



## **TRANSGRESSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS OF DALIT WOMEN: ISSUES, FACTORS AND CONCERNS**

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### ***Abstract***

*All human beings have the right to live as human beings. Human rights are not conferred or given. They already exist in society. In spite of these international and national declaration and resolutions, human rights are violated in different countries all over the world. Human right of dalits and women in general are normally violated by high castes and powerful communities to practice and exhibit patriarchy and Castetism. But human rights of Dalit women are violated extremely and in peculiar form. Dalit women are in worst position than dalits in general. There is a growing need to capture transgression of human rights of dalit women, so that talent and potential of Dalit women can be used for development of nation.*

### **INTRODUCTION:-**

The concept of human rights aims at protection of rights like right to life, liberty and property. These rights are attributed to human beings irrespective of class, caste, gender, colour and religion. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1948. The preamble of Indian constitution adequately empowers the central and state government to eliminate human rights violation in the country. In Indian society, due to the social barriers such as castetism, untouchability, patriarchy, disparity, superstition, religious

exploitation and class variations, specific, groups are becoming weaker and marginalised. These groups are facing the problems of identity crisis, deprivation, discrimination and atrocities. These marginalised groups are also identified and recognised as dalits, SC (scheduled castes), ST (scheduled Tribes), OBC (other backward castes), NT( Nomadic tribes), DT (Denotified Tribes), religious and linguistic minorities.

Dalit women are in worst position than dalits in general, In terms of sex ratio, wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation. Hence, it is important to discuss the status of dalit women and various problems they face even after 67 years of independence.

This article makes an attempt to discuss basic facts, issues and concerns related to dalit women to suggest some alternatives to combat violation of their rights for social justice and equality. Explanation of relevant terms such as ‘Dalit ; ‘Dalitism; and ‘Dalit women is given below to broaden understanding about the issue. Further, the vulnerable situation of dalit women is also discussed in detail:-

## **DALIT**

Dalit (oppressed’ or ‘broken’) is not a new word. Apparently it was used in the 1930’s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of ‘depressed classes’. The British used this term for what are now called the scheduled caste. Dr. Ambedkar chose the term ‘broken men’, as English translation of ‘Dalit’, to refer to the original ancestors of the untouchables. Dalit Panthers, the Youth activists from dalit community revived the term and in their 1973 manifesto expanded its reference to include the scheduled tribes, neo Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants , women and also those who are being exploited politically, economically in the name of religion.

## **DALITISM**

Dalitism essentially implies conditions of subjugation; economic, political, social and cultural. Dalitism also embodies different degrees of marginalisation. It includes not only marginalized status in the economics sphere but also in cultural, political, religious and social domains. That means Dalitism symbolizes marginalisation. It is a well known fact that marginalisation denies basic human rights and social justice.

## **DALIT WOMEN**

Dalit women are one of the most marginalised segments in the society. The condition of dalit women is more vulnerable than non-dalit women. Dalit women are suffering from multi-disadvantages:-

- (i) Of being dalit i.e socio-economically and culturally marginalized section &
- (ii) Being women and sharing the gender based inequalities and subordination.

To explore these and other crucial issues concerning dalit women there is need to discuss some basic facts concerning the vulnerable situation of dalit women. Vulnerable status of Dalit Women, 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.

This shows that dalit women are easy targets for any perpetrator Upper caste considers them to be sexually available. Hence they are largely unprotected by the state machinery. Further, there is prevalence of violence, making dalit women eat human excreta, parading them naked, gang-rape, murder, dacoity, robbery and burning of their huts or communities. These are the types of crime, which violate their human rights (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. The main complaints of the poorer dalit women are that they have no good houses. In urban areas most of them stay in unhygienic slums and in rural areas their houses are away from main stream society. Under conditions of grinding poverty and severe exploitation at work place, dalit women also suffer caste specific ban on water access from upper castes and may be beaten up in their own houses as well. A poem by a dalit poetess. Teressama, a teacher from Guntur puts the situation in the following words :

We go to work for we are poor But the same silken beds mock us, while we are ravished in broad daylight. III-stared our horoscopes are Even revenge If we cannot stand their touch.

At the outset, prevailing for violation of human rights of dalit women. To understand the root cause of the situation it is essential to examine basic factors responsible for their vulnerability.



**(i) Educational Status**

Low level of education is a problem in itself and in turn gives rise to many other problems. In 1991, literacy among the dalit women was indeed quite low. In rural areas only 19.46 percentage women were literate. A report published by ministry of Welfare, Government of India in dalits in general and gender specific. Literacy rate of dalits and non-dalits in general, and gender specific. Literacy rate of non – dalits is 64.13 % and literacy rate of woman is 39.29 %, where as dalit women's literacy rate is only 23.76 %. There is a large disparity in the literacy rate due to wide spread prejudice based on castetims and patriarchy againts dalits and women in general and dalit women in particular.

**(ii) Health and nutrition status**

Dalit women's daily diet is the leftover of family meals, inadequate in quantity and quality. Health services are either not available in case of illness or unaffordable even if available. In addition to that due to early marriage and too many pregnancies their health is always at risk. If birth control is practiced at all, 91 % cases of tubetomy are performed on the women who have to carry the burden of family planning. In an overall situation where dalits are prone to ailments in general, women suffer from more serious and more varied kind of sickness. More than 80 % of women in reproductive age group (15 to 45) are anemic. Poor health status of dalit women pushes her then into more vulnerable situation

**(iii) Political Status**

Women constitute half of total population, but are unable to get equal share in active politics. Their socio-economic status directly depends on their participation in politics. Political parties in India speak much about equality of women but have totally ignored the dalit women. Dalit women's sitting on chairs is seen as threat to social hierarchy. So, the upper castes in the village vetoed chairs in the panchayat office (P.Sainath in Rao, 2003). Dalit women also faced many problems in performing their duties due to illiteracy, lack of information and dependency on the male members of their families. An important obstacle is the no-confidence motion against dalit women as pradhan by the dominant sections. Rural elites are unable to accept the power, which has been given into the hands of the poorer and disadvantaged women. Despite recognition and legal sanction for political rights, rigid caste

system and patriarchy directly and indirectly has been suppressing dalit women and violating their political rights.

This proves that human rights of dalit women are violated right from her family to the society at large by one and all. All these factors are largely responsible for the precarious position of dalit women as far as their social, cultural, religious, economic, health and political status in the society is concerned. These factors force them to mutely allow violation of their civic and human rights. Thus they become victims of universal violence.

(iv) Socio-cultural and religious Factors :-

First and foremost dalit women are victims of social, religious and cultural practices like Devdasis and jogins. In the name of these practices, village girls are married to God by their helpless parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper caste landlords and rich men and directed in to trafficking and prostitution. In his autobiography, kale (1994) has described a ritual called 'chira'. The literal meaning of the word 'chira' is to cut or break. In this ritual when a girl from the lower caste community reaches the age of puberty, an elderly prestigious man from the higher caste breaks the hymen of the girl child by sexual act.

(v) **Economic deprivation and Unemployment**

A careful look at the economic situation of dalit women reveals that their work force structure is such that they rarely own any land. A large majority of them are agricultural labourers. The rate of unemployment among them is also quite high. About 90% of women working in unorganized sector are mainly from lower castes. In 1991, about 71% of dalit women workers in rural area were agricultural labourers. Only 19% of them owned land. A prominent researcher and sociologist while sharing her experience from a research on gender and land issue, informed that, when she enquired with dalit women about land owned by them in their names. They wondered about permissibility of owning land in their name. This indicates that neither do they own any land nor are they aware of their rights on land. It was learnt that NGOs usually do not keep record of caste. However, Human Rights Watch Report(1998) mentioned that a large number of dalit women are engaged in unclean, inferior occupation such as sweeping, scavenging and working in dumping grounds, rag picking and also in prostitution. These women have to face steep discrimination in the matters of social relation and employment due to their engagement in these occupations.

## **Efforts to protect Human Rights of Dalit Women**

With the realization that violence is one of the potent threats to the peaceful existence of human beings, whole hearted and all round efforts are made at international, national and local level. The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) serves as a foundation and philosophy of Human rights. There are a host of international conventions including those for prevention and punishment of genocide and elimination of all forms of racial and gender based discrimination. The World conference Against Racism (WCAR) related to racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, brought the issue of caste and untouchability based discrimination on the agenda of UN Conference in Durban. Among the several organizations, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) – a collective of dalit NGOs, other NGOs, academicians', activists and large number of supporters spearheaded the national campaign in India for inclusion of the issue of caste and untouchability based discrimination in the Durban Conference.

The preamble of Indian constitution adequately empowers the central and state government to eliminate human right violation in the country. Article 17 of the constitution provides for removal of untouchability. Based on this article protection of civil Rights Act' (PCR) was passed in 1995. However, there was no conviction under this Act hence. Thirtyfour years after the introduction of PCR Act, the Scheduled Caste and Schedule Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 was enacted to bring various forms of atrocities to an end. In this Act the complainant is given more weightage. There are stringent provisions against the police for negligence.

## **Emerging Identity of Dalit Women and formation of Dalit Women's organizations**

The focus on education of low caste women is one of the important factors responsible for the emerging identity of Dalit women. 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. Dr. Ambedkar's thought and action made important differences in the lives of dalit women. His movement and especially his organisations 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 organisation for dalit women at regional, state and national level.



After independence in 1960's and 70's the dalit movement and women's movement emerged to demand their rights against caste and gender respectively. However, specific problems of dalit women were not acknowledged by these movements. Hence in 1990's there were several special, Independent and autonomous assertions of dalit women's identity; a case in point is the formation of National Federation for Dalit Women (NFDW) and All India Dalit Women's Forum (AIDWF) at the state level. The Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana (MDMS) was formed in 1995. A year earlier, the women's wing of Bhartiya Republican Party (BRP) and the Bahujan Mahila Sangha (BMS) was set up the Bahujan Mahila Parishad. In December 1996, at Chandrapur, a Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad (VVDMP) was organised and a proposal to commemorate 25<sup>th</sup> December (the day on which Ambedkar had set Manu smriti on fire) as Bhartiya Smriti Divas was advanced. The Christi Mahila Sanghatana, an organisation of Dalit Christian Women was established in 1997.

These organisations have come together on several issues such as celebration of Bhartiya Stree Mukti Divas and on the issue of reservation for OBC women in parliament bodies. Indian Association of Women Studies (IAWS) network with dalit feminist across different regions had brought special issues on problems and identity of dalit women (Rege in Rao 2003) Several efforts have been made since independence to secure human rights of women in general and dalit women in particular. Despite this, human rights of dalit women are seen to be violated in different forms such infringement of human rights echoes the need of evolving suitable mechanism to empower dalit women to assert for equal rights and justice in order to live a dignified life.

### **Mechanism To Strengthen The capacity of Dalit Women**

To be human is to respond to human sufferings and pain with compassion and effective concern. It is not enough to feel with the dalit women in their pain. There is more need for effective action, otherwise it would be just sentimentalism says Sequeira in his article 'Human Response to Dalit women (Jogdand 1999). The needs and the problems of dalit women differ with city, village, area and caste. It is essential to keep in mind that dalit women are not mere individuals but belong to a sociological and dialectical system. Therefore to recognise the system and to prohibit violation, first and foremost proper perspectives about the issue has to be developed among all by considering following suggestions.

#### **(i) Awareness for Assertion**

Extensive reading of available literature can be done by young generation to understand the profile and problems of dalit women. Factual incidents & success stories of dalit women namely, 'we made History Too' by Meenakshi Moon & Urmila Pawar can be included in the educational texts.

#### **(ii) Access & Exposure Visits**

Special exposure visits to dalit localities can be organized for school and college students to access basic amenities accessible to dalit women namely-water, electricity, health and hygiene. Similarly dalit women's visit to urban structured colonies can be arranged to impress upon the importance of standard of living of non-dalits. Such purposeful visits will broaden their horizons resulting in improved living of marginalized section.

#### **(iii) Academic Activities :-**

Academic institutions need to be encouraged to undertake studies to assess the problems of violence and atrocities against dalit women as also the reasons therefore and to work out ways to overcome them. Thought provoking sessions on harmful social religions practices namely-Chira, Devdasi, jogin need to be held for basic understanding and effective interventional strategies.

#### **(iv) Campaigns and Sessions**

Campaigns for equal and rational distribution of natural resources among weaker sections can be organised to secure their rightful means of livelihood. Proper rehabilitation and shelter can be provided to those communities, which are out of the social periphery (NT/DT) to protect them from the risk of sexual abuse.

#### **(V) Inclusion of Dalit Women in various system**

More dalit women in their population proportion (16.5% SC, 7.5% ST) should be given chance to enter in the system like police, Judiciary, Education, health politics. Session can be organised for dalit activist and women activists to sensitize them about the magnitude of torture and oppression faced by the dalit women. Legal education dealing with protection



of human rights of dalit and prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) can be organised to prevent the problems of castism.

### **Conclusion**

At the threshold of 21<sup>st</sup> century it is absolutely necessary that common people need to be sensitized about the prevailing atrocities against Dalit Women. There is a growing need to capture violation of human rights of dalit women, so that talent and potential of Dalit Women can be used for development of nation. According to vippal a nation does not prosper only on fertile soil, dence forests and everflowing rivers. It is the healthy people who make a nation. A society is made up of both men and women from all states.

If women from whichever state is weak and exploited, it is not a healthy society, And when a society is healthy, then the nation will march ahead. To fulfill these dreams women in general and particularly from weaker section need to be empowered for development of the nation.

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