



Doubly marginalized Dalit Women: Journey towards the path of equality

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Abstract

The history of sexual violence against Dalit women is a history of atrocity and savagery and what makes the situation even worse is the fact that the legacy of this barbaric male hegemony commodifying Dalit women and considering them to be easily available continue till date.

The objective of this paper is to trace the journey of Dalit women from being sufferers of sexual abuse, violence, discrimination and deprivation to organizing and empowering themselves as a collective whole, showcasing solidarity, protesting against inequality and non-inclusivity in society, rightfully claiming their rights, raising assertive confident voices and treading towards the path of equality and inclusivity.

This paper undertakes historical research to locate the position of Dalit women since centuries and depends upon findings of Case Studies to prove incidents of violence inflicted upon Dalit women. The paper also adopts Action Research to examine the actions taken by Dalit women in bringing about a much-needed change in their way of existence.

References to a few Case Studies on the atrocities and brutalities unleashed on Dalit women help us further to understand the alarming nature of the situation.

Dalit feminism has emerged as a separate school of thought striving towards basic dignity, safety, security, economic and social rights of Dalit women as their struggle could never be rightly assessed and addressed by mainstream feminism. Jyotiba Phule, Savitri Bai Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar are the personalities whose contributions are unmistakable in the progress of Dalit women's living conditions.

In the post-Independence era Dalit women felt the urgency to voice their needs and express their demands. They knew that the tradition of oppression meted out to them could be stopped only by their assertive voices of protests and claim for equality. In the 1990s Dalit women assembled and formed various organizations, namely All India Dalit Women's Forum and National Federation of Dalit Women. Since then, various Dalit women's organizations fight for equality addressing issues not only pertaining to gender but essentially based on caste discriminations. The struggle of Dalit women for achieving their rights made them participate in the 1993 World Conference against Racism and the 1995 World Conference on Women. 2006 is a landmark year for Dalit women's movement as the first National Conference on Violence against Dalit Women was organised in New Delhi in March, 2006. In 2018 the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch presented testimonies of caste and gender based violence inflicted upon Dalit women at the 38th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council and presented a report titled 'Voices Against Caste Impunity: Narratives of Dalit Women in India'. The assertive voices of Dalit women social activists, women-run digital rural news platform, Dalit literary writers articulating the horrors of discrimination, torture, abuse and violence they have been victims of since centuries have helped Dalit women to get unified with each other, proclaim solidarity and march towards the path of equality. They have come a long way from being docile, timid victims of caste and gender discriminations to becoming protesting selves conscious about their own rights and claiming the same.

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Introduction

The history of sexual violence against Dalit women is a history of atrocity and savagery and what makes the situation even worse is the fact that the legacy of this barbaric male hegemony commodifying Dalit women and considering them to be easily available continue till date. "The Dalit female belongs to the most oppressed group in the world," says Dr Suraj Yengde, writer of *Caste Matters*. He observes: "She is a victim of the cultures, structures and institutions of oppression, both externally and internally. This manifests in perpetual violence against Dalit women." (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54418513>). Manjula Pradeep, director of campaigns for the Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network and the National Council of Women Leaders

observes: “Caste atrocities are not just based on caste; they’re also based on caste and gender. It’s Dalit women’s bodies that become targets of violence. For the majority of Dalit girls, the extreme forms of violence they face is sexual violence” (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/8/india-why-justice-eludes-many-dalit-survivors-of-sexual-violence#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Nationa%20Crime,day%20in%20India%2C%20on%20average>)

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to trace the journey of Dalit women from being sufferers of sexual abuse, violence, discrimination and deprivation to organizing and empowering themselves as a collective whole, showcasing solidarity, protesting against inequality and non-inclusivity in society, rightfully claiming their rights, raising assertive confident voices and treading towards the path of equality and inclusivity.

Methods and Procedures

This paper undertakes historical research to locate the position of Dalit women since centuries and depends upon findings of Case Studies to prove incidents of violence inflicted upon Dalit women. The paper also adopts Action Research to examine the actions taken by Dalit women in bringing about a much-needed change in their way of existence.

Results and Discussion

According to the National Crime Records Bureau’s latest data, there has been a 45 percent increase in reported rapes of Dalit women between 2015 and 2020. The shocking data shows that 10 rapes of Dalit women and girls are reported every day in India, on an average (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/8/india-why-justice-eludes-many-dalit-survivors-of-sexual-violence#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Nationa%20Crime,day%20in%20India%2C%20on%20average>)

Reference to a few Case Studies on the atrocities and brutalities unleashed on Dalit women would help further to understand the alarming nature of the situation. A Dalit mother recounts helplessly how her daughter never returned when she went to a crematorium in Delhi to fetch water: “At the crematorium, I found her lying on the ground. Her lips were blue, there was blood under her nose, she had bruises on her hands and arms and her clothes were wet,” (<https://idsn.org/dalit-women-and-girls-targets-of-caste-based-sexual-violence/>). The situation becomes more alarming when these violences and sexual abuse against Dalit women are supported by the judiciary comprising upper caste patriarchy.

The Hathras incident that took place on 14 September, 2020 in Uttar Pradesh is a case in point where a 19-year-old Dalit woman was gang-raped by upper caste males and the body was cremated immediately so that further investigation could be stopped. Intentional delays to register case and initiate police investigation, attempts to stop media coverage, consistent threat of upper castes, torture by police led to nationwide protests with hashtags like #DalitWomenLivesMatter and #HathrasHorror.

The reference to Khairlanji Massacre becomes imperative in this context when the genitals of Dalit children were mutilated and a Dalit girl was brutally raped before being thrown into the nearby canal while the entire village remained

spectator to the horrifyingly inhuman incident in Kherlanji in Maharashtra on 29 September, 2006. Such atrocities and barbaric incidents encountered by Dalits are innumerable.

The 2016 Ariyalur gang rape involves the gruesome gangrape of Nandini, a pregnant 17-year old Dalit minor girl in Sirukadambur village in Ariyalur district of Tamil Nadu by an influential upper caste and three of his friends. After being gang raped the fetus was snatched out of her womb and her genitalia was cut with a blade. After she died because of profuse bleeding her naked body was thrown away into a nearby well.

On 9 October, 2022 Hindustan Times, one of the leading newspapers of India, reported that a 50-year old priest and his associates raped a 25-year old Dalit woman for over a month in Ajmer district of Rajasthan. Chhavi Sharma, deputy superintendent of police, Ajmer (North) gave her statements saying: “In her complaint, the woman has said that the accused first raped her when she was alone at home and also made some obscene videos. Later, he extorted money from her and raped her again with others.” (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/dalit-woman-gang-raped-by-priest-aides-in-rajasthan-101665339228405.html>)

A young Dalit woman from Haryana draws a parallelism between the torture that she was a victim of and the physical abuse that a 19-year old Dalit girl had to endure. Talking about the 19-year old girl, the former says: “She was a Valmiki like us, from a landless and poor family like ours. They (a group of men belonging to upper caste) raped her, brutalised her and when she died, they burnt her body without the consent of her family. And even after all of that, they would not allow her family to talk about it and threaten them to keep quiet. This is exactly what I and my family have experienced and what we continue to go through. The only exception is that I am still alive” (https://www.equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/the_rape_of_india_s_dalit_women_and_girls/) “Violence, including rape and gang rape, have been systematically utilised as weapons by dominant castes to oppress Dalit women and girls and reinforce structural gender and caste hierarchies,” states a report by Equality Now, a global non-profit organization that fights for women’s rights, and Swabhiman Society, a Dalit-led organization in India (https://www.equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/the_rape_of_india_s_dalit_women_and_girls/)

Article 14 of India’s Constitution ensures equality by providing that: “The State shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.” Article 15(1) provides that the “State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them,” while articles 16(1) and 16(2) prohibit discrimination in general, and gender discrimination in matters of public employment. To promote equality, Article 15(3) provides that the state is free to make “any special provision for women and children.” (<https://www.clearias.com/constitution-of-india/>)

According to Article 2 of the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979

States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake:

a. To embody the principle of the equality of men and

- women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation if not yet incorporated therein and to ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle;
- b. To adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women;
 - c. To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination;
 - d. To refrain from engaging in any act or practice of discrimination against women and to ensure that public authorities and institutions shall act in conformity with this obligation;
 - e. To take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organization or enterprise;
 - f. To take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women;
 - g. To repeal all national penal provisions which constitute discrimination against women (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women#:~:text=2.,shall%20not%20be%20considered%20discriminatory>)

However, the truth pertaining to Dalit women is starkly different from what has been laid down in the Constitution of India. Belonging to the lowest rung of the society Dalit women inhabit the fringes as far as class, caste and hierarchies based on gender are concerned. In majority of the cases they are economically backward, uneducated and paid lesser than males. Many of them are compelled to choose prostitution as their means of living and are exploited both by the upper caste patriarchy and Dalit men as well.

The doubly marginalized position of Dalit women can be clearly understood by referring to the autobiography of Dalit social activist and feminist Urmila Pawar. In her book *The Weave of My Life* Pawar states how miserable the lives of Dalit women of the Konkan region were, on the one hand because of the Dalit males of their own families and on the other hand due to the predatory nature of the males outside their homes where these women were 'available' in the market where they used to go to sell twigs, earn money and manage household expenditure. Dalit women being victims of gender inequality and physical abuse at home is poignant in Pawar's words: "Every house had his own share of drunkards. There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband. She would walk painfully, somehow managing to drag her aching body along the way." (Pawar, 2009, p.23). Sexual abuse and exploitation are the common lot of Dalit women and it seems that the dominant patriarchy has given itself rights, as it were, to violate the dignity of Dalit women. While recounting her experience at the market, a Dalit woman expresses her anguish and disgust at the fact that a man had the audacity to disgrace and humiliate her by showing his private part to her because of her identity as a Dalit woman. So much As Gopal Guru, an eminent political scientist, rightly points

out Dalit women are subjected to both 'external factors (non-dalit forces homogenising the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the Dalits) (https://www.epw.in/system/files/pdf/1995_30/41-42/commentary_dalit_women_talk_differently.pdf).

It is a complex reality that has to be understood in order to address the issues of Dalit women.

Mainstream feminism in India centres around privileged upper castes and focusses on issues pertaining to the rights of upper caste women and does not address the needs of Dalit women whose daily existence is a tale of struggle based on discrimination and marginalization related to both gender and caste. Hence Dalit feminism has emerged as a separate school of thought striving towards basic dignity, safety, security, economic and social rights of Dalit women. Its emergence traces back to the 19th century social reformer Jyotiba Phule and Savitri Bai Phule. They formed the Satya Sadhak Samaj which criticized gender and caste discriminations. Babasaheb Ambedkar fought for decent lives of Dalit women and insisted on women's right over their own bodies. He emphasized on equality and demanded equal pay for women labourers. He was a strong critic of wage difference based on gender. He further introduced Maternity Benefit Bill in the Bombay Presidency in 1928 and fought for compensation for maternity leave. 1942 is a landmark year for Dalit women's movement because the Dalit Mahila Federation of 1942 Conference was held where discussions were made on issues related to decent working condition for women, compulsory education, reservation for women belonging to Depressed Classes and right to divorce.

In the post-Independence era Dalit women felt the urgency to voice their needs and express their demands. They knew that the tradition of oppression meted out to them could be stopped only by their assertive voices of protests and claim for equality. The first national level meeting of Dalit women was organized in Bangalore in 1987. In the 1990s Dalit women assembled and formed various organizations, namely All India Dalit Women's Forum and National Federation of Dalit Women. Since then, various Dalit women's organizations fight for equality addressing issues not only pertaining to gender but essentially based on caste discriminations. The struggle of Dalit women for achieving their rights made them participate in the 1993 World Conference against Racism and the 1995 World Conference on Women. They participated in the 2003 Asian Social Forum and the 2004 World Social Forum to analyse and assess the New Economic Policy. The 2007 World Social Forum witnessed a panel of women from South Asia and Africa discussing 'Combatting Caste and Descent and Descent Based Discrimination in Africa and Asia'. 2006 is a landmark year for Dalit women's movement as the first National Conference on Violence against Dalit Women was organised in New Delhi in March, 2006. The Delhi Declaration was passed in this conference where it was pointed out how Dalit women endure disparities at various levels primarily at the hands of the dominant castes. The International Conference on the Human Rights of Dalit Women was held at Hague in 2006. This conference plays a huge role to pave the way for Dalit women to walk towards the path of equality and claim inclusivity as far as the Indian socio-cultural and politico-economic scenarios are concerned. The Hague conference generated a sense of solidarity amongst Dalit women and demanded formulation of laws for protection of human rights for Dalit women and

also pointed out the necessity of implementing these laws.

Dalit social activists like Ruth Manorama are working incessantly to empower Dalit women on legal and political fronts. Manorama explicitly points out that laws meant to protect Dalit women are not implemented properly and sheer negligence to record complaints of Dalit women is a common phenomenon. The All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch in collaboration with Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre organised a conference titled 'Dalit Women Speak Out' in 2017 which was attended by almost 450 participants. The number of participants reflect the awareness that has been generated amongst Dalit women to fight for their rights and equality. In 2018 the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch presented testimonies of caste and gender-based violence inflicted upon Dalit women at the 38th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council and presented a report titled 'Voices Against Caste Impunity: Narratives of Dalit Women in India'.

Another landmark achievement towards Dalit women's claim for equality is India's only women-run digital rural news platform, *Khabar Lahariya*. It includes journalists who are women representing the margin. Its team of reporters investigate several burning issues like the rampant rape culture, patriarchal abuse, corruption to name a few. It is a platform for the marginalized women of the society and gives voice to their concerns and protests.

Several Dalit women social activists have taken resort to literary writing to articulate the horrors of discrimination, torture, abuse and violence they have been victims of since centuries. Bama, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Urmila Pawar, Gogu Shyamala, Meena Kandasamy, P. Shivkami, Babytai Kamble, Sharmila Rege are a few of them. These writers have employed diverse forms of writing like essays, autobiographies, short stories and poems to give expression to the manifold layers of deprivation and discrimination they have been subjected to both from upper caste patriarchy as well as internal gender hierarchies within Dalit families. These narratives not only talk about exploitation but also generate a sense of protest and sensitizes other Dalit women to raise their voices for attaining equality and claiming inclusivity in the society.

Conclusion

Society can never flourish leaving a section of people behind. Inclusivity is a major requirement for growth and progress of a society that is aiming at a sustainable future. The more marginally pushed Dalit women would be, the more society would be regressive. Inclusivity and equality are basic rights of every human being. The lived in condition of Dalit women is even more critical because of the fact that they are oppressed from all quarters. They are victims of both caste and gender-based discrimination and their position can never be rightly assessed by the upper caste women whose privileged existence is no match to the deprivation that Dalit women are subjected to. Hence, empowerment of Dalit women, their awareness of the necessity to build up solidarity with other Dalit women of the country, their protests against the wrongs meted out to them are imperative not only for their own progress towards equality; rather it is equality and inclusive nature of the society that can ensure a sustainable future marked by significant all round development of the society at large.

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