Education & Gender Equality: An Inquiry into the Status of Scheduled Caste Women of Aligarh District (U.P.)

The persistence of the status of scheduled caste women under the different social, educational and economic conditions inspired the present researcher to make a fresh study of one section of the society, that is, scheduled caste of the two tehsils of District Aligarh namely Koil and Khair. A large number of scheduled caste women of the district who were not being treated equally in the society because of being a women and their education is also affected because of this factor, now with the help of many government policies and programmes, their status has been changed. This fact itself is interestingly challenging as it points to latent desire among the scheduled caste women who feel that they have upgraded themselves by changing their status educationally as well as socially equal to men and hence have achieved a higher status in society. This view of their part challenges some of the basic elements of the nature and capacity of the caste system to have undergone a structural change.

This has led the present researcher to examine the nature of the status of scheduled caste women who fall under the umbrella of untouchables. The present study attempts to make reassessment of the past of the women with the objectives of understanding the role of education and gender inequality in the social structure of their community in bringing about changes in their status.
Earlier, the three upper castes of Brahmins, Kshatriyas & Vaishyas enjoyed the eluted social status whereas the Shudras, i.e., the untouchables were at the lowest ebb of social hierarchy in status. and when it comes to the women, no matter whether they belonged to the upper caste or lower, their position was the same in both the cases.

While the call for abolishing untouchability was constitutionally enforced, their inherent economic and educational prevented deprivation prevented them for obtaining education and thereby from entering the job market. At the same time modern instruments ranging from rapid communications to fire arms and efficient forms of organization (of all those who have resources) have added to the effectiveness of upper caste pressures upon the untouchables, often, the successful sanskritized ‘middling’ castes turn out to be most hostile and powerful opponents of the urges of the untouchables. In other words, sanskritization too helps to consolidate the isolation and repression of the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Like sanskritization, efforts by the government to provide certain privileges for the untouchables have strengthened rather than weaken caste alignments. For example, the educated untouchables want to forget their former caste identity but have not yet been able to build up a satisfactory “identity”. They also tend to discriminated against their own original caste group.

The “Scheduled Caste” is the legal and constitutional name collectively given to the groups which have traditionally occupied the lowest status in Indian society.
The Hindu society is based on four primary castes. The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. The lowest in the caste hierarchy was shudras and the lowest in that class was untouchables.

The present research study is undertaken to analyze the status of lower caste women in relation to education and gender, where caste plays a very peculiar role in Indian social structure. The effects in everyday life of the hierarchical division of caste and sub-caste are manifold. Caste determines social etiquette, payment for services, family life. Hence female education is also affected by the caste system.

According to T. K. Oomen “The traditional social organization of Hindu society was divided into five categories and most of the scheduled caste were designated as panchamars those of the fifth order. They were ranked below of the four varnas of the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras.

Since Indian society is a male-dominated one, for a long time women were denied education as a result, scheduled caste women have one of the lowest levels of literacy of all groups in India (in rural areas, only ten percent are literate). On the other hand, it is universally known that people belonging to scheduled castes have not only marginalized status in economic sphere but also similar marginal statuses in cultural, political, religious and other domains, which leads to the denial of basic human rights and social justice. Here, keeping these marginalization in mind, one can imagine the conditions of women belonging to scheduled caste communities.
In Vedic, Epic or later periods, one’s status and power was based on hereditary caste; mobility was also restricted in terms of horizontal and within one’s caste. Untouchables and that too women were at the lowest ebb of social hierarchy status, ritual purity and socio-political leadership.

As the time passed the caste system also underwent changes and four traditional varnas which were sub-divided into many sub-castes and emerged as endogamous sub-groups within the Hindu fold. With the invasion and conquest by Moghuls, the caste-groups became the citadels of social status, political power, economic leadership and various dominant upper castes were recognized by the ruling Moghuls as Zamindars who were not only owing the land of the area concerned, but also exercised political power and enjoyed superior status. The social distant between the ruler and ruled gave further consolidation to the caste, sub-caste groups and kept their separate identities.

The position of women in India has been a rather ambivalent in our culture, specially when they belong to scheduled caste community. On the one side, she has been raised to the status of divinity, and on the other side, she has been exploited by men in every walk of life. All through the ages, women have contributed immensely to the enrichment of the culture and progress of civilization without getting due recognition for their contribution. Progress of a nation can be measured by the progress of its women folk.
In recognition of the diversity of women’s situations and in acknowledgment of the needs of specially disadvantaged groups, measures and programmes are being undertaken to provide them with special assistance. These groups include all women in extreme poverty, destitute women, women in conflict situations, women affected by natural calamities, women in less developed regions, the disabled widows, elderly women, single women in difficult circumstances, women heading households, those displaced from employment, migrants, women who are victims of marital violence, deserted women and prostitutes. All the forms of discrimination of against the girl child and violation of her rights are shall be eliminated by undertaking strong measures both preventive and punitive and within and outside the family. Removal of discrimination in the treatment of girl child within the family and outside and projection of a positive image of the girl child will be actively fostered.

In the post-independence era, so many effort were made by the government of India, reservation policies and programme of the union and state government and also persistent efforts of enlightened sections within these communities like Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Jyoti Ba Phule and many others who through their reform as well as emancipator movements helped in raising the economic status of some Dalit women in urban areas.

It is proved through many sociological studies that the caste system of ancient vedic period does not exist today. Even the traditional theory through
providing basis of the caste stratification cannot sustain the breaking barriers
of inter-caste relations in the changing milieu. This issue was always been
the centre of attraction of so many scholars and sociologists, so many studies
of scheduled castes before and after independence.

The education which meant to broaden the minds to sharpen the
process of logic reasoning, to provide knowledge and to skill to individuals
and to bring him/her to a level that would lead to a gainful successive and
satisfying life. Education is liberator, emancipator of women from the
bondage of patriarchy and enables her to participate in all areas of life. The
traditional concept of purity and impurity impartially has lost in
contemporary India. Today Indian society is governed by a secular outlook.
So the changes in the position of scheduled caste women are more explicit
than the past.

Gender is the difference between women and men within the same
household and within between cultures that are socially and culturally
constructed and change over time. These differences are reflected in roles,
responsibilities, access to resources, constraints, opportunities, needs,
perceptions, view etc. held by women, men and their relationships.

The researcher has gone through a vast review of literature and found
that a large number of studies have been under taken on the topic of
education and gender equality and its various aspects are as follows:
Empirical & Theoretical Studies:

It is necessary to review the available material, which is helpful in understanding the problem under study. Various studies have been conducted by various scholars on the Indian caste system with special reference to the status of scheduled castes, their education, and measures to improve their status. However, a little has been done on the impact of certain inequalities on women as a vulnerable gender category.

Most of the studies were conducted specially in independent India and were inspired by the pioneering efforts and contributions of Prof. M.N. Srinivas. These studies were conducted by Bailey, Beteille, Hardgrave, Zelliot, and others.

All these studies which are referenced in the study did not necessarily deal with the variables Education and Gender and their effects on the status of Scheduled Caste women. These studies conducted by Cohn, Bailey, Beteille are basically general in nature.

Studies using different variables to analyze the status of Scheduled Caste women were conducted by various sociologists such as Andre, Beteille, Lynch, Sachchidananda, V.P. Sharma, M.N. Srinivas, Neelam Yadav, Vijaya B. Korishetty, etc.

The Scheduled Caste of District Aligarh form an interesting group which has targeted for the present study. A Sociological study of education, gender and its impact on the status of Scheduled Caste women form the main body of the thesis.
Objectives:

Following are the objectives of the study which are confined to the scheduled caste women, their status with reference to gender and educational inequalities.

1. How much education of women has increased among scheduled caste and what are the educational standards of women belonging to scheduled caste community?
2. How far the community takes its own initiative to educate women?
3. Does education really help to reduce gender inequality? If Yes, then how much?
4. How far the education is liberating an emancipator?

Because of the unique position of the Aligarh District, the large scheduled caste population of the district, Aligarh City and Tehsil Khair have been selected for the purpose of the present study. The sample for the present study is confined to the scheduled caste community of district Aligarh, and the purposive sample selected from the localities of two tehsils of the district, these are: Koil, and Khair.

In Tehsil Koil the localities selected are Avas Vikas Colony, Nai Basti, Pratibha Colony, Surendra Nagar, A.D.A. Colony, Ambedkar Nagar, Dhanipur, Naurangabad and Ram Leela Ground.

In Tehsil Khair, some major villages were selected, where the largest majority of scheduled caste families are residing, these are: Gomat, Bankner, Andala, Rajpur, Sujanpur, Kasisson, Jarara, Takipur and Chaudhana.
Fourteen respondents were selected through purposive sampling for the purpose of study, which is well suited for the conducting case studies. The sample was drawn from different localities of scheduled castes.

The sample population under study has been collected from two tehsils of the district namely Koil and Khair. The total sample size is 250, distributed in terms of various variables such as Age, Location, Marital Status, Income, Education, Gender and Occupation.

The data collection was based on both the sources that are primary and secondary.

In the primary sources, present researcher structured the interview schedule and questionnaire based case studies. It was the main tool. On the basis of interview schedule case studies of respondent’s observation were made. The interviews were taken from some important schedule caste personalities of the area been selected, which contribute to the present study.

Among the secondary sources, census reports of India, news papers, five year plans, District statistical magazines issued from District Economic & Statistical Department, Aligarh. District gazetteer taken into consideration about the scheduled caste to find out their population composition, their growth rate of literacy and number of caste rates of their growth.

Intensive field work was conducted in the selected areas for the primary information. Fourteen case studies were made from the responses of the respondents, who were from different educational levels, that are, highly educated, low educated and illiterate, then different age, i.e., lower.
medium, upper and in the last three categories were made for family’s monthly income, i.e., lower, medium and higher. However to have insight into the level of education specially what people think about the women education and what is their status in the family and outside among scheduled caste community. On the basis of formal and informal responses, observational data also been used wherever it is possible.

The foregoing results of the study shows that inequalities based on education and gender are weakening in today’s Modern Indian Society, which is changing fast. Therefore, changes are also coming into the status of women and when we talk about the status of Scheduled Caste women, their status is also getting uplifted but the speed of this change is gradual. Though when we compare these changes with the ancient and pre-independence period, their status has improved a lot.

It was observed that after independence, the Government of India continued the tradition of educating scheduled caste people which was initially set-up by Britishers, the pattern of education for all and gave special emphasis on the education of women belonging to all castes.

When asked about the Reservation Policy, almost all the respondent said that this supports Scheduled Caste Community, without it the women of Scheduled Caste Community could not make progress to the level they have today. Respondents also told that without reservation it would have been very difficult to get jobs in Government sector.
While on the issue of Gender Equality, most of the respondents said that education is the strongest factor that opens the door of development and equality in Scheduled Caste Community, various respondents said that different factors which are responsible for the Scheduled Caste Community such as Reservation, Modernization, Urbanization etc. And also highlighted factors that are deteriorating to women of this community such as, Poverty, Illiteracy, Lack of Educational Background, Lack of Determination etc.

It is observed that almost all the respondents said that untouchability is still prevalent in our society. It is more visible in rural areas than urban areas. However, it is generally accepted that untouchability is practiced in lower section of the society and people of higher class do not think much about it. But now a days, the practice of Untouchability has been reduced to a great extent. More importance is given to the economic condition, educational standards, values and civil rights, which has made Scheduled Caste more acceptable to the Hindu Caste.

It is analyzed that almost all the respondents are aware about their political rights. Women respondents are of the opinion that there should be more representation from their community in the political sphere. They strongly believe that their M.L.A./M.P./C.M. should be represented by their community in more numbers.

Most of the respondents cast their vote for BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party); on the other hand, few of them cast their vote in favour of Congress
and other parties. The reason behind casting their vote to BSP is that they want strong political representation from the persons of Scheduled Caste Community, as they believe only then they will be able to mobilize themselves from the downtrodden condition to a better and secure position.

When asked on the issue of privatization of education, more than three-fourth of the respondents said that privatization of education will not be beneficial for the poor section of society as they are not able to pay the heavy fees which is charged by Private Schools/Colleges/Universities in general and Scheduled Caste in particular. Only higher class and creamy layer class can send their children to the private schools colleges and Universities.

On the issue of Higher Education and Career for Women, almost all respondents have positive attitude about higher education and a better career for women. However in practice lower class hardly educates their girls. Though middle class have been providing education to their girls but after completion of their graduation of girl they, first attempt to arrange a partner for her.

It is observed from society that persons who have consciousness towards changing environment of our society motivate their daughters to higher education and career. It is also noticed that daughters who have got education through convent/ public schools are inclined to enter in the job market. These daughters are highly conscious about the changing position of
women in the society, human rights, family and marriage life. Middle class parents, who earlier not interested in the career of their daughter, are now also motivating their girl to be a career oriented.

Present study reveals that, to some extent education has been quite successful in removing the gender inequality in the form of the long awaited change in the perception of concerned people. Initially, girls were considered as a burden on parent’s shoulder but now with the changing circumstances and perception parents started considering them as an important number of their family and encouraging them to participate in various spheres of life.

In the light of above description it is concluded that education and gender equality affect the down trodden community. As it is evident that untouchability is still prevailing in society in latent form, scheduled caste people are more inclined towards the education, not only for the boys but also for girls.

Indeed government and the community itself struggling hard for the upliftment of scheduled caste women but is, lot to do with the mindset of the people, specially in rural areas, where to women is yet to find a niche for herself.