



Status of Dalit Women in India- Caste and Gender Based Exclusion

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to highlight the status of dalit women in India in a fastly globalizing world. In this paper I wish to present the devastating effects of the caste system on the educational, social, and economical status of Dalit women in modern India. The aim of the paper is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture Dalit women face every day of their miserable lives. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes, which is legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures.

Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world's total population. Dalit women are discriminated against three times over: they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Dalit women constitute half of the ca. 200 million Dalit population, and 16.3 of the total Indian female population. The traditional taboos are the same for Dalit men and Dalit women. However, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. Dalit women also have less power within the Dalit movement itself. Women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organisations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men.

Even after reservation policy, positive changes and a constant support of the political machinery in the country towards eradication of discrimination against the Dalits, it is still not easy being a Dalit. So the question that comes to one's mind is - if being a Dalit is so tough, how tough will it be to live a life of a Dalit woman? Women in any caste are considered lowly creatures. So how does a lowly creature among the alleged lowly creatures live? The Constitution of India "cast a special responsibility on the State to promote with special care the education, economic interest of the Scheduled Castes and promised to protect them from all forms of exploitation and social injustice (Article 46)."

Dalit women in India are considered the Dalits among Dalits and suffer from a three-fold oppression —
On account of gender because of existing patriarchy,
On account of their caste 'the untouchable',
Finally, on account of their class - as they hail from the poorest and most marginalized communities.

In Ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.), the caste system was non-existent since 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 was according to her own wishes and marriage was practiced 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). The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including the Manusmriti, Atharva Vedas, Vishnu smriti, and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmins (upper priestly hindu caste), led to a society in which equality between men and women was far from existent (Agarwal). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian constitution, also makes it very clear in his article

titled "The rise and fall of Hindu woman" that the root cause of suffering for women in India are these so called Hindu religious books (Thind; Agarwal). A book like the Manusmriti divides people into a stratified caste system and promotes inequality between men and women (Thind; Agarwal). According to the Manusmriti, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth (n.pag). It not only justifies the treatment of dalit women as a sex object and promotes child marriage, but also justifies a number of violent atrocities on women as can be seen in the following verses (Agarwal; Manusmriti): A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him. Or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age. If (the performance of) his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner. (Manusmriti IX.94) By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house." (Manusmriti V.147) Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. (Manusmriti IX.3) Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskaras are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth. (Manusmriti IX.18) A Brahman, Kshatriya, or Vaishya Man can sexually exploit any shudra woman. (Manusmriti IX.25) Even the killing of a dalit woman is explicitly justified as a minor offence for the Brahmins: equal to the killing of an animal (Manusmriti). If the killing of an untouchable was justified as a minor offence, we can imagine the treatment they received throughout their lives. In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. 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 n.pag). 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 n.pag).

Though Indian Constitution provides equality to all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, region and gender and also directs the State to take various measures to remove the different forms of discrimination and inequality, still the problem persists. This is true of large sections of Dalit women of the country as well, who have not adequately benefitted from the country's social, political educational and economic progress.

The impact of this triple marginalization on Dalit women can clearly be seen in their current national status in terms of; occupation, education, health, political power, extent of victimization through violence and access to forms of justice. Dalit women are in a worse position than Dalits in general, in terms of sex ratio, wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation (Bandhu cited in Rao, 2003). Each of these indicators has been further explored:

Occupational status:

In 2001, about 57 per cent of SC and 37 per cent of ST women respectively were agricultural wage labour in rural areas, as compared with 29 per cent for non-SC/STs. In urban areas, 16 per cent SC and 14 per cent ST women were daily wage labourers as compared with only 6 per cent from non-SC/STs. Only 21 per cent of SC women were cultivators compared with 51 per cent for STs and 45 per cent for non-SC/STs. SC/ST women also faced differential treatment in wage-earning, particularly in urban areas. In 2000, SC and ST women casual labourers received daily wages of Rs 37 and Rs 34 respectively, compared with Rs 56 for non-SC/ST women; the national average was Rs 42. Besides this, a large number of SC women are engaged in so-called 'unclean' occupations, like scavenging. Because of their association with these occupations, Dalit women face discrimination in the social and economic spheres. (Thorat, 2008)

Educational Status:

Literacy rates of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Persons – Sex-wise – All India - Rura

Year	Scheduled Castes			Scheduled Tribes		
	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons
1961	15.06	2.52	8.89	13.37	2.90	8.16
1971	20.04	5.06	12.77	16.92	4.36	10.68
1981	27.91	8.45	18.48	22.94	6.81	14.92
1991	45.95	19.45	33.25	38.45	16.02	27.38
2001	63.66	37.84	51.16	57.39	32.44	45.02
2009-10	73.0	52.1	62.8	70.7	52.1	61.6

Sources: GOI, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Selected Educational Statistics 2004-05 and NSSO.

Lack of educational development is another important problem. In 2001, the literacy rate among SC and ST rural females (aged 15 and above) was 25 per cent and 24 per cent respectively, compared with 41 per cent for non-SC/ST women. The literacy rate among SC women in urban areas was 48 per cent, compared with 54 per cent and 70 per cent for ST and non-SC/ST women respectively. The dropout rate among SC and ST women is also relatively high at every stage of education. The high dependence on casual labour, with relatively low earnings coupled with inadequate exposure to education, among SC and ST women induced a high degree of deprivation and poverty among them. (Thorat, 2008)

Health Status:

The high degree of deprivation among Dalit women is reflected in other indicators of wellbeing — under-nutrition and health. About 65 per cent and 56 per cent of ST and SC women respectively suffered from anaemia compared to 47.6 per cent of non-SC/ST women. In 2004-2005, 23.2 per cent of SC and 28 per cent of ST children under four years of age suffered from malnutrition (based on weight-for-age). Of these underweight children, 54 per cent of SCs and 56 per cent of STs were severely undernourished. There is a significant difference between SC and ST children and non-SC/ST children, 13.80 per cent and 41.1 per cent of whom are malnourished and undernourished respectively. While the Government of India has adopted the national goal of reducing the present infant mortality rate (IMR) to 60 by 2000, the SC's IMR, child mortality and under-5 mortality is 83.00, 39.50 and 119.3, respectively. Compare this with 61.8, 22.2 and 82.6 for non-SC/STs, respectively. Similarly, IMR, child mortality and under-5 mortality are 84, 46.3 and 126 among STs. About 72

per cent of births to SC women and 81 per cent of births to ST women took place at home; the corresponding figure for others is 59 per cent. (Thorat, 2010).

Dalit women are excluded from decision-making. They are not in a position to exercise their power. Wherever Dalit women have contested, they have faced stiff opposition and even been brutally attacked. There are instances where Dalit women have been elected into local governance and, through the reservation policy, nominated as the president of the local governing unit (Panchayat). But when these women have endeavoured to exercise their role, it has met with resistance, even to the extent of physical violence. The reservation for Dalits, particularly for women, is accepted in form but seldom in substance. Any change in the status quo is resisted. Dalit women's sitting on chairs is seen as threat to social hierarchy. So, the upper castes in the village vetoed chairs in the panchayat office (P. Sainath in Rao 2003). A Dalit woman president is not allowed to sit on a chair if the other caste members do not allow this. She is forced to be a mere figurehead, while the functioning of the Panchayat is taken over by upper-caste members. Political parties in India speak much about equality of women but have totally ignored the Dalit women (Jogdand, 1999).

Forms of Oppression: On account of their lower social status, sexual exploitation of SC/ST women is also high. There are some caste-related social customs and religious practices in Hindu society that exploit only women from Dalit communities. One of these customs is *devdasi* or *jogini*, involving religious prostitution imposed on unfortunate girls who are married to a village god and then become the subject of sexual exploitation by upper caste men in a village. There are similar practices in states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra where Dalit women are designated *devdasis* or devotees of god. (Thorat, 2010)

Access to justice: The impunity enjoyed by both dominant caste community and the state officials continues largely due to the insensitiveness and the continuous failure of the criminal justice administrative system. This is clearly illustrated in a recent national study of violence against Dalit women based on 500 cases:

- In 40.4 per cent of the cases, the women did not even attempt to obtain justice
- In 26.6 per cent of the cases, the victims were prevented to file cases
- In 1.6 per cent of the cases, the women were able to obtain informal justice
- In 17.5 per cent of incidents, the violence reached the notice of the police, but cases were left unaddressed
- Only in 13.9 per cent of cases was appropriate police or judicial action taken.
- A mere 3.6 per cent of cases have ever reached the courts while only 3 of the cases (less than one per cent) have ended in conviction. (Manorama, 2006)

Violence therefore forms the core result of gender based inequalities, caused, intensified and facilitated by caste discrimination, acting as crucial social mechanisms to maintain Dalit women's caste-gender subordinate position to men and particularly dominant caste men.

Impact of Globalization on Dalit Women:

Author of 'Untouchability' The Economic Exclusion of the Dalits in India, Smita Narula (2001) states that: "While a small proportion of Indians (of both sexes) can claim that caste does not matter, ...this freedom from caste is impossible for [lower caste women], who endure a combination of poverty and gender discrimination that keeps them illiterate, low paid, malnourished, and unhealthy..."

The process of globalisation has affected Dalit women considerably. With the introduction of new farming techniques, such as mechanisation for harvesting and transplanting, women have lost their traditional work in the agricultural sec-

tor. Food crops have been replaced by cash crops. Horticulture has been introduced by big agribusiness corporations for export purposes. This has deprived Dalit women of their land and the common resources in the village. Women used to collect greens, fish, and shells from fields for their food requirements for free. This is no longer available to them. Abject poverty has driven large numbers of Dalit women into the sex trade to earn for their families. The globalization process has increased the feminization of poverty and this has affected Dalit women in every sphere of their lives. There is also large-scale migration from rural areas to the urban centres in search of better livelihood options. Women are left behind to bear responsibility for the family. More and more female-headed households emerge and most of them are headed by Dalit women. Such situations push the women into further situations of impoverishment, making them more and more vulnerable to all forms of discrimination and violations. (Unheard Voices: Dalit Women, 2007)

Conclusion: Caste, class and gender discrimination prevents Dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights, particularly to dignity, equality and development. Atrocities and violence against Dalit women are both a means of sustaining systemic discrimination, as well as a reaction when particularly untouchability practices and caste norms are challenged or not adhered to. Impunity for this discrimination and violence is then used as a means to preserve the existing caste and gender disparities. Before Dalit women can enjoy their human rights, and before the Millennium Development Goals can be achieved, discrimination, violence and impunity must stop. Therefore Indian government take necessary steps to support them in asserting their rights and to ensure Dalit women and girls are brought on par with the general population in terms of overall development (e.g. poverty reduction) within a specific period. And the international community to undertake and support every possible measure to fight the widespread discrimination, violence and impunity committed against Dalit women.

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