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## A STUDY ON DALIT WOMEN MOVEMENT IN TAMILNADU

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### ABSTRACT

*Even as we are in the 21st century, caste discrimination, an age-old practice that dehumanizes and perpetuates a cruel form of discrimination continues to be practiced. India where the practice is rampant despite the existence of a legislation to stop this, 160 million Dalits of which 49.96 percentage are women continue to suffer discrimination. Dalit is a designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchable! The discrimination that Dalit women are subjected to is similar to racial discrimination. Dalit women are thrice discriminated, treated as untouchables and as outcaste, due to their caste, face gender discrimination being women and finally economic impoverishment due to unequal wage disparity, with low or underpaid labour. According to the Manusmiriti, women have no right to education, independence, or wealth. It not only justifies the treatment of dalit women as a sex object and promotes child 'marriage. Manusmiriti also promoted inequality between men and women. According to Victor Premasagar, the term presses their "weakness, poverty and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes in the Indian society. "As other parts of country in Tamil Nadu also Dalit women are facing challenges because of their'caste and gender discrimination. So, in order to improve and get due respect of Dalit women, the various women's forum and organization started as Dalit women movement to protect their rights.*

### INTRODUCTION

In this context, the present paper focuses on Dalit Women Movement in Tamil Nadu. This study also highlights the Dalit Movement in India and Role of Ambedkar for the rights of Dalits. 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 Maharashtra. Pune's Chitpawan 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's could not withstand for more than a decade. The Republican party (RPI ) has splintered into so many factions and the main faction led by Athuale 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.

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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 1990's 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

Taking inspiration from phule, Baba Saheb Dr. Ambedkar also talked the importance of education. But education must be rationalists and reasonable. Education agitates our mind. It gives us thought about what is good and what is bad. Hence, Education is root of every movement. Agitation on certain thing is uniting factor. It became the famous word of Ambedkar " Educate, agitate and organise". Ambedkar was one of the tallest intellectuals of the country, a scholar who understood the crookedness of the Shastras. He was an iconoclast and questioned the very essence of Shastras.

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 easte 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 Maharastra 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 Maharastra. He fought for the rights of Dalits and had a broader vision for his community. His main concern was to ensure fare 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 a constitutionalist he drafted constitution and later worked very hard to ensure fare deal for women in the Hindu Code Bill. In the last phase of his life when Babe 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. Dr. Ambedkar, before his conversion to Buddhism, had examined Jainism, along with other religions, but he ruled out Jainism because its adherence to nonviolence, was too extreme in his opinion. Ambedkar however continued to meet Jains to discuss religion, even on the last day of his life.?

## Dalit Movement in Tamil Nadu

The Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu has long and chequered history. Iyothee Thass, Erattaimalai Srinivasan, M.C.Rajah, N.Sivaraj and L.Elayaperumal Vai. Balasundaram weresome of the stalwarts associated with the movement at various stages. The founder of the Self-Respect Movement and the Dravidar Kazhagam, ' Periyar' E.V.Ramasami,( Title was given by Women organizations at Women Conference in Chengalpet in 1929.)who was also among the early champions of the Dalit cause.

One of the earliest organized endeavors for the Dalit cause was perhaps a memorandum submitted to the Governor of Madras Presidency in the early 1890s on the horrifying living conditions of Paraiyars, one of the two principal social groups among Dalits, in the then Chengalpat district. Following this, Paraiyars and other sections of Dalits were assigned what was termed ' Panchama land'. Over the years this land was grabbed by caste — Hindu usurpers in violation of the provision against the transfer of its ownership. A hundred years later, in 1994, a movement was launched in the same district to restore the land to its rightful owners. This agitation, in which two people died in police firing, marked the beginning of the present phase of the Dalit movement in the state.

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 se well: 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's 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 out come 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 year1997 by SRED (Society for Rural Education and Development), human rights organization who worked among women for 20years 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's 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. Politically, by emphasising the rights and well-being of any one caste community, however, leaders risk severing attachment to an emerging Dalit consciousness and fostering inter-caste rivalries between SCs. The DLM party leader says that it's easier to organize Dalits on the basis of their caste rather than unite them to fight caste prejudice as a whole.

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's Forum (TNWF) is a state level initiative for women's rights and gender justice. TNWF was started in 1991 in order to train women for more leadership, to strengthen women's movement and to build up strong people's movement. This movement is also collaborated with some of the dalit parties like Viduthala 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.

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.

### **Women Movement against poverty and violence (MAPOVI)**

Women MAPOVI is coordinated body of grass root women organizations or federations from all over Tamil Nadu. Grass root women become members of these federations by participating in a sangam in their respective village in respective districts. In the pursuit of village development each federations has become a local radical force for social and political change concerning the role of women. Each federation was organized with the efforts of concern NGOs who believe that empowerment of women can bring total empowerment of their society. Federation identified their own leaders to lead their federation and these women have themselves become empowered to act as role models and provide leadership among other women. As a result of their growing consciousness many federations joined together, networked to find joint solutions to common problems mainly the issues of poverty and violence. Many coordinated campaigns and joint public actions taken by Women MAPOVI and the social problems that they had been fighting against are the poverty and violence among women.

Movement has succeeded in many issues due to various lobby actions. For instance the public meeting and the rally conducted by Tamil Nadu Anti liquor movement (TALM) in Aundipatti on 5.02.2002 against the introduction of cheap liquor by the state in Tamil Nadu has certainly strengthened the movement. Because, the loud protest of the women, has reached the government and the political parties and they withdraw the cheap liquor in Tamil Nadu during the month of April 2002.

To conclude, Dalit women, despite their very active participation in politics, continue to lack of recognition and respect even within the Dalit Movement. Though there are some women organization fighting for the rights of dalits and to uplift dalit women they joined together as Dalit Women Movement without a strong political support even within their dalit political parties. However, Dalit Women Movement in Tamil Nadu has been playing a significant role through Tamil Nadu Women's Forum and with the support of dalit political parties against all forms of discrimination and for their rights. It seems to be there is positive changing situation for the empowerment of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu, albeit slowly.

### **Non-implementation of existing safeguards**

Despite the existence of constitutional, administrative and legal provisions to protect women from all communities, and specific provisions for women in the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), women of disadvantaged groups are vulnerable to gender-specific abuses such as rape, stripping and being paraded naked. All found non-implementation of the provisions set up to protect these very women against such abuses and to enable them to take advantage of the criminal justice system. Impunity for perpetrators remains one of the main obstacles to stopping violence/torture of women both in the community and by employees of the state. This

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pattern of non-implementation leads AI to believe that the government of India is failing to exercise due diligence in preventing these abuses.( Amnesty International Report)

### **An Appeal**

Caste, class and gender discrimination prevents Dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights, particularly to dignity, equality and development. Atrocities and violence against Dalit women are both a means of sustaining systemic discrimination, as well as a reaction when particularly untouchability practices and caste norms are challenged or not adhered to. Impunity for this discrimination and violence is then used as a means to preserve the existing caste and gender disparities. Before Dalit women can enjoy their human rights, and before the Millennium Development Goals can be achieved, discrimination, violence and impunity must stop. We urge this august body to pay special attention to this issue and come up with recommendations to eradicate the caste system.

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