

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PERCEPTION OF DALIT WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the experience of Dalit women in the process of empowerment. Dalit women are socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged in Indian society. Caste is a significant factor which determines the process of empowerment. This paper explores areas of development of Dalit women who are discriminated and exploited due to caste, class and gender. It examines the theories of empowerment and the challenges of Dalit women, and critically examines caste and gender relations in the context of powerlessness, poverty, social isolation, abuse, lack of access to resources and participation.

Empowerment means strengthening the capacities of individual and group, thereby transforming it into the development process. It encourages women to gain skill and capacities that allow them to overcome obstacles in life and improved the socio-economic and political status in society. Theories of empowerment include participation process with focus on eliminating the gender inequality. It is called as development approach.

The process of social development is to bring people into the mainstream. It is all about the well being of every individual and community irrespective of caste, class, gender, religion and languages. It helps to remove the barriers in society so that people can live a life with respect and dignity. This paper seriously looks into the field reality and self perception of Dalit women about their own empowerment in relation of caste .

Keywords: Empowerment, Perception, Dalit Women, Caste, Satara

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Introduction

Women's empowerment plays a vital role in bringing any social change. No society or nation can be regarded as advanced without empowered women. The core concept of empowerment is embedded within power. Power itself expects that it should be exercised by both the gender equally. Exploitation, discrimination, and violence are some of the key terms associated with disempowerment. The issue of empowerment of women demands for a thoroughly discussion on question of power from top to bottom. There is no doubt that women should be able to enjoy the natural freedom as well as Constitutional (legal) one. It is process of self-power, self-control, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-choice, self-respect and self-dignity – void of social, political, economic, cultural and religious pressures. International institutions including the World Bank had made 'gender mainstreaming' a priority in development assistance (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender 2002).

Based on the views of different authors, empowerment could be referred as access to resources, material well being, decision making power, and the ability to make personal choices without pressure. Decision making helps women to change the perspective of community. This is in a way individual empowerment that is interconnected with the community empowerment, which means changing one's life at the community level. It means people who exercise greater freedom in their lives may be more empowerment. Thus freedom and choice are the strategic propositions in the quest for empowerment of women. One could easily draw a point that no development or progress is possible without gender equality in any country of the world.

Framework of Empowerment and Perception of Dalit Women

The theory of empowerment examines the concept of power and powerlessness (Moscovitch and Drover 1981). The process of empowerment addresses the subordinated position of women at home, workplace, market and society as a whole. It is also important to understand thoroughly that sexual division of labour is upheld as the social pillar of society. Empowerment focuses on socially improving everyday living conditions of women namely gender, caste, religion, culture, social inclusion and so on. In fact it is the process which enables the neglected people to grab available opportunities and encourage them to develop skill for self-sufficiency, welfare of individuals, and community at large. In other words it is to enhance the potential of individual or group of individuals in order to make their choices and transfer them into the desired action. Here I would like to elaborate empowerment in four segments.

1. *Attitude, Beliefs and Values*

We could see it in three sub-section such as (a) social attitude; (b) social belief and (c) values of empowerment. Till today social propensity views women's empowerment as an inverse develop and therefore it is much contested and debated in such circles. Social perception with regard to empowerment of

women is required to change while empowering or delegating the women in border sense. Social belief is the perceptive which should lead to the empowerment of women. The society itself should trust that empowerment women can work successfully, but what we see is the other way around. Empowerment of women expects the credible society which can assist the women to move forward. Social belief plays the key role in shaping women's empowerment in a powerful way. Once the women get empowerment or the degrees of empowerment turn higher, they could bring forth feminine values to the society. Thus the social values of empowerment could play a significant role in transforming society.

2. Social recognition under Collective Experiences

Social recognition under collective experiences deals with sharing mutual experiences, information, knowledge, and individual realisation. Such experiences would help them to exemplify their perspective in terms of overcoming the bad experiences of society and holds the capacity to motivate the community and individuals to bring about social change to sustain a healthy society to pursue its positive approach.

3. Social Periphery of Empowerment

This engages with knowledge, skill, and critical approach. Under this, knowledge of all available resources is of great importance in relation to empowerment. None in any society could survive or sustain without knowledge of resources. Empowerment can lead to development through expending knowledge, skill, and critical approach. Social periphery of empowerment demands for updating information and adequate skill within the reach of the individual. Here the individual also analyses her psychological strengths and weakness.

4. Action

Such process of empowerment helps women to build constructive action plan and strategy. According to Wellertien (1992), empowerment is a social action process that promotes participation of people, organisation and communities towards the goal of increased individual and community control, political efficiency, improve equality, community life and social justice.

In this process of personal empowerment following are the main themes for analysis of empowerment.

a) Powerlessness

Powerlessness is a state of being disempowered, which explains the social domination and position of women in society. The main reason of the powerless is fear and failure. It is often based on the fear of rejection. It continues to the feeling of guilt, shame and loneliness. This experience is developed into the disempowered situation. This is how a Savita Mane (34 year Dalit woman)

narrates about this state. *'I always feel powerless when Non-Dalit women never invite us to Haldi Kumkum' ritual which is socially performed by them.'*

b) Social isolation

Women are isolated at home, public places and private spaces. Particularly, the patriarchal system does not encourage or promote the women to participate in the decision making process of the family. If such opportunities are provided to women to participate in the decision making process, then they could also contribute in prospering the domestic set-up. Hence, this segregation causes irrepressible loss. In family, for instance, providing education to girls vis-a-vis boys are not taken seriously into accounts. Society opines that educating girls will not yield high any productive results. Therefore, the girls are isolated from education. It is extremely important to sensitise men that women is part and parcel of the society. Hence, no women should be isolated or segregated from the community.

Here is what Swati Bansode (36 year Dalit woman) had to share on isolation. *'The stigma of caste is the main reason for social isolation. We are located outside village and therefore we are not considered part of the village. Only in the election process upper caste community invite us for the meeting. Women are only secondary part of the electoral procedure. Upper caste women are economically and socially very strong. That is the reason why we Dalit women are never part of the decision making process. We are isolated in homes where our opinion is never considered important in the family. For us social isolation is not only physical exclusion but at large economical and political isolated from the village.'*

c) Poverty

Amartya Sen (1985) argues that poverty is the lack of capacity to function in a given society. It is lack of or inability to have an active and socially acceptable standard of living (Corenzo 2005). Poverty is based on the assessment of needs, low means or lack of income and lack of purchasing power. This is the disempowering experiences of those women from low income group, which excludes them from the society. Uma Kamble (28 year old Dalit woman) says, *'poverty is manmade disasters for Dalit community. They economically*

¹ Halda Kumkum is social gathering of dominant caste women. According to the Hindu religion, it has traditional value. During the month of *Charita* (as per Hindu calendar) in spring season, married women invite village women and pray to god for the long life of their husband. This is considered as a symbol of strengths and empowerment of women. Mostly in villages, upper caste women never invite the Dalit women for this ceremony. According to them, Dalit women are impure. They do not have the chastity or moral values. Their character is always questionable, because they are easily available for dominant caste men. This kind of impurity sign makes more differences between Dalit and non-Dalit women. Even Dalit women are part of the self help group, while dominant caste women avoid their participation.

*depend on the dominant castes for their survival. Therefore, economic empowerment is important to become independent.*²

d) Abuse

Abuses are very common and it brings in the feeling of being unsafe within the social environment. In circumstances of abuse, women confront with several undesirable impediments. This isolation in social spaces diminishes women's self-confidence and self-esteem. Such undesirable insecurities block all ventilation for women to overcome abusive situation. While the abuser's position gets stronger and stronger, this socialisation of women disempowers her entirely. Uma Naynirgune (55 years Dalit woman) says, *'abuse is common to a Dalit woman because she is treated as a sexual object by the dominant caste men. They think that Dalit women are easily available for sexual relationship since they are bonded labours of dominant caste men. Therefore, they sexually abuse them.'*

The Factors of Disempowerment

1) Lack of support from the peer group

A well coordinated peer group could play a vital role in the individual empowerment of women from Dalit sections. Such peer group support is lacking which could uphold the personal empowerment, through emotional and practical support from each other. It helps the women to develop their self-esteem, self-confidence and personal status and individual motivation. Through the peer support mechanism women can be empowerment.

2) Lack of access to valued resources

Social inequality is the condition where women have unequal access to valued resources, services and status in society. Inequality means the system of social relationship that determines the hierarchy indicating one's position in society. It is related to respect, dignity, esteem and prestige in society. Powerful caste sections control the resources in society. Women are disempowered when she has little access to valued resources.

3) Participation

Participation is the involvement in the activities, which is the process of empowerment for women from socially, economically, and politically weak background. It enhances the self-confidence where there is a focus on individual access to resources, information, choices, and opportunity. It is possible when women participated in the activity (Lord and Hutchison 1993). Deepili Kamble (33 year Dalit woman) says, *'question of participation of Dalit women is not*

² In many part of rural Maharashtra, Dalit women are illiterate and landless. They do not have too many options to make themselves economically strong. All caste aspects continuously drag them into the web of poverty.

only related to decision making in private spaces but also to involve into action.'³

Discussion and Conclusion

Disempowerment of Dalit women is significance as it indicates powerlessness in families, communities and society. Indian consciousness and culture is based on the power and caste-based stratification of people, affecting Dalit women right from the beginning of history. Empowerment is at state that reflects the level of awareness and present condition of accessing power. Empowerment of Dalit women requires a special set of intervention that can reduce their powerlessness due to the experiences of discrimination. From the fieldwork, I understand that Dalit women are aware about their present condition, lack of resources and powerless position. They want to change the strategy in order to change this situation.

Empowerment is understood as 'gendered' process. But in the context of Dalit women, caste is the barrier for empowerment. This indicated that social status of Dalit women based on prejudiced image decides that they are different from other women. Caste restricts the Dalit women to get access to any valuable resources. It refuses them the opportunity to improve social condition. This could be broken by the heterogeneous collective, organised resistance and group knowledge against caste oppression. Such a potentially significant Dalit women can think the beyond the boundaries of caste, class, gender and other intersection.

The multiple levels and patterns of Dalit women experiences challenge the empowerment theory to rethink the process of empowerment and the intersection of caste and gender. So far that Dalit women are concerned, the problem is not just limited to the non-acknowledgment the diversity, there is a need to re-shape the basis concepts and theories of the empowerment itself.

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³ According to the Panchayat Raj Act Dalit women should be mandatorily made part of gram sabha and village activities, particularly in planning and implementation. When Dalit women raise question about their role and participation, dominant caste people try to suppress them as it is deemed to be breaking the caste rules. Hence even Dalit men restricted their women from participating in such activities. This suppression of voices of Dalit women has been responsible for many atrocities. Hence segregation and stratification of people in fact upholds the caste concept of Indian village.

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