

Dalits among the Dalits : Interrogating the Status of Dalit Women in India and their Quest for Justice against Atrocities

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Abstract

Victims of the repressive hierarchical structure, they are subjected to the heaviest burden of discrimination. I would try to highlight the status of these marginalised sections on the basis of various parameters that are generally referred by social scientists to gauge the condition of a particular class. The literacy rate amongst the Dalit women has improved from 41.9% in 2001 to 56.5%. But it is still behind the general women whose literacy rate is 64.6%. The condition of the Dalit women is indeed deplorable. Poverty forces them to work at any cost. Even for the Dalits it is the men of the house who gets the priority of job. Discrimination and Suppression are the two common words used in case of the Dalit women. Health is another issue of their backwardness. A weak frail body hardly permits them to face this ruthless world. The word 'violence', 'torture' and 'discrimination' seems to be affianced with the Dalit women. Violence against Dalit women only reinforces caste norms. Hence, much remains to be done to ensure gender justice and equality. They are indeed the "Dalit among the Dalits".

Introduction

"A youth was arrested by the police today for allegedly raping a married Dalit housewife after threatening her with dire consequences." (2013, July 22).

"A Dalit teenage girl, a victim of alleged sexual harassment, committed suicide following humiliation and threats to her family. The 16-year-old girl of Kokkaneri village near Pazhavor is said to be the second victim in the family." (Reporter,2013)

Amartya Sen was perhaps right when he said, "I would say caste is anti-national because it divides the nation. We want to be national, not anti-national, for which it is important to eliminate all divisions." (2016, June 17). However ironically caste still to this day seems to cast its spell on Indian society and the above incidents only certify the statement. Sixty-eight years after independence, ritual pollution, caste exploitation and all the other legacies of Indian civilisation are alive and seem to dictate the affairs of the day. For Economists like Amartya Sen it is anti-national but for many it is the basis of our long praised heritage! Even our *Bapu* was reluctant to annihilate the system. He tried to raise the moral sentiments of its participants to reform it for the good of all, an effort which hardly materialised in practice. Babasaheb interpreted it as a pyramid of earthen pots that crush the Dalits at the bottom and when you are "Dalits among the Dalits" then the discrimination becomes three-fold, in terms of caste, class and gender, (2000, p 122) they are Dalits, they are poor and above all they are women. It is undeniable that in spite of all the judicial and legislative measures the Dalit women experience endemic gender-and-caste discrimination and violence owing to a severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations

A stifling patriarchal shadow looms large over the lives of women throughout India and when she has to bear it the pain is unaccountable. Victims of the repressive hierarchical structure, they are subjected to the heaviest burden of discrimination. Offi-

cially referred as “Scheduled Castes” they are the “Untouchables” of the society. The name may have been banned but ubiquitous dissenting attitudes of mind still continue to dominate, as do the extreme levels of abuse and servitude experienced by Dalit women. Discrimination and exploitation are a daily affair, much of which is barbaric, degrading, appallingly violent and totally inhumane. In this paper, I would try to highlight the status of these marginalised sections on the basis of various parameters that are generally referred by social scientists to gauge the condition of a particular class. The impact of this triple marginalization on Dalit women can clearly be seen in their current national status in terms of; education, occupation, health, political power, extent of victimisation through violence and access to forms of justice

Educational Status

It is a well-known fact that education is indispensable for the development of any caste, race or community. The colonial government, the missionaries, the Dalit intellectuals have all tried in their own to propagate education among the underprivileged. Of course their purpose and objectives might be different, their efforts too were often inconsistent and marked by several contradictions. Some were sympathetic towards them while other were ready to offer limited education to guarantee their subordination while other felt its absolute necessity.

In the early pre- British days there were constant efforts among the upper castes to keep the depressed classes at bay. A popular saying went in those days:

*“namajati chin tumi bidyashikhya nai.,
Bidyahen bole mora tader charai
School jadi pai tara bidyan hoibe,
Amader man babu kabhu na rahibe.”* (Halder., p.139)

Indeed, the above lines clearly depict the fact that it was their illiteracy that ensured their exploitation by the privileged.

The Brahmanic policy made education a monopoly of the higher castes. The British pretended to civilise these outcasts for their general good but however they could not completely ignore their vested interests in ensuring differences between the privileged and the subaltern sections of the society. Nevertheless, the Act of 1813 shifted the responsibilities of education to the British and the Dalits had better access to education than before. However, discriminations prevailed at schools too. Ambedkar’s experience further attests to this fact. Although mass education was government policy the underprivileged were often excluded from it. While the upper castes represented by the Brahmans featured to be around 20 percent in primary, 30.70 percent in middle and 40.29 percent in High schools in Bombay, low caste Hindus figures were only 0.87 percent, 0.14 percent and 0 percent respectively. (Ambedkar, 1938) Ambedkar himself sat separately from the other higher caste boys of the schools. Five decades later Kumud Pawde too felt the brunt of discrimination in the school. (Viswanath, 2017)

State of Dalit education in independent India too was not very encouraging when compared to the upper castes. Though the rate of change of literacy level was more among the Dalits compared to the non - SCs yet the gap was high due the increased initial level among the latter. Female literacy among the SCs in 2001 was 41.9 which increased to 56.5 in 2011 as against general female literacy rate of 53.67 in 2001 and 65.46 in 2011. Even the male-female gap was 24.70 for the SCs and STs while it is 20.50 for the non SCs/STs. (Census, 2011)

Table1:
Literacy Rates of SCs by Sex and Urban-Rural Distribution

Scheduled Castes									
Year	Rural			Urban			Combined		
	Fe-male	Male	Total	Fe-male	Male	Total	Fe-male	Male	Total
1961	2.52	15.06	8.89	10.04	32.21	21.81	3.29	16.96	10.27
1971	5.06	20.04	12.77	16.09	38.93	28.65	6.44	22.36	14.67
1981	8.45	27.91	18.48	24.34	47.54	36.60	10.93	31.12	21.38
1991	19.45	45.95	33.25	42.29	66.90	55.11	23.76	49.91	37.41
2001	37.84	63.66	51.16	57.49	77.93	68.12	41.90	54.69	34.76
2011	52.60	72.60	62.80	68.60	83.30	76.20	56.50	75.20	66.10

Source: Census of India, Office of Registrar General, India.

For 1951, the population male, female and persons refers to effective literacy rates and the break up of Rural, Urban and male - female components are crude literacy rates.

Notes: 1. Literacy rates for 1951, 1961 and 1971 relate to population aged 5 years and above whereas literacy rates for 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011 relate to the population aged 7 years and above.

2. The 1981 literacy rates exclude Assam where the 1981 Census could not be conducted.

3. The 1991 literacy rates exclude Jammu & Kashmir where the 1991 Census could not be conducted due to disturbed conditions.

4. The 2001 and 2011 literacy rates exclude Mao Maram, Paomata and Purul Sub-divisions of Senapat district of Manipur.

Infact it has been observed that the gap between the SCs and non SCs /STs has been consistent in urban areas as compared to rural areas. The male female gap among the Dalits too exceeded that of the non SCs/STs. The literacy rate amongst the Dalit women has improved from 41.9% in 2001 to 56.5%. But its still behind the general women whose literacy rate is 64.6%. The five states where the literacy rate amongst Dalit women is shown in Table 2.

GROSS ENROLMENT RATIO (GER) BY LEVELS OF EDUCATION FOR ALL CATEGORIES AND SCHEDULED CASTES (SCs) IN INDIA -2013-14

Level	All categories girls	All Categories	SC girls	SCs
Primary (I-V(6-10 years))	100.6	99.3	112.2	115.5
Upper Primary VI-VIII (11-13 Years)	90.3	87.4	96.5	94.8
Elementary I-VIII (6-13 Years)	96.9	95.0	109.4	102.8
Secondary (IX-X) (14-15 Years)	73.7	73.6	76.2	76.1
I-X	92.4	90.8	103.0	97.6
Senior Secondary (XI-XII) (16-17 Years)	49.1	49.1	49.7	48.8
I-XII	85.9	84.6	93.3	92.2
Higher Education (18-23 Years)	19.8	21.1	14.2	15.1

Source: Educational Statistics at a Glance-2014 For School Education : U-DISE-2013-14(Provisional)

For Higher Education : AISHE-2012-13(Provisional) Report

The above table shows a peculiar trend where enrolment of SCs in the lower levels exceeds the general category enrolments, trend being reverse in case of higher education. This only implies that the Dalits are satisfied with some literary knowledge and a job to meet the feed of the family. Higher education does not seem to be their cup of tea but still with time, the gap is not abysmal. The effort should start at the very grassroots levels and reach every corner of the society. Mere statistics and literacy rate is not sufficient to gauge them. It is time for some serious vocational education so that unskilled labourers (most Dalit women belong to this section) may be skilled enough to earn a proper wage for themselves, thus ensuring at least some horizontal mobility if not the vertical one.

Life in the Public Sphere

In 2001, about 57 percent of SC and 37 percent of ST women respectively were agricultural wage labour in rural areas, as compared to 29 percent for non-SC/STs. In urban areas, 16 percent SC and 14 percent ST women were daily wage labourers as compared with only 6 percent from non-SC/STs. Only 21 per cent of SC women were cultivators compared with 51 per cent for STs and 45 per cent for non-SC/STs. (2017, September 11)

In 2000, SC and ST women casual labourers received daily wages of Rs 37 and Rs 34 respectively, compared with Rs 56 for non-SC/ST women; the national average was Rs 42. Besides this, a large number of SC women are engaged in so-called 'unclean' occupations, like scavenging. Owing to their association with these occupations, Dalit women face discrimination in the social and economic spheres. (2017, July, 17) According to the report submitted to the ministry of Minority Affairs in 2014, 44.8% STs

and 33.8% SCs in the rural areas were living in abject poverty. While the number was 27.3 and 21.8 in the urban areas.(2015, March)

The condition of the Dalit women is indeed deplorable. Poverty forces them to work at any cost. Lack of unity ensures that they work at minimum wages. Kaminibai, an agricultural labourer in Maharashtra only gives us an idea—One and a half rupees for sixteen hours of work lower even than their male counterparts. Two and a half for light work, three for heavier work. (Omvedt, 1979). The story hardly differs for the rest of the country. They hardly worry about the discrimination meted out to them as Kaminibai casually says we have our separate pots to drink. If they protest, the ones protesting would remain without any food (which is mostly “Bhakri, Jawari bhakri, sometimes lal bhakri—coarse bread made from millet, sometimes from milo), while others would go ahead. The leaders fail to highlight their dismal condition and are satisfied with a saree for their wives and dhoti for themselves, living the mass in rags. (Omvedt, 1979).

Gail Omvedt was right when she said that all researches primarily highlight middle and upper caste women. A mere statistic of women in work does not clearly bring out the scenario of these downtrodden of the downtrodden. Their mental world is seldom point of discussion for social scientists.

Moving into the urban areas— an overwhelmingly male world, mining is marked by male chauvinism; It is their responsibility to earn bread for the family, while the women earn ‘the butter’ claiming equal wage where it is evident that their frail bodies cannot put in the kind of hard labour demanded in the coal mines. The labour leaders seem to ignore the causes behind the declining numbers of women in the collieries. The active participation of women in leading or key roles in trade unions has also not always been welcomed by male trade unionists. (Akerkar, 1995) ‘ Even for the Dalits it is the men of the house who gets the priority of job which is most prevalent in the coal belt, thus reflecting the conventional wisdom that since economic issues such as mass labour retrenchment, mine closures and losses due to lack of productivity are intense, the position of women workers can only be of secondary significance. They face discrimination at every juncture whether public or private. But the question that comes forth is whether they really do have anything as private or public.

Those who have been fortunate enough to have a shed, can hardly distinguish between *andar* and *bahar*. Hence, the question of *anandarmahal* however perceived, either as the place for feminine privacy or one which reflects the woes of feminine confinement, does not arise. For them, the marketplace, the forests or the agricultural fields have been as much part of their existential reality as the home, and with equal ease they have moved to and fro from one to the other. The belief that they are more liberated than their upper caste counterparts is an absolute myth. It is economic obligations that force them to work in fields and mines along with the men. This does not ensure their liberty but only makes them susceptible to further discrimination. Dalit men can be doubly chauvinist and hit their women at the slightest provocation. (Prasad, 2006).

Discrimination and Suppression are the two common words used in case of the Dalit women. The Dalit girls face much humiliation and discrimination in the schools. They are vulnerable to eve teasing, harassment, violence perpetuated on them by the upper caste boys. Those working in the fields and unorganized sectors the conditions are even worse. They are mostly underpaid or even made to work without pay at all. The patriarchal values are very much ingrained within the Dalit world. Decision making is never left on these downtrodden women. The 73rd and 74th Amendment Acts of the Indian Constitution, passed in 1992 through its policy of reservation, emerged as a

new hope at the grass-roots level, by giving Dalit women, alongside other women, the power to voice their views, concerns and opinions in a political platform. Their elections are made but they act as only rubber stamps with all the power centered in the hands of their male colleagues. According to the Institute of Rural Management (IR-MA), Anand, Gujarat Report, despite various constitutional provisions and legislative measures, subjugation of Dalits in the social and economic spheres continues and in some instance has "even further intensified." (2008, 27 April) Instances of rape too were cited when the women tried to raise their voice against certain pilfering of funds.(2008, 27 April) Thus political participation by the Dalit Women remains disproportionately low. The Anganwadis are even avoided when run by a Dalit Woman — another case of social inclusion leading to discriminating exclusion.

Health—A greatest concern

Health is another issue of their backwardness. A weak frail body hardly permits them to face this ruthless world. The health condition of Dalit women is alarming with high incidence of maternal mortality and infant mortality. This is due to the fact that Dalit women are unable to access health care services. Medical field workers do not visit 65% of Dalit settlements. Due to denial and sub-standard healthcare services the life expectancy of Dalit women is as low as 50 years. The child sex ratio among Dalits declined from 938 girls per 1,000 boys in 2001 to 933 in 2011,(Census,2011) this only indicates the fact that Dalit girls are either being aborted or are dying through negligence. However, it is still better than the overall national average of 919 girls per 1,000 boys. Due to poverty, Dalit women are malnourished and anaemic. Prolapsed uterus is a common phenomenon among these poor women who failed to adopt contraception and when used, they are long-acting, hormonally dangerous ones. Forced sterilisation too is quite common among Dalit women. Early marriage is also very much prevalent among them. Working in the fields is a tedious job which they hardly can ignore. Seldom they get the opportunity to take proper care of their health conditions. Their bodies work, they suffer and bear the brunt of violence meted out to them in private and public sphere if only one can distinguish it in the lives of these poor women.

Violence, torture but justice delayed !

The word 'violence', 'torture' and 'discrimination' seems to be affianced with the Dalit women. Violence against Dalit women only reinforces caste norms. According to India's National Commission for Women, "In the commission of offences against... [Dalit] women the [dominant caste] offenders try to establish their authority and humiliate the community by subjecting their women to indecent and inhuman treatment." (1996, New Delhi, p. 33) Further, when transgression of caste norms occur leading to assertion of rights then they are subjected to further violence. Their socio economic vulnerability combined with being a women and Dalit is greatly responsible for the incidence of violence. Atrocities inflicted on them are multidimensional. Some are grievous (rape, murder etc.) while few are non-grievous(verbal abuse, intimidations). A recent three-year study of 500 Dalit women's experiences of violence across four Indian states revealed that the majority of Dalit women faced one or more incidents of verbal abuse (62.4%), physical assault (54.8%), sexual harassment and assault (46.8%), domestic violence (43.0%) and rape (23.2%). (Irudaya, Mangubhai, Lee, 2006) Verbal abuse, physical assault, kidnapping or abduction, forced incarceration have to be endured by these poor women. Apart from the above said incidence the Dalit women are not even safe within their homes. Domestic violence is very much common among the Dalits. A report of the Human Rights Watch (1998) points out that rape of a downtrodden woman is a common phenomenon in the rural

areas. They are raped as a part of the social custom. Girls are forced to sexual torture. Remnants of the Devadasi system still prevailing in various parts of the country only attest to such inhuman practices.

Discrimination prevails so does violence and subjugation but what exceeds all such torture is the fact that they go unreported, and justice is hardly secured, further these poor women do not even receive the medical assistance which they deserve. It is the family on which they rely and perhaps the men of their community for support. Few reach the doorsteps of the police station, and even fewer receive justice. It is often observed that even women police personals are insensitive towards these poor victims. They are ill-treated and made to wait for hours to register complain and even treated with consequences if they complain against the perpetrators. In a survey carried out in the three districts of Tamilnadu it was revealed that out of 150 cases of atrocities, the arrest was delayed in 56(35.9%) cases, and the accused were not arrested in 42(26.9%) cases. (2009) Legal provisions and Acts are enacted to protect them against such injustice. Article 14 ensures equality before Law and equal protection of law, Article 15 guarantees non-discrimination on the basis of sex, caste, race, religion or place of birth, Article 17 abolishes practice of untouchability, 1955, later amended in 1976 as Protection of Civil Rights Act, SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities Act) 1989, Article 21 ensures right to life and personal liberty—the list is quite formidable but the gulf between the paper and practice is hardly bridged.

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 has been a great step to protect women from their daily torments. The Act for the first time extends beyond the framework of mere 'punishment' to the offender of crime and tries to help and protect women from violence at home. The creation of an official cadre called Protection Officers (POs) and recognition of NGOs, as Service Providers (SPs), are two other salient features of the new law. Only 3 States including Bengal have appointed Protection Officers, five registered Service Providers and twelve notified medical facilities and shelters. Report on this issue reveals that in 2009 as many as 2500 PWDVA (The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act) cases were filed in Bengal.

Failure of the judicial and monitoring machinery has further added to the miseries of the Dalit women. The legal provisions and acts are present but that court fails to implement them. There are innumerable instances where non-bailable violence goes unattended thus the very principle is often violated. Organisations like National Commission for SCs and NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) failed to perform a significant role.

Hence, much remains to be done to ensure gender justice and equality. While lawmakers should create proper institutions/mechanisms to implement the law, one can hardly rely on state machinery alone for this. Laws based on stereotyped gender roles and patriarchal presumptions should be reviewed. The problem cannot be tackled without addressing the basic question of power inequality under patriarchy. The attitudinal change is of prime necessity. More laws like PWDVA should find a place in the judiciary. Protection should be ensured not only in the domestic front but as well as in the public sphere. We are often satisfied with some mere statistics that attest to women freedom and equality, but efforts should be made to project them in practice rather than be confined to pages of the researchers and diplomats. The society should rise from their hibernation and look beyond caste class dictum to be at their

side. Apart from their social stigma it is freedom from poverty that is absolutely necessary for these “Dalit among the Dalits”, as it is horizontal mobility that mostly precedes any vertical one.

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