

The Status of Dalit Women in India's Caste Based System

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In this paper I wish to present the devastating effects of the caste system on the educational, social, and economical status of Dalit women in modern India. My 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 the upper classes, which is legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures (Thind n.pag; Agarwal n.pag). We see 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 (Thind; Agarwal; *News Archives*). In doing so they most certainly ensure a brighter future for the generations to come. Ruth Manorama, an active member of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and the National Alliance of Women, once stated that in a male dominated society, "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" (*News Archives*).

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).

The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including the *Manusmriti*, *Atharva Vedas*, *Vishnu smriti*, and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmins (upper priestly hindu caste), led to a society in which equality between men and women was far from existent (Agarwal). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian constitution, also makes it very clear in his

article titled “The rise and fall of Hindu woman” that the root cause of suffering for women in India are these so called Hindu religious books (Thind; Agarwal). Books like the Manusmriti divide people into a stratified caste system and promotes inequality between men and women (Thind; Agarwal). According to the *Manusmriti*, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth (n.pag). It not only justifies the treatment of dalit women as a sex object and promotes child marriage, but also justifies a number of violent atrocities on women as can be seen in the following verses (Agarwal; *Manusmitri*):

A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him. Or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age. If (the performance of) his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner. (*Manusmitri* IX.94)

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house.” (*Manusmriti* V.147)

Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence. (*Manusmriti* IX.3)

Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskaras are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth. (*Manusmriti* IX.18)

A Brahman, Kshatriya, or Vaishya Man can sexually exploit any shudra woman. (*Manusmitri* IX.25)

Even the killing of a dalit woman is explicitly justified as a minor offence for the Brahmins: equal to the killing of an animal (*Manusmitri*). If the killing of an untouchable was justified as a minor offence, you can imagine the treatment they received throughout their lives.

In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the *Manusmriti* and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which Dalit women could be uplifted (Thind n.pag). The horrendous Laws in the *Manusmriti* were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favourable only to the Upper castes, which form the majority of India. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women. The Laws of the *Manusmriti* have a devastating effect on the level of education reached by Dalit women (Thind n.pag).

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 (Thind).

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. The majority of the stories we read and hear are of bright young Dalit girls who are punished by the upper caste teachers in rural area of India, for daring to score good grades. Feeling rejected most girls in this situations drop out of school and have nowhere to turn but towards manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs (*News Archives*).

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the majority of the educated people are of the upper caste, many of which may practice caste-based discrimination. Therefore, Dalit girls feel discouraged to enter education and we see 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 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 main reasons for the very low literacy rate among Dalit women could be some or all of the following:

- 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.
 - Humiliation and bullying by the high caste students and teachers.
- (Thind)

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, beatings, rape, and jail. There are also a number of cases where the houses of Dalit women have been burnt down (Agarwal; *News Archives*).

In one particular case, a four months pregnant agricultural labourer, from the southern part of India, was stripped naked and beaten, in front of the whole village and her family by the upper caste landlord. Later, she was retained in jail, where the police beat her. This resulted in the miscarriage of her baby (*News Archives*). In another case, a school student in Gujarat made a mistake of joining the dancing in the main square of her village, in which most of the participants were of the upper caste. The upper caste boys pulled her out and threatened to rape her. For interfering, her mother was slapped. In the hope for justice, she forced her parents to file a complaint to the police against her assailants. Her mother was constantly threatened by the upper caste families for complaining to the police. Feeling deeply humiliated by no justice and rumors of rape, the girl committed suicide (*News Archives*).

There are many cases like these, all of which cannot be discussed here. The worst exploitation of dalit women involves a lifetime of suffering, torture, and rape (Thind n.pag). Justified by the Vedic scriptures, the *Devdasi system* (also known as temple prostitution) was introduced by the High caste Hindus, and it

still exists in some parts of India (Thind; Agarwal; Narula). According to the *Human Right Watch Report* in 1992, an estimated 50,000 girls were sold every year to Hindu organizations that are involved in the Devdasi system (n.pag). These girls are called the “female servants of god” and are sexually exploited (Thind n.pag). After a lifetime of living as a prostitute and servant, the women in their later years are sold to brothels, where they are further tortured and often die of neglect or AIDS (Thind; *News Archives*). The Devdasi system and Child marriage are also justified by Hindu Scriptures (Thind; Agarwar; *News Archives*).

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. But what is even more disturbing, is that only one out of ten of the cases are reported annually whilst, nine go unreported. In addition to this, according to the Human Right watch Report, approximately 115 million children are in slavery and 2.6 million children are held as bonded labourers (Narula). After fifty-five years of India’s independence and despite the excellent laws in place to protect Dalit women, they are still suffering unimaginable atrocities from the high caste Hindus. It is believed that thousands of these cases go unreported and unpublicized because the poor Dalits that live in rural areas, who are the worst victims, have no control on power, wealth, justice, police and the media (Thind n.pag). The only way these Dalit women can escape the viscous cycle of poverty, abuse and oppression is through education. Through education more Dalit women can come to know their basic human rights and they can then raise an even stronger voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes (Thind; Agarwar).

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 abuse from the upper classes. 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). Since its roots are embedded in the Hindu religious scriptures, it seems this disease has no cure, but every voice raised against caste-based discrimination and suppression through Dalit Organizations will turn this from a losing battle to one of victory in which every Dalit will have equal rights, access to education, and a chance to succeed and prosper.

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 longterm objectives are to enfranchise Dalits as full citizens of their society and eliminate caste-based discriminations.

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