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# Dalit Women in India: At the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste

**Abstract:** As the lowest in the caste hierarchy, Dalits in Indian society have historically suffered caste-based social exclusion from economic, civil, cultural, and political rights. Women from this community suffer from not only discrimination based on their gender but also caste identity and consequent economic deprivation. Dalit women constituted about 16.60 percent of India's female population in 2011. Dalit women's problems encompass not only gender and economic deprivation but also discrimination associated with religion, caste, and untouchability, which in turn results in the denial of their social, economic, cultural, and political rights. They become vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation due to their gender and caste. Dalit women also become victims of abhorrent social and religious practices such as *devadasi/jogini* (temple prostitution), resulting in sexual exploitation in the name of religion. The additional discrimination faced by Dalit women on account of their gender and caste is clearly reflected in the differential achievements in human development indicators for this group. In all the indicators of human development, for example, literacy and longevity, Dalit women score worse than Dalit men and non-Dalit women. Thus, the problems of Dalit women are distinct and unique in many ways, and they suffer from the 'triple burden' of gender bias, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation. To gain insights into the economic and social status of Dalit women, our paper will delve more closely into their lives and encapsulate the economic and social situations of Dalit women in India. The analyses of human poverty and caste and gender discrimination are based on official data sets as well as a number of primary studies in the labor market and on reproductive health.

**Keywords:** Dalit women, gender, discrimination, exclusion, scheduled castes, India

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## Introduction

In recent years literature related to gender and feminist discourse in India has brought considerable insight into the problems of women in India. Literature, along with several civil society movements, has influenced the government policy for economic and educational empowerment of the women and their representation in local governance.<sup>1</sup> More recently we can also clearly hear multiple voices emerging on gender issues, particularly since the early 1990s, when the Indian feminist discourse becomes marked with multiple strands. These multiple voices, we can argue, are closely linked to the uneven gains of progress recorded by various groups. 'Woman' in India is not a homogeneous category; it is marked with differences in health status, educational attainments, economic performance as measured by human development indicators,

<sup>1</sup> Kamla Bhasin, *Understanding Gender* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2000).

particularly in the case of women belonging to Scheduled Castes (Dalits)<sup>2</sup> and Scheduled Tribes and Muslims. As we shall see in subsequent sections, the rate of progress in human development indicators, is significantly lower for Dalit women than it is for women from the upper-caste group. This means that Dalit women have benefited from development less than the rest of the women. Since the improvement in the human development indicators for Dalit women has been slower than for women from the upper-caste group, the disparities continue to persist between Dalit women and the rest. This has induced increased demand for group-specific gender policies.

This paper focuses on the challenges facing women belonging to the Dalit social group who are the lower castes, particularly untouchables. The caste system is based on the division of people into social groups (or castes) in which the civil, cultural, and economic rights of each individual caste are predetermined or ascribed by birth and made hereditary; the assignment of rights among castes is unequal and hierarchical, and this system provides a regulatory mechanism to enforce social and economic organization through the instruments of social ostracism (or social and economic penalties). In the traditional scheme of the caste system, the untouchables, who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, were deprived of all rights, and being located at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy, they suffer the most from an antisocial spirit and violence by high-caste Hindus.<sup>3</sup> They were denied the right to property, education, and civil and cultural rights, and restricted to so-called ‘polluting’ occupations and manual labour. Additionally, the untouchables also suffered from the notion of ‘untouchability,’ which is unique to them.<sup>4</sup> Because of this unique stigma of untouchability, the untouchables are considered to be impure and polluting, and they have suffered from physical and social segregation and isolation. This isolation and segregation led to suppression of their freedom and restrictions on physical and social mobility, resulting in denial of equal access in various spheres of society, culture, and economy.<sup>5</sup>

2 ‘Dalits’ is a Marathi term that means the ‘downtrodden.’ These are former ‘untouchables’ within the traditional varna framework. In the official government language, Dalits are referred to as Scheduled Caste.

3 B. R. Ambedkar, ‘Philosophy of Hinduism,’ in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3* (Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987a), 1–92, B. R. Ambedkar, ‘The Hindu Social Order – Its Essential Features,’ in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3* (Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987b), 96–115, B. R. Ambedkar, ‘The Hindu Social Order – Its Unique Features,’ in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 3* (Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987c), 116–129, B. R. Ambedkar, ‘Annihilation of Caste,’ in Vasant Moon (ed.), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. 1* (Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1987d), 23–63, B. R. Ambedkar, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Women,’ *The Mahabodhi (Calcutta)*, 59/5–6 (1950), 137–151.

4 Ambedkar (1987a), Ambedkar (1987b), Ambedkar (1987c), Ambedkar (1987d), Deepak Lal, *Hindu Equilibrium: Cultural Stability and Economic Stagnation, Vol. I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), as cited in Sukhadeo Thorat and Nidhi S. Sabharwal (2015) ‘Caste and Social Exclusion: Concept, Indicators, and Measurement,’ in A. K. Kumar, P. Rustagi, and R. Subrahmanian (eds.), *India’s Children: Essays on Social Policy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 774–392.

5 Thorat and Sabharwal (2015)

The Indian government has addressed the problem of caste and untouchability through various constitutional safeguards. The constitution of India has recognized Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as 'historically deprived' segments of the society. Thus, the Indian Constitution has listed 1,108 castes in its first schedule, and hence, these deprived castes are known as Scheduled Castes. The Indian Constitution carries certain safeguards in Article 341 for the Scheduled Caste for ensuring their fundamental rights as Indian citizens, and the Directive Principles of State Policy authorize the state to protect this socially marginalized group from any further discrimination in modern Indian society based on their caste identity. Subsequently, laws have been passed that aim to remove discriminatory practices against the Scheduled Castes and also to ensure their social and economic empowerment. Anti-discriminatory measures for the Dalits include the enactment of the Untouchability Offence Act, 1955 (renamed as the Protection of Civil Rights Act [PCR] in 1976), and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA), 1989, which aims to prevent crimes and atrocities stemming from discrimination and hatred toward Dalits. Notwithstanding the principle of equality of all citizens, the government reserves the right to pass legislation designed to give special relief to the 'weaker sections' of the society, which includes the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, women, and children. Permanent national commissions have been set up to safeguard their rights for both SCs and STs as well as for women.

There are also various economic schemes announced from time to time to create employment opportunities or grant welfare payments or other benefits to the 'weaker sections' of the society. Importantly, in addition to legal safeguards against discrimination, equal access to and participation in public employment, education, politics, and governance are ensured through reservation of some seats in government services, public educational institutions, Parliament, and state legislatures for SCs and STs; in the elected bodies of local government, there are reserved seats for women also. Although the practice of 'untouchability' has been banned since Independence (1947), in practice many of the associated behaviors, norms, and values persist. This means that Dalits still often live in separate locations with poorer services, face discrimination when accessing services, receive lower pay, and face discrimination in the marketplace.

However, the problem of Dalit women is distinct and unique in many ways because they suffer from the triple burden of economic deprivation, patriarchy, and caste- and untouchability-based discrimination (as we will see in the following pages) – all of which cannot be removed merely by applying the above kinds of laws. Dalit women are also victims of social and religious practices

such as *devadasi/jogini* (temple prostitution) that result in their sexual exploitation in the name of religion. Empirical analyses from official sources of information in this paper will highlight that Dalit women are at the lowest end of a social structure that is characterized by great inequality on the basis of caste and gender. The interface between caste, patriarchy, and gender is a theme that needs a thorough theoretical and empirical study for the purpose of understanding the nature and causes of the caste and gender exploitation of Dalit women.

In this paper we attempt to develop such an understanding of the problems of Dalit women and present an analysis of the complex intersectionalities of the challenges they face. This is accomplished through a review of the current theoretical discourse on gender and caste in India and of empirical findings regarding forms of gender- and caste-based discrimination faced by Dalit women. The analysis of human poverty, caste, and gender discrimination is based on the official data sources of the National Sample Survey Organisation, the Census of India, the National Crime Records Bureau, the National Family Health Survey, and a number of primary studies conducted by various scholars.

### **Feminist Discourse and Perspective With Respect to Social/Cultural Groups<sup>6</sup>**

The plurality of 'woman' as a category, and the need to address the diversity within this category, including how different groups of women have different access to citizenship and other rights, different identities, and different problems, is now recognized all over the world as an important issue in feminism. In this section we outline some of the important theoretical interventions from the Western feminists and their implications on the understanding of gender and its intersectionalities with caste identity in India.

The mainstream feminist discourse in the West came under criticism, particularly from African American and non-Western scholars, for ignoring the racial aspect of the gender issue and also from those who pay attention to the economic and social oppression of women. The writings from black feminists have focused on the distinct problems of women from discriminated groups, which are similar to those of other women at some level but are also different in other respects because of aspects of race, color, social origin, ethnicity, and nationality. The literature has underlined how the category 'woman' has, in fact, been representative of dominant groups of women in the same way that the liberal notion of citizenship has been representative of dominant groups of men.<sup>7</sup>

6 For a detailed analysis on this section, please see Sadana Nidhi Sabharwal, Wandana Sonalkar et al., 'Dalit Women Rights and Citizenship in India' (New Delhi: IDRC and Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2009).

7 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1990).

In the North American context, black feminists challenged many of the theoretical formulations that reflected white middle-class women's consciousness and experience. For example, quoting from Sylvia Walby's summary:

'The labour market experience of women of colour is different from that of white women because of racist structures which disadvantage such women in paid work. This means that there are significant differences between women on the basis of ethnicity, which need to be taken into account.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus, ethnic and racial issues needed to be examined in the context of gender and the specific histories of colonialism and slavery.

Similar parallels may be made about the intersection of gender and caste in the labor market in India. The labor market experiences of Dalit women are different from those of the upper-caste women because of the traditional notion of the caste system of purity and pollution. Dalit women are hardly ever employed as cooks in upper-caste homes. They will be hired to do the work of cleaning, washing clothes, and sometimes looking after the sick. They are treated by other castes coming into contact with them as untouchable, unapproachable, and at times even unseeable. It is this notion of untouchability that leads to physical isolation and restriction in employment opportunities. I elaborate such differentials further in the subsequent sections, where findings from empirical studies are presented.

Indian feminist discourse has been uncomfortable until quite recently, to acknowledge caste or religious differences among different groups of women. This is partly because it fractures the kind of political unity that feminists seek to build. The issue of violence against women — rape, murder, and other forms of violence — was taken up initially with campaigns such as those related to the Mathura police station gang rape case in the 1970s. The demands of the movement resulted in some changes in the law regarding 'custodial' rape, dowry-related deaths (Sections 3204B and 498A of the Indian Penal Code), and, most recently, domestic violence. Special police cells were set up in selected towns to deal with the issue of violence against women. However, most of the cases brought before these cells related to domestic violence, not the kind of public violence that Dalit women so frequently undergo, as we will see in later sections.

When activists of the Indian women's movement have recognized caste differences, they have recognized caste as an aspect of class, such as, for instance, in their efforts to organize rural women workers, many of whom might be Dalits; or when they take up issues of poverty, where Dalits and lower castes are

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8 Walby (1990), p14.



overrepresented; or when they address issues of violence against women. Dalit women prominently figure among the victims of sexual violence. For example, the gang rape of a woman (a Dalit woman) employee in a government scheme for ‘empowerment’ of women when she tried to stop a child marriage within a powerful landowning family in a village in Rajasthan. This case was taken up by a nongovernmental organization (NGO called *Vishakha* as a case of sexual harassment of a woman carrying out her assigned work duties. This led the Supreme Court to issue a ruling on sexual harassment at the workplace, with a directive to set up cells for the prevention of sexual harassment of working women at their places of employment.

However, the focus on labour and on class struggle has precluded an explicit focus on caste as it affects women, both of the lower and upper castes. That is, upper-caste feminists have often refused to recognize caste as a form of social privilege and capital that enables social mobility and choice. Rather than seeing caste as having its own independent identity, many feminists have seen caste as class-like; that is, as a socioeconomic category instead of an aspect of religious conceptions of self and society that reproduce structural inequality.

The proponents of the women’s movement in India have generally confined themselves to seeking changes in laws relating to gender relations, marriage, domestic violence, economic empowerment, and sexuality; they have been mostly silent on the public violence and discrimination that Dalit women so frequently endure<sup>9</sup>. The empirical evidence discussed in the later sections highlights specific concerns of Dalit women — why have these not become major issues for the women’s movement? For example, Dalit women are hardly ever employed for cooks — which commands higher wages than sweeping and cleaning do — in upper-caste homes because of the notion of untouchability, thereby affecting their level of income; the bodies of Dalit women are subjected to public sexual violence whenever they or the men of their community are seen as transgressing the caste hierarchy (e.g., the Khairlanji rapes and murders in 2006<sup>10</sup>) and existing *devadasi* system.

In the early 1990s, Dalit women began to question the mainstream women’s movement because of its failure to recognize the distinctive character of the problems of Dalit women. Dalit women’s discourse recognizes the problem of gender exploitation by their men, and therefore, the Dalit women’s movement,

9 Nidhi S. Sabharwal, Wandana Sonalkar et al., *Dalit Women’s Rights and Citizenship in India*, IIDS-IDRC Report Series No. 40 (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2010).

10 The rape of two women and the brutal murder of four members of the Bhotmange family in Khairlanji village in September 2006 is a recent example of this. This Dalit family improved their economic status by saving up to purchase agricultural land in their native village, and they had children accessing higher education. Their resistance (through legal mechanisms) to the upper-caste demands of constructing a road through their agricultural land invited hostility and violence. This violence was played out on the bodies of Dalit women of the Bhotmange family — both women, mother and daughter, were brutally gang raped and murdered.

like the 'mainstream' women's movement, addresses the issue of patriarchy, which prevents women from asserting their choices and participating in decision making in both the community and the family. However, writers on the problems of Dalit women have argued that low-caste women, particularly the untouchables, have suffered from not only gender discrimination and economic deprivation, but also discrimination related to prescribed customary provisions in the institution of caste and untouchability. They suffer a triple deprivation owing to gender, poverty, and caste.

Based on the understanding of their own situation and condition, today the Dalit women's movement is organized around issues of access to livelihood and social needs, patriarchy, caste-based discrimination, and impunity for violence against Dalit women. The movement struggles for antidiscrimination and affirmative action policies that claim access to resources such as land, nondiscriminatory employment practices (wages, number of workdays, and equal treatment at the workplace), and access to education as well as the promotion of good working conditions, public health care, and food security. In addition, Dalit women are seeking nondiscriminatory access and affirmative action policies for political participation. These demands were put forth by Dalit women in a groundbreaking conference of the Dalit Women's Rights Forum at The Hague (2006) on the 'Human Rights and Dignity of Dalit Women.'<sup>11</sup>

On a theoretical plane, it can be immensely empowering for members of a socially excluded group to articulate a cause and argue for it in a national or international public forum. This is particularly so for Dalit women because the caste system traditionally prohibits Dalits and Shudras from the utterance of sacred texts; this prohibition extends in modern society to public utterances on the state of society. They would also have to stand up to men from their own caste who would be all too eager to speak 'for' them.

Further, the Dalit women's movement has taken notably different positions from those of 'mainstream' women's organizations on certain topical issues. For example, in 2005, the government of Maharashtra decided to prohibit licensed bars and restaurants serving drinks from hiring women to dance for the entertainment of customers. The government's motivation was typically puritanical-patriarchal. These dance bars, according to the home minister, corrupt the morals of our young men. Women's organizations in Mumbai came out to protest against the ban. The main arguments of the women's organizations opposing the ban would be familiar to Western feminists: 'moral policing' by the state should be resisted; women have the right to earn their living in the way they

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<sup>11</sup> For details, please see the Hague Conference Report: <<http://www.dalits.nl/pdf/humanrightsdalitwomen.pdf>>.

choose; in any case, women today have little choice of occupation, and the ban would throw thousands of women out of work. The Dalit women's organizations provided a different response to the government ban. They welcomed it, while rejecting its moralistic justifications, because they felt that 'bar dancing' was a seemingly innocuous occupation that would easily lead lower caste girls into prostitution. They also demanded that the government should make arrangements for the rehabilitation of these girls.

An important point that needs to be noted here is that the two groups placed their responses to the ban within the frameworks of different feminist histories. The first evokes 'the right to one's body,' the individual's freedom of occupation, and the resistance to moralistic control by a patriarchal state. There is also the designation of prostitution as 'commercial sex work' on a par with other exploitative ways in which women have to earn their living. The Dalit women's groups, conversely, are aware of the existence of traditional, religiously sanctioned practices that lead to the sexual exploitation of women of lower castes, and with the growth of modern cities, many of these women end up as prostitutes. This has been noted by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar,<sup>12</sup> two Dalit women who have written an account of women's participation in the movement against untouchability led by Ambedkar. Dalit social reformers, from the pre-Ambedkar period right up to Ambedkar himself, have always demanded that Dalit women reject these traditional practices and stay away from prostitution, even at the cost of economic hardship.<sup>13</sup> This dichotomy between the reactions of the two groups of Indian feminists on the one hand and Dalit women's organizations on the other necessitates greater awareness about the historical discourses that each of them relates to.

To sum up, in this section we discussed the feminist discourse in India that has not squarely confronted certain questions that are crucial for Dalit women. Some recent feminist scholarship<sup>14</sup> has tried to bring 'Dalit women's voices' into the feminist discourse. What has been missing, however, is a thorough empirical study of dalit women's socio-economic position in contemporary Indian society. This would throw light on the nature and impact of both caste and gender in India today.

The contemporary Dalit women's discourse shared common problems with the mainstream feminists with respect to gender, economic empowerment, and patriarchy. But Dalit women also recognized and articulated their particular

12 Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2008), Translated by Wandana Sonalkar from Marathi, *Amhihi Itihaas Ghadavala* (Pune: Sugawa Press, 1989).

13 Sabharwal, Sonalkar et al. (2010)

14 Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 30/41-42 (Oct. 14-21, 1995), 2548-2550; Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2006).



problems related to their limited access to permanent sources of livelihood; their high dependence on wage labor with limited social security; their caste- and untouchability-based discrimination in multiple spheres; their subjection to caste-related violence and atrocities, particularly the institutionalized sexual exploitation through the *devadasi* system (temple prostitution). The issue of 'freedom of the individual' versus the 'rights of the community' affects Dalit women differently, because their bodies are often used as a means for the upper castes to assert their dominant position over the lowest castes in the hierarchy. We will look at these aspects in more detail in the next section with the support of empirical evidence from official sources and primary-level studies.

### **Human Poverty, Gender, and Caste-Based Discrimination**

In this section we will provide empirical evidence to these problems related to human poverty and various forms of caste- and untouchability-based discrimination experienced by Dalit women in accessing economic, social, and civil rights and entitlements. The main challenges that the Dalit women face are outlined below:

- Economic deprivation
- Educational deprivation
- Poor health
- Caste- and untouchability-based discrimination in accessing sources of livelihood, public services, and political participation
- Caste-based atrocities and violence
- Temple prostitution
- Gender discrimination

The empirical evidence is provided through available official data and primary surveys. To gain insights into the economic and social disparities of Dalit women vis-à-vis both Dalit men and non-Dalit women, and violence directed specifically against Dalit women, the following sources were consulted: the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO),<sup>15</sup> the Census of India, the National Crime Records Bureau,<sup>16</sup> and the National Family Health Survey-2 and 3.<sup>17</sup> Evidences on gender discrimination perpetrated by Dalit men against women of their own caste are drawn from limited primary studies and the autobiographical writings of Dalit women. Following that, we will present in the next section evidence on specific forms of discrimination experienced by

15 National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 'Employment and Unemployment Survey' (New Delhi: Government of India, 2009–10).

16 National Crime Records Bureau, 'Crimes in India,' (Government of India: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012).

17 IIPS and ORC Macro, *National Family Health Survey, India, 1998–99* (Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences, 2000); IIPS and ORC Macro, *National Family Health Survey, India, 2005–06* (Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences, 2007).

Dalit women in the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres drawn from primary studies conducted by scholars and studies undertaken by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (supported by various agencies such as International Labour Organisation, UNICEF, and ministries of the government of India).

***Human Poverty and the Economic and Social Status of Dalit Women: Empirical Evidence from Official and Government Sources***

*Economic Status*

Sources of Livelihood: According to recent available official sources such as the NSSO, most Dalit women lack access to income-earning assets and regular employment and depend mainly on wage labor. In 2009–10, 38 percent of Dalit women were self-employed as compared to 62 percent of upper-caste women – this indicated that access to permanent sources of livelihood was not equal within the category of women. Further, 9.80 percent of Dalit women were employed as regular salaried workers as compared to 20.8 percent of upper-caste women. The result: about 52 percent of Dalit women worked as agricultural wage labor in rural areas as compared to 17 percent of upper-caste women.

**TABLE 1** Distribution of workers by work status in agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, 2009–10

Sex and Means of Livelihood	SC			Others			Total		
	Agri sector	Nonagri sector	Total	Agri sector	Nonagri sector	Total	Agri sector	Nonagri sector	Total
<b>Male</b>									
Self-employed	36.7	29.9	33.0	76.3	44.7	56.2	61.2	40.5	49.9
Regular wage employee	1.4	26.9	15.3	0.9	41.2	26.5	1.1	33.2	18.7
Casual labor	61.9	43.2	51.7	22.8	14.0	17.2	37.7	26.3	31.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Female</b>									
Self-employed	39.0	35.9	38.0	78.5	41.2	61.6	59.0	41.6	53.3
Regular wage employee	0.8	29.3	9.8	0.3	45.5	20.8	0.4	32.5	11.0
Casual labor	60.2	34.8	52.1	21.2	13.3	17.6	40.6	25.9	35.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
<b>Person</b>									
Self-employed	37.6	31.1	34.5	76.9	44.2	57.4	60.4	40.7	50.8
Regular wage employee	1.2	27.4	13.7	0.7	41.9	25.3	0.9	33.1	16.5
Casual labor	61.2	41.5	51.8	22.3	13.9	17.3	38.8	26.2	32.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Source:** NSSO, 2009–10, Agri: Agriculture, Non-Agri: Non-Agriculture

Further, a large number of Dalit women are engaged in so-called unclean and polluting occupations, such as scavenging. Because of their association with their occupation (perceived as an unclean occupation — sweeping/manual scavenging), women belonging to the sweeper community are hardly ever employed for cooking and other household jobs. The NSSO 61st round provides us with similar results — the data for urban areas indicates that of the total number of women employed as cooks and waiters, close to 13 percent belong to Dalit social groups as compared to a higher proportion of women (33 percent) from upper castes. In the occupation category of professional, technical, and related workers, which are mainly regular salaried jobs in urban areas, we find a lower proportion of Dalit women employed as compared to upper-caste women (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2** Distribution of female population from social groups across occupation types, urban (female %)

	ST	SC	OBC	OTHER
Professional, technical, and related workers	7.83	9.75	12.42	12.71
Administrative, executive, and managerial workers	1.32	2.11	2.25	2.59
Clerical and related workers	0.29	0.77	0.77	1.37
Sales workers	3.18	2.13	3.34	3.30
Service workers	4.80	7.56	7.95	6.70
Farmers, fishers, hunter/loggers, and related workers	74.44	57.60	56.61	52.01
Production- and transportation-related workers and operators	8.13	19.97	16.53	21.18
Total in Labor Force	99.97	99.89	99.86	99.87

**Source:** NSSO, Employment and Unemployment: 61st round, 2004–05. OBC: Other Backward Classes

**Caste Disparity in Wage Earnings:** Further, Dalit women who worked as wage laborers faced discrimination in wage earnings, particularly in urban areas. In 2000, Dalit women who were casual wage laborers received daily wage earnings of Rs. 37 as compared to Rs. 56 for upper-caste women, whereas the national average was Rs. 42. The disparity in earnings between women from excluded groups and women from non-excluded groups reflects discrimination faced by them in terms of engagement in the labor market. This form of discrimination is likely to result in depressed earnings/income, which ultimately will cause a higher incidence of poverty among Dalit women.

**Unemployment:** Another important economic problem of Dalit women is lack of employment throughout the year. Agricultural work is seasonal in nature and is available only at certain times; at other times there is no earning. We generally find that in both rural and urban areas the percentage of unemployed among

Dalit women was higher than that of the upper-caste woman. For example, according to the recent National Sample Survey, 2009–10, the current daily<sup>18</sup> unemployment rate of Dalit women in rural areas was 9.8 percent, whereas it was 8.0 percent for women from the upper caste. Similarly, in urban areas the unemployment rate for Dalit women was higher (9.3 percent) than the unemployment rate for women from the upper caste (8.4 percent; see Table 3). This suggests that not only a large proportion of Dalit woman are agricultural laborers, but also the rate of unemployment among them was quite high.

**TABLE 3** Unemployment rate by current daily status of age 15+ in 2009–10

Group	Rural			Urban			Rural + Urban		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
ST	6.4	6.1	6.3	7.0	7.4	7.1	6.4	6.2	6.4
SC	8.9	9.9	9.2	7.5	9.3	7.9	8.6	9.8	8.9
OBC	5.8	8.0	6.3	5.5	10.6	6.5	5.7	8.5	6.4
Others	5.0	5.9	5.2	4.1	8.4	4.8	4.6	6.9	5.0
OBC + Others	5.5	7.4	5.9	4.8	9.6	5.6	5.2	8.0	5.8
Total	6.3	7.7	6.7	5.2	9.4	6.0	6.0	8.1	6.5

**Source:** NSSO, 2009–10, Others include: Upper castes (non-SCs/STs/OBCs)

### ***Illiteracy and Lack of Access to Education***

The lack of educational development is another important problem from which Dalit women suffer. In 2009–10, the literacy rate among Dalit women was 55.9 percent compared to 75.3 percent among Dalit men and 76.5 percent among upper-caste women. The literacy rate among Dalit women was indeed quite low in rural areas. In rural areas only 51.6 percent of Dalit women were literate. By comparison the rate for upper-caste women was higher (68.5 percent). Similarly, such disparities in literacy rates also exist between Dalit women and non-Dalit women in urban areas (Table 4).

<sup>18</sup> Current Daily Status (CDS) is the method used by NSSO to calculate daily employment/unemployment rates. This method is especially useful to know the status of work of those who are employed on daily wages.

**TABLE 4** Literacy rates

LITERACY RATE AGE 7+ IN 2009–10									
Group	Rural			Urban			Rural + Urban		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
ST	70.7	52.4	61.6	88.8	73.0	81.2	72.8	54.6	63.8
SC	72.6	51.6	62.4	84.1	70.0	77.3	75.3	55.9	65.8
OBC	78.9	56.6	68.1	89.5	76.4	83.2	82.1	62.4	72.5
Others	85.0	68.5	77.0	94.3	86.6	90.6	89.1	76.5	83.1
OBC + Others	81.2	61.0	71.4	92.1	81.8	87.1	85.1	68.4	77.1
Total	78.2	58.0	68.4	90.8	79.8	85.6	82.2	64.8	73.8

**Source:** NSSO, 2009–10

Beside a low literacy rate, another problem Dalit women face is a high drop-out rate from school. The percentage of dropouts at the primary, middle, and secondary levels in 2009-10 was quite high compared with the upper-caste girls. The Ministry of Human Development estimates show that at the class 1–8 stage, the drop-out rate was 51 percent.<sup>19</sup> Because of the high drop-out rate at the primary and middle stages, enrolment at the higher stages of school and college level is extremely low. NSSO data further indicate that the gross enrolment ratio (GER) of upper-caste women is more than four times compared with that of Dalit women at the postsecondary level. For instance, in 2009–10, the GER was 2.8 percent for Dalit women as compared to 12.5 percent for women from the upper-caste groups (Table 5). The enrolment in higher education is also characterized by gender inequalities within the Dalit group. The GER in higher education for Dalit women is lower (2.8 percent) as compared to Dalit men (5.4 percent).

<sup>19</sup> <[http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/SCSP-TSPReport\\_o.pdf](http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/SCSP-TSPReport_o.pdf)>.



**TABLE 5** Percentage of persons by general education

Educational Level Rural + Urban	Male						Female					
	ST	SC	OBC	Others	OBC + Others	Total	ST	SC	OBC	Others	OBC + Others	Total
Illiterate	33.0	29.8	21.4	12.4	17.4	21.0	54.9	53.2	44.9	27.1	37.1	41.6
Below primary	10.6	10.0	9.8	6.3	8.3	8.8	10.0	8.3	8.7	7.9	8.4	8.5
Primary	14.4	16.3	13.3	11.5	12.5	13.4	11.3	11.9	11.4	12.5	11.9	11.8
Middle	18.6	19.6	20.8	18.0	19.5	19.5	11.1	12.2	14.3	15.4	14.8	14.0
Secondary	12.1	12.1	16.5	19.4	17.8	16.2	6.8	7.7	10.3	13.9	11.9	10.6
Higher secondary	6.6	6.8	9.4	13.4	11.2	10.0	3.7	3.9	5.8	10.5	7.9	6.8
Diploma/certificate	0.8	0.8	1.7	2.1	1.9	1.6	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.7
Graduate and above	3.9	4.6	7.2	16.9	11.5	9.5	1.9	2.5	4.0	11.7	7.4	6.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NSSO, 2009–10

Moreover, the data indicates that the unemployment rate is very high among the highly educated Dalit women. In 2009–10, the rural unemployment rate among Dalit women with graduate degrees from college and above was 33.6 percent, and in urban areas the unemployment rate was 26.8 percent among Dalit women graduates. If one compares the picture with Dalit men, we find that only 11.2 percent of Dalit men with a graduate degree are unemployed in rural areas, whereas in urban areas the percentage is only 6.9 percent. Among women graduates and above from the non-Dalit social group, only 9.2 percent were unemployed (Table 6). Therefore, NSSO data indicate that the unemployment rate is highest among the highly educated Dalit women, and it is extremely high in rural areas.

**TABLE 6** Unemployment rate by educational qualification (CDS of age 15+ in 2009–10)

	Educational Level	Male						Female					
		ST	SC	OBC	Others	OBC + Others	Total	ST	SC	OBC	Others	OBC + Others	Total
Rural	Illiterate	4.8	7.0	5.7	4.7	5.4	5.8	5.4	8.7	6.2	2.6	5.3	6.2
	Below primary	4.0	7.7	6.1	4.4	5.6	5.9	3.0	7.3	8.3	2.5	6.8	6.3
	Primary	7.5	11.0	6.0	4.7	5.5	7.1	7.6	11.0	6.9	5.8	6.5	7.5
	Middle	7.5	10.7	5.5	4.2	5.0	6.4	8.7	10.0	10.5	3.1	7.8	8.3
	Secondary	10.8	9.8	4.3	4.1	4.2	5.6	8.0	14.1	8.2	4.3	6.5	8.2
	Higher secondary	5.7	9.7	5.9	5.5	5.7	6.2	15.1	22.4	20.7	26.2	23.5	22.4
	Diploma/certificate	4.7	9.1	8.2	12.8	10.4	9.9	5.5	38.1	44.2	29.4	38.2	35.8
	Graduate and above	14.1	11.2	9.1	8.7	8.9	9.5	31.8	33.6	23.4	25.9	24.6	26.3
Total	6.4	8.9	5.8	5.0	5.5	6.3	6.1	9.9	8.0	5.9	7.4	7.7	
Urban	Illiterate	4.6	6.1	4.7	5.0	4.8	5.1	4.5	5.4	4.5	3.1	4.1	4.5
	Below primary	5.7	8.5	5.4	4.6	5.1	5.8	1.7	4.0	2.9	3.2	3.0	3.1
	Primary	7.1	8.8	5.7	4.0	5.0	5.8	6.8	6.1	6.0	2.8	4.9	5.3
	Middle	6.8	8.1	5.9	4.6	5.3	5.8	5.9	10.1	7.5	8.0	7.7	8.1
	Secondary	3.4	5.6	4.4	2.7	3.5	3.7	13.3	8.6	22.6	15.3	18.8	16.7
	Higher secondary	13.6	8.6	6.1	4.6	5.2	5.8	22.7	22.4	16.7	13.0	14.5	15.6
	Diploma/certificate	12.0	11.4	6.5	4.4	5.4	6.2	26.9	13.2	14.1	8.2	11.1	11.6
	Graduate and above	7.6	6.9	6.2	4.2	4.8	5.0	11.9	26.8	23.1	9.2	13.5	14.5
Total	7.0	7.5	5.5	4.1	4.8	5.2	7.4	9.3	10.6	8.4	9.6	9.4	
Rural + Urban	Illiterate	4.8	6.8	5.6	4.8	5.3	5.7	5.3	8.2	6.0	2.7	5.2	5.9
	Below primary	4.1	7.8	5.9	4.5	5.4	5.8	3.0	6.7	7.3	2.6	6.0	5.7
	Primary	7.5	10.5	6.0	4.5	5.4	6.8	7.6	9.8	6.7	5.2	6.2	7.1
	Middle	7.4	10.0	5.6	4.4	5.1	6.2	8.4	10.0	9.8	4.5	7.8	8.2
	Secondary	9.6	8.5	4.3	3.5	3.9	4.9	8.8	12.3	13.1	8.9	11.1	11.1
	Higher secondary	7.4	9.3	6.0	5.0	5.4	6.0	16.2	22.4	19.0	19.5	19.3	19.5
	Diploma/certificate	7.7	10.3	7.2	7.4	7.3	7.7	11.7	22.3	26.3	14.7	20.7	20.6
	Graduate and above	11.3	8.8	7.4	5.3	6.0	6.4	20.3	29.3	23.2	12.0	16.0	17.4
Total	6.4	8.6	5.7	4.6	5.2	6.0	6.2	9.8	8.5	6.9	8.0	8.1	

Source: NSSO, 2009–10 CDS: Current Daily Status

### ***Poverty and Malnutrition***

As stated above, the percentage of Dalit women as cultivators in agriculture in rural areas and as self-employed in urban areas is quite low. Therefore, most of them depend on wage-earning employment. Given the poor economic base and higher unemployment rate, the level of living is reflected in a high poverty ratio.

Although the gender breakdown by poverty level is not available, a high degree of deprivation is reflected in other indicators of well-being as well, particularly in the high level of undernutrition and related health indicators.

In 2009–10 about 29.7 percent of Dalits in rural areas and 32.9 percent in urban areas were below the poverty line. In the case of non-Dalits, the poverty ratio was only 11.8 percent in rural areas and 12.2 percent in urban areas, which is much lower compared to that of Dalits (Table 7).

**TABLE 7** Level of poverty — India (in percentage)

POVERTY RATE BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE AND SOCIAL GROUP: 2009–10			
	SCs	Others (Upper Caste)	Total
Rural	29.7	11.8	22.0
Urban	32.9	12.2	20.9
Rural + Urban	30.4	12.0	21.7

Source: National Sample Survey, 2009–10

Further, the undernutrition problem is particularly serious for Dalit women because close to 45 percent of Dalit women had a BMI below 18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup> compared to 36 percent of upper-caste women according to the National Family Health Survey.<sup>20</sup> Poverty and undernourishment of SC mothers also impact their children. Among children younger than five years of age, a higher proportion of Dalit children were malnourished as compared to upper castes — 51 percent of Dalit children were underweight, whereas for upper-caste children, the prevalence of underweight was 36 percent, which is still disturbingly high but significantly better than among the Dalit children.

#### *Limited Access to Maternal Health Care*

Dalit women have lower access to maternal health care than upper-caste women. A lower proportion of Dalit mothers had access to antenatal care (ANC) as compared to women from the upper-caste groups: 74% percent of Dalit mothers and 85.2 percent of upper castes received ANC in 2005–06.<sup>21</sup> The data also indicate that a lower proportion of Dalit mothers gave birth in a health facility as compared to upper-caste mothers: 32.9 percent of Dalit mothers gave birth in a health facility compared to 51 percent of upper-caste mothers.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Slow Progress in Indicators of Human Development — Poverty and Malnutrition*

It is important to add here that although the status of Dalit women over the

<sup>20</sup> IIPS and ORC Macro (2007).

<sup>21</sup> NFHS-3, IIPS and ORC Macro (2005).

<sup>22</sup> NFHS-3, IIPS and ORC Macro (2005)

periods under consideration has shown improvement, the rate of improvement has been slower among Dalit women as compared to upper-caste women, as the data indicate. Hence, disparities between the upper-caste women and Dalit women persist, indicating a lower level of human development among them. For example, an analysis by Thorat and Dubey<sup>23</sup> indicates that in rural areas, during 1993–2010, poverty declined at a rate of 2.5 percent per annum on an average 1. However, the upper castes experienced the highest decline (2.8 percent) followed by Dalits (2.4 percent). A lower decline in poverty rates is also experienced by the Dalits as compared to the upper castes in urban areas (Table 8).

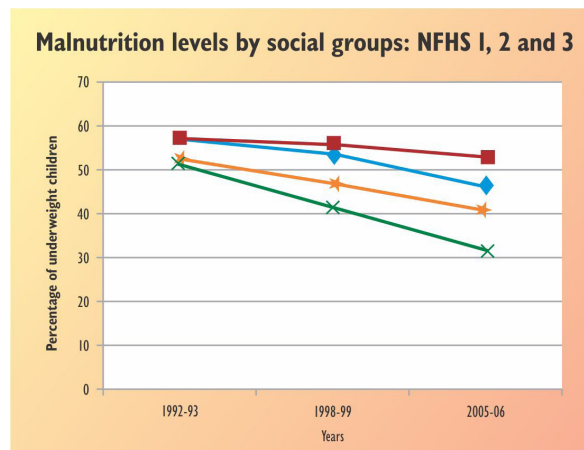
**TABLE 8** Average annual change in poverty rates by household types in India, 1993–1994 to 2009–2010 (percentage)

Social Groups	Rural	Urban
Scheduled Castes	-2.4	-2.1
Upper Castes	-2.8	-2.4
All	-2.6	-2.3

**Source:** Thorat and Dubey, 2012

Slow progress in malnutrition rates is seen in the case of the Dalits as compared to the upper castes. Figure 1 shows that between 1999–2000 and 2004–2005, the proportion of underweight children declined on an average (at a rate of 0.9 percent). Similar to poverty rates, the rate of decline in malnutrition rates was lower for Dalits (-0.9 percent) as compared to that of the upper castes (-2.3 percent). The progress in institutional delivery was also slower in the case of Dalit women (3.6 percent per annum) as compared to ‘others’ (4.5 percent per annum) from 1999–2000 to 2004–2005.<sup>24</sup>

**FIGURE 1**



23 Sukhadeo Thorat and Amaresh Dubey, ‘Has Growth Been Socially Inclusive During 1993–94 – 2009–10,’ *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47/10 (March 2012), 43–53.

24 NFHS-2&3, IIPS and ORC Macro (2000) and IIPS and ORC Macro (2005)

***Status of Dalit Women in Political Participation as Members of Parliament: Dalit Women have Low Representation in Parliament***

Political participation is generally recognized as a representative instrument toward achieving positive policy outcomes for each group. Indian data on the trends in participation at the national level of governance show that participation of women in general and Dalit women in particular remains dismally low in India. Data on Lok Sabha (lower house of the Parliament) from 1971–2004 reveal the dominance of SC men in politics. The fourteenth Lok Sabha had a total of seventy-five MPs from the SC social group, of which sixty-five were men and ten were women. There is a slight improvement in the percentage share of the women parliamentarians from the SC background, although they continue to be underrepresented when compared to the number of Dalit men and upper-caste women. The fifteenth Lok Sabha general election for the 543 electoral constituencies was held in 2009. A total of 8,070 candidates contested, out of which there were 7,514 men and 556 women from different social groups. Within the 556 contested women, only fifty-seven got elected: twelve Dalit women, five from Scheduled Tribes, and forty from the upper-caste groups. These data clearly highlight the lower political representation of women — and in particular Dalit women — at the higher levels of governance.<sup>25</sup> The figures for the sixteenth Lok Sabha are: 66 women MPs, of whom eleven are from the Scheduled Castes and five from the Scheduled Tribes.

The analysis of the economic and social status of Dalit women from the official data revealed the relative position of these women vis-à-vis Dalit men and upper-caste women. The analysis indicates that (1) Dalit women are at the bottom of the economic and social structures characterized by inequality on the basis of caste and gender — there are wide variations in human development indicators between Dalit women and the upper-caste women; and (2) political participation of Dalit women at the higher levels of governance (which is a factor included in the UNDP's Gender Empowerment Measure introduced in the Human Development Report of 1995) is lower as compared to upper-caste women, indicating a limited agency to achieve positive policy outcomes. Therefore, disparities continue to persist between Dalit women and the rest of the women because the reduction in social group disparities would require higher rates of improvement among Dalit women than the rest.

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25 Nidhi S. Sabharwal, David Lal, and Abhiruchi Ojha, *Dalit Women in Indian Politics: Making Impact through Parliament?* Research Report Series 61 (New Delhi: IDRC and Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2013).



### **What Causes Slow Progress in Human Development Indicators of Dalit Women?**

Although one will recognize that there are common factors (gender and poverty) that cause high deprivation for all women, including Dalit women, Dalit women additionally suffer from social exclusion and discrimination because of their lower position in the caste hierarchy. This additional factor in the case of Dalit women makes them vulnerable to more poverty and deprivation than their counterparts from the general population. Thus, it is this 'exclusion-induced deprivation' that differentiates Dalit women from other women.

This denial of equal rights that low-caste women have faced in the past continues into the present in some spheres, and it is not all due to social exclusion and discrimination related to their group identity. However, as mentioned above, although the role of 'social exclusion' has been recognized in the literature as an additional factor of poverty, it is less clear how social exclusion causes high deprivation for women from the excluded groups. What forms do the exclusions take and what outcomes do they yield that induce the high level of deprivation? There is a paucity of studies and data on the nature and forms of discrimination associated with the institution of caste and untouchability. This neglect in the Indian mainstream literature has constrained the capacity of the State to develop policies to address the obstacles imposed by processes of social exclusion for Dalit women. There are, nevertheless, some studies that capture indirect and direct evidence of discrimination experienced by Dalit women in nonmarket and market transactions. The studies on the forms of indirect and direct discrimination in nonmarket transactions; that is, goods and services supplied by government/government-approved agencies and the schemes run by the government in health and food security, are first outlined below and then followed by studies of discrimination in market transactions.

#### ***Indirect Evidence of Caste-Based Discrimination as an Additional Factor of Malnutrition***

As we have seen in the preceding section, the decline in malnutrition for Dalit women and their children has been slower between 1992 and 2006 compared to that of upper-caste groups. Using logistic regression analysis, Sabharwal (2011)<sup>26</sup> captured the key factors impacting malnutrition in rural areas. Income levels, educational attainment of the mother, access to antenatal care (as an indicator for access to health services), and social belonging have all emerged as important determinants of nutrition levels in this analysis. In the case of SC's, even after controlling for factors such as income, educational level of the

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26 Nidhi S. Sabharwal, 'Caste, Religion and Malnutrition Linkages,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 46/50 (December 10, 2011), 16–18.

mother, and access to health services, the malnutrition rates turn out to be high, indicating that there are constraints associated with their social belonging. The logistic regression exercise indicates that the likelihood of children in SCs being malnourished is around 1.4 times higher than among children from the 'other' categories. Similarly, for SC women, the likelihood of being malnourished is 1.1 times that of upper-caste women after controlling for wealth, occupation, and level of education. Hence, the logistic regression indirectly captures the influence of caste background on the incidence of malnutrition and estimates the likelihood of children and women from the Dalit group being malnourished compared to the rest when the wealth index, education, access to health services, and other factors are held constant.

Likewise, an analysis by Borooah, Sabharwal, and Thorat (2012)<sup>27</sup> on mortality in women among different social groups in India brings out two important features. It shows that the average age at death for Dalit women (39.5 years) is 14.6 years less than the average age at death for upper-caste women (54.1 years). The analysis establishes that Dalit women's life expectancy is lower as a result of higher exposure to mortality-inducing factors. In the case of age at death, mortality-related factors such as poor sanitation and water supply had more impact on Dalit women than on upper-caste women. However, even in cases in which the higher caste and Dalit women experience similar mortality-related factors, Dalit women have lower life expectancies. Even after accounting for social status differences, a gap of 5.48 years remains between the average ages of death of upper-caste women and Dalit women. Further, this analysis applied the levels of mortality-related factors catalogued for higher caste women and found that there is still a gap between the life expectancy for higher caste women and Dalit women. A difference of 11.07 years remains even after attributing the Dalit social status coefficient to upper-caste women. This means that life expectancy among Dalit women is 11 years lower than that of upper-caste women despite their experiencing identical social status conditions such as sanitation and drinking water.

Thus, the findings indicate that even after controlling for factors such as income, educational level, and access to health services, mortality and malnutrition rates turn out to be comparatively high among Dalit women and their children. The findings demonstrate that there are constraints associated with their social belonging. Lack of data means it is not possible to include such constraints in the regression equation. However, some field-based studies indicate group-specific factors for high malnutrition levels. These factors generally relate to

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27 V. K. Borooah, N. S., Sabharwal, and S. Thorat, *Gender and Caste-Based Inequality in Health Outcomes in India*, Working Paper Series VI/03 (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2012).

the discrimination Dalits face in accessing government schemes that provide services such as food and health. There is some evidence on discrimination faced by the Scheduled Castes.

***Direct Evidence of Discrimination in Schemes Related to Food Security and Public Health Services***

Empirical studies show evidence that Dalit women and their children experience differential treatment in accessing midday meals in schools, state kindergarten centers (*anganwadi* centers), and Safe Motherhood Schemes (*Janani Suraksha Yojana*). Access with differential treatment adversely affects Dalit children's food intake and nutritional level<sup>28</sup> and Dalit women's reproductive health status and well-being.<sup>29</sup>

*Evidence of Discrimination in Schemes Related to Food Security*

Examples of discriminatory practices found in the midday meal scheme (Thorat and Lee (2010), and Sabharwal, Diwakar et al. (2014) include the following: selective denial of meals, not being served a sufficient quantity, being served last, being served from a distance, humiliating children from marginalized groups who ask for a second serving, separating seating arrangements for such children, failure to recruit cooks from the lowest castes, refusal by higher caste children to eat if food was cooked by someone from marginalized groups, and requiring lower caste children to bring their own plates or refusing to wash their plates.

*Evidence of Discrimination in Schemes Related to Public Health Services*

Acharya (2010) and Sabharwal, Sharma et al. (2014) provide evidence of the discriminatory access faced by Dalit women and children to primary health services. Acharya found that the highest degree of discrimination in the treatment occurs during the dispensing of medicine followed by a diagnostic visit to the doctor (in Rajasthan) and the conducting of pathological tests (in Gujarat). Consultation for referral treatment was reported as the area of least discrimination.

In another study covering 112 villages in seven states (that is, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh)

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28 Nidhi S. Sabharwal, D. Diwakar, A. K. Naik, and S. Sharma, 'Swallowing the Humiliation: The Mid-Day Meal and Excluded Groups,' *Journal of Inclusion Studies* 1 (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2014), 169–182, Sukhadeo Thorat and Joel Lee, 'Food Security Schemes and Caste Discrimination,' in Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (eds.), *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

29 Sanghmitra Acharya, 'Caste and Patterns of Discrimination in Rural Public Health Care Services,' in Sukhadeo Thorat and Katherine S. Newman (2010), pp. 208–229, Nidhi S. Sabharwal, S. Sharma, D. Diwakar, and A. Naik, 'Caste Discrimination as a Factor in Poor Access to Public Health Service System: A Case Study of *Janani Suraksha Yojana* Scheme,' *Journal of Inclusion Studies* 1 (New Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2014), 148–168.

on the nature of access to and utilization of the government Safe Motherhood Scheme (*Janani Suraksha Yojana*), Sabharwal, Sharma, et al. found the following difficulties were experienced by Dalit mothers:

- Health link workers avoid visiting their neighborhoods (Dalit localities).
- They were not informed about/aware of the auxiliary midwife timings and village and health nutrition (VHN) meetings.
- Often, meetings on health and nutrition in the village were conducted in higher caste neighborhoods, and the lower caste groups were reluctant to attend these meetings.
- Health-care services that required contact between the medical professional and the patient/recipient were impacted negatively (e.g., tablets would simply be dropped into the hands of a lower caste person from a 'contact-safe distance'). SC mothers indicated that they received fewer postnatal checkups and less advice. Anganwadi workers (these are health link workers at the village level) avoided holding newborn children to weigh them and instead asked mothers to do it. Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANMs) avoided holding children's hands for immunization, and they also asked someone from the SC community to dispense polio drops to the SC children.

Thus, these studies revealed discrimination that is practiced by different providers in some spheres and that takes different forms that have adverse consequences on utilization of health services and Dalit women's dignity. Indeed, the NFHS data for 2005–06 reveal that SC mothers and children have relatively poorer access to public health services than others. For example, the immunization rates for SC children are about 20 percent lower than they are for others. Access to health services at the time of delivery is also lower for SC mothers than for others.

#### *Evidence of Discriminatory Treatment in Access to Drinking Water*

Dalit women also face caste-based discrimination while accessing drinking water. The study in Gujarat<sup>30</sup> that was conducted in 1971 is based on a survey of sixty-nine villages. A repeat survey of these villages was done in 1996 to assess if any changes had taken place in terms of the prevalence of untouchability. The study explored the practice of untouchability in seventeen spheres of village life in both the private and public domains. In 1971, forty-four villages had separate water facilities for SCs near their localities. Two villages had been added to this list over twenty-five years. Untouchability is usually not experienced

<sup>30</sup> G. Shah, H. Mander, S. Thorat, S. Deshpande, and A. Baviskar, *Untouchability in Rural India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006).

during normal conditions, but when there is a water scarcity; Dalits experience difficulties and discrimination in accessing water from high-caste locales. In regard to the remaining twenty-three villages wherein the untouchables take water from a common source, untouchability is practiced in 61 percent of the villages. In most such villages, Dalit women are allowed to take water only after the upper-caste women, or their taps or positions on the wells are marked separately. In seven villages (constituting 11 percent of the total sample), SC women are not allowed to fetch water from wells and have to wait until the upper-caste women fill water into their pots. The upper-caste women also constantly humiliate the SC women by repeatedly shouting at them, ‘Keep your distance, and do not pollute us!’

*Evidence of Discrimination in the Economic Sphere*

Very few studies have been conducted to analyze the nature and form of the caste-based discrimination that Dalit women face in the economic sphere. In their pilot study of 216 women and their access to the urban labor market of a metropolitan region of Delhi, Banerjee and Sabharwal (2013)<sup>31</sup> found that Dalit women face barriers and difficulties while seeking employment due to their group identity in certain categories of jobs. Dalit women had difficulties in getting employment for cooking because of the notion of the purity and pollution of occupations perceived to be unclean cooking was being done mostly by the upper-caste domestic helpers, whereas sweeping, mopping, and dusting was done by the lower-caste women (Table 9). Dalit women also had lower average wage earnings as compared to that of upper-caste women for the same activities of domestic work (Table 10).

**TABLE 9** Discrimination in hiring for type of work

Type of Work	Dalit Women	Upper-Caste Women	Total (N = 216)
Cooking	37.40	62.6	100
Washing utensils	41.0	59.0	100
Washing clothes	57.3	42.7	100
Cleaning (dusting, sweeping, and mopping)	62.5	37.5	100

**Source:** Banerjee and Sabharwal, 2013; data computed from fieldwork, March to May, 2013

31 Anuradha Banerjee and Nidhi S. Sabharwal, ‘Nature and Forms of Discrimination Experienced by Dalit Women in the Urban Labour Market in Delhi’, *IIDS-IDRC Report Series No. 60* (2013).



**TABLE 10** Average wage earnings

Type of Work	Dalit Women	Upper-Caste Women	OBCs
Cooking	2000	3500	3000
Washing utensils	500	750	600
Washing clothes	700	1500	1000
Cleaning (dusting, sweeping, and mopping)	500	1000	800
Average Monthly Wages (in Rs)	2000 to 3000	5000 to 8000	3000 to 5000

**Source:** Banerjee and Sabharwal, 2013; data computed from fieldwork, March to May, 2013. OBCs = Other Backward Classes

The employment of Dalit women in government schemes related to food security such as Midday Meal Schemes that is administered in schools is not immune to discrimination. Dreze and Goyal (2003),<sup>32</sup> in their study conducted in Rajasthan, reported the exclusion of Dalits as cooks and helpers<sup>33</sup> in almost 60 percent of the sample villages in Rajasthan. Similar findings were reported in the study by Thorat and Lee (2010). In a more recent study in 112 villages across seven states (Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh), Sabharwal, Diwakar, et al. (2014) provided similar evidence of discrimination against Dalits in the work of serving midday meals in schools and in *Anganwadi* ('public-supported kindergartens'). The participation of SCs was much less than that of the higher castes: only 20 percent of the cooks employed were from the SC community, whereas the rest were from the upper castes and the other backward classes (OBCs). The main reason for not recruiting Dalit women as cooks and helpers was due to the prejudice of the high castes against the untouchables. Prejudice was due to the notion of untouchability – the higher castes considered food cooked by Dalits to be polluted and unclean; thus, the higher castes refuse to eat if the food is cooked by Dalit women. The responses obtained during the focus group discussions (FGDs) corroborate these findings and reiterate the prevalence of caste-based discrimination in the Midday Meal Scheme.

The following are some of the responses that emerged from the FGDs in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh:

'The practice of untouchability forbids [the] SC from cooking food for the midday meals, even if they are educated and maintain cleanliness and hygiene. This is because the higher caste villagers will not allow such things to happen as they do not want their children to eat food

32 Jean Dreze and Aparajita Goyal, 'Future of Mid-Day Meals,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 1. (2003), 4763-4782.

33 Helpers to cook perform many activities for example help in kitchen, wash utensils, serve food.

from our hands. Thus, when the SC demanded the job of cooks for midday meals from the sarpanch, he said that these jobs are not meant for them.' (SC Male FGD, FGD No. 11131, Village No. 03, Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, 2012)

'The Midday Meal Scheme is run by self-help groups in the primary and secondary schools in this village. In the self-help group, an OBC woman is employed as a cook, but no SC women are employed because of their caste background. The higher castes never consider us 'clean' and 'equal.' If they appoint us as cooks and helpers, then the higher caste children will stop eating midday meals.' (SC Male FGD, FGD No. 31121, Village No. 02, Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh, 2012)

### ***Atrocities and Crimes against Dalit Women***

The Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities (POA) Act addresses the threat of violence and atrocities against the Dalits. The objective of these acts is to clearly emphasize the intention of the government to deliver social justice and to enable SCs to live with dignity, without fear of violence and atrocities. Although the acts incorporate strong compensatory and punitive measures, violence and atrocities continue against Dalits. The increase in the number of crimes and atrocities against Dalit women has raised a serious issue regarding empowerment of Dalits as a whole and especially of Dalit women, whose bodies become the sites of sexual violence committed publicly whenever they or the men of their community are seen as transgressing the caste hierarchy.

The position of Dalit women in society can be understood in terms of the nature and number of atrocities committed against them. On average, about 1,000 cases of sexual exploitation of Dalit women are reported annually (Table 11). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 1,576 cases of rape of women were reported in the country during 2012 as compared to 1,557 cases in 2011, which is an increase of 1.2 percent in the incidence of rape (Table 11). The number of atrocities that are not reported to the police and that remain unregistered is far greater. The cases that get registered are severe, and women who register are courageous women.

**TABLE 11** Incidences of rape against Dalit women over the years (evidence from the NCRB)

Year	Number of Dalit Women
1999	1,000
2000	1,083
2001	1,316
2002	1,331
2003	1,089
2004	1,157
2005	1,172
2006	1,217
2007	1,349
2008	1,457
2009	1,346
2010	1,349
2011	1,557
2012	1,576

**Source:** National Crime Records Bureau, GOI, 1999–2012

The official statistics, however, capture only the tip of the iceberg, providing information on the most heinous crimes such as rape; other forms of humiliation such as sexual harassment and derogatory remarks are not captured in the official statistics. However, there are some primary studies that do provide us with this information. A primary-level study across 500 villages (Shah et al., 2006) on the forms and nature of violence indicated that across the states studied, harassment of Dalit women takes the following forms: non-Dalits frequently use abusive and derogatory language when addressing Dalit women; non-Dalits refer to Dalit women as prostitutes or use caste names; in their workplace or in the market, non-Dalit supervisors or traders will often make sexual innuendoes to Dalit women. Another study by Irudayam, Mangubhai, and Lee (2014)<sup>34</sup> of the narratives of 500 Dalit women across four states on the forms and manifestations of violence found that the most frequent forms of violence that are perpetrated against the majority of Dalit women are verbal abuse (62.4 percent), physical assault (54.8 percent), sexual harassment and assault (46.8 percent), domestic violence (43.0 percent), and rape (23.2 percent), in descending order.

34 A. Irudayam, J. Mangubhai, and J. Lee, 'Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class, Gender Violence in India,' *Zubaan* (2014).

### ***Victims of Social and Religious Practices***

Moreover, Dalit women are also the victim of specific social customs and religious practices in Hindu society. Some of these customs include the *devadasi/jogini* system (temple prostitution). In this system Dalit girls are married to a village god by their parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper-caste landlords and rich men of the village. This system of religious sexual exploitation is found in parts of India such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Orissa. A primary survey by the *Aashray Jogini Vyayastha Vyatireka Sanghatana* on the *jogini* system estimated the number of *joginis* in six districts of Andhra Pradesh at around 21,421.<sup>35</sup> The National Human Rights Commission corroborates these findings and estimates that Andhra Pradesh had 29,000 *joginis*.<sup>36</sup> A similar practice exists in states such as Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, where they are designated as *devadasis*.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Patriarchy Among Dalits***

The limited evidence that is available indicates that within the Dalit community, Dalit husbands retaliate against their own oppressed position by perpetrating violence against their wives. Not many primary-level studies have been undertaken to examine the issue of patriarchy within the Dalit community. However, a primary study of 500 narratives of Dalit women documents domestic violence faced by them.<sup>38</sup> This violence assumes the form of verbal abuse against women, and it is often accompanied by physical assault. In most cases in which a Dalit husband is concerned, the violence takes on a strong patriarchal dimension: women are tortured within the home for not bringing enough dowries, for not bearing male children, for being too ugly or too beautiful or allegedly unfaithful, and for talking back to their husbands. Domestic violence also leads to desertion of some women by their husbands, whereas others are often forced to leave their marital homes. For a majority of the women, however, the social norms and pressures of married life and the 'wifely duties' that they have to fulfill toward their husbands compel them to continue to endure this violence.<sup>39</sup> These forms of violence have a strong patriarchal dimension and usually cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm to the victim. Dalit women

35 Gobinda Pal and David Lal, *Mapping Caste-Based Atrocities in India (with special reference to Dalit Women)*, Annual Report 2010–11 (New Delhi: Christian Aid and Indian Institute of Dalit Studies), p. 27

36 <<http://www.thehindu.com/features/magazine/slaves-of-circumstance/article5028924.ece>>, '29,000 Joginis in State: Commission,' *The Hindu* (November 23, 2012), <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-andhrapradesh/29000-joginis-in-state-commission/article4125208.ece>>, 'Jogini System Still Prevalent in City,' *The Hindu* (November 3, 2012), <<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/jogini-system-still-prevalent-in-city/article4059078.ece>>. Also see the link in *Guardian* on this issue. <<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/21/devadasi-india-sex-work-religion>>

37 Pal and Lal (2010), p. 27.

38 Irudayam, Mangubhai, and Lee (2014).

39 Irudayam, Mangubhai, and Lee (2014).

recognize the problem of gender exploitation by their men, and therefore, the Dalit women's movement addresses the issue of patriarchy that denies them the opportunity to assert their choices and participate in decision making within both the community and the family.

We do find mentions of patriarchy in their autobiographical narratives. For example, in an interview with Maya Pandit, the translator of *The Prisons We Broke*,<sup>40</sup> Baby Kamble (the author and the first Dalit woman to pen her autobiography) states that 'she was writing her autobiography in secret as she feared her husband and son'.<sup>41</sup> In another interview with Pawar and Moon, Kamble recounts how her husband always suspected her of talking to other men and frequently beat her without any pretext:

'When working in the fields, we have to fear for our modesty and at home we fear our husbands. I ran a vegetable shop. Not a single day of my life was spent happily. Beatings, quarrels, crying, and starvation — these were routine. I was convinced that a Dalit woman is really insecure'<sup>42</sup>

Summing up, a review of the economic and social situation of Dalit women highlights not only their economic and social situation but also the distinctiveness of their problems. Despite the constraints on the availability of the data, this section we presented selected evidence on the low performance of human development indicators and the nature and forms of caste-based discrimination suffered by Dalit women in terms of access to sources of livelihood and social needs. The caste-based discrimination in employment was found to be in the form of caste preference in hiring, denial of work for some types of work and in some places, and in work relationships. Discrimination in access to drinking water takes the form of either complete denial (i.e., Dalit women are not allowed to fetch water from the well) or access that is discriminatory in nature. In access to reproductive health services, discrimination was in the form of refusal by upper-caste health workers to visit Dalit localities to provide information on the timings for antenatal care services and other health-related information. Such discriminatory practices can lead to a failure of entitlements and result in low income and high poverty. Dalit women also have to face a patriarchal system within their households. Therefore, this section on Dalit women's issues is on caste, class, and patriarchy and their complex interface as they interact with and influence each other.

40 Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke* (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009), Translated by Maya Pandit.

41 As cited in Sabharwal, Sonalkar et al. (2010), p. 20.

42 *Amhihi Itihas Ghadavala* (1989), translated as *We Also Made History*: Pawar Umila, Meenakshi Moon, and Joshi. R. Barbara, 'We Made History Too: Women in the Early Untouchable Liberation Movement,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Fall 9/2 (1989), 68–71, <doi:10.1215/07323867-9-2-68>, Translated by Wandana Sonalkar from Marathi in 2008.



## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the main purpose of this paper was to develop an understanding of the problems of Dalit women and to present an analysis of the multidimensionalities of the challenges faced by them. A background to this analysis is an enquiry into the reasons for multiple strands of Indian women's movements in India. The analysis shows that the emerging multiple voices demanding group-specific gender policies are closely linked to the uneven gains of economic progress recorded by various groups such as the Dalit women's group. The analysis becomes important in order to understand the affect of multiple marginalized group identities (in Dalit women's case, gender-class-caste) on their level of human development and human dignity. Dalit women's access to citizenship rights, normally considered as accruing to every Indian citizen, has thus been examined more closely in regard to both their economic and social conditions as well as the various ways in which they are subjugated in public and private spheres.

The empirical evidence in this paper has indicated that there is a slow rate of improvement in the human development indicators for Dalit women as compared to for the rest of the population (i.e., Dalit men and non-Dalit men and women); Dalit women's role in production is the most laborious and under the most unfavourable terms of employment- their economic participation is in daily wage labour occupations; there is evidence of discrimination in the workplace and in accessing reproductive health services due to customary notions of their being from a 'low-caste' social status as well as the notion of purity and pollution; Dalit women face caste atrocities and violence; temple prostitution with religious sanctions impinge Dalit women's rights of freedom, and Dalit women lack control over their bodies and their sexuality.

Further, they experience the same problems related to gender exploitation of their labor, and economic deprivation as their poor non-SC/ST sisters do, but Dalit women additionally suffer from caste- and untouchability-based discrimination. It is this 'exclusion-induced deprivation' that differentiates Dalit women's problem from those of other women, and it also makes their problems more intense and complicated than those faced by other women. For Dalit women the genesis of this exclusion-induced deprivation lies in the fact that they are considered to be impure, polluting, untouchable, unapproachable, and 'unseeable'; in other words, not fit for social and physical association with others. This has enormous implications on the human right and human dignity of Dalit women.

Therefore, the multiple challenges that Dalit women face require multiple solutions. First, policies should be in place against gender discrimination

and poverty for all women, which will also help Dalit women; second, there should be complementary policy measures and legal safeguards against social exclusion and discrimination for women who belong to excluded groups. This would indeed demand group-specific gender policies, in addition to the general policy of women's empowerment, to address the voices of women from excluded groups. This would enable the State to conceptualize inclusive policies to address the problems of Dalit women more effectively. Further, the women's movement in India need to place at the centre of their theorization the fact that patriarchy in this society operates in conjunction with the caste system. This would make them more sensitive to the injustices suffered by Dalit women, which all too often are invisible to the government, the police and the judiciary. The empirical evidence presented in this paper would, it is hoped, stimulate such an effort in future.

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