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## GENDER , POVERTY AND CASTE SUBJUGATION

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### ABSTRACTS

*This paper focuses mainly on gender, poverty and caste subjugation/oppression in Maharashtra. This will entail a careful and impartial review of organisations such as Stree Mukti Sanghatana, Kagad-Kadi-Patra. A review of the literature suggests that while research on NGOs has been directed towards health, gender, causes of poverty, sources and uses of funding, unemployment, crime and domestic violence, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of caste in these studies. It is through such organizations that caste and poverty force Dalit women and women from the backward classes to enter inhumane work such as manual scavenging, cleaning toilets, bonded labour, leather work and prostitution. This provides the rationale for some important questions that I discuss in this research paper: Which are the reasons contributing to the working women's migration from rural to urban areas? Which are the working women who are being recruited into the above-mentioned organisations? Why do these organisations target these women? What is the process of their admission or initiation? This paper analytically explores these questions using secondary sources.*



**KEY WORDS :** *NGOisation, caste and gender exploitation, migration, marginalised women, poverty and caste.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses mainly on the formation of NGOs and the participation of women in the workforce from the perspectives of poverty, gender and caste. It discusses in detail the following three important questions:

1. What are the reasons for migration of working women from rural to urban areas?
2. How are working women recruited in NGOs?
3. Which caste-class is represented by the women associated with these organizations? And why is the same caste-class represented in these institutions?

Due to the existence of caste inequality in India, economic inequality based on this inequality has also come to the fore. This is clear from the following statement:

‘The brahmins, who occupy the top place in caste hierarchy, are privileged with all the rights, and the right reduces in a graded manner as we move from Brahmin to higher caste, to other backward castes and to the untouchables. The untouchables have no right to property, education and civil rights, except obligatory services to the focus castes above them’ (Thorat, 2018).

They were only allowed to serve (or slave for) three of the four upper castes of the caste system. Also, because they were denied the right to other work, they were only able to survive. So what is the relationship between the emerging economic inequality, its nature, the extent of those forms and the interconnected discrimination? The consequences of the discrimination in question need to be examined, and I have tried to study these issues in depth.

If there is one community that has to face poverty the most, it is the Scheduled Castes. According to the UNDP and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, 2018, every second person belonging to the Scheduled Tribes and every third person belonging to the Scheduled Castes remains poor. Similarly, every third Muslim is multi-dimensionally poor as are two in five children under the age of 10.<sup>1</sup>

As resource access and control were limited to a single set of castes, the lowest caste communities had no material to accumulate capital, and no right to accrue wealth. They have been hit the hardest in terms of economics.

In 2013, the upper castes owned about 45% of the country's wealth, accounting for more than 21% of their population. OBCs owned about 31 per cent, while SCs owned only 7 per cent of the country's wealth, which is far below the 18 per cent of their share in the total population of the country (Thorat, 2018). The effect of this inequality has been so profound that it has not disappeared today. It continues to exist in society as there has been no implementation of the laws that exist to ameliorate the current situation, which is characterised by the monopoly of property ownership by a particular set of castes.

The following is the manner in which caste affects poverty: history shows us that education and occupation were given religious significance as these were important for strengthening the caste system. Hence, Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward communities were kept illiterate, landless and subjected to inferior occupations.

As the capitalist class in India has its own caste, even if its economic status is elevated, its social status remains the same. They are denied a place of honor in social life. As the right to economic upliftment was restricted to one class only, the backward classes were not given a chance to improve their economic condition. 'The definition of property rights, occupation, employment, wages, social status of education, labor status, slavery and other economic relations is determined by caste system' (K.S. Newman & S.K. Thorat, 2007).

Just as caste affects the economy, so does the caste system affect gender. You cannot understand caste without understanding how women are bound in caste. Women are not bound by whom they want to marry. Similarly, caste is controlled by imposing norms on caste and religion, so control of women is control of caste system. (Ambedkar, 1916).

## MIGRATION AND WOMEN

Not only the drought and poverty of 1972, but also caste discrimination, were the causes of urban migration.<sup>2</sup> According to the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index 2010 report, five out of six multidimensional poor people in India are from Scheduled Castes / Scheduled Tribes. Fed up with poverty, in 2011, 93 million Indians from disadvantaged castes and tribes migrated to other parts of the state in the hope of education or secure employment. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme is an ambitious scheme of the Central Government which provides unskilled employment to the beneficiaries working under this scheme. The Mahatma Gandhi National Employment Guarantee Scheme has come up as an attractive employment option. So far 11,37,023 families have been provided employment in Maharashtra. These included Scheduled Castes (9.57 per cent), Scheduled Tribes (18.94 per cent), women (43.7 per cent) and others (71.49 per cent). The benefit of MGNREGA, 2005 scheme is seen to be available only to the established. Inequality in

<sup>1</sup> <https://theprint.in/india/every-second-st-every-third-dalit-muslim-in-india-poor-not-just-financially-un-report/262270/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://indiamigrationnow.org/>

employment also forces families in rural areas to migrate. So whether the migration is internal or external, when a caste group migrates to other places, its caste migrates with it and where there is caste domination and caste system, there is caste discrimination. Ambedkar says in his paper "Castes in India: Their System, Origin and Development": 'It is a local problem, but capable of much wider mischief, for as long as Caste in India does exist, Hindus will hardly intermarry or have any social intercourse with outsiders, and if Hindus migrate to other regions on earth, Indian caste would become a world problem.'

When the upper castes migrate, however, they do so to live a happy and luxurious life. But this is not the case with disadvantaged groups, who have to relocate to meet their basic needs. Not only that, but instead of curbing the persecution of these migrant women due to their gender and membership of a particular caste/religion, they are forced to live a degrading life without protection. How all these conditions affect the lives of Dalit women is a part of this process. Caste plays a major role in the division of labour among women. Each caste group has different reasons for migration. For example, tribal women are usually employed in the construction sector, while SC women are seen working in the brick making sector and other backward women are employed in paid domestic work or seasonal farming (Chauhan, 2020). Similarly, between 2008 and 2011, a study on gender and migration was conducted in 20 states of India by the Women and Child Development Office, Delhi. According to the report, compared to other caste groups, about 66 per cent upper caste, 36 per cent OBC, 19 per cent SC and 18 per cent ST women migrant workers were involved in white collar occupations (P. Singh & C. Rawat, 2020).

### AN ELABORATION OF THE BACKGROUND OF NGOS -

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many institutions and organizations began to be established. Meanwhile, the Societies Registration Act (SRA) was approved in 1860 to confirm the legal status of the growing body of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The SRA continues to be relevant legislation for NGOs in India, although most state governments have enacted amendments to the original version (P. Samaj, 2009).

After India gained independence, the number of NGOs started increasing significantly. After independence, the processes of industrialization, urbanization, expansion of education, politicization and democratization and modernization gained momentum. These processes have made people aware of existing inequalities such as economic inequality (especially land inequality), gender inequality, inhumane forms of social segregation such as caste inequality and untouchability, child marriage, child labor, restrictions on widow remarriage and other social evils.<sup>3</sup>

These organizations focus on slums. Women in the slums are organized, and further, their efforts focus on common issues such as domestic violence, health issues, addiction, growing poverty. Also, there is an emphasis on running family counseling centers, running self-help groups, and so on. All feminists have played a vital role in mobilizing women from disadvantaged communities and incorporating them into NGOs. The following is an in-depth study of some of these organizations.

### KAGAD, KACH, PATRA KASHTAKARI PANCHAYAT

Founded in 1993, the women affiliated with the organization are waste pickers. And their main focus is on business and project management, co-operativeism and solidarity economy, hygiene education, leadership training, rights and duties, risks and health, and waste management.<sup>4</sup>

Now what is a garbage collector? In the streets of any large city in India you will see small groups of women / and sometimes children / around and inside garbage skips, shifting through and collecting scraps of paper, tin, plastic and cloth. These are the rag pickers, as traditionally they collected rags and bones, but this has broadly to include recyclable waste more generally, and so the more accurate name is waste pickers' (Kilby Patrick, 2011). The profile of this organization mentions the

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/sociology/sociology-of-development/ngos-and-development-history-and-role-in-india/30699>

<sup>4</sup> <https://globalrec.org/organization/kagad-kach-patra-kashtakari-panchayat-kkp/>

possibility of scavengers being mostly uneducated, landless, dalits. But it does not explicitly state that these women are members of disadvantaged communities. It is also said that the structure of their recycling area is like a pyramid. This organization refers to it as a class, but a closer look reveals that it is a caste pyramid. This is because the group that sells garbage at the bottom of the pyramid has a caste. It is a group of Scheduled Castes and those who are above them are of higher caste. To say that this pyramid is not representative of the caste system but of the class system is an attempt to make the caste system in Indian society invisible.

### STREE MUKTI SANGHATANA

The Stree Mukti Sanghatana was established in 1975. The organization's efforts include family counseling centers, monthly publications for households, motivational challenges, programs for teenagers, day care centers, programs for garbage collectors and solid waste management. The organization also works to enable sustainable livelihood. In 1998, Stree Mukti Sanghatana started a program called "Parisar Vikas" in collaboration with MCGM. So far, 3,000 women garbage pickers have been involved in these programs.<sup>5</sup> Jyoti Mhapsekar, the founder of the organization, says, "We chose to do this because we understood that there is a lot of injustice out there and as responsible citizens we should change that." After reading Mhapsekar's statement, don't you think that it is unfair for these women garbage collectors to be given cleaning jobs without any change in their work? Although it was possible to see economic, political, cultural, mental oppression, dowry tradition, could they not see the institution of caste hierarchy in India?

For the last five-six years, the Women's Liberation Organization has been celebrating the five days, from 26th January to 30th January, as "Lokshahi Utsav". But are the principles of democracy really observed in their institutions, how much representation exists in crucial positions for SC women therein? These questions naturally arise. On the one hand the Stree Mukti Sanghatana claims that their emphasis is on women empowerment. But when the Scheduled Caste women who have been associated with women's emancipation for 10-15 years and who have risked their lives in epidemics like Corona are expelled from the organization, a question arises. Exactly which "women" are empowered under "Women Empowerment"? How is it trying to empower women, while firing the women mentioned above? Also, in the meetings held in the slums, the voice of Dalit women is suppressed and they are insulted. Surprisingly, when the organization claims to represent these women globally, it raises questions irrelevant to those it claims to represent.

The organisation claims that men's impulsive and unruly attitudes are responsible for rape, the devadasi system and prostitution, but ignores the fact that caste hegemony plays a major role in this. These organizations do not address Brahmanical patriarchy but only ordinary masculinity. For example, when women's liberation organizations talk about discrimination and violence against women, they only talk about gender discrimination. Discrimination and violence against Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes are ignored. Therefore, to pair Mumbai's garbage collector women with the Stree Mukti Sanghatana (which, apparently, stands by them) actually only belongs to an illusory world.

### CARE INDIA FOUNDATION

This organization was founded in 1940 as a "Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe" by 22 American charities to help survivors of World War II. CARE came to India in 1950. The organization works on issues such as health, livelihood, education and disaster relief. It has been said that the vision of this organization is to explore a world of inclusiveness and justice, where all people live with dignity and security. So their goal should be to try to save lives, enable social protection and defeat poverty. CARE says it focuses on neglected women and girls. It also addresses a wide range of concerns involving women and girls accessing population control, primary education, reproduction, food security, unemployment and girls' credit facilities.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://stremuktisanghatana.org/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.careindia.org/who-we-are/70-years-in-india/>

If you look at the statistics of the work given by the above organizations, you will think for a while that this organization is doing a great job and is contributing to the development of the country through these organizations. But the veracity of the figures they have mentioned should also be verified. In 2015, according to the records of the International Intelligence Bureau, most of the NGOs in India were de-funded, citing anti-development and lack of transparency in their operations.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, these organizations point out that their work focuses on the education, nutrition and health issues of women and girls in rural areas. But on the other hand, if we look at the reality, the awful reality comes to the fore.

A study of these institutions has found that all feminists are seen talking about child marriage, child labor, illegal occupations, illiteracy, unhygienic living standards. In the name of development of society, women are awakened to eliminate gender inequality, but they are not identified with Brahmanical patriarchy. Gender discrimination is rooted in Hindu scriptures. Also, the fact that the Manusmriti explicitly promotes it is deliberately concealed. Some NGOs are operating at the national level and most at the international level. The work of one is driven by the work of another. They seem to be very important in the development of society. But on the other hand, the lives of working women affiliated with these organizations do not seem to have changed as they should. Because in the name of skill development, women are trained to drive rickshaws, dispose of waste, etc.

These organizations visit Dalit slums and organize programs on family issues, financial problems, unemployment, domestic violence, drug abuse, child marriage. So are these problems found only in the Scheduled Castes? Is it due to this in Dalit settlements? It is just as important to ask these questions.

## CONCLUSION

In India, economic inequality and sexism have been exacerbated by social discrimination, and given the growing poverty rate, it is important to look at the relationship between caste, gender and poverty.

In-depth research of the above organizations revealed that the situation of many organizations is similar. If NGO agendas change, funding changes, then those discussions and organizations are limited to a few conscious ones. In that sense, the network of NGOs has become a way of systematically nurturing the status quo and surrendering to it, with the aim of making people forget about the concepts of exploitation, feudal-capitalism, caste annihilation, female slavery.

In the name of women's empowerment, these organizations are working to keep women from a deprived community confined to cleaning work. These organizations have turned the exploitation of women garbage collectors into a "work". Organizations such as NGOs recognize women's work as garbage collectors as "work". Also, by employing them in cleaning work, through other organizations, they simply declare that the women have become competent. The reason for this is that from their point of view, only this is women's empowerment. This is the definition of women empowerment. In other words, take them out of one mess, and throw them in another.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/sep/07/the-indian-government-has-shut-the-door-on-ngo>

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