

Status of Dalit women in India: Present Scenario



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It is estimated that out of the total population of the country the total population of Dalits is 20% (CERD !(1997) of which Dalit women occupy half of that population. Except for a few, the total segment of this population leads a miserable life. Socially discarded for a long period of time, they are compelled to live a vulnerable life, be it economic ,education, health and all other areas that fall under basic needs. The word Dalit itself connotes the lowest strata of the society in all the aspects, a term which is condemnable itself. One has to go back to its history to understand the situation of the Dalits. Based on the Hindu caste system the total social system is divided into hierarchies since long ; where people are divided into various castes and ethnic groups.

In this background the position of Dalit women is one of the lowest from all these aspects. Shudra which was placed at the bottom of the ladder in the caste hierarchies is termed as "Dalit" these days which is an untouchable group of society. Outlawed in the year 1963 itself, without no strong action against it ; the practice of untouchability still exists in all parts of the country. As it has not totally been abandoned and punished by the government. From the time immemorial they worked like slaves, sold as commodities resulting in their social discrimination, economic deprivation and educational backwardness. Dalits at many places are still prohibited to use the public facilities; such as water taps , schools , temples, restaurants, hotels etc. There have been cases where the Dalit women have been beaten by the upper caste women while filling water from public taps. Dalit women have to bear both social humiliation as well as the male dominance in the family.

Status of Dalit women:

In education field:

Till some years ago, many dalit women

were ill treated. They were educationally backward in spite of the facilities for free education. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among dalit women are many. The main reasons among them are:

- 1 Resistance from the family members to send girls to schools.
- 2 Fear of insecurity in villages.
- 3 Lack of physical facilities i.e. like accommodation, school, transport and medical facilities.
- 4 when the parents are away at work ,the girls were forced to take care of the siblings.
- 5 Girls were forced to do domestic work which prevents them from attending school.
- 6 Working to earn for the family prevent the girls from attending school.
- 7 Working with parents to earn their livelihood in beedi factories or other unorganized sector made them illiterate.
- 8 Because of the unemployed and sick parents girls were forced to work.
- 9 Many were forced to get married at young age, which stop schooling.
- 10 Social restriction which compels the girls to stop education after marriage.
- 11 In some areas there are complaints from dalit women teachers regarding misbehaviors, blackmail and exploitation by the male staff of other high caste people.
- 12 Distance of schools from home.
- 13 Irrelevant content of the education system.
- 14 Fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education is some of the other factors 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 many parents wish to withdraw the girls from schools.

The present position seems to be better with ref-

erence to the rate of literacy among dalits. There are some pre-examination coaching centers giving trainings for dalits which are doing very good service to train them in vocational line, for competitive exam, in medical and engineering field, railway recruitment boards, bank recruitment, etc. Dalits women belonging to the creamy layer of the society are better with good education. Socially and economically they are well off like other high castes. They are fully aware of the welfare schemes provided by the Government. Moreover, the coaching programmes conducted by the Government for dalit women are beneficial in training many women to compete for the competitive exam. But in real sense these programmes also do not reach the needy dalit women because they are cornered by the very few creamy dalit women.

This should be monitored properly and the schemes should be reached by the most deprived and constantly struggling dalit women. Because these dalit women are neglected by socially advanced communities and also by the better off among the dalits, which leads to an unhealthy socio-economic condition. There should be some scientific basis to pick up the poorest and they should be equipped with facilities. There is an urgent need to get a feedback about the welfare schemes where lot of money is spent for the development of Dalits. The funds are not utilized properly for their upliftment. Many of the schemes go unnoticed because they are not popularized properly.

Gender Equality:

Female infanticide is more prevalent among the uneducated dalit families. Educational development among SC women is very marginal. Therefore, 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.

Present scenario: steps towards change

In the total context of the country the status of the Dalit women was and still is the worst compared to others. The term dalit stands for change and revolution... we feel that the voices and protests of Dalit women are almost invisible. In fact when we use phrases like, marginalization of women in the development process, or feminization of poverty or women's contribution in the unorganized sector we are referring to dalit women without even being conscious about their specificity (1995:2). Dalit women were actively participating in the Ambedkar led movement in the pre-independence period. In the twentieth century, slowly changes occurred in the position of women after the movement started to educate women by Gandhi. As a result today dalit women are working in various government offices, they are active members of Zilla Parishads.

Latest status:

Mayawati (born 15 January 1956) is an Indian politician who worked as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. She worked for at least four terms as chief minister. Her supporters refer to her as Behan Ji, which means sister. At the age of 39, she became the youngest politician to be elected as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh and the first Dalit-woman chief minister of any Indian state. She is regarded as a symbol of dignity and political inspiration for millions of India's Dalits who were oppressed by the Hindu upper castes for centuries. There are allegations that she has used her status to amass a large amount of personal wealth.

According to an article in The Indian Subcontinent Times; -Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Dalit leader Kumari Mayawati has found a place among the Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Women in the World giving jitters to Indian National Congress President Sonia Gandhi. According to the Forbes list released on 28th Aug. 2008, Mayawati is ranked 59th just behind Queen Elizabeth of UK. In the running to be prime minister, from her perch as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. In 1995, at 39, she was the youngest politician elected to the post and was also the first Dalit (India's lowest, "untouchable" caste) to head a state government.

In 2007 she shrewdly built an alliance with Brahmins, and the Bahujan Samaj Party, which she heads, has started to increase its national presence. Some say she could trail-blaze again as India's first Dalit prime minister. - Kate Macmillan of the Forbes says in citation for Mayawati. Taking her to be an inspiration; many more women from Dalit community are educating themselves and moving ahead with a conviction to declare the change they will bring in their unsought for lives. Empowering women through reservation bill Reservation bill will be beacon for emancipation of women .The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha is a momentous, heartwarming step not only for India, but is likely to be an inspirational trendsetter for women's empowerment in the entire region. Although it is only the first step, the ripples from the smashing of a glass barrier are bound to be felt in virtually all areas of traditional male dominance. Like its democracy, therefore, India will also be a beacon in the matter of women's emancipation.

But never before has it seen so many lawmakers in its legislative chambers although the panchayats already have a large number of women members and office-bearers because of reservations. Even then, there is little doubt that the country is on the threshold of a new beginning.

As the halls of the Parliament House echo with the words "Madam Speaker?, I believe India has reached a new threshold in writing its own history. Of course, I'm proud. Meira Kumar, daughter of former Deputy Prime Minister and Dalit icon Babu Jagjivan Ram, left her job as a diplomat 24 years ago to join politics. Today she stands tall as the first woman speaker of the Lok Sabha in 57 years. Currently, India is ranked 100th in terms of representation by women in the Chief legislature (Lok Sabha). The percentage of women representation is a mere 11 percent, which is much below the averages of most nations across the world, including certain developing Africa nations. Amidst this bleak scenario, the call for a women's reservation bill appears justified. The bill ensures 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament as well as other state legislative bodies. The move will not only help women have their concerns addressed more effectively, it will hopefully enable Indian women to break the shackles of cultural and caste based stereotypes. In the end it can be said that Indian women dalit as well as non dalits have been subjected to cultural biases and atrocities since time memorial. However, the answer here is to not merely create reservations for women, but equip them with enough knowledge, support and resources to stand up for themselves.

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