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Women dalitism and untouchability: role of education as means to empower women with special reference to Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper deals with the position of dalit women in Indian society even in the twenty first century. At the level of social reality Hindu religion has so far functioned within the context of a caste society. The woman of the so-called higher castes pays for the dominant role gained by her male counterpart over the rest of society. A rigid control over higher caste women in the context of their body and granting a lot of room for lower caste women not as freedom but as a space for brahminical male licentiousness are results of brahminic patriarchy. Women of all caste groups, therefore, experienced this 'dalitism'. It was women of the lowest caste and outcaste groups who experienced the brunt of patriarchal repression both in the hands of the upper caste and in the hands of men. Raping dalit women is one more weapon in the well-stocked private armies of rich upper caste overlords in India's villages. The education is the main weapon which can help us to eradicate women dalitism and empower them to get a unique and respectable status in the coming digital society. Himachal Pradesh is playing its dominating role to take due steps for the empowerment of women. The researcher has tried to discuss some major steps and implemented policies regarding the empowerment of dalit women.

Keywords: Dalit, education, untouchability, women dalitism, empowerment.

Introduction

God has created the universe without any discrimination. But, human being has categorized himself as per caste, creed and profession. There are many classes and castes of human being in the world the lowest of which is dalits. The caste system is the dominant and ruling philosophy of Hinduism, directly linking power and social order. The caste system is the oldest surviving social phenomenon in the world. The inherent superiority of some castes and the inferiority of others is one of Hinduism's central elements, and when a person is born into a particular caste, it is not possible to change one's caste to another. The Outcaste (Avarnas) within the varnashram 3000 years' is social oppression, political exploitation, economically deprived and culturally dominated. These are associated with menial job, service provider, facilitator, etc. and officially known as Scheduled Castes (GOI Act, 1935) [9]. Dalit is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchable (Webster, John, 1999) [23]. This is dominant social orders of the 'untouchables' which are violating the most basic goal of society to guarantee security and happiness for people known as Dalit. The word 'Dalit' does not appear in any sacred scriptures or historical texts of India. It is actually a word based on 17th-century European notions about the Indian caste system. The word is derived from Sanskrit, and means 'ground', 'suppressed', 'crushed', or 'broken to pieces'. It was first used by Jyotirao Phule in the nineteenth century, in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile 'untouchable' castes of the twice-born Hindus (Oliver, Mendelsohn and Marika, Vicziany, 1998) [16]. According to Premasagar, Victor (2002) [17] the term expresses their 'weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian society.' Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi coined the word Harijan, translated roughly as 'Children of God', to identify the former Untouchables. The terms 'Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes' (SC/ST) are the official terms used in Indian government documents to identify former 'untouchables' and tribes. However, in 2008 the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, noticing that 'Dalit' was used interchangeably with the official term 'scheduled castes', called the term 'unconstitutional' and asked state governments to end its use. After the order, the Chhattisgarh government ended the official use of the word 'Dalit' (Express India, 18th January 2008 [4].

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Women Dalitism: It is true that both the elite and the populist currents of Hindu opinion and sensibilities regarding woman carry a deep impress of mother-goddess cults and forms of worship. At the level of social reality Hindu religion has so far functioned within the context of a caste society. The woman of the so-called higher castes pays for the dominant role gained by her male counterpart over the rest of society. A rigid control over higher caste women in the context of their body and granting a lot of room for lower caste women not as freedom but as a space for brahminical male licentiousness are results of brahminical patriarchy. Women from lower castes were considered so lowly and degraded in life that their body was a free terrain of colonization (Vidyut, Bhagwat, 1995) ^[22].

Many Hindu spiritual leaders assert that though the caste system is present in the Hindu Vedas, it was meant to serve only as a division of labour and not meant to stratify or discriminate social groups based on caste. There are no verses present in any Hindu text that support caste based discrimination, though the Manu Smriti, a text written several years later after the various Hindu texts, contains verses that assert superiority of certain castes over the other. In the Bhagvad Gita (Shlokas 41-44, Chapter 18th), Lord Krishna asserts that an individual's caste is determined by his duty and not his birth. Hindu texts, however, do not mention the presence or discrimination of a Dalit caste, indicating that Dalit discrimination arose in society due to the corruption of religious practices by social hierarchy.

When we talk about Dalit women they suffer from triple discrimination as oppressed by the so-called high caste people (which equally affects both male and female Dalits), oppressed by the design of the Hindu patriarchal system and oppressed by Dalit males. These women are also vulnerable to serious health issues, sex trafficking, domestic violence, and suffer from social, political, and economic powerlessness (Kiran, 2009) ^[13]. Dalit women are the dalit of the dalit in Indian society - the thrice oppressed victims of centuries of social, political, economic, cultural and religious pressures. Dalit women in India live a precarious existence combining abject poverty with grinding labor in the fields and work places; and in the home they are abused and used, powerless and exploited (Gnanadason, Aruna, 1990) ^[7, 8]. The coming of patriarchal Hinduism and its caste system into India institutionalized the oppression of the outcaste dalits and this had a particularly deleterious effect on women. The control on women's sexuality was essential for the development of a patriarchal caste hierarchy, both for the maintenance of caste and for the legitimating and control of inheritance. Restrictions of time, place and space were therefore imposed on women to ensure the purity of caste by avoiding the danger of inter-caste 'pollution' (Gnanadason, Aruna, 1990) ^[7, 8]. To add to this millions of dalit women live in an atmosphere of constant violence in their homes in the hands of drunken husbands and sometimes other members of the family. And yet, they often single handedly slave at home and in the fields to keep their children free from hunger (Joshi, R. Barbara, 1986) ^[12].

While discrimination based on caste has been prohibited and untouchability abolished under the Constitution of India, (Art. 15 and 17) ^[2] discrimination and prejudice against Dalits in South Asia remains (Srividya, P. V., 2011) ^[19]. Since its independence in 1947, India has implemented an affirmative policy of reservation, the scope of which was further expanded in 1974, to set aside and provide jobs and

education opportunities to Dalit (Ghosg, Partha, 1997) ^[6]. By 1995, of all jobs in India, 17.2 percent of the jobs were held by Dalits, greater than their proportion in Indian population. In 1997, India democratically elected K. R. Narayanan, a Dalit, as the nation's President. Many social organizations too have proactively promoted better conditions for Dalits through improved education, health and employment. Among rural women, there are further divisions that hinder women's empowerment. The most notable ones are education levels and caste and class divisions. Women from lower castes (the scheduled castes, other backward castes, and tribal communities) are particularly vulnerable to maternal mortality and infant mortality. They are often unable to access health and educational services, lack decision-making power, and face higher levels of violence. Among women of lower caste and class, some level of education has shown to have a positive impact on women's empowerment indicators (measuredhs.com/) ^[14].

Major Issues of Dalit Women:

- ♣ Untouchability / Caste discrimination
- ♣ Victim of inter-caste marriage
- ♣ Economic backwardness
- ♣ Ignorance
- ♣ Absolute poverty
- ♣ Severe condition of reproductive health
- ♣ High fertility rate
- ♣ Sexual exploitation and harassment
- ♣ Lack of employment opportunity
- ♣ Compulsion for prostitution
- ♣ Illiteracy
- ♣ No importance in family
- ♣ Lowest life expectancy
- ♣ No representation at political level including policy and decision levels.

Eradication of Women Dalitism and Empowerment of Dalit Women through Education: Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into mainstream society. Women's rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus, reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women, therefore, is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of discrimination that hinder their access to services (Upadhyay, R. (2012) ^[21].

Before beginning to examine methods of improving enrolment in primary education and literacy rates, it is important to know why education is such an important topic in development studies. The past century has been characterized by a global expansion of education. Alongside this growth in education has also been an increase in the gap between different social strata (Desai and Kulkarni, 2008) ^[3]. Education can be a way to increase the income of impoverished people. Education helps to ensure that benefits of growth are experienced by all. Economic perspectives see education as a means to make individuals more productive in

the workplace and at home. It can also be seen as a means of empowering socially and economically deprived groups into seeking political reform. By using any of these reasons as motivation to pursue educational development, governments are attempting to generate some form of social or economic equality for the population. Dalit leaders had concluded that the best way to change lives, achieve measurable results in their community, and escape their plight of oppression was through education. They wanted education that serves the whole person and includes community development (redinternational.org) [18].

Ensuring access to education for the Dalit women of India has been the greatest challenge for the Indian government in diminishing the social effects of the caste system, which still remain entrenched in Indian society. There have been many different reasons proposed as to why the Dalit women suffer from low rates of literacy and primary education enrolment, but the most realistic one describes history and unequal access as the causes. The ancient caste system of India, which has resulted in the social and economic oppression of the Dalit women, continues to play a dominant role in India. Because of unchanging social norms and behaviour, incentives to pursue education were minimal for the Dalit women who were still physically and emotionally harassed. Increasing efforts to eliminate caste discrimination combined with additional attempts to increase the accessibility and appeal for education have contributed to the slow progression of Dalit education for women. While some benefits of social programs and government policies designed to increase primary education rates can be noticed, the Dalit literate population still remains much lower than that of the rest of India. There remains still, hostility, oppression and flaws in social programs in Indian society that prevent an increase in education growth. Despite efforts to decrease caste discrimination and increase national social programs, the Dalit women of India continue to experience low enrolment rates and a lack of access to primary education in comparison to the rest of India (Fraser, Erik, 2010) [5]. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among dalit women are many. The following are the main reasons:

1. Resistance from the family to send girls to schools.
2. Fear of insecurity in villages.
3. Lack of physical facilities like accommodation, school, transport and medical facilities.
4. The girls were forced to take care of the siblings when the parents are away at work.
5. Girls were forced to do domestic chores which prevent 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 sick mentality and unemployed parents girls were forced to work.
9. Many were forced to get married at young age, which stop schooling.
10. Social restriction is that the girls should stop education after marriage.
11. In some areas there are complaints from dalit women teachers of 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.
15. No usability of present education skills in the domestic affairs of dalits.

As a result of education there are 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 reference to the rate of literacy among dalits. The literacy rate is 31.48% for boys and 10.93% for girls. Dalits women belonging to the creamy layer of the society are better with good education and socially and economically they are well off like other high castes. They are fully aware of the welfare schemes provided by the Government and their percentage is very low when compared with the total dalit population. In rural areas, the first generation girls from SC category need the attention of Government and other social organizations. The women are not properly informed about the Government schemes and 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. Here are some suggestions for the better implementation of the schemes to dalit women:

1. Competitive spirit should be instilled in the girls.
2. Selection and identification of the talented girls should be done correctly.
3. Identify the candidate at college level for coaching.
4. Result oriented teaching is necessary.
5. Group discussions, quiz, and seminars to instill confidence.
6. Teacher: Student ratio 1:20 or below.
7. Monitoring by the teacher after class hours.
8. Loan facility.

It is the slogan of GOI 'empowered women, empowered family' and the Govt. is taking sincere steps to empower the unreached women (Fig. 1). New job opportunities are created for women and Gujrat state has placed 39100 women which is 45.6% share in the placement of women, highest in the country. Such steps should be taken especially for the empowerment of 'dalit' women.



Fig 1: 'empowered women, empowered family'.

Financial aid for uniform for girls, maps, charts, examination grant, laboratory facilities, and library facilities should be provided for them. Special coaching should be given for meritorious dalit girls to compete for IAS and IPS exams. Hostel facilities for dalit girls at all levels of education

starting from primary school up to higher education should be provided reservation policy especially for girls should be allotted in both admission and employment. There is an increased awareness in recent years among dalit women about their rights and about the Government welfare schemes about higher education. This should be augmented by information technology, which should reach even to the remote rural citizen (Muthumary, J.)^[15].

Facilities to be given for Empowerment of Dalit Women:

Women seem to be invisible in Indian society. They are being subjected to social, psychological, physical and domestic violence and other forms of atrocities, suppression and deprivation. Almost 65% of women depend on agricultural operations. Though women are the best resource managers they are being paid less. The women in agricultural sector face problems of patriarchal culture and values, caste discrimination and economic exploitation. Hence, it is time to create a space for women, to educate and to empower them to stand and struggle against violence meted out to them. Space should be given for dalit women to make their own decisions. Dalit women must equally share power with men at all levels and hence the need to work for the empowerment of dalit women (isiblr.org)^[11]. They should be given opportunities to do the work even in small groups to generate the income sources as shown in Fig. 2 as follows.

The following facilities should be provided to dalit women or dalit girl children for their empowerment:

1. Nutrition: Malnutrition in dalit female children high infant mortality should be corrected.
2. Health: Unclean surroundings – proper accommodation should be provided.
3. Family welfare: SC – women get married very soon high fertility – affect health.
4. Safe drinking water.
5. Electricity in village.
6. Essential goods and medicines.
7. Retail outlets not available.
8. Fair price shops – necessary.



Fig 2: Women empowerment by working in groups

Women Empowerment in Himachal Pradesh: For empowering women in the hill State, the Government has declared a 50% reservation for them in all Panchayati Raj Institutions (P. R. I.'s) and Urban Local Bodies. The decision of the Government to enhance the social security pension from ₹200 to ₹300 a month would benefit at least ₹68,455 widows in the State. As much as ₹11,001 is being provided to poor and helpless girls as marriage grant under the Mukhya Mantri Kanyadaan Yojna and ₹25,000 grant to young widows for their remarriage. A financial assistance of ₹1,000 a year is being provided to widows, helpless and divorcee women to bear the expenses of two children besides social security pension under the Mother Teresa

Asahay Matri Sambal Yojna (Staff Correspondent, 2008)^[20]. The State Government is spending about 30 crore every year on various programmes aimed at welfare and upliftment of women of the State. In the education sector Pre matric scholarship is launched by the Govt. This scholarship is awarded to those students whose parents/ guardians income from all sources does not exceed ₹2.00 lakh per annum. A scholarship of ₹2,250 per student per annum to Day scholars and ₹4,500 per annum to hostellers of class IX and X is being given. During the year 2013-14, total 14,127 SC students have been benefited under this scheme. Mata Shabri Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojna has been started during the financial year 2011-12 for benefitting women belonging to BPL families of SC category. Under the scheme, 50% subsidy, subject to a maximum of ₹1,300 is given to eligible women for purchase of gas connection. As per schematic norms every year 75 SC BPL women will be benefited in each Vidhan Sabha Constituency. For the year 2014-15 there is a budget provision of ₹66.00 lakh. An amount of ₹65.98 lakh have been spent upto December, 2014 for 2290 gas connection released. The Himachal Pradesh Government has announced to generate employment and self-employment avenues for unemployed girls and women in order to make them self-dependent. Under this scheme ₹2,500 are provided to the women having annual income less than ₹35,000 for carrying income generating activities. During the year 2014-15 a budget provision of ₹7.00 lakh has been made. 244 women have been benefited under the scheme and an amount of ₹6.10 lakh has been spent upto December, 2014 (Directorate of Economics & Statistics (2015)^[3a].

The Govt. of Himachal Pradesh has launched various schemes individually as well as in collaboration with the centre Govt. for the empowerment of dalit women. These schemes are as follows:

1. Balika Samridhi Yojna
2. Construction/Expansion of Hostel Buildings for Working Women
3. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh
4. Swadhar Yojana
5. Scheme for Construction of Hostels for SC Boys/Girls
6. Improvement of Harijan Bastis & Drinking Water Supply Schemes
7. Pre Metric Scholarship to the Children of those engaged in unclean Occupation
8. Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedker Chhatervriti Yojna for SC Girls
9. Kishori Shakti Yojna
10. Beti Hai Anmol Yojna
11. Mata Shabri Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojna (<http://himachal.gov.in/welfare/Download.htm>)^[10]

In our society women have been given a special place since ages. In the present day dalit women are progressing more and proving their mettle in every arena whether it be education, politics, health, Govt. jobs, and agriculture or household jobs. The ex-chief minister of Uttar Pradesh sushree Mayawati and Lok Sabha Adyaks Smt. Meera Kumar are the examples of empowerment of women or dalit women. Himachal Pradesh Government has been honored at the national level by the Central Govt. for its excellent steps and programmes undertaken for the empowerment of women in Himachal. Women in Himachal are employed in vocational jobs. Education of females in rural areas has taken an edge in Himachal Pradesh. Earlier the women who used to

be busy with household work are now working in anganwadis, handlooms, learning sewing, weaving etc. The Himachal Government is giving a serious concern towards the empowerment of the women in the society like education, funds to widows and poor women, strict punishments against female infanticide etc. The result of all these initiatives by Himachal Government towards growth of women in society has made Himachal on the top list among all the other states in terms of empowerment of women.

A survey done by India's renowned magazine and electronic channel revealed that Himachal excels in working for women empowerment and has been awarded as the 'Diamond State' award in the previous years. Himachal Pradesh has come out to be the first state in the nation in which 50% reservation is given to the women in Panchayati Raj Institutions and other urban jobs. Moreover, all the Panchayats in Himachal Pradesh having large female population are provided with extra fund of ₹ 5 lacs for the progress and empowerment of women (Adonis, 2010) [1]. Thus, the time is changing now and more steps needs to be taken for the empowerment of women in the country also.

Conclusion

It is concluded in the end that Dalit women are affected by the burden of both caste and gender and even farther removed from legal protections. An example of this is the use of Dalit girls in the practice of 'Joghinis' – which literally means 'female servant of God' – where girls are forced into prostitution. Caste is a system of social stratification based on heredity and, within the caste group members are restricted in their choice of occupation and social participation. Marriage outside of the caste is usually prohibited till now. The Government policy of reservations in education and employment spheres has played a remarkable role for Dalit women and Adivasis. Even though there are criticisms on implementation side, the reservation facilities have given certain economic means of livelihood to over 1.5 million Dalits. Dalit women are not counted as a homogeneous community but the section of Dalits which has utilized the reservation policy and reached in the higher education. This section has made the social mobility which will vary from state to state, district to district, community to community, caste to caste across the country among this disadvantaged group. There have been many attempts over the past one hundred and fifty years to help increase the quality of life for the Dalit women of India through development focused on enrolment in primary education. Education provides individuals with the means to increase their income and to engage in economic activities. In addition, it can help to empower dalit women to lobby for social change through political activism. The lack of incentives to pursue education for the Dalit women of India can be traced back to a long history of mistreatment and oppression. Still occurring today, caste harassment makes teaching environments unstable for caste children, it places caste homes on the outskirts of towns so that children have greater distances to walk to school, and it economically suppresses the Dalits so that they are unable to pay for their girl children's education. Many suggestions, both traditional and modern, have arisen on how to go about resolving issues surrounding Dalit primary enrolment. Night classes and all-Dalit schools provided a safer learning environment for the Dalits, but did not address any issues of caste conflict. Twenty first century policies are helping officially decrease

some of the animosity and inequality between groups so that the Indian Government can have a greater focus on national primary enrolment rates. Funding increasing supplies of textbooks to Indian schools do not address any of the core reasons as to why dalits are not attending school. Instead of increasing enrolment, additional textbooks only had an effect on increased performance levels. Providing free medication at school has proven successful both in increasing the health of children which prevents absenteeism, and in increasing enrolment levels. Minor increases in incentives for Dalit girl children to pursue primary education have been beneficial, but not sufficient in equalizing the enrolment gap between the Dalits and members of upper castes. In order for significant progress to be made in increasing the primary enrolment rates of Dalit girl children, development organizations must continue to explore varying levels of incentives and pursue national social equality in India. The other states of country should take the lesson from Himachal Pradesh regarding empowerment of women in the coming era. Let us start from self to stop violence against women and contribute in the empowerment of especially 'dalit' women Fig 3.



Fig 3: 'say no to violence against women'.

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