
Historiography of Scheduled Castes in Contemporary India with special reference to Punjab

Shefali Chauhan

*Assistant Professor in History, Dev Samaj college for women, Ferozepur,
Punjab, India.*

Abstract

Caste remained an attractive topic to be explored among all the scholars of South Asia. There are many academic writings on castes in India and many scholarly studies can be seen. Many specialists define it as a system of elaborately stratified social hierarchy that distinguishes India from all other societies. Caste has been achieved significance attention in social, political and academic debates as race in the United States, class in Britain and faction in Italy. Historians have taken study of political and economic change in the subcontinent, both before and during colonial times. Since Independence, interest in social and economic history developed mainly due to the growing awareness and concerns for tracing the cause of contemporary social problems and economic backwardness of the country particularly of the lower castes, which are considered to be on the lowest rung of the ladder both socially as well as economically. In the present paper an attempt is made to see the various works done by scholars for scheduled castes in India with special reference to contemporary Punjab. The concept of Purity and Pollution, untouchability will be discussed from the point of view of various scholars.

Key Words: Scheduled castes, untouchables, Purity and Pollution.

Introduction

Caste remained an attractive topic to be explored among all the scholars of South Asia. There is a lot of academic writings on caste and many scholarly studies can be seen. Many specialists define it as a system of elaborately stratified social hierarchy that distinguishes India from all other societies, caste has achieved much the same significance in social, political and academic debates as race in the United States, class in Britain and faction in Italy.¹

Historians have taken study of political and economic change in the subcontinent, both before and during colonial times.

During colonial and Postcolonial times many sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists as well as historians have dabbled with the question of caste and social, economic as well as political condition of the scheduled caste people. In the context of India Dhananjay Keer² mentions the biography of the great chief architect of the constitution Dr B. R. Ambedkar who worked a lot for the all-round development of scheduled caste people. The work describes the early life of Baba Saheb Ambedkar and the part he played in liberating the suppressed humanity in India. Dumont³ views caste as a fourfold Varna based system, organized around the central axiom of purity and pollution, whereby

Brahmins are on the top followed by Kashatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras or Untouchables at the bottom.

M. N Srinivas⁴ talks about social change in modern India. He talks about sanskritization and westernization. By sanskritization he means it is a process by which “low” Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology and ways of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, “twice-born” caste. Further the work talks on westernization and explains that British rule brought new technology, means of communication were developed, laid the foundation of modern state by establishing modern bureaucracy, army, schools, colleges, roads canal colonies etc. They codified law and order and most important abolished many social evils which as a result helped in reducing the gap between the high and the low caste. Public transport further reduced the untouchability followed since ages. Another eminent works of M. N Srinivas⁵, talks about caste in twentieth century where articles on caste and women by various authors throws light on social as well as economic condition of scheduled caste people. Ghurye⁶ talks about the features of caste system and explains the segmental division of the society where the status of a person is not determined by his wealth rather by traditional importance of caste in which he had the luck of being born. N. D. Kamble⁷ talks about Untouchability and explains about the historical background and origin of the varna system. The work discusses issues like density of population of scheduled castes, urbanization, educational level, political participation, social reforms before Independence and the constitutional safeguards.

S. K. Gupta⁸ a prominent historian in his works, talk about the role played by scheduled castes in politics in the late nineteenth century. This work, explains how the Government of India Act of 1935 served as a precursor of the constitutional rights and guarantees that the scheduled castes were to enjoy under the constitution of the independent India. Its enactment marked an end to their most crucial formative and politically rewarding struggle and laid the foundation of an honorable position for them in an otherwise heavily caste ridden society. Dipankar Gupta⁹- talk about Social Stratification and divides his work in four section which discusses caste system and mentions caste profiles, consisting of writings which highlight the variations to the ideal pattern of the traditional caste system. Susan Bayly¹⁰ describes caste its themes and approaches as well as explains the history of caste system. The work explains everyday experience of caste in colonial India and then talks about caste debates and emergence of Gandhian Nationalism. The work is helpful to understand the Western orientalist and colonial perception of caste.

In context of Punjab there are various valuable works during colonial time period, that throws light on the social as well as economic condition of the people of Punjab in general as well as of scheduled caste in particular. The two important works of G. S Chhabra¹¹ and B. S. Saini¹² are quite, important to understand the social and economic history of Punjab. There is little mention of the lower castes and the caste system that prevailed in late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Both the works mention life and manners of people, social customs, religious beliefs, development of education, agriculture, trade and industry, communication and overall condition in terms of prosperity of the people. These

works do not analyze the impact of these developments on people of different sections of the society. Nor do they show the social and economic change under colonial rule. They just provides an overview of general social and economic condition of the Punjab under British rule.

In the colonial period Denzil Ibbetson¹³ (1916), comes forth with his pioneer work on the caste system present in Punjab and gives details of various castes and tribes settled in various parts of Punjab. His work is grouped into three parts in which the first group is that of land owning and agriculture castes, second group is that of professional and mercantile castes and the third group is that of vagrant menial and artisans. The last of the three groups comprises all the lower strata of society which is subdivided into 11 columns. There is another work by Tom G. Kessinger¹⁴ which throws light on the social change in rural areas. His work takes into account demographic, social as well as economic change in agriculture and industry which affected the village life in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Further, it mentions that how the factors like government policies and programmes, population growth, innovation of new techniques, agricultural pattern, urbanization and migration were taking place in a passage of time in a village of Punjab. This work is based on wide range of source material like the village records, census and settlement reports and other official and non-official contemporary accounts. In the study of *Vilayatpur* which, throws light on various categories of people belonging to different caste and class, including the lower caste people and artisans who served the agriculturists are discussed in detail.

Ethne K. Marengo¹⁵ also a social anthropologist studies social change in the Punjab during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and focuses on the response of the Sikhs to the opportunities provided by the British rule. The work is mainly based on census reports. It explains the change in occupation that occurred among the Sikhs and the menial castes or the untouchables during colonial rule. British rule helped to do away with the untouchability as maximum people from menial castes were employed in building rail and transport and settled in canal colonies. The work says that, firstly there was corporate caste change that is with irrigation projects and establishment of canal colonies which provided opportunities to Chuhra Sikhs, Mazhabi Sikhs and Chamar Sikhs to turn to agriculture, thereby corporately raising their status. Secondly, The imperial army gave the Mazhabi Sikhs, a large contingent, the opportunity to corporately raise their status, since they changed their occupations of traditionally sweeping and scavenging and became soldiers. There also occurred individual social mobility. Cash payments affected the menial and untouchable castes when they migrated to the towns or canal colonies and became skilled or unskilled laborers. Building of roads, houses, factories provided them cash money which increased their purchasing power. These menial castes who were paid in kind only earlier were allured towards the clean jobs that were highly paid as compared to their traditional occupation. Further the British rule tried to do away with the evil of untouchability by opening common schools. It was observed that there was tremendous increase in literacy among the artisans and the agriculturist class but the menials or untouchables lagged far behind.

Another two eminent historians who have worked on agrarian society of Punjab in colonial times is of Himadri Banerjee¹⁶ and Harish. C. Sharma.¹⁷ Banerjee talks about the agrarian society of Punjab and how colonization, irrigation projects, commercialization of agriculture, land revenue administration, rural credits and changing pattern of relations between tenants and zamindars was influencing the society of Punjab. There are *Kamins* which provides information on general condition of the lower castes as well as artisans. Their mode of payment and income is discussed in details. Further the work elaborates the peasant proprietor relationship with the village servants who formed a large chunk of the rural population and rendered invaluable services almost throughout the year and their wages were determined by customary rules. The work deals with changing status and economic condition of the village servants known as *vadee kamins* whose labor was intimately connected with agriculture and *Khangi kamins* or the house hold menials whose services were less regular. Banerjee has drawn heavily upon the land revenue settlement reports and sources like the surveys of prices and wages, district gazetteers and the records in the office of the financial commissioner Punjab.

Sharma¹⁸ on the other hand work talks about the social change that was taking place during colonial rule. He talks about artisan caste of Punjab, their changing profession. He takes into account the position of the artisans in the traditional economic, technological and educational developments in colonial rule having a direct or indirect bearing on the artisans and occupational mobility leading to a new pattern of relationships within an artisan caste and with others. The work says that the new patterns of social relations eventually led towards the emergence of socio-political organizations among the lower castes leading in some cases also to political articulation. The artisans were further divided into groups who performed clean occupation and unclean occupation. Those who performed unclean occupation were called the untouchables in the society. The artisans worked for the village land owner under the *sepi* arrangements also known as *Jajmani* system. The most important among the *sepidars* were those who assisted in agriculture labor, carpenters(Tarkhans), potters (Kumhars), Blacksmith (Lohars), etc were called *vade Kamins* and were superior while the Lohars and Mochis were the *laude* or inferior *Kamins*. The Chamars who provided leather products when not engaged in traditional work were required to do several works like white-washing the guest house of the village or plastering of the houses of the *Jajmans* with mud. At times Chamars were expected to render unpaid labor or *begar* and were called *begaris*. The *begar* included carrying the fodder for cattle of the land owners from the fields, carrying the luggage of the official from one place to another etc. Talking about residential settlement, the work explains that different castes were expected to live within their separate residential enclosures or *galis*. The Chamars, however were supposed to live away from the main residential site. The situation was not much different in urban areas too. These two works focuses on agrarian society of Punjab and little talks about the lower caste people.

John C. B. Webster¹⁹ explains the condition of dalits their origin, background, conversion, mass movement, their politics, constitution and compensatory discrimination, their reservation policies, social change etc during late nineteen and early twentieth century. Explaining the condition of "Chuhras" of Punjab the work, explains that occupation of these people varied due to region and religion that is in the eastern Punjab they performed the

work of sweeping, making dung cakes, grazing cattles etc whereas in central Punjab they did these things but were primarily, agricultural laborers. The converted Sikh "Chuhras" called the Mazahabi Sikh improved their status a lot as they were recruited to the armies of Sikh kingdom and the British who gave them a good livelihood and respect in the society. The "Chamars" were bound to village land lords through 'Jajmani system' that is they got certain hereditary rights like rights to dead cattle, shares of harvest etc but in exchange had to provide lots of services to the landlord including the menial jobs without any compensation. In the beginning of twentieth century these "Chamars" expanded their business towards industries and became wealthy and left some practices which were degrading as well as imitated the life style of higher castes. The foreign Christian missionaries took a great initiative for the upliftment of this class rather than the Indian Christians who were unenthusiastic and even antagonistic towards the mass movement.

Further there are a lot of contemporary works like of Mark Juergensmeyer²⁰ who explains untouchability in Punjab. He talks about the nonviolent movements for social change in which lower caste activists were involved. He has mentioned the foundation of Ad- Dharm movement in Punjab, its beginning, spread and decline he has also elaborated the influence of Ravi Das and Rishi Valmiki on their followers and the conversion of the untouchables towards Christianity. The work talks about the ex- untouchables of post independent Punjab, how were they re-located and whether they shifted from their places during partition etc. D. C. Ahir²¹ who, studies the influence of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar on Punjab, especially on the down trodden talks about the Ad- Dharam movement. His work mentions about the three visit of Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar to Punjab and how different religions allured Dr Ambedkar to join their sect but he inclined towards Buddhism and finds equality in it. S. L. Viridi²² work in Punjabi is an important informative work where history of caste is discussed with all dalit movements like Ad-Dharm, First Dalit conference, London round table conference, Poona pact, Republican party of India and Bahujan Samaj party, Mandal commission, Buddhist movements in Punjab. Further the work elaborates the dalit leaders and great men who worked for the welfare of scheduled caste people in Punjab. This work highlights the political scenario and the movements that took place in Punjab from 1901 to 2000.

M. S. Gill²³ edited work mentions different articles which focuses on the social, economic and cultural changes experienced by the people of Punjab in the wake of agrarian developments. The process of economic development and social change becomes more relevant in the regime of liberalization and globalization. Through various articles like that of Surinder Jodhka who looks into the demographic changes over time and his analyzing relates to population birth rate, death rate, sex ratio, landholdings and working population. The work concludes that agricultural growth has been responsible for decline of absolute poverty in Punjab. Further explaining that Punjab has not been able to attract large scale investment in the industrial sector as well as lacks performance in social development. His work also touches the issue of untouchability in Punjab and role of various reform movements. His work says that Chamars and Ad-Dharmis are the most prosperous people if compared to rest of the scheduled caste people in Punjab. His work views that institution of caste is comparatively weak in Punjab. Contrarily, Gill in his paper "Reservation and

Protective Justice finds it a social reality, which not only provides ground for social exploitation but also avenues for the mobility of scheduled castes". His study based on microanalysis affirms the perpetuation of structural inequalities, despite reservation policy Malkit Kaur²⁴ in her paper finds decline in sex ratio due to practice of female foeticide in the state and lack of education increases gender bias. Many other authors have talked on agrarian development, green revolution, financing of weaker sections, political empowerment of women etc.

Harish. K. Puri^{25,26} explains the social, economic as well as political position of scheduled caste people in Punjab. Various articles have been contributed in his edited work in order to understand the change that occurred with passage of time. How demography, green revolution, social, religious, political as well as economic equality led to the upliftment of scheduled caste people in Punjab. Paramjit S. Judge and Gurpreet Bal's²⁷ work explains that in case of Punjab where scheduled caste population is in largest proportion and maximum people belong to egalitarian religion that is Sikhism. Caste inequality do exist in Punjab despite government efforts to provide equal status to scheduled caste people by providing various benefits in all walks of life, be it economic, social or political. The work analyzes the socio-economic position of scheduled caste people by looking at the demography in rural and urban settings, their work occupation, empowerment, education and emigration.

Ronki Ram²⁸ has worked on dalits of Punjab and provides ample knowledge to understand the social, economic as well as political condition of scheduled caste people in Punjab. His articles touches various issues that the people of this community face like that of the caste conflicts, relation with the upper caste, impact of the green revolution, Ad-Dharm, emergence of *deras* which are providing relief to dalits in getting social equality, conversions taking place in order to gain social equality and were those conversions actually providing social equality to the lot. He also talks about conversions and sanskritisation in one of his article where he explains that conversion is a common practice among dalits to evade the social inequality or untouchability they face. All these works cited above gives an understanding of the social and economic condition of scheduled caste people but the questions regarding position of scheduled caste women remains unanswered in all the above scholarly works. An attempt is being made to fill this gap in history. Since the work will be interdisciplinary so these works provides a good understanding of the contemporary scenario in Punjab but the research work will be to analyze the social and economic condition of scheduled caste women of Punjab and district Ferozepur in a historical perspective.

Talking about women social as well as economic condition during late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the works of Radha Kumar²⁹ and Geraldine Forbes³⁰ elaborates that the nineteenth century was a period in which the rights and wrongs of women became major issues. Though attempts were made to reform the condition of Indian women but that too was largely conducted by men. The work provides a good understanding of general condition of women in 19th and twentieth century but the issue of scheduled caste women remains absent as there is focus on a few upper caste women who worked for the welfare of women. Forbes further talks on reform movement, which was established by men to

educate women and how education changed their life and brought them to take part in public life. The work discusses about the participation of women in freedom struggle and their role in the colonial economy. The work talks about role of women and their changing status in nineteenth century under colonial rule, to the twentieth century after Independence. Kiran Pawar³¹ in her edited works talk about social, economic, political as well as cultural perspective of women in India. Various authors have contributed articles regarding women issues during ancient, medieval, modern as well as contemporary times.

In context of Punjab Anshu Malhotra³² talks about gender, caste and religious identities in Punjab. Further the work describes that how the notion of being high caste as it developed and transformed during colonial period in Punjab contributed to the formation of a middle class among the Hindu and the Sikhs. This middle class life had a significant impact on gender relations and encouraged the re-examination of women's roles and place in society. It also explains that how there was a change in profession on one hand was giving pride of economic status attained and on the other hand giving miserable state as seen in the opening lines of the chapter that a kshatriya is unable to retain his purity of profession and is doing a business of selling leather shoes which was a profession fit for the lower caste. The lower caste or the untouchables were breaking the monopoly of education and jobs of the high caste people and as a result there is a great shift seen in profession.

Malhotra further debates that Punjab as an area that experienced multiple foreign invasions over recorded history, has been seen as a region where Brahmanism found it difficult to survive, and Punjabis had to adjust frequently to different peoples, their religions and social practices. Besides the influence of Islam and Sikhism in Punjab, with their potentially egalitarian ideologies, especially in matters soteriological has been taken as decisive in curbing the spread of brahmanical practices. Thus historians have commented typically on the 'flatness' of Punjabi society, with a few mercantile castes on top, a flat undifferentiated Jat peasantry in the middle and a bunch of menial castes at the bottom.

Amrit Walia³³ talks about development of education in colonial rule. Besides dealing with primary, secondary, higher as well as technical education, her work also talks about female education as well as socio-political change that occurred with the result of spread of education. The development of education by the colonial rule, though motivated by their own political, economic and administrative interests, led to awakening among the masses and later on became basis of political movements in later years. Kamlesh Mohan³⁴ states role of women and their participation in the national freedom struggle against the British imperialist rule. Women from the Hindu and Sikh middle classes chose to carry their crusade for gender justice and space in public life without getting aggressive against men and won active support of male leadership. The work provides a good idea regarding the condition of women in Punjab. The work discuss about the women of upper and middle classes in detail.

Nirmala P. Bhai³⁵ states the status of Harijan women in the society, their education, employment, political influence, wealth as well as their changing status in Kerala. The work explains how education and employment leads to change in status of women and how wealth becomes a factor in deciding the status of a women as well as their wish for mobility

in search of better job opportunity. P. G Jogdand³⁶ edited work describes the position of dalit women of India. The said work is an outcome of seminars held in which paper are presented by different authors regarding the problems of women in general and to their actual life situation. The problems of women vary from one social stratum to another one cultural and economic stratum to another which are discussed in detail. Further it is being argued that the dalit women are 'thrice alienated' by *class, patriarchy* and *caste*. While talking about the pre-Independence time the author says two movements which affected the position of women were the social reform movement of 19th century and nationalist movement of 20th Century. The early social reformers were concerned with two major problems that is emancipation of women and amelioration of the condition of depressed classes. Their efforts were against customs like Sati, prohibition against Widow remarriage female infanticide, purdah etc. Their debates were based on upper caste religious texts and forms of violence on women of upper caste whereas the lower caste women who were being marginalized were absent in those debates. Malkit Kaur³⁷ in her paper in edited works of M. S. Gill mentions decline in sex ratio due to practice of female foeticide in Punjab and lack of education increases gender bias. Many other authors have talked on agrarian development, green revolution, financing of weaker sections, political empowerment of women etc.

Conclusion

It can be said that a day would come when the meaning, usages and importance of jati and varna will not exist or will become less important in the society³⁸. Nevertheless, if one is to do justice to its complex history, and its contemporary culture and politics, caste must be neither disregarded nor downplayed – its power has simply been too compelling and enduring³⁹.

This is Bayly's conclusion from her authoritative historical survey of caste in India from eighteenth century to the 'contemporary scene'. Likewise, there are other researchers who endorse the significance of caste on the 'Indian way of life'. Caste still governs the lives of Hindu communities as well as that of Muslim, Christian and Sikh communities who have kept alive their caste identities⁴⁰. In the last decade alone scores of ethnographies from all over South Asia have come to the conclusion that caste continues to be a bedrock of social organization of hundreds of millions of people⁴¹.

Agreeing to, the validity of the above generalizations which apply to millions of people with enormous religious and cultural diversity. One finds that caste is still governing the people with its various degree of rigidity in certain matters like inter-caste marriage or practice of discrimination by the few orthodox section of the society.

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