

Depicting the Plight of Dalit Women: Caste, Gender and Social Violence

Fatima Zohra MESSAFEUR
University of Dr. Moulay Tahar, Saida, Algeria

Abstract

India is a country which appears at the first sight bolstering women's rights in different facets of life. Paradoxically, it is a land where discrimination against women, mainly Dalit women, is deeply rooted and exhibited in its various form of oppression. Dalit women, untouchables or Scheduled caste women, are all segregation connotations; whereby, these women are placed at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy as members of an impoverished underclass. The current paper tries to enlighten the dark side of India's caste-based society where Dalit women bear the heavy burden of caste, class and gender. On the other hand, national laws and international human rights standards prohibit any physical, sexual, or psychological violence against women. The paper emphasizes on the various forms of violence targeting Dalit women which are occurring on a large scale across India today.

Key words: Dalits, Dalit women, caste system, violence against women

1-Introduction

The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world. Moreover, certain kinds of violence are exclusively reserved for Dalit women; such as, verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, and other atrocities are only experienced by Dalit women. Dalit women are also threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. However, sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls also occur within their own communities. This dramatic situation is, first and foremost, due to caste disparity and social stratification. The objective of the present paper is to shed light on the discrimination and humiliation of this category of people in the Indian society. The first part, however, is going to introduce the Dalits and mainly Dalit women. The second part, aims to

define the caste system and the last part is devoted to depict, violence against Dalit women and the different types of atrocities they are facing in their daily life.

2-Who are Dalits?

According to Indu Baghel (2009), Dalits are one of the most miserable segment in the Indian society, who took to heart various kinds of exploitation and oppression practices. Hindu society is not only homogenous, but also lies beneath an entrenching discrimination, oppression and exploitation of the Dalit bulk under the cover of caste system. In addition, Indu Baghel also defines Dalits as:

“The term Dalit is chiefly used for those who are ex-untouchables in India (mainly Hindu) society, and are extremely poor, landless, illiterate and exploited. They are the products of highly discriminatory and inhuman nature of the functioning of Indian caste system. An entire segment of population was assigned ‘unclean’ occupations like scavenging, flaying, tanning etc. and converted into untouchables.”

Indu Baghel (2009: 66)

State	Dalit (Scheduled Caste) Population (in Crore)
Uttar Pradesh	3.52
West Benghal	1.85
Bihar	1.31
Andhar Pradesh	1.23
Tamil Nadu	1.19
Maharashtra	0.99
Rajasthan	0.97
Madhya Pradesh	0.92
<i>Karnataka</i>	0.86
Punjab	0.70
Total	13.54

Today, the bulk population of Dalits in India has considerably increased. According to the Census Report of 2001, they constituted nearly 16.66 crore-16.23per cent or nearly more than 169 million population in India. One out of every six Indian belongs to Dalit

category. ‘The important Dalit caste are Chamar, Dusadh, Regar, Musahar, Bhuiya, Dhobi, Pasi, Dom, Bhogta, Halalkhar, etc. in north India and Paraiyans, Pallans, Chakkilis in Tamil Nadu, and Mehar, Belsi, Bauri, Meghwal, Rajhans, Mazhobhi Sikhs, etc. in other states.’ Indu Baghel (2009: 67). The highest number of Dalits (scheduled caste or SC) are found in Uttar Pradesh (21%) followed by West Bengal (12%), Bihar (09%), Tamil Nadu (08%), Rajasthan (05.5%), (India:1998). It is worth mentioning the Dalit concentration states in the following table:

Table 1: Distribution of Dalit Population Adapted from Annual Report (2008-09) , Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

At the first glance, we notice that there are ten states where the Dalits are mostly found. Furthermore, about 84per cent of the population live in villages and are working as cultivators, sharecroppers, marginal farmers, and agricultural labourers; whereas, 42 per cent of Dalits are in the category of workers, among them, 04 per cent work as scavengers, while the others as weavers (12 per cent), fisherman (08 per cent), toddy-tappers (07 per cent), basket and rope makers (05 per cent), artisans (01%), shoemakers (01 per cent). (India:2001). The main socio-economic problems affecting the bulk of Dalit population are: chronic indebtness, landlessness, land alienation, lack of education, lack of productive assets, forced labour and prostitution, lack of minimum wages, child labour, social and religious discrimination.

3-Dalit Women

Dalit , Scheduled caste (SC) or untouchable women, are living in a highly patriarchal and caste-based society. Inevitably, Rabindra Kumar (2013) stated them as: ‘stigmatized people and are, on this account, excluded from mainstream society and made to suffer numerous disabilities, which are regulated through religious beliefs and practices’. In other word, this horrendous classification lead them to bear the triple burden of caste, class, and gender.

Systematically, since they are placed at the bottom of the social pyramid, they are subjected to many forms of discrimination, including lack of education, economic disadvantages, social disempowerment, domestic violence, political invisibility, and sexual oppression.

Before proceeding deeper to scrutinize the combination that led to the disadvantage of Dalit women, we have to understand that this category

of people are ostracized from the upper caste-Hindus. According to the caste system, Dalit women are considered “impure” and thus “polluting” to other caste groups. They are, therefore, exploited under the garb of "untouchability practices" in public and private life. These include segregation in housing, schools and cremation grounds; limitation or prohibition of access to public places such as roads, temples and tea houses; Restrictions on occupation and assignment of the most menial, dirty and dangerous jobs as defined by the caste hierarchy; Denial or limitation of access to public services such as water taps, health care and education and also prohibition of access to ownership of land (Indu Baghel, 2009).

The endemic gender, patriarchy and caste discrimination that Dalit women are facing is due the absence of homogeneity at the social and religious hemisphere. Consequently, this led to social, economic and political imbalance; which in its turn, led to extreme violence and inhuman treatment depicted in forms of sexual assault, rape, and naked parading. They are targeted as a way of humiliating entire Dalit communities. This undermines not only their dignity and self-respect, but also their rights to equality and development (CEDAW, 2014).

As a matter of fact, they do not benefit from any social security, maternity benefits, pension schemes or any other kind of economic protection. Though they hugely contribute to the prosperity of India, their employment opportunities are likely to be further reduced as they will have to suffer from competition from foreign technology and modern methods of agriculture.

As I have previously mentioned, Dalit women are triply disadvantageous. The issues of Dalit women are pitiable and tremendously different from that of other Indian women. They have been deprived from all kinds of human rights; such as, education, income, dignity, social status and religious rights. Thus, their subjugation is more acute in a sense that they are treated with great contempt by upper caste man and women alike, and their own menfolk.

4-Caste Discrimination and Violence against Dalit Women

4.1 The Caste System in India

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although diversity is omnipresent

in all human societies, it becomes a problematic when one or more of these dimensions play a role in shaping the stratification system whereby unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. The Indian Caste System is considered hitherto a complicated system of stratification, which means that the social status of a person is based on birth.

The caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas. According to Rabindra Kumar (2013), the Hindu society is classified as follows:

“Hindu society is not homogenous whole, but is vertically divided into four varnas – the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. Varna refers broadly to the ascribed status of different castes or jatis in the social order that distinguishes each group in terms of their social hierarchy, which is fixed at birth. Under the varna system, several jatis with similar ascribed ritual status are clustered together and hierarchically graded and grouped as one. Thus Hindu society is not the same as an individual Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vashya or Shudra. It includes all of them and many more sub-castes or *up-jatis* under each of the main varna.”

Rabindra Kumar (2013: 1)

The aim of this paper is not to put an emphasis on the classification of the caste system; though, it is of paramount importance to understand it because the imbalance and the harsh reality and suppression of the Indian society towards Dalit people is due to the caste system. As a matter of fact, at the very bottom of this classification are those who are considered the ‘untouchables’. These individuals, according to Velassery (2005), perform impure activities that are considered unclean and polluting, such as scavenging and skinning dead animals and are considered outcastes. They are not considered to be included in the ranked castes. Biswas, Oneil (1988), also argued that ‘the root of untouchability is the caste system, the root of (the) caste system is the religion attached to Varna, and the root of Varnashrama is Brahmanical religion, and the root of (the) Brahmanical religion is authoritarianism and political power.’ Biswas, Oneil (1988: 28).

The main concern, is to highlight the outcome of this caste classification and serfdom on Dalit bulk in general and on Dalit women

in particular. Dr Ambedkar, who is considered the father and the architect of the Indian Constitution and also the spokesman of Dalit plight made it clear in his article entitled 'The rise and fall of Hindu woman' that the root cause of women sufferings in India is due to the so-called Hindu religious books (Indu Baghel, 2009).

These religious books as Manusmriti divide people into a caste system stratification and encourage inequality between men and women. As stated in Manusmriti (Manu, 1920), women have no right to be educated, independent, or wealthy. Hence, this treatment of women emphasizes the fact that they are considered as a sex object and also justifies a number of atrocities committed on women and girls, as mentioned these Manusmriti verses:

“A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him. Or, a man of twenty-four marry a girl of eight years of age. If (the performance of) his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner.”

(Manu, 1920)

This implies that a girl, a young woman or even an aged one, has not the right to act or react independently, even in her own house. In addition, women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin; so women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth.

4.2 Violence against Dalit Women

Violence and humiliation prescribed in religious books are a testimonial that Dalit women are subjugated to torture and sexual abuse in the name of religion; whereas, dehumanization, exploitation, rape, forced prostitution, and many other forms of violence committed in everyday life is another pair of handle. It should be noted that important crime cases against Dalit women are not reported to the police for fear of social ostracism and also personal threat. Also the legal procedures are time consuming and costly. Besides, many innocent girls are dragged in prostitution by unscrupulous touts and also some religious practices of the temples which force them into this profession.

In order to be more practical, Aloysius Irudayam S.J., Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Joel G. Lee (2011), undertook a study where they analyzed

the various forms of violence experienced by 500 Dalit women. Twelve main forms of violence were narrated from Dalit women, nine of them are from the general community (physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction, forced incarceration and medical negligence) and three within the family (female foeticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse and domestic violence). These poor 500 Dalit women endured these forms of violence from 1999 to 2004.

Form of Violence	N° of Woman who have faced Form of Violence*		Frequency of Violence	
	Number of Women	% of total Dalit Woman (500)	Number of Incidents	Many times**
Physical Assault	274	54.8	532	30
Verbal Abuse	312	62.4	331	106
Sexual Harassment/Assault	234	46.8	241	73
Rape	116	23.2	122	9
Sexual Exploitation	44	8.8	15	39
Forced Prostitution	24	4.8		24
Kidnap/Abduction	24	4.8	24	
Forced Incarceration	23	4.6	24	1
Medical Negligence	17	3.4	25	
Female Foeticide/Infanticide	2	0.4	3	
Child Sexual Abuse	23	4.6	8	22
Domestic Violence	215	43.0	76	185
* most woman have faced more than one form of violence ** many times denotes instances in which women face the violence so reatedly or regularly that they cannot remember the exact number of times the violence occurred			Total: 1,401	489

Table 2: Number of Women Facing Violence and Frequency of Violence

Adapted from Aloysius Irudayam S.J., Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Joel G. Lee, (2011: 95)

As seen from table 2, most women have experienced more than one form of violence; while others lived other forms of violence, as domestic violence, verbal abuse, sexual exploitation, and forced prostitution in particular. These latter seem to be habitual forms of violence.

5-Conclusion

To conclude, the present paper highlights a tip of the Indian society's iceberg. Untouchability practices and caste based discrimination and injustices are yet under siege. Dalits as depicted in this paper are the most unfortunate group in India; since they suffer from exploitation, oppression and humiliation in their society. Caste system, on the other hand, is still being seen as the most archaic, the most contemporary and controversial reality. Dalit people and mainly women are the products of this inhuman and discriminatory Indian caste system. Consequently, they are paying the ransom by being raped, assaulted, tortured, humiliated, kidnapped and all the unimaginable atrocities inflicted to Dalit women.

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