THE MAKING OF THE DALIT WOMEN’S AGENDA: A STUDY OF THEIR ORGANISATIONS AND CULTURE IN KOLHAPUR DISTRICT, MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT

Maharashtra has had a long background of Dalit struggles, since the pre-colonial times (starting from Jyotiba Phule to Babasaheb Ambedkar) however, empirical work on the Dalit women still remains very scarce. I chose to work among the Dalit women of Kolhapur district in the state. The district of Kolhapur has a vibrant history of anti-caste struggles and it contributes a lot in the field of Dalit literature, folklore, culture, drama and theatre yet, much remains to be said about the women. In such a context my work explored the real life conditions of the following: the kalavanteen, the devadasi and the Mahar and Mang women in contemporary times.

I studied the Kalapathak Kalakaar Sangathan and the Loknatya Tamasha Mandal, two organizations that look after the kalavanteen or performing women, these remain dominated by men. The devadasis are divine prostitutes; therefore employment in any form is not possible. The Nehru Yuva Devadasi Vikas Mandal and the Samvedana Project were set up for uplifting their status and for eradicating this practice. However, the two vital issues namely alternative sources of living and combating the problem of HIV/AIDS are largely overlooked.

The Mahar and Mang two of the lowest castes in the society, are perpetually subjected to the worst forms of discrimination, they have mostly converted into Christianity to escape the rigours of caste-based society. However, most of them are unsatisfied with the state of things; the lands that they received are uncultivable, they are located far and still bear the name of the male members of the family. Provision of water and food is a great ordeal for them; stark poverty is the reality of their lives.

I used feminist methodology, more specifically inductive, qualitative analysis, that allows theory to emerge from data. Repeated journeys to the field allowed the fine-honing of perceptions and the internalization of their life experiences. Researching Dalit women has proved that women are the ‘agents of knowledge’ their voice is also one that can lay claim to reason and finally, their history (so far neglected) deserves to be studied.