

# Where do We Locate Tribal and Dalits Women in India: An Overview

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## Abstract

Historically, in the world, women have taken a secondary position in relation of men and when we talk about the dalit and tribal women then it's vast far from the secondary position also. In the present time the society is progressing but this can not be say that even today women position equal to men and they are not seeing as the part to play in society. In India women are discriminated and marginalized at each and every stage of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive health care. Women's empowerment in rural India is very less visible than in urban areas. So they need to be educated and economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men.

This paper try to understand that where the tribal and dalits women are existing in the society in past and present and what has needed to do for their upliftment. The different part of their lifestyle has studied and discussed. The aim of this paper is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture dalit and tribal women face every day of their miserable lives. Finally this paper also try to find out the suggestions for the development of tribal and delits women transition and policy inclusion by the government and society.

Keywords: Tribal, dalits, society, position, the world, suppression, struggle.

## Introduction

Dalit women are one of the most marginalized segments in the society. The condition of dalit and tribal women is more vulnerable than non-dalit and tribal women. Dalit and tribal women are suffering from multi-disadvantages:

- Of being dalit i.e. socio-economically and culturally marginalized section,
- Being women and sharing the gender based inequalities and subordination (Jogdand, 1995)

To explore these and other crucial issues concerning dalit and tribal women there is need to discuss some basic facts concerning the vulnerable situation of dalit and tribal women. Dalit and tribal women of India have been living in a culture of silence for centuries. They have been mute spectators to exploitation oppression and barbarism against them. They don't have any control over their own bodies, earnings and lives. The extreme expression of violence, exploitation and oppression against them is visible in forms of hunger, malnutrition, disease, physical and mental torture, rape, illiteracy, ill health, unemployment, insecurity and inhuman treatment. The collective forces of feudalism, asterism and patriarchy have made their lives just a hell, an overwhelming majority of them lives under the most precarious conditions. In the present age of modernism and post modernism they are still living in a dark age of savagery. Dalit and tribal women in India live an existence of the worst kind, combining object poverty with grinding labour in work places and at home, abused and exploited. Gail Omvedt a feminist sociologist has called Indian Dalit and tribal Women "*Dalit among Dalit*".

Dalit and tribal women were portrayed in both the epics of India Mahabharat and Ramayan. Dalit is a new word and is used commonly for oppressed and depressed classes. Violence, exploitation, Harassment and so many other problems reserved for these women. Extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading dismemberment, forcing to drink urine and eat faces branding. Pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails and violence including murder after proclaimed with craft are only experienced by women. Dalit women are threatened with rape as part of collective violence by the dominant casts. According to the National crime records Bureau, there were 2, 03,804 registered cases of violence against women in 2009 (crime in India 2009). A total of 1,346 cases of rape of Dalit or scheduled caste women were also reported during the same year. It should be noted that in India about 90 percent crime against Dalit women are not reported to the police for the fear of social ostracism and threat to personal safety and security. The issue of Dalit and tribal women is crucial important in contemporary Indian society in the context of new social movements that are being silenced due to shrinking of democratic space. The policy makers have to keep in mind and should make some rules and give more rights to women so they can be empower.

### **Vulnerable Status Of Dalit And Tribal Women**

It is easy for the historically dominating caste and gender to violate human rights of dalit and tribal women who are at the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. The type of violence inflicted on dalits is in the form of severest violation of human rights. Dalit and tribal women are raped as part of an effort by upper caste leaders, land lords and police to suppress movements to demand payment of minimum wages, to settle share cropping disputes or to reclaim lost lands. (Human Watch Report, 1998). The recent incident of Khairlanji Massacre is not something new. A dalit family had refused to let upper caste villagers built a road through their fields. Hence on September, 29th, 2006, Bhaiyalal Bhotmange's family, – wife Surekha, daughter Prinyanka and two sons were killed by the villagers of Khairlangi in Bhandra district of Maharashtra. They were first attacked with huge iron chains and then abused by the other caste women of the village. Surekha and Priyanka were paraded naked and raped, and later, their bodies were mutilated and thrown into a pond. (Hindustan Times, 14th November, 2006).

This shows that dalit and tribal women are easy targets for any perpetrator Upper caste considers them to be sexually available. Hence they are largely unprotected by the state machinery. Further, there is prevalence of violence, making dalit women eat human excreta, parading them naked, gang- rape, murder, dacoity, robbery and burning of their huts or communities. These are the types of crime, which violate their human rights (Human Watch Report, 1998). According to SC/ST commission report between 1981 and 1986 about 4000 dalit women became victim of rape. In 1993 –94 this figure rose to 798 and 992 respectively. This means annually about 700 dalit women fall prey to sexual assault by high caste people. (Pal and Bhargav, 1999). In urban areas most of them stay in unhygienic slums and in rural areas their houses are away from main stream society (Pillai, cited in Michael 1999). Under conditions of grinding poverty and severe exploitation at work place, dalit women also suffer caste specific ban on water access from upper castes and may be beaten up in their own houses as well. At the outset, prevailing caste and secondary status of women in the society is largely responsible for violation of human rights of dalit and tribal women.

### **Socio-cultural And Religious Factors**

First and foremost dalit and tribal women are victims of social, religious and cultural practices like Devdasis and Jogins. In the name of these practices, village girls are married to God by their helpless parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper caste landlords and rich men and directed in

to trafficking and prostitution. In his autobiography, Kale (1994) has described a ritual called 'chira'. The literal meaning of the word 'chira' is to cut or break. In this ritual when a girl from the lower caste community reaches the age of puberty, an elderly prestigious man from the higher caste breaks the hymen of the girl child by sexual act. This ritual is performed in a way to make the girl accept this fact as a routine practice. Chira, Jogins, Devdasi practices are prevalent even today are harmful and threaten the dignity of dalit women and violate their human rights (P.Sainath, not dated).

The 28th report of SC/ST commission reported that in February 1986 there were about ten thousand Jogins belonging to SC in Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh. The survey submitted by the district collector to Schedule Caste Finance Corporation revealed prevalence of 15,850 cases. Eighty percent of these Jogins belonged to SC (Pal and Bhargav, 1999). This data is just an example of one district of the country.

### **Educational Status**

Low level of education is a problem in itself and in turn gives rise to many other problems. (Thorat and Umakant, 2004). In 1991, literacy among the dalit and tribal women was indeed quite low. In rural areas only 19.46 percentage women were literate. A report published by Ministry of Welfare, Government of India in 1998 showed that there is much difference in the literacy rate of dalits and non-dalits in general, and gender specific. Literacy rate of non-dalits is 64.13 % and literacy rate of women is 39.29 %, where as dalit and tribal women's literacy rate is only 23.76 % (Paswan and Jaidev, 2002). There is a large disparity in the literacy rate due to wide spread prejudice based on castetism and patriarchy against dalits and women in general and dalit women in particular. To understand the root cause of the situation it is essential to examine basic factors responsible for their vulnerability.

### **Economic Deprivation And Unemployment**

A careful look at the economic situation of dalit and tribal women reveals that their work force structure is such that they rarely own any land. A large majority of them are agricultural labourers. The rate of unemployment among them is also quite high. About 90% of women working in unorganized sector are mainly from lower castes (Jogdand 1999). In 1991, about 71% of dalit women workers in rural area were agricultural labourers. Only 19% of them owned land (Pal and Bhargav 1999).

A prominent researcher and sociologist while sharing her experience from a research on gender and land issue, informed that, when she enquired with dalit women about land owned by them in their names, they wondered about permissibility of owning land in their name. This indicates that neither do they own any land nor are they aware of their rights on land. When enquiries were made with Stri-mukti Sanghatana and Prerana, Mumbai based organizations working on the issue of rag picking and prostitution respectively, to ascertain the proportion of dalit women in these occupations, it was learnt that NGOs usually do not keep record of caste (Tirmare, 2004). However, Human Rights Watch Report (1998) mentioned that a large number of dalit and tribal women are engaged in unclean, inferior occupation such as sweeping, scavenging and working in dumping grounds, rag picking and also in prostitution. These women have to face steep discrimination in the matters of social relation and employment due to their engagement in these occupations.

### **Health And Nutrition Status**

Dalit and tribal women's daily diet is the leftover of family meals, inadequate in quantity and quality. Health services are either not available in case of illness or unaffordable even if available. In addition to

that, due to early marriage and too many pregnancies their health is always at risk. If birth control is practiced at all, 91% cases of tubectomy are performed on the women who have to carry the burden of family planning. In an overall situation where dalits are prone to ailments in general, women suffer from more serious and more varied kind of sickness. More than 80% of women in reproductive age group (15 to 45) are anaemic. Poor health status of dalit and tribal women pushes her then into more vulnerable situation (Bandhu cited in Rao 2003).

Women have to more aware about the health because her health is not only affecting to her, if she is pregnant then, her health is matters for two life and for future generation. The different types of health awareness camp should be organize for the tribal and dalit women so they can take benefit and make themselves healthy. They have to spend more on their health as take proper food and nutrition's. Government hospital facility should be provide to them and treat them as equal to mainstream and upper class people. The door of health care centre should be open for them and avoid the discrimination.

### **Political Status**

Women constitute half of total population, but are unable to get equal share in active politics. Their socio-economic status directly depends on their participation in politics. Political parties in India speak much about equality of women but have totally ignored the dalit women (Jogdand, 1999).

Traditionally, leadership in the village was confined to 'rural elites', who were aged and belonging to higher castes. In the year 1993, 73rd amendment in the constitution granted reservation to dalits, tribals and women in local government. This amendment made it compulsory that one third of the seats reserved for dalits be filled by dalit women. In some states, there has been little or no acceptance of reservation for the lower castes and dalit women by the upper castes. This has resulted in atrocities against panchayat members including women. The members of the higher castes, who are not prepared to relinquish power to the lower castes, grabbed their land. An easier method to retain power is to put-up proxy candidates but keep the control in the hands of the dominant castes, always men (Kumar, 2006). The incapacity of women, particularly dalit women, to assert their rights is at the root of the problem. The reservation for dalits, particularly for women, is accepted in form but seldom in substance. Any change in the status quo is resisted. Dalit women's sitting on chairs is seen as threat to social hierarchy. So, the upper castes in the village vetoed chairs in the Panchayat office (P. Sainath in Rao 2003).

Dalit and tribal women also faced many problems in performing their duties due to illiteracy, lack of information and dependency on the male members of their families. An important obstacle is the no-confidence motion against dalit women as pradhan by the dominant sections. Rural elites are unable to accept the power, which has been given into the hands of the poorer and disadvantaged women (Manipal, 1998). Despite recognition and legal sanction for political rights, rigid caste system and patriarchy directly and indirectly has been suppressing dalit women and violating their political rights.

This proves that human rights of dalit and tribal women are violated right from her family to the society at large by one and all. All these factors are largely responsible for the precarious position of dalit and tribal women as far as their social, cultural, religious, economic, health and political status in the society is concerned. These factors force them to mutely allow violation of their civic and human rights. Thus they become victims of universal violence.

### **Violence Against Dalit Women**

Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse and

sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experienced by Dalit and tribal women. Dalit women are threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. However, sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls also occur within their own communities. For Dalit men, the suppression and rape of women could be a way to compensate for their own lack of power in society. The Devadasi system of temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. Dalit girl children are forced to prostitution. The majority of cases of violence against Dalit women are not registered. The lack of law enforcement leaves many Dalit women unable to approach the legal system to seek redress. Women are often also unaware of the laws and their ignorance is exploited by their opponents, by the police, and by the judiciary system. Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or the judge's own caste and gender biases, can lead to acquittal.

### Discussion

After know all these things about tribal and dalits women something should be done by Government, mainstream society and other people. The following facilities should be provided for their upliftment as Nutrition: Malnutrition in female children high infant mortality should be corrected, Health: Unclean surroundings – proper accommodation should be provided, Family welfare: SC – women get married very soon high fertility – affect health, Safe drinking water, Electricity in village, Essential goods and medicines, Retail outlets not available, Fair price shops – necessary, Train them in new fields for employment, Ensure minimum wages, Compulsory education up to 35 years, Introduce new employment facilities, Self-employment program for women, Modernizing existing traditional activities, Liberate the women from scavenging work – alternative arrangement for dignified work, Eradicate social untouchability, Provide minimum basic facilities, Positive discrimination- policy of reservation should be continued both in Government and public sector, Fee exemption, age relaxation for direct recruitment – separate interview, Atrocity control room: Close watch, monitoring of atrocities against dalit and tribes women. All these factors can change their life style and make them as equal to men. These issues should be discussed and solved for their betterment.

### Conclusion

At the threshold of 21st century it is absolutely necessary that common people need to be sensitized about the prevailing atrocities against Dalit and tribal women. There is a growing need to capture violation of human rights of dalit women, so that talent and potential of Dalit women's can be used for development of nation. The National Federation of Dalit women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, such as legal action against caste based atrocities, political empowerment of Dalit women, economic empowerment against growing pauperisation, building self-confidence and leadership.

The present position is better because of education, literacy rate for boys 31.48%, and girls 10.93%. Now they have lot of self respect, aware of their rights, organizations to voice their feelings. The creamy layer is well aware of the Government welfare schemes. Among SC dalit and tribes executive positions in associations are occupied only by men, very poor representation by women. Feedback about the welfare programs is very essential.

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