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## **A Survey of Dalit Women in West Bengal 1980-2010**

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### **Abstract**

*Several upheavals have modified our social history at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As civilization cannot be thought of except society, the position of women in a society has to be assessed in order to write down the history of a society. The history of the 'Sudras', the fourth class in the Hindu society, also says of such a thing. Although the 'Sudras' are the fourth class of the society, there remains another group just after it and it is called the Dalits. According to the census of 2011 the number of Dalit people in West Bengal was 1 crore 85 lakh people. However in accordance with modern constitution these people are known as Schedule Caste. These people have neither social position nor economic sufficiency. Slowly but steadily they are making a forward movement. They have got back social respect due to the sincere and selfless activities of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar but there is a big question as to how far the position of Dalit women have improved in the patriarchal society. I am trying to present this issue on the basis of information from the background of West Bengal.*

**Keywords:** Women, Dalit, Exploitation, harassment, Violence, Empowerment.

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**Introduction:** The present study paper to focus on the nature of promises, problems and prospects of empowerment of the Dalits women in West Bengal. It is a micro study about the socio-economic political and cultural spaces of Dalit women within a greater society. The objective of this study is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression, struggle and torture Dalit women face every day of their miserable lives .The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economical status, or lack of education, but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes, which is legitimized by Hindu religious scriptures (Thind n.pag; Agarwal n.pag). Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within their own communities. Men are dominant in Dalit communities. Gail Morden, a feminist sociologist, has called Indian Dalit women "Dalit among Dalit". Dalit women also have less power within the Dalit movement itself. Women are active in large numbers in the movement but most leadership positions in the organisations, local bodies and associations have until now been held by men. So the situation of Dalit women in west Bengal needs special attention.

Caste system, the unique feature of Indian society divides its members into different

segments on the basis of ascribed status. The people situated at the bottom have been identified as unclean or untouchables or achhuts. Though it is an eternal truth that all men are not equal but when and where human beings became unequal due to their birth then that inequality became a crucial issue in the process of social, political and economic mobilization. The common feature of this problem is maintaining a specific order which generally stood for suppressing the voices of the bottom rungs and concomitantly ignoring the usefulness of voice as instrumental to attain social justice. However after Independence the introduction of parliamentary democracy, universal adult franchise, various constitutional rights, and government sponsored development programs and enactments brought a massive change in caste based inequality. Various developmental and social transformation programs gave birth to the demands for equality and assertion of collective identity among the erstwhile segregated and marginalized groups.<sup>3</sup> They became vociferous about their identity, honor, dignity and prestige. They emphatically demanded their share and participation in every walk of life. Actually the post-independence discursive history of caste inequality has been viewed on the one hand as an ameliorative mechanism for the low caste and on the other hand as a tale of severe deprivation and obnoxious acts perpetrated on low caste people. This dialectical situation ultimately gives birth to new forces, which stand up to erase traditional abysmal position of the poor, segregated, low caste people and at the same time organize themselves for the installation of dignified and hegemonic position. This new forces raise hope among the low castes that they could set aside the parochial strictures of castes which would make way for a more secular political society. They were propagating the notion that individual equality per se would not emancipate automatically, so they need to re-invent dignity in their collective identity.<sup>4</sup> This contextual transformation ultimately provoked those marginalized low caste groups who have, by the help of the aforementioned mechanisms of politicization, emerged with a new sense of humanity and forge ahead to shape a new society based on the principles of justice, equality and freedom.

**Dalit:** At the outset it is necessary to justify the construction of the term ‘Dalit’; whom we may identify as dalit or who are identified as dalit in this study. The word was derived from Sanskrit language and its literary meaning is ‘ground down’ ‘oppressed’ or ‘broken’.<sup>5</sup> As political epithet it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi Marathi translation of ‘Depressed class’. Generally since 1960s the exuntouchables have been identified as dalit. It is important to note that the category dalit is not a homogenous one, but made with three broad divisions, each having its own distinctive background and own problems. These three divisions are scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward communities. Besides, the religious minorities have also begun to claim their belongingness to this category. We may not consider the members of dalit category as simple laborers’ or economically deprived or exploited individual. It is an aggregate of closed status group. The commonality of the members of this category is they are socio- economically oppressed, culturally subjugated and politically marginalized for centuries; actually all the members of this category are ex-untouchable. The determining factor of this category

is not economic but the birth identity. For interpreter ‘Dalits’ are those who have been broken, ground down by social groups above them in a deliberate manner. This identity is actually constructed on the one hand to express the denial of pollution or untouchability, unjustified caste hierarchy and on the other hand to express the spirit of pride and militancy.<sup>6</sup> By this constructed identity ex-untouchables emphatically express their willingness to uproot the traditional practice of untouchability and forge initiative in adopting and promoting a new identity which stands for their honor and advancement In administrative parlance, scheduled castes are considered as dalits. But some scholars and activists considered it as a narrow inclusion and demanded a broader one to encompass all those considered to be either similarly placed or natural allies. They intend to include landless poor peasant, women, scheduled tribes and other backward castes in this category. However though scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes are all marginalized group, yet their social heritage is not the same. The backward castes identified themselves as ‘pichadi jati’ and the scheduled tribes preferred to call themselves as ‘soshits’. The three words ‘dalita’, ‘soshita’ and ‘pichadi jati’ are evocative of the anguish and frustrated aspirations but it is not sufficient for sameness.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to note that always conceptualization of dalit in terms of traditional account would not provide complete picture of their places in society. It is difficult to provide a single universal definition of dalit. However considering present situation and common parlance this study regarded the scheduled castes as ‘dalit’.

**Current static dalit in west Bengal:** The total population of West Bengal at 2001 Census has been 80,176,197. Of these 18,452,555 persons are Scheduled Castes (SCs), constituting 23 per cent of the total population of the state. The state has registered 14.8 per cent decadal growth of SC population in 1991-2001. There are fifty nine (59) notified SCs, and all have been enumerated in 2001 Census.

**Population:** Size & Distribution: The Rajbanshi and Namasudra having more than 32 lakhs population each constitute 35.8 per cent of the total SC population of the state. Bagdi, Pod, Bauri and Chamar each have more than 10 lakhs population. They along with Rajbanshi and Namasudra together constitute 73.9 per cent of the total SCs. The Jalia Kaibartta, Hari, Dhoba, Sunri (excluding Saha), Dom, Lohar, Mal, Kaora, and Tiyar have sizeable population (Statement-1). The rest of the SCs have a comparatively smaller population.

**Statement-1:** All Scheduled Castes 18,452,555 100 %

2 Rajbanshi 3,386,617 18.4	3 Namasudra 3,212,393 17.4	4 Bagdi 2,740,385 14.9	5 Pod 2,216,513 12.0	6 Bauri 1,091,022 5.9	7 Chamar 995,756 5.4	8 Jalia Kaibartta 409,303 2.2	9 Hari 390,619 2.1	10 Dhoba 369,808 2.0	11 Sunri (excluding Saha) 317,543 1.7	12 Dom 316,337 1.7	13 Jhalo Malo 293,714 1.6	14 Lohar 279,582 1.5	15 Mal 273,641 1.5	16 Kaora 263,731 1.4	17 Tiyar 195,340 1.1.
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3. North Twenty Four Pargana, South Twenty Four Pargana and Barddhaman districts account for one third of the total SC population of the state.

4. Majority of SCs are living in rural areas (84.1 per cent).

**Sex Ratio:** The sex ratio of the total SC population is 949, which is higher than the national average (936) for all SCs. Of the sixteen major SCs, the sex ratio among Bagdi (978), Bauri (973), Kaora (963), Hari (963), Mal (962), Dom (959), Lohar (959), and Jalia Kaibartta (951) is above the state average for all SCs. It is lower than the state average among the remaining seven major SCs; the lowest has been among the Chamar (911).

The child sex ratio (0-6 age group) of 958 for SCs in the state is higher than the national average for the same category (938). Jalia Kaibartta (954), Sunri (excluding Saha) (951), Tiyar (951), Hari (948), Pod (947), and Dhoba (942) have recorded lower child sex ratio as compared to the state average (958).

**Social status:** Some of the sociologists describe that the status of Dalit women is better than that of the high caste women as both the men and women share the same work. So there are not so many rules that create gender discrimination in the low caste groups (Bennett, 1981). But so far as the social status is concerned Dalit women have been doubly victimised, being "women and untouchables. Often times they have to face humiliation and psychological depression while using the public spaces e.g. water sources, entering mandirs and others. Besides that, When they have to survive on the mercy of the upper caste groups they need to provide various services that are low paid and risky. In the labour force also, if there are untouchables, they are segregated while serving food. They need to stay away from the so called upper caste people of the same economic status while eating. Such practices have not been changed much from education and legal sanctions. A Chamar woman however is the most needed person during the time of delivery. She attends the birth and does all the required works as a doctor yet she is not allowed to enter the house. A certain amount of wage is given either in cash or in kind as the fees, which the person using her service can afford. Dolit women are often found to be the victims of illegitimate sexual relationships. If they have such relationships with the higher caste men, they are not accepted in their family. In such cases they have to lead a miserable life. On the other hand there are some groups in which women are indulged in prostitution as their profession. The Badi women are indulged in sex trade from the very young age which is a big source of earning to the family. Men of the family work as the dealers for their trade. Many Dolit women also have become the victims of girl traffickers being ignorant of all these activities. Having no other source of income, Dalil women are compelled to adopt such illegal and odious occupation for being destitute in the society.

#### Economic:

Most of the Dalils have no land and no other regular source of income. Those who are the occupational groups especially in the rural areas, get a fixed wage. For example a tailor will sew the clothes mostly during the Dasai or during rainy season when people usually sew new clothes. The blacksmith will make tools or sharpen them at the same time of the season when they are in use. Women share hands with their male in these activities. For this purpose they are given a certain amount of food grains from the families where they work seasonally, as most of the farmers also don't have their regular income. This allowance is

not sufficient if there are more family members to feed. In such cases they live in hand to mouth situation. So, they are compelled to take whatever job is available for them. Those who don't work as fixed labour still have difficulty to survive as there is no job in the rural areas. In such cases they become the victims of low wages of their arduous jobs as they have to take whatever job is available just to survive. Women will be the victims of such cases as they are not the skilled labourers. Due to illiteracy and lack of awareness men mostly spend their income in alcohol. Even the little food grains is used in preparing alcohol rather used as staple food. Women have to work hard in case of alcoholic husband to feed their children and take other household works. They also get continuous mental and physical torture from the drunken husband. Such households face all the hardships leading to a condition of destitute. A Dalit woman is the one to bear all the problems associated with these hardships. She may even leave the house and become victim of other social evils due to her own ignorance having no other alternative to survive. Terai Dalits still lead a miserable life than the hill Dalits. Most of the Dalits in the Tarai own no land of their own. They mostly live in the land of others, so they have to adjust in a limited space that is available for them. It is found that majority of them have just a small house to live in. The whole family have to adjust in that little space. They also keep birds and animals in the same house - chicken, duck, pig, goat, cow to add their income. Without space and proper food to feed they cannot rear the animals in proper way rather add up additional burden. This burden also falls on the shoulder of the women as the males have to go for wage earning. The women thus are never free from the household chores without proper food to eat and dress to wear. A Dalit woman leads a life worse than that of an animal full of scarcity throughout her life.

**Health:** The health condition depends on various factors economy, sanitation, education, health facilities, and other available and affordable resources. Most of the Dalits live in filthy areas and poor sanitation condition. Most of them even do not have access to pure drinking water facility. The health condition of Dalits is the lowest due to all the cumulative factors, low calorie intake and use of stale food, unhygienic labour work, poor living condition, heavy work load, ignorance, etc. They are the ones who suffer mostly from the infectious, and waterborne diseases. The most common diseases are skin diseases, bacterial and viral infections, gastro-intestinal diseases, worms and others. Most of the Dalit children are severely malnourished due to food deficiency and low calorie intake. Women are the victims of all these hazards as they have to look after all the sick and diseased people in addition to her household burden. She ignores her health to provide service to others and cuts short her life span. Due to various health problems Dalits have a short life span. There is also a high death rate among the children below 5 years. Due to this reason women are compelled to give birth to many children so that a few children could survive. Maternal and infant mortality rate which is quite high in the country itself is the highest among the Dalits. When there is no health facility they are compelled to depend on the faith healers, traditional birth attendants and locally available medicines at the time of illness and delivery. They rush to the hospital only in the case of emergency otherwise they survive in

the mercy of the almighty. Women face the problem of anaemia, uterus prolapse and other gynecological problems as they do not get good care and good food during pregnancy and lactation. The case of Dalit women is even severe if they are indulged in sex trade. The statistics show that quite a large number of Dalit women have adopted this profession. The Badi women are well known for such activities. Apart from this, girls from these communities are also trafficked in the very young age. All these factors have caused women to suffer from the problems of HIV/AIDS.

**Education:** History tells that Dalits were not allowed to attain knowledge as they were the service providing groups. Women in particular, even in the upper-caste groups were prohibited for gaining knowledge. Where women of upper castes were somehow benefited by their men, the Dalit women were prohibited from such opportunity also. So they lived in complete ignorance. This in total, affected the Dalit community. They even didn't feel the need of education for their children due to all the cumulative factors. Although the opportunity for schooling was opened for all since 1950 only in the country itself, the social and economic situation did not allow to do so for the Dalits. The situation for Women of all groups did not change much due to the religious orthodoxy, so both the women and the Dalits have been left behind from the educational opportunities. The Dalit women hold the lowest status in education being doubly exploited as Dalit and women. A study (CERID, 1997) shows that the literacy percentage of Dalits is below 10% and that of Dalit women is below 5%. The enrolment of Dalit children at the primary level is negligible. Schools in most part of the country do not treat the Dalit children equally. They are kept away from other children in the class room, are not allowed to drink water from the same pot, or eat food with other children. Most of the Dalit children are not attended properly by the teachers in schools so they cannot perform well in their studies and dropout even at grade I. There are ample of stories told by the educated Dalits about the humiliating situations they had to face during the time of their schooling. People did not rent their houses when they knew that they were the untouchable castes. Even the friends kept seclusion from them to avoid the societal encroachment. The other fact is that due to poverty they do not get sufficient food to eat at home and cannot stay in the school for long. When they become older to share hands with parents they are withdrawn from the school due to the necessity of survival. Girls are the most vulnerable groups among the Dalits also, as son preference is practised there too. There are few Dalits who have received graduates or above degree, and women can be counted in fingers. The educated also have not got job opportunity which has brought frustration among them.

**Employment:** Only about 8% of the total population is engaged in the productive work and the rest is engaged in agricultural works. When there are fewer job opportunities for the younger generation in the country there is very little or no job opportunity "for the Dalits being educationally left behind and having none of their people in power. Only a few Dalits who have received higher level of education also have not been able to join the government job. Due to low level of education and approach to the authority, they hardly get the opportunity in other jobs too. There is no reservation system for Dalits either in education

or in the job which has further marginalized them as they cannot compete with others. Some of the areas where Do/its have been engaged are in teaching, music, and other occupation. The situation escalates in the case of Dalil women as they lag far behind in education and other opportunities. A few of the Dalil women are found to work as nurses, and teachers. A vast majority of the Dalil population work as wage labourers, women also equally participate in the wage labour as there is no other alternative to survive.

**Politis** There is hardly any representation of the Dalils in the politics. There is one government nominee in the house of representatives. No one has represented this group as the electorate candidate in the house of representative. None of them have come in the cabinet since the establishment of democracy. There is a nominal representation even in the local level politics. There is not a single representation from the woman Dalil in the higher level politics in the history. Dalil women have been marginalized in the total voices of women as they are small in number. However, the Dalil Women's Organisation is raising the voices about the Do/it women's issues which has drawn the attention of Government, NGOs and I Gas at the present time.

**Policy of GO, NGO and INGO for the Upliftment of Dalits:** Since the establishment of democracy the voices against untouchability and upliftment of Dalil community has been raised by various NGOs and the INGOs. The government also has started to give due consideration on the issue. There are GOs and rNGOs who work for the benefits of the Do/its as they are the poorest of the poor of the country. Various Dalil's organisations are raising their voices against the issue and are also working to uplift their condition. A separate NGO 'Dalil Women's Organisation' works on the issue of women of this group. The I GOs, Plan International, Action Aid, and Lutheran have been working since long in this area. Since the establishment of democracy the government has been providing scholarships to all the Dei/il children enrolled in school. All these programmes have drawn public attention to the issue which has aroused some awareness among the people. However, due to long established caste system, the upliftment of Do/its' situation especially in the social situation has not changed much. Other major lacuna of all these programmes, especially of the INGOs have been the big investment in the administration and contingencies than to the beneficiaries. They are termed as the White Elephants who consume a large amount of their budget on their own benefits rather to the target groups. Although there are programmes addressed for the upliftment of the Dalils they are run on the piece-meal basis. They have not been able to design and run programmes for the whole country in a consolidated form. Apart from the Dalil Organisations, other GOs and I GOs have programmes in their specific areas focusing to all the poor people of the surrounding locality. In such a situation the Dalils have not been able to utilize the benefits and are marginalized. There is no specific programme for Dei/il women from these organizations and the programmes addressed especially for women have hardly been able to bring the Dalil women in it. It is also difficult for the Dalil women who have to live in the hand to mouth situation to attend the programme on the regular basis and so they drop out. On the other hand their problems have not been addressed by such programs and so they do not feel

comfortable to participate fully. There is also the discrimination against caste groups among the participants in the programme. A handful of Dalit women participating in the programme would hardly be taken care by the programme organisers as special focus group and are given due care. In such a situation they feel even embarrassed and humiliated and try to keep away themselves from such an awkward situation.

**Violence, Exploitation, Harassment and Problems:** Cert abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat ain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women. Extreme filthy verbal faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experienced by Dalit women. Dalit womens are threatened by rape as part of Collective violence by the higher castes. However, sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls also occur within their own communities. For Dalit men, the suppression Dalit women and girls also occur within their own communities. For Dalit men, the suppression Devadasi system of temple prostitution is the most extreme form of exploitation of Dalit women. Dalit girls children are forced to prostitution. Women are often also unaware of the laws and their ignorance is exploited by their opponents, by the police, and by the judiciary system. The status of Dalit women is in such a pathetic condition that upper caste men exploit the women and the lower caste men and women. Again the upper caste women also exploit the lower caste women. The Dalit women are thus exploited by Dalit men and the upper caste men and women.

Therefore it is very urgent and important to focus attention and policies on the betterment of Dalit women and to establish their equal status and personality as a human being. First and foremost Dalit women are victims of social, religious and cultural practices like Devdasis and Jogins. In the name of these practices, village girls are married to God by their helpless parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the upper caste landlords and rich men and directed in to trafficking and prostitution. Dalit women's are oppressed by the broader Hindu society, their own community's men and also their own husbands. Dalit women's husbands are mostly suffering from false sense of superiority for being men and thus suffering from all kinds male chauvinism. They command the authority structure in the family putting Dalit women at the secondary or tertiary positions. They are often under the habits of liquor- Women's Link Vol. XVII consumption and gambling, and take away the wages earned by Dalit women and thus, leaving the whole family to starve. They also beat their wives on the slightest pretext and protest. Dalit women are often employed in agricultural farms owned by higher caste feudal landlords during tilling, sowing, irrigating, cutting and harvesting seasons, and are on their mercy for their bread and butter. They are always paid far less wages than prescribed by the rules and have to work for longer hours. Dalit women have largely been the targets of population control programmes, in an effort to limit their family size and to provide them an opportunity for development. Horror stories have been related by Dalit women of how they along with many other communities have been butchered in family planning camps, often without their knowledge of what is happening to them. Injectable contraceptives and other hormones drugs are tested on these

powerless, voiceless women by unscrupulous multinational business houses. The atrocities on Dalits by uppercastes is also directly affecting the normal life of Dalit women, the murders of Dalits stabbing, social boycott, loss of property, revenging them using the public well, tanks, entry to public places such as temples, cinema hall, denial of employment of the Dalit women and many such types of incidents add to the distress of Dalit women. The social security and protection of Dalit women are low. The lack of control over productive resources and a persistent gap between consumption and expenditure leading too perpetual indebtedness deprived them of all important bargaining power and were comparatively higher when compared to upper caste women. The components of this vast group of occupational mobility. The proportion of Dalit women below the poverty line is are unskilled workers, landless agricultural labourers, factory workers, members of household with uneconomic holdings and those in traditional menial jobs. These women have been subjected to wage discrimination, physical harassment, maternity benefit, pension promotion, leave facility and other job security. The structural adjustment in the new economic policy lists women, as leading the decline in employment and income by the introduction of imported technology. The policies totally neglect womens role in Indian economy and especially rural technology. The policies totally neglect womens role in Indian economy and especially rural the economic status of women and also right to work and not even allowed the single Dalit women to participate in policy and decision making.

**Conclusion:**

1. Economic factors must be given full weight age in an attempt to uplift Dalit women from their prevailing marginalized, dehumanized status. This requires consideration of all issues that have relevance to the development perspectives and strategies of our nation.
2. Rural development and urban development should be considered together and not in isolation. Same way, organized and unorganized sectors should be examined together because they constitute two sides of the same coin that is the national economy parameter.
3. All aspects of the present debate on liberalization of Indian economy should be thoroughly examined. Dalit women have contributed to growth and development throughout history. And even then they have remained at the lowest rung of the society, lowest of the low. What has contributed to this state of affairs? Which are the forces responsible for the present insecure, unstable and dehumanized status of the Dalit women?
4. There is a cultural domain which requires deeper scrutiny. This includes structure of relationship between Dalit women and non-Dalit women. What are the perceptions of each other? to what extent they are helpful and sympathetic? What are the reason for apathy and alienation and social divisiveness among them?

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