An Analysis of the Continuum in Inter-caste Relations in India
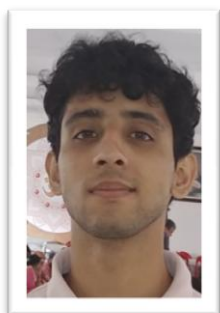
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Abstract

Historicity of inter-caste relations can be traced in the early stages of evolution of rural community in the Indian society. These relations have witnessed vicissitudes during long drawn interactions between caste groups. Inter-caste relations evolved in a more organized form in the guise of Jajmani system. This is a system of permanent and hereditary inter-caste relations and gives a kaleidoscopic view of socio-economic relations among various caste groupings. Universality of its prevalence in rural India for centuries is well recognized and documented. But it has been undergoing metamorphic change in some regions and changing at a slower pace in the others during post-independence period.   An empirical study was conducted with the objectives to know whether Jajmani system is in vogue in the rural areas and type and intensity of socio-economic ties among different caste categories and to find out change in inter-caste relations, if any, owing to industrialization and modernization. Information was elicited from 225 respondents using an interview schedule specially designed for this purpose. It is discernible that in majority of cases, inter-caste social relations which find better expression on the occasions like marriage, death, birth and festivals etc. among Brahmans and lower castes vis-à-vis other caste categories have grown weak. The data further unearth that economic relations as maintained on the occasions of marriage, sacred thread ceremony, *mundan* sacrament, birthday, death, *yajna, katha*, routine hair cut, manufacture and repair of various iron, earthen, wooden and leather articles, between members of higher castes (general category) and lower castes (scheduled castes) are moderate but weak in case of Other Backward Classes vis-à-vis all other caste categories. Overwhelming majority of informants believe that decline in hereditary occupations, depreciation of products and services in vogue for centuries and their availability being made by industry in the market are main reasons in descending order for change in inter caste relations. Modernization, westernization, industrialization, transportation and communications, growing materialism and consumerism together have brought change in relations among caste groups affecting about a nine hundred million people inhabiting rural India.

Keywords: Inter-Caste, Jajmani, Sacrament, Yajna, Modernization.
Introduction

Genesis of inter-caste relations can be traced in the early stages of evolution of rural community in the Indian society. These relations have witnessed vicissitudes during long drawn interactions between caste groups. Inter-caste relations evolved in a more organized form in the guise of Jajmani system. The term *Jajman* has been derived from a Sanskrit word *yajnaman* which had initially changed to *Yajman*. The word *'Yaj'* has often been pronounced as *'jaj'*, therefore, yajman came to be known as jajman in popular usage. In fact *Jajman* is a person who belongs to a Brahmin Caste and performs *Yajna,* a religious activity conducted around sacred fire. However Jajmani System is a system of relationship between different castes who exchange goods and services. In this system there is exchange of goods and services between landowning higher castes and landless service castes. The service castes traditionally include weavers, leather workers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, barbers, washer men and so constitute groups of artisans serving the community. The landed higher caste *Jajman* are the patrons, and the service castes are the *kameen* (servers) of the *jajman*. The Jajmani system is based on the agricultural system of production and distribution of goods and services. It is the link between the landowning high caste groups and occupational castes. Since India traditionally, has been an agrarian and a caste ridden society, the

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Jajmani system developed as a web of relations between different castes. William Wiser is known to have introduced the term 'Jajmani System' who in his study in Uttar Pradesh observed that different caste groupings exchanged goods and services. This is a system of permanent and hereditary relations between higher and lower castes. The members of castes receive grains against services rendered which are indicative of prevalence of barter system. In fact this is a system of permanent and hereditary inter-caste relations and gives a kaleidoscopic view of socio-economic and historicity of such relations. Universality of its prevalence in rural India for centuries is a recognized social reality. But it has been undergoing metamorphic change in some regions and changing at a slower pace in the others during post-independence period.

Objectives of the Study

This study was conducted with the following objectives:

1. To know whether Jajmani system is in vogue in the rural areas;
2. To find out intensity of socio-economic ties between caste groupings;
3. To attempt to explain reasons of change in inter-caste relations.

Methodology

Research Design

Main purpose of this study was to understand socio-economic relations among various caste groups. It necessitated eliciting information pertaining to background variables such as age, caste, educational qualification, hereditary occupation, present profession of informants and their sons etc. Exploratory-cum-descriptive research design was used in this study.

Universe: It is a herculean task to conduct a study over a large area or to interview large number of subjects due to limitation of time, money and resources. Such difficulties are compounded when study is to be conducted by single person and that to in the regions which have numerous tough hill terrains and inaccessible areas not connected by any mode of transportation whether road, rail or air. This study was conducted in Hamirpur district which is located in the Western part of state of Himachal Pradesh in India.

Sample

Himachal Pradesh has twelve districts namely: Sirmour, Solan, Shimla, Kinnour, Bilaspur, Mandi, Kullu Lahul Spiti, Kangra, Hamirpur, Una and Chamba. Hamirpur district was chosen because it has registered highest literacy rate ever since it came into existence in 1972. In the second phase, two tehsils, Hamirpur and Bhoranj were selected from total of five tehsils. The reason for selecting these two tehsils was that the former is the most urbanized and the latter happens to be totally rural. Further four villages each were selected from both the tehsils. A sample of 225 was taken. Men were the unit of study.

Jajmani System

In sociological literature Jajmani system has come to be accepted as a general term to describe the economic interaction between the castes at the village level. The land owning castes occupy a privileged position in the Jajmani relations. The interaction between occupational castes and the land owning castes takes place within the framework of non-reciprocal and asymmetrical type of relations. The land owning castes maintain a paternalistic attitude of superiority towards their occupational castes that are called *Kamins* in North India. The term *Kamin* means one who works for somebody or serves him. The Functionalists and Marxists have viewed Jajmani system from different perspectives. The former views it as the basis of self-sufficiency, unity, harmony and stability in the rural community. The scholars from the latter school of thought consider the Jajmani system as essentially exploitative, characterized by a latent conflict of interest which could not crystallize due to the prevalent social setup.

Caste Categories in India

India attained independence from the suzerainty of United Kingdom on 15 August 1947. During post independent period the country witnessed process of categorizing various castes into categories- General Category (GC), Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Scheduled Castes (SC). The investigation dwelled on four castes- Brahman, Nai, Lohar and Chamar, thus drawing at least one caste group from each of the categories. Brahman is the highest caste in the hierarchical order of about three thousand castes and falls in the grouping of high castes and categorized by Indian state as 'General Category'. "High castes," or "big castes," is a grouping/category comprising the highest three ('twice born') *Varnas:* Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya. Nai is part of 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC). The Mandal Commission developed criteria under three headings- Social, Educational and Economic to identify 'Other Backward Classes'. Lohar and Chamar have been declared as Scheduled Castes by the Constitution of India. The Scheduled Castes who comprise bulk of the untouchables are technically, outside the four-fold *varna* scheme of caste hierarchy. Imputed with maximum degree of ritual and social impurity, the occupations of these castes were held to be the lowest in normative hierarchy and this led to their ecological segregation in most villages and townships.

Table 1 Distribution of Population of each Religion by Caste Categories (%)

Religion/Caste	SCs	STs	OBCs	General Class/Others
Hinduism	22.2	9.0	42.8	26.0
Islam	0.8	0.5	39.2	59.5
Christianity	9.0	32.8	24.8	33.3
Sikhism	30.7	0.9	22.4	46.1
Jainism	0.0	2.6	3.0	94.3
Buddhism	89.5	7.4	0.4	2.7
Zoroastrianism	0.0	15.9	13.7	0.4
Others	2.6	82.5	6.3	8.7
Total	19.7	8.5	41.1	30.8

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The Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 which was conducted with the help of hand-held electronic devices in all the 640 districts of twenty nine states and seven territories made its first findings available in the public domain on July 3, 2015. This is a first- ever caste based census conducted after 1931 though comprehensive census is conducted in the country once in every decade. The provisional rural data of SECC 2011 reveal SCs at 18.5% and OBCs at 68.5% in rural India. Information obtained from merged sample of Schedule 1 and Schedule 10 from National Sample Survey Organization 1999-2000 National Sample Survey Organization 2004-05 is compressed in table 1.

The data unearths the fact that in India population of Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes and General Category is spread in all the major religious communities viz. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists. However in overall population percentage of persons belonging to the SC, OBC and General Categories are about twenty, forty one and thirty one respectively.

Social Relations

It is discernible from the information compressed in table 2 s that intensity of intra-caste social relations is moderate among members of general category but strong among the scheduled castes in majority of cases. However intensity of such relations is strong to moderate in overwhelming majority (82.2% -88.2%) of cases in all the three caste categories.

Table2 Social Relations among members of Different Caste Categories (%)

Intensity of Relations		Caste Category		
Intra-caste	Intensity	General*	OBC**	SC***
	Strong	21(33.9)	45(40.2)	27(52.9)
	Moderate	33(53.2)	47(42.0)	18(35.3)
	Weak	8(12.9)	20(17.9)	6(11.8)
Total		**62(100.0)**	**112(100.0)**	**51(100.0)**
Inter-caste	Strong	7(11.3)	56(50.0)	3(5.9)
	Moderate	22(35.5)	21(18.7)	18(35.3)
	Weak	33(53.2)	35(31.3)	30(58.8)
Total		**62(100.0)**	**112(100.0)**	**51(100.0)**

* Brahman   ** Nai   *** Lohar, Chamar

As regards inter-caste social relations, the data unearths that its intensity is strong in OBC and weak among members of general category in majority of cases. However such relations are moderate to weak among SCs in overwhelming majority of cases. Reasons for strong to moderate intra-caste relations among all the three caste-categories can be that there continues to be observable influence of caste- the age old and one of the fundamental social institutions on the interaction and behavioral patterns of the people. People inhabiting study area have wedded to modern way of life using latest gadgets in their day today life. But when it comes to performance of rituals they call Brahman who has the privilege to be performing sacred ceremony since millennia. It partly goes in line with findings of Pandey (2015) who has observed that social brakes are applied by the dominant caste or castes. However, owing to growing materialism, individualism, industrialization, modern educations system, development of science & technology and transportation & communication, mobility and host of other reasons social inter-caste relations particular among high and low castes have emerged as moderate to weak.

Economic Relations

Economic relations between caste groupings have witnessed vicissitudes during centuries of evolutionary process. These relations fulfill functional needs of in Indian Society. Different caste groups have their own expertise in different domains. Brahman performing rituals for others is known as priest. He would perform a number of rituals which start from birth of a child, preparation of his horoscope, solemnization of birthday, performance of sacred thread ceremony (*Upnayan Sanskar*), *Mundan Sanskar* (First sacred haircut of boy), tallying of horoscope of boy and girl analyzing position of their respective stars and qualities of the potential couple. Apart from reciting incantations from sacred Vedic literature and other sacred texts, he performs several rituals in a definite order at the time of marriage of his *Yajman* (The client). Nai is supposed to perform multifarious duties at the time of *Mundan Sanskar,* (Sacred thread ceremony), giving haircut to its clients visiting their residences, during marriage, Sair festival and last rites. Interestingly he visits couples of villages and dozens of houses on behalf of his *Yajman* to invite guests for festivities. The invitees lovingly give him something in kind or cash. *Lohar* (Ironsmith) and *Chamar* are supposed to do iron and leather works respectively for their clients. In lieu of services rendered by the Yajman, food grain or other goods of daily use are given to Kamin. Many a times services of one's caste given in lieu of the services of Yajman. Thus it is a sort of barter system.

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Table 3 Economic Relations among Members of Different Caste Categories (%)

Relations		Caste Category		
Intra-caste	Intensity	General*	OBC*	SC***
	Strong	18(29.0)	23(20.5)	2(3.9)
	Moderate	37(59.7)	58(51.8)	17(33.3)
	Weak	7(11.3)	31(27.7)	32(62.7)
Total		**62**(100.0)	**112**(100.0)	**51**(100.0)
Inter-caste	Strong	12(19.4)	15(13.4)	7(13.7)
	Moderate	39(63.0)	38(33.9)	31(60.8)
	Weak	11(17.7)	59(52.7)	13(25.5)
Total		**62**(100.0)	**112**(100.0)	**51**(100.0)

    * Brahmin   ** Nai   *** Lohar, Chamar

Intra-caste economic relations among castes of general category and Other Backward Classes are observed to be moderate in majority of cases but weak among Scheduled Castes in nearly two third cases. On the other hand such relations of OBCs with non-OBC castes have emerged as weak in majority cases. However economic relations of castes belonging to general category and scheduled castes have been found to be strong to moderate with the members belonging to castes of other categories. Acceleration in the processes of consumerism, materialism, individualism, transportations and communications are impacting intra and inter-caste economic relations. Owing to strong social ties within castes and weak social interactions between castes, we expect informal economic transactions in the village to be concentrated within the caste observes Munshi (2006). He further asserts that caste-based economic networks, which currently serve many functions, will also ultimately disappear. These networks continue to be active in the globalizing Indian economy because information and commitment problems are exacerbated during a period of economic change. In the long-run, however, the markets will settle into place and the community networks will lose their purpose. In his study he found that lower caste boys in Bombay were held back by their working class networks, whereas lower caste girls (without that historical baggage) were apparently willing and able to take advantage of the new opportunities that became available with economic liberalization in the 1990's. This is reflected not only in their schooling choices, which will presumably map into their labor market outcomes, but also in their marriage decisions; specially, whether they married within their caste. The data reveal that neither intra nor inter-caste relations in economic domain are strong. These range from moderate to weak. It could be owing to decreasing dependence on agricultural actives, growing secondary and tertiary activities.

Change in Socio-economic Relations:

Intra-caste and inter-caste socio-economic relations have been undergoing rapid change in Indian society during post independence period. Pace of change appears to have accelerated during last decade of twentieth century and afterwards. Nearly three fourth of the subjects are of the opinion that availability of services and products from sources other than Jajmani system is one of the main reasons of change in socio-economic relations. Almost four fifth of the respondents observed depreciation in caste based traditional services and products as main cause of change in intra-caste and inter-caste relations. However overwhelming majority of respondents believe that decline in hereditary occupations has lead to change in relations.

Table 4 Causes of Change in Socio-economic Relations among Caste Groups

Cause	Frequency*	Percentage
Availability of services & products from other sources	161	71.6
Replacement of old services & products	178	79.1
Decline in hereditary occupations	192	85.3
Individualism	91	40.4
Miscellaneous	47	20.9
Total	225	100

*Multiple responses

Modern education is available without distinction of caste as such. Upon acquiring professional or other type of modern education educated youth prefer to go to job market which offers them better opportunities, packages, perquisites and position in the society. Educational attainments and job placements have together helped people in achieving new status, different and many a times better than what they have had from caste based ascribed status. It paved way to have individual identity of person concerned resulting in diminishing caste based 'we feeling' and growing individualism. Besides, urbanization, transportation & communication, state policies and programmes for upliftment of deprived sections and categories of society, growing use of science & technology, increasing competition in different spheres, rising demand of personnel having expertise in various fields and modernization together have acted as catalyst in bringing change in such relations observed one fifth of the subjects.

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(Munshi 2016) has observed that one side of caste networks is that they harness social ties within the community to solve market imperfections and increase economic efficiency. The other side is that they exclude outsiders once they are established. This discrimination is not a consequence of social prejudice, but is simply the outcome of economic competition between groups. In recent years, a number of studies have examined another aspect of inter-caste relations whereby upper caste employers prefer not to hire lower caste workers. One approach that has been used to identify caste based such treatment is the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition. In this method, the earnings differential between upper castes and lower castes is divided into two components: differences in the estimated returns to endowments such as education and occupation for the two caste-groups, and differences in the endowments themselves. This realism has also impacted intra-caste and inter-caste socio-economic relations. In Weber's view, the stability of the caste hierarchy served as a natural barrier to occupational mobility and entrepreneurial activity. This view has been contested by social scientists who take the position that mobility is possible, even in a caste-based society, but that this mobility involves the movement of the entire group.

Main Findings

In Indian society population of Scheduled Castes, Other Backward Classes and General Category is spread in all the major religious communities viz. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists. However in overall population percentages of persons belonging to the SC, OBC and General Categories are about twenty, forty one and thirty one respectively.

Intra-caste social relations are strong to moderate among all the three categories. However intra-caste economic relations are moderate in general category and OBCs but weak among scheduled castes. On the other side inter-caste social relations are moderate to weak but economic relations are weak among scheduled castes but moderate in general category and OBCs in majority of cases. It is discernible that socio-economic inter-caste relations which are backbone of Jajmani system in rural India are moderate to weak owing to growing impact of modernization in rural society and agricultural activities.

Availability of services & products from other than caste based sources, replacement of age old services & products by better quality and cheaper goods and services and decline in hereditary occupations by the modern professions are causes of change in socio-economic relations in intra-caste and inter-caste relations.

Conclusion

Rural community in Indian society is passing through the process of modernization. A vast population living in rural areas has already wedded to modern goods and services and way of life. In Himachal Pradesh intra-caste and inter-caste relations still significantly influence socio-economic life of the people as overwhelming majority of population in this hill state inhabit in villages Majority of the people pursue agricultural activities and depend on fellow caste members or members of other castes in day today activities making it a self-sufficient society. In fact this society portrays blend of caste based age old interaction and cooperation and adoption of modern competition in different spheres of life.

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