

Formation and Functioning of Ramgarhia Sabhas: A Sociological Analysis of Caste-Based Associations in Amritsar City.

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Abstract

A community or caste organization may be involved (indeed it regularly is) in bringing the persons of that particular caste or community together to develop some awareness of, and feeling for, their “community” and to work at common problems arising out of the interest or function they have in common. The present paper is aimed at exploring the formation and functioning of Ramgarhia sabhas. The primary data was collected through interview schedule from every ten members of different Sabhas in Amritsar city. Thus total 80 Ramgarhia men were interviewed. Majority of the respondents that is 29 percent and 23.66 percent joined these caste associations to have contacts with Ramgarhia brethren and out of their passion or social work. further 38.26 percent respondents admitted that socially they have gained status by welfare activities of Sabhas.

Key words: Ramgarhias, sabhas, caste, and community.

Introduction

The term Sabha means “assembly”, important unit of self-government in Hindu society. It is basically an association of persons who have common interests, such as the member of the same endogamous group, but may also be an inter caste group (e.g. a Mazdur sabha or an association of labourers). (Dictionary.reference.com/ browse/sabha). But here the study is purposefully concerned with one community analysis (an endogamous group of Ramgarhias), so our definition of the Sabha is confined to an association of persons of same endogamous group having common interests. It is also called as caste-association or community organization. A community or caste organization may be involved (indeed it regularly is) in bringing the persons of that particular caste or community together to develop some awareness of, and feeling for, their “community” and to work at common problems arising out of the interest or function they have in common. Thus a caste association is a formal group organized for a specialized and specifically stated purpose by a specific caste group. It is a process by which a community identifies its needs or objectives, orders these needs or objectives. An association has established rules of organization and procedure, or formalized system of leadership and certain common interests among its members so as to develop the confidence and will to work at these needs or objectives, finds the resources to deal with needs or objectives, takes action in respect to them, and in so doing extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community.

The representative leaders, in consultation with members of their groups, identify a problem or problems about which they wish something might be done. It is simply a process of becoming conscious of “things we don’t like”, “things we need here”, “things we wish we could do” etc. and In this way, in the community organization the problems, needs, concerns and hopes of the community come to consciousness, feelings about them is expressed, emotion is discharged and harnessed that will further come the motivation for the action (Ross & Lappin, 1967).

Background of Ramgarhia Sabhas

The formation of the caste-associations of Ramgarhias have their roots in the past, when in the year of 1900 the Punjab Land Alienation Act was passed. These sabhas were actually established in response to this Act that came into force: classifying the Tarkhan-lohar as a non-agriculturist, and disqualified him from buying agricultural land. Those of the caste who already owned such land were not, of course, evicted; but the landownership is a big status symbol in Punjabi society. (kessinger,1974:155-156). The importance of land in the agrarian society can be gauged from the value a community/group attaches to it. In their opinion, person owning land cannot be hungry in his life, i.e. it sustains life. To this avenue the Ramgarhias’ entry was now banned.

Due to the mobility among Ramgarhias the neo-rich members of the caste found this barrier to agricultural landownership more and more frustrating. Since the barrier had been built in terms of caste, they appear to have concluded that the efforts for its removal too would have to be in terms of caste: the caste, in short, had to be mobilized. For this purpose they would employ devices then widely current in Punjabi society - organizational workers (parcharaks), journals, and schools; for the individuals developing and overseeing these activities, the rewards lay in the experience of public leadership, an enlargement of social relationship, and occasional calls to conspicuous public roles. Even caste-journals began to appear: Ramgarhia Patrika, a monthly from Lahore in 1902; Sevak Singh Patrika, another monthly from Lahore in 1904 (Singh, 1966).

During the first decade of the 20th century, the name Ramgarhia appears to gain in circulation, different caste-association or Sabhas were formed like Ramgarhia Sevak Sabha in 1904, Vishwakarma Vansh Sudhar Sabha in simla in 1911 and Ramgarhia Sabha in 1912. In this way the “infrastructure” for the Ramgarhia identity was being laid. These community organizations, free of the hold of the caste panchayats in the cities, concerned mainly with the need for community uplift, especially in education and other concerns like social reforms in the community.(Ramgarhia Gazette,1920).

Methods of the Study

The choice of the methods to be used to conduct the study depends upon the aims or objectives of the study. Therefore, it is important to first state the objectives of the study, which are detailed below. The major objective of the study is to know about the formation and functioning of Ramgarhia Sabhas as caste-associations.

The universe of the study is Amritsar (city) that is, one of the major commercial centres of Punjab state of India. Prime reason for selecting Amritsar city is that the place has good proportion of Ramgarhias, and secondly, the researcher's familiarity with the city, which was an added advantage.

During an exploratory survey, it was found that there are total eight Ramgarhia caste associations functioning in the city. In the table 1 all the Ramgarhia sabhas are enlisted with the total number of members in them. Among these community organizations, only one association is managed by the Ramgarhia women, all other organizations are functioning under the supervision of male members. The total number of the members in the sabhas is 800. It was decided to study the 10 per cent of the total number of the members. Therefore, 80 respondents were selected randomly out of the list. An effort was made to give an equal representation to all the caste-associations. Thus, 10 respondents were selected from each caste association. The sampling units included traditional artisans, modern and medium industrial entrepreneurs, retail shopkeepers/wholesalers, retired government and private employees.

Table 1
Ramgarhia Sabhas of Amritsar City

Sr. No.	Name of the Association	Total Members	Sample Drawn
1	Ramgharia Bhai Bandi	100	10
2	Bhai- Bandi	300	10
3	Ramgharia Welfare Forum Society	100	10
4	Ramgharia Child & Women Welfare Society	30	10
5	Ramgharia Brotherhood Society	80	10
6	Bhai Lalo Ji Welfare Society	50	10
7	Imarti Carkoon Committee	33	10
8	All India Jassa Singh Federation	107	10
	Total	800	80

It was informed during data collection that all these sabhas were established on the pattern of Freemason's Lodge primarily initiated in England. Freemasonry is one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies. The motto of freemasonry is brotherly love, relief and truth. The Ramgarhia Bhai-Bandis or Sabhas formed in Amritsar or different parts of India got motivated by the higher principles of the lodge and introduced the same in their community organizations. The ideals of Ramgarhia Sabhas are "Sangat" (companionship), "Pangat" (eating together or common kitchen), "Didaar" (interaction to each other), "Vichar" (reflection). The major difference between the two is that the former is universal in nature that is believing in common brotherhood and the latter is caste-specific.

About the information of caste-associations, as mentioned earlier, at present there are nine Ramgarhia Sabhas, functioning in the city of Amritsar in different areas. Every respondent in the sample have caste association. Each Sabha has different number of members. The total number of members in all the associations is ranging from 20 to 300. Mostly those persons have strong hold in the caste associations whose occupational standing is good and who are financially sound. Every association has one president, one vice-president, one secretary, and one cashier. After every one month they gather at Jassa Singh Ramgarhia Hall for meeting where they discuss various issues like planning for how to celebrate the religious functions, i.e., Gurburab, and festivals (mainly the Diwali). Besides this they discuss problems related to occupation and social and personal aspects. Occupational problems are regarding wages, supply of raw material, marketing etc. They discuss all these issues in association meetings and try to resolve it. From social point of view, if the members of the caste have any conflict with other caste members, any religious conflicts etc. are the major concerns. If any member of the caste association has any serious personal problem regarding family, they show concern for help. Sometimes these caste-associations perform mutual functions, falling in the social sphere or inter-caste issues like inter-caste marriages, inter-religious disputes etc. In these circumstances these associations play significant role. So there are various reasons to have the membership of these caste associations by the people.

Reasons to Join the Sabhas

Every respondent in the sample disclosed different reasons to be a member of these community organizations. A cursory look at the table 2 reveals that various reasons given by the respondents indirectly show their way of thinking, their economic and social status. Some people who are economically poor like that of a daily wage earner or labourer, a carpenter or a mason, they gave a frank response that they want to take some help from the sabhas in case of any exploitation of them. Some revealed that they are not being paid properly if they are engaged in some work under contractorship. The Sabha members help to settle the rate of their labour and also to settle the mutual work at different places as conveyed by the proportion of 7.63 per cent in the table. Thus this category of people by becoming the members of the sabhas, provide their contribution to the Sabhas in the form of their manual labour for the construction of heritage monuments, sometimes on wages or sometimes free of cost, and 8.98 per cent respondents show this.

Table 2
Reasons to Have Caste Associations

Reasons	Number	Percentage
To take help from Sabhas	10	7.63
Membership is a status-symbol	22	16.79
Contracts with Ramgarhia Brothers	38	29.00
To do Social Work in Joint-Venture	31	23.66
To Propagate Rich Heritage of Ramgharias	11	8.39
To move in the Society	9	6.87
To help women	10	7.63
Total	131*	100

* Multiple responses

22 (16.7%) reasoned that the membership of caste associations is a status symbol where everyone whether poor or rich is treated equally and is treated with dignity and respect. The major proportion 29.00 per cent of the respondents in the sample gave the reason that they have joined the sabhas to increase their sociability in the community, as sociability increases contacts with their Ramgarhia brethren. These contacts proved useful in their personal and social life as these contacts paved the way for the matrimonial of their sons and daughters in the families of same status. With the interaction to each other, their communicational skills have improved. Through the membership of sabhas, they gain the knowledge of the activities of the sabha and get motivated to do social work in a joint venture for the upliftment of the Ramgarhia community as the social work requires man power, finance, sources and system as reasoned out by the 23.66 per cent, economically well off members of the sabhas. 8.39 per cent members wanted to contribute in the community development by propagating the rich heritage of Ramgharias through their literary works. It has been mentioned in the introductory part of the study that there is one separate Ramgarhia Women Association called Bhain Bandi or Women health and Child care organization is also functioning in the city on its own and managed by the ladies who are in majority house wives or retired government employees and business entrepreneurs. Among them 6.87 per cent revealed that they did not want to be confined within the four walls of house every time, so they joined the association to go out of the house and move in the society. Other 7.63 per cent revealed that they have greater sensibility towards women sufferings, thus by joining the organization, they will be able to peep into the problems of women and help them. Conclusively, it is revealed from the empirical findings of the table :1 that all the Ramgarhia Sabhas are joined and managed by those people who have the passion for social work and they desire to channelize their time, energy and money for the noble cause of their community development to heighten the status of their caste in the various social spheres.

Further, there is some common eligibility criteria laid down by all the sabhas for the membership in these community organizations. The contents of the criteria are that first of all a person should belong to the Ramgarhia caste, he/she can be of any age and should have faith in Ramgarhia traditions. He/she should prove to be cooperative and contributive to the sabhas and should pay the fixed amount of membership fees as per the rule of the organization.

The process of election varies in each Sabha like some hold elections after every six months, and others declared the election with majority consent among the members or with seniority wise.

Functions of the Ramgarhia Sabhas

- These organizations deal with economic problems like the reduction of expenses on ceremonies connected with marriage and death. For this purpose, S. Jassa Singh Hall in the area of East Mohan Nagar of Amritsar city is being offered to the poor people or other members on the least rate of rent for the hall and also on other items required in such ceremonies.
- The second function is the spread of education by educating the poor children by giving them scholarships. Some free educational and technical schools are also opened to aid the needy students. The other function is to help the widows and orphan children to encourage them for becoming independent persons in their lives and respectful persons in the society.
- To promote Sikhism among the present generation and encourage their membership in the sabhas so that with their education and innovative minds, they can give new ideas and enthusiastically contribute in the developmental projects undertaken by the sabhas.
- To promote intra-caste marriages in the community. For this purpose free matrimonial services are provided by the sabhas. Anybody who is desirous of finding a suitable match for her/his daughter or son in the Ramgarhia caste, can fill the matrimonial form of the sabha in which the whole biodata of the candidate is detailed and submit this form to the sabha to seek help in the matter.
- To arrange the medical camps for the poor people so that they can avail the medical facilities free of cost. For camps the sabha members consult and contact various medical experts or doctors to visit the camp to facilitate the people with free medical check up and treatment. Some sabhas have provided women and childcare cards which are of great help in government hospitals to have free prescription of the doctor and the medicines on least rates.
- There are sabhas whose members are mainly contractors and labourers like there is one association is “Building Worker Union”(Imarti Karkoon Committee). This sabha mainly functions to protect the rights of the labourers and to stop their exploitation at the work place. The manual labourers who are mainly engaged in construction work if in case suffer any mishap or physical injury, are being provided

compensation through the help of sabha members. Besides this, this sabha fixes the rates of construction work and workers and handles the disputes of the walls. The construction workers also get economic help from the association and the sabha is trying to uplift them socially by encouraging fraternity and mutual regards among them. One thing is worth noticing that the decisions given by the sabha would have the legal sanction in disputes of common walls and in the protection of workers' rights like the daily wage should be of 8 hours only and there should be some time for rest for the workers after every 4 hours. And also pay for the overtime work of the labourer. So it enforces the implementation of governmental rules and also puts pressure on government to frame the new rules in favour of manual workers. This sabha also provide free labour to different sabha projects.

- To arrange the marriages of the poor girls and donate them some household items and money so that they can start their family life on their own. Also to provide them with some employment as per their ability and to donate them sewing machines after giving them the training. In this way they can become economically independent in their life.

These are the main functions performed by the Ramgarhia Sabhas in the city of Amritsar to create love and brotherhood among Ramgarhia brethren. These community welfare activities of the sabhas have different impacts on the Ramgarhia society from which one can observe the level of their social standing and upliftment in various spheres.

Table : 3
Impact of the Sabhas on Ramgarhia Community

Sabhas' Impact	Number	Percentages
Social Impact	75	38.26
Economic Impact	61	31.12
Cultural Impact	60	30.61
Total	196*	100

* Multiple responses

Table 3 shows the various impacts of the activities of the sabhas on the Ramgarhias of all classes. The proportion of 38.26 per cent responded about the social impacts of the sabhas that socially Ramgarhias has gained status because they have become one endogamous group with more mutual contacts based on fraternity. Thus their numerical strength is increased which is the first characteristic of any dominant caste group. They have been socially uplifted than the earlier times. In the earlier times they were accustomed to provide their services to the higher castes that appreciably put them lower to their patrons in the rural situation but now in the urban setting through these community organizations they are morally dedicated to the welfare and upliftment of their own caste fellows and constitute the advanced section of the society. 31.12 per cent respondents in the sample remarked that as far as the economic Impacts are concerned, the contribution of the sabhas to the needy

people is unavoidable. The affluent members in the sabhas not only provide the economic aid to the poor Ramgarhias but also try to offer job or employment in their firms or work places or wherever the work is available, they use their reference to adjust their unemployed brothers. But all this depends on the willingness to do the work on the part of the person in need, as “self-help” is the essential base of any program of aid. The first preference is being given to the Ramgarhia labourers because they have technicality in their blood (technically wise by birth), so need less training to do different technical works. But it has been reported by most of the respondents that present generation is less interested in manual labour and majority of them are prone to liquor consumption. So mix castes labour is available in the market than the Ramgrahia workers. But Still efforts are being made to support them economically. Third one are the cultural impacts as told by 30.61 per cent persons in the sample, meant to acquaint the people with the rich heritage and traditions of Ramgahias by circulating different books and by publishing the historical material and other literary works on the least rates or free of cost so as to make them accessible to the poor people. To propagate the rich Ramgarhia heritage different monuments are being built in Amritsar city like in the area of 100ft road, a big statue of Jassa singh Ramgarhia and the Ramgarhia Gate have been established and another Ramgarhia gate is under construction at the Chatiwind area near gurudwara Shaheedganj Sahib.

Conclusion

In nut shell these sabhas have brought caste solidarity among Ramgarhias. In general, these sabhas or community organizations emerge as a process which moves towards increasing cooperation among community as the latter deal with common community projects. So the associations have become a symbol of community cooperation as they have provided one platform. The people in the association, and the way the association functions, can represent the actuality of the idea for many people in the community. If it is to do this effectively, the association must have strength both in terms of its involvement of accepted sabha – heads and in terms of its ability to work through difficult community problems. The Ramgarhia sabhas as such associations have won the participation and support of the people, and will be a symbol which stands for, and induces community cooperation.

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