

Layers of Subalternity and Scheduled Castes Hindu Women: A Case Study of District Ghotki

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Abstract

Scheduled Castes Hindu women of Ghotki district are facing layers and layers of subalternity in the male dominate district. They are facing social, economic, political and religious discriminations simultaneously. Overall, caste-based discrimination against Scheduled Castes has become norm of the society. Nobody is bothered to look into their life striking subalternity matters. As religious minority in the district, scheduled caste Hindu women are suffering layers of discrimination in an Islamic society, dominated by 99 percent Muslims with additional burden of conversion. The concept of othering can be best illustrated in the sense of Scheduled Caste women; the practice of 'untouchability is rampant in the society. In other words, they are being considered as Achhoot in the society. As a result, Scheduled Castes often live-in separate colonies, are being compelled to eat food in separate crockery, and are not allowed to sit with Muslims and upper castes Hindus as well. So, in a sense, the Scheduled Castes women face systematic oppression in both public and private spheres; first in Muslim dominated district, second in the higher caste Hindu community and third in the male dominated structures of their own families. At the bottom of social hierarchy, schedule castes women are not only deprived of social assets but also frequently suffer from the violation of personal dignity and freedom through sexual abuse, alienation, abduction and force conversion and marriages. They are facing class bound subalternity, age bound subalternity, gendered bound subalternity, religion bound Subalternity, and political bound subalternity simultaneously.

Keywords: Subalternity; Women in Ghotki; Low Castes; Discrimination; Marginalisation.

1. Introduction

Scheduled Castes Hindus in Pakistan are un-officially known as 'Low Castes Hindus' and frequently described as 'Achhoot' or as 'untouchables. These castes fall outside of the four-caste Hindu hierarchy (Mahdi, 2016). The untouchables of district Ghotki includes; Kolhi, Bheel, Baghri, Marecho, Meghwal, Jhogi and Oadh etc. The government of Pakistan through Presidential Ordinance in 1957, declared some forty low castes mostly Hindu castes as Scheduled Castes in order to uplift them socially, economically, politically and constitutionally. Scheduled Caste is specifically a constitutional term and has nothing to do with the degradation of any caste which was

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included in the 1957 Presidential Ordinance. Historically speaking, many writers of castes believes that Scheduled castes have Dravidian roots and are indigenous people of Sindh. The point to ponder over is that the Scheduled Castes Hindus are considered as the real masters of Sindh but with regret to say that they are being treated as Achhoot in their own land and are being deprived of land in their own province especially in district Ghotki Sindh. In other words, Scheduled Castes Hindus are down to earth and downtrodden people, having no or very little respect and land in their possession. However, their women are facing layers of discrimination in patriarchal social order of the district.

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Broadly speaking, the low castes Hindu women in Muslim dominated district cannot even sit, eat, drink and travel with Muslim women and upper caste Hindu women alike (Guriro, 2016). They are being completely isolated from the society. In other words, they are being treated as alien in their own land. Their marginalization starts from their homes wherein they are considered useless and second sex (Zeb et al., 2019). The constitution of Pakistan gives equal rights to all its citizens; constitution rejects any type of discrimination on the basis of caste, creed, class, gender and religion. But, frequently, the women of scheduled caste communities are not allowed to drink water from same well and are not allowed to eat food in the same plate. Similarly, women of lower caste Hindus are also facing the forms of discrimination at the hands of upper caste Hindus as well. For example, in many cases, they are not even permitted to perform religious practices in the temples of upper caste. So, women are not even accepted as human beings; they are treated with injustice and inequality everywhere around the district. In short, women are being denied of every kind of rights. They are being neglected around the feudalists' environment of Ghotki district; they cannot even take decisions of their own bodies. The sense of controlling-how to control women, is a basic theme, by which male dominate the women. Honour of the male can be challenged, if women get freedom of expression (Brohi, 2013). However, in the case of scheduled caste women, they are facing even more layers of discrimination than Muslim women of the district.

The aim of the study is to highlight and shed light on the subalternity based status of low caste women in male dominated, feudalists based and patriarchal based society of district Ghotki. Further, the study tries to fill the gap in the academia by exploring the life staking subalternity in the lives of

lower castes Hindu women. How and why schedule caste women of district Ghotki are on the bottom of the hierarchy? How systemically, the schedule castes women are being deprived of proper education, proper health and honourable life? Who is representing them (agency of representation) in the society? In short, the research attempts to investigate the age bound, class bound, religion bound, gendered bound and political subalternity in the lives of selected lower caste women of Ghotki.

There is no direct literature is available so far on the status of lower caste women in Ghotki district. Few research articles, research reports, and unpublished works are found to be very helpful in connecting the dots on the plight of low castes women of Ghotki. For example, Sabah Zaib's article "Subalternity of the Rural Women of Sindh: A Historical Approach" (2019), Jurgen Schaflechner's article "Forced Conversion and (Hindu) Women's Agency in Sindh" (2017), Ahmed Ali Brohi's unpublished work under the title "Gender Differential in Social Development in Rural Sindh: A Sociological Study" (2013), Ghulam Hussain's unpublished work "Peasant Activism in Sindh: creating space for marginalized Kolhi community through multiple channels" (2014), last but not the least, Zulfiqar Shah's research "Long Behind Schedule: A Study on the Plight of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Pakistan" (2007) have contributed a lot for the conduct of current research on the plights of scheduled caste women of Ghotki.

The present research is based on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies by analysing subaltern approach in the lives of selected lower caste Hindu women of district Ghotki. Moreover, study has touched feminist' approach and methodology as well. The research relied on descriptive and analytical method by using subaltern frame work of analysis. Descriptive in a sense, that the research studies the life experiencing interviews of selected lower caste women of district Ghotki and compared with the interviews of selected Muslim women of the district. Analytical method is also applied for interpreting and analysing the conducted interviews to shed light on the status of lower caste Hindu's women of Ghotki.

Further, the research is based on primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include: interviews of selected lower caste Hindu women and Muslim women of Ghotki; Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's reports on minorities, International Dalit Solidarity Network and Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network etc. Whereas, secondary sources include: newspapers, books, articles and unpublished works.

2. Understanding the Concept of Subalternity

Ranajit Guha and Antonio Gramsci, has defined the word subalternity as an opposite to hegemony and domination. The term "subaltern," drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture (Hall, 2000). Guha, defines subalternity as a construct of demographic differences. In demographic differences, he points out culture, cast, class, and age as the eminent factors causing

subalternity in people (Gayan, 1994). Gramsci applied the concept of class based subalternity in the struggle of Italian labourers with authorities whereas, Guha applied the concept on the Indian peasants (Guha, 1982).

However, another very important theorist of subalternity who further modified the concept, is a Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She wrote famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She revised the text originally drafted before her encounter with the subaltern studies project. Spivak argued that the subaltern was not only deprived of the capacity to speak by the dominant order, but that the subaltern was defined by its exclusion from representation as such, in both political and aesthetic senses. Subaltern people do not only limit of forms of cultural, social, and political domination, but are removed from all lines of social mobility. Thus, they are the most marginalized, oppressed individuals and groups in the society. She also criticized subaltern studies as itself an elite based school of thought because of its ignorance of the issue of gendered subalternity. So, Spivak relates the concept of the subaltern to the marginalized poor women. She introduced the concepts of class, caste and culture and gender with regards to subaltern women (Spivak, 1983).

Taking Guha's concepts of subalternity, Spivak further specifies the theme of gendered subalternity. She sets her discourse in postcolonial society and challenges colonialism as it produced negative impacts on colonized. According to her, among all subalterns, women are at the most challenging state of marginalization. She concluded her essay as that subaltern woman cannot speak.

3. Demographic Profile of district Ghotki

Sindh, the second largest province of Pakistan having 140,914 sq. km area and has total thirty districts. Amongst all other districts, Ghotki district lies in the North of Sindh. The district in terms of resources is one of the richest districts of Sindh. It is administratively divided into five Talukas. Namely Ghotki, Mirpur Mathelo, Khangarh, Daharki and Ubauro. The taluka of Mirpur Mathelo is a Head Quarter of the district because of its strategical location. The district is spread over an area of 6,083 square kms (PBS, 2017). It is located in upper Sindh and is bordered on the north-west by district Kashmore, on the east by district Rahimyar Khan of Punjab, on the south-east by Indian State of Rajasthan and on the west by district Sukkur (Reliefweb, 2014).

In terms of population, the district is counted as one of the populated districts of Sindh. As per 2017 census, the total population of the district is 1,648,708. Amongst them, male is approximately 52 per cent while women are 48 per cent. In terms of faith, Islam is the major religion of this district as nearly 98 per cent of the population is Muslim. For Scheduled castes, the government of Pakistan in 2017 census had given scheduled caste a separate box and Hindus as a separate box for counting. However, due to religious practices and due to their lack of education, they have wrongly counted as Hindus not a scheduled caste.

Demographic Chat of Ghotki

Total Population Castes	Muslims	Hindus	Scheduled
1,648,708	1,544,355	78,000	23,974,

Scheduled Castes of Ghotki in Male-Female Ratio in Taluka Wise Detail

Total Population	23,974,	
Male 12,630	Female	11,343
Total Population of Daharki Taluka	14,931,	
Male 7,883	Female	7,048
Total Population of Ghotki Taluka	4,038	
Male 2,111	Female	1,926
Total Population of Mirpur Mathelo	2,994	
Male 1,595	Female	1,399
Total Population of Ubauro Taluka	1,127	
Male 577	Female	550
Total Population of Khangarh Taluka	884	
Male 464	Female	420

Bureau of Statistic, Government of Pakistan Census- 2017

4. Social Bound Vulnerabilities of Scheduled Castes Women of Ghotki

In the male dominated society of district Ghotki, women are generally subservient in patriarchal social order of the district, however, schedule caste women have double marginality in this sense. They are being considered as class less and even not being considered as human. They have talent like of men; they have abilities like of men; they are brave like of men, but with regret to say that, they are being deprived of everything within the communities and outside the communities simultaneously. Women of low caste Hindus are the most oppressed people of the society (Shah, 2007).

The low status of scheduled caste women in the district is mainly because of the three major causes: poverty (economic dependency and economic vulnerability), illiteracy, and cultural norms of patriarchy. The concept of honour connected to women restricts their mobility in the society. On the other side, men enjoy all leverages, includes, political power, economic power, and cultural power simultaneously. Since, women are as the carriers of culture, tradition and the honour of the family and community, control over

women sexuality becomes the central feature in the process of forming gendered identity. Particularly, lower caste women in district Ghotki have been subject to horrendous discrimination, in all sphere of life. Lower caste women are grappling with the discrimination due to caste hierarchy and untouchability. Acute poverty, less employment opportunities, their unacceptance in society as Achhoot, and their illiteracy, are some of the prominent factors that have contributed in their social bound vulnerabilities.

Women mostly from Bagri community of schedule castes have adopted the work of begging in order to earn two-time meal for their families especially children. While conducting an interview for the current study to one of the women of Bagries community, about their profession. She replied that they do beg because, they have no opportunities to live honourable life. "It is our compulsion to beg". She further added that, sometime they face sexual exploitations, people pass derogatory comments and gaze them continuedly. They visit, shop after shop, to earn one or two rupees; some people in one hand give them one rupee and on other hand try to touch them, she lamented. People don't miss any opportunity to touch them, because they knew that they are powerless, and to whom they can complain and Who will listen to them? These women are the most vulnerable and oppressed one; their voices are muted in the social order of the district.

While conducting another interview for the current study to one of the women of the Meghwar community, researcher found that they are expert in art crafts and handicrafts. Many do their small works like sell bangles in the villages; some make Sindhi chadar and Sindhi topi. Some involves in making of house hold things especially used in villages. For example, making material for roof covering. Some work in the agriculture fields with their male counterparts. They, with regret to say that, having expertise in many fields especially in agriculture, these women get very minimal money and respect and thus living in perpetual poverty and bondage of feudal debt trap. Even though, their young daughters are not safe in the hands of these owners and powerful people. They feel insecurities, but they cannot complain against them because they need to feed their children and live in their villages.

Furthermore, on the question of girl's education, the unanimous voice was, "we have no meal to eat, how can we send our girls to schools"? When the interviewer reminded that there are government schools, why have not send them over? One reason found was that these schedule caste people are poor. They utilize children especially girls' services in earning two-time meal. And another reason of not sending children to schools is a bad-behaviour of Muslims. Muslims even in schools treat them Achhoot (untouchables). However, few families who are living in cities send their male child to schools but unfortunately again boys of the families are prioritised and ranked over girls. Hence, the social constructed barriers have stopped many children especially girls of schedule caste to get education in free atmosphere. In this respect, one can call women, as the lowest of the low, are being humiliated at the hands of powerful people of the Muslim community and their own male

members. These women are expert especially in agriculture works but unfortunately, they are the most economically vulnerable in the society.

5. Religious Bound Vulnerabilities of Low Caste Women of Ghotki

Low caste women are religious minority living under perpetual poverty and bondage. Ironically, religion is being used as a tool to fulfill sexual desires as well. It was reported that once Muslim kidnap a scheduled caste girl, there are no chances of recovery because it becomes a religious issue. Schedule caste women on the pretext of religion faces continuous mistreatment at the hands of Muslims of the district (Schaflechner, 2017).

The researcher had very long interview with schedule caste women of Meghwar community. On the name of religion, these women are facing discrimination at the hands of Muslims. Whenever, these women visit Muslim houses for selling handcrafts and for any other reason; they are being treated as untouchable. Muslim women first order them to sit on the ground, then they offer water in a separate glass and meal in a separate plate. For such treatment, two reasons were unearthed. One, because these women are not Muslims, and second, Muslim treats as in this way because Muslims have opinion that low caste women do not care about their cleanliness. However, many Muslims are also do not care about their cleanliness but people prefer to sit and eat with them and not with schedule caste people.

6. Political Bound Vulnerabilities of Low Caste Women of Ghotki.

The low cast women's representation around the district Ghotki is very complex question. The pertinent question is that who represent these women? Who has become their voices? Who is fighting for their rights? To whom they are selecting their representation through vote? As already briefly narrated that the district Ghotki is feudal based district where feudal always reaches to assemblies. When the interviewer asked the question from selected women of the district about the voting behaviour and their representation. They of the view that, they cost vote on the instructions of their male members. However, when asked from their men, they replied, it is very difficult for us to have right of expression and opinion and even choice of casting vote. They said, "we schedule caste communities, mostly are living on the lands of wadero (Land lords) and we work on their lands. So, we cost vote, on the wishes of our wadero". For example, if few schedule caste Hindus are living in the area of Mahar sardar'; they obviously go with Mahar sardar and if some families are living in the area of Lund, Pitafi and Bozdar sardars, they would vote for them. So, they cannot antagonise them by doing opposite to their wishes. After all, they have to live with them. With regards to women, they have no voices. On the votes of untouchables, big feudal reaches on the assembly's floor. Yet, schedule castes are unaware of their representation and voting power. It can be said that, indirectly, women of the district are being represented by MNAs and MPAs, but their real representation is out of question for at least in near future.

7. Age Bound Vulnerabilities of Low Caste Women of Ghotki

Scheduled caste communities in Ghotki have adopted the practice of early marriages. Girls as young as ten to twelve years are married without their consent and willingness. Researcher found early marriages remain a serious problem in schedule caste girls of the district. When inquired regarding the marriage customs of their children; one of the women, named Sehbari, told “we use to finalise grooms for our girls and marry them at their childhood. After many years when they reach at ten to twelve years, we send them with their grooms”. Another woman, disagreed with Sehbari and told that, now things have largely been changed. “We have largely abandoned the practice of selecting grooms for our girls at childhood and marriage practices. Now we incorporate sometime their wishes and consent and get married them when they reach at fourteen to sixteen years.”. However, whatever the truth is, but according to the Sindh Child Marriages Act, 2013, 18 year is the minimum age of marriages. Most of the marriages in schedule caste Hindus are arranging in their childhood which are against law and their wishes.

This is another sheer negligence on the part of the schedule caste families, when they get girls marriages at childhood. Early marriages led to psychological problems for girls. Some time they end up their lives due to acute early pregnancies and dreadful poverty and ragged economic conditions. In the other words, one the one-day, early marriages, gets over-burdens on the girls with psychological impact and on the second hand, their dependency on male members of the family with bad economic conditions, increases layers of violence and discrimination on them.

8. Forced Conversion or Faith based Conversion of Low Caste Women of Ghotki.

Women from religious minority communities remain particularly vulnerable to abuse in the country. A report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan found that at least 1000 girls belonging to Christian and Hindu communities are forced to marry Muslim men every year (Rehman, 2019). And it is an established fact that Hindus are mostly living in Sindh. The government of Sindh has done little to stop such forced marriages. According to annual report of 2019 by Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the Hindus communities in Sindh continued to report cases of forced conversion. Coming back to district Ghotki, where schedule caste women face full victimization of sexual abuse, violence and abductions. They are subject to kidnapping and forced marriages into the Muslim families.

Official reports of Human Rights commission of Pakistan, NGOS like Aurat Foundation, and other independent observer groups on minority issues, suggests that many girls of schedule caste are raped by Muslim men and often in gang rapes. These cases are rarely reported because of fear of further victimization and persecution by police of the districts. Women and girls from the low caste Hindus are easy targets for harassment because the majority knows that they are weak and cannot take any action. Ghotki district in Sindh

is notorious for conversion of Hindu girls and women. In this respect, it is important to discuss the recently most highlighted and reported case of Raveena and Reena Meghwar of Ghotki. The then India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj inquired the case from the Indian high commission in Pakistan; then Pakistani state took it seriously, and at the end the case landed in Islamabad High Court for final verdict. (Rehman, 2019). The Chief Justice of the Islamabad High Court, Athar Minallah, who, when the sisters were produced before the court, asked, "Why are such incidents repeatedly being reported from one district [Ghotki] of the Sindh province?" (Sarfaraz, 2019). After long inquiry, the court concluded that the girls were not forcibly converted (Sahoutra, 2019).

On March 20, 2019, two sisters Reena and Raveena Meghwar, disappeared from home in Dharki taluka of Ghotki district. Their family approached police station for FIR lodge but the police as usual did not cooperate- so, the next day father of girls started protest in front of police, that video got viral in minutes on social media. (Sahoutra, 2019). After that, the local police lodged an FIR of missing. However, same day a video of both sisters went viral on social media in which they claimed that they had converted to Islam and married two Muslim men. The point to ponder over is that, both girls were thirteen or fourteen years and their husbands were of thirty plus. Astonishingly, both grooms were already married and had children too. The conversion took place at the madrassa of Mia Mithu, Bharchundi Sharif, Dharki (Jahangir, 2019).

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in 2019, conducted special report on the reported forced conversion case of the district. The HRCP, reports say, they arranged an open meeting, the brother of Raveena and Reena was invited there. He disclosed in front of commission that, when his sisters were kidnapped, neither the police nor the government had responded to their protests. He claimed that, Hindus especially Hindu of schedule caste regularly faces discrimination at the hands of authorities. He claimed further that, when his sisters were brought to Islamabad court, our mother was given only five minutes to meet them at the court building and his mother reported that the girls were continuously weeping and looked fearful. To date, no one had allowed the family any further access to his sisters, he lamented (Baig, 2019).

Further, He also disclosed that cases of conversion were frequently being celebrated through jubilant processions under the guidance of Mian Mithu, in order to further harass the Hindu families. However, some participant of the meeting differed to him, and interrupted in front of commission that local people do turn to Mian Mitho for conversion and protection (Baig, 2019). Some Hindu girls, elope with Muslims to change their social and economic conditions. Whatever the reason of the conversion but many of the Hindu schedule caste conversion of the district violate section 3 and 4 of the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint Act 2013, which sets 18 years as the minimum marriage age. Most of the converts are of a tender age, some of

them are between eight to fourteen years. The girls once converted and married off are not permitted to come into contact with their families, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and mental and psychological torture. The “Sindh Hindu Marriage Act 2016” was passed to regulate Hindu marriages, but not truly implemented to stop forced marriages and conversion.

In October 2020, the head of the Parliamentary committee on forced religious conversion, senator Anwar Haq Kakar, visited Sindh’s cities Sukkur and Mirpur Mathelo of district Ghotki to get first-hand information regarding the conversion issues. He argued, “most of forced conversion have some degree of willingness on the part of the girl” (Ali, 2020). Further, in some cases, schedule caste girls fall in love with Muslim guys, he continued. While conducting interviews, the researcher found that sometime love and affections reach on the peak when girl from schedule caste or boy from Muslim background continually visit each other’s streets. It is true that some schedule caste girls voluntarily seek marriages with Muslim men as to change the economic and social order.

9. Conclusion

In a nutshell, the scheduled caste women of Ghotki are facing layers and layers of discrimination and overall, are victims of poverty, debt, bondage, slavery, forced marriages, child abuses, domestic violence and malnutrition. They are equally deprived of health and education services and kept away from economic and political opportunities.

Women are being discriminated socially, politically, economically, and educationally simultaneously. This paper argues that lower caste women be given proper education, be given respectable, honourable and equal social status in the society. Women be given education and equal economic opportunities and freedom of expression. At the end, government of Sindh not only pass laws to protect these vulnerable women but ensure its implementation in true spirit.

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