

Re-thinking Dalit Women in Post-colonial India

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Historically, women in general and of India in particular are persistently exploited, victimized and discriminated. Dalit women being dalit and women at the same time are located in a 'place' where the systemic as well as patriarchal forces, both from without and within, work to make their subjugation perpetual. The paper gives a social narrative of the saga of dalit women in Post-colonial India.

[**Keywords:** Casteism, untouchability, gender discrimination, dalit women, saffronisation, sanskritisation, patriarchy, *varna* system]

Introduction

Women in general and of India in particular, if viewed historically, are persistently exploited, victimized and discriminated. Discrimination is one of the factors which play against equality. Though several steps have been taken nationally as well as internationally to eliminate various discriminatory and unequal treatment practices but the manifestations of the evil practices are still prevalent in diverse forms in many areas throughout the country. The question of gender discrimination and deprivation of women have received considerable importance from the last few years. The constitution of India guarantees equality of opportunity and status to women and men. It directs that women shall not only have equal rights and privileges with men but also the State should make provisions, both general and special for the welfare of the women. Despite the constitutional safeguards, women in India are still subjected to many disadvantages, inequalities and oppression in each and every sphere of their life.

In Indian society, due to the social barriers such as casteism, untouchability, patriarchy, disparity, superstition, religious exploitation and class variations, specific groups are becoming weaker and marginalized. These groups are facing the problems of identity crisis, deprivation, discrimination and atrocities. These marginalized groups are also identified and recognized as Dalits, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Castes, Nomadic Tribes, Denotified Tribes, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Michael 2007).

For the purpose of this paper, the concept *dalit* is conceptualized as the former 'acchut', untouchable or an outcaste. Dalit fall outside the *varna* system. Here at the outset, we must remember that when we talk of *dalits*, we are not talking of scheduled castes because scheduled castes include caste groups which have never endured the kind of discrimination and deprivation that *dalits* have. Dalit is not a caste, the term *dalit* is a political coinage of independent India which has a legacy from the first census constructed by the British administrators. As a new form of identity, *dalit* coinage came to the fore more as a political tool than as a substantive concept. The concept *dalit* provides sufficient scope for inclusion and exclusion, as per the requirement of a particular situation of a particular region at a particular time. For the present paper, therefore, the term *dalit* stands out as a post-colonial term that has grabbed our attention, generating every possible form of discourses labeled as *dalit* theorization. However, this post colonial abstraction is a difficult one to realize when we go for sociological study of Indian society.

The paper takes up, in particular, the issues of women belonging to the category of those people who are living in absolute exclusion - socially, economically, politically, educationally and in terms of religious rights. While going ahead with the discussion for the purpose of this paper, this term *dalit* Women will be loosely used for pointing out their plight and deprivation.

Women of India, in general, are already exploited in every form due to patriarchal norms and *dalit* women are being crushed in the vortex of gender, patriarchal norms and caste. The present paper explores and attempts to understand whether the *dalit* women in India have improved their conditions in last six decades of independence and constitutional democracy under the backdrop of dominant ideologies of Brahminism, globalization and democratic politics. Despite the numerous posts held by *dalits* at various public offices, we cannot escape the question that why Indian women in general despite being made highly visible advances and promotion, and empowerment-oriented work – are still not developing as they should? Moreover, in case of *dalit* women, they continue to remain overshadowed and veiled, known yet ignored. There is little understanding of the economic, religious, political and ideological isolation of *dalit* women. *Dalit* women themselves, their experiences of suffering, exclusion are based on *three-fold marginality* - by virtue of gender, caste, and class. There is an acute mismatch between rhetoric and reality.

Vulnerability of Dalit Women

Dalit women are the most marginalized segments in the society. The condition of *dalit* women is more vulnerable than non-*dalit* women. *Dalit* women are suffering from multi-dimensional disadvantages of being *dalit* which is culturally, socially, economically and religiously marginalized and being women and carrying the burdensome gender based oppression, subordination, inequalities and disabilities. The type of violence inflicted on *dalits* is in the form of extreme violation of human rights. The recent Khairlanji Massacre is nothing new. A *dalit* family had refused to let upper caste villagers built a road through their fields. Hence on 29 September 2006, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange's family, wife Surekha, daughter Priyanka and two sons were killed by the villagers of Khairlanji in Bhandra district of Maharashtra. They were first attacked with huge iron chains and then abused by the other caste women of the village. Surekha and Priyanka were paraded naked and raped, and later, their bodies were mutilated and thrown into a pond (*Hindustan Times*, 14 November 2006).

These kinds of atrocities against *dalit* women, in particular, show that they are easy targets of upper caste, not only men but also women, who consider them to be sexually available. 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 (Pal and Bhargav 1999). The atrocities against *dalit* women include gang - rape, murder, parading them naked, making *dalit* women eat human excreta etc. (Human Watch Report 1998).

The vulnerability of *dalit* women can hardly be overemphasized in the public and private spaces. It has been entrenched by class, caste and gender factors. *Dalit* women have largely being engaged in the production and different activities related to production which can be traced from a distant history. As per Kancha Ilaiah, there is hardly any distinction between the private and public sphere which is the case of other four *varnas* of Hindu women and they are being provided with equal rights to men in their caste mechanism. As per him, *dalit* women worked side by side with men in the fields, at the market places or at the home. But, due to several factors like the process of Hinduization, globalization, brahminization and multiculturalization, they have unknowingly absorbed the basic tenets and values of Hindu caste systems and its discriminatory processes. Now, the experiences in the public and the private spaces, for all practical purposes, are not an area of bliss for *dalit* women. That liberating space in many senses is where exploitation and oppression of *dalit* women are being witnessed. The upper caste men, in the name of inflicting disciplinary actions, do not take a step back from raping and performing several other atrocities against them. Also, in several instances the rape of *dalit* women may not be considered as rape at all because of the customary access that the upper caste men have had to *dalit* women's sexuality.

Many high caste Hindus have certain ideas in mind about people belonging to the lower orders: ideas that they are dirty, lazy, quarrelsome, not-reliable, that the women enjoy much more freedom than rural high caste women and above all that 'they [the women] have no morals and therefore deserve to be raped' (Pawade 1995: 145). While the comprehensive legislation, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of) Atrocities Act, 1989, exists on paper, social, political and economic pressures ensure that it remains ineffective. Of the innumerable cases of rape of *dalit* women, only a fraction is filled by the police, while actual conviction is negligible. The problem lies not so much with the law itself as with the context in which it exists (Malik 1999: 323 -24)

Dalit Women at Work

Dalit women work very hard and most of the time much more than their men folk. But very few *dalit* women have a regular job with a fixed salary. And the few who do work in places like factories get no contract and are often cheated. Dalit women's labour is mostly unskilled and is frequently underpaid or unpaid. The lives of *dalit* women are largely circumscribed by their poverty and lack of access to productive resources like land, financial capital, or educational qualifications. In all states, the overwhelming majority of *dalit* women work outside the home, most often as agricultural labourers. The only exception seemed to be Madhya Pradesh where, according to 1991 census, 65 per cent of *dalit* women were not employed. Certain agricultural tasks are typically assigned to women. They are always paid less than men. About 71 per cent of *dalit* women are agricultural labourers, whereas only 43 per cent of non-*dalit* women were agricultural labourers. Even in urban areas, 28 per cent of *dalit* women were employed as agricultural labour, as compared to only 5 per cent in the case of non-*dalit* women. Dalit women whose husbands are working outside the state reported being abused by landlords. In rural Orissa, *dalits* are made to wait for several hours before being paid and non-*dalits* place the money on the ground instead of directly handing it to the *dalit* worker. Non-*dalit* women are more rigid in maintaining practices of untouchability than non-*dalit* men. Non-*dalit* women internalize the caste ideology that stresses the role of women as upholders of caste purity for the entire household. Non-*dalit* women practice untouchability to wield power over others, given their limited opportunity to do so (Shah et al: 2006: 117-121).

In the urban sectors *dalit* women mainly belong to the unorganized sector workforce. They are in the activities like hawking, scrap collection, petty trade or home based production or service activity. These women suffer the most if they are without kinship support and other social and political linkages including contact with municipal bureaucracy, police etc. there are health risks also which often cut into their meager earnings. A document *National Perspective Plan for Women , 1988-2000 A.D.* has noted that 'Employment opportunities in the governmental and public sectors and the private corporate sector are limited in view of the general constraints on resources for region, expansion and dependence on the dictates of market mechanisms which are prejudicial to women. Given these realities and based on the performance of previous decades, it is unlikely that this sector can offer much relief by way of expanded employment potential to women. Given this assessment, it appears that employment prospects for *dalit* women in particular are too grim. Entry into organized sector depends much upon contacts and social connections in addition to educational qualification and previous job experience. There are other negative features also. They include: (i) segmentation in the labour market which works against *dalit* women, (ii) adverse implications of technological growth and (iii) lack of unionization of female workers. In addition there are two other handicaps, namely (a) absence of a meaningful human resource development policies aimed at improving *dalit* women's employability and productivity through training and (b) absence of national labour policy encompassing the needs of *dalit* women in the organized sectors. It appears that participation of *dalit* women in organized sectors is considerably negligible (Jogdand 1995).

It is evident that land ownership structures in Indian States are still skewed, keeping in mind the historicity of land ownership and over five decades of land reforms implementation in India. Understanding land distribution pattern in India in a social group framework is a decisive and necessarily needed task in context of *dalits* in general, and their women in particular. A combination of high incidence of wage labour, low educational attainment and high unemployment results in a high degree of deprivation and poverty among *dalit* women like their counterpart from marginalized communities like the tribals are placed in a socio-economic context which intrinsically links them with natural resources and hence the impact of climate changes. One cannot deny the link between poverty and marginalized women who are placed at the bottom of the development ladder. Also, still now thousands of *dalit* girls in the age group of 6 and 13 years are dedicated to temple duties, especially in South India. Once they are dedicated, there are unable to get married and are forced into prostitution.

Dalit women are being marginalized more in this era of globalization. After independence, due to several reformative measures it was expected that a considerable change can be brought in the working and living conditions of the marginalized communities like *dalits*. It is a fact of this decade that some though very limited, *dalit* men have improved their socio-economic conditions. If we look at various fields then we will see that *dalit* men have marked their presence be it as a President of India or any other field. But *dalit* women can hardly be identified in these various diverse fields of work. It is very disheartening to note that globalization has brought privatization, corporatization and liberalization which is further deepening the

caste discrimination and polarizing *dalit* women from non-*dalit* women. It has been noted that with the development of forces of production, the labour and skills of *dalit* women have suffered a downward mobility. There has been a relative deskilling in relation to men and their economic dependence on men has increased. This has been borne out by empirical studies on gender and caste based occupations (Rege 2000: 492).

Reservation policy at government sectors have not brought any considerable visibility of *dalit* women due to lack of implementation of policies, education, proper knowledge, discrimination, their acute poverty etc. Also the reservation policies is not effective in the newly formed private sectors, hence the already deprived and downtrodden *dalit* women's conditions are being perpetuated rather than any sort of improvement. They are still the most deprived agricultural workers at the rural sector and unidentified poor labourers of unorganized sector of urban centres. New age factors which are bringing social change are unable to change the under privileged conditions of *dalit* women rather accentuating it in every respect.

Gail Omvedt while addressing the dichotomy in the issue of reservation in private sector argues:

The reactions to the question of reservation in the private sector from the corporate bosses on the one hand, and most Marxists on the other, are interesting. Indian capitalists are a backward, upper caste dominated group and this is reflected in their unwillingness to consider the issue – in contrast with US/multinational capitalists who have learned to live with affirmative action. (There is also fact that the whole history of the struggle for representation in India has differed from that of the US). So they have mostly responded by stressing the false and ideologically indefensible notion of “merit”, as if the upper castes who dominate in the higher – earning sections of the working class do so because of some inherent biological qualities...(Omvedt 2005: 28).

Dalit Women in Movements and Politics

After dealing with the problem of status and work of *dalit* women, it is important to understand the issue of *dalit* women dealt by women's movement, leadership among *dalit* women and *dalit* women dealt by the democratic politics of India. Women's action began quite early. In recent years women's studies have appeared in many languages in India and abroad which take into account several diverse issues related to women and the dominant ideologies. But, unfortunately, there is very little interest in *dalit* women. Also in *dalit* literature not much attention has been given to *dalit* women and their problems.

The *dalit* leadership has failed to give any clear-cut direction to their followers especially in the wake of legislation passed by the government of India and also failed to give any positive insights to the problem of *dalit* women. Moreover *dalit* movement today faces challenges from the communal forces on which several conferences, held on *dalit* women, have only showed their concerns without coming out with a strategy to counter it. *Dalit* women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organizations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men.

Rather than mobilizing *dalit* women in *dalit* movements, they are facing communal threat all over which is trying to saffronise them into the folds of destructive Hindu ideology. Surprisingly the problems of *dalit* women hardly make any place in *dalit* movements on the basis of the fact that *dalit* women face equality in their community rather than inequality faced by non-*dalit* women in general. This causes invisibility of *dalit* women from mainstream *dalit* movements. The existing *dalit* movements of post colonial India has done much for a handful of male *dalit* intellectuals, less for the great majority of *dalit* men such as improving their position within the family, and nothing for *dalit* women. The only way out of the dilemma confronting the women would be to initiate their own *dalit* movement, because given the *dalit* men's attitude towards their women, no major changes may be expected from that side in the near future (Michael 2007: 257). Though there are scholars and writers like Bama, Meena Kandasamy, Urmila Pawar, Ruth Manorama etc are just few who are trying to build *dalit* women feminist discourse but there is no such action at the grassroots level. Though we can now find recent literatures and theoretical observations of *dalit* women in general but hardly there is any application of suggestion given by formulating the problem. Unless the *dalit* women are encompassed within the folds of *dalit* movements and leadership, the *dalit* movements will be crippled and the wholesome development of *dalits* will not be possible.

After the 73rd and 74th Constitution Amendment Acts of 1992 a larger number of women and a handful of *dalit* women have established themselves in the local government bodies like municipalities and *panchayati raj* institutions. This amendment made it compulsory that one-third of the seats reserved for *dalits* be filled by *dalit* women. However the experiences of *dalit* women in political participation has been mainly dissatisfactory with majority reporting cooption, intimidation or outright hostility in addition to their impediments such as illiteracy and lack of experience in political governance. Also, rural elites and dominant castes are unable to accept the fact that power has been given in the hands of poor and disadvantaged *dalit* women. Despite having legal sanction for political rights, rigid caste system and patriarchy directly and indirectly has been suppressing *dalit* women.

As Buch points out, 'Women's identity as a social category, for whom reservation of seats in the national Parliament and state legislatures in India is being bitterly contested at present, has also to contend with the differences among women based on class/caste/ethnic groups. Any intervention to break the link between social structures of inequality and their political reflection in the presence and participation in the institutions of government has to address not only women's identity but also the plurality of differences' (Buch 2010 : 15). Equality and equity is still a very distant dream for *dalit* women unlike non-*dalit* women who have to some extent received somewhat importance from various spheres and theoretical discourses.

The dominant norm of patriarchy and upper caste is reflected in the functioning of Political Parties. Dalit women are found to be unrepresented in inner party structures, almost invisible in the actual decision making bodies and influence on significant party policies is out of question. Nor do the political parties focus on dalit women's issues in their agenda or reflect any concern for gender and caste equality in their day - to - day functioning. If we look at the state Uttar Pradesh then we will find that a dalit woman Mayawati is the chief minister belonging to the so called party of dalits Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) but despite of such an achievement by a *dalit* woman, data shows that rather than improvement, deterioration in the condition and status of women is reflected. Dalits and *dalit* women are being mobilized only for the sake of vote banks and nothing more. Furthermore, during 2001 Mayawati in order to keep her crime figures low issued a written order suspending the use of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act but anyways was forced to withdraw the same in 2003. This had a very adverse effect on *dalit* women in particular. The atrocities on them continued to be perpetrated but their cases were not being registered by police. In this way the democratic politics of this era is used to manipulate the marginalized communities for the sake of vote banks and in the process *dalit* women are further pushed to margins.

Conclusion

Today, through the *sanskritisation* process which is brought by modernization and globalization, the *dalits* are losing their cultural world view. They are being influenced by the new age Brahminized values. The practices and values of the high caste are being absorbed by the so called newly formed 'elite and educated' *dalits*. The traditional freedom enjoyed by *dalit* women is under constraints.

Visibly by exercising control over women's sexuality, caste is preserved. Still in the post colonial period it is being claimed that upper caste women's progeny being pure and that of the *dalit* women being impure. Several associations of *dalit* women exist today, which have been trying to nurture and assert *dalit* women's identity. These are like Dalit Mahila Sangathan and National Federation of Dalit women etc. The formation of independent *dalit* organizations has brought about several debates among feminists activists. They misinterpret it by claiming that these organizations of *dalit* women fail to realize the gender specificities. Though few *dalit* women have become politically conscious and started speaking differently, but undoubtedly they are still the triply exploited and excluded from feminist discourse. They are yet not properly figured in women's studies nor in caste studies. Furthermore they are considered to be 'other' among the non-*dalit* women. In fact, according to many scholars, *dalit* women are 'downtrodden among the downtrodden' (Bandhu), the subaltern among the subaltern (Malik) or 'slaves of the slaves' (cited in Zelliott).

The marker that is used in this paper to discuss the problem of Dalit Women is more or less similar to the experience that we have out of our gendered existence. However, in our march to derive state benevolence, it is often seen, the term *dalit* women are used as means to achieve such benefits. This is where the present argument diverges from such discourses and tries to point out that our understanding of the marginalized group requires much more re-thinking than what has happened in last 60 years.

Women have class and caste identity, not just a gender identity. In fact, 'gender as a phenomenon hardly ever appears in a pure form. It is almost always alloyed with caste, class and religious factors. In matters where there is a clash between gender and caste or class, we cannot expect women to align themselves with other women, going against their caste or class loyalties' (Vyasulu et al, 1999: 3684). Hence, an effective way of achieving the emancipation of dalit women and to gain equal rights, it is ideal to take 'difference' seriously and engage with the politics of difference. There is no point in drawing universalistic vision and conclusion when historically and continuously Dalit women are being crippled against the backdrop of democratic politics, gender and the dominant institution of caste of India.

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