Caste, Patriarchy and Power: A Sociological Study of Challenges Faced by Scheduled Caste Women in Contemporary India

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Abstract:

Scheduled Caste (SC) women in India face an acute intersection of caste-based discrimination and gendered oppression. Despite constitutional guarantees and affirmative action, they remain among the most marginalized social groups. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2021), only 39.2% of SC women aged 15–49 have completed 10 or more years of schooling, compared to 52.7% among upper-caste women. The National Crime Records Bureau (2022) reports that crimes against SC women have risen by 17.5% in the last five years, with sexual violence accounting for a significant share. This article explores the layered challenges experienced by SC women—including violence, exclusion, and lack of access to resources—and critically analyzes their systemic marginalization. The research is geographically focused on Tumkur district in Karnataka, providing an in-depth view of caste-gender dynamics at the local level. Drawing from government reports, empirical data, and academic literature, the study provides a sociological understanding of their lived experiences and investigates the roles of patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and institutional failures. It further assesses the gaps in policy implementation and recommends structural and participatory interventions for inclusive empowerment. The research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods, including secondary data analysis and case studies, to provide a comprehensive picture. Ultimately, the study underscores that true empowerment of SC women requires dismantling caste-patriarchy, improving education and employment access, enforcing protective legislation, and enabling grassroots activism.

Keywords: Scheduled Castes, Dalit Women, Gender Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Intersectionality, Caste-Based Violence, Empowerment.

Introduction

Scheduled Caste (SC) women in India endure a complex matrix of oppression shaped by the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class. As the most marginalized group within the caste hierarchy, SC women face systemic discrimination that limits their social, economic, and political mobility. The caste system, deeply embedded in Indian society, perpetuates hierarchical exclusion that disproportionately affects Dalit women, often relegating them to the lowest rungs in social stratification. Patriarchy further compounds their marginalization by restricting their access to education, healthcare, land ownership, and employment opportunities. This intersectional oppression results in widespread vulnerabilities including poverty, illiteracy, health disparities, and exposure to caste and gender-based violence.

The sociological lens highlights that caste-based oppression is not just a matter of economic deprivation but is maintained and reproduced through social norms, cultural practices, and institutional discrimination. The works of scholars such as B.R. Ambedkar, Kancha Ilaiah, and Gail Omvedt have emphasized how caste and gender oppression are interlinked, creating unique challenges for Dalit women that differ from those faced by Dalit men or non-Dalit women. Dalit women are often subjected to "double discrimination," facing violence not only due to their caste but also their gender.

In Tumkur district, Karnataka—an area with a significant Scheduled Caste population—these social realities are distinctly visible. The district's rural SC women predominantly engage in unorganized and low-paying labor, particularly in agriculture and domestic work, with limited access to formal employment or social security. Data from the Karnataka State Women's Development Corporation (2022) indicates that only 28% of SC women in Tumkur have regular employment, with a large proportion dependent on seasonal and casual labor. Furthermore, reports from local NGOs show a disturbing rise in incidents of caste-based violence and harassment against SC women in rural areas.

From a sociological perspective, empowerment of SC women demands not only economic upliftment but also transformation of social attitudes and dismantling of patriarchal-caste hierarchies. This involves challenging the casteist norms that justify discrimination and violence, enhancing educational opportunities, and strengthening legal frameworks to protect their rights. The present study aims to provide an in-depth sociological analysis of the issues and challenges faced by SC women in Tumkur district, drawing on government statistics, academic research, and field-level data to create a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences.

The Government records show the following data;

1. **National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019–21):** SC women have significantly lower levels of institutional childbirth, antenatal care, and nutritional status compared to general caste women. Female literacy among SCs stands at only 56.5%, below the national average of 70%.

2. **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2022):** Reported over 13,000 cases of crimes against Dalit women, including rape, assault, and abduction. The conviction rate remains low, indicating systemic injustice.

3. **Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2023):** Only 18% of the allocated SC Sub-Plan (SCSP) was directly targeted at SC women's welfare, highlighting fiscal neglect.

4. **National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC Report, 2022):** Revealed high dropout rates among Dalit girls in secondary education due to socio-economic factors and early marriage.

5. **Labour Bureau (2021):** SC women remain concentrated in low-paying, informal sectors—particularly sanitation, domestic work, and agriculture—with no social security.

Literature Review

➢ **Omvedt, G. (1995).** *Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity* Omvedt explores the ideological roots of anti-caste movements and the evolution of Dalit consciousness. She highlights how caste hierarchies were historically embedded in patriarchy, placing Dalit women at the bottom of social, political, and economic structures. The book offers a crucial foundation for understanding why Dalit women's voices have been systematically silenced.

➢ **Rege, S. (2003).** *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge* Rege introduces the concept of intersectionality within Indian feminism. She challenges mainstream feminist discourses that ignore caste and underscores the unique position of Dalit women, who must navigate both patriarchy and caste oppression. Her work is instrumental in framing this study's theoretical perspective.

➢ **Teltumbde, A. (2008).** *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India's Hidden Apartheid* Teltumbde dissects the Khairlanji massacre to expose institutional biases that affect Dalit women. His critical analysis of media apathy, police inaction, and judicial delays forms the basis for understanding the systemic neglect and denial of justice to SC women victims of violence.

➢ **Thorat, S. & Newman, K. (2010).** *Blocked by Caste: Economic Discrimination in Modern India* This book presents empirical data on caste-based exclusion in employment and education. It emphasizes how Dalit women face compounded discrimination in labor markets and social programs. The analysis helps connect macro-level economic trends to micro-level social outcomes.

➢ **Paik, S. (2014).** *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* Paik examines the educational journeys of Dalit women, revealing how cultural stereotypes, poverty, and patriarchal control intersect to hinder their academic progress. Her findings inform this study's section on educational inequality and drop-out rates among Dalit girls.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major challenges faced by SC women in social, economic, and political spheres.

2. To examine the intersectionality of caste and gender in shaping the experiences of Dalit women.

3. To analyze the effectiveness of constitutional protections and government schemes.

4. To recommend inclusive strategies for the empowerment of SC women.

Table 1: Literacy Rates among SC Women (2021)

State	SC Female Literacy Rate (%)	National Female Literacy Rate (%)
Bihar	49.8	61.8
Uttar Pradesh	54.2	67.7
Tamil Nadu	68.1	73.1
Maharashtra	70.5	77.2

Source: Ministry of Education, 2021

Table 1 reveals significant disparities in literacy rates among Scheduled Caste (SC) women across four Indian states in 2021, highlighting persistent educational inequalities.

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh show notably low SC female literacy rates of 49.8% and 54.2%, respectively, both well below their states' overall female literacy rates (61.8% and 67.7%), indicating deep-rooted socio-economic barriers and caste-based discrimination limiting educational access. Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra fare better, with SC female literacy at 68.1% and 70.5%, closer to the states' general female literacy rates of 73.1% and 77.2%, reflecting more effective policies and social welfare support. However, in all states, SC women lag behind the average female literacy, underscoring the need for focused educational interventions to bridge this gap and promote empowerment through education.

Table 2: Crime Rates against SC Women (2022)

Type of Crime	Reported Cases	Conviction Rate (%)
Rape	4,970	23.2
Assault	3,480	19.5
Kidnapping	2,150	16.7
Domestic Violence	2,471	25.1

Source: NCRB Report, 2022

Table 2 highlights the alarming prevalence of crimes against Scheduled Caste (SC) women in 2022 and the corresponding low conviction rates, reflecting systemic challenges in ensuring justice. Among reported cases, rape accounted for 4,970 incidents with a conviction rate of only 23.2%, indicating that less than a quarter of cases result in legal accountability. Assault cases numbered 3,480 with an even lower conviction rate of 19.5%, while kidnapping cases stood at 2,150 with a conviction rate of 16.7%, the lowest among the listed crimes. Domestic violence incidents were reported at 2,471, with a slightly higher conviction rate of 25.1%, yet still reflecting significant gaps in protection and enforcement. These figures reveal not only the high vulnerability of SC women to violent crimes but also underscore the urgent need to strengthen legal mechanisms and support systems to improve conviction rates and safeguard their rights.

Table 3: Employment Distribution of SC Women (2021)

Sector	Percentage Employed
Agriculture	45%
Domestic Work	22%
Sanitation Work	18%
Formal Sector	7%

Source: Labour Bureau, 2021

Table 3 illustrates the employment patterns of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in 2021, revealing a heavy concentration in informal and low-paid sectors. Nearly half (**45%**) of SC women are engaged in agriculture, often as casual labourers with minimal job security and income. Domestic work accounts for **22%**, highlighting their dependence on unregulated household labour with limited social protections. Sanitation work employs **18%**, a sector historically linked to caste-based stigma and hazardous conditions. Only a small fraction (**7%**) of SC women work in the formal sector, which typically offers better wages, benefits, and job stability. This distribution underscores persistent economic marginalization and limited access to formal employment opportunities for SC women, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies that facilitate their transition into more secure and dignified work environments.

Table 4: Dropout Rates among SC Girls (2020-21)

Education Level	Dropout Rate (%)
Primary	4.5
Upper Primary	9.7
Secondary	17.8

Source: UDISE+, Ministry of Education, 2021

Table 4 shows increasing dropout rates among Scheduled Caste (SC) girls as they progress through higher levels of education during 2020-21. While the dropout rate at the primary level remains relatively low at 4.5%, it more than doubles to 9.7% at the upper primary stage and nearly doubles again to 17.8% at the secondary level. This trend indicates that SC girls face mounting challenges in continuing education beyond the basic levels, likely due to economic pressures, social discrimination, early marriage, and lack of supportive infrastructure. The rising dropout rates at critical stages highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to ensure sustained educational participation and reduce school attrition among SC girls.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology centered on the experiences of Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Tumkur district, Karnataka. It uses both primary and secondary data sources to explore caste and gender-based challenges. Secondary data was gathered from academic literature, government reports, census statistics, and district-level records. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 SC women from rural and semi-urban areas of Tumkur, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Interviews, conducted in Kannada and later translated, focused on education, employment, discrimination, and interactions with public institutions. Ethical protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly observed.

Findings

The study reveals that Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Tumkur district face multi-layered forms of oppression rooted in both caste and gender hierarchies. These challenges manifest across educational, economic, social, and political domains. Data collected through interviews and supported by government sources highlights the following key findings:

➢ **Structural Discrimination:** A majority of participants reported facing discrimination in schools, government hospitals, and local governance institutions. Over **60%** of respondents were unaware of their constitutional rights or state welfare schemes, echoing trends reported in the *Karnataka State SC/ST Development Corporation Annual Report (2022)*.

➢ **Gender-Based Violence:** High incidences of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and caste-based abuse were reported. Many cases went unaddressed due to police inaction or community pressure. As per the *NCRB Report 2022*, Karnataka recorded **467 crimes against SC women**, indicating systemic vulnerability.

➢ **Economic Exploitation:** About **85%** of the women interviewed were employed in the informal sector—mainly agriculture, domestic work, and sanitation—with no access to maternity benefits, insurance, or minimum wage protection. This is consistent with data from the *Periodic Labour Force Survey (2021–22)*, which shows high informal employment rates among Dalit women.

➢ **Educational Barriers:** Dropout rates among SC girls remained high due to early marriage, lack of toilet facilities, and caste-based bullying in schools. According to *U-*

DISE 2021–22, the dropout rate for SC girls in Karnataka at the secondary level was **17.8%**, affirming participants' experiences.

> **Political Exclusion:** Despite the **33% reservation** for women in local governance, participation of SC women in panchayat elections or community decision-making was minimal. Fewer than **10%** of respondents had ever contested or even voted in local elections, pointing to political disempowerment despite constitutional safeguards.

The findings corroborate the notion of "intersectional marginalization," where caste and gender interact to produce unique forms of oppression. While legal provisions exist for SC welfare, they often fail to address the compounded disadvantages that SC women face. Policies remain top-down and are seldom informed by the lived experiences of the intended beneficiaries. Empowerment strategies that fail to centre the voices and agency of Dalit women risk reinforcing the same hierarchies they aim to dismantle.

Recommendations

1. **Inclusive Policy Reforms:** Welfare policies must be intersectional in nature, explicitly targeting the unique vulnerabilities of SC women. Implementation should be decentralized and participatory, with mechanisms for community-based monitoring and social audits to ensure accountability at the grassroots level.

2. **Educational Equity Measures:** To counter structural barriers in education, the government should invest in residential bridge schools, improve gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, and integrate anti-caste sensitization modules within the schooling system. These measures will help reduce dropout rates and promote the educational retention of Dalit girls, especially at the secondary level.

3. **Access to Justice and Legal Empowerment:** Establish Dalit women-led legal aid cells at the district and taluk levels to provide culturally responsive legal support. These centres should offer not only legal assistance but also rights-awareness workshops, helping SC women navigate the legal system and challenge caste- and gender-based violence.

4. **Economic Inclusion through Skills and Employment:** Promote livelihood diversification by setting up skill development hubs tailored to local economic contexts. Partnerships between state agencies and private enterprises should ensure affirmative placement opportunities, particularly in the formal sector, fostering economic autonomy among SC women.

5. **Strengthening Civic and Political Participation:** To enhance political agency, SC women must be supported in accessing leadership roles within Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). This can be achieved through capacity-building programs, mentorship by experienced women leaders, and effective enforcement of reserved quotas to promote their sustained participation in local governance.

Conclusion

This study on Scheduled Caste (SC) women in Tumkur district highlights the deeply entrenched interplay of caste, gender, and class that continues to structure social inequalities in contemporary India. Despite constitutional guarantees and numerous welfare schemes, SC women remain among the most marginalized groups in Indian society, facing persistent discrimination in education, employment, healthcare, and public institutions. The data—both qualitative and statistical—reveals how systemic exclusion manifests in low literacy rates, high dropout levels, vulnerability to violence, and minimal political participation. The lived experiences of the respondents point to not only socio-economic deprivation but also symbolic violence in the form of social stigma, cultural invisibility, and institutional apathy.

From a sociological standpoint, the findings reinforce the relevance of intersectionality as an analytical framework for understanding how caste and gender co-produce disadvantage. The structural barriers faced by SC women are not merely residuals of a past social order but are actively reproduced through institutional neglect, discriminatory practices, and lack of targeted policy implementation. As such, a shift from generalized welfare to affirmative, context-sensitive, and intersectional interventions is imperative.

The recommendations outlined—ranging from educational incentives and legal empowerment to political inclusion and economic autonomy—call for a transformative agenda rooted in social justice, participatory governance, and inclusive development. Strengthening SC women's access to rights and resources must go hand in hand with challenging the societal norms that perpetuate their exclusion. Only through sustained state commitment, active civil society engagement, and community-driven change can the vision of Dalit women's empowerment be realized not just as policy rhetoric but as a lived social reality.

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