

DALIT AND DALIT WOMEN

Origin and Development of Dalit Community

They constitute nearly 15.75 per cent of India's population (Registrar General and Census Commissioner). Scheduled Castes named as Harijans by Gandhi are entangled in sub-human social existence, abject poverty, economic exploitation, sub-culture of submission and political powerlessness. "Centuries of continuous misfortunes have suppressed the heat of his anger and he patiently handles his miseries. He places his wife on work to supplement his income. She makes her baby lie and cry on the footpath and herself grooms the road-side near by. When the sons and daughters grow slightly up the age, they are at once put to the grooming task, denying them schooling, playing and loitering worthy of their age" (R.P Dewan). It is India's untouchables, has withstood the psycho-economic pressures of social conformity for centuries.

The details of the origin of untouchability and the racial, ethnic composition of the Scheduled Caste population are shrouded in mystery. They have been the weakest constituent to the Indian social structure except the Adivasis. They are designated with a variety of nomenclatures such as untouchables, harijans, depressed classes, dalits, servile classes, weaker sections, panchamas, atisudras, avarnas and antyajas and Scheduled Castes. The term '*depressed classed*' refers to those castes which belong to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy and whose touch or proximity is considered polluting by the caste Hindus (G.N. Reddy). This is a British innovation from an article written by Dr. Annie Besant in the *Indian Review*, February 1909 with the caption "*The uplift of the depressed classes.*" The word '*Dalits*' denotes poverty and their oppressed conditions. The '*servile classes*' phrase was used to denote the servile nature of their working

relations with the higher castes and the degraded nature of work with which they were involved like Scavenging and sweeping etc

(G.S. Ghurye). D.G. Tendulkar preferred the term 'Harijan' to Antyaja used by the Saint Narsimha Mehta. Later, it became a catch-word-cum-brain child of M.K.Gandhi who popularized the concept.

Limited exclusiveness and consequent practice of ceremonial purity show themselves as fundamental traits of culture and character of other and Western branches of Indo-European peoples. The Greeks even in the heyday of their philosophical thought, manifested this spirit. Their contempt of the slaves is almost proverbial and the bulk of the slave population differed from them in both race and culture. Plato, the maker of ideal laws, offers the finest testimony of the depth of this feeling and perhaps of the extent of the practice. His penalty of the heinous offence of striking one's parent is the perpetual exilement of the striker from the city. In order that this exile and ostracism may be completely successful, Plato further lays down a rule, which is redolent of the caste penalties of the Hindus on their erring members. It runs: And if any person eat or drink, or have any other sort of intercourse with him, or meeting him have voluntarily touched him, he shall not enter into any temple, nor into the agora, nor into the city, until he is purified for he should consider that he has become tainted by a curse (A.C. Pradhan). So in Greek, the slaves had a similar status of Dalits that we find in our Indian tradition the position of Harijans.

Ancient India

The origin of these dalits is a complicated theme. We trace its origin from the Vedic period, i.e., the coming of Aryans to India during 2500 B.C. to 2000 B.C. and from the writings of Rig-Veda which was written during 1200 B.C. to 1000 B.C. so in the early

Vedic time, it is said that, all men were equals and there was no trace of untouchability as we see it to-day. According to Rig-Veda, in those days, perfect brotherhood was prevalent. In course of time, when the Aryans, having grown in overwhelming numbers, scattered and colonised throughout the whole of *Aryavarta*, they divided themselves into four divisions according to their different qualities (*guna*) and actions (*karmas*) in order to organize their society and set it upon sound basis. This four fold division has been a pre-dominant feature of Hindu social fabric” (R.R. Prasad). Historically, untouchability was the social fruit of the Aryan Conquest of India.

In the process of social interaction, a portion of the indigenous conquered population was incorporated into the Aryan fold. The most backward and despised section of this incorporated population, it appears, constituted the hereditary caste of untouchables” (A.R. Desai) But many read a kind of caste structure with four varnas in the Rig-Veda, in its Purusha Sukta. Though doubts exist about the status of the Purusha Sukta as an integral part of the Rig-Veda, it is certain that functional division of society was known at the time of the Rig-Veda. The existence of the four fold divisions of society in Iran, viz., Athravans, Rathaestars, Vastria Fshouyants and Hiuti, corresponding to the four varnas in India, must have been known to the early Aryan colonizers and a functional division of society on similar lines could have been practised. So untouchability as we now understand it seems to be not existent during the Vedic period. The reference about four varnas which we find in Purusha Sukta of Rig-Veda does not necessarily suggest the Brahminical supremacy over the three other varnas. It rather suggests that all the four groups are equally important for the preservation of total human race or Purusjati. Head, hand, thigh, leg, etc., are all vital aspects of human physiology and a balanced composition of all these is obviously necessary for the continuance of

man. Therefore, the so-called religio-philosophical outlook of Vedas seems to have been more directed towards human welfare in socio-ethical plane. Any reading of transcendental, mystical and supernatural theological concept of divinity regarding caste can be said as an unwarranted interpolation from without. The distinction concerning four Varnas is from the standpoint of certain qualitative standards (Guna, Karma and Veda) and it need not be interpreted in terms of birth. This point has been very much supported in the Upanishadic period when one finds not only non-brahmins like Kshatriya in the social plane on account of their qualitative mark and excellence.

So the later Vedic literatures such as other three Vedas, brahmans, Aranyakas and Upanishadas and Vedangas or Upavedas, Smruties, Sutras and the epics give a glimpse of the concept of untouchability. If *Varna* (colour) *bheda* may be accepted as the basis of system there should have been only two castes; one of the Aryans and other non-Aryans. But this is not accepted, however, the origin of the caste system can be traced to their professions which they practiced and perfected hereditarily.

In the later Vedic Period this caste system was not absolutely rigid; rather, it was a mid-way between the laxity of the Rig-Vedic Age and the strong rigidity of the age of the Sutras. The term Varna was now used in the sense of caste not in the sense of colour in this age. In the Sutra period, caste system was rigid. Various restrictions were imposed.

Untouchability had begun to creep in. the probability seems to be that in Vedic times the Varnas were classes rather than castes and that post-Vedic scholars, looking for authority for the caste system in the earliest Vedas, have interpreted the nature of the Varna in terms of the caste system as they knew (J.H Hutton).

In Puranic period i.e., 3rd century A.D. to 1000 A.D., due to certain economic forces the people belonging to higher castes indulged in lower occupations and naturally

they were declared as out castes and once they lost their position it was not possible for them to regain it.

The Dharmasutra writers declare the *chandals* to be progeny of the most hated of the reverse order of mixed unions, that of a Brahman female with a Sudra male. Kautilya agrees with the Dharmasutra writers and he has no objection if they treat them as Sudras. He regards the chandals so low that he advises all other mixed castes to avoid being with the Chandals. According to Manu they were to be the hangmen who were to be prohibited entry into villages and towns during day time, were to be stamped with some marks and were to serve as the undertakers for unclaimed corpses. The chandals were technically '*apapratras*' according to Manu. The earliest evidence of caste and untouchability is textual, and dates back to more than two thousand years. Varna is first mentioned in a late Vedic text (C. 1000 B.C), and by the time of the law book of Manu (C. 1000B.C. to A.D.200), Varna and jati (or caste) co-exist as isomorphically ranked social order (Michael Moffatt).

Untouchability is largely an outgrowth of the system of caste, and caste in its turn, is the illegitimate child of the concept of Varna. But, in the absence of any historical evidence, it is difficult to say with any precision or finality as to when the three or four Varnas or occupational divisions of society into Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra came to be multiplied into numerous castes. The origin of untouchability also is lost in antiquity (V.S.Nargolkar).

Stuart Piggot, a British archaeologist and author of Prehistoric India has put forward a thesis that even before the Aryan arrival in India from the North-West; the Harappan civilization might have developed a caste system. He is, however, quite certain

about fact. ‘The concept of caste’, says he, ‘as known in the later literature is quite unknown in Rig-veda (V.S.Nargolkar).

So in the later Vedic period, specifically in the period of Smritis and Sutras we find little restrictions in interactions. There is the possibility that in this phase of development of human civilization, the healthy spirit of equality, gave place, in course of time of the tradition bound caste system and then again to the institution of untouchability which divided the Hindus, wrapped their thinking and eroded the structure of the community. The Hindu scripture interpolated the concept of Varna and legitimized the concept of Chaturvaran and gave it a divine origin. Those who did not recognize this system-mostly indigeneous people who had their own gods, religion and social system as well as those who opposed or violated this system were out caste and were put aside the Pale of Hinduism, they were forced to live outside the towns and villages and were treated as untouchable.

The idea that certain persons defile, while others sanctify the company if they sit down to a meal in one row is present in the sutras. In this idea may be discerned the origin of the later practice not to dine in the same row with people of other castes than one’s own. The idea that an impure person imparts pollution by his touch and even by his near approach to a member of the first three castes finds definite expression in the law-texts of this period, generally with reference to the persons who are out caste and even specifically in relation to a class of people called chandalas.

In Post-Vedic times society was clearly divided into four Varnas. Each Varna was assigned well-defined functions, although it was emphasized that Varna was based on birth and the two higher Varnas were given special privileges. The first three Varans were given or the twice-born, were entitled to wearing sacred thread and studying Vedas

and the Sudras did not possess any such rights. The Sudras were treated as slaves and has the only right to serve the three other higher Varnas. Some of the Sudras were treated as untouchables. This Varna divided society with the concept of special privilege gave rise to tensions. The Kshatriyas, who acted as rulers, however, reacted strongly against the ritualistic domination of the Brahmins and seems to have led a kind of protest movement against the importance attached to birth in the Varna system. The Kshatriya traction against the domination of the priestly class called Brahmanas, who claimed various privileges, was one of the causes of the origin of new religious sects of Hinduism such as Jainism and Buddhism. Jainism did not condemn the Varna system. According to Mahavir, a person is born in a high or in a lower Varna in consequence of the sins and virtues acquired by him in the previous birth. Buddhism made an important impact on society by keeping its doors open to women and Sudras. Since both were placed in the same category by Brahmanism, they were neither given sacred thread nor allowed to read the Vedas. Conversion to Buddhism freed the Sudras from marks of inferiority. But neither Jainism nor Buddhism could make any substantial change in the position of Sudras. Although Sudras could be admitted to the new religious orders, their general position continued to be low. It is said that Gautama Buddha visited the assemblies of the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the grihapatis or house-holders, but the assembly of Sudras is not mentioned in this connection.

Gradually, as the Hindu Varna system grew fashionable strong strict measures were adopted to enforce it. Social intercourse and intermarriage were prohibited. Society became strictly endogamous and was divided into water-tight compartments. Those who violated the law of endogamy were ex-communicated and were forced to live outside the

community. In, consequence they had no option other than the low and degrading occupations.

The Buddhist birth-stories called the Jatakas, written in Pali, may be taken to reflect mainly the conditions prevailing East of Allahabad about the second century B.C. We read in them of the chandalas as the lowest caste... The reference to chandalas are specific and almost invariably show them as a despised group, to see members of which is to see evil, to avert which one must at least wash one's eyes. Chandalas are described as occupying sites outside village and towns whether in the West near Taxila or in center near Ujjain. They could be detected by their special dialect. Sweeping was their hereditary occupations (G.S Ghurye).

By the close of the pre-Mauryan period rigidity had crept into the caste-system and intermarriages were disfavoured but these were confined to higher classes alone the chandalas were looked down upon. They were doomed to miserable plight and lived outside the city. The untouchable, who were also known as the *Panchamas* (the fifth caste), or the *antayajas* (the last born), has been living outside the cities and towns for centuries. They were not allowed to enter the cities or to have contact of any kind with the nobility and the upper caste people. Mangesthesis's account speaks volumes of forbidden inter-caste marriage and a rigid caste system.

Faihen, who came to India in the (399-414 .A.D) 5th century A.D. during the Gupta period in the of Vikramaditya (Chandra Gupta II), mentions about the untouchables who lived outside the cities and Vishnupurana mentions an incident in which Hindu Kings were condemned to be born as dogs, crows, pigs etc., for the sin of looking at or conversing with an untouchable (Bhagvan Das). Again, Faihen refers to this

special class of people called chandalas, who lived outside the city gates and had to strike a bamboostick on the floor, while traveling on the road-side so that people might take precaution and were not touched by them. Their shadow was not to fall on the people. The chandalas reared pigs and birds and ate all kinds of foods.

In the Gupta times, the chandalas were a neglected section also, and have been described as living apart from village settlement. Harsha is called the last great Hindu emperor of North India (A.D. 606-647). The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan tsang who came to India (626 A.D to 645 A.D.) gives an account of the condition of the untouchables. By fifth century A.D. the untouchables grew to only in numbers but by glaring disabilities. Whenever they entered the town the upper caste people kept themselves at a distance from them because the road was supposed to be polluted by them. The Chinese pilgrim takes notice of untouchables such as scavengers, executioners, etc. they lived outside the villages and took garlic and onion. The untouchables announced their entry into the town by shouting loudly so that people might keep away from them. Thus the untouchables were neglected and looked down upon. "It can no be inferred that the Chandalas followed some degrading occupations and that they lived outside the villages. But it is very difficult to imagine that persons born out of forbidden sex contacts were numerous enough to form a separate caste group, since they are to be found practically in all villages of India. It is possible that because they were following occupations which were despised, they were characterized by the Dharmashastras as equivalent to the despicable progeny of forbidden sex relation. In other words, these statements should not be taken in literal sense as explaining the origin of these groups (B. Kupuswamy). As observed in the Hindu Shastras in the eyes of laws these Antajas had no status.

Medieval India

Alberuni, writing in about A.D. 1020, grouped together Dom and Candelas, as two of the groups not reckoned among any caste or guild. They are occupied with dirty works. Like the cleansing of villages and other services and distinguished only by their occupations. So, the Hindus had developed a very complex social structure by the beginning of the 11th century. Inter-marriage and inter-dining were strictly prohibited. The untouchables lived outside the towns and villages. They suffered from many social and economic disabilities which made their lives miserable. The ruling elite and the orthodox Brahmins shut themselves into the ivory towers of caste-system and were cut-off from the main stream of the society or the masses. In central Hindustan, there was untouchability and Chandalas were required to make their presence known by striking a piece of wood while entering the market place or the quarters inhabited by upper class people. No wonder, more than half of the Hindu populace stood forth as mere spectators when the Rajput rulers had to fight a life and death struggle against the Turkish invaders. They did not consider themselves to be responsible for the defence of their own hearths and homes. During the Turkish rule, Hindus made the caste rules more rigorous.

So during the Muslim rule, amongst the Hindu caste system was so rigid that both inter-marriage and inter-dining were taboos. Because of much rigidity, the untouchable became a prey to the process of conversion started by the Muslims. Many of these untouchables and low caste people embraced Islam and joined the invaders partly to avoid prosecution, partly in search of freedom.

Then the Mughals, like other Muslims had come to India not only to conquer the country, but also to convert its people to Islam. Islam is militant faith and its followers are zealous missionaries who look upon it to be their main duty to propagate the message

of Mohammed. The Mughals, like early Turko-Afghan rulers, were foreign conquerors and despised the Hindus as inferior people. They were filled with conqueror's innate pride and were determined to retain their separated identity. So, Muslims refused to be absorbed in Indian Society. Hence Hinduism tried to defend itself by making the caste system more rigorous and the condition of the untouchables became more miserable. The worst effect of the cramping Mughal rule was that the Hindus could not speak or write the truth. They couldn't deal with the Muslims in equal terms, and developed low cunning, hypocrisy and even deceit to get on in the world. It is believed that caste-system was much more rigorous than the previous period and Mughals exploited this weakness by which some of the lower caste Hindus, notably in Bengal and in certain other parts, were converted into Islam and some high castes in Punjab and Kashmir had in the same manner, been compelled to abandon their ancestral religion.

Therefore the Bhakti movement from the 12th to the 17th century was nothing more than an attempt on the part of Hinduism to win the battle that was lost in the 10th century. It is a generic name for all the movements which are non-ritualistic and based on Bhakti. Under the patronage of Mughal administration Bhakti movement gained movement. But it is not historically true that Islam taught the Hindus monotheism. Islam did give an impetus to the movements against the supremacy of the Brahmans and religious rituals and indirectly promoted the cause of the Bhakti movement which offered a common meeting ground to the devout men of both creeds in which their differences of rituals, dogma and external marks of faith were ignored. This movement was geared by a set of saints in different parts of India: Ramananda, Kabir, Vallabhacharya, Nanak, Sur Das, Tulsi Das, Raidas, Mirabai in North, Chaitanya, Sankara Dev in East; Namadev, Tukaram, Sant Gyaneswar, Eknath, Ram Das in the West, Ramanuja, Purander Das and

Basava in South India. This movement was reformist in the sense that it attempted to correct some of the evils in Hinduism, Particularly the practice of untouchability without questioning the caste system. They were all initiated by caste Hindus and /or admitted clean caste Hindus also into the movements fold. Once castes with differing ritual ranks came to be associated with the movements, the participants developed a dual identity; a religious ideological identity with fellow movement participants and a socio-cultural identity with social collectivities (castes) to which they traced their origin. So the first initial protest movement had got its ignition in the traditional Indian society to uplift the Harijans' social status. It started with the Jainist and Buddhist revolt of 6th century B.C. against the central ideology of the concept of purity and pollution and Bramhminical supremacy. Again, it is for the second time that the Bhakti protest movement occurred against social discrimination. This movement confined its attention to the ideational realm without any proper socio-economic programme to uplift the Harijans, hence turned to a mirage. Whatever might have been the efforts of the Bhakti movement to bring about social elevation of the untouchables, the Hindu social customs were powerful enough to nullify them. In spite of this reformist trend, the Harijans were debarred from worship at most Hindu Temples, from the services of the Brahman Priests and from the use of the village well.

Untouchability was expressed in the maintenance of physical distance between Scheduled Castes and high castes and in extreme restrictions of commensal relationships between untouchables and all others. Upper caste groups also enforced a code of conduct which symbolised this superordinate position vis-à-vis the untouchables and deferential behaviour in manner, dress and language was expected of the Scheduled Castes. Individual Hindu philosophers and saints often ignored the distinction between caste

Hindus and untouchables. They seldom concerned themselves with the reform of social institutions. Profound and universal ignorance was then natural consequence (J.R. Kamble).

After the Mughals, during the rule of Marathas and Peshwas, it is also recorded that, the Mahars and mangs were not allowed within the gates of Poona after 3 P.M. and before 9 A.M. It was because before 9 and after 3 their bodies cast too long a shadow which falling on a number of the higher castes-especially Brahmins-defiled them. Thus, untouchability was institutionalized.

Brahmins at the top-the most pure of human beings purifies himself in order to approach God. The (Dalit) untouchable at the bottom-the least pure of human beings makes personal purity possible by removing the strongest sources of organic impurity (removing of garbage, dead animals, etc). Thus the completion of the cycle by two unequally ranked units is equally necessary. In other words, the execution of impure tasks by some is necessary for the maintenance of purity for others. Thus the two elements are together the higher castes and the untouchables (G.N. Reddy).

Pollution and maintenance of social distance are specific forms of segregation and inequality bred within the Indian caste system. Hinduism sanctifies it through its theory of Karma and Dharma and the cycle of rebirth, those who are indispensable for the maintenance of caste hierarchy are excluded from it. The classification of certain sections of people as Periahs obviously is not accidental. The overt bases of exclusion were menial occupations, constant contact with pollutant like leather, excreta, earth etc., yet without the performance of such tasks by some, the other (i.e., high caste people) couldn't maintain their purity. Thus some form of coercion had to be exercised over these

village servants and dalits upon whom fell the exclusive responsibility of their performance (A. Ghosh).

However, the generally accepted notion is that, the untouchables were the aboriginal inhabitants who were conquered and enslaved by the Aryan invaders. Apart from they being known to perform all degrading service, they were alleged to have following characteristic: Drunkenness, shamelessness, brutality, truthlessness, nucleanness, disgusting food practices and an absolute back of personal honour. To be an untouchable is to be beyond the reach of the Hindu culture and society, to be almost cultureless. Among the savarnas the sudras are required to perform hard work (like farming, cattle rearing and artisan work etc.) but they are not expected to do degrading work like scavenging and sweeping public roads etc. The untouchables are described thus: “persons of a discreet set of low castes, excluded for reasons of their extreme collectivity, impurity from particular relations with higher beings-both human and divine (Michal Moffatt).

The ideas of untouchability and unapproachability observes G.S. Ghurye arose out of the ideas of ceremonial purity, first applied to the aboriginal sudras in connection with the sacrificial ritual and expanded and extended to other groups because of the theoretical impurity of certain occupations(G.S. Ghurye).

The Varna system, in course of time broke into hundreds of castes and sub-castes as a result of the operation of a variety of factors, such as racial admixture, geographical expansion of the population, inter-regional isolation of the various parts of the country and growth of crafts which tended to become hereditary. The result was the emergence of the caste system, as found today in the Hindu society. While the untouchables stood

outside the pale of the Varna system, they formed an essential part of the caste system (A.C. Pradhan).

So the concept of untouchability is peculiarly a Indian idea. There are several theories to support the doctrine of touch. Those who believe in the theory of sanctity, specify the idea, the more the sanctity the more the nearer to God. It is lost by touching objects of less or no sanctity and restored by both or utmost by a paltry unmeaning ceremony of expiation. A common man who does not search for the reason of a practice which is sanctified by religion, believe it to be a sin to violate the custom and hence practices it firmly. The practice of untouchability thus was not the result of a deliberate conspiracy to suppress the Sudras or the untouchables. It was just the holding on to wrong beliefs about religious purity. From the modern point of view, the beliefs are not only completely wrong, but they amount to positive irreligion (V.S. Nargolkar).

Socially Scheduled Castes have been denied status in the traditional Hindu caste system, for they are ritually far below the pollution line. They fall beyond the varna system. But surprisingly they are accommodated in the local jati system in the villages. The Hindu caste system, despite severe inequalities, is marked by an organic unity among castes made possible through internalization of the egalitarian values, embodied in the twin concept of 'Karma' and "Dharma" observed both by upper and lower castes. This phenomenon was facilitated by a peculiar complex "*jajmani system*" (exchanges of goods and services among various castes), but the Scheduled Castes always stood on the wrong (exploited) side of exchange.

The Hindu Sanskrit has been closed to the Harijans since time immemorial. Their social and cultural marginality is well reflected in the village settlement of Indian society-upper Hindu caste live in centrally located areas while Harijans live in the

outskirts of the villages. The Hindu high caste feudals have enforced a culture of repression of Harijans. The status quo was maintained by sanctions and the Harijans were kept in a state of constant fear under a permanent threat of violence. This made, Harijans to avoid any danger and risk involved in contact with upper castes and now situations; hence they remained unexposed and inactive.

Renaissance and Reformation in British India

Along with the religious, cultural and linguistic diversity, Indian has also developed a unique form of social stratification known as the caste system. However, what is more significant than the caste system is the appearance in the Indian society of social groups which are identified as 'untouchables'. While those social groups who controlled the economic resources and wielded political power become the privileged upper castes, others were treated as social outcastes. Without access to the vital economic resources and bargaining power, they become the most exploited peripheral group in the Indian society (Jose Kanannikil). The social customs deprived the Harijans of their right to seek higher social status by taking to occupations other than the hereditary ones.

Economically they were the poorest of the poor toiling in most unremunerative and often degrading occupations. Traditionally predominantly rural, they have been mainly landless, agricultural labourers and marginal sharecroppers and peasants- commonly indebted beyond redemption and held in varying degrees of 'bondage' in different parts of the country. Historical evidence shows that the Harijans have been completely by passed by the controlling elite group. They have been neglected by the elite formation and circulation process such as wars, Pre-British royal land grants, British India land settlements, industrial expansions and spread of English education (M.P Singh). The British rule awakened Harijans to the enquiry of certain social customs and

religious traditions. One such socio-religious tradition was the practice of untouchability among the Hindus. So before independence, the reform movements and political awakening during 19th century were urban and mostly remained as upper caste affairs.

The fight against social evils particularly untouchability based on ancient rules and customs become a nation wide debate. With the advent of British the upper caste Hindus and Muslims elite joined hands with British, representing a political triangle in which the British played a dominant role by completely neglecting the Scheduled Castes. However, the western education taught Indians the value of freedom and independence and dispelled from their minds the cringing, slavish mentality and freed them from the age-old superstitions and caste ritual. With the impact of western education, three groups emerged with different plans of actions to ameliorate the bondage of untouchables. One group was those who wanted to adhere to old society but wanted to reform by gradual process. The second group was revolutionary social reformers who wanted a complete transformation. The third group represented a revivalistic tendency. For a long time, education was the monopoly of the Brahmins. Christians were the first to open the doors of education to the untouchables. Those who embraced Christianity encouraged other members of their family to embrace Christianity. Those who did not embraced Christianity but got education become aware of their low condition. The British with a view to collect information regarding the subjects of its empire conducted the census in Punjab which was followed by a census of British India. These reports showed that the population of Muslims, Christians and Sikhs was increasing and that of the Hindus was falling. This was mainly due to large number of the low castes embracing Christianity or Islam.

Hence in 1814, Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833) founded the Atmiya Sabha. Fourteen years later in 1828 he founded the Brahmo Samaj which started preaching the gospel that unless religious evils were removed, the society could not advance. So, it successfully attacked social evils like casteism and untouchability, then came the Arya Samaj under the leadership of Swami Dayanannada Saraswati (1824-1883) in 1875. He decried casteism and untouchability on the ground that they were not sanctioned by the Vedas. Then Arya Samaj started opening schools and educated the masses. The chief significance of the Arya Samaj lies in the fact that it created a feeling of self-confidence and self-reliance among the Hindus and undermined the prevailing notions of superiority of western races and culture. But its greatest success lies in raising the social status of the untouchables among the Hindus and preventing them from leaving Hinduism and joining other religious denominations. It started a purification (Suddhi) movement or reconvert those who had accepted Islam and Christianity. But the untouchables who were received into Hinduism continued to be treated as untouchables.

Ramakrishan Mission was set up by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) in the memory of his Guru Rama Krishna Paramhansa in 1896. Vivekananda tried to impart a social purpose to the Hindu religion and declared that he did not believe in a religion which did not wipe out the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth. He asserted, "Him I call a Mahatma whose heart bleeds for the poor, otherwise he is a Duramta. So, long as millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold everyman a traitor who, while educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them". So this is safely concluded to be a phase of Hindu renaissance. Anyhow, its gospel instilled in the hearts of millions of untouchables a sense of brotherhood. He was perhaps the first Indian to

describe himself as a socialist and to declare that the Sudras (the Proletariat), who had all along been suppressed, must assert themselves and become the ruling force in society.

The depth of Vivekananda's understanding of the modern world and his farsightedness emerge perhaps most clearly from his attitude towards the oppressed and the downtrodden and in his remarkable prophecy: "A time will come when there will be the rising of the Sudra class with their Sudrahood. A time will come when the Sudras of every country with their inborn nature and habits will gain supremacy in every society."

Jotirao Phule (1826-90)

Jotirao Phule was the first Indian to proclaim in modern India the dawn of a new age for the common man, the downtrodden, the underdog and for the Indian women. It was his aim to reconstruct the social order on the basis of social equality, justice and reason. As we have just seen, the 'Aryan theory of race' constituted the most influential common discourse for discussing caste and society in Phule's time. European 'Orientalists' like William Jones, Charles Wilkins, James Prinsep and others (Marshall, 1970: 1-44) conveniently used it to assert an ethnic kinship between Europeans and the ancient Vedic peoples (see O'Hanlon, 1985: 57-59). The constant interest of European scholars like H.H. Wilson, C. Lassen, H.T. Coplebrooke, Monier Williams, Max Mueller and others (Kejariwal, 1988) in ancient Aryan society and their appreciation and praise of this society provided an important moral boost to high-caste Indians. Thus, Indian civilization was seen as primarily derivative from Aryan civilization, and the caste system was lauded as a means by which people of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds were brought together and subjected to the civilising influence of the Aryans (Omvedt, 1976:103).

At one level, Phule simply reversed this notion, arguing that the low castes, whom he sometimes called ‘Shudras and Atishudras’ and were simply listed as ‘Kunbis, Malis, and Dhangars... Bhils, kolis, Mahars and Mangs’ were the original inhabitants of the country, enslaved and exploited by conquering Aryans who had formulated a caste-based Hinduism as a means of deceiving the teeming masses and legitimising their own power. It was the confirmed and sincere view of Jotirao that the ancient history of India was nothing but the struggle between Brahmins and non-Brahmins (Keer, 1964:120). Hence, Phule consciously sought to bring together the major peasant castes (these were, besides the Kunbis or cultivators, the Malis or ‘garden’ cultivators and Dhangars or shepherds) along with the large Untouchable castes of Mahars and Mangs in a common ‘front’ against Brahmin domination (see O’Hanlon, 1985; 131).

Jotirao’s attack on Brahminism was uncompromising. He realized that the seeds of the Brahmins’ power, supremacy and privileges lay in their scriptures and Puranas; and these works and the caste system were created to exploit the lower classes (see O’Hanlon, 1985-132). Phule also reinterpreted sacred religious literature. To give an example: by reading the nine avatars of Vishnu as stages of the Aryan conquest and using King Bali as a counter-symbol to the elite’s use of Ram, Ganapati or Kali (see O’Hanlon, 1985:137; Keer, 1964:90-125). Thus, Jotirao attacked the Brahminical scriptures and Puranas, revolted against priestcraft and the caste system and set on foot a social movement for the liberation of the Shudras, Antishudras (Untouchables) and women.

Phule realized that the strongest hold of religious tradition in the people derived from the extensive integration of Hindu religious literature into the popular culture and oral traditions. Phule’s answer to this to provide alternative accounts of the texts, myths

and stories most common in popular Hinduism. He linked these with important symbols and structures from contemporary Mharashtrian society in order to convey the real community of culture and interest that united all lower castes against their historical and cultural adversaries: the Brahmins.

To fulfill his life's ambition to establish a casteless society, Phule founded the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (truth-seeking society) on 24 September 1873. The Samaj set up the first school for girls and Untouchables. Phule also organized marriages without Brahmin priests, widow remarriages, etc. According to Phule, the performance of any religious ceremony by a Brahmin priest for a member of another caste expresses in a concrete form the relations of purity between them which make up the basis for Hindu religious hierarchy. It is the Brahmin priest alone who, in his ritual purity, has the power to mediate between the human world and that of the high gods, and so it is he who controls the entry of divine power into the world (Babb, 1975: 31-67). For this reason, Phule felt that the employment of Brahmin priests negated the very principle upon which he hoped a community of the lower castes would be based. The *Satya Shodhak Samaj* actively encouraged marriages without Brahmin priests. Thus, the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* assumed a vital role as the ideological conscience for all those who identified themselves with the lower castes, whether they belonged to the Samaj or to one of the numerous other groups working for lower caste uplift.

Gandhian Approach on Caste and Varna

Hindu reformers, including Gandhi, were of the opinion that the Untouchables could maintain a Hindu as well as a Vankar or Malliga identity without the stigma of being Untouchable. The Hindu reformers delinked the problem of untouchability from the caste system. Untouchability, according to them was not an essential part of

Hinduism or, for that matter, of the caste system. It resulted from a violation of the basic spirit of Hinduism. 'Varnashram,' Gandhi asserted, 'was for the preservation of harmony and growth of soul' (Shah, 1995:28). Gandhi repeatedly harped on the evils of untouchability. He himself adopted a Dalit girl as his daughter. He voluntarily decided to live with the Untouchables to become one with them. He symbolically called Untouchables Harijans that is people of God. He started the Harijan Sevak Sangh to launch programmes to remove untouchability and improve the economic condition of the Untouchable (Shah, 1995: 28-29).

Periyar's (1879 – 1973) vision for justice

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar (Great Sage), was born in 1879 in Erode into a respectable middle-class family of artisans. He married at the age of 13, but after six years he became a *sanyasi*, traveling as a religious mendicant over the whole of India. In his visits to pilgrim centers, he gained an intimate knowledge of the evils of popular Hinduism and also of the exploitation of the masses by Brahmin priests.

Periyar became convinced that casteism and Hinduism were one and the same. He wanted Hinduism, as he saw it to be removed altogether. His movement took a turn towards racial consciousness and became a 'Dravidian' movement, seeing to defend the rights of the Dravidians against Aryan domination. It blamed the Aryans for introducing an unjust and oppressive social system in the country (see Hardgrave, 1965: 17). Periyar realized that the important feature of all new ideologies of the elite was the 'Aryan view of race'. The 'Aryan view' was adopted enthusiastically by the Indian elite as a new model for understanding caste. That is, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were held almost as a matter of definition to be the descendants of invading Aryans, while Shudras and Untouchables were those of the native conquered inhabitants. In this new language

of caste and race, to claim 'Aryan' descent was equivalent to claiming 'twice-born' status, to say 'Dravidian' or 'non-Aryan' almost equivalent to saying 'Shudra'

The high-caste elite of India began to take Aryan and Sanskritic culture as the basis of 'Indian nationality', but in so doing they were in fact taking a part- the culture of the upper castes and roughly more northern groups- for the whole. Periyar's movement sought to defend the rights of the Dravidians against Aryan domination. He saw in the Brahmins the representatives of Hindu arrogance and the stronghold of social injustice (Devanandan. 1960).

Naicker quit the Congress and attacked it as a tool of Brahmin domination. In 1925, he organized the 'Self-Respect Movement', designed as Dravidian Uplift, seeking to expose Brahmin tyranny and the deceptive methods by which they controlled all spheres of Hindu life. Naicker publicly ridiculed the Puranas as fairy tales, not only imaginary and irrational, but grossly immoral as well. Naicker attacked the Hindu religion as the tool of Brahmin domination.

Under the Congress ministry of C. Rajgopalachari in 1937, Hindi in the schools was introduced to the South as a compulsory subject. Taking this as an affront to Tamil culture and its rich literary tradition, Tamil patriots like Annadurai, Karunanithi and others under the leadership of Naicker reacted with violent protest. Naicker saw the imposition of Hindi as a step towards subjugation of Tamil peoples by the North Indian Aryans.

The Hindu religion was denounced as an opiate by which the Brahmins had dulled and controlled the masses. A Hindu in the present concept may be a Dravidian, but a Dravidian in the real sense of the term cannot and shall not be a Hindu' (A.S. Venu, cited in Harrison' 1960:127). Pains were taken to destroy images of Hindu deities such

as Rama and Genesha. According to Periyar, 'Rama and Sita are despicable characters, not worthy of imitation or admiration even by the lowest of fourth-rate humans'. Ravana, on the other hand, is despicable as a Dravidian of 'excellent character'. In his preface to *The Ramayana: A True Reading* he states that 'the veneration of the story any longer in Tamil Nadu is injurious and ignominious to the self-respect of the community and of the country' (Naicker, 1959:iii-iv)

On the eve of Independence, Naicker called upon the Dravidian people of South India 'to guard against the transfer of power from the British to the Aryans' (The Hindu, 11 February 1946). Fearing Brahmin dominance under Aryan 'imperialism', Naicker called for the formation of a separate South India state, Dravidasthan. Today, the several Dravidian political parties in Tamil Nadu trace back their inspiration to Periyar in their programme to build a Dravidian civilization in the Indian subcontinent.

Dalit Women Today

The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups any where in the world, and make up 2% of world's total population. Dalit women are discriminated against three time over they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Dalit women constitute half of the 200 million Dalit population, and 16.3 of the total Indian female population. The traditional taboos are the same for Dalit men and Dalit women. However, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. Dalit women also have less power with in the Dalit movement it self. Women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organizations, local bodies and associations have until now been held men

Even as we are in the 21st millennium, caste discrimination, and age-old practice that dehumanizes and perpetuates a cruel form of discrimination continues to be practiced. India where the practice is rampant despite the existence of a legislation to stop this, 160 million Dalits of which 49.96% are women continue to suffer discrimination. The discrimination that Dalit women are subjected to is similar to racial discrimination, where the former is discriminated and treated as untouchable due to descent, for being born into a particular community, while the latter face discrimination due to colour. The caste system declares Dalit women as 'impure' and therefore untouchable and hence socially excluded. This is a complete negation and violation of women's human rights. We urge this august body to pay special attention to this issue and come up with recommendations to eradicate the caste system.

Dalit women are thrice discriminated, treated as untouchables and as outcastes, due to their caste, face gender discrimination being women and finally economic impoverishment due to unequal wage disparity, with low or underpaid labour. According to the Hindu caste hierarchy, there are four castes namely the Brahmins (priestly caste), the Kshatriya (warriors), the Vaishyas (traders) and the Shudras (menial task workers). Below this four tier caste ladder is another rung, who are called the untouchables (Panchamas). Among the untouchables, the status of women is further eroded and closely linked to the concept of purity. This is what the rigid, fundamentalist Hindu promotes through continuation of caste system, imposing the Brahminical values to maintain the caste system. In order to trace the traditional status of 'Dalit' women one has to turn over the pages of Indian history of the origin and features of the caste system.

The Caste System is probably the longest surviving hierarchical system in existence in the world today; its roots can be traced back to the Manusmriti a sacred

document of the Hindus. The Hindu social organization is traditionally divided into two substrata, known respectively as Dwija and Ekaja. The Dwija comprise three higher Varnas - the Brahmin (the priestly caste) the Kshatriya (warrior caste) and the Vaishya (trading & artisans) with their future sub-divisions into castes but the Ekaja or Shudra consist of the lower castes, who are meant to serve the Dwija and are thus placed lower in the social order. The whole system is known as Chaturvarna Vyavastha or four-fold division of society in which a large chunk of people belonging to a number of the other castes do not find their place within this schematic structure. They are, therefore, called as Panchama (Fifth order) or Chandala, Avama (coloured), Antyaj (low born) etc (Cf. Buhler, 1886: 14-24, Hocart, 1950: 127; Hutton, 1951: 64; Mayer, 1956: 136; Ghurye, 1960: 55-56; Srinivas, 1962: 63-69).

But a Dalit women, who fortunately had no fallen prey into the net cunningly women by Hinduism was more free and less dependent. She was physically strong and could work hard. Anti women feelings were not to be found in their social life. Child marriage, strict monogamy, widowhood, dowry practice and the heinous practice of "Sati" were all unknown to them. Dalit woman has more freedom than her counterpart in the higher castes. But this freedom does not really mean anything. This is the freedom given to her by men for their own conveniences.

In their vain attempt to be identified with and approved by the caste Hindus, tried to follow their practices, forced their women into subjugation; widowhood was thrust on them. They are forbidden to remarry. The freedom that the Dalit woman was enjoying was mercilessly taken away so in the present day society a Dalit woman is also considered to be unequal to her men. Today the Dalit women who constitute the major working force.

Being a Dalit is a reason enough to be ready to face a life full of miseries, suffering degradation and dehumanized way of life. Being a woman means a life of exploitation in the name of sex, a weak variety of human subordinating to man, unwanted burden since birth and a domestic servant for life. Almost all Dalit spokesmen (and most, infact, are men) clearly recognize women to be the most oppressed of their groups, the "Dalit among the Dalit and the oppressed," as it is sometimes put. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, the leader of Dalits, described the Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthen pots set on one another. When Brahmins and Kshatriyas are at the top, Sudras and the Untouchables are at the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women.

The Dalit/Bahujan woman is a social force, a cultural symbol and has a historical background. She is the prominent feature of a farming culture. She is the true builder and heir of prominent face in the Industrial culture. She plays a big role in the construction of buildings and laying roads. Dalit women are estimated to contribute eighty per cent of total labour to strengthen the national economy. She looks after the family, she walks miles and miles to fetch water, fodder, fuel and so on. She gets up before the cock crows. Her day starts by sprinkling water mixed with cow dung in front of the house. As the sun-rises she goes out to work in the fields. She comes back in the evening and starts her routine house- hold work. She eats very less and sleeps late in the night and she wears patched clothes. Such a hard working supporter and builder of the family, society and nation at large, today is suffering a lot in India. She is struggling for survival and existence. She is leading a life full of disadvantage of being Dalit and of being a woman. Dalit are not only a socio-cultural group but often represent an economic class as well. More than 50% of the Dalit workforces were landless agricultural laborers. A number of

social studies have revealed that Dalit women makes up a large number of professional sex workers 90% of those who die of starvation and attendant diseases are Dalit. Their untouchability status accentuates their economic exploitation and their poverty, strengthen their polluting social status. Untouchability was made a legal offence by the Indian Parliament in 1955. However, untouchability as a social institution was an still is kept alive by the use of brutal force. Untouchability is related to the oppression of upper caste women as well, as it become an effective means of patriarchal/Brahmanic control over high caste women's sexuality, which was essential for maintenance of caste privilege. At the same time, the potential threat to these system of domination that the rape of upper caste female by lower caste males represented, was negated by calling or branding them as 'untouchables'. The same ideologies allowed upper caste men to violate low caste women's sexuality with impunity.

The status of the Dalit women and also presents a holistic picture of the position of the Dalit women at a micro level. What makes these women triple of the victims are factors like class, gender and caste. There are large numbers of Dalit in the country. Only around 16% of the Dalits live in urban areas and the remaining 84% live in rural areas. Their contribution to society in terms of labour art and culture is enormous. Their share of the country's resources and culture is however, disproportionately lower. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar describes the Hindu Caste System 'as a pyramid of earthenware post, set on top of another'. Not only are Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top and the 'Suhudras' and untouchables at the bottom, but within each earthenware pot, men are the top and women of that caste are at the bottom like 'crushed' and 'power'. At the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women. Dalit women have been kept powerless, their voices silenced, their dignity and personhood trampled on. In this chapter

effort has been made to address their heart burning issues and related specific handicaps, difficulties and problems suffered by the Dalit women in the longer context of the social sphere in which they live. The Dalit problem has been universally acknowledged to be acute social malice that demands an immediate solution.

The Dalits today are receiving wide attention from both government and non-governmental organizations (NGO) by way of policies and welfare schemes to improve the position of these women. The Constitution of India provides for reservation in jobs, educational institution for the Dalits under Scheduled Caste (SC) category. There has been a rise in educational access to Dalits as a result of the post-independence educational programmes. Apart from reservations in educational institutions, other major programmer for upliftment of Dalit include, exemption from school fees, procisions of stipends or scholarships, precisions of facilities like book grants and maintenance of hostels or assistance to hostels for SC students.

Dalit women and work

1. Agricultural Labour

(1.) The Scheduled castes, more particularly their women folk contribute significantly in agriculture sector, by their manual labour. In 1991, over 76 percent of the SC male workers were engaged in agriculture and related pursuits and remaining 24 percent in non-agriculture sector. By comparison, a smaller percentage, i.e. 62 per cent of male workers were engaged in agriculture and allied sectors among the non-SC/ST population; conversely the proportion of SC population on agriculture was more than that of non-SC/ST population. This dependence on agriculture was even higher among the SC women (i.e.86%).

It is however, noteworthy to point out that disparity in dependence between women folk of Scheduled Castes and non-SC/ST population is relatively less when compared with that between men folk of the two social groups. In the non-SC/ST population, more males have taken to non-agriculture pursuits and that too possibly highly remunerative.

In the agriculture sector, the scheduled castes involved, are by and large, agriculture laborers and small and marginal farmers and tenant cultivators, the SC agricultural labour constitute nearly half (49.07 per cent) of the total SC workers. In absolute number, the SC agricultural labourers are 24.47 million which constitute 32.80 percent of the total agricultural labourers in the whole country. Men of the scheduled castes are sharecroppers of other forms of insecure tenants. In the rural economic structure, they are the weakest link. Then come to the marginal cultivators who constitute 25.45 percent of the total SC workers. The marginal cultivators also somehow maintain very unstable economic condition which forces them to incur debts which results in alienation of land as also advance sale of their crops; the consequence is debt bondage. Whatever meager assets they have are depleted and in course of time they join the group of landless agricultural labourers. Economically, there is hardly any difference between a marginal farmer, a sharecropper and a landless labour.

There has been progressive swelling in the number of landless agricultural labourers as well, in the number of marginal operational holders since 1961. In 1961, 39.4 percent of total workers were cultivators and about 30.0 percent were agricultural labourers. In case of non-SC/ST population, however, the percentage of it was quite low as agricultural labourers. The incidence of agricultural labourers among the SCs was infact three times higher than of non-SC/ST population. This disparity in work force

composition of SCs population. This expectation is not fully materialized. The population of workers engaged in agriculture, in fact has increased from 69.4 percent in 1961 to 74.5 percent in 1991, but in case of non-SC/ST group, it has declined from 62.0 percent to 59.4 percent during the same period. This implies that over a period of thirty years 1961-91 the gap between the two groups has further widened. The difference which was 8.0 percent points in 1961 went up to 15 percent in 1991. The gap has enhanced by nearly 100 per cent. Fewer shifts in agricultural to non-agriculture occupations among the SCs faced lacking in comparable economic and social base in the agricultural sector itself.

2. Work participation rate among Scheduled Caste Women

Of 66.29 million SC females reported in 1991 census, 13.29 million, i.e. 20.05 percent were reported economically active and classified as main workers. Besides, 3.93 million (i.e. 5.93 percent) of them were reported as marginal workers. In all 26 percent of the SC females were reported as workers.

Among the SC females, i.e.25.98% was next to that of the ST females i.e. (44.76%) and higher than that of the non-SC/ST females which is 18.97%, same trend is visible in both rural and urban context. Among the major states, the highest female workers among the SCs is found in Andhra Pradesh (46.71) and the lowest in Punjab (5.40) followed by Delhi (7.49) and Haryana (11.65). The SC population is largely rural-based which has a higher female WPR than the urban SC population, Secondly, the female-oriented; thirdly, because of poor literacy level of SC women, the school going female population would be much less and there by increasing the participation of younger girls in economic activity.

The average female WPR among the rural SC population is 29.02. The states which have WPR higher than the average are: Andhra Pradesh (52.47), Karnataka

(42.68), Madhya Pradesh (40.66), Himachal Pradesh (37.01, Gujarat (34.81) Kerala (33.57), Rajasthan (33.29) and Tamil Nadu (31.53) . On the other hand , the WPR among rural SC women in Punjab is the lowest, i.e. 5.59 followed by Tripura (9.21), Haryana (12.8) West Bengal (14.12) and Uttar Pradesh (18.94) Regarding low WPR of Punjab and Haryana, the Census paper-1 of 1991 has observed that “it is commonly believed due to cultural factors and the reluctance among the higher caste women to report themselves as workers even though they may be participating in some economic activity, particularly in the agricultural sector”. The practice is visible among the rural SC women as well, possibly because of the “Sanskritisation” process commonly vogue in the Hindi speaking region.

The lives of Dalit women are largely circumscribed by their poverty and lack of access to productive resources like land, financial capital, or educational qualifications. In all states, the overwhelming majority of Dalit women work outside the home, most often as agricultural labourers. The only exception seemed to be Madhya Pradesh where, according to the 1991 census, 65 percent of Dalit women were not employed. Certain agricultural tasks are typically assigned to women. In Punjab, for instance, women are employed to weed crops, pick cotton and sow potatoes, as well as clean the cattle sheds of big landowners. All over India, wherever women work for non-Dalit landowners, performing tasks that include transplanting paddy, weeding, harvesting, threshing and winnowing, they are always paid less than men. Although there is no caste discrimination in the wage-rare since both Dalit and non-Dalit women are paid equally, Dalit women tend to be relegated to the most menial and arduous tasks.

In south Orissa, Dalit women who work as agricultural labourers are paid as little as Rs.15 a day. Dalit women from Orissa report that they prefer to migrate to towns in

search of work. Not only are the wages higher, they do not have to face caste-based discrimination. In rural Orissa, Dalits are made to wait for several hours before being paid, and non-Dalits place the money on the ground instead of directly handing it to the Dalit worker.

In 24 of the 52 sample villages in Bihar, women are paid Rs16-20 for 10 hours of work; in non villages, they are paid Rs. 10-15. Both women and men are paid much less than the legal minimum wage. While women do not generally migrate out of the state for work, some migrate within the state during the paddy season or to the brick kilns. Dalit women whose husbands are working outside the state reported being abused by the landlords. Since they are paid at 10- or 12-day intervals, they are forced to go to the moneylender, to whom they pay Rs.10 in interest every month on a loan of Rs.100.

In Perayam, Kerala, Dalit women reported distinctive caste discrimination in the division of labour in cashew processing factories. Dalit women are confined to the hardest task of breaking the roasted cashew nuts, a task which over time deforms and stains their palms and fingers. An educated young Dalit woman who asked to be assigned the easier job of peeling cashews was not allowed to shift. She protested against caste discrimination and fought the factory management.

Dalit women in Tamil Nadu say that they instinctively avoid touching non-Dalit women in the workplace. They eat separately. When working in the fields, if non-Dalit landlords provide the food, Dalit males and females have to either bring their own utensils or eat in leaf plant. When serving water, non-Dalits hold the pot at a height, pouring a trickle into Dalit hands to avoid pollution.

Yovelamma of Yadavalli village, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh, works as an agricultural labourer. She points out that when landlords perform rituals for paddy

transplantation and harvest, Dalits are not allowed to participate. Dalit women have to keep their food away from other workers and eat separately. On tobacco plantations, Dalits have to bring their own pots to water the saplings, where as non-Dalit workers can use the landlord's pots.

3. Other employment outside the home

Many Dalit women are also employed to do domestic and other chores in non-Dalit agrarian households. These tasks include cleaning the cattle shed, sweeping the courtyard or outer areas, washing clothes, and sometimes cleaning cooking utensils. These activities are spatially defined so the Dalit women do not enter particular parts of the non-Dalit house, especially the kitchen. In all states, Dalit women pointed out that non-Dalit women are more rigid about maintaining practices of untouchability than non-Dalit men. In more than 50 per cent of the villages surveyed, Dalit women reported that they were discriminated against by upper- caste women. This may be because non-Dalit women internalize the caste ideology that stresses the role of women as upholders of caste purity for the entire household. Non-Dalit women may also practice untouchability as one of the few ways in which they are able to yield power over others, given their limited opportunity to do so.

In Jayntira village in central Orissa, they have to enter through the back door, work in the backyard and leave from there. In Sarriya, Narsada, Dashrathpur and Ramput Gohania villages in Uttar Pradesh, non-Dalit women do not touch Dalit workers when they have to give them something. Women in Hullahalli, Karnataka, say that if they accidentally touch their non-Dalit women employer, she takes a bath and changes her clothes. Dalit women are not employed to wash the cooking utensils in Brahmin or other upper-caste households. Untouchability seems to have wakened to some extent in rural

Punjab where Dalit women are employed in well-to-do upper-caste households to clean the house, wash clothes and even kitchen utensils. In some households, although they are still not allowed to enter the kitchen, they are served food in separate vessels set aside for them.

Even if Dalits violate pollution norms accidentally, that are punished severely. Rangamma, a Dalit woman of Appannapeta village in Karimangar district, Andhra Pradesh, recalls that one day she was called by her master's wife saw this and became furious, scolding and slapping her. Later she washed going to her house to collect leftovers.

Dalit washerwomen from Betarsing village in south Orissa report that upper-caste women will not touch them while taking clean clothes, but do not mind physical contact while giving dirty clothes. Dalit women from Ghumar village in south Orissa who have formed a weavers' cooperative note the contradiction that non-Dalit women avoid their touch while purchasing saris, but don't mind wearing Dalit-made fabric even when performing religious rituals.

It was reported from Agali, Kerala, where Dalit women are hired to do kitchen chores that they are not allowed to enter the puja room. When they are given food, it is served in separate wells. In Elamkunnappuzha, Kerala, Dalit women vendors say that they get fewer customers than non-Dalit vendor in the market.

Working in the fields and homes of non-Dalits exposes Dalit women to sexual abuse and violence, which they are often powerless to resist. The dependence on non-Dalits prevents Dalit women from devising work routines that avoid non-Dalit spaces and the experience of being humiliated every day. Women in Perayam, Kerala, says that when they work in upper-caste households, they are sometimes forced to give in to

men's sexual advances. Fearful of losing their jobs, they silently submit to sexual harassment. If the case somehow becomes public, the Dalit woman is blamed, without any stigma being attached to the non-Dalit man. In Punjab, Dalit women not only go to work in the fields of the big farmers but also collect fodder from there. While in most cases they get shouted at for centering the fields and cutting plants, some of them are also sexually abused. As a well-off Dalit from a village in the prosperous Doaba region of Punjab asserted: 'As long as we remain dependent on the jats for collecting fodder for our cattle, and our women keep going to their fields, there is no way that we can uphold our dignity'. When Dalit men are able to afford it, they stop their wives and other female kin from working outside the home. Dalit women seem to appreciate this restriction on their mobility because their burden of work is reduced and they do not have to face sexual and other harassment.

Many Dalit women also perform tasks of scavenging, midwifery and prostitution. Each of these activities becomes the site for specific forms of discrimination. The devadasi form of prostitution was found in Karnataka in Maraldini, Hebbali, Pettlur and Navalgi villages. Navalgi has 400 devadasis; all Dalit households in this village seem to have women engaged in prostitution and they are discriminated against in several ways. The women serve upper-caste men who refuse to recognize the paternity of children born to Dalit women. In Bihar, Dalit women are allowed into non-Dalit houses to act as midwives, but cannot enter the kitchens or the puja room. Older Dalit women who work as scavengers in Hullahalli village in Karnataka are generally given leftover, even spoiled, food. Women from the Awar region of Uttar Pradesh are compelled to wash clothes because there is no other job available. They complain that upper-caste women

tell them to wash even the clothes soiled during childbirth and menstruation, which they cannot refuse.

4. Domestic work

In addition to working outside their homes, Dalit women also shoulder the responsibility of running their own households. Their domestic tasks include collecting fuel and fodder, fetching water, cooking, cleaning, bringing up children, as well as tending livestock or land, if they have any. These activities in turn expose them to particular practices of discrimination, untouchability and violence.

In Orissa, discrimination and abuse are highest at the water sources. When Dalit water sources dry up, they are not allowed to use tube wells in the non-Dalit areas and if permitted have to wait until all the non-Dalit women collect the water. Dalit women from Badabasul, Bikramguda and Karlakote villages in south Orissa and from Similpur in central Orissa said that whenever they collect water from the tube well in the upper-caste hamlet, non-Dalit women abuse them and wash the tube well. Women say that they would rather get water from muddy ponds or walk long distances to other Dalit hamlets than face upper-caste harassment. The notable exception is Muktapur village in central Orissa where Dalits and non-Dalit use the same tube well for drinking water, without any discrimination. In Mouda village in central Orissa, discrimination seems to have instituted recently. Women report that earlier, there was only one well in the village and there were no caste-based restrictions around it. However, when two tube wells were installed in the village, access to their water was immediately divided by caste. When bathing and washing clothes in streams or rivers, Dalit women in Orissa experience untouchability. Even though Dalits have separate bathing ghats downstream, of soapy

water from their ghat accidentally reached non-Dalit ghats, they are subjected to a string of caste and character abuses.

Dalit women in Lanke, Karnataka, also report that when that is compelled to fetch water from the non-Dalit colony, they are made to wait until the upper-caste women have had their turn. After wards, the non-Dalit women clean the taps with tamarind. In Salgunda village in the same state, where there is a common well, upper-caste women do not let Dalits touch the pulley and bucket. Instead, they draw water themselves and pour it from a distance into Dalit pots.

Since most Dalits do not own land, women are compelled to collect fuel and fodder and graze their livestock on either non-Dalit private lands or on village common land. This exposes them to constant harassment and abuse for trespassing. Even a basic human need like defecation becomes a constant ordeal for Dalit women because they have nowhere to go besides the non-Dalit lands.

A Dalit girl was raped by a non-Dalit in Bhooni village, Nagour district, Rajasthan, while she was grazing her animals. A case was lodged and the police arrested the culprit who has since been released on bail. Without access to indoor toilets, Dalit women in Kesharay Patan tehsil of Bundi district, Rajasthan, live in constant stress. They are forced to go to relieve themselves in a group and that too only early in the morning or late at night, surreptitiously, when non-Dalits cannot harass them in their fields. As a result, many women suffer from chronic gastrointestinal problems.

In Punjab, almost all available land has been brought under cultivation through the Green Revolution. Rich and powerful landowners have appropriated most of the village common lands and grazing grounds for cultivation. Some land has also been converted into housing plots. Even village ponds have been taken over. As in other parts of India,

poor villagers use fallow land on the outskirts of the village for defecating. The grabbing of the commons has left poor Dalit women with nowhere to go. They are forced to defecate before sunrise or at night. If they go to the fields, they get abused and shouted at by farmers. It becomes particularly difficult for the old and the sick. While many of the landowning upper-caste families have constructed regular flush toilets in their houses, most.

Dalits lack the resources to build these. Even though the state government gives grants to promote rural toilet construction, most Dalits who lack even a pucca house to live in, cannot afford to spend a few thousand rupees on a toilet. Even Karnataka Dalit women have complained about the problems they faced because of the lack of toilets.

In Madhar village, Chhattarpur district, Madhya Pradesh, when a Dalit girl was going for her evening ablutions through their fields, she was raped by two Thakur boys. They coerced her not to reveal the incident but the matter came to light when the girl became pregnant. A police case was registered against the boys, but no action has been taken.

Status of Dalit women in India

In India, according to the Census report of 1991, dalit women constitute 49.96 percent of the 200 million of Dalit population, 16.3 of the total India female population. The Dalit women literacy rate in India was only 23.76 per cent, 7.7 per cent in Bihar, 8.31 per cent in Rajasthan and 10.69 in Uttar Pradesh showing distinct biases that state structures and contingent biases have that directly exclude the dalit women. One of the major reasons for the high dropout rate among dalit women in primary school is the discriminatory and insulting treatment that they receive first from their non-dalit teacher and from their fellow students.

The Dalit women labour force constitutes the backbone of Indian agricultural economy. Although the Indian state consistently defaulted over the past 55 years is not recognising this truth by its abject neglect of their right to livelihood and education. 32-40 per cent of the household sector and large number of them employed as unorganised labour in the urban areas. Feminisation of labour and poverty amply illustrate in the light of dalit.

According to Kumud Pawada a Marathi writers means “a person completely broken, destroyed and downtrodden. Because of public persecution, Complete and in human neglect, the group of human beings that are down trodden are completely neglected ignored” (P.G. Jogolanad). 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 believes 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 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.

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 Dalit women, her suppression, humiliation sufferings dilemmas and exploitation. Her suffering are two fold: she has her own share of universal suffering as a women and additionally, she is victim of a variety of

exploitations social, religious economic and cultural as a Dalit women. Her experience of patriarchal domination is qualitative, more severe than that of non-Dalit women and opportunities and avenue available to her voicing her grievances and agonies are very few ((P.G. Joglanad)). Indian society is a male dominated society. All men dominate women. Therefore it is very obvious for a Dalit man to dominate a Dalit woman. After fifty years of independence, she has to work hard for earning livelihood for family. She has to undergo atrocities committed on her by her family drunkard husband. She has to protect herself from the people where she works and she has to fight against all the exploitation. Poverty is a great curse for the Dalits. Because of weak economy, the Dalits cannot progress. The women working as constructions working in houses as maid – servant, in municipal corporations road broom, breaking stones on roads, putting coal tar as road – buildings are mostly done by dalits. Dalit women have to make a two – way struggle, one in the house and the other, out of the house women due caste system which has strong hierarchic and patriarchal bias discriminate against dalit women denying them just and equal wages, fair share in economic distribution, maternity benefits, the security and protection of property rights etc.

Social Status of Dalit Women in India

In India, the traditional fourfold caste system, called varna, consists of Brahmins (the priestly caste), kshatriyas (the warrior caste) and Vaishyas (the trading caste) – all of whom are considered twice-born and are allowed to read the holy texts. The fourth group, shudras (the servile caste) are not allowed to read the holy books. Dalits were an even lower caste, the so called “outcaste” or Untouchable groups, whose very shadow was considered polluting to caste Hindus. For example, the peshwas introduced especially limiting strictures on mahars dalits, such as carrying post for their own spittle

and brooms to erase their own footsteps from the road. Many untouchable groups could not draw water from the wells and tanks used by the caste Hindus. They were denied the use of public roads and transport. Dalit women could not dress in the manner of other hindu women are could they wear jewelry, and as domestic labor by women of the upper caste.

Dalits may or may not be Hindus; e.g., holiya and madiga are Hindus; but so are former “untouchable” converts to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and other religions. However, only “Hindu” and Sikh Scheduled Caste can claim the benefits of reservation. The marathi word dalit, was chosen by the group itself and it means literally “ground”, or “broken or reduced to pieces”

Compared to the women of other social groups, Dalit women are more awakened and aware of the existence in the society now a day. They have – a revolutionary mind. In India, caste system can only be comprehended when it is realized it is essentially permeated by religious conception the Caste system has established “direct link between the religious beliefs and the social differentiation (Max weber). “Each group of caste, each Caste and sometime even sub-Caste was allowed to cultivate its distinctive styles of life in the matter of diet, dress. Worship, marriage etc (Ander Beteill). Very often these observation have made to think about the relationship between caste hierarchy and the various customs and religion beliefs and practices existing in the Indian social scene.

The term Dalit is an imposed category, for many “untouchable” and former “untouchable” groups do not identify themselves with the term, and furthermore, none of the women and girls in the study sample referred to here, identified themselves hamlets at the edge of a village. They are a small and vulnerable minority in any given region, main resistance to exploitation and violence is very difficult. Dalit constitute over 16

percent of the total Indian population. The 1991 Census estimates the total Dalit population in India at 138 million, and in Karnataka state as seven and a half million (7.5), or 16% of the total state population.

Dalit are not only a socio-cultural group but often represent an economic class as well. The 1971 census figures show that over half of the Dalit workforces were landless agricultural labours, compared to 26 percent of the non-dalit workforce. A number of social studies have revealed that Dalit women make up a large number of the professional sex workers. Studies reveal that 90 per cent of those who die of starvation and attendant diseases are Dalit. Their untouchability and poverty support each other – their untouchable status accentuates their economic exploitation and their poverty strengthens their polluting social status.

Untouchability was made a legal offence by the Indian parliament in 1955. However, untouchability as a social institution was and is kept alive by the use of brutal force. The caste Hindus insisted of enforcing the inferiority of the dalits in many ways, and if they tried to improve their standards of living they were cruelly.

There are various barriers for Dalit women not to take participation in the active politics, such as Social, Economic and Political inequality in the India society the social barriers such as practice of untouchability, casteism, illiteracy, socio-cultural variation, religious exploitation and superstitions and class variation in the society.

Devdasi System

Married to God before puberty, the devadasis (servants of God) may of whom live in the temples become sexual servants to the villages' upper-caste men after their first menstrual period. In some villages devadasis are kept as conubines but the men she bought them. In others they are public shuttle, who can be used by men free of charge.

Indian can't seem to shake off one of the sruelst traditions of its hidebound caste system. Dedications of devadasi girls have been supervised by village priests in southern India for thousands of years. The British tried to outlaw the tradition, and the Indian government has banned it too. But according to human-rights activists, as many as 15,000 girls in rural areas are still dedicated to God each year. "The parents simply don't see any other possibility," says Pailey "Somebody has to be dedicated, or the goddess will be angry." Religious duty often ends up as prostitutions; many dalit women leave the villages to earn money in the filthy brothels of Bombay. Activism and education are starting to change attitudes.

Educational Status of Dalit Women:

"I pray to you with folded hands that you give me blessings I am going to do divine work. I want your blessings and good wishes" (Champa Lernaya). The person who was making this request was Smt. Savitribai Phule, Mahatma Phule's wife and she was praying before the Brahmins of Pune who were pelting stones at her, curising her and throwing cowdung on her. Her clothes used to get stained with blood. The heinous crime that savitribai and committed was to teach girl. This incident occurred in the first half of the 19th century. In the state of Maharashtra, the city of Pune was the strong hold of orthodoxy. In those days to get educated was supposed to be the greatest sin for women. The orthodox people thought that if women would begin to read and write and become literate, they would take to apth of sin women were threatened that if they become literate they would become widows. In those days women were tied down by shalkles of customs and traditions and were confined within the four walls of their homes in change of the kitchen and child care persecuted. Perhaps the most effective weapon which helped in the

perpetuation of the untouchability was the institutionalized bias and denial of access to educational resources.

Untouchability is related to the oppression of upper caste women as well as it became an effective means of patriarchal/brahmanic control over high caste women's sexuality which was essential for maintenance of caste privilege. At the same time, the potential threat to these systems of domination that the rape of upper caste females by lower caste males represented was negated by defining offspring of such unions as untouchable. These some of the ideologies allowed upper caste men to violate low caste women's sexuality with impurity and without consideration of issues around caste purity and female honor.

Even the process of Sanskritization or approximation to upper castes' code of conduct' did not help Dalits to cross the barriers of untouchability. Dalit all over India have tried to change their lifestyles, marriage practices and caste names but to no effect.

Alarmingly for the past several years, official Indian figures on violent attacks against Dalits have routinely exceeded 10,000 cases per year. Indian human rights workers report a far larger number go unrecorded, buried by collusion between police and local privilege. Justice is rare, even when charges are filed.

Suganabai Kshirasagar looked after him. The orthodox people tried to put a lot of obstacles in the path of Jyotiba's education Suganabai left no stone unturned to teach Jyotiba English language as she knew his caliber. One 1st January, 1884 Jyotiba started the first school for girls in Pune and he started another school for untouchable children in 1891. The orthodox (so-called religious) people created a lot of hurdles in Jyotiba's work.

Before Jyotiba, the Missionaries had tried to start girl schools but their efforts proved to be futile. However, taking inspiration from Jyotiba's attempts, some of his

Brahmins and non-brahmin friends helped him in his work. The first school started in the house of Shri. Bhide who instead of taking rent, promised to donate Rs. 5 per month as help to the school and for the initial expenditure of the school donated Rs. 101. Savtribai become the first teacher and the Principal of this school. They registered the names of their friends' daughters. The students were of the age of 4, 5, 6 years. The couple started convincing the people and though at first people were frightened, gradually the number of girl students started increasing. Any good work is at first looked down upon, but later on people feel curious about it and ultimately accept it, as it happened in Jyotiba's case. The public preferred the schools started twenty schools in Pune and its Vicinity. Afterwards male teachers like Shri. Vishnupant Atre and Shri Vamanrao Kharadkar began working in the schools. Usman Shiekh's sister Fadtima Sheikh started teaching after she had taken training. He was the first Muslim teacher.

Savitribai was very beautiful. When she was teaching in her youth once a good a tried to molest her on the way. But Savitribai was not only beautiful but also physically strong and mentally firm. She could understand the intention of the goonda and attacked him like a tigres and gave him three-four slaps. The goonda was flabbergasted and ran away from there. This news spread ever where and people realized savitribai courage. So nobody dared cause her any trouble there after. Otherwise people of orthodox attitude used to throw stones at her every day but she faced the assault peacefully and courageously.

At time when even the shadow of a person from scheduled caste used to be shunned, when people were averse to giving water to thirsty untouchables and had no compassion for them, jyotibe savitribai spend the well in their house for the use of the untouchables. It was a great miracle. It was a challenge thrown at the orthodox,

reactionary people. The Brahmins cried out, “The entire city of Pune is drowned in sin. The Kaliyug evil age has arrived. Now the day of deluge is soon coming.” It is a sorry state of affairs that even today after a hundred years, things have not changed much. In villages and small townships the untouchables have to pine for water.

Economic Status of Dalit Women

Economic disability is the main thing which concerns the scheduled castes in the state. Large numbers of them have been landless agricultural labourers working for others as daily Wages. With the mechanization and improvement in agricultural economy most of them have lost their traditional occupation. One of the Constitutional provisions with regard to the reservation of job for scheduled caste in governmental and public undertaking. But due to ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and official apathy these advantages are not fully made use of by them. The economic oppression of Dalit women has made them live below the poverty line. The Dalit women often descend below the subsist. Once the line with the disappearance of their means of earning and livelihood, women work both in organized and in unorganized sector. The Dalit women employed mainly is unorganized sector., and work as labourers in agriculture, construction work, landless labourers, factory work and other house hold and marginal works, as daily wages workers (P.C Jain and Shashi Jain, Shudha Bhatnagar).

The basic problem that affects the Dalit women is role and opportunities for employment in this sector spring from this helpless dependence supposed by lack of adequate employment autonomous limited skills illiteracy, restricted mobility and lack of autonomous status. The lack of control ones predictive resources and a persistent gap between consumption and expenditure leading to perpetual indebtedness, deprive them of all bargaining power and occupational mobility. The proportion of Dalit women below

the poverty line is comparatively higher than upper caste women. The structural adjustment in the new economic policy lists women, which leads to decline in employment and income by the introduction of imported technology.

Political Status of Dalit Women.

Women constitute about 50 percent of the population of India and 80 percent population of women resides in the rural areas. Most of the rural women are engaged in the domestic and household activities. Some of them are also engaged in the economic activities to earn livelihood for their families. Even after fifty years of independence, they have not been able to participate effectively in various occupations. The role differentials created by the culture in a specifies society can be changed through educational development, change in social values and political will of the state. Thus the concept of gender in political participation is abstract and it can be used successfully for women's participation in political life of the nation (Hoshior Singh and Ajmer singh Malik). Some researcher evaluated the status and position of women in the society, especially is terms of political participation. Change finds that discrimination against women is deeply rooted is the structure of society is the role women play and in a sexual division of labour, which relegated females primarily to the domestic spheres of life (W.H. Clage). Jahan points out that woman generally participate in large number in voting but their participation is very low in the political activities (R.Jahan). Kaushik (Sushila Kaushik) state that the right to vote is the starting point in the struggle for women's political equality and their participation by way of voting has been growing but not steadily ones the years. Mohanti reveals that it is necessary to create proper socio-economic and political conditions to enable women to participate effectively in the Panchayati Raj Institution without endangering the positive values of the prevailing family system

(Bidyut Mohanti). Sudha pai's in her brief study of three villages from Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh warns that unless reservations are accompanied by female literacy, independent voting rights and change in status of family and society, women will continue to act a more name sake representatives of the male members of their family (Sudha Pai).

Weaker section means the weak groups of society need special care and protection. It refers to both economic and social weaknesses and both of these weaknesses to together, each kind re-inforcing the other. Weaker sections are the alientated sections of society comprising SC, ST, OBC, marginal and small farmers, rural artisan and landless labourers etc. Social and economic backwardness is considered as a criterion to be eligible as a weaker section (U.Gurmurthy). Dalits are the people who are socially and economically backward and most of them are landless labourers depending on the land owing classes for their livelihood. The Scheduled Tribes are victims of isolation, primitive economy and all sorts of exploitation. All the political parties in India speak much about equality of women, and have totally ignored the Dalit women, where their political status and participation is insignificant. It is regretable that the Dalit women have not been given the representation in all the political parties which reflects the social difference. By recognizing the seriousness of women's participation in politics, in the year 1987 the Janata Government in Karnataka announced 25 per cent reservation for women in Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat as per Zilla Parishad Act 1932, with a special provision of 5.1 ratio reservation to Dalit women in 25 per cent women reservation, which is a very important and significant aspect. This reservation a number of Dalit women had an opportunity to take part in active politics, 19 dalit women against 211 upper caste women in Zilla Parishad and 2469 Dalit womens against 14025 upper

caste women in Mandal Panchayats were elected. The Participation of these representatives in active politics varies. A few women have really showed good performance in the participation. The representation of Dalit women in Zilla Parishad and Mandal Panchayat does not widen the reality of women's political visibility. Therefore efforts should be made to increase the scope and percentage of reservation in legislatures and in parliament. All the Political parties should strictly implement the reservation specifically for Dalit women. And it is the responsibilities of voluntary social organizations, Dalit organizations and the implementation of reservation also to create the political awareness and its importance among women.

Government Economic Policy for Dalit Women.

Scholarship schemes for the scheduled castes were one of the important constitutional provisions. But for this incentive it would not have been possible for many scheduled caste students to continue their higher studies at different levels. The parents of their respondents, being financially in a difficult position and educationally backward, would perhaps not have allowed their children to go to schools and colleges. Very often the parents consider children as economic assets when they are young, since children are employed in many areas in the village, which supplements family income.

Reservation of jobs of the Scheduled Castes in government and public undertakings are being extended from time to time but as it is time-bound, it will come to an end at one stage.

Dalit Women and the Public Sphere

There are fewer reports of Dalit women experiencing discrimination and untouchability in the public sphere as compared to men. Yet this absence does not indicate the women are treated fairly, but that women do not even enter many public

places. Prescribed norms about women's 'proper place' mean that they rarely go to post offices, banks or even the panchayat office. As women from Ganiari Khurd, Garhwa, Bihar, said, 'What work do women have in the panchayat'. Only men go there ' In Tamil Nadu, Dalit women cannot enter village temples, hotels and eating places. In Andhra Pradesh, women cannot enter village temples. Subordination keeps most Dalit women out of the public sphere. A major departure from this is the reservation of one-third of the posts in gram panchayats for women.

1) Panchayats

Dalits in India, officially termed scheduled castes, form the largest discriminated community. Their discrimination is based, first, on their descent or birth into specific 'untouchable' castes, and secondly, on their traditional 'polluting' work. As a result, although almost one in five Indians is a Dalit, half of whom are women, their political participation as a large minority community in India remains disproportionately low. Looking specifically at Dalit women, the current Indian Lower House of Parliament has only 12 Dalit women MPs, a mere 2.2% of Parliamentarians. In its consideration of the Government of India's report in 2007, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted its concern over the under representation of Dalits in all levels of government. The Committee went further to state that: "Dalit candidates, especially women, are frequently forcibly prevented from standing for election or, if elected, forced to resign from village councils or other elected bodies or not to exercise their mandate, [and] that many Dalits are not included in electoral rolls or otherwise denied the right to vote..."

To just take the example of Dalit women's political participation in local governance institutions in India called the panchayats. The simple reason is that this is

the largest political space open for Dalit women today to participate in public affairs. Moreover, at this level, there are separate quotas for Dalit women, aside from quotas for Dalits and women in general, meant to facilitate their inclusion in local governance.

It is true that the quota system has resulted in over 100,000 Dalit women elected representatives across the country today. Unfortunately, however, political representation through quotas has not led to effective political participation for the majority of Dalit women. The main obstacle is the multiple discrimination these women face arising from the entrenched caste hierarchy, chronic poverty and patriarchy.

Dalit women are excluded from caste councils (jati panchayats). Many of them are unable to participate meaningfully even in the gram panchayats. Lacking political-economic authority and formal education, and unfamiliar with administrative procedures, Dalit women who are elected to panchayat posts find themselves unable to function effectively. Many Dalit women in south Orissa complain that non-Dalit women do not inform them about panchayat meetings and so they never get to participate.

2. Health services

Dalit women deal with government officials most frequently when they seek health services for themselves and their children. The village anganvadi worker and ANM (auxiliary nurse-midwife) discriminates against them. Dalit women from Sanjhiki, Bahabal and Randa villages in north Orissa say that upper-caste anganvadi workers do not allow them to enter the anganvadi center. Their children are also discriminated against. Dalit women in Maouda village, central Orissa, note that their anganvadi worker is an adivasi; she does not visit their hamlet and refused to let them enter the center. In Similpur village in central Orissa, women report that the health worker takes Rs150 from them for every visit to the Dalit hamlet. Dalit women across Uttar Pradesh report that the

ANMs practice untouchability; hardly any pregnant Dalit women approach health workers for their services.

In pandalam Thekkekara, Kerala, Dalit women report that the doctors at the local hospital spend for more time in examining and treating upper-caste women. In Attipra, Kerala, the non-Dalit anganvadi worker discriminates against her Dalit colleague.

Dalit women from Tamil Nadu say that upper-caste families don't send their children to the anganvadi because it is run by Dalit women. In two villages, non-Dalit women avoided using the health center because the health worker was Dalit. Premlatha, a Dalit woman from Andhra Pradesh, is a graduate who is working as an anganvadi teacher. Despite being educated and employed in a government job, she still encounters caste-based discrimination. As she puts it: 'Chinta chacchina pulupu chavadu' (A tamarind may die but it does not lose its sourness)

The practice of untouchability in Lon Khurd, Parbhani district, Maharashtra, became apparent when researchers for this study held a group discussion with three upper-caste and four Dalit women. The meeting was held in anganvadi centre where the worker is a Dalit woman. The researcher opened the meeting by asking the anganvadi worker to apply haldi-kumkum (turmeric –vermilion) to each woman's forehead, a common way of welcoming women in Maharashtra. The three upper-caste women refused to let the Dalit woman touch them to apply haldi-kumkum to their foreheads. Instead, they took the powder and applied it themselves.

In the rare cases when a Dalit woman manages to become a government employee, she encounters discrimination from her colleagues and clients. Forty-year-old Pralaya Senapati is the ANM of Telipalsh village in district Kalahandi, Orissa—a great achievement for a Dalit. But whenever she goes to the upper-caste women and children,

they change their saris and bathe to purify themselves after she leaves. That is why non-Dalit ask Senapati to come early in the morning so that they can deal with her before they have had their morning bath. If non-Dalits need her help later; in the day they ask her to place medicines so that they can avoid touching her hand. Senapati says 'I do my work sincerely. I feel so insulted by this behaviour'.

3) Self Help Group

Villages in several states now have women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs) where women regularly deposit small savings and use the funds to provide loans. In 30 to 40 per cent of the villages surveyed, Dalits reported that they were discriminated in SHGs. In Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, in instances, where the SHG includes both Dalit and non-Dalit women, Dalit women are made to sit separately. Dalits and non-Dalit women do not eat together. Dalit women from a now-defunct SHG in Lon Khurd, Parbhani district, Maharashtra, report that Maratha women members used to sit apart from women of other castes. When Sheela Athavle, a Dalit, was made the head of the group because she was literate, Maratha women members refused to accept her and stopped paying their monthly contributions to her. The group stopped working two years ago.

3). Schools

In some schools in Kerala, boys have started making friends across the Dalit/non-Dalit divide. They visit each other's homes and occasionally eat food together as well. Compared to boys, socializing between girls of different caste is still very limited. Premlatha, a Dalit from Andhra Pradesh who succeeded in becoming a graduate, recounts her ordeal in school where non-Dalit teachers and students would humiliate her by calling her by her caste name. When she was in the fourth standard, she accompanied her upper-caste friend to her house, only to be ordered out immediately. Premlatha dreams of a

society free of discrimination, but to her disappointment, even the next generation has had to confront untouchability. Recently, Premlatha's daughter visited her upper-caste classmate's house to pick up a textbook. As she was thirsty, the friend offered her water in a tumbler. Just then, her friend's mother walked in and, finding a Dalit girl drinking from the tumbler, grabbed the vessel and threw it down, shouting caste abuses at her. In another case, the upper-caste head –master of a village school in Tamil Nadu refused to accept a boiled egg because a Dalit cook had removed its shell.

4. Other public spheres

On local buses in Bihar, upper-caste women are allowed to sit in the seats reserved for women, while Dalit women are asked to sit at the back, along with the men. In Tamil Nadu, Dalit women say that they are made to give up their seat in the bus when an upper-caste women boards. Kanakarathnam, the leader of a Dalit SHG in Andhra Pradesh, encounter the same discrimination when she boarded a bus along with women from the upper-caste SHG in her village to go for a meeting at the mandal headquarters. The upper-caste refused to let Kanakarathnam sit on the seat reserved for women; they shouted at her saying: 'Have you forgotten your caste?' However, the conductor intervened and insisted that they share the seat with Kanakarathnam.

Resistance and change in Many Dalit women so not submit to discrimination; they act against it. In Kuanrput village in central Orissa, Kamala, a Dalit woman entered the village temple and confronted the priest: 'Has God debarred us from the temple and allowed only upper castes to enter, or is it your rules that you are imposing on us?' This led to a big fight between Dalits and non-Dalits. Today Dalits dare not venture near the temple.

A few Dalit women in Kerala have breached the caste divide by marrying upper-caste men. In Attipra, a Dalit girl said, she is happy with her husband and his family. Her only sorrow is that her in-laws do not allow her to meet her parents or others in her natal family. In order to marry the person of her choice, a non-Dalit, she has been forced to sacrifice her ties to her kin. In Kerala, it seems that the rules of kinship and marriage are being intensely renegotiated. When the Dalit girl's upper-caste mother-in-law was interviewed, she revealed the domestic politics behind her decisions. This woman has four sons. She says that her second son had an affair with a Dalit girl slightly older than him. The mother created scenes and vigorously opposed the affair. To her relief, the boy abandoned the Dalit girl and has now married someone from their own caste. Later, her youngest son also got dragged into a similar 'foolish affair' with a Dalit girl. However, in this case, the boy was determined. The mother loves him marry the girl. But she makes sure that her youngest daughter-in-law's relations are not allowed to visit her house. She admits that she likes her daughter-in-law, but confesses that she cannot give up her 'other' feelings about Dalits.

New projects in Kerala that use decentralized planning to focus on women's particular needs are beginning to change women's access to the public sphere. Many Dalit women are benefiting from schemes and projects that, for instance, train women to drive autorickshaws and buses, provide bicycles (for school girls), skills training, and instruction in karate. In a cultural milieu where women are not supposed to stand on the street other than for unavoidable reasons like shopping or waiting for a bus, these projects given women a new visibility and confidence. Women-driven autorickshaws enable the embodied presence of Dalit women in spaces where they are usually excluded. In the

process, they challenge the age-old patriarchal prejudice that the public sphere is a male domain.

The specific forms of discrimination that Dalit women struggle against are produced by the combined weight of caste, class and patriarchy. Social beliefs about pollution, the economic compulsions of being dependent on upper castes for work and livelihood, and the vulnerability imposed by gender subordination, fuse to make the lives of Dalit women especially hard.

Social change among the Dalit women

Compared to the women of other social groups, Dalit women are more awakened and aware of their existence in the society now a day. They have revolutionary mind. They are participating in all kinds of social gatherings organized on various social issues. Dalit women are always ahead in the huge procession on the Dhamma Chakra Parivartana day. They are seen in large numbers on the Diksha Bhoomi at Nagpur. Dalit women today are living like burning flames in the society. To name some of them, Mayawati and Phoolan Devi are championing the cause of Dalits through their political activities. The political awakening is definitely more among Dalit women as compared to the women of the higher castes. They are very conscious in the matter of their right to vote and keeping in mind the qualification and work of the candidate rather than the symbol.

Social

Even the killing of a Dalit woman is explicitly justified as a minor offence of the Brahmins: equal to the killing of an animal (Manusmitri). If the killing of an untouchable was justified as a minor offence, you can imagine the treatment they received throughout their lives.

In a male dominated society, Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the Manusmriti and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political social, educational, and personal channels through which Dalit women could be uplifted (Thind n.pag). the horrendous laws in the Manusmriti were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favourable only to the Upper caste, which form the majority of Indian. Even today, in modern times, we see the severe oppression and exploitation of Dalit women. The Laws of the Manusmriti have a devastating effect on the level of education reached by dalit women.

The caste discrimination inherited by birth results in Dalit women facing multiple oppression that violates their economic, political, social and cultural rights. The most deprived section of the society comprises of Dalit women who are the poorest, illiterate and easy targets for sexual harassment. The women face not just caste violence inflicted on them by the dominant castes, but also state violence.

Achievements in Education

A large majority of the illiterate population comprise of Dalit women with 76.24% of Dalit women being illiterate. The girl drop out rate among Dalit families is increasing with girl-children are forced to work as child laborers, More and more girl children from Dalit communities are school drop-outs and working as child labourers. Dalit illiterate because they have less access to education which is an inherent part of the caste system. There are not enough facilities for education, taking care of small children and they join the adults to add top the income of the family. Dalit girl children are involve mostly in hazardous work like Beedi making, working in match factories and in the fire-works industry.

Traditionally dowry, which is not a practice of the Dalits, has now become a bane. Due to Sanskritisation by the caste Hindus, the Dalits have begun to emulate the customs and rituals of the Hindus. Dowry is one such custom. The Dalit families have succumbed to the societal pressures, added to this the fear of sending the girls to schools which are usually located in distant places deprive them of education.

Girl children are deprived of access to education as belonging to economically weak families; they are unable to pursue their education. They do not get uniforms, school books, special fees, and have to walk long distances to reach their school. This is a limiting factor for Dalit children.

The major achievement in absolute term has been noticed in the field of education. The level of literacy among the Dalits has grown up considerably during the past two decades. But there is a considerable gap between upper caste women and the Dalit women. Education is the means of realizing one's life-desire which help to develop one's personality and it accentuates in improving one's status in all respect. Education has direct association to the socio-economic and political status of women. It is due to the lack of education the Dalit women are not able to come out of their poverty and marginalized situation. Being illiterate they are not aware of their own rights and their own life-situation. It is because of their innocence and ignorance that upper caste people can easily exploit them and oppress them. Due to lack of education there is no knowledge of health among them and they do not care about their health, and easily becomes the victim of pandemic diseases.

Following are the reasons why Dalit women bother least about education of their children are:

Their main aim is to earn their livelihood, for education is not needed. By seeing other people as domestic workers, sweepers, weavers, etc, they can earn their living. When the mother goes out for work, the girl children, stays back at home, in order to assist in cooking, are looking after the young ones and grand parents. They don't show any interest in educating their girls. Girl children help them at domestic chores and even these women discriminate between male children and female children.

Dalit women are ahead in the educational field, but still they have to enter many more areas such as business, professional education, medical etc., but still economic progress is needed. Until recently, the contribution of women to the Indian economy through self-employment and home based work has not received much attention. Employment of women in organized and unorganized sectors has drawn large number of women out of the family and the house hold who make their contribution to the economy visible.

It is important to note that under Dr. B.R.Ambedkar's leadership the Dalit women took active part in Dalit protest movements on a number of occasions. Until and unless there is an improvement in the status of Dalit women and their equal participation in the society all talk of nation's progress and development is meaningless.

Economic

Of the total population, Dalit women constitute 16.3% of which 18% women live in rural areas. The women perform hard domestic labour which is unpaid and as agricultural labourers or casual labourers they continue to toil under the burning sun, with no protection or benefits that labour laws should provide, since majority of these women are in the unorganized sector. They do not even get the minimum wages that the state/country has specified, since they are unable to organize and demand for decent

wage. Dalit women undertake manual, low paying, tedious, time consuming work. They earn less than one U.S. Dollar.

The women have to walk miles to fetch drinking water and often the water is not safe and potable. Dalit hamlets are usually at the end of the main village or in the village outskirts. They live in small huts and even the few who may have slightly better housing are devoid of basic amenities such as sanitation, light and safe and clean drinking water. The women work on construction sites, carrying heavy loads of construction material. They also work in brick kilns for long hours, as casual labourers to lay roads with hot tar in the burning sun, without sandals and any other protective gear. The women have to walk miles not just for collecting water but also fuel and fodder for their domestic chores. Dalit women are victims of bonded labour, they are abused, sexually exploited by other caste, humiliated and are easy targets of insult.

A study conducted come up with some shocking facts about the work of Dalit women. What is horrifying is that Dalit women work more than bullocks and men. Bullocks and men work in a hectare in a year for 1064 hours and 1202, respectively, while women work for more than 3485 hours. The caste and patriarchal norms legitimize the poor economic conditions of Dalit women. She has to work to survive. She is powerless and has neither access nor control over resources.

Manual scavenging continues as an occupation in India and most of the manual scavengers is Dalit women. The women are subjected to do this humiliating and degrading work, which further results in discrimination and social exclusion.

Health

The health condition of Dalit women is alarming with high incidence of maternal mortality and infant mortality. This is due to the fact that Dalit women are unable to

access health care services. Due to denial and sub standard healthcare services the life expectancy of Dalit women is as low as 50 years. The infant mortality rate is 90 / 1.000. The sex ratio of Dalit women is 922 / 1000 compared to 927 / 1000 for rest of the population in India. Due to poverty, Dalit women are malnourished and anemic. Early marriage and multiple child births cause the women to suffer from prolapsed uterus. Continuous bending, working while sowing and harvesting in agricultural causes acute back pain. They also develop skin irritation and allergy due to excessive use of pesticides. As they work barefoot and the soil is damp and wet, the women develop soars between their toes. Due to lack of awareness and medical care, many of them suffer from reproductive health complications, including STDs and cervical cancer with white discharges.

Dalit women are easy target for the Government Birth Control Schemes. Women face forced sterilization, are tested for the use of new invasive hormonal contraception like guinea pigs. They are force to use long-acting, hormonally dangerous contraceptives. They do not get basic medical facilities. Pregnant Dalit women receive discriminatory treatment in hospitals and there are instances where doctors have refused to conduct the delivery of Dalit women.

Political Power

Dalit women are excluded from decision making. They are not in a position to exercise their power. Wherever Dalit women have contested, they have faced stiff opposition and even been brutally attacked. The 73rd amendment provides for mandatory reservation for Dalit women to be elected to the local governing bodies. They are elected but not able to exercise their power. Menaka (a Dalit women and a village Panchayat President was killed in broad day light)

Ranganayaki was deposed for solemnizing an inter-caste marriage. Banwari was gang raped when she objected and reported to the authorities against child marriage in her village. Gowri was made to parade naked for hoisting a flag on Independence Day. Dalit women are militant and powerful. They are now fighting for political power within this caste system.

There are instances where Dalit women have been elected into local governance and through the reservation policy nominated as the President of the local governing unit called Panchayat. But when these women have endeavoured to exercise their role, it has met with resistance even to the extent of physical violence. A Dalit woman President is not allowed to sit on a chair, if the other caste members do not allow this. She is forced to be a mere figure head, while the functioning of the Panchayat is taken over by other upper caste members.

There are several traditional practices and customs that violate human rights. The practice of dedicating girl-children to become Devadasis, Basavis and Mathammas. This practice is a violation of Dalit women's rights. Dalit women are discriminated and treated as untouchables. The shoemakers. Arunthathiar, practice Mathamma, dedicating Dalit girl children to their goddess Mathamma.

Superstition coupled with poverty and illiteracy is responsible for such practices. It is also using religion to sanction prostitution through the interpretation of mythology by the upper caste so that they can both economically and sexually exploit Dalit women. It also is a form of upper caste manipulation to control the lives of Dalits. Further the lack of medical services, allows for such practices to flourish. There is a strong belief that the goddess has dealing powers. So when a Dalit girl is sick. She is taken to the temple and left there till she is cured of her sickness. As already mentioned the economic situation is

another reason that Dalits are unable to spend money to buy good health service. Once the child is cured, the child is named after Mathamma and married to the goddess with the “Pottu Thali” (wedlock). After she becomes a dancer she belongs to the temple. During temple festivals she dances and earns her livelihood. She is not treated with respect and publicly humiliated by men who harass her sexually.

The team which plays music with her exploits her by having a share in what she earns. Once the girl is dedicated to Mathamma, she cannot marry and lead a family life, as she is wedded to the Goddess. Therefore, she is sexually exploited by her partner who leaves her, to fend for herself and her child. Other men also tend to sexually exploit these Dalit women. Mathammas have no family, no security and left all alone with a child, so she has to struggle life long to maintain herself and the child. Dalit women who are dedicated to Mathammas end up in the sex trade and become vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

Dalits facing Human Rights violations is a legion. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story: “Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers”; “Dalit tortured by cops for three days”; Dalit ‘which’ paraded naked in Bihar”; “Dalit killed in lock-up at Kurnool”; “Seven Dalit burnt alive in caste clash”; “Five Dalits lynched in Haryana”; “Dalit women gang-raped, paraded naked”; “Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits”.

Dalits in India, officially termed scheduled castes, form the largest discriminated community. Their discrimination is based, first, on their descent or birth into specific ‘untouchable’ castes, and secondly, on their traditional ‘polluting’ work. As a result, although almost one in five Indians is a Dalit, half of whom are women, their political participation as a large minority community in India remains disproportionately low.

Looking specifically at Dalit women, the current Indian Lower House of Parliament has only 12 Dalit women MPs, a mere 2.2% of Parliamentarians. In its consideration of the Government of India's report in 2007, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted its concern over the under representation of Dalits in all levels of government. The Committee went further to state that: "Dalit candidates, especially women, are frequently forcibly prevented from standing for election or, if elected, forced to resign from village councils or other elected bodies or not to exercise their mandate, and that many Dalits are not included in electoral rolls or otherwise denied the right to vote..."

I want to just take the example of Dalit women's political participation in local governance institutions in India called the panchayats. The simple reason is that this is the largest political space open for Dalit women today to participate in public affairs. Moreover, at this level, there are separate quotas for Dalit women, beside from quotas for Dalits and women in general, meant to facilitate their inclusion in local governance. It is true that the quota system has resulted in over 100,000 Dalit women elected representatives across the country today. Unfortunately, however, political representation through quotas has not led to effective political participation for the majority of Dalit women. The main obstacle is the multiple discrimination these women face arising from the entrenched caste hierarchy, chronic poverty and patriarchy.

Globalization

The process of globalization has affected Dalit women considerably. With the introduction of new farming techniques such as, mechanization for harvesting and transplanting, women have lost their traditional work in the agricultural sector. Food crops have been replaced by Cash crops. Horticulture has been introduced by big

agrobusiness corporations for export purposes. This has deprived Dalit women of their land and the common resources in the village. Formerly women used to collect greens, fish, and shells from fields free for their food requirements. This is no longer available to them. The abject poverty condition has driven large numbers of Dalit women into sex trade to earn for their families. The Globalisation process has increased the feminisation of poverty and this has affected Dalit women in every sphere of their lives. There is also large scale migration from rural areas to the urban centers in search of better livelihood options. Women are left behind to bear the responsibility of the family. This further adds to the existing burden that Dalit women are trying to cope with. More and more female headed households emerge and most of them are Dalit women. Such situations push the women into further situations of impoverishment, making them more and more vulnerable to all forms of discriminations and violations.