

## Caste-Wise Structural Violence Against Women in Indian Society

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### Abstract

Women are at the peak of the ladder of success. Women achievers can be located in socio-economic, cultural, educational, and other fields of modern India. But on the other flipside, they are mutely suffering violence, discrimination, marginalization, malnourishment, cruelty, rape and defamation afflicted on them by society and their family members. The majority of them are still in the grip of patriarchal social norms and subservient positions. In spite of the constitutional guarantee of equal opportunity, patriarchy asserts itself via legal loopholes and manipulations to consolidate age-old domination.

**Keywords:** Equality, Justice, Patriarchy, Feminism, Emancipation, Caste, and Structural Violence against depressed women.

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### **Introduction**

Historically the Indian caste system is one of the primary aspects where in India people are distinguished socially via gender, class, religion, region tribe, and language. Even though in all human societies some kind of variation prevails, it becomes problematic when there is an overlapping of one or more than one of these aspects with each other and happens to be the only premise of “systematic positioning and unequal ingress to important resources” like income, wealth, repute, influence and power.<sup>1</sup> The Indian caste system is taken as a “stratification system which is closed”, which connotes that the social status of a person is constrained to which caste they took birth into society. People do not interact freely or behave normally with people from another social cohort.<sup>2</sup>

Explaining the word ‘caste’ itself is more complex than thought to be. Caste has been defined by Sociologists as a “hereditary, endogamous group which is usually localized”. It is customarily linked with a job and a specific status in the castes’ local hierarchy. Among many things, caste relations are ruled by the ideas of purity and impurity, and general highest commensality, i.e. interlining takes place within the caste.”<sup>3</sup> Ketkar defines it as “A caste is a social cohort with two features: (1) Membership is restricted to those who become members by birth and encompasses all those so born. (2) The members are not allowed to have an inter caste marriage”.<sup>4</sup> Risley identifies ‘Caste’ as “a collection of groups or families having the same name; same descent with a mythical ancestor, godly or human; advocating to go after the akin hereditary calling, and regarded by those who are qualified enough to provide a perspective as establishing one homogenous community.”<sup>5</sup> It can even be defined as a hereditary or an endogamous subdivision of an ethnic unit with an inferior or superior rank of social esteem juxtaposed with other such subdivisions.<sup>6</sup> Generally, caste name is linked with a particular job and, as mentioned earlier, is a closed stratification making it endogamous.

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<sup>1</sup> Sekhon (2000), *Joti in Modern India*. Boston, McGraw-Hill, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>3</sup> Srinivas, M.N. (1962), *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ketkar (1909), *History of Caste in India*, Ithala, New York, Taylor & Carpenter, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Hutton, J.H. (1963), *Caste in India: Its nature, Function and Origins*. Bombay, Indian Branch, Oxford University Press, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Velassery, Sebastian (2005), *Casteism and Human Rights: Toward an Ontology of social order*, Singapore, Marshall Cavendish Academic, p. 2.

Penguin Dictionary of Sociology explains the Indian Caste system as a caste system in the shape of social stratification in which hierarchically castes are organised and segregated from each other by norms of “ritual purity and impurity”. The caste system’s lowest strata are known as “untouchables” since they cannot perform any rituals that apparently have religious purity. In this hierarchical pyramid, every caste is ritually supposed to be purer than the one behind it. The caste system shows social closure in which ingress to prestige and wealth is not allowed to social groups that are not included in the performance of ritual purification. Rules of endogamy further reinforce this ritual segregation.

The organization of the Hindu caste system is premised on 4 main castes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra), at the local, village level, there is a lot of diversity where the main castes are again divided into smaller sub-castes groupings which are known as ‘Jati.’ Every ‘Jati’ consists of a group getting its livelihood mostly from particular employment. People take birth into a particular caste and become members. Then as per the “jati”, they are into the occupation. They are stratified as per their, power, wealth prestige and entitlement. Some hegemonic castes “monopolize leadership positions in society”. Ritually the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas are supposed to be higher than the lower castes.<sup>7</sup> The Brahmans, generally scholars and priests, are at the notch. In contemporary India, education and economic competition are predominant, and the Brahmans take over this place in both areas.<sup>8</sup>

The Brahmans are followed by the Kshatriyas. The Kshatriyas were the ruling class and generally unified with the Brahmans to rule their regions. In earlier India, holy scriptures were in existence that the rulers had to obey to justly rule their kingdoms. Kshatriyas are supposed to have a certain bravado, be alert, generous disciplined and modest.<sup>9</sup> Priests and warriors were considered to be either “superior” or better to the other castes. Generally, the two upper castes were taken as unified into a ruling class as per the population at large. However, even though these two classes were in unison and were deemed to be higher to the other castes, the Brahmans overtly declared that they were the higher caste. The factor for this, as per the Vedas, is that Brahmans have a characteristic as being self-adequate, but the Kshatriyas rely on priests. Hence, it is said that there are no rules for the Brahmans, but rulers cannot adequately implement their powers sans the help of Brahmans.<sup>10</sup>

The next one is the “Vaishya, or merchants”. The duty and responsibility of a vaishya was to make sure that the community prospered via trade, cattle rearing and agriculture. Later, agriculture and the rearing of cattle were over taken by the Shudras while the Vaishyas became traders and merchants. But, even though they were “brown-twice” and financially better off, a high social status was denied to the Vaishyas and this was the reason for which they begrudged the higher castes. This indignation was visible in their aid of the anti-Brahmanical sects that got established about the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., such as Jainism and Buddhism. They are then ensued by the Sudras, who are generally servants, peasants and labourers. It was believed that Sudras were devoid of any special attributes and were acknowledged to be capable only of “serving as slaves to the higher three castes”. Sudras were deprived of entitlements and rights were not allowed to perform or take part in any homa or sacrifices, even read or learn the Vedas or recital of the mantras. They were denied temple entry, could not wear “janew” and were slaves to the upper three castes with the occupation of either a cobbler, blacksmith or a barber<sup>11</sup>.

At the lowest rung are the “untouchables”. These people were engaged in occupations considered to be dirty and polluting and unclean, like “rummaging garbage and skinning carcasses and recognized as outcastes”. Though Hindu norm books considered only four Varna and untouchables are within shudra castes, some sociologists called them “Pancham Varna”. They were not permitted to enter into temples and streets where the higher castes lived, and there were multiple laws and customs that kept confined them to the towns and villages. Since they were marked as outcastes, they could only be in the suburbs of the villages and could never be an important part of the village community. But, their services were important to the community’s

<sup>7</sup> Smith, Brian (1994), *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Sekhon (2000), *Joti in Modern India*. Boston, McGraw-Hill, p. 44.

<sup>9</sup> Lahiri, R.K. "Caste System in Hinduism", Balaji.com - A Study in Diversity- News, Views, Analysis, Literature, Poetry, Features- Express yourself. 20 Nov. 2005. Web. 3 Nov. 2010)

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Brian (1994), *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, Brian (1994), *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 45.

health even today and thus still difficult to be a part of the system to look after the upper castes.<sup>12</sup>

Three characteristics are included in caste: hierarchy, aversion and hereditary specialization. There are diverse norms in the Indian caste system that needs to be adhered to by the caste members so as to avoid being ostracized by the other members of their caste or as per Hinduism, being born in a lower caste in their next life. The Indian caste system's two most imperative feature is to do with endogamy and employment limitation. Each caste member or sub-caste is needed to get married within their own caste. Any contravention of this leads to "excommunication" from one's caste and family. When it comes to employment, each caste is linked with a specific one to which its members are needed to follow. Other features are that each caste levies limitations on its members when it comes to diet and has its own rules that govern the member's food habits. Another is the social engagement between castes. There are acute hurdles when it comes to the amalgamation of a superior caste with an insubordinate caste. Thus, each caste under the caste system goes by well defined and well-established norms of interaction<sup>13</sup>.

Another concept is the faith in "purity and impurity". In Hinduism, cleanliness is seen to be a very imperative aspect of value, and this idea is coerced by the caste system. Hence, untouchability was a way of exclusivism, a social tool that turned into piousness only by being pulled into the pollution purity complication. Thus, the belief was that the higher castes were purer and less polluted, the lower castes on the other hand were identified as just the opposite. A final feature which is very imperative for the caste system to stabilize is the "restriction of caste mobility". When a person is born into a specific caste it limits a person to remain in this caste and restricts the upward and downward mobility of an individual in the hierarchy<sup>14</sup>.

The caste system has made a huge effect on the political and socio-economic framework in the Indian villages. Essentially the village was considered a unit furnishing food, where every family of the service caste or craft was connected with 1 or more than that of the land-owning farmer caste families. This system came to be referred to as the "jajmani system", which was in practice till the 20th century in India and with varying forms, it is seen in villages to date. W.H. Wiser, in "Hindu Jajmani System", illustrates the commonality of relationships in a village community premised on the barter of services and goods between diverse castes. Every individual had a social status and a fixed economic. Fundamentally, "some individual who was in one relationship with an employer was in another relationship with the employed. The maze of economic security and stability furnished by a persons' specific caste and these relationships the individual attained via their employment was important to village life. The caste system has an impact on these relationships, and these relationships are one reason the caste system stays unblemished.

### **Status of Backward Caste Women**

Amid the post-Vedic period, womens' status and position began to deplete along with their independence and started becoming dependent. Womens' status in every family is that they need tubes protected either by their fathers, or husbands or sons over a period of time. She would lose her identity post marriage. Man is taken to be accountable for being the breadwinner of the family whereas women have to take care of household chores. Sons are taken to be the support for old age and hence it becomes prestigious with the birth of a son child. On the other hand, the daughter as soon as she is born is taken to be someone else so investment on them is considered useless since they would eventually have to leave their home after marriage. Till today, in many OBCs households, a sons' birth is a time for rejoice and if a daughter is born then its a curse.<sup>15</sup> The presumption of male superiority has led to the ideas of male hegemony and female reliance. The majority of the important decision-making parts are thus the area of man in the majority of the cases.

<sup>12</sup> Velassery, Sebastian (2005), *Casteism and Human Rights: Toward an Ontology of social order*, Singapore, Marshall Cavendish Academic, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, Brian (1994), *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Nayak B. and Doleswar Bhoi (2015), "Social Exclusion and Dalits in Contemporary India: Some Reflections," *Indian Journal of Dalit and Tribal Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, p.. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Yadav, Nomita (2002), "Other Backward Classes: Then and Now", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 44/45, p 4495.

In the majority of the backward families, within and outside the educated elite, the girls are taken as economic accountability because of the prevalence of the dowry system. As time passed, these features became sort of mandatory and today commercialization of the entire process has taken place. The male child is breastfed more and for a longer period of time juxtaposed to a girl child. Higher childhood mortality among girls is the major factor behind the skewed “sex ratio in the Indian population”. There is great variation in the sex ratio in various districts and states, which mirrors discrepancies in female literacy and other pointers of the status of women.

Female higher education is robustly linked to accelerated age at marriage, practice and knowledge of contraception and having fewer children. However, families belonging to the lower socio-economic groups are not very interested in paying for the education of their daughters. Literacy is on the lower side among women juxtaposed to men. The gender gap in education is much higher in the northern states like MP, UP, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar<sup>16</sup>. Even in states where enrollment rates of girls are higher, post a few years many girls drop out of school. Cultural determinants like inhibition on education being advocated by male teachers to girls once they reach adolescents are accountable for dropout. Marriage at an early age and childhood persist to be the social rules in families. These cultural constraints are seen or followed more in lower socio-economic status families though the same phenomenon is some times seen in middle-class families. In backward families, women gain their status mainly from their role of being able to bear a child and the number of sons they have measures their value. Women themselves rely on sons for economic security and social position and are generally hesitant in using contraception before having a son. There is a significant rise in the practice of family planning among women who have two sons or more than two. The cultural custom of women eating last in the family does have a good impact on her health if the household is financially weak.

During the period after independence, many positive and good endeavours have been initiated by the government to ameliorate women's socio-economic position. In fact, the reformation procedure had come in much before with the eradication of the *Sati* system. Post-independence, the achievement of egalitarian status for women in each dimension of life was described as one of the primary aims of the Indian Constitution. As per the census of 2011 498.7 million are women which is, “49.2 percent of the country's population of 1027.01 million”. Beginning with the First Five-year plan, furnishing egalitarian status to women has been a primary objective. Though the first four plans concentrated on arranging diverse welfare measures and giving importance to the education of women, the fifth and sixth plans saw a change in attitude from welfare to holistic progress of women with a three-layered thrust on education, health, and women's job. The eighth five-year plan made an important change from the development to the empowerment of women. It suggested 30 percent reservation for women at each government layer. The ninth plan made sure that a minimal of 30 percent of the advantages or funds goes to women from all departments and ministries. Some positive indicators of the development of women can be witnessed in the female literacy rate, life expectancy, and fertility rates. Women presence at the district and village level, near about one million women, is heads and local self-government institutions' members.

### **Structural Violence against OBCs Women**

**At the Societal Level:** Brahmanism and patriarchal structure have influenced over OBCs community and women too for thousands of years. Most of the OBCs community restricts their girl child and female to participate in socio-cultural and religious affairs, they believe that these affairs are for man only. Most of the women still belief and practicing superstitions, unhealthy traditions and customs. They do not complete any social functions without social rituals, if she tries to do this, then there is a fear in her mind that something untoward may happen. Despite being educated and self-dependent, women still consider boys as the heir of the family, if a boy is not born in a family, then wait until the boy is born. Ironically, on the one hand, she herself comes at the bottom rung in the social system but on the other hand, she keeps untouchability and discrimination from the women below her. Inter caste marriage and inter caste feast is a socially taboo. In this community, the right to free avenues of expression for women is restricted. Women of the OBCs community engaged in agro-business, agriculture, grocery shops and unorganized sectors, whatever earns from these occupations, she gives it to her husband or family members. Despite earners, she works in financial matters only after consulting her

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

husband or family members. all these practices hinder in changing the status of women in society<sup>17</sup>.

**At Economic Level:** women of the OBCs community are a generally major labour force in agriculture, agro business, grocery shops and unorganized sector. In one way, they help in advancing their business by working shoulder to shoulder with the men but on the other hand finance and ownership of family income are usually in males' hands. Man often operates the bank account or financial matters of the family. Even the women of the family in service cannot spend their income freely. Despite having constitutional rights and laws, the society established hurdles in the execution of womens' rights for sharing in the family property. On other flip sides, women of those families who do not have land are forced to go to the unorganized sectors for employment where they face multiple exploitations. The absence of agro-based and rural industries for income generation and employment to rural women is a major hurdle for women of those families of OBCs community who are economically marginalized<sup>18</sup>.

**At Political Level:** Despite having Constitutional Rights, the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, women have been perceived as politically marginalized for years. Women usually by nature ignore leading the group organization and the society because they face sexual harassment and exploitation by officials, male leaders, social workers and others. There has been reservation in the local government of women of the OBCs communities, due to the compulsion of reservation, if a woman wins the election, then someone else is running her duty and responsibly. Generally, society does not give women the status they are given to a man despite being elected by society. On the other flipside, there has been a political provision for gender vanguard, are either not executed or trampled by men, if executed. The society which is headed by males cannot agree to the women coming forward to head the society. The ill will people mislead the women leaders in their vested interest and hence weaken them<sup>19</sup>.

### Status of Scheduled Caste Women

In all states across the globe, there is a community that continues to be marginalized and stripped off of their fundamental human rights just because they belong to a certain status within the society which is influenced by race, class, gender, ethnicity, caste and colour. In India, the determination of one's social status is through caste, and untouchables or SCs even today stay as one of the most exploited and subjugated communities in India. This occurs even when they are constitutionally protected and provided with various provisions just for SCs communities to ameliorate their socio-economic position so that they get to the mainstream of society. "The exclusionary mechanism of entrenched hierarchical social relations" has provided varied results for the SCs, particularly the women. They "have to go through the burden of deprivation with regards to gender, caste and penury. SCs women are coerced to join the labour market at a very young age so as to help their families financially. Customarily allocated marginalized and unskilled workers are usually given to them. Good paying jobs persist to be out of their league via systematic refutation of "rights to higher education, assets, skill training, and other productive resources". In addition, this process makes sure that they are excluded from socio-political scenes and keeps them limited to society's bottom as invisible citizens.<sup>20</sup>

In the patriarchy and societal ladder, the SC women occupy the lowermost rung of society and bear diverse hardships when it comes to penury and the absence of independence and untouchability, which obviously pushes them away from the rest of the population. Due to caste hierarchy and untouchability, SC women are seen to be the "lowest achievers in the socio-economic development process of India". Dr Ambedkar opined "A society's progress can only be measured when women progress and it is not possible to achieve this unless and until the position of Dalit women ameliorates in the society."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Surya, Rathore (2007), "Empowerment of Rural Women: An Analysis of Constraints," *Indian Research Journal of Extension Education*, p. 91. (accessed on: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343818915>)

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>20</sup> Mukharjee, M. and Nidhi Sadan Sabharwal (2015), "Status of Dalit Women in India," *Indian Institute of Dallit Studies*, vol. 9, November 02, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

## Violence against Dalit Women

Diverse determinants impact the fragile position of Dalit women – weak economic conditions, reliance on the upper castes' resources, low literacy rate and patriarchal rules, absence of knowledge regarding legal rights, government policies and measures adds to this susceptibility.

### At Economic Level

One of the main factors (s) for the susceptibility of Dalit women is that their financial status is not good. Almost half of the of Dalit women population in rural regions and 56% in urban locations are BPL (below the poverty line). As the majority of Dalit women work out a living via daily wages and are also more regularly out of a job than the rest of the population. In addition, they do not have much employment choices because of being branded as low caste and “untouchable”. Most of the landless labourers are Dalit women who are compelled to come in touch with landowners and enforcement agencies many times more than upper-caste women, thus making them more vulnerable to exploitation. There are many cases where Dalit women get sexually exploited by landlords and they use various kinds of tools to silence their voices of dissent and labour movements of Dalit communities.<sup>22</sup> It has been commented by The National Commission for Women (NCW), “In the commission of offences against SC women, attempts are made by the offenders to have their control and authority and insult the community by exploiting their women to crass and indecent treatment, including sexual abuse, naked parading, using abusive language, etc”.<sup>23</sup> Dalits also face wage discrimination, and this is worse when it comes to Dalit women.

### At Political Level

Many studies have revealed that the political involvement of Dalit women as a huge minority community in India stays very low. There are only 12 Dalit MPs in today's Lok Sabha which is just 2.2% of parliamentarians. In the Government of India's report in 2007, it was noted that “the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination was worried regarding the underrepresentation of Dalits at every government level. The Committee even stated that: *“Dalit candidates, particularly women, are often coercively held back for election or, if elected, coerced to resign from any elected body, [and] that a lot of Dalits are excluded from electoral rolls or otherwise refused their right to vote...”*”

For instance, the max that a Dalit woman politically takes part in India's local governance institutions is the Panchayats. Today, panchayats are the biggest forums where Dalit women can overtly take part in public matters. In addition, Dalit women get separate quotas at this level, apart from the general reservation for Dalits and women. The objective behind this is to make this section of the community take part in local governance. In fact, the quota system has led to more than 100,000 Dalit women being elected representative heads all over the country. But sadly, political representation via reservations has been a little unsuccessful in the efficacious political participation of most Dalit women. The primary hurdle is the diverse bigotry these women are confronted with emerging from the rigid caste hierarchy, patriarchy and acute penury. Thus, in the lack of other activities, political involvement via quotas can result in a circumstance where gender and caste hierarchies are fortified, and Dalit women are averted from efficacious political involvement in the future.

Due to all these hurdles, Dalit women are prevented from exerting efficacious political authority, which in turn discourages them from providing more “caste-sensitive and gender-responsive” progress results. In lieu, they see siphoning off of development aids and schemes, even those that are for the Dalits, to dominant caste communities, further worsening the already existing development gap between the communities.

### At the Cultural and Religious Level

Degradation (s) of Dalit women in terms of status in Indian society is deep-rooted in the Hindu religion and culture. Its mythology and epics continue to keep Dalit women at the periphery. It could be seen that the marginalised position of Dalit women is because of the existing religious and cultural mindset that the upper caste imposed on them. The very fact of being a Dalit denotes a junior status vis-a-vis the rest of Hindu society, and prohibition from cultural measures is a straightforward way of showing this. Resultantly, Dalits are averted from participating in cultural and religious festivals and rituals, with conflicts making sure that if they choose to not obey the banning. There is a very severe banning on nuptials and other social engagement between Dalits

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<sup>22</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> NCW, 1996, p. 33.

and non-Dalits. Even to this day, all Dalit men and upper caste want their spouses to be like Sita from Ramayana – obedient and long-suffering. The majority of Indian women today is akin to that of Sita and Savitri, but with a meagre variation. However, upper castes could contravene the rights of Dalits to choose to marry the woman or man of their choice, even today, in the contemporary era, we could see the acute exploitation and subjugation of Dalit women in the name of religious and cultural norms.

### **Restricted ingress to Social Infrastructure**

Brutality linked to civic amenities is regularly to the absence of important facilities or restricted access amenities to (in) Dalit localities. The unavailability of rudimentary amenities can be observed in the majority of Dalit homes, as per a report that Human Rights Watch published (2007). This is because the residential separation of the Dalit community leads to the lack of diverse amenities available in other regions of the habitation. Residential separation of Dalits prevails in the project villages. Apart from the separation of residential locations, the same can also be witnessed in schools, access to services, access to public services, and operated by the private player. The right to discrimination-free education is not for just Dalit children, and they are confronted with persistent obstacles in their access to education. The majority of the people said that Dalit students are enrolled in government schools with the absence of basic infrastructure, teachers, classrooms and teaching tools. Dalit girls are confronted with more predicaments in taking formal educational amenities, as there are inadequate government schools available locally.

The absence of ingress to health amenities rose as another concern for Dalit women. Occupations based on caste (like scavenging) that a lot of Dalit women are made to regularly perform unearth them to severe and sometimes harmful health dangers.

### **Status of Scheduled Tribe Women**

As per the 2011 census, the status of tribes in UP, “Scheduled Tribes in Uttar Pradesh were 11.34 lakhs which are 0.6% of the entire population of India and 1.1% of the entire populace of Uttar Pradesh”. It has fifteen tribal communities as are: Gond, Nayak, Dhuria, Pathari, Ojha Raj Gond are from the same community and are mostly found in the districts of Mehrajganj, Sidharth Nagar, Basti, Gorakhpur, Mau, Deoria, Azamgarh, Balia, Jonpur, Gazipur, Mirzapur, Varanasi and Sonbhadra. Khairwar and Kahrwar are found in the districts of Balia, Deoria, Varanasi, Ghazipur, and Sonbhadra. Sahariya tribes are in the district of Lalitpur, Pankha and Panika in the districts of Sonbhadra and Mirzapur, and Chero in the districts of Varanasi and Sonbhadra. Sonbhadra district is largely populated by the tribes like Parahiya, Baiga, Agariya, Patari, Bhuiya and Bhuinya. Among the STs in U.P., Gond, Dhuriya, Nayak, Ojha, Pathari, Raj Gond are the 50.2%, Kharwar, Khairwar are 14.2%, Tharu 9.3%, Saharaya 6.2%. The other 11 STs communities have less than 5% population size, and they comprise 12.9% of the STs population of U.P. The remaining ST population is only 7.3% of the ST population of UP.<sup>24</sup>

Tribes of Sonbhadra earlier were only involved in shifting cultivation, burning down forest patches, and sowing seed on the ground fertilized by ashes after the rains. Now the government doesn't this slash-and-burn culture, endeavors are made to get to regular cultivation. They are slowly embracing settled habitats, and in Mandla, where a substantial block of the forest was given to them in which they could persist their destructive practice of shifting sowings, it is reported that the most of them have now become regular cultivators<sup>25</sup>.

The primary source of income in rural areas is agriculture, but most of the tribes are mostly dependent on labour for livelihood. This is because they either did not own agricultural land or had negligible land measures that were insufficient for their sustenance. One could also say that very few tribes are dependent on agriculture for livelihood, but the income through agriculture is meagre. Since the income from agriculture yield is not enough, several tribes also work as daily wage labourers. They sell firewood at times, and if they are fortunate, they could get an opportunity to work under the MGNREGA<sup>26</sup> scheme. Since education is poor among tribal communities, they do not hold government or private jobs or in any sort of business. From the above activities, the majority of the tribes can generate less than Rs. 5000 per month. Since the family's monthly income is less, the living standard is also deficient for tribes of the Sonbhadra. According to the government policy, all families living below the poverty line (BPL) should

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<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2020

<sup>25</sup> Mohanty, P.K. 2004, *Encyclopedia of Primitive Tribes in India*, Vol.I-II, Delhi: Kalpaz Publications. vol I. p 24.

<sup>26</sup> Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Gaurntee Act was passed by the central government in 2007 which ensure and guaranteed 100 working day of each villager who are under poverty line.

have ration cards to avail of facilities from the Public Distribution System (PDS). Many tribes did not have ration cards and mostly because there was a large scale discrepancy in the allotment and distribution of ration cards.<sup>27</sup>

The primary source of drinking water is a hand pump. In the tribal villages of Sonbhadra, despite the having scheme named 'Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna,' which provides a home for disadvantaged families and 'Pradhanmantri Ujjwala Yojana', which provides the first gas cylinder free to the BPL household, but the still tribal community lives in mal structured homesteads made by soil and uses firewood to cook their food. Under 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan', toilets were constructed in the households; however, most of the tribal community goes into the open field to relieve themselves. With the penetration of mobiles in the rural areas, the tribes could avail the benefits of entertaining themselves by listening to music or talking to their relatives who live far away. One could also see cycles and the least number of motorcycles-car and heavy vehicles in many tribal families.

In older times, tribal societies had their own political system of governance. For instance, among the Gond and Kharwar tribes of central India, there is a system called Parha, which is a confederation of villages. The Parha is like the Supreme Court, having legislative, executive, and judiciary power for the villages falling under a particular Parha. If the disputes cannot be settled at the village Panchayat level, they are taken to the Parha Panchayat, and whatever the decision of the Parha is considered to be final. In the same way, there used to be a socio-political governance system among the other tribal community. Tribes are concerned chiefly with the maintenance of tribal integrity and prestige. The social and village administration is looked after by the village headman called 'Mukkadam.' Other village officials include the landlord called 'Malguzar' and a watchman known as 'Kotwar.' The legal issues and offences are handled by the 'Panches' constituting five members.

The tribal community of Sonbhadra practices untouchability because of the influence of the Hindu religion in the neighbourhood. Tribes try to consider it safer to ignore social interaction with people of scheduled caste and who openly eat beef. They follow the Hindu customs of exchanging food items, all kinds of dry and uncooked food. Women are guarded much more severely. They are not allowed to eat outside the tribe and also with their sub-tribe. Among the tribal community, two schools of thought exist with regard to extra-tribal marriages. "First, the rigorist school considers that tribal purity must be maintained even at the cost of a little personal frustration". Secondly, the Liberal party is almost a proselytizing party that tries to make as many new members (own caste) as possible through intermarriages.<sup>28</sup>

The Tribal community's kinship system is of the usual classificatory kind. Their social custom has an impact on their terminology. Diverse terms are generally used for every class of relatives as per their age and relationship. "The right to marry within the group of relatives is controlled by clan exogamy and by the general Indian laws" prohibiting close kin's union except for cross-cousin marriages. The law of exogamy prohibits marriage and intercourse within the clan. Every tribal community belongs to an endogamous Jat, a territorial Garh and artificial social division.<sup>29</sup> The tribal community of Sonbhadra maintains putative kinship ties with the members of other neighbouring communities.

The life of tribes is overshadowed by witchcraft. They believe that many diseases and disasters are due to witchcraft and that mistakes in ritual and the failure to execute commitments made to bhoot (spirits) or mata also bring disease. They have multiple places of worship, such as Tree groves, fields, homes, Forest, Temple, etc. They also believe that disease is also due to hostility of the unseen supernatural being. They take the help of magic to treat various diseases, stimulate the growth of crops, safeguard them from natural calamities, or protect them from wild animals, etc. The village magicians try to ensure that every aspect of village life is not to be professed by the wanton rage of spirit and witch. The religion of the tribal community is purely animistic.

Many forms of formal and informal worship occur at home, where they also offer puja to their pitrs (ancestors) and clan spirits. They affirm tree groves and forests as other important places of worship reveal their relationship with nature. Before every hunting expedition, the tribes have puja of the van devta (forest god). Worship in the field also shows their dependence on food gathering and the agricultural economy. The existence of temples in the tribal heartland shows their process of Hinduisation. However, they have not entirely given up their traditional beliefs

<sup>27</sup> Sonbhadra Report, 2020,p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> Elwin (1986) "Atrocities on Dalits," pp. 176-177.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.,p. 177.



and practices, which may one day become fully absorbed into the dominant Hindu religion. At times animals are also sacrificed, and alcohol is also provided to the gods and goddesses. Animal sacrifice is extraordinary to the tribal communities, and this practice in the selected villages shows that the blood sacrifice was still maintained in the tribal community despite the influences of the Hindu dominant caste groups. The motive behind their worship, in general, is to attain prosperity, safety, wealth, have a son, deliverance from problems, employment, development, and welfare through the sacrifices they offered to the deities.

There is a prevalence of caste-system in the tribal community of Sonbhadra district, meaning that the Hindu Varna system of Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra and backward and tribal communities are prevalent. These classifications and categories of the caste system are also practiced in the tribal communities. It shows that the acculturation and assimilation of the Hindu caste system are prevalent in the tribal community. One community does not share their food with other communities. There seems to be a strong sense of in-group/intra-community feelings, which prevented them from sharing their meal with others. This was also a sign that untouchability was prevalent in the villages. The members of various communities could eat and drink with other communities if they were socially acceptable. Otherwise, they had their taboos in accepting the food of others.<sup>30</sup>

The tribal communities are not allowed to take a wife from his own sept or another, but he/she may marry within his mother's sept, and in some areas, the amalgamation of first cousins is allowed. In Sonbhadra, the tribes do not have marriage within their gotra (clan). However, a small percentage of them did admit that there were clan endogamy cases in their communities as well. The majority of the tribal community do not allow inter-tribe or inter-caste marriages, however, very few tribes have a liberal view about marriage outside the community.

Probably there were some exceptions due to 'love' marriage and not what we call the preferred marriage in conformity with the law of the tribe. Many of the tribal groups across the country do not practice dowry; they rather have the bride price tradition, in which the male spouse gives price to the bride's parents. This bride price is typically given to the parents in appreciation of the girl's upbringing, who the bridegroom will marry. Most marriages in the tribal community are arranged marriages. Three ceremonies follow the marriage. The first could occur at any time post both children were born and comprise just in the arrangement for their betrothal. The second is the ratification of just the first. When the children reach a nuptial age, the barokhi or final betrothal is held. The remarriage of widows is allowed, and divorce is permitted where the wife breaks a straw in the presence of the caste panchayat. If the woman stays in the akin village and does not remarry again, the husband is accountable for the maintenance of her children.

In contrast, a divorced woman may not remarry sans the sanction of the Panchayat as long as her husband is alive and stays single. Polygamy is allowed.<sup>31</sup> Even though cross-cousin marriage is allowed, adult marriage is the rule. They select their spouse through negotiations. However, the system of marriage by service (Ghar-jowai) and wedding by elopement still exists. The payment of the bride price is obligatory. The vermilion mark, toe-rings, and Karia sutta form marriage symbols for women of the tribes.

### **Structural Violence Against Tribal Women**

There have been many instances of communal violence and atrocities on tribal women in the Sonbhadra district. The leading cause of violence against women is the patriarchy, male superiority and land acquisition. The reasons this violence erupts from time to time have the tribal and non-tribal community's presence in that region and their conspiracy to acquire tribal lands, and have power over women. Belligerence against women is one of the important social tools by which women are coerced into subordinate positions compared to men. Arguments of culture always legitimize belligerence against women in tribal communities, the patriarchal culture inevitably validates belligerence as an acceptable, even aspired characteristic of masculinity that goes to devalue women. The reason for domestic violence is a social structure which treats" as fundamentally of less value than man is conducive to violence against women. Poverty, alcoholism, unemployment, and frustration contribute to violent behaviour among women. The tribal women face violence from patriarchal ideas of ownership's bodies, labour, sexuality, mobility and level of autonomy and reproductive rights. Tribal women face several problems which they require to overcome so as to ameliorate their status in society such as:

<sup>30</sup> Sonbhadra Report, 2020, p. 36 and based on Interviews of the tribal community, date 20 March 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Russell, R V. & Lal, Hira. 1975, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*. Delhi: Cosmo Publication, p. 83.

**Unfix livelihood-** tribal communities in Sonbhadra, are very malnourished, marginalized and less educated. Women of tribal communities work with their husbands to fulfil their rudimentary desires, the majority of the time, they are involved in agricultural work on other communities' lands. They do not have any fixed occupation where they could fulfil their basic requirements. Their main job is agriculture and their secondary occupation is daily wage labourer. During the agricultural and daily wage labour, she faces sexual harassment, rape, an unhealthy environment and discrimination in wages. Aside from that, they are involved in making handicrafts. The economic situation of households are linked to other dimensions of their life.

**Deprived of education-** The majority of tribal women travel and work out and are involved in diverse activities so that they irk out a living for their families. Women are mostly engaged in, agricultural work and daily wage labour. These mothers are accompanied by their young children mostly girls. Most of them are dropped out of school or irregularly. The parents rather prefer their daughters to help them in earning something than send them off to school. The impact of patriarchy can be seen in the majority of the tribal people. Women who earn give their money to their husbands. The husband generally spends the money on drinking alcohol. When a girl child attains adolescence, the parents drop them off from school and wants to marry a suitable partner from own tribal community. Due to the absence of education, tribal women are not aware of our legal rights, family rights, and political rights. They lack awareness, face derivation, exploitation (even sometimes physical exploitation), and feel cheated.

**Mal condition of health-** Inadequate health infrastructure and facilities had affected the health of tribal communities. From the public health perspective, the primary importance is the need for immediate nutritional intervention programs to be implemented among the tribes of the Sonbhadra district who are experiencing nutritional stress. Due to the lack of good nutritious food, women and children are facing health issues. Mothers face difficulties while giving birth, and children are born weak, underweight, and unhealthy. Although the situation is improving, it is still lagging behind as compared to the other social groups. The tribal children continue to be the most malnourished. It has also resulted in high child mortality. The Body Mass Index (BMI) among adults is very low. It is a paradox that with the increase in age, malnutrition also increases. Lacks of awareness about nutritional requirements mostly tribal women are weak, feeble, and suffer from various diseases.

**Migration-** tribal migration is voluntary, looking for better prospects in the new place of destination due to famine, lack of employment opportunities, family conflict, and harassment... However, the majority of tribes now do not want to migrate from their current location. They have their land and some social security, which they are afraid would be lost if they migrated to another place where everything afresh would have to be organized. Those who wished to migrate were primarily those who did not have any land except the Indira Awas and lived from hand to mouth on daily wages. They expected better fortunes in the new place of destination. However, they did not seem to be clear about what they wanted to do in the new location. This pattern shows a lack of clarity and indecisiveness among the tribe, which is quite usual, especially when they faced such hardship. If their life in the present was uncertain and insecure, they were not in a position to say anything about their future. Due to migration, the tribal women face a two-type problem than the man. At the family level, they face violence from their partner as patriarchy and male frustration and another from outside the family, such as sexual harassment, rape, exploitation etc...

**Displacement-** there have been numerous efforts by corporates and industries to acquire lands of the tribals in Sonbhadra. However, tribes are not ready to leave their land. They know that displacement will lead to the loss of land, culture, and identity. Recently in February 2020, gold reserves were found in the Sonbhadra district of Uttar Pradesh. The government of Uttar Pradesh was planning to auction this area for mining. In this case, more than 400 tribal families in the Sonbhadra district of U.P.began to get scared of having no home post the Geological Survey of India (GSI) has unearthed deposits of gold of around 3,550 tons worth Rs 12 lakh crore, which is mainly five times India's prevailing reserve of the yellow metal<sup>32</sup>. In another case, tribals were agitated by the forcible acquisition of the tribal land for the proposed Kanhar Dam in Sonbhadra in 2014 by the Uttar Pradesh government. The land was acquired sans conducting "any new cost-benefit analysis and environmental and social effect analysis ". It was also in violation of the National Green Tribunal's order which goes back to December 24 2014, which "mandated Forest Clearance and Environment Clearance for any construction by the Irrigation Department of UP". Despite all those laws, the government was illegally going ahead with the construction. The local

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<sup>32</sup> Sonbhadra Report, 2020, p 37.

tribals reported this to the administration and went to the high court, but that was of no use. There have been persistent endeavours to torture people by the link between local land mafias and police to deny hundreds of poor tribal villagers land and forest rights. When the tribes protested against this acquisition peacefully and democratically, they were crushed with open firing and rampage. Kanhar Dam had caused massive displacement due to forcible land acquisition<sup>33</sup>. The tribal land that was occupied sometimes belonged to the agriculture category and was not being adequately compensated. When tribes go to reclaim the land, then they are not given proper support to do it.

## Conclusion

In last, changing the status of women in India is a daunting task. We have to recognize that discrimination based on gender is rooted deeply in social malice which is practised in India in diverse forms for thousands of years. It would take some time and hardcore endeavours to end this malice. Making policies and laws is not adequate as it has been seen that the majority of the time, these policies and laws just stay on paper. On the other hand, the ground reality just remains the same and, in a lot of instances, it becomes very bad. Tackling the malice of discrimination on gender and women empowerment in India is the time taking struggle against robust structural forces of the society which are against progress, development and freedom of women.

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