



DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

DAYA ARUNA

M.Phil, Research Scholar, Department of Hindi, MANUU, Hyderabad.

Intorduciton:

There are about 250 million Dalits in India but there is no proper survey to give the correct number of dalit women in India. They are generally scattered in villages and they are not a monogamous group. What is the position of Dalit women in India today in the field of education, higher education, gender equality?

The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among dalit women are many: 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 are forced to take care of the siblings when the parents are away at work to work to earn for the family and to do domestic chores which prevent them from attending school. Many girls are forced to get married at young age, which stop schooling because social restriction is that the girls should stop studying after marriage. Fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education can be attributed as one of the reason for low literacy level among SC girls. Even if the education improved the marriage prospects of the girls, the minus point is the increase in dowry. Therefore Educational development among SC women is very marginal because girls are not sent to school.

Gender equality:

The gender discrimination starts at the very early stage in the life of a dalit girl. Normally girl children are retained at home to look after the siblings. Another thing is the compulsory marriage of the girls at very early age after which the education is stopped. Generally in the male-dominated society, polygamy is allowed and more so in many dalit families. Because of this the position of the women deteriorated. Joint family system, polygamy, property structure, early marriage, and permanent widowhood were hurdles for the development of all women in early period.

Occupational inequality:

85% of the Dalit women have the most formidable occupations, while working in traditional sectors of economy. They often work as agricultural labourers, Safai Karmchari, sweepers and disposers of human waste (Ministry of Labour). That is why the contribution of SC women to the economic development of India is significant especially in the agricultural sector. But they are exploited by the higher caste landlords. They are paid very marginal salary for the hard work in the field for the whole day. In leather industries the tanning process is considered to be an unclean job which is done only by socially backward class. The condition of scavenger and sweepers is very deplorable and they remain the most vulnerable sectors among SC. The working condition is very poor and the remuneration is also very poor.



Family role:

Because of the girls remain uneducated, they got married very early. Marriage in the high reproductive stage with high fertility rate, children care more. Because of the unlimited family, the burden fell on the young girls which affected their health. They were not able to assist in family matters to their husbands. But now the situation is different. The girls manage to plan their family, educate the children, assist the husbands in family matters and office going and professional girls improve the economic conditions. On the whole the family becomes socially developed because of the education of the girls. Education among women increased intercaste marriages, which is definitely a sign of development. Government also encourages inter-caste marriages among dalits and high caste by incentives. Untouchability practices are acute in villages. However, there is a gradual change in rural areas because they have become aware of their rights.

There are several problems are faced by the Dalit women in India, there are

1. gender discrimination – patriarchy
2. social /caste discrimination - untouchability
3. Violence - domestic, at work place and in society
4. economic deprivation – poverty, unemployment, landlessness
5. Political powerlessness – non acceptance and participation in decision making

Dalit Women also have a limited access to livelihood, food, water, sanitation and other welfare programmes.

We see many examples of brave Dalit women who being quite aware of the horrifying truth and despite the heavy odds still strive to put an end to their suffering (Thind; Agarwal; News Archives). In doing so they most certainly ensure a brighter future for the generations to come. Ruth Manorama, an active member of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and the National Alliance of Women, once stated that in a male dominated society, “Dalit women face a triple burden of caste, class and gender” in which she sums up the plight of Dalit women, highlighting the fact that Dalit women are a distinct social group and cannot be masked under the general categories of “Women” or “Dalits” (News Archives).

In Ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.), the caste system was non-existent since even the most learned men were good householders and had varied occupations. The women of ancient India were just as superior as men in learning, education, and intellect. The choice for her mate was according to her own wishes and marriage was practiced after the coming of age. She attended parties, competitions, and religious functions as she wished. The remarriage of young widows was also a common practice (Thind). The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including the Manusmriti, Atharva Vedas, Vishnu smriti, and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmans (upper priestly hindu caste), led to a society in which equality between men and women was far from existent (Agarwal). Dr. B. R.



Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian constitution, also makes it very clear in his article titled “The rise and fall of Hindu woman” that the root cause of suffering for women in India are these so called Hindu religious books (Thind; Agarwal).

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 (Thind). There are large numbers of reported atrocities on Dalit women that can be found recorded in various newspaper articles, journals, and government reports in India many of which can be viewed on www.ambedkar.org. 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 situations drop out of school and have nowhere to turn but towards manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs (News Archives). 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). The Annual Report of University Grant Commission for 1999-2000, shows that Dalits in general have very low participation rates in higher education (Annual Reports of University n.pag).

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. (Thind)

Since only a small percentage of the total population of Dalit women are educated, the fate of the majority is very grim. According to India’s Ministry of Labour, 85% of the Dalit women have the most formidable occupations and work as agricultural laborers, scavengers, sweepers, and disposers of human waste. Many of these women work for minimal wages under the upper caste landlords, since it is proposed that by the National Commission for SC/ST that 85% of the Dalits are landless (News Archives). When the Dalit women refuse to work for ridiculously low wages or fail to follow their harsh orders it results open violence, humiliation, beatings, rape, and jail. There are also a number of cases where the houses of Dalit women have been burnt down (Agarwal; News Achives).



In one particular case, a four months pregnant agricultural labourer, from the southern part of India, was stripped naked and beaten, in front of the whole village and her family by the upper caste landlord. Later, she was retained in jail, where the police beat her. This resulted in the miscarriage of her baby (News Archives). In another case, a school student in Gujarat made a mistake of joining the dancing in the main square of her village, in which most of the participants were of the upper caste. The upper caste boys pulled her out and threatened to rape her. For interfering, her mother was slapped. In the hope for justice, she forced her parents to file a complaint to the police against her assailants. Her mother was constantly threatened by the upper caste families for complaining to the police. Feeling deeply humiliated by no justice and rumors of rape, the girl committed suicide (News Archives).

There are many cases like these, all of which cannot be discussed here. The worst exploitation of dalit women involves a lifetime of suffering, torture, and rape (Thind n.pag). Justified by the Vedic scriptures, the Devdasi system (also known as temple prostitution) was introduced by the High caste Hindus, and it still exists in some parts of India (Thind; Agarwal; Narula). According to the Human Right Watch Report in 1992, an estimated 50,000 girls were sold every year to Hindu organizations that are involved in the Devdasi system (n.pag). These girls are called the “female servants of god” and are sexually exploited (Thind n.pag). After a lifetime of living as a prostitute and servant, the women in their later years are sold to brothels, where they are further tortured and often die of neglect or AIDS (Thind; News Archives). The Devdasi system and Child marriage are also justified by Hindu Scriptures (Thind; Agarwar; News Archives).

The 1992-93 Annual report from the Ministry of Welfare shows 1,236 reported cases of rape on Dalit women and the National Commission for SC/ST shows that approximately 10,000 cases of human right violations on Dalits are reported every month. But what is even more disturbing, is that only one out of ten of the cases are reported annually whilst, nine go unreported. In addition to this, according to the Human Right watch Report, approximately 115 million children are in slavery and 2.6 million children are held as bonded labourers (Narula). After fifty-five years of India’s independence and despite the excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women, they are still suffering unimaginable atrocities from the high caste Hindus. It is believed that thousands of these cases go unreported and unpublicized because the poor Dalits that live in rural areas, who are the worst victims, have no control on power, wealth, justice, police and the media (Thind n.pag). The only way these Dalit women can escape the viscous cycle of poverty, abuse and oppression is through education. Through education more Dalit women can come to know their basic human rights and they can then raise an even stronger voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes (Thind; Agarwar).

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 situation of Dalit women in India is becoming worse day by day and it needs immediate attention of Government of India so that to form and implement such policies specifically dealing with problems of Dalit women. Since ancient times, the violence against Dalits especially Dalit women are carried and after many ages, the eco of pains and problems can be heard in modern times also. These ancient practices needs to be stopped or banned immediately which force Dalit women to indulge in prostitution or other immoral acts.

There are many policies being made for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe people but there is no such policy among at solving problems of Dalit women and therefore it has become necessary to enact such policies. According to convents and other international treaties, the government is at obligation to make such policies which will ensure the protection of women in the country and accordingly the rules are being made in Constitution of India, 1950 and other enactments. But perhaps it is the implementation procedures which are not as effectiveness as they should. In future, it has been expected that India may become superpower, therefore it is necessary to protect all its citizens in order to succeed.