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***SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF HARIJANS LIVING IN
MYMENSINGH MUNICIPAL AREA***

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ABSTRACT

The study was conducted in Mymensingh Municipal area. All the sample Harjans work as scavengers in different organizations. They are severely underpaid in relation to their services. They are currently cohesive but professionally unorganized. They are also highly indebted to money lenders. They are generally neglected by the society at large. Some suggestions have been made to improve their economic condition.

I. INTRODUCTION

The term Harijan (Man of God or children of God) was first used by the great (Gujrati saint, Narshima Mehta, and later adopted by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to many groups of people who were traditionally considered as untouchables (Jayaraman 1981). Unlike in India, the Harijans in Bangladesh are mostly urban based and professionally relatively homogeneous. The Harijans in Bangladesh are at the lowest rungs of the economic, social and political life in the country. Though they are not strong numerically, their services are indispensable to our daily life.

The practice of untouchability and other forms of social disabilities to which the Harijans are subjected to in India are not so acute in Bangladesh. In spite of the indispensable services of the Harijans, hardly any step has been taken to study their position and problems and alleviate their economic plight. •

The main objective of this paper is to identify the existing socioeconomic position of the Harijans, their perceptions about their problems and relevant solutions.

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Data were collected from 82 Harijan households living in Mymensingh Municipal town. As the Harijans are mostly urban based, the data collected from Mymensingh may be taken as typical. Out of 82 sample respondents, 12 were female. In order to select the sample, a list of all the heads of the Harijan families was prepared and then about fifty percent households were interviewed at random from that list. Of the 82 respondents, 54 were living in the Municipality provided houses, 8 in the railway colony, 7 in S. K. Hospital compound, 7 on Government Khas land and 6 in the compound of the District Board. Data were collected during December 1981 to January 1982.

Results and discussions are presented in Section II. Conclusions are drawn in the final section.

II RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some of the important characteristics of the respondents are discussed below :

1. Age and Sex

The respondents are classified into five age groups (Table 1). Since nearly all the respondents were head of the household, none was below 20 years age.

TABLE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS BY AGE AND SEX

| Age group (years) | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|----------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|--------------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| 20-29 | 12 | 14.6 | 2 | 2.4 | 14 | 17.0 |
| 30-39 | 23 | 28.1 | 3 | 3.7 | 26 | 31.8 |
| 40-49 | 14 | 17.1 | 6 | 7.3 | 20 | 24.4 |
| 50-59 | 12 | 14.6 | 1 | 1.2 | 13 | 15.8 |
| 60 and above | 9 | 11.0 | — | — | 9 | 11.0 |
| Total | 70 | 85.4 | 12 | 14.6 | 82 | 100.0 |

2. Caste

The sample Harijans are not a homogeneous category but are divided into four sub-castes viz., Hela, Domar, Bajfur and Bhumali. Hela constituted 65.9 percent of the respondents, followed by Domar (19.5 percent), Bajfur (11 percent) and Bhumali (3.7 percent).

There was no consensus among the respondents regarding the basis of sub-castes and ranking of the sub-castes. Historically, these sub-castes were engaged in different types of work. The Hela used to clean roads, houses, etc., the Domar dealt with the disposal of dead bodies while the Bajfur performed both the functions of Hela and Domar. The Bhumalis are generally gardeners, though Taylor (1978) mentioned that they were involved in cleaning up garbage in town areas in the nineteenth century. However, due to poverty and growing unemployment problem members of a particular sub-caste are now finding it difficult to stick to their specific profession. In fact, all the sample respondents were engaged in cleaning roads.

Culturally the sub-caste system is quite strong. No inter sub-caste marriage is allowed. The members of a sub-caste do not generally take cooked food or drink water at the houses of persons belonging to other sub-castes. However, Vanaja and Venkateswarlu (1980) conducted a survey of socioeconomic structure of Harijans in the small township of Kalyandurg, Anantapur district under Andhra Pradesh in India and found that there was no restriction on marriage among the sub-castes of Harijans in that area.

3. Family Size

The highest proportion (45.1 percent) of the respondents have a family size of 3 to 5 members, 34.2 percent have 6 to 7 members and 14.6 percent have 8 to 10 members. There are only 3.7 percent and 2.4 percent of the respondents having a family size of above 10 and less than 3 members respectively. It is noticeable that 48 percent respondents have below average size family, i. e., 3.90 persons.

The responses about the average number of children for an ideal family are shown in Table 2.

Age of the respondents and desired number of children for an ideal family is highly significantly correlated ($r = .99$).

The average family size of the respondents is about 5.78 which is less than the national average. But the expected size of the family is higher than that of national

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO AGE AND AVERAGE NUMBER OF DESIRED CHILDREN FOR AN IDEAL FAMILY

| Age group of respondents | Number of respondents | Average number of desired children |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|
| 20-29 | 14 | 3.5 |
| 30-39 | 26 | 5.3 |
| 40-49 | 20 | 7.7 |
| 50-59 | 13 | 8.6 |
| 60 and above | 9 | 10.7 |
| Total | 82 | 6.7 |

average. The reasons for apparently higher expected family size are unclear from the available data.

The Harijans favour more sons than daughters irrespective of the desired number of children. The preference for son is backed by three factors namely religious conviction (100 percent), financial security in old age (88 percent), and the growing complexity in the marriage system of the daughter (62 percent). The third factor indicates that it is a problem to find out a bridegroom in time because parents prefer early marriage of their daughters while male youth are reluctant to get married at an early age due to problem of unemployment and of their changing outlook.

4. Land Holdings

None of the respondents reported possessing any land, cultivable or homestead. Generally they reside in houses provided by their employing organization. The Municipality and the District Board do not charge any rent on their house but the respondents bear the repairing cost when it arises. The house rent per month in railway colony and S.K. Hospital compound is TK. 90 and TK.75

respectively. No rent is paid for living on Government land, They built their own shelter, but it seems to be a temporary arrangement,

5. Education

The education level of the respondents is poor. Only 5 respondents have some education. Of these, 4 respondents have education up to class eight while one read up to class five.

Only 4 respondents out of 82 have sent a total of 6 children to school. The factors which discourage the guardians from educating their children are financial hardship (100 percent), lack of job opportunities of the educated Harijan (100 percent), no use of education (80 percent), and environment of the society (20 percent). About 80 percent respondents opined that their children would carry on the same activity, i.e. scavenging so education of children was regarded as unhelpful. But the rest of them expected that their children would not take over scavenging but get job in different offices.

6. Occupation and place of work

The Harijans have only one occupation, i.e. scavenging. Only one respondent was found to work in a commercial bank as a peon. About 36 percent of the respondents are employed by the Municipality. Bangladesh Railway is the second avenue for employment absorbing 11 percent of the respondents, followed by Mymensingh Medical College Hospital, Bangladesh Agricultural University, Office of the District Commissioner and other Government, semi-government and autonomous organisations.

Asked about the reasons for sticking to scavenging as a profession, the respondents gave four main reasons: (a) they are scheduled caste so no other occupation is open to them, (b) because of financial problems they are unable to enter other profession, (c) lack of education restricts their occupational mobility, (d) scavenging being their ancestral occupation, they wanted to continue with it. The distribution of these answers according to the age of the respondents is shown in Table 3.

7. Income

The monthly salary varied from Taka 103 to Taka 732, depending on the organizations. Of course the working hours in Mymensingh Medical College Hospital,

TABLE 3. REASONS FOR NOT LEAVING THE PRESENT OCCUPATION

| Age group | Number of respondents | Reasons | | | |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | | A | B | C | D |
| | | Percent respondents mentioning | | | |
| 20-29 | 14 | 100 | 100 | 100 | — |
| 30-39 | 26 | 100 | 50 | 27 | — |
| 40-49 | 20 | 100 | 75 | 25 | 40 |
| 50-59 | 13 | 30 | — | — | 100 |
| 50 and above | 9 | — | — | — | 100 |
| Total | 82 | 79 | 51 | 31 | 37 |

Notes: A. Being scheduled caste, opportunity for occupational mobility is absent.

B. Lack of funds for starting any business

C. Lack of education

D. Scavenging is an ancestral occupation.

Bangladesh Railway and the Bangladesh Agricultural University is 8 hours, while the working hour in other organizations are not fixed. They have to work 1 to 3 hours daily on the basis of work load. The average monthly income and daily working hours under different organizations are shown in Table 4. Generally, Harijans prefer to work in institutions other than Municipality. Service under Municipality is not permanent. The workers are not entitled to any facilities like medical allowance, pension and gratuity. The monthly salary in the Municipality is only Taka 108 and Taka 103 for male and female worker respectively. Only two respondents reported that their salary was taka 120, as they were Zamaders (Supervisor).

The respondents reported that in addition to salary they also earned, on an average, Taka 500 annually from contract work.

TABLE 4. INCOME AND WORKING HOURS OF THE RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO EMPLOYING ORGANIZATIONS

| Name of the organization | Average monthly income (Taka) per head | Average daily working hour |
|--|--|----------------------------|
| 1. Mymensingh Municipality | 108.09 | 1 to 3 |
| 2. Bangladesh Railway | 472.11 | 8 |
| 3. Mymensingh Medical College Hospital | 462.50 | 8 |
| 4. Bangladesh Agricultural University | 569.50 | 8 |
| 5. District Board | 471.00 | 1 to 3 |
| 6. Others | 378.75 | 1 to 3 |

8. Expenditure Pattern

The respondents family expenses was estimated for a year by using weekly expenses on food, fuel etc. and annual expenditure on clothes, recreation, medical treatment, and religious ceremonies.

The lion's share of the family income was spent for food (about 85 percent) and about 7 percent for alcohol, 4 percent for clothing and 4.23 percent for health care, recreation, housing and education. The young members of the family up to 20 years old were reported to be less addicted to alcohol.

9. Indebtedness of the Family

The extent of indebtedness of the Harijans was observed with interest. Borrowing and repaying of loan is a continuous process to Harijans. None of the respondents was free from debt. They borrowed both in cash and kind from the shop-keepers and money-lenders. Normally no security is required for obtaining loan. The rate of interest varied from 180 percent to 240 percent. If the borrowers had failed to repay the loan, the creditors would make arrangement to get back their money from borrowers'

salary at employing offices. The outstanding position of loan of the respondents is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5. CAUSE WISE EXTENT OF INDEBTEDNESS AS IN DECEMBER, 1981

| Purpose of borrowing | Respondents | | Range (Tk.) | Average (Tk.) |
|----------------------|-------------|---------|----------------|------------------|
| | Number | Percent | | |
| Family maintenance | 68 | 82.9 | 150-1500 | 607 |
| Marriage | 7 | 8.5 | 500-4000 | 1728 |
| Death | 4 | 4.9 | 700-2000 | 1425 |
| Medical treatment | 3 | 3.7 | 100-500 | 306 |
| Total | 82 | 100.00 | 100-4000 | 732 |

10. Attitude of the Respondents Towards Selected Issues

An attempt was made to reveal the attitude of the respondents towards marriage age of the youths, female work outside the home and their social habits, etc.

a. Marriage—In the Harijan community both the boys and girls are married at early age. The general practice is that after marriage the bride moves into the husband's house. But in case of early marriage (up to 10 years age) the bride live in the father's house up to about 12 years of age. Then the marriage ceremony is performed for the second time and then the bride moves into the husband's house. Marriage takes place within the locality and also between distant areas.

The arrangement of marriage is generally settled by the guardians of the bridegroom and bride. The girls are not allowed to mix with adult males before marriage. So they are not allowed to work outside the home before marriage. The age and sex composition of working family members confirmed the statement (Table 6).

The dowry system is not rigid, yet the guardian of a bride has to give a dowry depending on one's financial ability. It may include ornament, wrist watch, bi-cycle, radio etc. However, both the parties have to spend a lot of money for entertaining Harijans in the locality.

TABLE 6. AGE AND SEX COMPOSITION OF WORKING MEMBERS

| Age group of workers | Percentage of members working | |
|----------------------|-------------------------------|--------|
| | Male | Female |
| 12-20 | 100.0 | — |
| 21-25 | 62.5 | 37.5 |
| 26-50 | 52.3 | 47.7 |
| 51-60 | 92.8 | 7.2 |
| 61 and above | 100.0 | — |
| Total | 63.9 | 36.1 |

There is no provision of divorce among Harijans. Marriage of the widow is prohibited. But the husband is allowed to get remarried if the first wife is incapable of bearing children. Remarriage does not demand divorce of the first wife. So she is entitled to receive any sort of support from her husband. The social belief is that it is the women who is incapable of having children. However, the case of remarriage was not found in the sample. The marriage ages of the respondents are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS ACCORDING TO MARRIAGE AGE

| Age group | Marriage age | | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | Male | | | | Female | |
| | 14-16 | 17-20 | 21-25 | 26-28 | 12-14 | 15-18 |
| 20-29 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 30-39 | 5 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 3 | — |
| 40-49 | 4 | 8 | 2 | — | 4 | 2 |
| 50-59 | 7 | 5 | — | — | 1 | — |
| 60 and above | 5 | 3 | — | — | — | — |
| Total | 23 | 29 | 13 | 5 | 9 | 3 |

Only two male respondents both in the 20-29 year age group were unmarried.

Respondents were asked about the age at which male and female members should get married. The answers are shown in Table 8.

The respondents of 60 and above age group preferred early marriage, while the respondents of 20-29 years of age group supported late marriage. The opinion of the respondents about the marriageable age of the youth was highly negatively correlated with the age of the respondents. However, the expectation of older respondents about marriage at an early age does not materialise now-a-days. There were many unmarried girls and boys aged 16 years and above.

b. Attitude Toward Female Work Outside the Home—Generally the respondents of an older age do not object to females working outside of the home. They found no problem to be associated with female workers. But the attitude of the younger respondents is quite different. They are scared of the possibility of the female workers falling victim of misconduct. Moreover, they do not consider outside work of female members as honourable. However, they allow female members to work outside because of financial hardship.

TABLE 8. OPINION ABOUT AGE AT WHICH YOUTH SHOULD MARRY

| Age group of respondents | Number of respondents | Suggested age of marriage | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------|------|------|--------|-------|------|--|
| | | Male | | | | Female | | | |
| | | 8-14 | 15-22 | 23 & | 5-10 | 11-15 | 16-18 | 19 & | |
| 20-29 | 14 | — | 5 | 9 | — | 6 | — | 8 | |
| 30-39 | 26 | 5 | 15 | 6 | 9 | 2 | 6 | 9 | |
| 40-49 | 20 | 13 | 6 | 1 | 17 | 2 | — | 1 | |
| 50-59 | 13 | 7 | 6 | — | 7 | 6 | — | — | |
| 60 and above | 9 | 9 | — | — | 9 | — | — | — | |

Chi-square = 46.49

d. f. = 8

Significant at 5% level

Chi-square = 88.29

d. f. = 12

Significant at 5% level

c. Attitude Toward Smoking and Drinking Habits of the Women—Out of 96 female members in the age group of 20 years and above, 74 members have smoking and drinking habits. This habit of the women is considered as bad by all the respondents of 20-29 years of age group. But 97.60 percent respondents aged 30 years and above do not consider these habits bad.

d. Attitudes Towards Non-Hindus—Asked what the respondents felt about the attitudes of non-hindus toward them, about 37 percent mentioned that they had no conversation with their employers about anything outside their business. However, they commented with hesitation that they were looked down by the Bangalees in general. It may be mentioned that Missionaries have been successful in converting many Indian Harijans into Christianity (Zelliot 1966), further evidence is also available for Harijans living in Dhaka city (Hayat 1979). But so far, no such conversion has taken place in Mymensingh Municipal area.

A question was also asked to 15 non-Hindus "what do you think about Harijans?" About 67 percent of them were indifferent to the problems of Harijans. They were considered as less intelligent to manage their family by 33 percent of the respondents. But 33 percent of them opined that Harijans are insincere and not dutiful, while only thirteen percent respondents thought that if their socioeconomic position is improved, they will not render required services to society.

11. Respondents' Awareness

a. Knowledge of Government Programme—The respondents are not aware about the various measures launched by the government for the improvement of the poor people. They do not know about mass literacy programme. No such programme has yet been taken up in their localities. However, they are informed about family planning programme but do not accept it. The attitude of the respondents towards family planning programme is shown in Table 9.

The family planning field workers have contact with more than fifty percent of the fertile couples of different age group. It is evident from the Chi-square test that older respondents are more conservative than the younger respondents in terms of accepting family planning practices.

b. Awareness of the Banking Service—The respondents' level of awareness of the banking service is also very low. Asked why they did not borrow from bank for business purpose, they were astonished to know that the bank could

TABLE 9. ATTITUDE TOWARD FAMILY PLANNING

| Age group of respondents | Percent of respondents contacted by family planning field workers | | Percent of respondents saying family planning objectionable in view of religion | |
|--------------------------|---|-------|---|------|
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| 20-29 | 64.3 | 35.7 | 28.6 | 71.4 |
| 30-39 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 65.4 | 34.6 |
| 40-49 | 40.0 | 60.0 | 90.0 | 10.0 |
| 50-59 | 61.5 | 38.5 | 84.6 | 15.4 |
| 60 and above | — | 100.0 | 100.0 | — |
| All | 46.0 | 54.0 | 72.0 | 28.0 |

Chi-square = 21.35

d.f. = 4

Significant at 5% level

advance loan to poor people for various activities. Moreover, none but one serving as a peon had an account in the bank.

c. Organizational Consciousness—Social cohesion among the Harijan community is very strong. As a community they are organized. In case of outside threat to their community particularly on religious issue they try to resist it collectively. out of five locations in which Harijans live, there are only two associations in one locality to perform mainly religious and social ceremonies. It is very common in Bangladesh that in every sector or office the employees have their own trade union organization to safeguard their interests. But in case of sample harijans, there is no such formal organization even where they

constitute the overwhelming majority. Moreover, they have no affiliation with any political party.

Respondents' Perceptions about Problems and Solutions

The respondents were asked whether they were satisfied with their existing socioeconomic position. Only one of them was found satisfied as he believed the socioeconomic position was determined by God. All others pointed out a number of problems which are grouped as (a) poor income, (b) poor food and housing condition (c) usurious rate of interest charged by money lenders and (d) lack of employment opportunities.

Most of them could not indicate possible solution for the above problems. But a few of them suggested to:

- (a) improve the present service condition of the Harijans.
- (b) keep the price level of essential commodities within their reach
- (c) control the money lenders' interest rate to some extent
- (d) reserve the scavenging activity for themselves or create new avenues for employment.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The services of the Harijans are essential to run the daily life of the society but they are underpaid and neglected by all sections of the society. Practically no step has been taken to improve the social and economic status of the Harijans in Mymensingh. The level of consciousness of the Harijans about their own status and problems is also very low. They are not organized for collective bargaining to improve their service condition. They have no Union or organization to represent them.

Economically they live a very poor life and are severely indebted. To protect the Harijans from the clutches of 'Mahajans' and money lenders, a step may be taken to organize them into cooperative groups and run their

own business of essential commodities. In this area, the commercial banks may help by advancing credit to those cooperatives for small business.

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