

INTROSPECTING THE SOCIAL STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

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ABSTRACT

Over the ages women's place in the society was determined by the needs, dreams and aspirations of man who determined her norms and behaviour, the way she should conduct herself in the society and the things she should sacrifice for the well being of the family. The consequences were the growth of a society in which woman, was confined to domestic servitude. Women belonging to all communities shared in common degradation, indignity, oppression, violence and discrimination in everyday life. When historically analysed the caste system along with the Brahmin dominance in Kerala led to the decline of the status of women of Kerala, particularly that of the lower caste women. Dalit women in Kerala experienced endemic gender-caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Their socio- economic vulnerability and lack of political power when combined with the dominant risk factors of being Dalit women leads to potentially violent situation, simultaneously reducing their ability to escape. The 18th and 19th centuries witnessed far reaching changes in the history of Kerala and that of womenfolk, which marked the culminations of the trials and tribulations perpetrated on women which ultimately paved the way for a series of uprisings to restore the pre-eminent status they enjoyed in the early society. In this context new opportunities of contacts and official programmes for the development activities of the Dalits, it would be of great interest to understand the mode of response of the Dalit women towards the general social status and challenges in the society.

Keywords: Dalits, Adiyar, Madam, Karikadi, Ambalavasis.

Introduction

Though Dalit women have been living a life of silence throughout the centuries, they were considered as a social force, cultural symbol, and held a historical background in which she plays a major role of farming and industrial culture. At present also they are still leading life of savages in the forms of violence, exploitation and oppression in the form of hunger, malnutrition, disease, physical and mental torture, rape illiteracy, ill-health, unemployment, insecurity, and inhuman treatment.¹ In Kerala Dalit women history explains the intensity of their backwardness. The pre independence period was quite horrible, but in the post-independence period their position found some improvements. Social structure and traditional position of Dalits contributed important factor of their backwardness.²

Etymological meaning of Dalit

The word Dalit has its route both in Sanskrit and in Hebrew. In Sanskrit the route 'Dal' means to crack, to split open, to break etc. In Hebrew, the route 'Dal' which means low, weak, poor etc.³ In 1970's the 'Dalit panthers', a group of educated Dalit youths from Maharashtra revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and for those who were exploited politically, economically, and religiously. It is observed that Dalit is not a caste and it is a symbol of change, revolution and empowerment.⁴ In Indian context, it is more concretely used to refer the Scheduled castes that had been considered as *Out castes, Panchamas, Antyajas, Avarnas, Exterior castes, Depressed classes, Untouchables* and *Harijans* in the history of Indian society.⁵

Traditional Social Structure of Dalits in Kerala

Caste system did not exist in ancient Kerala society. It was an innovation introduced by the Aryans, who came here from outside. The study of caste structure and association today is faced with a complex of force and phenomena like modernity and tradition, invoking various transformations in the stratification as follows:

- The *Nampoodiris* who were at the apex, enjoyed the highest position in the social hierarchy. The *Kshatriyas* formed a small percentage of the population.
- A group of intermediary castes constituted by *Ambalavasis* placed below the *Kshatriyas* above the *Nairs*, *Sudras* constituted the bulk of the population who were the last among the caste Hindus.

- The polluting castes or the non - castes were of different hierarchical categories each practicing untouchability between themselves.⁶

In traditional society caste played significant role and the upper castes occupied the position of upper class and the lower castes constituted the lower class. Social activities of people are mainly limited within each class. Though some times the upper class people may have to depend on lower classes for various services. These people were kept at distance by upper classes during social functions like marriage etc. This is true in the case of lower classes also.⁷ Liberty of all kind was denied to lower castes and they had no security of life and freedom. Among the *Avarnas, pulayas, parayas* were considered as the slave castes. They were the pillars of the agriculture oriented economy of the land. In Kerala Dalit women are estimated to contribute eighty percent of total labour to strengthen the national economy. They occupied a very low status in the society. They cannot use public roads, several tax burden were imposed on the socially backward class. The language used by the lower castes too was degrading, like for *I* was *Adiyan* (your slave), his rice *choru* was *Karikadi* and house was *Madam*.

Dalits had undergone many humiliating experience in social educational economic and religious life of the country. They had no right to education and not allowed to possess land or wear gold and silver ornaments and construct houses using brick and tile. They were prescribed distance to be observed by them at the sight of higher castes. The caste system and its operation now broken down in Kerala owing to a variety of causes. In the beginning of 19th century. The arrival of protestant missionaries marked a turning point in the social history of Kerala. Colonial masters believed that the only practical way of raising the country from its miserable condition and of securing the blessing of government lay in Christianization and the consolidation of the British power in India.

The influence of Christian missionaries and the introduction of Western liberal education made its impact on the thinking and the way of life of these downtrodden communities. Most of them accepted Christianity mainly by the reasons of convenience, protection; material benefits and education were very great in numbers. The converts developed an intense feeling of self-respect and self-reliance that they never had before. But it was not enough to raise their standard of living. Social reformers like Ayyankali had given attention to the education of Dalit women, as shown in the incident regarding the school admission of the Dalit girl Panchami. The chief sources of strength behind the struggles such as Kallumala agitation, were Dalit women called Kali Ayyappan, Poomatha, Malakunji and others. Hence, the colonial intervention created a new form of subjectivity for the lower castes that were gradually leading to long standing transformation. Another example is that the women of the backward communities were not allowed to cover their bosoms. The style of dress prescribed to the lower classes consisted of single cloth of coarse texture, to be worn a like by males and females no lower than the knee and no higher than the waist. The missionary ladies Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Mault arrived at Travancore in 1818, and they devised a plain loose jacket with short sleeves for female converts of the mission leading to serious social protest. But the efforts of the missionaries secured for the women of all classes the right to cover their bosoms and they began to move through the streets in a proper manner.

In the latter half of the 19th Century socio- religious reformers, social workers and national leaders helped a lot in improving the status of Dalit communities in Kerala. In Kerala effect of social fermentation experienced through the *Namboodiris, the Nairs, the Ezhavas*, the Syrian Christians and the Muslims came for a general transformation. The social reformers identified the problems faced by the lower castes and tried to solve them as much as they could. The reformers criticized the caste structure and the notion of superiority of the higher castes.⁸ They organized new social movements and political awakening and created socio- political revolutions in the society.

Dalit women actively participated in the freedom movements and other public activities along with men. The spread of education has kindled awareness in the consciousness of these people, that the unification of downtrodden is the only way out of their backwardness. Transformation as a working class helped the Dalits especially Dalit women to form organization among themselves. The emergence of social integration created a kind of conscious action that could further enable to social change for the community as a whole.⁹ Through the reformers they got a new direction which could persuade them to achieve massive transformation. From the first generation of modern educated women, it was very difficult to find the names of Dalit woman who came up. Later their literacy rate has grown up considerably during the past two decades. *Dakshayani Velayudan* was one of notable among them who passed matriculation from Cochin and was the first Dalit girl in India to get graduated. In education field they have to enter many more areas such as business, professional, education and medical.

In Kerala the emergence of communist party and their socialist ideologies influenced Dalit and their life. The party provided political platform for the lower castes to work together for common cause and

continues their activities to break the walls of religion and customs.¹⁰ The *Vaikom Sathyagraha*, *Guruvayur Sathyagraha* and the *Paliyam struggles* for the right to walk-on public roads, was one such move. Many Dalit women participated in such struggles, paving way for their political emergence.

As a conclusion, Social structure and traditional position of Dalits also contributed important factors for their backwardness. The impact of Christian missionaries and social reformers to the upliftment of Dalit communities deserve special mention. But their life has not been fully improved. Although, Dalit women are better placed with greater access to education, government employment and political representatives etc. they still lack a social status. The status of Dalit women is a complex phenomenon that has to be studied as an integrated part of the socio- economic structure in which women had been living. To improve the social status of Dalit women, it is important to understand the trends of the past, as a way to their advancement in social history. Dalit woman as one who suffers the double marginalization due to caste and gender is very apt and meaningful. What empowered them in these struggles was then experience of caste and gender discrimination in the society of higher caste male domination in the past. Though they are socially conscious of the inequalities experienced by the both inside and outside their domestic circle and are ready to come forward actively in social struggles their contribution to social changes has not been recognized adequately.

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