

The status of Dalit Women in India- from Deprivity to Supremacy

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Out of the 22 million population of the country it is estimated that the total population of Dalits is 20% (CERD !(1997) of which Dalit women occupy half of that population. Except for a few, the total segment of this population leads a miserable life.

Socially discarded for a long period of time, they are compelled to live a vulnerable life, be it economic education health and all other areas that fall under basic needs. The word Dalit itself connotes the lowest strata of the society in all the aspects, a term which is condemnable itself. One has to go back to its history to understand the situation of the Dalits. Based on the hindu caste system the total social system is divided into hierarchies since long.; where people are divided into various castes and ethnic groups. In this background the position of Dalit women is one of the lowest from all these aspects. Shudra which was placed at the bottom of the ladder in the caste hierarchies is termed as “Dalit” these days which is an untouchable group of society.

Outlawed in the year 1963 itself , without no strong action against it ; the practice of untouchability still exists in all parts of the country. As it has not totally been abandoned and punished by the government.

Dalits at many places are still prohibited to use the public facilities; such as water taps , schools , temples, restaurants, hotels etc. There have been cases where the Dalit women have been beaten by the upper caste women while filling water from public taps. Dalit women have to bear both social humiliation as well as the male dominance in the family.

STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN ABOUT 30 YEARS AND NOW

In the total context of the country the status of the Dalit women was and still is the worst compared to others. The vulnerability of Dalit women as depicted by a Nepali writer can be taken as an example on how these women are oppressed in the social and family context. In her story *Naikape Sargini*, Parijat has well described the life of low caste woman who has to earn her living by digging sand in the Bagmati river in Kathmandu valley.

“The woman works so hard digging the sand in the Bagmati river during the cold and chilly winters of Kathmandu. During that cold winter she has wrapped herself in a thin saree and a blouse without proper winter clothes. She returns home after she finishes the work at 40’clock in the evening, which is almost dark during the winter time. She then begins to cook the evening meal and waits for her drunken husband to come home from playing cards which is his daily job. Her husband who is disabled who cannot help her in anything ; ever giving physical comfort , but assaults her with bitter words and gets satisfied as being a man. He comes to the Pati(shelter for the homeless) with all his frustrations , inferiority complex and defeat which automatically comes in his words. He still demands the money she earned by her hard work as his right, to drink alcohol ; the money which she cannot protect without proper place to hide. After completing her household chores she sleeps in her wet clothes , that is all she has to wear. She can neither revolt nor fight against this injustice”.^[1]

This story gives a clear picture of what Indian Dalit woman confronts in her day to day life. It is not the cruelty which is limited to domestic violence but laid wide open in the society. The Dalit women are discarded and pushed away in the name of their caste and creed. They are not left with much choice of occupation but to become scavengers in the upper-caste houses, sweepers the Bai’s or maid servants ; or given into body trade or prostitution for the sake of their livelihood.

As Gabriele Dietrich (1992) in her extremely balanced article "Dalit Movements and Women’s Movements" points out while discussing the interrelationships between caste and patriarchy, that

caste should be looked at as a marriage circle and endogamy which is related to patriarchal controls over women. Women were and are the ‘gateways’ of the caste system. Dietrich further states that "in his early writings of 1916 Ambedkar comes very close to Morton Klass" version of seeing caste as a "marriage circle" which regulates access to resources as well as exchange of services based on territoriality and kinship" (:Dietrich 1992:90) (1995:1).

Her conclusion is that "... neither Morton Klass nor Dr. Ambedkar go into an analysis of how the closing into endogamous marriage circles is related to patriarchal controls over women" (1992:92). She further states "... intermarriage and even fantasies about intermarriage and interdining are major factors in triggering off caste riots in Tamil Nadu today. There is a need to work on a feminist position on this issue by Dalit women themselves since otherwise the debate deviates into the rape fantasies of men" (1992:91). I would only make an addition here by saying why talk of intermarriages; even marriages within kinship by choice are opposed vehemently by the dalit-caste panchayats to chop off the heads of young couples, e.g., the recent case in U.P (August 1993) (1995:2).

In short, the term dalit stands for change and revolution... we feel that the voices and protests of Dalit women are almost invisible.

In fact when we use phrases like, marginalization of women in the development process, or feminisation of poverty or women’s contribution in the unorganized sector we are referring to dalit women without even being conscious about their specificity (1995:2).

Dalit women were actively participating in the Ambedkar led movement in the pre-independence period. Today we see no protests against the so-called 30% reservations for women in the local self government which further denies the possibility of dalit women getting any representation (1995:2).

Through there are some autobiographical writings, and some literary texts, dalit women’s writings has not become a force as yet. Malika Dhasal’s autobiography Mala Uddhvasta

Vhayachay was in a sense a significant contribution. Today dalit women are working in various government offices, they are active members of Zilla Parishads, but they are still bearing the burden of a double-day, sexual division of labor and overall patriarchal ideology and not saying anything about it. Why is it so? It is not sufficient to answer it only in terms of political economy and brahminical ideology (1995:3)

It is generally argued by many social thinkers that in India women are protected by community, caste, kinship and family networks. This neglects the fact that women are the gateways of caste-system and the crucial pivot on whose purity - sanctity axis the caste hierarchy is constructed (:3-4).

The participation of women in the anti- Mandal agitations and caste-based violence (Gothala/Pimpri-Desmukh) has implications for both the women's movement and the Dalit movement. The women's movement has in its enthrallment of 'sisterhood' failed to note the 'caste' factor while the Dalit Movement has remained patriarchal and sees the dalit women's oppression merely as a caste oppression.^[4]

THE SEA OF CHANGE

Mayawati ([Hindi](#): मायावती) (born 15 January 1956) is an [Indian](#) politician.^[8] She is the current [Chief Minister](#) of [Uttar Pradesh](#), India's most populous state. After three short tenures between 1995 and 2003, it is her fourth term in this office. Her supporters refer to her as *Behen Ji*, which means [sister](#).^[6] At age 39, she became the youngest politician to be elected chief minister in Uttar Pradesh and the first [Dalit](#)-woman chief minister of any Indian state.^[6] She is regarded as a symbol of dignity and political inspiration for millions of India's Dalits who were oppressed by the [Hindu](#) upper [castes](#) for centuries. There are allegations that she has used her status to amass a large amount of personal wealth.^[8]

According to an article in The Indian Subcontinent Times; -Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Dalit leader Kumari Mayawati has found a place among the Forbes' 100 Most Powerful Women

in the World giving jitters to Indian National Congress President Sonia Gandhi. According to the Forbes list released on 28th Aug. 2008, Mayawati is ranked 59th just behind Queen Elizabeth of UK.

In the running to be prime minister, from her perch as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. In 1995, at 39, she was the youngest politician elected to the post and was also the first Dalit (India's lowest, "untouchable" caste) to head a state government. Commands a large following and goes simply by Mayawati. In 2007 she shrewdly built an alliance with Brahmins, and the Bahujan Samaj Party, which she heads, has started to increase its national presence. Some say she could trail-blaze again as India's first Dalit prime minister. — Kate Macmillan of the Forbes says in citation for Mayawati.

Taking her to be an inspiration; many more women from Dalit community are educating themselves and moving ahead with a conviction to declare the change they will bring in their unsought for lives.

Reservation bill will be beacon for emancipation of women

The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha is a momentous, heartwarming step not only for India, but is likely to be an inspirational trendsetter for women's empowerment in the entire region.

Although it is only the first step, the ripples from the smashing of a glass barrier are bound to be felt in virtually all areas of traditional male dominance. Like its democracy, therefore, India will also be a beacon in the matter of women's emancipation.

The bill faces other barriers, of course, of which the securing of the Lok Sabha's approval is the most crucial. But the expectation among its proponents is that the momentum it has acquired by clearing the roadblocks put up by its critics should make the subsequent passages much easier.

There are several misgivings, which are not unexpected because of the unprecedented nature of the proposed law. For instance, the 33 percent reservations for women mean that 181 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, including 40 for Scheduled Castes or Dalits and Scheduled Tribes of adivasis, will be set aside for women. Since another 82 seats are already reserved for the Dalits and adivasis, it will leave only 280 seats in the unreserved category although women may contest these as well.

It is understandable, therefore, why the male MPs cutting across party lines are uneasy although the party whips have forced them to keep quiet. The fewer number of constituencies available to them are not their only problem. Equally unsettling is the fact that the 181 seats for women will not be fixed, but will be rotated.

This will mean that none of the MPs, either men or women, will be certain about their next constituency. As a result, they will not be able to nurse their constituencies in the hope of winning another term, as has been the practice till now. It is obvious, therefore, that a great deal of uncertainty will be introduced into the system, whose long-term implications are unknown.

It is the fear of the tremors which the new system will cause which led to suggestions that, instead of reserving seats in parliament, the parties themselves should nominate women contestants for a third of the seats. But the matter was never seriously pursued because of the difficulty of enforcing such a writ, which might not be legally tenable.

Other ideas like expanding parliament itself by another 200 seats or thereabouts were also aired, but did not find favour with the political class. In the end, it was the simpler move to reserve seats which was accepted although it, too, was challenged by the parties of the backward castes which wanted a separate quota for these groups inside the overall quota for women.

It was their protests which led to ugly scenes in the Rajya Sabha for two days, finally forcing the chairman of the house to evict them with the help of marshals. But during their demonstrations, they demanded that quotas should be set aside not only for the backward castes but also Dalits and Muslims.

That the bill will face further difficulties was evident from the fact that apart from the champions of the backward castes like Lalu Prasad of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party, Mayawati of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) voiced her dissatisfaction with the bill.

The abstention of Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress from the voting was seen as a ploy to woo Muslims although she later ascribed it to a lack of communication with the floor managers. However, these signs of disquiet, along with the RJD's and Samajwadi Party's decision to withdraw support from the government, suggest that the ruling Congress may not have an easy time in parliament.

On the other hand, the support extended to the bill by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Left introduced a new element of cooperation among adversaries. It may not last, but the show of amity between the Congress and its opponents led to a relaxed atmosphere that enabled the BJP's Arun Jaitley to persuade Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to agree to a debate before passing the bill, an idea to which a tense Congress was earlier opposed.

A clear gainer from all this has been Sonia Gandhi because it was her insistence that the bill had to be passed, come what may, which forced the Congress to push it through despite the fear that

its majority in the Lok Sabha might be dangerously reduced, exposing it to harassment by both friends and foes.

It was clear, however, that Sonia Gandhi was taking a long-term view to project the empowerment of women as her party's contribution to the social and political scene. If there aren't too many hiccups on the way of its implementation, she can bank on it as a surefire electoral gambit.

For the women of India, the sight of a huge influx of women into the august body of parliament will be an exhilarating sight, at least initially, irrespective of how they perform as MPs or what signs of improvement they provide. Since not only parliament, but the assemblies, too, will see a large body of women as members, Indian politics will experience a seminal, unexpected change.

India has been a land of surprises. Along with a powerful prime minister like Indira Gandhi and the presence of many other prominent women in public life, like Sonia Gandhi herself, it has also seen female infanticide and dowry deaths.

But never before has it seen so many lawmakers in its legislative chambers although the panchayats already have a large number of women members and office-bearers because of reservations. Even then, there is little doubt that the country is on the threshold of a new beginning.

As the halls of the Parliament House echo with the words 'Madam Speaker', I believe India has reached a new threshold in writing its own history. Of course, I'm proud. Meira Kumar, daughter of former Deputy Prime Minister and Dalit icon Babu Jagjivan Ram, left her job as a diplomat 24 years ago to join politics. Today she stands tall as the first woman speaker of the Lok Sabha in 57 years.^[2]

Women’s Reservation Bill: Empowering Women or Inhibiting Merit?

March 9, incidentally a day after International Women’s Day, witnessed the historic sanction of the controversial Women’s Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha. The sanction happened after more than a decade of deliberation, with constant resistance from majority of members of the House. In fact, several opponents of the Women’s Bill turned physically hostile while the House was in session, a day before the Bill was passed. Seven such House members were voted to be suspended for the remaining term for their behavior.

Women’s Bill: A Momentous Development towards Emancipation of Women

Currently, India is ranked 100th in terms of representation by women in the Chief legislature (Lok Sabha). The percentage of women representation is a mere 11 percent, which is much below the averages of most nations across the world, including certain developing Africa nations.

Amidst this bleak scenario, the call for a women’s reservation bill appears justified. The bill ensures 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament as well as other state legislative bodies. The move will not only help women have their concerns addressed more effectively, it will hopefully enable Indian women to break the shackles of cultural stereotypes.^{[6],[7]}

A final word: Indian women have been subjected to cultural biases and atrocities since time-memorial. However, the answer here is to not merely create reservations for women, but equip them with enough knowledge, support and resources to stand up for themselves.

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