



Early efforts of Dalit Women assertion in India

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The status of Dalit women is one of the most marginalized segments in Indian society. Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups seen in various parts of the country. The condition of Dalit women is very diverse as Dalit women are discriminated not only by the people of higher castes but also within their own community. Actually, the condition of Dalit woman is more vulnerable in comparison to the non-Dalit women. The Dalit women are suffering from multiple disadvantages which are (i) of being Dalit i.e. socio-economically and culturally marginalized section (ii) being women and sharing the gender-based inequalities and subordination (iii) being poorly unable to attain the basic needs of living.

Dalit Women and Human Rights:

India is a democratic country, where most of the relevant-human rights are theoretically provide equally to men and women. While analyzing the universal declaration of Human Rights and treaties such as the international covenant on civil and political rights, the international covenant and economic, social and cultural rights and 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 realize their rights. Generally, it is accepted in international law that the Government has to do more than just pass law to protect human rights. The Indian Government has an obligation to take all measures, to make sure that women can fulfill their dreams and enjoy their fundamental rights. It also has an obligation to punish those who engage in caste-based violence and discrimination. Equally, the government must implement these laws, policy measures and programmes to fully discharge their obligations under international law. The Government of India, as a modern country with a growing economy, has the means to fulfill, its obligations. In the year 2000, all over the world 1089 countries agreed to accept the



millennium declaration and commit to taking the necessary action to attain eight specific goals which are also called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The realization of human rights of Dalit women will have substantial positive effects on the realization of the MDGs.

Dalit women's assertion:

With the passage of time, Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform; created, developed and controlled by themselves, through which they could attain their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problem as Dalit as well as the Dalit women. The current mood of the Dalit women is not one of mere acceptance, but one of determination to transfer their pain into power. In fact, the Dalit women have been active throughout history, though often this has not been recognized and recovered earlier. During the 1920s they were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti untouchability movements. Presently, they are strongholds of the Dalit movement in thousands of Indian villages and are often at the forefront of the struggle for basic human rights. They are making their mark as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world by opposing dominant caste ideologies. They continue to play a critical role in the movements for land and livelihood rights potential for their self-emancipation, given adequate support.

While recognizing the gendered nature of caste discrimination for Dalit women, these women have turned their suffering into resistance, actively participating shoulder to shoulder with men in their communities in the anti-caste and anti untouchability movements. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive change in the status of Dalit women. They have simultaneously contributed to the welfare of families, sustained their communities given their labour for producing food and even wealth for their countries. This assertion of distinct identity and the simultaneous forging of a collective identity in multiple struggles marks the Dalit women's movement in various ways such as legal action against caste-based atrocities, political, social and economic empowerment against growing pauperization, building self-confidence, and spirit of leadership.



Growing awareness among Dalit women:

With the passage of time, the present position of Dalit women becomes better due to education and awareness. Now they have a lot of self-respect, awareness of their rights, and organizations to raise their demands. The creamy layer of the Dalit women is well aware of the Government welfare schemes. At the beginning of the late 1970s, Dalit women activists undertake to organize issue of gender violence like rape, wife beating, sati, dowry burning, female-neglect resulting in differential mortality rate and more recently, female feticide following amniocentesis.

An overview of the role of the Indian Government towards the Dalit women's movement:

The declaration on the elimination of violence against women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, affirms that the states must "exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and in accordance with national legislation punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the state or by a private person. Although on particular occasions, numbers of women can be mobilized for protests, rallies and mass movements, the number of different activities with sustained movement. The involvement, as well as supporters who identify with a collective feminist consciousness, are limited in comparison with such numbers in the west.

Applying international human rights law without understanding the responsibility of the state for abuses of women's rights by private sectors including employers, partners, family members or neighbours, simply robs women of protection and of remedies for the majority of abuse against them. Due to the party to the convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination since 1968, India has been committed for many years to ensuring civil and political rights to all its citizens without any type of discrimination. This commitment was reinforced with its ratification of the Convention of Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in July 1993. At the local level, the political representation of women has increased. In the year 1992, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act included a provision for statutory minimum reservation of 33% seats, only for women in Panchayati Raj.



This amendment gave the opportunity to a number of women to participate in community decision making processes, including those from the marginalized communities. It provided the reservation of seats for scheduled caste, scheduled tribe, and backward caste categories.

The action of the Dalit women - Getting organized as Dalit women:

During the 1970s, the Dalit women were actively participating in anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. Presently they are the strongholds of Dalit movement in thousands of Indian villages. They are actively presenting themselves as independent thinkers and writers in the literary world and visionary leaders in the Panchayati Raj institutions. In the 1970s, feminists came together in one front named as "Autonomous Women's Organization" in January 1979, a group of women started the publication of *Manushi* in Hindi and English language. In 1981 at Bombay, a forum was founded to fight against the oppression of women. It took up issues of rape, dowry deaths and harassment of women commuters. In 1982, a group named *Saheli* was formed who looked after the issues like dowry and domestic violence. With the passage of time, a number of institutes become home to large research efforts, which focus on the issues related to women.

During the late 1980s, the Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need of separate platform, which was created, developed and controlled by them. Through such a platform, the women could forge their own identity, fight for their specific problems as a Dalit and as well as a woman. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women which was committed to undertake the tasks to bring about positive changes in the life of the Dalit women, such as legal action against caste-based atrocities, social and political empowerment of Dalit women, economic empowerment against growing pauperization, building self confidence and the quality of leadership.

Significant Women organizations:

In recent years, some change has taken place and the Dalit women have started asserting for their significant place in Indian society. The role played by many Dalit women in running the Panchayats across the country has turned out to be an amazing success story of political



awareness and mobilization beyond any conceivable imagination. The Dalit women organized many associations proved as the women wings of different political parties in India. It promotes women education and declared itself a political group. Even the members of All India Women's Conference (AIWC) were also active in the nationalist movement. The All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) is a common platform for Dalit women committed to challenging the nexus of patriarchy, caste, traditions and social costumes, class oppression, exploitation and above all marginalization of Dalit women in the family, social community and even in their nation, where they live in. All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) is a campaign for Dalit women's Rights with the objectives to hold the state accountable for its failure to prevent violence against the Dalit women and to take up advocacy at the state, national as well as international level.

Under CPI leadership, another organization is formed namely National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). It also worked for protecting and promoting the rights of women. The Dalit Women Access to Justice and Dignity (DWAJ) is another organization under the Strengthened Access to Justice in India (SAJI) programme. The project was initiated with a vision that the Dalit women should have equitable and effective access to justice delivery mechanism to protect themselves from violence, exploitation, and atrocities, and to live with dignity. The DWAJ project works to identify cases related to violence against the Dalit women, identify human rights defenders, organize and conduct training for Human Rights Defenders, conduct fact-finding, organize roundtable conferences with various law enforcement agencies to sensitize and bring pressure on the police, revenue and judicial system to address the issues, access panel and pecuniary justice to the victims. The last decade and a half have also seen the formation of a number of non-governmental largely urban organization which attempts to enhance the economic and social situation of women workers in the informal sector.

Emerging identity of Dalit women from Grass root level to present scenario:

An important force that works for women's interest is located in grass root political movement of India in which women play a major role. It includes the well known Chipko movement, popularly known as tree-hugging that protested deforestation in Uttarakhand in 1978.

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Dalit women activist were important in pressurizing J.P. Narayan who formed Yuva Sangarsh Vahini in Bodh Gaya of Bihar, which focuses on the issues of drunkenness and wife beating in addition to the grass root movement. The reformist intervention by Savitri Bai and Mahatma Jyotiba Phule added upon the twinning point for changing the status of the Dalit women.

During the period of the 1960s and 1970s, the Dalit movement and women movement emerged to demand their rights against caste and gender respectively. In the year 1973-74, Maoist women formed the progressive organization of women, initiating a self consciously feminist critique of radical leftist politics along with an overarching analysis of gender oppression. These organizations have come together on several issues such as the celebration of *Bhartiya Istree Mukti Divas* and the issue of reservation of OBC women in Parliamentary bodies. In the 1990s, several special, independent and autonomous assertions of Dalit women's identity were farmed like National Federation for Dalit Women (NFDW) and All India Dalit Women's Forum (AIDWF) at the state level. In Bombay, the forum against the oppression of women was organized which took up issues of rape. With the passage of time, the women activists in India have played a crucial role in highlighting the problems faced by this section of society.

Protest against violence:

The Central Government and State Government have taken several steps to protect women through the enactment of legislation and to prosecute those who perpetrate violence against women. The Indian penal code has been amended several times in relation to a crime against women largely as a result of campaigns against violence lead by the women's movement in the country. Almost every campaign against gender-based violence and women during 1980s resulted in new legislation providing protection to them.

The autonomous groups took up issues of sexual violence through a combination of political strategies that were both radical and pragmatic. Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code defines the offense of rape as sexual intercourse against the will or consent of the women. Section 354 of the Indian Penal Code provides punishment for assault or criminal force to women with intent to outrage her modesty, a wide-ranging provision which is commonly used in



incidents of violence not amounting to rape but which invite a far lesser punishment of imprisonment of up to two years. Between 1970 to till now, feminist activists mobilized around different aspects of gender violence. The anti-rape protests were followed by the anti-dowry campaigns. The women activists in India have played a crucial role in highlighting these types of problems faced by women. Feminist groups have continued their support for women who are victims of family violence and have extended their protest to other issues such as the practice of Sati and female feticide. Many Dalit nongovernment organizations both in India and abroad, have been involved in raising the plight of India's 250 million untouchables. Many Dalit women have formed NGO's through which they collectively fought against violence.

Conclusion:

Many significant efforts have been made since independence to restore the human rights of the women in general and the Dalit women in particular. No doubt, the human rights of the Dalit women are seen to be violated in different forms. But still, the courage, struggle, and persistence of today's Dalit women against suppression, exploitation, and torture have the power to ensure that the future generations will not have to face black reality, which the Dalit have faced for the past two thousand years. The long term objectives are to enfranchise the Dalit women as a complete citizen of the society and eliminate caste based discriminations. In the future, there is only the need of evolving a suitable mechanism to empower the Dalit women to assert equal rights and justice in order to live a dignified life.

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