Caste and Climate Change: How systemic oppression, exclusion and caste-based discrimination against Dalit Women of South Asia will further push them to the margins in the quagmire of climate emergency

Ritwajit Das

(All The Photos Used For This Story Is Belongs to International Dalit Solidarity Network)

Caste-based discrimination affects more than 260 million Dalits worldwide who suffer from the hidden apartheid of segregation, exclusion and discrimination. This story depicts how the historic, institutionalized and systemic oppression of Dalit women from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal will make them one of the most vulnerable, susceptible and high-risk targets in the changing climate.

According to Isabel Wilkerson Pulitzer Prize Winner Journalist with New York Times in her recent article Americas Enduring Caste System, July 2020 - Caste is the powerful infrastructure that holds each group in its place. Its very invisibility is what gives it power and longevity. And though it may move in and out of consciousness, though it may flare and reassert itself in times of upheaval and recede in times of relative calm, it is an ever present through the line in the country’s operation. As we go about our daily lives, caste is the wordless usher in a darkened theater, flashlight cast down in the aisles, guiding us to our assigned seats for a performance. The hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power – which groups have it and which do not. It is about resources – which groups are seen as worthy of them and which are not, who gets to acquire and control them and who does not. It is about respect, authority and assumptions of competence – who is accorded these and who is not. As a means of assigning value to entire swaths of humankind, caste guides each of us often beyond the reaches of our awareness. It embeds into our bones and unconscious ranking of human characteristics and sets forth the rules.

The Dalits of South Asia constitute most victims facing this form of structural discrimination, which leads to marginalization, social and economic exclusion and limited access to basic services, including water and sanitation. Discriminatory practices include physical and social segregation, restrictions on occupation or enforcement of certain types of menial jobs, and widespread caste-based violence. Dalits are more vulnerable to both natural and climatic disasters compared to dominant upper caste people due to their marginalized social position; the location of their homes, usually in marginal lands in the periphery of settlements; their vulnerable occupations, such as rubbish and sewage disposal, casual farm labor and lagoon fishing; and the nature of their housing – Dalits often have little or no land rights.

While the climate crisis manifests globally, we need to acknowledge that indigenous peoples, low-income families, people of colour, and other historically marginalized groups like the Dalits represent frontline communities who experience harmful climate impacts ‘first and worst’. To live our values of a truly sustainable future for all, we must commit to understanding and undoing the historical injustices which contribute to this reality and, in our solutions, address systemic inequities.

---

1 Ritwajit Das is a global climate change and human rights professional (having a high degree of regional understanding) with a total of more than twelve years of cross-functional experience in the private sector, public sector, government, non-profit, UN and bi-lateral/multi-lateral institutions - with a strong focus on advocacy management, communication management, strategy, programme development, project management, monitoring and multidimensional research. He has worked on a range of core climate change (adaptation and mitigation) and sustainable development projects in 24 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe and South America. He is associated with International Dalit Solidarity Network and Global Call For Climate Action. He belongs to the most historically oppressed, systematically discriminated and excluded ‘untouchable community’ outcasted groups in India called Dalits. He is also a recipient of Youth Professional Award at UN Habitat 2020 on climate change and sustainability issues.

2 International Dalit Solidarity Network (www.idsn.org)

3 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/magazine/isabel-wilkerson-caste.html?referringSource=articleShare
Climate justice encompassing voices of women and indigenous groups but usually it fails to articulate the perspectives of Dalit their ecological positions, and their relationship with nature remains constricted from the ambit of dominant environmental framework\(^4\).

**Dalit women and girls are the most discriminated, systematically excluded and historically oppressed group in the sub-continent. Dalit women lag behind in most of the areas of human development indicators.** Unequal access to resources and opportunities makes Dalit Women more socially vulnerable and frequently exposes her to the chance of being a victim to caste, class and gender-based violence\(^5\).

The vulnerable socio-economic and political conditions of Dalit women make them highly susceptible and prone to heinous violence and hate crime. Dalit women and girls are forced to spend more time on the field or travel longer distance to pick fodder due to increased drudgery associated with climate change. As a result of this, they are becoming an easy target of rape and other forms of sexual and physical violence\(^6\). Most of the physical and sexual violence against Dalit women goes unreported. In caste affected countries of the South Asia more than 15 Dalit Women and girls are raped and sexually violated every day\(^7\).

A woman’s caste in South Asia can increase her exposure to mortality as a result of factors such as poor sanitation and inadequate water supply and health care, says a report by the UN Women. It states that the average age of death for Dalit women is 14.6 years younger than for higher caste women. Dalit women are often discouraged from accessing water, food and accommodation due to ingrained, discriminatory societal norms that lead to a separation of common water sources, common dining and common shelter areas according to caste status\(^8\).

Dalit women are fighting caste, patriarchy and survival against climate change in an inhospitable environment and therefore being the most vulnerable inhabitants in rural India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal. Dalits are historically prohibited and prevented from owning land. Dalit women are almost landless. Dalit women and girls are mostly working as farm labourers in other people’s land and face caste-gender based abuse; much of it is unreported.

Climate change is going to exacerbate their vulnerabilities by adding more drudgery farm related work. Dalit women have to negotiate with local dominant upper caste institutions to lease tenure and basic irrigation facilities. The dominant upper caste farmers lobby inhibit the flow of rainwater into the farmlands belonged to Dalit women and prohibit them from walking through their piece of land to reach theirs\(^9\). When landless Dalit women becomes cultivators, it is seen as an act of defiance and face resentment\(^10\). The dominant upper caste villagers try to subjugate them with violence\(^11\). Dalit women routinely face humiliation whenever they went even to a roadside to get fodder for animals and always under risk of physical violence\(^12\). Supported by age-old patriarchy and rigid social systems, land

---


\(^5\) Dalit Women Seek Justice, Status Report on Access to Justice 2018-2020, All India Dalit Mahila Mukti Morcha, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights


\(^7\) Dalit Women Seek Justice, Status Report on Access to Justice 2018-2020, All India Dalit Mahila Mukti Morcha, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and FEDO, Nepal


Caste based discrimination and heightened acute water shortage crisis due to climate change combine to torment Dalit women every summer. Dalit women and girls sometime walk long distances to fetch water, exposing them to incidents of physical and sexual violence. They are most vulnerable to implicit and explicit violence and occupy a very dismal position in the social hierarchy. In rural hinterland of India, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh ‘water riots’ are breaking out — the dominant upper caste women are not allowing the Dalit women to use the government hand pumps and wells amid water crisis. Dalit women are beaten up if they try to access these institutionalized potable water sources. To escape physical violence Dalit women are travelling for more than a kilometre outside of their villages to collect water. This is not an isolated incident.

In India, with its grave water crisis, Dalit women are restricted from drawing water from a public well located at the foothills of Otthakadai Yanamalai, as untouchability is still practised in this village. Locals said that the well is "sacred" and more than 150 people use the water from this well for drinking purposes. During climatic crisis, the issues that are being overlooked are different communities’ vulnerabilities, inequitable distributional impacts and social justice. In over 100 villages affected by drought in India, Dalit women are being denied access to water sources in 48.4% of villages because of segregation and untouchability practices. More than 20% of Dalits do not have access to safe drinking water.

Dalit women are more exposed to climatic natural disasters than other groups, and less likely to receive humanitarian aid. Laws that are meant to protect them are not properly implemented, and humanitarian agencies do not always understand the particularly vulnerable situation of Dalit Women.

Even prior to any extreme weather events like drought, floods, typhoons or cyclones, Dalit women are more vulnerable and exposed to disasters. Their social exclusion means they often live outside of main villages, with less access to the amenities and information of administrative centres. In some contexts, this less desirable land will be more exposed to floods or hazards and have less developed infrastructure like drains, drinking water or flood barriers.

The livelihood situation of Dalit women, dependent on wage labour and on dominant upper caste groups, is particularly vulnerable to shocks and stresses like extreme weather events. Critical issues concerning Dalit women in recent humanitarian crises include unequal or denied access to health services, shelter and housing, clean water and education; no compensation or restitution due to e.g., lack of documentation to claim entitlements related to land and property; lack of protection of rights of Dalit women who after major natural disasters embark on inter-state migration or are displaced internally.

---

**Examples of caste-based discriminations faced by Dalit women and girls during climatic disasters and humanitarian aid (as per International Dalit Solidarity Network findings under European Commission Assessment, 2013)**

| Dalit women and girls prevented from receiving emergency aid or accessing shelters or kitchens due to perceived ‘untouchability’ and the internalised social norms or fears of violence. | Dalit women and girls excluded or marginalised from the main village centres and community structures and therefore their needs are not part of formal data gathering or decision-making on | Dalit women and girls face problems of registering in relief camps. |

14 https://www.newsclick.in/overlooked-correlation-climate-change-social-exclusion
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>response with government officials or humanitarian agencies.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dalit women and girls often receive relief materials of a poorer quality or lesser quantity compared to other recipients.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dalit men and women are exploited for their labour to remove corpses and debris from disaster-affected areas.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dalit losses are less visible as their work or assets are not formally recognised: e.g., fishing boats and nets used by Dalits prior to the super cyclones and Tsunamis, and makeshift houses without land titles.</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dalit women informal work, often in supportive day labour to official ‘casted’ occupations, is impacted by the loss of formal work in disasters, and sometimes by the response efforts that might supplant the role of Dalit day labourers.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dalit women are not consulted or included in decision-making in needs assessment and appropriate emergency aid provision that meets their needs. The limited presence or total absence of Dalits in local governance bodies further exacerbates the lack of engagement and consultation.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Systemic problems of Dalit marginalisation and exclusion from formal development (like in owning land, land titles for homes, official licences for fishing etc.) undermine their ability to access opportunities for recovery of homes or livelihoods in disaster recovery programmes.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of appropriate assessments of loss or damage of Dalit property, crops and other assets or exclusion of their names in the compensation lists of the authorities further excludes them from receiving their entitlements.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>