Social Disability among Dhobis in Haryana

Abstract

The traditional Indian society was considered hierarchal as caste was a dominant institution based on the principle of *Purity and Pollution*. The traditional occupation of Dhobis was washing and ironing of clothes as a 'serving caste' The Jajmani system is an integral part of caste based Hindu society. Dhobhis were associated with the upper castes in a ritual context as a purifier for providing services which were considered essential on occassions like birth, marriage and death. They were placed at the lower side of the caste hierarchy and were known as untouchables and outcastes.The Government of India adopted legal measures to abolish untouchability and granted privileges under the policy of 'Protective Discrimination' which could not be availed by the Dhobis in Haryana whereas their counterparts enjoyed in other states of the India. Therefore, the present paper examines social disability in terms of their marginalized status in Haryana. The socioeconomic characteristics and its relationship with social disability is examined. The selection of sample is based on the concentration of these communities in different districts. The personal interviews were held with 189 respondents belonging to Dhobi community.

Keywords: Purity and Pollution, Jajmani System, Social Disability, Indian Society

Introduction

Caste is a dominant institution in Indian society that divides the society into four groups according to their birth. Brahmins occupied the highest position followed by Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Thus, the Brahmins were not only ritually superior to the Shudras but also in the spheres of existential conditions such as distribution of power and property relations. They enjoyed much more power and economic security than the Shudras on the opposite side. Despite the fact that the untouchables were integral part of the society both in ritualistic (value based) and existential (functional) terms the services of the untouchables were essential at the time of the birth of a child, in marriages and in family rituals

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the profile of respondents in terms of socioeconomic characteristics
2. To assess the level of social disability among Dhobis in Haryana.
3. To correlate disability with biographical variables like age, gender, marital status, occupation, spatial background.
4. To examine the relationship of disability with family background variables relating to households

Universe and Sample

The universe of the present study is the state of Haryana which is undertaken to ascertain the claim of Dhobis for the schedule caste status. There are organized efforts by their community or 'Dhobi Samaj' to get included in the schedule so as to avail of the reservation and development benefits. The leaders of their community are well aware of the fact that the process of identification of caste initially notified by a State by a presidential notification. To locate the distribution of the respective communities in the state of Haryana the discussion was held with their leaders on the basis of their information the method of purposive sampling was adopted. The selection is based on the concentration of these communities in different districts such as Ambala, Fatehabad, Gurgaon, Hissar, Kaithal, Karnal, Kurukshetra, Panipat, Sonipat, Yamuna Nagar, etc. The personal interviews were held with 189 respondents belonging to Dhobi community.

The word Dhobi word is derived from Dhona which means to wash. The dhobi is servicing caste involved in the occupations of washing clothes. The majority of the dhobis pursue their traditional occupation of

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washing clothes and running laundries. Their occupation is providing services of cleaning, washing and ironing of clothes to upper castes and their women also participate. They wash clothes as a routine activity as well as on specific occasions like birth, marriage and death. The clothes washed by them are not clean but also considered as ritually pure should be worn on ritual occasions.

Social disability

The concept of social disability has emerged from physical disability This led to the emergence of disability studies and social model contrary to the medical model whose focus was on deprivation and social oppression. The scholars like Fine and Asch (1988), Hahn (1997) and Oliver (1990) and William (2001) highlight that physical disabled are victims of prejudice, discrimination, deprivation derogation and marginality because of disabling conditions created for them by world of non-disabled. The social disability can also be conceptualized as a lack of ability to perform a 'normal' economic, social and cultural activity because of the disabling conditions created by the mainstream society.

Therefore, in the present study, social disability is measured to ascertain marginalization and deprivation of respondents belonging to backward communities in social, economic and cultural terms which render a person socially disabled in the human society. However, unlike physical disability, the social disability flows from the group identities, especially in the context of Indian society where a village, caste and joint family constitute social reality. Thorat (2007) and Sen (2001) express that disability is an outcome of exclusion which works through group or community identities and also locates exclusion in group dynamics. On the other hand, Sen (2001) main focus is on the capabilities of an individual which are constrained by the social structure which impose restrictions upon an individual which result in exclusion and disability. Thus, the source of disability lies in the structural processes which work through group identities.

Social disability is closely related to social exclusion has been defined differently by various scholars in different spatial-temporal contexts. The term was coined in France in 1974 to refer to groups of people who were not protected by social insurance and were labeled as "social problems". Since then the excluded groups were identified on the basis of various definitions and criteria laid down by the scholars. In fact, the concept of social exclusion became popular in the 1990s, it had deep roots in social justice that arose when it was realized that citizens deserve certain benefits under welfare state. Scholars like Young (1990) offers the ideal of "differentiated solidarity" as a means of inclusion of groups with the realities of an unequal world. The process of social exclusion in India works through the group or the social institutions like caste, tribes, and backward communities faced historical discrimination which resulted in inequality. Thorat's (2009) also explains, the basis of exclusion not the individual but the group.

In brief, social exclusion is a result of discrimination perpetuated by the institutional structures that denied a minimal human existence to oppressed groups like backward communities and scheduled castes like shudras, untouchables or Dalits. In the following discussion, we will examine the relationship between caste and disability.

Caste and Disability

The indological perpective on caste explains that it has a divine origin and its basis is in Hinduism. The idea of transmigration of soul that birth in a particular caste is determined because of the nature of one's *Karma and Dharma* in the previous birth. According to Rigveda, the Brahmins sprang from the head or mouth of '*Purusha'* the Kshatriyas from his arms and the Vaishyas from his thighs and the Shudras from his feet. Also, there is an another interpretation given for the divine origin, i.e., the Brahmins possess attributes like intelligence and wisdom are identified as being 'sattvic' who also practice vegetarianism; whereas the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are ascribed to 'rajasic' qualities and finally, the Shudras are seen as possessing 'tamasic' qualities. The traditional Hindu organization, i.e., the system of Varna was divided into two main substrata known as *dwijas (twice born)* and *sudras* were based on ritual consideration that was the basis for division of labour in society. The twice-born Hindus- the Brahmins, the kshtriyas and the vaishyas. The shudras were lower caste placed on bottom of the hierarchy. Dumont supports the idea that the relationship between castes is determined by an ideological principle 'purity and pollution'. For instance, the twice born were considered pure and the shudras as impure. Bougle(1971) explains that the caste system divides the society into four groups which were determined by births and were hereditary in nature. They were separated from each other and certain restrictions existed in terms of food, commensality etc. The membership in these groups is expressive of one single principle-the ritual opposition between 'purity and pollution'.

Hutton (1951) describes the caste in terms of certain strictures or restrictions on interpersonal and intergroup behavior attached to caste which has endogamy its basis. These restrictions on commensality are reflective of the nature of separation and hierarchy between groups. Srinivas(2003) and Dumont(1981) described the structure of the relations that arise between castes on the basis of these restrictions are related to attributes of marriage, dress, and speech, custom and ranking of caste. Also, for Srinivas the status of a caste is a consequence of a number of factors-untouch a social, economic and political-working in combination. For Dumont, on the other hand, these attributes are not expressive of the status of a caste but are in fact determined by the *purity or impurity* of a caste. This ideology holds its importance at the micro ideological cultural level. The caste hierarchy is reckoned in terms of ritual status, which means every caste has socio-religious position and assigned a specific task. In other words, castes are arranged in an order of high and low which may be termed as ritual hierarchy.

According to Bailey (1957), caste "stands in a ritual and secular (political, economic) hierarchy expressed in rules of interaction". MacKim Marriott (1955) like Bailey expressed that ritual hierarchy itself emerges in non-ritual secular i.e. the economic, political context. Thus, interaction theorists argue with the view that caste-ranking flows from the interaction pattern. They also argue that ritual hierarchy always tends to match with the non-ritual hierarchy (i.e. economic and political status).

It is important to understand caste at the micro level in terms of sub-castes (Jatis). Beitelle (1965) Sharma (1998) suggest to understand the caste at the empirical level in terms of structure and interaction. Caste has two aspects. One, structural-functional in terms of integration and two, conflict in terms of segregation, untouchability and disability.

The untouchables had been subject to a variety of disabilities, deprivations and oppressions under the traditional system. The untouchables were placed on the most degraded bottom layer considered as out-castes and out of the traditional fourfold Varna system. The terms such as 'antyaja', 'panchama' and 'chandala' were used for them. Ghurye (1969) while explaining the forth feature of caste system in terms of 'civil and religious disabilities and privileges considered them as binary opposition or as two extremes of same variable having privileges or abilities as one extreme and disabilities as the other extreme. The upper castes enjoyed privileges in terms of social status education, political power, whereas shudras, lower castes and untouchable suffered multiple disabilities. Ghurye explained how civil and religious disabilities were prevailing in different parts of the country. The untouchable were made to reside on the outskirts of villages. He gives an illustration of Tamil and Malyalam regions, where different castes were divided into three parts. The Brahmins were on one corner and the dominant castes were residing on the other and the third and separate was meant for the untouchables. In a village of Ramanand district a group of service castes like artisans, washermans and barbers in the north-east corner and untouchables were found in the south-east. It was not only in terms of spatial distribution, but untouchables were victim of different kinds of disabilities such as the gates of Poona were closed for the Mahars because their bodies had a long shadow which could pollute the Brahmins. In addition to this they could not use public wells and could not educate their children. They were not allowed to enter the Hindu temple, could not hear and recite Vedic hymns whereas the Brahmins could only perform sacred rituals. It was only Brahmins have the access to the inner area of the temples. In terms of privileges in social life they were exempted from capital punishment and enjoyed privileges in tax relaxation.

The word 'Harijan' (children of God) was given by Mahatma Gandhiji. This was not only disliked, but scorned and opposed as it was assumed that the 'untouchables' were whose progeny was not known. The expressions, 'depressed classes' and 'exterior castes' were commonly used before 1930 and they were listed in the census in the 1931. But

since the passage of the Government of India Act of 1935, they have been referred to as 'scheduled castes' and the census of 1941 also categorised them as Scheduled castes. The social identity of the untouchables is marked further by the fact that they generally reside in the outskirts of the 'village settlement' which is known as *'cheri'/ dhani* is considered as being ritually polluted. Therefore, a distance has to be maintained from the village. The stigma attached to the untouchables (untouchability) is associated with the occupation and the work they perform. Regarding the lifestyles they were not permitted to wear clothes/garments made of silk or jewelry of superior variety normally worn by the higher castes. Harijans were prevented from living in brick and tile houses. In traditional Hindu society there were legal and ritual sanctions which prevented untouchable to follow the lifestyles of the upper castes.

The untouchability is not practiced in a rigid way except at birth, marriage, death and special occasions like festivals. The institution of caste is in flux. The ritual aspect of caste the ideology of 'purity and pollution' which was relevant in the traditional sociey has undergone a change. The untouchables still work under the patronage of upper castes, especially landlords- dominant caste in the rural areas. They experience discrimination, work as bonded labour, suffer atrocities in terms of assaults, rape and murder.

Caste and Jajmani System

The jajmani system has been integral part of the caste system in India. It refers to the exchange of goods and services between upper castes-patron and lower serving castes as recipients. Wiser (1999) in a study of karimpur village in Uttar Pradesh examined the relationship in terms of exchange of goods and services among twenty-four castes. Lewis (1954) explained that each caste is supposed to give services to the families of higher castes. In fact, these relations are hereditary and exist at the level of family. Dube (1953) drew the relationship, obligation and dealings in different terms which involves jajmani links which were multiple, integrated and lasting. Dube also supports the facts that the jajmani system exists at the level of family. Wiser observed reciprocity in the jajmani system and establish a relationship between the Barber and Artisans as symmetrical. But Wiser observed that the barber was not extending his services to the sweeper. Dumont (1970) categorized relationship between different castes and highlighted that artisan, washerman, carpenter, barber who had fixed right in grains as a permanent maintenance receive customary payment for ceremonial occasions. Therefore, Dumont classified the jajmani system into asymmetrical or hierarchical involving unequal distribution and interdependence from the lower castes. Srinivas in the study of Coorgs of south India explained how Coorgs were integrated with other castes in the idioms of rituals. It is interesting to explain the relationship of dhobis (Washerman) with Coorgs. The washerman's services were considered significant for ritual occasion like birth, marriage, etc. He supplied clean clothes for a bridal pair and for the

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ceiling above the bridal seat. He was considered as a purifier because of his occupation but as his position was low in the caste hierarchy, he was not allowed to enter the sacred place like a kitchen. He Supplies clothes at village festival and purifies ritual pollution caused by birth or death. The Dhobi (washerman), on the other hand, has a small representation because he serves primarily upper-caste or upper-class patrons. Dhobis are a lower caste. They are an important parja caste and their services are required on almost all-important life cycle rituals. The Dhobis are considered to be 'unclean' as they wash dirty clothes of others. The upper castes and intermediate castes do not have any commensal relations with them. They claim not to eat food at Chamar and Dhanuk households. Dhobis claim to occupy a higher position among the lower castes.

Disability and Biographical Variables

The relationship of biographical and social variables with a disability is examined in the following discussion. Age is considered to be the crucial variable of one's life. The physical capabilities, roles and outlook, perception and attitudes vary with age. Therefore, respondents belonging to different age groups differ in terms of their values, perceptions and capabilities. It is hypothesized that disability, deprivation, dependency and helplessness increase in terms of health, physical, economic, social, cultural aspects of their lives. The data depicted that Dhobis, in the age group of 51-60 years experienced a high degree of disability. (Table No. 1). Perhaps during these years of their lives they have to work hard for establishing themselves in their occupation.

Table No. 1 Disability by Age

Dhobi Disability	Age						
	Below 30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	Above 70	Total
Low	15 (44.1%)	21 (31.8%)	16 (35.6%)	4 (21.1%)	7 (33.3%)	1 (25.0%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	17 (50.0%)	35 (53.0%)	21 (46.7%)	9 (47.4%)	12 (57.1%)	2 (50.0%)	96 (50.8%)
High	2 (5.9%)	10 (15.2%)	8 (17.8%)	6 (31.6%)	2 (9.5%)	1 (25.0%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	34 100.0%	66 100.0%	45 100.0%	19 100.0%	21 100.0%	4 100.0%	189 100.0%

Gender

Division of Labour on the basis of Sex is the biological distinction between male and female, whereas Gender is defined in terms of social and cultural expectations of men and women in a society. To correlate gender with the disability, it is hypothesized that women feel a high level of disability due to the domination of men and also they have to handle both the intimate creation of home and external world of employment. Dhobi men experienced more disability, perhaps their continuation of traditional occupation did not enable them to meet their livelihood which they have to substitute it with other occupations like establishing vegetable shops, construction work, but that did not enable them to make ends meet for which they remained partially involved with their traditional occupation along with their family members. (Table No. 2)

Table No. 2 Disability by Gender

Disability	Men	Women	Total
Low	57	7	64
	33.9%	33.3%	33.9%
Medium	83	13	96
	49.4%	61.9%	50.8%
High	28	1	29
	16.7%	4.8%	15.3%
Total	168	21	189
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Marital Status

To correlate marital status with a disability it is assumed that generally married respondents face low level of disability when compared to unmarried or widows and widowers. It may not be appropriate to examine marital status as variables. Our interaction with both married and young unmarried respondents reflects that they faced problems of mutual adjustment when they interact with each other and with other communities. (Table No. 3)

Table No. 3 Disability by Marital Status

Dhobi Disability	Marital Status			Total
	Married	Unmarried	Widow/Widower	
Low	49 (33.8%)	14 (35.0%)	1 (25.0%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	68 (46.9%)	25 (62.5%)	3 (75.0%)	96 (50.8%)
High	28 (19.3%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (.0%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	145 100.0%	40 100.0%	4 100.0%	189 100.0%

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Education

Education is one of the most important indicators of human development. Education changes the basis of status from ascribed to achieved. It is due to this fact that the modern democratic state focuses on providing modern education to their citizens. It is because of this fact that the Constitution of India and subsequent policies of the Government of India focus on educating the weaker sections consisting of backward castes, scheduled castes and tribes. Education provides employment opportunities and as a consequence, perception of disability may decrease. Thus, it is hypothesized that education reduces disability. This has been proved reliable in case of Dhobis to whom training has not enabled them to raise their position in society and to scale down their perception of disability. In other words, education makes them conscious of their difficulties because of their lower status in caste hierarchy. Thus, education can work in two ways. It may liberate individuals from their traditional status as well as instill an awareness of disadvantages being faced by them due to their background. (Table No. 4).

Table No. 4 Disability by Education

Dhobi Disability	Education						Total
	Illierate	Primary	Middle/Under Middle	Matric	Intermediate	Graduates and above	
Low	26 (35.6%)	12 (40.0%)	10 (23.3%)	8 (34.8%)	6 (46.2%)	2 (28.6%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	41 (56.2%)	13 (43.3%)	27 (62.8%)	7 (30.4%)	6 (46.2%)	2 (28.6%)	96 (50.8%)
High	6 (8.2%)	5 (16.7%)	6 (14.0%)	8 (34.8%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (42.9%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	73 100.0%	30 100%	43 100.0%	23 100.0%	13 100.0%	7 100.0%	189 100.0%

Occupation

There is a hereditary specialization of occupation and based on this, various groups are ranked in caste based traditional Indian society according to ritual value of their occupation. Occupational disability in Indian society is a function of caste system. However, the ranking of occupations in a hierarchy has rendered those in the lower strata incapable of acquiring skills to work in modern industrial and multinational organizations. Thus, on the basis of the occupational structure of Indian society, it can be hypothesized that a low occupation ranks may even lower their status in society. Thus, Dhobis' continuation of traditional occupation, which they substituted by low paid construction work and labour jobs is also a source of disability. Some efforts were made by them to change their occupations, but that did not help raise their status. (Table No. 5).

Table No. 5 Disability by Occupation

Disability	Agriculture	Govt. Service	Housewife	Labour	Petty Business	Traditional Occupation	Total
Low	0	2	27	0	12	23	64
	.0%	66.7%	41.5%	.0%	63.2%	23.2%	33.9%
Medium	1	1	35	0	5	54	96
	50.0%	33.3%	53.8%	.0%	26.3%	54.5%	50.8%
High	1	0	3	1	2	22	29
	50.0%	.0%	4.6%	100.0%	10.5%	22.2%	15.3%
Total	2	3	65	1	19	99	189
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table No. 6 Disability by SpatialBackground

Disability	Spatial Background		Total
	Rural	Urban	
Low	27 (50.9%)	37 (27.2%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	22 (41.5%)	74 (54.4%)	96 (50.8%)
High	4 (7.5%)	25 (18.4%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	53 100.0%	136 100.0%	189 100.0%

Spatial Background

To examine the relationship of spatial background with disability, it is hypothesized that people belonging to rural areas face a lot of problems in adjustment after migration to urban areas and as a result experience alienation and disability. Our data depict that respondents from rural areas perceive low disability perhaps in urban areas they have to struggle more and face adjustment problems. (Table 6)

Table No. 7 Disability by Type of Family

Disability	Type of Family		Total
	Joint	Nuclear	
Low	23 (30.3%)	41 (36.3%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	38 (50.0%)	58 (51.3%)	96 (50.8%)
High	15 (19.7%)	14 (12.4%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	76 100.0%	113 100.0%	189 100.0%

Type of Family & Size of Family

It is believed that Joint family still gives economic, physical, and psychological security to its members. In other words, Joint family can be said to be instrumental in providing economic support and in instlling cultural values in its members. Therefore, it is hypothesized that those who belong to joint families feel more secure and experience lower disability as compared to those belonging to nuclear families. *Dhobis* belonging to joint families ranked high in disability and also find it difficult to maintain joint trade and business and prefer nuclear families and with lower size of family observed lower degree of disability. (Table No. 7 & 8)

Table No. 8 Disability by Family Size

Dhobi Disability	Family Size			Total
	1 to 5	6 to 10	Above 10	
Low	33 (35.1%)	26 (34.2%)	5 (26.3%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	49 (52.1%)	36 (47.4%)	11 (57.9%)	96 (50.8%)
High	12 (12.8%)	14 (18.4%)	3 (15.8%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	94 100.0%	76 100.0%	19 100.0%	189 100.0%

Table No. 9 Disability by Type of Dwelling

Disability	Type of Dwelling			Total
	Kacha	Pucca	Semi-pucca	
Low	20 (35.7%)	36 (30.8%)	8 (50.0%)	64 (33.9%)
Medium	33 (58.9%)	56 (47.9%)	7 (43.8%)	96 (50.8%)
High	3 (5.4%)	25 (21.4%)	1 (6.3%)	29 (15.3%)
Total	56 100.0%	117 100.0%	16 100.0%	189 100.0%

Table No 10. Disability by Separated Facilities

Disability	Separate Facilities				
	Nil	Low	Medium	High	Total
Low	41 (45.1%)	1 (33.3%)	13 (20.9%)	9 (27.3%)	64 (33.8%)
Medium	40 (44.0%)	2 (66.7%)	36 (58.2%)	18 (54.5%)	96 (50.8%)
High	10 (11.0%)	0 (.0%)	13 (20.9%)	6 (18.2%)	29 (15.4%)
Total	91 100.0%	3 100.0%	62 100.0%	33 100.0%	189 100.0%

Type of Dwelling

Dhobis are found to be still living in *Kuccha* houses and one-half of them staying in semi-pucca houses perceived low degree of disability. The relationship of disability and the access of basic amenities in terms of separate facilities of toilet, washroom, basin do not change their perception of disability. (Table No. 9 &10)

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Table No. 11: Disability by Casting of Votes

Dhobi Disability	Casting of Votes		Total
	No	Yes	
Low	25 (61.0%)	39 (26.4%)	61 (32.3%)
Medium	14 (34.1%)	82 (55.4%)	98 (51.9%)
High	2 (4.9%)	27 (18.2%)	30 (15.9%)
Total	41 100.0%	148 100.0%	189 100.0%

Table No 12. Disability by Membership of Association

Dhobi Disability	Membership of Association		Total
	No	Yes	
Low	61 (38.1%)	3 (10.3%)	61 (32.3%)
Medium	76 (47.5%)	20 (69.0%)	98 (51.9%)
High	23 (14.4%)	6 (20.7%)	30 (15.9%)
Total	160 100.0%	29 100.0%	189 100.0%

It is also important to examine the role of political participation in the empowerment of respondents after having examined the relationship of disability with biographical, social and economic characteristics. Political participation is operationalized in terms of casting votes, membership of caste, occupational and political associations. Our data depicted that 88.9% respondents participated in terms of casting votes. It is interesting to find that those who did not vote and were not members of community associations observed low mobility. It may be concluded that political participation do not determine their disability.

Conclusion

The situation of service castes is distinct in the sense that their services are required both in a ritual manner and in a functional context. They have to observe certain rules by not entering into kitchen and central areas by avoiding pollution of their patrons. Also, they were not supposed to provide services to the lower castes to maintain the purity of the patrons. The requirement of their services has undergone a change.

The plight of dhobis as service castes has lost its significance both in a ritual and in the secular context. The dhobis do not cater to the domestic sector (Patron-client) for washing and cleaning clothes these days. However, their services are availed for the ironing of clothes. Perhaps their services are substituted by washing machines and domestic maids belonging to lower castes. In the commercial sector like hospitals, hospitality industry- tent house, hotel they provide washing service.

The findings of this study show that a very few respondents could establishing dry-cleaning shops. Howerver, more than half of them are continuing with their traditional occupation, and one thirds have substituted it with labor and other petty jobs. Unable to make ends meet they remain partially involved in their traditional occupation with the assistance of women, who demand autonomy for their entry into the external world of work which has been resisted by men. Hardly anyone has acknowledged to have experienced untouchability, but they continue to face economic hardship, and are victims of discrimination, deprivation and humiliation.

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