

A CRITICAL INSIGHT ON STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Since long ago, Dalit women in India have been living in silence through the centuries. They have remained and acted as mute spectators to their exploitation, oppression, and barbarity done to them. They do not have control over their own bodies, earnings, and lives. Instead, somebody else controls them. The extreme expression of violence, exploitation, and oppression against them is visible in forms of hunger, malnutrition, diseases, physical and mental torture, rape, illiteracy, ill-health, unemployment, insecurity and inhuman treatment. The collective forces and the effect of Feudalism, casteism, and patriarchy have made their lives a living hell. An overwhelming majority of them live under the most precarious conditions. In the present age of modernism and post-modernism they are still living in the dark age of savagery. Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women ie Dali women. In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower castes have lesser access to public fore, which is compounded by their gender. The Dalits and the marginalized are still colonized by the feudal lords, the elites without freedom from caste discrimination.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

In all countries across the globe, there are communities which continue to be marginalised and deprived of their rights due to their location within the society determined by class, race, ethnicity, gender and skin colour. In India, caste determines one's social status and Dalits or untouchables remain the most oppressed and exploited social group in the country. Though the Constitution of India has enshrined several provisions for Dalit communities to safeguard and promote their socio-economic status in order to bring them back in the mainstream of population, the exclusionary mechanism of entrenched hierarchical social relations have brought differential outcomes for the Dalits, especially the women. They have to bear the triple burden of deprivation in terms of caste, gender and poverty. Dalit women are forced to enter the labour market at a very early age in order to sustain their families. Traditionally allocated menial and stigmatised works are generally assigned to them. Better paid and dignified jobs continue to be out of reach for them through a systematic denial of rights to higher education, skill training, assets and other productive resources. This process of systematic denial further ensures their exclusion from socio-political scenario and keeps them restricted to the bottom of the society as invisible citizens.

Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women. In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower castes have lesser access to public fore, which is compounded by their gender. The Dalits and the marginalized are still colonized by the feudal lords, the elites without freedom from caste discrimination. Indians have driven out the colonizers but not the ones who are discriminating Dalits. For Dalit women, they are also coerced to be victimized in the patriarchy. Dalit women are bearing the burden of double-day caste and the division of labor based on sex. Dalit women are demeaned and degraded and their body is a free terrain of colonization by men from other communities. Dalit women are a deprived section and at the lowest level of economic and educational structures. They are poor, illiterate, sexually harassed, face caste violence and exploited. Doubly, triply or multiply discriminated, Dalit women face a lot of struggles on a daily basis; otherwise just being overwhelmed by those surges of discrimination up to them. Without being struggling, Dalit women would be just left in despair.

In ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.), the caste system was non-existent and was not prevailing because even the most learned men were good householders and had varied occupations. The women of ancient India were just as superior as men in learning, education, and intellect. The choice for her mate for her whole life was made according to her own wishes and marriage was performed according to her wish after the coming of age. She attended parties, competitions and religious functions as she wished. The remarriage of young widows was also a common practice (Thind, 2000).

In a male-dominated society, Dalit women suffer or bear unimaginable oppression which is beyond anyone's imagination, not only through caste but by gender too, from which there was no escape or no other way.

The laws in the Manusmriti and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which Dalit women could be uplifted **(Thind, 2000)**. The horrendous laws in the Manusmriti were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favourable only to the upper castes, which form the majority of India. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women. The Laws of the Manusmriti have a devastating effect on the level of education reached by Dalit women **(Thind, 2000)**.

Historically, oppression has been and continues to be a serious issue of concern in both developed and under developed countries. The composition of Indian society, with its hierarchies and power structures, is an ideal place to better understand the experience of oppression and the lives of the exploited. In India, the combined effects of the caste system, class inequality and patriarchy result in the marginalization of more than half the population. Women throughout the established hierarchy and members of the lower castes and classes have historically carried the impact of oppression generated by the Indian social structure. A noteworthy hallmark of the caste system is its framework of social preference. In Indian society, Brahmins are placed at the top of the social hierarchy and Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) are relegated to the bottom.

Dr. B. R Ambedkar in his writings on the riddle of women has explained in detail how Manu has deprived the status of women by curbing their liberty and equal rights. He was willing and very keen to bring certain changes in the Hindu Law for the betterment of women. In 1952, when he was a Law Minister in J.L.Nehru's cabinet, he tried to bring an amendment in Hindu Law such as adoption, guardianship, divorce, Hindu Marriage, Widow Re-Marriage and property rights to women. But due to strong opposition by the traditional caste Hindus, the bill was not accepted in the parliament and ultimately Dr. Ambedkar had to resign from Nehru's Ministry.

In India, women cannot be treated as a 'single' unit. Caste-gender intersectionality plays a crucial role in determining one's status in the society, and the status is maintained for the lifetime through the process of 'caste-endogamy' (Mukherjee & Sabharwal, 2015).

DALIT LITERATURE: REPRESENTING WOMEN

Literature is a panacea, which heals the wounds of the society. Dalit Literature is the embodiment of social and cultural indignities that heaped upon the Dalits especially their womenfolk.

Sudha Umashanker (The Hindu 26th July 2011). Is it easy being a Dalit in India? And a woman at that? Have things changed for the better for the Dalits who constitute roughly 16.23 percent of our population, since the Constitution of India "caste a special responsibility on the state to promote with special care for the education, economic interest of the scheduled caste and promise to protect them from all forms of exploitation and social injustice (Article 46)".

Bhupendra Yadav (The Hindu, 19th July 2011). Caste is inlaid in a pre-determined hierarchy. It is something one cannot choose but inherits. Caste matters a lot in everyday life and marriages are negotiated on its basis. It plays a decisive role in elections and as the saying goes, 'Indians do not cast their vote but vote their caste.'

Kumar, N, and Raj, M (2006):- Traditionally, leadership in the village was confined to 'rural elites' who were aged and belonged to a higher caste. In the year 1993, 73rd amendment in the Constitution granted reservation to Dalits, tribals, and women in local government. This amendment made it compulsory that one-third of the seats reserved for Dalits are filled by Dalit women. In some states, there has been little or no acceptance of reservation for the lower castes and Dalit women by the upper castes. This has resulted in atrocities against all the panchayat members including even women members. Dalits who stood or moved one step ahead for election for the betterment of their people were beaten and Dalit women were raped and ill-treated. The members of the higher castes, who are not prepared to relinquish power to the lower castes, grab their land. An easier method to retain power is to put-up a proxy candidate and keep the control in the hands of the dominant castes, always men.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN

In general, Indian society today is totally male-dominated and biased against the female gender. This results in all sorts of exploitation and discriminatory practices. Obviously, the treatment of Indian women is unjust and inhuman. For instance, female feticide and female infanticide are widespread and the practice of Sati has also not disappeared completely. Women are frequently tortured in the broad daylight because of insufficient dowry. Hundreds of women commit suicide either due to humiliating sexual atrocities on

them or because of unbearable tortures from the husband or in-laws an account of dowry. Women on their part have been struggling through various organizations and movements to liberate themselves from the clutches of the male-dominated social order.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN VEDIC PERIOD

In the Vedic period, women enjoyed all sorts of rights which are essential for a human being. Women had right to access to all the branches of learning, and women even enjoyed a position at par equally with men. Women played an important role in religious ceremonies. The girls were free to choose their own life partners in a Swayamvara after attaining puberty. They had all the opportunities to pursue education, including study of the Vedas and were even eligible for Upanayana. They could end a marriage and widows re-married. Even during Kautilya's time, women lived with dignity. The Vedic hymns that existed previously and were being followed honestly inform us that both the husband and wife were equally joint owners of family, property, and a daughter whether married or unmarried retained her sole right of inheritance in the property of her deceased father. Women were actively involved and associated with men in all socio-religious rituals and ceremonies. The examples of polygamy were rare and mainly confined to the ruling class. Dowry system was prevalent but only in rich and royal families. A wife was regarded as an indispensable member of the husband's family and a centre of the domestic world. She proved herself a sincere friend, partner and a guide for her husband. She could move freely out of her house and enjoyed freedom of movement by attending fairs and festivals, sabhas or assemblies of learned people. Marriage was regarded as an indissoluble holy union and divorce was unknown, Sati system was not prevalent. A woman had absolute ownership over the property and it was regarded as her "Stridhan". Thus, a woman was regarded as an equal partner, friend and enjoyed equal share in joys and sufferings of her husband's life in the Vedic period. In social, cultural and educational activities, she enjoyed considerable freedom and more or less possessed equal rights in matters of religion. She was considered as a human being and enjoyed a status of prestige in the society.

DALIT WOMEN'S IDEOLOGY

The Dalit woman is a social force, a cultural symbol and has a historical background. She is the prominent feature of a farming culture. She is the true builder and heir of prominent face in the industrial culture. She plays a big and important role in the construction of buildings and laying roads which are beneficial to all. She foils and gets herself involved into textile mills, cement factories, hospitals, and quarries. Dalit women are estimated and calculated to contribute and are responsible for eighty percent labour to strengthen the national economy. They look after the family. They walk miles and miles to fetch water, fodder, fuel and so on. They get up before the cock crows. Their day starts by sprinkling water mixed with cow dung in front of the house. As the sun rises, they go out to work in the fields. They come back in the evening and start their routine household work. They eat very less and sleep late into the night and wear patched clothes. Such a hard-working supporter in every type of field and builder and developer of the family, society, and nation at large, they themselves today are suffering a lot in India. They are struggling a lot for their own survival and existence. They are leading a life which is completely full of the fight against upper castes and bear the disadvantage of being a Dalit and especially of being a woman. They are not even able to recognize Hindi letters and words and put their signatures in their own handwriting. They could hardly count numbers beyond nine or ten. Ironically, they do not seem to be much interested in receiving education through adult or non-formal channels. Neither, are they interested in educating their children, particularly daughters as they think that it was of no use to them and in no way related to their real-life-situations, or fetch some meaningful work or employment for them.

DALIT WOMEN MOVEMENT IN INDIA

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has encouraged women across all social groups to be educated, mobilized and participate in public life to put an end to caste hierarchy (Zelliot, 2005). After Independence, neither the women organisations nor Dalit activists addressed the caste and gender intersectionality (Vimal Thorat, 2001). Dalit movement became 'masculinised' and women activists started treating women as a homogenous group (Sharmila Rege, 1998, page: 42). "Women's lives in India and the world over are circumscribed by what can be termed as five 'P's: Patriarchy, Productive resources access inadequacy, Poverty, Promotion advancement insufficiency and Powerlessness" (HemaLata Swarup, 1993).

From 1980 onwards, caste identity started playing a significant role in the political arena, social sciences and feminist discourses. Two distinct paths of feminism were identified, the first one is upper caste or SAVARNA and the second one is Bahujanwadi or ASAVARNA feminism. The second one is also known as

Phule-Ambedkarite feminism which believed in getting social justice through “Education, Organisation and Agitation” (**Rege, Sharmila, 2010**). In the 1980s, young Dalit feminists formed Mahila Sansad in Mumbai and in mid-1990s, the Dalit feminist literary movement was started by Samvadini Dalit Stree Sahitya Maanch. In 1995, Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women accepted that indigenous women face some specific problems due to their social status. After 1995, many organisations like National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), All India Dalit Women Forum and Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sangathan etc. came up and started addressing the issues of women empowerment from socially marginalised communities. In 2003, Dalit Bahujan Mahila Vicharmanch publicly set aflame the Manusmriti at the historic Chaitya Bhumi (**Rege, Sharmila, 2006**) and revived the Ambedkarite movement for women empowerment.

MAIN CHALLENGES FOR DALIT WOMEN

1. Access to Key Productive Resources In India: Throughout the world, women are engaged in all levels of the economy. They are farmers, land managers, and guardians of the forests. Through activities of livelihoods women play a vital role in agriculture, especially subsistence agriculture, seed production and post-harvest management, animal husbandry, fishery, natural resource management, and energy management. These are activities that provide subsistence to families and communities by taking care of basic necessities such as food, water, fuel, homes, healthcare and social security. Productive resources are the key and important considerations for every kind of existing livelihood activities. Resources may be economic (land and credit), political (participation governance and decision making at community level), or social (education, skill building, training). Right to access is the opportunity to use, manage and control resources. Productive resources are important and very critical to women because the right to food does not only mean or stop at just feeding the hungry, getting the stomach full and making the world free from hunger. For women, especially those from marginalized communities, it is getting increasingly difficult to access these resources due to biased customary laws and patriarchal norms, and is perpetuated by gender blind policies which have exacerbated the obstacles that women confront and made them vulnerable to food insecurity—malnutrition, chronic hunger and starvation .

2. Illiteracy: Till some years ago, many Dalit women were ill-treated and educationally backward in spite of the facility of free education. Most Dalit women are given a chance of finishing their education at the primary level. They are discouraged from getting married and raising a family when they are in the age of 12-15 yrs. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among Dalit women are many.

The following are the main reasons:

- a) Resistance from the family to send girls to schools.
- b) Fear of insecurity in villages.
- c) Lack of physical facilities like accommodation, school, transport and medical facilities.
- d) The girls were forced to take care of the siblings when the parents are away at work.
- e) Working to earn for the family prevent the girls from attending school.
- f) Because of the sick and unemployed parents, girls were forced to work.
- g) Many were forced to get married at a young age, which stops schooling.
- h) The social restriction is that the girls should stop education after marriage.
- i) In some areas, there are complaints from Dalit women teachers of misbehavior, blackmail and exploitation by the male staff of other high caste people.
- j) Fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education is another factor for low literacy level among SC girls. If the education levels improved, the marriage prospects of the girls dropped due to the increase in dowry. Therefore, many parents wish to withdraw the girls from schools.

3. Political Participation and Empowerment: Dalit women are politically marginalized, but rural Dalit women are given even less of a voice in the decision-making process. In India, there is a quota system or the reservation system in force for Dalits to have seats in the local panchayat or to protect their rights (town assembly). But the role being played by Dalit women is consistently subordinated to their male counterparts. Dalit women who attempt to utilize their power in the panchayat are met with male and dominant caste backlash, pressure and sometimes violence. Many a times Dalit women are told they are not even allowed to sit on a chair but must take their place on the floor. In the majority of instances, a Dalit woman has no ability to exercise her rights and voice her concerns in the panchayat because her husband represents her and makes the decisions while she is forced to stay at home until he can usurp the panchayat seat for himself.

4. Violence against Women, Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation: Dalit women suffer from both gender and caste-based violence. The UN Special Rapporteur mentioned on the violence done against women and

has noted or seen that Dalit women face targeted violence very harshly, even rape, and murder being attempted and done, by the state actors and powerful members of the dominant castes like upper caste and used to inflict and spread political lessons and crush dissent within the community.” Gender inequality sanctified by religious and cultural norms subordinates women and reinforces the patriarchal order, allowing for violence against them to be carried out within their own homes and communities as well. Dalit women face verbal, physical and sexual violence in the public and private domain. In the private domain, Dalit women are assaulted for not being dutiful wives, not bearing children or male children specifically or not bringing enough dowry into the marriage. Dalit women face violence from community members, complicit police personnel, their in-laws and their families. Between norms of female subjugation and cultural norms regarding the “natural” caste hierarchy, women are constantly assaulted and taken advantage of. Further, due to their low socio-economic status, Dalit women are often the victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Dalit women’s sexual and bodily integrity are threatened and violated, even from a young age. Dalit women are victims of social, religious and cultural practices like Devdasis and Jogins. In the name of these practices, village girls are married to God by their helpless parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the dominant upper caste landlords and rich men who think doing this is a work which requires immense power and they show their power and direct them to trafficking and prostitution.

Empowerment of Dalit Women

The achievement of equal status for women was one of the specific objectives implicit in the preamble, fundamental rights and directive principles of the state policy in the Constitution of India. Social change is a complex process which does not affect the different sections of women in a uniform manner. Therefore, the status of women cannot be defined easily. Political power in this country has, for long, been the monopoly of a few dominant upper caste men who think that they are made to rule, which merely deprived the downtrodden or the lower people of the changes for betterment in which the condition of Dalit women is insignificant and very pitiable. This clearly reflects or shows the degree of inequalities existing in the society. The upper caste women leaders, who enjoyed power, have also neglected the downtrodden women and did not care about them and did not try to improve their social, economic and political status. But they must have played an important role in forming the social programmes, legislations for the welfare of women. It is regrettable and unfortunate for Dalit women to be neglected in considering their share in the active politics and their potential in the national development process. In politics, the organizational structures, leadership and sharing of power in government are mostly dominated by men. Money and caste are important factors which play the main role in Indian politics. Women participation in the political process is central to their struggle against oppression. The social, economic status of women directly depends upon their participation in the decision making process. Unfortunately, all the existing political parties in India talk too much about the stability and equality of women but have completely and totally ignored the Dalit women and have clearly stated that their political status and participation is insignificant and is of no importance at all. It is very sad to state that the Dalit women have not been given their concern for their representation in all the political parties which clearly reflects the social difference. Most of the women involved in politics and power sharing are women from the upper castes with political, high financial background of the family. It may be very surprising to know that till 1932 the representation or involvement in the legislature was only by the upper caste Hindus and the Dalits were totally ignored.

Some Socially Relevant Points:

- a. Economic factors which are important for nation development must be given full weightage in an attempt to uplift and raise the standard of Dalit women from their prevailing marginalized, dehumanized status. This requires consideration of each and every issue that has relevance and is important for the overall development perspectives and strategies of our nation.
- b. Rural development and urban development should be considered together and not in isolation. Same way, organized and unorganized sectors should be examined together because they constitute two sides of the same coin that is the national economy parameter.
- c. All aspects of the present debate on consideration of liberalization of Indian economy should be thoroughly and completely examined. Dalit women have also contributed towards the growth and development of our country. And even then they have remained at the lowest rung of the society, lowest of the low. What has contributed to this state of affairs? Which are the various forces which are responsible for the present insecurity, instability and dehumanized status of these Dalit women?

- d. There is a cultural domain which requires deeper scrutiny. This includes and defines the structure of the relationship existing between Dalit women and non-Dalit women in today's world. What are their perceptions of each other relative to each other? And if they are considerate then to what extent are they helpful and sympathetic? What is the reason for apathy and alienation and social divisiveness among them?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DALIT WOMEN ISSUES

- The amendment should be made in the constitution which should clearly ensure the dignified representation of Dalit women at all state mechanisms.
- Reservation mechanism in all state organs should be provisioned in the new Constitution for Dalit women to empower them on their economic, social, cultural and civil and political rights.
- Dalits ownership of land should be ensured with due consideration to Dalit women on their access and control over resources.
- Free technical, vocational and academic education should be provided to Dalit women by the state with scholarship facility to them.
- The promulgation of the provision as an untouchable free country should be implemented through a constructive plan of action effectively.
- The discriminatory laws, traditional practices and dogmatism against Dalit women should be abolished by providing them the social security for their rehabilitation.
- The international legal obligations and instruments related to Dalits and Dalit women should be applied in practice along with their effective implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.
- Constitutional Dalit Commission should be established to safeguard and protect women rights with special support centers for Dalit women.
- Appropriate compensation should be provided to these Dalits and even to the victims of the transitional period on trafficking, rape, sexual exploitation, displaced Dalits with due consideration about the situation of Dalit women.
- Dalit women's economic enhancement programs should be launched for their income generation and self-reliance.
- Dalit women's employment opportunities should be ensured.
- Massive awareness against caste discrimination should be escalated.
- Strict legal action should be implemented in the case of caste discrimination and abuses. One-step solution to the issue of Dalit and Dalit women rights does not exist.

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