

Dalit Women in Economic Structure: An Analysis**(*Dr. Aman Jyoti & ** Dr. Vinay Kumar)**

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The economic field is such a stage where everyone can improve at any stage of life. It is the right of every human being to participate in the economic field according to the ability and capability without any discrimination or restriction. In 1975, the United Nations Organization proposed three significant themes for women as the promotion of equal rights for men and women, the integration of women in development, and the role of women in strengthening peace. The first two themes are related to work whereas the third theme is related to status. These are applied to every member country of the United Nations. The economic level of women in many states in India is not good as they are not provided equal opportunities in career options and even their educational level is also low in many Indian states.¹ This low educational status is a significant hindrance in making her economically sound. The women who have attained education may be in a better position to get economic opportunities and may develop the overall personality and position in society. Occupation is an important indicator of a person's position in society but the majority of the women in India are supportive in the agriculture sector. Since the Indian patterns of economic growth have been a mixed one without too much alteration of the old feudal system at grass root level where caste, tradition, joint family and clan are gradually changing, the most important change for rural women is the access to education and training in modern farming technology, cattle and poultry farming, use of electricity and another option to utilize new energy resources. The women should also have access to employment and training in small-scale and agro-industries, forestry, and fishing. Women are often relegated to comparatively heavy work such as carrying loads for construction.

The sphere of employment is considered as an important indicator of women's status where one can find several contradictory trends. In the organized sector of the economy, i.e in service and professions and that sector of industry which may be

¹ Tara Ali Baig, **Indian's Woman Power**, New Delhi: Books from India Ltd., 1976, p. 175.

described as the creation of the 20th century, the employment of women has increased fairly rapid in the years since the independence of the country, at a rate faster than the growth rate in total employment for this sector. This sector, however, includes a very small proportion of women workers in the country. The major part of the Indian economy, including agriculture, all traditional industries and services, and even a sizeable section of new industries, continues to be in the unorganized sector. The employment of women in this sector has been declining at a very fast rate.² So the general assumption that economic and educational development coupled with the removal of legal barriers results in improving women's economic activity and thereby their status in society, is completely disproved. Traditionally, it has been an opinion in the general masses in India that the women working outside the family should not be encouraged which also resulted in a drop in women's employment. The protective labour laws, particularly maternity benefits make women more expensive from the employer's point of view leading to a decline in women's employment. Comparing the present state of women's economic participation to the situation prevailing in the traditional Indian economy, it is observed that while women had played distinctive and accepted roles in the process of production and exchanged in the traditional economy, as cultivators, artisans, traders, and professionals, and continue to do so in those parts of the economy where traditional forms of the economic organization still prevail.

The Dalit woman is a strong social and economic force, a significant cultural symbol, and has a notable historical background. She contributes to the farming culture and also is the true builder and heir of a prominent face in the industrial culture. She is playing an important role in the construction of buildings and laying roads as a labourer, counterpart to the male and also foils in the factories and other industrial work. She takes care of her family, works at home while eating less and sleeping late in the night for the family, working day and night for the betterment of the family. Though she is a hardworking supporter and builder of the family but still is leading a life full of a disadvantage of being a Dalit and of being a woman. She is facing a 'Hidden Apartheid' and multiple forms of discrimination. In January 2007, the United Nations Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women concluded that

² Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar, **Women in Indian Society**, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2001, p. 24.

the Dalit women in India suffer from deeply rooted structural discrimination.³ In comparison to the Dalit men, the Dalit women do not have equal access to employment opportunities or justice mechanisms. They must contend with threats to their security which include trafficking and sexual violence. In other words, it may be elaborated that the Dalit women now a day face triple discrimination, one as she is an untouchable, second she belongs to the poor class and thirdly as she is a woman. The residential segregation of the Dalit is prevalent all over the country even in the schools, in access to public services, and even in access to services operated by the private sector. The greatest scourge of untouchability was felt by the manual scavengers whose job was to clear the faeces from the public and private latrines and dispose of dead animals. As this job seems polluting and filthy, it is assigned to the Dalit and that too the Dalit women. They are the worst victims of untouchability as they are considered unclean, impure and placed at the lowest level of the caste hierarchy. Even other Dalit often consider them as untouchables. Manual scavengers are considered to be the most oppressed and disadvantaged of any community Indian. The practice has been long outlawed; however, it continues in many Indian states. In 1992, the government in India allocated a sum of more than Rs. 600 Crore to launch a nation wide scheme to identify, train and rehabilitate manual scavengers throughout the country but the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has described the implementation of this scheme as poor.⁴ ‘Bonded labour’ refers to work in slave-like conditions to pay off a debt. Due to the high-interest rates charged and the abysmally low wages paid, the debts are seldom settled. Bonded labourers are frequently low-caste, illiterate, and extremely poor, while the creditors are usually higher-caste, literate, comparatively wealthy, and relatively more powerful members of the community.⁵ The Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976 abolishes all agreements and obligations arising out of the bonded labour system. It aims to release all labourers from bondage, cancel any outstanding debt, prohibit the creation of new bondage agreements, and order the economic rehabilitation offered by bonded labourers by the state. It also punishes attempts to compel persons into bondage with a maximum of three years in prison and

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CEDAW/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

⁴ Himansu Charan Sadangi, **Dalit – The Downtrodden of India**, Delhi, Isha Books, 2008, pp. 225-26.

⁵ Virendra Pratap Yadav and Brijendra Bahadur Srivastava, “Problems and Prospects of Dalits” in **The Asian Man**, Vol. 4, No. 1, (January-June, 2010).

an Rs. 2000 fine. However, the extent to which bonded labourers have been identified, releases, and rehabilitated in the country is negligible. The problem of bonded labour in spite of constitutional restrictions still exists in India where again the evidence shows that the vast majority about 87% of bonded labourers in India come from the Dalit and Adivasi communities.⁶

Sometimes, the Dalit attempted to demand their rights or to lay claim to land that is legally theirs but they consistently met with economic and social boycotts and even retaliatory violence. With time, the agitations by poor peasants and agriculturist labourers acting in their class interests, and this has meant an increased role for women, Dalit, and Adivasis.⁷ In Punjab, there are many examples of violence against the Dalit while they demanded their equal status. In 2003, the incident of Village Talhan in district Jalandhar is worthy to mention where the Dalit demanded their right to be the part of the management of the religious center in the village but instead of that, they were socially boycotted which further lead to the clash between the Jats and the Dalit of the village in different parts of the state.⁸ Similarly, in 2006, a Dalit labourer and activist Bant Singh, seeking persecution of the people who gang-raped his daughter, was beaten so severely that both his arms and one leg had to be amputated. In 2009, the incident of attack and murder of *Dera Sachkhand Ballan* successor Sant Ramanand in Vienna is a similar example of community clash while the Dalit claiming equality in any sphere. It is evident that whenever the oppressed people raise the voice for their rights, they have been greeted with severe hardships. Such incidents have shown the dark picture of Indian socio-economic order even after 70 years of Indian independence.⁹ The Dalit women are still trying to attain equal economic rights however it seems to them tough. The educational revolution coupled with the foundation of new universities has increased the education and employability of the Dalit youth. Immigration to a foreign land has also resulted in economic empowerment. It is ironic however the same has not trickled down to the Dalit women of the region. In the study of the northwestern states,

⁶ N Paul Divakar and Ajai M, "UN Bodies and the Dalits: A Historical Review of Interventions" in Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant (Ed.), **Caste, Race and Discrimination**, Jaipur: Rawat Publications, pp. 20-21.

⁷ Gail Omvedt, "Women and Rural Revolt in India" in **Social Scientist**, Vol. 6, No. 1 (August 1977), p. 24.

⁸ Ronki Ram, "Untouchability in India with a Difference: Ad Dharm, Dalit Assertion, and Caste Conflicts in Punjab" in **Asian Survey**, Vol. 44, No. 6 (November/December 2004), pp. 906-12.

⁹ Ronki Ram, *Social Exclusion, Resistance and Deras: Exploring the Myth of Casteless Sikh Society in Punjab* in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, No. 40 (October 6-12, 2007), p. 4071.

Punjab is at the lowest of the participation of women in the workforce. Even when one comes across the singing glorifying the Dalit courage, one can not help noticing the masculine tone of the songs in which violence and manly courage remains the fundamental attribute. The rising economy of the region could not ensure significant participation of the women in general and Dalit women in particular in the socio-religious world of the region.