

EXTREMITY OF DALIT WOMANHOOD IN SOCIAL WORK IN INDIA

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Abstract

The paper aims to discuss marginal women in India live and prevalence of the lowest kind combining wretched poverty with eroding labour in the work places and in home- abused and used and exploited. As long as untouchability exists, no civilized country can claim that human rights are safeguard in that country. In many of the writings it is truly depict the Dalits continue to face physical violence, including mass killings and rapes by vigilante groups owned and operated by high caste landowners, when they ask for fair wages and freedom from molestation. The Paper analyses the Brief history of caste to map out the potentials of dalit women miseries as the genre of the insurrectionary marginal. Interdisciplinary approach and comparative methodology is applied to explore the changing configurations of Dalit literature highlighting in the process its dynamic evolutionary character in terms of its growing accent on the 'separatist' political tone and tenor. Despite the many positive developments in securing women's human rights, patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of India denying the majority of women the choice to decide how they live. The introduction of patriarchal Hinduism and its caste system into India institutionalized the oppression of the outcaste dalits and this had a devastating lot effect on their women. It discovers the different patterns to enhance the status of dalit women and how the social work occupation helps the dalits. The paper is important pertinence of this subject is not only in language and literature, but also in history, sociology, psychology and geography. Dalit literature's appeal is not economic or political but socio-cultural and ethical. It is so powerful that in the brief period of its flowering, it inspired the Dalit Panther movement and way for social equality.

Keywords: Dalit, Ambedkar, insurrectionary, economic, socio-cultural, Panther, survival

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Introduction:

Caste System in India

Simply put, caste is a defining feature of the Indian society. Etymologically the English word 'caste' derives from the Spanish and Portuguese *casta*, with its roots in Latin *castus*. It meant 'race, lineage, or breed'.(Teltumbde,17).The Indian name for caste is *jati*. The origin of Untouchability is obscure and its development difficult to trace. Untouchability with its manifold manifestations is rooted in the notions of "purity" and "pollution", which is believed to have developed in the later *Vedic* period, when Brahmanic literature emerged in the form of *smritis*, *samhitas* and *Upanishads*. The Rigveda does not show any acquaintance with people with whom contact was even remotely tabooed. In the later Vedic period terms like *Chandala* and *Paulaksa* come into existence and they suggested such people as objects of spite and abhorrence existing at the lowest rungs of the ritual and social ladder. But they were not treated as "untouchables". (Anand,55).

Stratification of societies is a phenomenon known to all civilizations living as well as dead. This is a direct result as class struggle and class exploitation. The ancient Indian society was not only stratified but also fossilized into different varnas and jatis, which were determined by the accident of birth. The Shudras, who were the lowest on the social ladder, were further divided into indefinite number of mixed caste of varying states and finally into a indefinite number of mixed castes of varying status and finally into a group of despised Castes forming the lowest stratum of the Indian society. (Anand,4). The word 'Shudra' which signifies the lowest rung of the Caste stratification of the Indian society occurs in the Rigveda at one place in the Puruskasukta. The Varna system hierarchy in the

caste system was established in the vedic period along with the then existing dasa pratha but it was then in its foetal stage¹.The Shudras were divided into numerous sub-Castes. Now a days the term Dalit is used for untouchables. Dalit writers however extend the term Dalit meaning and use it as a signifier of exploitation and oppression in the name of caste-hierarchy. Arjun Dangle argues, “But with reference to the Dalit literary movement, we have not used the traditional meaning of the term ³but have added a new dimension and content to it. Dalit means exploited and oppressed economically, socially,

Culturally . . . Dalit writers hope that this exploited group of people will bring about a revolution in this country” (Dangle, 265). Quite evidently ‘Dalit’ is a dynamic term which if at one level reminds lower castes of their oppressive past and at another level exhorts them to work for social change. Being Dalit is no longer shameful; it is rather a sign of awareness. If ‘Harijan’ tried to underplay the segregated presence of *shudras* within Hinduism, ‘Dalit’ overstated it. If ‘Harijan’ suggested the politics of co-option, ‘Dalit’ stood for combativeness. Satyanarayan says: The untouchables who are the lowest caste, performed occupations like Scavenging, leather work, etc.(5). Dalit literature is an apparent area of literary and cultural investigation. It has provided a major frame of reference for their literary and intellectual activities. Dalit literary figures were mostly white-collar people, lecturers, artists, writers and clerks. They were from among the first and second generation of Dalits who had access to university education because of Ambedkar’s efforts in opening colleges for the Dalits.

Plight of Dalit Women: Current Trends

The over-riding importance of “community” in a patriarchal sense ensures that women rarely have an independent say in community issues. The way in which the concept of “honour” is used is also a severe barrier to the realization of women’s rights. Practices persist which led one member of the UN Human Rights Committee to observe in 1997 that “women are expendable in India.” Female feticide continues to be common. Impoverished families have little interest in educating girl-children and will often engage them in marriage as children as a means of ensuring that they are provided for economically from an early age.

As in many parts of India, levels of violent crime against women in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan are extremely high. According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures for 1998 issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. Uttar Pradesh ranked first and Rajasthan ranked fourth in the ratings of recorded crimes against women. These include rape, kidnapping, dowry death, mental and physical “torture”, molestation, sexual harassment and trafficking. (Jogdand, 61) There are seven major areas of discrimination against women belong to poor section in India. They are:

- (i) *Malnutrition:* India has exceptionally high rates of child malnutrition, because tradition in India requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives, even when pregnant and lactating Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle.
- (ii) *Poor Health:* Females receive less health care than males. Many women die in childbirth of easily prevented complications. Working conditions and environmental pollution further impairs women’s health.
- (iii) *Lack of Education:* Families are far less likely to educate girls than boys, and far more likely to pull them out of school, either to help out at home or from fear of violence.
- (iv) *Overwork:* Women work longer hours and their work is more arduous than men’s, yet their work is unrecognized. Men report that “women, like children, eat and do nothing.” Technological progress in agriculture has had a negative impact on women.
- (v) *Unskilled:* In women’s primary employment sector – agriculture – extension services overlook women.
- (vi) *Mistreatment:* In recent years, there has been an alarming rise in atrocities against women in India, in terms of rapes, assaults and dowry-related murders. Fear of violence suppresses the aspirations of all women. Female infanticide and sex-selective abortions are additional forms of violence that reflect the devaluing of females in Indian society.
- (vii) *Powerlessness:* While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions.

Women lack power to decide who they will marry, and are often married off as children. Legal loopholes are used to deny women inheritance rights.

- (viii) *The Women's Position in the Family*: In Indian society, the women's position here is also secondary. Though she may be wage earner she has to consult her husband, father, son or an elder from her family and friends.

For Dalit woman 'Development' implied that they have been herded into crowded and unhealthy areas in dalit sections of villages or in slums, with civic amenities next to nil and with limited access to conveniences and benefits which are the basic rights to them. Development has brought about displacement from the traditional productive activity and

their labour and sexuality have been exploited in the capital market parlance. Akati kamble, a dalit woman full time worker with the Tobacco Processing worker's union in Nipani, Maharashtra, says: the women supervisors in the factory would give us a lot of trouble. The Manager and the owner were even worse. If they saw any good looking women they would call her to sweep the owner's office and rape her. At that time we could not protest because if we said anything they would remove us from work. So no women would say anything. (Rajawat, 14). So all the women were in the same condition of poverty and the mahars. Casteism was so strong that these dalit women were not allowed to touch the keys or even the water utensils.

In the period of classical age, several new restrictions came to be imposed on Marriages- child marriages became the norm, widows were denied remarriages, women were denied property rights, and the dowry system came into being. Women and shudras were regarded as equally contemptible. Add to this the misery of millions of dalit women who live in an atmosphere of constant violence in their homes in the hands of drunken husbands and sometimes other members of the family and yet they often single handedly sweat at home and in the fields to keep their children from hunger.

The Backdrop

The control on women's sexuality was essential for the development of a patriarchal caste hierarchy for two reasons, one for the maintenance of caste and second for the legitimating and control of inheritance. Restrictions of time, place and space therefore came to be imposed on women to ensure the purity of caste by avoiding the danger of inter-caste 'pollution'. There is a definite scale of purity and pollution. Brahmins are generally considered the purest and the shudras the most polluted and the outcastes (dalits) are polluted to such an extent that they find no place in the four *varna* system. Brahmins are not born pure, they have to attain and maintain their purity through observance of strict ritual purity. This ritual purity is in the shape of a religious status, but it generally coincides with economic wealth and social esteem.

Control over women is one among the factors that caste must observe along with vegetarianism and teetotalism before it can lay a claim to be ritually pure. Specifically, this control involved two main aspects. One is women's disinheritance from immovable property in

the form of land, and seconds their exclusion from the productive economy, involving removal from public life and into the domestic sphere of the home in the form of seclusion or purdah. The second one is the far greater control exercised by men over women's sexuality through the customs of arranged marriage, child marriage, the prohibition of divorce, and strict monogamy for women, leading to *sati* and a ban on widow remarriage. These were strictly enforced by the higher castes, particularly the Brahmins but some of the lower castes have also adopted them.

Social Awakening

Social awakening is happening to the Dalits, and it mostly begins with Dalit women. The male-dominated and caste-dominated society is eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Dalit women. The feminist movements have convenient of chosen to ignore the struggles of Dalit women. If we study the Dalit movements we can find that conventionally men are on the top, and women are once again suppressed.

But the 'new Dalit women' do not want to suffer the exploitation lying down. They are coming up, and they are struggling for recognition. They are demanding that their problems should be dealt with separately. Karamchedu in Andhra Pradesh became the starting point for the revolt of the Dalits against the outrage, and the exploitation of the Dalit women. This made them reject the financial aid offered by the Government and laid the foundation for the Dalit Movement. After the attack on Dalits of Neerukonda on 15th July, 1987, the Dalit women of the place took up the fight with the police. When the leaders of the Dalit Movement at Kollipara were arrested, and taken to Tenali Police Station, the Dalit women took out a huge procession and got their leaders released! There are many such incidents in Andhra Pradesh.

An effective anti-attack movement was started by Dalit women in Andhra. The Dalit women of Bihar got organized decided to protect themselves. For generations these women were subjected to exploitation and suppression by the caste people. Now they are making it clear that they are not going to bear this more. These women were trained by one young Dalit man, who had been oppressed by caste people. They got trained to use pistols and bombs. Recently the caste people came to spoil the Dalits. The Dalit women and their children used pistols, bombs and stones and chased these caste people out.

In another village 40 trained Dalit women chased away 300 villagers. In Maharashtra also hundreds of Dalit women are organising themselves showing the social awakening of Dalit women. If all the Indian Dalit women organise united movement, with their husbands and children supporting them, the fight for their liberation will attain its goal soon. (Rajawat,33)

Compared to the extreme exploitation and subordination suffered by most female Dalit labourers, should we be worrying about a few Dalit women who become middle class? Possibly not, especially when they themselves consider it a better life. The Dalit housewife no longer suffers the exhaustion and vulnerability of agricultural labour and she has more time to care for her children, husband and household. But there is a cost to a more comfortable life, especially in terms of autonomy.

This is reflected at the aggregate level by data sets that suggest that Dalit women are now both poor and lacking in autonomy (Deshpande, 136-130). Deshpande argues that the earlier 'trade-off between material well-being and autonomy and mobility' (108) has now vanished. In Deshpande's view, Dalit women are now worse off across the board in that they now have neither wealth nor freedom. Using National Family Health Survey (NFHS) and National Sample Survey (NSS) data, she shows how SC women seem to have lost the comparative advantage in terms of freedom of movement, access to money, decisions about healthcare, cooking and purchasing. They also suffer more domestic violence than upper-caste women (or are at least more open in admitting it). This leads Deshpande to conclude that while Dalit women still remain just as materially disadvantaged compared to upper-caste women, they do not enjoy greater equality to compensate for it (139).

Conclusion

Men and women are changing the very meaning of what it is to be Dalit. They hope that to be Dalit is no longer to be constituted by subordination (Mosse 1994: 74, 1999: 68); it is to be different but yet identifiably honourable, prestigious and respectable. The extent to which Dalit women pay the price for this new identity is the real question.

The greatest hindrance to the uplift and progress of the dalit is the prejudice prevailing in the minds of the caste Hindus. It can be overcome only by understanding of customs, values and style of life of the dalits. It could only be got rid by close interaction between the caste Hindus and the dalits in different walks of life. It is quite evident that the status of women in any society undergoes changes with respect to certain significant social characteristics which may be broadly classified into education, occupation or employment position, income and wealth conditions, role of social policies, and social customs. The` significance of these factors in contributing to the status dynamics of women in general and dalit women in particular is very high in the present set up in the state. New official policies covering regulations providing opportunities to the weaker sections, have added much to the incentives for the dalit women in responding themselves to the spirit of change in principle and actual practice in society.

Dalit women join their voices with all the other women of this land crossing barriers of caste, language, religion or economic strata to speak clearly of what women want for their people, their society, their environment. Dalit women join their voices with all other women of and crossing barriers of caste, language, religion or economic strata to speak clearly of what women want for their people, their society, their environment.

“Defying police degradation

Tossing aside tradition

We have come!

Dalit, battered woman, worker, farmer

We have come!

To end dowry, rape and abused authority

To stop wife beating and cruelty

We have come!

To wipe out women’s suppression (Rajawat, 17-18)

They try through their political movement to provide a feminist alternative aimed at reclaiming life and recovering its sanctity for the liberation of all women and men and for the liberation of society.

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