



Human Rights in India: Dalit Women Perspective

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Abstract: All human beings have the right to live as human beings. Human rights are not conferred or given. They already exist in society. The concept of human rights aims at protection of rights like right to life, liberty and property. These rights are attributed to human beings irrespective of class, caste, gender, colour and religion. In Indian society, due to the social barriers such as casteism, untouchability, patriarchy, disparity, superstition, religious exploitation and class variations, specific groups are becoming weaker and marginalised. These groups are facing the problems of identity crisis, deprivation, discrimination and atrocities. These marginalised groups are also identified and recognised as Dalits. Today every tenth Indian is a Dalit woman yet invisible and marginalised. Dalit women constitute 9.79 crore, or approximately 48 per cent of the total Dalit population, 16 per cent of the total female population and 8 per cent of the total Indian population. Violence on human beings in any form results in violation of human rights. Human rights of Dalits and women in general are normally violated by high castes and powerful communities to practice and exhibit patriarchy and castism. But human rights of Dalit women are violated extremely and in peculiar form. Dalit women are in worst position than Dalits in general, in terms of sex ratio, wages, employment, occupation, assets, education, health, social mobility and political participation.

Key Words: Dalit Women, Human Rights, Forms of Violence, Women Organizations, Untouchability,

Introduction

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In Indian society, due to the social barriers such as casteism, untouchability, patriarchy, disparity, superstition, religious exploitation and class variations, specific groups are becoming weaker and marginalised. These groups are facing the problems of identity crisis, deprivation,

discrimination and atrocities. These marginalised groups are also identified and recognised as Dalits. Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world. They make up more than 2 percent of the world's population, still they are marginalised

Violence:

Women in patriarchal society always are delegated to a secondary role in the society. The status of women in India has been that of a dependant, subservient and unequal. In the case of Dalit women, she suffers from three oppressions; gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalised communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, the



'untouchables'. Many Dalit women live in constant violence in their homes in the hands of drunken husbands and sometimes other family members. Naturally Dalit women are hired to do the work of cleaning utensils, washing clothes in upper caste homes. During this time Dalit women are faced domestic violence by upper caste women. Since the Dalit women work in the homes, fields, and other places they are exposed to sexual harassment and exploitation.

The Devadasi system of temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. Devadasi cult provides a license for prostitution with religious sanction. Thousands of Dalit women are forced to become maidens of God in many villages. In this system Dalit women are induced into prostitution in the name of religion. They are taken from their families; never to see them again they are later sexually exploited by the temple priest and local land lords or upper caste men and finally auctioned secretly into prostitution.

Dalit Women are threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. Dalit women are easy targets for any perpetrator upper caste considers them to be sexually available. Hence they are largely unprotected by the state machinery. Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft are only experienced by Dalit women. Further Dalit women have been faced to various kinds of sexual violence such as rape,

molestation, kidnapping, abduction, homicide, physical and mental torture, immoral traffic and sexual abuse. The National Crime Records Bureau data records reveal that more than four Dalit women are raped every day in India.

With regard to the girl students who could take up education, a majority of them face adverse situations, especially in the villages. The girl students belongs to Dalit communities who are staying in government hostels are also facing critical situations. Recent news in the dailies were reveal that many inmates of the hostels became pregnant by the male wardens. But the governments in many cases do not respond seriously against the culprits. Due to these unethical situations took place in government hostels, parents are unwilling to continue the education of girl children and they arrange marriages at an early age.

The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. Most of the atrocity cases the police men says "give me complaint in writing", and the complainant leaves. In many cases FIRs are wrongly written, tampered with, the names of the accused are deleted from the FIRs or falsely recorded. Often the police not only take money from the perpetrators and providing protection to the criminals than to the Dalit women. In the case of violence against Dalit women, there is a collusion between the police, the medical officer, the investigative officer and all concerned authorities, which works to protect the perpetrators of the crime. Human Rights Watch reveals the difficulties in obtaining judgment in favour of Dalits. "Dalits (so-called



Untouchables) and tribal groups continued to face discrimination and violence. The difficulties the Dalit community has in obtaining justice were highlighted by recent court verdicts in four cases in Bihar and one in Andhra Pradesh states. In each of the cases, the courts overturned convictions in high-profile incidents that took place between 1991 and 2000 involving killings of Dalits due to lack of evidence, highlighting the failure of prosecutorial authorities¹

Impunity For Violence Against Dalit Women:

The systemic nature of violence against Dalit women is accompanied by equally systemic patterns of impunity. In 2006, the official conviction rate for Dalit atrocity cases was just 5.3 percent.² Impunity for violence, therefore, is an intrinsic factor in the maintenance of the caste system and caste and gender based norms circumscribing Dalit women's fundamental rights and freedoms. The study of 500 Dalit women's cases of violence revealed: In less than 1% of cases were the perpetrators convicted by the courts. In 17.4% of instances of violence, police obstructed the women from attaining justice. In 26.5% of instances of violence, the perpetrators and their supporters, and/or the community at large, prevented the women from obtaining justice. In 40.2% of instances of violence, the women did not attempt to obtain legal or community remedies for the violence primarily out of fear of the perpetrators or social dishonour if (sexual) violence was revealed, or ignorance of the law, or the belief that they would not get justice.³

Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or

the considerations of caste and gender biases, can lead acquittal. The failure to successfully prosecute cases of rape also allows against women to continue unabated, and in the caste context, encourages the use of rape as a tool to punish and silence Dalit communities.

Role of Governments and NGOs:

The government of India has identified in its Tenth Five Year Plan 2002-2007 the empowerment of socially disadvantaged groups such as Dalit and Women as priority strategies for development of the nation. Complementing this development priority is the elimination of discrimination and all forms violence against women and the girl child, which is a central objective of the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001 in attempting to bridge the gap between *de jure* equal status and *de facto* pervasive gender inequality. As the National Policy states, "All form of violence against women, physical and mental, whether at domestic or societal levels, including those arising from customs, traditions or accepted practices, shall be dealt with effectively with a view to eliminate its incidence. Institutions and mechanisms/schemes for assistance will be created and strengthened for prevention of such violence, including sexual harassment at workplace and customs like dowry; for the rehabilitation of the victims of violence and for taking effective action against the perpetrators of such violence. A special emphasis will also be laid on programmes and measures to deal with trafficking in women and girls".⁴

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on



December 10th, 1948. The preamble of Indian constitution adequately empowers the central and state government to eliminate human rights violation in the country. National Commission for SC/ST shows that approximately 10,000 cases of human right violations on Dalits are reported every month. But what is even more disturbing, is that only one out of ten of the cases are reported annually whilst, nine go unreported.

Many Dalit Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), both in India and abroad, have been involved in raising the plight of India's untouchables. One of the most important tasks of these Dalit NGO'S, many of the Dalit NGO's are involved in establishing schools, scholarships, and basic supplements to Dalits in the rural parts of India. NGO's such as the Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice and the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights are involved in bringing the plight of the Dalit people to the attention of the international community and to document and publicise human rights abuse.

Role of Dalit Women Organisations:

Dalit women in India were feeling alienated both from the women's movement and the Dalit movement discourse. Within the women's movement, Dalit issues have not been taken seriously. Within the Dalit movement, women have been ignored. Since the late 1980s, the Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform created, developed and controlled by themselves through which they could forge their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problems as Dalits and as women. Conscious that the call for a separate platform could be

interpreted as a divisive move by both Dalit men and non-Dalit women, the proponents of such a special movement. Rather they assert that there is need for strong alliances between the Dalit movement, the women's movement and the Dalit women's movement if their common vision of social, economic and political equality and justice for all is to be realized.

Over the years of Dalit women's organisations and movements have increasingly voiced their specific concerns and asserted their separate identity, calling for solidarity from the international community. The fourth world conference on women in Beijing in 1995 saw for the first time international recognition given to the discrimination faced by the Dalit women. Dalit women also played a crucial role in the World conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001, where Dalit issues were brought to the international attention. following the National Conference on violence against Dalit women in Delhi on 7th,8th March 2006, Justicia et Pax Netherlands, Cordiad, and CMC as members of the Dalit Network Netherlands (DNN), in collaboration with the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR, India), the National Federation of Dalit Women (India), the All India Dalit Women's Rights Forum India, Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO, Nepal), the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) and other Dalit Women's rights organisations, responded to the request of Dalit Women and organized the International Conference on the Human rights of Dalit Women on 20th, 21st November 2006 in The Hague, The Netherlands. It is argued that this



international recognition of the Dalit women's rights as human rights creates a sort of moral expectation on the domestic political system to address the issue of caste-based oppression.

The Hague conference resolved as, "Therefore, we, the participants of the Hague Conference on Dalit Women's Rights, call upon the respective governments in Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to take seriously the voices of Dalit women as they explain their specific situation, to support them in asserting their rights and to ensure Dalit women and girls are brought on par with the general population in terms of overall development (e.g. poverty reduction) within a period of five years. We call upon the International community to undertake and support every possible measure to fight the widespread discrimination, violence and impunity committed against Dalit women".⁵

The Hague Conference advised both men and women belongs Dalit community have change the irrational and wrongful attitudes and particularly directed the Dalit men as "Change your attitude; change your mind set. You must see the world through Dalit women's eyes. Women must be prioritized in the Dalit movement. You must acknowledge that violence against women is a problem in our community; even the ratio of female children is dropping- the movement must address this openly. You must respect the right of women to decide when to have children- indeed, the integrity of our bodies".⁶The Conference also gave direction to Dalit women as "Stop following brahmanical practices, including discriminatory practices regarding childbearing and raising, the

feeding, educating and care of children. Assert your rights and break your silence. Come together with other Dalit women to fight domestic violence and create social security systems to support the survivors of domestic violence".⁷

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10th, 1948. The preamble of Indian constitution adequately empowers the central and state government to eliminate human rights violation in the country. Though the Constitution of India guarantees all its citizens human rights irrespective of their caste, creed, gender infavour of justice, Equality, Liberty and Fraternity but the implementation of these principles has unfortunately, been a terrible failure.

Conclusion:

Many years ago in his works and speeches, Dr.Ambedkar explicitly draws out the links between the subordination of women and the caste system. He argues that, Women are the gateway to the caste system.The caste system consolidates further the subordination of women. Brahminical culture is responsible for the subordination of the women. The Hindu Code Bill is a counter to caste-based patriarchal laws. Dalit women have a specific identity and are a political force. Violent practices against women must be opposed.The common agenda of JothibhaPhule and Ambedkar to ameliorate the conditions of the oppressed majority includes the emancipation women. The starting point of their emancipation initiates with the advocacy of Dalit women to become equal women, so that the caste system and its structural foundations are effectively



rooted out. They could debase all the rationalizations of the gender and caste inequality by pitting rationality and the ideals of democracy as against the ideology of natural inequality. The road map laid down by Phule and later on consolidated and codified in the modern Constitution of India by B.R. Ambedkar follows the elevation of Dalitwomen to the totalitarian restructuring of Indian Society.

Dalit organizations, NGOs and Human Rights bodies at national and international level could play a vital role to protect Dalit women rights and also brought to issues to global scenario. Then only the respective governments will act. Dalit women are also striving continuously on their grievances and make the society more progressive and dynamic. As Ambedkar said "Rights are protected by laws but by the social and moral conscience of society".

In a country like India where incidence of poverty and levels of unemployment are high, government policies need to be monitored constantly to ensure that social costs are minimized. On the whole, the deprivations of the vicious cycle of being poor, low-caste and money have not been contained by the new economic ventures and intern aggravated the mutually supportive hardships to women, especially to Dalit women.

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⁶ibid, P.25

⁷ibid, P.25