

DALIT WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND CAREER OBJECTIVES – PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES

SPANDANA SONKENAPALLI*

ABSTRACT

Dalit women in India suffer from triple oppressions – gender, as a result of patriarchy; class for being the poorest among the working masses; and caste for being at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Although discrimination on the basis of caste is against the Indian constitution and prohibited by many laws, its practice is still widespread in India. In the increasingly hostile environment, conflicts between the men of Dalit community and dominant caste, often results in the rape and sexual abuse of Dalit women. Gender and development paradigm recognises women's triple role that is reproduction, production and community management.

In the Indian Hindu culture, marriage consistently distracts her. Although she reinforces her enthusiasm for higher education, the Hindu norms and traditions do not allow women to pursue higher education. In spite of her struggles they are ill-treated. Women reservation, particularly that of Dalit women, is treated as being non meritorious. Thus most of the women do not reach their career objectives and are diverted to the temporary productive employment. They are unable to reach the higher echelons of the government or decision making bodies – neither at the political level nor at the level of executive.

The present paper tries to analyse the problems and perspectives of Dalit women's career objectives in pursuing higher education and to reach the decision-making positions. The paper argues the need for sensitisation of Dalit women with regards to their rights, entitlements and legal framework. It also suggests the need to take up capacity building measures and educating the educated Dalit women in order to make them Dalit conscious.

Keyword: **Dalit, Women, Culture, Education, Career, Decision making, Capacity building**

* Spandana Sonkenapalli is a PhD scholar in Kakatiya University, Warangal. She could be contacted at spandanasonkenapalli@gmail.com

I measure the progress of the community by the degree of progress which women have achieved in that community.

– Dr. B R Ambedkar

Dalit Women – Oppressed, Marginalised and Exploited

Dalit women are a social force, a cultural symbol and have a historical background. They are estimated to contribute nearly thirty percent of the total labour of national economy. Such hardworking supporter and builder of the family, society and nation have to undergo a lot suffering in India at present. Her struggle is for survival and existence. She leads a life full of disadvantages of being Dalit a working class and a woman. 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. In India, basically women are oppressed and are not treated at par with men. Moreover, the Dalit women are oppressed among the oppressed and enslaved among the slaves. People who live outside the boundaries of village away from civilisation and education are Dalit.

The story of women in India in general depicts a continued way of exploitation and discrimination. The society refuses to recognise their potentialities, hard work and contribution to the welfare. Women are possessions of men and therefore the men subjugate them. They have no independence. Their life is meant for giving pleasure and comfort to their men. They are called the 'fair sex' and are unfair treatment. Anti-women ideas and acts such as child marriage, forced widowhood and compulsorily burning the wife in funeral pyre of the husband all advocated and glorified in Hinduism (Paswan and Jaideva 2003). The caste system of Hindu doctrines gives ultimate legitimacy through the scriptures like vedas, puranas and manusmruti where there are sanctions not only on untouchables and shudras but also on the women. This puts the position of the Dalit women into a state of disempowered, and disrobed of all possible spaces that are usually the domain of men and in particular dominant caste men.

Accordingly being a Dalit indicates that one has to be ready to face a life full of miseries, suffering, degradation and de-humanisation. Being a woman means a life of exploitation in the name of sex, a weak variety of human subordinated to man, unwanted burden since birth and a domestic servant for a life (Samel 2006). Her experience of patriarchal domination is more severe than that of non-Dalit women and opportunities and avenues available to her for voicing grievances and agonies are very few. All men dominate women in a male dominated society like India. Therefore, it is very obvious for a Dalit man to dominate a Dalit woman. After nearly seventy years of independence, she today works hard to earn a livelihood for her family, take all atrocities committed by fellow caste men as well as men from dominant castes, and has to fight against all exploitations. As much as caste, poverty is a great curse for Dalits. Economic crisis also blocks the progress of Dalits. The women working in construction sites, in houses as maid servants, in municipal

corporations as road sweepers, breaking stones on roads, putting coal tar on road building are mostly Dalit.

Anti-women feelings were not found in Dalit social life. Child marriage, strict monogamy, widowhood, dowry practices and heinous system of 'Sati' were all unknown to them. Divorces and re-marriages were not resented in their society (John 2008). The consolidation of Hinduism slowly eroded this commendable status of Dalit women. In their vain attempt to be identified with and approved by the caste Hindus, Dalits began to follow their practices by forcing their women into subjugation. In many places widowhood was enforced on them. They are now forbidden to remarry. The freedom that the Dalit women enjoyed thus has been mercilessly taken away. With all these cultural infiltration, a Dalit woman is considered only as a secondary subordinate to her man. The Dalit women – who constitute the major working force – are thrice alienated and oppressed on the basis of their class, caste and gender.

Historical fight for Dalit Women's Education

There is a positive relationship between education and socio-economic development indicators. Schools were actually advantageous, but the historically contingent power structures in which they were located and through which emerged their capacities, skills and abilities to educate themselves in the face of discrimination, indifference, inequality, prejudice and hostility is entirely different to understand. Dalit women mobilised against caste differentiation, educational disadvantage and gender discrimination. They agitated and took organised and unorganised action. Several studies have highlighted the ways for education and economic betterment, which resulted in internal divisions among Dalit.

Most significantly, unlike the upper caste nationalists, instead of focussing on merely modernising education and gender relations, Phule and Ambedkar sought to democratise them and emphasised egalitarian relationships as hierarchies in ways that opened up new spaces for women in general and Dalit women in particular. Radicals like Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar analysed how the public institution of education became entangled with hierarchies of caste, gender, class, community and sexuality; subordinated and shaped the lives of Dalit women in particular ways. To recognise the politically countered home and public lives of Dalit women which initially made women to seek education and later insisted that women were still to follow men, Ambedkar differed from the Brahmins hereditary office and the Brahminic agenda of knowledge accumulation rather than discrimination. The Dalit women's ideas and practices are not only actuated but extended critique of Ambedkar's feminist praxis by challenging the political leaders and men inside the household, however limited (Paik 2014).

Ambedkar supported Dalit women by conducting 'Dalit Mahila Sabha's in relation with his Independent Labour Party. He started Scheduled Caste Women's Federation and in the first session of All India Depressed Classes Women Conference that took place on July 20, 1940 at Nagpur said, 'a society cannot be developed without

women's participation.' Later he introduced the Hindu Code Bill in order to modify and codify certain laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, adoption and property rights of women in Hindu family which was rejected by the Indian parliament.

Savithribai Phule, Jankaribai, Ahalyabai Holkar, Oodha Devi are Dalit women who fought against the Brahmanical society. In Indian history, Savithribai Phule started the first school for untouchable girls in 1851. She started fighting against the social obstacles like child marriages and sati too. Even today many educated Dalit women are following her footsteps.

Being an Educated Dalit Woman

Undoubtedly one of the major achievements of Dalit women has been noticed in the field of education. The level of literacy among the Dalit has grown up considerably during the past two decades. Yet there is a gap between women from upper caste and Dalit background. Certainly education is one of the key means of realising one's life dreams. Education further helps the women to develop one's personality and it accentuates in improving one's status in all respects. 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 marginalised situations. Being illiterate they are not aware of their own rights and thus upper caste people can easily exploit and oppress them. Lack of education also keeps them ignorant about health knowledge and they become easy prey to pandemic diseases.

There were many hurdles for Dalit education in the past. The caste Hindus objected admission of Dalit into the schools. Some other facts have been the lack of motivation towards education among Dalit, lack of interest by parents and uninterested teachers from dominant castes, who refused to teach them. Low socio-economic status and lack of proper administration of schools in the Dalit areas was also an important constraint. In spite of several legal measures, Dalit women's progress of education has not been significant. Many reasons lead to poverty and backwardness resulting in high scale dropout rates in higher educational institutions. The key determinant of educational achievement remains far away from Dalit girls (Harinath 2013).

On the other hand, the social obstacles faced by the Dalit women in the Indian society are due to lack of education. Despite all support from economically backward parents and the institutional scholarships, her pursuance for higher education is filled with hardship in any environment. After the completion of her education, she is forced to get married in spite of her dreams of career objectives. Her dreams and passions built in the educated environment go into vain. She is bound to the societal values and her parents have to arrange for the dowry to get her married. In spite of being educated, she has to restrict herself and remain unemployed. In case if she decides to go ahead with her objectives of finding an employment without the permission of her family members, her life would become miserable. This is how patriarchal behaviour gets inculcated into the family structures.

The oral sources illuminate the expressive cultures that have shaped Dalits pursuit of their rights, emotional pressures and challenges faced by women of different generations in their efforts to pursue their fantasies and desires. Educated Dalit women work in education, corporates and administrative fields, live with the identity crisis. Almost all Dalit women engaged in white collared jobs suffer from a kind of inferiority complex due to caste identity. Therefore most of them conceal their caste identity and are scared to reveal it. Some of them follow Hindu rituals and worship Hindu gods. Though they still keep fast in the name of Hindu gods and goddesses, there is an impact of social reformers like Ambedkar and Phule. They now think beyond the Hindu frameworks.

Problems faced by the Dalit Women in the Educational Institutions

In general terms, people hailing from dominant castes hold the key positions in administration and management of universities. In such universities, there are thousands of Dalit, Adivasi and minority students with the hope of building a bright future. Ideally, university is a place where everyone should have equal rights and opportunities. Indian universities are far from these aspects. Various patterns of discrimination, isolation and exclusion with Dalit, Adivasi and minority students are very common in university spaces. Such incidences become the everyday feature of media reporting. Students from dominant caste sections hardly support such struggles of Dalits and Adivasis.

In such contexts, if there is a problem with any Dalit woman, only the Dalit support her. Others see a problem in her or view the expression of support for the 'victim' as inviting problems and thus remain as spectators to such dramas. It is certain that exposing continuity of discrimination, exclusion, insults and untouchability unites everyone who have had similar experiences and those who resonate with such experiences. To them it brings a challenge, shame and hope, a welcomed scope for change and reconciliation, in an effort to overcome the institutional space as means of political assertion of their dignity (Nelavala 2008). Most universities in India are anti-Dalit and communal. The Dalit students are not so explicit to express their agony of communal violence. Many students from oppressed and marginalised sections have committed suicide on the campuses since the evolution of the universities. Yet, corrective steps were not taken to understand and change. Why the university remains threatening and unwelcoming space for the Dalit students still remains a puzzle.

There remains a danger in this. People make young women from upper caste background to be caste loyal thus judge people from Dalit background to make the Dalits feel them inferior in any circumstances. The young Dalit women are not allowed to take independent decisions and move freely according to their inner instances. This forms a ghettoised opinion in the institutional spaces. The Dalit-Adivasi women are ghettoised and ill-treated by the dominant caste young women with their ignorance and educated arrogance. There are many cultural differences, when they live together in hostels – ideas differ, attitudes differ, and names differ. They are included in the void group from the university. Thus they get polarised and

therefore not interested to express their opinion based on the Dalit conscious. Reading through the experiences of Dalit women one could capture the aspects of abject discrimination in the university life along with the interconnections of being a female Dalit student and issues of social justice.

Dalit identity in our society is stigmatised, no matter how one sees it. Whether a non-Dalit male or female, once they know you are a Dalit they would not immediately walk away from you. But slowly and steadily they start to maintain their distance from you and one could witness it even in classrooms. Such hierarchies are vibrant and they decide who sits where and who sits beside whom. Discrimination towards Dalit-Adivasi students is mainly in disallowing them from building the inner resources of self-respect, self-reliance, honour, individual development, daring and most importantly improvement on both at personal and community level. Primarily in Indian campuses, students from different social groups have different levels of identity construction. Due to dissimilar ways of identity construction, it becomes more difficult for them to situate identities or engage with the evolving identity. This could be observed both in the past as well as in the present. Hence such question of identity makes a clear break from the Hindu caste system, but also brackets the subtly humiliating baggage of modern forms of compensatory discrimination.

Descent based discrimination surrounding caste results in the violent appropriation and sexual control over Dalit women by men of the dominant caste, evident in systematic rape and perpetuation of forced prostitution in the name of religion through 'Devdasi' system. In one case study Rao(2009) explores the intersection between law, violence and Dalit women's sexual vulnerability mainly in post independent India (Sarkar 2006).

In academia these inter connection between caste and gender was not brought to the fore. Dalit women, thus, figure neither in women studies nor in Dalit studies. While many women put aside the anti-caste struggle in favour of a broader national movement, parallel to this under the mask of a progressive women's movement, many dominant caste women's writings were engaged in reinstating a middle class upper caste code of conduct as these women had the real fear of being outcasted from their own social circuits. They offered little or no discussion of different and difficult issues like untouchability and caste inequalities because of apprehending perceptions of the Dalit women writers. Most of the Dalit writers get conscientised and energised by Dalit movement and are consequently acutely aware of their caste identity, they are equally sensitive and opposed to patriarchal oppression both inside and outside their own homes and communities (Joseph 2004).

Tensions exist between the affirmative logic of the quota policies and human rights imperatives (Ovichegan 2015). For instance, Ghosh (2008) defends the quota system as ethically necessary to compensate for the centuries of injustice suffered by a large section of the Indian population (the Dalits) due to their caste and social status. In other words, if a non-Dalit student is denied admittance to a university due to reservations made for the Dalit, the non-Dalit applicant may view this as an affront to his or her own rights. Consequently, the quota system generates tensions between

non-Dalits and Dalits. In summary, the quota system has offered concessions and incentives (including scholarships and hostel accommodation) to support the Dalits in gaining access to and participating in university education. However, Dalit applicants both students and faculty members have consistently been marginalised at the hands of their non-Dalit counterparts by deliberate inconsistencies and corrupt practices in the allocation of quota benefits (Sharma 2002).

It should be noted that in terms of the choice of higher education every individual must acquire the baseline qualifications required to gain entry to universities. This in itself is a major obstacle to the poorer rural students from Dalit communities. The absence of effective measures to monitor and manage the implementation of the quota policy has made many of its benefits unavailable to rural Dalit in greater need, in particularly the Dalit women. It was not that easy for a Dalit candidate to secure quota funding – one had to perform really well to acquire it. One had to prove to the management and administration that they are worthy of acquiring the scholarship. Many Dalits have benefited from the higher education scholarships and have earned themselves access to reputable positions. The constitutional safeguards were necessary to support and develop Dalit rights to educational access. During the 1970's in particular, the government aimed to increase Dalit access to education in order to set them on the path of progress along with the rest of Indian society (Paswan and Jaideva 2003; Chatterjee 2004).

Radical Dalit women significantly transformed the nature of modern education by fashioning new idioms of power and symbols rooted in the indigenous traditions. Their politics emerged from day-to-day struggles of existence, heading on with power-centres and quest for social justice. Thus, the radicals did not fight merely for entry into schools or seek employment, but for attaining education, for equal right to the public domain, and for human rights, justice and egalitarian citizenship. They insisted that education was necessary to disrupt dominant discourses that denied them access to public realm and gave it a unique flavour by infusing it with human and civil rights, equality and justice (Paswan and Jaideva 2003).

The Indian Constitution assures many rights and constitutional safeguards specially provided for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other weaker sections. Though we have securities either as a women or a Dalit in general, the Dalit women do not have special identity as the most oppressed ones among the Dalit. The government of India has passed two legislations namely Protection of Civil Rights Act (PCRA) 1955 and The Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) 1989 to enable the Dalits to enjoy human rights on par with other sections of Indian society. Rights may be self-evident and constitutionally secured. However, they do not automatically implement themselves (Sirnate 2014).

Social Responsibility of Dalit Women

Any State has a principal responsibility for bringing social change and a good part of social change has been stimulated and directed by government agencies. But within the government, the innovative and reformist functions rest with the elites. Such

elites are hardly committed to community welfare or society's development. They have vested interests. The progress in a society depends on a politically committed group of individuals within the community, not the elites from within who generally dominate.

Since indifferent and manipulative elites have dominated over committed progressive and rationalist, the development of Dalit society has been blocked. Like political elites, the Dalit bureaucrats are more ritualistic than innovative. Dalit in judiciary is more traditional than liberal, and the Dalit police personnel are committed more to politicians in power than to law. Since the Dalit policy makers and law enforcers do not share the necessity of social change conducive to people's welfare, development has been overlooked. The Dalit women from the three organs of the State – legislature, judiciary and executive – have a major role in the development of common Dalit women.

Suggestions and Conclusions

Economic independence is an important step in enhancing women's status. The universities should play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of Dalit women with particular emphasis on their participation in vocational, technical and professional educational at different levels. Such efforts would result in the provision of quota scholarships specifically for Dalit women who are interested in pursuing university education. The gender perspective should be incorporated in all aspects of academia alongside addressing intersection of caste and gender (Ovichegan 2015).

The state must recognise Dalit women as a distinct social group and make special provision in planning programmes, participation in implementation and allocation of finances. While designing these, it is important to remember that every girl or woman is vulnerable to violence. The most vulnerable are women who also suffer multiple social and economic disadvantages and oppression. These include Dalit, Adivasi and women of minority communities, women in conflict situations and disabled women. Many women easily succumb to difficult situation and continue to pity self for having no control over their destiny.

The change has to come from within the Dalit women as they start making conscious choices to focus on career, despite the wrenching demand of their personal commitments. The biggest question is how. Dalit women have to consistently prioritise and not let internal or external situations to derail their growth, clear the confusions in their head and pledge to follow their dreams, rekindle the fire of passion and ambition, build the right attitude and portray themselves as a capable, efficient and confident woman who has survived all the odds.

References

- Harinath, S. (2013). Dalit Women and Dropout Rates in Collegiate Education – A study of Warangal District of Andhra Pradesh. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- John, M.E. (2008). Women Studies in India – A Reader. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

- Joseph A. (2004). Touch Me, Touch Me Not: Gender, Caste and the Indian Women's Movement. *Contemporary Sociology*. November, 33(6), 654-57.
- Nelavala,S. (2008). Liberation Beyond Borders: Dalit Feminist Hermeneutics and Four Gospel Women. PhD thesis (Unpublished). DREW University: New Jersey
- Ovichegan, S.K. (2015). Faces of Discrimination in Higher Education in India: Quota Policy, Social Justice and the Dalits. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Paik, S. (2014). Dalit Women's Education in Modern India – Double Discrimination. London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Paswan, S. and P. Jaideva (2003). Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India – Human Rights: New Dimensions in Dalit Problems. Vol. 14 Delhi: Kalpaz Publication
- Samel, S.H. (2006). Rights of Dalits. Delhi: Serials Publications.
- Sarkar, R.M. (2006). Dalit in India: Past and Present. New Delhi: Serials Publications.
- Shinde, P.K. (2005). Dalit's and Human Rights. Vol.III (Dalit: The Broken Future). New Delhi: Isha Books.
- Sirnate, V. (2014). Good Laws, Bad Implementation. *The Hindu*. February 1.