

Positioning Dalit Women in Indian Society

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Abstract:

Even on the verge to complete seventy five years of independence of India, Dalit women along with tribal women have been living in the culture of silence throughout the centuries and have become voiceless spectators to their oppression, exploitation and discrimination and are easily overwhelmed among all Indian women. They are the victims of caste oppression, class exploitation and gender discrimination. The root cause of their oppression are to be found in the ancient varnashrama dharma, patriarchy, feudalism and modern day market driven policies of globalization compounded their subjugation and marginalization, adversely affecting their socio-eco-political trajectory. Their social position is worse, political representation is least, economical status is at the bottom, literacy and employment ratio is considerably low and health status is really poor. A majority of them lives under the most precarious condition. They are still living in the age of savagery bearing all the burden of social structure. They are Dalit among Dalit.

Key words: Women, caste system, Dalit, oppression, exploitation, violence.

Indian Social structure is based on the varna system observing caste hierarchy. It has anti-climax structure from *Brahmin, Shkatriya, Vaishya* to *Shudra*. It has constituted caste system in which Brahmin possesses top position; whereas Dalit is at the bottom. It inculcates various ideologies that favors the privilege section and limits and discards the deprived section. In patriarchal structure of society, women are treated as the 'other' and among them, Dalit women possess the lowest position reinforcing inequality within the community. They are hegemonized through caste, class and gender hierarchies, they are victims of caste oppression, class exploitation and gender discrimination. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has compared the caste system dictated by *varnashram* to pots kept one on top of the other with Dalit women as the one below Dalit men, at the very bottom, tolerating the whole burden.

Population of Dalits in India is no less than population of neighboring countries. It is 200 million that is 16.6% out of total population. It is a large section and plays pivotal roles in social, political, economical, literacy and employment facets. Their contribution is really considerable; however it is unfortunate that their social and political representation, land and property ownership, literacy rate, employment ratio, and earning are disproportionately lower. It

consequences unequal status in society, politics, employment, education, health, sanitation, civil amenities and human rights compared to the other section. They populate more in rural area than urban area, the locality and the peripheral conditional constitute their livelihood. It profoundly affects their each and every sphere of life.

Social Condition:

Dalit women have almost negligible significance in society that functions to errand the certain section and cast off the Dalit section, especially Dalit women. It is orthodox and caste-ridden and has compelled a large section of its people to live sub-human lives like animals. They are victims of social injustice and are oppressed, ill-treated and subjected since time immemorial, the other section enjoys much higher status in the social hierarchy. Gail Omvett has asserted Dalit women are 'Dalit among Dalit'. Their locality is generally situated at the outskirts of the villages or cities; it is at distance where the upper castes people live. It is usually made of mud-walled cottages huddled together in the rows known as 'chamarahi', 'raidas tola', 'bhim tola', 'mahar wada' etc. There live the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass cutters and the other outcastes. It is sailed by dirth and filth of the public latrines, situated about it, the odor of the hides and skin of the carcasses left to dry, the dung of donkeys, sheep, cows and buffalos heaped up to

be made into fuel cakes, and the biting choking pungent, fumes that ooze from the sides. It is generally located in the opposite direction of air since the other communities object to air getting polluted if it originates from the direction of Dalit locality. Near about 20% Dalit population does not have access to safe water. The Government does not provide an attention to proper and enough supply of water and it remains only on the official statistics. The struggle against Coca Cola's efforts to take over the water resource in Sivaganga district in Tamil Nadu saw a major participation of Dalit women. The privatization of water by International and other national companies is a major threat. Near about 60% Dalit households have no electricity and more than 80% have no sanitation facilities. In the absence of both they become really vulnerable to sexual assault and violence, apart from spending more time and energy in getting thing done. Similarly lack of burial ground or denial of clear access to it or illegal occupation of it by upper caste is increasingly felt in many parts. They do not get enough food to fulfill their hunger. The government schemes like 'Food Security' and BPL and APL corn provision etc. either do not reach to them or are rejected to access them. It is surmised that 30% people sleep without food every day in India; the statistics reaches to peak when the Dalits are considered numerically.

Along with lack of provision of basic amenities, society observes untouchability since long ago. The suffering, misery and wretchedness of the untouchability is dark reality of their life. They are treated as the 'other'. They are not supposed to touch the upper castes people or their accessories, and if it happens even by mistake, they have to pay largely. Every trumped charges are imposed upon the Dalits and the women are targeted to their vulnerability. The oppression, injustice and humiliation are part and parcel of their life.

Political Representation:

Politics is a medium to enter into main stream and to present own community and its voice. Dalit women have nothing to be mentioned about in India political scenario. Their representation is least. They are not permitted to enter in politics; they are just bound to domesticity or the minor works to restrict them to the lower status. There are

some MPs, MLAs and Ministers but among them, the women are countable on fingers. Ramnath Kovind, Jitenram Manzi and Randas Aathawale are some names in politics from the community, however it is difficult to recall any woman name immediately except Mayavati. Constitution of India creates them space in politics; otherwise they are denied and excluded. They are utilized by the upper castes politicians for the sake of their political agendas. They are commodities in caste power politics.

Economical Status:

Locality of Dalit women is found in both rural and urban areas and they work in unorganized and organized sectors. Their earnings differ area and sector wise, it is less without doubt regardless of any facet. It inculcates to determine their life style. 85% of Dalit women in rural area work in agriculture as labors. Rural economy is principally based on agriculture. Their wages are meager and less than their men counterparts. They are landless or whatever join pattas are given to them by the Government, they have been appropriated and purchased by the upper castes people. Even non-transferable lands like Panchami land in Tamil Nadu are appropriated by the land grabbers. The Government scheme 'PM hami rojgar yojna' does not benefit the women because it is not appropriately implemented. In some areas, agricultural land is used for non-agricultural purpose that hampers their working activity and source of earning. Other women work in non-agricultural sector, their condition is the same. Lack of infrastructure and other facilities ceases other sectors' development; it consequences in less wages. It forces the women to migrate. On the other hand, in urban area, the women occupy the unorganized, self employed sector as hawkers, petty traders, crafts makers, scrap collectors etc. They do wage works like domestic work, earth work, brick kiln work, beedi manufacture, leather work, candle making etc. These sectors pay lower and irregular wages and are characterized by absence of social security, sexual harassment and dependency on the middlemen, contractors and employers. For instance, in Gondia and Bhandara districts in Maharashtra, beedi workers get only Rs. 15 per 1000 beedies, it is less than the Government's wage. Girl child labors are also found in Dalit

community. They have to work in the same places and sectors where their parent works to support their families.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Employment reports reiterate that the number of scavengers in India of whom the vast majority is women. 'The Employment of Manual Scavengers and construction of Dry latrines (prohibition) Act 1993' considers manual scavenging 'to be an affront to human dignity and a major social evil'. Those who perform 'unclean' work are 'untouchable' among the Dalit community.

Even in organized sector, the reservation policies cannot function to avail them opportunities of employment because of various reasons. The women from the community are not educated. The ratio is poor, it hinders in the path of employment. Number of women in Special services like IFS, IPS, IES etc. ranges 1 to 6. Their rural and lower caste/class background and lack of skills required in organized sector may not seek a place to them there.

The caste system relates social relation of individual has had a devastating effect on production relation and consequently on the wage structure. In a patriarchal system, its adverse effects on gender labor relations can be enormous. Caste, therefore, has a determining role even in the way one understands labor in general and Dalit women's labor in particular. Dalit women labor is labeled as unskilled and therefore unrecognized, underpaid and even unpaid. Since today even the general wage level is getting depressed, their desperation is ever increasing. According to Menon, their subjugation is more acute- being Dalit they are treated with great contempt by upper caste men and women alike, and their own men folk. Despite that they have hugely contributed to the development of India by their seer hard work and labour. But, their contributions have never been recognized. Their voices and protests are almost invisible. In fact, when we talk of marginalization of women in the development process, or feminization of poverty or woman's contribution to the unorganized sector in India, we are referring to them without even being conscious about their specificity (Menon:1981).

Educational status:

Education statistics of Dalit women is

really poor. Reformist intervention by Savitribai and Mahatma Phule of opening school for untouchable girls way back in 1848 was a turning point for changing status of Dalit women. (Raja: 2003). Dr. Ambedkar's thought and action made important differences in the lives of Dalit women. His movement and especially his organizations encouraged many Dalit women to become educated to be active in public life and to gain leadership, self respect in the contemporary period encouraged women to participate in organization for Dalit women at regional, state and national level. (Rao: 1997). According to 2011 census, the literacy rate of Dalit is 66% against the national literacy rate 73%. As many as 66.4 million SC men (75.1%) and 47.2 million women (56.4%) are literate. It is certainly lower than non-Dalit women. Even Dalit men have higher literacy rate than their counterparts. It is more derogatory to see it is considerably less in rural area where 4/5 th of Dalit women live in this area; it is little higher in urban area but it is notability less in the women community. Thinking at state level, Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh women literacy rate is below 50%. The majority of Dalit women inhabits in Up; its rate is also below 50%. The dropout rate is alarming for Dalit girls at all primary middle and secondary stages of schooling. Over 60% Dalit girls drop out in secondary school and its percentage is higher in higher stage that affects negatively. Now-a-days, the privatization of education directly hampers the community. It is obvious that Dalit women are much behind the main stream education qualification and also lingers within the community.

Health:

The status of health of Dalit community is worst. The rates of maternity mortality, child mortality and child malnutrition are higher in comparison of other communities. The female infanticide and feticide are also seen. The communicable diseases have devastating impacts. The privatization of the health sector and the Government's withdrawal from the provision of basic amenities are making the situation worse.

Crimes, Administration and Laws:

The Dalits belong to the lowest stratum of society. They have to undergo violence,

humiliation, subordination and ostracism. The practice of untouchability continues in various intolerable forms. In Khairlanji (Maharashtra) the upper caste people raped and murdered the lower caste women and boycotted alive member. In Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), a Dalit woman was bitten and roped to tree charging she does black magic. Land owners frequently exploit them physically, psychologically and economically. When upper communities want to teach a lesson to Dalits, they make a target to Dalit women. Incidences of punishment to Dalits being Dalit done by the caste and elected village panchayats are on the increase. The police and administration do not want to oppose the village hierarchies and remain 'invisible' during such crimes. Dalit community panchayat also delivers judgments with a patriarchal bias against women. They are soft target for all kind of vulnerabilities. According to National Crime Bureau Record in 2000, every hour two Dalits were assaulted; every day three Dalit women were raped, two Dalit were murdered and two Dalit homes were torched. In the period 1995-1997, 90925 cases have been registered with the police under crimes against Dalits. Out of this, 1,617 were murders, 12,591 were hurt, 2,824 were raped. Specific crimes under PCR and SC/ST (POA) Act were 35,478. Just three states, UP, Rajasthan and Mp contribute for 70% of such crimes. Statistics for 1999, indicate that these 3 states accounted for 65.4% of the total number of atrocities against the Scheduled Castes. (India: 2000) According to the National Crime Statistics in 2009, there were 21,397 reported cases of rape, 89,456 cases of torture, 38,711 cases of molestation, 25,741 cases of kidnapping and abduction, 11,009 cases of sexual harassment, 8383 cases of Dowry death and 2474 cases of trafficking under Immoral Traffic Act. Thus, there were 2,03,804 registered cases of violence against Women in the year 2009 alone (India: 2009). It should be noted that in India about 90% crimes against Dalit women are not reported to the police for the fear of social ostracism and threat to personal safety and security. It is easy for the historically dominating caste and gender to violate human rights of Dalit women who are at the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. The type of violence inflicted on Dalits is in the form of severest violation of human rights. Dalit

and tribal women are raped as part of an effort by upper caste leaders, land lords and police to suppress movements to demand payment of minimum wages, to settle share cropping disputes or to reclaim lost lands. (Human Watch Report: 1998.) According to SC/ST commission report, between 1981 and 1986 about 4000 Dalit women became victim of rape. In 1993-94 this figure rose to 798 and 992 respectively. This means annually about 700 Dalit women fall prey to sexual assault by high caste people. (Pal, 1989).

The state has a special responsibility for the safety and security of Dalits under the constitution Articles 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 19. Laws like Prevention of Atrocities, 1989 and Protection of Civil Rights, 1955 have been enacted to help the Government to protect and ensure security of Dalits; however administration is reluctant to utilize the laws to do its duty efficiently. Most often it either refrains or misinvestigates the occurrences that go against Dalits. Crime ratio against Dalits is quite high that dehumanize, subordinate and castrate them in society.

Conclusion:

Even after 73 years of independence, Dalit women along with tribal women are most oppressed and subjugated of all Indian women. They have to undergo caste oppression, class exploitation and gender discrimination and possess degraded socio-economic-political status. They are victimized by upper caste community, administration and Dalit community. The root causes of their oppression and subjugation are found in the ancient *varnashrama dharma*, patriarchal structure of society and modern day market driven policies of globalization. Marginalization, dehumanization and violence are the darkest realities of their lives despite of the laws. It is essential to uplift Dalit women from such debased condition. For this, the Government should provide the basic amenities, land, loan, minimum and equal wage, market to sell the commodities and protection from all kind of violence and dehumanization.

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