

The Dalit Woman: A Portrait of Life on the Periphery

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ABSTRACT

The already heated social climate was made worse by the use of gender differences as a tool of segregation. For as long as anybody can remember, repressive patriarchal leaders in our society have treated women like puppets, victims, martyrs, and scapegoats. Above all, they have treated them like marionettes. Women attempt to inhale deeply and live as distinct entities while under the control of men, akin to grass that unfurls while being tramped. However, it was not so simple to overthrow the massive, unstoppable structure of the patriarchal domain. Coventry Patmore's popularization of the phrase "angel in the house" awakens the sleepy mind to the realization that the angel in question is imprisoned inside the walls of the house, much to a bird whose wings have been clipped and who is confined to the ground. Realizing that women's rights and duties are largely focused on domestic issues, rather than their own growth and happiness, is deeply disturbing. In truth, before India's independence, women had no rights to either mobile and immovable property. This resulted in the social and economic exploitation of women. Women were not only forbidden from leaving the house to further their education or pursue a job, but they were also not considered as living, thinking human beings with the same rights as males. A mistreated woman's humiliation is bad enough, but for members of the Dalit community, who are ruled by patriarchal institutions not just in the greater community but also in their own households, the pain is devastating. In other words, dalit women are doubly marginalized, first by the group that excludes them and then by the community in which they dwell, among the numerous narratives of depreciation and marginalization of dalits by the thick-skinned, inconsiderate individuals and classes.

Keywords- Women, Patriarchal, Dalit, Gender, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

The Dalit communities in Indian society have been subjected to unjust marginalization and subordination throughout human history. Even though one of the main goals of the Constitution's drafting was to end all forms of discrimination in order to create an egalitarian society, the idea of a perfect, faultless nation has always seemed unattainable due to the pervasiveness of the "casteism" system. Discrimination based on caste and gender is oppressive because it limits a person's access to resources and opportunities for personal growth. It also tends to rob them of their right to a prosperous and satisfying life. The oppressive nature of discrimination based on caste and gender curtails not only an individual's access to resources and possibilities for advancement in life but also tends to snatch away one's right to live a prosperous and fulfilling life. Endless stories of human progress have been concocted by various spokespersons and ambassadors of culture down the ages, those which glaringly highlight the seamless contributions of renowned researchers and academicians, eminent social activists and illustrious thinkers. But the tendency of the influential classes to promote bias and inequality is still a big stumbling block that has created a rift among the social classes and greatly hindered the subsequent growth of the Indian nation.

It is a fact to be mourned that despite the innumerable endeavors to ameliorate the depraved condition of the Dalits, their struggle to emancipate themselves from the vicious cycle of constant and indiscriminate suppression seems to be an eternal one. Truth to be told, the dehumanizing exploitation faced by Dalits is manifested quite discernibly in the domain of educational attainment and professional development, for the lower castes are always cornered and sidelined as undeserving and ignoble beings. These people are generally seen to be grappling with hostile circumstances that desist them from leading a life of dignity and convenience. Although special quotas were seen as a significant advancement in affirmative action, it is still one of the most contentious issues as to whether they genuinely helped the socio-economic circumstances of underprivileged people.

When gender disparities became a factor of segregation and intensified the social situation with increased hostility, discrimination took on a complex shape. Women have lived their lives as scapegoats, martyrs, victims, and mostly as puppets controlled by the repressive patriarchal powers in our society since the beginning of time. Like grass that unfurls underfoot, women too make attempts to breathe and exist as distinct individuals under male domination but the inexorable, gigantic structure of the patriarchal domain was not so painless to be surmounted without any difficulty. The phrase “angel in the house” popularized by Coventry Patmore arouses one's inert consciousness and makes him realize that the angel in consideration has been confined within the walls of domesticity quite like the bird with clipped wings bound to land. It is alarming to discern as to what extent the rights and roles of women are primarily centered on matters pertaining to home and housekeeping but so little on their personal development and well-being. In fact, women in pre-independence India did not have any legal standing with regard to movable or immovable property. Because of this, women were exploited not just economically but also socially. Far from being treated as breathing and thinking individuals who could exercise free will over their choices and actions, women were not even permitted to leave the house for the purpose of obtaining education or establishing a career. However, the agony of mortification that a wronged woman undergoes becomes intensely tormenting and excruciating when the woman is affiliated to the Dalit community for these neglected women are governed by patriarchal institutions not only in the larger community but also in their own household. In other words, amidst the multitudinous narratives of depreciation and marginalization of dalits by the thick-skinned, inconsiderate people and classes, dalit women face the plight of being doubly marginalized not only by the community that excludes them but also by the community they live in. As Gail Omvedt, a feminist sociologist has rightly called Indian Dalit woman a "Dalit among Dalit" (Paswan &Jaideva, 2002, p.72).

In India, Dalit women endure one of the most arduous and deplorable forms of living, one that combines extreme poverty with back-breaking labor in the workplace and in the home, where they are mistreated, demeaned and exploited. They have remained silent bystanders burning in the flames of wrath but utterly helpless against the exploitative,oppressive and barbaric behavior directed towards them. Undeniably, this sort of existence is akin to a living hell in which an individual is coerced into confronting the most precarious circumstances. The innumerable instances and evidence of unforgivable pain and assault inflicted upon the Dalit women incontestably suggest that Dalit women have no power or influence over their lives, their bodies, or their wages. Hunger, starvation, sickness, physical torture, rape, illiteracy, poor health, unemployment, instability, and inhumane treatment are all apparent signs of the severe expressions of violence, exploitation, and oppression that they face. The vast majority of dalit women are forced to survive and make their living within the most perilous dwelling conditions. Numerous assaults of sexual nature, rapes, and public displays of nudity are only a few testimonies to the inhumane practises that are used as a social mechanism to keep Dalit women in an inferior position in society. The vast majority of human rights offences committed against Dalit communities, the bulk of which involve women, go unreprimed. The number of employment opportunities and other ways to make a livelihood that are open to Dalit women is significantly lower than the number of jobs and other options that are open to Dalit males. Dalit women are regularly ignored by members of the police force, who also refuse to acknowledge their constitutional right to seek legal and judicial aid. In many situations, the court system is unable to enforce the provisions that are designed to shield Dalit women from being discriminated in the matters of caste or religion.

The perpetrators of the crimes that are committed against Dalit women are ignorant of the truth that the contribution of the latter to the society is indescribable. These hardworking women who are mercilessly disregarded and dismissed from every plane of recognition, in reality, deserve our appreciation. It is heart-wrenching to perceive that even after serving the nation tirelessly, they are not given due recognition for their beneficence but only castigated in the most compassionless ways by the unjust oppressors. In addition to being the potent and vigorous forces in the society that collectively serve as the cultural icon, the Dalit women stand steadfast as the symbol of robust strength, sturdiness and fortitude. A Dalit woman is the most notable aspect of an agrarian economy; even in her exhaustion, she tends to be highly motivated, innovative, diligent and keen to diversify the business with unstoppable labour. No matter how challenging the circumstances are and how drenched they are with excessive perspiration, but their faces will glow with sunburnt mirth and their hearts with unwavering spirit and determination. As the torchbearer of unlimited progress and development, a Dalit female earns her prominence as the actual builder and successor of a significant face in the culture of industrial production. Her contributions to the construction of new structures and the paving of new roads are significant; as a foilist at hospitals, textile mills, cement companies, and quarry sites she works with great efficiency leaving no stone unturned to accomplish the assigned task. However the extreme hardwork that she displays at work only suggests the presence of a tender, affectionate heart that hopelessly and unconditionally contemplates the welfare of her children waiting to be fed back at home. Having been left alone after the husband's death or forsaken by the husband and in-laws or completely thwarted and embittered because of a dipsomaniac domestic partner, these women are often the sole breadwinners of the family and perform multifarious chores to save the families from drowning in the sea of demolition. To be precise and exact, a lot of pain is being endured in present-day India by this selfless provider for one's loved ones, community, and country.

Challenges Faced By Dalit Women

Even though she works nonstop, a Dalit lady faces numerous difficult situations in order to maintain her family's survival as well as her own. It is abhorrent to see how desperately these oppressed people need a basic education—they have been, whether intentionally or not, creating favorable conditions for the wealthy elites. Their inability to read and write even with minimum proficiency is the root cause of their unending exploitation. As they fail to realize the nature of injustices entrapping them continuously in an atrocious cycle of dehumanization, they lose the ability to retaliate and stand against the wrongdoers and as a result, feel defeated, wronged and betrayed by society because of their own ignorance. Moreover, ideas encompassing women being ritually impure emerged along with physical curtailments on their activities and emphasized that these functions—menstruation, reproduction, and sexual—made women naturally clean. Her poor rank within the caste was justified by its views, and her incapacity was the root of all issues. To be honest, women from all castes have experienced Dalitness at its worst but women belonging to the lower castes and outcaste groups have severely endured the burden of patriarchal tyranny at the hands of both higher castes and males from their own caste. A lower caste that had strengthened its economic situation may try to advance up the hierarchy over several generations, but economic power alone was not enough. The caste also had to accommodate other cultural aspects of ceremonial purity, which included restricting women's freedom. As a matter of fact, a substantial amount of control exercised on women, notably over their sexuality and movement, as well as their inheritance rights, became an integral component of an elevation in the caste hierarchy. Women began to be seen as males' property, just as his farm or possessions were his. The birth of boys became essential since they were the only ones who could inherit property. Due to the impurity connected with menstruation, it was necessary for a son to be born in order for him to carry on the family name and execute specific rites, most crucially lighting his father's funeral pyre in order to ensure that he would have a better existence after death.

Historically, Dalit women have been more vulnerable and susceptible targets of particular forms of aggression. These pitiable figures have to go through unendurable detest and are subjected to outrageous verbal abuse and abominable remarks directed at their sexuality. Their existence on earth as humans is perpetually condemned by means of nude parading, mutilation, being intimidated and coerced to feed upon feces, being labeled with derogatory names, ripping out of teeth, tongue, and nails, and violence including murder after professing witchcraft. Men from upper castes absolutely lack conscience as they cast aspersions on the characters of Dalit women and make an arrogant display of their wrath against them by bullying them with rape threats. What is more sinister and alarming is the fact that these unfortunate women and girls become the victims of sexual assault and rape even inside their own communities. The contemptible attitude of the Dalit males to subjugate and harass them through sexual assault is nothing but a very degraded action to pacify their inflated male ego and make up for the lack of control they have in their own lives. Landlords and wealthy men from the upper classes often force these young women into prostitution and trafficking so that they may sexually exploit them. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has noted that “Dalit women face targeted violence, even rape and murder, by the state actors and powerful members of the dominant castes used to inflict political lessons and crush dissent within the community.” Truth to be told, the propagation of social, religious, and cultural traditions such as Devdasis and Joginis have humongously and disproportionately affected Dalit women. Blinded by their god-fearing frame of mind and unreasonable pious attitude, many parents in the rural areas often feel powerless to stop these rituals and ended up marrying their daughters over to God. The males of the Hindu population at large, the men within their own communities, and even their own spouses all contribute to the oppression of Dalit women. Most males who marry Dalit women are victims of male chauvinism, which manifests itself as a false sense of superiority. These men might be directionless and misguided, imbecilic and unemployed and too worthless to earn a penny, but triggered by the chauvinist ego, they demand an unquestionable authority over the household hierarchy; thereby relegating Dalit women to the background. From binge drinking and gambling, to stealing the money that Dalit women earn to feed their families and also going to the extent of mercilessly beating their spouses for the least provocation, everything is just a gloomy manifestation of the dismal condition of Dalit lives caught in a web of multiple perplexities.

Dalit women are frequently at the mercy of their higher caste exploitative employers for their survival, since they work in agricultural farms throughout the tilling, sowing, irrigating, cutting, and harvesting seasons. They consistently have to put in more time and effort for less pay than is allowed by law. Population control programmes have mostly focused on Dalit women in an effort to reduce their birthrates and improve their economic standing. Dalit women have told horrifying tales of how they and members of other communities used to get slaughtered in family planning camps, frequently without their knowledge. Unscrupulous multinational corporations try injectable contraception and other hormone medications on these helpless ladies. The atrocities committed against Dalits by upper castes have a direct impact on the daily lives of Dalit women. These atrocities include murder, stabbing, social boycott, loss of property, taking revenge by using public wells and tanks, being denied entry to public places like temples and movie theaters, and being denied employment. In comparison to women from higher castes, a disproportionately larger number of lower caste women, or Dalit women, live below the poverty line. Unskilled employees, landless agricultural laborers, factory workers, members of households with properties that are not economically viable, and those working typical menial jobs are the components that make up this

massive group. These women have experienced discrimination in regard to wages, physical harassment, maternity benefits, pension promotions, leave facilities, and other aspects of work security. As these women are unenlightened of the laws that could have ameliorated their deplorable condition, their opponents, the police, and the judicial system all seem to take advantage of their sad callowness. Because of the pitiful state of dalit women's standing, even women from higher castes take immense delight in exploiting the women from underprivileged castes. It won't be wrong to say that behind the glittery splendor of the lavish lives led by the higher caste women and men, as well as dalit males, lies nauseating treachery and villainy that have long been exploiting dalit women in nefarious ways. Because of this, it is of utmost importance and a pressing necessity to direct attention and policies towards the improvement of the lives of dalit women and to establish their equal position and distinct personalities as human beings.

The result of severely unbalanced social, economic, and political power equations is that Dalit women endure widespread gender- and caste discrimination and violence due to their vulnerable position at the bottom of India's caste, class, and gender hierarchies. The major risk characteristics of being Dalit and female, together with their socioeconomic weakness and lack of political power, heighten their exposure to potentially violent circumstances while also limiting their capacity to flee. Violence against dalit women is egregious proof of pervasive caste-based discrimination and exploitation against these women who are weaker than males in a patriarchal culture in terms of power relationships. Violence against Dalit women undermines not only the dignity and self-respect of Dalit women, but also their right to development by denying them opportunities, choices, and freedoms on many different levels. This study is based on 12 major forms of violence, nine of which occur in the general public (physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction, forced incarceration, and medical negligence), and three of which occur within families (female feticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence from biological and married family members). In India, there is a serious problem with sanctioned impunity on the part of the criminals, and Dalit women's rights to legal help and justice are frequently denied or purposely neglected and delayed by the police. There is a pattern of anomalies in criminal process and report filing delays, which promotes widespread impunity and poses major obstacles for Dalit women seeking justice. Impunity conveys the idea that gender and caste-based violence are acceptable and thus persist since there is no reliable means of deterring offenders. In many rape situations, dominant caste members or others in the society would put pressure on Dalit women to flee the situation or make a deal, often agreeing to a "compromise" in exchange for a minor payment. Another strategy is to file a counterclaim and level unfounded accusations against the lady or her family on behalf of the accused or a member of the ruling caste. These complaints are frequently subjected to more thorough investigations than the one the Dalit lady originally filed.

Several types of movements have been established at various periods in various sections of the country to end the practice of discrimination. As Gandhiji made the abolition of untouchability a part of his political platform and philosophical outlook, these campaigns attained the pinnacle. Owing to the genuine endeavors and profound ideologies of social reformers, including Jyotiba Phule, Shri Narayan Guru, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, E.V. Ramswami, G. N. Mudaliar, and others, this much detrimental issue was duly addressed. However, it was Babasaheb Ambedkar who amalgamated the fragmented ideas of justice, equality and rebellion and initiated a full-fledged movement that gradually grew throughout the nation to encompass all facets of human civilization. The social reformers had visualized a casteless society in which the dalits would be humanely treated and regarded with humility; they dreamt of working ceaselessly towards the restoration of an impartial organization that would ensure an equitable distribution of resources and the protection of dalits from the intolerant "Brahmins." It is because of the substantial endeavors of those eminent reformers that in the present times, the Indian Constitution has a number of clauses aimed at eradicating caste distinctions and also those clauses that promote gender equality, women's equality and give the state the authority to enact laws that positively discriminate in favor of women. In case, Dalit women are severely mistreated and oppressed in our society, they may be given certain special protection under article 14 of the Constitution. As far as the requirements of Article 14 are concerned, a fair categorization for the weaker members of our society can also be made.

The Constitution's Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, sex, colour, and place of birth, while Article 16 guarantees everyone equal job opportunities. Article 39 guarantees equal compensation for equal labor, promotes justice on the basis of equal opportunity, and provides free legal aid by suitable laws or programmes or in any other means to ensure that no person is denied justice owing to financial or other impairment. "The state shall provide for appropriate and humane working conditions and for maternity aid," Article 42 states. "Advance with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker portions of the people and to preserve them against social injustice and all sorts of exploitation," Article 46 states. Article-47 requires the state to "promote public health" and "improve the level of nutrition and standard of life of its people." Encourage peace and unity among Indians regardless of religion, language, region, or socioeconomic status; reject customs that degrade women. Article 243 D mandates proportional seating for reserved castes and tribes. Women from the selected castes and tribes must get one-third of the seats. Each Panchayat shall reserve at least one-third of direct-election seats for women.

Recommendations

According to recent surveys and research, Dalit women who belong to the highest echelons of society receive equal benefits from schooling and have comparable levels of social and economic prosperity as women from other upper castes. They constitute a comparatively tiny fraction of the dalit community overall, although they are fully aware of the government's welfare initiatives. Therefore, the first generation of SC girls who live in rural areas need to be given attention by the government and other organizations. The main hindrance probably is that the government's programmes are not effectively explained to women, and it is vital to acquire their opinions on the welfare programmes that spend a lot of money on the advancement of Dalits. Unfortunately the money is not used effectively for their elevation. Several of the strategies are overlooked because they are not well popularized. The government's coaching programmes for dalit women have helped many of them prepare to take part in competitive exams. However it is distressing to see that the few creamy dalit women have cornered the needy dalit women, these programmes likewise fail to reach them. Due to the socially advanced communities' and the better-off dalits' disregard of these dalit women, this creates an unfavorable socioeconomic environment. Several women's education scholarships are available to assist women from disadvantaged backgrounds and provide them an opportunity to pursue an education. There are several scholarships available as well to help females in India pursue their careers by returning to school or enrolling in different training facilities where they may enhance their studies. Also, a lot of NGOs encourage females in India so that they might benefit from schooling. The Indian government is also allocating cash for programmes that empower women and other efforts that do the same. So to say, both the government and non-governmental organizations (NGO) offer grants to women who want to better their life. These funds can be used by married women or single moms to further their education to the degree level, as well as for postgraduates and Ph.D. After discovering that women may do better than males if they are adequately educated and equipped, these awards for women are receiving the majority of the support from various firms. Last but not the least, there should be a reservation policy, particularly for ladies, for both employment and entrance. In recent years, dalit women have become more conscious of their rights and the government's assistance programmes for higher education. Information technology should supplement this and enable even the most isolated rural resident to use it. It is quite advantageous that the UGC has granted SC students a 15% seat reservation and ST students a 7.5% reservation for college. In addition to that, in order to ensure the effective implementation of government directives and to ameliorate the situation of university-level dalit students, the university has designated SC/ST cells as well.

CONCLUSION

Using physical force against women is one of the most heinous examples of gender inequality, and it can take many different forms. Such violence is frighteningly common, not only in impoverished and economically challenged groups but also in wealthy communities and modern societies. Dalit women themselves must immediately concentrate on forming a feminist position on this issue. Group- and gender-specific policies and programmes are needed for Dalit women in order to address the issue of multiple deprivations. Despite the fact that India has a number of positive policies for socially marginalised groups and women and also guarantees the right to education for everyone, Scheduled Caste (SC) women and girls still face the scourge of illiteracy and marriage before they reach the age of majority. Because of the higher rates of newborn and child mortality that are prevalent among Dalit people, it is imperative that comprehensive health policies be enacted, particularly in the areas of maternal and child health. The root of the problem that restricts the roles that Dalit women may play and the chances available to them is the helplessness and dependency that results from a dearth of suitable career options, inability to read or write, restricted movement, and lack of legal autonomy are all characteristics of this group. The governments of the State and Central India have created a number of programmes specifically aimed at uplifting Dalit women. But, the advantages of such plans and programmes almost seldom make their way to them. There is no end to their tribulations; life is challenging and fraught with unhappiness. The problem of Dalit women is of utmost significance in today's Indian society, particularly in the context of emerging social movements that are largely rendered inaudible as a result of the constriction of their democratic space.

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