

A pilot study about the Status of Dalit Women Working in Urban Educational Settings

Bharti Tandon, Monika Rathore **

**Assistant Professors, MIER College of Education, State : Jammu and Kashmir,
Country : India

Abstract

India is home to as many as 100 million Dalit women; a calculation based on provisional figures on Dalits from the national census 2011. Dalit women are placed at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy as they face systemic and structural discrimination threefold: as Dalits, as poor, and as women. Dalits often work as agricultural laborers, Safai Karmchari, sweepers and disposers of human waste (Ministry of Labor). In this study, the authors highlighted emergent findings from interview-based pilot research about the impact of socio-economic variables such as gender inequality, economic deprivation, occupational inequality, and/or high illiteracy rate on the life of Dalit women working in an urban private educational institution. Suggestions were provided for to improve the economic as well as social status of dalit women based on the findings of the study. The authors also suggested more empirical studies are needed in the area.

KEYWORDS: Economic Status, Dalit Women, Poverty, Social Stratification, Illiteracy, Gender Discrimination and Occupational Inequality.

Two thirds of the population of India is backward, being illiterate and living in utter poverty; their status is ascribed to them by birth in certain caste or tribal group (Roa, 2011). Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), a Marathi social reformer belonging to the backward caste, was the first to use the term Dalit to describe all Scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, workers, landless labourers, poor peasants, women and others who have been exploited politically, economically and on the basis of religion not all of whom are drawn from the Scheduled Castes. The word Dalit denotes all sorts of oppressions, i.e., social, economic, religious, political and cultural. Dalit have been historically associated with occupations regarded as ritually impure such as any work involving cleaning streets, latrines or sewers. As a result, Dalits were commonly segregated, and banned from full participation in Hindu social life Hence, the Dalit means all oppressed people of society. Dalits in general are considered the bottom of the casten group in the Indian caste system and Dalit women are lowest most within the group. Dalit women in India are the oppressed victim for centuries of Social, Political, Economic, Cultural and Religious exploitation. The constitution of India clearly recognized that it is necessary to take special steps to help the socially, economically and educationally backward classes. With passing of time almost all communities of India have felt the impact of change and development of market and technology .These changes represent the sharing of ethos and environment and a way of life. In spite of optimism in development policies the Dalit women bear the stigma of their caste and they are the poorest of the poor in Indian society. For Dalit women development implies limited access to conveniences and

benefits which is their basic right. However there is manifestation of the new desire in these sections for education and social mobility, which is new desire to give up their traditional way of their life and the poverty and illiteracy associated with it. One of the changes in contemporary Indian society has been the emergence of a new sense of identity among the Dalits. This began with the indigenous reform movements starting from Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Brahmo samaj, Arya Samaj rebelled against caste rigidities and social evils. The centenary year of B.R Ambedkar has seen plethora of publications, thus adding to the growing literature on Dalit policies and the Dalit movements. The study of the Dalits has attracted some leading sociologists over the past two decades in India and abroad. A notable scholar M.S. Arao has taken a cue from Merton and Runciman and has argued upon the emergence of reforms, protest and movement among Dalits. In order to protect the interests of dalits a number of constitutional provisions exist. Based on the Article 38 and article 39(a), (b), (c) of the constitution the Government of India has set up the planning commission to look after the task of achieving all round development with emphasis on social justice. Emphasis has been on the welfare programs for improving the economic and educational status of the Dalits under the Five year plan. In order to cover maximum population of the Dalits under various schemes the state Government's have selected villages with large Dalit population.

Various development programs have been implemented in these villages such as drinking water, kisan pension, sanitation, Link roads etc. In spite of several policies and studies conducted on the Dalits the status of Dalit women is still debatable. Their voices are almost invisible in fact when we talk about women in the development process we refer to them without being conscious about their specificity (Chandra & Mitra, 2003). There is a scant literature on the life of Dalit Women (Verma, 1999). The present study highlighted the emergent findings from interview-based pilot research about the impact of socio-economic variables on the life of Dalit women working in an urban private educational institution.

Method and sampling: Given that the purpose of the pilot study was to determine the socio-economic status of working Dalit women in urban societies, purposeful sampling method was used to identify a single private educational institution. This pilot study helped to evaluate feasibility, time, cost, and effect size (statistical variability) in an attempt to predict an appropriate sample size and improve upon the study design prior to performance of a full-scale research project. This study provided an opportunity to explore the connection between economic, social, education, and family setting on the job and the living conditions of dalit women in natural setting within a bounded context. A two-tiered strategy was used in order to identify the working dalit women group in this study. The first tier of the process was an initial identification of a group through a referral by the members of the institution who were familiar with the employment of these women. Since it is not mandatory in the private sector to declare on the job application that you are a "dalit," identification of high placed dalit women in the institution was difficult. The second tier of the selection process was to have an informal discussion with the group to get their willingness to participate in the study. Out of 10 women, six dalit women working as "safai karmcharis" agreed to participate in the study.

Description of the participants: The group selected for this pilot study consisted of six women in the age range of 30-50 years. All of them were married; however, two were widows. They have 2-4 children and most of them were living in a nuclear family setting. Five of six women in the study either had primary or middle school education. Except one, all five women lived close to the workplace. Four of six had more than 20 years of work experience in the same institution and preferred to continue working there. The salary of the group ranged from Rs 3000-4500.

Description of the research site: The research site selected for the study was located in the urban settings in North India. The institute was founded in 1936 as the oldest private educational enterprise in the state. It was an autonomous non-governmental organization (NGO) devoted to the promotion of education, (general, technical and professional), research, training, social welfare and new technologies in India according to the best emerging trends in theory and practice. This institution had two campuses; the inner city campus has a 10+2 Experimental School attached to the College of Education in addition to the Department of Education running a Masters in Education program. The other campus was located in the suburb of the city and was a full functioning engineering college. There were more than 5000 students, about 200 teachers and nearly 100 non-teaching staff.

Data analysis: The data collected for this study was through group interviews. These interviews were of approximately 20-25 minutes long each. The interviews were conducted at a location convenient to the participant. Semi-structured interview schedule was followed to collect the data. Semi-structured interviews helped the authors in collecting in-depth information while providing an opportunity to ask more questions or provide probes.

The questions of the interview were based on the following parameters: educational background, income of the family, family size, knowledge about different governmental schemes, nature of job, and problems faced in the family and at work place as a dalit woman. Electronic copies of the audio files were created. Followed by word-to-word transcription of the audio files and a running narrative was generated. The authors went over the interviews a number of times to identify the themes. The themes were finalized and the data was coded accordingly.

Results: The results of the study are discussed under the following five themes:

Social conditions and settings: Mangala Kulkarni in her article "Problems of Dalit women" argues that Dalit women have to face more social exploitation than non-dalits and this comes from the larger society as well as the Dalit community itself. She said, "For example, when a Dalit woman delivers a baby boy, even if the Dalit family does not have money, they borrow it to celebrate their happiness. On the other hand, if a girl-child is born, the Dalit woman has to face tremendous mental harassment within family." Gender discrimination begins at birth. All six women in the group for study shared the similar discrimination experiences in the family such as they were not given equal opportunity for education or they were given the leftovers for meals in the family. However, it was interesting to note that they didn't want their daughters to face such discrimination in the family and stood as a strong support for them. One of the reasons

for this attitudinal change could be the awareness they had while working in the educational institution, which was very lucid in their interaction. All of them had their own houses to live but either a part of it or the entire house was a “Kachha House.” On further inquiring in the interview, four of six women had a plan for the construction of “Pacca House” in near future.

Education: According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 2000, approximately 75% of the Dalit girls drop out of primary school despite the strict laws of the Government of India, which hold reservations for Dalit children (National Commission n.pag). Despite showing keen academic aptitude, reasons for this early drop out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society, and even their teachers. The majority of the stories we read and hear are of bright young Dalit girls who are punished by the upper caste teachers in rural area of India, for daring to score good grades. Feeling rejected most girls in this situation drop out of school and have nowhere to turn but towards manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs. The results of the study highlight that four of six women themselves didn’t get encouraging educational opportunities due to poverty and gender inequality in their families. However, they strongly believed and were providing higher education to their daughters, so that they could opt for better jobs. All of them understood the importance of education in social mobility and for sound economic position in society. One of them said, “I don’t want my daughters to work like me as safai wali, so I am motivating them to continue their education after high school.”

Awareness about different policies and schemes: The Indian Constitution banned the practice of untouchability under Article 17 and the Schedule Caste/ Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act), 1989 was introduced to combat persecution and discrimination against Dalits and Adivasi (tribal) people. The awareness about different policies and beneficial schemes still couldn’t reach this target group. The results of this study supported the literature, the women in the study had no knowledge of different schemes and policies launched by the government.

Economic status: Income of an individual or a society is usually considered an indicator of his or its economic class. The term “economic status” is based on economic resources. Most of the Dalits as a group are underemployed and women are no exception. Wages are arbitrary and pitifully low. They are denied of basic amenities and are forced to live in “inhuman conditions.”

Results of the study indicate that all six women were in low economic group as the total income of the family was approximately from four to seven thousand. Five of six women in the group had another earning hand in the family. To meet the needs of the family these women decided to work rather than to take help from their relatives or take money on interest from the money lenders on “high interest rate.” It was interesting to note that they felt “empowered” because of the job; however, their decisions were not considered in fiscal matters of the family.

Working conditions: Research highlight that Dalit women are generally free to work in the spheres that are kept off from the upper caste. A large percentage of Dalit women work in unorganized sector due to low level of education, limitation of labor markets,

lack of adequate skill training, etc. Moreover, there is no benefit for these women at the work place and these women constitute a major “Manual Work Force.” The group participated in this study worked as “Safai Karamchhari” and manually did cleaning of the classes in the school. All the six women didn’t complain of any discrimination based on either their caste or low economic status in the society. It was pointed out by them in the interview that most of the faculty and the administrative staff were sympathetic to their problems, if any and were ready to help them as much as possible.

Conclusion: This was a pilot study of six dalit women working in the educational setting-MIERas “Safai Karamcharis.” Based on the data collected through group interviews, the following conclusions on the life of Dalit women could be inferred: (1) Dalit family system living in urban societies still practice patriarchal family structure. (2) Dalit women’s place in the family is secondary even if she earns and she does not take any independent decisions. (3) She has economic independence but spends all the money for her family needs and survival (4) Since most of them don’t possess any technical skill or degree, they are left to opt for menial work (5) Economic standard is low. (6) Houses, usually were in the low economic pockets of the city and had mud constructions or “Kachha Houses”. (7) She understood the importance of education in social mobility and economic upliftment and they gave credit to this awareness to their working environment. On the basis of above points it could be summarized that the life of Dalit women is still governed by societal rules and taboos as prescribed by non-dalit high castes. Consequently, the Dalit women are subjected to discrimination. For those who are employed, the life of dalit women is on the path of change. They are more conscious and are trying to establish their own identity in society.

Suggestions: According to an article in The Indian Subcontinent Times; -Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Dalit leader Kumari Mayawati has found a place among the Forbes? 100 Most Powerful Women in the World giving jitters to Indian National Congress President Sonia Gandhi. According to the Forbes list released on 28th Aug.2008, Mayawati is ranked 59th just behind Queen Elizabeth of UK. However, the results of the study was consistent with the literature that still dalit women are considered the lowest section of the society and are deprived of the basic amenities and rights. The government has launched various policies and scheme to benefit this group, but due to lack of awareness and education even in the urban settings desired results have not been accomplished. Law and policies exist, but there is no implementation. Awareness camps at the workplace should be organized so that dalit women are aware of the schemes appropriate for them. It is suggested that evening education classes should be organized either by the NGOs or by the employers. The government should also ensure that these women and their children can access education without being discriminated and for that effective monitoring systems should be put in place.

There is scant empirical literature highlighting the problems and issues of dalit women in different societies such as rural, urban and metropolitan and different working environments.

Therefore, it is suggested more research is needed in this area.

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