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SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

Shri. Y. I. Chawan. Assistant professor of Sociology Govt First Grade College Haliyal

Pin- 581329. Dist-Uttar Kannada, State-Karnataka

ABSTRACT

As the lowest in the caste hierarchy, Dalits in Indian society have historically suffered caste-based social exclusion from economic, civil, cultural, and political rights. Women from this community suffer from not only discrimination based on their gender but also caste identity and consequent economic deprivation. Dalit women constituted about 16.60 percent of India's female population in 2018. Dalit women's problems encompass not only gender and economic deprivation but also discrimination associated with religion, caste, and untouchability, which in turn results in the denial of their social, economic, cultural, and political rights. They become vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation due to their gender and caste. Dalit women also become victims of abhorrent social and religious practices such as devadasi, resulting in sexual exploitation in the name of religion. The additional discrimination faced by Dalit women on account of their gender and caste is clearly reflected in the differential achievements in human development indicators for this group. In all the indicators of human development, for example, literacy and longevity, Dalit women score worse than Dalit men and non-Dalit women.

Thus, the problems of Dalit women are distinct and unique in many ways, and they suffer from the 'triple burden' of gender bias, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation. To gain insights into the economic and social status of Dalit women, our paper will delve more closely into their lives and encapsulate the economic and social situations of Dalit women in India. The analyses of human poverty and caste and gender discrimination are based on official data sets as well as a number of primary studies in the labor market and on reproductive health.

KEYWORDS: Dalit women, discrimination, Scheduled Castes, India

INTRODUCTION

In recent years literature related to gender and feminist discourse in India has brought considerable insight into the problems of women in India. Literature, along with several civil society movements, has influenced the government policy for economic and educational empowerment of the women and their representation in local governance (Bhasin, 2017). More recently we can also clearly hear multiple voices emerging on gender issues, particularly since the early 1990s, when the Indian feminist discourse becomes marked with multiple strands. These multiple voices, we can argue, are closely linked to the uneven gains of progress recorded by various groups. 'Woman' in India is not a homogeneous category; it is marked with differences in health status, educational attainments, economic performance as measured by human development indicators, particularly in the case of women belonging to Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes and Muslims. As we shall see in subsequent sections, the rate of progress in human development indicators is significantly lower for Dalit women than it is for women from the upper-caste group. This means that Dalit women have benefited from development less than the rest of the women. Since the improvement in the human development indicators for Dalit women has been slower than for women from the upper-caste group, the disparities continue to persist between Dalit women and the rest.

This paper focuses on the challenges facing women belonging to the Dalit social group who are the lower castes, particularly untouchables. The caste system is based on the division of people into social groups in which the civil, cultural, and economic rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and made hereditary; the assignment of rights among castes is unequal and hierarchical, and this system provides a regulatory mechanism to enforce social and economic organization through the instruments of social ostracism or social and economic penalties. In the traditional scheme of the caste system, the untouchables, who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, were deprived of all rights, and being located at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, they suffer the most from an antisocial spirit and violence by high caste Hindus (Ambedkar, 1987).

FEMINIST DISCOURSE AND PERSPECTIVE WITH RESPECT TO SOCIAL/CULTURAL GROUPS

The plurality of 'woman' as a category, and the need to address the diversity within this category, including how different groups of women have different access to citizenship and other rights, different identities, and different problems, is now recognized all over the world as an important issue in feminism. In this section we outline some of the important theoretical interventions from the Western feminists and their implications on the understanding of gender and its intersectional ties with caste identity in India.

The mainstream feminist discourse in the West came under criticism, particularly from African American and non-Western scholars, for ignoring the racial aspect of the gender issue and also from those who pay attention to the economic and social oppression of women. The writings from black feminists have focused on the distinct problems of women from discriminated groups, which are similar to those of other women at some level but are also different in other respects because of aspects of race, color, social origin, ethnicity, and nationality. The literature has underlined how the category 'woman' has, in fact, been representative of dominant groups of women in the same way that the liberal notion of citizenship has been representative of dominant groups of men (Hooks, 1984; Walby, 1996).

In the North American context, black feminists challenged many of the theoretical formulations that reflected white middle-class women's consciousness and experience. For example, quoting from Sylvia Walby's summary: 'The labor market experience of women of color is different from that of white women because of racist structures which disadvantage such women in paid work. This means that there are significant differences between women on the basis of ethnicity, which need to be taken into account.' (Walby, 1990, p14).

HUMAN POVERTY, GENDER, AND CASTE-BASED DISCRIMINATION

In this section we will provide empirical evidence to these problems related to human poverty and various forms of caste- and untouchability-based discrimination experienced by Dalit women in accessing economic, social, and civil rights and entitlements.

The main challenges that the Dalit women face are outlined below:

- Economic deprivation
- Educational deprivation
- Poor health
- Caste- and untouchability based discrimination in accessing sources of livelihood, public services, and political participation
- Caste-based atrocities and violence
- Temple prostitution
- Gender discrimination

The empirical evidence is provided through available official data and primary surveys. To gain insights into the economic and social disparities of Dalit women vis-à-vis both Dalit men and non-Dalit women, and violence directed specifically against Dalit women, the following sources were consulted: the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), the Census of India, the National Crime Records Bureau, and the National Family Health Survey-2 and 3 (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2018

and 2018). Evidences on gender discrimination perpetrated by Dalit men against women of their own caste are drawn from limited primary studies and the autobiographical writings of Dalit women.

Following that, we will present in the next section evidence on specific forms of discrimination experienced by Dalit women in the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres drawn from primary studies conducted by scholars and studies undertaken by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (supported by various agencies such as International Labour Organization, UNICEF, and ministries of the government of India).

Human Poverty and the Economic and Social Status of Dalit Women: Empirical Evidence from Official and Government Sources Economic Status

Sources of Livelihood: According to recent available official sources such as the NSSO, most Dalit women lack access to income-earning assets and regular employment and depend mainly on wage labor. In 2017-10, 38 percent of Dalit women were self-employed as compared to 62 percent of upper-caste women this indicated that access to permanent sources of livelihood was not equal within the category of women. Further, 9.80 percent of Dalit women were employed as regular salaried workers as compared to 20.8 percent of upper-caste women. The result: about 52 percent of Dalit women worked as agricultural wage labor in rural areas as compared to 17 percent of upper-caste women.

TABLE 1 Distribution of workers by work status in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, 2017 –18

| Sex and Means of Livelihood | SC | | | Others | | | Total | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|----------------|-------|-------------|----------------|-------|-------------|----------------|-------|
| | Agri sector | Nonagri sector | Total | Agri sector | Nonagri sector | Total | Agri sector | Nonagri sector | Total |
| Male | | | | | | | | | |
| Self-employed | 36.7 | 29.9 | 33.0 | 76.3 | 44.7 | 56.2 | 61.2 | 40.5 | 49.9 |
| Regular wage employee | 1.4 | 26.9 | 15.3 | 0.9 | 41.2 | 26.5 | 1.1 | 33.2 | 18.7 |
| Casual labor | 61.9 | 43.2 | 51.7 | 22.8 | 14.0 | 17.2 | 37.7 | 26.3 | 31.5 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Female | | | | | | | | | |
| Self-employed | 39.0 | 35.9 | 38.0 | 78.5 | 41.2 | 61.6 | 59.0 | 41.6 | 53.3 |
| Regular wage employee | 0.8 | 29.3 | 9.8 | 0.3 | 45.5 | 20.8 | 0.4 | 32.5 | 11.0 |
| Casual labor | 60.2 | 34.8 | 52.1 | 21.2 | 13.3 | 17.6 | 40.6 | 25.9 | 35.8 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Person | | | | | | | | | |
| Self-employed | 37.6 | 31.1 | 34.5 | 76.9 | 44.2 | 57.4 | 60.4 | 40.7 | 50.8 |
| Regular wage employee | 1.2 | 27.4 | 13.7 | 0.7 | 41.9 | 25.3 | 0.9 | 33.1 | 16.5 |
| Casual labor | 61.2 | 41.5 | 51.8 | 22.3 | 13.9 | 17.3 | 38.8 | 26.2 | 32.7 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Us with similar results-the data for urban areas indicates that of the total number of women employed as cooks and waiters, close to 13 percent belong to Dalit social groups as compared to a

higher proportion of women (33 percent) from upper castes. In the occupation category of professional, technical, and related workers, which are mainly regular salaried jobs in urban areas, we find a lower proportion of Dalit women employed as compared to upper-caste women (see Table 2). Caste Disparity in Wage Earnings: Further, Dalit women who worked as wage laborers faced discrimination in wage earnings, particularly in urban areas. In 2018, Dalit women who were casual wage laborers received daily wage earnings of Rs. 37 as compared to Rs. 56 for upper-caste women, whereas the national average was Rs. 42. The disparity in earnings between women from excluded groups and women from non-excluded groups reflects discrimination faced by them in terms of engagement in the labor market. This form of discrimination is likely to result in depressed earnings/income, which ultimately will cause a higher incidence of poverty among Dalit women.

TABLE 2 Distribution of female population from social groups across occupation types, urban (female 96 %)

| | ST | SC | OBC | OTHER |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Professional, technical, and related workers | 7.83 | 9.75 | 12.42 | 12.71 |
| Administrative, executive, and managerial workers | 1.32 | 2.11 | 2.25 | 2.59 |
| Clerical and related workers | 0.29 | 0.77 | 0.77 | 1.37 |
| Sales workers | 3.18 | 2.13 | 3.34 | 3.30 |
| Service workers | 4.80 | 7.56 | 7.95 | 6.70 |
| Farmers, fishers, hunter/loggers, and related workers | 74.44 | 57.60 | 56.61 | 52.01 |
| Farmers, fishers, hunter/loggers, and related workers | 8.13 | 19.97 | 16.53 | 21.18 |
| Total in Labor Force | 99.07 | 99.89 | 99.86 | 99.87 |

Source: NSSO, Employment and Unemployment: 61st round, 2004-05. OBC: Other Backward Classes

Unemployment: Another important economic problem of Dalit women is lack of employment throughout the year. Agricultural work is seasonal in nature and is available only at certain times; at other times there is no earning. We generally find that in both rural and urban areas the percentage of unemployed among Dalit women was higher than that of the upper-caste woman. For example, according to the recent National Sample Survey, 2017-18, the current daily unemployment rate of Dalit women in rural areas was 9.8 percent, whereas it was 8.0 percent for women from the upper caste. Similarly, in urban areas the unemployment rate for Dalit women was higher (9.3 percent) than the unemployment rate for women from the upper caste (8.4 percent; see Table 3). This suggests that not only a large proportion of Dalit woman are agricultural laborers, but also the rate of unemployment among them was quite high.

POVERTY AND MALNUTRITION

As stated above, the percentage of Dalit women as cultivators in agriculture in rural areas and as self-employed in urban areas is quite low. Therefore, most of them depend on wage-earning employment. Given the poor economic base and higher unemployment rate, the level of living is reflected in a high poverty ratio. Although the gender breakdown by poverty level is not available, a high degree of deprivation is reflected in other indicators of well-being as well, particularly in the high level of under nutrition and related health indicators. In 2017–18 about 29.7 percent of Dalits in rural areas and 32.9 percent in urban areas were below

the poverty line. In the case of non-Dalits, the poverty ratio was only 11.8 percent in rural areas and 12.2 percent in urban areas, which is much lower compared to that of Dalits (TABLE 3).

TABLE 3 Level of poverty-India (in percentage)

POVERTY RATE BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE AND SOCIAL GROUP: 2017–18

| | SCs | Others (Upper Caste) | Total |
|--------------|------|----------------------|-------|
| Rural | 29.7 | 11.8 | 22.0 |
| Urban | 32.9 | 12.2 | 20.9 |
| Rural, Urban | 30.4 | 12.0 | 21.7 |

Source: National Sample Survey, 2017-10

Further, the under nutrition problem is particularly serious for Dalit women because close to 45 percent of Dalit women had a BMI below 18.5 kg/m² compared to 36 percent of upper-caste women according to the National Family Health Survey (IIPS and ORC Macro, 2017-18). Poverty and undernourishment of SC mothers also impact their children. Among children younger than five years of age, a higher proportion of Dalit children were malnourished as compared to upper castes-51 percent of Dalit children were underweight, whereas for upper-caste children, the prevalence of underweight was 36 percent, which is still disturbingly high but significantly better than among the Dalit children.

VICTIMS OF SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Moreover, Dalit women are also the victim of specific social customs and religious practices in Hindu society. Some of these customs include the devadasi system. In this system Dalit girls are married to a village god by their parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper-caste landlords and rich men of the village. This system of religious sexual exploitation is found in parts of India such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Orissa. A primary survey by the Aashray Jogini Vyayastha Vyatireka Sanghatana on the jogini system estimated the number of joginis in six districts of Andhra Pradesh at around 21,421 (Pal and Lal, 2010, p. 27). The National Human Rights Commission corroborates these findings and estimates that Andhra Pradesh had 29,000 joginis⁸ (as reported in The Hindu; Kadapa, November 23, 2012). A similar practice exists in states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, where they are designated as devadasis (Pal and Lal, 2010, p. 27).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the main purpose of this paper was to develop an understanding of the problems of Dalit women and to present an analysis of the multidimensionality's of the challenges faced by them. A background to this analysis is an enquiry into the reasons for multiple strands of Indian women's movements in India. The analysis shows that the emerging multiple voices demanding group-specific gender policies are closely linked to the uneven gains of economic progress recorded by various groups such as the Dalit

women's group. The analysis becomes important in order to understand the affect of multiple marginalized group identities in Dalit women's case, gender, caste, class on their level of human development and human dignity. Dalit women's access to citizenship rights, normally considered as accruing to every Indian citizen, has thus been examined more closely in regard to both their economic and social conditions as well as the various ways in which they are subjugated in public and private spheres.

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