

India: Discrimination Continues to Target Dalit Women Labour in Punjab

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There is an urgent need for the Dalit women labourers of rural Punjab to organise themselves into unions and groups to take forward their battle for human existence. This is the view of intellectuals and activists on the ground who have been working with this segment of people, aired at a discussion at Punjabi University in Patiala on Friday at the release of a landmark study titled '*Khise Khali, Thid Bhukhe, Tan Liran: Pendu Punjab De Dalit Aurat Mazdoor Parivaran Da Ik Sarvekhan*' (Empty Pockets, Hungry Stomachs, Tatters on the Body: A Survey of Dalit Women Labour Families of Rural Punjab).

Compiled by a team - Dharampal, Gurinder Kaur, Veerpal Kaur and Jyoti - directed by economic expert Gian Singh, the survey points to an extremely dismal scenario. These households are living in abject poverty and hardly find any place in the priorities of the heavily embedded media or the political and administrative class.

"We are often told no, the situation cannot be this bad. We counter such people by saying that they should themselves conduct such studies to see for themselves," Gian Singh disclosed.

Data for the study was collected from 927 Dalit women labour households across four sample districts of Jalandhar, Amritsar, Mansa and Fatehgarh Sahib representing the Doaba, Majha and Malwa regions of Punjab.

Besides several other indicators, the study reveals that 61.7% of Dalit women labourers suffer from one or other serious conditions like body aches, diabetes, blood pressure, bronchial problems, heat exhaustion, gynecological problems and the like in the rural areas of Punjab. This is primarily because of unhygienic living conditions and malnutrition.

"As the government hospitals and clinical laboratories are scarcely available in the rural areas, they find no other option than to consult the local medical practitioners for the purpose," it says.

The survey found that 24.5% of respondents had faced discrimination at the workplace on the basis of their caste. The so-called 'higher caste' employers often use filthy language for them.

Further, "It is pertinent to note that 5.50 per cent of the respondents have faced sexual exploitation at the workplace. Another 23.95 per cent respondents faced no such type of harassment at the workplace. However, majority of the respondents (70.55 per cent) gave no response in this regard. This may have been because of saving their chastity in the society," the study says.

Activists confirm that the majority of these women face sexual harassment. "They do not come out and speak about it. It takes multiple interactions to get them to talk on this subject. This is an uncomfortable truth," said Kiran of the Kisan Mazdoor Khudkushi Peedit Parivar Committee.

"The reason behind this reluctance is that women are considered to be gehna (jewels) or izzat

(pride) of the house,” added Bimal Kaur of the Krantikari Pendu Mazdoor Union.

The study says that due to lack of knowledge about the Minimum Wages Act, 91.9% of rural Dalit women labourers are not aware of the standard working hours fixed under the law. “Further, 37.32 per cent are not being paid equal wages for equal work with men,” it underlines.

There is also an all important need to ensure these women get full days of employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. It was pointed out at the discussion that the scenario with regard to MGNREGA implementation is pathetic.

“Have you ever seen a government drive to popularise MGNREGA? The main question is why it is not being done,” said economic expert Dr Balwinder Singh Tiwana.

Tiwana further said that these women must organise themselves and agitate to get their dues, in a state like Punjab where a semi feudal society prevails. “It must be understood that doles do not work. The socio-economic structure has to be changed,” he said, pointing to the non implementation of land reforms. “The ruling class is cunning. Till the time social discrimination exists, there can be no development.”

It was underlined that land rights to Dalits can take them forward in a big way and land ownership means empowerment for this community.

“On one side we have a situation where bonded labour continues and on the other, working as farm labour or marginal farmers does not make farming remunerative. They need to be given land as it will take them forward. We need a movement towards this direction,” said Paramjit Kaur of the Zamin Prapti Sangharsh Committee (ZPSC) which has been taking forward the fight for land rights to Dalits in Sangrur and adjoining areas of Malwa region of the state.

Observing that Dalit women labourers are landless, the study emphasises the need to introduce land reforms in favour of Dalits, who have remained a neglected lot for ages.

To substantiate this contention the study points to Balad Kalan village in Sangrur, where under the aegis of ZPSC the Dalit households have been able to take control of village common land on a lease-in basis despite the opposition of many. “It has provided them a feeling of self-respect. Now the Dalit women do not require to go to the fields of large farmers for fodder, vegetables, and food grains,” the study reports. In villages where Dalit families have got cultivation rights on common lands, the ZPSC has successfully been able to promote the co-operative farming model.

“Co-operative farming did not fail in India on its own. It was deliberately failed,” said Paramjit Kaur.

Another important aspect highlighted by the study is the extent of indebtedness in such households. With higher consumption expenditure than their income, 96.3% of Dalit woman labour households are in debt in rural areas of Punjab.

“Further, the Dalit woman labour households, on an average, take 80.40 per cent of their total debt from the non-institutional sources mainly from the large farmers and landlords. It has been observed that the Dalit woman labour households find it easy to incur debt from non-institutional sources and they hesitate to incur debt from institutional sources,” the study says.

This is primarily because being illiterate they do not understand the formalities and procedures to be followed for availing loans from institutional sources. The indifferent attitude of the officials disappoints them, and under the prevailing feudal system large farmers and landlords easily provide loans with the sole aim of exploiting them. Their main interest lies in ensuring a supply of labour

during the peak season when the demand for labour is quite high.

A positive aspect of this grave problem is that 76.3% of the total debt incurred by such households is for productive purposes.

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