

Status of scheduled castes in Punjab

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Received: 23.09.2019; Revised: 22.10.2019; Accepted: 06.11.2019

■ **ABSTRACT** : A significant change has been occurred in the social status of scheduled castes. It includes change in their education, occupation and employment status, emigration to different countries, political participation (at Panchayati level), and change in their residence (from lehndey pase or outskirts of the village to in the village). The study based/relied upon various issues of Census of India, Economic Survey of Punjab, Economic and Statistical Organization, Punjab, Statistical Abstract of Punjab and data was obtained from the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, Punjab. The study found that there is a significant change in the literacy rate from 1971 (16.12 %) to 2011 (64.81%) and there is increase in the enrollment of SCs students in recognized institutes over the time. Percentage increase in the government jobs have been found but it is more in the class IV level jobs. Emigration and their political participation at grass root as well as state level play an important role in the change in their social status.

■ **KEY WORDS**: Untouchability, Caste system, Education

■ **HOW TO CITE THIS PAPER** : Kaur, Amanpreet and Sharma, Shalini (2019). Status of scheduled castes in Punjab. *Asian J. Home Sci.*, 14 (2) : 361-366, DOI: 10.15740/HAS/AJHS/14.2/361-366. Copyright@ 2019: Hind Agri-Horticultural Society.

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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. The paradigm within which caste is studied has undergone many significant changes over the years (Jodhka, 2000; Judge, 2003 and Judge and Bal, 2008). Continued practice of untouchability constitutes the greatest dilemma of Indian society. Powerful movements launched by saints, poets, social and religious reformers failed to eradicate it (Webster, 2001). Dalits comprised a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchables. Dalit is the name given to the people belonging to the castes at the very bottom of India's caste hierarchy

(Webster, 1999). In the *varna* scheme of the Vedas there are only four orders, and the untouchables have no place in it. But there are references in Vedic literature to groups such as the *Ayogava*, *Chandala*, *Nishada* and *Paulkasa*, who are outside the *varna* scheme, and who seem to be despised (Srinivas, 1962). The word Dalit comes from the Sanskrit language, and means ground, suppressed, crushed, or broken to pieces. It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century, in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile untouchable castes of the twice-born Hindus.

Mahatma Gandhi coined the word *Harijan*, translated roughly as "*Children of God*", to identify the former Untouchables. But Dalits never took '*Harijan*'

in a good stride and they perceive the term as if whose father is not known. In 1935 British passed the Government of India Act, 1935 which brought the term Scheduled Caste into use and defined the group as including such castes, races and tribes formerly known as the Depressed Classes. After independence, the Constituted Assembly continued the prevailing definition of SCs and STs via article 341, 42 and compiled a full listing of castes and tribes via two orders, The *Constitution Order* (SC) 1950 and the *Constitution Order* (ST) 1950. There are 1108 Scheduled Castes and 744 Tribes enlisted in *The Constitution Order* 1950.

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. They constitute 31.9 per cent of the total population compared to 16 at national level (Census, 2011). Punjab is comprised of three socio-cultural zones Majha, Malwa and Doaba. Though Dalits are unevenly spread over the three regions, the largest concentration is in the Doaba region. In more than 3000 villages of Doaba region proportion of SC population is over 40 per cent and in some villages like Talhan having as high as 65 per cent, became for Dalits a measure of strength. Out of the total 38 Scheduled Castes, two major groupings Ad Dharmi's and Balmikis together constitute 80 per cent of the total scheduled castes here (Awasthi, 2003). In Punjab state, out of thirty-seven Scheduled Castes like Mazhabi, Chamar, Ad Dharmi, Balmiki and Bazigar together constitute 86.8 per cent of the total SC population. Social Status is general position of an individual in relation to other individuals, which is due to specific attribute, cluster of attributes or generalized summation of all the attributes. Education, occupation, income and political power compositely make up social status.

■ RESEARCH METHODS

The present study is based on the secondary data procured from various sources. Various issues of Census of India and various issues of Economic Surveys of Punjab provided data regarding education, occupation and workforce of SCs. Employment statistics were obtained from, Economic and Statistical Organization, Punjab and Statistical Abstracts of Punjab. Data regarding political participation of SCs in Panchayats were drawn from the Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, Punjab.

■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social status is general position of an individual in relation to other individuals which is due to specific attribute, cluster of attributes or generalized summation of all the attributes. But education, occupation, political power, emigration has played a vital role in the social status. So an attempt has been made to understand the change in the social status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) on the basis of following determinants:

- Education
- Occupation
- Employment
- Emigration
- Political power

Education:

Education is an important means to uplift population or a section of it lagging behind. It provides capability to individuals to be prepared in development through imparting of information, knowledge and skills. Recent research in theory of economic growth brings out that human capital is the most important factor in economic growth. Education, health and nutrition are means for human capital formation. It is, therefore, worthwhile to examining the role of education in upliftment of SCs in Punjab. Education in the state is largely public funded (except the unaided schools and colleges) and there are special facilities for SC students in the form of fee concession, stipends, free books and clothes etc. As a result, there is significant change in the literacy rate of SCs in the last two three decades. Data on literacy rate among SCs have multiplied four times between 1971 and 2011. The literacy data shows that the SCs of Punjab have made significant headway during the 1991–2011 decade. The overall literacy rate of SCs which was 41.1 per cent at 1991 census, has gone to 64.81 per cent according to the 2011 Census. The Ad Dharmis have the highest literacy rate at 76.4 per cent and occupy the top position among the SCs. The *Mazhabhis*, who are numerically the largest community, have the lowest literacy rate at 42.3 per cent (Sharma, 2010). Female literacy rate in Punjab is 58.33 per cent which is more than the national figures (54.46%).

Furthermore, the enrollment of SC students in recognized institutions also rising, it was 7.9 lakhs in the year 1980-81, 10.2 lakhs in 1990-91 and it raised upto 14.3 lakhs in the year 2000-2001. Data indicates that

Particulars	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	Gaps (1971-2011)
Total Persons	16.12	23.85	41.09	56.22	64.81	48.69
Males	22.94	30.96	49.82	63.88	70.66	47.72
Females	8.10	15.66	31.03	48.25	58.33	50.23

Source: Census of India, 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001, 2011

enrollment have doubled between 1981 and 2001.

Year	Boys	Girls	Total
1980-1981	4.7	3.1	7.9
1990-1991	6.7	4.3	10.2
2000-2001	7.60	6.71	14.3

Source: Economic Survey of Punjab, 2001

Though the literacy rate has improved over the past few decades but their (SCs) representation in the higher education is dismally low. The high proportion of the SC students in government aided schools is a sign of weakness rather than strength. This is the reason why very few students from these sections join higher education. Poor schooling acts as a one of the serious limitations for SC students to join higher education.

Occupation:

Occupation is an economic role separated from household activity as a result of the growth of markets for labour. Presently the Scheduled Castes in Punjab are divided into two segments. The first segment includes dalits whose profession is scavenging and cleaning and are called as *Mazhabhis* and *Rangretas*. *Mazhabhis* and *Rangretas* were the *Chuhras* who converted to Sikhism. The other segment of the dalit Sikhs consisted primarily of the *Chamars*. The Ad-Dharmis are predominant among Chamars and are mainly leather workers. Chamars (including the *Ramdias* and *Ad Dharmis*) and *Mazhabhis* (including *Chuhras* and *Balmikis*) together constitute nearly three-fourths of the total scheduled caste population in Punjab. SCs were associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure, such as scavenging and cleaning, leatherwork, butchering, or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses, and attached laborers (*siris*).

The scheduled caste population of the region has been comparatively vulnerable in the economic structure of the village. Their ownership of agricultural land is

among the lowest in the country (Jodhka, 2002). The work participation rate of the SC population in Punjab is 37 per cent which is lower than the 40.4 per cent aggregated at the national level for all SCs. They mainly work as agricultural laborers (38.4 %) and only 3.9 per cent of them have returned as cultivators. About 55.2 per cent of the *Mazhabhis* constitute Agricultural Laborers followed by Other workers (39 %).

A conscious effort was made by a large number of Scheduled Castes to move away from such traditional occupations as carried an alleged stigma. According to a field study of 51 villages, covering the state's three regions of Punjab, not more than 20 per cent of them were presently involved in their traditional occupations. It was described as a phenomenon of "Dissociation, Distancing and Autonomy". Only about 15 per cent of them worked now as agricultural labourers (Jodhka, 2004). In *Doaba* region of Punjab, Ad Dharmis have foot ahead in singing with CDs such as *charat chamara di*, etc.

Particulars	Ad-Dharmis	Mazhabis
Agricultural labourer	22.8	52.2
Other workers	68.7	39.0

Source: Census, 2001

Employment:

Employment is the supply of labour by persons of either sex for the production and processing of all the products. It can also be defined with reference to person's usual activity rather than their current activity.

According to present estimates, over 200,000 SCs in Punjab were in jobs in government departments and public sector undertakings such as banks, LIC, FCI, Municipal bodies etc. That included IAS, IPS and PCS officers, doctors, engineers etc., and many in business and trade (Puri, 2003).

Data given in the Table 4 show that in 1980 only 18 per cent of SCs were in government jobs followed by 20.91, 23.98, 23.13, 23.89, 25.10, 24.35, 25.56, 24.16 and

Table 4 : Representation of scheduled castes in Punjab Government employees

Year	SC Employees (%)
1980	18.48
1990	20.91
2000	23.98
2006	23.13
2007	23.89
2008	25.10
2009	24.35
2010	25.56
2011	24.16
2013	23.58

Source: Economic and Statistical Organization, Punjab

23.58 per cent in 1990, 2000, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2013, respectively. It is very much clear from the table that percentage share is increasing in Punjab government employees. But this share is more in class IV jobs as indicated in the Table 5.

Table 5 : Share of SC and non-SC employees in Punjab Government Services (%)

Class	Employees (%) SCs		Non-SCs
	2001	2013	
Class I	16.50	14.97	83.50
Class II	18.14	18.42	81.46
Class III	19.22	23.46	80.78
Class IV	42.23	34.15	57.77
Average	23.64	23.58	76.36

Source: Statistical Abstract of Punjab

The Table 5 shows that in the case of class IV employees, the SCs were 42.23 per cent of the total—much higher than the share of SC in population. Their share declines with the rise in the class of employment. The share of SC employees was 19.22 per cent among class III, 18.14 per cent of class II and 16.50 per cent of class I employees. It is clear that a large number of SCs are unable to get the benefits of the government policy because of lack of education. Since the SCs are lagging behind in education, an adequate number of SC candidates are not qualified for many jobs.

A study of 26 villages in Malwa region showed that in 21 villages SCs had working as *Siris*. However, the situation is entirely different in the Doaba region where majority of them have dissociated themselves from such type of work (Jodhka, 2002).

Emigration:

Emigration involves the (more or less) permanent movement of individuals or groups across symbolic or political boundaries into new residential areas and communities. International migration of Punjabis began in the 19th century and accelerated in the early 20th century. The emigration of SCs has a history older than that of Jats. Dr. Baldev Singh Share (son of Giani Ditt Singh of Singh Sabha fame) and Mangoo Ram immigrated to USA in early nineties. The Ad Dharmis accounted for 10 per cent of the total emigrants to England, and considerable changes have occurred among the Dalits. Being ten per cent of more than half a million Punjabis is a substantial size (Judge, 2002 and Juergensmeyer, 2004).

Emigration is more prominent in the districts of Jalandhar, Hoshiarpur and Nawanshahar. One out of every three families had at least one member working abroad. Remittances from SCs NRIs contributed to a conspicuous change in the self-image and the aspirations of their families (Mahajan and Jodhka, 2012).

Political Power:

Mobilization of the SCs of Punjab by different reform movements during the early 20th century made them politically active. Ad Dharm movement (1920), Ad Dharm Mandal (1946), Republic Party of India (1956) and revival of Ad Dharm movement in 1970s are important political movements related with SCs. Kanshi Ram, the founder of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) belonged to Punjab. In the formal political process the efforts of the Indian government to empower the Dalits have taken a new turn when it introduced the 72nd (Panchayats) and 73rd (Nagarpalikas) Constitutional amendments bills. These came into force as the Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act and the Constitution (74th Amendment) Act in 1993. In the light of these.

In the light of these amendments there is provision for reservation of seats in local bodies in rural and urban areas for women and SCs. After a decade of these amendments changes have been witnessed as in all the seats of the Sarpanches meant for reserved category have been filled, as has been the case with the reservation in Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha.

Mobilization of the scheduled castes of Punjab by different reform movements during the early 20th century made them conscious of their political rights. The active

Table 6 : Number of scheduled castes Sarpanches in Punjab

Year	1978	1983	1992	1998	2003	2008	2012
Number	961	774	671	2499	2598	3353	3514

Source: Department of Panchayats and Rural Development, Punjab

opposition by the scheduled castes to the Akali demand for a separate Punjabi Suba clearly reflects their high level of political sense. The first autonomous political formation of the scheduled castes of Punjab had emerged in the form of the Ad-Dharm movement that was later merged with Ambedkar Scheduled Caste Front and subsequently transformed into the Republican Party of India (RPI). While parties like the RPI attempted to mobilize the support of these groups, they could not succeed in eliciting support owing to lack of strong leadership and divisions among the leadership over the strategy to be followed. The period between 1947-1980 is characterized as a phase of low political consciousness and participation in politics by the Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabhis in Punjab due to the initial period of accommodation and co-option within the dominant Congress party. The period between 1985-1997 was the period of rapid democratization of the political system and the growth of identity consciousness among the SCs. Then Kanshi Ram formed the BSP in 1984 (Sharma, 2010).

In 1967 to 1977, 23 out of 104 seats were reserved for SCs. Since 1977 the numbers of reserved seats were increased to 29. Latest delimitation of the constituencies the number of reserved seats in Punjab has been raised to 32. The total members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly from 1967 to 2007 were 1131. Out of the 1131 members 272 belonged to the SCs. With the decline of the BSP in Punjab, there is lack of efficient leaders in SCs but being highest in proportion they play a vital in politics of Punjab (Kumar, 2005).

Conclusion:

Sikhism though does not legitimizes untouchability, caste based discriminations were widely practiced in Punjab. Changes are occurring in the social status of SCs largely due to the safeguards provided by the State and Central Governments. Other factors contributing are such as remittances by NRI's, urbanization, political movements, Industrialization, globalization and technological changes etc. The improved socio economic condition of the SCs due to rising social and political consciousness over the years has led to sharpening their

bright future and a better standard of living and they are no more in denial mood and becoming assertive. More over their assertion push the society into a state of conflict, the conflict is just not between the two castes but it is between the journey of a caste in becoming a class. But the occurring changes in Dalits of Punjab lack uniformity, Ad Dharmis, have experienced tremendous changes in their conditions whereas *Mazhabhis* have not improved their status. The social change experienced by Dalits is at two levels. Whereas the overall development of the society has affected the conditions of the Dalits, the affirmative action programmes of the government have contributed to the improvement of their conditions.

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