

Upsurge in Atrocities against Dalit and Adivasi Women in the Wake of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The Chinese virus has triggered a social, economic and health crisis of global dimensions. This paper talks of how the novel covid-19 has affected Dalit women in India. Everybody is equally at risk as the pandemic does not discriminate on the basis of caste, religion and gender even if society does. Discrimination and atrocities against women have increased, and unsurprisingly Dalit and Adivasi women are the worst sufferers. The practice of untouchability has revived. Instead of physical distancing people have started following social distancing with people of marginalized groups. The necessary implementation of lockdown to combat the disease has led to rise in caste and gender violence. According to the data collected by the National Dalit Movement for Justice, the practice of untouchability seems to have escalated. Episodes of domestic violence, sexual assault, hunger deaths, murder, trafficking, death in shramik special trains, students dropping out, unavailability of PPE kits and, witch branding are making the life of Dalit women difficult. The National Dalit Movement for Justice has manifested its solidarity with 'Black lives Matter.' Considering the violence in the present time, it is the need of the hour to insist that 'Dalit women's lives matter.' Dalit women are even a more vulnerable group at this moment. They need to be identified, and proper measures must be taken to protect their human rights.

Keywords- Atrocities, Dalit, Human rights, Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir said, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 17-18). Women have been universally marginalized across the world even if their problems and the ways of discrimination may vary. Women of each section have raised their voices in protest and in this way, feminism has found expression. Virginia Woolf in her seminal essay said, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write

fiction" (Woolf 4). Alice Walker draws solidarity with Woolf's essay but is disappointed as black women are excluded in the essay. Walker identifies the limitations of Woolf's essay. Walker shares that not all women have money and space for themselves. Walker gives the reference of Phillis Wheatley, a slave, and says that this woman and many other women writers exist outside the safe space and room and "had she (Phillis Wheatley) been white, she would have been easily

considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day” (Walker 4). Western feminism differs from black feminism. In the Indian context too, Indian feminism also did not adequately represent Dalit and tribal women. The mainstream women’s sufferings are quite different from those of Dalit women. The nature of suffering is not the same. Dalit women are victimized because of their caste identity. Through this paper I would like to bring attention to their stories of suffering and humiliation during this corona period.

NATION, CASTE AND GENDER

Nation-building refers to the development of the nation through the state. The terms ‘state’ and ‘government’ are often used synonymously for referring to the political group who is in power in a nation or territory. There are several policies made and initiatives taken by the government every year in order to make its territory strong and developed. India at the present time is recognized as a developing country. Benedict Anderson described the nation as “an imagined political community” (Anderson 6).

It is socially constructed by people living in that territory and associating themselves with that region through language, culture, and other means which they feel are part of them. For nation development, it is necessary for a nation to grow economically, as well as to bring social harmony among its nationals. In order to bring social harmony, it is essential that it focuses on the eradication of various kinds of discrimination among its citizens. India is undeniably a highly casteist society and a hugely male dominated country. In this situation social equity can only be brought by various policies like reservation and

government schemes that bring elevation in the status of downtrodden people. It is a matter of utter shame for a nation that a large population is still being treated as less than human. Unquestionably, things have changed to a great extent, but still caste and gender have strengthened their very roots. Every individual has to be respected and should be allowed to live with dignity. India has witnessed various kinds of discrimination on grounds of caste, class, color, and gender since centuries. Dalit women are the most discriminated of all because of triple subjugation as they are placed at the lowest order of the hierarchy based on their caste, class and gender. Dalit women in India are mute models as they have been silenced for centuries. They are seen as mute recipients of oppression, violence, and barbarity inflicted upon them. In this postmodern era, Dalit women still live under most precarious conditions. This is even more aggravated in this time of pandemic with the rise of atrocities against women of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Be it their health issues or their vulnerable condition at home as well as outside, they are always at risk. Dalit women are more at risk of death during childbirth. Malnutrition and overwork often result in miscarriages. However, much has improved with the introduction of various schemes like “Integrated Child Development Scheme” for pregnant and lactating women. In case of Dalit women, often these schemes are unreachable due to illiteracy, ignorance and lack of a proper channel which could make them aware of these facilities provided by the government. It is women belonging to the Dalit community who are impacted the most by child labor, prostitution and human trafficking. Unsurprisingly, even during this corona pandemic, most of the migrants who

were unfortunately walking back to their home were Dalit. Nobody will ever forget the cycle woman, Jyoti Paswan who cycled 1200 kilometers from Gurugram to Darbhanga to bring her ailing father home. What she did was a matter of bravery and courage, but it destroys the complacent assumption that all caste women have similar kinds of problems. Dalit women are more vulnerable to rape than people of other castes. Recently, a minor girl of similar name and caste as the Dalit woman, Jyoti Paswan, was found dead. In the period of lockdown, she went out to collect mangoes from a mango orchard that belonged to an upper-caste family. The victim's family has claimed it to be an incident of rape and murder, but it is a known fact that money and power can surpass justice.

DISCUSSION

The age-old practice of untouchability is back and is working in a subtle manner. There are several stories where in the name of controlling the community transmission of the virus, Dalits are not allowed to use the roads and streets frequented by caste people. Usually, villages are planned based on caste-ghettos forcing Dalits to stay in the outskirts of the village. Stopping Dalits from entering the village and from walking on streets deprives them of basic facilities and alienates them socially and economically. This practice in the present time is affecting Dalit woman's reproductive health. Several women have undergone childbirth complications and have had to give birth at home, deprived of nutritional, medicinal and vaccination facilities.

The Dalit community in Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh consists of 1200 members. These people are not allowed to use the main road by the

dominant caste people. They are harassed and rumors are spread about them being infected with the virus. The SC colony people are even threatened to be burnt alive if they use the main road. However, the victims have called for police protection (Opinion).

Adivasi and Dalit communities have been affected not only because of their caste, but they are also at risk of the deadly virus because of the nature of their work. Most of the caste-based jobs like manual scavenging, drain cleaning, cleaning jobs at hospitals, sanitation work and other jobs that are considered as unclean are performed by the Dalits and the Adivasis. Though this pandemic recognized these jobs as pivotal, still there has been no attempt to adequately equip Dalit workers for their safety and protection. This puts them and their families to an even greater risk, making them poorer.

Historian Amit Kapoor compared the 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic with that of Corona to say: "While caste was predominant in 1918, in 2020 the impact of this pandemic has more to do with the economic hierarchy than the social hierarchy." (qtd.in. Sur). However, in India it is a known fact that higher castes are more economically sound than lower castes. Nevertheless, there are exceptions which cannot be denied.

According to the United Nations Development Programme, half of the Adivasis population in India is considered poor. Commenting on the situation of the 1918 Spanish Flu, Amit Kapoor said that 61 patients that died for every 1000 were Dalits, while for upper-caste Hindus the number was 19 for every 1000 and when white people ratio was taken into account, their death was lowest (Sur).

Government has tried to help the lower strata of the population with various schemes including cash transfers and subsidies. Most of the poor who could not make access to these schemes are Dalits. According to the Dalit Bahujan Resource Centre, 22 percent of people engaged in jobs which are considered menial did not have the Unique Identity card which is necessary to avail government schemes (Sur).

Mumbai based sanitation worker; Vanita Bhaskar Salvi did not even have the employment identity card which was a prerequisite to avail transport facility in this difficult time. The non-availability of this card deprived her of other benefits like health insurance and benefits that are given to essential service workers. She was forced to walk ninety minutes to reach her workplace, and when she tried to make a request for an identity card for herself, she was not entertained by the Dean. Salvi says “She threatened me and said don’t you dare come inside and called the guard to take me away. She thinks we are trash, and now she has more reason to treat us like trash” (qtd.in. Sur).

Dalit women who were previously working as domestic helps or in construction work are now at greater danger of facing domestic violence.

A forty-four-year-old Dalit woman, Mamta, from Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh was beaten up by the councilor Meenakshi Sharma. Mamta worked as a domestic servant in a different household but was facing unemployment due to the pandemic. She is the head of the family as she is a widow and has to care for two of her sons one of whom is differently abled. Beena Pallical, General Secretary of Dalit Arthik Adhikar Andolan commented that “the majority of the migrant workforce in India was from the Dalit

community. As a result of the lockdown, they are not allowed to go to work which is why they have no source of income” (qtd.in. Ekta).

Caste based slurs are considered to be an offensive practice against section 3 (1) (x) but the people distributing ration cards addressed Mamta in a very derogatory manner. They said “tum chuhrechammar ho” and “marosalichamaranko” (Ekta). Mamta was not only denied ration along with 400 other residents but she was one who was physically and verbally assaulted by the councilor’s family members. Pallical said “they not only took the liberty to not give her the ration but also beat her up. They would have never treated a dominant caste woman like this” (Ekta).

There are several incidents of denial of food cooked by the Dalit women in isolation centres. One such incident took place in Uttar Pradesh, Gorakhpur district. Siraj Ahmad along with other members refused to eat food cooked by Lilawati Devi in the isolation centre for the food was prepared by this Dalit woman (Srivastava).

Association for India’s Development, a non-profit charitable organization says Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group women are most affected by the pandemic. Yogini Dolke who works for SRUJAN talks on the impact of Covid-19 on tribal single women at Kolam village of Yavatmal district in Maharashtra state. They are at first not able to understand any language other than Kolami language which keeps them away from news on lockdown and other government announcements concerning viruses. It is essential to translate the news to make them aware about the present situation so that they prevent themselves and others from the virus. Ninety percent of women who work in farms as laborers are forced to stay

indoors, bringing their livelihood at stake. Most of these vulnerable people are out of food and cash. It is estimated by the organization that 8 to 10% of them do not have Aadhar cards or ration cards which prevents these tribal women from getting life sustaining items from the government. Families excluded from the Public Distribution System for not having cards believe “bimari se pahle bhook maar degi” (qtd.in. Dolke).

In Jharkhand tribal women are seen with large necks caused by goiter which is caused by iodine deficiency. Some are anemic because of low range of hemoglobin. Even the anganwadi is not capable of reducing the death rate of children in this covid-19 time. Childbirth at home is making pregnancy complicated. Already fragile because of socio-economic conditions, tribal women are finding difficulty in fighting the virus.

CONCLUSION

21st century India was forced to repeat the horrific scene of partition. Here, the only difference was that the force was internal. The sight of people marching towards their homes along with their families and belongings will continue to haunt us even after the pandemic ends. The statement that the present virus makes no difference between rich and poor, men and women, is only a half-truth. Novel coronavirus or covid-19 has potential to affect people irrespective of their caste, class, religion and gender. However, when it comes to fighting the disease, the marginal communities are affected the most, especially women and among them the worst sufferers are Dalit women. The aim of social justice is to help people through implementation of certain programmes. It is very essential to bring certain provisions that will benefit and will focus on Dalit and tribal women.

It is the work of our nation to safeguard all its citizens giving special attention to the marginalized communities as they are socially and economically challenged.

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