



DALIT WOMEN: ECONOMICAL PROBLEMS

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Introduction:

The Dalit women experience endemic gender-and-caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Their socio-economic vulnerability and lack of political voice, when combined with the dominant risk factors of being Dalit and female, increase their exposure to potentially violent situations while simultaneously reducing their ability to escape. Violence against dalit women presents clear evidence of widespread exploitation and discrimination against these women subordinated in terms of power relations to men in a patriarchal society, as also against their communities based on caste. Violence against Dalit women is to deny them opportunities, choices and freedoms at multiple levels, undermining not only dalit women's dignity and self-respect, but also their right to development. Twelve major forms of violence constitute the basis of this study, nine being violence in the general community – physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction, forced incarceration and medical negligence – and three being violence in the family – female feticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse and domestic violence from natal and marital family members.

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. They don't own any land nor are they aware of their rights on land. 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.

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. In the year 1993, 73rd amendment in the constitution granted reservation to dalits, tribal and women in local government. This amendment made it compulsory that one third of the seats reserved for dalits be filled by dalit women. In some states, there has been little or no acceptance of reservation for the lower castes and dalit women by the upper castes. This has resulted in atrocities against Panchayat members including women. Dalits who stood for election were beaten, and dalit women were raped and ill-treated. The members of the higher castes, who are not prepared to relinquish power to the lower castes, grabbed their land. An easier method to retain power is to put-up proxy candidates but keep the control in the hands of the dominant castes, always men. 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.

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. We need to do the following to address the dalit women atrocities:

Awareness -Extensive reading of available literature can be done by young generation to understand the profile and problems of dalit women. This includes real life case studies. The people can come forward and write to the government bodies or take the help of media to bring issues related to dalit women in limelight.

Exposure Visits-Special exposure visits to dalit localities can be organized for school and college students to assess 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.

Campaigns and Sessions-Campaigns for equal and rational distribution of natural resources among weaker sections can be organized to secure their rightful means of livelihood. Proper rehabilitation and shelter can be provided to those communities, which are displaced from their locations.

India is a democracy and is a Party to most of the major human rights treaties. These treaties provide the same rights for men and for women. Because India is also a Party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Government has an extra obligation to make sure that women can realize their rights. It is generally accepted in international law that governments have to do more than just pass legislation to protect human rights. The Government of India has an obligation to take all measures, including policy and budgetary measures, to make sure that women can fulfill their rights. It also has an obligation to punish those who engage in caste-based violence and discrimination. The government of India, as a modern country with a growing economy, has the means to fulfill its obligations.

India is also a Party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This treaty not only identifies a range of economic, social and cultural rights, but it also requires that all people have these rights, without discrimination. The treaty also discusses the ways in which states must work to realize the rights. The rights outlined in the ICESCR include the right to work and to just and



favorable conditions of work, and to form trade unions, the right to social security, protection of the family, the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, housing and clothing, and the right to health. Dalit women hardly enjoy any of these human rights.

India is a Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Based on this treaty, the Government of India has an obligation to make sure that Dalit women can enjoy a whole range of human rights, such as the right to life, freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, freedom from slavery, the right to be equal before the court, the right to recognition as a person before the law, the right to privacy, the right to marry only with free and full consent, and the right to take part in public affairs. The life and dignity of Dalit women depends on the realization of these human rights.

At the threshold of 21st 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.

Dalit in general are treated in an inhumane ways and Dalit women are marginalized even further in three fold on the basis of caste, class and patriarchy. They are even thrice oppressed victims of centuries of social, political, economic, cultural and religious pressures. They are downtrodden among the downtroddens and Dalit of Dalitsin Indian society. Moreover the dalit women are oppressed among the oppressed and slaves of slaves. They are victims of the worst kind of patriarchy, feudalism, casteism, corruption and insensitivity of our society. She suffers in the family first because she is a woman and then she has to face the society and she is a Dalit woman. They are oppressed by the broader Hindu society, their own community's men and also their own husbands. Thus they are triply disadvantageous. After sixty seven years of independence and despite excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women, they are still suffering unimaginable atrocities of the society. Indian society has not been able to deliver justice and dignity to them. A Dalit woman is relegated to a life of inequality from the moment she is born. They are worst victims of violence, discrimination and exploitation. Specific types of work continue to be assigned to them on the basis of their hierarchical status. Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse, sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out teeth, tongue and nails, tied to a pole and beaten, depriving them to fetch water from well and violence including murder after proclaiming witch are experienced by Dalit women. The Devadasi, Jogini, murali and Chirasytems are the extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. These are the systems under which the Dalit are often require to dedicate their young girls in service of the Hindu God in a temple, which then becomes an institution of open sexual abuseresulting in sexual exploitation in the name of religion. These dalit girls are unable to marry and instead forced to become a prostitute for temple priests, dominant castes in the village. The government has passed a law against devdasi and similar system but it is still practiced



in some states. The majority cases of violence against Dalit women are not registered. They are also unaware of the laws and their ignorance is exploited by the opponents, by the police and even the judiciary system. They do not have any control over their own bodies, earning and lives. Gender based inequality perpetuated by patriarchal power relation and intensified by caste discrimination result in structural inequality. Though, the Constitution of India guarantees all citizens basic human rights regardless of caste, creed, gender, or ethnicity in favor of Justice, Equality, Liberty, and Fraternity but the implementation and enforcement of these principles has, unfortunately, been a terrible failure. Thus they face multiple forms of discrimination, violence, and exclusion from the rest of society. Dalit women also face violence when they try to access rights and entitlements provided by the constitution and the government.

Dalit women are a distinct social group and cannot be masked under general categories of women or Dalit. Today every tenth Indian is a Dalit woman, yet invisible and marginalized. There are similarities and differences in the problems faced by women belonging to Dalit and rest of the women. Like all women these women also suffers from subordination due to patriarchy within the family, at the place of work, and in society. Like other female groups, they also suffer from lack of access to income earning assets, education and resultant high poverty. However, Dalit women differ from rest of the women in so far as their performance with regard to human development indicators is lower compared with their counterpart from rest of the women. The causes of more deprivation of these women lie in social exclusion and discrimination. Thus excluded women are not like the rest of the women; they are disadvantaged by who they are. Dalit women are vulnerably positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy as they suffered from denial of property right. The women from discriminated groups suffer from triple deprivation – gender, poverty and social exclusion. The Dalit women's autobiographies have several references to how Dalit women agricultural labourers are sexually abused by the upper-caste landowners. Dalit life narratives situate personal and collective suffering within a larger discourse of human rights. Many dalit women live in an atmosphere of constant violence in their homes in the hands of drunken husbands and sometimes other members of the family and remain as slave at home and in the fields to keep their children from hunger. Another kind of violence on Dalit women is related to domestic services. Because of the notion of purity and pollution; Dalit women are hardly employed as cooks in upper-caste homes. They are hired to do the work of cleaning, washing clothes, and sometimes looking after the sick. Similar observations may be made about civic hygiene. In spite of a 1993 law prohibiting the use of manual labour to dispose of human excreta, Dalit scavengers still do this work in many smaller towns.

Main problems of Dalit Women:

- 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
- No representation at political including policy and decision levels
- Trafficking Dalit Women in Constituent Assembly:

Dalit women constitute almost half of India 's 160 million Dalits, comprise about 16% of India 's total female population, and 8% of the total population. However, there is little understanding of the economic, religious, political and ideological isolation of Dalit women. This is certainly true of their experience in the mainstream women's movements, where most of them feel disillusioned and alienated.

Despite having worked with several women's groups as an activist for over 15 years, I had been instinctively uncomfortable with defining myself as a feminist but never understood the reason for a long time. But I found myself, surprisingly, recoiling from the term “Dalit Feminism”, and took time to understand the reason for this reaction. I understood after some thought that it was because, what Feminism and feminists in India engaged with was far removed from the lived experiences of Dalit women. The agenda of feminism, as set by its very well-known, senior and experienced leaders, had little, if anything at all, to do with the lives of Dalit and other subaltern women. There was also some literature on the term Dalit Feminism but this to my knowledge did not ring true to type, not least because the one who wrote it was not a Dalit woman. Add to this the stereotype among scholars that Dalits are good at practical things like mobilizing crowds but not very good at theorizing, vividly satirized and categorized by Prof. Gopal Guru as “Theoretical Brahmin and Empirical Shudra”, in an article published in EPW many years ago.

But perhaps this exclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream women's movement is not such a bad thing after all: it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity and agency, and build effective working relationships and their own platforms.

What was clearly needed in its place is an articulation based on the consciousness of the Dalit women themselves, their experiences of suffering, exclusion and thrice-removedness - isolation by virtue of gender, caste, and class –



not to speak of religion, if one were a Muslim or a Christian Dalit. We have a right to be seen not as objects but as subjects, who have to play an active role in the attempt to better their own lives. Our voices have been muted and our issues obscured thus far. Our attempts to communicate about condition, in our own language, using our own mediums have not been given the hearing and audience they deserve. For instance, that their voice has to be heard not only at decision-making levels in policies, programmes and funding for projects for economic or social development but also in questions of identity formation, in struggles for the entire gamut of civil, political, economic and cultural rights and their fullest participation at all levels of in the institutions of society at large. We have a greater right to be heard than the privileged ones – in fact justice and equity make it imperative that our voices be heard and our articulations publicized.

In searching for this alternative, I discovered that black women had had similar experiences in the US and Africa. So they came up with a new term – womanism – to distinguish their struggles and experiences and used in a way that may be seen as tangential to feminism. It was one where women did not only see males as oppressors but also saw them as victims – of racism. Soon Hispanic women in Latin America had also found a term – *Mujerita* – to describe their own struggle for identity apart from feminism which appeared to dominate the academy and the movement for justice among women. And with a visceral rejection of the oxymoronic term Dalit Feminism, I feel the best way to go for us is to call our struggle Dalit Womanism. I now feel that this term is a more appropriate term to use, though it is not very well-known in India given the uppercaste - upperclass biases that tend to define the discipline of Women's Studies in India and which has also appropriated the discursive space offered by the term Third World Feminism.

The Dalit Womanist paradigm will be invested with its own meanings from its own political and geographical location, just as Black/African womanism is imbued with its own meaning. Dalit womanism will be broad enough to include the experience not only of the Dalit women in general, but also sensitive enough to provide space for the expression of the diversity of the experiences of religious minorities, tribal and ethnic identities who are presently termed subaltern, and there can be no stopping the process. It will not only build and shape theory, it will also learn to mediate the spaces as well as build solidarity between itself and the existing Feminist and Womanist thought and theory. It will also negotiate its differences with and build solidarity with men from Dalit and other subaltern and marginalised groups. Anyone who see the imperative need to change the paradigms of society from a caste and patriarchy-dominated ethos towards a more inclusive and equitable society will realize its significance.

In the year 2006, just such an attempt was made in a two-day consultation entitled “Dalit Women's Movements – Leadership and Beyond” at the United Theological College, Bangalore. It was a gathering of about 50 activists, students, and academics to think together on the vexed questions of Dalit women's existence, and the need to build a strong and vibrant movement around their cause, which in many



material terms differed from those of other women. Certain important things happened: One, it was decided that a Solidarity network of Dalit women be set up, called the “Dalit Women's Network for Solidarity (DAWNS)”;

two, a statement (hereafter called the DAWNS Statement) was drafted and issued, and three, it announced the coining of a new term, “Dalit Womanism”, and explains the need for this new entity.

The statement has been in the public domain since mid-2006, having been posted on the website of the Women's Studies Department of the United Theological College, Bangalore... In its Preamble, it states:

“At a time when nascent movements of the marginalised are under siege in India from the forces of dominant ideologies including Brahminism, majoritarianism, and globalisation, we feel the need to affirm that the voices of the marginalised and their aspirations should be reflected in the rich tapestry that comprises the Indian nation. The voices of the women and children of the populations which are pushed to the margins are rarely heard – specifically, the Dalit women. This consultation dedicated itself to bringing to the mainstream discourse their voices, aspirations, and visions. As no one movement can effectively reflect the specific issues and situations of Dalit women whose situations vary widely across regions, states, languages and religions, we welcome the trend of a growing number of movements of Dalit women to take up issues and work on their concerns.

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