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The Predicament of The Vulnerable: Dalit Lives in Keeranur Hamlet, India

By Jeeva M.¹, Bijin Philip², Vinesh Raj V³

Abstract

Dalit people and Dalit women especially experience deep prejudice and pressures in Indian society. This paper highlights these challenges in a specific region of India, the village of Keeranur. The authors explore how to eradicate inequality and how Dalits can live with dignity in society as human beings. Both researchers and Dalits themselves as victims also propose alternative conditions to their current lives. We have gathered first-hand information from 67 Dalit women who reside in the village of Keeranur. In India, four states account for 50% of the Dalit population, according to the 2011 census. Tamilnadu and the hamlet of Keeranur are part of those four states. We evaluated survey instruments for validity and reliability using a pilot test. Logistic regression and exploratory factor analysis were used for the data analysis to determine whether or not Dalits continue to experience crises based on their identities. According to the in-depth report, the researchers discovered that Dalit women still experience sexism, inequality, impoverishment, and difficulties stemming from their identity, in their daily lives. One of the important findings from the study is that urban migration of Dalit women can shield them from their vulnerable identities. As part of this study, we also developed a model that illustrates the various ways Dalits' identity and standard of living might be enhanced.

Keywords: Dalit women, Dalits identity, Caste system, Logistic regression, Vulnerability, Urban migration, Justice

JEL Classification: J15, I31

Introduction

India is a socially divided country, and caste is one of the key elements contributing to the nation's social stratification. Numerous facets of social life are firmly anchored in the caste system (Mittra, Mayurakshi, 2021). The word "Dalit" comes from the root "dal," which means to divide or break. As an adjective, it refers to being crushed or demolished. Dr. Ambedkar was the first to utilize the term "Dalit," and it was first assumed as a descriptive term by the Arya Samaj⁴. Mahatma Gandhiji created a new phrase called "Harijan" during the freedom movement. The new terminology was limited in that it assisted people in developing alternative names without altering the underlying prejudices, such as the belief that Dalits might be thought of as outcast spirits in the material world.

Many women continue to suffer in silence and are hesitant to discuss their issues because of how they have been defined historically. Dalit women have represented an "abandoned class on the boundaries (hashiye par)" (Samuelsen11) of humanity which frames them into a distinct classification. Gabrielle Eve rightly stated in her book, *Culture, and the State: Alternative Interventions*, that "Dalit women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only

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⁴ A monotheistic Indian Hindu reform movement that promotes values and practices based on the belief in the infallible authority of the Vedas.

through caste but gender too, from which there was no escape". (1515). As increasing numbers of Dalit scholars and Dalit activists note, Dalit women experience existential crises on a daily basis. The intersectionality of caste and gender is apparent and exemplified in popular culture including films, which frequently feature the intertwining of caste and gender, when, for example, women's caste status puts heroes (men) in awkward situations (Pal, Bidisha, et al, 2021), thereby normalizing discrimination against Dalit women.

Rather than reiterating the growing body of Dalit scholarship that carefully documents the multiple forms of discrimination against Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular, this article's contribution to the literature is through its focus on a particular study, rather than reiterating the voluminous scholarship that outlines the many forms of discrimination from the denial of property rights, education and civil and cultural rights and the impact of this marginality and othering: loneliness, physical seclusion, stigma that labels them as filthy and polluting. Apartheid and isolation have been further factors in the denial of their freedoms. Lack of access to physical and social mobility have resulted in the denial of equitable access in social, academic, and commercial sectors (Dutta, S., Sinha, I., & Parashar, A, 2018).

Brief Review of Select Literature

India holds a special place in South Asia due to its political influence, size, geographic location, economic dominance, and cultural-historical legacy. Dalits (sometimes referred to as untouchables, Scheduled Castes, or Outcastes) comprise approximately 200 million people, or roughly 16.6% of the population (Kumar, Ajay, 2021). Mary Grey, in her article, "Dalit Women and the Struggle for Justice in a world of Global Capitalism" and Jayshree Mangubhai (2014), in her book *Human Rights as Practice: Dalit Women Securing Livelihood Entitlements in South India* Dalit women's livelihood struggles, and the power dynamics between these women and different state and non-state actors, which continuously condition and, in turn, are conditioned by Dalit women's collective action. Anandhi, in her book *Writing The History of The Invisible*, portrays Dalit women as successful women through their struggles. Palik in her book *Amchya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* argues that even education qualifications of secondary education do not offer equality to Dalit women who suffer from physical as well as mental anguish because of their social isolation.

Dalit feminism has highlighted an "outsider within" status (marginality within Dalit society due to Dalit patriarchy and marginality within non-Dalit feminisms), enabling them to depict their lived realities in new ways. Sharma, B., and Kumar, A. (2020) examine three Dalit women writers' life narratives: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2015), Bama's *Sangati: Events* (2005), and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), to discuss and explore the sociological significance of three common themes in these narratives: (1) their role in eradicating discrimination, (2) endurance and resilience, and (3) the interconnected nature of Dalit women's oppression. As per the study, Dalit women writers' perceptions are generating a new understanding of their lives, relations, and communities, creating a springboard for the creation of a Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

K.R. Raman (2020) documents and analyses the 2015 protest by Dalit women in tea plantations in the south Indian state of Kerala, exploring how the conflict transformed them into active political subjects: a "subject position from which to speak." The study seeks to supplement postcolonial organization studies from deeper subjective aspects of the labor process. Another movement that drew on women's subjective experiences of a social problem, the the #MeToo movement prompted many women to share their narratives of sexual harassment on social media. However, the campaign's influence in India was limited because it did not include the perspectives of historically marginalized people. By reproducing a few key components of a victim/survivor of a caste-based event of sexual violence in Maharashtra, Satyabhama's case, Bansode (2020) analyses how Dalit women's testimonies of sexual violence

were erased—but which are nonetheless crucial for developing both the feminist and Dalit movements.

R. Govinda (2009) analyzes the interaction of NGOs, the state, and international donors with Dalit women in rural Uttar Pradesh in northern India, uncovering the complexities, contradictions, and challenges that are created, reproduced, and undermined in these interactions. NGOs have tended to create more opportunities for men than women limiting women's capacity for financial independence (Heyer, J, 2010). Thus, the issues of Dalit women are distinct in many respects, and they suffer from the triple burden of gender bias, caste prejudice, and economic deprivation (Sabharwal, N. S., & Sonalkar, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

Outside of caste-based South Asian societies, there is a lack of global awareness of the persistence of casteism. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the misery that casteism causes among Dalit women in Indian society, to analyze and assess potential alternatives to casteism to improve the lives of Dalit women in particular.

Objectives

- To analyze the influential factors in Dalit women's suffering
- To analyze the impact of Dalit identity on women
- To uncover problems that Dalit women face
- To develop a model to enhance the quality of the Dalit women's lives

Hypothesis

H0	There is a significant impact of Dalit identity on women
H1	There is no significant impact of Dalit identity on women

Methodology

The present study is based on primary data collected from 67 Dalit women in the village of Ottanchathiram Taluk, Keeranur. Researchers implemented a pilot test, and the survey items were checked for validity and reliability. The survey used a 5-point Likert scale. The content and conceptual validities of the survey were also checked. The clarity, conciseness, and reliability of the items to the subject matter were evaluated according to the answers of the village participants. We performed data analysis using exploratory factor analysis and logistic regression. To probe the topic of Dalit identity crisis, we carried out exploratory factor analysis and logistic regression using SPSS 23.0 for our analysis.

Results and Discussion

To comprehend the various latent dimensions of the suffering of the Dalit women, we collected responses from a set of 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale. The tests of Adequacy favored the conduct of EFA (KMO = 0.836, Bartlett's test of sphericity, Chi-square =423.54 with significance value < 0.01). The communalities extracted from all the 16 items were more than 0.4; hence, all the items contribute well to the total variability of the data. Three factors were identified with an Eigenvalue greater than one. Hence, these five factors are utilized for further analysis. The EFA findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test**KMO and Bartlett's Test**

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.	.836
Approx. Chi-Square	35.036
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity df	10
Sig.	.000

Table 2: Rotated Component Matrix

Factors		Factor loading
Discrimination	Gender discrimination	0.803
	Caste- and untouchability-based discrimination	0.787
	Discrimination in employment opportunities	0.744
	Discrimination in educational opportunities	0.708
Deprivation	Economic deprivation	0.791
	Educational deprivation	0.743
	Food and other necessities	0.722
Equality	Not given equality in common celebration such as festivals	0.712
	Other caste people do not mingle with us because of our identity	0.692
	Equality in job opportunities and promotion	0.667
	Equality in education	0.589
Dalit Identity	Introducing yourself as a Dalit woman in front of your peer group	0.705
	Economic Status	0.673
	Do you believe that traditional values make you feel bound by the society	0.619
Suffering	Temple prostitution	0.671
	Caste-based atrocities and violence	0.645

The above table presents the important aspects that influence the life of Dalit women in society. To find the influence of these factors on Dalit women's lives, we carried out a logistic regression; the predictor variable is dichotomous, Satisfied ($Y = 1$) or not ($Y = 0$) with the Dalit identity. The hypothesis model is,

$$Y = \log \left\{ \frac{p(y=1)}{1-p(y=1)} \right\} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ Discrimination} + \beta_2 \text{ Deprivation} + \beta_3 \text{ Equality} + \beta_4 \text{ Dalit Identity} + \beta_5 \text{ Sufferings.}$$

The estimates of the regression coefficients are presented in the table

Table 3: Estimate of Logistic Regression Model

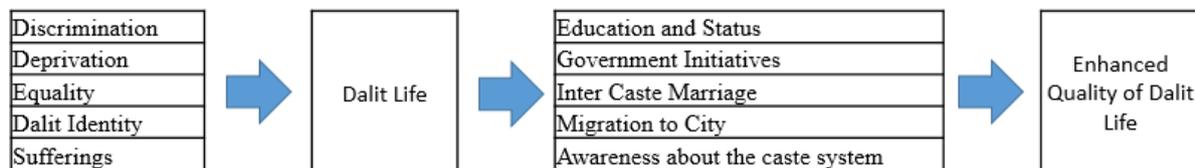
	B	Wald	Sig.	Odds Ratio
Discrimination	-0.932	12.713	.000	.119
Deprivation	-0.459	45.807	.000	.423
Equality	-0.754	25.223	.000	.520
Dalit Identity	-0.965	8.011	.000	.097
Suffering	-0.188	29.553	.000	.502

The sign of the estimated coefficients of logistic regression, reveals if odds (+) are greater or smaller (-) than the reference level, the factors that adversely affect the lives of Dalit women in society. The negative sign of these coefficients indicates that it is highly essential to improve these factors to remove Dalit discrimination, exclusion, and stigma to gain a “normal” life.

From the analysis, discrimination and Dalit women's identity are the most dominant factors that affect the lives of Dalit women, including temple prostitution and violence. In her article, “Devadasi System: Forced Prostitution by Dalit Women in the Name of Religion” Deepa discusses that practice of, “keeping Dalit women as prostitutes, and by tying prostitution to bondage in rural areas, upper-caste men reinforce their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes” (2016).

H0	There is a significant impact of Dalit identity on women	Accepted
H1	There is no significant impact of Dalit identity on women	Rejected

Table 4: Model Developed to Enhance the Quality of the Dalit Women



According to the data, moving to a city is one of the most direct methods of alleviating Dalit misery. In urban areas, they are more likely to obtain a suitable education, gain status through government initiatives, inter-caste marriages, and caste system awareness campaigns. These can improve the Dalits' sense of identity and quality of life.

Conclusion

The study offers a statistical window into the discrimination that Dalit women continue to experience, s that are documented by literary and social scienced data. The research emphasized the following results: 1) Dalit women face private and public discrimination; 2) They expressed that in urban settings they can find reprieve from their suffering through access to education, a status that offers them greater opportunities. As Dalit women enter into all positions within society, they will be recognized and respected for their qualifications.

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