

THE STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA'S CASTE BASED SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT : *This paper presents the devastating effects of the caste system on the educational, social and economical status of Dalit women in modern India. The aim is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture Dalit women face every day of their miserable lives. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by society. There are many examples to brave Dalit women who being quite aware of the horrifying truth and despite the heavy odds still strive to put an end to their suffering. In doing so they most certainly ensure a brighter future for the generations to come. “ Dalit women face a triple burden of caste, class and gender” in which she sums up the plight of Dalit women, highlighting the fact that Dalit women are a distinct social group and cannot be masked under the general categories of “Women” or “Dalits”.*

Introduction

In Ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.), the caste system was non-existent since even the most learned men were good householders and had varied occupations. The women of ancient India were just as superior as men in learning education and intellect. The choice for her mate was according to her own wishes and marriage was practiced after the coming of age. She attended parties, competitions and religious functions as she wished. The remarriage of young widows was also a common practice (Thind). In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women.

This paper presents the devastating effects of the caste system on the educational, social and economical status of Dalit women in modern India. The aim is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture Dalit women face every day of their miserable lives. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by society. There are many examples of brave Dalit women who being quite aware of the horrifying truth and despite the heavy odds still strive to put an end to their suffering. In doing so they most certainly ensure a brighter future for the generations to come.

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 2000, approximately 75% of the Dalit girls drop out of primary school despite the strict laws of the Government of India, which hold reservations for Dalit children (National Commission n.pag). Despite showing keen academic aptitude, reasons for this early drop out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society and even their teachers. There are large numbers of reported atrocities on Dalit women that can be found recorded in various newspaper articles, journals and government reports in India many of which can be viewed on www.ambedkar.org . Feeling rejected most girls in this situations drop out of the school and have nowhere to turn but towards manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs (News Archives). Dalit girls feel discouraged to enter education and the lowest literacy rate for Dalit girls compared to the Total population of educated upper caste girls (National Commission n.pag). The annual report of the University Grant Commission for 1999-2000, shows that Dalits in general have very low participation rates in higher education (Annual Reports of University n.pag).

The Annual Report of University Grant Commission (1999-2000)

01	The Lack of educational resources especially in rural areas
02	Extreme poverty, because of which they cannot afford the expensive fees for the private schools.
03	The demand for an increase in the Dowry for educated girls.
04	Humiliation and bullying by the high caste students and teachers. (Thind).
05	Privatization of schools and colleges

The main reasons for the very low literacy rate among Dalit women could be some or all of the following:

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- The Lack of educational resources especially in rural areas.
- Privatization of schools and colleges
- Extreme poverty, because of which they cannot afford the expensive fees for the private schools.
- The demand for an increase in the Dowry for educated girls.

Human Right Watch Report in 1992

01	Human Right Watch Report in 1992	Vedic scriptures, the <i>Devdasi system</i>	Estimated 50,000 girls	“female servants of god”
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The 1992-93 Annual report from the Ministry of Welfare shows 1,236 reported cases of rape on Dalit women and the National Commission for SC/ST shows that approximately 10,000 cases of human right violations on Dalits are reported every month.

Annual report shows

01	1992-93	Ministry of Welfare women	1,236 reported cases of rape on Dalit women
02	1992-93	National Commission for SC/ST	10,000 cases of human right violations on Dalits are reported every month.
03	1992-93	Human Right Watch Report	115 million children are in slavery and 2.6 million children are held as bonded laborers

Since only a small percentage of the total population of Dalit women are educated. The fate of the majority is very grim. According to India’s Ministry of Labour, 85% of the Dalit women have the most formidable occupations and work as agricultural laborers, scavengers, sweepers and disposers of human waste. Many of these women work for minimal wages under the upper caste landlords, since it is proposed that by the National Commission for SC/ST that 85% of the Dalits are landless (News Archives). When the Dalit women refuse to work for ridiculously low wages or fail to follow their harsh orders it results open violence, humiliation. There are also a number of cases where the houses of Dalit women have been burnt down(Agarwal; News Archives).

Many Dalit Non-Government Organizations (NGO’s) , both in India and abroad, have been involved in raising the plight of India’s 250 million untouchables. One of the most important tasks of these Dalit NGO’s is to bring the plight of Dalit people to the attention of the International community and to document and publicize human right violations. As the poorest of the poor, Dalit women lack the means and the opportunity to defend themselves at home or to make their problems known outside of rural India. Many Dalit women have formed NGO’s through which they collectively fight against society. Such Dalit women abandon tears and embrace the shield of confidence in the hope of equality. The courage, struggle and persistence of today’s Dalit women against suppression, exploitation and torture has the power to ensure that the future generations will not have to face the bleak reality Dalits have faced for the past two thousand years. The caste system is truly a crippling disease to approximately 250 million Dalits in India today (Narula n. pag).

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 publicize human rights abuse. The long term objectives are to enfranchise Dalits as full citizens of their society and eliminate caste-based discriminations.

References:

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