



INCLUSIVE EMPOWERMENT OF DALIT WOMEN: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and pain Dalit women face every day. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes. They suffer multiple forms of discrimination – as Dalits, as poor, and as women. They remain largely marginalized, poor and socially excluded. The main reason behind this is that most women aren't aware of women rights in India and other times their legal rights are not protected as they should be. There is a dire need for active participation of both the sex to move forward towards the ideal of woman. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional roles and change their life. Education also brings reduction in inequalities and function as a means of improving their status within family. Empowerment of women means enabling or arming them to function independently or authorization that is enduring to equip women with all attributes. Empowering women exclusively attempt for the removal of gender biases, cultural restrictions, provision of adequate facilities. This paper deals with the empowerment of Dalit women and focus on women awareness towards education which is the powerful instrument of changing their position in the society who are being included in the minority.

Keywords: Dalit, Legal Rights, Empowerment, Education.



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Introduction

“I strongly believe in the movements run by women. If they are truly taken in to confidence, they may change the present picture of society which is very miserable. In the past, they have played a significant role in improving the condition of weaker sections and classes.”

– Dr B.R. Ambedkar

India is fast emerging country as a global power but for half of its population, the women across the country, struggle to live life with dignity continues. Human development indicators consistently reflect women's low status in areas of health, education, political participation

and social status. Nussbaum (2000) is of the view that women across the world face special problems associated with their sex. 'Lack of essential support for leading lives that are fully human... are frequently caused by their being women... Thus, even when they live in a constitutional democracy, such as India, where they are equals in theory, they are second class citizens in reality' . Women in India consistently lag behind men in terms of access to education, health care, jobs etc. Apart from the economic and social inequality, women in India are victims of heinous crimes such as, dowry deaths, rape, molestation and immoral trafficking. Unless drastic measures are taken to improve female literacy, create skills and capability among women for enabling them to stand on their own feet and care for themselves and family, it will be difficult for India to prosper as a nation. Many NGOs are working at the grass root level to empower women to attain economic participation in order to overcome poverty and inequality. Women's empowerment begins with the awareness about their rights and responsibilities, encompasses their political, economic independence and social upliftment. Empowering women exclusively attempt for the removal of gender biases, cultural restrictions, and provision of adequate facilities.

Women Empowerment

Women's empowerment in India is heavily dependent on many different variables which enables or arm them to function independently or authorization that is enduring to equip women with all attributes. It deals with the totality of having decision-making power of our own. Policies on women's empowerment exist at the national, state and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic and political participation. Women's education is extremely important intrinsically as it is their right and required for the flourishing of many of their capacities. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional roles and change their life. Education also brings reduction in inequalities and function as a means of improving their status within family. It is however noticed that most programmes for education of girls and women in India have reinforced Gender Role. It Is a Key Intervention in Sustaining and Initiating Process of Empowerment.

Minority Groups in India

Even though the word "minority" forms part of popular political vocabulary in the country. Usually, it is used to denote those non-Hindu religious Communities whose members are one Muslims 120 million (13.4%), Adivasis (scheduled tribes) 84 million (8%) 2001 Census including Nagas 100,000 (0.1%); also Christians 25,080,000 (2.4%), Sikhs 14,800,000 (1.9%), reason or the other inclined to assert their distinctiveness in relation to the

Hindu community. Main minority groups include Dalits (scheduled castes) 166.6 million (16%) 2001 Census, Kashmiri's 9 million (est., 0.9%); others include Buddhists, Jews 6,000 (BBC News, 2008), Anglo-Indians, Andaman Islanders. On the whole, therefore, the word "minorities" seems in India to have been narrowly defined and denotes religious communities whose members project themselves as being different from the majority community. Minorities are not based on religious difference. They are based on social disadvantage and deprivation. 16 per cent of the total population of India consists of the scheduled castes which includes 'Dalits' also known as Harijans, or 'Untouchables'. Even within the broader Hindu tradition however, many groups have suffered discrimination and persecution. A prime example of the systematic discrimination to which a group may be subjected within Hinduism is evident from the case of the Dalits. The term Dalit, which means 'the oppressed', is an assertive term of self-identity, and as noted above, referred to what in strict legal and constitutional terms are known as the scheduled castes.

According to the 2001 Census, the Scheduled Caste population in India is 166,635,700 persons, constituting 16.2 per cent of the country's total population. Being rural people, four fifth (79.8 per cent) of them live in rural areas and rest one-fifth (20.2 per cent) live in urban areas. The sex ratio of 936 females per thousand males is slightly higher than national average of 933. (Karade, 2008). Dalits are daily victims of the worst crimes and discrimination. Although, Dalits today make up 16.2 per cent of the total Indian population, their control over resources of the country is less than 5 per cent. Close to half of the Dalit population lives under the official Indian Poverty Line and even more (62%) are illiterate. In the agriculture sector, most Dalits are landless or near landless agriculture labor. The total household income for Dalits in 1998 was just 68 per cent of the national average. Less than 10 per cent of Dalit households have access to safe drinking water, electricity and toilets. Socially discarded for a long period of time, they are compelled to live a vulnerable life, be it economic education health and all other areas that fall under basic needs.

Historical Background Of Dalit Women

The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world's total population. Dalit women are positioned at the bottom of India's caste, class and gender hierarchies. They 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. The caste system, estimated to affect 260 million people globally, declares Dalit women to be intrinsically impure and 'untouchable', which sanctions social exclusion and exploitation.

The vast majority of Dalit women are poor; they are landless wage labourers; and lack access to basic resources. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. As a result of this Dalit women are subjected to inhumane living conditions and human rights violations; discrimination and violence systematically deny them opportunities, choices and freedoms in all spheres of life. This undermines not only their dignity and self-respect, but also their rights to equality and development.

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the majority of the educated people are of the upper caste, many of which may practice caste-based discrimination. Therefore, Dalit girls feel discouraged to enter education and we see the lowest literacy rate for Dalit girls compared to the Total population of educated upper caste girls (National Commission n.pag). Lack of educational development is another important problem. In 2000, the literacy rate among SC and ST rural females (aged 15 and above) was 24 per cent and 23 per cent respectively, compared with 41 per cent for non-SC/ST women. The literacy rate among SC women in urban areas was 48 per cent, compared with 54 per cent and 70 per cent for ST and non-SC/ST women respectively. The dropout rate among SC and ST women is also relatively high at every stage of education. The high dependence on casual labour, with relatively low earnings coupled with inadequate exposure to education, among SC and ST women induced a high degree of deprivation and poverty among them. (Thorat, 2008).The main reasons for the very low literacy rate among Dalit women could be some or all of the following:

- The Lack of educational resources especially in rural areas.
- Privatization of schools and colleges.
- Extreme poverty, because of which they cannot afford the expensive fees for the private schools.
- The demand for an increase in the Dowry for educated girls.
- Humiliation and bullying by the high caste students and teachers.

Violence Against Dalit Women

Dalit women face the worst conditions and oppression. Dalit women are living a history of pain, agony, sorrow, misconduct, maltreatment and suffering. They are not only the victim of gender discrimination but also the victim of caste-ism. Moreover, the lives of Dalit women are spiralling downward from bad to worse. Their life stories tell of physical and verbal abuse, forced labour and slavery, trafficking, abduction, and sexual violence, including

rape, which give insight into how their social position make them vulnerable to these human rights violations.

Violence against Dalit women is most often used as a means of punishment and demonstration of power by the dominant castes towards both the woman herself and her community. Police personnel often neglect or deny the Dalit women of their right to seek legal and judicial aid. Women tell of police officers refusing to intervene or to even take their statements. In many cases, the judiciary fails to enforce the laws that protect Dalit women from discrimination. Apart from being forced into the most demeaning jobs, Dalit women are extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation and are often victims of trafficking and forced sexual labour. In India, some Dalit women are especially targeted for the harmful practices of the devdasi and jogini systems of forced prostitution. The marginalization of Dalit women can clearly be seen in their current low national status in terms of occupation, education, health, political power extent of victimisation through violence and excess to form of justice. Dalit women are in worst positions then Dalits in general in terms of sex ratio, wages, employment, Occupation, Assets, Education, Health, Social Mobility and Political Participation.

Educational Facilities For Dalit Women

Education to women is the most powerful instrument of changing their position in the society. Education also brings about reduction in inequalities and also acts as a means to improve their status within the family. In order to encourage education of women at all levels and to dilute gender bias in the provision and acquaintance of education, schools, colleges and even universities were established exclusively for women in the country. To bring more girl children, especially from marginalised BPL families, into the mainstream of education, Government has been providing a package of concessions in the form of free supply of books, uniform, boarding and lodging, clothing for hostilities, mid-day meals, scholarships, free by-cycles and so on. Financial aid for uniform for girls, maps, charts, examination grant, laboratory facilities, and library facilities should be provided for them special coaching should be given for meritorious Dalit girls to compete for IAS and IPS. Hostel facilities for Dalit girls at all levels of education starting from primary school up to higher education should be provided reservation policy especially for girls should be allotted in both admission and employment.

The UGC has given reservation for seats in colleges for SC students 25%, ST 7.5%, which is highly beneficial. Also relaxation in marks for 5% is given to all Dalit students in admission. Financial assistance in the form of fellowships is given to Dalits. Rs. 3,600/- is

given per JRF to continue research studies at the University level. There are special SC/ST cells at the University for effective implementation of the Government orders and to improve the condition of University level Dalit students. Supply of books to the Dalit students. Incentive scholarship should be given to deserving and meritorious girls to encourage them for higher education.

Constitutional Provisions For Dalit Women:

The important Constitutional safeguards for SCs & STs are mentioned below:

(a) Directive Principles of State Policy

Article 46 :-"The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections, of the people, and in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation".

(b) Social Safeguards

Article 17. "Untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "Untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

Article 23. Prohibits traffic in human beings and beggar and other similar forms of forced labour and provides that any contravention of this provision shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law. It does not specifically mention SCs & STs but since the majority of bonded labour belong to SCs/STs this Article has a special significance for SCs and STs. In pursuance of this article, Parliament has enacted the **Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976**. For effective implementation of this Act, the Ministry of Labour is running a Centrally Sponsored Scheme for identification, liberation and rehabilitation of bonded labour.

Article 24. provides that no child below the age of 14 years shall be employed to work in any factory or mine or engaged in any other hazardous employment. There are Central and State laws to prevent child labour. This article too is significant for SCs and STs as a substantial portion.

(c) Educational and Cultural Safeguards

Article 15(4) empowers the State to make any special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for SC and ST. This provision has enabled the State to reserve seats for SCs and STs in educational institutions including technical, engineering and medical colleges and in Scientific & Specialised Courses. In this as well as in **Article 16(4)** the term 'backward classes' is used as a generic term and comprises various categories of backward classes, viz., Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes,

Other Backward Classes, Denotified Communities (Vimukta Jatiyan) and Nomadic/Seminomadic communities.

Article 330 provides for reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the Lok Sabha.

Article 332 provides for reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the State Vidhan Sabhas (Legislative Assemblies).

Article 334 originally laid down that the provision relating to the reservation of seats for SCs/STs in the Lok Sabha and the State Vidhan Sabhas (and the representation of the Anglo-Indian community in the Lok Sabha and the State Vidhan Sabhas by nomination) would cease to have effect on the expiration of a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution. This article has since been amended four times, extending the said period by ten years on each occasion. This provision was to expire in January 2000.

(c)Service Safeguards

Article 16(4) empowers the State to make "any provision for the reservation in appointments or posts in favour of any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State".

Article 335. "The claims of the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes shall be taken into consideration, consistently with the maintenance of efficiency of administration, in the making of appointments to services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of a State".

Barriers Or Challenges

There are several challenges that are currently plaguing the issues of women's rights in India. A few of these challenges are presented below:

Education: Many Dalit women were ill treated and educationally backward inspite of the facilities for free education. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among Dalit women are resistance from the family to send girls to schools, fear of insecurity in villages, lack of physical facilities like accommodation, school, transport and medical facilities. The girls were forced to take care of the siblings when the parents are away at work. Working to earn for the family prevent the girls from attending school.

Female infanticide: It is more prevalent among the uneducated Dalit families. Educational development among SC women is very marginal because only girls were not sent to school because of the responsibilities at home. Therefore the gender discrimination starts at the very early stage in the life of a Dalit girl.

Poverty: Due to abject poverty, Dalit women are exploited as domestic helps and wives whose incomes are upsurged by the man of the house. Additionally, sex slaves are a direct outcome of poverty, as unearthed by Davinder Kumar; Andhra Pradesh accounts for nearly half of all sex trafficking cases in India, the majority involving adolescent girls. According to police estimates, a shocking 300,000 women and girls have been trafficked for exploitative sex work from Andhra Pradesh; of these just 3,000 have been rescued so far. The state is relatively prosperous, ranking fourth in terms of per capita GDP in India, but it is also home to some of the poorest people in the country. Other issues or challenges faced by Dalit women are:

- Untouchability/Caste discrimination
- Victim of inter-caste marriage
- Economic backwardness
- Ignorance
- Absolute poverty
- Severe condition of reproductive health
- High mortality and fertility rate
- Sexual exploitation
- Lack of employment opportunity
- Compulsion for prostitution
- Illiteracy
- Lowest life expectancy

Recommendations:

- Universalisation of primary education programs should give special emphasis to the education of Dalit girls.
- Affirmative action policy for Dalit in international agencies like the UN.
- Progressive educational policies in imparting vocational skills for the dropouts.
- Dalit girls should be given preference and special treatment under existing and future programs.
- The policies adopted by the government for the inclusion of Dalit women must be developed for Dalit women, and in consultation with them, to specifically address the issues and challenges that affect them.
- The Government should develop a National Action Plan to eliminate caste-based discrimination, which establishes specific provisions for the inclusion and promotion of Dalit women's rights.

Conclusion:

Dalit women who are in the lowest run of the Indian society are in need of empowerment and upliftment. The dehumanizing bondages of caste, class and gender have to be eliminated and their rights to live with human dignity have to be restored. In this struggle for justice and liberation, these women have to be conscientized through constant participatory efforts. The women are not properly informed about the Government schemes and there is an urgent need to get a feedback about the welfare schemes where lot of money is spent for the development of Dalits. The funds utilized properly for their upliftment. A new dawn of equality in the lives of Dalit women is the true dawn of freedom in India.

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