

**CHANGING STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN
IN MAHARASHTRA
(A Sociological Analysis)**

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has not been submitted previously by her for
any degree to this or any other universities.
We recommend that the dissertation be placed
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The various minorities in India have drawn the serious attention of the academics from both in and outside the country. There are a large number of studies on the problems of the Dalits but these are mostly either descriptive or problem oriented in nature. However, the problem of the Dalit women has not attracted any serious discussion. Present dissertation is an exploratory exercise about changing status of the Dalit women in a state like Maharashtra. I am very much grateful to my supervisor, Dr Nandu Ram, for his active guidance and cooperation. His encouraging comments, perceptive criticisms, have contributed significantly to the shape the work has now.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The position of women in many developing countries, besides in economically and industrially advanced countries has undergone considerable changes during the recent past. This has resulted from the victories achieved by the national liberation movements in the developing countries to which the women also have contributed through their various democratic movements. Such movements have earmarked the struggle of the people of these countries into a new stage which is characterised by a more profound social content. The proclamation of the principle of equal rights for men and women in the constitutions of a majority of these countries must be considered as a singular achievement in regard to women's emancipation. In many of these countries the various electoral laws also have been adopted under which women may take an active part in political and public life.¹ Today, they participate in the activities of the various political parties, trade unions and other public organisations and are advancing, with increasing frequency, toward the

1 Chandrashekhar, M. "The position of women in the countries of Asia and Africa" in Women Today, Kovaleky, N.A. and Blinova, Y.P. (eds.), Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1975, Pp. 210, 233.

acquisition of leading positions, including the governmental posts.

In the strategy of the new states of Africa and Asia which is designed to bring about economic independence and social renewal a special importance is attached to the full and rational use of labour resources and the broad involvement of women in production. In a large number of independent countries the new labour laws have been put into effect under the influence of the struggle of working class people for their rights. Legislations introduced by the colonial authorities in these countries before independence have been circumvented to protect the labour rights of the working class people, particularly the women.

Education also has been considered important for raising the status of the women in these countries. An illiterate woman cannot manage her family well nor be employed in today's highly mechanised enterprises. But we find that women are discriminated in educational endeavour also, especially the scientific and technical education,² as the level of literacy and educational achievement among them is lower than that among men.

2 Ahoja-Patel, Krishna, "Women, technology and development process," Economic and Political Weekly, Sept. 8, 1979, Pp. 1549-1554.

Therefore, discrimination in the field of education leads to discrimination in employment among women leaving them only for the most low paid jobs in the public or unorganized sector and in agriculture. In many countries which are struggling to eliminate their economic backwardness women workers are continuing with their demand for the nationalisation of the basic sector of the economy, and above all, the nationalisation of banks, foreign-trade enterprises, etc. so as their interests may also be accommodated.

Besides, women in these countries are also drawn more and more actively into the movement for social and economic reorganisation there. This is so because building up a national economy demands the enormous efforts of the entire population, both the men and women. Thus, women in the developing countries want to play their active part in carrying out the major economic tasks confronting their countries with the same determination with which these countries have once fought against colonialism there.³

Women in India

Several significant achievements made by the women have been observed in the recent decades in India also.

3 Chandrashekhar, B., op.cit., P. 234.

Speaking at the Second Afro-Asian Women's Conference held at Ulan-Dator in 1972, M. Chandrasekhar⁴ said, "...during the 25 years of independence Indian women have worked for winning their rights, to enjoy equality in every sphere of India's social and political life... Parliament has enacted laws which give women equal rights...as those enjoyed by men... Women both in urban and rural areas are coming forward in increasing numbers to make use of opportunities in education, claim for the right to work and agitate for higher living standards for themselves and their families. A new woman is emerging on the Indian scene, whose social awareness is growing and who is anxious to reshape and remould India's social and economic structure."

There is, however, a great need for Indian women to come forward and contribute to the all-round development of the country today, especially when India is striving to carve out its own position in the community of the world's nations. Commenting on the women's liberation movement Indira Gandhi⁵ has stated, "Women's liberation is not a luxury for India but an urgent

4 Ibid.

5 Quoted in Grewal, Serla, "The status of women and the family planning movement in India," Journal of Family Welfare, Vol. XXII, No.2, Dec. 1975, P.5.

necessity to enable the nation to move ahead to a life which is more satisfying materially, intellectually and spiritually."

If we look back, we find that with a brief period in the Indian history which witnessed setbacks to the status of the women, there has been a firm and steady record of their achievements in different walks of life and of the recognition of their status in the society. For instance, in the pre-Buddhist times in India the sentiments toward women were very low. No personal liberty of fundamental rights were sanctioned to women in the Hindu society. "The legal position of women, according to Manu, the earliest exponent of the law, was definitely bad. They were always dependent on somebody -- on the father, the husband or the son. Almost they were treated in law as chattels."⁶

Equality between the sexes, now relentlessly being advocated by the United Nations Charter on Human Rights, was reported to be completely existed in India as back as in 2500 to 1500 B.C. During that period women

⁶ Kalivda, B.G., "The status of women in Buddhism," The Siddharth College of Law Magazine, Bombay, P. 31.

enjoyed much greater equality and the discriminatory and preferential practices were said to be non-existent. Lord Buddha knew very well about the unequal status assigned to the women by the Vedic dictum. He accorded, therefore, a dignified and equal status to them in the society of that time. The entrance even to the Buddhist Sangha (assembly) was open to all irrespective of sex. On entering the Sangha a woman became a free entity and was not considered as a slave of the man. The women were advised to put on white robes and had to practise pure, chaste and virtuous life. Thus, due to the initiative of the Buddha the women who joined the Buddhist order became distinguished for their intellectual attainments and moral earnestness.

Further, according to the Buddhist Law, the husband has no right over the property of his wife. She was in absolute control of her property and of herself. But among the Hindus, Muslims and some sects of Christians, the wife has always been dependent on some body for her livelihood and survival. Again, according to the Buddha and the present Buddhism, the ideal of marriage is that it is a partnership of love and affection and when it does not exist, it should be dissolved. Thus, during the time of Buddha women enjoyed a unique social and legal

position in the society, and were considered to be equal with men. In fact, the Buddha was the first man who revolted against the inferior status of women and advocated for the accordence of a dignified status to them.

With the passage of time, however, the position of women in India deteriorated. A number of social, economic and political factors contributed to this process of deterioration. As a result, all the rights and privileges enjoyed by the women in early times, especially during the Buddhist period, were virtually lost to them.

The typical nineteenth century Indian woman, then, was an illiterate, ignorant and dependant on her husband. A woman was expected to end her life on the funeral pyre of her husband. She was too weak even to resent this barbaric custom. The Hindu woman, however, continued to be economically and socially dependent on her husband and other male members in the family. She had no right to inherit any property from her father or husband. She could not earn a living as she was not properly equipped for it. The prevailing social conditions made it impossible for a woman to work outside the home. She had no time for it any way as she was heavily burdened with continuous child bearing and child rearing. She was, thus, entirely dependant on her family for her

sustenance and support.⁷

Social and Religious Reform Movements and the Women

The impact of British rule, English education and Christianity propagated by missionaries resulted into a number of changes among the people in India in the 19th century. "The first impact of Western teaching on those who received it was to incline them strongly in favour of the Western way of looking at things and under this influence they bent their energies, in the first instance, to the re-examination of the whole of their ancient civilization or their social usages and institutions, their science, their art, in fact their conception and realisation of life."⁸

The incorporation of such changes resulted later into a number of social and religious reform movements. The broad aims of these movements in the social sphere were specially to emphasizing on social reform or abolition of caste system and improvement in the rights and status of women and people of the lower castes. They stood generally against social and legal inequalities

7 Manohar, Sujata, "Road to women's equality," The Journal of Family Welfare, Vol. XXII, No.2, Dec. 1973, P. 32.

8 Potwardhan, R.P. and G.K. Gokhale (eds.), Speeches and Writings of Indian Leaders, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962, P. 122.

among men and women. Later, they got involved in attacking on certain social institutions and practices like child marriage, position of and treatment given to widows and seclusion and the denial of women's rights to property and education, the roots of which lay in the religious traditions of different communities.⁹

It was, therefore, inevitable that the movements of social reform should develop within the folds of each religion rather than as a unified movement for the transformation of the society as a whole. The most important movements that grew within the Hindu society were the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal, the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and the Arya Samaj in northern India.

The Brahmo Samaj was founded by Ram Mohan Roy in 1829. Concerned with religious issues it opposed the dogmatic structure of the Hindu religious tradition. The great reform brought out by Rajaram Mohan Roy was to raise the first banner against the Sati (self emolation) which was ultimately prohibited by law. It also attempted to remove certain restrictions and prejudices, rooted in religion against the women. These included the abolition of child (especially girls) marriage, seclusion of women,

9 Towards Equality — Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Department of Social Welfare, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1974, P. 90.

limited inheritance rights, polygamy, etc. The Samaj emphasised on the need for educating women as it considered education as the best instrument to improve their position.

Later, under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen the Brahmo Samaj became more concerned with improving the position of women. Provision was made for educating women at home and the government assistance was ensured for this purpose. In 1862 an inter-caste marriage was solemnised under the auspices of the Samaj. Opposition of orthodox Hindus to the legality of such marriage resulted in the passing of the Native Marriage Act (the civil marriage act) in 1872 which permitted inter-caste marriage and divorce, prohibited polygamy and prescribed the 14 and 16 years as the minimum age of marriage for a girl and a boy respectively.¹⁰

In the same fashion, the Prarthana Samaj and the Arya Samaj also advocated for improvement in the status of women. Whereas the Arya Samaj emphasized on women's entitlement for putting on sacred thread (Yajnopavit) and thereby receiving education, the Prarthana Samaj

10 Ibid, P. 91.

attached much importance to education of women and widow remarriage. Jyotirao Phule, A. Karve, M.G. Ranade, etc. were among the champions of education and other rights of women in Maharashtra.¹¹ In addition to their valiant effort to modify the strictness of caste system and raise status of the Sudra classes, "They gave sanctity to the family relations and raised the status of women."¹²

After independence the legal and social status of women in the country has changed beyond recognition. The latest Acts in the series of reformist legislations in regard to rights and position of women were passed about two decades ago. These are the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956 and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956. These Acts provide the Hindu women a new charter of rights. Since then, no significant legislation with the sole exception of the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, has been enacted to improve the status of women in India. Moreover, in absence of proper and rigorous implementation these Acts are unable to safeguard fully the interests of women in India.

11 Natarajan, S., A Century of Social Reform in India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962.

12 Ibid, P. XI.

The Dalit Women

The Hindu society, which developed over a period of more than 2,000 years through the different reigns in India had many common features like supremacy of the Brahmins, dominance of men over women, segregation of the lowest castes, hereditary occupations, caste solidarity, and lack of free social intercourse among the different castes. However, the specific nature of political power, systems of revenue collection and ideology of the dominant religious sects in each political territory -- influenced caste relations in a more complex manner.¹³

Even in the changed situations the untouchables occupied the lowest place. This means, there was no major alteration in their status in the Hindu social system. This has been true in the case of status of women also. In the Hindu social system the status of a woman usually goes alongwith that of a man, in the case of a married woman with that of her husband. But in the case of a socially not recognised marriage, especially where husband comes from an upper caste and wife from a lower caste, status of both the husband and wife is determined by that

13 Pandit, Nalini, "Caste and class in Maharashtra," Economic and Political Weekly (Annual Number), 1979, P. 426.

of the latter. However, in the normal course there should be equality of status of both the men and women belonging to a certain caste. With the same logic the status of a Dalit woman is not different from that of a Dalit man. But in actuality, we find the status of a woman is always considered inferior to that of man, as stated earlier.

Traditionally, the status of the Dalit woman was, more or less, equal to that of their men in every spheres. They enjoyed considerable freedom in managing the family affairs and helped the males in their occupations, especially in agricultural pursuits. But in the passage of time the Dalit women also lost their freedom and equality at least with their men. There have been a number of factors contributing to such a state of affairs. The Dalit women have been brought to the status inferior to that of their men as a consequence of the general pattern that has taken place in the country. Secondly, the Dalit men have been subjected to the lowest status in the caste system. There is no other caste group which could be extended a further inferior status providing opportunity to the Dalit men to claim for a superior status. Therefore, in absence of this the Dalit women have been their immediate subject to be considered as

their inferior. And thirdly, the Dalit women, especially belonging to the better-off sections, have surrendered their freedom and equality to their men by considering the latter as the main earner and confining themselves to the domestic affairs. This again is a part of the general trend undergoing in the country, especially among the better-off sections in the society.

This leads to conclude that the Dalit women have been suffering from the multiple inferiority of their status like, a) inferiority of their status in relation to that of their men, b) having their status inferior to that of the men in general, and c) their status inferior to that of women in general.

However, a number of changes have taken place among the Dalit women in the recent past. With the introduction of a number of measures adopted by the government and the various efforts made by several voluntary organisations the educational level, especially the rate of literacy among the Dalit women has gone up in comparison to the previous decades. They have also taken up a number of employments including employees in industrial and bureaucratic organisations particularly in urban areas. In rural areas also the Dalit women have become conscious of their healthy family relations, wage

conditions and changing world view, though in the limited sense. In certain cases they have got opportunity in their access to the urban world also through both the temporary and permanent migration of their men.

The above mentioned changes have been recorded in the various Censuses and the reports of the Commissioner for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. More precisely, these have listed changes among the Dalit women in the demographic and educational spheres in the country. The data on the rate of proportional growth of the Scheduled Caste male and female population in the recent decades is an indication of the improvement in health and living conditions of their women.¹⁴ These reports also show the increase in the literacy rate among the Dalit women in the country.

Changes have also taken place among the Dalit women in the country by making the higher castes including their womenfolk as their reference. The Dalits in some parts of the country have emulated the culture and behaviour pattern of these castes in order to achieve higher status

14 Trivedi, H.R., The Scheduled Caste Women: Study in Exploitation, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 1976, P. 16.

in the society.¹⁵ But in this type of attempt aimed at upward social mobility among the Dalits the role of their women seems to be quite marginal for initiator of change in Indian society are generally the males and not the females. The Dalit women have been made to adopt customs and practices which are generally rejected by upper castes and do not contribute much to enhance their social status. Conversely, they have proved to be instrumental in making the Dalit women lose their greater freedom and equality that they have been enjoying with their men under the indigenous social relationships.¹⁶

Changes have, however, taken place among the Dalit women both in cities and villages and existing studies have tried to analyse these changes though not in a more comprehensive and systematic manner. We would examine, in the present study, the nature of the changes taking place among the Dalit women living both in cities and villages. We will also enquire about the various factors affecting such changes. Finally, we would also analyse

15 For instance, the Jatavs (Dalits) of Agra (U.P.) adopted this process initially. See O.M. Lynch, Politics of Untouchability, National, Delhi, 1974. Srinivas has called such a process among the lower castes as sanskritization, See his Social Change in Modern India, Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1966, Pp. 1-45.

16 Trivedi, H.R., op.cit.

the changes taking place in their social status in terms of changes in their demographic characteristics, socio-economic condition and attitudes and behaviour of others toward them.

The Framework

The term status has been used in the sociological literature in three different senses. First, the status has been used for the position occupied by a person in one domain or the other, like education, employment, income etc. Secondly, it has been used for a composite of a number of positions. For instance, a composite of one's position in education, employment, etc. constitutes one's status. This type of status is generally known as composite status.¹⁷ Finally, the status has traditionally been used for position of a person (or rank of a caste) in the ritual or religious hierarchy of the caste system in India.¹⁸ In fact, a status in traditional India has been regarded as religious in nature and is not subjected to any type of change. But in the modern time in India such a conception of status has undergone some sort of changes. Today, the status of a person is regarded as

17 Sabarwal, S., "Status, network and social mobility in an industrial town in Panjab," in his Beyond the Village (ed.), Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1972.

18 Dumont, L., Homo-Hierarchicus, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1966.

his position in one aspect or the other of material achievement. In other words, status of a person is seen in terms of the emerging class structure. But, in real sense, status of a person is to be seen both in the class structure and caste system because the latter is not completely replaced by the former one. It is not our intention here to measure change in the status of Dalit women in the context of the third type of its meaning because in the type of exercise done here it is not possible to measure the change in the status, mentioned above on the basis of information collected from the secondary sources.

Further, social status can be measured in terms of the varieties of achievements in the areas of education, employment, economic endeavour and political power. In other words, change in the status of a person or a community can be measured on the basis of the material achievement obtained in one endeavour or the other as stated earlier. The other way of measuring change in status of a person or a group or community is to see whether a certain type of negative attitudes, prejudices and behaviour of others have also changed. The first way of measuring the change of status in the case of a person or a group is not altogether a complete

one unless it incorporates the second type of measurement also though it leads to the changes of the second type. Thus, such a perspective seems to be a viable one for a complete measurement of change in the status of a person, a group or a community.)

It has already been said that the Dalit women in general have been suffering from both the types of social disabilities, namely, the negative attitudes, prejudices and exploitative behaviour of the upper caste people and their low status in terms of education, employment, etc. It has also been mentioned that certain amount of changes have taken place in their traditional status. Such changes have been accelerated, in a way, by a number of social reform movements and the various governmental measures provided for the Scheduled Castes as a whole though these measures are not very specific about the Dalit women.

It is, therefore, proposed in the present study to measure the changes in status of the Dalit women particularly in Maharashtra in the perspective mentioned above. Such a perspective is relevant as it incorporates both the material and non-material type of changes in status of the Dalit women.

Hypotheses

No body can deny the fact that the status of the Dalits is changing in the modern time in India. Such a change also includes the change in status of the Dalit women. However, the magnitude and pace of change is more accelerated among those Dalit families which are educated and socially and economically and politically advanced. It is our assumption that status of the Dalit women is better in cities than in villages because the various avenues of changes such as education, secular occupations, etc. are easily available in cities in comparison to that in villages. And finally, the various provisions provided to the Dalits are effective only in a limited number of the Dalits leading to the changes in status of their women also.

Methods

Location of the present study is Maharashtra because this is a state where a variety of efforts on organised basis were made even prior to the national independence and a number of provisions meant for the Dalits in the country have been much effectively implemented there after the independence. Thus, both the social reform and governmental measures have

considerably affected social status of both the Dalit men and women in this state.

Further, the material achievements like improvement in educational level, employment, economic independence, political participation, increase in age at marriage and out-migration of the Dalit women will be treated as the independent variables through which changes in their socio-economic status will be measured. Similarly, changes in the socio-psychological attitudes, prejudices and behaviour of caste Hindus toward the Dalit women will be regarded as the dependent variables as such changes are largely governed by the changes in their material conditions.

The present study is based mainly on the secondary sources of material like, books and articles, Census reports, reports of the Commissioner for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes and also reports of the various commissions and committees published from time to time. Although such sources of material are not quite exhaustive in terms of providing a correct picture of the changing status of the Dalit women either in India or in Maharashtra, yet they serve, in a way, some source of information for a time-bound endeavour like this.



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The present study is divided into six chapters, Chapter I surveys the present status of women in the developing countries including India. It also explains briefly the present status of Dalit women in the country, besides providing a specific framework, a number of hypotheses and methods viable for the present study.

Chapter II provides a longitudinal profile of women in general and Dalit women in particular in a state like Maharashtra. Next chapter gives an account of traditional status of the Dalit women in the state. Chapter IV explains change in status of the Dalit women in terms of their demographic characteristics in Maharashtra. Change in the socio-economic status, social and political consciousness and attitudes and behaviour toward the Dalit women has been analysed in Chapter V. Finally, the last chapter suggests some trend in the change in status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra.

Chapter II

WOMEN IN MAHARASHTRA - A SOCIAL PROFILE

Women have been regarded inferior to men not only in India but in other countries also in the world, as mentioned in the previous chapter. In India the women of all backgrounds have been placed at inferior position in every walk of life even in the modern time. There have been a number of reasons for their such positions which have been discussed in the previous chapter. However, there are variations in position of the women belonging to the various groups and castes and sub-castes in different parts of the country. We will examine, in this chapter, the position of women in Maharashtra in terms of their proportion to the total population, literacy and educational level, marital status, employment position, migration and socio-political awareness among them. Incorporation of these variables is important as they affect much the status of women (and men also) though some variables contribute more significantly in this matter. For instance, "Exports on women studies as well as women themselves have often been prone to take the view that the question of education and employment is fundamental to their

enjoyment of equality and status." ¹ It is based on "the assumption that employment gives a woman earning capacity which in turn enhances her social status." ² Hence, while drawing a profile of women in Maharashtra, we will compare, as and when it is necessary, their position with that of the men. We will also analyse, briefly, the position of Dalit women in comparison to that of women in general in Maharashtra.

India is the second largest country in the world in terms of its population. This is true in the case of its female population also. For instance, in 1901 the female population in the country was 117 millions which rose to 264 millions in 1971. This is more than the total population of any Western country. Thus, over the last seven decades (1901-71) or so, the female population in India has increased by 147 millions or 126 percent. As compared to this, the male population has increased by 163 millions or 130 percent. Such a differential growth has, however, brought about a decline in the sex ratio. For instance, there were 972 females over per 1,000 males

1 Ahmed, Karuna, "Studies of Educated working women in India: trends and issues," Economic and Political Weekly, Aug. 18, 1979, P. 1435.

2 Ibid.

in 1901 in India, but this ratio has declined to 930 females over per 1,000 males in 1971.³

It is pertinent here to examine why there has been decline in sex ratio ever since 1901. There may be a number of reasons behind such a decline. However, many demographers have put forth the various hypotheses to explain this. These hypotheses are: " (a) higher under remuneration of females in the Indian Census, (b) the higher mortality rate of females, (c) the marked preference for sons and the consequent neglect of women at all ages, (d) the adverse impact of frequent and excessive child bearing on the health of women, (e) the higher incidence of certain diseases in women." ⁴

Without going into details of these hypotheses it may be agreed upon that these have been proved empirically true by most of the recent studies.

Further, if we look at the sex ratio from the point of view of the age and residential (rural-urban) background, we find an unevenness in it. In other words, in 1971, there have been 931 females over per

3 Towards Equality; Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Department of Social Welfare, Government of India, 1974, P. 9.

4 Ibid, P. 11.

1,000 males in all ages in rural and urban areas respectively. This has increased steadily in the case of the older age groups both in towns and villages, but with the similar differentials. Thus, we find that the females, specially old women, have concentrated mainly in villages.

Besides, the demographers and social planners have estimated not only an increase in the total population of the country but also a proportional increase in the female population by 1980's.⁵ Thus, the total population in the country has been estimated to increase by 124 millions or by 21.3 percent by 1986. The male population is expected to increase by 63 millions or 20.9 percent while the female population by 61 millions or 20.2 percent.⁶ In other words, in comparison to 1971 the rate of increase both in the male and female population in future in the country has been estimated quite low. Such projection of population is obviously made keeping in view the curve of population through the various methods of family planning.

5 See, for instance, Bose, Ashish, India's Urbanization - 1901-2001, Tata McGraw-Hill, New Delhi, 1978.

6 Towards Equality, op.cit., P. 11.

Finally, the sex ratio is estimated to be 938 females over per 1,000 males by 1986. Of course, the validity of such projection depends on the fulfilment of the assumptions regarding the reduction in the rate of mortality and fertility both among men and women. This also implies not only an improvement in the sex ratio of males and females but also an improvement in the health and social and economic conditions of the women leading to change in their status.

Women in Maharashtra

Maharashtra is a state where a number of social reforms had taken place prior to independence, especially during the 19th century. Prominent among these reforms were the reforms brought out by Jotiba Phule and M.G. Ranade. These social reformers were concerned mainly with upliftment of the depressed people including women. They advised the women-folk to adopt the cleanliness. They also encouraged them, by opening schools, to take up the formal education and prepare their children also to get educated. In the 20th century Dr B.R. Ambedkar also encouraged, especially the Dalit women, to forge the educational training in them and their family. Government also, on its part, has paid some attention to promote education among the women in the State.

In view of the above mentioned facts one may assume that status of the women in Maharashtra is better than that in other states. However, such assumption may be examined on the basis of available facts relating to their representation in the total population of the state, their literacy rate, marital status, age at marriage, employment position, etc.

We have mentioned earlier that the sex ratio and rate of growth of males and females varies from castes to castes and states to states. This is true in the case of Maharashtra also. If we look at the sex ratio in Maharashtra, we find that there have been 932 females over 1000 males in 1971. This is a slightly higher rate than that in the country (930) as a whole. But when we look at the differential growth of the female population in comparison to population of the males in Maharashtra in different decades, we find a continuous decline in that (except in 1941). Such decline is observed also in the country as a whole and has been regarded as "a disturbing phenomenon in the context of the status of women."⁷ But the interesting point to note here is that the decline in the sex ratio in Maharashtra has been

7 Towards Equality, op.cit., P. 11.

consistently less than that in the country. This can be seen in the following table.

Table 2:1: Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males) in the different decades (1921-1971) in Maharashtra.

Decades	Sex ratio	
	India	Maharashtra
1921	953	950
1931	950	947
1941	945	949
1951	946	941
1961	941	936
1971	930	932

Source: Computed from Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Govt. of India, 1974, Pp. 10-15.

Another point to note here is that the representation of the female in the total population in Maharashtra is quite low in comparison to that in other states like Kerala, Orissa, Bihar, etc. Thus, Maharashtra occupies 9th place in the sex ratio after the states mentioned above.⁸ Kerala is the only state in which representation of the female population has

⁸ Ibid, P. 13.

always been more (1019 according to 1971 Census) than that of the male. However, sex ratio does not give correct picture about status of women except a clue to surmise that a balanced sex ratio provides equality of women with men at least in terms of their numerical strength.

Literacy

Women have always been lagging behind men in terms of literacy both at the national and state levels. Out of 29.03 percent literate population in the country, there were 39.5 percent males and only 18.7 percent females, according to 1971 Census. Similarly, out of 39.18 percent literates in Maharashtra there were 51.03 percent males and only 26.44 percent females. Thus, the literacy among females in the state is proportionately less than the men as is so in the case of the women in the country.

As it is true that a large number of women live in the rural areas in Maharashtra, the literacy rate among them is low (17.85%). Thus, out of 26.44 percent total literate females in the State 47.3 percent literate females live in urban areas. Although the literacy among females is higher in urban areas than that in rural areas, yet this is quite low in comparison to that

among the urban males (66.8%).

One point is worth noting here that the literacy rate among females in the urban areas is higher than that of males (42.3%) living in rural areas. Apparently it seems that the status of women in urban areas is better than the status of men living in rural areas. That may be, to some extent, true also. But, it will be erroneous to draw such a conclusion because the status of women is to be seen in terms of a certain social space, including residential locations (rural and urban) in which they live. In other words, when we compare the status of women, at least in terms of literacy among them, both in urban and rural areas separately, we find that it is certainly inferior to that of men not only in rural areas, but in urban areas also. In absence of authentic data regarding enrolment of women for the various types of higher and technical education it is not possible here to record their educational achievement in the state.

Marital Status

In the traditional set up a female enjoyed a complete status of womanhood if she was married and an unmarried, widow or divorced lady had always been looked down upon in the society. Moreover, a woman married within the caste enjoyed better status than that who married outside

the caste. To discourage the inter-caste marriages a number of restrictions were imposed, in an organized manner, among the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins in Maharashtra.⁸ In the present century some changes have certainly taken place in this regard. "The caste endogamy is broken sometimes, especially in urban areas. Studies made within the last ten years show this more frequently, ...the people involved in it were educated people and social reformers and the very fact of their inter-marriage made them a subject of public controversies."⁹ Such marriages, however, were not always bonds according to the status of the women equal to that of men.

It is only in the recent years that the women, especially after getting educated, have started claiming for their independent status irrespective of their marital status. However, this is true in the case of a limited number of females, especially the urban educated ones. But marital status of a woman decides, by and large, her status as such in the society. It is, therefore, interesting to see the marital status of women and draw

8 Ghurye, G.S., Caste and Race in India, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1979, pp. 454-55. See also, Karve, I., Maharashtra - Land and Its People, Government of Maharashtra Publications, Bombay, 1968, pp. 161-63.

9 Karve, I., Maharashtra - Land and Its People, pp. 162-3.

come inference out of that about their status in Maharashtra.

Figures pertaining to the total number of married women is not available either at the country or the state level. However, figures pertaining to the marital status of the total population in Maharashtra explains that more than 50 percent of people are either unmarried or widow/widower or separated. Further, the percentage of unmarried population (both males and females) is high in urban (36.6% males and 48.9% females) and rural (39.5 males and 44.7% females) areas. It is also interesting to note that the percentage of females, either widow or separated, is higher than that of males both in rural and urban areas. This may be seen from the following table.

Table 2.2: Marital Status of women in Maharashtra.

Population		M	F	U	D/S	W
Total	Males	36.91	41.99	2.13	0.29	0.04
	Females	44.93	44.28	9.30	0.43	0.02
Rural	Males	39.5	41.9	2.9	0.3	0.03
	Females	44.7	44.9	9.0	0.4	0.02
Urban	Males	36.6	41.9	1.6	0.1	0.07
	Females	48.9	41.9	0.0	0.3	0.02

Source: Computed from Census of India (Maharashtra), 1971.

One may say that the status of women in Maharashtra is now better as more than 90 percent women in the state are not married. But this may be wrong to say because quite a sizeable number of them are widows or separated and, thus, not always accepted as dignified persons. However, the marital status of women does not give any correct picture about their status as a whole.

Employment

Employment among women is another indicator of measuring their status. Since a large majority of people including women are unemployed both in the country and particularly in Maharashtra, the employment factor also may not help us completely to explain the status of women in the state. Yet, this may explain at least economic independence of those women who are employed in the various activities. It is also significant from the point of view of enjoying greater freedom, autonomy, though limited, mere prestige in the family by such women.

Traditionally the women, especially coming from upper castes, were confined only to the domestic activities, as stated in the previous chapter. "Not so long ago in Maharashtra, Brahmin women, especially in rural areas and even those belonging to richer houses, had to fetch all the water needed by the large joint family because Brahmins

could not use the water touched by other castes. They had to scrub all the pots and wash all the clothes." ¹⁰

In the present century, however, changes have taken place in the employment position of women in the state. Women have come out of home and taken up a variety of economic activities.

When we look at the engagement of women in the various economic activities over the past half century in the state, we find that their large majority is confined to agriculture only. "...Though the proportion of people working in agriculture has slightly decreased, the proportion of women working in agriculture (in western Maharashtra) has increased considerably." ¹¹ In the case of the eastern Maharashtra this has remained the same. Further, "(a) the percentage of women working in 1961 is slightly lower than in 1901 and (b) a large percentage of women than in 1901 working in agriculture presents a picture of a society passing from peasant culture into an industrial era." ¹² Again, there were 26.7 percent women employed in the various economic activities in

10 Ibid, P. 90.

11 Ibid, P. 119.

12 Ibid, P. 122.

urban and rural areas in 1971. Out of this, 91.9 percent and 33.8 percent were engaged as agricultural labourers and cultivators respectively. Similarly, there were 2.9 percent and 2.6 percent women who were engaged in the household and non-household industries. Finally, there were 9.5 percent women who were employed in other services in the state.

When we compare the representation of women in the various economic activities with that of men, we find that they always lag behind the men except in agricultural labour where they work merely as servants. This can be seen from the following table (See P. 37 for table 2.3).

There is a growing tendency among the people in the country and also in Maharashtra that they migrate from rural to urban areas. This is so because people migrate to urban areas in terms of getting better employment, education, individual freedom and better way of life. Women in the state also have followed this trend. But in most of the cases they have migrated to towns and cities not alone but alongwith other members of their family, especially their husband. Only in few cases, they have gone alone to urban areas either for getting higher education or employment. While

Table 2:3: Economic activities of the people in Maharashtra.

Employment category	Percentage of employed		
	Persons	Males	Females
Total workers	18390279 (100)	13603032 (100)	4787247 (100)
I Cultivators	35.55	36.16	33.78
II Agricultural labourers	29.33	21.90	51.94
III Livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting and plantation	1.61	1.96	0.16
IV Mining and quarrying	0.24	0.96	0.20
V Manufacturing, servicing and repairs:			
a) Household industries	3.06	3.12	2.90
b) Other than household industries	9.96	12.53	2.66
VI Construction	1.90	1.79	0.69
VII Trade, commerce	6.70	8.91	1.95
VIII Transport, storage and communication	3.04	3.94	0.03
IX Other services	9.00	10.21	9.54

Source: Census of India (Maharashtra), 1971.

staying in towns and cities they are employed mostly in uncleaned or menial jobs and only in some cases in the white-collar jobs.

In the recent years a few number of women have taken up skilled and some of them highly skilled jobs, administrative responsibility and academic endeavours. In absence of any statistics at present it is not possible to show the number of women employed in the various types of activities in urban areas. However, these activities have helped only a small number of women to raise their status in urban areas. A large majority of the working women is still engaged in unskilled and semi-skilled type of activities even in urban areas, as stated earlier.

Dalit Women in Maharashtra

We have mentioned that nearly half of the women in the state are active in the various economic pursuits both in rural and urban areas. We have also discussed their literacy, marital and migratory status on the basis of which there seems to be some improvement in their overall status in the state. Hence, such state of affairs among the women include the Dalit women also in the state which have been discussed in detail in chapters three, four and five. We would, however, like

to give here a brief resume of their present status in Maharashtra.

We have mentioned in Chapter 1 that the Dalit women have been most degraded in the country in general and in Maharashtra in particular. This is clear when we look at their literacy rate, marital status, employment position, etc. In regard to literacy, we find that only 12.8 percent Dalit women were literate in comparison to 26.4 percent women in general, in 1971 in the state. This was above one-third of the literacy among the Dalit men (37.0%). Further, the same ratio of literacy was maintained between the rural and urban areas as it was only 9.2 percent among the Dalit women in rural areas in comparison to 24.2 percent in urban areas. Thus, the Dalit women are the most illiterate persons in the state.

In the case of the marital status and age at marriage also the Dalit women are the most affected persons of the various adversaries like widowhood, divorce, underage marriage, etc. According to an estimate,¹³ the average age at marriage of females was below twenty years, in 1961 in all the twenty six districts in Maharashtra. This included obviously a large majority of

13 Towards Equality, op.cit., P. 24.

the Dalit women, especially in rural areas, who get married before twenty years of their age.

Finally, the Dalit women both in rural and urban areas are employed mostly in menial jobs. We have mentioned that a majority of the employed women in rural areas are engaged in agricultural activities like cultivation, labour, etc. The women labour-force in agricultural activities comprises largely of Dalit women. Only a small number of them are engaged as cultivators. In the case of migration there seems to be an imbalance between the Dalit men and women as the former migrate in most of the time temporarily to the urban areas in search of jobs. Thus, their womenfolk are left behind in rural areas. However, in those cases where the Dalit women do migrate to urban areas, they are often accompanied by their menfolk. There they either get engaged in the same economic activities in which their menfolk do or they look after family affairs while staying at home. Moreover, like some women in general, a few number of Dalit women also migrate alone to urban areas and pursue their study or employment. In sum, the status of Dalit women, at present, in Maharashtra is not much revealing, as stated earlier.

CHAPTER III

DALIT WOMEN IN MAHARASHTRA : THEIR TRADITIONAL STATUS

The Untouchables had been kept, once outside and later below, in the four-fold division of the Hindu society in India. The four varnas or castes, namely, Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants) and Shudras (servitors) broke later up into the numerous groups and sub-groups, "all with intricate sets of rules and regulations governing their contact with each other..."¹ But the major line dividing the top three varnas from the fourth, the Shudras, was the entitlement of the former to wear the sacred thread "which identifies them as 'twice-born' meaning that in a symbolic second birth they have been admitted to the study of the vedas or in effect, recognized as more or less fully privileged Hindus."² However, the four varnas are known as Savarnas (with Varna or within the Varna system). "The untouchables or Ati-Shudras are called Avarnas -- those who have no varna"³ (or outside the varna system).

1 Icace, M.R., India's Ex-untouchables, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1969, P. 26.

2 Ibid.

3 Ambodkar, B.R., Who Were the Shudras?, Thackers, 1970, P. 20.

Social Disabilities of the Dalits

Through the passage of history the Untouchables were regarded, sometimes in the 400 A.D., as a part of the Hindu caste system, if not of the varna system. This was an outcome of a second reconciliation among the various groups, especially those who were at the top in the Hindu social order.⁴ They were clamped with the numerous social, religious and legal disabilities almost in the same fashion in which once the Shudras of the Hindu varna system were subjected to. As the caste system became more crystallized, the untouchables were regarded as unseeable, unapproachable, untraceable, etc. during the Gupta period. "In many places they could not enter at all upon streets or lanes used by caste Hindus, or else they had to carry brooms to brush away their footprints in the dirt behind them as they passed. In some places, they could not contaminate the earth with their spittle but had to carry little pots around their necks to keep the ground reserved for caste Hindu spittle only."⁵

4 Ambodkar, B.R., The Untouchables, Jetavana Mahavihara, Shrasvasti (U.P.), 1977, P. 204. Also see his Who were the Shudras?, op.cit.

5 Isaacs, H.R., op.cit., P. 27. See also Ghurye, G.S., Caste and Race in India, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1969 and Majumdar, D.N. and T.N. Madan, An Introduction to Social Anthropology, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1957, Pp. 231-32.

In several parts of the country, especially in the Southern states, physical distances were proscribed for the untouchables to keep themselves away from the people of other castes. For instance, they were supposed to maintain a distance of 33 feet from low-rated groups like artisan and other menial groups, 66 feet from the middle level castes including castes similar to the Kohatriya of northern India and 99 feet from the Brahmins, the highest-rated of all. "By some rules an untouchable had to shout a warning before entering a street so that all the holier-folk could get out of the way of his contaminating shadow. By others he could not raise his voice at all because the sound of his voice falling on a caste Hindu's ear was doomed to be as polluting as his touch." ⁶

Untouchability, thus, was found all over the country, though it was much more acute in the Northern states. In the combined Maharashtra state, the untouchables were allowed "...not to make free use of the public conveyances and discrimination in some form or other was practised in some of the public or semi-public institution..." ⁷ In villages also, they "were not even

⁶ Ghurye, G.S., op.cit., Pp. 8-13. Also see Majumdar, D.N. and T.N. Madan, op.cit.

⁷ Report of the Committee on the Amelioration of the Backward Classes in the Merged State Areas of the Bombay State, Bombay Government, Bombay, 1930, P. 53.

allowed to move about freely in new clothes or wear shoes in the presence of others. The Harijans were also made render customary services amounting to forced labour for little or no remuneration." ⁸

Most of the untouchable castes in the state were associated with the traditional hereditary occupations, as mentioned earlier. Some of them had occupied the hereditary offices also in villages for which they were remunerated in kinds. In the case of Mahars there was a system of Maharki Wattan lands (a small piece of land) granted to them for their village watchmanship and other services.⁹ Since they were engaged in traditional hereditary occupations often defiled in nature, even small piece of land could not improve their economic position and raise their status in the society.

The Untouchables were, in a way, excommunicated as they were made to stay outside the village or the main settlement. In other words, the Untouchables were found in every village but their settlements were located outside the main villages. This trend is found even today in the country. In Maharashtra also this practice is on since centuries. For instance, the Maharas being

⁸ Ibid, P. 40.

⁹ Ibid.

the largest Untouchable community in the state are to be found in every village but their quarters are located outside the walled villages.¹⁰ In fact, in every village in Maharashtra there are Maharwadas and Mangwadas (the settlements of the Mahars and Mangs - another major Untouchable caste in the state). Furthermore, the houses in which they were supposed to live were also to be constructed in the manner different from that of caste Hindus. In a word, the entire way of living of the Untouchables had to be distinct from that of caste Hindus. This continued till the end of the eighteenth century.

The Dalit Women in the Past

In Chapter I we have made a conjecture, though a logically derived one, that the Dalit women have been the most degraded persons in India. They have been the victims not only of men in general but of the women and their own men also. Here, we shall mention about the social degradation and economic exploitation of the Dalit women in a state like Maharashtra and compare them, as and when necessary, with that of the Dalit women in the country.

10 Ambedkar, D.R., The Untouchables, op.cit., P. 33.

Like the Dalit men, the Dalit women also have undergone the countless social disabilities and economic exploitation. The numerous social and religious disabilities imposed on the Dalits were to be shared by their womenfolk also. This was so not only in rural but even in urban areas. During the Gupta period the Dalit or Untouchable women were not allowed to wear any ornaments nor even clothes above their waist. It is stated, "...that the backwardness of our community as well as our sisters followed, in the middle ages, with the origination and commencement of the caste system, particularly the untouchability. The people of our community were segregated and outcasted by the other Hindu communities. They had to live outside the villages and had to do all sorts of menial and filthy work. This social tyranny did not stop here but went a step further; it did not allow the untouchables even to put on decent clothes, or ornaments." ¹¹

Even today, in some places "nothing resembling ornament or finery is allowed" to be worn out by the Dalit women. Thus, in some parts of the country

11. Dongare, Sulochana, Presidential address to the All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, held at Nagpur on 20th July, 1942.

" to clothe themselves with certain articles of show or luxury in public " ¹² is the right given to certain castes only. In Southern India, for instance, "wearing of clothes above the waist was formerly a privilege of the twice-born castes while the Shudra castes themselves until quite recently insisted that it was forbidden to the exterior of untouchable castes. The same prohibition extended to the use of gold or even silver ornaments or umbrellas and even of shoes." ¹³ This was found in North India also where the Chermars were beaten up by upper castes, especially the Rajputs whom they emulated in terms of dressing or wearing the gold ornaments. Similar types of practices were found elsewhere also in the country.

Traditionally, the women in India have been supposed to be confined to home only, as stated in the previous chapter. "A married woman's world is her home and she is primarily required to look after the welfare of her husband, her progeny, and other members of the family, if any, and the husband's task is to assume full responsibility of making adequate arrangements for the provision and protection of the family. While the sphere of the wife has been strictly limited and confined

12 Kamble, J.R., Rise and Awakening of Depressed Classes in India, National Publishing House, New Delhi, 1979, Pp. 4-5.

13 Ibid.

to the home under the protection of man, the husband's field of activity is largely outside the home." ¹⁴
 This is applicable, to some extent, to the Dalit women also.

The Dalit women were, and they are even today, the most illiterate persons in the society. Not even a single case of the Dalit women educated before the beginning of this century has been reported. But economically, they were relatively independent as their economic activities were not only confined to the home but they were equally active in the field also. "Women from the lower strata of society (Dalit women) have always worked for wages in this country, but those from upper classes were mostly confined to their homes." ¹⁵ Thus, they were co-journeers of their husband or other male members in the family while working on the fields owned either by the family or others. In Maharashtra also the major Scheduled Castes like Chambhars, Mahars, Mangs, etc. were engaged in traditional occupations like tanning,

14 Kapur, Premilla, Marriage and Working Women in India, Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1972, P. 297.

15 Sengupta, Padmini, "In trades and professions," in Tara Ali Baig (ed.) Women of India, Government of India, New Delhi, 1938, P. 240. See also Shahid Pravin, Women, Marriage and Morals, Record Publishing Company, Calcutta, 1949, Pp. 23-32.

shoe making, wolding ropes, etc.¹⁶ Their womenfolk also used to assist them in their such activities.

Though the Dalit women in the past were earning members in the family and apparently enjoyed almost equal status with their men, but it does not mean that they were economically independent in the absolute sense. In fact, they were economic contributor to the family income and it was taken for granted that the women had to work even outside the home like other members in the family. They were, however, regarded inferior to their men. Even outside the home they were looked down upon by others, especially upper caste men and women because for them they were merely labourers like others. In addition to their being considered less hard working than men and thereby getting low wages they were regarded socially inferior because their working in the field was against the tradition of non-manual labour among the women, especially the upper caste women.

The Dalit women like their men in Maharashtra and elsewhere in the country were subjected to the various types of social discrimination and untouchability. In the most general sense they were treated untouchables

16 Karve, Iravati, Maharashtra: Land and Its People, Maharashtra Government, Bombay, 1938, Pp. 19-33.

and discriminated against. But in some specific contexts like helping the upper caste women in their domestic works (but extremely non-pollutory in nature) and attending them at the time of their delivery they were not discriminated against. Thus, their subjection to the various types of discrimination and untouchability vis-a-vis their inferior status was contextual and complex and not a simple one.

Another very peculiar form of social disability of the Dalit women in Maharashtra and neighbouring states was their status of Devadasis or Aurasis literally meaning a female servant of God and dedicated to the presiding Deity in the temples. " In its original import, marriage of the Dasi (female servant) to the Deity is a renunciation of ordinary family life and a consecration to the service of God... whatever its origin, the system has now degenerated into one giving religious sanction to the vulgar profession of prostitutes. The degeneration has gone so far that the Devadasis or Aurasis no longer even live in the precincts of the temples to which they are dedicated, but after consecration are considered free to follow the profession of a prostitute wherever

they please." ¹⁷ Initially, the practice of Devadasis or Muralis facilitated the Dalit women in the state to get their status enhanced but as the practice degenerated to the level of prostitution, they were brought back to the status worst than earlier. Thus, the system of Devadasis proved to be another form of exploitation of the Dalit women in the state.

Status in the Family

We have mentioned that the Dalit women have been engaged in the various economic activities, both in and out of home, in addition to their normal domestic works like caring for husband, looking after children and other members in the family. We have also said that their engagement in the economic activities helped them, in a way, to enjoy equal status with their men. Since they were helping out their husband in performing hereditary occupations, they could influence, to some extent, the major decision-making in the affairs both within and outside the family. However, in India there exists a typical pattern of relationship between husband and wife

17 Report of the Committee on the Amelioration of the Backward Classes in the Merged State Areas of the Bombay State, op.cit., P. 95.

that is of the male dominance and female subordination. " The husband enjoys the superior position over the wife and the major decision-making roles are mostly the domain of the husband." ¹⁸ The Dalit women in the past were not outside such relationship. In fact, they were considered socially inferior to their men inspite of their economic contribution to the family income, as stated earlier.

Traditionally, a woman especially a Hindu woman, could even enhance her status both in and outside the family alongwith her ripe age and bearing on a number of male children. ¹⁹ She had to enjoy high status in early age also provided she was wife of the eldest member in the family. ²⁰ Thus, her elderly age provided her command over even the male members in the family and elsewhere. This was applicable to the Dalit women also in the country and the Dalit women in Maharashtra were not exception to it. But one significant point is to be mentioned here. The aged Dalit women enjoyed better status and exercised

18 Kapur, Premilla, op.cit., P. 298.

19 Kapadia, K.M., Marriage and Family in India, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1968.

20 Ibid. See also Karve, Kiravati, op.cit., Pp. 161-182.

command only over the members of their caste and their such status was not universally recognized by the people of upper castes though in certain specific cases it was socially accepted.

The Dalit women, however, could not enjoy the dignified position in and exercise considerable command over other members of the family because of two main reasons. First, their economic position vis-a-vis that of their family was so poor that it could not place them in the dignified or commanding position. Secondly, they were illiterate and, therefore, did not have innovative vision to acquire better status in and outside the family. Besides, they were victims of the psyche of their own men as well as men in general. As a result of their all such handicaps, they were socially, economically and physically exploited by others in the society.

Social Reform, Government Measures and the Dalit Women

We have already mentioned that the poor condition and degraded status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra and other parts of the country continued till the eighteenth century. It was only in the beginning of the 19th century when the Dalit women in Maharashtra as well as in the country drew the attention of the various social reformers. In the later period the government.

also paid a little attention to the problems of the Dalit women alongwith that of women in general. More precisely, the government has paid, after independence, some attention to the problems of the Dalit women in terms of providing them educational and employment facilities. We shall discuss here some of the efforts made by both the social reformers and the government to ameliorate the poor condition and raise the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra.

Maharashtra is one of the pioneer states in social reforms in the country. Since the beginning of the 19th century a number of social reformers like C.G. Agarkar, M.G. Ranode, Mahatma Phule, Shahuji Maharaja of Kolhapur, Dr B.R. Ambodkar and several others took up the cause of the poor people, particularly the low castes and the women in the state. Through their various activities they tried to create an atmosphere in which the problems of the poor peasants, Untouchables and the women both belonging to the Dalit and upper castes could seek considerable attention of the people in Maharashtra and outside.

Regarding the problems of the Dalit communities the main focus of the social reformers was on removal of untouchability. The various social reformers demonstrated

their concern about the problems of untouchability vis-a-vis Untouchables through their activities like organising community feasts, opening of the public places such as temples, wells, tanks, etc. for the untouchable castes. Reformers like Ranade, Phule and several others started new schools and hostels for the untouchables boys and girls.²¹ Special attention was paid to facilities of education and white-collar employment among the Dalit men and women. However, the various social reform activities were confined to bring about certain reforms in the existing Hindu social order, though these activities contributed to adopt liberal views among caste Hindus toward the problems of the Untouchables. They left impression of obligations and not responsibility in the minds of both the caste-Hindus and the Untouchables toward the various problems of the latter.

It was Mahatma Phule and Dr Ambedkar who created a sense of pride and dignity among the Untouchables and made them think about their status and role in the society. Ambedkar, for instance, prepared the Untouchables (later Scheduled Castes and recently Dalits) to come forward and fight for their rights in the society. He

21 Jagirdar, P.J., Mahadeo Govind Ranade, Publications Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 1971, Pp. 108-117. Also see Omvedt, Gail, Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society, Scientific Socialist Education Trust, Bombay, 1976, Pp. 106-7.

asked the Dalit women as early as in 1940's to realise their responsibility toward preparing an intelligent and militant generation. He also advised them to adopt the habits of cleanliness and educating their children and, more than that, instilling a more rational, scientific and modern values among them.²² How far the various reform activities including the efforts made by Mahatma Phule and Dr Ambedkar and a number of welfare measures adopted by the government, especially after Independence, have brought any significant change in the traditional status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra will be discussed in the next chapter.

22 Ambedkar, B.R., His Address to the All-India Depressed Classes Women's Conference, op.cit.

Chapter IV

CHANGING STATUS OF DALIT WOMEN:

THE DEMOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

We have already discussed, in chapters 2 and 3, that a number of social reforms had taken place in the 19th century and the various socio-legal measures have been adopted by the government in the present century, especially after Independence in the country. These reforms and measures have helped the women in general and the Dalit women in particular, both in the country and in Maharashtra, to change their status in as well as out of the family. Women are now taking up higher education and white collar jobs, besides participating actively in politics. A number of married and unmarried women are taking up higher education also alongwith their getting employed in the various government services. The married women are doing all this, besides looking after their family. Women's age at marriage has also increased in the recent years. In a word, women are pursuing the various types of social activities as they wish to raise their status in the society.

We shall discuss in this chapter, the various types of changes taking place among the Dalit women in

Maharashtra. To be more precise, we shall analyse here the changes in the ratio of their population, health and hygiene, their marital status and age at their marriage as such changes help them improve their status in the society of the modern time.

Population Distribution

We have mentioned earlier that the Scheduled Castes represent about 6 percent of the total population in Maharashtra. Before we discuss the population distribution of the Dalits, both males and females in rural as well as urban areas in the state, it is necessary to mention one significant point here. In 1936 Dr B.R. Ambedkar and his followers embraced Buddhism and, as a result of that, in the 1961 Census the converted Buddhists were excluded from the Scheduled Caste population in Maharashtra. That led obviously to decline in the total population of the Scheduled Castes in the state. But the decadal variation of the combined population of both the Scheduled Castes and Buddhists shows faster rate of population growth (25.33%) as compared to the corresponding rate of growth (23.60%) for the total population in the state.¹

1 Census of India (Maharashtra), 1961.

In the beginning of independence, the Dalits were numerically much more important in Bombay state as a whole but were less in number in Saurashtra and Kutch. According to the Census of 1931, they constituted 8.35 percent of the total population in Bombay state but were only 2.88 percent in Saurashtra and 1.31 percent in Kutch.² However, the Census of 1951 had one limitation as the figures for Saurashtra and Kutch for the previous decades could not be collected because of the extensive boundary changes and lack of data. The following table shows the Dalits³ population recorded at the past three censuses in the combined state of Bombay.

**Table 4.1: Population of the Dalits in
Bombay State in Three Decades
(1931-51)**

Decades	Dalit population	% of Dalits in total population	Decennial increase in Dalits' population
1931	2260,359	8.95	...
1941	2558,744	8.77	+ 13.20
1951	3003,024	8.35	+ 17.36

Source: Census of India - Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch, Vol.IV, Part II-A, 1951.

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- 2 Census of India (Bombay State, Saurashtra and Kutch), Part I, Vol.IV, 1951.
- 3 In the Census of 1951 the population of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the other Backward Classes were combined.

Further, according to 1951 Census, 73.5 percent of the Dalits in Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch lived in rural and only 26.5 percent in urban areas. They were, thus, slightly less urbanised than the total population (31.17%) in the State, if the urban residential location is regarded as an indicator of urbanization.⁴ In Ahmedabad and Poona districts 57.5 percent and 44.9 percent of Dalits lived in urban areas and their proportions both in rural and urban areas approximated very closely to that of the total population. In the districts of Kolaba, Ratnagiri and Kanara in the Konkan region about half population of the Dalits was urbanised as compared to the total population.⁵

Again, population of the Dalits (males and females) have steadily increased in the recent decades. According to 1971 Census, total population of the Dalits in Maharashtra was 3,023,761 and 75.32 percent of them were living in rural and only 24.68 percent in urban areas. However, "...the differences in the size of male populations in the rural areas within the decade 1961-71

4 Earlier studies conducted on urbanization in India have called the people located in towns and cities as the urbanized population; see Bose, Ashish, Studies in India's Urbanization (1901-71), Tata Mc-Graw Hill, Bombay, 1973; Bulsara, J.F., Problems of Rapid Urbanization in India, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1964; Sovani, M.V., Urbanization and Urban India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1966, etc.

5. Census of India - Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch, 1951, P. 125.

are higher than that of the female population." ⁶ Further, about 70.85 percent Dalit females lived in rural and only 29.12 percent in urban areas during the said decade. Thus, there was an increase in the urban population of both the Dalit females and males in the recent decades in Maharashtra over the previous decades. For instance, according to 1961 census, only 8.91 percent males and 8.52 percent females of the Dalits lived in urban areas as compared to 15.93 percent males and 15.99 percent females of the Dalits living in urban areas in the country as a whole. Thus, if we take the simple distribution of population in rural and urban areas as an indicator of social status, we can say that status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra has improved in the recent years in comparison to that of the Dalit women in the country as a whole.

Sex Ratio

We have mentioned in chapter 2 that the sex ratio (number of females per 1,000 males) has consistently declined in the previous decades in India and also in Maharashtra. This is true in the case of the Dalit population also. Generally, the sex ratio is higher in

6 Trivedi, H.R., Scheduled Caste Women - Studies in Exploitation, Concept Publishing Co., Delhi, 1977, P. 53.

rural than in urban areas in the case of both the Dalits and total population in the state. But the sex ratio among the Dalits is a little lower in rural and higher in urban areas than that of the total population. This may be so because of the fact that the Dalits have migrated alongwith their other family members including females to the urban areas in the recent years where in the beginning both the males and females got engaged in some types of jobs. In most of the cases the Dalits have migrated to urban areas alongwith their entire family unit and are employed in semi-skilled, unskilled jobs or construction works.⁷ Contrary to that, the non-Dalits have migrated to the urban areas, in most of the cases alone, for work, services, education, etc. Hence, such pattern of migration raises the sex ratio of total population high in rural areas in Maharashtra. The sex ratio for the Dalits and total population for the last three decades in the State can be seen from the table No. 4.2. Figures for the Buddhists and the combined population of the Dalits and Buddhists are also shown for comparison.

It is clear from the table No. 4.2 that the sex ratio in the case of the total population in Maharashtra

7 See Majumdar, P.S. and Ila, Rural Migrants in an Urban Setting, Hindustan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1978.

was five points and eleven points lower in 1961 (936) and 1971 (930) than that in 1931 (941). Contrarily, in the case of the Dalits the sex ratio was 35 points and 50 points lower in 1961 (962) and 1971 (947) than that

Table 4.2: Sex ratio of the Dalits and total population in three decades in Maharashtra.

Population	Sex ratio		
	1931	1961	1971
Total population	941	936	930
Dalits	991	962	947
Buddhists	919	921	o
Combined population of Dalits and Buddhists	996	978	o

Source: Census of India (Maharashtra), 1961 and 1971.

in 1931 (991). Similarly, their ratio was 13 percent lower in 1971 than that in 1961. But it was 17 points higher than that of the total population in the state in the said decade. Further, there was a tremendous increase in the sex ratio of the Buddhists in 1961 (921) over that in 1931 (919).

The sex ratio for the combined population of the Dalits and Buddhists in the state was 996 in 1931 and 978 in 1961. Thus, it has gone down by 18 points in

* Sex ratio among the Buddhists and the combined population of the Dalits and Buddhists for 1971 decade is not available.

1961 over that in 1951 for the combined population of the Buddhists and the Dalits as compared to the reduction of only five points in the case of the total population in the state.

Health and Hygiene

The health and hygienic condition of people in India is generally poor in comparison to that of the people specially in developed countries in the West. Even in India the life expectancy among males is more than that among females. Here, "more boys are born than girls but more girls die than boys and expectation of life at birth is lower for females." ⁸ Such a state of affairs is much true in the case of the Dalit women especially in the countryside. The Dalit women have suffered from numerous types of disabilities like higher mortality rate, neglect of female infants, excessive child bearing, higher incidence of varieties of diseases, etc. This is so due to their low level of education, ignorance, economic poverty and so on.

However, in the recent years there has been some improvement in the health and hygienic condition of the

8 Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1974, P. 11.

people in the country. Although the females in general are not much benefitted from such improvement, yet some sections of females especially the urban educated ones have improved their health and hygiene. There is also improvement in their adverse rate of mortality alongwith an increase in their life expectancy. The urban educated Dalit women have also been benefitted from such change. Some changes have certainly taken place among the Dalit women in rural areas in terms of improvement in their health and hygienic conditions but these are not upto the level of expectation.

If one accepts sex ratio and health and hygiene at least as a partial indicator of social status of women in general and the Dalit women in particular in India, one finds that the status of women in India has always been inferior to that of men. But the status of the Dalit women in India, especially in Maharashtra, has been better than that of the women in general in the previous years. This may be so as most of them have enjoyed status equal to that of their men at least in contributing to their family income, as mentioned earlier. But it is also true that in comparison to the women in general, especially coming from the better-off family background,

the Dalit women have always been under privileged in the state. In other words, the Dalit women in Maharashtra have not enjoyed, apart from their numerical number, as much facilities -- educational, economic etc., as the women in general have enjoyed.

Marital status

A woman is regarded even in modern time to be disposed-off in marriage, as mentioned earlier. Traditionally, there was practice of child marriage and widow remarriage at least in the case of non-twice-born families in India. In the case of the twice-born families of a woman, especially after the death of her husband, could not get remarried nor she could have divorce from her living husband. However, divorce was allowed for others and in the case of certain caste groups it was a common if not very frequent practice. In brief, marital status of the general as well as Dalit women in India was not very satisfactory as they had to undergo the various types of discrimination, exploitation and subordination of the menfolk. Maharashtra also witnessed this phenomenon and in the case of the twice-born caste groups more severely though it was declining due to a number of

social and religious reform movements⁹ launched prior to the national independence.

In the wake of a variety of changes which took place since the beginning of the present century some sort of improvement has certainly taken place in marital status of the women in general and Dalit women in particular in India and also in Maharashtra. For instance, besides the legal prohibition on child marriage, a girl is now not to be compulsorily disposed-off in marriage by her parents against her wishes. The marriage of a woman against her wishes is illegal under the law. But this is applicable in the case of an adult woman only. In certain cases the well educated and employed women prefer to remain unmarried throughout their life. This is possible in the case of women living in urban areas only. But such a phenomenon is rarely seen in the case of the Dalit women even in urban areas. In rural areas such women are generally regarded as social pariah and are always traditionally looked down upon not only by men but women also. In the case of unmarried, divorced or widow Dalit women in rural areas their poor economic condition

9 Natarajan, S., A Century of Social Reform in India, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962.

adds fuel to fire of their social degradation.

Another significant change has taken place in marital status of the women in the country in terms of making the divorce more liberal through laws and legalising the widow remarriage even in the case of the twice-born groups. But a phenomenon is worth mentioning here that the widow remarriage is easier if a woman does not have any child at the time of her getting widow as a widow mother gets involved in the various types of disputes if she tries to remarry.

The following table shows figures relating to marital status of the Dalit men and women as well as men and women in general in the decade 1961-71 in Maharashtra state.

Table 4.3: Marital status of men and women in Maharashtra.

Marital status	Dalit population				Total population			
	1961		1971		1961		1971	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
MA	52.01	40.27	55.80	44.57	53.30	42.18	55.91	43.95
M	44.90	48.18	41.87	45.64	43.09	43.67	41.59	44.29
W	2.36	10.66	1.88	9.12	3.12	11.48	2.13	1.72
D/S	0.47	0.82	0.26	0.61	0.43	0.61	0.29	0.43
U/S	0.04	0.03	0.07	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.02

Source: Census of India (Maharashtra State), 1961 and 1971.

Thus, according to 1961 census, 48.18 percent Dalit females were married. This was 2.34 points higher than that in 1971. Similarly, there were 40.27 percent Dalit females of all the ages who were never married in 1961. This was 4.57 points lower than that in 1971 in Maharashtra. Further, regarding the females in general there were 45.93 percent females who were never married and 44.28 percent were married in 1971. This was 1.36 points lower than that of the Dalit women in the same year. Since the percentage of women both in general and the Dalit women who never got married includes women of all the ages, one can guess that the majority of such women were below the age of marriage. But one cannot deny that there would have been quite a few number of women who never got married even after reaching the age of marriage. Similarly, there were 1.72 percent women in general as compared to 9.12 percent Dalit women who were widow in 1971. This vilifies the assumption that the Dalit widows get frequently remarried.

Further, divorce rate is also higher among the Dalit women than that among the women in general perhaps due to the liberal tradition of divorce among the Dalits and lack of property involving any dispute over its distribution between the Dalits women and men. Even in

the cases of Dalit families either in rural or urban areas in the state property does not affect much adversely a separation, if any, between the husband and wife. In fact, any such disputes over divorce are resolved either amicably or with a little interference of caste panchayat or court of law. In sum, "...the marital status of (Dalit) females is not as sound as that of the males." ¹⁰

Increasing Age at Marriage

We have mentioned earlier that the age of women at their marriage was very low in the previous years in India. During the medieval period in India there was a general practice of child marriage, especially of a female child. Parents were of the view that the female child was a burdensome property of others and their (parents') job was only to look her after upto certain age after which she was to be disposed-off in marriage. Such a view was inscribed closely in the roots of the religious dictum and its violation was regarded as a severe offence and was to be repented in the next birth. This was observed much in the case of the Dalit families.

" Generally, the lower castes and in particular the Scheduled Castes have a tendency to get their children married...in the early age." ¹¹

10 Trivedi, H.R., op.cit., P. 55.

11 Ibid, P. 53.

In the present century, however, the attitudes of parents have considerably changed due to an overall change in the social condition and the enactment of a number of laws. This has resulted into the increase in age at marriage of females. There may be two reasons for that, besides the significant efforts done by the social reformers prior to independence. One reason is that parents encourage these days even their female child to take up higher education and employment also in most of the cases. To some extent, there seems to be equilibrium in the attention of the parents toward their sons and daughters. It leads certainly to the late marriage of females in the country as well as in Maharashtra.

In the case of the Dalit family in Maharashtra age of women at their marriage was very low earlier because the parents were illiterate and poor and they wanted to dispoce their daughters off at an early age. But now-a-days, due to the increased level of education and an overall consciousness in the Dalit family¹² the age of women at their marriage has certainly increased both in the rural as well as urban areas in the state.

Migration may be other reason for increasing age at marriage of the Dalit women because the more is the

12 Trivedi, H.R., op.cit., P. 36.

rate of migration to towns and cities for getting higher education and white collar employment, the more are the chances of getting married lately. Earlier, the rate of migration, especially among the women, was very low. Today, the migratory status of the women has also changed but howfar this is true in the case of the Dalit women in a state like Maharashtra remains to be seen. We shall analyse here the change in the migratory status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra in regard to increase in the age at their marriage.

Migration among the Dalits in Maharashtra has been encouraged from time to time by a number of persons or organizations. For instance, Dr B.R. Ambedkar advised the Dalits prior to independence to leave their traditional occupation, go to cities and do work in factories, industries as well as in railways. He suggested them to migrate to cities where they could get so many jobs as there was choice for jobs and they could do any job.¹³ As a result of this advice some Dalits with their family

13 See his "Thoughts on Linguistic States," in Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol. I, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1979, Pp. 157-58. Also Nathan, S.K.S., "The Star among the Revolutionaries - Dr Ambedkar," in Thoughts on Dr Ambedkar - Siddharth Educational and Cultural Society, Agra, 1961, Pp. 23-24.

and many alone migrated to urban areas. They left their traditional occupations and got engaged mostly in the non-traditional occupations. Their women-folk also followed the same path. This facilitated the process of improving their social status but did not bring any fundamental change in the status of the Dalit women as in most of the cases the unskilled or semi-skilled employment provided them to live at the bare subsistence level. Moreover, their illiterate condition and unskilled employment did not affect them much to change their traditional bent of mind and that of others toward their womenfolk.

If we look retrospectively at the age of marriage of both the women in general and Dalit women in particular in the combined state of Bombay, we find that it was very low (12.22). In fact, it was less than that in the country (13.26) before independence. Further, the mean age at marriage among the Brahmin women in Bombay state was 12.98 years for the period of 1901-31. It was only 10.21 years for the Dalit women for the said period.¹⁴ Thus, in the case of both the Brahmin and Dalit women in the state age at their marriage was

14 Aggrawala, S.N., Age at Marriage in India, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1962, P. 117.

very low. At the all India level also age of the Brahmin as well as Dalit women at their marriage was 12.80 and 12.98 years which was certainly lower than that of the women from the other caste groups.

This may be explained in terms of the orthodox attitudes among the Brahmins toward marriage of their females and low economic conditions among the Dalits which caused the disposal of their women-folk in marriage at an early date.

Table 4.4: Mean age at marriage among males and females of different castes in Bombay state for the period 1901-31.

Castes	Mean age at marriage (in years)			
	Bombay State		All-India	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Brahmin	21.59	12.58	20.49	12.80
Warrior	20.79	12.31	21.38	13.46
Trading	20.97	13.78	20.21	13.80
S.C. (Dalits)	16.59	10.21	18.93	12.98
Total	19.89	12.22	20.26	13.51

Source: Aggrawala, S.N., Age at Marriage in India, Kitab Mahal, Allahabad, 1962, P. 176.

In the later decades age of the women in India as well as in Maharashtra at their marriage increased. For instance, it went upto 14.93 and 15.38 years in 1941 and 1951 in the case of women as a whole in the country. Similarly, it was 14.26 and 15.48 years in the case of women of all castes in Bombay state in the said decades. The data regarding age at marriage of the Dalit women in the state for this period is not available. But one can guess that, like increased age at marriage of the women in general, there was an increase in the age at marriage of the Dalit women also during this period. However, it clearly shows that their age at marriage in the decades 1961 and 1971 has certainly increased. For instance, according to 1971 census, it was 14.89 and 15.39 years for the Dalit women in rural and urban areas in Maharashtra in comparison to 14.87 and 15.45 years for the Dalit women in rural and urban areas in the country as a whole.¹³

One point is significant to note here that during all these years the age at marriage of women in general and of Dalit women in particular has always

¹³ Census of India, 1971, Series 1, Paper 4 (Female Age at Marriage), 1977, Pp. 10, 32.

been lower than that of the men. This is so because there has been a taboo regarding age of wife always to be lower than that of her husband. This is evidenced from a common belief that a wife gets invariably older than her husband at an early age as she undergoes the process of looking after the home affairs, producing and rearing of children which is a painstaking exercise in the human reproduction. Such a taboo is strictly observed in the case of age of women at their marriage irrespective of their caste or community background, their educational and employment positions both in the rural and urban areas.

In sum, there is some improvement in the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra in terms of their demographic characteristics. Since men and women are regarded as equal partner in familial and social life, there should be equal proportion of their numbers. But we have noticed that the number of women in general and that of the Dalit women has always been less than that of the men. In fact, it has declined consistently in the recent decades though there has been a slight increase in the urban areas. Further, we have also observed that there is some improvement in the marital status of the Dalit women which is again a part of the

general trend among the women in the country and is contributed by the rise in their educational and employment position. Finally, we have seen increase in the age at marriage also of the Dalit women in both the urban and rural areas in Maharashtra. Besides being a part of the general trend in the country and in the state increase in age at marriage of the Dalit women in Maharashtra is also facilitated by migration, engagement in the higher education and white collar employment and an overall change in the attitudes of the parents toward the progress of their children both the males and females.

Chapter V

CHANGES IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS, ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR

We have discussed, in the previous chapters, the changes taken place in the status of Dalit women, both in the rural and urban areas in Maharashtra, in terms of increase in their population in proportion to that of the Dalit men, improvement in their marital status, increase in age, at their marriage, migration, etc. But such a change is not conclusive in regard to change in their status in the society in Maharashtra unless their position is also seen in the socio-economic condition and an overall status of the people in the state. We shall examine, therefore, in this chapter, the changes in the status of Dalit women in Maharashtra in terms of their socio-economic status in the state. It is likelihood that inspite of changes in their socio-economic status there may not be much change in their social awareness and attitudes. We shall, therefore, explain here also the changes in their awareness and attitudes, and attitudes of others towards them.

Educational Achievement

Women in the country have been regarded educationally backward. The Scheduled Caste women may,

however, be considered doubly backward in education as they have been suffering from two sources of disadvantages, " the disadvantage of their caste status and the disadvantage of their sex status..."¹ As stated earlier, formal education in pre-British India was limited only to the upper castes and classes. Manu, who wrote the Manusmriti (Hindu Law) said that the Sudras and women were not entitled for taking up education. If they tried to learn Sanskrit, they were subjected to varieties of punishment. However, the modern system of education was introduced during the British period in which education was open to all, irrespective of caste, colour, sex, etc. As a result, people belonging to different castes, communities, sexes, etc. got benefited from formal modern education. In some cases the Dalits also received a little advantage of such education though it was dominated mainly by the people belonging to upper castes and classes and that too the male members.

Before Independence, the Dalits in the country were advised by persons like Dr B.R. Ambedkar to send their children both male and female to schools and instil

1 Chitnis, Suma, A Long Way to Go, Allied Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 1981, P. 15.

new values among them. He said, " Education is necessary for females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress. As you are, so your children will be. Mould their lives in a virtuous way, for sons should be such as would make a mark in this world." ² Thus, he emphasized equally on education of both the Dalit men and women.

Nowadays, there is change in the educational levels of the Dalits in the country in general and Maharashtra in particular. The Dalit parents now provide education to their daughters also. This may be so partly because of the government policy but more importantly because of the message given by Dr Ambedkar. The educational achievement of the Dalits, including their females, in Maharashtra can be analysed on the basis of the rate of their literacy and enrolment in the various educational institutions. We shall take up the literacy rate first and try to measure improvement, if any, therein in the case of the Dalit women in the state. Then, we shall analyse their enrolment in the various educational institutions in the state.

2 Keer, D., Dr Ambedkar - Life and Mission,
Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1962, P. 103.

According to 1951 census, the literacy rate among women as a whole in the state was very low. There was approximately one literate female to every three literate males. Similarly, the percentage of literacy (14.11%) among the Dalits as a whole was very low. Among the Dalits, however, there was approximately one literate female to every five literate males. The literacy rates among the Dalit males and females in the state for this period were 21.8 percent and 5.21 percent respectively. Thus, the number of literate Dalit males was almost equal to half of the total population of the Dalit females in the state. Yet, the percentage of literacy among the Dalits was above 8 percent only in the districts like Mehsena, Surat and Amreli.³

The rate of literacy among the Dalits, both males and females, in Maharashtra has increased in the recent decades.⁴ Yet, it is much below the literacy rate among the general population in the state. According to 1961 census, the literacy rate among the Dalits in Maharashtra was 13.78 percent as compared to 10.27 percent among the Dalits in the country as a whole. Similarly, it was

3 Census of India (Bombay State), 1951.

4 Patwardhan, S., Change among India's Harijans: A Case of Maharashtra, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1973, Pp. 80-103.

5.70 percent among the Dalit females in the state as compared to 3.29 percent among the Dalit females in the country. Further, the literacy rate among the Dalits as a whole in Maharashtra reached to 25.27 percent as compared to 14.67 percent among the Dalits in the country in 1971. Similarly, in the case of Dalit females it reached to 12.85 percent in Maharashtra and 6.44 percent in the country as a whole. This can be seen from the following table.

Table 5.1: Literacy rate among the Dalits in the decades 1961-71 in Maharashtra.

	Total/ Rural/ Urban	Percentage of literates					
		1961			1971		
		P	M	F	P	M	F
India	T	10.27	16.96	3.29	14.67	22.36	6.44
	R	8.89	15.06	2.52	12.77	20.04	5.06
	U	21.81	32.21	10.04	28.65	38.93	16.99
Mahara- ashtra	T	15.78	25.46	5.70	25.27	37.02	12.85
	R	12.15	20.62	3.51	21.02	32.35	9.26
	U	28.77	42.17	13.93	38.25	50.78	24.23

Source: Census of India, 1961, Vol. I, Part V-A(1) and Census of India, 1971, (Paper 1 of 1975), P. viii-ix.

The points are worth mentioning here. First, the literacy rate among the Dalit females both in the country and in Maharashtra has always been less than that among the Dalit males. Secondly, the literacy rate among the Dalit females has always been higher in urban areas than that in rural areas. This may be, further, explained in the light of the fact that literacy rate among the Dalits as a whole has been higher in urban areas than that in the rural areas.

If we look at the above table, we find that the literacy rate among the Dalit women has increased in both the rural and urban areas in the recent decades, as mentioned earlier. Then, if we accept the literacy rate as an indicator of change in the status of a person, we find certainly some changes taken place in the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra.

Apart from literacy rate, educational achievement among the Dalit women in Maharashtra can be seen from their enrolment for the various courses of study at different educational institutions in the recent years. Thus, according to 1961 census, there were 10.82 percent Dalit females as compared to 14.75 percent total females in rural areas in the state who were literate without educational level. Similarly, there were 13.79

percent Dalit females as compared to 14.61 percent total females in urban areas in Maharashtra who were literate without educational level. The percentage of total and the Dalit literate females both in the rural and urban areas was certainly less than that of total and Dalit males in this category. Further, in the primary and matriculate education the percentage of the Dalit females was only 3.39 and 0.04 as compared to 6.88 and 0.12 of the total females in the rural Maharashtra. Similarly, there were 8.69 and 0.36 percent Dalit females as compared to 15.14 and 2.58 percent total females in these categories in urban areas in Maharashtra. In the case of other categories of education the enrolment percentage of both the Dalit and total females in rural as well as urban areas in the state was negligible (see table 5.2).

Thus, the educational achievement of both the Dalit men and women in rural Maharashtra was very low and in the case of latter it was almost negligible. But it was slightly better in urban areas and was in the proportion of a general trend in the state as well as in the country.

In the recent decades, however, there has been some improvement in their educational achievement, especially in urban areas in the state. For instance, according to 1971 census, there were 11.89 percent Dalit

Table 5.2: Level of education among the Dalits and total population in the decades 1961-71 in rural Maharashtra.

	1961				1971			
	Total		Dalits		Total		Dalits	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Literate without educational level	44.40	14.75	54.27	10.82	22.39	13.02	35.74	12.61
2. Primary or juniorbasic	32.54	6.88	30.54	3.39	27.33	11.26	40.91	8.81
3. Middle	*	*	*	*	14.38	3.66	*	*
4. Matriculate or higher secondary	1.59	0.13	0.90	0.04	3.39	0.49	2.53	0.19
5. Non-technical diploma not equal to degree	*	*	*	*	0.21	0.03	*	*
6. Technical diploma or certificate not equal to degree	*	*	*	*	0.27	0.00	*	*
7. Graduate and above	*	*	*	*	1.23	0.26	0.18	0.00

* Figures not recorded in the Census.

Source: Computed from Census of India (Maharashtra), 1961 and 1971, Series II, Part- V/A (General Tables and Special Tables for Scheduled Castes and Tribes), Pp. 304-337.

females and 20.38 percent Dalit males who were literate without educational level. There were 16.65 percent Dalit females and 42.46 percent Dalit males who had achieved primary level of education. Such achievement was higher than that of the total males and females, especially in urban areas in the state. But in the case of higher level of education their achievement was lower than that of the total females in the state (see table 5.3).

Thus, on the basis of literacy rate and educational achievement there is certainly some change in the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra. But such a change is confined mainly in the urban areas. In the rural areas such change is almost negligible though there has been some increase in the level of literacy rate and educational achievement of the Dalit women. The low level of literacy and educational achievement among the Dalit women in rural Maharashtra might have been caused by the poor economic condition and traditional bent of mind of the Dalits in such areas.

Economic Status prior to Independence

The economic situation of the Dalits have been desperate for centuries as about 90 percent of them have

Table 5.3: Level of education among the Dalits and total population in 1961-71 in urban Maharashtra.

Educational categories	1961				1971			
	Total		Dalit		Total		Dalit	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1. Literate without educational level	24.18	14.61	36.95	13.79	15.88	9.59	20.38	11.89
2. Primary or junior basic	31.43	15.14	35.88	8.69	17.76	11.76	42.46	16.65
3. Middle	*	*	*	*	18.16	9.52	*	*
4. Matriculation or higher secondary	8.71	2.58	3.73	0.36	11.28	4.58	6.34	1.24
5. Non-technical diploma not equal to degree	0.12	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.02
6. Technical diploma or certificate not equal to degree	*	*	0.03	0.02	0.58	0.25	0.01	0.06
7. Technical diploma equal to degree	0.22	0.03	0.03	0.00	1.80	0.67	0.06	0.00
8. Univ. degree or P.G. degree other than tech. degree	1.40	0.38	0.29	0.01	0.39	0.12	0.65	0.05
9. Professional**	0.87	0.16	*	*	0.63	0.15	*	*

* Census has not recorded figures in these categories.

** Professional — engineering, medicine, agriculture, veterinary and dairying, technology, teaching, others.

Source: Computed from Census of India, 1961 and 1971 (Maharashtra) Series II, Part V-A, General tables and special tables on Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

lived as landless labourers in villages. There, they have been engaged in poorly paid unclean occupations (skinning, tanning, etc.). "The hereditary work of the Mahars, for example, was to remove dead cattle from the village, sweep the streets, run errands for the village offices, watch the village property. They were given a small piece of land (inam) but never cultivated it by themselves."⁵ Besides, other Dalit caste groups like Mangs, Chambhars, etc. were also engaged in their traditional caste occupations. We have mentioned earlier that their womenfolk also assisted them in their such activities which were considered both as defiled and degraded. Thus, their association with such occupations resulted into their destitute poverty and lowest status in the society.

In the pre-independence times the Dalits in the country and in Maharashtra as well were not permitted to amass wealth because it would do harm to the Brahmins and other high caste people. Hence, their property, if any, could be confiscated. The dogs and donkeys

5 Fiske, Adele M., "Caste among the Buddhists," in Harjindra Singh (ed.) Caste among Non-Hindus in India, National Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, P. 94.

constituted the only wealth of the Chandalas and the Svapakas (the Dalits) who used the garments of the dead as their dress, took their food in broken dishes and had their only ornaments made of black iron.⁶

However, in the wake of the changes initiated in the present century the Dalits were also affected, though not in the same fashion as other castes and communities, by the emergence of new type of occupations. In Maharashtra, for instance, "The Mahars were the first people to serve the British officers and their wives as butlers, butchers and ayahs (maid servants). Being beef eating themselves, the Mahars did not mind working for the foreign, beef eating master."⁷ It means the Dalit women were economically more independent than women of other high castes even during the British period in Maharashtra. They were adding their family income even through their manual labour. But in no case the status of the Dalits as a whole and particularly of their womenfolk was better, as mentioned earlier.

6 Sharma, R.S., Some Economic Aspects of the Caste System in Ancient India, published by M. Sharma, Patna, 1952, Pp. 14-16.

7 Patwardhan, S., op.cit., P. 20.

Such degraded status was deeply analysed and opposed by Dr B.R. Ambedkar (born in an untouchable caste) who found Hinduism solely responsible for such a situation relating to the Dalits in the country. It was Hinduism which was responsible for rise and fall of the Indian women,⁸ both Hindu and Dalit women. He found Hindus according lower status to the Dalits. As a result, he alongwith millions of his followers, both men and women converted to Buddhism in 1956. There is a little evidence regarding effect of conversion on the improvement of economic conditions of the Dalits in the country as well as in Maharashtra. However, there seems to be one definite change among a large majority of the Dalits regarding their dissociation from the traditional occupations.

We have already mentioned that Ambedkar showed the path of progress to the Dalits in the country, especially in Maharashtra. As an economist, he talked of freedom which cannot be thought of with out economic equality. Therefore, he advocated for economic freedom of the Dalits. He rebelled against the Zamindari or

8 Ambedkar, B.R., Rise and Fall of Hindu Women, Bheem Patrika Publications, Jullunder, 1970.

Khoti system. " His piloting the bills in the Legislative Assembly for abolition of Mahar Watan system and Khoti system have opened the historical chapter in exposing the economic inequality existing in India. His ideas of Veth and Begar (forced labour without payment) have uprooted the economic system of the day. His philosophy of economy is based on the idea of material detachment as has been followed in the Buddhist Sangh. Buddha's theory of no-god, no priesthood, no exploitation of priesthood and absolutely no personal property as exactly enunciated to Buddhist Sangh or Bhikku's ideal one with a view to have humanitarian service in form of hospitals, joint services and development of human dignity and human rights" ⁹ have been advocated in Ambedkar's economic thought.

He was against all sorts of social and economic inequalities and slavery of the Dalits. He rejected the occupational theory of the origin of untouchability according to which untouchability against the Dalits originated because they were associated with unclean and filthy occupations. But in view of Ambedkar such

9 Dongre, M. K., Economic Thoughts of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Ambedkar Samaj Publications, Nagpur, 1974, P. xii.

occupations are common in all human societies and nowhere, except in the Hindu society, the people performing such occupations are treated as untouchables. Hence, it was not the nature of occupation but the worst economic condition of the Buddhists (broken men) and such other men in this country that resulted ultimately in untouchability.¹⁰ Therefore, he always advised the Dalits to leave their traditional occupation, leave the villages and go to the cities, take education and change their economic condition, as stated earlier.

It is, therefore, pertinent at this stage to analyse the shift in traditional occupations of the Dalits, especially of their womenfolk in Maharashtra. It is also necessary to find out at the extent to which such occupational changes have affected their economic condition and, finally, improved their social status, especially after independence.

Today, the Mahars (Dalits) in Maharashtra no longer work as village peons but are hired by village development workers and are paid for their work. There is a definite positive response to the call given

¹⁰ Ambedkar, B.R., The Untouchables, Jetavana Mahavihara, Shravasti, Balrampur (U.P.), 1977.

earlier by Dr Ambedkar to the Dalits for moving to the towns and cities and taking up non-traditional jobs, as stated earlier. M.N. Wankhede has also pointed out that there is a "definite attraction of cities for the new Buddhists. In a factory, no one asks about one's religion, etc. It is a long process. The education and industry alone will change caste." ¹¹ But some Dalit caste groups in Maharashtra are still associated with their traditional occupations. For example, the Chambhars do skinning and tanning, the Mangs prepare brooms, ropes and so on.

The better employment opportunities are supposed to provide the earning capacity to educated women with which they can raise their social status. There is little objective basis to warrant such an assumption, especially in the case of women mostly in urban areas and in some cases women in rural areas also. But we know that women, mostly illiterate in rural India, as indeed women in all agrarian societies, have always worked and have been an integral part of the household economy. They have been handling the more tedious and laborious jobs. Similarly, urban Dalit women have worked

¹¹ Quoted in Fiske, Adele M., op.cit., P. 94.

to supplement their family income. However, their status has always been low both in and out of the family.

"Furthermore, there is a possibility that opportunities for work, earning capacity, etc. may be influenced by their social position rather than influence their status." ¹²
 In fact, "in rural as well as in urban areas women from economically weaker sections have always laboured hard, and yet their status has always been low." ¹³ This may be because of their low caste background also.

Economic Status after Independence

The position of Dalit women, however, seems to have undergone some changes since independence. "It has been urged and realised that improvement in the economic conditions of the Scheduled Castes is a pre-requisite for their emancipation from traditional bondage to the caste Hindus and also for their better status in the society." ¹⁴
 Keeping this in view, the government has adopted several welfare and developmental measures under the various Five Year Plans to improve the social and economic

12 Ahmad, Karuna, "Studies of Educated Working Women in India - trends and issues," Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XIV, No.33, Aug. 18, 1979, P. 1435.

13 Ibid.

14 Trivedi, H.R., The Scheduled Caste Women, Concept Publishing House, Delhi, 1976, p. 37.

conditions of the women in general and, the Dalit women in particular, as stated earlier.

Till recently in rural areas the working force in a Dalit family primarily consisted of the husband and wife. However, brothers, sons, daughters or sisters also worked and contributed toward the family income. This indicates that a Dalit female was considered in the family to be as important an asset as any other male member. In spite of the willingness on the part of a Dalit couple to earn their livelihood by honest and earnest labour on daily wages, they found it difficult to get regular employment. "Uncertain conditions compelled them to borrow money from the rich landlords to meet heavy expenses at the time of sickness, death or marriage." 15

Such a state of affairs prevails with little variations among the Dalits in the country as a whole. The Dalits of rural Maharashtra are no exception to it. Almost all the members including women in a Dalit family in Maharashtra work and add their family income. But it is very difficult, especially in an agrarian setting, to get employment through out the year. The Dalits in

rural Maharashtra have to go as unemployed during the off season, especially the rainy season because there is no work in the field at that time. Since there is no other means to earn, they are left with three alternatives - either they have to collect enough food to pull on during off the season or to depend on the money lenders to feed them during this period or to ^t say with empty stomach. Undisputedly, the Dalits in rural Maharashtra would have adopted the second alternative till the recent years.

Now, there is a little improvement. In rural areas also in Maharashtra the Dalits and their working women force get better return of their work. In urban areas the Dalit women are employed mostly in construction work, other services and secondary and tertiary occupations. There, they get better emoluments which help them raise their family income, living standard and social status.

Retrospectively, the percentage of the Dalits who were engaged in the non-agricultural occupations was greater than that of the total population in the Bombay state. According to 1951 census, 45.58 percent of the Dalits in Bombay state were engaged in the non-agricultural occupations as against 40.43 percent of the total population. In Saurashtra and Kutch divisions

divisions more than two third of the Dalits were engaged in the agricultural occupations. However, most of the Dalits engaged in the agricultural occupations in Bombay, Kutch and Saurashtra divisions were cultivating labourers. Only 26 percent of the Dalits were cultivating owners, while as many as 19.0 percent were agricultural labourers. Further, in Baroda, Broach, West and East Khandesh, Sholapur, Belgaum, Bijapur and Dharwad districts more than 30.0 percent of the Dalits were cultivating labourers. In sum, high proportion of agricultural labourers and low proportion of owner-cultivators was the main characteristic of the Dalits in the Bombay state. The proportion of the Dalits who were tenants was much the same as of the total population.

We have mentioned earlier that many of the Dalits in the state were associated with their traditional occupations like tanning and shoe-making, village servants, sweepers, etc. which are regarded to be non-agricultural occupations. Thus, their association with activities other than cultivation accounted for 21.0 percent and with other services and miscellaneous sources of livelihood for 19.8 percent of the Dalits in the state. The proportion of Dalits engaged in commerce was negligible. Since the engagements of the Dalits both men and women with specific types of

occupations were not tabulated in the census of 1931, it is not known as to what extent there has been a shift from their traditional occupations to newer ones at least for the said period.

The following table explains the livelihood pattern of the Dalits including the other (unscheduled) backward classes as compared to that of the total population in 1931 in the Bombay State.

Table 5.4: Occupational pattern of the Dalits (the Scheduled Castes, Tribes and other backward classes) and the general (total) population in Bombay State.

Occupations*	Dalits	General (total)
Primary occupations	54.42	59.60
Secondary occupations	23.14	22.25
Tertiary occupations	22.44	18.15
Total workers	100.00	100.00

Source: Census of India (Bombay, Saurashtra and Kutch), 1951, Pp. 124-125.

* The major three types of occupations included eight main categories. These are: Primary Occupations - I-IV (I. cultivators of land wholly or mainly owned and their dependents; II. cultivators of land wholly or mainly unowned and their dependents; III. cultivating labourers and their dependents; non-cultivating owners of land, agricultural rent receivers, and their dependents). Secondary Occupations - V-VI (V. production other than cultivation; VI. commerce). Tertiary Occupation - VII-VIII (VII. transport; VIII. other services and miscellaneous sources).

The censuses⁵ of 1961 and 1971 provide relatively more meaningful information about the occupational pattern of the Dalits both males and females in Maharashtra. Thus, where we do not know the percentage of the total Dalit workers upto 1951, we are certainly informed that 54.2 percent of the Dalits were engaged in the various types of occupations in rural and 36.20 percent in urban Maharashtra in 1961. This again was 40.95 percent and 30.18 percent both in rural and urban areas respectively in Maharashtra in 1971 (see table 3.5). When we look at the employment position of the Dalits in Maharashtra in the last three decades, we find that the percentage of the employed Dalits has certainly increased in the recent decades, though in comparison to their employment position in the primary type of occupations in 1961 it has gone down in the decade 1971. But there has been increase in their percentage engaged in secondary and tertiary types of occupations. Then, looking at the employment pattern of the Dalit women in Maharashtra we find that there were 50.16 percent female workers in rural Maharashtra in the decade 1961 which came down to 29.50 percent in the decade 1971. That means about half of the rural Dalit females employed in 1961 became either unemployed or migrated to urban areas in 1971.

Table 5.5: Percentage of the Dalit workers and non-workers (males and females) in rural and urban areas in Maharashtra.

Occupations	1961				1971			
	Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
A. Total workers* (i-ix)	59.08	50.16	49.48	22.03	52.41	29.50	45.62	14.74
1) Primary	51.81	47.82	10.32	8.59	41.05	26.68	5.35	3.78
2) Secondary	1.91	0.47	15.39	3.32	7.34	2.25	18.17	3.43
3) Tertiary	0.81	0.07	7.92	2.18	0.76	0.07	9.19	1.53
4) Other services	4.08	1.75	15.80	8.80	3.22	0.47	12.97	5.96
B. Non-workers	40.92	49.84	50.52	77.06	47.58	70.49	54.37	85.25
5) Workers in special services:								
a) Tanning, currying of hides and skins	1.00	0.16	0.74	0.09	**	**	**	**
b) Scavenging	3.63	3.42	0.15	0.12	**	**	**	**

* Based on a sample of 100 workers.

** Figures not available.

Source: Census of India (Maharashtra State), 1961 and 1971 (special tables)

Same was the pattern of the employed Dalit females in the urban areas also in the state. In the case of primary, secondary and tertiary types of occupations the same pattern was observed as it was found among the employed Dalit men.

The low percentage of the employed Dalit women both in the rural and urban areas in the country and in Maharashtra state in the decade 1971 in comparison to the percentage of their employment in 1961 can be explained in many ways. Many educated Dalits have migrated to towns and cities alongwith their wives and other family members and got employed in white collar and other semi or unskilled jobs. Consequently, they would have disallowed their womenfolk to go out and work unless the earning of the employed male members was insufficient to feed the family. Such Dalits might be considering themselves as members of the middle class¹⁶ and not allowing the womenfolk to work out of family has been a part of the middle class culture till recently. Further, traditionally, the young Dalit girls also, especially in rural areas, used to work, as stated earlier. But in

16 Ram has termed them as "new middle class."
See his Social Mobility and Status Identification among the Scheduled Castes, Doctoral dissertation, 1976.

the early periods of their marriage they are usually not allowed to go out of home and work.

Further, women in upper caste/class families in villages do not work outside the home. This accords them social status higher to that of the Dalit women. This serves as a reference¹⁷ for the Dalit families, especially in rural side. In this process increase in their educational level and socio-political consciousness, impact of urbanization, etc. also help them much. All these might have lowered the percentage of the employed Dalit women in Maharashtra. But conversely, these might be regarded as indicators of change in their social status in the traditional set up. However, there is certainly some change on the basis of modern parameters of change in the status of those Dalit women in the state who are educated and employed in the secondary and tertiary types of jobs, especially in urban areas.

Change in the Socio-Political Consciousness

Traditionally, the socio-political consciousness among the Dalits in the country has been low because of their low cultural background. However, if we look

17 This may be regarded as an extended outcome of the Sanskritization process among them. See, Srinivas, M.N., Social Change in Modern India, Allied Publishers, Delhi, 1966.

at the trend of socio-political consciousness among the Dalits both men and women, in the recent years, in the country as a whole, we find that it has certainly been increasing. This growing trend of the consciousness can be attributed to the certain factors such as growth of the democratic political institutions, spread of educational facilities, greater economic mobility, rise of new cultural institutions, etc.

The growing socio-political consciousness among the Dalit men and women is, however, not found every where in the country in the same extent. In culturally and economically backward regions in the country the Dalit men and women are, thus, not much politically consciousness because of the influence of the oppressive feudal economic system. This is also contributed by the dominance of the age-old traditions, customs and usages which are nurtured and nourished by the caste system and beliefs in the Karma, rebirth, transmigration, etc. But the Dalits in the culturally and economically advanced regions in the country have shown their greater political and social consciousness because of the growth of their political and social organizations under the effective, foresighted and honest leadership.

Nobody can deny this fact that there has been considerable amount of change in an overall socio-political consciousness among the Dalits in Maharashtra. Such a consciousness among them is often demonstrated in the form of sending their children for achieving higher and technical education. Education among the Dalits in Maharashtra has greatly been encouraged by Dr Ambedkar who established a number of colleges with the said objective. Further, the consciousness among the Dalits in the state is also manifested through their taking up non-traditional occupations. Besides, they show now a considerable amount of resistance toward their low position in the society, their economic exploitation and the various types of discriminations practised against them. In other words, they are well aware of the social and economic inequalities in the society of which they are the worst sufferer.

In no case the Dalit women in Maharashtra are out of the above mentioned consciousness. Whereas they have become aware of their low status in the family, they are also better informed about their severe exploitations in the outside world, especially dominated by men.¹⁸ For instance, the Dalit women in the past both

¹⁸ See the All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference held at Nagpur on July 20, 1942.

in rural and urban Maharashtra were supposed to express their respect, in some cases out of humility but in the majority of cases out of compulsion, to a person particularly a male member either brother-in-law (elder) father-in-law, husband's other relatives or other members in the community. This they had to do in the form of usually not coming, or coming with clothes on their head, in front of such members. Such practice was found among the Balahi (Dalit) women in Madhya Pradesh¹⁹ and the women of other Dalit caste groups in other states also. But as a part of the socio-political consciousness and modernization there is change in this practice particularly in urban areas. In fact, in the recent times in urban areas the Dalit women, especially the educated ones, have adopted the modern usage of expression of their respects to the elders both in and out of the family.

There may be a number of factors contributing to the increase in socio-political consciousness among the Dalit women (Dalit men also) in the state. First, there is an overall increase in the socio-political consciousness among the people, both males and females, in recent times in the country and also in Maharashtra due to urbanisation,

19 Trivedi, H.R., op.cit., P. 37.

industrialization, modernization, politicization, etc. The Dalits have also been influenced by such consciousness affecting the consciousness of their womenfolk either. Secondly, government also has adopted the various welfare, developmental and protective measures to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of both the Dalit men and women in the state. Positively, these various measures have aroused the aspiration and expectation of the Dalits, besides improving, to some extent, their socio-economic conditions. But negatively, the various measures have not been properly implemented. As a result, there is a growing dissatisfaction and unrest among the Dalits often shared by their women also in the state. Gail Omvedt²⁰ finds such dissatisfaction and unrest resulting into protest, demonstration and social movements among the Dalit women in rural and urban areas in Maharashtra.

Finally, Maharashtra has been a place of social reform movements, as stated earlier. In the present century the most important social movement for the cause of the Dalits was carried out by Ambedkar who mobilized the Dalits in the state to become socially and politically conscious toward their status and rights in the society.

20 Omvedt, Gail, We Will Smash This Prison, Zed Press, London, 1980.

He also activated them to improve their status and achieve their rights through protest rather than charity. This was greatly exhibited at the time of conversion in 1956 when the millions of Dalit men and women in Maharashtra threw away the Hindu gods and goddesses, embraced Buddhism and took oath of living a life of the cleanliness. Thus, the present socio-political consciousness among the Dalits both men and women in the state, demonstrated through their formal and informal protest, is the extension of their consciousness construed in the social movement carried out by Ambedkar and his lieutenants.

The socio-political consciousness among the Dalits has been strengthened, in the recent times, by the leadership and the various socio-political activities of the Dalit Panthers, Bouddha Mahasabha and other Dalit organizations in the state. Thus, the socio-political consciousness among the Dalit women in Maharashtra is evidenced from their growing consciousness about their status and rights in the rural areas, their migrating to urban areas, taking up higher education and non-traditional employment, educating their children, adopting the culture of urban middle class and so on.

Changes in Attitudes and Behaviour

We have already mentioned in Chapter 3 that the Dalit women have been victims of traditional attitudes of caste Hindus both men and women and also of their own men. We have also mentioned that such a state of affairs has been a part of an overall degraded status of women in the Hindu society. However, the Dalit women have been more exploited socially, economically and, in some cases, sexually also. In brief, the Dalit women have always been looked down upon in the Hindu society.

In the recent years a shift has definitely taken place in the attitudes and behaviour of the people toward the Dalit women in the state. In fact, it is not so easy now to look at the Dalit women with the sectarian and prejudicial attitudes and behaviour at least in public. However, such attitudes and behaviour still prevail over in the mind of the people, especially caste Hindus, which get expressed in their private domain. Such a phenomenon is distinctly receding in urban areas. In rural areas also in Maharashtra the attitudes and behaviour of people toward the Dalit women have undergone one or the other type of changes. There is at least some amount of check over the derogatory expression of attitudes and behaviour of the people toward the Dalit women (and men also) due to some resistance shown by the latter.

Such changes have become possible also in view of the fact that the society in modern India envisages to be based, at least in principle, on no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, sex, etc. In the wake of modernization people in the country, especially in urban areas, seem to have compromised, to some extent, with the egalitarian values getting instilled there. In rural areas the changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the people are contributed by the growing social and economic unrest among the Dalits. This has led, in most of the places, to migration of the Dalits from villages to cities, creating the problem of non-availability of cheap labour in the agrarian sector. Secondly, the Dalits in most of the villages in Maharashtra have politically organised in the recent years which has also moulded the traditional attitudes and behaviour of caste Hindus toward them, especially their women-folk.

A large number of cases of harassment, molestation, rape of and other type of atrocities inflicted on the Dalit women and men also in the different parts of the country and in Maharashtra is increasingly reported every year. But, the organised protest, educational achievement, change of religious faith (conversion) and growing socio-political consciousness among the Dalits

have resulted into putting a considerable amount of check over the traditional attitudes and behaviour of caste Hindus towards them including their womenfolk. However, this cannot be denied that the various types of harassment, exploitation, discrimination, etc. still continue against the Dalit women and men living in the remote villages in the state. In such cases neither their socio-economic condition nor their social status has improved. Even in the case of Dalit women and men living in slum areas and employed in unskilled and semi-skilled works in towns and cities their status has not much improved. In fact, the Dalit women continue to be exploited in many ways even in such areas.²¹

In brief, there is some change in the status of the Dalit women, especially in the case of those who are educated (or are part of the educated family), employed in non-traditional occupations and are living in urban areas in the state. Further, the status of those Dalit women has also changed who are socially and politically conscious and have joined hands with their men in the various types of demonstrations, protest movements etc. But the change is not visible in the case of those Dalit women who are illiterate, employed

21 Trivedi, H.R., op.cit.

in traditional occupations and are manual agricultural labourers in villages. So is the case with those Dalit women who are living in the haphazard social conditions in urban areas, as stated earlier.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION

Women have been regarded inferior to men not only in India but in other countries also in the world, as mentioned in Chapter I. Today, the status of Indian women as well as of the Dalit women also is changing. It is true that status of women was very low in the earlier times when women and the Shudras were awarded lower and, in fact, the lowest status. The Dalit women were Shudras within the Shudras and their exploitation was doubled. The Dalit men had a little higher status than their women because the men as such were regarded superior to women.

In the earliest, probably the Vedic period women had status equal with men - but in the latter period, especially in pre-Buddhist period they were brought to status lower than that of men. According to the Hindu religious laws, women had a very low status, and were treated as chattel. It means, virtually they did not have status at all. They did not have any right or freedom but only the right of bearing and rearing of the children. They had to look after their household and were regarded to be faithful to their husband. They were always dependent on their father during the childhood,

on husband during young age and on son during old age. But during the Buddhist period they were given equal rights and freedom and were allowed to join the Buddhist Sangha (assembly). They were also allowed to live as Bhikhuni (nun). In other words, there was an overall change in status of the women and Shudras during the Buddhist period.

In the post-Buddhist period a decline came again in the status of Indian women. For instance, in the nineteenth century in India women were fully dependent on their husband. After the death of their husband, especially the women from the twice-born groups were not allowed to remarry but to follow the custom of sati (self-immolation). Thus, the Hindu women were economically and socially dependent on their husband and other male members in the family. They had no right of owning property either at the place of their father or husband. Thus, they were regarded virtually as slaves though they were part and parcel of the family life. The women in Maharashtra were the worst sufferers as the society in Maharashtra was ridden by a relatively more orthodox tradition.

We have discussed in Chapter 3 that the various social and religious disabilities were imposed on the

Dalits in the country. These were equally visible in Maharashtra. We have also mentioned that the Dalit women were the most sufferers both in and outside the home. But one noticeable fact about the Dalit women was, as discussed in Chapter 3, their economic independence. Traditionally, they were engaged in the various economic activities and they contributed equally to the family income. However, socially they were the most degraded and physically exploited persons in the society. The Dalit women in Maharashtra were not exception to their status inferior to their men as well as men and women in general.

Due to the impact of the British rule and English education some sorts of changes took place among the people in India. Women also in the country got influenced from such changes. For instance, a limited number of women, especially those coming from the upper middle class background started looking upward in terms of taking education and a number of professions. In their venture they were encouraged by an overall atmosphere created during the British period and, more than that, by a number of social and religious reform movements taken place during this period. The broad aims of these movements were to abolish the varieties of social

and religious disabilities including the caste system and make improvement in the rights and status of women. These movements became instrumental in the abolition of the custom of Sati. The Brahma Samaj in the east, the Prarthana Samaj in the west encouraged, in a way, by the British rule, and the Arya Samaj in the north played the vital role in improving the status of the women and the Shudra castes as discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 3.

The various social reform movements taken place in the nineteenth century in the country particularly in Maharashtra offered the social life of the Dalit women also. Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, M.G. Ranade, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, etc. tried to raise the status of the depressed classes and advised them, especially their womenfolk, to adopt the cleanliness, get educated and send their children to schools. They were also responsible for bringing about some looseness in the practice of untouchability against the Dalits in the state.

After independence government also have provided a number of facilities to the women in general and the Dalit women in particular to improve their educational and employment position in the country and in Maharashtra. Attention has also been paid to improve their health and hygienic condition.

These provisions alongwith a rich tradition of social reforms have helped the Dalit men as well as women in Maharashtra to enjoy a better status than that in the other state. Thus, by accepting sex ratio, health and hygienic condition, marital status and age at marriage as indicators of the improved status we have seen, in Chapter 4, that there is change in the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra. We have also seen that sex ratio has consistently declined in the country and also in Maharashtra since the beginning of this century. For instance, there were 930 females over per 1,000 males in 1921 in Maharashtra but their number came down to 932 in 1971. This may be so as inspite of improvement in the health and hygienic condition leading to the positive improvement in rate of the fertility and mortality among the people as a whole in the country and in Maharashtra state there is not much improvement in rate of the female mortality, especially in the country side. In addition, the traditional inclination of people toward the male child and consequently a neglect of the female child has not undergone an overall change.

Besides, changes have also taken place in the marital status and age at marriage of the Dalit women in Maharashtra, though these are not as they ought to be.

Regarding marital status, we have seen in Chapter 4 that the percentage of married Dalit women has declined and the percentage of the Dalit women who did not marry has increased in the recent years. Such a state of affairs may be explained in the light of the fact that the figures in the category of women who did not marry are enumerated within a certain stipulated time and a woman might have got married just after the enumeration is over. Moreover, this category also includes the girls of unmarriageable age and the widows. However, one cannot deny the possibility of a never married Dalit woman, especially in urban areas, though it is a rare possibility, as stated in Chapter 4.

Further, the number of widow Dalit women in Maharashtra has also increased in the recent years. This reflects a general assumption about the Dalits that the widow remarriage is common and frequent among them. However, the lessening of the widow remarriage among the Dalits in the state may not be explained in terms of the process of Sanskritization which has never been adopted by them in the state. Instead, it can be appreciated in the light of the fact that the widow remarriage even among the Dalits is easier if the spouses,

especially the female ones, do not have children from their earlier marriage, as already stated.

Traditionally, the divorce rate was high among the Dalit women because it was easier for a man or a woman to get divorce at the instance of the caste panchayat or elder members in the caste. But now, since a case of divorce may easily be litigated to the legal complications, they fear to adopt it very easily. However, the rate of divorce is certainly high among the Dalit women than that among the women in general in the state.

In the case of the Dalit women age at their marriage was very low earlier because the parents were illiterate and poor and they wanted to dispose their daughters off at an early age. But nowadays it has increased. As stated in Chapter 4, the age of the Dalit women at their marriage has reached, according to 1971 census, to 14.89 and 15.39 years in rural and urban areas respectively in Maharashtra. This is almost equal to the average age of the Dalit women at their marriage in the country as a whole. Such an increased average age of the Dalit women at their marriage is a little less than that of the women in general in the state due to the above mentioned reasons. However, this can be said that there is a definite change in the age of the

Dalit women at their marriage and, thereby a change in their status in Maharashtra.

The changes in the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra, on the basis of changes in their demographic profile, have further been examined in the perspectives of the socio-economic status and attitudes and behaviour. This is necessary because the demographic changes alone do not provide a very clear picture about changes in the status as such of the Dalit women in Maharashtra. However, such a change has been measured on the basis of literary and educational level and employment position of the Dalit women in the state. We have mentioned in Chapter 5 that there is a positive change in the rate of literacy and level of educational achievement among the Dalit women in Maharashtra. Such change has been contributed by a number of social reforms carried out prior to independence, Dalit movement itself launched by Dr Ambedkar and his supporters and a number of measures undertaken, especially by the Government, in the state.

Thus, we have noted that whereas in 1951 there were only a very few educated Dalit females in the state, there has been a notable increase in their literacy rate within the last two decades or so, as reported in the

censuses of 1961 and 1971. Not only that but quite a good number of them have been enrolled for the higher education, especially in the educational institutions in urban areas. However, the number of educated Dalit women both in rural urban areas is less than that of the women in general in the state.

We have mentioned in Chapter 3 that the Dalits in the state were engaged in the traditional caste occupations and their females also supported them in their such activities. But because of a special call given by Dr Ambedkar a large number of the Dalits migrated, either alone or with their family, to cities and undertook a variety of non-traditional occupations. Their women also have been engaged in some kind of economic activities. There, they are doing the white collar jobs, working in mills, factories and in other organizations. In the case of those who are staying in villeges there is some change. For instance, both the Dalit men and women are engaged in agricultural and other activities, in most of the cases as labourers, but the mode of payment has certainly changed and now they do not work under the traditional subordination of the employers. But still quite a few Dalits in the state continue with their traditional occupations. Thus, the Dalit women, young

or old in the state have used to work both in and out of home. Then, whereas they are economically independent, they add to their family income also. This means, they have achieved economic freedom but their social status has not equally improved. However, in the recent years some Dalit women, especially the educated ones have entered the white collar jobs and other jobs in the tertiary sector in urban areas. In the case of these women their socio-economic status has improved leading to change in their status in the society. But their number is obviously small.

Change in the status of the Dalit women in Maharashtra has, further, been examined in terms of changes in their social consciousness and their attitudes and behaviour and that of others towards them. Thus, regarding social awareness and consciousness, attitudes and behaviour, we have found in Chapter 5 that in the wake of the movement launched by Dr Ambedkar and his associates the Dalits, both men and women in Maharashtra became aware and conscious of their rights and status in the society. They started showing collectively their resentment to the various social and religious disabilities imposed on them. Besides, they started adopting the habits

of cleanliness, sending their children to schools and dissociating themselves from their traditional caste occupations. They did migrate to towns and cities where they found a different social environment. Even in villages they developed a considerable amount of social awareness and consciousness among them.

One of the most significant indicators of the social awareness and consciousness of the Dalits in the state is their adoption of the strategy of getting their problems resolved and status improved through agitation. This strategy of the Dalits initiated during Ambedkar's movement has been, further, strengthened in the recent times through their organizations like the Dalit Panthers, Buddhist society, etc. Both in rural and urban areas in the state the Dalit men and women are agitating for achieving their just rights and status in the society. The numerous atrocities inflicted on them, at the mass level, are outcome of their unity and mobilization.

Finally, we have also recorded changes in their attitudes and behaviour and that of others towards them. The change in their attitudes and behaviour is manifested through their awareness and consciousness and its enactment. Similarly, the change in attitudes and behaviour of others towards them is clear from the fact

that the people belonging to upper castes and classes do not find now easier to discriminate, harass and exploit the Dalit men and women both in rural and urban areas in the state. Their sectarian and partisan attitudes are resented by the Dalits unitedly. However, in most of the cases the Dalits, especially their womenfolk are not escaped from the partisan and prejudicial attitudes and behaviour of others in the countryside.

In sum, on the basis of the various aspects of the status, analysed especially in Chapters 4 and 5, we have found that the changes have taken place in the status of only a small section of the Dalit women in the state. These women are educated and employed in non-traditional occupations in urban areas. The status of the Dalit women has also changed in rural areas if not materially then at least at the level of their social awareness and consciousness about their rights and status in the society in Maharashtra.

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