

Origin of Bhangi Caste: An Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

In India caste is the most important basis of social categorization. Though caste is believed to have originated in a division of people on the basis of their natural inclination and occupation. It has turned out in course of time to be hereditary. It has created a social group based on kinship and ethnicity. The hereditary occupation have created vested interest in the form of socio-economic monopolies and have based on extreme form of exploitation. (Mehta & Jaswal:1998). Origins of the caste system in India may be traced back to the dawn of civilization in this country, viz, Dravidian followed by Aryan civilization. Hinduism divided the caste into three clear cut sub-divisions which started by virtue of the occupation pursuits followed by various classes. The priests and the scholars were known as Brahmins and looked after religious ceremonies, education etc. This class was supposed to be the highest class or at least respected and regarded as such. Then come the Kshatriyas who were the people engaged in fighting wars and ruling and administering the states. Thirdly, there were the Vaisyas who carried on the occupation of trade and commerce. The Sudras were added as the fourth class after fusion of the pre-Dravidian with the Dravidian and Aryan civilization which formed the basic fabric Hinduism and Hindu society. This class was treated as a little inferior and suffered from certain disabilities.

Bhangi Caste:

The Bhangi caste is one of that lies in the bottom most rung of the lower caste in Hindu caste hierarchy. It is considered to be highly polluting caste since its member is usually engaged in sweeping and cleaning. They are known by various names in different states for example in Punjab they are known as Chuhra; while in U.P Bihar and Rajasthan, they are known as Bhangi, Mehtar, Jharmali, Halalkhor, Raut, Hela, Dom, Domar, Basor and so on. In Punjab, some of the chuhras who have adopted Sikhism are known as Mazbi and Rangreta. The U.P Bhangi has started associating themselves with Balmiki, the writer of Ramayana, which is highly revered by the upper caste, in their oral tradition. The fundamental and core feature of India's social structure is its caste system. Even after nearly sixty years of India's independence, caste remains the symbol and essence of Indian society differentiating it from other society. This hierarchy, which accords some caste the privilege and the power to dominate over other castes, has been present in Indian history since time immemorial. The dominant Brahminical cultural code accords so called lower caste, or Dalit as they prefer to be called, have always been marginalized by the upper caste, who have forced them to remain within the confines of their lowly birth based menial occupation. (Narayana 1965).

Different name of Bhangi Caste:

The Bhangi is a scheduled caste; they have many synonyms viz. Churu, Mehtar, Harijan etc. Shyamlal (1984) has also mentioned another group of the Bhangi that is Dhalio-ka-Bhangi. According to their own history, Bhangi is the descendants of Brahman who carried away and buried a dog that died in the midst of Brahman assembly. The Bhangi hamlets are located on outskirts of all the cities. Their Mohalla's or bus tees (location) are called 'Bhangio-ka-mohalla' or 'Bhangio-ki-bastee'. There is a Marwari saying "jathi-jao-vathi-Bhangi" meaning "wherever you go you will see Bhangi".

Clan of Bhangi Caste:

The Bhangi has sub-caste. Within the sub-castes the social division exists at the clan's level. The common clan is Athwal, Gavri, Garu, Phuar, Kalyant, Chowhan, Khokar, Narwal, Chandale, Pariwar, Lohar, Kodli, Parmer, Kuar, Soneki and so on. The Bhangi are conscious of their subordination to the other caste. They are aware of varna system and consider themselves as sudra. The other communities also consider them as sudra. (Singh 1998).

Origin and Meaning Of Their Name.

The sweeper or the scavenger did not from the category of the caste in ancient India. In classical Sanskrit text, there is mention of this caste. To some scholars, the sweeper comes to be known as a caste in India, particularly in western

India after the advent of the Muslim rule (Karlekar: 1982). The sweeper of northern India is known by different names (Fuches: 1981). The most common name of the sweeper is that of the Mehtar which literary means “*prince or leader*”. (Charan :1988). To quite an example, the head of the ruling family of Chitral state (now in Pakistan) is called ‘*Mehtar of Chitral*’. (Srivastava: 1997). **Mehtar** is a word of Persian origin, which means prince or leader. Mehtar is derived from *Mehtar*. It could be *Maht Tar* which in Persian means moon saturated or very beautiful. Mehtar could be derived from *Mu-attar*, the latter in Persian means *sweet-smelling*. The use of the word for a *sweeper is ironical*.

But according to another theory, the name ‘Mehtar’ is derived from the Sanskrit *Meh* which saturated. Since this caste’s work is with ‘*Night Soil this theory describes the obvious*’. (Sharma 1995).

It is now known how this name has been acquired though they are considered the lowest and most despised caste of Northern India. Another name might have come from their habit of taken “*bhang*”. (The intoxicating hemp plant). Other derived the word from bhang only fit those scavengers who split bamboos and make mats and baskets. However, scholars give different views regarding the term Bhangi. For instance Crooke (1896) traces their origin from the Sanskrit word ‘*Bhang*’ (hemp) denoting a drunken habit of the caste. Zilliot (1970), also subscribe to this view. But Mishra (1936) rejects this view. The Bhangis according to him are the descendants of the Chandala who is said to have begotten a sudra and born to Brahman mother. Ghurye (1961) and Chauhan (1967) introduced another theory when they make a reference to the expulsion of the persons called Bhangi from society. Issacs (1974), on the other hand, hold the view that the word Bhangi. Which is colloquial dialect of the lowest classes, *means a people apart even among people apart is more correctly applicable to these people because it describes the status of the caste*. (Dube S.C:1988).

Bhangi is a Hindi word meaning ‘*one addicted to drinking bhang*’ bhang is an intoxicating drug prospered from hemp levels. Since the word Bhangi in no way denotes their profession, sweepers may have acquired this name due to their once common use of bhang. Local versions give a different interpretation Bhangi is name for god. (Sharma: 1995).

Lalbeg: As the name of the sweeper caste has several interpretations. Lalbeg was a Turkish saint who exercised a considered authority in the socio-religious life of the caste. The name of Lalbeg was perhaps given to them by Muslims. (Sharma: 1995).

Crooke (1896) refers to a legend about the origin of Muslim section of the Lalbegi which states. “The Prophet Elias had attended the court of almighty God, where many Prophets were setting, suddenly, Elias coughed, and finding no room to spit in, he spat upwards which fell upon the Prophets. At this, all of them felt upon the Prophets. At this, all of them felt disgusted and complained to almighty God, who in turn directed Elias to serve as a sweeper.” Later on, Lalbeg was created as the Prophet for the sweepers to intercede for them on the Day of Judgment. (Singh 2008) His descendants were cursed to live their life as sweepers. The Mehtar was one day approached by a Sufi saint, who asked him why he did not wear a coat. The Mehtar replied that as a sweeper, he did not need a coat. The saint commanded that he wear a coat, and the Mehtar went to an open a pitcher, but was unable to do so. So the saint said, use my name, and you will be open the pitcher. And out of the pitcher came a young boy who was named Lal Beg. The community claim descent from this boy. (Wikipedia)

According to **Thaliph Joseph**, a muslim named Lalbeg in Hyderabad Deccan stole a fowl and ate it. In the morning, the fowl started crying in Lalbeg’s stomach, saying “*Sath Guru Tu*” (you are God). Lalbeg went to baba (mendicant) and said “the fowl late after stealing it is making a noise in my stomach, for I have committed a crime. Grant me pardon and I shall become your dispel.” In order to received into Mehtar caste and initiated as a dispel of the Baba, had to offer a Puja (worship) at the chabutra(altar) by burning insense. While putting incense in the fire he had to say, ‘*Tuhiaiek-Theranamkitek, khotakare, karekothukidhek*’(you are the one your name is the shelter. If anyone plays false, you will see him). After the ‘puja’, Lalbeg was admitted in to the Mehtar caste and was made dispel of the Baba, hence the Mehtars started calling themselves Lalbeg. In this story, the Hyderabad fowl speak Punjabi so do lalbeg and the Baba.(Sharma 1995)

Rangreta before the chuhars made contact with modern Christianity; there had been contact between them and Sikhs from early on RaiDastells of his family engaged in carrying animal’s carcasses round about Benares. Something of a formalization of the relationship between Sikhs from the Chuhars caste and the rest of the Sikh fraternity occurred under the guru ship of Guru Gobindh Singh, during the events that followed the execution of his father, ninth guru, TegBahadur, because of his refusal to the so be forcibly converted to Islam. Two untouchables, one a Lalbaba or water-carrier, and one a Rangreta, under cover of darkness, carried off the several head to Anandpur. One tradition gives the date as 12-16 November 1675. There it was received by the young son of TegBahader, now the tenth Guru Gobind Singh, who is said to have welcome the sweeper with the of-quoted words ‘**Rangreta, GuruKa Beta**’-the lowborn is

the son of the guru- thus signaling the acceptance of the untouchables into the Sikh brotherhood. There are, it must be said, many account of the return of the several head to Sikh, which while not always agreeing in the details, do argue in the broad outline. (Mannion 2008)

Halalkhor-W.Crooke(1896) writing about his community states that the name Mehtar was commonly applied to the servants of emperor Humayun. Another title for them Halalkhor, one who eats what, is lawful, one whose earnings are legitimate. This euphemistic title is said to have been introduced by Emperor Akbar. Halalkhor is also Persian word meaning '*who eats halal or honestly earned food*'.

They are also known as khakrob, or "sweeper of dust" and Bharawala, one who is not admitted in to the house. '**Khakrob**' is from Persian word '**khak**' means **earth** and '**rob**' means **sweeping**. In Punjab the Bhangi are known as chuhra and they have been derived from their work of clothing and sweeping up scraps (chura-herna) meaning '*destroyed and chur-chur*' their social and cultural status. (Srivastava 1997).

The Sikh Chuhras -Mazbi and Rangreta- the Mazbi and Rantgreta, denote Chuhra who have become Sikhs. Of course a Mazbi will often have been returned as Chuhra by caste and sikh by religion. **Mazbi** means nothing more than a member of the scavenger class converted to Sikhism. Their great guru is TegBahadur, whose mutilated body was brought back from Delhi by Chuhras who were then and there admitted to the faith as a reward for their devotion.

The people known as **Berads** from a district community who live in southern Maharashtra. They are well known to the general public and are distributed on a large scale in the district of Kolhapur and Sholapur of Maharashtra. The Berad of southern Maharashtra roughly correspond to the ramoshis of Poona district, the Bhil's of Khandesh (now split up into dhule and jalagaon district) and kalis of Gujarat.

The word **Berad** itself is a corrupt form used by high-caste Hindu people which has its origin in the term bedar, which in turn is derived from *bed* which again derived from *uyadha* all of which mean *hunter*. In Maharashtra the term bedaru is used to signify the characteristics unscrupulousness of this community. The berad belonged to the hunter class. According to a berad legend the founder of their tribe was one kannaya (a flower and hunter), a devout worshipper of God Shiva. Pleased with devotion, Shiva and his wife, Parvati appeared to him and offered him a choice of boons. kannaya asked Shiva and Parvati to make him and his descendents excellent shots and to make his and their lands grow corn without much labour and water. Shiva granted his prayer-accordingly all berads were good marksman, who lived by hunting, fowling and growing only rabi crops which require neither much water nor much labour. The characteristics of marksman seem to have been transmitted from generation to generation. Further the berad claim Valmiki (valya kali), the author of the Ramayana, as their caste fellow. As Valmiki was devoted to Rama-the berads identify every god with Rama and begin their prayer by uttering the word 'Rama' since they regard Valmiki as their caste fellow, the berad sometime is known as Valmikijanaru. Despite these various explanations regarding their origin according to Buchanan's account the name 'Baiduras' (berads) like other caste (tribes) like shepherds (kurubas or dhanagars) and husbandman (kubis who are found in ratngiri district including the newly formed sindhodurg district) including many early tribes who different from each other in origin, physical appearance and position.

The berad belong to the Dravidian language family, and they are immigrants from south Indian Dravidian territories. They belong to the group of kannadig as the whole berad community is derived into two linguistic group viz, telugu and kannada. The berad belonging to the former linguistic groups are mainly in south india and even in south Karnataka where they are known as boya. In north Karnataka and south Maharashtra the berads to the latter linguistic group and are known as 'berads proper'. (Bhanu 2004).

They are known as **Baloch**. Pottinger and Khanikoff for the Baloch race a turkoman origin and sir.T.Holdich and other an Arab descent, below assigned them Rajput descent on very inadequate philological grounds, while Burton, Lassen and others have maintained that they are, at least in mass, of Iranian race. This last theory is supported by Mr. Longworth Dames who shows that the baloch came in to their present location in Merkan and on the Indian border from parts of the Iranian plateau further to the west and north, bringing with them a language of the old Persian stock, with many fetuses derived from the Zed or cold Bactrian rather the western Persian. (Ibbetson :1996).

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the present work is to analyze of the origin of the Balmiki caste. The information has been collected from various sources like books, journals, and gazetteer.



CONCLUSION

At last we can say that the Bhangi are known by different name like Balmiki, Lalbegi, Rangreta, Halalkhor, Khakrob and Bhangi. Their social or economic status is not good in Indian society. The Bhangi caste is like the other scheduled caste in India. They are landless, economically backward and engaged in their traditional or manual occupation. They are facing discrimination like the other scheduled caste in India.

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