The Dhobis of Assam: Social and economic repercussions

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Abstract- From time immoral the Schedule castes of India are unprivileged of the rights and status in the society. The Indian society being caste ridden is based on dichotomy of purity and pollution. According to the Varna ashrama dharma, Indian society is based on four Varna namely the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra. The untouchables are the outcaste group among the four Varna. This distinction has stratified Indian society in terms of caste system. Each caste encompasses numerous jatis into its fold making the system a rigid one. Therefore the Indian society is a close society undermining minimal mobility among castes. The Brahmans in the top of the hierarchy has got the status of pure and is privileged culturally, socially, economically, politically. The shudras and the untouchables on the other hand are termed to be polluting having lower status in the society. Thus in this context of the caste system, the paper is based on the Dhobis, washerman, a Schedule Caste group of Indian society. The paper will look upon the socio-economic problems of the Dhobis of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji district of Assam. The Dhobi community of Assam is generally migrants from different states of Assam. This group of people came to Assam basically during the British regime of Assam as tea garden labourers. But after the British regime most of the people settled in Assam and are into different occupational sectors apart from the traditional occupation of washing clothes. The study will reflect on the problems which these people face socially and economically and will generate new sociological insights on the betterment of living for these people.
Stigma and its problems

The burning problem facing the country's about one fifth of the population is that of the problem of untouchability. It is one of the serious social problems of the Indian society. It is the greatest blot on humanity. It is a stigma attached to some people because of their ritually impure status and is of eternal source of pollution to others. Untouchability implies those disabilities which are imposed upon the scheduled castes by the higher castes. The untouchable castes are those who suffer from various social, religious, economic and political disabilities many of which are traditionally prescribed and socially enforced by the higher castes. It is estimated that this practice is rooted in the socio-cultural and religious life of the people of India for over two thousand years (Parvathamma, 1984).

It is believed that untouchability was born around 400 A.D (Rafel, 2010). It is seen that untouchability doesnot have a definite origin. The speculations of an optimum standard are hard to adhere this. The problem of significant notice is that untouchability is the known stigma that prevails around the country. Thus this is in the view that makes untouchables the deprived sections of the society. No one knows the origin of untouchability. All the existing theories are based on the conjectures of some kind. It may be said that the scheduled castes are socially, culturally and economically distinct from the rest of the population. They were unlawfully brought under the fold of Hinduism and were also reduced to assume the position of untouchables over a period of time. It may be stated that untouchability cannot exist in the absence of either the higher castes or the scheduled castes since it is practiced by one group i.e. higher castes over the other i.e. scheduled castes. It is the state of mind in which the higher castes believe strongly that the scheduled castes are unworthy of touching. It is the ways and means by which both the higher castes and the scheduled castes are constantly reminded that the later are unworthy for the former not only for touching but also for even approaching. It is the disease which has corrupted the minds not only of higher castes but also of the scheduled castes and, as a result, they do not look at people objectively, rationally and on the basis of merit as fellow human beings. It directs their minds to determine the status of each individual whom they interact with only on the basis of the particular caste they belong to. They, therefore, accord superior status to the higher castes and lower status to the scheduled castes (Ramaiah, 1995). Whatever may be the origin of the untouchability, its persistence even today negates all the
values that Indian Society is trying to realize through development and modernization. Observance of untouchability is undeniably condemned publicly by almost everybody. However, a very few people really practice what they preach in their private life. Surprisingly, the untouchability also exists among the various sub-castes of the scheduled castes themselves. The nature of this problem would have been much different, had the scheduled castes themselves succeeded in uprooting this evil amongst them first. Failure on their part to do so has adversely affected the whole movement against untouchability. The leaders particularly the scheduled caste leaders spearheading the fight against untouchability are seriously handicapped in putting forth their viewpoints forcefully and asking the people, in general, to remove the stigma of untouchability (Roy and Singh, 1987).

The problem of untouchability still exists in the society and it has become a cause of concern for one and all. The politicians, policy makers, social workers, intellectuals and all those who are victimized are grouping together to find out a solution to this great social evil confronting the society as a whole.

Although rigidity in the practice of untouchability is somehow disappearing from the society, yet the majority of the respondents are not favourably inclined towards it. The respondents in the present study were asked whether they believe in untouchability or not? In response to this question, almost all the respondents said that they do not believe in untouchability. Thus, it shows that at the attitudinal level, the scheduled caste people do not believe in untouchability but in actual practice, it is observed that the untouchability is highly practiced in the study area. However, it has been observed that those respondents who are well educated, exposed to the outside world and are in Govt. /Semi Gov., jobs, while outside their homes and villages do not believe in and practice untouchability but while at home, they are compelled by the social circumstances i.e. the societal norms to believe in untouchability. Thus, it can be said that in actual practice, the untouchability still exists in the village communities and people still commonly follow it.

The Dhobis in the Shadows of untouchability

Dhobis are recognized by the constitution of India as the Scheduled Caste Community of India but in some part they are put under Other Backward Community. Dhobis in India are largely engaged in their traditional job, due to the social exclusion in the day to day life. There is not
much literature available to know about the socio-economic and political conditions of Dhobis, but the study I am doing on the dhobis of India would definitely bring some basic ethnographical understanding of these community. Paper largely focuses on the socio-economic and political dynamics of the dhobis in India and tries to bring some sensible understanding to the readers who do not know much about these communities in general.

In India religion does matter when castes come in it, and it is also true that all other religion has been affected by the Hindu religion, so one can understand caste is obviously the important part of these religions and without it cannot exist. My study suggests that dhobis are the most backward communities when we talk of social and political parts. More than ninety percent of this community is engaged in pity jobs, because they do not have any option of getting jobs. Very rarely one could find in job and that of very low profile jobs. Even today largely these communities are engaged in their traditional works live washing and ironing cloths. Even if they migrate to any parts of India prefer to do their traditional works reason, they find very difficulties to get other jobs, because large scale of social exclusions in day to day life. Now it is high time for this community to assert themselves and find out the way out and give up their traditional jobs which is not only dirty but also against the dignity. No doubt economically they are well in many parts compare to other scheduled caste communities, but educationally, politically, they are highly backward and government of India and states government have to take it very strongly to uplift these community so that they could also get their basic share as the citizen of India. Now their profession has been taken by the capitalist world and now it named as dry-cleans which is one the biggest markets.

**Methodology**

Survey method is used to collect data from the districts of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur districts respectively. A purposive sampling method is used where a total number of 406 individuals are interviewed with the help of an interview schedule. The main parameters of education and occupation are taken into account to highlight the socio-economic problems among the dhobis.
Educational Level and Awareness about the Provisions in Constitution to Eradicate Untouchability

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Serial No</th>
<th>Educational Levels of Respondents</th>
<th>Awareness about the constitutional provisions to eradicate poverty</th>
<th></th>
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<td>aware</td>
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A cursory look at the table shows that majority of the respondents who are educated above middle levels are aware about the provisions in the Constitution to eradicate the practice of untouchability from the society while majority of those respondents who are either illiterates or educated up to primary level are not aware about the same. This indicates that higher the educational level of the respondents, higher is their awareness about the provisions of the Constitution to eradicate the practice of untouchability while less is the education level of the respondents; the less is their awareness about the same. The chi-square test also shows a significant relationship between the educational level of the respondents and their awareness about the provisions in the constitution to eradicate the practice of untouchability.

**Conclusion**

Although there has been a gradual increase in the literacy rate of the scheduled castes over the years yet the gap between the higher castes and scheduled castes in their educational achievement is still very wide. No doubt, facilities in education such as scholarships, hostels, free
text books and dresses, special coaching for the competitive examinations, reservation of seats in educational institution, etc. have proved to be of great use but are stated to be inadequate by the respondents. These facilities are utilized marginally and suffer from bureaucratic procedures and do not reach the needy scheduled caste people well in time. They also stated that during their studies, the scheduled castes face problems like lack of guidance, lack of conducive environment, discriminations, financial and language problems. All these problems affect their motivation and performance in education. Further, in case of getting higher education to their wards, they face the problem to send their children to the cities and towns, for getting higher education as the facilities of higher education are not available in the rural areas. Their socio-economic conditions do not allow them to send their wards to higher educational institutions in the cities. Most of the scheduled castes also face problem to acquire higher educational loan as they have no knowledge from where to get such type of loans. It has been reported by majority of the respondents that they have not been benefited by the facility of getting higher educational loan for their children.

In political sphere, it has been found that the provision of political reservation although has provided an opportunities to the scheduled castes to get elected to the local bodies, state legislatures and the Parliament, yet their say in decision making, be it at the grassroots level or district level or at the state level or the national level, it is hardly given the due weightage and consideration. Similar is the attitudes of the various political parties of which they are the members. The elected scheduled castes leaders are often used by their higher caste political leaders to meet their own political and personal needs. The scheduled castes' representatives are also often unable to effectively articulate the interests of the scheduled castes in the legislatures and at various other platforms. It has been stated by the respondents that due to the poor economic conditions of the scheduled castes, they face the problem of finance to contest the elections to the elected bodies and they also lack the potential to fight these elections. They also pointed out that the scheduled castes in the village communities are still being exploited and discriminated by the higher caste people on one pretext or the other.

Further, it has also been observed that all the scheduled caste people in the village communities want to avail the facilities and concessions meant for them even if their socio-economic conditions have improved. Further, they also do not want to get these facilities and concessions
discontinued especially meant for the scheduled castes even in the case of those scheduled castes that are above the creamy layer and as long as they come at par with the higher caste people and the evils of castism and untouchability are abolished from the society.

References


