

# DALIT WOMEN IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

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## **“Dalit widows, being of lower caste why do you dare to enter into the temples?”**

This bitter statement which drives a sharp nail into the heart of humanity is not an imaginary quotation, but is an abuse by the so-called upper caste people to the lower and this has been a tradition for a long time even though all these people belong to the same religion, HINDUISM.

The above mentioned statement is an example of a village called Kottar of Godawari VDC, which is very close to the capital city, Kathmandu. Always these people have tolerated such inhuman behavior by the upper caste peoples while going to the temple. So called Dalits (called untouchable in our society) have been facing the same sort of problem everywhere and every moment of their life through out the country, Nepal.

There may be discrimination on the basis of religion, colour, financial status, etc. in some parts of the world, but in Hindu religion people are said to be touchable or untouchable castes by their birth. In this religion their caste is determined by their traditional occupation. This of course is the eighth wonder of the world.

The Hindu religion has divided people into four different groups such as Brahmin(the superior), Chhetri(the warrior), Baishya (the businessmen) and Sudra (the physical worker/labour). Most of the people belonging to Sudra category are called untouchables. The origination of this concept is supposed to have been approximately in 1200 BC according to one of the Hindu scriptures Rik Beda. There has not been any evidence of existence of caste prior to that period. Later on the division into groups developed on the basis of their work. In the very beginning there was also a provision for Sudra to become a Brahmin by his intelligence and wisdom. No Hindu scriptures indicate the existence of the group system before the inception of Rik Beda.

In the very beginning all men and women were eligible to read the religious book, Beda. During the course of time rules were changed gradually and people of specific groups used to be trained in particular fields in the name of skill development. Brahmin involved in studies and writing literature, philosophy, religious books, etc. which promoted and more firmly established their higher status. Some historical books express the view that people who were defeated in the war were assumed to have been Sudra and were treated as slaves. In the later period the physical workers of the Hindu religion were converted to Sudra due to the exploitation of Brahmins. After the victory of hardness over softness not only the Sudra but also the women were treated as poor, powerless/helpless and hated. This kind of tradition was developed and institutionalised by religious bigots. Many laws were formulated by the state to prevent Dalit and women from protesting against the autocratic patriarchal society. Similarly many philosophies and much literature were introduced in favor of them.

Manu who is supposed to have been a key person in developing the Hindu religion, has said that the Sudra who offers his life, property and wife to the Brahmin becomes touchable and those who do not remain untouchable.

The father of Hindu literature Mr. Kali Das compares the Dalit and women with animals. All so called intellectuals have done very much to exploit Sudra and women. The greatest poet of Nepal Late Bhanu Bhakta has expressed his view that women should stay within the boundary of the house and those who go outside and laugh with others are prostitutes. In this way Dalit and women were oppressed by each and every sector of the society, to fulfill the selfish desire of the Master. Women were not treated as badly as the slaves but were deprived of property rights and were compelled to be dependent on males, and labeled as a reproductive machine.

As it is said that the servant follows his master, so the Dalit also started to exploit Dalit women as others did. As a result Dalit women were compelled to bear the double exploitation by their own males and the males and females of so-called upper castes. This paper will therefore, focus on the real condition of Dalit women in this context.

### **CONDITION OF DALIT AND WOMEN IN NEPAL:**

In the early days there was neither racial nor gender discrimination, since all citizens were from Mongol community. Women and workers were highly respected in that society. Later on the Lichchhibi Aryan entered Nepal to escape from the neighboring country, India due to the attack of the Mugal regime. They were Hindus and slowly tried to introduce Hindu religion by dominating the original Nepalese people. This has been mentioned in the Lichchhibi period history of Nepal. At that time the Kathmandu valley inhabitants were divided into four groups and eighteen castes. Since the Mongol inhabitants were Buddhists it was difficult for Hindus to adopt their religion. In 14th century then king Jayasthiti Malla became successful in implementing the group system in the Kathmandu valley. He divided the people into four groups (called Varnas) and sixty castes. In this way he succeeded in planting the seed of castesim in Nepal. Gradually Hindu religion became a strong base for the rulers of the country. As a result of this, the exploitation of Dalit and women became more severe.

The condition of Sudra (Dalit) and women in the Rana regime was also miserable, since the ruling mechanism was mainly based on Manu Smriti (introduced by above mentioned person Manu). To suppress women and Dalit, more and more strong laws were formulated. The civil act called "Muluki Ain" of 1853 is an example of this fact. Despite strong rules and regulations the rulers used Dalit women as a means of enjoyment during this period. Bir Shamsar, the then Rana ruler, married a Kau (called untouchable) caste woman and announced that this caste was touchable. This is a good example of the so-called head man who labels the people as touchable or untouchables on the basis of the use of Dalit women.

The revolution of 1951 also did not bring any change in the condition of Dalits and women. The complex and unfair social structure remained the same. The political change obviously brought political freedom, but there was almost no influence on the socially deteriorated mentality of the people. No amendment in the law was enforced by the government. This made the situation worse even at the time of the advent of democracy. Later on in 1963 with the introduction of Panchayat regime King Mahendra dismissed the 1853 act and formulated a new act which was comparatively more progressive. The main theme was that no discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender and class will be legally acceptable. This of course opened up a new dimension on the legal aspect, but could not establish a strong enough base to break the complex social structure of the nation. The government did not pay

attention to the practical implementation. As a result, the inhuman tradition remained as it is. The lack of provision of punishment for the violation of this law has been a main drawback of this act.

Even after the restoration of democracy in 1990, no significant change in the racial discrimination has been observed due to the lack of practical enforcement of the prevailing laws by the government, even though the constitution expresses the view that there will be no discrimination on the ground of race, religion, gender and class. Some small efforts have been made by Dalit and women themselves during this period for the upliftment of the situation. Some legal disparities also still exist in the law. Due to the dependency of the government on the so-called social norms and values of Hindu religion, approximately one fifth of the population of the country have been cut off from the whole process of national development and are deprived from the benefit as well.

As the condition of women (50% in population) and Dalit (20% in population) is miserable, one can easily imagine the condition of Dalit women who are exploited by their own males and males and females of so-called higher castes.

## **WHO ARE DALIT WOMEN ?**

As I mentioned earlier, even if the constitution of Nepal does not legally permit racial discrimination, no one can deny its existence in real life. It is a matter of misfortune to Dalit that even after the restoration of democracy there has not been any significant change in the social and economic structure of the country. Basically, in the Hindu religion people are divided into two categories i.e. touchable and untouchable. Untouchable are Kami, Damai, Sarki, Poda, Kusule, Badi, Gaene, Chamar, Dusadh, Dhobi, etc. more than fifty castes. These untouchable castes are called Dalits. Half of the Dalit are women. Therefore, the women within Dalit living in the lowermost social status are Dalit women.

## **PRESENT SITUATION OF DALIT WOMEN:**

There is a need for a relief program from the government for the suffering of Dalit women as a compensation for the age old feudatory exploitation. But in the government plan there is no special program for them. Very few programs have been launched for women in general and these are meaningless for the Dalit women as they do not have accessibility. No special programs have been launched by NGOs and INGOS either. We are grateful to Save the Children USA for the scholarship program to Dalit in fifteen districts of the country and a BELE project as well. Apart from these no special attention has been paid to implement other programs. I would like to briefly explain the situation of the Dalit women who are neglected from each and every sector of the society hereunder.

### **1. EDUCATIONAL CONDITION:**

It is obvious that education provides a vast store of knowledge and wisdom. It not only makes a person aware but also opens the door of possibility. It helps in promoting the skills, ideas and feelings of human beings. Therefore, the development of society in a country

entirely depends on the extent of the education it is providing. The developed countries can be taken as an example in this context.

The educational situation of Dalit is very poor, since they have been deprived of the bright rays of education in the past and even at present. In the Rana regime there was little chance of getting education for others, let alone for Dalit. As the Dalit were deprived of education, one can easily imagine the status of Dalit women. This was obviously a kind of day dreaming for them. At that period, Dalit were strictly prohibited from education.

Even after the dawn of democracy in 1951 no significant change in the educational sector for Dalit was observed. The rules and social structure itself are completely responsible to prevent Dalit from gaining education. The main factors were the existence of 1853 civil act and the influence of Brahmins on state affairs. In a community where males do not have access to education, education for women is impossible. This of course is the fault of the state itself. In the civil act of 1963, racial equality has been addressed but nothing special was brought in regard to the education of Dalit. During the Panchayat regime very few Dalit were able to gain education by their own effort but were harassed due to their jobless situation. Can a girl have an opportunity for education within this situation? In the situation where the government do not have a record of the actual population of Dalit, how one can find the literacy rate of that community? I therefore, strongly recommend the government that a population census program, particularly for Dalit should be implemented immediately. According to the survey done by Save the Children USA in five different districts recently, the literacy rate of Dalit was found to be 10.6%, which is quite low in comparison to the national average of 40%. In case of Dalit women it was 3.2% whereas the rate is 24% for all women of Nepal. Only 1.9% are studying in Secondary school and 0.2% in higher secondary schools. The survey also presents that in 22 communities there are 1022 families, in which 3258 men and 3314 women, of whom 10 women have passed SLC (10th class) and only two have passed intermediate.

The above statistics show that the educational status of Dalit women has not changed even after the restoration of democracy in 1990. In our working area, called Godamchaur and Godawari of Lalitpur district, only two women have passed SLC. There are altogether 1000 people in these villages, which are close to the capital and have schools nearby. If the situation near the city area is like this, imagine the situation in the villages where it takes one to two hours walking to get to school. The inhuman social structure and the poor economic condition are the main hindrances for Dalit women's education.

## **2. SOCIAL CONDITION:**

As all are aware, Nepal has already signed the UNO convention promising that no kind of racial discrimination will be entertained in any country in the world. Legally there is equality after the amendment of the civil act of Nepal, but the real situation has not been changed significantly. According to the same survey by SCF (USA) more than 81% of Dalit agree on the continued existence of the racial discrimination even now. The people from town areas felt that the concept has been changing gradually. It is my experience that even in the city areas Dalit are not allowed to rent houses easily and similar constraints apply for jobs. There has been a tradition from so-called upper caste people psychologically discourage Dalit workers. In such a tragic situation no one can claim that there is equality. Obviously in the places where people are more educated and have migrated from outside, the discrimination

seems to be less. The problems such as cleaning the pots after having food in the hotels and restaurants, prohibition to enter into the temples and to open a food industry, etc. still prevail even in the city areas. One can imagine the situation in the village where people are more illiterate, ignorant and conservative. This is the real situation Dalit and Dalit women in Nepal at present.

It would be fair to say that the whole Dalit community has been boycotted by the society. Because of the low level of thinking of the males of their own community, the ultimate sufferers of this painful tradition are the Dalit women. The males used to spend the major part of their income in drinking alcohol, playing cards, etc., which creates misunderstanding between husband and wife. They become wild in addiction of alcohol and beat their wives. Therefore, most of the Dalit women are the victim of the domestic violence.

Dalit are not allowed to fetch water from the same tap or well, as the superior caste people use. It is assumed that if the lower caste people touch the tap or well, it becomes impure and becomes unusable to them. Because of the concept of untouchability, there is a big problem in health and sanitation for Dalit. In some parts of the country they are not allowed to touch the water pipeline either. In our working area the Brahmin have not allowed Dalit to connect the pipeline from the Brahmin village, because it will be touched by Dalit if they do so. As a result of this kind of bad concept the Dalit women are compelled to fetch water from the small pond which is down below the village and it takes two to three hours to come back with water. This of course is an example of extreme discrimination in the society.

In addition to the above, the Dalit women are also victimised from inter-caste marriages. The society has not accepted this kind of system. The case becomes more severe when the girl is from lower caste. The result has shown that very few marriages have been successful. To make the marriage successful the boy has to leave his family and be separated.

The virtual wall of inequality created between the people of the same country and religion has badly damaged the society itself. One is forced to accept the inhuman behavior of the other silently. This is not only a big tragedy but also a violation of human rights.

### **3. ECONOMIC CONDITION:**

According to Manu Dalit are not supposed to have their own property, they have to eat from earthen-pots and live under a thatched roof. In the society where males are also deprived of the property right, it is natural for the women to be economically poorest among the poor.

As you all know Nepal is an agricultural country and the main source of income of it's people is the production from the land. But Dalit own much less land and they can hardly sustain themselves for two months from the production. According to the same survey by SCF (USA) the status of the land ownership of Dalit community is as below.

Landless	-	21%
< 5 Ropani	-	39%
Up to 10 Ropani	-	14%
11 - 20 Ropani	-	12%
> 21 Ropani	-	9%

From the above figures, if we assume the people having more than 10 Ropani of land can survive on it's production, then 70% of people have to depend on other source of income. People having less than five Ropani of land have to completely depend on other sources. These data reveals that if the whole Dalit community is suffering from the deficiency and poverty, the Dalit women can not be put aside. They have to contribute physical labour for their existence. Due to the lack of land and education they have to depend on the lowest level of work. There is also inequality of wages. Since they are not allowed to do other kinds of business because of caste, they are compelled to do jobs like cleaning pots/streets, working as a porter and so on. To work as a slave has been the culture of this community. Dalit are suffering from extreme economic exploitation, and the women having no property right have been suffering twice over.

#### **4. SEXUAL EXPLOITATION:**

This is one of the biggest problems of Dalit women. Because of poverty, ignorance and lack of education, many among those women who are spending their lives as prostitutes in different cities of India and Nepal are from Dalit community. The news published in different papers from time to time is the evidence of the fact. Religious and anti-social tradition have been the main reason for this problem. The women from Badi community can be taken as an example. They are traditionally dependent on earning from prostitution for their livelihood. The historical fact proves that the so-called upper caste people used to use these women for their sexual satisfaction. Moreover, most of the women working in hotels, government offices, industries, private organisations, etc. have been victimised by the bad conduct of their male bosses and seniors. This problem is more severe in city areas than villages, where so called intellectual people live. In villages the landlords rape Dalit women by threatening them. No one has paid attention to this serious problem till now.

#### **5. HEALTH PROBLEM:**

Due to poverty and ignorance the health situation of Dalit is very poor. Child as well as adult mortality rate is high in comparison to other castes. According to the survey done by CARE Nepal, the average life expectancy of the caste Mushar (one of the Dalit castes) is 42 years. Thousands of children die each year due to malnutrition. The main reasons are as below;

- Unreliable source of income
- lack of education
- Lack of health and environmental education
- lack of knowledge of proper utilization of resources
- Government's negligence

Generally, no drinking water facility has been provided to these communities and the existing nearby source are also not maintained properly. Due to the lack of knowledge of family planning, women of this community are bound to give birth almost each year. This has not only caused deterioration on health of Dalit women but also has added an additional burden of population growth to the nation itself.

In Nepal, women do more physical work than men. The compulsion of giving birth every year and working hard for their livelihood have obviously led to shorter life span. One the basis of the survey done by the Action Aid Nepal a few years ago in Sindhupalchowk district, about 90% of Dalit women have been suffering from **Prolapsed Uterus**. Since no proper documentation has been done by the government or by the NGOs so far, it is very difficult to present the real health condition of the Dalit community. Therefore, this of course has been a subject matter of research.

## **CONCLUSION:**

If we try to see Dalit women within the socio-economic context there are many factors forcing them to lag behind. The main reason is the state dominated by the influence of Brahmins. As a result of negligence of the government the situation has been worsened day by day for a long time. In the situation where the whole Dalit community is being deprived of it's human rights, it seems that to be exploited by others and be neglected in the society is the fortune of Dalit women in general. It is obvious that they themselves are not the cause of this problem. This of course is the defect of the economic, political and social structure of the country and it's ruler. But the anti-social activities like racial and gender discrimination should not be tolerated silently by the community. Solution of the problem should be explored as soon as possible by the concerned authority with a high level of commitment, otherwise the situation may go out of control. To open the way to a solution Dalit and Dalit women should be organised and united in order to fight against the age old discrimination of all kinds.

## **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:**

I would like to present some suggestions below. These are my own, may not be enough and others may add to these. The following three sectors should be more active for the upliftment of the Dalit women.

- The government
- The community
- The NGOs

### **Work to be done by the government**

- a) A special program should be launched by the government as a compensation for the age old discrimination of all kinds.
- b) Compulsory education should be introduced and scholarships should be granted from primary to high school education.
- c) Strong laws should be formulated to eradicate the concept of untouchability.
- d) Unequal and contradictory laws should be dismissed.
- e) Dishonorable words to any caste should be omitted from laws and acts.
- f) The degradable proverbs and words used in the literature and curriculum should be banned.
- g) Human rights education should be made compulsory right from primary education.

- h) Legal provision should be made to provide equal property right to women as to men.
- i) A fixed number of seats in the government or non government jobs should be reserved for Dalit women who are equally qualified and competent as others.
- j) Special laws should be formulated to provide for protection and compensation in the case of divorce made due to caste reasons.
- k) For the time being, at least 1% of seats to be for Dalit women from the seats in the parliament.
- l) Dalit women should have first priority in the skill development and income generating programs launched by any organisation.
- m) The books giving dishonor to women such as Badhu Shichhya (bride education), Manu Smriti, etc. should be prohibited in the society.
- n) Dalit should be encouraged and protected to open hotels, restaurants, shops, etc.
- o) Awareness programs should be broadcast through the mass media.
- p) Women involved in prostitution should be motivated and reestablished in the society with due respect.
- q) There should be representatives from Dalit women in the Human Rights commission which is said to be formed in the future.
- r) Such an environment should be created that all people feel respected as human beings irrespective of the nature of their job or work.
- s) Strong laws should be formulated with practical implementation to improve the unequal wage system.
- t) Since no actual population is known, the government should immediately implement a population census program focusing on Dalit communities.
- u) A detailed study and research program should be carried out to trace out the actual life standard of the Dalit women.
- v) Women having interest in inter-caste marriage should be encouraged and protected to minimise the existing defect of the society.

#### **Work to be done by the community**

- a) Dalit women should be given the chance to be involved in the main stream of Dalit movement.
- b) For the recognition of the problem at a national and international level Dalit women should unite and organise seminars, workshops, etc. by themselves.
- c) Since Dalit women are prevented from getting an education, they should be more active and should take initiative in creating awareness among the community.
- d) To be more conscious and self dependent, literacy and income generating programs should be organised by the community level.
- e) As said by Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the great leader of India, “be educated, organised and do struggle”, Dalit should be united for achieving the goal otherwise the change will just be a “Castle in the Air”.
- f) A good network should be established with government and non governmental organisation for the quick circulation of information.
- g) Dalit should also broaden their vision of the status of women and should develop the concept of equality in the society.

#### **Work to be done by the NGOs and INGOS**



- a) I do not think that the program launched by different NGOs and INGOS have reached to the targeted groups or communities. Some organisations may be in exception. In fact, almost no program has been launched particularly for the welfare of Dalit women till now. I therefore would like to suggest all NGOs and INGOS to review their programs so that the most disadvantaged group will benefit from the fruits of development.
- b) Dalit educated women, who are not able to gain experience due to the lack of opportunity, should be employed in appropriate positions to develop their career.
- c) Top priority should be given to Dalit and Dalit women in the programs launched by the different NGOs and INGOS.
- d) Pressure should be given to the government for the implementation of all international treaties and contracts in regard to human rights.
- e) There should be more participation of Dalit women in non-formal education and income generation programs.
- f) An intensive study and research program should be carried out about the over all condition of Dalit women.
- g) Dalit women should be encouraged in any plan program prepared by themselves for their upliftment.
- h) All human rights related organisation should be more active and should establish a network with Dalit organisations to raise the problem at national and international forum.
- i) All women-related NGOs should not hesitate to include the problems of Dalit women in their plans and programs and implement accordingly.

At the end, the above mentioned suggestions may be bitter to any one belonging to the society having feudatory structure, but these are the facts which need to be changed for the freedom of women and Dalits. The existing situation is against accepted human rights. At the same time the oppressed group should always remember that authority is not given freely. To achieve the goal extreme efforts have to be made and difficulties faced by the sufferer. Therefore, the need for today is to be organised and march forward with self-confidence for victory.

(Translated by M.B. Bishwakarma)

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