



SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT AMONG THE HARIZEN (CHAMAR) OF UNITED PROVINCE

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Abstract

India as a country houses several religions and spiritual systems. Notable religions are Hinduism, Muslims, Sikh, Christian, Jains, Parsi and several others. The Hinduism happens to be the followed by majority of Indians technically if not practically. The Hindu population constitutes 72% of total population of India. Hinduism is more or less represented in every part of India. It is followed by a large number of peoples in Uttar Pradesh. Before 1950 Uttar Pradesh had known as United Provinces. Hinduism divided into four following Varna's: Brahman, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. It is form of caste system and caste is decided upon birth. Caste is also divided into sub-castes. The Harizen Caste is a scheduled caste and traditionally treated as untouchable caste. This caste has had a significant contribution in the social structure but it was placed at the lowest level in the Brahminical Hindu order. This paper focuses upon the attempt being made by Dalits in general and the Harizen in particular to reform their social and cultural conditions by the way of undertaking reform process. This paper is mainly focused on understanding social and religious condition of the Harizen caste in United Provinces and also examines the nature of social and religious movements by its ethnic organizations.

Key Words: Social reform, caste, Harizen, Dalits, Hinduism, untouchability



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Introduction

Initially the United Provinces was a part of north western provinces. After 1902 the name was changed to the United Provinces. It was renamed as Uttar Pradesh in 1950. The state of Uttar Pradesh happens to be biggest state in the Union of India on the basis of population. In general, all religions and castes are found here and it is also centre of Hinduism as well as the emergence of Buddhism. While Hinduism recognizes the Varna and caste system but Buddhism speaks of equality, fraternity and liberty. Hindu religion is based on caste system, which classifies society into various castes and sub-castes. The caste system divides Hindus into four main categories Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras. The Dalit communities are treated as Avarnas which means a group outside of Varna system. These communities were also traditionally treated as untouchables on account of their occupations and ritual status (Rawat, 2012). This paper investigate the question of how and why did most

of the Chamars remained in Hindus in Uttar Pradesh unlike in South India where most of Dalits converted to Christianity and in Maharashtra large scale conversion to Buddhism took place. The Chamar caste numerically constitutes biggest share among several Dalit castes in Uttar Pradesh.

The Chamar caste found in most of north Indian state traditionally engaged in professions such as currier, tanners, cobblers and other leather related professions. Their name is inventive from the Sanskrit charma-kara, a “worker in leather.” Traditionally the Chamar is considered as the progeny of Chandala women by a man of the fisherman caste. Whose numbers were in Uttar Pradesh according to Indian Census Report 1901 total Chamar people were 46510,668 and 14% share of caste in total population in 1911.

In this way, the Harizen represent a large number of the population of Uttar Pradesh in colonial rule. Even then they did not have the right to equality, no right to participating cultural activities and bound to do leather work for their occupation or economic activities and also face exclusion, discrimination and untouchability like other Shudras castes (Briggs, 1920)

Social condition of Harizen caste

The Harizen(Chamar) caste happens to be one of the numerically largest communities of India. They are a Scheduled Caste that has a single generic name. The name Chamar is derived from the Sanskrit Charmkar (leather worker). They work with leather, making shoes, bags and hides. They were relegated to living on the outer edges for villages due to the smell of rotting hides and chemicals that they were steeped in (Crook, 1896). The name Dalit (Marathi word for the oppressed or broken people) is preferred name for this community. Under the broad umbrella of the terms the Chamar, different castes were referred.

They are known by different names in each state and listed along with other synonyms and sub-groups. In Uttar Pradesh they are known as Raidas, in Panjab as Raigar or Ramdasi, in Himanchal Pradesh as Monchi Arya, in Bihar as Charmkar, Ravidas or Mochi, in Chandigarh as Ramdasi or Jatia Chamar, and Haryana as Jatia or Jatav. Some of these subgroups, such as the Satnami of Madhya Pradesh, prefer not to identified with Chamars and sustain a separate uniqueness (Crook, 1896). The Chamars is one of the major Dalit Communities found in Uttar Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh, while Dalit constitute more than two-fifths of the state population, two-thirds of them are Chamars. This community traditionally engaged in occupation related to skin dead animals, tan the leather and make articles out of it. An

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interesting aspect is that proportion of Chamars engaged in leather-related occupation has been declining over decades. What was four percent in 1931 came down to 0.6 percent in 1961. Yet the professional stereotype of the Chamar being a leather employee persists. The Jatava, a sub-group of the Chamar eminent for leather craftsmanship, reside in the districts of Mathura and Agra and disassociate their culture from other Chamar (Prasad, 2010).

Slightly superior to these people is the Chamar, or currier, who is a recognised village menial, receiving as perquisite the hides of dead cattle, which he tans. In return he is bound to supply shoes and other leather articles, such as the skin bag with which water is hauled up from the well to water the fields. His calling is naturally most offensive to the pious Hindu and he is generally obliged to live in a helmet apart from the houses of the respectable residents, and here he keeps that foul and pigs. His wife acts as the midwife, and is traditionally considered as impure. These varied occupations account for the concept with which he is regarded by the higher classes. (Briggs, 1920) Below these more or less respectable members of rural society, we find a number of outcast groups, village menials, or broken tribes some of whom pollute the high-caste man even at a distance, while others are guilty of the crowning enormity of eating beef. Among these the Chamar, tanner, shoemaker, cobbler, and cattle poisoned, is the subject of a number of injurious reflexions. Though he is as wily as a jackal, he is also so stupid that he sits on his awl and beats himself for stealing it. He laments that he cannot tan his own skin. He knows nothing beyond his last, and the shortest way to deal with him is to beat him with a shoe of his own making, a practical axiom which is expressed in the saying that "old shoes should be offered to the shoemaker's god (Prasad, 2010)

Religious condition of Chamar caste So far as religion is concern the Chamar are basically Hindus. They belong to both Shiva and Bhagvata sects. They follow the saintly teachings of Ravidas. They narrate mythological tales and sing songs from the spiritual epics. They celebrate the festivals such as, Panchami, Diwali, Holi Ganesh Chaturthi and Navratra. The Chamar castes are primarily Hindu but some are Sikh and Buddhist in North India, mainly Hindu Chamar belong to the Ravidasi sect and worship Guru Ravidas, a disciple of Ramananda, who is known as a champion for promoting change for the depressed Chamar. Besides this, village deities are also worshipped by Chamars. Some Chamar communities also trust in spirits and the evil eye and consult sorcerers. Bihari deities include Sati, and Sitala Mata (Rawat, 2012), while in Goa, Ganesh and Shiva are worshiped. Most Chamar in Panjab are Sikhs and they are called Ramdasi after Guru Ramdas the fifth Sikh Guru. They

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bow down before the Guru Sahib, the holy book of the Sikhs. The Nirankari and Radhaswami sect advocate worship to an omnipresent Supreme Being who is without form, does away with rituals and idolatry and provides close fellowship within equals (Prasad, 2010).

Reform movement

India has a long history of socio-religious reform movements. However, the present paper focuses on the social reform movements of Nineteenth and twentieth century from the perspective of Dalits. The reforms by definition entail change or replacement of the institutions, which have become functionally irrelevant (totally or partly) to the contemporary social order and are responsible for low quality of life, deprivations, unrest and misery to the sizeable sections of the society. Etymologically, „reform“ means „forming again“, „reconstruct“, which can be done only when a system is first demolished; but social reform envisages „amendment“, „improvement“ etc.; thus entailing peaceful crusading, use of non-violent means for change and change in slow speed. A reform movement is a kind of social movement that aims at making gradual change, or changes in certain aspects of society, rather than rapid or fundamental changes. In United Provinces so many effort for reforms of Chamar caste by ethnic and religious groups like as Adi Hindu Movement, Arya Samaj and the Chamar Mahasabha etc (Jones, 1994).

The Arya Samaj

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) is an important figure in Indian socio-religious reform movement. He says that “The world is fettered by the chain forged by superstition and ignorance. I have come to snap asunder that chain and to set slaves at liberty”. He establishes the Arya Samaj in Bombay (now Mumbai) on April 10, 1875. Later on several branches of this organization has been formed in different parts of the country. The main aims of this organization were--abolition of image worship and sub-castes, to provide social service through education and charitable enterprises. It has its foundation on the Vedas and through it Swami Dayananda gives a call „Go back to the Vedas“. He pleads that the study of the Vedas be made open to all. He strongly criticizes the hereditary basis of caste system and the belief in the superiority of Brahmins over the other caste groups.

The Arya Samaj for the first time focuses attention on the deplorable condition of the untouchables. It starts a crusade against untouchability and tries to ameliorate the social status of untouchables. It pleads equal rights for both male and female (Jodhka, 2008). In pursuance

of these ideals of social service the Arya Samaj took great interest in the social uplift of the lower classes. Two ways were adopted

- (I) the raising of status of castes not entitled to wear the sacred thread by giving them that privilege, and
- (II) (II) raising untouchables to the rank of touchable, and educating them to higher social ideals, with a view to eventually putting them on a footing of social equality with other Hindus.

For the fulfillment of this purpose the Dayanand Dalitodhar Mandal was organized at Hoshiarpur (Pandey, 1985). The hard work of Christian missionaries in converting the lower and untouchables castes, furthered Hindu fears and led the rebellious Aryas to build up their own ritual of conversion, shuddhi. Primarily shuddhi was employed to sanitize and readmit Hindus who had converted to Christianity or Islam. In the wake of the 1891 census that reported an increase in Christian converts of 410 percent for the earlier decade, Aryas and their Sikh associates in the Singh Sabhas began to develop the use of shuddhi. The first of these was performed on 31 March 1896, when the Shuddhi Sabha purified five people, and on 5 April another six. During the 1890s bigger groups were purified and the meaning of shuddhi reinterpreted (Jones, 1994). Originally shuddhi applied only to those converted, but soon it was performed for anyone whose relatives had once been Hindus.

Aryas also used shuddhi to purify untouchables and transform them into members of the clean castes. During the first decade of the new century, Aryas purified a number of Rahtias, a caste of Sikh untouchables, as well as Hindu Odes and Mehgs (Jones, 1994). The Aryan samaj has played a crucial role in promoting socio-religious reform movement among the Chamars of Utter Pradesh.

The Chamar Mahasabha

Initiatives have also been taken by Chamars themselves to instigate socio-religious reform movement. The rise of the leather industry at one level and the commercialization of agriculture at the other level initiated the transformation of Chamar caste towards improved socio-economic conditions. Development in material conditions prompted them to claim high status in traditional Hindu social order.

The Harizen Mahasabha has raised questions on untouchability and exploitation of traditional forms. In particular, the traditions of Beggary (unpaid labour) have emerged as the domain of tradition resistance in the form of agricultural work, leatherwork, and service of

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personnel and government officials (Briggs, 1920). In the different parts of the United Provinces, political and social activism of the grass root level was gathered in May 1924 as the establishment of the Harizen Mahasabha in Mainpuri (Rawat, 2016). This Mahasabha tried to take many measures for the development of the Harizen caste. These measures ranged from social reform to political rights.

Among its proposals, the purity of Harizen 's vegetarianism and his lifestyle was mentioned. In 1926, the Chamar Mahasabha passed a resolution to abandon perverted occupation and blowing the dead bodies in Banaras. This Mahasabha not only engaged political mobilization of Dalits but also promoted social reform movement to improve the conditions of Dalit castes (Rawat, 2012).

Anti Caste Reform In general, Harizen are Hindus. They accept elementary Hindu doctrines such as karma (the law of cause and effect) and samsara (transmigration), follow Hindu rituals, and worship many Hindu deities (Raj, 1987). However, they do refuse the Hindu teachings that make them Untouchables and the Brahman priests who assert these teachings. This does not affect the mediocre status assigned to Harizen by other Hindus. In the past, they were barred from entering many Hindu temples, and some Brahman priests still refuse to serve them.

They are allowed to make offerings at temples devoted to Devi, Bhairon, to various mother-goddesses, and at some Shiva temples. In several places, Chamars have their own temples. Fundamental to this cover of Hinduism is widespread and deep-seated faith in animism, natureworship, and superstition. The devotion of stones is universal. The stones represent village supernatural being and are anointed with vermilion (a red colouring), possibly the survival of an ancient blood-sacrifice. Many trees are worshipped in particular, the pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and the Nim tree (*Azadirachta indica*).

The Nim is considered to be the home of Shitala Mata, the goddess of smallpox. The snake, the tiger, the elephant, and various other animals and birds are revered and worshipped. The Chamar have numerous superstitions about evil demons, spirits (Bhuts), and ghosts who have to be driven away or appeased through blood-sacrifice. Various diseases or epidemics are thought to be brought on by deities such as Shitala Mata or Mari, the goddess of cholera. Goats, pigs, chickens, and eggs are among the sacrificial offerings made to appease demons and gods. Chamars strongly believe in the dangers of witchcraft and

of the evil eye (Crook, 1896). Chamars have a number of resources they can turn to for protection from evil spirits.

There are numerous god lings—spiritual beings and local saints who are seen to have special powers over the forces of evil. Guga Pir, for example, is worshipped in the Punjab and Rajasthan to prevent snake-bite (Sharma, 1960). He was born a Hindu, so his legend tells, but became a Muslim so he could enter the earth and bring the snake-kingdom under his control (a pir is a Muslim saint). He is also worshipped on behalf of sickly children, to cure various diseases, and to remove barrenness. In addition, there are various practitioners skilled in dealing with the spirit world. These include sorcerers, magicians, witch-doctors, shamans, and the like known by names such as Ojha, Sayana, Baiga and Bhagat. Given their low down status in traditional Hindu society, it is not unexpected that Chamars have been attracted to religions that downplay or refuse notions of untouchability. Numerous are followers of devotional (Bhakti) Hindu sects such as the Kabir Panth (Crook, 1896). One such group is the Satnami Chamar of Madhya Pradesh. Some Chamars have accepted the teachings of the Sikh Gurus (Puri, 2003), while other Chamar castes such as the Julahas are Muslims. Christianity has made some headway among the Chamars (Jayawardena, 1966). In recent times, some groups such as the Jatava in Uttar Pradesh have converted to Buddhism. They were motivated in this by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and conversion to Buddhism.

Women Reforms ‘

The Chamar woman unlike women of upper strata of Indian society is equally as productive as a man. The Chamar women traditionally engaged in works such as agriculture, midwives, maids, collection of forest products and caring families. The material conditions of the Chamar improved during the British period on account of the progress of leather industries in Agra, Meerut and Kanpur regions. In due course of time, a middle class among the Chamar community came into existence. It is this class attempted to initiate several reforms related to the improvement of the status of women. Unfortunately, women reforms among Chamars remained to be manly Sanskritized reforms wherein attempt was being made to follow the cultural and ritualistic practices of upper strata of society.

The Chamar Mahasabha attempted to promote reforms such as taboo on widow remarriage, child marriage, confining women to the domestic sphere, following Parada system etc. It was this process that has brought the Chamar chaste very close to orthodox Hindu practices (Rawat, 2012).

Conclusion

This paper proposes the Arya Samaj at one level and the Chamar Mahashabha at another level played a crucial role in socio-religious reform movement among Dalits of United Provinces. The apparent fact is that the socio-religious reform movement undertaken by the Chamar Mahasabha mainly followed the traditional which is popularly known as Sanskritisation. On account of this, the reform process mainly remained to be an imitation of caste Hindu traditions rather than having an alternative trajectory of emancipation as was the case in Maharashtra (conversion to Buddhism) and South India (conversion to Christianity). The observable fact is that the Chamar society was pushed to a more orthodox tradition in terms of treating women and adopting cultural practices. On account of these trends, the Chamars unable to carve out a distinctive social identity and remained to be victims of orthodox traditions.

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