

Assessing the Change in Social Status of Scheduled Castes: A Case Study of Rural Haryana

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ABSTRACT

Haryana is a historically dominated state by rigid agrarian caste hierarchies and traditional social structures. The present paper tries to examine the shifting socio-economic and political landscape of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in rural Haryana by applying a mixed-method approach on the basis of secondary data with empirical knowledge collected through field observations across the selected districts in the state. The study also tries to access the primary drivers of social mobility and persistent barriers of true equality. The findings of the study reveal that the scheduled caste population in Haryana shows a notable transition in the past few decades. The findings also reveal that structural shifts in the rural economy—specifically the decline of traditional *jajmani* ties, infusion of mechanization in agriculture, and a subsequent migration toward urban areas have significantly reduced traditional forms of economic dependency on dominant landowning castes. Furthermore, state-led affirmative action, coupled with rising literacy rates and digital connectivity, has fostered a heightened sense of political consciousness and legal awareness especially among the youth of scheduled castes. The study highlights that occupational mobility and political reservation have enabled institutional representation while substantive social integration remains contested. The ritual hierarchies, residential segregation, and subtle forms of everyday discrimination persist in scheduled caste residency pockets. The backlash against assertive scheduled caste identities often manifests in localized conflicts, revealing deep-seated structural anxieties among dominant agrarian communities. The study shows that traditional caste-class nexus is weakening economically while deep-rooted social prejudices continue to adapt in modern contexts.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Rural Haryana, Social Mobility, Caste Hierarchy, Agrarian Economy

INTRODUCTION

The caste system has historically remained one of the most influential institutions shaping the social structure of Indian society. Rooted in the traditional Varna order and later transformed into a rigid hierarchical caste arrangement, it has deeply influenced access to power, occupation, education, and social prestige. Among the most marginalized communities within this structure are the Scheduled Castes (SCs), formerly regarded as “untouchables,” who were systematically excluded from mainstream social, economic, religious, and political life for centuries. Despite constitutional safeguards and numerous welfare measures introduced after independence, caste-based discrimination and social exclusion continue to persist in varying forms across rural India. Haryana, a predominantly agrarian state with deeply entrenched traditional social relations, presents a significant context for examining these transformations and continuities in the social status of Scheduled Castes.

Haryana was carved out of Punjab in 1966 and rapidly emerged as one of the economically prosperous states of India, particularly due to the Green Revolution. Agricultural modernization, irrigation facilities, mechanization, and state-supported rural development contributed significantly to economic growth. However, the benefits of this development were unevenly distributed. Dominant agrarian castes such as Jats, Ahirs, and Rors retained control over land, local governance, and rural resources, while Scheduled Castes largely remained dependent on wage labor and traditional occupations. The historical relationship between dominant castes and Scheduled Castes in Haryana was governed through the *Jajmani* system, a traditional arrangement that institutionalized caste-based occupational dependency and reinforced social hierarchy. Under this structure, Scheduled Castes

performed labor-intensive and stigmatized occupations in exchange for minimal economic security and social protection.

According to the Census of India (2011), Scheduled Castes constitute nearly 20.2 percent of Haryana's population. Major SC communities in the state include Chamar/Jatav, Balmiki, Dhanak, and Bazigar groups. Historically, these communities were spatially segregated within villages, often residing in separate localities at the outskirts of settlements. Their exclusion extended beyond physical space to social interaction, access to education, temple entry, water resources, and participation in village-level decision-making. Untouchability practices, though legally abolished, continued in subtle and overt forms in many rural areas. The caste hierarchy not only shaped occupational and economic life but also determined dignity, identity, and opportunities for social mobility.

However, the post-independence period brought important structural changes that began to challenge traditional caste relations. The Constitution of India, inspired largely by the vision of B. R. Ambedkar, provided legal safeguards and affirmative action policies for Scheduled Castes through reservations in education, employment, and political representation. Land reforms, expansion of rural education, Panchayati Raj institutions, urbanization, industrialization, and migration gradually weakened the rigid foundations of caste-based occupational dependency. In Haryana, these processes accelerated after the 1990s due to economic liberalization, improved transport and communication networks, and increasing exposure to urban lifestyles and democratic values.

Education has emerged as one of the most significant instruments of social transformation among Scheduled Castes in rural Haryana. Increased access to schools, scholarships, and higher educational institutions has enabled many SC families to aspire beyond traditional occupations. Government welfare schemes, hostels, coaching facilities, and reservation policies have facilitated the emergence of a small but growing educated Dalit middle class in the state.

Political consciousness among Scheduled Castes has similarly undergone considerable transformation. The implementation of reservation policies in Panchayati Raj institutions and electoral politics has enhanced the political participation and representation of SC communities. Dalit assertion in Haryana has increasingly become visible through demands for dignity, equal rights, and access to public resources. Social movements, awareness of constitutional rights, and digital media have contributed to a growing sense of identity and collective consciousness among Dalit youth. Nevertheless, the rise of political representation has not always translated into genuine social equality.

Despite visible progress in literacy, political participation, and occupational mobility, the social realities of rural Haryana continue to reveal persistent inequalities. Caste-based discrimination has not disappeared; rather, it has adapted to changing socio-economic contexts. Residential segregation remains common in villages, and subtle forms of untouchability continue in social interactions, marriage relations, religious practices, and access to community resources. Incidents of caste violence, social boycotts, and resistance against Dalit assertion demonstrate the continuing anxieties of dominant castes over changing power relations. Land ownership patterns remain highly unequal, with the majority of Scheduled Castes continuing to work as agricultural laborers or informal workers without significant economic security.

Another important dimension is the internal differentiation within Scheduled Castes themselves. Not all SC communities have benefited equally from state policies and development opportunities. Certain groups such as Jatavs have achieved relatively higher educational and occupational mobility, while others like Balmikis and Dhanaks continue to face severe socio-economic deprivation. This internal hierarchy highlights the uneven nature of social transformation and raises important questions regarding equitable distribution of opportunities within Scheduled Castes.

The present study seeks to critically examine the changing social status of Scheduled Castes in rural Haryana within this broader socio-economic and political context. It aims to analyze the nature and extent of social mobility experienced by SC communities and to identify the structural barriers that continue to limit their complete integration into mainstream society. The study explores how education, urbanization, migration, state

policies, and political participation have influenced the social position of Scheduled Castes in rural areas. Simultaneously, it investigates the persistence of caste prejudice, discrimination, and economic inequality despite modernization and constitutional safeguards.

This study is sociologically significant because rural Haryana represents a unique social landscape where rapid economic development coexists with strong traditional caste structures. The contradiction between constitutional democracy and deeply rooted social hierarchy provides an important framework for understanding contemporary caste dynamics in India. By focusing on the lived experiences of Scheduled Castes in rural Haryana, the paper attempts to contribute to broader debates on social justice, caste mobility, rural transformation, and democratic inclusion in contemporary Indian society. Haryana's socio-economic fabric is deeply rooted in its agrarian economy. Following its separation from Punjab in 1966, the state witnessed rapid economic growth, heavily accelerated by the Green Revolution. However, this economic prosperity was asymmetrical, primarily benefiting landowning communities such as the Jats, Ahirs, and Rors.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the study are:

- To examine the changing socio-economic and political status of Scheduled Castes in rural Haryana.
- To analyze the impact of education, urbanization, and state policies on social mobility among SCs.
- To identify the continuing barriers of caste discrimination and social exclusion.
- To understand the transformation of traditional caste relations in the context of modernization and democratic assertion.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a mixed-method research design combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to understand the changing social status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in rural Haryana. The study primarily relies on secondary sources of data along with empirical observations gathered through field-based understanding of rural society in selected districts of Haryana.

Nature and Sources of Data

The study is descriptive and analytical in nature. Secondary data were collected from various sources such as:

Census of India Reports (2011)

Government reports and policy documents

Haryana State Commission reports

Research journals, books, and scholarly articles

Reports related to caste, rural economy, and social mobility

Primary insights were also developed through informal interactions, field observations, and socio-cultural understanding of rural communities in districts such as Rohtak, Hisar, Jhajjar, Sonapat, and Bhiwani.

Sampling and Area of Study

The study focuses on rural areas of Haryana where Scheduled Castes constitute a significant proportion of the population. Particular attention was given to villages with visible caste-based settlement patterns and agrarian social structures. The major Scheduled Caste communities considered in the study include Chamar/Jatav, Balmiki, and Dhanak communities.

Method of Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through sociological and thematic interpretation. Concepts such as caste hierarchy, social mobility, agrarian relations, exclusion, and political participation were used as analytical tools. The study also applies the perspectives of prominent sociologists and thinkers such as B. R. Ambedkar, M. N. Srinivas, and Surinder S. Jodhka to interpret changing caste dynamics in rural Haryana.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study reveal that the social status of Scheduled Castes in rural Haryana has undergone significant transformation during the last few decades. However, this transformation remains uneven and incomplete due to persistent structural inequalities and social prejudices.

1. Decline of Traditional Jajmani Relations

One of the major findings of the study is the gradual weakening of the traditional Jajmani system. Earlier, Scheduled Castes were economically dependent on dominant landowning castes for livelihood and survival. With increasing mechanization in agriculture and the decline of labor-intensive farming practices, traditional caste-based occupational dependence has reduced considerably. This shift has weakened the economic control historically exercised by dominant agrarian castes over Dalit communities.

2. Rise in Educational Awareness

Education has emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing social mobility among Scheduled Castes. Government scholarships, reservation policies, and increased access to schools and higher education institutions have contributed to rising literacy rates among Dalit youth. Educated youth are increasingly seeking employment in government services, private sectors, and urban occupations instead of remaining confined to traditional caste-based labor. Education has also strengthened awareness regarding constitutional rights, dignity, and social justice.

3. Urbanization and Occupational Mobility

The process of urbanization and migration toward cities has created new economic opportunities for Scheduled Castes. Many rural Dalit families have diversified their occupations through wage labor, industrial work, transport services, and small businesses. The study finds that occupational mobility has reduced direct economic dependence on village elites. Urban exposure has also encouraged greater social confidence and political consciousness among younger generations.

4. Political Participation and Democratic Assertion

Political reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions and legislative bodies has increased the participation of Scheduled Castes in local governance. Dalit representatives are now more visible in village politics and public institutions. However, the study also indicates that symbolic representation does not always translate into real decision-making power. In many villages, dominant castes continue to exert indirect political influence over elected SC representatives.

5. Persistence of Social Discrimination

Despite socio-economic progress, caste-based discrimination continues in subtle and overt forms. Residential segregation remains common in many villages where Dalit settlements are spatially separated from dominant caste localities. Practices of untouchability may have declined legally, but social distance, exclusion from community networks, and discriminatory attitudes continue to persist in everyday interactions.

6. Landlessness and Economic Inequality

Land ownership continues to be one of the most significant determinants of social power in rural Haryana. A large proportion of Scheduled Castes remain landless agricultural laborers with limited access to productive resources. Economic vulnerability restricts the ability of many Dalit families to achieve sustainable upward mobility. Conflicts related to village common land (Shamlat land) further reflect ongoing struggles over economic rights and social dignity.

7. Emerging Dalit Consciousness

The study highlights the emergence of a stronger Dalit identity and collective consciousness among younger generations. Social media, digital connectivity, Ambedkarite ideology, and access to higher education have contributed to growing awareness regarding equality and constitutional rights. This new assertion often challenges traditional caste hierarchies, leading at times to social tensions and localized conflicts in rural areas.

8. Internal Differentiation within Scheduled Castes

Another important finding is the increasing internal differentiation among Scheduled Castes themselves. Some communities, particularly those with better educational access and political networks, have progressed relatively faster, while more marginalized groups such as Balmikis and Dhanaks continue to face severe socio-economic deprivation. This internal inequality indicates that the benefits of development and reservation policies have not been distributed equally across all SC sub-castes.

OVERALL DISCUSSION

The overall findings suggest that rural Haryana is experiencing a transitional phase where traditional caste hierarchies are weakening economically but continue socially and culturally in modified forms. The relationship between dominant castes and Scheduled Castes is no longer entirely based on hereditary dependence; instead, it is increasingly shaped by democratic assertion, legal awareness, education, and economic diversification. Nevertheless, structural inequalities related to land ownership, social discrimination, and unequal access to opportunities continue to limit the realization of substantive equality. Therefore, the transformation of Scheduled Castes in Haryana represents both progress and resistance operating simultaneously within rural society.

CONCLUSION

The social status of Scheduled Castes (SCs) in rural Haryana is currently undergoing a highly sensitive and transformative phase. This shift is the result of a complex dialectical struggle between traditional dominance and modern consciousness (a dialectic of progress and pushback). From a historical perspective, the transition from the absolute subjugation and exploitation of the Jajmani era to contemporary constitutional assertion marks a milestone shift. The expansion of education, urbanization, new employment avenues, and constitutional protections have equipped Dalit youth with a renewed sense of identity and self-confidence. Today's generation is outright refusing to adhere to the traditional feudal scripts of forced deference, signaling a major structural shift in rural society.

However, parallel to this progress lies a harsh reality: the realization of true egalitarianism remains a distant goal. Despite legal rights, social distance and discrimination persist on the ground. Spatial segregation is still starkly visible in villages, where Dalit settlements often remain physically isolated from the main village grid. Furthermore, extreme land inequalities, structural violence, and persistent attempts to maintain caste-based hegemony act as resilient barriers to comprehensive social mobility. Another concerning dimension is the internal fragmentation within the Scheduled Caste community itself, where certain sub-castes have lagged behind in the race for development, creating an internal hierarchy of marginalization.

Essential Policy Interventions: To transcend mere political representation and achieve comprehensive socio-economic equity, concrete policy interventions are vital

Effective Land Reforms: Since land is the primary source of power in rural Haryana, the strict enforcement of land ceiling laws is imperative. Additionally, the transparent, conflict-free allocation of village common lands (Shamlat) to Dalit self-help groups for collaborative farming must be ensured to foster economic self-reliance.

Robust Institutional Protection: The implementation of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act must be strengthened at the grassroots level. Establishing dedicated fast-track courts in sensitive districts like Hisar, Rohtak, and Jhajjar is essential to minimize political interference and ensure swift justice for victims.

Targeted Skill Development and Internal Equity: Targeted economic policies must be formulated to bridge the internal divide among SCs. It is crucial to ensure that the most marginalized sub-castes (such as Balmikis and Dhanaks) receive equal access to technical education, modern skill development, and entrepreneurial capital.

Final Thought: Ultimately, the complete integration and empowerment of Scheduled Castes in Haryana cannot be achieved through state intervention or legal frameworks alone. It demands something far deeper: a fundamental democratization of rural civil society. Until the cultural frameworks and social mindsets that normalize caste-based supremacy are completely dismantled, the vision of a truly just, inclusive, and egalitarian Haryana will remain unfulfilled.

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