

**Issues and Practices
of Caste and
Casteism in India:
An Overview**

Edited by

**Parthapratim Sen
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Chapter IV

A Journey of Pain-Women among Dalits in Indian Society

Arunima Ray

My essay is an attempt to bring out principally the violences inflicted on and exploitations faced by the dalit women by dint of their caste and gender positions details of which I tried to gather from various sources. Along with this investigation I have tried to look into the efforts of the dalit women to address their positions and search for redressals. While trying to look into the situation I could not put this grave sociological issue under any particular time frame. It is due to the fact that since the time of Manusmriti which can be dated from around the period of the Sunga dynasty that is second century BCE lasting till third century C.E. women in general were treated inferior to men thereby reinforcing male superiority in the society. Till this date, women and more particularly the dalit women remain perhaps one of the most vulnerable sections of the society. What is terrifying is the fact that all kinds of physical violences on dalit women are justified in the name of the caste positions. Upper caste people evade punishments by dint of their social standings. While going through the gory details of violences committed on dalit women what I find out is that society in general remains oblivious to such criminal offences. I do not claim to be an expert in this field and although there is no dearth of literature I needed to address the issue once more.

Women particularly the lowcaste or more precisely the dalit women are perhaps the ones who are most exploited physically, socially, and economically in our country. Rapes are rampant towards dalit women in India. Most of the times, the crimes are committed by the upper castes. Studies show that dalit women are subjected to verbal abuses and hate speeches where she is pointed by her caste names along with sexually implicit insults. One 2009 report of the UN Special Raporteur on violence against women shows that there are innumerable instances when dalit women are beaten and raped by higher caste males. The causes may be

sometimes disputed over land and sometimes simply because they are dalit women. Even the law enforcing officials try to threaten dalit women if they try to lodge complaints. Even they are denied of their rights to treatment. If this is the scenario from one side the other side is even more serious and dangerous. The male perpetrators are released on bail they can even evade arrest. (Dalit women in India, 2014)

Recent data shows that Dalit women die younger than their upper caste counterparts. A survey data says that the average age of death for a dalit women is 39.5 years while life of an upper caste women is usually 54.1 years. Principal reason is the health inequality, that is a dalit woman is denied of proper healthcare. By dint of their caste status dalit women are denied access to hospitals or health care opportunities although the laws of the land make it a punishable offence if anyone is denied access to health care facilities on the basis of untouchability. (Masoodi, Sreevatsan 2018)

Looking into the abysmal conditions of the dalits in general the government of India has come up with multiple safeguards enshrined in the constitution where the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes are ensured of their fundamental rights. Moreover laws have been passed to stop discrimination. However the practices of discrimination still follow despite safeguards. Sufferings of the dalit women however remain unhighlighted. 'The problem of dalit women is distinct and unique in many ways because they suffer from the triple burden of economic deprivation, patriarchy and caste- and untouchability-based discrimination..' and cannot be solved by the governmental safeguards. (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, July 2015) In the name of religion dalit women are subjected to sexual exploitation for example the practices of devdasis in the temples. Even in the labour intensive occupations dalit women face discrimination in respect to the upper caste women. Because of the traditional notions of caste purities and impurities dalit women are regarded as untouchables and are deprived of even the normal menial jobs. In numerous households they are denied of the work of cooking since untouchables cannot cook food in an upper caste household. Instead they are made to work in cleaning, or washing clothes or scavenging. Even further there are great disparities faced by dalit women who work as wage labourers particularly in urban areas. As N. Sabharwal provides statistics that in the year 2000 Dalit women working as wage labourers earned wage as low as Rs 37 compared to their higher caste counterparts whose daily earning was Rs 56. Thus in urban areas particularly as Sabharwal argues dalit women faced

massive discrimination. In Sabharwal's words, 'The disparity in earnings between women from excluded groups and women from non-excluded groups reflects discrimination faced by them in terms of engagement in the labour market'. (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, 2015) This ultimately leads to the poverty among the dalit women. Along with this dalit women face lack of educational facilities compared to the upper caste women. Moreover there are high dropouts from school among the dalit women. As Sabharwal reiterates that the percentage of dropouts of dalit women in elementary, middle and secondary levels in 2009-10 were alarmingly high compared to the upper caste women. Even dalit women participation in the political process of the country is also very low. Thus marginalisation of dalit women knows no boundaries and cannot be put under any particular time frame. Consciousness and anti caste movements could only be the logical outcome.

Looking into the history of the movement aiming at the eradication of untouchability we come across the Self Respect Movement in South India where the non-brahmins specially those belonging to the Nadar community started claiming higher caste status in the early nineteenth century which they gave up in the latter part of the nineteenth century as a protest towards the high caste rituals. In the 1930s and 1940s the leadership of the Self Respect Movement was taken up by Naicker. In about the same period when the Self Respect Movement was formed another movement came up under the leadership of Jyotirao Phooley. Under his leadership the NonBrahmins of Maharashtra especially the untouchables were organised. He organised the first school for the untouchables in 1852. Arya Samaj under Dayanand Saraswati advocated repudiation of caste by dint of birth. Arya Samaj followers even considered untouchability as against the Vedas. Another important anti caste movement was led by Sri Narayan Guru in the initial years of the twentieth century where his aim was to uplift a depressed caste group Ezhavas of Kerala. When the nationalist movement under Mahatma Gandhi was under full swing Bardauli programme was undertaken in 1922 through which an effort was made to organise the untouchables whom Gandhiji renamed as the Harijans.

Finally and perhaps most importantly we come across Dr. Ambedkar and his movement for the eradication of untouchability. Himself belonging to the dalit community of the Mahars of Maharastra he was a victim of untouchability since his childhood. He saw caste system and untouchability as nothing but tyranny on the part of the upper castes. He was vehemently

against the irrationality of the caste system where all opportunities are provided to people by dint of their caste status and the so called sudras were denied of every rights and complete subjugation of women. Ambedkar believed in the equality of women. He can be treated as the foremost feminist among feminists in India. He perceived women question and rights at a time when no one did. In 1928 a women's association was founded in Bombay with Ambedkar's wife Ramabai as its president.

It was before 1947 that issues concerning women were being advanced and linked with the nationalist movement. The most important organisation of the pre independence period was AIWC or the All India Women's Conference which was eventually succeeded by the National Federation of Indian Women. Although these organisations were functioning along with National Council of Women In India it is as Mangala Subramaniam argues that 'Indian women's movement became particularly visible after the 1970s'. (Subramaniam, 2004 pp 635-639)

Regarding the Indian feminist discourse Sharmila Rege is of opinion that during the 1970s the type of women's movement that grew up revolved mainly around three areas- 'the categories of woman, experience and personal politics'. (Rege, 2018) And that all theorization of oppression revolved around the 'collective' that is all of the women being oppressed and that 'by the fact of their womanhood.' Little attention was given to particular caste or class or ethnicity. Thereby the experiences of the dalit women were totally ignored. In the early 80s several organizations like Shramik Mukti Anathema, Satyashodhak Communist Party etcetera tried to address dalit women's plight more distinctively. However the left party based women's organisations did not address the dalit women and more so never against Bramhinism. Sharmila Rege is of opinion that movements by the Dalit Panther or the left led women's movement addressed only the 'universalisation' of the upper caste women's experience or the dalit Male experience.

In the 1990s assertions of the identity of the dalit women were becoming more loud and prominent. National Federation of Dalit Women and the All India Dalit Women's Forum were formed. The Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana an organization of the dalit-Christian women was founded in 1997 along with other organizations. These organisations asserted the non-Brahmanical ideological views. Perhaps a great upsurge in the field of Dalit women's thoughts and actions came from an article by Gopal Guru titled

'Dalit Women Talk Differently'. Here Guru states that, an environment increasingly marked by women's political movement and mobilisation around 'the notion of difference' the dalit women's political movements and organisations based on differences is only a 'logical outcome'. Gopal Guru speaks about the external factors and internal factors regarding dalit women's effort to speak differently. The external factors consist of the non-dalit opinions which are 'homogenising the issue of the dalit women, and the internal factors like the 'patriarchal domination of the dalits'. While speaking on the external factors Guru argues that the question of rape cannot be 'grasped merely in terms of class, criminality or as a psychological aberration or an illusion of male violence'. Here the caste factor is also an important factor since tortures on dalit women are more severe and brutal. Although dalit women supported the 'feminist radicalism' in the peasant movements in Maharashtra they however could not support the dalit subordination in the entire peasant movement. Again Guru reiterates that the dalit women could not support the 'moral economy' as advocated by the Shetkari Sangathana of Maharashtra since no solution was given on the question of dalit poverty. Moreover the claim of women's solidarity ignore the differences that exist between the upper caste and the dalit women. Dalit women are in most cases mistreated by the upper caste women in both urban and rural areas. It is against this background that Guru asserts, "dalit women have of late protested against their 'guest appearances' in a text or a speech of a non dalit woman and instead organised on their own terms." (Guru, 1995)

Again dalit women are trying to fix their position vis-a-vis the dalit men. Male dalit leaders on many occasions have tried to suppress the voices of the dalit women. Not only in the political arena dalit women are subordinated in the literary arena too and that also by the dalit counterparts. (Guru, 1995). In order to voice dalit feminism the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was formed in 1995 by dalit social activist Ruth Manorama in order to promote the rights of dalit women nationally and internationally.

The first National Conference on Violence Against Dalit Women took place in March 2006 in New Delhi. This conference brought out the disparities of the Dalit women in the face of violence, poverty and sickness. In the same year in November another conference was held in the Hague where the violence on Dalit women were addressed and an identity of Dalit women was created thereby giving them solidarity on all issues.

Jina Amucha or the *Prisons We Broke* by (Baby Kamble, 2008, pp98-99) is an important work directed against the patriarchy. Kamble describes the violence both psychological and physical, that a dalit woman faces in every aspect of life along with the twin oppressions of the caste and the patriarchy. Agonies faced by the dalit women were multifarious -physical, mental, economical. Baby Kamble in her book *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* brought out vividly the perils of lives faced by the hapless dalit women day in and day out. One statement that strikes us is the way husbands beat their wives 'as they were beasts' and 'would do so until the sticks broke'. Moreover 'the heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious'. When unable to bear tortures that woman would try to escape her in-laws' household all hell would break loose. Her own household wouldn't show any sympathy for her and her in laws who had followed her would beat her in the words of Baby Kamble 'to a pulp' and after making her to return she would be made to wear a huge piece of wood with an iron bar through the sides on her foot. (Kamble, 2008, p.98-99) While analysing 'the practices of violence against women by caste' Sharmila Rege points out while women belonging to the upper castes are likely to face violence and controls within the family, dalit women are more likely to face rape threats, sexual assaults and other sorts of heckling more in the public sphere. Sharmila Rege further points out that the feminist movement or more precisely the feminist politics could not give pivotal importance to the most marginalised classes. (Rege, Oct 31-Nov 6, 1998)

In an article entitled 'Dalit Women are brewing their own Social Revolution', Ashwaq Masoodi writes that in one such effort to stand up for their rights in 2008 seven women all from dalit castes went to the police station in Haryana's Indri village in the Kurukshetra district in order to seek reasons why no FIR hadn't been filed as yet against the rape and murder of 13 year old dalit girl. Manisha Mashal an anti caste activist and a member of the Swabhiman Society led the force asserting the rights of the dalit women and forced the police to file the FIR. However no arrests had been made. Masoodi writes that after the Nirbhaya incident rape laws were changed Dalit women forum started asking questions regarding the nonchalance of the public when so many rape cases among the dalits were reported. Sumedha Bodh from the Rashtriya Dalit Mahila Andolan says that there is an imminent need for the dalit women on for having a separate platform to speak and act. Manisha Mahal and her group documented and

still trying to find out why 110 cases of rape and murder of dalit women between 2010 and 2018 in 14 districts of Haryana went unreported and ended in a sort of compromise. All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch was formed in 2006 and had since been fighting for women's rights as well as 'working on leadership building of Dalit women at the national level'. Owing one's own land is an important aspect to fight caste based discrimination opines Fatima Burnad founder of Tamil Nadu based NGO Society for Rural Education and Development (1979). (Masoodi, 6 Aug 2018) "Where upper caste women are considered to 'belong' to the upper caste men, dalit women are not seen as just 'belonging' to dalit men but they can be accessed by upper caste men as well." (Tamalapakula, 2016). Urmila Pawar is of opinion that although the dalit men fight for equal right with their upper caste counterparts they render inhuman treatments towards their female counterparts. Thus not only on the societal front dalit women are susceptible to physical atrocities in the domestic front too.

In the Ambedkar movement which started in the 1920s we find women taking equally important roles. Besides women from the Mahars several other untouchable castes like Chambhars and Dhors participated in the social movements. Ambedkar emphasised on the self respect of women since self respect help them gain 'the capability to fight individually for their rights'. (Pawar and Moon, 2008, p40). The year 1972 saw the birth of the Dalit Panthers marking the beginning of revolutionary changes in the dalit politics when a unique concept of dalit identity came up distinct from the 'Hindu influence'. However the Dalit Panthers were not so concerned about the issue of the gender. Women were infact treated as mute victims of the socio economic circumstances This is perhaps the reason why in the 1980s dalit women were voicing their opinions more and more. But unfortunately dalit women's movements have not been treated in a positive way. Rather they are considered as betrayal to the greater cause of caste annihilation.'(Pawar and Moon, 2008, p40) Dalit Mahila Swabhiman Yatra held in September 2016 a protest march, addresses the issues of violence faced by the dalit women. Here the dalit women leaders 'pointed to the fact that the dalit women are neglected in the decision making bodies of the dalit organization in Una'.(Una March held in 2017) In the post Mandal Commission agitation period large number of dalit women could be seen holding important posts in the 'power structure' which has led to further violence on dalit women as Sharmila Rege opines. The violence often culminates to rape or 'hacking to death of their kinsmen'. Sharmila

Rege therefore argues that dialogues are needed between the dalit and the feminist activists. (Rege, Oct 31-Nov 6, 1998).

Thus after looking into the conditions of dalit women in the present scenario it seems a long battle is to be fought before any justice can be meted out to the dalit women of the country. What they need primarily as I feel due respect as human beings irrespective of the caste status. In the twentyfirst century world of unlimited access to technological knowhow, human intellect reaching unimaginable zones this kind of humiliation and segregation are unthinkable. Putting down women as untouchables have been detrimental for the society and economy by far. However as every cloud has a silver lining stronger opinions are being formed from the educated dalit women themselves. Thus strong dalit female voices are heard from people like Sanghapali Aruna social and media activist, Rajeswari Kasi, First dalit women president Of All India SSC Employees Association, Kiruba Munuswamy an advocate practising in the Supreme Court of India. We hope more such strong opinions be formed and fight be continued till justice for dalit women as respectable members of society are dispensed.

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Caste is fundamentally a social phenomenon typical to South Asia in general and India in particular. Caste based mobilization of people has been taking place in India from very early periods of history. However with the advent of British rule and the spread of modern education, assertion of caste identities through organized movements started to gather momentum. With independence and constitutional allowances through reservation policy, caste based politics became somewhat institutionalized. Political parties of all shades encouraged caste mobilization wherever possible and caste based social organizations turned to politics to establish their claims from the state. This complex situation has given rise to newer complexities and caste still plays and promises to play a very significant role in Indian society and polity in years to come.

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