

## Dalit women in India: A Critical study

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper describes the ways in which Dalit women are quite different from their higher-caste counterparts. It aims at providing comprehensive and critical introduction to the Dalits in contemporary India from the perspective of history and political economy. It discusses women who had a close involvement with the Ambedkar movement. These women activists are a great source of growing enthusiasm. In contrast to poorer families, women undertake strenuous agricultural and domestic labour. They are relied upon to order, sustain and provide for the household. For all sits hardships, Dalit life affords women autonomy and allows for a distinctive Dalit female subjectivity. In the lieu deprived families, social mobility has resulted in the subjection of daughters to the requirements of middle-class morality. In such families the increased emphasis on women as 'status producers' is manifested by a greater investment in girls' education on the one hand but a heightened surveillance of female sexuality on the other. When socio-economic circumstances allow it, Dalits begin to repudiate egalitarian norms; they attempt to consign them to the past by labeling them 'backward'. Instead, they appropriate a gender ideology similar to that of the locally dominant castes and adapt it to fit a politicized construction of Dalit identity. When they withdraw from work, women escape the drudgery, degradation and hardship of labour. But when they become housewives, not only do they lose some of the freedom they once took for granted, they now see these old 'freedom' as marked mobility brings more a 'comfortable' life and enables women to avoid the various forms of exploitation associated with wage labour. It erodes Dalit egalitarianism within the family and community.*

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### 1. Introduction

To be a Dalit woman is a great calamity in Indian society. To understand the position of the Dalit woman one needs to know about the Dalits. The word "Dalit" means "downtrodden" and "Depressed". In India, Dalits are such communal groups of people who were denied to live as human. They were compelled to lead a miserable life as they are the last men of society; they were treated as beasts, their shadows on streets during the day-time were regarded obscene, so they were not allowed to walk in the streets during the day time. The Indian society is based upon the *Varnashramdharma Vyavastha* (the order of class and stage). There are four *varnas* or classes – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudras. The classification depends upon the occupation: to study for the Brahmins; to protect the society for Kshatriya; commerce for Vaishya and labour to serve to these three, for the Shudras. These four classes were manmade water-tight compartments which meant that a man from a particular class though efficient could not enter another class. The fourth class was looked down upon for doing manual work. In the fourth class some people are touchable and others are untouchables. Dalits were called untouchables for they were involved in lowest type of manual work for the society, e.g., sweeping, cobbling, scavenging, etc. "Untouchability is an aspect of social psychology" says Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. (Paswan, 242). The attitude of social nausea is expressed with persistency traditionally in the Indian society even today.

China Rao rightly analyses about their origins that how it is obscure and their presence was neglected: In standard Indian History works, the dalits are treated either as marginal people without works, the dalits are treated as marginal people without a history of their own or as objects rather than subjects. (Rao, 1). By the late 1960s, the first generation of university-educated Dalit youth in Mumbai, inspired by black literature movement in the United States (US), began expressing themselves in writing. The resultant output, which was difficult to fit the norms of the mainstream Marathi literature, completely hegemonised by the Brahmans, therefore, assumed different identity for itself as "Dalit Literature". As in the US, this literary outburst of indignation soon gave birth to the Dalit Panthers in 1972 taking inspiration from the Black Panthers in the US. The shock waves created by the Dalit Panthers spread all over the country giving currency to the term 'Dalit' and inspired the Dalit youth to adopt it as their rebellious identity for themselves. Dalit came to symbolize change as revolution: the quest for equality, self-dignity and the vanguard in the battle against Brahmanism. Arguably, there have been momentous changes that took place in and around castes over the last century. One of the changes is that the castes today are shown of their systemic feature and ritualistic base and are reduced to a class-like divide between Dalits and the rest. The main prop of the contemporary castes, paradoxically, has been the modern constitutional state, which is mistakenly taken as anti-caste and pro-Dalits. While these aspects have by and large escaped the literature on the Dalits, there is a serious death in literature of the perspective that could provide direction for the Dalit struggle.

Against this background, a Dalit woman is a downtrodden among downtrodden. She suffers on two counts, first in the family because she is a woman and then she has to face the society as she is a Dalit. What is her position in the constitution and in practice? Based, on classifications we may discuss them as urban and rural, literate and illiterate, conscious and others who are not aware of their rights of justice and equality.

Dalit according to Kumud Pawade a Marathi writer means "a person completely broken, destroyed and downtrodden. Because of public persecution, complete and in human neglect, the groups of human beings that are down trodden are completely neglected ignored." (Jogdand, 157).

For ages together, they are living away from the society and civilization. The social structure is so stubborn that it does not allow anyone to make reforms in its. In India the caste system is so strong that even today people believe in the old and worn out classifications of society as the basis of the four *varnas*. Though there are laws and atrocity acts, people are still dominated and discriminated against because laws and acts cannot change the minds and hearts of the people. Dr. Ambedkar burnt the Manu Smriti, which gives second class treatment to the Dalits Shudras and women. ( Anand, 40).

In India basically women are oppressed and are not treated on par with men. Moreover the Dalit women are oppressed among oppressed and slaves. People living outside the boundaries of village, away from civilization, education religion and culture and dalits. One even with a little human sensitivity gets stunned with the realistic and authentic accounts of the life conditions of the Dalits women, her suppression, humiliation, sufferings, dilemmas and exploitation. Her sufferings are twofold: she has her own share of universal suffering as women and additionally, she is victim of a variety of exploitations social, religious, economic and cultural as a Dalit woman. Her experience of patriarchal domination is qualitative, more severe than that of non-Dalit women and opportunities and avenue available to her for voicing her grievances and agonies are very few. Indian society is a male dominated society. All men dominate women. Therefore it is very obvious for a Dalit man to dominate Dalit women. The Dalits are a diverse but distinctive cultural and social community in India, who are treated unequally in daily life because of the lowest status accorded to them in the Hindu Social Order. As its worst victims they characterize India's hierarchical caste society as its most essential. They were historically excluded from most situations in social, cultural, religious and economic life for over two millennia. It is only during colonial times (1757-1947) that changes started happening as they did to the wider society. Although castes have undergone significant change in their configuration as well as in their operation, for the majority of Dalits at the bottom, they continued to be as oppressive as ever.

## 2. The Truth of Dalit Life

Dalits lead a nauseating life in India imposed upon them by the "Smritis". According to the Smritis – religious laws, some points about the life of the Dalit people are given – (1) They have no security. (2) They have to live outside the villages on the banks of the rivers, towards the southern direction which is

regarded inauspicious as it has to face adversities of all kinds as per the Hindu mythology. They should not live in well-built houses. They should not wear a clean dress or shoes; women should not put on ornaments of noble metals and fragrant flowers in their hair. They should have inauspicious names. The remnants of food of the touchable should be consumed by the untouchables. Thus they were denied all humanitarian rights. Equality before law was an absurd idea for these traditional law-givers. If you study the punishments in the *Manusmriti* you can fathom the heinous fact of the injustice meted out to Dalits in India.

## 3. Woman and Indian Society

It is said that in India, the women and the Dalits are put into the same bracket of the Shudras. The 'Smritis' and people like Manu have made a number of taboos for them, especially in the context of marriage. A woman should marry a man only from her caste even though; he may be lame or blind, illiterate or poor. Another restriction for her was on learning. She was forbidden to be educated and read the religious books. She was not allowed for *Mounja Vidhi*, i.e., (Baptism in Hindus) which is an essential ritual for males prior to education. Her only *sanskar* is marriage in which she should have no choice of selecting her life-partner. According to Manu she should only look after husband, children and household affairs. She should be a good housewife.

Today also the Indian woman in general, appears to be illiterate drowned in superstitions and a victim of social torture. In the family she is always a subordinate person. Wife beating is a common practice in India because religious books approve of the torture given by the husband. When we think about the Dalits and the women, one fact should be borne in mind that both are ignored factors of Indian society. Both are devoid of justice and are suppressed under the pressure of various social taboos. The Dalits have been at the bottom most layer of the Indian society.

**Position of Family:** The society is a combination of families. So the family is a significant factor. What is the position of the Dalit woman in the family? Of course, it is subordinate like other women in India. For every decision she has to accept the man's viewpoint (he might be a father, brother, husband, a son or even a male friend). In a city, ghettos of the Dalits are formed of people who have migrated mostly from rural areas. So one can have the closest view possible of a traditional Dalit life. In a family there is paternal domination even though a woman may be an earning member, she cannot feed or allow her maternal relatives to stay in her family. On the contrary, the relatives of her husband are hailed warmly. To serve them is her most important function. To earn for the family is another essential duty. Moreover, she has to give her money to her alcoholic husband to satisfy his addiction. Thirdly, she has to do all the domestic work. She gets up early in the morning at 4 o'clock and is the last to go to bed at 11 o'clock at night. Male members in the family do not help her for they think it is degrading for the male to do domestic work. The result is that she has to expect help from other female members and this evokes a quarrelsome response in the family.

In general Dalit women in every religion are traditionally religious and worship their Gods, adhere to their faith in religion and culture. They are superstitious also. They believe in witchcraft, black magic, haunted spirits evil eye, etc.

#### 4. Dalit Women in Rural Society

The life of Dalit women in rural areas is full of difficulty and misfortunes. They have to face the problem of hunger almost daily. Because of extreme poverty they have to go to collect fuel for cooking and while doing so listen to the curses and abuses of higher class Hindus. They have to slog in the household from morning to night. A woman has to bear the beating and mental torture of the husband as he is her God according to the orthodox teachings. For that matter she has to spare money from her meager salary just for the sake of his liquor. She has to tolerate the injustice and torture of the higher case masters when she goes out to work in their fields. Even then she courageously lives to fight them back and does not surrender herself to the wretched system. While doing so she becomes vociferous and cannot speak in a refined manner as other class Hindu women can. The rural Dalit woman has to fight the adversities of the caste system much more than the urban Dalit woman.

Dalit women are freer, liberal, and conscious of their rights of justice and equality. After independence, the position of the Dalit woman has been a remarkably good one and her status has improved in comparison to the pre-independence era. The issue of violence against women was taken up by the Indian women's movement initially with campaigns like that related to the Mathura case mentioned earlier. The demands of the movement resulted in some changes in the law, such as that on "custodial" rape, and brought dowry related deaths into public view. Special police cells were set up in selected towns to deal with violence attitudes gradually changed to some extent. The framing of a bill like the Domestic Violence Bill of 2005 would not have been possible without the painstaking efforts of feminist activists over a long period of several decades. Similarly, awareness about sexual harassment in the workplace spread after the Supreme Court judgment of 1997 on the Vishakha case, though implementation of the Supreme Court guidelines has, on the whole, been slow. One can, therefore, say that the feminist movement in India has had notable success in bringing the issues of domestic violence and sexual harassment in the workplace out into the open.

But violence, especially sexual violence, against *dalit* women, on the other hand, has in caste society always been a public issue. It is a permanently existing threat whereby upper-caste men assert their superiority over dalit men on a day-to-day basis. And it is a means to punish dalit women or men who dare to assert their rights by transgressing the norms of a society hierarchically divided on caste lines. Dalit and bahun scholars like Gopal Guru, Sukhdeo Thorat, Kancha Ilaiah, have occasionally written about women's issues while Sharad Patil, a rebel from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has placed caste and women's issues at the crux of his theoretical contributions. Scholars such as Ruth Manorama, V. Geetha, Anupama Rao, Susie Tharu and Sharmila Rege, have tried to explore how the position of dalit women in Indian society – 'triply-oppressed' because of their class, caste and gender – is

critical to the way power configurations work themselves out in India's society, economy, politics, and culture. The work of dalit-bahun women mainly writing in Indian languages is being translated into English so that it becomes available to a wider readership: Pratima Pardeshi, Saroj Kamble, Rekha Thakur, are a few examples from Maharashtra. Pawar and Moon's text, a substantial work in terms of its size and subject-matter, should find its place among these initiatives and open up possibilities for further research and exploration of the past.

#### 5. Dalit Women Activists

The best way to explain the position of women by mentioning the story of Ramabai who was married to Dr. Ambedkar when she was still a child, probably nine or ten years old. Ramabai's name before her marriage was Raamibai. She was the daughter of Bhikubaba Valangkar, who lived at Dapoli and earned his living through wage labour. Later on, after he died, she was brought up by her maternal and paternal uncles. Her paternal uncle looked after several fatherless children. The burden of running a home fell on Ramabai's shoulders when she was of a very tender age, but she faced up to a situation of extreme economic hardship with great courage and never let outsiders know the troubles of her household. Most of her life was spent in a *chawl*, and she always had to live a life of toil. Towards the end of her life she went to live at "Rajagraha" in Dadar. Although she thus enjoyed for a short period a more comfortable existence there, she was always drawn to her women friends in the chawl. Ramabai was a close witness to the inspiring life of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. She understood the importance of his work, and she took up much of the burden, working as Babasaheb's partner in order to bring about the uplift of the untouchable class. On 4<sup>th</sup> June 1920 Babasaheb went to London to complete his unfinished academic studies. The money he had left with Ramabai for household expenses was soon spent. Ramabai's brother, Bhau Shankarrao Dhutre, and her younger sister, Gaurabai, were both wage labourers.

Sometimes they would get to eat only in the evening, and that too, not enough. Ramabai practised the utmost frugality to run her household. To get cheap fuel for cooking, she would go out after dark, and, taking Yashwant with her, walk from Poybawadi as far as Dadar and Mahim. Carrying the load of firewood, the two would return by nine or ten at night. She went out after dark so that no one would see that 'Saheb's' wife had to carry firewood on her head. On the days when Shankarrao did not get work, Ramabai, Lakshmi and Gaura would go to Worli village at dawn and make cowdung cakes till 8 p.m. In these difficult circumstances, Ramabai managed to do the housework, work outside the home and also fit in a little study.

Ramabai was fiercely independent and proud. When Dr. Ambedkar had gone abroad for higher studies, she did not mind making cowdung cakes in order to manage her household, but she never borrowed money, or borrowed a handful of flour from a neighbour's house. She was disciplined by nature and kept a well-run and orderly home.

Babasaheb was fully aware of Ramabai's limitless altruism, her unconditional love and her commitment. He writes in the dedication of his book *Thoughts on Pakistan*, written in 1945:

Inscribed to the Memory of Ramu....  
 As a token of my appreciation of her goodness of heart  
 Her nobility of mind, and her purity of character  
 And also for the cool fortitude and readiness to suffer along with me  
 Which she showed in those friendless days of want and worries which  
 Fell to our lot. (Pawar, 204).

The second Dalit Activist is Meerabai Ambedkar who was a fearless and stirring activist. She says: Really I have not done much work in the movement, and whatever I have been able to do has been after 1977. The reason for this is that the people in our family were all caught up in working for society. So naturally I was managing the household, teaching the children, and of course, since Babasaheb's social contacts were numerous, there were always a lot of people coming and going. Coping with all this meant it was difficult to take part in social activity. I did not have the time. (Pawar, 336).

Still, being Babasaheb's daughter-in-law she considers it her duty, so she has devoted herself to religious work. She has no liking for the sphere of politics.

I was married in 1953. I feel it is a great blessing that I became Babasaheb's daughter-in-law; I have great respect for Babasaheb. I feel proud of him as the leader of India's social revolution and the sculptor of her Constitution. Taking inspiration from Babasaheb's movement, from his life's work, I took up social and religious activity. (336).

After Bhaiyasaheb's death she was appointed president of the Indian Buddhist Council and after that she undertook to tour villages all over on behalf of the Council to preach Buddhism and spread its influence. Accordingly she visited Nanded, Parbhani, Satara, Pune, Delhi, Yeole and other places. She tries to raise people's awareness through her speeches. Even though their community is divided into several small organizations, people regard Babasaheb as their ideal leader and become united when occasion demands, that is the situation today.

She did not take part in the renaming agitation. She had made an oral appeal which was broadcast on All India Radio. Women's liberation means treating women with humanity and equality. In the last ten years men have become willing to help women with household chores. Slowly a change is taking place in men. From much earlier, Babasaheb used to tell women, "Do not regard you as inferior. Get educated and teach your children. Along with your household duties, take part in social activity, etc." I follow this and work as much as I am able. (337).

So it shows the ways in which Dalit women are quite different from their higher-caste counterparts. Their capabilities, the history they had made in the most adverse circumstances, their longing for education, ethical dignity courage and development shows the way of emancipation. It brings new identity and confidence to an oppressed section of society. The experience and struggles of dalit women shows the path to modernity and brings out the social change in the society.

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