



Dalit Women: Victims of Social Discrimination and Social Exclusion

Dr. Smita Sahu
Guest Faculty
Clat Possible

Caste, class and gender have been at the centre of social discrimination and social exclusion in India for a long time. The term social exclusion, which has its origin in France, was a term first used in 1974 by a social policy analyst, to refer to selected categories of people, who were excluded from the provisions of social insurance. The term, however, soon came to mean denial of equal opportunities to individuals, groups and communities in basic political, economic and social functioning of a society. These individuals or groups were socially discriminated against on the basis of their race, class, caste, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. Within the Indian context, we find such deep-rooted social discrimination and exclusion embedded and upheld by the rigid caste system and the societal institutions that “exclude, discriminate, isolate and deprive” some groups on the basis of their identities such as caste, class, and gender (Chander 52). The most glaring examples of this tripartite discrimination and the resultant exclusion are the Dalit women.

The Dalits, also known as ‘Untouchables’ have been socially and economically oppressed for centuries. Belonging to the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system, they have been politically marginalized and exploited time and again. The Hindu Caste system, as we know, is divided into four categories or Varnas: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors and princes), Vaishya’s (farmers and artisans) and Shudra’s (tenant farmers and servants). There is however, a fifth category that falls outside this Varna system, which consists of those, who are known as the “untouchables” or Dalits.

Traditionally a Dalit was actually someone who was born below the caste system. They were often assigned tasks that were considered too polluting (for instance manual scavenging) to merit inclusion within the Varna system. So, while those at the top of the caste pyramid were considered pure and were entitled to several benefits and facilities, those at the bottom were considered impure or polluted and were only entitled to duties and responsibilities (Roy 7).

Not only does the traditional Hindu model stratify individuals on the basis of their descent and occupation but also added to this is the belief of karma, wherein one's past actions decide which caste and class one is born into. The Hindu Caste has been defined as follows;

A system of graded inequality in which castes are arranged according to an ascending scale of reverence, and a descending scale of contempt . . . i.e., as you go up the caste system, the power and status of a caste group increases and as you go down the scale the degree of contempt for the caste increases, as these castes have no power, are of low status, and are regarded as dirty and polluting (Peebles).

The term 'Dalit', which has been derived from the Marathi language, means 'oppressed' or 'broken'. The root word 'dal' in Sanskrit also means 'split', 'broken', 'cracked', or 'crushed'. It was Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, a prominent social reformer and thinker from Maharashtra, who first coined the term 'Dalit' to apply to all people considered lower caste and untouchables by the Brahmins. It was a personal incidence of discrimination and humiliation that sparked off Jyotiba's quest against social injustice and caste discrimination widely prevalent in the Indian society.

Today Dalits represent almost one-sixth of India's population, i.e. approximately 160 million people. Despite their huge numbers the Dalits face complete ostracization from the other castes. For instance, in villages the Dalits are not allowed to cross over the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They are not allowed to use the same wells as the upper castes, visit the same temples, or drink from the same cups at tea stalls. Even in schools Dalit children are made to sit at the back of the classrooms.

While the Dalits have faced social exclusion for centuries, Dalit women have faced the worst kind of discrimination. Although women have always been victims of regressive and repressive patriarchal rigors, Dalit women have borne the heaviest burden of social discrimination. They have been exploited at three levels: at the level of caste, at the level of class and at the level of their gender. While they have faced discrimination and exploitation by the upper caste men, their own men too have not shied away from exploiting them. The reason for this is that Dalit men, who have been rendered powerless under the Hindu caste system, compensate for their relative powerlessness by presiding over their women.

Out of the 160 million Dalits in India, approximately 49.96% are women. These women are positioned at the lower most rung of the caste, class and gender hierarchy, where there is a complete negation and violation of their human rights. These women are not only victims of honour killings and rape by upper caste men, but also appalling work conditions, and limited access to basic resources like water, sanitation and employment. Dalit women are denied formal education and the girl child is often made to drop out of school and engaged in child labour.

Most of these women reside in rural areas where they are involved in domestic, agricultural or casual labour. They spend long hours toiling under the harsh sun, without any protection or benefits provided under the labour

laws, as they belong to the unorganized sector. Their work involves tough, manual work, which is usually low paying and time consuming. The approximate wages for Dalit women varies from region to region, but on an average it ranges from 25- 35 rupees per day for agricultural labour and 30- 50 rupees per day for casual labour (brick kilns, construction etc.).

Dalit women have to walk for miles in order to procure drinking water for their families. Even then they are required to stand in separate queues and can only take water after the upper caste women have finished taking water. In certain places Dalit women are not even allowed to use common water resources and have to thus rely on either unclean sources of water or walk longer distances for getting safe drinking water.

Displacement of the marginalized in the name of development has been going on for decades. Studies have shown that almost twenty-six million Indians have been displaced from their habitats in the name of various development projects like mining, dams, canals, industries, thermal plants etc. These marginalized sections primarily include the tribals, dalits, and other backward classes. It has been found that even within the tribal areas it is the Dalits, and particularly the Dalit women, who are the most vulnerable. Displacement and relocation seems to have the maximum adverse impact on Dalit women by increasing the exertion on their two main chores i.e. “fetching of water and firewood” (Sainath 75). Even if compensation is provided to the displaced in the form of land or cash, it is beyond the control of these women, who have no access to either.

Although all women face discrimination, according to a U.N report, the human rights of Dalit women are violated in peculiar and extreme forms. Stripping, naked parading, caste abuses, pulling out nails and hair, sexual slavery and bondage are few forms peculiar to Dalit women. The extent of discrimination can be seen in the fact that Dalit women are even expected to wear their saris in a different fashion (involving more skin exposure) than the way worn by upper caste women. In short these women bear the maximum brunt of exploitation, discrimination and physical attacks.

Sexual abuse and violence at the hands of landlords and even the police are often inflicted upon Dalit women in order to teach them a ‘lesson’ and crush dissent within their community. A most egregious example of this is the story of Surekha Bhotmonge, a 40-year-old Dalit woman, who belonged to the Mahar caste. Surekha lived with her family in Khairlanji, a village of less than 200 families in Bhandara district of Maharashtra near Nagpur. Unlike other Dalit women, Surekha was educated as were her three children. The Bhotmonges were a landowning Dalit family, who were battling a land dispute with the surrounding upper caste land- owners. On September 29, 2006, she along with her 3 children were mercilessly tortured and killed by a Hindu mob, led by the men of the upper caste. Surekha and her 17-year-old daughter Priyanka, were stripped, paraded naked in the village, raped multiple times and finally killed. Surekha’s two sons, Roshan (21) and Sudhir (19) too were tortured and murdered for trying to save their mother and sister. All the four bodies were found dumped in a canal.

What was Surekha’s fault that led to such a barbaric death? Her only fault was that she was a Dalit that too a woman, who had the audacity to aspire for a better life and protest against injustice being meted out to her family.

Surekha's story is only one of many such stories of barbarity and monstrosity that is dispensed towards Dalit women in India.

Dalit women face the worst kind of discrimination and social exclusion by men from the upper castes. Practices like Devadasi, in which young girls are married to the gods and subsequently sold into prostitution, focus on the extent of exploitation that these women face. The Devadasi system, although banned by the government of India, still continues in certain parts like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Kerala and Orissa. Closely related to the Devadasi is the Jogini system, where Dalit girls are inducted, by Hindu temple officiants, into a life of ritualized rape. What differentiates Joginis from Devadasis is that while Devadasis traditionally reside in temples and only serve men, who are patrons of the temples, Joginis lead their lives in their own homes and sexually serve men in the community irrespective of their relationship to the temple or its community. In both cases, however, the Dalit women are condemned to a life of institutionalized prostitution and rape (Irudayam S. J., Jayshree P. Mangubhai and Joel G. Lee). The irony is that while the Dalits are considered untouchables, practices like Devadasi and Jogini are legitimized brazenly. As Baburao Bagul said, "the exploitative state has a peculiar characteristic; it allows only those doctrines to survive and prosper which help its exploitative nature to proliferate . . ." (275). The Hindu Varna system was established by the ruling class in order to safeguard their own interests, wealth and power. The oppressed, on the other hand were confined to a life of sorrow, misery and servitude.

Feudal practices that are especially discriminating towards Dalit women still exist in certain parts of India. For instance in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu, when a Dalit couple gets married, the village chief of the dominant caste sleeps with the Dalit bride first, only after this are the bride and groom allowed to sleep together. Equally demeaning and humiliating is another practice where men of a particular dominant caste have the privilege of having sex with Dalit women at will. If a Dalit man comes to his house in the evening and finds a dominant caste man's shoes outside his doorstep he is expected to quietly move away and spend the night elsewhere.

Condemning the practice of untouchability in India, former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh once said on Dec 27, 2006,

Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of 'untouchability' was Apartheid in South Africa. Untouchability is not just social discrimination. It is a blot on humanity (Hidden Apartheid, 3).

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a scholar, a social reformer and a leader of the Dalits and law minister of the Government of India (1947-51), dedicated his life to eradicating social inequality in India. Baba Saheb wrote extensively on the condition of Dalits and the caste system in the Hindu society. In his article "The Rise and fall of Hindu Woman" Ambedkar pointed out that the root cause of suffering for all women in India are the Hindu religious

books. Texts like Manusmriti promote inequality between men and women. According to it, women have no right to education, independence or wealth. In fact it justifies the treatment of Dalit women as objects of sex and promotes child marriages and atrocities on women. According to the Manusmriti, even killing of a Dalit woman by a Brahmin is considered a minor offence, equivalent to killing of an animal.

For centuries Dalit women have been denied a life of dignity and a space for utterance. They have been treated as the most downtrodden among the downtrodden. As Ambedkar once said, “Dalit women face the paradox of being regarded as untouchable and polluted but still being exploited in the most intimate spheres of their existence.”

Despite several legal, constitutional and government welfare programs in place to protect the rights of women and eliminate caste-based discrimination, the iniquity continues. It is time the government takes stringent and appropriate measures to ensure the implementation of these welfare programs for the protection of Dalit women. Practices like devadasi, jogini, manual scavenging and caste-based discrimination need to be eliminated from the root. Over the years several Dalit women’s groups have emerged that have worked relentlessly to address these issues. Writings of Dalit women have enriched the Dalit literary movement and established the fact that Dalit women’s activism and their literature are an inseparable part of each other. These women have a right to live a life free from any kind of discrimination, a right to live a life of dignity and self-respect and a right to education and equal economic opportunities.



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