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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DALITS WOMEN MOVEMENT IN TAMILNADU

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Abstract

Women the marvelous masterpiece of creation, constitute half of the human population. Traditionally, women bear primary responsibility for the well being of their families, which is the nucleus of the society. They play a constructive role in building up the country by contributing their labour in both organized and unorganized sectors. In Indian cult female goddess are given credible devotions. Nevertheless suppression of women is rooted in the very fabric of Indian society - in traditions, in religious doctrine and practices, within the educational and legal systems, and within families. They, in all spheres of life silently or stridently spelt out their suppressed and dehumanized existence. They are systematically denied access to the resources to fulfill their responsibility.

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Introduction:-

India is a unique state of multi culture, caste, religion, custom and conventions based on the hierarchy system of India's age old culture. India's multicultural setup may facilitate the power holder and caste wise high rung people and it may not be suitable to lower class people. The 73rd Amendment of the Constitution is a step forward to ensure and provide empowerment of women in general and Dalit women in particular, and it has given fillip to create political space for them by being the partners of the development process at grass root level. The representation of women in the institutions of local government has been facilitated through affirmative action, where one third of the seats have been reserved for women. This raises issues related to the representation of gender interests and the constraints on such representation

Women's Empowerment refers to the process by which women acquire due recognition on par with men, to participate as a partner with human solemnity in the development process of the society through the political institutions. In India, although some prominent women are in the forefront of Indian politics like Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Mamata Banerjee and Mayawati, the participation of women in governance is very small and their presence in the political system is insignificant.

The plural connotations of Indian society has produced variations and differential participation in the local governance based on the age, sex, caste, class, gender and the patriarchy. It is also pertinent to note how these factors influence the participation of different social categories in the decision making processes. It is also quite interesting that the socially and politically excluded collectivises respond to the changing conditions and take up the challenges to find their new identities. In this process of identification of 'images' independent of caste, gender and patriarchy have caused holocaust leading to tensions and conflicts. The conflict of interests from traditional-conservative values with that of democratic egalitarian values is a major thrust of enquiry.

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The word 'Dalit', is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal', which means 'tom-asunder, broken, discriminated, disowned, subjugated, and a victim of apartheid'. But for the Dalit people, the real meaning of Dalit is "The struggle for Human Rights." Today in most of the Indian languages, the word 'Dalit' represents the oppressed and downtrodden. There are 300 million Dalit people in the world, 250 million in Asia and 150 million of those in India alone. More than 50per cent of the Dalits in India are in the states of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu has the fourth highest Dalit population in India, 10.7 percent. In this link the study of Dalit women, 'the bottom most oppressed', marginalized, susceptible to deprivations and subjected to multiple discriminations is quite essential as they belong always to the other world outside the domain of the protection of caste and protection from the male counter-parts within the family. This helplessness and lack of self-protection has rendered them subjugation and subordination. Dalit women, as feminists put it, needs a different perspective independent of other categories women because their problems are specific to them.

The structural interventions by the way of constitutionalisation of Panchayat Raj Institutions i.e., local governance, and one third reservation for women have certainly given new lease of life to the women in general and Dalit women in particular to air their grievances as the forerunners of political forum at grass root level. It is also necessary to record the perception and outlook of the rural elites, mostly constituted by the dominant upper castes and recently emerged economically powerful intermediary castes towards the decentralization of power and the inclusion of social categories hitherto kept out of the power structure, viz., the women of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Social and cultural exclusion from the political system resulted in women and other disadvantaged sections of the population being alienated from the politics and governance. The reservation of seats in local governments has offered women new political space and opportunity to participate in politics and governance. Equality in opportunity, however, does not guarantee the effective participation of women. Non - participation of women in local governance is a consequence of many inter-related factors. Socio - cultural constraints manifested in the gender inequalities and differences among women, resulted in the construction of a non - political identity.

Need for the study:

Social discrimination is problem identified due to untouchability practice maintained by upper caste people. In the upper caste family function the dalits are not permitted. In village functions the first preference is given to upper caste people. Social problem are experienced by for dalits people in view of untouchability practices in rural areas. The important social problems for discrimination and inequality affected dalits. Attempts have been made by Governments though acts of law to fulfill the constitutional obligation of providing production to dalits and to abolish untouchability. Though amply the Govt. of India to uplift the status of dalits formulates number of welfare activities and there is still selective inclusion of dalits in the society. There are several studies that highlighted the kind of caste problems, land holding land distribution economic development of dalits. Indebtedness, dalits movement that prevail in India. It appears that there are only a few attempts made to investigate their problems therefore this study makes modest attempt to fulfill the gap.

Objectives:-

1. To describe the socio – economic condition of the dalits.
2. To examine the causes and consequences of discrimination faced by dalits.
3. To bring out suggestion and remedies for resolving for resolving of social problems affecting dalits.

Disparity as Dalit Women:

Dalit women face specific problems which are uncommon to other caste women. Though in gender disparity they confront with the problems which common for all women, they are often alienated even from their fellow-women. The identity of caste secludes them from other women. The following discussion narrates the discrimination experienced uniquely by Dalit women in different aspects of life.

Identity of Dalits:

In ancient times the Indian population was fragmented by the Varna system. In the lowest rung of this system i.e. Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, falls the 'fifth caste' traditionally known as untouchables or outcastes. Today they are known as 'scheduled castes' or 'Dalits'. The word, 'caste' came from the Portuguese word, 'casta', signifying 'breed, race, or kind' (Sunderaj, 2000:p.37) but in India it represents social stratification.

The term scheduled castes was first incorporated into the Government of India act of 1935 and was continued to be promulgated in August 1950 in the free India (Santhakumari, 1982; Sunderaj, 2000). Scheduled caste is a constitutional and not a sociological concept. Because a caste can be specified as a scheduled caste only by the President of India; once specified, any inclusion or exclusion to the list can be made only through an act of the parliament (Chandra, 1981).

The term 'Dalit', is derived from the Sanskrit word 'dal', which means 'tom-asunder, broken, discriminated, disowned, subjugated, and a victim of apartheid'. But for the Dalit people, the real meaning of Dalit is "The struggle for Human Rights." Today in most of the Indian languages, the word 'Dalit' represents the oppressed and downtrodden. For centuries, Dalits have been socially suppressed, culturally neglected and economically exploited by upper caste people. They were not only known as the 'outcastes' or 'untouchables' of Indian society but also considered as 'unseeable, unapproachable, unshadowable and even unthinkable'. Concepts like "defilement (Theetu in Tamil), pollution, impurity, and exclusion" are blatantly attributed to the Dalits

Diversity of Dalits:

Dalit community is not a homogenous group. Instead it comprises Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and Muslims. Estimates of the Dalit subgroups ranged from 500 to 900, many of them situated in specific areas of the country and speaking different languages (Das, 1982; Haslam, 1999:p.2). According Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC, 1999) the list of schedule castes in Tamil Nadu had numbered as seventy six (appendix-D). Some of the prominent schedule castes are Chakiliyar, Pallar, Parayar and Madari. Though all of them belong to the oppressed group more often they behave rivals to each other than standing together against the oppressive system.

Dalit Movement in India:

Dalit movement has a rich history of rationalism and humanism. In fact, the historical evolution took place with Buddha's revolt against Varnashram dharama. Buddha not only rejected supremacy of Bramins but also of the Shastras. After Buddha, Mahavir Swami rejected the notion of caste and violence in the brahmanical structure. In the 15th century Kabir talked of rejection of caste system and talked of one God. He attacked rituals and shastras and talked of a society based on equality. Yet the brahmanical system continued by hook or by crook. The brahmanical literature degraded Dalits and talked very cleverly about the pre- birth theory. While Mughal rule in India was a status quo one, the emergence of British power made a lot of difference for the downtrodden people. They brought a sense of liberty for the marginalized communities. Jyoti Ba Phule belonged to Mali community of Maharastra. Punea Chtpawan Bramin would not allow any Dalit and backward to join schools. Women and particularly of Dalit community could never dream of going to school. Phule realized that unless the community gets educated they would not be able to emancipate themselves. So he started a massive work of education by starting various schools in and around Pune. The Brahmins opposed education movement among Dalits which they had denied for years. Phule appreciated Christian missionaries for their noble work in school education.

Dalit Movement today is at the crossroads. The early center of the movement was Maharashtra since the pre-Independence period. Ambedkar and the Maharashtra Movements were the source of inspiration for the dalit movements elsewhere. But, the dalit panthers of 1970 could not withstand for more than a decade. The Republican party (RPI) has splintered into so many factions and the main faction led by Athaule is clinging on to the Congress apron strings. The BRP led by Prakash Ambedkar is still enjoying mass respect and influence, still, there is no movements worth the name.

The dalit movement in Karnataka, symbolized by the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS) was known for its agitational and movemental character. In Andhra Pradesh the Dalit movement showed some signs of revival in the mid 1990s when the BSP made an attempt to expand its wings to south India. Lakhs of people got mobilized in the inaugural rally. Ex-PWG leaders, prominent dalit leaders etc., joined the BSP in the presence of Kansiram. Kerala has the lowest proportion of dalits in south India. The 68 communities included in the list of S.Cs form a mere 9.8 percent of the population in a state dominated few major communities Muslims, (27.70%) Ezhavas, (22.91%) Chirstians (19.02%) and Nairs (12.88%) and S.Ts form a miniscule 1.1 percent. The dalits of Kerala are the most literate among the S.C. population in the country.

Role of Ambedkar for the Dalits rights:

Ambedkar fought for the dignity of Dalits. The Hindu Varnavyavastha snatched the dignity from Dalits. It degraded labour. He considered the Hindu law book as the source of caste system and discrimination against Dalits in India

that he launched a movement against it. On December 25th 1927, he launched a Satyagraha in Mahad town of Maharashtra for the water rights of Dalits and against the Manu Smriti. He burnt Manu Smriti terming it a document of discrimination with a number of his supporters.

It was of great courage to do so in the den of violent Chitpawan Brahmins in Maharashtra. He fought for the rights of Dalits and had a broader vision for his community. His main concern was to ensure fair participation of Dalits in political life of the country and he succeeded in getting separate electorate for them, which he had to withdraw to save the life of Gandhi in 1932 known as Poona Pact.

Then as constitutionalist when he drafted constitution and later worked very hard to ensure fair deal for women in the Hindu Code Bill. In the last phase of his life when Babu Saheb embraced Buddhism, his main concern was providing a political alternative to Dalits. It is also interesting to note that B.R. Ambedkar was a humanist to the core of his heart. Even when his so called followers have converted him as a caste man or narrowly interpreted his ideologies and perception, Ambedkar could be termed an international humanist. Poor Dalits who consider him his emancipator. Ambedkar is a uniting factor for Dalits. No Doubt that he has become an icon from North to south from Hindiland to the Southern Tamilnadu.

Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu:

In the 1990s, the Dalit response was to get organized. The regional movements demonstrated the strength arising from numbers and unity, but also brought out some inherent limitations. First, of course was the fact they did not have the resources, the personnel and leadership to build up and sustain large-scale movements. Of the three, leadership was the most crucial. It is in this context that the services of K. Krishnasamy and Thirumavalavan have to be appreciated, the former a medical practitioner and the later a well placed government official. Both of them gave part time help to aggrieved fellow Dalit initially, later they became leaders of Dalit Movements and have since emerged as political personalities. Their sustained effort and personal sacrifices have succeeded in mobilizing Dalits, enthusing more Dalits to devote time for the movements, and generated resources to make the movements fairly well established in the state. The DPI, one of the large dalit political movements in Tamilnadu since the 1990s has been remarkably active in taking up the issues of caste atrocities on dalits in the northern parts of the state. Its powerful protests against caste oppression and adherence to Periyar radical social values were once well known.

The conflicts between Dalits and Thevars, a caste Hindu social group, the southern districts are not new in the state and Dalits have mostly been at the receiving end. A significant outcome of the confrontation between Dalits and caste Hindus in different parts of the state for nearly a decade is the emergence of two principal organizations, Puthiya Thamizhagam led by Dr. K. Krishnasamy and Viduthalai Siruthaigal of Thol. Thirumavalavan

Dalit Women Movement in Tamil Nadu:

Tamil Nadu Dalit women movement was launched during the year 1997 by SRED (Society for Rural Education and Development) human rights organization who worked among women for 20 years to promote their rights. During those past period they start organizing women into groups and then as a federation. In the latter stage, they start coordinating all the groups into movements or one forum called Tamil Nadu women forum that concentrate on promoting rights among common grass root women. Then while working among dalit women, they realized need for separate movement for dalit women with the focus of dalit and especially to protect their rights.

With the help of various NGOs in Tamil Nadu they organized dalit women and start highlighting the issues of dalit wherever they find. Thirty voluntary leaders from 30 districts of Tamil Nadu coordinate together and take this movement to the grass roots. This movement is open for dalit women who can address their issues and atrocities where this movement fights for the rights and justice. This movement is active in 16 districts of Tamil Nadu and takes issues of violence against dalits, untouchable practices, discrimination, atrocities against them and the denial of livelihood rights.

Tamil Nadu Women Forum (TNWF) is a state level initiative for women rights and gender justice. TNWF was started in 1991 in order to train women for more leadership, to strengthen women movement and to build up strong people movement. This movement is also collaborated with some of the dalit parties like Viduthalai siruthaigal (Dalit panthers of India- DPI). However, the transformation of the DPI from a political movement to a party seems to have led to a dramatic dilution of its radicalism. Importantly, dalit women despite their very active participation in politics, continue to lack of recognition and respect even within the dalit movement.

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When Parliament enacted the constitution (73rd) Amendment Act in 1993, the move was hailed as a breakthrough in bringing about a vibrant system of participatory democracy at the grassroots level and a paradigm shift in the process of development, for the first time it provided for statutory reservation of elected posts in local bodies for women, besides the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and the Schedule Tribes. Caste Hindu leaders challenged the reservation of elected offices in local bodies for Dalits. In the elections, Dalits were prevented from filing nominations in several villages where Panchayat president ship were reserved for them. A large number of elected Dalit and women Panchayat presidents suffered humiliation at the hands of the Vice Presidents and co members and even government officials. For rural women and Dalits most of whom were elected to these posts for the first time, it was uphill task.

Conclusion:-

Both Central Government of India and State Government of Tamil Nadu have shifted their approach in welfare schemes from individual to group approach. In this context, the role of SHGs has become very prominent in order to empower the rural women and the downtrodden. However systematic studies on SHGs are conspicuous by their absence. There is also a need to develop scientific tools to popularize research in this field. The various dimensions of empowerment need to be analyzed in order to develop integrated strategies for the uplift of the rural people. Moreover, Dindigul district has considerably large number of Dalit population (17.41 per cent). Their empowerment depends up on the concerted efforts by the Government and NGOs through Self-Help Groups. Therefore, an analytical study will help to formulate policy and programmes for their empowerment.

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