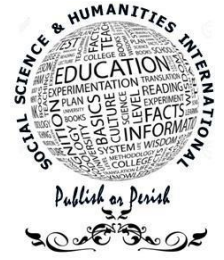


Social Science & Humanities International

(An International Multidisciplinary Journal)

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The Status of Dalit Women in India's Varna System

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KEYWORDS

Dalit Women, Varna, Manusmriti, Vedas, Devdasi System.

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 30-1-2022

Revised: 12-2-2022

Accepted: 16-02-2023

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, Dalit women in India have been surrounded by a culture of silence. They have remained oblivious to the exploitation, persecution, and barbarism perpetrated against them. They have no control over their bodies, their wages, or their lives. Hunger, malnutrition, sickness, physical and mental torture, rape; illiteracy, ill-health, unemployment, insecurity, and inhuman treatment are all examples of extreme kinds of violence, exploitation, and oppression directed at them. Feudalism, casteism, and patriarchy have combined to make their lives a living misery. The vast majority of them live in the most perilous of circumstances. They are still living in a deeper age of cruelty in this age of modernism and postmodernism.

The present study intends and tries to narrate impact of the Varna system on Dalit women's schooling, social and economic conditions in modern India. This study also depicts how difficult truth of the repression is faced by Dalit women like battling and tormenting their miserable lives every day. Not only because of their poverty, low economic status, and lack of education, the struggles of Dalit women are a direct consequence of the extreme exploitation and suppression of the upper classes, legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures¹. In ancient India the Varna system did not exist, since even the most educated personalities were from decent family background and had different occupations. In learning, schooling, and intelligence, Ancient India's women were as high as men. Her mate's preference was according to her own desires, and after the arrival of maturity, marriage was practiced. As she wished, she attended parties, games, and religious events. A recent practice has also been the remarriage of young widows².

A society was established in which equality between men and women became a dream by the emergent developments of

several Hindu religious texts, including the Vedas, the Manusmriti or the Vishnu Smriti, and many others³. Dr. B.R Ambedkar in his essay entitled "The Rise and Fall of Hindu Women" stated that these so-called Hindu holy books are the main cause of misery for women in our nation⁴. Books such as the Manusmriti split people of our country into a stratified caste structure and encourage gender discrimination. A woman does not have right to schooling, freedom, or wealth, according to Manusmriti. It defends the exploitation of Dalit women just like a sex object and encourages child marriage as well as a sequence of abusive abuses of women, as seen in the verses mentioned below⁵.

"A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age. If (the performance of) his duties would otherwise be impeded, he must marry sooner". (*Manusmrit* IX.94)

"By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house." (*Manusmriti* V.147)

¹ Thind, G. S. *Our Indian Sub-Continent Heritage*. Crosstown Press, LTD. British Columbia, Canada.

² Shahzada Akhter, *Kashmir: Women Empowerment and National Conference*, Jammu and Kashmir

³ Agarwal, S. 1999. *Genocide of women in Hinduism*. Sudrasthan Books. Jabalpur. India.

⁴ Satyajit Das, *Ambedkar and woman rights: An analysis*

⁵ Dr. Debjani Ghosal, *Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956) : The Messiah Of The Depressed Classes And The Zealous Crusader Against Caste And Untouchability*

"Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence." (Manusmriti IX.3)

"Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskaras are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclean as the untruth." (Manusmriti IX.18)

Dalit women faced unprecedented injustice, not only by caste, but also by gender, from in made dominated society in which there was no way to escape from this darkness. Manusmriti's laws and other Vedic texts close all socio-economic cum political, educational and human networks through which women from Dalit can be brought up. Manusmriti's horrible laws were adopted into Hinduism because they benefitted the Upper Castes, which comprised much of India. Still today, the extreme discrimination and violence of Dalit women is evident in modern times. Manusmriti legislation has a detrimental effect on Dalit women's education standards⁶.

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Government of India.*

Approximately 76% of Dalit girls are not able to attend primary schools despite the stringent regulations of the Government of India, which retains reservations for Dalit students, according to the National Commission for SC and ST⁷.

In India, various journals, newspapers, and government reports targeting Dalit women are reporting large numbers of crimes. Most of the stories we're reading and listening to are about talented young Dalit girls in rural India who are disciplined to score high grades. Under these circumstances, Feeling denied most girls leaving school and turn to manual rummaging and other repulsive occupations⁸.

According to the National and Scheduled Castes Commission, The majority of educated persons come from the upper caste of the Scheduled Tribes, many of whom may practice prejudice based on caste. In this regard, the 1999-2000 Annual Report of the University Grants Commission notes that Dalits typically have very limited higher education participation rates⁹.

In addition to all this, the Hindu High Caste introduced the Devdasi system (also famous as prostitution in temples), and it still exists in some parts of our

⁸ *News Archives. <http://www.ambedkar.org>.*

⁹ *The Annual Reports of University Grant Commission, Government of India.*

independent nation¹⁰. According to the 1992 Human Rights Watch Report, approximately 50,000 girls were sold annually to the Devdasi scheme involving Hindu organizations. These girls were then called "female servants of gods" and sexually abused. After a lifetime of working as a prostitute suffering, the women in their last years are sold to larcenies, where they are further abused and sometimes die and no one care about them. The system of Devdasi and Child Marriage is both justified by the Hindu religious texts¹¹.

The 1992-93 Annual Report of the Welfare Ministry shows that 1,232 cases of rape against Dalit women were registered and the National SC-ST Commission has reported about 10,000 human rights abuses against Dalit per month. Furthermore, the Human Rights Watch Report reports that about 112 million children are living life of slavery and two and six million children are bonded labor¹².

Despite Dalit women's excellent legislation, they still face implausible Hindus atrocities after more than 70 years of Indian independence. These Dalit women can only escape the viscous cycle of poverty, ill-treatment and injustice through

education. Dalit women can learn about their fundamental human rights through education and can then raise their voice against the exploitation and violence of high castes¹³.

Many Dalit women have founded non-governmental organizations by which they collectively combat high class violence. Such Dalit women give up fear and take up the shield of trust and hope. The bravery, struggle and determination of Dalit women today against suppression, abuse and torture is the power to avoid the terrible reality that the Dalits have endured for the last two thousand years for the coming generations. The caste system in India is essentially a paralyzing disease for about 250 million people. Many Dalit NGOs are active in the establishment of schools, scholarships and basic supplements for Dalits in rural India. The Dalit people are brought to the attention of the international community by NGOs, including the Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice and the National Dalit Human Rights Movement, which document human rights violations. Long-term aims are to free the Dalits from caste-based discrimination as

¹⁰ Meena bardia, dr. B.r. Ambedkar his ideas about religion and conversion to Buddhism

¹¹ Agarwal, S. 1999. *Genocide of women in Hinduism*. Sudrastan Books. Jabalpur. India

¹² Narula. S. *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables."* London: Human Rights Watch, 1999

¹³ Thind, G. S. *Our Indian Sub-Continent Heritage*. Crosstown Press, LTD. British Columbia, Canada

full citizens of their communities¹⁴.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the impact of the Varna system on Dalit women's education, social, and economic conditions in modern India. The Varna system was legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures and caused the suppression and exploitation of Dalit women. The Manusmriti, one of the Hindu religious texts, is the main cause of the misery of women in India and encourages gender discrimination, child marriage, and the exploitation of Dalit women. The laws of the Manusmriti have a negative effect on the education of Dalit women, as 76% of Dalit girls are unable to attend primary schools. Moreover, there are large numbers of crimes against Dalit women, as most of them are forced to leave school and turn to manual labor. The Hindu High Caste introduced the Devdasi system, which still exists in some parts of India and involves the sexual abuse of girls sold as "female servants of gods". The 1992-93 Annual Report of the Welfare Ministry shows that 1,232 cases of rape against Dalit women were registered and the National SC-ST Commission reported about 10,000 human rights abuses against Dalit women per month. Despite legislation in favor of Dalit women, they continue to face

exploitation and suppression.

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¹⁴ Narula, S. *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's "Untouchables"*. London: Human Rights Watch, 1999.

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