in great enthusiasm by the community members and processions are taken through the different streets of the Balmiki localities to the main centres of the Amritsar city. It also finds that Balmiki muhallas are witnessing a new wave of socio-political mobilization through the wave of Ambedkarism. The young generations of the community are doing various efforts to revive the ideology of Ambedkar in order to get self-respect and dignity in a caste ridden society of Punjab. Ambedkar Jayanti is celebrated annually in the muhallas and at the Valmiki temples. Seminars and special lectures on the life and contribution of Ambedkar are organized on this special day. The purpose of such gathering is to awaken the community regarding the social and political vision of their activists and leaders.

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