



A STUDY ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CHANGE OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN IN EAST GODAVARI DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

All human societies from the simplest to the most complex have some or other form of social inequality. (Betelle, Andre.1969). In particular wealth, power, prestige and privileges are unequally distributed between individuals and social groups. Those who have more wealth, power and privileges form higher strata in the society and vice versa. Inequality pervades through all aspects of social life between this higher and lower strata. Scheduled Caste women suffering from two disabilities namely untouchability and gender and as such suffered from double deprivation. The present study aims to examine the social change that is taking place among the Scheduled Caste Women and their economic, socio-cultural aspirations in the East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh basing on Self Help Groups.

KEYWORDS :

INTRODUCTION:

In the contemporary Indian Society, the number of educated, Scheduled Caste Women is gradually increasing. They come from disadvantage and deprived section, suffering from old system of untouchability and disabilities (Kapoor, Pramila 1998). Coming as they do from disadvantaged and deprived sections of the society suffering from the age-old stigma of untouchability with all its disabilities their problems and patterns of adjustment to new situation are likely to be characteristically different from those of the educated women belonging to the caste Hindus (P.L. Jain, Shashi Jain and Sudha Bhatnagar, 1997). Scheduled Caste Women from Vedic period onwards were abused exploited and were symbols of sex. Even though she was untouchable and had come from depressed class the higher caste, Zamindars used to have sexual relations with them. In those earlier days the Scheduled Caste Woman was a mere instrument to quench the sexual hunger of higher castes (Desai, I.P 1993).

It was only if there was an open and long time liaison with a very low caste women, men had to run the risk of being ostracized. However, it is always possible for men to return to their caste fold by paying atonement for what they have done. (Yalman, Nur, 1963). The above being the exploitation of the Scheduled Caste Women in earlier times that has slowly given rise to a change in the position. From being illiterate, polluted women, the Scheduled Caste Women have now started taking up education and also employment. However the change taking place among the Scheduled Caste Women is painstakingly slow. A number of scholars have made attempts to analyze the changing status of women on the basis of empirical studies conducted by them in different parts of the country.

The objective of the Self Help Groups programme is to serve the income levels of women belonging to poor households i.e., scheduled caste in East Godavari District so as to enable their organized participation in social development towards economic self-reliance. The focus of the attention is on the women members of IRDP families to increase income and to provide supporting services for income generating activities (backward and forward linkages etc.) and linkages with other social development programmes like health, education, sanitation etc.

Review of literature:

Promilla Kapur (1974) attempted to understand the problems and marital relationships of educated working women of the entire upper, middle and lower classes in her book, 'Marriage and the working women in India.' C.T.Kanan, in his book, 'Inter-Caste and Inter-Community Marriages in India, (1963)' attempted to analyze the inter caste marriages. C.A.Hate, in her book, "Changing State of women in Post-Independence India (1969)", dealt with marital condition family life, family

planning, education and employment of women. Later J. Joshi, 1973 in her article, "Contemporary change in the socio-economic role of women in India, its impact on family life" (1973) reflected on various developmental aspects viz., education, employment, legal rights for women and their impact on family life.

Besides these, there are a number of scholars such as Ranade and Ram chandra (1970), Shastri Jain (1973), Mehta (1981), Deshpande (1982) Gati (1982), Chakravarty (1984), Saraswati (1984), Sinha (1985), Singh and Gill (1986) who have studied different aspects of Women's life in the contemporary changing situation. In brief their findings denote that because of a number of factors both the role and the status of women are in the process of change.

Sociologists have in general distinguished four main types of stratification viz. slavery, estate, class and caste. (Lenski, I.1966). The scholars who have made contributions to the analysis of social stratification include : Karl Marx (1848), Thorstein Veblen (1899), Max Weber (1922), Pitrim Sorokin (1927), W.L Warner (1941), Davis and Moore (1943), Talcott Parsons (1953).

M.V.Patwardhan (1985), T.R.Singh, (1993) B.S.Cohn (1994) Sunila Malik (1988), in their works explored the socio economic condition of Scheduled Castes. Kuppuswamy (1980), Nirmal Kumar Bose (1993) observed some distinguishing changes featuring the social movements among Scheduled Caste men and women. Harshad R. Trivedi (1998), made a study on "The Scheduled Caste Women of Karnataka M.P and U.P." Abbasayulu (1999) in his study on Scheduled Caste worked on education, Social conditions, awareness, constitutional provisions, and family reputation. Parvathamma (1998) in her work he in Scheduled Castes and Tribes depicted a socio-economic survey of Scheduled Caste and tribes P. Nirmala Bhai (1986) in her Study on "Harijan Women in Independent India" (1986), referred to inter caste relations and the conditions of Harijan women.

Gautam and Singh (1990) reported the impact of SHGs in 4 districts of Himachal Pradesh. A total of 23 types of different economic activities were being pursued under this scheme, with maximum number of groups (126) pursuing milk production activity. In spite of 91 per cent achievement of the target in organizing units of groups under DWCR and DWACUA the functional units accounted for only 67.17 per cent.

Premkumar and Rahul Kumar (1992)17 in their study "DWCR: A Case Study" tried to highlight the impact of SHGs on the development of individual families in the Gulbarga district of Karnataka state. The study concluded that all the beneficiaries under study who were found to live below the

poverty line prior to the implementation of SHGs have not crossed the poverty line, employment status improved substantially.

Different Views on Indian Caste System:

Caste system is the source of the Hindu social structure. Caste is also referred to as *Jati* or *Kulam* in general parlance. Personal qualities and achievements cannot change a man's caste. (Srinivas, 1962) Louis Dumont holds the view that the caste system is based on the notion of purity and pollution. Caste system is characterised by segmentation of several orders (Betielle, 1965). The word caste is used in everyday life and we use it to distinguish one person from another, in our society. We say that such and such a person belong to a particular caste (Patwardhan M.V., 1989). In saying so we commonly mean to convey that he is born to parents or is a member of the family said to belong to a particular caste. Caste is a hierarchical group. Caste may be defined as a hereditary, endogamous group which decides the personal's position in the social stratification and his profession etc.

Social stratification system is that of an open and a closed system. In an open society the member can put in effort to achieve wealth, power, prestige and social status. He is free to compete and acquire them (Bottomore T.B., 1998). But otherwise, in a closed society, class, status, power and privileges are ascribed and inherited rather than achieved. In such societies the individual, born in a specific social status group, inherits that status and remains in that group only. This system is rigid and the individual has no opportunity to move into or out of the stratum and this type of closed stratum is called the caste system (Johnson H.M., 1997).

According to the criterion of pollution and purity, *Brahmins* hold the highest rank and *Shudras* the lowest in the caste hierarchy. The *Brahmins* are required to study and to teach, accept alms and perform priestly functions. The *Kshatriyas* occupied the rank below the *Brahmins*, and *Vaishyas* occupy the third place, in the value system. *Kshatriyas* had the responsibility of administration and defence. *Vaishyas* were to look after agriculture and commerce. The *Shudras* were at the lowest rank of social ladder and their responsibilities included service to the three superior *varnas* (*dwijas* twice born people) (Dutta N.K., 1999). The so called untouchables did not find a place in 'Chaturvarna' system.

If one were to analyse the Caste system one could see a number of lines that separate the castes by their rank. Some of these lines are clear and distinct and some are blurred. But there is one line that stands thick and clear, the line that divided the so called untouchables from the rest of the society (Agarwal 1976). Bailey (1958) called it the pollution barrier.

Condition of Women:

In every society social inequality is noticed and exclusively gender inequality. Mostly women are the disadvantaged parts of the society. Along with the social inequality of class and caste in Indian society there is one more angle of stratification which is gender stratification. Gender is one of the different bases of stratification. By gender we mean the sex of an individual on which he or she is assigned specific responsibilities in the society. There are no societies in which men do not, in some aspects of social life, have more wealth, status and influence than women (Giddens, 1989, 225). Women in different societies and in different times manifest a homogeneous trait, that of a nonentity (Singh, 1988: 1 and 1959: 1) United Nations Report (1980).

The position enjoyed by women in the Rig-Vedic period deteriorated in the later Vedic society. The period in between 1206-1761 A.D. witnessed deterioration in the position of women. In this period female infanticide, child-marriage, *pardah*, *jauhar*, *sati* and slavery were the main social evils

affecting the position of women. The reform movements and the national movement generated social consciousness among women. The All Indian Women's Congress was established in January 1927. This concentrated on educational and social awakening among women. The well known Utopian Socialist, Charles Fourier who developed a system of ethical socialism once said that one can judge the degree of civilization of a nation by the social and political position of its women.

Sex like Male or female is a physical distinction and gender like masculine or feminine is social and cultural distinctions. It is through social processes and social institutions like family, marriage leadership, education and training, gender roles like women doing house work, taking care of children and men doing jobs etc. are shaped and reshaped in all human societies (Singh, Inder Prakash, 1988). Women comprise fifty percent of the world's population and perform nearly two-third of the work hours, receive one-tenth of the world income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property. As Jogendra Singh (1986:88) rightly asserts; Women as a category constitute a deprived and discriminated section of Indian Society. Female members are by and large regarded as the weaker sex, because it is widely felt that women cannot work as hard as men. They are considered inferior to men and are regarded especially for household domestic work, giving birth to children, taking care of them and family members (Daniel, Bell. 1973).

The year 1975 was considered International year of women. Nearly five decades have passed. The Constitution has declared that man and woman are equal. Structurally both are equal but functionally the difference is observed. Men always have shown gender injustice towards women. Women through the ages have always been treated as lesser sex. Woman, through ages, has been considered minority, slave and weak. She had no freedom in her own family. From birth till death she has to live under the control of men in the form of father, husband and son. Common woman, born in upper caste was treated in this manner, then what about the woman belonging to the lower caste. They were symbol of pollution and defilement.

Condition of Women of Scheduled Caste:

Women are treated as Dalits (down trodden and inferior) in their families by parents, in-laws and even by their husbands. According to Manu in childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent (Leela, Dube, 1998). The scenario of the studies on Indian women in general, and the Scheduled Caste Women in particular points to a dearth of up-to-date studies on the Scheduled Caste Women who have crossed the social barriers to enter into job front. As a group subjected disability and discrimination, first as an untouchable then as a woman; that too as an untouchable. How could they cross these barriers to enter the job front?

The exploitation of the Scheduled Caste Women in earlier times has slowly risen to a change in their position. From being illiterate, polluted women, the Scheduled Caste Women have now started taking up education and also employment. Encouraged by protective discrimination quite a few Scheduled Caste Women took to education and employment. However the change taking place among the Scheduled Caste Women is painstakingly slow. Whereas the change is quite noticeable in the urban areas, at the same time in the rural areas, where the majority of Scheduled Castes live, the plight of Scheduled Caste Women is still miserable.

As the women were considered minority group in Indian Society and were downtrodden through ages, their status was not up to the mark when compared to western women. If a

common woman or an upper caste women had such position then what about the woman belonging to Scheduled Caste, who was the sign of impurity and pollution. Her occupation was to perform menial and filthy work. She was regarded as untouchable among the untouchables and deprived among the deprived. Scheduled Caste women suffer from two disabilities namely untouchability and gender and as such suffered from double deprivation (Sachidananda, 1991).

Socio-Economic and Cultural Change:

The study Scheduled Caste women was carried out in East Godavari District which is one of the advanced districts in Andhra Pradesh. An attempt is made in this work to understand the demographic, educational and economic characteristics of the Scheduled Caste women which will greatly influence the social change. In urban areas caste is slowly losing its relevance. The Scheduled Castes are taking up education in a big way and are gradually shifting from traditional occupations to non traditional occupations, which ask for minimum educational requirements. Whereas this is the general scenario among Scheduled Castes, the women among the Scheduled Castes in East Godavari District, are not lagging behind. Realising the importance of education and occupations in deciding the status change and it is expected to gain greater insight into understanding the mobility process of the Scheduled Caste women.

The Scheduled Caste denied access to education in the earlier closed system of social stratification that was fortified by religious sanction and the Scheduled Caste women were completely denied access to education. Under British rule, the introduction of western secular education has given the Scheduled Castes a chance to seek education. Even then, the western education was monopolised by the upper castes only. The Scheduled Castes were excluded from western education until first decade of 20th century. They were forced to continue in menial occupations for which education has little relevance. Education of Scheduled Castes received attention in a more precise manner only after independence (Whankade 1987). After independence realising the importance of education the Constitution (through Articles 15, 29(2), 46) Government (through reservation of seats, Scholarship, Hostel etc.) initiated concrete steps to further education among the Scheduled Castes. Quite a few studies have proved the steps initiated by government has proved that successful and catching up among the Scheduled Castes (D'Souza 1980, Usha Rao 1981, Kamble 1982, Sachidananda 1986).

Besides the unclean occupations the Scheduled Castes are also engaged as agriculture labour in a great number. Realising the importance of occupation in the amelioration of the Scheduled Castes the Government embarked upon a strategy to uplift the Scheduled Castes especially women through reservation in jobs and providing economic assistance. Many studies noticed occupational change among Scheduled Castes (Jayaram 1979, Mankdyu, 1979, Sing and Sharma 1980, Naidu 1991). Scheduled caste women are of the opinion that the government's plans and programmes are in the right direction and wish the schemes meant for them to continue. They have very few complaints and they are like any other caste in the society. The traditional belief that the Scheduled Caste Women suffer from the twin disadvantage of caste and gender, they feel, do not hold good any more for them. They are as good as any other higher caste women in terms of education, economic position and social status.

The Scheduled Caste Women respondents were asked to give their own assessment about whether the status of Scheduled. Caste Women has improved. Many of the Scheduled Caste Women opinion that there is favourable change in terms of their status and at the same time admitted the change is only marginal. Change of faith is way out to improve social status.

With centuries of oppression and discrimination, the Scheduled Caste tried to find out the ways and means of overcoming the humiliation meted out to them. One of the avenues available to the Schedule Caste is changing their faith. By changing their faith and converting into Christianity the Schedule Caste tried to improve their social status in the East Godavari District. It is observed that the policies and programmes planned by the government for them is of considerable help to them, and confidently feel the social distance between them and the higher caste women does not exist anymore. Many studies have proved that the protective discrimination has worked for the positive development of Scheduled Caste women in all spheres of life.

The impact of Self-Help Groups on Scheduled Caste women:

The impact of SHGs on specific category i.e., Scheduled Caste women and how far SHGs has helped them to generate additional income and employment in rural areas to come out of the vicious circle of poverty. But the studies did not touch the evaluation of Self Help Groups in East Godavari district. The scheme of Self- Help Groups was launched with great aims and aspirations. It intended to empower the rural women in different walks of life. But, while implementing the programme many impediments came in the way. It is also alleged that the benefits of the programme are reaching the development of vulnerable sections of the society like Scheduled caste women particularly in East Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh.

Hence, as an approach direct attack on poverty at micro level and empowering scheduled caste women at gross root level the formation of SHGs is a need based economic endeavour planned deliberately towards productive purposes and development of the scheduled caste economy. SHGs have now become a modern economic weapon for the poor scheduled caste women to fight against poverty and economic depression. It is a most potent tool against human deprivation and mainly intends to build human capital. SHGs have become a ladder for the poor scheduled caste women to go up not only economically but also socially, mentally and attitudinally. So the concept of SHGs should not be considered as a social sector programme or a mere intervention to provide as socio-economic safety net to the scheduled caste women.

CONCLUSION:

The present study seeks to describe the social change that is taking place among the Scheduled caste Women and their socio-cultural aspirations. Woman sometimes in past was considered a goddess and at other times a slave but never a human being with a personality. As the Scheduled castes were dependent on the higher castes for their livelihood, they were subservient and had little chance to protect their women. The little and slow change is quite noticeable in the urban areas, at the same time in the rural areas, where the majority of Scheduled caste people live, the plight of Scheduled caste Women is still miserable. During the post-independence era there have been significant changes in the outlook, orientation, views and behaviour of women in the country. Self Help Groups certainly raise the income level of poor Scheduled caste women and involve them in the social development by achieving economic self-reliance. It was noticed by improving the status of Scheduled castes women in East Godavari District educationally and economically the Social status of the Scheduled castes will improve.

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