

DALIT WOMEN: POVERTY, GENDER AND CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Lower caste women are singularly positioned at the bottom of caste class and gender hierarchies. Largely uneducated and consistently paid less than their male counterpart's worldwide they invariably bear the brunt of exploitation, discrimination and physical attacks. Sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women are often used by landlords and the police to inflict political "lessons" and crush dissent within the community. Lower caste women also suffer disproportionately in terms of access to health care, education and subsistence wages as compared to women of higher castes. Dalit women in India and Nepal make up the majority of landless laborers and scavengers, as well as a significant percentage of the women forced into prostitution in rural areas or sold into urban brothels. As such they come into greater contact with landlords and enforcement agencies than their upper caste counterparts. Their subordinated position is exploited by those in power who carry out their attacks with impunity. Incidents of gang-rape, stripping and parading women naked through the streets and making them eat excrement are all crimes specific to Dalit women in India. Sexual violence is also linked to debt bondage in India, Pakistan and Nepal. The present paper would like to explore Dalit Women and their Poverty, Gender and Caste-Based Discrimination with reference to India.

Key words:

Dalit Women, Poverty, Gender and Caste-Based Discrimination

Objective:

To know the Dalit Women and their Poverty, Gender and Caste-Based Discrimination in India.

Research Methodology:

The present paper is based on secondary data, literature and discussion with experts.

Introduction:

The caste discrimination inherited by the birth results in Dalit women facing multiple oppressions and violates their economic, political, social and cultural rights. The women face not just caste violence inflicted on them by the dominant castes, but also state violence.

Dalit women in India are targeted for violence and discrimination not just because of their gender, but also on the basis of their caste, community religious affiliation and other factors. The rape is a major means for isolating her and her husband within the community because of the stigma attached to this crime in India. Other common forms of violence perpetrated against Indian women include; female feticide (selective abortion based on the fetus' gender), domestic violence, dowry death, mental and physical torture, sexual trafficking and public humiliation.

Discussion:

The 1992-93 annual report from the ministry of welfare shows 1236 reported cases of rape on Dalit women and the national commission for SC/ST shows that approximately 10,000 cases of human right violations on Dalit are reported every month. but what is even more disturbing, is that only one out of ten of the cases are reported annually whilst, nine go unreported in addition to this according to the human right watch report approximately 115 million children are in slavery and 2.6 million children are held as bonded laborers. After fifty-five years of India's independence and despite the excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women, they are still suffering unimaginable atrocities from the high caste Hindus. It is believed that thousands of these cases go unreported and unpublicized because the poor Dalits that live in rural areas, who are the worst victims, have no control on power, wealth justice, police and the media. The only way these Dalit women can escape the viscous cycle of poverty, abuse and oppression is through education. Through education more Dalit women can come to know their basic human rights and they can then raise an even stronger voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes. Dalit women face the triple burden of caste, class and gender. Dalit girls have been forced to become prostitute for other forms of violence against women are used by landlords and the police to inflict political lessons and crush dissent within the community. Less than 1% of the perpetrators of crimes against Dalit women are ever convicted.

Dalit Women and Social Security:

Most of Dalit women work whether paid or unpaid. Despite its obvious economic and social worth

much of the work that women do remain invisible in national accounting and censuses and even while defining the informal sectors and assessing its contribution to the GDP. Estimates based on the national sample survey NSS 1999-2000. Women are said to account for one third about 118 million unorganized workers in India. These figures would be much larger if the unpaid worked done by most women is recognized and included. Nearly 95 % of all female workers in India are engaged as unorganized workers.

Gender based wage disparities exit across all sectors and occupation. While unorganized male workers are paid wages far below the minimum wage standard, women workers are paid even less. Social security provisions must ensure that workers are paid living wages which enable them to have an adequate standard of living. floor level wage must be fixed based on the living needs for all workers, and once this floor level wage is set occupation or sector wise minimum wages must be fixed and all women workers should have equal remuneration.

Caste Discrimination against Dalits:

Dalits are particularly vulnerable to arrest under draconian security laws. Additionally, under a theory of collective punishment the police often target entire Dalit communities in search of one individual and subject the community to violent search and seizure operations. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence by the police which is used as a tool to punish Dalit communities. Police also actively allow private actors to commit violence against Dalits with impunity and at times, collude with private actor in committing such atrocities. Police systematically fail to properly register these crimes under the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes (prevention act 1989, and the protection of civil rights act 1995.)

Violation of fundamental rights:

Dalits fundamental civil, political economic social and cultural rights are routinely violated by state actors and private individuals.

The right to equal treatment before the tribunals and all other organs administering justice:

Dalit women in particular lack sufficient redress for the crimes committed against them due to the caste and gender biases of India’s law enforcement machinery.

In India Caste-based poverty by a focus on the position of Dalit women was recognized. Of 200 million Dalits, nearly 50% are women, often referred to a ‘thrice Dalit’, as they suffer from the triple oppressions of poverty, being female and being female Dalits. They are frequently let down

by both the Dalit movement itself as well as the women’s movement in India that focuses more on social problems like dowry deaths—more relevant for caste women and not those outside the caste system. Many Dalit women are denied access to education, to meaningful employment, health provision and are the first to suffer the negative effects of globalization. Access to upper caste wells is forbidden. Worst of all, Dalit women are exposed to many forms of violence and are frequently raped as a way to humiliate Dalit men. The degrading work of ‘scavenging’—removing human excrement-falls mostly on Dalit women, since men are more likely to be ‘upwardly-mobile’. Despite all of this, a new strength now emerges in challenging caste boundaries, contributing to self-esteem and a stronger sense of identity. The strong spirituality of Dalit women has sustained strength through songs and stories, and in some cases by subverting patriarchy through ironically re-shaping traditional myths.

Global justice: theory practice rhetoric:

problems related to Dalit women with limited access to permanent sources of livelihood; their high dependence on wage labor with limited social security; their caste-and untouchability-based discrimination in multiple spheres; their subjection to caste-related violence and atrocities, particularly the institutionalized sexual exploitation through the devadasi system (temple prostitution). The issue of ‘freedom of the individual’ versus the ‘rights of the community’ affects Dalit women differently, because their bodies are often used as a means for the upper castes to assert their dominant position over the lowest castes in the hierarchy.

Dalit women: Poverty, Gender, and Caste-Based Discrimination

poverty and various forms of caste- and untouchability-based discrimination experienced by Dalit women in accessing economic, social, and civil rights and entitlements. The main challenges that the Dalit women face are outlined below:

- Economic deprivation
- Educational deprivation
- Poor health
- Caste- and untouchability-based discrimination in accessing sources of livelihood, public services, and political participation
- Caste-based atrocities and violence
- Temple prostitution
- Gender discrimination

The reality of Dalit women and girls is one of exclusion and marginalization. They are often victims of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights violations, including sexual abuse

and violence. They are often displaced; pushed into forced and/or bonded labor, prostitution and trafficking.” Dalit women are often trapped in highly patriarchal societies. The severe discrimination they face from being both a Dalit and a woman, make them a key target of violence and systematically deny them choices and freedoms in all spheres of life. This endemic intersection of gender-and-caste discrimination is the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Dalit women suffer from severe limitations in access to justice and there is widespread impunity in cases where the perpetrator is a member of a dominant caste, above the Dalits in the caste system. Dalit women are therefore considered easy targets for sexual violence and other crimes, because the perpetrators almost always get away with it.

Denied justice, access to education, health and other services:

Sanctioned impunity on behalf of the offenders is a key problem. Police often neglect or deny the Dalit women of their right to seek legal and judicial aid. In many cases, the judiciary fails to enforce the laws that protect Dalit women from discrimination. Caste and gender discrimination in the delivery of education health care, water, sanitation and other basic services are also major obstacles for Dalit women severely impacting on their welfare and opportunities. This discrimination has been documented repeatedly by UN agencies and major international human rights and development NGOS.

Born into modern slavery and prostitution:

Dalit women often work in modern slavery and are key targets for trafficking. They are often used as debt slaves in brick kilns, garment industries and agriculture. 98% of those forced into the dehumanizing work of manual scavenging, removing human waste by hand, are also Dalit women. Dalit women may also be born into temple prostitution as ‘Devadasis’ (sex slaves) in India or be branded prostitutes in Nepal due to their caste status.

Suggestion:

Literacy can be empowering, however, it must be done at a pace and level determined by women themselves. And most importantly it must address issues important to Dalit women and be accompanied by other social and economic reforms

such as the following sanitation, health, childcare, credit and loans, land reforms, water and fuel supply and conservation, and reservation and scholarships for Dalit women.

Conclusion:

Due to triple oppression of class, caste and gender, Dalit females have the least access to education and other opportunities for social and economic mobility. Their liberation does not lie purely in economic or political terms, but social and cultural liberation must also be taken into account. Education of Dalit girls and women is necessary for their full participation in all aspects of society. Despite multiple obstacles and oppression, many Dalit females are struggling daily to gain access to education opportunities. Their resistance and determination to obtain access to information is but one aspect of their agency and power. Despite the existence of constitutional administrative and legal provisions to protect women from all communities and specific provisions for women in the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes act women of disadvantaged groups are vulnerable to gender specific abuses such as rape, stripping and being paraded naked. AI found no implementation of the provisions set up to protect these very women against such abuses and to enable them to take advantage of the criminal justice system.

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