



Changing Social Status of Dalits in Doaba Region of Punjab

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Since Independence, India has made impressive progress in terms of growth, education, caste system and untouchability etc. Caste and untouchability have been much studied subjects of Indian social setting. Dalits comprised a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables. The position of Dalits in the state of Punjab is quite different from that of Dalits in other parts of India. One of the distinguishing features of Dalits in Punjab is their numerical strength (31.9%). Other distinguishing features are their high literacy rate, emigration and active political participation. The study had a specific objective to access change in the social status of Dalits. The study was conducted in *Doaba* region of Punjab. Two blocks from each of the four districts of *Doaba* region were selected randomly. Two villages from each block were further selected and then 10 Dalit respondents from each village were interviewed personally with the help of an interview schedule. Thus total sample size was comprised of 160 respondents. The study found the increase in the education level of respondents. They were deviating from traditional occupation of agricultural labour to government jobs and to other ventures. A small percentage had moved to the upper caste locality in the village. Emigration and political participation were emerged as important factors in better social status. They were no more dependent on upper caste for

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cash or kind. Overall development of the society has affected the conditions of Dalits, the affirmative action programmes of the government have contributed to the improvement of their conditions.

Keywords: *Dalits; Doaba; change; status.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Independence, India has made impressive progress in terms of growth, education, caste system and untouchability etc. Caste and untouchability have been much studied subjects of Indian social setting. But the position of Dalits in the state of Punjab is quite different from that of Dalits in other parts of India. Sikhism appears to have experienced a significant liberating influence on Dalits in Punjab. The teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the religious institutions of *sangat*¹ and *langar*², the absence of a caste based priesthood, and the respect for manual labour, all these together aims at creating a harmonious community in which distinction of caste, creed and status are not relevant [1,2]. Besides some discrimination against them, the position of Dalits in Punjab is quite different than that of Dalits in other parts of the country. There are many factors responsible for better position of Dalits in Punjab.

Numerical strength of Dalits is highest in the country. They constitute 31.9 per cent of the total population compared to 16.6 at national level (Census, 2010). This numerical preponderance of Dalits is a measure of their strength [3,4,5,6]. Literacy rate of Dalits in Punjab is 64.8 per cent in 2011 which is very close to the percentage at national level i. e. 66.1 percent (GOI, various issues). *Ad-dharmis* have the highest literacy rate of 76.4 per cent and occupy the top position among the Dalits. Another significant factor which made a major difference in the status and self-perception of the Dalits in Punjab is related to the large scale migration of the Dalits, particularly *Ad-dharmis* of *Doaba*³ region, to foreign countries. It is estimated that on an average one member in every second Dalit family in *Doaba* region have gone abroad. The studies on migration by scholars [7,8,9,10] show that initial emigration from Punjab was the emigration where higher castes were dominated. Mcleod [8] has given caste wise data of Punjabis entering New Zealand. According to this data,

out of 212 Punjabis entering between 1912 and 1921, 133 were Jats and 24 were *Chamars*.

Today, Dalits diaspora form an important part of the Global Indian diaspora. Dalits had suffered and resist changes in the diaspora culture despite oppressions over a period of time in various countries. However, at present it is observed that the Dalit diaspora has become resilient and in a position to support their counterparts in India, the land of their forefathers [11,12,13]. Emigration of Dalits to the other countries initially as indentured labourer or forced labourer, but Punjabi Dalits emigration is a post-independence phenomenon, as a voluntary labourer and it resulted in their economic development. Initially *Chamars* of *Doaba* region were numerically predominant among the Dalits in the immigration process which seems to be a result of their economic improvement. The change in the economic conditions of Dalits is both a cause and a consequence of emigration [14,15,16,17].

The remittances sent home by these Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and contribution they made to the enlargement of the community's autonomous cultural spaces may be an exceptional distinguishing feature. Another factor responsible for their enhanced status is increased political representation of Dalits from the grass root level of Panchayats to the legislative assembly. Political movements such as Singh Sabha movement, *Ad-dharam* movement started in *Doaba* region, laid foundation for their political participation in different movements and contributed to the change in their status [18,19,20,21,22]. Due to these factors, socio economic status of Dalits has changed significantly. They were no more dependent on upper caste for cash or kind. Overall development of the society has affected the conditions of Dalits, the affirmative action programmes of the government have contributed to the improvement of their conditions.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in *Doaba* region of Punjab and based on primary data. *Doaba* region comprises of four districts i.e. Jalandhar,

¹ A Sikh term which means company, fellowship, association.

² Term used in Sikhism for community kitchen where free meal is served.

³ Region of Punjab state that lies between the Beas and Sutlej river.

Hoshiarpur, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Nagar and Kapurthala. It had been purposely selected as it has the highest proportion of Dalit population i.e. 40 per cent. Two blocks from each of the four districts of *Doaba* region were selected randomly. Two villages from each block were further selected and then from 16 villages, 10 Dalits from each village were interviewed personally with the help of an interview schedule. Thus total sample size was comprised of 160 respondents. Data was tabulated and statistically analyzed by using frequency and percentages.

Socio-economic status of the respondents had been measured by using Kuppuswamy's Socio Economic Status (SES) scale after doing necessary modifications. On the basis of their status, respondents were categorized into three different levels i.e. low, medium and high. Based on the scores given to three levels, socio-economic status scale has been developed as below:

Status level: Score
Low: 4-9
Medium: 10-15
High: 16-21

2.1 Inter - generational Occupational Mobility

The Inter-generational occupational mobility had been measured by the change of occupation from generation to generation and from that of fathers to the occupation held by the younger generation. Simple percentages were used to measure the rate of inter-generational occupational mobility.

2.2 Dalits in *Doaba* Region

This region of Punjab, between the Beas and Sutlej rivers is known as *Doaba*. It is also known as *Bist Doab*. People of this region are known as *Doabia*. The dialect of Punjabi spoken in *Doaba* is called *Doabi*. The term "Doaba" or "Doab" is derived from Persian, *do ab*, two water meaning "land of two rivers". This region includes districts of Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar, Shaheed Bhagat Singh (SBS) Nagar and Kapurthala. In more than 3000 villages of *Doaba* region, proportion of Dalit population lies between 40-60 per cent as compared to 31.9 per cent in Punjab and 16.6 per cent at national level. Majority are *Ad-dharmis* who are traditionally leather workers and contributed to state through leather trade. This area is also called the NRI hub of Punjab. The

distinguishing feature is that Dalit migration to the west and NRI remittances almost equal to that of Jats for the region.

All the visited 16 villages were located 5-6 km from the nearby city. In six villages, sarpanch of the village was Dalit and in one village it was Dalit female sarpanch. Dalits participated in the elections freely and without any fear. There was no pressure on them to vote for the particular candidate and party. In 14 villages there were separate gurdwaras of *Ad-dharmis* and *Balmiki Mandir* for *Balmikis*. Even there was no restriction on their entry on Jat gurdwaras. They celebrated Ravidas Jayanti by performing *Parbat Pheri*⁴ and by holding *Akhand Path*⁵. These *Parbat Pheris* were performed by holding *Amrit Bani* (a separate religious granth, including shlokas of Guru Ravidas originally found in *Guru Granth Sahib*) in a decorated palanquin. They held *nagar kirtan*⁶ sand show off their strength, religion and economic well-being by distributing sweets, fruits and *langar*.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Socio-economic Status

The analysis of the socio-economic status was based on socio-economic status scale. The socio-economic status of the respondents had been measured by applying Kupuswamy's socio-economic status scale (SES), with necessary modifications. Variables used to develop this scale were, education, occupation, income, caste, land holding, political participation and type of the house of the respondents. On the basis of this scale, the respondents were categorized into three categories i.e. low, medium and high. It is clear from the Table 1 that 28.7 per cent for respondents had low socio-economic status while this percentage was 43.7 per cent for middle status. Data further showed that more than one fourth (27.5%) respondents had high socio-economic status. It is clear from data that majority of the respondents had middle socio-economic status.

3.2 Education

Education level of the respondents had been divided into four categories i. e. illiterate, up to

⁴ A morning procession to mark respect for their Gurus.

⁵ In Sikhism, continuous, front to back reading of Sri Guru Granth Sahab.

⁶ Sikh custom involving the processional singing of holy hymns throughout a community.

matric, higher secondary, graduation and above. It is clear from Table 2 that among high status respondents no respondent was found illiterate. In low status 63.1 per cent were illiterate. Data revealed that majority of the respondents were educated up to higher secondary. Study further highlighted that high status respondents (54.8%) had education graduation and above. Thus this can be concluded that status and education are positively related.

When education level of the respondents was compared with that of their fathers' (Table 3), it was found that no respondent had education less than their fathers'. Almost three respondents were educated more than their fathers. Status wise analysis revealed that respondents from medium and high socio-economic status were educated more than their fathers. This clearly pointed towards the better educational status of respondents which mainly was due to benefits from government welfare schemes.

3.3 Occupation

The occupation of the respondents was categorized into six categories i.e. farm labour,

crafts & services, semi-skilled and skilled, farming, petty business and white collar professionals. The study recorded complete dissociation of the sample respondents from traditional occupations, which established the fact that they were no more practising traditional occupation of scavenging, picking animal carcasses and polluting jobs in order to get rid of stigmatized identity attached to such jobs. In the study area, it was found that Twenty households were headed by females due to different reasons and they were not actually engaged in any paid work and had not contributed to the family income, so their occupation was not considered. It was also found that one respondent was not engaged in any job or work. It is clear from the Table 4 that forty two per cent respondents were doing

Table 1. Distribution of respondents on the basis of status

Status	Respondents
Low (4-9)	46 (28.75)
Medium (10-15)	70 (43.75)
High (16-21)	44 (27.50)
Total	160 (100.00)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 2. Distribution of respondents on the basis of education

Status	Illiterate	Up to matric	Higher secondary	Graduation & above graduation
Low (n=46)	12 (63.16)	15 (29.41)	17 (28.81)	2 (6.45)
Medium (n=70)	7 (36.84)	27 (52.94)	24 (40.67)	12 (38.70)
High (n=44)	-	9 (17.64)	18 (30.50)	17 (54.83)
Total (n=160)	19 (11.87)	51 (31.87)	59 (36.87)	31 (19.37)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage

Table 3. Variation in education of the respondents from that of their fathers'

Status	Less than father's	Equal to father's	More than father's
Low (n=46)	-	17 (36.96)	29 (25.44)
Medium (n=70)	-	16 (34.78)	54 (47.37)
High (n=44)	-	13 (28.26)	31 (27.19)
Total (n=160)	-	46 (28.75)	114 (71.25)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 4. Distribution of respondents on the basis of occupation

Status	Farm labour	Crafts & services	Semi-skilled & skilled	White collar professionals	Petty business
Low (n=43)	16 (80.00)	13 (65.00)	10 (16.95)	-	4 (12.12)
Medium (n=58)	4 (20.00)	5 (25.00)	32 (54.24)	2 (28.57)	15 (45.45)
High (n=38)	-	2 (10.00)	17 (28.81)	5 (71.43)	14 (42.42)
Total (n=139)	20 (14.38)	20 (14.38)	59 (42.44)	7 (5.03)	33 (23.74)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 5. Variation in occupation of the respondents from that of their fathers'

Status	Lower than father's	Equal to father's	Higher than father's
Low (n=46)	-	18 (50.00)	28 (22.58)
Medium (n=70)	-	9 (25.00)	61 (49.19)
High (n=44)	-	9 (25.00)	35 (28.23)
Total (n=160)	-	36 (22.50)	124 (77.50)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 6. Distribution of the respondents on the basis of having kitchen gadgets

Status	LPG	Refrigerator	Food processor	Microwave oven
Low (n=46)	46 (28.75)	41 (26.45)	-	-
Medium (n=70)	70 (43.75)	70 (45.16)	18 (30.50)	1 (9.09)
High (n=44)	44 (27.5)	44 (28.39)	41 (69.49)	10 (90.90)
Total (n=160)	160 (100.00)	155 (96.87)	59 (36.87)	11 (6.87)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 7. Distribution of the respondents on the basis of owning vehicle

Status	Motorcycle	Scooter	Car	All
Low(n=46)	46(28.75)	1(1.75)	-	-
Medium(n=70)	70(43.75)	36(63.15)	4(10.25)	1(5.26)
High(n=44)	44(27.50)	20(35.08)	35(89.74)	18(94.73)
Total(n=160)	160(100.00)	57(35.62)	39(24.37)	19(11.87)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

semi-skilled and skilled jobs and 23 per cent of them had petty business. White collar professionals revealed that they had benefitted from reservation policy. None of the respondent was doing farming. This indicated they did not have any agricultural land.

Data given in Table 5 highlighted the variation in occupation of the respondents than that of their fathers. It is clear from the data that no respondent was found having lower occupational prestige than their fathers'. Twenty two per cent respondents were found following their fathers' occupation of the farm labour, crafts and services. Majority (77.5%) of respondents had acquired upward occupational mobility as they were doing some government jobs and other skilled and semi-skilled jobs. Medium (49.1%) and high (28.2%) status respondents had achieved greater occupational mobility and were following high prestige occupations of business and white collar professions. Thus, analysis highlighted that the medium and high status Dalits moved to high prestige occupations.

3.4 Kitchen Gadgets

Kitchen gadgets play an important role to assess one's standard of living. So far as the possession of kitchen gadgets was concerned, study reported that all the respondents used LPG in

their kitchens. Majority of them (96.8%) had refrigerator in their houses. Food processor was also owned by 36.8 per cent of respondents. Study, further observed that majority of the respondents who owned microwave ovens were from high status.

3.5 Vehicle

In the modern time having a vehicle has become a necessity as well as status symbol. Data regarding ownership of vehicle has been given in Table 7. Data revealed that all the respondents owned two wheelers (motorcycle). During study it was reported that majority of low status and some from medium status respondents, purchased motorcycles on EMIs from commercial banks. It is clear from the data that 35.6 per cent had scooter. Near one fourth of them owned cars and out of these majority (89.7%) were from high status. Further, study reported that 11.87 per cent of them had all these vehicles. Results of the study clearly indicated that all the respondents in the study area were owner of two wheelers and 36.2 per cent of them owned cars too.

3.6 Segregation

Segregation of individual castes or of groups of castes in a village is the most obvious mark of

civil privileges and disabilities, and it has prevailed in a more or less definite form all over India. Southern India stands out distinct in the rigidity of these rules but in Northern India generally, it is only the impure castes that are segregated and made to live on the outskirts of villages. Study investigated the change in this particular feature, by observing if there is any change in the pattern of residence in the sample area. Study highlighted (Table 8) that more than one third (36.9%) of the fathers' of Dalit respondents lived in the *chamarhli* (a separated living area of Dalits in a village) and the rest two-third (63.1%) lived on the outskirts of the village but that locality was also inhabited significantly by their own caste mates. With economic affluence and occupational mobility 5.6 per cent of the Dalit respondents had built up their residence within village (mostly from high and medium status). Study observed a decline in percentage of Dalits residence who lived in *chamarhli*. Thirty per cent of respondents lived compared to 37 per cent of that fathers' at this side in *chamarhli*. So study observed that segregation of the erstwhile untouchable caste was on wane, though was not completely achieved.

3.7 Neighbourhood

It is clear from the above discussion that they had started living in the village, a feature that was totally absent during their father's

generation. It was found that 5.6 per cent of Dalits from medium and high status had Jat Sikhs as their neighbours (Table 9). In their father's generation this phenomenon was absent as majority (99.3%) lived in the localities inhabited by their own caste only. Though a small percentage had moved to the upper caste locality in the village but still a change had been initiated.

3.8 School Education of Children

Unlike the traditional education in Hindu society, modern secular education is open to everyone. There is no caste based discrimination in education system. However, it is mostly the upper castes and rich who have taken to modern education and who continue to dominate these institutions. Due to growing awareness about the use of education among Dalits and benefits from protective discrimination, Dalits too have been able to acquire education. All respondents went to government schools for education, but a change in trend had been found in schooling of their children. It was reported by 58.7 per cent of respondents that they sent their children to Private English Medium schools (Table 10). There was mushrooming of private schools mostly at nursery and primary level. A significant number of Dalits were conscious and convinced regarding the importance and role of education in upward social mobility and hence were eager to send their children to private schools.

Table 8. Distribution of respondents on the basis of residence

Status	In the village		Outskirts of the village*		Chamarhli/Vehrha	
	Respondent	Father	Respondent	Father	Respondent	Father
Low (n=46)	-	-	21(20.39)	24(23.76)	25(52.08)	22(37.29)
Medium (n=70)	2(22.22)	-	50(48.54)	51(50.50)	18(37.50)	19(32.20)
High (n=44)	7(77.78)	-	32(31.07)	26(25.74)	5(10.42)	18(30.51)
Total (n=160)	9(5.62)	-	103(64.37)	101(63.12)	48(30.00)	59(36.87)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 9. Distribution of respondents on the basis of neighbourhood

Status	Same caste		One side Dalit, one side Jat Sikh	
	Respondent	Father	Respondent	
Low (n=46)	45(29.80)	45(28.30)	1(25.00)	
Medium (n=70)	66(43.71)	70(44.03)	1(25.00)	
High (n=44)	40(26.49)	44(27.67)	2(50.00)	
Total (n= 160)	151(94.37)	159(99.37)	4(2.50)	

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

Table 10. Distribution of the respondents on the basis of type of school attended

School	Respondent	Children
Government School	160 (100.0)	66 (41.25)
Private school	-	94 (58.75)
Total	160 (100.0)	160 (100.0)

Figures in parenthesis indicate percentages

4. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that social status of Dalit had been improved, there was a rise of middle class within Dalits. A majority of the respondents had improved their status in class and position in society. Improved socio-political and economic position had sharpened their sense of social consciousness. They distanced themselves from their traditional occupation of scavenging and farm labour. Emigration and political participation were emerged as important factors in better social status. Overall development of the society has affected the conditions of Dalits, the affirmative action programmes of the government have contributed to the improvement of their conditions. Social distance had been decreased and dalits were more conscious, assertive and autonomous.

CONSENT

As per international standard respondents' consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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