

## STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

Dr. Sita Ram Bairwa\*

### ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the status of Dalit women in india as Education, Social Equality, Gender equality, Occupational inequality, Family role, problems and challenges, leadership programmes and role of AIDMAM. There are about 250 million Dalits in India but there is no proper survey to give the correct number of dalit women in India. They are generally scattered in villages and they are not a monogamous group. What is the position of Dalit women in India today.

**Key words : Dalit, Education, Social, Equality, Gender, Occupational,empowerment**

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\* Lecturer in Political Science, Rajesh Pilot Govt. P.G. College Lalsot, Dausa, Rajasthan

As the largest democracy in the world, India has enjoyed the freedom to continuously experiment with a number of forms, structures and modes of organizations to achieve women's equality. The state is seen as the prime mover in bringing about this social change and is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the fundamental rights to equality and freedom of the sexes and prohibition of discrimination on this ground. The replacement of institutional structures and formations from time to time, their modifications, renewal as well as organic growth have come about as responses to emerging concepts on women's issues. During the last six decades, development planning for women straddled theories as disparate as welfare, development, equality, efficiency & empowerment (Sujaya, 1995). The institutional structures have undergone changes in response to these evolving concepts and have changed from welfare to empowerment and beyond, in response to experiences of social reality at the field level as well as factors governing external environment. Today, the state has accepted women as active agents, participating in development programmes and schemes & thereby achieving their own Development.

The status and empowerment of Dalit Women in India are seen in following points -

#### Education:

Dalits in general have very low participation rates in education and higher education. Approximately 75% of the Dalit girls drop out of primary school Education scenario for Dalit women is quite bleak as only a small percentage of the total population of Dalit women are educated. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among dalit women are many: resistance from the family to send girls to schools; fear of insecurity in villages; lack of physical facilities like accommodation, school transport and medical facilities; the girls are forced to take care of the siblings when the parents are away at work to work to earn for the family and to do domestic chores which prevent them from attending school. Many girls are forced to get married at young age, which stop schooling because social restriction is that the girls should stop studying after marriage. Fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education can be attributed as one of the reason for low literacy level among SC girls. Even if the education improved the marriage prospects of the girls, the minus point is the increase in dowry. Therefore Educational development among SC women is very marginal because girls are not sent to school.

#### Gender equality:

The gender discrimination starts at the very early stage in the life of a dalit girl. Normally girl children are retained at home to look after the siblings. Another thing is the compulsory marriage of the girls at very early age after which the education is stopped. Generally in the male-dominated society, polygamy is allowed and more so in many dalit families. Because of this the position of the women deteriorated. Joint family system, polygamy, property structure, early marriage, and permanent widowhood were hurdles for the development of all women in early period.

**Occupational inequality:**

85% of the Dalit women have the most formidable occupations, while working in traditional sectors of economy. They often work as agricultural labourers, SafaiKarmchari, sweepers and disposers of human waste. That is why the contribution of SC women to the economic development of India is significant especially in the agricultural sector. But they are exploited by the higher caste landlords. They are paid very marginal salary for the hard work in the field for the whole day. In leather industries the tanning process is considered to be an unclean job which is done only by socially backward class. The condition of scavenger and sweepers is very deplorable and they remain the most vulnerable sectors among SC. The working condition is very poor and the remuneration is also very poor.

**Family role:**

Because of the girls remain uneducated, they got married very early. Marriage in the high reproductive stage with high fertility rate, children care more. Because of the unlimited family, the burden fell on the young girls which affected their health. They were not able to assist in family matters to their husbands. But now the situation is different. The girls manage to plan their family, educate the children, assist the husbands in family matters and office going and professional girls improve the economic conditions. On the whole the family becomes socially developed because of the education of the girls. Education among women increased intercaste marriages, which is definitely a sign of development. Government also encourages inter-caste marriages among dalits and high caste by incentives. Untouchability practices are acute in villages. However, there is a gradual change in rural areas because they have become aware of their rights.

**Dalit Women are facing -**

- Gender discrimination – patriarchy
- Social /caste discrimination - untouchability
- Violence - domestic, at work place and in society
- economic deprivation – poverty, unemployment, landlessness
- Political powerlessness – non acceptance and participation in decision making
- Dalit Women also have a limited access to livelihood, food, water, sanitation and other welfare program

### **Improvement of Dalit women and Leadership Programme**

All India Dalit MahilaAdhikarManch (AIDMAM) is a movement initiated and promoted by NCDHR (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights) at the national level to focus exclusively on Dalit women. Its genesis is rooted in an attempt to address severe vulnerabilities faced by the 80 million Dalit women and girls who are socially excluded and lie at the bottom of India's caste, class and gender hierarchies.

AIDMAM initiated the programme in September 2009 with the primary intention of strengthening Dalit women elected representatives in the Panchayats of five states of Northern India. The aim is to enable these women to be aware of their rights and responsibilities in the areas of addressing violence against women and ensuring more effective allocation, planning and utilization of Panchayat funds. Beginning from the orientation workshop to the insights into Panchayati Raj and the specific role of women has been remarkable. Each Dalit woman in the Panchayat faces a unique set of challenges which are specific to her own context. AIDMAM firmly believes that the Panchayati Raj Institutions have for the first time, mandated space for Dalit women in local decision making process. This is a very significant step, however without the required support and capacity, this powerful tool is completely decimated. The casteist and patriarchal society only continue the cycle of oppression in different ways.

In the past few months of engagement on the issues pertaining to Dalit women in Panchayats, AIDMAM have come across some stories of amazing grit and courage as well as those of sheer helplessness and ignorance. But in each of the women that AIDMAM has engaged with, we can feel a strong sense of commitment and willingness to break the traditional shackles and grasp the reins of power. What the women are looking for is information, solidarity and support from the community and civil society groups. Given

this, the Dalit women have displayed the potential of making changes possible within the Panchayats.

#### Overall objectives of the programme

- Equip Dalit Women Sarpanches to engage and advocate for better policy implementation in addressing violence against Dalit Women and access to justice
- Study and document the constraints and barriers and Dalit Women Sarpanches
- Enhance their capacity of DWS in six states in addressing violence on DW in their districts
- Promote a State level network of DWS
- Advocacy work with state for more effective participation of DWS in PR

#### Tasks

- Study the impediments of Dalit Women Sarpanches in addressing the violence against Dalit women
- State level consultations with Dalit Women Sarpanches and Civil society organizations.
- Strengthen DWS and CSO's in addressing violence
- Capacity development of DWS and CSO's
- Handbook
- Fact finding of cases, follow up, report preparation
- Advocacy
- Coordination at the State and National levels
- and meeting reports

#### Intended impacts of the project on the target group/beneficiaries

- DWS will recognize the need for addressing critical issues associated with the rights violations and development of Dalit community and Dalit women in particular.
- Skills of DWS, social activists and academic will be increased in monitoring of penal and pecuniary justice.
- DWS will be in position to represent the cases to concerned officials and members of state and district monitoring and vigilance committees
- The results, impacts of the project will be shared in the wider human rights environment, which will support, strengthen human rights efforts at different levels.

- AIDMAM aims to support and strengthen Dalit women to address violence and access justice and rights through networking, enhancing skills and leadership at district and state level.
- AIDMAM's objective is to Empower Dalit Women to challenge against Caste, Class and Patriarchal Norms. Support Dalit Women to liberate Dalit Women from their multi-dimensional issues.

#### **Policy & Women Empowerment:**

Gender equality and women empowerment are the buzzwords, entrusted with different interpretations to suit varied socio-political perspectives. The rhetoric of gender equity and women's empowerment has acquired an important place in government policy, non-governmental advocacy, media and academic research. The terms, women empowerment and gender equality determine the direction of diverse discourses on women, locally, nationally, internationally. The action plan, as recommended by International Conference on Population and Development at Cairo (1992) included<sup>13</sup>: (i) establishing mechanism for women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process; (ii) promoting the fulfillment of women's potentials through education, skills development and employment, giving paramount importance to the elimination of poverty, illiteracy and ill-health among women; (iii) eliminating all practices that discriminate amongst women and assisting them to establish and realize their rights; (iv) adopting measures to improve women's ability to earn income beyond traditional occupations, achieve economic self-reliance and ensure their equal access to the labour market and social security systems; (v) eliminating violence against women; (vi) eliminating discriminatory practices by employers against women; (vii) making it possible through laws, regulations and other appropriate measures for women to combine the roles of child-bearing, breast-feeding, and child-rearing with participation in the workforce; (viii) strengthening policies and programmes that improve, ensure and broaden the participation of women in all spheres of life as equal partners and improve their access to all resources needed for the full exercise of their fundamental rights. The Beijing Conference (1995) was the first significant milestone in the journey towards ensuring gender equality and women empowerment. The goals of the Conference were; (i) sharing power equally; (ii) obtaining full access to the means of development; (iii) overcoming

poverty; (iv) promoting peace and protecting women's rights; (v) inspiring a new generation of women to work together for equality and equity.

Economic empowerment is a necessary condition for enabling women to seek justice and equality. Without economic strength, women cannot be able to exercise their guaranteed rights. It is, therefore, necessary to seek participation of women as equal partners with men in all fields of work, equal access to all positions of employment, equal opportunities for work related training and full protection of women at work place. Economic empowerment of women, including reduction of female poverty require programmes that focus on identifying, developing and promoting alternative approaches to increase women's access to and control over the means of making a living on a sustainable and long term basis (Srivastava, 2001). It necessitates supporting their existing livelihood, widening choices and building capacity to take advantage of new economic opportunities. Its strategies to advocate that the government undertakes legislative measures to speed up women's participation in economic life, including the right of equality in property ownership and inheritance and access to credit, financial service and assistance in entrepreneurial development. The basic requirements of women's empowerment strategy are; (i) introduction of special measures to increase the proportion of women involved in decision making; (ii) establishment of specific training programmes, especially for women living in extreme poverty, to improve their condition; (iii) creation of equal employment opportunities for educationally, technically and professionally qualified women by dismantling the forbidding walls of silent discrimination in their recruitment and related process; (iv) encouragement to women's entrepreneurship and other self-reliant activities, particularly in the informal sector; (v) integration of gender perspective into all economic structuring; (vi) elimination of all forms of discrimination in employment, including wages and breaking down of gender based occupational segregation; (vii) initiation of measures to improve working conditions of women in the informal sector, particularly, by encouraging them to organize so that they know their rights and are able to obtain necessary support to exercise them; (viii) mobilization of banking sector to increase lending on easier terms to women entrepreneurs and producers, especially in the rural areas; and (ix) activation of enforcement machinery to ensure that the interest of women workers are protected, especially in the informal sector where large scale discrimination persists.

The gender dimension on the development approaches at conceptual level came from uncovering several distinct areas of gender bias. Their subordinate status meant development benefits; be it education, health, income, employment did not rest them in same measure as men. All pervasive sexual division of labour that assigned the task of family maintenance and child care to women meant their inability to participation in many activities outside the home, whether social, economic or political (Krishnaraj, 1996). July, 1946, the All India Women's Conference adopted an Indian Women's Charter of Rights that demanded full civil, legal rights, equal opportunities in education, employment, policies etc. In 1947, the National Planning Committee, set up in 1939 by the Indian National Congress, had constituted a special women's committee which submitted its report on 'women's role in a planned economy', their rights and development. Importantly, in 1974, report of the committee on the status of women reiterated many earlier demands with emphasis on the poor, the unorganized and rural women. Its most significant contribution was the extensive documentation of the conditions of women, which had deteriorated in the three decades after independence. Similarly, various UN documents, resolutions, conventions especially Beijing Conference (1995), also gave pre-eminence to state action to enforce and monitor women's rights by establishing a special national machinery for women. A comprehensive plan for women was formulated by the Department of Women & Child Development, called 'The Perspective Plan For women 1988-2000'. A National Commission for Women was established with a view to ensure women's rights and entitlements. From 19th century, the role of the state in defining and influencing the status of women has informed many struggles for their equality. The state, its policies and programmes continue to be the focus of much of the energies of the women's movement in post-independence India as well. From 1970's, the women's movement has tried to establish an autonomous identity for itself and attempted to bring about changes through the process of influencing and pressurizing the state and its structures (Jandhyala, 2001).

The trends in planning in India show that in the first Five Year Plan, most of whose members had liberal education and also participated in the national struggle for independence wanted to give women the rights of self centralization to the fullest extent. They laid down very progressive parameters of higher education, the need for women to

get employment and to function in a protected labour environment. The Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth plans carried forward on the same strategies. It was only in the mid seventies, in preparation to celebrate the International Women's Year in 1975 that a committee to survey the status of women was set up 1971. From the Sixth Plan onwards, a new exercise in planning stressed on women development and Department of Women & Child Development, GOI was set up in 1985 with a separate minister in-charge. National Commission for Women, a National Crèche Fund, a National Credit Fund, a National Women's Fund, MahilaSamridhiYojana and Indira MahilaVikasYojana were set up. This acted as an effective nodal unit for monitoring activities relating to women's development in various ministries of the government and taken for review and its recommendations.

The strategy for women's development has been multi-dimension and multi-sectoral. Although many schemes have been made for women in different ministries and departments, the agencies for executing them have been the same and they give women a certain consideration. Since 1980's, there has been an effort to give women an integrated approach and to provide health, family welfare, non-formal education and create awareness of their rights and skill training at the same time. Several states have launched the projects for women empowerment, development and welfare. These projects are financially supported by foreign agencies, and implemented with the vital role of NGO's and voluntary sector. Importantly, women empowerment programmes emphasize on SHG's formation, its stabilization and linking with viable micro enterprises.

While formulating the First Five year plan (1951-56), it was envisaged that the programmes under various sectors of development would benefit all sections of the population including SC's, ST's, OBC's and minorities. But, unfortunately, it never happened. Therefore, special programmes under Backward classes sector were formulated keeping in view the special requirements of SC's, ST's and OBC's. The second Five year Plan (1956-61) promised to ensure that the benefits of economic development accrue more and more to the relatively less privileged classes of society in order to reduce inequalities. The Third Five Year Plan (1961-66) advocated the principles to establish greater equality of opportunity and to reduce disparity in income and wealth. The Fourth and Fifth Five Year Plan (1969-78) envisaged basic goal as rapid increase in the standard of living of the people through measures, which also promote equality and social justice. The Sixth Five

Year Plan (1980-85) marked a shift in the approach to the development of Scheduled Castes. The Special Component Plan (SCP) launched for the Scheduled Castes expected to facilitate easy convergence and pooling of resources from all the other development sectors in proportion to the population of SC's. In the Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90), SCP for SC's was strengthened, while the other schemes for the welfare and development of SC's continued. There was substantial increase in the flow of funds for development of SC's under SCP from state plans, Central Plans, Special Cultural Assistance and Institutional Finances resulting in the expansion of infrastructure facilities and enlargement of their coverage. Priority in the Plan was given to the educational development of SC's. In the Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97) national level apex bodies have been set up to act as catalytic agents in development schemes for employment generation and financing pilot projects. The Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) envisaged the empowerment of socially disadvantaged groups as agents of socio-economic change and development through creating an enabling environments conducive for the SC's, OBC's and minorities. The Plan has adopted three pronged strategy of (i) social empowerment; (ii) economic empowerment; and (iii) social justice. The nationwide popular scheme of Post-Matric scholarships (PMS) for SC students after its revision in 1997-98 extends its scope for enhancing the income limit of parents of the beneficiaries and for extending some additional benefits to persons with disabilities amongst SC's. Scholarships are given to eligible SC students, which include provisions of maintenance allowance, reimbursement of compulsory non-refundable fees, thesis typing/ printing charges, study tour charges, book allowance for students pursuing correspondence courses etc. The scheme of Pre-matric scholarship for the children of those engaged in unclean occupations introduced in 1977-78 aims at motivating the children of scavengers, sweepers, flayers and tanners to pursue education and also for controlling school drop outs amongst them thereby weaning them away from the obnoxious practice of scavenging. The scheme of hostels for SC boys and girls launched in 1961-62 provides hostel facilities to students studying in middle secondary and higher secondary schools, colleges and universities. Under the scheme, central assistance is provided to states and UT's including universities and NGO's, for construction of new hostels and also for extension of existing hostel buildings for SC students. However, the maintenance cost of these hostels is to be borne by the state/UT's.

The scheme of Special Education Development Programme for Scheduled Castes Girls belonging to Very Low Literacy Districts introduced during 1996-97 aims at establishing special residential schools for SC girls who are first generation learners in low literacy pockets where the traditions and environment are not conducive to learning. The scheme covers 48 districts of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh where the literacy of SC girls was less than 2 percent in 1981 census. Book Bank scheme for SC students launched in 1978-79 aims to supply text-books to SC students for pursuing Medical, Engineering, Veterinary, Agriculture, Polytechnic, CA, MBA, Bio Sciences and Law Courses. Similarly, the scheme of upgradation of merit of SC students launched in 1987-88 aims to provide remedial and special coaching to SC students studying in Classes IX to XIII. While the remedial coaching aims at removing deficiencies in school subjects amongst the SC students, special coaching aims at preparing them for competitive examinations for entry into professional courses like medical, engineering etc. Importantly, the coaching and Allied scheme for SC/ST students was launched in 1960-61 for improving the knowledge and attitude by providing special coaching through Pre-Examination Training Centre and thus for preparing them to compete with others in the competitive examinations.

The economic empowerment schemes for SC's include: (i) Revitalize the National Scheduled Castes Finance & Development Corporation (NSFDC) and National SafaiKarmachari Finance Development Corporation (NSKFDC) to play an effective catalytic role in promoting employment, income generation activities with both backward and forward linkages; (ii) Special efforts through various training programmes to upgrade the traditional skills, equip them with modern technology so as to meet the market demands; (iii) enforce special legislative measures to ensure payment of minimum wages and equal wages, with no gender discrimination in the informal or unorganized sector; (iv) motivate the Private and the Corporate sectors to invest in the welfare and development of the weaker sections as they form a potential force in country's human resources; (v) endow every landless SC family with a minimum piece of land; restoration of land ownership and effective implementation of protective legislation; (vi) involve NGO's in promotion of small and lift irrigation projects, especially in the drought prone, dry and hilly areas to ensure food security at the village level; (vii) sensitize the financial institutional to pay special loans

on differential rate of interests. Besides, certain allocation has been fixed in the general programmes of economic development, which include Jawahar Gram SamridhiYojana, SwarnJayanti Gram SwarojgarYojana, Indira Awas Yojana, Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme, Central Rural Sanitation Programme, SwarnaJayantiSahariRojgarYojana etc. being the most powerful instruments to ensure social justice to socially disadvantaged groups, efforts were being directed to this end with much more vigour and force during the Ninth Plan. Further implementation of the reservation policy in and in services for SC's is being strictly observed to fill up all the reserved vacancies promptly. Besides, legal measures have been resorted to for the protect or the interests of SC's.

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