Questions

1. Are Balmiki (or Valmiki) Hindus listed as a “scheduled caste” in Punjab?
2. Do Balmiki (or Valmiki) Hindus face discrimination?
3. What is the attitude of the BJP to mixed caste marriages?

RESPONSE

1. Are Balmiki (or Valmiki) Hindus listed as a “scheduled caste” in Punjab?


Background information on the Punjab’s scheduled castes, with reference to the Balmiki, follows below, sourced from the Government of Punjab’s Human Development Report 2004. The report notes that the Balmiki make up “over 40 percent” of the Punjab’s “total Scheduled Caste population”; that they “are characterised as Hindus”; and that they are concentrated “in the Doaba and Malwa region”. The report also notes that the Balmiki were once particularly available to conversion to Christianity on account of their status as the very bottom of the caste system: “[c]onversions to Christianity began in the mid-1870s, mainly amongst the
Balmiki etc., who were at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy, overwhelmingly illiterate, backward and socially deprived”.

There are 37 Scheduled Castes in Punjab. Major Scheduled Caste groups are Mazhabis, Charmakars (including Ramdasias), Ad Dharmis, Balmiki, Bazigars, Dunna (Mahasha), Megh, Sansi, Bauria, Kabirpanthi (Julaha) and Dhanak. These eight castes in order of composition make up 92 percent of the Scheduled Caste population. As per the 1991 Census, the percentage of the eight numerically preponderant Scheduled Castes are shown in Table 7.1.

Ad Dharmis and Ramdasias belong to the same social strata. Similarly, Balmikis and Mazhabis belong to the same group. Balmikis are characterised as Hindus and Mazhabis are those who are converted to Sikhism. Similarly, the Ramdasias are Charmakars converted to Sikhism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Scheduled Caste</th>
<th>Population in 1991</th>
<th>Percentage of Population to All Scheduled Castes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ad Dharmi</td>
<td>915098</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bauria, Bawaria</td>
<td>78429</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bazigar</td>
<td>162804</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charmakar (including Jatia Charmakar)</td>
<td>1484268</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehgar, Raigar, Ramdasi, Ravidasi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balmiki etc.</td>
<td>640210</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhanak</td>
<td>57997</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunga, Mahasha, Doom</td>
<td>158357</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabirpanthi, Julaha</td>
<td>65028</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazhabi</td>
<td>1765798</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megh</td>
<td>105157</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sansi, Bhedkut, Manesh</td>
<td>81062</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Thus both the Charmakars and Balmiki category together constitute over 80 percent of the total Scheduled Caste population and individually over 40 percent each. This establishes the important point that the Scheduled Castes are not a homogeneous but a heterogeneous category. Scheduled Castes, as a percentage of the total population in the state, were 24.7 percent during 1971, which increased to 26.9 percent in 1981 and further increased to 28.3 percent by 1991.

The Ad Dharmis are concentrated in the Doaba region; Mazhabis in Majha and Malwa region; Ramdasias in Malwa region and Balmikis in the Doaba and Malwa region. Mazhabis and Ramdasias primarily follow the Sikh religion. Although the Ad-Dharmis tried to establish a separate religious identity, they continue to practise Sikh rituals (Anand Karaj in their marriages); only the Balmikis follow the Hindu religion. Thus an overwhelming number of Scheduled Castes are Sikh.

Impact of Christianity

In Punjab, Christianity enjoyed considerable importance for about 60 years. Conversions to Christianity began in the mid-1870s, mainly amongst the Balmiki etc., who were at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy, overwhelmingly illiterate, backward and socially deprived. The Christian initiative in education increased the availability of Western education to lower castes and gave them greater opportunities for social mobility. Conversion to Christianity was often a matter of concern for Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religious leaders, although in rural Punjab, mass conversions to Christianity diminished from the mid-1920s (Government of Punjab 2004, Human Development Report 2004, UN Development Program website, Chapter 7: ‘Dalits – On the Margins of Development’, pp.143-153
Dr Eleanor Nesbitt of the University of Warwick provides extensive background on the Balmiki social group in a study addressing the influence of Hindu and Sikh culture on the children of migrant families in the UK. Nesbitt observes that many of the Punjab’s Hindus practise their faith in such a way as to be mostly Hindu, but also partly Sikh, while many of the Punjab’s Sikh’s practise their faith in such a way as to be mostly Sikh, but also partly Hindu (see pages 5 to 6). “The lowest castes”, like the Valmiki and the Ravidasi, are said to “have had a particularly shifting pattern of religious allegiance” (Nesbitt provides a table on page 6 of her study that tabulates the beliefs that may, or may not, be practiced by Punjabi’s according to where they fit in to the Hindu–Sikh continuum) (Nesbitt, E. 1991, ‘My Dad’s Hindu, My Mum’s Side are Sikhs: Issues in Religious Identity’, University of Manchester – Faculty of Arts website, pp.5-6 http://www.art.man.ac.uk/CASAS/pdfpapers/identity.pdf – Accessed 26 October 2006 – Attachment 5).

According to Nesbitt: “Valmiki is the preferred title for [the] community [though it is] often known as Balmiki. Both names derive from their deity, whom they call maharishi (great sage) Valmik. In Gurmukhi, the script of Punjabi, ‘b’ and ‘v/w’ are often interchangeable” (p.40, n.1).

The occupations of the lowest castes were essential to the corporate welfare of the village community, but they were regarded as polluting by the members of higher castes. So both the Valmikis and the Ravidasis have a history of social oppression as untouchable castes. Many dislike any reference being made to the menial jobs with which they are still identified by Punjabis from other castes. They were excluded from the temples of the higher castes and lived in isolation from higher caste people. Reformist movements such as Sikhism and later, in the late nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj, discredited casteism. Since 1950 the practice of untouchability has been illegal in India and ‘scheduled castes’ have been entitled to positive discrimination in education and government employment. Nevertheless, social stigma still persists both in India and overseas. It was during their struggle in India in the 20th century for economic and educational parity with more privileged sectors of society that members of these two castes adopted the more prestigious titles of ‘Valmiki’ (or ‘Balmiki’) and Ravidasi. ‘Valmiki’ identifies their caste with the revered rishi (sage), Valmik, the composer of the great epic, the Ramayana. The title ‘Ravidasi’ links the Ravidasis with Ravidas, the fifteenth-century leather-worker, many of whose inspired hymns are incorporated in the Guru Granth Sahib, the scripture revered as Guru by the Sikhs (Nesbitt, E. 1991, ‘My Dad’s Hindu, My Mum’s Side are Sikhs: Issues in Religious Identity’, University of Manchester – Faculty of Arts website, p.7 http://www.art.man.ac.uk/CASAS/pdfpapers/identity.pdf – Accessed 26 October 2006 – Attachment 5).

The title of Balmiki (or Valmiki) was affected by Balmikis (or Valmikis) to distance themselves from the manner in which they had been constructed, historically, as the lowest caste strata of the untouchables; as the sweepers, or scavengers, known as Bhangis or Chuhras (for an overview of the manner in which this initially occurred, see: Mahar, P.M. 1960, ‘Changing Religious Practices of an Untouchable Caste’, Economic Development and Cultural Change, vol.8, no.3, pp. 279-287 – Attachment 6).
In 1994, a *Far Eastern Economic Review* article observed that, while “the Bhangis have been graced by a euphemistic new name, Valmiki, a reference to the author of the ancient Ramayana epic”, “they are still the ones who sweep the streets, clear the drains and clean the toilets”. *Frontline* has recently reported that, despite claims to contrary by the Government of Punjab, there are still significant numbers of manual scavengers at work in the state of Punjab cleaning human excreta from dry latrines. The report suggests that little is being done to help such sweepers escape the manner in which the caste system has confined them to this role in Punjabi society (‘Born in Chains’ 2004, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 3 November – Attachment 7; Zaidi, A. 2006, ‘India’s Shame’, *Frontline* website, vol. 23, 9-22 September http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2318/stories/20060922005900400.htm – Accessed 26 October 2006 – Attachment 8).

Dr Parvati Raghuram, of Nottingham Trent University, has produced an extensive study of the manner in which caste traditions continue to confine many Balmikis to the role of manual sewage disposal as the only means of subsistence. Raghuram’s case study does not take place in the Punjab (it is set in Nithari, a village “located in the Ghaziabad district of the northern Indian State of Uttar Pradesh”) but it may be of interest nonetheless (Raghuram, P. 2001, ‘Caste and Gender in the Organisation of Paid Domestic Work in India’, *Work, Employment & Society*, vol. 15, no. 3, pp.607-617 – Attachment 9).

2. Do Balmiki (or Valmiki) Hindus face discrimination?

There have recently been reports of claims that the Punjab’s Balmiki community are being unfairly marginalized in terms of the benefits afforded to the state’s scheduled castes. On 11 June 2006, *The Tribune* reported that “Mr Darshan Rattan Ravan, Chief Organiser of the National Adi Dharam Samaj (the leader of a Balmiki organisation) “alleged at a press conference here today that the benefits of reservation were only availed by members of the Ravi Dass community” and that “almost all members of the Balmiki community were still deprived of reservation benefits”. The report follows in detail:

Mr Darshan Rattan Ravan, Chief Organiser of the National Adi Dharam Samaj, alleged at a press conference here today that the benefits of reservation were only availed by members of the Ravi Dass community. The Scheduled Castes comprised 37 communities, including Balmikis, in Punjab. He said almost all members of the Balmiki community were still deprived of reservation benefits.

Giani Zail Singh during his tenure as Chief Minister of Punjab had fixed 12 per cent reservation for the Balmiki community, within the 25 per cent quota for SC/ST.

Petrol stations, gas agencies, ration depots and plots under various schemes had also been “captured” by members of the Ravi Dass community, he alleged.

He said by installing Ms Santosh Chaudhry, who was also from the Ravi Dass community, as Chairperson of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, the Congress had hurt the sentiments of the Balmikis.

The samaj had decided to oppose Congress candidates in the forthcoming elections, he said.

He demanded the dissolution of committees relating to the Balmik Tirath and introduction of Balmiki tirath act on the pattern of the Sikh Gurdwara Act (‘SC/ST not getting quota benefits: dharam samaj’ 2006, *The Tribune*, 11 June
The issue appears to be ongoing and was recently reported on in greater detail by *The Times of India*:

Punjab was closed on August 4. The issue: Reservations. No, it was not Mandal, version I or II. This protest was against a few castes cornering the benefits of the existing SC reservations, and about ensuring that the most backward among Dalit communities can benefit from them as well.

An anguished Darshan Ratna Ravan, the leader of Adi Dharma Samaj – a socio-religious organisation of Dalits, mainly the Balmikis – discovered that the same media that had lapped up any reservation-related news had no space for their bandh. He could sense a caste hierarchy within reservation debates: Reservation becomes a national issue only when it upsets upper castes.

...This issue is not confined to these three states. All over the country, the operation of reservation for scheduled castes has led to disproportionate advantage to some castes.

In most states of north India, the Jatavs or Ravidasis (leatherworkers by traditional occupation) community, has gained a disproportionate share of the benefits of reservations, leaving the Balmiki (traditionally scavengers) and other Dalit communities way behind.

Virtually every Dalit IAS officer you come across from north India, 104 out of 107 in the Punjab cadre according to one estimate, is from the Ravidasi community.

...Try raising this question with Dalit activists and intellectuals – most of who naturally come from advantaged communities within Dalits – and they offer the same arguments that are used against them by 'brahmanic' intellectuals.

First of all, there is a simple denial: Why are you exaggerating the difference between different communities?

Then there is distancing: Why should I be punished if these lazy, backward communities do not want to study and take advantage of reservations?

Finally, there is distrust: The attempt to create sub-division is politically motivated, aimed at dividing the Dalit community.

...If the commission’s findings confirm the popular impression that the benefits have been cornered by a few castes, it can recommend a central legislation or even a constitutional amendment to implement the sub-categorisation (Yadav, Y. 2006, ‘Let’s Fine-tune Quotas’, *Times of India* website, 26 October [http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/msid-2029822,prtpage-1.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/msid-2029822,prtpage-1.cms) – Accessed 26 October 2006 – Attachment 3).

As Dalits, the Balmiki community are susceptible to the various forms of discrimination and violence which continue to affect India’s lower caste peoples. Human Rights Watch has reported on the Dalits as follows in its most recent *Country Summary* on India:

Although caste-based abuses are forbidden under Indian law, and the government has embarked upon consultations to protect the rights of Dalits, other marginalized castes, and vulnerable communities, the government has failed to eradicate prejudice, particularly in rural areas. In a May 2005 report, *After the Deluge*, Human Rights Watch documented numerous instances in which higher-caste communities refused to share post-tsunami emergency relief...
with Dalits. Ongoing abuses against Dalits include harassment, excessive force by security forces in routine matters, mutilations, and killings by members of other castes for attempting to cross caste barriers. For example, in September 2005, more than fifty Dalit homes were burned down by the upper-caste Jat community in Haryana state.

Increasingly, caste panchayats, or caste-based village councils, extrajudicially punish inter-caste marriages with public lynching of couples or their relatives, murder of the bride or the groom, rape, public beatings, and other sanctions. This is particularly common if either bride or bridegroom is a Dalit (Human Rights Watch 2006, *Country Summary: India*, January – Attachment 12).

A report recently published in *The Hindu* has argued that the Punjab’s problems in this regard remain particularly acute.

While Punjab is one of our most prosperous states it also has a declining sex ratio 800 girls to a 1,000 boys, which means female foeticide is rife. Officially, about 62 per cent of Dalits live below the poverty line yet the Punjab government spends only 8 per cent of its revenue on their welfare.

Dalits comprise 30 per cent of Punjab’s population, yet only 0.5 per cent of landholdings are cultivated by scheduled castes. It is ironic that in Punjab, which is the granary of India, 40 per cent of Dalits are malnourished.

On the banks of the Chavadar lake at Mahad, B R Ambedkar had urged Dalits to draw water from the lake, which had been forbidden by caste Hindus.

In a scathing speech he had observed, “Caste Hindus do not prevent birds and beasts to drink from this lake... they are so kind, they do not kill animals and would never grudge a crow a few grains of food they are eating”. That was in 1927, but not much has changed.

Since 2004, at least 94 cases of atrocities against Dalits have been registered which includes Dalit women being paraded naked.

Most incidents go unrecorded, for fear of reprisal. Why is it that in our most prosperous state, Dalit women and men walk in fear? There is a glimmer of hope in that both Dalits and women are becoming increasingly aware and demanding their rights. (Chhabra, S. ‘Caste violence’, *Times of India*, 26 October – Attachment 13)

In the neighbouring state of Haryana (as is noted in the HRW report) a Balmiki community has recently suffered a serious episode of mistreatment and violent attack. According to one report:


In March 2004 it was reported that “the Dalits in Punjab are finding themselves subjected to increased discrimination after having exercised their ‘free will’ in the recent elections to the State Assembly and panchayats”. According to this report: “Some Dalit leaders [had] even
been deprived of their voting rights for speaking out against discrimination by the ‘upper castes’”. The report is supplied as Attachment 11 (Dikshit, S. 2004, ‘In Punjab, a division along caste lines’, *The Hindu*, 24 March – Attachment 11).

Alternatively, a 2004 essay written by a PhD candidate for the Centre for Development Studies argues “that the cases of atrocities against Dalits in rural Punjab are not all that glaring” compared to other states of India.

The Field survey indicates that the cases of atrocities against Dalits in rural Punjab are not all that glaring. Of all the 51 villages studied, there was only one village in the Malwa region from where a case of social boycott of Dalits by the dominant castes was reported to have taken place during the last five years. Boycotting no longer works as an effective method of controlling Dalits in rural Punjab. However, there have been a few cases of “individual oriented” atrocities. Though the caste factor remains important in these cases, so far most of these cases did not lead to the involvement of the entire caste communities in the conflict. Most frequent cases of atrocities reported from rural Punjab are those of physical beatings. And nearly all of them emanate from the prevailing structure of agrarian relations, viz., the Dalit labourers being assaulted by their dominant caste employer farmers. About 8 cases of physical beating were reported from the sample village most of those who work as attached labourers on annual contract basis do so out of some economic compulsions, invariably involving debt from the employer farmer (Venkatesan, S. 2004, ‘Caste Violence and Dalit Deprivation in India: A Capability Approach’, [http://www.unipv.it/deontica/ca2004/papers/venkatesan.pdf](http://www.unipv.it/deontica/ca2004/papers/venkatesan.pdf) – Accessed 27 October 2006 – Attachment 14).

3. What is the attitude of the BJP to mixed caste marriages?

Definitive information on the attitude of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) towards intercaste marriage, in terms of official policy and actual practice and attitudes, could not be located within the time constraints in which this report was completed. Nonetheless, it may be of interest that in March 2004 it was reported that “Jagmati Sangwan, who is president of the All-India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), Haryana, made some pointed references to the ruling BJP government and its allies [at a seminar on honour killings and inter-caste marriages] for not doing enough to eradicate the social evils”.

This ensued heated discussions after the lecture, and the embarrassed organisers had to remind the audience that “discussions are not aimed to target political parties, but to remove the social stigma associated with inter-caste marriages.”

“Be it the government machinery, administrators or women’s organisations, all are equally to blame. No one is helping the cause,” said Sangwan, who is also a lecturer at Maharishi Dayanand University, Rohtak. She, however, added that it was only the communist parties, which were playing their role well.

In fact, her direct references to the BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal for not doing much had a section of audience fuming.

“It is sad that the killing of young persons is not even considered a crime,” she said, adding that generally it was the marriage of an upper-caste girl and a lower-caste boy which irks the society leaders more.
“This leads to killings, as elders fear that girls would ask for their right in property and the status of lower caste boys would get elevated in the process,” said Sangwan. “Killing one’s children is painful for parents, but pressure from feudal leaders forces them to do it,” she added (‘Lecture on honour killings takes political hue’ 2004, *Times of India*, 28 March – Attachment 15).

**List of Sources Consulted**

**Internet Sources:**

**Databases:**
FACTIVA (news database)
BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)
REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)
ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)
RRT Library Catalogue

**List of Attachments**


13. Chhabra, S. ‘Caste violence’, *Times of India*, 26 October. (FACTIVA)
