

Scheduled Caste Women in Organized Sector

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Introduction

In India, SCs are systematically discriminated on the basis of their work and descent for centuries. Over 200 million people are SCs, also known as untouchables or outcastes. They experience violence, discrimination and social exclusion on a daily basis.

The situation of SC women in India needs special attention. They are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world and make up two per cent of the world's total population. They are poor, they constitute half of the 200 million SC population and 16.3 per cent of the total Indian female population. The traditional taboos are the same for Dalit men and SC women. However, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. SC women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in SC communities.

India is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Government has an extra obligation to make sure that women can realize their rights. The Government of India has an obligation to take all measures, including policy and budgetary measures, to make sure that women can fulfill their rights. It also has an obligation to punish those who engage in caste-based violence and discrimination, party to the international convention on Civil and Political Rights based on this treaty, the Government of India has an obligation to make sure that SC women can enjoy a whole range of human rights, such as the right to life ect freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, freedom from slavery, the right to be equal before the court, the right to recognition as a person before the law, the right to privacy, the right to marry with free and full consent, and the right to take part in public affairs. The life and

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dignity of SC women depends on the realization of these human rights. However, they are breached systematically. Article 24(2) of the Convention provides that child shall be registered immediately after birth. In India, 46 percent of all children are not registered. There is also no system of registration of marriages. This is not only a barrier for the realization of civil and political rights; it also prevents the protection of SC girls from sexual exploitation and trafficking, child labour and forced early marriages.

The total population of India, according to 2001 census is 102.86 crores of which Scheduled Castes is 16.6 crores, constituting 16.20 per cent of the population of India. Of the total SCs population of India males constitute 86,088,760 while females are 80,546,940. The total number of SCs as per 2001 census is 166,635,700.1 The highest scheduled caste percentage of population to the total population of the State, among 32 States/Union Territories was recorded in Punjab (29) and lowest was recorded as Mizoram (0.03). Andhra Pradesh is in the 12th place with 16.19 percentage of SC population.² According to 2001 census, the SC workers including main and marginal workers are 6.73 cores in India. These SC workers constitute 40.41 per cent of the total SC population of the country. Among these total workers, 4.36 corers are males and 2.37

In ancient India, though patriarchal system was highly prevalent - all male domination women enjoyed a position of respect and reverence. Several inscriptions make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the freedom to make liberal gifts to religious institutions like temples, *dharmasalas* not merely for the welfare of heads of the families but for their parents as well.

Women held very important position in ancient Indian society. There are evidences to suggest that woman power destroyed kingdoms and mighty rulers. Elango Adigal's Sillapathigaram mentioned that Madurai, the capital of Pandyas was burnt, when Pandyan ruler Nedunchezhiyan killed a woman's husband by mistake. Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata tells the story of the fall of Kauravas because they humiliated Draupadi. Valmiki's Ramayana is also about the annihilation of Ravana when abducted and tried to marry Sita forcibly. The plethora of Goddesses in ancient period was created to instill respect for women. *Ardhanarishwar* (God is half-man and half-woman) was highly worshipped. Women were

allowed to have multiple husbands. They could leave their husbands. In the vedic society women participated in religious ceremonies and tribal assemblies. There is no seclusion of women from domestic and social affairs but they were dependent on their male relatives throughout their lives. The system of *Sati* existed among the Aryans in the earlier period. The hymns of the Rig-Veda, the Adharva Veda show that it was still customary for the widow to lay symbolically by the side of her husband's corpse on the funeral, forced child marriages were unknown.

Historical Background of SC Women

In India basically, women are not treated on par with men. Moreover, the SC women are oppressed among the oppressed. One even with a little human sensitivity gets stunned with the realistic and authentic accounts of the living conditions of SC women, their oppressions, humiliation, sufferings and exploitation.

SC women's sufferings are two-fold: they have their own share of universal suffering as women. Additionally, they are victims of a variety of exploitations - social, religious, economic and cultural as well. Her experience of patriarchal domination is more severe than that of non-SC women. Opportunities and avenues available to her to voice her grievances and agonies are very few.

Indian society is all male dominated society. Men dominate women. Therefore, it is very natural for SC woman to be dominated by her husband and other male folk. Even after sixty years of Independence and constitutional guarantees, she has to undergo several travails. She has to work hard for earning livelihood of her family. She has to 79 Undergo atrocities committed on her by her drunken husband, she has to protect herself from the people where she works and she has to fight against all exploitation. Hence SC women in general, have to make a two-way struggle, one in the house and the other outside the house.

In a male dominated society, SC women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the Manusmriti and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which SC women could be uplifted (Thing n.pag). The horrendous Laws

in the Manusmriti were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favorable only to the upper castes, which form the majority of India.

According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (2000), approximately 75 per cent of the SC girls drop out of primary school despite reservations for SCs. Reasons for this early drop out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society and even their teachers. Atrocities on SC women can be found recorded in various newspaper

Articles, journals, and government reports many of which can be viewed on website www.ambedkar.org. The majority of the stories are of bright young SC girls who are punished by the upper caste teachers in rural areas of India, for daring to score good grades. Feeling rejected, most girls drop out of school and have nowhere to turn but towards manual scavenging and other repulsive jobs.

Discrimination against Scheduled Caste Women

The traditional Indian society treated woman in general as an object of sex and sexual exploitation. It was an established fact that woman was looked down in all aspects of life. Discrimination is showed towards her in all spheres in the disguise of tradition and culture. Manu Dharma Sastra says that woman should not be given freedom but should be kept under the control of man in every stage of life.

A Sudra was to be awarded death punishment if he cohabits a Brahmin woman or with a woman of any higher caste. If an unmarried girl was raped by anyone, the criminal would be punished by cutting his limbs. Women who were not chaste are also liable for punishment. A young woman, cohabiting willingly with a man of higher caste would not be punished but if she cohabited with a lower caste man she would be punished by confining her to the home. If a woman, proud of her beauty committed adultery to insult her husband she would be thrown to the dogs to be bitten to death. Even in primitive Vedic period, lesbianism was known and such girls were liable to be punished as criminals.

Scheduled Castes constitute about 250 million of the Indian population and half of them are women. They are most marginalized lot

in the caste structure of the Indian society. Among the large scale violations of human rights perpetuated on the Scheduled Castes are the burning of their homes and fields, murder, torture and assault of women molestation and rape and deaths in custody. These occur in spite of constitutional guarantees, abolition of untouchability and ensuring protection of the human rights of all Indian citizens.

Origins of Untouchability

Before we discuss the history of SC women in India, a brief survey of the origin of untouchability in Hindu social system is not out of place. Far from so, it helps us to understand the plight of the SCs in general and the SC women in particular.

According to Hindu law codes, the chandala, the representative of the untouchables of ancient times was the progeny of a Sudra father and a Brahmin mother -the offspring of the most condemned pratiloma marriage. This theory of the origin of the untouchables is the product of Varna conception of the orthodox Brahmins and was not based on historical facts. Chandalas came into existence around the end of the later Vedic era (6000-1000 BC). In this period, the Aryans who had been mainly herders advanced into the upper and middle reaches of the Ganga basin and formed an agrarian society.

The later Vedic era was also a time when the Brahmins secured the top position in society by virtue of the monopoly of priesthood. They practised 'purity' and 'pollution' – the twin concepts which kept a majority of the population outside the four-fold Varna system of the Hindu society. Emphasis on purity gave rise to people on the opposite end of societies who were considered to be impure. In between, the most pure Brahmins and the polluted untouchables were inserted. The remaining three varnas were ranked according to their level of purity.

A woman plays so many roles (of daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, mother...) and for ages has been a multi-tasker; one who cook food, does the domestic works, raises kids, and cares for everyone. She works 24X7, never complains and asks no remuneration.

Her tasks and challenges have increased and hardened multifold now when she is super multi-tasking; juggling between career, travelling,

kitchen, kids, husband, house, society, personal health, passion and desires. Balancing between so many duties and obligations, a woman faces numerous challenges and problems every day, every time, and may be every second minute or second. Here a simplistic summary of what all a working woman has to face in her daily life, the challenges and the problems:

- **Discrimination at Work.** Discrimination starts at the very level of recruitment and interview, where recruiters/interviewers see women incompetent for challenging roles and ask questions like whether you would be able to continue after marriage ?
- **Challenges to Safety, Life and Dignity.** Sexual harassment, theft, molestation, eve-teasing, etc. are some of the forms of challenges working women face to their safety, life and dignity.
- **Non-acceptance of Talent, Offered Disrespect!** A woman going out to work in many societies is seen very lowly and questioned about her character/moral. A working woman who is beautiful or well-maintained or presentable or is friendly with everyone and is progressing in her career instead of being complimented is disrespected and disgusted; is questioned/remarked on her dignity and morals.
- **Family Duties.** In today's modern era, even after working in the corporate world and after taking up challenging roles of executives/directors/marketing professional/IT professionals, etc.; the age old image of a woman of being a home-maker is not much changed. Even if she works, comes home tired/has to leave early for office; she is expected to cook food, take care of kids and all other household duties and the male counterparts may volunteer but they hold no responsibilities.
- **Juggling Between Work, Home, Relationships and Personal Life.** Amid all the dilemma and stretch of balancing the job responsibilities, following her passion, going ahead with her aspirations and looking after her family-kids-husband; a woman handles and balances a big lot of stress, which deprives her of peace, rest, sleep, independent thought and luxury to be herself.
- **Ego of Male Counterpart.** One of the most tough to handle challenges is to manage and cope with the ego of your male counterpart as wife/

partner. Males do support women to go out and work, but somewhere they find it hard to accept the progress and achievement of women whether she is his colleague or life partner.

• **Inequality as in Provision of Opportunities in Terms of Job Responsibilities, Projects and Organizational Advancement.** One of the most unfortunate challenges for women that they are subject to undergo at work despite all their qualifications, skills, talent, hard work and performance; is to be overlooked and low rated in comparison to their male colleagues. This is one reason, why many women have to settle down at less challenging jobs than their capabilities/talent, or get stuck at an irrelevant job/field or get stuck at one point of career with no opportunities for further growth, etc.

• **Low Dignity and No Ownership of Her Own Earning.** Mostly women are not seen as independent earners, who command respect and dignity. Instead is seen as a small back-wheel of a heavy vehicle and thus, her role and contribution is mostly over looked. In most of the families, especially middle class, upper middle class and lower middle class; it's seen that the income of the woman either goes in the hands of her father or husband, rather than in her hands.

• **Sexual Harassment!** Every single day a woman when steps out, stays out whole day working while travelling, in office, in field, in canteen, in outdoor meetings...; directly/indirectly she is subjected to a lot of sexual abuses and harassment. It's not always with hands she is hurt, but she is attacked and hurt with eyes, with tongue, with gestures and of course unfortunately physically. A few women wave off, ignore and move on; some disgust them to the very soul, out there is no way out so with tears or suppressed anger they move on; while some root off their dignity and even existence. To some women have to compromise, to some escape routes, while some compel them to revolt or break down. And it's no less than a part of the working women, directly or indirectly, to a small and ignorant to large scale.

Around the same age, regional states were formed in the upper and the middle reaches of the river Ganges, going beyond the framework of tribal institutions. The Kshatriyas who ruled these states saw the

advantages of incorporating ideas propounded by the Brahmins into their politics, thus, contributing the political ingredient to the development of untouchability. That is to say, the existence of untouchables functioned to displace, the dissatisfied direct producers, Vaisyas and Sudras within the Varna based society thus enduring a stable social order, besides carrying out a bulk of menial work needed for the agrarian economy.

Since then the untouchables have been placed outside the framework of the Varna social order and have functioned to cement class relations in that society in the form of groups ranked to their level of purity or impurity.

The Indian labor market displays several striking features: very low rates of female labor force participation; considerable variance in rates of female labor force participation across Indian states; and a large share of both women and men working in the informal sector.2.3 The literature on female labor force participation in India has traditionally focused on how demographic characteristics and educational attainment affect the labor force participation decisions of women. In a separate literature, well-known rigidities in Indian labor markets have been put forth as the reason for the high share of informal employment in overall employment for example, about 85 percent of India's non-agricultural workers are employed in informal sector jobs. Studies have noted the lack of medium-sized enterprises in India, and have linked firm hiring decisions, growth, and productivity outcomes to cross-state differences in labor market regulations.

Working women still do housework Isn't that stating the obvious Whenever I think of my three decades+ career as a senior banking professional, a single parent and a home maker, I remember all those 5 am wake-up alarms, hurried cooking, packing lunch boxes for my son, rushing out to catch the 8.10 am Janakpuri-Connaught Place chartered bus to reach my work place by 9 am at Connaught Circus, New Delhi after ensuring that my son was ready for school and striding straight into the kitchen after returning from the bank at 9-9.30 pm. Being a single parent also required me never to miss the all-important PTA meetings at

my son's school. And then, there was the buying of vegetables for the entire week at the Janakpuri Saturday market which needed meticulous planning, such that the vegetables properly lasted till the next Saturday. I am sure; this is the routine with slight changes here and there, of most working woman in India barring a few exceptions.

Mercifully, I had no in-laws, no full-time domestic help or anyone else at home except my son... But often, there'd be friends and relatives from South who'd camp at my place during their Agra, Rishikesh, Haridwar, Badrinath etc. trips...! I must, however, confess to a sense of guilt that I couldn't give much time to my son in his growing years and couldn't entertain guests as much as I'd have liked to...

Is there a working woman in India, who doesn't do housework? Even the high, salaried ones who may be able to afford a battery of help, cannot avoid housework. The cook almost invariably asks the lady of the house about the menu or informs only her when the gas cylinder is over. When the driver needs an advance, he'd much rather appeal to the feminine 'humane' nity of Madam... When the maid needs Chutti, she turns to Madam. And it's the working woman, who checks out if everything's ok at home before rushing out for work. I believe that planning a menu in a way that all needs are taken care of till one returns home or managing maids, drivers, cooks etc. is like running a parallel administration at home along with office work... Counseling and helping maids, lending them a sympathetic ear no matter how busy one is, are also a part of the housework that a working woman has to deftly handle...

As for the less fortunate, middle and lower class working women, it's a daily, non-stop 5 am- 11pm routine for most part of their lives... with no domestic help either in the form of maids or in-laws at home. The lower class working woman is generally the bread winner with often a husband who is an alcoholic and wouldn't hesitate to beat her up or the kids if his wishes are not fulfilled

Conclusion

As the time passed the position of women underwent changes in all spheres of life. In the vedic period, women lost their political rights

of attending assemblies. Child marriages also came into existence. According to the Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery. Atharva Veda also deploras the birth of daughters. Yet, certain matrilineal elements are discernible in this period also. The importance assigned to the wives of the Raja in the Rajasuya Yaga has been regarded as an indication of matrilineal influence. The Vamsavalis or genealogies of teachers attached to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in which many seers bear metonymics, indicate their importance. There are references to women seers like Gagri and Maitreyi. However during this period, we see the growing tendency to stratify the Indian society along gender lines. The position of women gradually deteriorated as the Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of *Smritis*, women were bracketed with the Sudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and to perform Vedic rites. Marriage or domestic life became compulsory for women and unquestioning devotion to husband is their only duty. During the Mauryan period Brahmanical literature was particularly severe in the treatment of women and assigned them a very low status in the society. Buddhist texts on the other hand were much more considerate in treating them. Megasthenes testifies to the growing practice of polygamy; employment of women as palace guards, bodyguards to the kings, spies etc., permission of widow remarriage and divorce. Thus the position of women though inferior was not as bad as it came to be in the later ages.

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