

Dalit women and Dalit liberation Movement

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Dalits are a discriminated, powerless, and oppressed community. They are socially and educationally backward. They are agricultural laborers and bonded laborers. They lack social status, political power, and economic well-being. Dalits are minorities and are treated as outcastes. They are down trodden and they are Untouchables. They have been deprived of basic rights and are underprivileged. They are victimized and live in agony and frustration. Dalits are untouchable, unthinkable, invisible, and unapproachable. The word "Dalit" is from a Hebrew word meaning crushed, broken, or torn ascender.

There are 160 million Dalits in India and 10 million of them in Tamil Nadu. SCs literacy rate is 46.7% and the SC population in India is 16.48% and 19.18% in Tamil Nadu. Out of the 10 million Dalit people, 5 million are women in Tamil Nadu.

Dalit women are thrice discriminated: as women, as Dalits, and as workers. It is caste, class, and gender that keep Dalit women discriminated thrice in our society. Dalit women are Dalits among the Dalits and backward among the backwards. Their social, economic, and political situation is worse than other Dalits. Caste arrogance and custom leads to the organized and systemic rape of Dalit women. The caste system perpetuates untouchability in access to food and sharing of water. Landlords, priests, IAS officers, and police officers violate and sexually abuse Dalit women.

"We are untouchable by day and touchable by night"

The Dalits represent 16.03% of the total Indian population. Women constitute 49.96% of the Dalit population. Of all women, 18% live in rural communities and 12% live in urban areas.

They are marginalized, subordinated, and face more atrocities. Dalit women suffer with starvation, deprivation, segregation, humiliation, violence, bondage, and slavery from generation to generation without justice or reparation.

Dalit women are agricultural workers and are paid very low wages. They work more than both bullock and men. One Himalayan study states: bullock work for 1064 hours, men work for 1202 hours, and women work for 3485 hours in a hectare of land per year.

Dalit women undertake scavenging, garbage picking, cleaning, sweeping, and other kinds of dehumanizing menial jobs.

Dalit women walk miles to find water to bring back to their homes. Dalit women work everyday to earn wages. "If there is no work there is no money." They are bonded and indebted. Every day

survival is a very big question. Dalit women face many problems. They have no basic amenities. They must endure injustice, ill treatment, rape, and unemployment.

Dalit women face dowry harassment. A Dalit woman can be either killed or deserted for not bringing sufficient jewels or cash to her husband-to-be. Dalit women, while in custody, are raped by police, their landlords, and even by their own men at home. During communal caste riots, it is the Dalit women who are raped, molested, and robbed. All of this goes unnoticed.

Eleven year olds Meena, Nadiya, and Anitha were brutally raped by men from another community.

Dhanam, a schoolgirl, lost her eyesight because she took drinking water. Dalit children are not allowed to have drinking water at school.

At Kulapadi, children were electrocuted when they went to swim in the landlord's well. Two Dalit women were murdered when they went to stop the sale of illicit Arrack.

Menaga, a 35-year-old woman leader, was murdered in broad daylight. During the caste riots, Dalit women were badly attacked resulting in abortion. Dalit women lost their fetuses.

"Rape and molestation which is (are) new dimensions of a caste war used as weapons of reprisal to crush the morale of a section of the people." (Justice Bhagavathi)

They work in unhygienic conditions. They face occupational hazards such as

- Frequent illness,
- Prolepses,
- Back pain,
- Water diseases,
- White discharge,
- Pesticides infection,
- Skin diseases,
- Loss of fetuses.

Whatever they earn is not enough to feed their family. Dalit women are malnourished and weak. They have no property and no savings. Most of them suffer without proper clothing. Dalit women have to do double household work; they work both at their own homes and at the landlord's home. She will earn very little for cleaning cowshed, feeding cattle, and washing other community

members' clothes. At the end of her hard work, she is given some left over food.

Dalit women live in a constant violent situation. Her life is unprotected. She faces violence from the State, her family, and her employer, the landlord.

Police raped Padimini in front of her husband when she was in custody. At Kundupatti, people refused to vote for the ruling party because police have attacked Dalit women. A 30-day-old baby was killed and women were forced to have abortions.

Due to the globalization process, Dalit women face unemployment and start selling their bodies as sex workers. Dalit women are sexually exploited and harassed from childhood. Dalit women are dedicated to the Gods "Mathamma." When a girl child gets sick, she is kept in front of the Goddess called Mathamma. If the child is cured from the disease, she is married to the Goddess by a custom called "Pottu Thali." From that day on, the girl is exploited and starts dancing in all of the festivals. She will remain single because men will not marry her. The people believe that if a man marries her, he will die. Beautiful Dalit girls are chosen and named Mathamma.

Throughout their life men from their own caste and other castes sexually exploit them. Mathamma, sanctioned prostitution, is a violation of Dalit women's human rights. Dalit women do not find enough work in the agricultural sector and are pushed into sex trade.

Inter-caste marriages are not allowed. Three Dalit men were tonsured (made to shave their heads) forced to parade around naked, and tied to trees at Pudukottai for marrying girls from a caste different from their own. Dalit men celebrate Ambedkhar Jayanthi to show that they follow the principles of Ambedkhar. But they are very reluctant to shed patriarchal notions of control. Their own women at home cannot speak freely in social and political life.

TAMIL NADU DALIT WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Atrocities against Dalits, particularly against Dalit women, increase every year. Most of the cases against Dalit women go unreported for various reasons. The Dalit women are especially targeted during caste riots. They are sexually abused, brutally attacked, and their genitals are mutilated. Even pregnant women and children are not spared from attacks that result in miscarriage and child rapes. Sexual abuse and assault is a political weapon used to preserve the caste system.

Under such conditions, the communal attacks on Dalits particularly on Dalit women in the southern part of Tamil Nadu drew the attention of the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum. The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum quickly responded to these human rights violations by staging demonstrations, protest meetings, fact finding sessions, and by speaking to various forums. The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum

urged the government to combat caste atrocities.

A group of Dalit women discussed and developed strategies to protect and promote their rights. As a result of holding many meetings, the Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement was created to confront Dalit women's issues.

The two main enemies of Dalits and Dalit women are Brahmanism and capitalism. Dalit women should constantly challenge these two enemies. Dalit women are militant and have revolutionary ideologies. The Dalit women should resist all kinds of atrocities and discriminations. Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement has pledged to education, agitate, and mobilize Dalit women. Whenever caste riots take place, the TNDWM conducts fact-finding missions to reveal the truth. Later these findings are reported and published at press meetings.

The atrocities are exposed. The Dalit women's movement conducts public meetings, conferences, demonstrations, and public hearings to pressure the government to stop atrocities against Dalits.

Tamil Nadu Dalit Women's Movement also conducts training programs for Dalit women leaders on legal methods to confront caste riots legally and socially. Dalit women participate in national and international meeting. They join campaigns to internationalize Dalit issues.

The Dalit Women's Movement is preparing Dalits to participate and assume leadership roles in the local government (Panchayat). Strong Dalit women leaders are confronting discrimination atrocities in the villages. The Dalit Women's Movement is very strong. It supports the Dalit movement where women are not included. The Dalit Women's Movement is joining the National Women's Movement and other worker's movements to cast out caste.

“Dalit women are fighting to gain political power and land rights.”

Ms. Burnad Fatima N.