Scheduled Castes, Conversions and Socio-economic differentials: A Comparative Study of Two Social Groups in Maharashtra State

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Abstract

The Scheduled castes in India constitute 16.2 per cent of India's total population and their presence can be found in all over India with different proportions. The potential of Buddhism as an instrument of social change and its sociological relevance to address a social problem (Untouchability) was well realized by Dr. Ambedkar and he appealed to all downtrodden and oppressed people to embrace Buddhism for their emancipations and to live a life with dignity and respect. Of the 59 SCs in Maharshtra only the Mahars (Neo-Buddhist) got converted into Buddhism in 1956. The other two dominant SCs in Maharashtra namely Matang and Chamar preferred to remain in the old Hindu fold as Hindu Dalits. The influence of Buddhism on Neo-Buddhist is not restricted to its spiritual realm alone but it is helping the people to their all-round development in all spheres of life It has brought the psychological changes and changed their life styles.(Kurne, 1997, Sharma, 2003, Beltz, 2005,).It is now a well-known fact that there is a wide Socio-economic disparity between the converted and non-converted scheduled castes in Maharashtra state.

The present study tries to find out the reasons behind their disparity and to what extent the conversion to Buddhism as an intervention has helped or not helped to the converted formerly untouchable castes.

Keywords: Scheduled Caste, Conversion, Buddhism, Socio-eco differentials, Dr Ambedkar

Introduction

Scheduled castes in India constitute 16.6 percent of India's total population (Census, 2011) and their presence can be found in all over India with different proportions. In the states like Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal more than 25 percent of the state population is scheduled castes. As far as the state of Maharashtra is concern of the total 11.24 crore, scheduled caste population in the State is 1.33 crore that is 11.8 per cent of the total population (Census, 2011). Literacy rate of scheduled

caste population has increased from 71.9 per cent in 2001 to 79.7 per cent in 2011. [1] Status and plights of these scheduled castes differs from caste to caste even though they share a common history. Almost all of them were out castes and were called as untouchables as per the Hindu Dharma Shastra. What is remarkable about them is that after the India's independence, they became target groups for Government's welfare policies including the policies of positive discrimination (Reservations and fixed quotas in various sectors including services and education) The studies like Patwardhan, (1973), Parvathammma (1984), Shivram (1990), Salve, (1998), Wankhede, (1999) and Karde (2010) shows that there is a differential impact of enactment of these policies on the various scheduled castes in India. Some caste have benefited and marched ahead in their socio-economic developments others lagged behind. The question therefore arises why this has happened? The Jats in Punjab, Chamars in Uttar Pradesh, Malas in Andhra Pradesh and Mahars in Maharashtra are relatively well developed scheduled castes in India and all of them shares a common feature that is they are staunch Ambedkarites and have walked on the path shown by Dr B. R Ambedkar. They are modern Buddhist. The untouchable castes which denied the leadership and legacy of Dr Ambedkar and preferred to continue in the Hindu fold are observed to remain socially and economically backward.

The solidarity and unity amongst these scheduled castes is yet another unresolved issue. The scheduled castes if united can pose some formidable challenge to the cultural and political hegemony of upper castes Hindus. Dr. Ambedkar in his speech delivered at Solapur on December, 31, 1937 had openly addressed the question of disunity amongst various sub-castes within scheduled castes. He remarked: "... first, it is misfortune for all of us that there is no unity amongst the various castes such as Mahar,Chambhar, Bhangi etc. prevailing amongst the untouchables. The real reason for absence of this unity is the existence of caste distinction (jati- bhed) in Hindu society. the painful part of it is that, Hindus not only do not remove the caste discrimination ...on the contrary, they strive for strengthening the differences amongst the untouchables, taking undue advantage of their ignorance. They support Mangs and raise them against Mahars; they support Chambhars and raise them against Mahars and Mangs..though the original responsibility of the caste distinction is on Hindu society, for us, to forget our responsibility would be suicidal. It is our foremost duty to remove the caste distinction.. unless we achieve this, we would never prosper." [2]

The fear expressed by Dr. Ambedkar proved true. After the first Lok Sabha general election Ambedkar was defeated by a 7th pass candidates, a Congress candidate, N.S.Kajrolkar, a chamar by caste, defeated Ambedkar.

Hinduization of Dalits (Scheduled Castes)

The Scheduled caste being ex-untouchables have fought a long battle against the Hinduism as a victims of its pro high caste ideology. The hinduzation of sections of Dalits is great set back for their emancipation movement. The Sangha Privar, the right wing Hindu organisation has been for a

long time following a policy of Hinduizing Dalits and Adivasis through the active intervention of variety of organizations (Panikkar K. N., 2004) The Hindutva Projet of the Sangh Parivar implemented by its various Political and religious Offshoot organization throughout India is basically meant for communalizing the innocent Dalits and Adivasis and transformed them into a veritable army of Hindutava to fight its street battle.[4]

The Dominant Schedule Castes among SCs

The data shows that there are 22 dominant castes in the country, which counted for 55.36 percent of the total schedule caste as per census, 1981. Apart from this, there are more than 1000 other smaller castes, which account for remaining 44.64 percent of the total SCs population. The problems and issues of these 22 dominant SCs are discussed at lengths at various levels including academicians since many years. The problem today is that some kind of differentiations is being made between the dominant SCs and other small and Non-dominant SCs. This is the result of decade's long policies of the respective governments managed by the ruling classes.[5]

Role of Buddhism

The potential of Buddhism as an instrument of social change and its relevance to address a social problem (untouchability) was well realized by Dr. Ambedkar and he appealed to all downtrodden and oppressed people to embrace Buddhism for their emancipations and to live a life with dignity and respect. Of the 59 Scheduled castes in Maharshtra only the Mahars(Neo-Buddhist) got converted into Buddhism on 14 October 1956 at Nagapur as a part of mass conversion enacted by Dr B R Ambedkar. The other two dominant scheduled castes in Maharashtra namely Matang and Chamar preferred to remain in the old Hindu fold as Hindu Dalits. Over the period of time the visible influence of Buddhism on Neo-Buddhist can be seen not only in spiritual realm but also in their all round development in all spheres of life. It has brought the psychological and materialistic changes and changed their life styles.(Kurne, 1997, Sharma, 2003, Beltz, 2005) It is now a well known fact that there is a wide Socio-economic disparity between the converted and non-converted scheduled castes in Maharashtra state leading to the demands by the underdeveloped scheduled castes to re-categorized them on the basis of their level of backwardness and fix a reserve quota within quota meant for scheduled caste for the purpose of government services and educational opportunities.

Recent Developments

The Backwardness of these communities and the possible ways of removing it is being debated in different parts of India and almost in every state during this decade. The underdeveloped scheduled castes in each of the State is demanding separate quota within quota (with the blessing of ruling caste's divide and rule policy), as an answer for their under development. The states like Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh had given

separate quota to such castes amongst scheduled caste which was later challenged in Supreme Court of India. The Supreme Court of India in its judgment on 5th November, 2004 has struck down their demands by saying that the sub-categorization of scheduled castes does not fit in the scheme of Constitution as well as in Article 341(1) Scheduled caste forms a class by themselves and it is beyond the power of the state to sub- classify a class already recognized by the constitution. The apex court further said that it is also the violation of Article 14 of the constitution. All the three states, viz., Punjab, Haryana and Andhra Pradesh have withdrawn their respective orders of sub-categorization [6] The central government is set on bringing the constitutional amendment Act to nullify the effect of Supreme Court's Judgment.

Review of literature

        There are numerous studies done by the Indians and the scholars in abroad on various aspects of caste and caste system. The scheduled castes and their problems has remained a matter of discussion amongst various Dalits and non-Dalits intellectuals. The socio-economic development of Neo-Buddhist after their conversion into Buddhism shines throughout the Indian History as how best a religion can be employed for addressing and solving the historical blunders. The Neo Buddhist Movement in India has firmly established the sociological value of Buddhism. The economist amongst the social scientist refused to discuss religion, according to them notions pertaining to religion or religious behavior did not confirm to the canons of rationality, as there was no means-end relationships between re-ligious ideas and beliefs and out come of such ideas and beliefs (Damale, Y. B., 1982) Marx described the religion as opium of masses and observed that religion is being use for exploiting the masses Comte discussed the stages of human development from theological as most simple stage to scientific stage as a most advanced stage. He felt that with the advancement of science, religion will recede, even get extinct.(Ibid).Y.D Damale further points out that ethical and moral values which are really non rational exert a great deal of influence on human affairs and though non rational have to be recognized as an important force in human society which cannot be explained by employing canons of rationality. Marx Weber went further and contended that a firm linkage could be established between religious belief, values and rational action. He used the method of agreement and difference and proposed that religion or certain religious ideas and beliefs are directly conducive to development of rationality, the scientific sprit, economic development and so on (Ibid., 31)

        Chandra Ramesh and Sangh Mittra (2003) the authors in their book, 'Dalits and their Future,' discussed the impact of Neo-Buddhism on the Dalits in India and abroad. The authors opine that the direct impact of Neo-Buddhism among the downtrodden masses on the whole at national level is evident in the emergence of Dalit society. The author referring to the impact of Neo-Buddhist elsewhere in the world points out that there is

a definite impact of Neo-Buddhism in the United Kingdom, US and many other Western countries.

Sharma Sanjay P (2003) the author in his book entitled, 'Dr. Amedkar : A Crusader of Social Justice,' has discussed in detailed how a religion like Neo-Buddhism is used by Dr. Ambedkar as an instrument to achieve social justice and addressing the social and economic problems of the Dalits. The author opines that neo-Buddhism does not restricts its influence in the spiritual realm only, it is helping people to an all round development in every sphere of life.

Patvardhan Sunanda (1965) in her Ph. D. thesis investigated the changes in internal structure of six scheduled castes in the urban areas of Pune city. It is the record of the pattern of behavior as it is today and the description of the material changes, the compromises and the non –changes are revealed particularly in the case of Mahars, who are the most numerous and advanced among all the scheduled castes, because of their conversion to Buddhism enemas in 1956. On the one hand published material was collected and on the other 100 families each from three major castes (Mahar, Mang and Chambhar) were selected and 30 families from three different minor castes were selected likewise in all 390 respondents were interviewed. The study found that not a single 'Mahar' had kept up his original occupation in this urban sample. Ambedkar's leadership and the awakening of self-respect, and conversion to Buddhism are some of the important reason for change of traditional occupations in case of Mahars. In case of other two major Scheduled Castes, Matang and Chambhar they still follows the traditional occupations. On educational transformation the study finds that 'Mahars' have made good progress in education, compared to the other untouchable communities. However, the researcher observed that their position in rural areas is still unchanged. They are still backwards educationally and economically, compared to higher castes. (p. 95)

Shastree Uttara (1981) her Ph.D. thesis, 'Neo-Buddhists: As a Marginal Group in India', aims at examining the marginal characteristics of the Neo-Buddhist as a group and the changes brought about in their behavior and lifestyles because of their conversion to Neo-Buddhism. The study was conducted in the city of Pune. Preliminary house hold survey of 212 households was conducted from the residential clusters of Neo-Buddhists. Out of this survey of 212 house holds a further simple random sample of 100 cases was drown for the detail enquiry by using a guided enquiry schedule. The study   found that acceptance of Buddhism was mainly motivated by the desire to raise one's status. The findings revealed that economic position of the whole group was low. (P. 415) After the conversions the Neo-Buddhists were expected to rejects all aspects of Hinduism- their fasts and festivals, God and Goddesses. However, this study reveals that the complete negation of the old has not been still possible for them, their religious practices consists of the elements of both the pattern traditional Hindu 'Mahar pattern' and Buddishts pattern. However, the study observed the changes in performance of marriage and funeral ceremonies, in adoption of new festivals like

the 'Buddha Jayanti', 'Ambedkar Jayanti', and observance of fast to honor 'Buddha Pournima'.

Johannes Beltz (2005) in his study, 'Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation,' interviewed 299 Buddhists from Urban areas of Maharashtra, particularly from western cities like Mumbai and Pune. The respondents were taken from various spectrum of society from slum dwelling Buddhists to a university Professor Buddhists, the main purpose of the study was how the ex-untouchables perceived themselves as a Buddhists and how Buddhism has worked as a tool of emancipation for the untouchable/Mahars in Maharshtra. The author points out that conversions has brought the psychological changes, it has changed their lifestyle and the way of life completely by giving them new out look But much could not be achieve on economic front. Most of the Buddhists occupy low paid jobs; they are un-employed and excluded from society and the situation is worse in villages where in two third of Buddhists live today.

Kurne Anjali (1997) in her Ph. D. thesis, 'Ethnic Identity and Social Mobility: A case study of the Buddhist in Pune,' analyzed the relationship between the ethnic identity and social mobility among Buddhist community in the city of Pune and argues that the assertions of new identity as Buddhist by the Dalits/Mahar had lessen their social disabilities, dis-privileges, oppressions and led to their upward mobility and socio-cultural change among them was a result of conversion to Buddhism.

Setting of the Study

The study is conducted in Pune City. The city has sizable population of scheduled castes residing in slums. The City is one of the most important educational and industrial center in Maharashtra and recently came up as an IT hub in Pune. The city has a mixed cosmopolitan population coming from different parts of Maharashtra and India. Forty percent of Pune's population, an estimated 14 lakh people, lives in slums. Every year, the number of people migrating to the city is continuously increasing. The city might be an IT hub and a center of learning, but it is fast gaining another epithet, that of a city of slums.

Objective of the study

1. To study and understand socio-economic profiles of two different scheduled castes living in urban setting.

2. To study and find out the causes of their socio-economic differentials with special reference to the role of conversion (Buddhism)

3. To study and analyze the problems in the unifications of two castes and to make recommendations.

Methodology

By considering the Buddhism as an intervention tool, the researcher has selected two different scheduled castes, one of them converted to Buddhism

(Mahar) as an interventional group and other not-converted scheduled caste (Matang) as a non-interventional group. The Slums/communities wherein both these castes co-habits were identified and proportionate number of respondents were selected from four different communities namely, Ambedkar Nagar, Dandekar Bridge, Ram Nagar and Bhavani Peth. In all 74 respondents, 38 from converted Scheduled caste, and 36 from non-converted scheduled caste were selected and they were interviewed with the help of predetermined set of questions. The responses have been analyzed so as to know the extent of their socio-economic mobility, the reasons for the same, how the two castes perceives each other's prospects in terms of development and how Buddhism have favored or not favored as a tool of change in their social mobility is also investigated.

Sampling Procedure

The multistage simple random technique was used. In the first stage the slums habited by the scheduled castes communities were identified. In the second stage four slums (communities) predominantly inhabited by the Mahar caste and Matang caste (mix population) were selected. In the third stage 38 respondents from Converted Scheduled caste and 36 respondents from non-converted scheduled castes, likewise 74 respondents were selected and investigated by applying the purposive sampling technique. The data was drawn mainly from primary sources such as interviewing, discussions and observations. The secondary source of data includes the various empirical studies conducted before and the government's reports. The data thus collected was scrutinized, edited and entered into computer and analyzed with the help of SPSS.

Result and discussion

Profile of Respondents: In all 74 respondents were investigated for the purpose of this study. The sex wise division of the respondents shows that 59 (79.7 %) of them were males and 15 (20.3 %) were females. The mean age of the respondents was 34 with minimum age as 19 and maximum age as 58. The caste wise breakup of the total respondents shows nearby equal representations of both the castes. As far as the marital status is concern it is observed that 58 (78.4 %) were married and remaining 16 (21.6%) were unmarried. Looking at the level of education it revealed that 10 (13.5 %) of the respondents were illiterate and 12 (16.2 %) of them were educated up to the primary level. The maximum number of respondents were educated up to high school and secondary levels and only 11(15 %) of them had completed their graduation. The mean income of the respondents was Rs.6000/ with minimum income as Rs.1500/ and maximum income as Rs.15000/. More than a quarter of the respondents are earning near about Rs.5000 to Rs10, 000 per month and almost equal numbers of them are in income group 3500 to 5500. Less than a quarter of the respondents are living in a house made of Cements with slap on the roof, whereas majorities (65 per cent) of them are living in a house of made of tins Patra's and

bricks. Looking at the educational background of women respondents it is found that more than 35 percent of the women folk was illiterates and women educated up to primary, high school and secondary level was found to be 20 percent in each category. The Number of women educated up to higher secondary and above was negligible. The women's participation in the workforce indicates that majorities (62.2 percent) of the women were housewives and 22 percent of them were working as domestic servants. While looking at the educational status of the respondents in a caste wise manner what we get is number of illiterates respondents are more 10 (11 percent) in a non-converted caste (Matang) where as it is very negligible 2 (2.7 percent) in respondents converted into Buddhism. Similarly, almost 20 percent of the Buddhist respondents were educated up to higher secondary level as compare to just 10 percent in case of non-converted respondents. Educational advancement amongst the Buddhist community is attributed to the conversion by the Buddhist respondents whereas the non-converted respondents did agree with the educational development of Buddhist but they do not directly attributes it to the conversion into Buddhism but most of them believe Dr. Ambedkar is the cause of their educational development. Dr. Ambedkar became a role model for the Buddhist and they followed his footprints, the non-converted opined.

Socio-Economic Disparity: A comparative View.

The present data does not differ much on the economic front. The economic conditions of both castes are more or less similar with little balance tilting in favor of Buddhist. However, several other studies conducted at larger scales and the secondary data made available by the government of India in the form of periodic census proved beyond doubt that the Buddhist (Neo-Buddhist)   in Maharashtra and elsewhere in India enjoy far better economic status. This fact was also accepted by all the respondents irrespective of their caste in a present study. This economic disparity is the main issue behind the sub-categorization movement initiated by non-converted Dalits/scheduled castes in India. When asked by the present researcher as to what extent their Socio-economic status is improved during the last few decades a quarter of the respondents from both the social groups believed that their Socio-economic status is somewhat improved but comparatively more number (15 percent) of respondents from Buddhist community opined that their status is well improved during the past few years as against 10 per cent from the non-converted respondents.Table No. 4). Further, this changed according to majority Buddhist respondents is due to the conversion whereas only 10 percent of the non-converted respondents relates this development to the conversion and a large number (33 percent) of them did not responds to this question because they could not anticipate the link between the development and conversion as an instrument of change.

Occupational Mobility

There seems to be generational occupational mobility in both the

groups. Most of them are first generational workers in a non-farm sector. The untouchables were driven out of the villages and were excluded from all kinds of dignified occupations except sweepers, cleanings, and scavenging and landless agriculture laborers. This has forced them to migrate to the city areas in search of better jobs, better life and an escape from social stigmas and taboos. Industrialization followed by urbanization provided some space for the Dalits and marginalized sections in terms of employment. The converted and non-converted scheduled castes have shown a remarkable occupational mobility. A good number of the respondents are self-employed and quite a number of them are involved in skillful occupations like construction workers, driving, paintings and other service based occupations.

Religion and Development

It was Max Weber, who brought religious discourse in the economic development of man. According to him our belief systems, our values and rituals can play an important role in the economic development. Similarly, Dr. Ambedkar was also of the firm belief that philosophy of a particular religion can be a cause of the downfall of the people following that philosophy. The researcher did try to investigate this aspect in the present study. Upon asking the respondents as to whether, religion is related to human development as many as half of the Buddhist respondents believed that our faith and development are related. If the religion is superstitious, based on karmakanda and blind faith it result into unwarranted and excessive economic expenses and we might live an unproductive life. When the same question was put to the non-converted respondents only 20 percent of them had said that there is a relation between religion and development 12   percent of them were disagree to the statement that there is a relation between religion and development. It was surprising to be noted that 16 percent of the non- converted respondents were undecided on the issue of relation between religion and development.

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