



Article Type: Research Article

Article Ref. No.: 21082500718DR

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-CSI1-a004>



## DISENGAGING CASTE IDENTITY IN INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PUNJAB

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### Abstract:

In India, caste is deeply rooted in peoples' routine life. A person is recognized by his caste in which he born but not by his ability or quality. He felt honored if born in high caste otherwise neglected in every facet of life. Indian society is segregated into different casts. Caste system in Hindu society is mainly based on four hierarchically varnas-Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra and next divided into sub-castes also called jatis. All the four varnas performed some specific functions and secured different rank in the society. But there are one more class exists 'Avarnas' also known as untouchables (Dalits) mainly performed polluted jobs and omitted from all rights as well as excluded from all social platforms. In caste system, the status of an individual is ascribed by his caste, not by his achievements and he is helpless to utilize his ability to change his identity. Although various constitutional provisions have been preventing untouchability and any discrimination based on caste but in spite of the provisions, caste system and untouchability has been basic element of Indian social structure. Besides, some discriminations also exit against Dalits in Punjab but their position is quite different from Dalits belongs to other states of the country. In Punjab, caste exits in soft manner. Most of people believed in casteism but not its rigid nature. Marginal or exclusive section of society benefitted due to reservation and quota in various educational and political institutions.

**Article History:** Submitted on 25 Aug 2021 | Accepted on 20 Sep 2021 | Published online on 25 Sep 2021

**Keywords:** Caste, Social Life, Social Change, Punjab

### 1.0 Introduction:

From an ancient period, caste is the basic institution in Indian society and deeply rooted in people's life style. The social status of any person decided by his caste, he felt honoured if belongs to upper caste otherwise ignored and exploited. Caste system in Hindu society is mainly based on four hierarchically varnas- Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra and next divided in sub-castes also called Jatis. Every sub-caste or jati have its own profession or occupation. Caste is a hereditary group of people having common name, customs, occupations and clinging some basic rules regarding meals and marriages which further divided into small endogamous divisions. In general, caste is an association of people having a particular social status mainly defined by

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*This article was presented in the International Conference on 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity: Issues, Concerns and Challenges' on 25th September, 2021 (via Virtual mode), organized by the School of Education, LPU, Punjab, INDIA in collaboration with the Department of Education, Dr. Meghnad Saha College, West Bengal, INDIA.*

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descent, customs, marriage and professions. 'Caste' is an English word originates from the Spanish and Portuguese word 'Casta' means "Race, lineage or breed".

Indian Hindu society is divided into four social divisions or varnas where Brahmans secured first position in social hierarchy and performed scholarly and ritual functions followed by Kshatriyas were rulers or soldiers, the Vaisyas were mainly producers like merchants, traders and farmers and at the last, Shudras were artisans, servants or slaves performed serving functions for other three varnas. There are one more class exists 'Avarnas' also known as untouchables mainly performed polluted jobs and omitted from all rights as well as excluded from all social platforms. (Kadel, 2014)

From ancient Hindu social structure, caste is an ideological separation between 'pure' and 'impure' which define their social ranking. Hereditary aspect of caste originates endogamous kin groups results segregation of society into jatis which prohibits marring, eating and living together. In caste system, the status of an individual is ascribed by his caste, not by his achievements and he is helpless to utilize his ability to change his identity.

The social changes were happened in Indian society during the British rule, introducing of modern education, judiciary, means of transport and communication, market economy and industries etc. An English medium education gives a rational and scientific vision of life. The educated Indian people started examine the society with new perception, they raised their voice to abolish various social evils and this approach gave birth to many social reform movements.

Various International Human rights bodies emphasized that at global level 260 million citizens suffered and faced caste-based discrimination. In India, caste is an identity and elements of life opportunity. The Indian constitution facilitate equality to all the citizens without any discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, creed, language and sex etc India has made positive improvement in the field of education, economic growth and other social problems like caste system, child marriage, sati, etc. Although various constitutional provisions have been preventing these problems but in spite of the provisions, caste system and untouchability has been basic element of Indian social structure. But Dalits in Punjab secured different position from other Indian states. Sikhism is the major religion of Punjab and the teachings of Sikhism, the institutions of sangat and pangat and respect to all human beings abolished the untouchability and caste system. Besides, some discriminations also exit against Dalits but their position is quite different from Dalits belongs to other states of the country.

**2.0 Objective:** The study has these main objectives:

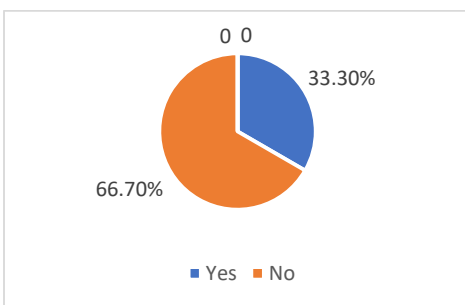
- To know whether caste rigidity exists in Punjab.
- To know people felt any barrier in their social life due to their caste.
- To know if they believed in caste endogamy.

**3.0 Methodology:**

The data is based on primary and secondary sources. The responses are collected from 80 respondents (30 employees, 30 students up-to 12th standard, and 20 illiterate or just literate). Convenience sampling method is used for collecting primary data. Illiterate or just literate respondents personally interviewed and questionnaire sent to other respondents on Whatsapp for primary data. Secondary data obtained from various articles available on web.

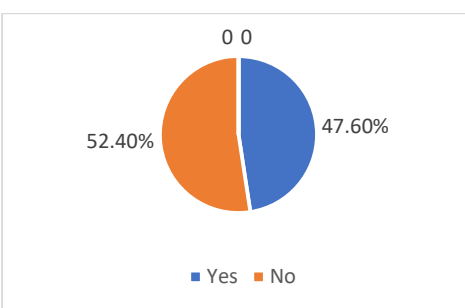
**4.0 Main Findings:**

The primary data revealed that rigidity of caste system is not existed in Punjab.



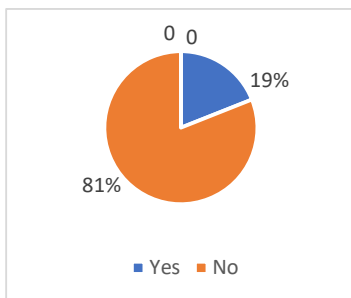
**Fig. 1: Believe in Caste by people**  
(Source: Primary data by author)

The study revealed that only 33.30 percent people believed in caste and 66.70 percent people did not accept the rigidity of casteism. In the selected samples, educated people denied caste but illiterate or just illiterate believed in caste.



**Fig 2: Believe in Caste Endogamy**  
(Source: Primary data by author)

47.60 percent samples believed in caste endogamy. They believed that bride/ groom from their own caste easily adapted in their religious and cultural customs. If they will make their relations in outer caste, they ruined their homely environment. On the other hand, 52.40 percent thought the life partner must be understandable, no matter which caste he/she belongs.



**Fig. 3: Feel Barriers in Social Life due to your Caste?**  
(Source: Primary data by author)

In the study, only 19 percent people felt barriers in their social life due to their caste. On the other side, 81 percent people felt that caste is no barriers in their social life. They get scholarships, reservation/ quota due to their caste and upgrade their social life. In the nutshell, people from Punjab did not believe the rigidity of casteism. The various studies shows that these are some responsible factors for better position of Dalits and casteless society in Punjab.

- **Numerical Strength:** According to census 2011, there are 16.6 percent Dalits resides in India whereas they constitute 31.9 percent in total population of Punjab. Their numerical strength improves their position into society.
- **Migration:** People from Doaba region of Punjab has been migrating overseas and covers about 10% of the Indian diaspora worldwide. Doaba region is predominately belongs to sikh, dalit and jatt. Whereas Punjab in totality is being urbanised but the SCs population is also increased in villages along with Chamars, Churahs, Mazabi sikh and Ramdasias. Jatt sikhs are dominate class with economic prosperity, social-political influence and control over majority of agricultural land, Dalit population is more in numbers but less control over land. In spite of economic inequalities amongst jatts and SCs, some Dalits have been successful to raise their position with occupational variation, educational and job opportunities with reservation and migration. However, jatt sikh gained supremacy over resources which encouraged western migration specially in UK where 10% of Punjabi population comes from Dalits. Punjabi populace in UK whatever they are jatt sikh or Dalits would not be classify themselves and recognized by their caste. The NRI remittance and investment in development projects like building and improvement of health and educational services, expansion of roads, electricity, transport and communication reshaped the caste relations in Punjab.(Singh)
- **Education:** Modern education is obtainable to every person. Education is also an important element to disengaging caste system. State sponsored education (Right to Education) and specific quota in educational institutions switched them from their traditional occupations (scavenging, picking animal skeletons and other polluting jobs) to white color jobs. Mushrooming of private English medium schools changed their outlook and they conscious about the importance of education in social mobility. Thus, they send their kids to modern private schools. The reservation policy gives an opportunity to Dalits to access higher education which is not possible earlier.
- **Increased Political Representation:** Indian govt started reservation or quota for upbringing of SC and Other Backward classes in higher education and public sector employment. The anti-reservationists opined that it has been destroy merit and gave unfair benefits to lower classes and started caste-based violence. Actually, it is not an effective tool to change the economic relations among castes but firmly enclosed within realm of political rivalry. The political upsurge of lower caste and formation of caste based political parties results revolutionary transformation in their position. Despite, capturing political power and intimidating upper caste political control, lower classes are incapable to use their power into institutional change which support them transform socio-economic equality. In Punjab various social reform movements during the early 20th century made them conscious about their rights. On the other hand, green revolution has been drastically transformed social structure and weakened the old owner -client relationship. The occupational shift improved their living and they moved to urban areas for employment. The economic prosperity emerged an elite class among Dalits who required improved position and more share in political power at different levels. In 1984 Kanshi Ram formed BSP to raise up their political aspirations. In Doaba region Ad-Dharmis swapped their loyalties from congress to BSP and party marked its position in the first election in 1985. The only reason of why they support BSP is that they felt absence of representation in each political party in Punjab. Although the BSP is not successful to maintained its position in Punjab politics but it realized the importance of SCs to the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal the dominating political parties of Punjab.(Sharma)

- **Modern outlook:** Segregation of castes are exists in villages where lower classes segregated from higher classes and they lived in separate area in village locality but this division of people are vanished. With financial affluence, they built their dwelling within locality. (Kaur, 2019)
- **Inter-Caste Marriage:** (Kumudin Das) Marriage is the basic social institution and regarded as best means to eradicate caste barriers. The education, age of female at marriage time, the liberty given to her to select her life-partner and increasing city culture encourages people for inter-caste marriages. Matrimonial advertisements also reflect that people preferred inter-caste marriages. The study shows that men who remarried experience inter-caste marriages it is because they feel difficulty to find life-partner within same caste.
- **Existence of Deras:** SCs in Punjab comes from various religion and castes, Mazhabis and Ramdas as two dalit communities among sikhs are maximum underprivileged. They joined Sikhism in the hope of social equality but they failed and still faced untouchability and social exclusion. So, they magnetized towards various deras for social equality with dignity. (Ram, 2007)
- **Welfare State:** Dalits also gained benefits with emergence as (welfare) state spending on public belongings such as equal access of education, transport, healthcare, drinking water and electricity. The welfare state launched various schemes or programmes for upbringing of socially and economically weak classes. Various social reforms and constitutional provisions plays a significant role to loosen the caste system. State involvement in rural progress and agricultural development positively encouraged the changing process. Social and economic progress declining traditional caste hierarchy and dependency on upper castes and this social change also impacts the local-level caste system. These changes are also visible in democratic political developments.
- **Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG):** The neo-liberal policies rising economic disparities and threaten caste-based reservation benefits. In fact, Indian policy makers promotes industrial investment which is somehow promotes various welfare schemes, socio-economic rights in favour of marginal sections of society. If caste is eliminated from modern development society it will helpful to disappeared caste- based discriminations. (Mosse, 2018) The development of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization of social mind sets and democratization of political institutions would helpful to wane the caste system in India. Like the western countries, economic development and progress shifted the Indian closed caste society to open social division based on personal achievements to be attained by excellence and hard-work (Jodhka, 2015)
- **Joined New Professions:** Dalits has joined new professions with help of educational subsidies and reservation but a lot of the town's professional variation arises with industrial advancement. The skills for various skillful profession know how to be learnt not overtly on requirement but in domestic privacy or through apprenticeship. Dalit starting his own business with his personal tools and with high demand, he finds apprentices ignoring caste, thus caste as a determinant of profession is noticeably on the decline. (Saberwal)

## 5.0 Conclusion:

The above information revealed that Punjab is a prosperous state based on agrarian society. Caste is also existing in the state but not in rigid manner. Most of the people (Dalits also) specially from Doaba migrated in overseas and sending remittance upgrade the living standard of their family. Their economic upliftment breakdown the feudal social system and inhaled self-confidence among them. With economic prosperity Dalits becomes more educated and joined new professions. Welfare state also minimize the rigidity of caste system. Various constitutional provisions,

increasing political representation, and state sponsored schemes benefitted Dalits as state spending on education, transport, healthcare, electricity and so on. With modern outlook youngsters believed inter-caste marriages and their parents also supported them. Henceforth, the rigidity of caste is disengaging from Punjab.

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