



DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW OF THEIR STATUS

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ABSTRACT

Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women. In a highly hierarchical society, women belonging to the lower castes have lesser access to public fore, which is compounded by their gender. The Dalits and the marginalized are still colonized by the feudal lords the Elites without freedom from caste discrimination. Indians have driven out the colonizers but not the one who are discriminating Dalits. For Dalit women, they are also coerced to be victimized in the patriarchy. Dalit women are bearing the burden of double day caste and sexual division of labor. Dalit women are demeaned and degraded and their body is a free terrain of colonization by men from other community. Dalit women are a deprived section and at the lowest level of economic and educational structures. They are poor, illiterate, sexually harassed, faces state, caste violence and exploited. Doubly, triply or multiply discriminated, Dalit women face a lot of struggles in daily bases otherwise just being overwhelmed with those surges of discrimination up to them. Without being struggling, Dalit women would be just left in despair.

KEY WORDS: Dalit, Inequality of status and freedom, Sexual Exploitation, Scheduled Castes, Untouchable.

INTRODUCTION

Society is the biggest reason behind problems faced by women, to move ahead it has to be left behind. ~Kundan Srivastava

Historically, oppression has been and continues to be a serious issue of concern in both developed and underdeveloped countries. The composition of Indian society, with its hierarchies and power structures, is an ideal place to better understand the experience of oppression and the lives of the exploited. In India the combined effects of the caste system, class inequality, and patriarchy result in the marginalization of more than half the population. Women throughout the established hierarchy and members of the lower castes and classes have historically carried the impact of oppression generated by the Indian social structure. A noteworthy hallmark of the caste system is its framework of social preference. In Indian society *Brahmans* are placed at the top of the social hierarchy and Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) are relegated to the bottom.

The untouchable population had been severely isolated throughout Indian chronicles, and Dalit female remain idly at the lowest ebb of their rank. Class, caste, and gender create a triple oppression for the Dalit female because women fall at the bottom of the gender hierarchy, the Dalit population is the lowest position one can hold in the caste structure. For example, the female Dalit is restricted from entering places of public worship in most Hindu villages. She is not allowed access to watering places, public charitable institutions, or many footpaths and roads. The Dalit female is restricted in terms of the use of fineries and jewelry and is not allowed admittance to hospitals, educational institutions, and public employment. They suffer from discrimination and prejudice at public places and institutions and are expected to perform low status jobs such as scavenging. Dalit women live in permanent tension. They live in permanent fear that they might be beaten or burnt or that something might happen to their husbands and children. The Dalit female has also been



subjected to violent atrocities that are acts of revenge for having tried to exercise their legitimate rights as dictated by the Indian Constitution. The Constitution of India acknowledges the existence of bigotry and untouchability and forbids such practices. The Constitution of India's chapter on Fundamental Rights is adamant in terms of endorsing parity. Article fourteen, in particular, disputes all categories of prejudice and articles fifteen and sixteen contest the subsistence of caste discrimination. Also, Article 17 is quite specific in terms of obligating to eradicate untouchability against Dalits.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, virtually two hundred million Dalits in India still suffer from sub-human conditions and this persists as a significant human rights matter. The Constitution of India has not been able to obstruct this practice, as Dalits continue to be deprived of the right to own land, the right to education and health care, and are constantly subjected to torture and degrading treatment. As reported by Dunn (1993), in many rural areas, ninety to ninety-nine percent of Dalit females are functionally illiterate. In addition, a number of studies cited by Dunn, have revealed that Dalit women compose a large portion of the prostitution population. As indicated by these data, untouchability and poverty tend to sustain each other. Despite the oppression experienced by Dalit individuals, they do not accept themselves as abject individuals. Dalits view themselves as an oppressed nationality. Dr. Ambedkar, known as the father of the Dalit Movement, coined a slogan, **"Educate, Unite, and Agitate"** This slogan represented Dr. Ambedkar's message to the Dalits of India. He tried to communicate the need for Dalit education in order to fully understand the predicament of the so-called fifth caste. The prolonged social struggle that burdened the Dalit population for centuries continues to filter into the day-to-day struggles of this population. Education, upward mobility, and opportunities that might be available for other levels within the social hierarchy of contemporary India are still inaccessible to this group. Today in India there are some organized groups that attempt to address the plight of the Dalit population through various programs designed specifically for this purpose. Day to day survival and lack of education in terms social awareness, precludes participation by the majority of Dalits. Change, when it has come to the Dalit population, has come slowly.

Out of the 1.21 billion population of the country it is estimated that the total population of Dalits is estimated that 20.14 crore of the total population belonging to various scheduled castes in the country. Except for a few, the total segment of this population leads a miserable life. Socially

discarded for a long period of time, they are compelled to live a vulnerable life, be it economic education health and all other areas that fall under basic needs. The word Dalit itself connotes the lowest strata of the society in all the aspects, a term which is condemnable itself. In this background the position of Dalit women is one of the lowest from all these aspects. They suffer multiple forms of discrimination – as Dalits, as poor, and as women. The caste system declares Dalit women to be intrinsically impure and 'untouchable', which sanctions social exclusion and exploitation. The position of women has always been a rather ambivalent one in our culture. A woman is a symbol of sacrifice and blossom of life. She prepares herself for life ahead and lives in a daze with an unexplained smile. One side, she was raised to the status of divinity and on the other side she was exploited in every aspect. There is invisibility and underestimation of women's economic contribution. Though they contribute nearly one third of India's GNP, it is undervalued and invisible. Yet she continues to be in a disadvantaged position. The problems of inequality of status and freedom, sexual harassment, Lack of economic independence, lack of health facility, lack of access to credit, training, decision making positions which prevent women to participate in formal and informal social organizations. Women, in many societies, are often restricted to the roles inside the house, those of wife and mother. While major changes have occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades, norms that restrict women to the home are still powerful in defining the activities that are deemed appropriate for women and they exclude political life, which by its very nature takes place in a public forum. Caste has played an instrumental role in raising issues related to the more marginalized among women. This exclusion makes it difficult for these women to represent and articulate the voices of their constituencies and their demands are often overlooked or subsumed by the dominant sections of the society. The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world, and make up 2% of the world's total population. Dalit women are discriminated against three times over: they are poor, they are women, and they are Dalits. Dalit women constitute half of the 200 million Dalit population, and 16.3 of the total Indian female population. The traditional taboos are the same for Dalit men and Dalit women. However, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. Dalit women also have less power within

the Dalit movement itself. Women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organizations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men. The vast majority of Dalit women are impoverished; they are landless wage laborers; and they lack access to basic resources. They are subjugated by patriarchal structures, both in the general community and within their own family. Violence and inhuman treatment, such as sexual assault, rape, and naked parading, serve as a social mechanism to maintain Dalit women's subordinate position in society. Human rights abuses against Dalit women are mostly committed with impunity.

In India, Dalits – officially known as Scheduled Castes – constitute one sixth of the population. They are consistently discriminated against despite a constitutional ban on 'untouchability', and the enactment of specific legislations including the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Of the country's almost 100 million Dalit women, approximately three fourths live in rural areas where they face systematic oppression, social exclusion, and direct and structural challenges from within their own community as well as from 'upper' castes.

MAIN CHALLENGES FOR DALIT WOMEN

1- Access to Key Productive Resources

In India, Dalit rural women face serious challenges in carrying out their multiple productive and reproductive roles within their families and communities, in part due to lack of rural infrastructure and lack of access to essential goods and services. Due to the intersection of caste, class and gender, Dalit women are subjected to direct and structural violence. Specifically, the structural violence and lack of access to resources perpetuate their poverty and undermine their dignity. Dalit rural women have very limited access to and control over land, which in turn leads to food insecurity. When it comes to infrastructure and resources in Dalit communities, the government often overlooks those areas and does not allocate the necessary funds to ensure equality of access to resources. Further, Dalit women lack employment options and other livelihood opportunities, more so than their male Dalit counterparts.

2- Illiteracy: Till some years ago, many dalit women were ill-treated and educationally backward in spite of the facilities for free education. Most dalit women are given a chance of finishing their education to the primary level. They are discouraged from getting married and raising a family when they are in age of 12-15 yrs. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among dalit women are many.

The following are the main reasons:

- a) Resistance from the family to send girls to schools.
- b) Fear of insecurity in villages.
- c) Lack of physical facilities like accommodation, school, transport and medical facilities.
- d) The girls were forced to take care of the siblings when the parents are away at work.
- e) Working to earn for the family prevent the girls from attending school.
- f) Because of the sick and unemployed parents girls were forced to work.
- g) Many were forced to get married at young age, which stop schooling.
- h) Social restriction is that the girls should stop education after marriage.
- i) In some areas there are complaints from dalit women teachers of misbehaviors, blackmail and exploitation by the male staff of other high caste people.
- j) Fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education are some of the other factors 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 many parents wish to withdraw the girls from schools.

3- Political Participation and Empowerment:

Dalit women are politically marginalized, but rural Dalit women are given even less of a voice in the decision making process. In India, there is a quota system in place for Dalits to have seats in the local panchayat (town assembly), but the role Dalit women play is consistently subordinated to their male counterparts. Dalit women who attempt to utilize their power in the panchayat are met with male and dominant caste backlash, pressure and sometimes violence. Many times Dalit women are told they are not even allowed to sit on a chair, but must take their place on the floor. In the

majority of instances a Dalit woman has no ability to exercise her voice in the panchayat because her husband represents her and makes the decisions while she is forced to stay at home until he can usurp the panchayat seat for himself.

4-Violence against Women, Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation:

Dalit women suffer both gender and caste-based violence. The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has noted that “Dalit women face targeted violence, even rape and murder, by the state actors and powerful members of the dominant castes used to inflict political lessons and crush dissent within the community.” Gender inequality sanctified by religious and cultural norms subordinates women and reinforces the patriarchal order, allowing for violence against them to be carried out within their own homes and communities as well. Dalit women face verbal, physical and sexual violence in the public and private domain. In the private domain Dalit women are assaulted for not being dutiful wives, not bearing children or male children specifically or not bringing enough dowry into the marriage. Dalit women face violence from community members, complicit police personnel, their in-laws and their families. Between norms of female subjugation and cultural norms regarding the “natural” caste hierarchy, women are constantly assaulted and taken advantage of. Further, due to their low socio-economic status, Dalit women are often the victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Dalit women’s sexual and bodily integrity are threatened and violated, even from a young age. Dalit women are victims of social, religious and cultural practices like Devdasis and Jogins. In the name of these practices, village girls are married to God by their helpless parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper caste landlords and rich men and directed in to trafficking and prostitution.

- 5- Women’s Access to Justice:** Vulnerably positioned at the bottom of India’s caste, class and gender hierarchies, Dalit women experience endemic gender-and-caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Their socio-economic vulnerability and lack of political voice, when combined with the dominant

risk factors of being Dalit and female, increase their exposure to potentially violent situations while simultaneously reducing their ability to escape. Violence against dalit women presents clear evidence of widespread exploitation and discrimination against these women subordinated in terms of power relations to men in a patriarchal society, as also against their communities based on caste. Violence against Dalit women is to deny them opportunities, choices and freedoms at multiple levels, undermining not only dalit women’s dignity and self-respect, but also their right to development. Twelve major forms of violence constitute the basis of this study, nine being violence in the general community – physical assault, verbal abuse, sexual harassment and assault, rape, sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, kidnapping and abduction, forced incarceration and medical negligence – and three being violence in the family – female feticide and infanticide, child sexual abuse and domestic violence from natal and marital family members. Sanctioned impunity on behalf of offenders is a major issue in India, and the police often deny or purposefully neglect and delay Dalit women’s right to legal aid and justice. There is a consistent pattern of delay in report filing and irregularities regarding criminal procedures, which leads to widespread impunity and creates serious barriers to justice for Dalit women. Impunity sends the message that gender and caste-based violence is tolerated and is thus perpetuated because there is no effective deterrence for offenders. Often in cases of rape, Dalit women are pressured to withdraw or settle, sometimes making a ‘compromise’ and receiving a small payment by dominant caste members or others in the community. Another tactic is for the accused or a dominant caste member to file a counter case and make a false accusation against the woman or her family. These cases are often more vigorously investigated than the original case lodged by the Dalit woman.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1- Development and Social Impact:-** Few Dalit women elected representatives were able to exert any substantial influence in the Panchayats to ensure development benefits for their communities, though many did put forward Dalit interests. Only 18.5% of

Dalit women presidents felt that they had a significant say in the distribution of development schemes. At one level, the positive development outcomes for Dalits and women that some Dalit women elected representatives achieved took the form of primarily small projects for basic amenities – roads, housing, drinking water, etc. – rather than projects that would challenge existing gender-caste inequalities such as land distribution or alternative employment opportunities for Dalits. According to 34.3% of Dalit women elected representatives, their political participation had generated some change among women mainly that some women were able to speak up in their households and gram sabhas more freely. Other Dalit women also increasingly recognized their own capacities for leadership and expressed greater willingness to contest panchayat elections. By comparison, only 28.9% of Dalit women elected representatives indicated change in attitudes towards them from the Dalit community, mainly in terms of Dalits now approaching these women to represent their developmental problems to government officials; Dalits now settling disputes among themselves under the women's leadership; and other Dalits now feeling that they too had the capacity to play leadership roles in village administration.

2- Impact on Process of Resource Allocation:- The second level of outcomes relates more to changing institutional rules and resource allocations in favor of Dalits and women. On this front, there was little success. The women's ability to generate development outcomes remains significantly limited by government resistance in practice to the implementation of the Panchayati Raj system, including the full devolution of functions, powers and resources. Within this context, there was little evidence to suggest that the Dalit women panchayat representatives were able to significantly increase attention and resources to address the critical livelihood needs of Dalits or women. This was made apparent by their low participation in decision-making on the use of panchayat revenue, development and welfare funds, as well as in dominant caste male monopolization of panchayat resources and benefits.

3- Interactions with Government Officials:- Government officials were often complicit in reinforcing dominant caste male power by adopting the role of neutral facilitator regarding Dalit women's political participation: that is, they failed to intervene when witnessing proxy representation and

discrimination, or pleaded lack of power to take action.

In fact, some government officials suggested that their sole jurisdiction over issues Dalit women elected representatives brought to them concerned only development schemes and funds. Thus, while constitutional provisions render illegal discrimination on grounds of caste or gender, and reservations in the panchayats aim to correct structural discrimination against Dalits and women, government officials expect those affected by discrimination to deal with such problems. The only conclusion to be drawn is negligence by these officials in the execution of their legally mandated supervisory roles over the panchayats. On the other hand, officials also harassed Dalit women elected representatives by making them frequent visit government offices to deal with the same matter, or delayed in implementing schemes despite repeated requests from the women, as mentioned by 23.1% of women. Linked to this, 17.9% of women had to wait for a long time to meet these officials to discuss official panchayat matters. A further 2.6% of women also mentioned how government officials expected bribes in order to render any service to the women.

4- Social Empowerment:- Women are educated about the social benefits including awareness about the existing social problems in the society, good recognition & image in the family & community, role in making important decision in their family, plan & promote better education for their children, taking care of health of the aged and the children just to mention a few. Women are also allowed to participate in political and public life. Therefore, they are given a chance to serve the community including fighting for the basics amenities & welfare needs of the village community such as:

- Safe drinking water
- Public sanitation
- Street light
- Chance to help the weaker people like disable and the aged
- Schools

5- Empowering Dalit Women by Education:- The present positions seems to be better with reference to the rate of literacy among dalits. The literacy rate is 31.48% for boys and 10.93% for girls. Dalits women belonging to the creamy layer of the society are better with good education and socially and economically they are well off like other high castes. They are fully aware of the welfare schemes provided by the

Government and their percentage is very low when compared with the total dalit population. In rural areas, the first generation girls from SC needs the attention of Government and other organization. Mostly the teachers of the locality provide information to them about the welfare schemes. In many Dalit association executive position are occupied by male members whereas very poor representation is made by women in their pasts. The women are not properly informed about the Government schemes and there is an urgent need to get a feedback about the welfare schemes where lot of money is spent for the development of Dalits. The funds are not utilized properly for their upliftment. Many of the schemes go unnoticed because they are not popularized properly. The coaching programmes conducted by the Government for dalit women are beneficial in training many women to compete in the competitive exam. These programmes also do not reach the needy dalit women because they are cornered by the very few creamy dalit women. This should be monitored properly and the schemes should be reached by the most deprived and constantly struggling dalit women. Because these dalit women are neglected by socially advanced communities and also by the better off among the dalits, which leads to an unhealthy socio-economic condition. There should be some scientific basis to pick up the poorest and they should be equipped with facilities. There are number of women education grants that offer help to women from poor background in order to give them a chance to be educated. There're various scholarships that benefits girls in India to achieve their career by going back to school or various training institutions where they can further their education. Also, many NGO's in India offer support to girls in order to benefit them in education. The government of India is also setting aside funds that are used to empower women & other initiatives that will empower them. Women who have the desire to improve their lives are allowed to take these grants from the government and NGO's to empower themselves with the help of their spouses or without for single mothers to get education to the degree level, post graduates, PHD just to mention a few. These grants for women get most supports from different companies after realizing that women can perform better than men if they are well educated and equipped. Financial aid for uniform for girls, maps, charts, examination grant, laboratory facilities, and library facilities should be provided for them special

coaching should be given for meritorious dalit girls to compete for IAS and IPS. Hostel facilities for dalit girls at all levels of education starting from primary school up to higher education should be provided reservation policy especially for girls should be allotted in both admission and employment. There is an increased awareness in recent years among dalit women about their rights and about the Government welfare schemes about higher education. This should be augmented by information technology, which should reach even to the remote rural citizen. The UGC has given reservation for seats in colleges for SC students 25%, ST 7.5%, which is highly beneficial. Also relaxation in marks for 5% is given to all dalit students in admission. Financial assistance in the form of fellowships is given to dalits. Rs. 3,600/- is given per JRF to continue research studies at the University level. There are special SC/ST cells at the University for Effective Implementation of the Government orders and to improve the condition of University level dalit students.

6- Reservation bill will be beacon for emancipation of women:-

Their socio-economic status directly depends on their participation in politics. Political parties in India speak much about equality of women but have totally ignored the dalit women. In the year 1993, 73rd amendment in the constitution granted reservation to dalits, tribal and women in local government. This amendment made it compulsory that one third of the seats reserved for dalits be filled by dalit women. In some states, there has been little or no acceptance of reservation for the lower castes and dalit women by the upper castes. This has resulted in atrocities against Panchayat members including women. Dalits who stood for election were beaten, and dalit women were raped and ill-treated. An important obstacle is the no-confidence motion against dalit women as Pradhan by the dominant sections. Rural elites are unable to accept the power, which has been given into the hands of the poorer and disadvantaged women. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill in the Rajya Sabha is a momentous, heartwarming step not only for India, but is likely to be an inspirational trendsetter for women's empowerment in the entire region. Although it is only the first step, the ripples from the smashing of a glass barrier are bound to be felt in virtually all areas of traditional male dominance. Like its democracy, therefore, India will also be a beacon in the matter of women's emancipation. The bill faces other barriers, of course, of which the securing of the

Lok Sabha's approval is the most crucial. But the expectation among its proponents is that the momentum it has acquired by clearing the roadblocks put up by its critics should make the subsequent passages much easier. It is understandable, therefore, why the male MPs cutting across party lines are uneasy although the party whips have forced them to keep quiet. The fewer number of constituencies available to them are not their only problem. Equally unsettling is the fact that the 181 seats for women will not be fixed, but will be rotated. This will mean that none of the MPs, either men or women, will be certain about their next constituency. As a result, they will not be able to nurse their constituencies in the hope of winning another term, as has been the practice till now. It is obvious, therefore, that a great deal of uncertainty will be introduced into the system, whose long-term implications are unknown. It is the fear of the tremors which the new system will cause which led to suggestions that, instead of reserving seats in parliament, the parties themselves should nominate women contestants for a third of the seats. But the matter was never seriously pursued because of the difficulty of enforcing such a writ, which might not be legally tenable.

7- Getting organized as Dalit women:- Since the late 1980s, therefore, Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform – created, developed and controlled by themselves – through which they could forge their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problems as Dalits and as women. Conscious that the call for a separate platform could be interpreted as a divisive move by both Dalit men and non-Dalit women, the proponents of such a special forum emphasize that their initiative must not be mistaken for a separatist movement. Rather they assert that there is need for strong alliances between the Dalit movement, the women's movement and the Dalit women's movement if their common vision of social, economic and political equality and justice for all is to be realized. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was launched by Dalit women themselves and committed itself to undertake several tasks to bring about positive changes in the lives of Dalit women, such as legal action against caste based atrocities, political empowerment of Dalit women, economic empowerment against growing pauperization, building self-confidence and leadership.

8- All India Dalit Women's Forum (1990):- Women's Movement in Andhra Pradesh is spearheaded by various women's organizations working on different issues and platforms. Dalit Women's Forum of Andhra Pradesh is one of them and is devoted exclusively to the problems of Dalit women. In addition to the Common Dalit Problems like illiteracy, ignorance, diseases, untouchability etc., they have to face gender discrimination and domination, within their own community on the one hand, and also sexual assaults and abuse by the people of the upper castes on the other hand. As these issues are of common concern to the Dalit women all over India, CARDS took the initiative to form a national level organization "All India Dalit Women's Forum" in 1990. The Forum is managed by a Governing Body, consisting of a President, two Vice Presidents, a General Secretary, a Secretary and a joint secretary. The lower level units from the state to village level have also similar structures. The All India Forum is headed by M/s. Swarnalatha Devi of CARDS and is working under the guidance of Dalit Open University of India.

Activities: Bringing the problems of Dalit women into special focus in the national press and other national media.

- a- Coordination with other National Level Women's organizations on the problems of Dalit women.
- b- Representations to the Govt. authorities on the issues concerning Dalit Women.
- c- Implementing of programmes on women issues with the support of Govt. Departments and other National and International Organizations.

9- Role of Media:- Kanshi Ram, the founder of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) encouraged for a voice for Dalits in the media (Ninan, 2007). Ever since the evolution of mass communication be it print or audio-visual media, Dalits tried to run their own media on a par with the rest of the media industry. But, due to many factors they could not live to tell the tale. The Hindu, a daily English newspaper, celebrated its 125th anniversary on September 2003. Parayan, a Dalit magazine, which was started by the Dalit scholar Rettaimalai Srinivasan in the same as that of The Hindu does not find its subsistence today. Similarly many magazines were started by Dalit activists. Though the mainstream media gives coverage to Dalit issues now and then, they are miniscule in number. There are mammoth problems unnoticed and uncared by the mainstream media. In this scenario, Dalit women are making use

of this new medium to speak for themselves. Due to the negligence of the mainstream media in representing Dalit issues, Dalit women have taken shelter under the alternative media like websites, online forums, blogs, Facebook, etc. Majority of the Dalit activists agree to the fact that internet like websites, online groups, forums and social networking sites as blogs and Facebook play the role of alternative media. Several studies have cited that Dalit activists view internet as the media, enabling and facilitating access and participation by the members of the community and the channel of communication for the stigmatized community. Further, an alternative media is considered as the media which can stand on par with the mainstream media and can offer a counter-hegemonic representation of Dalits. Thus, media has become a tool for the marginalized Dalit women to utilize it as an alternative media. Studies have provided evidence of the contribution of internet in educating, empowering and strengthening Dalit community they serve. Internet is acting as focal point for the members of the Dalit community to inform others about the day to day issues on Dalit women and to get connected with each other.

CONCLUSION

India has been a land of surprises. Along with a powerful prime minister like Indira Gandhi and the presence of many other prominent women in public life, like Sonia Gandhi, Sushma Swraj, Meera Kumar, Ambika Soni, Dimple Yadav, Smriti Irani, it has also seen female infanticide and dowry deaths. But never before has it seen so many lawmakers in its legislative chambers although the panchayat already have a large number of women members and office-bearers because of reservations. Even then, there is little doubt that the country is on the threshold of a new beginning. As the halls of the Parliament House echo with the words "Madam Speaker" I believe India has reached a new threshold in writing its own history. For the women of India, the sight of a huge influx of women into the august body of parliament will be an exhilarating sight, at least initially, irrespective of how they perform as MPs or what signs of improvement they provide. Since not only parliament, but the assemblies, too, will see a large body of women as members, Indian politics will experience a seminal, unexpected change. Many of the Dalit NGO's are involved in establishing schools, scholarships, and basic supplements to Dalits in the rural parts of India. NGO's such as the Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice and the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights are involved in bringing the plight of the

Dalit people to the attention of the international community and to document and publicize human rights abuse. The long-term objectives are to enfranchise Dalits as full citizens of their society and eliminate caste-based discriminations. At the threshold of 21st century it is absolutely necessary that common people need to be sensitized about the prevailing atrocities against Dalit women. There is a growing need to capture violation of human rights of dalit women, so that talent and potential of Dalit Women can be used for development of nation. Legal and structural mechanisms can only function effectively if the attitude and perception of people are changed. Law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, civil society and other stakeholders must combine efforts to enable such change and firm measures must be taken by state agencies to punish officials who neglect or violate legal and other statutory provisions.

A final word: Indian women have been subjected to cultural biases and atrocities since time memorial. However, the answer here is to not merely create reservations for women, but equip them with enough knowledge, support and resources to stand up for themselves.

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