

Scheduled Caste Women in Organised Sector

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Abstract

SC women in India needs special attention. India is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Government has an extra obligation to make sure that women can realise their rights. In India basically, women are not treated on par with men. Moreover, the SC women are oppressed among the oppressed. One even with a little human sensitivity gets stunned with the realistic and authentic accounts of the living conditions of SC women, their oppressions, humiliation, sufferings and exploitation.

KEYWORDS- SC women, Organized Sector, Discrimination, Untouchability

Introduction

In India, SCs are systematically discriminated on the basis of their work and descent for centuries. Over 200 million people are SCs, also known as untouchables or outcastes. They experience violence, discrimination and social exclusion on a daily basis.

The situation of SC women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world and make up two per cent of the world's total population. They are poor, they constitute half of the 200 million SC population and 16.3 per cent of the total Indian female population. The traditional taboos are the same for Dalit men and SC women. However, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. SC women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in SC communities.

India is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Government has an extra obligation to make sure that women can realise their rights. The Government of India has an obligation to take all measures, including policy and budgetary measures, to make sure that women can fulfill their rights. It also has an obligation to punish those who engage in caste-based violence and discrimination, party to the international convention on Civil and Political Rights based on this treaty, the Government of India has an obligation to make sure that SC women can enjoy a whole range of human rights, such as the right to life ect

freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, freedom from slavery, the right to be equal before the court, the right to recognition as a person before the law, the right to privacy, the right to marry with free and full consent, and the right to take part in public affairs. The life and dignity of SC women depends on the realization of these human rights. However, they are breached systematically. Article 24(2) of the Convention provides that child shall be registered immediately after birth. In

India, 46 per cent of all children are not registered. There is also no system of registration of marriages. This is not only a barrier for the realization of civil and political rights; it also prevents the protection of SC girls from sexual exploitation and trafficking, child labour and forced early marriages.

The total population of India, according to 2001 census is 102.86 crores of which Scheduled Castes is 16.6 crores, constituting 16.20 per cent of the population of India. Of the total SCs population of India males constitute 86,088,760 while females are 80,546,940. The total number of SCs as per 2001 census is 166,635,700.1

The highest scheduled caste percentage of population to the total population of the State, among 32 States/Union Territories was recorded in Punjab (29) and lowest was recorded as Mizoram (0.03). Andhra Pradesh is in the 12th place with 16.19 percentage of SC population.2

According to 2001 census, the SC workers including main and marginal workers are 6.73 crores in India. These SC workers constitute 40.41 per cent of the total SC population of the country. Among these total workers, 4.36 crores are males and 2.37

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination -- women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, *dharmasalas* not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well.

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman's husband by mistake. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to instill respect for women. *Ardhanareshwar* (God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped. Women were allowed to have multiple husbands. They could leave their husbands. In the vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. The system of *Sati* existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Adharva Veda show that it was still customary for the widow to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral, forced child marriages were unknown. Women could choose their husbands through a type of marriage called *Swayamvara*. In this, potential

Historical Background of SC Women

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SC women's sufferings are two-fold: they have their own share of universal suffering as women. Additionally, they are victims of a variety of exploitations - social, religious, economic and cultural as well. Her experience of patriarchal domination is more severe

than that of non-SC women. Opportunities and avenues available to her to voice her grievances and agonies are very few.

Indian society is all male dominated society. Men dominate women. Therefore, it is very natural for SC woman to be dominated by her husband and other male folk. Even after sixty years of Independence and constitutional guarantees, she has to undergo several travails. She has to work hard for earning livelihood of her family. She has to 79

Undergo atrocities committed on her by her drunken husband, she has to protect herself from the people where she works and she has to fight against all exploitation. Hence SC women in general, have to make a two-way struggle, one in the house and the other outside the house

In a male dominated society, SC women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the Manusmriti and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which SC women could be uplifted (Thing n.pag). The horrendous Laws in the Manusmriti were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favorable only to the upper castes, which form the majority of India.

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (2000), approximately 75 per cent of the SC girls drop out of primary school despite reservations for SCs. Reasons for this early drop out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society and even their teachers. Atrocities on SC women can be found recorded in various newspaper

Articles, journals, and government reports many of which can be viewed on website www.ambedkar.org. The majority of the stories are of bright young SC girls who are punished by the upper caste teachers in rural areas of India, for daring to score good grades. Feeling rejected, most girls drop out of school and have nowhere to turn but towards manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs.

Discrimination against Scheduled Caste Women

The traditional Indian society treated woman in general as an object of sex and sexual exploitation. It was an established fact that woman was looked down in all aspects of life. Discrimination is showed towards her in all spheres in the disguise of tradition and culture. Manu Dharma Sastra says that woman should not be given freedom but should be kept under the control of man in every stage of life.

A Sudra was to be awarded death punishment if he cohabits a Brahmin woman or with a woman of any higher caste. If an unmarried girl was raped by anyone, the criminal would be punished by cutting his limbs. Women who were not chaste are also liable for punishment. A young woman, cohabiting willingly with a man of higher caste would not be punished but if she cohabited with a lower caste man she would be punished by confining her to the home. If a woman, proud of her beauty committed adultery to insult her husband she would be thrown to the dogs to be bitten to death. Even in primitive Vedic period, lesbianism was known and such girls were liable to be punished as criminals.

Scheduled Castes constitute about 250 million of the Indian population and half of them are women. They are most marginalized lot in the caste structure of the Indian society. Among the large scale violations of human rights perpetuated on the Scheduled Castes are the burning of their homes and fields, murder, torture and assault of women

molestation and rape and deaths in custody. These occur in spite of constitutional guarantees, abolition of untouchability and ensuring protection of the human rights of all Indian citizens.

Origins of Untouchability

Before we discuss the history of SC women in India, a brief survey of the origin of untouchability in Hindu social system is not out of place. Far from so, it helps us to understand the plight of the SCs in general and the SC women in particular.

According to Hindu law codes, the chandala, the representative of the untouchables of ancient times was the progeny of a Sudra father and a Brahmin mother -the offspring of the most condemned pratiloma marriage. This theory of the origin of the untouchables is the product of Varna conception of the orthodox Brahmins and was not based on historical facts. Chandalas came into existence around the end of the later Vedic era (6000-1000 BC). In this period, the Aryans who had been mainly herders advanced into the upper and middle reaches of the Ganga basin and formed an agrarian society.

The later Vedic era was also a time when the Brahmins secured the top position in society by virtue of the monopoly of priesthood. They practised 'purity' and 'pollution' – the twin concepts which kept a majority of the population outside the four-fold Varna system of the Hindu society. Emphasis on purity gave rise to people on the opposite end of societies who were considered to be impure. In between, the most pure Brahmins and the polluted untouchables were inserted. The remaining three varnas were ranked according to their level of purity.

Around the same age, regional states were formed in the upper and the middle reaches of the river Ganges, going beyond the framework of tribal institutions. The Kshatriyas who ruled these states saw the advantages of incorporating ideas propounded by the Brahmins into their politics, thus, contributing the political ingredient to the development of untouchability. That is to say, the existence of untouchables functioned to displace, the dissatisfied direct producers, Vaisyas and Sudras within the Varna based society thus enduring a stable social order, besides carrying out a bulk of menial work needed for the agrarian economy.

Since then the untouchables have been placed outside the framework of the Varna social order and have functioned to cement class relations in that society in the form of groups ranked to their level of purity or impurity.

Conclusion

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the vedic period, women lost their political rights of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also deploras the birth of daughters. Yet,

certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. The importance assigned to the wives of the Raja in the Rajasuya Yaga has been regarded as an indication of matrilineal influence. The Vamsavalis or genealogies of teachers attached to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in which many seers bear metronymics, indicate their importance. There are references to women seers like Gagri and Maitreyi. However during this period, we see the growing tendency to stratify the Indian society along gender lines. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of *Smritis*, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband is their only duty. During the Mauryan period Brahmanical literature was particularly severe in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them. Megasthenes testifies to the growing practice of polygamy; employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies etc., permission of widow remarriage and divorce. Thus the position of women though inferior was not as bad as it came to be in the later ages.

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