

# Exploring the Status of Dalit Women in Indian History: A Synoptic View

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## Abstract

This paper tries to explore the status of Dalit women in Indian society from historical perspectives. Multiple discriminations are being faced by Dalit women in our patriarchal Indian society. The Dalit women belong to the margin of marginalized community; consequently their history is not rich and well documented. Mainstream academia and history deliberately ignores the subaltern history of Dalit women and their struggles. A historical review of the status of Dalit women is assessed here based on available literature. After independence, various affirmative actions have been undertaken at the governmental level but we could not find the desired results in the context of upward mobility of social status of Dalit women.

**Keywords:** *Dalit; Women; Marginalization; Discrimination; Intersectionality; Feminism*

## 1. Introduction

The socially generated multiple forces like caste based social hierarchy and gender based discrimination and oppression push Dalit women more vulnerable in Indian patriarchal society. Social exclusion and gender inequality has been found in India and such social evils have been a deep rooted problem though in Rig Vedic period women's status and position is portrayed with tremendous reverence and they were treated equally to their male counterparts. The glorious status of women during the Vedic, Epic, and Jain and Buddhist periods significantly declined during the Dharmashastras, Manusmriti onward. Manu's anthology of harsh and rigid societal laws, inflexible Brahmanical sternness of manner, rigorous constraints of the social caste system were all responsible for the deterioration of women's position in India (Dwivedi and Malik 2022).

The independence of women was seized by Manusmriti (viz. the laws of Manu) where it was mentioned that she would be protected in her childhood by her father, her husband would protect her in youth and her son would look after her in old age. In Manu's Dharmashashtra which constitutes the Varna (viz. division of professions) system push Sudras (viz. Dalits) as lower caste in social hierarchy. Thus, Dalit women are the victims of double or multiple discriminations- caste, economic class and gender. Dalit women have been the primary targets of discrimination from patriarchy from their own community as well as from other communities. Historically the status of women in India in general has undergone significant transformations but the position of women belonging to Dalit community (viz. Scheduled Caste) is somehow terrible; Dalit women find themselves to be at the intersections of caste, gender and economic class. Due to the existence of caste hierarchy, the condition of the poorest women belonging to the Dalit community did not change very much especially in rural India; their dependence on the patrons pushes them into trap of exploitation for job financial security (Sarvesh 2017). Therefore, Dalit Women have been suffering from multiple burdens due to discriminatory social norms and cultural practices in India. Dalit feminism is not a homogeneous category because of divisions of sub-caste and differential endowment of social capital. It is a tenuous, heterogeneous concept thwarted by caste, sex and sexuality, and class differences (Paik 2014)

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Dalit women experience violence, discrimination and social exclusion on a daily basis because they belong to the bottom of the caste hierarchy and are considered as inferior human beings. Gender roles are the products of interactions between individual's attributes and their social environment. Poor social and physical capital of Dalit women and their occupations make them vulnerable. Almost 100 million Dalits in India – or one third of their total number – continue to live in multidimensional poverty; Dalit population constitute almost one fourth of India's multidimensionally poor people (NITI Aayog 2021). According to the recently published Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021, five out of six multidimensionally poor people in India live in households whose head is from a backward community (NITI Aayog (2021)). The situation of Dalit women in India needs special attention. As per the 2011 National census, the total female population in India is 58.7 crore of which 16.68 percent is Dalit women. Dalit women face multiple burden of marginalization because they are poor, they are women, they are unhealthy, they are uneducated and they are Dalits! It is revealed that 45 percent increase in reported cases of rapes against Dalit women during 2015 to 2020; moreover, 10 Dalit women are raped every day in India (NCRB 2021). In many of the cases, these crimes are committed by upper Caste perpetrators. Therefore, the constitutional safeguards and existing laws fail to stop such deep rooted discrimination, exploitation and violence against Dalit women in India. Our present paper is structured as follows. Section-II deals with methodology, planning and scope of the present study. In section-III, we locate and highlight the status of Dalit women from a historical perspective. A critical review of the theories related to Dalit women is carried out in this section. Conclusion is given in section-IV.

## 2. Objectives, Methodology and Outlines

The present study aims to highlight the dynamics of social status of Dalit women by way of exploring the pattern and processes of social changes within the society from subaltern social history perspectives in India. The conventional mainstream historiography is biased towards upper caste and very little is mentioned about the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. The paper aims to analyze the concept of exclusion, oppression and discrimination of Dalit women from a historical perspective. How do we assess the social reality in the context of social justice and equity in the context of Dalit feminism? How far and to what extent the existing theories are capable to explain the Dalit movement in India? What are the affirmative policies undertaken to eliminate the exploitation of Dalit women? It is true that in early literature on caste highlights the vulnerabilities of Dalit men (due to masculinity) but due to intersectionality, the Dalit female's trauma and misery is different from Dalit men and it is not well documented in subaltern history (Rege 1998, 2006). The present study discusses about the contributions of Ambedkar and other social reformers and leaders in shaping the movements of Dalit women.

The thematic qualitative analysis developed by Braun and Clarke is employed in our paper to study Dalit Women's movement; thematic analysis is based on three approaches like essentialist or realist, constructionist and contextualized methods. It uses constructionist method of thematic analysis; partly we use the realist method also. It deals with social events and interactions based on realities. How does the society experiences any events can well be understood through the lens of constructionist methods. It broadly studies the social structure, power and control emerging out of social institutions. Thematic analysis is considered as a method reflecting social reality. Thus, our paper attempts to derive the patterns or themes out of the movements and literatures on Dalit women in Indian backdrop. In addition to this, this paper tries to explore the issues of marginalization of Dalit women and their lack of voice as reflected in everyday lives using Dalit feminist literature. Thus, we have adopted historical method based on sequence, comparative analysis and integrity of facts and events.

## 3. The Status of Dalit Women: A Historical Perspective

### 3.1 Ancient Period

Women in general have been ignored in the mainstream history because the history has been framed about the exercises and transmission of the domains of power in politics and economics in specific geographical areas. This leads to a little known evidence about the powerless communities like Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular (Rose 2010). The Dalit women experienced the extreme forms of exclusion in the historical process since they belong to the most marginalized community and the lowest in the hierarchical order in the caste system in India. Dalit women's voices in the transitional processes of the society went unheard and undocumented and this is termed as 'sanctioned ignorance' (Nair 2008). Dalit feminism is not a homogeneous category. It is a tenuous, heterogeneous concept thwarted by caste, sex and sexuality, and class differences (Paik 2014)

The Vedic philosophy practiced in ancient India considers the entire world as a single family in which welfare of all human beings has been the prime objective. Over time, the four-fold Varna (caste system) came into existence from the Vedic periods onward where Shudra (viz. Dalits or untouchables or Scheduled Caste (SC)) belongs to the bottom of the caste hierarchy. In Dharmashashtra, the Brahmins (viz. upper caste) is considered as law-givers who created the theory of religious superiority comprising social rules, norms in respect of marriage, dietary rules, purity,

monarchy, birth based occupation and untouchability (Kaushalya 2012). In Rig-Veda, Sudras are also known as Dalits, untouchables and Scheduled Castes (Singh 2015); in the rituals of everyday life of the upper caste community, Dalit women were absolutely excluded from their entire discourse. The idea of purity and the punishment for touching Dalit woman was prevalent in society. *Advija* (twice-born) was never supposed to see or be in the presence of a *Sudra* woman. If one sees a *Sudra* woman, one must suspend his Vedic recitations (Olivelle 1999). In *Rigveda*, many women recited hymns and took care of the agricultural fields but there was not space for Dalit women. *Atharvaveda* depicted *Sudra* women as lascivious creatures. The caste and gender hierarchies coexist in Dharmashastra and simultaneous presence of these dual burdens make the Dalit women as double slaves. The first is enforced from caste hierarchy and the second originates from gender; thus slavery of Dalit women is double-layered.

During 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, Jainism and Buddhism were developed by Mahavira and Buddha respectively. Equality, non-violence and compassion for every human being were the major common philosophy of Jainism and Buddhism. Mahavira had sermonized equality between male and female; Jainism provides women a central role in spiritual and ethical patterns. The religious activities and rituals are performed by women in Jainism. Jain mothers primarily are engaged in teaching their siblings especially their daughters so that they may prepare for their future roles and duties as good wives and responsible mothers. Thus, intergenerational transfers of religious norms and ethics are ensured especially by the women in Jainism. The number of nuns (viz. female ascetics) who are supposed to practice a strict self-indulgence as spiritual discipline in Jainism exceeds the male ascetics, thus, Sethi (2012) has rightly argued that Jainism offers the possibility of emancipation and liberation to women, they are considered as valid aspirants of salvation but this is missing in Hinduism which is dominated by Brahmins.

Similarly, Buddhism acknowledges the fact that both male and female are equal in achieving freeing (viz. Nirvana); Buddhism is gender neutral which applauds reviviscence, overcoming personal faultiness, liberating oneself from miseries. Toynebee (1995) has rightly pointed out that Sangha (comprising both nuns and monks) formed by the followers of Buddha was a courageous decision in ancient India; this is a major breakthrough in female religious practice. The *Therigatha* is a collection of poems by Buddhist nuns belonging to Sangha clearly portrays sexual equality in terms of spiritual attainment. Indeed, it is a stark contrast to the gender based social inequalities found in Manusmriti's Dharmashastra of Hinduism.

### 3.2 Medieval Period

During the medieval period (from 6<sup>th</sup> century to 16<sup>th</sup> century), the status of women irrespective of caste and class has been deteriorated because of the practice of Sati (viz. the inhuman practice of the immolation of woman on the death of her husband in his funeral pyre), female infanticide, female child marriage, Purdah system (viz. veil means seclusion of women from public observations) and restriction of female in education. Muslim invasion in the Indian subcontinent started in 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards and there was an influence of Islamic culture on Indian society, consequently a mixed Indo-Persian culture was emerged. Socialization and the possibility of interactions with rest of the society were restricted to the females and they were secluded and confined within the enclosures. The Islam during this period worsened the conditions of women in general though few women like Razia, Nurjahan, and Rudramma Devi were exceptions; the practice of polygamy, easy divorce by men and the law of inheritance went against female during this period; however, Mughal tried to put down Sati but could not pursue the reforms strictly. The most notable fact during this period was the emergence of Bhakti movement; a new social group was developed which could not fit into the traditional hierarchy as practiced by the Brahmins in Hindu religion; this socio-religious group popularly known as 'Bhakti movement' had brought a significant socio-cultural changes in India. The saints of this group brought religion to the downtrodden and marginalized sections of the society popularizing devotion are more important than rituals. The Bhakti followers believed that women could also practice bhakti (viz. pray for God) and they were considered as an equal in the eyes of God; though Bhakti movement was dominated by men, it included women as its significant and prominent members. Notable's women saints who were famous in southern India were Andal, Karakkal Ammayar, Akka Mahadevi; Sakhubai, Muktabai and Bahinabai of Maharashtra and Lal ded (popularly known as Laleshwari) of Kashmir made a significant contribution in Bhakti movement. The rise of Bhakti movement was due to strict rituals and evil practices of Hinduism, discrimination against the lower caste, Muslim invasion and fear of spreading Islam (Mukherjee 1974; Thapar 1978; Ramaswami 1997; Pande 2010). Bhakti movement originated in south India and over the centuries (from 6<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century), it gained popularity all over India. Dalit women's participation in Bhakti movement in South India was significant; Ramaswami (1997) has critically examined the social backgrounds of women saints in Bhakti movement in South India and argued that Dalit women were more emancipated and equal to their male partners than upper caste women. A deep sense of individualism, strong believe in spiritualism and eternal love, devotion and faith in God found among the saints of Bhakti tradition made the rise of women's voices. One can trace the elements of exploitation, inequality, social exclusion and caste discrimination through the songs, poems and ways of life of the saints belonging to Bhakti tradition.

During 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, Devadasi (viz. women who wedded God) system was prevalent especially in temples of southern India. Initially, Devadasi were seven categories but majority belonged to 'Dutta Devadasi' (viz. who is offered by the family to temple). They belonged to non-Brahmins (especially OBCs) and Dalits (SC) community and the non-Brahmins Devadasis possessed high rank and dignity in the society because of their ritual powers and sacred service to the Deities of the temples (Vijaisri 2004; Mishra 2014). The Devadasis belonging to non-Brahmin communities performed classical music and dance, while the Dalit Devadasis performed folk dances during temple festivals; as part of their duties, the Devadasis offer sexual services to their patrons who are economically, politically and socially powerful in the society (Black 2007; Mishra 2014). Thus, the Devadasi system during this period epitomized intersectional subjugation of religion, gender, caste and sexuality (Geetha 2021). The central debate of the sexual labour extracted from Dalit women in the form of ritualised, religiously sanctioned and socially "accepted" Devadasi system pitted against the moralistic idea of female purity. Initially the Devadasi system intended to honour deities where a young girl was married to a god, however, the system took a dark twist transforming these women into pawns in a ritualistic form of prostitution. The system of Devadasi was influenced as well as controlled by the upper caste landlords; the upper castes have influenced the establishment of an order of prostitutes who are licensed to carry on their profession under the protective shield of religion (Orchard 2007).

### 3.3 Colonial Period

Initially, the primary objective of the British was trade and the advent of British Raj did not make conditions better for women; gender discrimination, early female child marriage, casteism and prejudices prevailed in Indian society during early phase of British Raj. After conquering the powerful princely states in India, British Raj felt the necessity of spreading English education in India for smooth running of the administration and consequently an elite class was created from the upper caste in India who exposed to European liberalism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through Western education. This Indian intellectual group felt the necessity of social reforms and urgency for banning the Sati, child marriage, purdah, property rights and polygamy. The social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, K V Panthulu, M G Ranade, Karve, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and many others provided leadership to women's liberation but they did not specifically focus on the Dalit women's misery and exploitation though the reformer were successful to remove the major social obstacles in the life of the women. Rashmoni Das (1793-1861), popularly known as Lokmata Rani Rahmoni of Janbazar, Kolkata was one of the earliest Dalit social reformer and forerunners of the Bengal renaissance who supported widow remarriage and fought against polygamy in India. The contributions of Sabitribai Phule and her husband Jotiba Phule of Maharashtra were famous in subaltern history. They had jointly fight against Brahminical patriarchy and fought for the up-liftment and empowerment of depressed community especially in the context of girls education during 1850. It needs to be mentioned here that Sabitribai Phule was the first Dalit female who understood the importance of education in general and female education in particular; she along with her husband established 18 schools both for boys and girls in Maharashtra before her death on 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1897 ( Rosalind 2002; Narake 2009).

The historical and cultural narratives of India are endocentric in approach dominated by the higher caste and economically powerful class; history was not written from gynocentric point of view. However, Queen Velu Nachiyar of Sivagangai (part of southern Tamil Nadu), Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, Begum Hazrat Mahal of Lucknow are famous who fought bravely against the British in the great revolt of 1857 but women from ordinary families like Asha Debi, Avanti Bai, Kuyili, Asghari Begum, Habiba, Rahimi, Raj Kaur, Shobha Debi, Jhalkaribai and Udadevi who had fought against the East India Company and most of them had sacrificed their lives in the battlefield.

The life sacrificed by Dalit woman, Nangeli of Cherthala of Travancore (of Kerala) is terrible in the context of abolishing 'Breast Tax'. The story of 'Breast Tax' in Travancore (of Kerala) in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century has re-ignited the issue of horrible oppression, sufferings and exploitation of Dalit women since the publication an article from BBC in 2016. Nangeli cut off her breasts in an effort to protest against a tax on breast though the story was not recognized by the historical accounts (Pillai 2019). Allen (2017) and Pillai (2019) have argued that when Nangeli protested against the regressive tax system, it was an assertion made in great torture about the inequality, exploitation and social order itself.

After the revolt of 1857, the new education system and social movement had geared up the process of awakening the underprivileged and women's visibility in public domains. The Hindu religious organizations like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ram Krishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha had played a significant role to enlighten and accelerate the socio-religious movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Dalit women were actively involved in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s. In order to weaken the freedom movement, the British Government enacted the 'Communal Award' on 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1932. The objective of the 'Communal Award' was to ensure separate electorates for the Muslims, Sikhs, Anglo-Indians, Europeans and Dalits; initially B R Ambedkar was in favour of the Award because he believed that there should be a separate political voice for the Dalits but Mahatma Gandhi vehemently opposed this Award. Ambedkar believed that the political strategy of gaining power is either an end in

itself or a means to other ends of development outcomes; political power if it is possessed by the Dalits can augment the bargaining power of the Dalits and consequently the exploitation is expected to be reduced. A negotiation took place between Gandhiji and Ambedkar regarding the Award which was known as 'Poona Pact'. The Pact ensured the interest of the Dalits allowing well representation of the electoral seats in the legislature of the depressed classes, unfortunately, the Pact did not mention about the Dalit women's participation in assembly!

The problem of women received the attention of social reformers right from the beginning of the nineteenth century; the period from 1911-18 was of great significance because of Annie Besant, the president of Indian National Congress. The Women's Indian Association (1917), The National Council of Women in India (1920) and All India Women's Conference (1927) were set up with the objectives of spreading women's education, eliminating child marriages and other gender based societal evils and injustice. Women like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde worked hard and tried to improve the conditions of women in general though they did not highlight specifically women's condition in terms of different caste realities prevalent within the Indian society. Some regional women's organizations like Sharda Sadan (1892) & Bhagini Samaj (1916) in Pune, Maternity and Child Welfare League (1914) in Baroda, Shri Zoroastrian Mandal in Bombay (1903) worked with the particular objective of improving women's lives. The feminist movement indiscriminately left the depressed class women's voices; the multiple discriminations of caste, class and patriarchy faced by Dalit women could not be addressed since the feminist movements were dominated and controlled by the upper caste women (Sarvesh et al 2021). It is believed that Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, during his years as a student at Columbia University from 1913 to 1916 became aware of the consciousness and assertion of Black people in America; Ambedkar was influenced greatly and it gave him the knowledge base of developing a strategy for fighting against caste discrimination in India (Kapoor 2004). Ambedkar reinforced Dalit women's agency to fight their stigma and assert themselves in their struggle to achieve a revolutionary modernity and to simultaneously fight against the violence of caste discrimination and untouchability (Paik 2014; Rama et al 2021). Independent Dalit women's movements, for and by the Dalit women was initiated in India especially in Maharashtra since 1920; earlier women's movement could not reach to the mass because of diverse religions, multilingual, multi-ethnic and hierarchical caste system in India. Ramabai Ambedkar, wife of B R Ambedkar was a social reformer and her contributions to Dalit education and social reform were notable. She played a crucial role in the establishment of the first school for Dalit girls in Pune. There was a great influence of B R Ambedkar towards formation of Dalit feminism. All India Dalit women conference was organized in Nagpur in 1942 which was attended by Ambedkar and presided over by Dalit female Congress leader Sulochanabai Dongre; about 25,000 Dalit women participated in the conference. Mahatma Gandhi was against the family planning but Dongre strongly supported the usefulness of family planning and she was pioneer in advocating family planning among the Dalits women. She was unhappy with the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and detached herself from the Conference. Dongre believed that the voice and space of Dalit women were being appropriated by non-Dalit women belonging to AIWC; later she became the leader of All India Depressed Classes Women Congress and chaired 'Dalit Mahila Federation' (Pawar and Moon 2008). It needs to be mentioned about Dakshayani Velayudhan, the first Dalit woman from Kerala who was elected to the Constituent Assembly of India in 1946; she was a great follower of Ambedkar and in the Parliament she took special interest in the matters of education especially that of the Dalits (Kshirsagar, 1994).

### 3.4 Post-Independence Period

Ambedkar in India's Constitution provided constitutional guarantees and protections for a wide range of civil liberties including freedom of religion, the abolition of untouchability and the outlawing of all forms of discrimination against caste and gender. But, women in general and Dalit women in particular continued to have an inferior and sub-optimal status in every sphere of life like social, economic and political. This was clearly proved from the national report on equality, 'Towards Equality Report of 1974'. International women's day for the first time was celebrated on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1975. How did it influence the Dalit women? This is extremely difficult to assess. Some women's organizations like Saheli, Manushi, Stri Mukti Sangathana,

The Dalit Panthar of Maharashtra which was formed in 1972 embraced with the philosophy of Marx and Ambedkar had made a significant contribution towards cultural revolt of the depressed caste, though it was dominated by male Dalits. Dalit Panthers were led by Namdeo Dhasal, J. V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble in Bombay. The Dalit Panther movement was a radical departure from earlier Dalit movements owing to its initial emphasis on militancy and revolutionary attitudes; however, the radical movement failed to reach its objective due to lack of able leadership and rhetoric outstripping capabilities of the leaders (Kumar 2016).

Ambedkarite feminist movements were held mainly in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu during 1970s and 1980. The socio-cultural and familial status, the history of struggles, oppressions and exploitations of Dalit females can be assessed from some notable Dalit female writer's novels or autobiographies or poems (Thiyagarajan 2018; Sethi and Nayak 2020). The followers of Ambedkar and influential Dalit feminist writers as well as social reformers were Baby Kamble, Kausalya Baisantri and Urmila Pawar of Maharashtra; Bama Faustina Soosairaj, Sukirtharani and P.

Sivakami of Tamil Nadu. After reviewing some of the Dalit feminist literature, Rege (2006) has pointed out that Dalit male writers selectively excluded women's voices and brought forth their views on behalf of Dalit women.

The 73<sup>rd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1993 pertaining to the political reservations of seats in local governance (viz. Panchayati Raj) for marginalized communities and women has been an essential affirmative action undertaken by the Government of India. Political participation and decision-making powers are the enabling instruments of empowerment. Dalit women are supposed to experience multiple discriminations (in respect of caste, class and gender), therefore, the Panchayati Raj has made a significant contribution of Dalit women to raise their voices in modern India (Mangubhai et al 2009, Paik 2018). In 1995, Ruth Manorama, a Dalit socio-political activist from Bangalore had formed the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW). The NFDW has built up confidence among the Dalit women. Various autonomous Dalit women organizations were set up at the state level during mid 1990 such as Satyashodak Mahila Sabha, Dalit Mahila Sanghatana, Bahujan Mahila Parishad, Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad, Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana (an organization of Dalit-Christian) etc. The self-representation of Dalit women in Durban Conference on Racism (in 1993) and International Women's Conference in Beijing (in 1995) are path breaking events in the history of Dalit women's politics.

The political history of Dalit had achieved a new height when Mayawati, the leader of Bahujan Samajbadi Party (BSP) was first elected to parliament in 1989. In 1995, she became the chief minister (CM) of Uttar Pradesh (UP); she had been as CM for four separated terms in UP. Under the leadership of Mayawati, various affirmative actions were undertaken for the depressed and backward communities in UP. Dalit empowerment was Mayawati's lasting contribution to the Indian polity. Reservation of seats in respect of caste and gender through Panchayati Raj raises the visibility of Dalit women in power structure; it is undeniable that such political empowerment has led to an increased backlash against the Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. Despite societal advances in India, the mindset of people regarding Dalits has not changed much. How does the society feel and react between Dalit and Non-Dalit rape and murder case? A clear contrast is found if we compare the two rape and murder case of Hathras (Dalit) held in 2020 and Nirbhaya (Non-Dalit) held in 2012. In the Nirbhaya case, where there were three dying declarations, the court also considered the law regarding statements given before death but in Hathras case the justice was denied even the UP Government acted in in-human manner. Moreover, the victim was denied the right to a dignified burial, as authorities forcibly cremated her body without family members' consent. What was happened in Rajasthan in 1991? Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman protested against child marriage and she was gang-raped by the upper caste Hindu! Moreover, Bhanwari and her husband were arrested as criminals! Ankita Yadav and Vaibhav Gaur(2023) has observed the similarity of Hathras case with the famous Bhanwari Devi case of Rajasthan in 1991, where the court's reasoning was outrageous as the judge stated, "An upper-caste man could not have defiled himself by raping a lower-caste woman." The status of Dalit women remains the same over the decades in India if we compare between Bhanwari Debi case of Rajasthan and Hathras in UP!

#### 4. Conclusion

We have reviewed the status of Dalit women in Indian backdrop from historical perspectives. The status of Dalit women has improved among those who are educated and joined in politics like Mayawati and some other Dalit women leaders like Krishna Tirath, Shailaja and Meera Kumar. Mayawati led UP government could not improve the status of Dalit women. The Panchayati Raj has been considered as an excellent political decentralization process through which the marginalized communities and Dalit women can be empowered. Space for raising voice for Dalit women is available but there should be some capability of raising voice; only education can raise such capability. The female literacy among the Dalits in India is around 56.05(according to Census 2011) which is much lower than the national average. Historically the Dalit women are oppressed, exploited, marginalized and silent. Such tradition of silencing needs to be broken by acquiring knowledge through education and this was first felt and realized by Sabitibai Phule in colonial period. Indeed some degree of inequality among the Dalit women has been emerged; they are not homogenous. Among the Dalit women who are educated and well-off should do for their own community.

#### 5. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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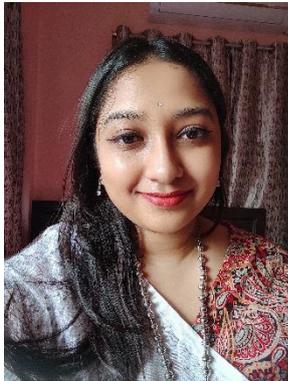
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#### About Author



Sucharita Halder is a doctoral researcher in Sociology at the University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal. She holds both her B.A. and M.A. degrees in Sociology from the esteemed Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her academic journey is marked by a deep commitment to exploring and addressing the complex social realities of contemporary India.

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