

EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF DALIT WOMEN

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Abstract

Indian history is honest and does not hide the pathetic saga of the Dalits and, more particularly that of the ex-untouchable communities. It is honest as far as in recording the limbo status accorded to Harijans and the way they were treated by the Hindu society. The literature is very rich but, its reading is painful. Any Indian in general and particularly the caste Hindus with a little bit of conscience have to bow their heads in shame. No amount of remorse or repentance would absolve those who committed crime on the Dalits. This study is about rural Dalit women; the recapitulation of their pathetic social history is avoided here as it is well known by the Indians across the country. Understanding the problems and prospects of empowering Dalit women and assessing the role of education in this endeavour is the main theme of this study as both are inosculated and intertwined. Given the complex and slippery nature of the concept, ideology and dimensions of empowerment, an understanding of the meaning and scope of the latter seems to be essential.

Key Words : Untouchables, Dalit, Misogynic and Patriarchic Ethos

Methodology

The methodology adopted in the study is historical, analytical, exploratory and descriptive in a chronological context. The study makes use of both the primary as well as secondary data. The source materials for the study are mostly primary records found in the Tamil Nadu Archives; primary source materials like District Gazetteers, Census Reports, Government Orders of various departments, Reports of all Commissions and Committees, Administrative Reports, Reports of Public Instruction, Policy Note on Education, Madras Information etc. Secondary data are collected from published books and articles. In addition to these, various newspapers, magazines, journals, souvenirs and calendars of institutions have been tapped to build up the study.

The dismal chronicle of the Dalits and, more specifically, that of the ex-untouchable people, are not hidden by the truthfulness of Indian history. In terms of describing the limbo status given to Harijans and how Hindu society handled them, it is accurate. Without any hesitation, the classical and historical literature both acknowledges the Harijans' worst-case social exclusion, isolation, subjection, and exploitation. It's also true that Dalit groups in India have been well studied. It has been very thoroughly documented what their struggles, issues, and predicaments were over the decades.¹ Although the literature is incredibly rich, reading it is difficult. Any Indian in general and the caste Hindus in particular who have even the slightest conscience must hang their heads in shame. Anyone who committed crimes against the Dalits would not be exonerated by

any amount of regret or repentance. Since the focus of this study is on rural Dalit women, a recapitulation of their tragic social history is omitted because it is common knowledge among Indians nationwide.

The major goal of this study is to comprehend the challenges and opportunities of empowering Dalit women while also evaluating the contribution of education to their efforts. Understanding the significance and range of empowerment appears to be crucial given the concept's and ideologies complicated and shaky character. Similarly, we must describe the function and reach of education in promoting the process of empowerment given the history, complexity, volume, and severity of the issues faced by rural Dalit women in their unwelcoming environment.² Therefore, it is assumed right away that having a grasp of the idea of empowerment as well as the social situation of Dalit women in rural India in relation to the function of education would serve as the required context for the analysis that will take place in the future chapters. This chapter opens with a brief mention of the position given to women in India generally, and more specifically that of rural Dalit women. This is necessary given the setting.³

Everyone agrees that women are "the mother of the human race and the foundation of its society." She is revered as one of Nature's exceptional creations and a priceless gift that she has given to humankind. Even now, women are still exalted as man's better half. She is an equal collaborator in all human undertakings and a devoted steward of society's culture and customs, despite the fact that males view her as the weaker sex.⁴ By virtue of their unwavering commitment and sacrifice, they stand in for our past in all its beauty and suffering, in terms of time and geography, social upheavals, political enslavement, and freedom. Ever since the dawn of human history; they have been playing a vital role in the life of mankind in general and in the making the development and conservation of human civilization. Human civilization would not have been possible without their service, dedication and sacrifice.

Since time immemorial folklores have eulogized mother as the first teacher's for every child. In fact every human child in every country receives its earliest social training from its mother.⁵ There is no alternative to mother in upbringing of the young and transmitting to them the socio-cultural heritage. Therefore the importance of the role of woman as an educator and an efficient custodian of culture cannot be over emphasized. The contribution of women to human development, its economy, polity and culture is well known. No society can envision its development without women playing varied and versatile roles in it. Women's active engagement has made human economy feasible at all phases of its history and development. In a same vein, women have made substantial contributions to politics, administration, and state formation.⁶ In truth, Gandhi correctly stated that "Woman is the partner of man, given with equal mental powers," and that she has the right to take part in all aspects of male activity and is legitimately entitled to equal rights, independence, and liberty.

However, it is indisputable that a woman can only properly fulfil her function as an equal partner in a man's life in general and as the primary educator of her children in particular when she has received a sufficient education herself.⁷ It has been noted that "The laborious and vital responsibilities of a wife and mother cannot be properly handled while a woman is left in a state of ignorance and depravity, and no significant advancement in general culture and morals can be realistically anticipated. Leaving women ignorant would so totally immobilise one half of society and weaken the other half by allowing the unsound fraction to hover over it and divert its attention."

Despite the conflicts and controversies, women have played a significant role in India's social awareness for a very long time. She has been called the "ultimate gift from God to man," in fact. Manu, a well-known Hindu law giver who is also notorious for being misogynistic, says that when women are respected, the gods themselves are happy, but where they are not respected, no holy ceremony can even produce results.⁸

The guiding ideals of our constitution are liberty, equality, and fraternity. Evidently, women have the same right to the highest position in their respective fields of endeavour as men have. The state works hard to guarantee that everyone has access to political, social, and economic equality. Unfortunately, while we have achieved political justice, social and economic fairness have not. Inequality is pervasive in many aspects of life in the nation. The moment has come to put an end to inequality since it fosters a variety of socioeconomic ills that hinder the advancement and freedom of women.

Strangely enough, the civil society, which has historically been predominately patriarchal, does not appear to have granted the dignified space, status, advantages, rights, and opportunities she wonderfully and correctly also deserved. Despite the magnificent eulogies and a fantastic portrayal of woman. Generally speaking, Indians' patriarchal attitude and mentality have not evolved much throughout the years. Even a cursory look at the socioeconomic and cultural history of the globe in general and of our nation in particular would reveal the persistent prejudice against women and the dominance of males in all walks of life.¹⁰ Although women have the same right to the highest position in their chosen field of endeavour as men have, they have instead been sidelined, discouraged, and worst of all, treated like animals in cages. They have indeed been acclaimed as "fair sex" without receiving a "fair-deal" in terms of access to the benefits of progress. With merely a superficial improvement, our nation's policies, programmes, and development process continue to exhibit an excessive "male bias." Therefore, it is obvious that our woman has been leading a difficult socioeconomic and stifling social life.

Nowhere is this masculine bias in growth more strong and disturbing as in the field of education, and nowhere is the appalling disregard of women that results from it as alarming. In reality, two-fourths of the women in our nation, or the vast majority (58 percent), are illiterate today.¹¹ The democratic Indian conscience ought to be shocked by this. The education of women in India is plagued by such a complex web of issues that it is more accurately said to be in a crisis. Women's liberation from the confines of the house would only benefit humankind and mankind by bringing more pleasure, wealth, advancement, and relief. True societal advancement is impossible without promoting women's emancipation. Our developmental priorities need to lay emphasis on welfare of women in order to provide them a pride of place in our society.

The idea of a woman's individuality has experienced unimaginable change over time. Today, she is not a caged pet bird. Through pure cunning, she has demonstrated her skill and ability to contribute equally to the initiatives and procedures designed to further human evolution. It is time for Indian society to realise the gravity of the issue and undo the historical error. The society has to let go of its long-held misconceptions and biases about women in general and their Dalit counterparts in particular.

Women undoubtedly make up over half of the population in our nation in terms of demographics. They are not, however, a uniform class or category in terms of their physical characteristics, social structures, cultural practises, or economic standing. They belong to many strata and are diverse in terms of caste, religion, education, employment, and class. As a result, they belong to several social and economic classes rather than one homogeneous class. We cannot attempt to generalise on any topic due to the socioeconomic and cultural inequalities.¹²

It is generally known that the caste system in India continues to play a significant role in social discrimination as well as stratification, if not officially or even openly. Additionally, the caste system was what established a person's standing and the advantages they were entitled to. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct sociological assessments of the issues and future prospects for the development of women in India within the framework of the caste system. As is generally known, the caste system divides women into upper and lower castes, Dalit or non-Dalit women. In actuality, there are significant differences between Dalit women and non-Dalit women in terms of their social standing, privileges, and difficulties. Caste as a social variable has to be considered in the sociological assessments of their lives. Ambedkar did link the caste issue with the issue of women, regarding both as vital. This paper on caste in Indian is not only a critic of the caste system but also a candid analysis of women's problems. Considering that Dalit women constitute the main focus of this thesis, a brief attempt is made here to understand the social status accorded of Dalit women both within and outside her family.

Dalit women: Dalit among Dalits:

Dalit women make up a smaller portion of Indian society and have multiple disadvantages due to being both female and Dalit. 48 percent of all Dalit people are women, who make up over 66 million Dalits in total. 81.4 percent of India's 16.3 percent population of Dalit women reside in rural regions.¹³ They make up a sizable social group that still experiences prejudice based on descent that results from the caste system, along with their male counterparts. People from Dalit castes are forced into social exclusion as a result of caste-based discrimination, which also separates them physically from the dominant castes in housing patterns,

strictly enforces the ban on intermingling in public spaces, and compels them to work in demeaning jobs like manual scavenging. (Manorama)

Dalit women have historically experienced subjugation and gender-based discrimination since they belong to a socially, economically, and culturally oppressed community. The lives of Dalit women are terrible because of patriarchal social standards that are prevalent in Dalit households. They are the most oppressed people in the world. Even someone with a little level of human sensibility is astounded by the realistic and accurate stories of the Dalit women's living situations, including their exploitation, humiliation, and repression. Her woes come in twos. As a woman, she experiences a portion of the universal miseries. Additionally, as a Dalit woman, she is a victim of several forms of social, religious, economic, and cultural exploitation. She has a more severe experience with patriarchal dominance than non-Dalit women.

According to statistics, Indian Dalits have reportedly been among the world's least heard and defended communities for millennia. Among the Dalits, their women are one of the most vulnerable groups (Beittile). In India, 66 million women who make up 48% of the Dalit population are classified as Dalits. 81.4 percent of India's 16.3 percent population of Dalit women reside in rural regions.¹⁴ They have experienced "caste, gender, and class" triple oppression. According to various research, Dalit women experience violence more frequently. The majority of crimes, including physical abuse, financial fraud, and discrimination at work and at home, go undetected, which only serves to exacerbate the issue. The indifference of the officials toward Dalit women makes this situation worse. Data showing that, on average, three Dalit women are raped in India each day supports this. The SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act records a disproportionate number of atrocities and human rights abuses against women each year. In rural regions, the unemployment rate for Dalit women is 4.0 percent, compared to 0.97 percent for non-Dalits, while in urban areas, it is 3.3 percent vs 1.98 percent for non-Dalits. Only 23.8 percent of Dalit women are literate, compared to 39.3 percent of non-Dalit women. At the elementary school level, the dropout rate for Dalit women is 53.96 percent.¹⁵ Compared to non-Dalit women, Dalit women have a poverty rate of 36.2% as opposed to 21.6%. The unorganised, self-employed sector, which includes farm/wage labourers, domestic assistants, etc., employs 94% of Dalit women and is characterised by excessive work, low compensation, non-payment of fair salaries, and a lack of social security or maternity benefits (Stephen).

The labour force of Dalit women is the foundation of India's agricultural economy. 31.0 percent of Dalit women work in the domestic sector, compared to 79.0% who are agricultural labourers. Many of them work in unorganised industries and frequently in filthy jobs in metropolitan areas. They are not given fair and equal pay, a fair economic share, maternity benefits, security, or protection. The majority of Dalit women start working before the age of 20, and 31.6% of all girl children from Dalit households work as children.¹⁶

According to the study mentioned above, Dalit women face a number of issues that make them more helpless than Dalit males and non-Dalits, including a lack of educational development. In reality, the literacy rate for Dalit women was 41.90 percent, with rural regions having the lowest rate (37.84 percent), followed by Bihar (14.13 percent), Rajasthan (31.18 percent), and Uttar Pradesh (28.33 percent). 53.96% of Dalit girls drop out of school in elementary, middle, and secondary grades, and there are significant interstate differences in the literacy rates of Dalit females. Caste and gender inequality still affect educational and professional chances today.

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