



Flowers Bloom: India

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Project Overview

My project examines how globalization has shaped the lived experiences of women in rural and urban India, especially Dalit communities. According to Boli and Lechner, globalization refers to the processes by which people across long distances become connected in more and different ways". (p. 2)

My research examines the impact of globalization on disenfranchised communities in India. On the one hand, it studies how historical systems of oppression such as caste, class, and gender interact with the systemic disadvantages of market led globalization, which has reversed welfare policies instituted in the early years of independent India. On the other hand, the paper navigates alter globalization feminist movements and how they have empowered Dalit women in their struggle for justice.

Through my conversations with dalit women and feminist activists, my research demonstrates that globalization on its own has not brought economic empowerment for women, as many have lost the traditional support structures. However, globalization as seen through social movements, has brought about agency and empowerment among Dalit women.

Dispossession with Globalization

In my field visit with Dalit women in rural Karnataka, women spoke about the changes in farming practices that were driven by big agricultural corporations taking over small farmlands. This process has undermined their autonomy over their land and food practices. Furthermore, farmers control over seeds and agricultural knowledge has been undercut with the entry of genetically modified seeds. This has led to a situation which has economically deprived them. They have to buy seeds from the market. Environmentally destructive GM crops have impacted the biodiversity of the region. Health has been an issue as their diet has changed and they are experiencing new diseases of modern life such as cancer; socially, they are dis-empowered by both their social status as Dalits and the new economic patterns.

The result has been forced migration to cities in the hope of economic security. Many women spoke about the challenges of globalization and caste discrimination in the villages, which was forcing them to leave their homes and migrate to the cities. However, finding jobs in the city has been difficult as many women had dropped out of school before due to caste discrimination and hence, experienced difficulty in seeking employment.

Flight to urban areas is sought by many Dalit people as their long-term means of survival in rural areas is threatened. However, as described below, caste as well as gender discrimination often play a role in preventing urban-based Dalit population from obtaining jobs, enabling them to purchase adequate food.

Conclusion

To address inequalities of globalization, it is important to note the empowerment politics at the grassroot level carried on by Feminist movements.

Method

This research is based on field ethnographic study conducted in the Summer of 2017. I visited rural Karnataka and women's organizations in Bangalore city. In rural Karnataka, I interacted with Dalit women farmers, who did Millet farming to sustain their families.

In Bangalore, I visited Fedina, an organization for textile factory workers, which focuses on empowerment by unionizing labor. At Fedina, I met with a number of women textile workers and discussed with them about the challenges of working in the corporate textile industry.



Social Context

Caste and patriarchal structures define position of Dalit women in India. They are subjugated within dominant caste based institutions, representing the lowest and the untouchable category in the caste structure. Dalits in India, fall outside the caste hierarchy because they are considered a polluted category. Hence, they occupy the margins of society and are ostracized from social life.

As women, their rights are suppressed under the patriarchal system. Some key areas in which their disenfranchisement in society can be observed are in the kinship networks, education and employment. S. Wadley notes that in the kinship networks, there are significant social controls on the female members of the household, exerted either by the male members of the household or the female head of the extended family. Control over women and their bodies is maintained through physical punishment and verbal abuse (p.20). Along with this, there is also the stigma of going against the accepted norm. Going against this community ideal is going against family honor as well as risking economic loss (pp. 21 – 22). This gives women in India, very little opportunity to exercise their own autonomy with regards to something as basic as child rearing or getting education or working.

Fedina

In my meeting, women described work conditions in factory and the exploitative nature of the job. Many discussed long hours of work with no overtime compensation and low wages. They had no job security as many worked without contract.

Late hours of work led to domestic troubles at home, as their husbands and in-laws grew suspicious of their activities. Their social status was not equivalent to their husbands in the domestic setting, even though they brought near about the same wage. Those who earned more than their husband faced challenges.

They also mentioned unacceptable safety standards as well as workplace sexual harassment and sexual assault.

How Societies Can Address Challenges of Globalization for Dalit Women

Meetings with feminist activists in India brought another facet of globalization, where one could visibly see a larger global feminist movement politics focusing on third world women's issues. I spoke and met with a number of feminist including Manorama, a leading Dalit women activist in India.

Taking an inter-sectional perspective from Feminist politics, Manorama notes that Dalit women continue to be particularly vulnerable due to the continuing discrimination based on **caste, class and gender**. As such, they have been victims not only of discrimination and poverty but also violence.

Manorama notes that Dalit women continue to be among the most vulnerable in India as represented by significant incidents of lack of progress toward constitutional protections. First, a high percent of Dalit women are subject to violence; this has included incidents of being stripped and paraded naked, being forced to engage in ritualistic prostitution, and other incidents of sexual violence. In addition, she notes that as many as 2,500 Dalit women have been killed between 2003 – 2013 based on the accusation that they were practicing witchcraft. Second, Dalit women suffer from lack of education, as well as living in areas with lack of infrastructure such as poor roadways and long distances between their homes and any access to school or work (p. 222). Manorama notes that recent history has shown that other marginalized communities in India have in fact advanced because of their **access to education**; Dalit women in particular continue to be deprived. Finally, Dalit women are left out of decision-making and continue to suffer from access to the benefits of development (p. 222).

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