The Scheduled Castes in India: Post-Independence Scenario

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The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are officially designated groups of historically disadvantaged people in India. The terms are recognized in the Constitution of India and the groups are designated in one or other of the categories. They are among the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in India. The Government of India has enacted progressive legislation, programmes and schemes for the development and empowerment of the SCs and STs. The present paper is an attempt to analyze post-independence scenario of SCs in India. It has been concluded that the impact of change among SCs is more striking after independence as they have been comparatively immobile before independence. Protective discrimination, reform movements, sanskritization and westernization have yielded much dividends for SCs.

[Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Change, Inter-caste relations, caste hierarchy]

1. Introduction

The term ‘Scheduled Castes’ is primarily an administrative category, used in the Constitution of India. They are the castes identified by the President of India, under Article 431, and put under a Schedule. The term was used for the first time by the British government in the Government of India Act, 1935. Before this, some of these classes were labelled as ‘depressed classes’ - the term was used for the first time in the beginning of last century. Sociologically speaking, these castes suffered

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the stigma of untouchability and were considered ati-shudras or avarna, i.e., beyond the pale of the Hindu caste-structure. However, all ex-untouchables do not find place in the ‘Schedule’ and all castes under the Schedule did not experience an equal degree of ‘untouchability’ in the near or distant past.

Some social reformers such as Vivekananda, Dayanand, Gandhi and others rejected the caste system based on birth. They considered untouchability a blot on humanity. It was a stigma on Hinduism. Untouchability arose out of aberration of the varna dharma, they said. They pleaded for reforming Hinduism. B. R. Ambedkar was one of the leading proponents of reforms among SCs and eradication of untouchability so that they can live with dignity. After independence, number of measures have been undertaken for the upliftment of SCs.

2. The Problem and Objectives of the Study

Many SCs pursue traditional caste occupations along with agriculture or independently. They are leather workers, weavers, fisherfolk, scavengers, basket makers, etc. A few of them, particularly leather workers, have improved their economic condition by improving and marketing their products. Chamars in Agra is a case in point. However, this has not changed their social status. They still suffer from the stigma of being ex-untouchables. Studies on scavengers show that their condition have not improved much and their occupation continues to be looked down upon s polluted.

In urban areas, SCs are engaged in organized and unorganized industrial sectors, are petty shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs, scavengers, and are in white-collar occupations mainly in the public sector. Though there are a number of studies on problems of the workers in organized and unorganized sectors, scavengers etc., most of them do not focus on SCs as a broader social category. The Scheduled Caste white-collar employees, irrespective of their position in the administrative hierarchy, suffer from remnants of untouchability and are some-times humiliated by their colleagues. After independence, not only has the number of SCs white-collar employees increased, but at the same time the attitude of caste Hindus towards SCs has become stiffer, which has manifested itself in anti-reservation agitations. The present study is a humble attempt to investigate social change among the SCs after independence in urban setting.

The objectives of the present study are posited as under:

1. To find out the extent of increase in education and employment among the Scheduled Castes after independence;
2. To analyze the change in their inter-caste relations;
3. To find out the working conditions of the educated and employed among Scheduled Castes and compare them with those still illiterate and unemployed; and
4. To find out the changes among the Scheduled Castes after independence with particular reference to their life styles, family life, occupation and caste hierarchy, i.e. the institutional and structural changes.

3. Conceptual Framework

‘Status’ and ‘Social Change’ are considered to be the most important sociological concepts in relation to the focus of this present study. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. Hence, a brief explanation of these concepts is presented here:

1. Status: The term ‘Status’ was used in a different sense till 1920. It was used to refer to some of the capacities, which could be legally enforced, and also to the limitations of people or their relative superiority and inferiority. But since 1936, the term has been undergoing radial changes. It has now come to be a synonym for any ‘position in the social system’. The state has now intervened to help women in their development process. It counteracts the traditional system of social stratification. Status, which is generally based on birth, therefore loses its importance, significance and power, and the way for achieved status that is achieved by one’s own efforts, is cleared.

2. Social Change: The most important and relevant concept with which we are concerned while examining the status of Scheduled Castes is ‘Social Change’. Our hypothesis is that the status of Scheduled Castes has changed today when compared to that of the past and this is being tested in the present generation. Social Change is quite often considered to be different from cultural change because generally social change means change in the structure and social relationships in the society. Cultural change is said to mean change in the cultural values, beliefs, customs, traditions and norms. In the present study, both social and cultural change are important and are included in the term Social Change.

4. Coverage of the Study

The locale of the present study is Meerut in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh. Meerut district is one of the most important district in north-west region of Uttar Pradesh. The universe of the study is the Scheduled Castes of Meerut. Being a prosperous modern city and having good proportion of Scheduled Castes, Meerut has a potential for such a study of social change among the Scheduled Castes. There are four Mohallas, viz. Subhash Nagar, Purva Shekhlal, Bhagwatpura and Lakshmanpuri in Meerut where more than 60 per cent Scheduled Castes are resident. 40 per cent of them are government servants, 30 per cent technical/businessman and 30 per cent labour class. A sample of 250 Scheduled Castes respondents has been selected from these mohallas by random sampling. The unit of study is these 250 selected respondents.
Major characteristics of the sample are as follows:

1. The sample consists of seven SCs, Chamars and Jatavs constituting more than half (56.0 per cent). These are the two castes among SCs who are predominant in Meerut.

2. The sample consists of respondents of all age groups-young (22.0 per cent), middle aged between 21 to 45 years (41.2 per cent) and between 46 to 60 (29.2 per cent). The aged or senior citizens constitute remaining 7.6 per cent.

3. Sex-wise, a little less than two-third sampled respondents (63.2 per cent) are males, whereas, the remaining are females (36.8 per cent).

4. As regards the educational level of sampled respondents, an overwhelming majority of them are educated (86.8 per cent) though at various levels. Nearly one-third (32.2 per cent) are graduates or post-graduates.

5. The sample consists of respondents of all the types of material status. Married represent a little less than three-fourth (72.8 per cent) and nearly one-fifth unmarried (21.6 per cent). There are 11 divorces and 3 widows/widowers.

6. There are more respondents from nuclear families (59.2 per cent) as compared to joint families (40.8 per cent).

7. As regards nativity, more than three-fourth of the respondents (48.4 per cent) are local residents of Meerut, whereas, the remaining have come from other places (16.0 per cent) for work.

8. As regards the family income, again two-third of the sampled respondents (65.2 per cent) come from lower income families.

5. Tools, Data Collection and Data Processing

The primary data about the selected respondents have been collected through pre-coded and structured interview schedules in 2005. Besides this, the techniques of informal interview and non-participant observation are also made use of. The secondary data about the position of SCs before and after independence are collected through secondary sources. The data collected through interview schedules have been processed through computer, whereas, the secondary data have been handled manually.

6. Major Findings

Change is law of nature as everything changes over a period of time. When the concept of change is extended to social sphere, it is called ‘social change’. Social change is a word used to describe variations in or modifications of any aspect of social processes, social patterns, social interactions or social organization. In its most concrete sense social change means that large number of persons are engaging in activities that differ from those which they (or their immediate forefathers) engaged in some time before.
Social change not only varies from one society to another, it also varies within different groups and communities in the same society. For example, tribal communities experience less change in comparison to rural communities, which in turn, changes at a slow speed as compared to urban communities. Similarly, the down-trodden section of society experience lesser degree of change than the affluent ones. The same has been the case with regards to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in India. They have been the suffers of many disabilities either due to untouchability or inaccessible habitation or lack of contact with outside world and consequently have been deprived of all the benefits of technological advancements or other changes. The situation remained almost unchanged for a long time. It was only during the British rule that they started experiencing change due to outside contact. However, the change among SCs and STs was very superficial and their socio-economic position did not improve significantly.

However, how far the protective discrimination in the form of reservation of seats in elected bodies to enhance the political status of SCs and STs, reservation of seats in government jobs to uplift the economic status of SCs and STs, reservation in educational institutions to improve the educational status of SCs and STs and in abolition of untouchability to bring them at par with other sections of Indian society has delivered the desired results? This is a question which is still being debated not only among social scientists but also the policy-makers, the politicians and all those vigilant groups and authorities interested in the upliftment of SCs and STs in India. An attempt has been made in this study to present empirical evidence in respect of social change in different aspects of selected SCs. This has been done under the following heads keeping in view the objectives of the study.

7. **Vision of the Founding Fathers**

A number of commentaries on the Indian Constitution by legal luminaries are available. Political scientists offer institutional analysis of the Constitution dealing with federalism, executive, judiciary etc. But critical analysis of the Constitution focussing on socio-politico ideological underpinning of the founding fathers is, by and large, absent. Austin’s study (1972) is, however, an exception. But his treatment of Protective Discrimination is peripheral. According to him, the Indian Constitution has not been Gandhian or socialist, but it has accommodated various views and perspectives. Following the principle of accommodation and decision-making by consensus, the Indian Constitution aims at bringing ‘social revolution’. Provisions of Protective Discrimination are part of the agenda for social revolution. However, Austin does not elaborate how the Indian revolutionary path would fulfil the basic needs of the common man. He harps on the hope that ‘this revolution would bring about fundamental changes in the structure of Indian society—a society with a long and glorious cultural tradition, but greatly in need, Assembly members, believed, of a powerful infusion of energy, and rationalism.’ Such expressions are wishful thinking and sentiments rather than critical analysis.
Dr. Ambedkar argued that/equality of opportunity ‘is a generic principle. At the same time,’ we had to reconcile this formula with the demand made by certain communities that the administration which has now for historical reasons been controlled by one community or a few communities, that situation should disappear and that the others also must have an opportunity of getting into the public services.’ He charged, ‘the administration was unsympathetic to the Scheduled Castes because it was manned wholly, by Caste Hindu officers who were partial to the caste Hindus’ and ‘who practised tyranny and oppression’ on the Harijans. In Ambedkar’s view, the best way to remedy this situation was for the Harijans to become members of the various governments in India and thereby to ensure that Harijans also became members of the civil services (Austin, 1972).


A secular and egalitarian social order are two major objectives that India has set before itself to achieve. In the Preamble to the Indian Constitution, the people of India solemnly resolve to secure to all it citizens: Justice (social, economic and political), Liberty (of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship), Equality (of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all) and Fraternity (assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation).

In order to attain the above objectives, the Constitution has made certain provisions to remove the discrimination that the SCs traditionally suffer from. The Constitution has made a number of provisions under various Articles to categorize the practice of untouchability, the stigma from which the SCs suffer from, as an offence. Article 15(2) of the Constitution states-

No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition will regard to a) Access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainments, or b) The use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

Further, Article 29 (2) forbids persons in charge of "any educational institution receiving aid out of State funds" to deny admission to an applicant "on grounds only of religion, race, caste, language or any of them". Article 17 deals specifically with the issue of untouchability as an offence. It declares that ‘Untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

9. Studies depicting the Position of SCs after Independence

Many studies have been undertaken to find out the change among SCs after independence. The fact has been brought that the impact of change is more striking among the SCs as they had been comparatively immobile in the past. Changes in
status which may appear limited in absolute terms acquire different significance when viewed against the background of traditional society. But the winds of change do not always run in the same direction and sometimes they may even run counter to one another.

The changes came along three avenues. The first avenue was provided by the reform movements which took place among some scheduled castes at various periods of time. The second was provided by the process through which a caste or a group of people move up in the social hierarchy by adopting the style of life associated by tradition with the upper castes. The third avenue was inspired by the process of westernization, which refers to the adoption by a community of western patterns in dress, manners and customs. It brings in its wake new norms and values and new symbols of prestige. We have literature on all three kinds of change though the data is uneven and differs in depth and coverage. Although the three processes have been dealt with in this section separately, they may be seen at work simultaneously in some communities.

Bateille (1967) finds that the sanskritization affects the culture of castes in the lower and middle regions of the hierarchy. Many of the scheduled caste people are now adopting caste Hindus names and affecting a change in their occupation, diet and social practices. Occupations considered degrading in the Sanskritic scale of values such as distilling liquor or oil pressing or tanning are often given up and there is a tendency even to deny any past association with them. Forbidden items of food such as beef and beverages like alcohol are often given up. There is an attempt to abandon widow re-marriage and to replace bride price by dowry. Among some sections of scheduled castes, Arya Samaj has a special appeal in sanskritizing their styles of life. The scheduled caste as also others are adopting models which the traditional elite have now left behind.

Sharma (1994) has observed that the change in the emphasis on the studies from caste to class, or from hierarchy to stratification, or from closed to open stratification or change in the application of the methods of study from indological to empirical and now experimental are no doubt indicators of the realization of the need for studying what is more relevant than what was in the past.

10. Concluding Remarks

In sum, it may be concluded that the impact of change among SCs is more striking after independence as they have been comparatively immobile before independence. Protective discrimination, reform movements, sanskritization and westernization have yielded much dividends for SCs. No one can deny the fact that educational and employment status of SCs has gone up after independence. The untouchability along with the disabilities associated with it, has been eradicated resulting in increased inter-caste changes. The empirical data collected for the present study have shown significant changes in education and occupation over a period of one generation. Change in inter-caste relations is clearly evident and this
change is more among educated and employed persons. Life style and standards of family life have also undergone drastic changes. Change in status of SCs may appear limited in absolute terms, but they acquire different significance when viewed against the background of traditional Indian society. Social gap between SCs and non-SCs is definitely decreasing in urban areas. Government policies have provided new avenues of employment, self-employment, freedom and better economic conditions. These get reflected and demonstrated in patterns of living, housing, social celebrations etc. They have been able to get power positions in elected bodies and their participation in politics has increased. Some of the SCs have even revived their traditional caste panchayats.

References


