
9

DALIT WOMEN IN FARMING: A SOCIOECONOMIC AND GENDER ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide an overview of the numerous challenges that Dalit women encounter in the field of agriculture, with a focus on how gender and caste combine to shape their experiences. The study delves into the complex dynamics surrounding Dalit women's involvement in farming, illuminating their distinct challenges, accomplishments, and wider consequences for sustainable development.

The study also looks at the resourcefulness and resiliency Dalit women showed while overcoming these obstacles. It emphasises the critical roles they play in a variety of agricultural endeavours, from livestock management to crop cultivation, and it highlights their noteworthy yet often underappreciated contributions to rural economies and household food security.

Introduction

Dalit women, who make up a sizable portion of the population in India, have long experienced severe social and economic marginalisation. "Dalit" refers to people who were traditionally classified as "untouchables" in the Indian caste system. Since agriculture

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is a significant source of income in rural India, it has a significant impact on how Dalit women experience life. Dalit populations have been subjected to social exclusion, untouchability, and discrimination for centuries. Dalits were historically confined to the periphery of society and given menial and demeaning jobs. The dual identities of Dalit women and women in general created additional challenges for them. In order to develop policies and programmes that address the intersecting realities of caste and gender with an aim to create a more equal and welcoming agricultural landscape, it is vital to fully understand the background of Dalit women in the agricultural sector. In order to break the cycle of discrimination and encourage inclusive growth for Dalit women in agriculture, insightful research and representation are very necessary.

Historical context of Dalit Women's Marginalisation

The social structure and caste system of India, which have supported a discriminatory and hierarchical order for centuries, are fundamental to the historical marginalisation of Dalit women in that nation. Dalit women's lives have been significantly impacted by the caste system, which is defined by a strict hierarchy that places Brahmins (priests and scholars) at the top and Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) at the bottom. The historical background of the marginalisation of Dalit women is as follows:

Colonial Era: Due to prevailing social hierarchies and colonial policies, Dalit women in India suffered greatly from marginalisation during the colonial era. While officially outlawing customs like untouchability, British colonial rule unintentionally institutionalised some forms of discrimination. The administrative choices and census classifications frequently served to legitimise preconceived notions based on caste. During this time, Dalit women, who were already marginalised in society, faced even more difficulties. In an effort to uphold social order, the British government occasionally turned to established elites, which strengthened the power relationships that allowed Dalit communities to continue to be marginalised. Furthermore, although missionary work helped some people receive healthcare and education, it also unintentionally reinforced social hierarchies.

Social Reform Movements: Dalit women's lives were significantly impacted by the social reform movements in India, especially those led by figures like B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule.

These movements also represented a critical turning point in the Dalit women's struggle against centuries of social oppression. These movements fought for the rights and dignity of Dalits, especially women, and attempted to overthrow the deeply ingrained hierarchies based on caste. The emphasis on education as an instrument for empowerment was one important result. To end the cycle of ignorance and illiteracy that had sustained Dalit girls' marginalisation, efforts were undertaken to give them access to education. Social reformers also attempted to eliminate untouchability and other forms of discriminatory social norms and practices that restricted Dalit women to lowly jobs. These movements additionally encouraged Dalit women to pursue careers outside of traditional roles and highlighted the importance of economic empowerment. These reform movements had a slow and difficult impact, but they prepared the way for later legal and policy changes following independence. Social reformers' actions were crucial in increasing awareness, giving Dalit women a sense of pride and self-worth, and starting a larger cultural change that continues to influence the fight for social justice and equality.

Post-Independence Era: India made tremendous progress in redressing the historical marginalisation of Dalit women during the post-independence era. Affirmative action and reservations are two examples of constitutional provisions that were put into place to end untouchability and advance social equality. Even though the goal of these measures was to improve the lives of Dalits, especially women, there were still difficulties in converting legal provisions into real improvements in their lives. The intersectionality of caste and gender frequently makes socioeconomic disparities and discrimination against Dalit women worse. Their overall development was impeded by their continued limited access to economic opportunities, healthcare, and education. The need for more focused interventions was highlighted by the discrepancy between the goals of policies and the realities on the ground. Dalit women themselves spearheaded the emergence of

grassroots movements that fought for their rights and overturned repressive social norms. Though systemic problems still exist, awareness and activism have helped bring about small changes over time. In order to ensure significant progress towards a more inclusive and equitable society, addressing the post-independence challenges faced by Dalit women requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal reforms, socio-economic empowerment, and community-driven initiatives.

Current Challenges: Dalit women in modern-day India face a multitude of difficulties that are a reflection of the pervasive effects of past discrimination and deeply ingrained social injustices. Due to the barriers that many Dalit women must overcome to receive a good education, there are still gaps in education that limit their potential for both professional and personal development. Wage disparities and restricted access to resources aggravate economic vulnerabilities and prolong poverty cycles in Dalit communities. Workplace discrimination still exists, which prevents them from advancing in their careers and upholds social hierarchies. In addition, there are many health and safety concerns, as their well-being is impacted by inadequate medical facilities and dangerous working conditions. A feeling of marginalisation is exacerbated by the persistence of social exclusion and stigma. Their vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by the intersectionality of gender and caste, which disproportionately targets Dalit women for discrimination. Although there are legal frameworks in place to protect their rights, substantive change is still hampered by implementation gaps and the enduring social norms that discriminate against them. In order to address these modern issues and create a more inclusive and equitable environment for Dalit women, a comprehensive strategy that includes targeted policies, legal reforms, community empowerment, and a change in societal attitudes is needed.

Examination of Caste-Based Oppression on Dalit Women in the Context of Agriculture

Dalit women in India are greatly impacted by the widespread and deeply embedded problem of caste-based subjugation in the social

as well as agricultural setting. Their access to resources and opportunities is restricted by the historical prejudices linked to the caste system, which also feeds the cycle of socioeconomic marginalisation. The analysis of caste-based discrimination against Dalit women in farming takes into account multiple crucial aspects:

Unequal Resource Distribution: Disproportionate resource distribution is a structural problem that Dalit women farmers in India frequently face. This inequality undercuts their economic empowerment and makes it more difficult for them to participate in agricultural activities as an entrepreneur. Dalit women face a disproportionate lack of access to vital resources like land, credit, seeds, and irrigation facilities when compared to their non-Dalit counterparts.

Discriminatory policies and practices in rural communities and institutions worsen this disparity by sustaining long-standing injustices. Specifically, the lack of land ownership limits the economic and self-determination of Dalit women. Targeted policies that guarantee fair access to resources are desperately needed to address these issues, as are awareness campaigns that aim to dispel prejudices and social norms that support these inequities.

Discrimination in the Workplace

Pay Gaps: Even though Dalit women are essential in numerous agricultural activities, they are often paid less for their work. The persistent discriminatory practices as well as deeply embedded social hierarchies in rural communities are reflected in this wage gap. Dalit women's economic vulnerability is made worse by their limited access to education and skill-building opportunities, which feed the cycle of low-paying jobs and constrained opportunities for upward mobility. It will take coordinated efforts to combat caste-based prejudices, raise awareness of labour rights, and push for equal pay policies in order to close the pay gaps that affect Dalit women farmers. Building a more equitable and sustainable agriculture sector depends on ensuring fair compensation, which is also a matter of economic justice.

Occupational Stereotypes: As a result of the historical caste system, Dalit women farmers in India face constant obstacles such as stigmatisation, social rejection, and occupational stereotypes. Since

the stigma attached to their Dalit identity is sustained by prevailing social norms, these women frequently experience discrimination and exclusion from their surrounding neighborhoods. Their struggles are made worse by occupational stereotypes, which frequently limit them to jobs that are seen as dirty or menial, like manual labour in agriculture or low-skilled scavenging. These erroneous assumptions cause them to be socially and professionally marginalised in addition to limiting their professional prospects. In order to overcome these obstacles, it is necessary to destroy deeply rooted societal stereotypes as well as promote a more comprehensive awareness of the varied and significant contributions made by Dalit women to the agricultural sector.

Restricted Educational Opportunities: Discriminatory practices in schools can take the form of social exclusion, which deters Dalit girls from going to school. Dalit women's educational opportunities are further restricted by financial hardships and families that prioritise the education of their male members. Their inability to obtain formal education makes it more difficult for them to learn the necessary skills and knowledge, which feeds the cycle of scarce opportunities in the agriculture industry. Targeted initiatives are required to overcome these barriers, such as the adoption of inclusive school policies, the offering of scholarships, and community awareness campaigns that question caste- and gender-based prejudices. In addition to supporting personal development, educating Dalit women is essential to breaking down structural barriers and advancing an inclusive and egalitarian society.

Safety and Health Issues: Female Dalit farmers perform labour-intensive jobs like planting, harvesting, and caring for livestock, and they frequently work in dangerous environments without the proper safety precautions. Their susceptibility to occupational hazards is increased by their limited access to healthcare facilities and lack of protective equipment. Their health concerns are further exacerbated by social and economic factors in addition to the physical risks. Discrimination could discourage people from getting medical help, which could result in untreated health problems. These issues are made more severe by the combination of caste and gender, which puts Dalit women farmers' welfare at risk. In order to ensure a safer and healthier

environment for their agricultural endeavours, addressing safety and health issues requires comprehensive interventions that prioritise both the physical and socio-economic aspects of their work.

Limited Ability to Make Decisions

Marginalised Agency: The voice of Dalit women farmers is marginalised within households and communities by the deeply ingrained caste-based discrimination combined with the patriarchal social structure. Prevalent social norms that uphold inequality often dictate decisions about family welfare, resource allocation, and agricultural practices. Economic discrimination also exists, as Dalit women may find their views ignored on important issues like credit availability and land ownership. Their inability to actively participate in decision-making processes is further hampered by their limited educational opportunities. Targeted initiatives to strengthen Dalit women farmers' social and economic empowerment are necessary to overcome these systemic and historical barriers. These initiatives also need to make sure that their voices are respected and heard when determining the course of their agricultural pursuits and wider livelihoods.

The Intersection between Caste and Gender:

Simultaneous Discrimination: In India, female Dalit farmers bear the twin burden of discrimination on the basis of both gender and caste, posing intricate issues that affect many facets of their lives. Dalit women face discrimination in the agricultural sector, where caste-based roles are deeply embedded, which restricts their access to opportunities and resources. Inequitable compensation, limited decision-making authority, and exclusion from community activities are examples of workplace discrimination. They are further restricted by gender-based expectations to particular jobs that are frequently more labour-intensive and pay less, which exacerbates economic vulnerabilities. Another layer is added by social stigmatisation, which makes them vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion in their communities. The confluence of gender and caste increases health risks because of the compromised well-being caused by unsafe working conditions and limited access to healthcare. Their socioeconomic mobility is further restricted by

opportunities for skill development and educational barriers. Addressing the discrimination that Dalit women farmers experience concurrently requires a complex understanding of the interrelated difficulties they face. Complete interventions are necessary to break the cycle of systemic biases and promote an inclusive and egalitarian environment. These interventions may include focused policies, educational reforms, awareness campaigns, and community empowerment programmes.

Legal and Policy Frameworks: It is essential to create strong legal and policy frameworks in order to advance the rights and general welfare of Dalit women farmers in India. In order to address the intersectionality of caste and gender, inclusive laws and policies are crucial, given recognition of the historical and systemic discrimination they endure. Redressing historical injustices and promoting economic empowerment can be greatly aided by affirmative action policies like land distribution reservations and credit availability. Furthermore, it's critical to enforce anti-discrimination laws strictly in order to combat societal stereotypes that could prevent Dalit women from working in agriculture. Reducing wage disparities and fostering safer work environments require the implementation of legal provisions that guarantee equal pay for equal work and safeguarding from discrimination at work. Furthermore, the downward spiral of limited opportunities can be broken by implementing targeted policies that support Dalit women in agriculture through education and skill development. Since agriculture is a state-regulated sector in India, cooperation between both the national and state governments is essential to ensuring that these laws and policies are implemented as intended. India can work to remove obstacles and create a more welcoming and unbiased atmosphere for Dalit women farmers by establishing an extensive legal and policy framework.

Contributions to Household Food Security and Rural Economies by Female Dalit Farmers

With their committed work in agriculture, Dalit female farmers significantly contribute to rural economies and household food security. These women make important contributions that benefit their families

and the larger community in spite of a variety of social and economic obstacles. Some salient features of their contributions are as follows:

Food Production and Security: Women farmers from Dalit communities actively participate in farming, helping to produce a variety of crops. Their farming endeavours contribute to a consistent and diverse food supply for their households. These women are essential to improving food security in their families and communities because they grow a variety of crops.

Livelihood diversification: Dalit female farmers frequently work in poultry farming, cattle rearing, and other revenue-generating ventures in addition to traditional agricultural methods. By diversifying their sources of income, these women are better able to weather economic turbulence and rural economies as a whole.

Eco-friendly and sustainable farming: Eco-friendly and sustainable farming methods are used by a large number of Dalit women farmers. They support long-term sustainability in agriculture and contribute to environmental conservation by using crop rotation, organic farming practices, and effective water management. These methods are necessary to protect the environment and guarantee the land's productivity for upcoming generations.

Community Building and Empowerment: To address shared challenges, Dalit female farmers frequently organise cooperatives and self-help groups. They exchange information, assets, and experiences via these neighbourhood-based projects, which strengthens their sense of unity. This cooperative strategy empowers women socially and economically while also enhancing the social fabric.

Education and Skill Development: A large number of Dalit women farmers actively look for chances to further their education and develop their agricultural skills. Through learning about contemporary farming methods, pest control, and consumer trends, they raise their own productivity levels and further the development of rural agricultural practices in general.

Market Participation and Income Generation: In local markets, Dalit women frequently sell extra produce. Their involvement in the

agricultural value chain boosts economic activity and produces income, which benefits rural economies. Their families and communities benefit from this economic empowerment, which has a domino effect.

Shattering Social Barriers: Dalit women's active engagement in agriculture subverts social norms and traditional gender roles. These women create an atmosphere where everyone can contribute to the best of their abilities by dismantling barriers and paving the way for greater gender equality in rural communities.

Conclusion

To conclude, the contribution of Dalit women to farming is a complex fabric that combines gender empowerment with socioeconomic resilience. Their unwavering dedication to agriculture challenges social norms and dismantles barriers that have historically marginalised them in addition to ensuring food security for households and boosting rural economies. These women exemplify the transformative potential of inclusive agricultural development because they actively participate in sustainable farming practices, create supportive networks within their communities, and pursue education to further their skills. Encouraging strong and equitable rural communities requires acknowledging and resolving the particular difficulties Dalit female farmers face, in addition to being a social justice issue. They will have a greater influence and help create the foundation for a more equitable and sustainable future in rural communities if a comprehensive strategy that values their contributions and encourages gender-inclusive policies is adopted.

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