The Pain and the Power of the South Asian Culture

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ABSTRACT

In South Asia – that is, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – Dalits have endured discrimination based on work and descent for centuries, and this discrimination continues today. The Dalits – known as ‘untouchables’ or ‘outcastes’ – number around two hundred and sixty million people in South Asia. On account of their caste, they experience discrimination, social exclusion and violence on a daily basis. Although economic growth in the region has been strong over the past decade, caste disparities remain and are in fact increasing. The situation of Dalit women in these countries, or anywhere in the world and face systemic and structural discrimination thrice over: as Dalits, as women, and as poor. So, in order to improve and get due respect of Dalit women, the various women’s forum or movement and organization started as Dalit women movement to protect their rights. In this context, this paper focuses on the Discrimination, Atrocities and Victims against Dalit Women and their Movement. This study also highlights Ambedkar for the rights of Dalit Women. This article title consists Atrocity against Dalit Women as Pain and Women’s movement as Power.

Key Words: Dalit Women, Caste Discrimination, South Asian Culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world: they make up more than two per cent of the world’s total population. They are discriminated against three times over: they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Although both Dalit men and women suffer under the same traditional taboos, Dalit women are confronted with these more often. They are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities, where men are dominant. Consequently, Dalit women have less power within the Dalit movement itself. Although they are active in large numbers, most leadership positions in the organizations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men (Gore, 1993). The five lakh villages in our country are pregnant with the pain and power of Dalit women. Their stories break the shroud of the inhuman violence in our society. Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women. These include: extreme verbal abuse and sexual epithets, being paraded naked, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft. Dalit women are also threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes, but sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls occur within their own communities too. The devadasi (or jogini) system of forced temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. In spite of its severity and frequency, most 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. As the women are often unaware of the laws, their ignorance is easily exploited by their opponents, the police and the judiciary. Even when cases are registered, the lack of appropriate investigation, or the judge’s own caste and gender biases can lead to acquittal (Gore, 1993).

2. DALIT WOMEN AND THE SOCIETY

The caste system declares Dalit women to be intrinsically impure and ‘untouchable’, therefore socially excluded. In class terms, the vast majority of Dalit women are poor; many are landless daily wage labourers who are systematically denied access to resources. As women, they are subjugated by patriarchal structures. Due to this intersectional discrimination, Dalit women are specifically targeted for daily, egregious acts of violence, in particular for sexual violence, including the Devadasi system of forced and ritualized prostitution. On account of their ‘impure’ caste and poverty, Dalit women comprise the majority of manual scavengers, that is, labourers who clean human excrement from dry toilets. When they assert fundamental rights, Dalit women are targeted for punitive violence by dominant castes. Due to patriarchal notions of community honour residing in women, dominant caste violence against Dalit women functions to punish the entire Dalit community and teach Dalits a lesson of obedience to caste norms. Moreover, Dalit women are discriminated against not only by dominant castes on account of their caste, class and gender, but also by their own communities on account of their gender. Dalit women have less power within the Dalit community in general (Vasant Moon, 1987). When considering discrimination and violence against Dalit women, one can state that impunity is the key problem Dalit women face today – not only while seeking legal and judicial redress for violence, but also while attempting to access and enjoy their fundamental rights and freedoms. Perpetrators enjoy virtual immunity from prosecution for violence against Dalit women, as the police, who themselves often harbour caste
3. VICTIMS AGAINST DALIT WOMEN AND THE MOVEMENTS

Dalit women today are not simply passive victims; the current mood is not one of mere acceptance, but one of determination to ‘transform their pain into power’. In fact, they have been active throughout history, though often this has not been recognized and recorded. They have been actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. Today they are the strongholds of the Dalit movements in thousands of South Asian villages, and are often at the forefront of struggles for basic human rights. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land and livelihood rights and against untouchability, pointing to the potential for their self-emancipation, given adequate support. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world by critiquing dominant caste ideologies. They participate today as visionary leaders in the local governance institution by asserting their rights. While they continue to struggle against structural discrimination and exclusion, violence and impunity are systematically unleashed by dominant castes to keep them in their place. While recognizing the gendered nature of caste discrimination for Dalit women, they have turned their suffering into one of resistance, actively participating shoulder to shoulder with men in their communities in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. They have simultaneously contributed to the welfare of their families, sustained their communities given their labour for producing food and wealth for their countries. In this regard, Dalit women build their identities on a culture of resistance against the hegemonic culture of the caste system, expressing their defiance and revolt against the caste, class and gender discrimination that oppresses them. This assertion of distinct identity and simultaneous forging of a collective identity in multiple struggles marks the Dalit women’s movement in various ways (Majunder and Bhanwar Singh, 1997).

4. ERADICATION OF THE DISCRIMINATION AND VICTIMS AGAINST DALIT WOMEN

The countries where caste discrimination persists, the Government’s are have a specific obligation to make sure that women can realize their human rights. It is generally accepted in international legal standards that governments have to do more than just pass laws to protect human rights. Governments have an obligation to take all measures, including policy and budgetary measures, to make sure that women can fulfill and enjoy their fundamental rights. Equally importantly, governments must implement these laws, policy measures and programmes to fully discharge their obligations under international law. This includes an obligation to exercise due diligence in punishing those who engage in caste-based discrimination and violence. Dalit women are extremely poor, and make up two percent of the world’s population. In India, for example, 60 million children do not attend primary school; a disproportionate number of these children are Dalit girls. Caste, class and gender discrimination prevents Dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights, particularly to dignity, equality and development. Atrocities and violence against Dalit women are both a means of sustaining systemic discrimination, as well as a reaction when particularly untouchability practices and caste norms are challenged or not adhered to. Impunity for this discrimination and violence is then used as a means to preserve the existing caste and gender disparities. Before Dalit women can enjoy their human rights and before the Goals can be achieved, discrimination, violence and impunity must stop. Therefore, we call upon the respective government to take seriously the voices of Dalit women as they explain their specific situation, to support them in asserting their rights and to ensure Dalit women and girls are brought on par with the general population in terms of overall development. We call upon the international community to undertake and support every possible measure to fight the widespread discrimination, violence and impunity committed against Dalit women (Friederycke Hajer et al. 2006).

the voices ...

1. Disaggregate all criminal, economic, social and political data on the grounds of gender and caste.
2. Evolve and implement a comprehensive strategy to address impunity and ensure criminal justice for Dalit women.
3. Grant powers to make legally binding recommendations to relevant human rights institutions to establish an independent complaints and monitoring mechanism to address the discrimination and violence against Dalit women.
4. Enact domestic violence (prevention and protection) laws that acknowledge the unique vulnerability of Dalit women, allocate adequate resources and ensure a comprehensive monitoring mechanism with representation of Dalit women for effective implementation of these laws.
5. Provide support to establish informal organizations for Dalit women to freely discuss the social, domestic and development issues in their own community and to strengthen leadership within local governance structures.
6. Mandate proportional representation of Dalit women elected into parliaments, legislatures and local governance systems, including equal distribution of other minority groups, irrespective of their faith, and provide adequate budget allocations in this regard.
7. Restore land earmarked by governments for Dalits and register them in the name of Dalit women or jointly with men, and also acquire and distribute surplus land by implementing and reform acts and distribute land to Dalits in proportion to their populations in each country.
8. Ensure Dalit women enjoy equal access to and share of common property resources, in particular water resources, and provide budgetary support to create common property for their own.
9. Enact appropriate legislation to prevent displacement of Dalits and alienation of their land in the name of development projects and schemes in the context of economic globalization.
10. Eradicate the practice of manual scavenging and enforce rehabilitation policies and programmes for their alternative livelihood and sustenance.
11. Implement laws that prohibit bonded or forced labour.
12. Allocate sufficient budget for full primary and secondary level education of all Dalit girls, including funds for staff in schools and infrastructure, and vocational institutions.
13. Ensure reduction of pre-natal mortality, infant mortality and maternal mortality among Dalit women on a time-bound basis.
14. Provide assistance to launch a national campaign of caste sensitization and elimination of caste, class and gender discrimination (Sivakumar, 2006).

5. AMBEDKAR AND DALIT WOMEN MOVEMENT

Ambedkar was a great supporter of women's liberation. He blamed the verna system, which has not only subjugated Dalits but also women. He questioned Manu Smriti (Laws of Manu), the law book (Dharam-Shastras) of Brahminic Hinduism and...
attributed to Manu, the legendary first man and law giver. Manu Smriti prescribed the Dharma of each Hindu, stating the obligations attached to his or her social class and stage of life. It was hostile to the interest of lower caste people and women. It prohibited re-marriage of widows. He felt that Manu Smriti was solely responsible for the downfall of Hindu women. He encouraged the Dalits to embrace Buddhism to liberate their own selves from Hindu subjugation. Hence he fought for the right to choose ones' faith. After embracing Buddhism, Ambedkar said, “Unfortunately for me I was born a Hindu Untouchable... I solemnly assure you I will not die as a Hindu.”

6. CONCLUSION

Dalit women, despite their very active participation in politics, continue to lack of recognition and respect even within the Dalit Movement. Though there are some women organization fighting for the rights of dalits and to uplift dalit women they joined together as Dalit Women Movement without a strong political support even within their dalit political parties. However, Dalit Women Movement has been playing a significant role through Women’s Forum and with the support of dalit political parties against all forms of discrimination and for their rights. It seems to be there is positive changing situation for the empowerment of Dalit women in the society, albeit slowly.

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RELATED RESOURCES