

DALIT WOMEN: The Triple Oppression of Dalit Women in Nepal

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Background

Nepal is a country characterised not only by biodiversity but also by socio-cultural diversity. Meanwhile, Nepalese political and social life is primarily dominated by the Hindu religion, which divides Hindu society into four varnas, namely, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Over a period of time, casteism developed a rigid hierarchical society with the purity and pollution of castes. In this manufactured caste hierarchy, Brahmins lie at the top, and Sudras, or Dalits, lie at the bottom of society.

The word dalit literally means "a person immersed in a swamp." Traditionally, Dalits have been treated inhumanely as "Untouchables." Although untouchability was abolished by the New National Code of Nepal in 1963, its practice still continues. The people belonging to this community are living in a swamp of illiteracy, exploitation, marginalisation, absolute poverty and, above all, caste discrimination. Dalit women, however, are triply oppressed: (1) oppressed by the so-called high caste people, which equally affects both male and female Dalits, (2) oppressed by the design of the Hindu patriarchal system and (3) oppressed by Dalit males.

It is estimated that the Dalit community constitutes 20 percent of the total population of the country, or four million people, and that the population of Dalit women is half of this figure, i.e., two million people. In general, Dalits are characterised as being illiterate, unemployed, landless, poor, ignorant, exploited, docile, unhygienic, dirty, sick and ignored by the rest of society. The Dalit community has lost its self-respect and dignity as a result of centuries of social discrimination, oppression, exploitation and suppression. Despite being marginalised, Dalits are skilled artisans. However, statistics have revealed that Dalits are far behind in the development process compared to other caste groups. Unlike other ethnic groups, Dalits are scattered throughout the country.

In today's context of the globalisation of women's issues, Nepalese women from different segments of society are also raising their voices against discrimination and exploitation. The government has already established the Women Development Ministry to monitor national and international women's issues, which can be viewed as a good initiative. Unfortunately, the Dalit women's issue has not been recognised yet as a national issue. In addition, the so-called "mainstream" women's movement, led by high caste women, ignore Dalit women and their concerns.

In general, the status of women in Nepal is very low, like in other South Asian countries. Among them though, Dalit women face the worst conditions and oppression. Dalit women are living a

history of pain, agony, sorrow, misconduct, maltreatment and suffering. They are not only the victim of gender discrimination but also the victim of casteism. Moreover, the lives of Dalit women are spiralling downward from bad to worse. There is no controversy among development planners and workers that there has been very little impact on raising the status of Dalit women from the development initiatives implemented thus far in Nepal.

The Condition of Dalit Women

The difficult lives of Dalit women are perhaps best revealed by studying the social, economic, educational, health and political conditions of Dalit women, which are outlined below.

Social Condition: Untouchability

Though outlawed since 1963 and made punishable by the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal in 1990, untouchability is still practised. Thus, Dalits are treated as socially untouchable even in a democracy. This can be observed around the periphery of the Kathmandu Valley and in the rural areas. Even in public places, such as schools, Dalit students face discrimination. The entire Dalit community is exploited and discriminated on the grounds of caste, but women, as noted earlier, are further victimised.

Untouchability related to women is practised in many ways that affect all Dalit women every day. For example, when Dalit women fetch water from public water taps, wells, etc., they suffer from mental as well as physical assaults. Moreover, by traditional cultural practise, women usually are the member of the family that worships in the temple; but in Nepal, Dalit women are not allowed to enter the temples nor are they allowed to enter the house of upper caste people.

Meanwhile, intercaste marriage is socially disapproved, and Dalit women are the principal victims of this system. If a girl from an upper caste family marries a lower caste boy, for instance, then she is accepted by the boy's family. However, when a marriage takes place between an upper caste boy and a lower caste girl, problems occur as she is not accepted by her husband's family. Subsequently, she is mentally and physically abused and abandoned in many cases.

Economic Condition: Exploitation

Most Dalits have their own traditional occupation, but they are economically exploited. It is estimated that more than 50 percent of the total population of the country lives below the absolute poverty line. Dalits, due to their history of discrimination, exploitation and abuse, constitute a large proportion of this number-approximately 90 percent of the total Dalit population of four million people. Since women have no economic power in the family, it clearly indicates the economic condition of Dalit women. These women have to work hard as labourers to earn a living, but they receive very little in return. Moreover, payment is mostly in kind, and their pay does not justify the intensity of the work. There is no doubt that Dalit women are more economically exploited than their upper caste women counterparts.

Education Condition: Illiteracy

The literacy rate of Dalit women is very low in comparison with high caste women. The present literacy rate of men is 66 percent, and the education rate for women is 30 percent. However, the literacy rate of the Dalit community is 16 percent; and for Dalit women, the literacy rate is only 7 percent. Among two million Dalit women, there are hardly 10 to 15 graduates and postgraduates. Ignorance, absolute poverty, caste and gender discrimination can be considered as the explanation for such statistics.

Health Condition: Lowest Life Expectancy

In Nepal, the life expectancy of women is lower than that of men (Nepal is one of the three countries in the world where women live less than men). Compared though to the so-called "upper caste people," the health condition of Dalits is very miserable. For example, a very backward Dalit caste-the Mushar of Terai -has a life span of 42 years against the national average of 55 years. Moreover, gynecological diseases, like a prolapsed uterus, are very common among Dalit women. They do not know much about birth control and spacing and become pregnant every year. Furthermore, because of illiteracy and ignorance, they live in filthy and unhygienic conditions which further deteriorates their health. The children of Dalits are also severely malnourished. As Dalits do not have easy access to clean drinking water in most places, they are compelled to drink polluted water and thus suffer from various gastrointestinal diseases. In this environment, both the mortality and fertility rates are high.

Political Condition: Non-Representation

Nepalese society is patriarchal, and the involvement of women in public life is not encouraged. This social prohibition applies to politics too. Thus, although Nepali women comprise 52 percent of the country's population, their representation in politics is among the lowest in Asia, i.e., as low as 5 percent. This is in spite of the 1990 Nepalese Constitution in which there is a mandatory provision that 5 percent of all candidates put forward by the country's national parties should be women. However, there were no mandatory rules for women to be represented in local government. In 1997 though, 5 percent of the seats were reserved for women in local government, and yet this rule cannot embrace Dalit women.

Dalits are about 20 percent of the total population, but Dalits are not represented in national-level politics. Presently, there are four nominated parliamentarians in the National Assembly, but there is none that have been elected to the Lower House of Parliament. If the representation of men is so negligible, then one can easily imagine the political participation of Dalit women.

Sexual Exploitation: Trafficking

Because of poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, Dalit women and young girls are compelled to be involved in prostitution. One of the Dalit castes-Badi-is regarded as the prostitute caste. In addition, there is the trafficking of girls. Most of the Dalit girls taken by the brokers are trafficked to Indian brothels. In addition, many women working in carpet factories, hotels and

government and private offices are sexually harassed and exploited. Because of the untouchability problem related to caste, Dalit women are deprived of the opportunity of working in the moneymaking professions, i.e., opening teashops and restaurants. Their time is spent on earning subsistence wages, and they do not have time to think about improving their condition.

Solutions

We feel very uncomfortable in reporting that very few efforts have been made by the government of Nepal to eradicate the problems of Dalits in general and of Dalit women in particular.

In recent years, particularly after the restoration of multiparty democracy, the women's movement has gained momentum with the emergence of many women's organisations and leaders. Unfortunately, none of these women's organisations have taken the issues and plight of two million Dalit women seriously. This is why we established an organisation dedicated to the rights and emancipation of Dalit women.

As mentioned above, there is a serious lack of consciousness among the entire Dalit community about their fundamental human rights. Therefore, they accept all forms of discrimination and exploitation as God's grace to them. Meanwhile, the outside world has been silent about caste exploitation and discrimination.

In recent years, we, a few educated Dalit women, have come forward to move the issue forward. We intend to influence the government, donor agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), enabling them to realise the harsh reality of Dalit women and to direct resources for the upliftment of these downtrodden women. We also plan to agitate at the local level against caste discrimination and violence and to join hands with other like-minded organisations.

The vast problems of Dalits and Dalit women cannot be solved through the efforts of one or two organisations though. Therefore, we strongly feel that all national forces should join hands together. In this spirit, we would like to offer the recommendations below.

- (1) Various programmes should be launched to uplift the living conditions of two million Dalit women.
- (2) Scholarships should be provided from primary to higher education to all Dalit girls.
- (3) The practice of untouchability in all public places, like schools, water sources and teashops, should be punished with immediate effect.
- (4) All laws and acts which discriminate against Dalits and Dalit women should be rescinded immediately, and a law should be formulated and enforced to discourage the practice of untouchability.

- (5) Intercaste marriage between Dalits and non-Dalits should be promoted and protected.
- (6) There should be reserved seats for Dalit women in appropriate constitutional bodies, and these seats should be reserved for Dalit women in elections from the local to the national level.
- (7) The government should abide by the U.N. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
- (8) Dalits and Dalit women should be represented in the National Human Rights Commission.
- (9) A separate commission at the national and the international level should be formed to identify the problems of Dalit women and to make recommendations to resolve these issues.

As for national and international NGOs, it is recommended that they consider the steps that follow.

- (1) A series of in-depth studies should be undertaken about Dalit women.
- (2) All NGOs should declare Dalits as one of their target groups of development and should formulate specific programmes to improve their lives.
- (3) All human rights organisations should network with Dalit organisations and expose the human rights problems of Dalit women at the national and international level.
- (4) The government of Nepal should be pressured to implement all of the U.N. conventions on human rights.
- (5) International NGOs especially should give priority to Dalits and Dalit women in employment and involve them in the formulation of plans and programmes for the Dalit community.

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