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PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF SCHEDULED CASTE WOMEN : A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract:-This Article focuses on problems and challenges of scheduled caste women : a sociological analysis The “Scheduled Castes” is the legal and constitutional name collectively given to the groups which have traditionally occupied the lowest status in Indian society and the Hindu religion which provides the religious and ideological basis for an “untouchable” group, which was outside the caste system and inferior to all other castes. The terms are recognised in the Constitution of India and the various groups are designated in one or other of the categories. During the period of British rule in the Indian subcontinent, they were known as the Depressed Classes. In modern literature, the Scheduled Castes are sometimes referred to as Dalits. Sociologically the word gender refers to the soc-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles. The distinction between sex and gender was introduced to deal with the general tendency to attribute women’s subordination to their anatomy. The Scheduled Castes (SCs, also known as Dalits) among the most socially and economically disadvantaged groups in India. Hence, there is increase in exploitation, discrimination and violence against the scheduled caste women. The female feticide, illiteracy, gender inequality, Devadasi, Jogini practice, Nude Service to Deity, different types of violence, dowry, child marriage, etc are few of the problems faced by scheduled caste women in present society in india. And also she struggle by the Scheduled Castes women for their rights and equal treatment is now facing new challenges,

Keywords: Violence, Harassment, suicide, murder, Atrocities, poverty, illiteracy, Scheduled Caste, Trafficking.

INTRODUCTION :

Women were not even consulted. Women’s wrongs formed the theoretical basis for men’s rights or more properly male duties towards moderating women’s lust. Women were not given equal matrimonial rights to property, rights to widows to remarriage, adoption and divorce rights. This situation was severely criticized by the colonial authorities. In return, Indian cultural nationalism argued in favour of Indian tradition. Therefore, the 19 th century is often termed as the century of social reform.

The criticism angered the people of India and caused a serious threat to the longevity of colonial rule in India. It cannot be clearly stated whether equal rights between men and women prevailed or not during the Vedic period. But available sources show that liberal attitudes and practices pertaining to women did exist. Women were actively involved in religious and social matters. They had some freedom to choose their partner in marriage and a widow was permitted to remarry. As India started taking steps towards civilization, social discrimination increased. Jainism and Buddhism emerged as potent religious reform movements. According to Buddha, women’s spiritual capacities were equal to men’s. “Buddhism began as a religion that treated women as equal to men in their capacity for personal spiritual development.”¹ “The universal prejudices against women, who are said to be weak- minded, fickle, treacherous and impure are shared by the Jains and expressed in several passages of the canon and in the form of maxims.” The high status that women enjoyed during early Vedic period gradually started deteriorating in the late

Vedic period. When the SC women refuse to work for ridiculously low wages or fail to follow their harsh orders it results in open violence, humiliation, beatings, rape, and jail. There are also a number of cases where the houses of SC women have been burnt down (Agarwal: News Archives). The only way these SC women can escape the vicious cycle of poverty, and oppression is through education. Through education more SC women can know their basic human rights and they can then raise their voice against abuse and exploitation from the upper castes. As the poorest of the poor, SC women lack the means and the opportunity to defend themselves at home or to make their problems known outside rural India. In a male dominated society, SC women suffered unimaginable oppression, not only through caste, but gender too, from which there was no escape. The laws in the Manusmriti and other Vedic scriptures close all economic, political, social, educational, and personal channels through which SC women could be uplifted (Thing n.pag). The horrendous Laws in the Manusmriti were incorporated into Hinduism because they were favourable only to the upper castes, which form the majority of India. According to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (2000), approximately 75 per cent of the SC girls drop out of primary school despite reservations for SCs. Reasons for this early drop out from the education system is poverty or to escape humiliation, bullying and isolation by classmates, society and even their teachers. Atrocities on SC women can be found recorded in various newspaper articles, journals, and government reports many of which can be viewed on website www.ambedkar.org.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

To study the background of scheduled caste women.
To know the problem and challenges of scheduled caste women.

METHODOLOGY:

The present paper examine the indicators of problems and challenges of scheduled caste women : a sociological analysis A two-step methodology was followed for this article, comprising literature review, and analysis of secondary data. drawn classified from the Publications of books, monthly journals, articles, and magazines, and internet was used.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

It is very important to know the historical background, if we are to make a study of status of women in India. It is not easy to find answers for questions like when did women start losing their status or who was responsible for this situation. Indian women are not treated on par with men. Moreover, the SC women are oppressed among the oppressed. One even with a little human sensitivity gets stunned with the realistic and authentic accounts of the living conditions of SC women, their oppressions, humiliation, sufferings and exploitation. SC women's sufferings are two-fold: they have their own share of universal suffering as women. Additionally, they are victims of a variety of exploitations – social, religious, economic and cultural as well. Her experience of patriarchal domination is more severe than that of non-SC women. Opportunities and avenues available to her to voice her grievances and agonies are very few. Indian society is all male dominated society. Men dominate women. Therefore, it is very natural for SC woman to be dominated by her husband and other male folk. Even after sixty years of Independence and constitutional guarantees, she has to undergo several travails. She has to work hard for earning livelihood of her family. She has to undergo atrocities committed on her by her drunken husband, she has to protect herself from the people where she works and she has to fight against all exploitation. Hence SC women in general, have to make a two-way struggle, one in the house and the other outside the house.

In India, the traditional four-fold caste system, called varna, consists of Brahmins - the Priestly caste - Kshatriya (the warrior) and the Vaisyas (the traders), all of whom are considered twice-born and are allowed to read holy texts. The fourth group - the Sudras - the servile caste is not allowed to read the holy scriptures. SCs were an even lower caste, the so-called 'outcaste' or 'untouchable' groups, whose very shadow was considered polluting to caste Hindus. They cannot draw water from the wells and tanks used by the caste - Hindus. They were denied the use of public roads and transport. Untouchable women could not dress up in the manner of other Hindu women nor could they wear jewellery. They were exploited sexually by upper caste men and as domestic hands by the upper caste women. This way, they are doubly exploited by the men and women of caste – Hindus. The hardships of SC women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper castes, which is legitimised by Hindu religious scriptures (Third n.pag; Agarwal n.pag). Ruth Manorama, an active member of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and the National Alliance of Women, once stated that in a male dominated society, "Dalit women face a triple burden of caste, class and gender" in which she sums up the plight of SC women, highlighting the fact that SC women are distinct social group and cannot be masked under the general categories of "Women" of "Dalits". In Ancient India (3200-2500 B.C.), the caste system was non-existent since even the most learned men were good householders and had

varied occupations. The women of ancient India were just as superior as men in learning, education, and intellect.

The choice for her mate was according to her own wishes and marriage was practised after the coming of age. She attended parties, competitions, and religious functions as she wished. The remarriage of young widows was also a common practice. The creation of a number of Hindu religious books including the Manusmriti, Atharva Vedas, Vishnu smriti, and many others like these and their strict compliance by the Brahmans (upper priestly Hindu caste), led to a society in which equality between men and women was far from existent. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an architect of the Indian Constitution, also makes it very clear in his article titled "The rise and fall of Hindu woman" that the root cause of suffering for women in India are these so-called Hindu religious books. Works like the Manusmriti divide people into a stratified caste system and women. According to the Manusmriti, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth. It not only justifies the treatment of SC women as a sex object and promotes child marriage, but also justifies a number of violent atrocities on women as can be seen in the following verses (Agarwal; Manusmriti): A man, aged thirty years, shall marry a maiden of twelve who pleases him or a man of twenty-four a girl of eight years of age.

Problems and challenges of Scheduled Caste Women: Problems confronting the Scheduled Caste women are multifold. At the most basic level, she is not allowed to choose whom she marries. After marriage, she cannot decide how often or when and how many children to have. She is conditioned to believe that male children are more important for the family than girl children. Despite the condition of her body she is forced to become pregnant and deliver a male child. It is not uncommon in rural India, when a woman fails to deliver a son she is not only looked down, but her husband threatens to divorce her if she does not give consent to his second marriage, ostensibly to beget a male child who is supposed to perpetuate the dynasty.

Harassment and suicide or murder: Promises made at the time of marriage by the bride's parents and the greediness of the bridegroom and his family for more money often results in the harassment of the bride and her subsequent suicide or murder. Another form of victimisation is childlessness, a condition always attributed to women. For want of a child, the whole family influences her to accept her husband's second marriage. Strangely this happens not only with the in-laws but she often faces pressure from her parents too.

Violence : Agriculture is the major occupation of rural women in India. Among the agricultural women workers Scheduled Caste women constitute a majority. Farm work is her chief source of income. Quite often she is the major earner in the family. She earns family's daily food by working in the fields of landlords earning a wage far less than the minimum fixed by the government. Violence in the form of beating or forcing for free sexual gratification are not uncommon for the Scheduled Caste women in India as the village economy is dominated by the high caste landlords and their kith and kin. Quite often the members of her family are silenced by the threats of local high caste politicians as well as the perpetrators of the ghastly crime along with their fellow caste men in the police department which is supposed to protect them.

Participate and Decision: not allowed to participate in the decision-making at any stage of her life, Though the Scheduled Caste woman earns a major share of her family income, she is not allowed to participate in the decision-making at any stage of her life. Men decide everything such as what to wear, how to walk, with whom to talk and interact etc. Any form of resistance to this control results in violence. This apart, it is not uncommon for her to get regular thrashing from her drunken husband who in addition to spicy food often demands money for extra boozing. While water is a scarce commodity in India, liquor flows from the barrels of barons of liquor trade to all nooks and corners of India.

social welfare hostels: Many dailies and television channels dish out incidents of the sexual abuse of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe girls who stay in social welfare hostels. Apart from denying food and minimum facilities, the staff indulging in mean activities have become quite a routine affair. Such kind of incidents are not reported from other educational institutions and hostels where high caste girls and other than Scheduled Caste girls study, staying in hostels. Why this ill-treatment is meted out to Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe girls only Is it because of caste antagonism? Is it because of their helplessness? This is a point that needs a scholarly probing.

poverty and illiteracy: Due to the poverty and illiteracy of the parents most children of the Scheduled Castes must share the family's economic burden and thus they are exploited as child labourers. They work in the fields and in the quarries. This is the reason why school dropout percentage is increasing day by day. Among the child labourers a majority belong to the deprived sections of the society.

Atrocities and Violence against Scheduled Caste Women: Women are often condemned by their own families as well as their community for speaking out against discrimination and abuse. When they seek help from the state to enable them to carry out their legitimate activities they are often confronted with further discrimination from the

criminal justice system and from the state machinery which pushes them to conform to a gender stereotype which decrees that women should not question the status quo and thereby undermine the family and community. Vulnerably positioned at the bottom of India's caste, class and gender hierarchies, SC women experience endemic gender-and-caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations. Their socio-economic vulnerability and lack of political voice, when combined with the dominant risk factors of being SCs and female, increase their exposure to potentially violent situations." Hence, violence, which serves as a crucial social mechanism to maintain SC women's subordinate position in society, is the core outcome of gender-based inequalities shaped and intensified by the caste system. revealed the multiple layers of violence that pervade their lives, SC women endure violence in both the general community and in the family, from state and non-state actors of different genders, castes and socio-economic groupings.

Gender bias in identity formation: The Indian society's unique social structure is an oppressor of women in almost every sphere of life due to its denial of equal status to them. The patriarchal system of the society forces women to be confined to the four walls of their homes largely engaged in the household chores.

Trafficking of women: According to a recent survey women are bought and sold with impunity and trafficked at will to other countries from different parts of India, only to be forced to work as sex workers undergoing severe exploitation and abuse. These women are the most vulnerable group in contracting HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases. Acute poverty and lack of employment opportunities has been abetting an increased voluntary entry of women into sex work. Trafficking is a complex challenge as it is an organized criminal activity.

Honor killings: To be young and in love has proved fatal for many young girls and boys in parts of north India as an intolerant and bigoted society refuses to accept any violation of its rigid code of decorum, especially when it comes to women. Many such killings, which go by the name honour killings, happen with regularity in Punjab, Haryana

Discrimination against Scheduled Caste Women: Major Areas of Discrimination against Scheduled Caste Women Broadly speaking there are major areas of discrimination against Scheduled Caste women in India. India has exceptionally high rate of child malnutrition because tradition requires that women eat last and least throughout their lives even when pregnant and sick. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle. Poor health Females receive less health care than males. Many women die in child birth very often in villages and remote areas for lack of proper medical care and service. Working conditions and environmental pollution further impair their health. Lack of education Illiteracy is rampant among the Scheduled Caste women particularly in rural areas. Hence they suffer from discrimination throughout their life. Overwork Women work for more hours than men. They have to attend to domestic duties and work outside to eke out their livelihood. Scheduled Caste women are agricultural workers. Most of the Technological progress in agriculture has had a negative impact on these women. Unskilled Because of lack of education and skills many Scheduled Caste women take up low paid jobs, often working as agricultural labourers. Mistreatment In recent decades there has been an alarming rise in crimes and atrocities perpetuated on Scheduled Caste women.

This trend is much more rampant in rural areas than in towns and cities. Fear of harassment makes them quite often not to report against assaults, rapes, and domestic violence and seek legal remedies. Law enforcing agencies such as police quite often pooh pooh their complaints and in many instances refuse to register cases against the perpetrators of crime against these helpless women. Helplessness While women are guaranteed equality under the Constitution, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. Scheduled Caste women lack power to decide whom they will marry and are often married off as children. Despite the Sarada Act, child marriage is prevalent in rural areas particularly among these untouchable castes. Unlike their counterparts in other castes particularly of high castes, Scheduled Caste girls do not have opportunity of falling in love with men of other castes and go for inter-caste marriage, defying their caste customs, tradition, elders, etc. If they do so, the chances of getting any protection from legal authorities or even public sympathy are very slim. Legal loopholes are used often to deny them their rights.

Untouchability: untouchability in Hindu social system is not out of place. Far from so, it helps us understand the plight of the SCs in general and the SC women in particular. The Scheduled Caste population is widely spread out and is essentially a minority in almost all the villages in India. These people can hardly hope to assert themselves to avail of the constitutional benefits. That each should know one's place in the hierarchy has such a stranglehold in the minds of the people, that to break the barrier is resisted by all upper castes.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

According to Ministry of Labour, Government of India. The Scheduled Castes (SCs, also known as Dalits) among the most socially and educationally disadvantaged groups in India. Social effects of violence include

economic punishment in terms of the destruction of SC women's livelihood or loss of employment or social boycotts or forced to leave their homes. More often than not, Scheduled Caste women are denied the right to equality. The right of equality is a fundamental one. However, the institutional forces hostile against it are equally powerful and exert control and shape people's mindsets. Facts like caste, class, community, region, religion, locality, family, occupation all combine to affect Scheduled Caste men and women alike, making them accept gender inequality as something given without the need for questioning. Some derogatory names have been banned by law; in practice they are commonly used. Members of the Scheduled Castes are found all over India in some areas rising to over 25% of the population. With total numbers of over 100 million, they are the largest minority group in the world — indeed one person in 40 is born "untouchable". Hence, there is increase in exploitation, discrimination and violence against the scheduled caste women. The female feticide, illiteracy, gender inequality, Devadasi, Jogini practice, Nude Service to Deity, different types of violence, dowry, child marriage, etc are few of the problems faced by scheduled caste women in present society. The "Scheduled Castes" is the legal and constitutional name collectively given to the groups which have traditionally occupied the lowest status in Indian society and the Hindu religion which provides the religious and ideological basis for an "untouchable" group, which was outside the caste system and inferior to all other castes. Today, untouchability is outlawed, and these groups are recognized by the Indian Constitution to be especially disadvantaged because of their past history of inferior treatment, and are therefore entitled to certain rights and preferential treatment.

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