

ASSESSING THE MARGINALIZED CHILDREN AFTER THE PANDEMIC: A SURVEY OF JAUNPUR DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Caste and marginalization of certain downtrodden communities are inter-linked. The lower castes are the most vulnerable to any natural or man-made disasters. The pandemic had similar effects on the Dalits and their children. This article is an overview of the Dalits children after the two years of pandemic, primarily it had analysed their school dropouts and their health.

Introduction

It's been more than two years since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (a highly contagious virus), and every person has been the victim of this unprecedented crisis, it had caused numbers of causalities, increased rates in mental health issues, more school dropouts (Express News Service, 2022)and, higher unemployment rates. According to World Bank, global inequalities had increased between and within the countries due to the pandemic, (The World Bank, n.d.)and a recent report (2022) showed that India had the most number of poor's and people who are surviving on Rs 46 per day had increased to 56 million. The poor and marginalized classes were the most affected groups by the pandemic i.e., Dalits, and tribals. The pandemic had hit hard to the lower caste families and their children in these two years, it had pushed back them into the vicious cycle of poverty. The number of unemployed persons in these marginalized families is higher, and the children are prone to malnutrition, and limited access to education and psychosocial development.

Methodology

This paper is part of my Ph.D. research work on Dalit identity. During my fieldwork, I visited different *Bastis* from the district. For data, an unstructured interview was conducted in four villages (Behra, Barai, Bambawan, Naupur) the marginalized families specifically from Chamars, Musahar, and Nat castes, in their native language (Bhojpuri). The purpose for choosing

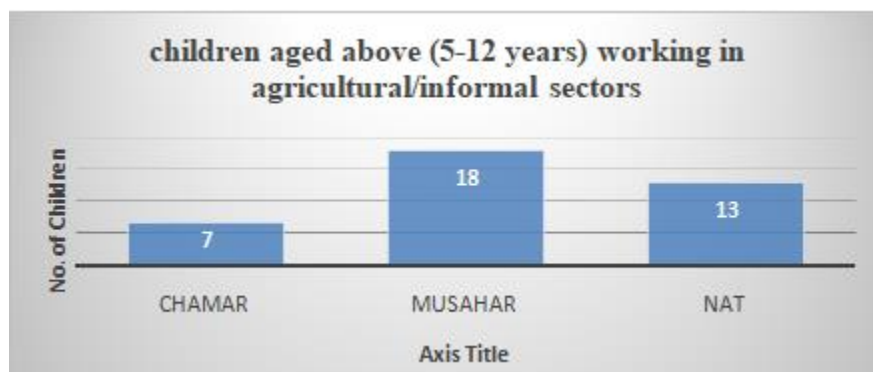
these three castes is their location in social stratification. Within the Dalit fold, Chamars are at the top of the hierarchy and Musahar and Nat are at the lowest rung.

The objective of this paper is, **a)** To see the socio-economic conditions of the Dalit children. **b)** To assess the health of children in post-pandemic years. **c)** To analyse the impact of the pandemic in last two years on the education of Dalit children. This study will also help us to analyse the flow of affirmative actions of the government during and after the pandemic for Dalits and the caste hierarchy within it. For samples 25 children between age 5-12 has been taken into considerations.

Vicious Cycle of Poverty

In a country like India where caste stratifications persist, a discriminatory system based on the notion of ‘purity and pollution’ of different varnas later *jatis*(Dumont, 1980), it had caused the deprivation of lower castes for centuries and forced them to the fringe at bottom of the hierarchy. Due to their low social status and extreme poverty Dalits are unable to represent themselves at the forefront as compared to mainstream society. They are deprived of their social, political, and economic rights. Their children are always at risks of entering into child labour and as per Census 2011, 10.1 million children are exploited in child labour (Kaur & Byard, 2021). Lower castes barely afford basic sustenance for livelihood, as they abstained from primary healthcare, education, their socio-economic development, etc. The source of income in Dalit families is primarily daily wage, or agricultural labour, brick kiln workers, but due to the pandemic and lockdown, they are forced to sit at home. This affected their earnings and pushed backed the Dalits and their children into chronic poverty. When lockdown imposed structural and economic imbalances in the Dalit families led children from lower castes clandestinely shifted into agricultural or in informal sectors (Kaur & Byard, 2021).

Figure 1¹: Musahar children are more in numbers who are involved in child labour



¹ Source: From the field.

Some of the narratives “*humko do time ka khana naseeb hona v mushkilhai, ab to lagta h hamari garibi kabhi khatam nhi hogi*”, these people had lost their every hope to come out of poverty ever in their lives, neither their children can. After two years of the pandemic out of three only Chamar castes, children are in barely better positions as compared to the other two and a maximum of the children from the Musahar caste are working in brick kilns for 8-10 hours a day, and they start working with their parents at very early age. Whereas Nat caste is amongst the most deprived and marginalised ones in all the four villages and they and their families barely get any work due to their stigmatised caste notions, their conditions had not changed very much but only deteriorated.

Health

The global pandemic had increased the serious risk to the health of children between age 0-10 years, due to higher rates of unemployment, unavailability of food, and inaccessibility of medical care and as a result it had increased the rate of under nutritious children (Ntambara & Chu, 2021). India ranked 107th in Global Hunger Index among 121 countries and as per GHI, this is the worst scenario of poverty in this century due to the pandemic. The low rank of India is an indication of child stunting, wasting, higher rates of child mortality, and a greater number of children undernourished.

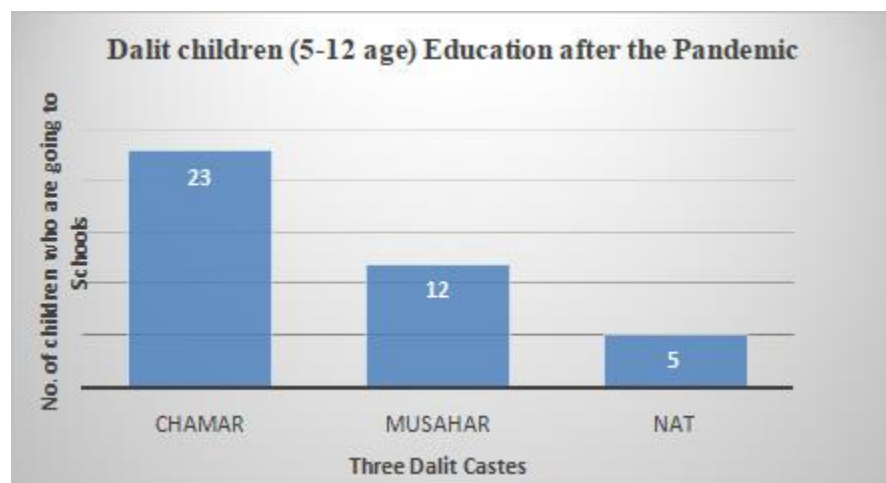
It is the marginalized children who are primarily affected by the pandemic in India. Due to the lower position in the caste hierarchy for Dalit families and their children, it is pandemic over pandemic since 2020. One of the primary impacts is psychological and mental stress on these children which is deteriorating their mental health and social personality. The physical health of children has also been affected since the pandemic; their families could not afford the minimum amount of nutritious food which is required for their healthy growth. Except Chamar children whose parents are a bit aware about their child health, Musahar and Nat kids are just surviving on rice and chutney in a day or only dry chapatis. After pandemic some families also lost their child due to unavailability of healthcare in villages.

Education

Save our future, report by Education commission 2021 revealed, emergence of the pandemic led to increase in more 10 percentage of school dropouts or those who could not read and learn. There are many parameters for school dropouts including individual, family, and social locations of Dalits. During my visit to their basti, (Chamar/ Harijan Basti mostly on the south side of the village, Musahar and Nat Basti on the outskirts), I found the maximum number of children are deprived of education, and those parents from the lower castes who are willing to educate their child could only afford government school (primary school educations). Of the total percentage

of children studying in primary schools, 95% of them were from lower castes. After the pandemic the children and teachers both have Except fora few families, most of them have only a keypad phone which makes it hard for the children to learn through online mode. After two years of the pandemic Dalit children have become more school dropouts, when asked by parents why they are not sending their children to schools still many of them fear that if their child might infect by the virus and no one would come up to help them. In villages when they have very limited access to school institutions i.e., only primary schools. In these institutions, there is no facility for providing education from online mode, and after two years except for mandatory government rules, no faculty had taken initiative for Dalit children to provide the best form of study materials. One of the major causes for dropouts is their low interest in studies after a long gap from school. I asked the teachers what efforts they were putting in during the pandemic, they said we visited door-to-door with every child's family and provided them with study materials and we assess their studies weekly. Many boys had also started to work as daily wage labourers to earn a livelihood for their families along with other male members and girls are with their mothers or elder sisters helping with household chores.

Figure 2², shows that it is Nat children who are less likely to join schools after the pandemic as compared to other two caste, before pandemic also Nat and Musahar families have very limited access to educations and its benefits



Conclusion and Suggestions

The Dalit children are the still he marginalised children must be given special attention by the administrative authorities in to bring them at the at the forefront of socio-economic society. After two years of the Government must ensure awareness programs among marginalized communities

² Source: From the field.

for the holistic development of children. In rural areas *aganwadi* workers play key role, firstly these workers should be trained for further awareness among the lower caste families.

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