

DALITS AND VULNERABILITIES

Unpacking structural, inter-sectional and existential layers of Dalit marginalisation and ethical challenges and dilemmas of their strategic empowerment: How can bio-ethics community respond?

COPASAH – Community of Practitioners on Accountability and Social Action in Health

In association with

People's Health Centre [A South India Initiative of Centre for Health and Social Justice (Delhi)]

Dalit Human Rights Forum – Karnataka

Scavengers Dignity Forum

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Dalit communities, the historical survivors of the practice of untouchability, have shown their resurgence and resilience in varied ways against the collective social injustice and indignities in India. Constitutional, legal and policy-programmatic measures have meant to address the historical injustice have been half-met due to the entrenched caste-ethic that forms the strong base of resistance to any societal change. The realisation that marginalisation is systemic, multi-layered and inter-sectional and the process of resistance and struggle, have given visibility to the layers of marginalisation which form the underbelly of the construct of Dalits, which posit several ethical challenges and dilemmas.



The participatory workshop aimed at unravelling the various contours of the intersectionality of Dalit marginalization in terms of class, patriarchy/gender in addition to the embedded caste identity – viz. manual scavengers, Dalit women and devadasis. Though the practices of untouchability, manual scavenging and devadasis is constitutionally and legally banned, yet it is rampantly prevalent as existentially experienced by the community. The legal prohibition has not resulted in the change in social ethic and hence the community faces the additional challenge of proving the existence of such practice in the face of a hostile society and the authorities deny its existence. While some of the practices are taken

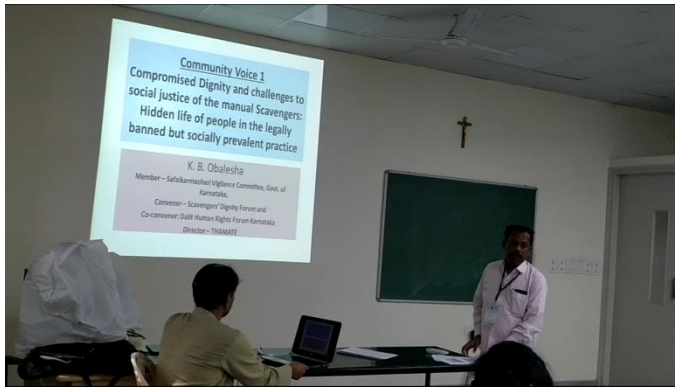
up by the social movements, the other are subtle and sub-terrain in nature.

Three presentations were made in the workshop based on the grass-roots work of confronting such challenges, and were presented by community leaders –women and men - who have led the struggles and faced the challenges both from the State and the societal order while working on the building blocks of stitching together strategies within the larger framework of social justice, dignity and equality. The workshop was participatory in nature and aimed at collectively eliciting the response from the participants, as representatives of the bio-ethics community, to explore collective responses.

Presentation 1:

Compromised Dignity and challenges to social justice of the manual Scavengers: Hidden life of people in the legally banned but socially prevalent practice

Presenter: K. B. Obalesha (Member – Safaikarmachari Vigilance Committee, Govt. of Karnataka, Convener – Scavengers' Dignity Forum and Co-convener: Dalit Human Rights Forum Karnataka)



The practice of untouchability and manual scavenging is prohibited in policy and law. However, the menial task of cleaning man-holes and sewerages is carried on by a section amongst the Dalits who are considered lowest in the rungs of social hierarchy. The discourse on Dalits has not sufficiently evoked societal conscience to this 'hidden' issue with blatant denial by authorities and hostile cover-up provided by the middle-upper class populations. This presentation focused on the challenges the community experiences in proving their existence (legally), providing

evidence for the adverse effect of their work such as illness and morbidity (administratively) and for making their voices heard even in Dalit movements.

Presentation 2:

Triple marginalisation of rural Dalit women agricultural labourers issue of social justice in relation to caste, gender and class

Presenter: Narsamma (Sanchalaki [Co-convener] – Jagrutha Mahila Sanghatane [JMS] Raichur



Dalit women in rural areas face three-fold exploitation as Dalits, women and wage workers/agricultural labourers that mutually contributes to reinforcing the structural exploitation. Dalit women are denied equal wages, face hunger and violence, and occasionally become the targets of caste based violence, sexual exploitation and social boycott's as well as exclusion and discrimination in public institutions. The presentation narrated the complexity and intersectional nature of systemic exploitation and injustice experienced and dilemmas faced. Based on the 20 years' journey of JMS, women leader Narsamma described the multi-pronged and intersectional strategic approaches taken intuitively to navigate through such dilemmas and challenge the

normative bio-ethics and individualised ethics framework.

Presentation 3:

Multi-layered Exploitation of Dalit Devadasi women: Issue of stigma, survival and dignity

Presenter: L. Manjula (Programme Coordinator – People's Health Centre &DHRF)



Dalit women form a major portion of over 1, 00,000 enumerated Devadasis in Karnataka and equal number of such unenumerated ones. In addition to being Dalit women, they face the challenge of being 'single women', exploited by their partners, face intimate partner violence and face stigma which haunts their children. This presentation narrated the complexity in the lives of Devadasis who are aged, living with disability, living with HIV/AIDS, and the ethical challenges involved in organising them. The presenter also highlighted the efforts to organise them in Koppal district of Karnataka.

Following the presentations discussions were held on with the participants regarding the ethical challenges and dilemmas faced by the vulnerable communities. It discerned from the deliberations that though untouchability and occupations like manual scavenging are outlawed yet marginalised communities face ethical challenges in terms of discrimination at both societal and official levels, face discrimination in public spaces as well as denial of human rights. Dalit women especially face triple marginalisation in terms of being Dalits, women and agricultural labourers.