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THE POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with dalit women in political empowerment in India. The article concludes that education of women is road to empowerment and with education comes the awareness, courage and then the dalit women can have true representation of self.

INTRODUCTION:

Dalits are a pan -Indian category. Heterogeneity is a marked feature of them. They belong to 'the most oppressed bottom' collectivities in the hierarchical society. They are part and parcel of village communities all over Indian subcontinent, except few north eastern states. They are found not only in India but they are found in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and other neighbouring countries. They share common features across the country and states and even sometime they are found in more than one state known by synonyms such as Mahars and Holeyas or Chalwadis in Maharashtra and Karnataka respectively. Similarly the caste called Malas in Andhra Pradesh; Paraiyas in Tamil Nadu are one and the same as Holeyas and Chalwadis in Karnataka state. Madiga caste, another untouchable community, that exist by the same name in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh states and Mangs in Maharashtra is synonym of Madiga in Karnataka State. The matrimonial alliances take place between them across the state boundaries and it is very common in border areas of more than one state.

Direct political participation of Dalit women in local governance (Panchayati Raj) is a central human right in itself and enables the realisation of a host of other human rights. Political voice and decision-making power concerning basic services, economic development and social justice are critical factors in challenging and transforming structural caste-class-gender discrimination, and enabling Dalit women to realise their fundamental rights. Political participation also demands accountability from state and non-state actors to guarantee and respect these women's equal political voice and development. This requires a transformation of power relationships both within institutions of governance and in the women's social environment.

In India and other countries in South Asia, people have been systematically discriminated against on the basis of their work and descent for centuries. Over 200 million people are Dalits, also known as untouchables or outcasts. They experience violence, discrimination, and social exclusion on a daily basis. Economic growth in India has been strong over the past decade. However, the caste disparities are increasing. Recent legal and policy reforms in India to ensure the representation of marginalised social groups in decentralised governance, including Dalits and specifically Dalit women, through constitutionally mandated reservations (affirmative action quotas) in Panchayati Raj institutions bring these issues to the fore. They demand analysis to determine how Dalit women are enabled to claim their right to political participation in local governance, and the extent to which this participation is an effective tool for empowerment and realisation of human rights for excluded social groups. Annamalai, quoted above, calls on Dalit women to persevere with the 'social revolution' that the panchayat system and reservations therein have started in India.

Dalit women:

The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They 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.

Civil and political rights of dalit women:

India is a Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Based on this treaty, the Government of India has an obligation to make sure that Dalit women can enjoy a whole range of human rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, freedom from slavery, the right to be equal before the court, the right to recognition as a person before the law, the right to privacy, the right to marry only with free and full consent, and the right to take part in public affairs. The life and dignity of Dalit women depends on the realisation of these human rights. However, they are breached systematically. An essential precondition for the realisation of civil and political rights of Dalit women is registration. Article 24 (2) of the Covenant provides that every child shall be registered immediately after birth. In India, 46 % of all children are not registered. There is also no system of registration of marriages. This is not only a barrier for the realisation of civil and political rights; it also prevents the protection of Dalit girls from sexual exploitation and trafficking, child labour and forced and early marriages.

Action by Dalit women:

Dalit women have been active throughout history, though often this has not been recorded. They were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit movements in thousands of Indian villages. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land rights. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders in the Panchayati Raj institutions. However, they are unable to put an end to the structural discrimination and exclusion. Violence and impunity are used to keep them in their place.

Getting organised as Dalit women:

Since the late 1980s, therefore, Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform – created, developed and controlled by themselves – through which they could forge their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problems as Dalits and as women. Conscious that the call for a separate platform could be interpreted as a divisive move by both Dalit men and non-Dalit women, the proponents of such a special forum emphasise that their initiative must not be mistaken for a separatist movement. Rather they assert that there is need for strong alliances between the Dalit movement, the women's movement and the Dalit women's movement if their common vision of social, economic and political equality and justice for all is to be realised.

The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, such as legal action against caste based atrocities, political empowerment of Dalit women, economic empowerment against growing pauperisation, building self-confidence and leadership.

Empowerment through education:

Empowerment through education is the most important step to begin with. With education comes the awareness and strength to stand up and demand one's rights. Education here should not be confused with literacy. It has a deep rooted aim of empowerment of the human being which lead to worldview building and development of self and is the force behind all revolutions and reformations. Creating supportive environment to ensure greater political participation of women is the prerequisite to make the system of Panchayati Raj more participative and ensure holistic representation. Special provisions to ensure smooth and fair election process of Dalit women to panchayats need to be implemented. This could be done by appointing a special officer to look into the matters relating to the same. Granting more decisive power to the local bodies is a step further in the empowerment of Dalit women sarpanches. The bureaucratic structures should function as an aide to the Gram Panchayats. Civil society organizations can help in empowering the women by educating them directly and being an ally in representing their cause to state authorities.

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