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## Caste, gender, and labour: A case study of dalit women domestic workers

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### Abstract

The broader aim of the paper is to analyse the lived experiences of the dalit women *viz a viz* the work they perform with the purpose to deconstruct these structures of oppression and humiliation which shape their idea of the self. The nature of work, its demand and relationship with labour has further undergone some overt changes during the pandemic. The paper seeks to understand the oppression dalit women face in the labour that they perform and how the pandemic has re-shaped/ revised the kind of struggles women at the intersection of caste and gender face. makes the power producing knowledge systems explicit consequently shifting the pivot of the problem from the body of the dalit woman to that of systems which produce and reproduce such hierarchical identities. Such an approach helps to deconstruct the forms of coping mechanisms adopted by them to deal with this oppression induced by caste and gender and aggravated by the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Dalit women, labour, experiences, oppression, domestic work

### Introduction

Such an interrelationship becomes even more significant because caste is observed to be a religious cum occupational category prescribing occupations for each caste separately. Amartya Sen (2000) remarks that this inequality takes the form of social exclusion which produces situations where individuals are not included and kept out or are included in deeply unfavourable circumstances. They have inevitably been a part of the social exclusion discourse through selective inclusion (differential treatment), forced inclusion (tasks based on traditional caste practices) or selective exclusion (exclusion of those working in the so-called polluting occupations). Studies of scholars (Thorat and Attewell, Deshpande and Newman, Jodhka and Newman) suggest that Dalits continue to be discriminated against despite equivalent and adequate qualifications and stereotypes against low castes persist while engaging in hiring and recruitment practices. The labour of the Dalits is one of the most debated aspects, in the words of Ambedkar, it breeds for them the lower level of status and the higher degree of contempt. Their labour not only shapes their status but also idea of the self, especially when linked to the dual 'flaws' of caste and gender, as for the Dalit women. The Dalit women are excluded from the labour market on the dual grounds of gender and caste. Consequently, they form an equally relevant segment in the debate on social exclusion which functions on the grounds of treating labour of some not as value generating but as the one generating stigma.

### Labour and the Concept of Intersectionality

#### Theoretical Insights to Deconstruct the Relationship between Caste, Gender, and Labour

The relationship among caste, gender and labour can be explored by understanding the concepts of intersectionality and feminist engagement with labour. Within India, one of the most prevalent intersections can be seen between 'women and caste.'

Gothoskar (2013) <sup>[4]</sup> takes up the idea of domestic work to ask pertinent questions such as whether domestic work generates surplus value or not, whether demanding wages for domestic work adds value to it or furthermore confines women the domestic sphere. She makes an interesting observation as to how domestic work both unites and divides women. It unites them, because whatever occupation they follow, domestic work is perceived to be

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their responsibility. It divides the women however, because it pits two women against each other not as women but as an employer and a worker.

Even though the domestic help provided is for the entire household and not just the woman considered responsible for getting it done, the conflict comes out to be between the woman employer and the woman domestic help in the public realm. When looked at the proportion of Scheduled Castes in casual employment, it turns out to be the highest and it 'is the only social group which has more than half of its women workers in casual employment' (Neetha N, 2013)<sup>[8]</sup>. The analysis of experiences of Dalit women on the field shows that when it comes to domestic service, the intersectionality of gender and caste brings a complex layered relationship between the employer and the employed. In the in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted with Dalit women domestic women providers, more than half of the respondents complained about the caste factor as the most detrimental when it comes to the allocation of work among the domestic service providers.

The job of a full-time domestic service provider is rarely given to that of Dalit women. The reason is simply that the job entails the employed to always stay within the household, hence, be a part of all household chores such as cooking, of employment relations. Nevertheless, in the private realm, this conflict is between the man and the woman regarding the gender division of labour. The extended relationship between the value of labour and caste has been explored extensively.

Taking from Ambedkar, Dubey quotes that caste stands for not just division of labour but also division of labourers (Dubey, 2016)<sup>[6]</sup>. Menon (2019)<sup>[7]</sup> here makes an important observation that works such as domestic labour cannot be understood without the dimension of caste for the nature of domestic labour performed and the wages allocated for it directly depends on the caste of the woman worker who performs it. She explains with an example where a Dalit women's work would be to clean the toilets but would not be allowed in a Hindu middle-class family kitchen.

### **Caste, Gender, and Domestic Work in India**

Cleaning, serving etc. which is still considered as somewhat polluting when performed by a lower caste. One of the respondents further comments that even when it comes to part-time work, the lower spectrum of domestic service work such as cleaning the toilets, and sweeping are the ones allocated to Dalit women. Cooking, washing utensils and other kitchen-related tasks are still reserved for the upper caste workers.

Sinha and Kumar (2018)<sup>[9]</sup> also try to explore the role played by caste in the field of domestic work and non-domestic scavenging work through focus group discussions with both sets of respondents in the Sonapat District of Haryana. They observe that as the relationship between the employer and the employee remains unstructured in the informal sector of the economy, the autocratic way of getting things done precedes. While quoting the NSSO data, the authors remark that even when the number of domestic workers have increased to more than 20 million, it cannot be assumed that caste affiliations no longer matter with the increased urbanization and demand for domestic workers. Taking up the self-categorization and identity approach, they delve into two research questions, first, in what ways

caste affiliations still discriminate in the domestic work market and how do these workers manage their dehumanized identities. They bring to the notice the demeaning works the low castes are given in the case of domestic workers far drawn from the prospects of being a cook, nanny or babysitters; occupations reserved for the upper caste domestic workers whereas the non-domestic scavenging workers are habituated to cleaning dirt and filth and being meted out exclusion. Their caste determines not only their nature of work but also the nature of behaviour employers have towards them. Worthy of being noted is the fact that how employers and employees both are conditioned to accept disgust as a part of the work and caste they belong to. Employers are full of looks that constitute only filth, disgust and loathing for them.

### **Covid-19 pandemic and Dalit Women Domestic Workers**

The predicament of exclusion for 'Dalit women' seems to have worsened with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Patil (2021)<sup>[8]</sup> remarks that while terms like social distancing came into regular parlance, she remarks that distancing and exclusion had already formed a large part of the lives of these women. As these women already form a major workforce in the sanitation industry, the pandemic worsened the state of their job security, posed a threat to their health standards for the lack of any protective gear or equipment, excluded them further with patients in quarantine still demanding to not be served food from the lower caste and yet at the same time being referred to in glorifying terms as Covid-19 heroes.

Interestingly, Patil draws a picture from a set of personal interviews which makes the readers believe that even while these Dalit women were referred to as the warriors or the heroes of the pandemic, they were treated like villains. Referring to the Dalit women's informal labour workforce amidst an operational gig economy, Patil asserts that the issues of these women have accelerated much more amidst the pressures of patriarchy, caste and class and cannot be equated to those of the proletariat/precariat. The structures of oppression, the norms of distancing and the mechanisms of humiliation seem to have strengthened with the pandemic. More than half of the respondents asserted that their chances of getting a job or part-time work stooped to even lower levels after the pandemic.

While the employers were generally practising distance from the 'filthy' as a norm in the wake of the rising covid surge, the Dalit women had suffered exclusion at dual levels, physical exclusion as being considered impure and unhygienic, and social exclusion from the upper caste domestic service.

### **Conclusion**

The above discussion makes it clear that domestic service as an occupation continues to be overlaid with the notions of manual labour where the intersection of the identities of caste and gender presumes paramount importance in determining the nature of work, the outlook towards work and the behaviour meted towards the employed. These structures of oppression have only got more complex undertones in the wake of the rising pandemic. While the distancing norms come into practice, they largely and

gravely affect those who are already distanced. Furthermore, with withdrawal of minimum pay wage scale the security of those employed as domestic service providers further goes for a toss. What ought to be questioned while analysing the relationship of labour vis a vis caste and gender, is how the stigma associated with caste and accentuated by the pandemic can be averted to deconstruct such mechanisms and structures in place. While there is evidence of some Dalit women having resorted to means such as concealment of their caste identity to save themselves from the added humiliation, many are conscious of their caste and take pride in their identity even though it continues to unravel day-to-day experiences of humiliation and oppression for them. Resistance in such a scenario, comes out to be half-hearted and not overt. Mechanisms of resistance from the above findings are usually found to range from concealment of identity and rejection of households that practice severe forms of discrimination. While the pandemic has made exercising even these forms of resistance difficult, intersectional identities such as Dalit women appear to be struggling each day to find a way out.

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