

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DALIT WOMEN: OBSERVATIONS FROM INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Difference among the people is potential enough to create differences and the distance from difference to discrimination is not far away. The discrimination of socially and economically vulnerable groups as Dalit's is quite unfair and oppressive discrimination. India is a multi cultural, multi linguistic and multi religious country and diversity is the basic and fundamental nature of nation. Therefore, acceptance and inclusion of every social groups is part of social justice and human rights. While approaching towards the issues of dalit women; they called as 'Dalits of Dalits', 'Thrice Dalits'. The discrimination towards dalit women process in triple ways: discrimination through caste, class and gender.

This paper attempts to analyse the social situation of dalit women in India. Government of India has enacted legislations to prevent discriminatory practices like Anti-discriminatory measures include the enactment of the Untouchability Offence Act, 1955 (renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act [PCR] in 1976), and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities (POA) Act, 1989, social discriminations still hunting throughout the life of dalit women. This paper suggests that anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices may bring changes in the society.

Key words: *dalit women, discrimination, exclusion, anti-discriminatory practice, social justice*

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INTRODUCTION

In all nations across the world there are communities which continue to be marginalized and are denied their rights due to their location within the society determined by their class, caste, race, ethnicity, gender and colour. In India, caste discrimination ensures *Dalits* remain one of the most oppressed and exploited people. In case of *Dalit* women, this discrimination is systemic in nature and ensures their exclusion and subordination as poor, as *Dalit* and as women. *Dalit* women form a major part of the poor in India. On the one hand *Dalit* women are forced into the labour market because of the need to sustain themselves and their families. At the same time the only occupations that are available and traditionally allocated to them are those which no one else would prefer to do. Better paid and dignified occupations continue to be out of reach for them through a systematic denial of rights to education, training, land and other livelihood resources. This in turn has ensured their exclusion from active participation at socio-economic and political levels, and has restricted them to the bottom of the society, impoverished and invisible as citizens.

THE CONCEPT OF *DALIT* IN INDIAN CONTEXT

We are in the 21st millennium, and yet caste discrimination, an age-old practice that dehumanizes and perpetuates a cruel form of discrimination, continues to be rampant against *Dalits* despite legislation to stop the practice. The term “*Dalit*” is most commonly used to define people who were once known as the “untouchables”. In Marathi, the term connotes “oppressed” or the “broken people”. As used by rights’ activists, “*Dalit*” reflects the situation of the millions of people within South Asia, who are systematically and institutionally deprived of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in every aspect of life.

Dalits are socially excluded and face widespread discrimination on the basis of work. The caste system has relegated them to the lowest level in caste hierarchy and steeped them in poverty and helplessness. For *Dalit* women being “*Dalit*” means oppressions and denial of rights at all levels. *Dalit* women are discriminated against because they are born into a caste that is considered “impure” and thus “untouchable”. Untouchability rituals and practices further stigmatize *Dalit* women as they are treated like social “pariahs” i.e., social outcasts. Their very

existence as human beings with dignity is denied, leading to further denial of all basic services like health, education, livelihood, including those meant for the poor, on the grounds of their birth. *Dalit* women's oppression and exploitation outside homes gets further exacerbated inside the household where they continue to live within patriarchal norms. The denial of rights is deepened by their poverty as well as the fact that they are women, tripling their oppression and serving to keep them at the subservient levels of the society.

PROFILE OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

India is a best example of unity in diversity with its diverse population of 1,210,000,000 (1.21 billion) and having 1,600 dialects on record, in addition to these, there are 18 languages recognized by the Indian constitution as state languages. But still our social system is based on hierarchy of caste system and *Dalit* community by and large experiences social exclusion and discrimination in the society leading to deprivation of access to resources and facilities for a decent livelihood. Given the issue, there is a dire need to study the magnitude of exclusion in the country to maintain Social Carrying capacity of the State and Nation. Though in recent years, the situation of *Dalit* women in India has been explored and documented, the focus has been more from the atrocity perspectives, where violence against *Dalit* women has been the subject matter. Not much is documented as evidence with regard to the violations of their economic, social and cultural rights. Therefore, the objective of project is to develop insights into the inter-linkages between the factors of social exclusion and the growth of social development.

THE PLIGHT OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

Multiple forms of discriminations mean that overlapping oppression often creates specific forms or ways of experiencing discrimination. Intersectional discrimination multiplies and amplifies the obstacles women face, thus leaving them in a situation of further disadvantage. The intersection of gender discrimination with other barriers (e.g. poverty, caste, rural residence, etc.) similarly has a multiplicative effect. It produces something unique and distinct from any one form of discrimination standing alone. *Dalit* women face not just violence inflicted on them by the dominant castes, but also state violence, violence at homes and outside. These discriminations being systematic and consistent over a long period are internalised by the *Dalit*

woman herself. She accepts the situation as given, and cannot comprehend a life beyond all these discriminations. She is socially conditioned to believe that being a *Dalit* woman this is what her life is going to be. Powerless and unable to access or control any resources for survival, she undertakes humiliating tedious and time consuming work, mostly without any remuneration, including the most menial and degrading job of manual scavenging. The better paid and dignified occupations continue to be out of reach for them through a systematic denial of rights to education, training, property rights and other livelihood resources.

DALIT WOMEN AND LANDLESSNESS

Landlessness is growing at a rapid speed among *Dalits*, as is evident from the fact that the proportion of all *Dalit* workers as agricultural labour is increasingly growing at a very fast rate as compared to the non- *Dalit* agricultural labourers, implying that after losing their land holdings, *Dalit* cultivators are becoming agriculture labourers. One consequence of this is that *Dalit* men migrate to urban areas for better work whilst *Dalit* women are left behind to bear the responsibility of domestic work, care giving as well as work outside in farms and at odd jobs. Absence of males in the family deepens the women's isolation and impoverishment, making them increasingly vulnerable to other forms of discrimination and violence. For example, in absence of any male in the family, men from upper castes threaten and grab land or any other assets from the women. In absence of any safety nets, and work being very casual, *Dalits*, like the other poor people, are forced to take loans to meet any contingencies such as illnesses, deaths, marriages, etc. In their case, given their almost total lack of resources as well as the other caste-based discriminations they face, the upper caste landlord and high interest rates are mostly their only option.

BURDEN OF INDEBTEDNESS IN DALIT FAMILIES

This indebtedness becomes an excuse for upper castes to exploit them further in some cases, even making them work as bonded labourers. *Dalit* women in such cases, are most vulnerable to violence included sexual violence and other atrocities. Burdened with work both outside and inside the home, oppressed and excluded socially and economically, *Dalit* women are unable to organize and demand their rights. Compounding this is a fact that groups working on rights generally fail to recognize the triple jeopardy faced by *Dalit* women. In general, when

Dalit issues are raised, the focus is on caste-based discrimination and the gendered aspects of oppression of *Dalit* women are rendered invisible. Similarly, when women's issues are discussed, caste-based oppression faced by women is left out. Again, whenever *Dalit* women have tried to fight oppression, they are subjected to all kinds of atrocities and violence, including state violence. Though in recent years, the situation of *Dalit* women in India has been explored and documented, the focus has been more from the atrocity perspectives, where violence against *Dalit* women has been the subject matter. Not much is documented as evidence with regard to the violations of their economic, social and cultural rights.

The land occupied or accommodated by *Dalit* has its own unique geographical, social and cultural features that impact the lives and livelihood of *Dalits* in the country. It's adverse climatic conditions, where livelihoods are intimately connected with ownership patterns over land and water sources, and its decadent feudal history, which increases the caste system's stranglehold over the society, has deep seated implications for *Dalits* and the discriminatory practices against them. Women within this society continue to function within strong patriarchal norms, amplifying the adversities *Dalit* women have to deal with both within and outside the family.

SITUATION OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

Today, when the role of Women in Society is an issue of worldwide interest it is opportune that we should pause to look at it from a *Dalit* perspective. In the recent past, a number of books have been written on the changing status of women in Hindu and Islamic societies, but with regard to *Dalit* women very little interest has been taken in the subject. Since, there is much overlapping of discrimination, social exclusion and deprivation across class, caste, gender, communities; research sought to undertake Gender perspective primarily focusing on women from socially excluded communities, such as *Dalit*. It becomes important to study the interfaces with emboldened issues of women. Since women are more vulnerable and the issue at hand is too large to encapsulate it under an umbrella term; henceforth the need is to address gender perspective exclusively.

The main purpose of the research is to present the status of socially marginalised groups of *Dalits* women with respect to disparities in attainment of their socio-economic/human

development, since the deprivation of these groups is closely linked to processes of caste and ethnicity-based exclusion and discrimination. The research discusses the concept of social exclusion in general, and caste and untouchability-based exclusions and discrimination in particular, which are seen as causative factors for deprivation of these groups. The development of the concept of “exclusion” in general, and that of caste-untouchability and ethnicity-based exclusion and discrimination in particular, brings out various dimensions of the concept in terms of its nature, forms and consequences. Caste and untouchability based exclusion and discrimination are essentially “structural in nature”, comprehensive and multiple in coverage, and involve denial of equal opportunities especially to excluded groups like the former “untouchables”. In case of *Adivasis*, it is not systemic or structural in nature and therefore, the process of exclusion is different in nature; although its outcomes are similar to that of former “untouchables” in many respects, if not all.

The research will carry out in-depth analysis of situation of Dalits women to understand variations in the social, economic and political dynamics perpetuating marginalization these groups and also responses of state machineries at local level. The present research will help in understanding the dominant emerging issues based on collation of views of various stakeholders on various aspects of atrocities against *Dalits* and studying the role and functions of various national level organisations such as NHRC, SC/ST Commission, NCW, etc, with regard to atrocities against disadvantaged sections of the Indian society.

CONCLUSION

In summary, inclusion of *dalit* women into mainstream of the society is highly necessary for the democratic development of nation. *Dalit* women subjects to undergone multiple forms of socio-economic and cultural discrimination. In the same way the discrimination leads to violence against *dalit* women. They lives inhuman conditions, badly treated by their own family members and highly oppressed by male members from their community as well as dominant caste men. Infact, verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence and rape are frequent forms of violence perpetuated against *dalit* women in India. Moreover, the living conditions of *dalit* families are miserable; basic civic services like drinking water, sanitation, housing and sanitation facilities are not reaching in their life. Anti discriminatory practices has to ensure in

every policies adopted by the government of India. It is more important that ensure the dignity, equality and development of *dalit* women as a social group is mandatory for a justice orient society.

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