Empowerment of Women Dalits in Kanyakumari District

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Abstract: The pyramidal structure of Indian society portrays that Dalit women are in the lowest socio-economic strata of the society. After independence, the constitution of free-India made discrimination based on caste and gender as unlawful. However, in reality the practice of inequity persists in several ways. Dalit women who are the most unfortunate in free India, are recognized as "Dalit among the Dalits or downtrodden among the downtrodden". Struggles of Dalit women are formidable in a male-dominated, deprived society. They are looked down as dependent, weak and powerless. Being an oppressed class in the society, Dalit women face the dual core of the struggles for survival and social threats of injustice and inequality. They are most despised, least respected and considered as loose women. They have developed a power of endurance, long suffering and patience, not in terms of merely accepting their subjugation but hoping and aspiring that they will be delivered one day. This is ‘Empowerment’. This paper seeks to assess the empowerment of Dalit women in Kanyakumari District.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Kanyakumari District, Discrimination, Oppression, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment means giving the capacity or to divert women’s life towards desired goals. Empowerment is a process by which women gain greater control over resources such as income, knowledge, information, technology, skill and training.

Women who constitute half the human race have been oppressed to a greater or lesser degree in every country, in every class of society. The nature and degree of oppression differs in the different socio-economic, political and cultural systems. In India, the situation of women is complex because we are divided not only by class but by caste as well. Dr. Ambedkar, the leader of Dalits, described the Hindu caste system as a pyramid of earthen pots set one on top of another. Untouchables are at the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women.

According to Lohia, “System of caste is a terrific force of stability against change, a force, a force that stabilizes all manners, dishonor and lies”. The caste system degrades the human militates against the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. The caste-ridden society degrades and continues to dehumanize the lowest castes. They are kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and any social contact is loaded with restrictions and taboos.
In society, Dalit women are the weaker vessels, culturally silent and continue to live in their thrice alienated position. They are most despised, least respected and considered as loose women. The downtrodden among the downtrodden are not simply passive victims of ignorant tradition. In fact at the very base of Indian society among the downtrodden, the current mood seems to be not one of mute acceptance of tradition but one of bitterness, anger and readiness to act when action looks possible. When Dalit women are awakened to the contradictions that colour their lives of oppression, the possibility is that perhaps there is after all in India a rich and ancient cultural base for revolution among the low castes, Dalits, Adivasis and women.

With the advent of the Christian Missionaries in Kanyakumari district, suppressions were resisted and social disabilities were questioned. Awakened by the light of education, the Dalits got enlightened and enhanced their position in the society. Government policies, working of various associations paved the way for the low Dalits, to be empowered.

In general, the study of Dalit women becomes important because the problems of Dalit women vary from one social stratum to another, one cultural group to another and also from one economic stratum to another. It can be said that not enough attention has been focused so far on the life condition and problems of women belonging to the Scheduled castes. For this, there is a need for proper understanding of their problems specific to time and place so that relevant development programmes can be made and implemented.

A Review of Related Studies

A review of some important and relevant literature will be useful in understanding the present study. *Dalit the downtrodden of India*, by Himanu Charan Sadangi describes about the depressed caste, the Scheduled caste Harijans and untouchables. They were called by different names in different parts of the country.

Edgar Thurston, pioneer in caste study in South India, provides valuable information about the social life of the Dalits in his work entitled *Caste and Tribes of Southern India. Dalit Women in India* by Mukta Mittal mentions that the Dalit women are ‘thrice alienated’ by class patriarchy and caste. Samuel Mateer in his book *Land of Charity and Native Life in Travancore* gives a vivid picture of the miserable state of the low caste and low caste women in South Travancore.

*Adi Dravidargalin Poorvikka Charithiram* (Tamil) by D. Gopal Chattiar pertains to a wide range of information regarding the early history and conditions of the Dravidians.

The Evolution of Christian Missionaries in the beginning and later many associations and personalities and the governmental machinery is analysed in the book *Scheduled Castes: History of Evolution, Tamil Nadu 1900 – 1955* by P.E. Mohan.

The book *Crime Against Dalit Women* by A.K. Singh analyses caste the violence and Dalit deprivation in India. Why violence against Dalit women and girls happens and how to prevent. He describes the effects of caste, class and gender oppression states parties, obligations to end caste-based discrimination.

*Raobahadur Rettaimakai Srinivasan* (The Champion of Civil Rights of Dalits in Tamilnadu) by Dr. G. Thangavelu depicts the civil rights of the downtrodden community which rights were included as the fundamental rights of the Indian Constitution.

*Periyar Kazhanchiyam* (Tamil) by Dr. K. Veeramani and *Periyarin Dalitiyam* (Tamil) by Arunan gives a vivid account of Dalitism and Dalit movements in Tamilnadu and Travancore.

Dalit Empowerment by K.C. Das gives impressive details of empowerment of the Dalits and other lower classes.
Concept of Women Empowerment – Its Origin

The concept of women’s empowerment throughout the world has its roots in women’s movement. It is since the mid-eighties of the twentieth century that this term has become popular in the field development, especially in reference to women. The concept of women empowerment was first introduced at the International Women’s Conference in Nairobi in 1985. As for India, the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) laid the foundations for the cause of women. Women’s empowerment principally aims at enhancing their social functioning by a quantitative and qualitative clause, particularly in the field of education, health and employment which will bring the desired level of change. The Government and non-Government organizations have come out with many income-generating schemes to raise the economic status of women.

The issue of Dalit identity in social, economic, political content has become so important now-a-days that it has been affecting the thinking processes of all opinion making and decision taking authorities in Tamil Nadu. Even though originally, it was social problem, now it has attained significance resulting in far reaching consequences in deciding the future of Tamil Nadu policy which has its impact on Kanyakumari District.

Today, Dalit women are empowered in all fields. Dalit women are exhibiting excellent achievements with the help of governmental and non-governmental organizations. Government of Tamil Nadu has been monitoring the functioning of constitutional privileges with all its efforts for the purpose of creating awareness, enabling Dalit women to cross all social and economic barriers, to get equality of status in democratic, economic, social and cultural spheres of life. In this connection, it is indispensable to understand the position of Dalit women and their development through missionaries associations, government welfare programmes in Kanyakumari district of Tamil Nadu. There are a number of studies so far made on Dalit and their performances throughout the world, including India and Tamil Nadu. However, there is scarcity of resource literature regarding the empowerment of Dalit women in Kanyakumari district. Because of the continuous struggle by the Dalits of Kanyakumari District against the denial of their basic rights, they achieved success.

Constitutional Privileges for Dalit Women

The Indian Constitution, in its bill of rights guarantees of all citizens basic civil and political rights and fundamental freedom. In addition the Constitution has special provisions prohibiting discrimination based on caste. These provisions are found under the right to equality.

Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth. Empowers the state to make special provision for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes.

Article 16 – Equality of opportunity in matter of public employment but special provision for Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes.

Article 17 – “Untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of “untouchability” shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

Article 19 – Protection of traffic in human beings and forced labour relevant to distances of bounded labour among Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes.


Article 35 – Legislation to give effect to the provisions relating to fundamental rights.

Article 38 – State to secure a social order for the promotion of welfare of people.

Article 243 – OD Reservation of seats for Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes in Panchayats.

Article 330 – Provides for reservation of seats for Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes in the LokSabha.

Article 332 – Provides for reservation of seats for Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes in the State VidhanSabha (Legislative Assemblies).

Article 335 – Claims of Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes to services posts.
Article 341 — makes possible the governmental identification of different subcategories of Scheduled castes in relation to each state the list of Scheduled castes or sub groups within the Scheduled castes. Published by the President through public notification is deemed final.

**Conclusion**

In recent decade lower castes are enjoying political rights as well as developing their community and changing their social positions in positive way. Numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of democratic decentralization, quota system for women, disadvantaged sections and marginalized groups, social inclusion policy, the political empowerment, the impact of caste, gender and patriarchy on the process of constitutionalisation of Panchayat Raj Institutions.

Dalit women, ‘the bottom most oppressed’, must change and the future India will change. If they continue to be in chains of caste, gender and patriarchy, the country will be in bondage. For healthier future for India, Dalit women must strive to break the chains of bondage. The Government and Non-Government organization should take necessary action for Dalit and Dalit women to provide proper training facilities for administration work in Panchayat offices; they should be given proper awareness programs for community development, to give education facilities for all.

**References:**

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