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STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN: NEED FOR EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality issue is more concerned in the third world countries. It is widely accepted that the issue is primarily related to economic empowerment of women. The women status is low in our social system and dalit women status is comparatively very low due to social hierarchy. There are eight ways i.e. access to resources, control over income etc. which can lead to dalit women to a stronger status. Similarly, understanding of empowerment issues and formation of subsequent strategies can uplift the Dalit women status. The role of self help groups, education and training, political participation are important to achieve gender equality.

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INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment and gender equality have become topics of utmost importance in the recent times, because gender inequality and its socio-economic and cultural dimensions are all pervasive in the third world as well as in the developed world. However, in the third world, the problem of gender inequality is more acutely associated with economic disempowerment of women. And therefore, of recent, several initiatives are being taken up in the third world countries for the economic empowerment of women so as to reduce the gender inequality. In India, the status and position of women have been historically deplorable. The Indian experience of gender inequality has become more deplorable because of the combinations and permutations of economic un-freedom with caste and class rigidities. There was a fall in the status of women to an abysmally low position from a relatively high status and nobility of the Vedic times. The fall in status has led to a socio-economic and religio-cultural deprivation of women. From the womb to tomb women are victims of violence and deprivations. The vulnerability of women in rural India and that too in U.P. state is worse compared to the all India levels. Therefore, women empowerment is unthinkable in India, without the caste calculus. Apart from this general condition of gender inequalities, the situation seems more miserable in the case of Dalit women. They are victims of a double deprivation: one, on the gender front and the other on the caste

front. The Dalits form a sizeable proportion of our population. The socio-economic conditions of the vast bulk of these people have greatly deteriorated with over 70 percent estimated to be living below poverty-line as against 48 percent of the general population. The Dalits live a life of abject poverty and starvation. Wretchedness is their fate. 82.8 percent of the land of our country is owned by the caste Hindus. It is said that only a 7 percent of the land is owned by the Dalits, and among them nearly 70 percent have less than one hectare. There is no doubt that after Independence the Government of India has undertaken several measures to improve the conditions of the Dalits. The pro-active policies of Government of India for economically empower them through reservations and provisions of subsidies are very significant. Nonetheless, most of such economic policies missed the target of actually empowering the Dalit women. One of the reasons for this failure was the imperfect notion of women empowerment. The second reason lies in the process of implementation, which was highly bureaucratic and hence liable to corruption. The concept of empowerment of women is psychological sense of personal control in the persons, domestic, social and political realms. In order to examine these problems, certain parameters of women empowerment are to be identified. The so-called "ASHTAPATH" to empowerment is considered as the parameters of women empowerment, which is stated below:

Ashtapath (eight –fold-path) to empowerment

1. Access to and control over private assets and resources: This means access and control over productive resources such as land, house and equipment including agricultural implants.

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2. Access to public resources: The term public resources include the entire range of service and fundamental rights guaranteed by the state. This will encompass natural resources such as common land, forest, water and other social and economic rights such as education, health care, credit, which should be assured by the welfare state.

3. Control over their income and labor: This would include an opportunity to participate in productive work and more importantly to be able to decide how she would like to spend the income earned.

4. Control over their body-sexuality, reproduction and physical security: One of the most crucial aspects of gender subordination is women's lack of control over their bodies. This would include the decisions regarding the three important aspects: marriage, sexual relations and family planning.

5. Control over physical mobility: An important and less discussed parameter of women's status is women's control over their physical mobility. We need to assess if the women have the autonomy to move freely an individual and does she go alone or does she need an escort.

6. Access to and control over political sphere: The participation of women into political spaces including local self government, trade unions, federations of urban and rural poor, caste/ community associations is the most critical in recording poor relations between men and women in the public arena.

7. Access to and control over intangible resources-information, influence, sense of self worth and self esteem: Intangible resources such as information and knowledge, the skills, self – confidence, articulation though invisible are integral elements in getting access and entitlements to material resources and in asserting their rights.

8. Position in law and their access to legal structures and redressal: The constitution of India guarantees right to equality to every citizen irrespective of sexes and simultaneously also makes special provisions for women. This has provided the requisite condition for their development but for empowerment to take place the women need access to the legal structure and the redressal system.

It is a process by which one is authorized to think, act and control resources in an autonomous way. The most critical component of women's empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempower women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows with women's education. However, poverty, which is the root cause for educational backwardness of the scheduled caste all these years, is still the root cause today. Whatever incentives the Government has given for advancement of education among the scheduled castes have not really helped the poor scheduled castes. Poor economic conditions are still responsible for illiteracy and massive dropouts. Therefore economic empowerment assumes supreme importance in their empowerment. Secondly, the bureaucratic mode of implementation of Governmental programmes failed to reach the target of empowering Dalit women. However, in the recent past, the SHGs have become a powerful medium for the rural women in India to advance in

various fields. The SHG approach towards women empowerment is found to be highly promising and effective. SHGs of women in India have been recognized as an effective strategy for the empowerment of women especially in the rural areas. Over the years, SHGs have freed them from the clutches of moneylenders and landlords. The income-generation activities have helped them to improve their condition in nutrition, health care, and the education of their children. Thus, to a certain extent, SHGs have succeeded to provide economic freedom to the rural women folks. And this, in turn, has contributed to their improvement in terms of economic decision making, access and control over assets and resources, control over physical mobility, control over their body-sexuality, control over political sphere, widening of their intangible resources such as knowledge and information etc. The saving and credit groups also provide a base for poor women to organization themselves expand options for livelihoods and to participate actively in development. The SHGs thus often provide a platform for women to become functionally literate, to sharpen their communication and conflict-resolution skills, and acquire skills. The empowerment of the women leads to development of the family and of the community at large.

Empowerment : Concept and its meaning

Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience. (Hashemi Schuler and Riley, 1996) Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny and the circumstances of their lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). (Baltiwalla,1994).It is not merely a feel of greater extrinsic control, but also grows intrinsic capacity, greater self-confidence and an internal transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Pinto, 2001). Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment mean individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises chose and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. As per the United National Development fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women's empowerment means:

- Acquiring knowledge and understand of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an

international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources.

Status of dalit women

The Indian society is based on a unique socio-cultural phenomenon – the caste system, which is essentially a religious system, sanctioned and sustained by Hinduism. There is no caste system outside the Hindu context. Speaking about the caste system, J.H. Hunton concurs that it is an exclusively Indian phenomenon and that no other society in world can be compared to the caste-ridden society of India (J. H. Hunton 1963 p-40). Caste inequality and hierarchical thinking permeate every aspect of life in India. The most affected by this growing inequality are those who by their birth bear the stigma of untouchability. Casteism is a cruel social system, which poses the major cause of most evils in India for it, suppresses the untouchables, the Dalits and denies them the opportunity to grow as children of God. While expounding Vedic religion and Upanishadic philosophy, we realize that a large number of Indians are guilty of treating millions of their fellow countrymen as less than human beings. This untouchability has not come into existence at a particular period. During the Vedic period there were no people called untouchables. According to P.V. Kane, there was no question of untouchability in Vedic sacrifices and in all festivals. (T. Nath, 1987 p-18). Walter Fernandes is of the opinion that the caste system originated as a result of the conquest of the Aborigines by Dravidians and then, of the Aborigines and Dravidians by the Aryans (Walter Fernandes 1981 p-1). Many scholars conclude that the origin of the caste system is from says Manu (Time Magazine April 13, 1992 p-11). His text called Manusmriti canonizes the caste system (Barbara Joshi. R. 1986, p-5). But according to Ambedkar caste system was there even before sage Manu, who only articulated the institution of the caste system (Arjun Dangle 1992, p-235).

Root and meaning of the term dalit

The Dalit is derived from Sanskrit language where it is used both as noun and adjective. As noun Dalit stands for all three genders: Masculine, Feminine and Neuter. It has as its root dal, which means to split open, to crack, etc. when used as a noun or adjective, it means burst, split, broken trodden down, scattered, crushed, destroyed etc. (The practical Sanskrit, English dictionary Delhi; 1989), there is also a word dal in Hebrew language, which means broken, crust, down-trodden, split etc., (M.E. Prabhakar, 1988), and may be “ used in two senses: it may refer either to physical weakness or to a lowly insignificant position in society (Elsa Tamex, Bible of the Oppressed, 1983, p-70). In other words, Dalits are people who are broken, crushed and torn apart. They are extremely poor and lowly. The term Dalit can be use for any oppressed group or people who are marginalized and dehumanized.

Usage of the word dalit

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890), a Marathi social reformer belonging to the backward caste, was the first to use the term Dalit to describe the outcaste untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of Hindu Society. The young intellectuals of the Dalits Panther Moment, who used the term

to name and define their movement, however, popularized the term Dalit, during the 1970s. They included in their definition of the word all Scheduled castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, workers, landless laborers, poor peasants, women and others who have been exploited politically, economically and on the basis of religion not all of whom are drawn from the Scheduled Castes. The word Dalit denotes all sorts of operations, i.e. social, economic, religious, political and cultural. Hence, the Dalit means all oppressed people of society. In our discussion the term Dalit is used strictly to refer to the Scheduled caste or depressed classes of India who are born with the stigma of untouchability, socially outcastes, politically powerless, economically indigent, discriminated both religiously and culturally and who are not included in the four-fold Varna structure of Hindu society. The term Dalit is not a mere label or name. In the real sense it describes the condition of a people and it also represented a struggle for their self-identity and recognition in society.

The social condition of Dalits

The Dalits in India, wherever they are suffer the stigma of untouchability and the violation of human rights. Society does not treat them as human beings. The basic human dignity, self-respect and freedom-freedom to live as human beings, freedom to speak, freedom to choose any occupation and freedom to develop their talents – have been totally denied to these people for centuries. They Dalits are considered to be polluted beings. The pollutions – purity principle operates so strongly that their touch, their mere shadow, and even voices are believed to pollute the caste Hindus. They (Avarnas) are not simply human beings. No need to talk about them. They exist either, as objects are pleasure for the high caste or means for their welfare and luxury. They are caste out and left out. The Dalits were denied the comfort of good clothes and even footwear. Besides, some most perverted practices existed in the Indian society. For instance, the Dalits were forced to hang an earthen pot around their neck to collect their spit, and a broom had to be tied behind them to erase their footsteps as they walked on a public road. When a Brahmin came by, the Dalits had to lie at a distance on their face lest their shadow should fall on the Brahmin and pollute him. In some places the Dalits were not allowed to go out on the road or to a public place between 3 p.m. and 9 p.m. because before 9 a.m. and after 3 p.m. their bodies cast long shadows. (B. R. Ambedkar, 1971 p-39). By birth and occupation the Dalits are considered to be polluting and morally defiling and hence they are segregated as much as possible.

Economic powerlessness of dalits

Income of an individual or a society is usually considered an indicator of his or its economic class. The term class is based on economic resources. Needless to say, untouchability is not only a religious system but also an economic system. In a caste-ridden society like India, competition is not on the basis of talents and natural aptitudes but on the basis of the caste in which one is born. 82.8 percent of the land of our country is owned by the caste Hindus. It is said that only a 7 percent of the land is owned by the Dalits and among them nearly 70 percent have less than one hectare (Seminar on Ambedkar, New Delhi, 1191). They are asset less, being mostly landless agricultural laborers or small artisans. They stand no chance in the battle for livelihood; the contest is unequal. There is equality only among equals. To treat unequal as equals is to

perpetuate inequality. The greatest injustice is to divide equally among unequals. Most of them are underemployed. Wages are arbitrary and pitifully low. All this drives the Dalits into indebtedness, the result of which is bondage to which even death brings no end. They are denied access to drinking water well, Dalit women by the powerful and the upper castes is the worst form of dehumanization. They are left with no voice and face. They are the victims of violence and atrocities both at home and outside. Reports of the Commissioner for Scheduled castes and Scheduled Tribes, 1977-78 admit that the Scheduled caste in many parts of the country.... are humiliated, insulted, manhandled, assaulted, burnt alive, tortured and their womenfolk molested. "The miseries are aggravated when they are boycotted socially and economically". There is a character in the novel "Gana Devta" of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, a Gyan Pith Awardee, in which a young Dalit women who was asked by her mother to serve by cleaning the house of the Zamindar of the village but in the process she was raped and as compensation was paid large sum of money. In spite of knowing the background how she earned, her mother expressed her happiness. Later it was noticed that other nobles frequently used to visit her and enjoy her with sexual intercourse. But during the day she was treated as an untouchable, and her very sight was considered as pollution. Not only women alone, Dalits irrespective of sex were considered as untouchables by caste Hindus. In fact if a caste Hindu touches a Dalit by mistake, the Dalit was usually punished. Women were no exception.

Dalit women are compelled to go for various economic activities primarily due to these economic conditions. Even they go for hard labor, even the work that are supposed to be done by men. But they used to get fewer wage in comparison to their male counter part. Women work as daily labor for threshing paddy, transplanting seedling or even as labor in road or building constructions, mostly of higher caste Hindu, Muslim or Christian, many time raped. Though normally considered as untouchables, these Dalit women were permitted to enter in inside of the houses at the time of childbirth. After jobs are over they are reverted back to the untouchable status. The life of Dalit women is governed by certain rules and taboos as prescribed by Manu. Consequently, the Dalit women are subjected to inhuman behavior and acute discrimination. They are not being treated as human being. For those who converted to Buddhism or Christianity, the life women have undergone change. They are more conscious and are trying to establish their own identity in society. On the contrary, the Hindu Dalit women are still stuck to the tradition and superstitions. As a result, they (Hindu Dalit Women) are lagging behind in all spheres as compared to Nav Buddha women.

Strategies of empowering dalit women

Empowerment of the Dalit women is means to poverty alleviation. The goals of poverty eradication can be effectively achieved if Dalit women could be organized into groups for community participation as well as for assertion of their rights. Any strategy of sustainable development relating to poverty eradication has to involve the large number of poor women. Social mobilization and building organization of the poor are essential prerequisites for poverty alleviation. There are several strategies, which enables overall development of Dalit women. The following strategies were found more effective for overall development. They are:

- a) Empowerment of women through development of women and children in the rural areas/ Self-Help Groups.
- b) Empowerment of women through education and training.
- c) Empowerment through political participation.
- d) Empowerment evaluation as a strategies of empowering women.

These different strategies are not independent and exclusive but used interactively.

a) Empowerment of women through DWCRA/SHG approach

Women's empowerment is used to alleviate poverty and other socio-economic issues. Self-Help movement through thrift and savings has been taken of as a mass movement under the government program of development of women and children in the Rural Areas (DWCRA), some of the state Government assisted these self- help groups by providing revolving fund and helping them in micro- enterprise activities. DWCRA programme of self-help groups helped the women to earn additional income. With improvement in economic status, there is enhancement in social status as well. These women show increased awareness of family welfare, promote their children's nutritional and educational status, shows concern about environment and health, issues of sanitation and drinking water. Thus mobilizing the poor women in rural areas for self-help group formation either state Government assisted SHGs or SHGs assisted by Non-Government organization is an effort toward participation of women in poverty alleviation and subsequently increases their awareness towards various social problems. Building the common corpus is the first step toward empowerment of women. The Report of the independent South Commission on Poverty Alleviation (1992), started that when poor participate as subjects and not as objects of the development process, it is possible to generate growth, human development and equity individually the poor women would not be able to overcome obstacles in their struggle for survival, security and self-respect, which they could do through collectives action. The support mechanisms like government and non-government organizations provide the poor women a partnership. The poor collectively can start income generation activities with their own resources to achieve self-reliance with the support of this organization. Thus, starting from the socio-economic base the poor women show increasing awareness, cooperation, self- reliance, self-management and move towards social consciousness, empowerment and self- respect. The emancipation of the Dalit women from economic and social bondage enables to become more productive. The establishment of a self-reliant activity will mutually reinforce the process of promoting positive attitudes and values.

b) Empowerment of women through education and training

One of the most critical components in the development of a society is the investment in human development. The South Asian countries are poorest, most illiterate, malnourished and least gender-sensitive. The Human Development Report on South Asia (1998) shows that South Asia has the lowest adult literacy rate (49%) in the world, which is lower than that of sub-Saharan Africa (57%). In India public primary education facilities have been expanded and national literacy shows an

increase of 38 percent in 1991 to 65.38 percent in 2001. Participation of women in education programme has grown faster than those of men. Female literacy increased two the half times faster than male literacy between 1970 and 2001. However, these achievements are small as India still accounts for 30 % of the total adult literates all over world, where, 24% of girls of primary age are still not in school compared with 16% of boys. Poverty and other economic and social pressure continue to be the major challenge to the achievement of education for all. Keeping girls out of the school is costly and undermines developments. Poverty can be effectively tackled by educating the girls. Educated women keep their families healthier, show concern about their children's education and nutrition. Total literacy campaign started by the National Literacy Commission in some regions in India brought rapid social change.

The Non-Government Organization (NGOs) plays a significant role in the area of education. To large extent the NGO activities have been confined to non-formal education sector. Now a partnership is emerging between the NGOs in they area of basic education as seen in the model of Lok Jumbish, a government-sponsored project for primary education in Rajasthan. Various NGOs are participating in the formal education sector, for example, Action Aid, Plan International, Aga Khan Foundation etc. NGO action in primary education emphasizes delivery system of quality education to the marginalized people like, poor women and girls. Programs of formal and non-formal education are emphasized by the government in collaboration with local NGOs and the communities. The NGOs use the strategy of popular education in spreading knowledge among people. This is seen in people's participation in developing "IEC" (Information, Education and Communication) package of spreading knowledge about HIV/AIDS, health promotion, environmental risks, etc. In the popular education, cultural forms of education are used like, drama, music, stories, etc. Popular education is effective in increasing awareness towards various social issues like, immunization, girls' education, sexual harassment, etc. Popular education can be applied anywhere, adapting to local context, the ideology and culture of the people with in the existing political system. Thus, the NGOs can play a significant role in empowering women through education and training and it is also the basis in the strategy of women's participation in political field.

c) Political participation and empowerment

There is low representation of women at all levels of political institutions. Women still face major obstacles in seeking higher positions in society. Political participation is a human right, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Women are poorly represented at different levels of political life and decision-making. Thus, there is widespread neglect of women's priorities by politicians and bureaucrats. As per the Human Development Report, 1999 women hold only 12.7 % of the world's parliamentary seats and only 8.7 % of those in the least development countries. In India, the process of politically empowering through reservation in the local bodies has helped in the wider mobilization. On many occasions, elected women have provided the leadership for organizing women and get their legitimate demands fulfilled like, window pensions, gas connections, etc. There is a growing realization among the women that local elections are a means to bring positive change in their lives. In different parts

of the country, the SHGs have jointly put a women candidate for the election in the local bodies such as Zila Parishad, Gram Panchayat, etc. Women are motivated to change the traditions. The women's political campaigns refer to solving the issues that affect their daily lives like safe drinking water, schools, health centers, roads, etc. some women have taken the agenda further by displaying a mature understanding of the contexts in which the political economy functions. In our society men, having attitudes resist the political empowerment of women. There is a feeling that women should only contest the reserved seats and not the general seats. In some parts of our country, there is some change, for example, women in the villages of the Hill State of Uttaranchal are waging their own political battle of assertion and articulation of identifies. Several NGOs working in they area try to educate women about the voting behavior and election procedures. Elected women members learn to negotiate their newfound positions in an inherently male dominated system, fighting the adverse institutionalized practices like, corruption. Women face many obstacles while contesting election such as sabotage, threats, boycott and pressure from family. However, women on gaining the political power can bring rapid change in the lives of other women and attain equality.

d) Empowerment evaluation and strategy of empowering women

Empowerment evaluation is the basis of empowering women and community development. Empowerment evaluation reflects the process of participatory communication. SHG formation, popular education and political participation are all based on the process of participatory communication. Empowerment evaluation as a capacity building process is based on the principals of participatory inquiry research and evaluation. Its objective is to highlight community members own knowledge and to empower them. This can be attained by participating the women in each stage of programme development that is, need assessment programme, objectives, implementation monitoring and evaluation. Empowerment evaluation would promote self-determination and community control. The traditional evaluation is done by the professional experts, usually for funding of the organization. It is closed decision-making process and community participation is limited to providing feedback. In the empowerment or participatory evaluation there is shared responsibility and decision making power lies with the participants. In the empowerment evaluation participants not only are evolved but also control the process. Despite its focus on self-determination and collaboration empowerment evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the empowerment evolution process produces a rich data source that enables a more complete external examination. Self-determination defines as the ability to decide one's own course in life, forms the basis of empowerment evaluation. It consist of numerous interconnected capabilities such as the ability to identify and express needs, establish goals or expectations and plan of action to achieve them, identify resources, make rational choices from various alternative, take appropriate steps to pursue the objectives and evaluate the results. Women face resistance because a traditional social structures, norms and values. NGOs can facilitate the process by training the people. Training, facilitation, advocacy and liberation are the facets of empowerment. Liberation means being freed or freeing oneself from pre-existing roles and constraints. It often involves conceptualization of oneself and

others. Empowerment evaluation can also be liberating, as women liberate them from traditional expectations and roles, find new opportunities perceive existing resources in a new light, and redefine their identities and future roles. Empowerment evaluation is a long-term process resulting in improvement of quality of life of community with support from development agencies.

Conclusion

After having looked at the present scenario of Dalit Women it is evident that the need of the hour is empowerment of Dalit women. Due to triple oppression of class, caste and gender, Dalit Women have the least access to education and other opportunities for social and economic mobility. Thanks to the international agencies such as UN. Women empowerment is the key slogan of the 90s and of the new millennium. Empowerment of women means....

- Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus empowerment means psychological sense of personal control in the persons, domestic, social and political realms. It

is a process by which one is authorized to think, act and control resources in an autonomous way. Empowering Dalit Women would go a long way in solving the problems encountered by them. Social activist and social workers can play a key role in the process of empowerment of Dalit women so as to enable them to come into the mainstream of the society.

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