Issues of Dalit Women

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The Working Group on Women’s Agency and Empowerment for the 12th Five Year Plan defines women’s empowerment as “as a process, which enables women to have a notion of dignity and self-worth, bodily integrity, freedom from coercion and control over resources. It affirms that empowerment is achieved when, along with the condition of women, their position improves and their freedoms and choices are enlarged economically, socially and politically. Empowerment must enable all women to negotiate these freedoms and increase their capabilities.”

A brief overview of the condition of Dalit women in India affirms the fact that they perhaps constitute one of the most disempowered sections of the society. The issues faced by them are deep-rooted in the caste-based patriarchal social structure inherent in the society. Dalit women face triple deprivation by being poor, being women and being a Dalit (Scheduled Caste). The interface of the severely imbalanced (social, economic and political) power equations in caste and patriarchy impacts Dalit women uniquely; very distinct from the experience of other women and even Dalit men (Irudayam, Mangubhai, Lee, 2006). Dalit women remain marginalised in all spheres of life, be it education, health, political participation, occupation, wages, assets, social mobility, extent of victimization through violence or access to justice. Incidence of violence against Dalit women is particularly high and assumes a dual nature of being both sexual as well as caste-based. Violence is often used against the women to ‘keep them in their place’ as a lesson for them to adhere to the existing feudal and patriarchal dominant-caste norms. According to the National Commission for Women, “In the commission of offences against... [Dalit] women the [dominant caste] offenders try to establish their authority and humiliate the community by subjecting their women to indecent and inhuman treatment.”

Further, when they transgress caste norms such as those prescribing caste endogamy or untouchability practices, or assert their rights over resources or public spaces, violence is unleashed on them.

Dalit women have been subjected to rape, molestation, kidnapping, abduction, homicide, physical and mental torture, immoral traffic and sexual abuse. The National Crime Records Bureau data reveals that more than four Dalit women are raped every day in India. Dalit women’s experience of violence across four Indian states shows that the majority of Dalit women report having faced one or more incidents of verbal abuse (62.4%), physical assault (54.8%), sexual harassment and assault (46.8%), domestic violence (43.0%) and rape (23.2%) (Irudayam, Mangubhai, Lee, 2006) as quoted in Violence Against Dalit Women. Input to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in connection with her visit to India between 22 April – 1 May 2013. The violence against Dalit women is linked primarily to violation of their sexual or bodily integrity, gender inequality and ‘natural’ caste hierarchy, violation of their civil rights, economic exploitation, and resistance to the group’s assertion of their political rights and when Dalit women seek justice and protection of the law. The incidence of violence against Dalit women is particularly high when they assert their political rights, contest in Panchayat elections or when they try and exercise their political authority as elected Panchayat representatives.

Given such multiple disadvantages faced by Dalit women, especially the high incidence of violence targeted at them, it is of utmost importance to accord special attention to their overall development and empowerment. A number of policies and programmes have been introduced for the development of Dalits, however the extent to which their concerns have been integrated in the policy and planning processes of the country is a question worth assessing. Likewise, though there are a number of measures in place for women in general, to what extent have the Dalit women found a place in these, is also worth looking at. The idea is to try and assess the nature of social rank being accorded to ‘Dalit women’ in the government policies and programmes in recognition of the triple disadvantages that they face, and how far has the group been recognized as a separate category whose needs are different from those of poor men, Dalit men, and non-Dalit women.

National Policy for Women (2001):

Recognizes that women belonging to the Scheduled Castes have inadequate access to education, health and productive

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1 Working Group on “Women’s Agency and Empowerment” for the 12th Five Year Plan, Planning Commission, Govt of India


5 Ibid

6 Available at http://wcd.nic.in/empwomen.htm
resources. It also recognizes the need for targeted policies in the field of education to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate lifelong learning as well as development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women, whereby it emphasizes the need to focus particularly on SC women and girls.

Union Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD):

There is supposed to be a special emphasis in various schemes and programmes run by the Ministry on the benefits for SCs and STs. To ensure that at least 28.2 percent of the total allocation of the Ministry is utilized for the benefit of SCs and STs, the Ministry has earmarked funds for them under three major schemes, viz. ICDS, SABLA and IGMSY. During 2012-13, an amount of Rs. 5217 crore has been earmarked for the purpose.

Specific Interventions under the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment⁴ (MSJE):

- Under Special Central Assistance (SCA) to Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan (SCSP), at least 15% of the SCA should be utilized by States/UTs for SC women.
- Mahila Samriddhi Yojana under National Scheduled Caste Finance and Development Corporation (NSFDC): exclusive Micro-credit scheme for women beneficiaries.
- Mahila Kisan Yojana under NSFDC: Term Loans up to Rs. 50,000/- at an interest rate of 5% p.a., exclusively to women beneficiaries for taking up income generating ventures in Agriculture and/or Mixed Farming related economic activities.

- NSKFDC: Women are a priority group under the economic development and rehabilitation measures under this.
- Several scholarships (Pre-Matric, Post Matric, National Overseas Scholarship, Top Class Education for Meritorious Students etc.) that have a provision for earmarking a certain percentage for girl students.
- Hostels for students, with special focus on Girls’ Hostels (eg: Babu Jagjivan Ram Chhatarwas Yojana, Girls Hostels) Under Babu Jagjivan Ram Chhatarwas Yojana, under the girl’s hostel component of the scheme, 100% Central Assistance is provided for new construction and expansion of existing girls’ hostel building to State Governments (as against 50% assistance for boy’s hostels).
- Machinery for Implementation of PCR Act of 1995 and Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989: functioning and strengthening of SCs and STs Protection Cell and Special Police Stations, setting up and functioning of exclusive Special Courts, cash incentives for inter-caste marriage, relief and rehabilitation of atrocity victims and awareness generation.
- A number of studies sanctioned to various organisations to study the different forms of vulnerabilities faced by Dalit women.

Working Group on Women’s Agency and Empowerment for the 12th FYP:

The working group acknowledges that Dalit women face multiple disadvantages, which are primarily a result of the dominant socio-cultural norms and practices. It recognises that the empowerment of SC women needs special attention in our development policies, and the need is to follow a rights-based approach, take steps to eliminate untouchability, ensure provision of subsidized foodgrains with outlets in SC bastis (operated as far as possible by SC women), special intervention for migrant SC women and children, and provide assistance and infrastructure to carry out fishing operations and related activities.

12th Five Year Plan (2012-17):

The observations and recommendations are along the same lines as the Working Group with special focus on the education of SC girls through scholarships, hostels, residential schools and other such measures. The approach is to ensure security and dignity especially of SC women, improve their development status, empower them for political participation and implement SCSP effectively to achieve inclusive growth. Priority is to be given for economic development and rehabilitation of manual scavengers (most of whom are SC women) through National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC).

The Scheduled Castes Sub-Plan Bill, 2013 (Draft Bill for the National Legislation):

Dalit women do not find a mention in this draft Bill except the clause to have at least three women members among the six social workers, as a part of the National Scheduled Castes Development Council. That is not to say that there should be separate earmarking for Dalit women within SCSP, however, the recognition of the fact that they have specific needs, distinct from Dalit men, and incorporation of the same in the overall planning process under the SCSP would have been welcome.

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⁴Outcome Budget 2012-13 of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Gov
⁵As given in the Annual Report of MSJE (2010-11), Official website of the MSJE (https://www.socialjustice.nic.in/index.php), Union Budget Documents (Gender Budget Statement and Expenditure Budget Vol. 2 for 2013-14)
It is clear from a brief overview of the policies and programmes in place that the approach towards empowerment of Dalit women is either subsumed under their identity of being a Dalit or of being a woman. Recognition of the fact that women are a heterogeneous group with varying issues and needs and at the same time, concerns faced by Dalit women are different from those faced by Dalit men, is yet to be incorporated in our policy framework. What is lacking is a substantive approach to address the specific issues faced by Dalit women. Especially, given the high incidence of violence against the group, it is important that separate allocations be made for addressing this concern through strengthening the implementation of existing policies and legislations as well as designing new structured interventions. It is high time that Dalit women are treated as a distinct group and a comprehensive needs-based approach is adopted to address the disadvantages facing the SC women.