

What it means to be a Dalit child in Bihar: Influence of cultural practices, social norms and gender dynamics in the journey of Dalit children

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ABSTRACT

This study is an inquiry into the violation of the rights of Dalit children in Bihar in the context of the behavior and cultural dimensions of the problem. It has tried to look into the issue of violation of rights among Dalit children adopting a broad contour rather than being issue-centric. Since the rights of children are inalienable and issues are interconnected with each other in the context of family, surroundings, social, cultural, and normative practices, this study tried to look at it through a multi-dimensional approach. The study was conducted through a field survey of 400 households in 20 Gram Panchayats across 10 districts of Bihar. The survey was supplemented with FGDs with groups of Dalit children, boys and girls; and adult community members like parents and teachers; and in-depth interviews from Dalit communities. There are some important findings from the survey which indicate that within Dalit families, gender inequity and practices that perpetuate gender discrimination exist. Girls and boys were confined to the normative behavior of gender. The survey found that some of the social and cultural practices that harmed children, especially girls, were still in practice in Dalit communities. Some of these are in context with social norms in general and child labour, child marriage and reproductive maternal & child health in particular. Therefore, promoting behavioral change through education and training for those responsible for protecting the rights of Dalit children is essential for achieving long-term development within the Dalit community.

Keywords: dalit children, cultural and social norms, child marriage, child labour, reproductive maternal & child health, behaviour change

INTRODUCTION

Discrimination on the ground of caste is a bitter reality in India and this social evil is still in practice in both visible and subtle ways. Dalits or Scheduled Castes are a group that has faced discrimination for centuries from upper caste people and have been treated as social outcasts who have been deprived of even basic rights in India. They are confined to the bottommost rung of the social hierarchy. The scenario is, however, changing due to affirmative policies and programs initiated by the government and political assertion and mobilization by Dalit groups or groups empathetic to the rights of Dalits. But the progression is painfully slow, impacting women and children the most. Dalit children, in particular, are vulnerable because of their young age. Our day-to-day experience shows that Dalit children face violations of their rights in the realm of their survival, development, protection, and participation. Experiences are further worse for Dalit girls. Here, they face a double jeopardy. A field study was conducted in the state of Bihar to understand how children from Dalit households experience the day to day discrimination and what role does the socio-cultural gender norms and behavioural practices of Dalit families generate friction in the forward journey of Dalit children and Dalit girls.

Bihar is the poorest state in the country scoring lowest multidimensional poverty index (NITI Aayog: 2021). This explains the level of deprivation of Dalit children in the state who, because of their inequitable social status are far below than children from other communities. The life experiences of Dalit children are that of living in a ghetto, as in the words of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar: “Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto” (quoted in Jodhka 2002: 3350). A ghetto is also a place with its own cultural practice and social norms which because of deprived access to information and resources may continue to practice many of these norms in their crude form producing harmful results to its population mainly children and girls. These ghetto like condition continue to follow children even when they go to school or playground where children from all communities and castes come to study and play, as they are discriminated or neglected by their teachers and their classmates, forcing them not to mingle with others. With time, the outline of these ghettos have changed, however, the underlying principle of untouchability have not and they continue to mutate (Prasad: 2021). This deprivation and discrimination gets manifested in serious violation of rights of Dalit children. For instance, a study based on the primary survey of the socio-religious background of the trafficked victims by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), New Delhi found that almost a third of the victims, 32.3%, were from the Scheduled Castes, 5.8% were from the Scheduled Tribes, 21.9% from the Other Backward Classes and 17.4% from other castes. There are studies that clearly indicate an intersection between child labour and children’s Dalit identity (Chaudhary: 2020). Further, a public hearing organised by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) at Patna in 2013, suggested policy-level interventions that included the prohibition of discrimination against Dalit children in schools. The New Education Policy document (2020, p.25) recognises that ‘a multiplicity of factors, including lack of access to quality schools, poverty, social mores and customs, and language have had a detrimental effect on rates of enrolment and retention among the Scheduled Caste children’. The data published by the Education Department, Government of Bihar about drop-out rate of Scheduled Caste (SC) children in the state shows a steady decline in drop-out rate of Dalit children at primary and upper-primary level in schools between 2015-16 and 2019-20, which is an encouraging indicator. But during the same period, the drop-out rate of Dalit children at secondary level has increased sharply from 59.05% to 65.01% showing an increase in drop-out rate by 5.96%. This also indicates a decrease in transition from secondary level to senior secondary level of education by Dalit children (Bihar Economic Survey: 2021-22)

This research, done through an extensive field-level household survey of Dalit families, tries to understand the effect of cultural practices and social norms on children both from within and outside, especially among girl children. An attempt has been made to study how the socio-cultural norms impact both boys and girls and gender norms and how normative behaviour expected of boys and girls violates their rights. This study hypothesizes that cultural practices and social norms play an important role in the protection and promotion of the rights of children.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The survey was planned to be conducted in one block in each ten districts of Bihar. Two Gram Panchayats with a significant population of Scheduled Castes were selected in each block. This was done purposively to get a comprehensive picture of the violation of the rights of Dalit children. Hence, as stated in Table 1 a total of twenty Panchayats across ten districts were selected for this study. The household survey was conducted with 400 Dalit households (Table 2), covering 40 (Table-1) households in every district. For this purpose, a listing of Dalit households was prepared out of these only those households were selected for random sampling that had children. A representative sample was prepared for every Panchayat based on the number of Dalit households (HHs) there and then a proportionate number was taken from a denominator of 20 HHs in a Panchayat so that all caste groups within the Dalit community were represented. While preparing for the research design, we found that there were 14 caste groups (Table 2) within the Scheduled Caste list who were residing in the 20 Panchayats/40 villages or tolas selected for this study. Hence following the stratified random sampling technique, the number of Households to be studied from every caste congregation was calculated on a proportionate basis using simple mathematical calculation.

Table 1: Structure of Research Design

S.No.	Name of the Districts	% SC Population to total population	Sex Ratio (Child)	No. of Blocks	No. of Panchayats	No. of Dalit village/ Tolas
1	Darbhangha	15.64	931	1, Darbhanga Sadar	2	4
2	Madhepura	17.19	956	1, Guwalpada	2	4
3	Muzaffarpur	14.83	926	1, Turki	2	4
4	Samastipur	17.30	930	1, Patori	2	4
5	Patna	13.44	922	1, Danapur	2	4
6	Nawada	15.66	915	1, Kosi	2	4
7	Sheikhpura	25.47	945	1, Barbigaha	2	4
8	Munger	15.77	909	1, Kharapur	2	4
9	Jamui	18.85	923	1, Jhajha	2	4
10	Khagadia	20.60	930	1, Khagaria	2	4
	TOTAL	15.91	935	10	20	40

Census of India, 2011, Bihar Economic Survey (2020-2021)

Table 2 Count of Household surveyed in 14 caste groups within the SC category

Sl. No.	Scheduled Caste	No. of Households where the survey was conducted	Sl. No.	Scheduled Caste	No. of Households where the survey was conducted
1	Musahar	143	8	Turi	8
2	Chamar/Ravidas	90	9	Dom	5
3	Dusadh	73	10	Nat	5
4	Pasi	29	11	Lalbegi	4
5	Dhobi	16	12	Karori	4
6	Chaupal	10	13	Tatma	3
7	Rajwar	8	14	Bhangi	2
Total: 400 households					

Tools of the Study

The research design assessment tools for the study, have used a mixed method research framework combining both quantitative (through Household Schedule) and qualitative methods (through Focused Group Discussion) in alignment with the objectives of this study. The following tools were developed to address certain specific questions to understand the gender equity issues and status of children within the Dalit caste and the violation of their rights within and outside the family/community:

- (a) Household Schedule to be conducted with ten Dalit families from each village/Tola from every Panchayat in a block/district being covered in the study. With two Panchayats to be covered in every district, a total of 2 X 2 village/tolas = 40 families (Table 1) from different Dalit castes in a district would be administered the HH schedule, ultimately covering 400 Dalit Households in ten districts.
- (b) Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with parents, teachers’ boys and girls - Two FGDs were planned for every Panchayat in 10 districts to a total of 20 FGDs. Table 1 gives a descriptive picture of this. A checklist of questions in alignment with objectives was prepared. The community FGDs were conducted with the stakeholders/ village influencers who are the residents of the same habitat from a village/tolas, especially with parents and teachers. The initial questions were to initiate the conversation and build rapport gradually moving to open-ended questions concerning issues related to the rights of Dalit children in the context of traditional and cultural practices and social norms.

Procedure

Data from the household schedule was analyzed using advanced MS Excel and simple statistical calculations. Wherever required, data has been presented in the form of charts and graphs. Qualitative data has been analyzed based on the coding of keywords.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Certain socio-cultural norms are considered harmful as far as children’s attainment of rights according to their full potential is concerned. These cultural practices emerge from the belief system that a community holds in general. However, these beliefs are not static and they keep changing with the change in contexts and over some time. However, changing one’s belief is quite tough even if the practitioner is aware that a particular social belief is harmful to the family, children, and the community as a whole. To test such common practices and norms, the respondents of the household survey were given some statements which represented a particular belief and they were asked to tick the appropriate option from the following to show what they feel about it in general

Strongly agree	Agree	Can’t say	Disagree	Strongly disagree
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This was done to test the degree of their concurrence or difference to a particular cultural belief system in general and child labour, child marriage and maternal & child health in particular. The respondents were given the following statements:

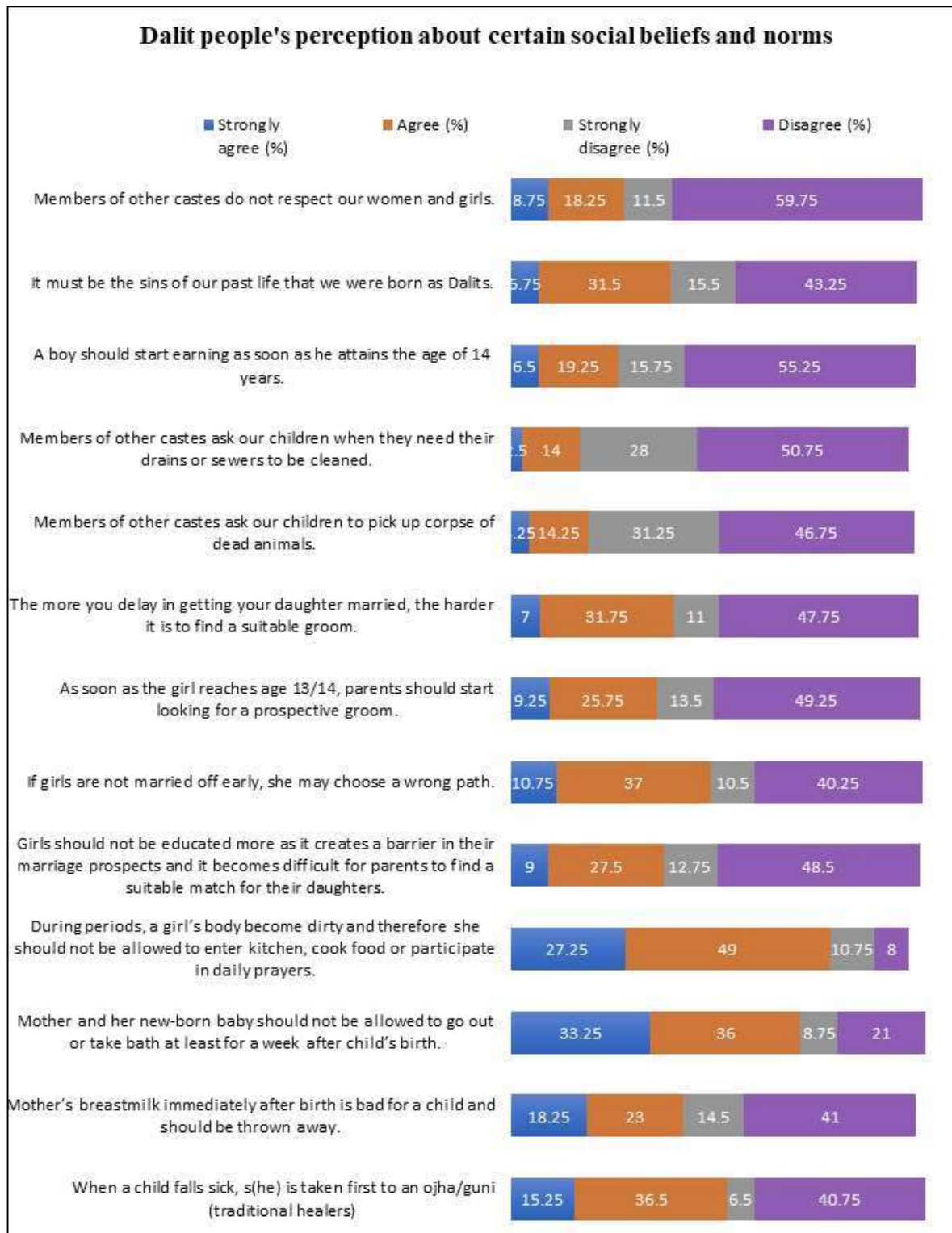
1. Members of other castes do not respect our women and girls.
2. It must be the sins of our past life that we were born as Dalits
3. A boy should start earning as soon as he attains the age of 14 years.
4. Members of other castes ask our children when they need their drains or sewers to be cleaned.
5. Members of other castes ask our children to pick up the corpses of dead animals
6. The more you delay in getting your daughter married, the harder it is to find a suitable groom.
7. As soon as the girl reaches age 13/14, parents should start looking for a prospective groom.
8. If girls are not married off early, they may choose the wrong path.
9. Girls should not be educated more as it creates a barrier in their marriage prospects and it becomes difficult for parents to find a suitable match for their daughters.
10. During periods, a girl's body becomes dirty and therefore she should not be allowed to enter the kitchen, cook food, or participate in daily prayers.
11. The mother and her newborn baby should not be allowed to go out or take a bath at least for a week after the child's birth.
12. A mother's milk immediately after birth is bad for a child and should be thrown away.
13. When a child falls sick, s(he) is taken first to an ojha/guni (traditional healer).

The above statements from serial no. 3 and 6 to 13 represent the beliefs or norms held by a significant section of society in general as well as by Dalits. But there are certain statements (e.g. from serial no. 1, 2, 4 and 5) that are concerned with Dalits only, e.g. the ones related to removing animal corpses, cleaning toilets and sewers, considering birth as Dalit as a result of past life sinful act and ill-treatment of Dalit women and girls because of their caste.

Agreement or disagreement with a particular statement and also the degree to which a respondent agrees or disagrees shows his/her perception. This also explains, in part, why Dalits in particular as a community are comparatively much behind non-Dalit castes. The problems faced by Dalit castes are a result of the structural issues and the social beliefs, cultural norms, and practices.

The chart 1 below presents these responses on the four parameters. A very small percentage of respondents could not form any opinion or chose not to say anything. The first two sections in the bar represent the respondent's agreement with the statement given on the left, whereas the last two sections represent disagreement.

Chart 1



The highest level of agreement (after adding together the percentage of both 'agree' and 'strongly agree') is observed in the following:

- I. Considering that a girl's body becomes dirty, she should not be allowed to enter the kitchen, cook food, or participate in daily prayers (76.25%)
- II. Not allowing the mother and her new-born baby to move out of the room or take a bath at least for a week after birth (69.25%)
- III. Taking a child first to a traditional healer when s(he) falls sick (51.75%)
- IV. Girls should be married off at a young age to prevent family dishonor (47.75%)
- V. Mother's milk immediately after birth is not good for a child's health and should be thrown away (41.25%)

Except for the statement at S.No.-IV, all four statements are closely related to the health and personal hygiene of mothers, children, and adolescent girls. This explains the high risk of infant mortality, child morbidity, malnourishment, and early pregnancy and reproductive, maternal and child health (RMCH) issues among girls and women in Dalit households.

The analysis of disagreements shows that the highest level of disagreements is observed in the following:

1. Members of other castes do not have respect for the women of the Dalit community (59.75%)
2. A boy should start earning as soon as he attains the age of 14 years (55.25%)
3. Members of other castes call upon the children of the Dalit community when they need their drains or sewers to be cleaned (50.75%)
4. Once the girl child reaches age 13/14, parents should start looking for a prospective groom (49.25%)
5. Girls should not be educated more as it creates a barrier in their marriage prospects and it becomes difficult for parents to find a suitable match for their daughters (48.5%)
6. The more one delays in getting his/her daughter married, the harder it is for him/her to find a suitable groom (47.75%)
7. Members of other castes ask our children to pick up the corpses of dead animals (46.75%)
8. It must be the sins of our past life that we were born as Dalits (43.25%)

On questions from point 1, 3, 7 and 8 concerning exploitative and undignified professions like cleaning the drain or sewers or removing dead animal corpses, indicating a very high level of consciousness that they should no longer get associated with these occupations as it does not give them a dignified place in the society. It also shows a strong sense of resentment towards being asked to do these by non-Dalit caste persons. This is a welcome change as it marks a major shift in Dalit children opening up to dream and aspire for decent work and dignified professions just like the children from non-Dalit castes. A higher level of disagreement indicates a higher level of consciousness among Dalits about issues like dignity for their womenfolk. They disagreed with the earning of boys by age 14 as stated in point 2 also indicates that they are favouring boys' education. On another hand, though the data from point 4, 5 and 6, a higher level of awareness among Dalits about girl child education can be seen.

The statement the more you delay in getting your daughter married, the harder it is to find a suitable groom, a majority of the respondents disagreed (47.75%). This shows that they do not believe that early

marriage or marriage at an early age is a prerequisite for a good marital match. However, 31.75% of the respondents in agreement also goes on to indicate a higher prevalence of early marriage among girls. Similarly, regarding the statement that girls should be married off at an early age to stop them from making romantic relationships and thus save the family honour, while 40.25% of the respondents disagreed, but a strikingly 37% of the respondents agreed to it. This indicates that if parents find out that their daughter has made friends with a boy or she is in a romantic relationship, they would prefer to make her sit at home rather than sending to school and marry her off before 'it is too late'. This was confirmed even in meetings with community members, which constituted mostly female members.

With another tool, FGD many strong traditional, cultural and social norms have been observed. Multiple statements conveying the challenges have been heard which need to be addressed

- “Galat sangat me padne par badlaami na hoga sir, isliye kya karengem jaldiye shaadi kara denge.” (“A girl falling into romantic relationship shall bring dishonour to the family. What can we do but marrying them off early!”- A female in Samastipur during a discussion with community members)
- “Ladki ko bhi sochna na chahiye ki agar padhne gaye hain to padhai karen na ki ladka log se dosti. Agar dosti hi karna hai to fir ma-baap kya karega, naam katwa k ghar me baitha dega.” (“Girls should also think that if they are going to school, they should just focus on their studies. But, if they make friends with boys, parents will have no option but to make them sit at home and not allow them to go to school anymore.” - A parent during an interview in Khagaria)
- “hamare school me du go bahan aati thi, wo dono hi ek ladke se khoob baat karti thi. Ek din uske pitaji dekhe to bahut maare aur naam katwa diye. Ladka lekin abhi bhi padhai kar hi raha hai.” (“Sir, there were two sisters who were studying in our school. They were close friends with a boy. One day, their father found this and beat them a lot. Both the sisters were taken out of the school and they don't come anymore. The boy, however, continues to come.” - An adolescent girl during group interactions in Patna)

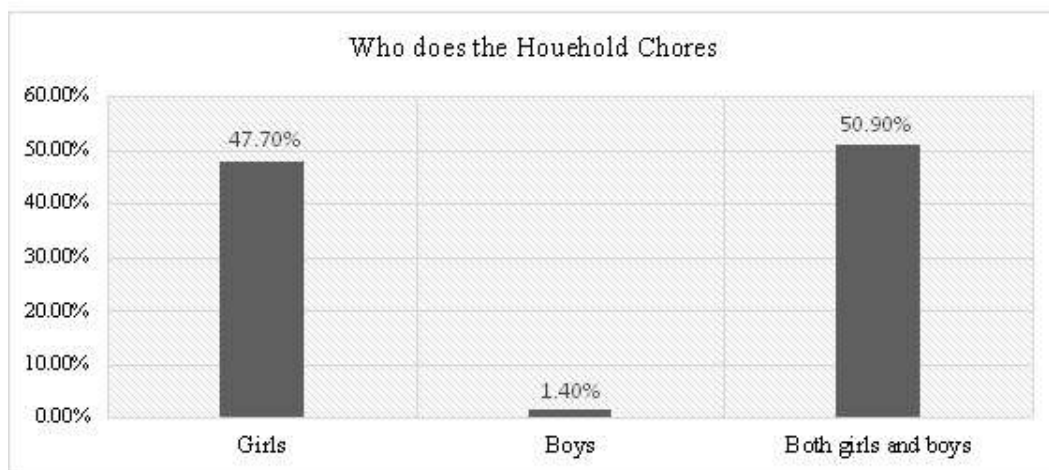
So, the picture of girls' child marriage is not clear. More instances justify its prevalence as compared to those against it. But the community has some percentage of the population not favouring it which is a good sign as they can be the trigger point to mobilise others to not favour child marriage. In addition to the above, the FGD with teachers has shown a picture in that incorporates traditional cultural or community practices of Dalits that harmed their children. This survey found that Dalit girls were generally more interested in studies than boys. This was confirmed by the teachers as well during FGD with girls in the field. But while the girls are focussing on their studies, they are still not as privileged as the boys from their families are. The older girls in the family have to assist their mothers or female members in doing the household chores, for which they get up early in the morning at around 5 a.m. Washing utensils, cleaning the household, cooking food, or assisting in things like firing the hearth, getting wood for fuel and water for cooking, doughing flour, taking care of younger kids in the family, etc. are the essential parts of a Dalit girl's life. Because of that dropout among girls is prevalent among them.

The respondents of Household survey were asked to tell who among their son and daughter, was responsible, apart from adult members of the family, for household chores like washing utensils and clothes, cleaning the house, and taking care of young children. Graph 1 shows that only 1.40% of respondents said this for a boy, whereas 47.7% said this for girls.

During FGD discussions, the boys said that they also assisted their families in getting water and wood, but they were never asked to help in the kitchen. It also shows a positive picture that 50.9% believes in sharing the burden.

“Ye sab kaam to didi log karti hai.” (“This kitchen stuff is done by older girls”.)

Graph 1 Gender Role in Dalit Households



In addition to the above, girls also assist their parents in fields during sowing and harvesting season. When this survey was being done in the month of October-November, it was a time of paddy harvest and families needed extra hands to help. So, girls of all ages and boys of younger ages said that they were helping their parents with this. This also forced them to skip classes for around a week which hampers their education. The work done by girls was not considered work, as it did not earn them any money. It was always considered ‘assistance’ or ‘help’ performed to support the family or their parents even if it contributed to supplementing the household income.

However, this is different for boys. During Focused Group Discussions and also in the household survey, it was found that many adolescent boys worked as labour- agricultural labour, construction labour, and as migrant labour and earned for the family. So, when they returned home, they did not work to help with the household chores. However, this stereotyped gender-normative behaviour is not just specific to Dalit castes; it cuts across every caste and community to varying degrees.

Conclusion

The study has reinforced the fact that Dalit children are still the most deprived in the state. There is a gap between the required situation and the existing situation. HHS and FGD findings have proved the hypothesis

that cultural practices and social norms play an important role in the protection and promotion of the rights of children.

Because of such behaviour, practice of child labour, child marriage and low level of awareness towards maternal and child care is in existence. The deprivations are multiple and therefore a multidimensional picture of reality has been presented through data, figures, and narratives.

Among girls, less awareness about menstruation and the prevalence of child marriage; for child health more dependence on traditional healers is observed. Among boys, it has been seen that education is favoured but if they earn money as child labour to support their family is appreciated.

This study recommends that the value of education for children and the family should be communicated to the parents through regular meetings and awareness campaigns. Training and sensitization of key duty bearers working at the grassroots level like Para-legal volunteers, Vikas Mitras, ANMs, ASHA workers, Aanganwadi Workers, PDS shop owners, etc. need to be undertaken to address harmful traditional and cultural practices and social norms among Dalit children. Multi-pronged gender equality strategies with a focus on the value of education; awareness about the health service provider and health especially in the context of maternal, child, and reproductive health; and aspiration development need to be devised to discourage the practice of child marriage in Dalit communities. Education for a girl becomes an incentive for the family only when both the boys and girls from Dalit families get an education saving them from child marriage and child labour. The government should seek active partnerships with such organizations to carry out sensitization and awareness programmes with both Dalit and non-Dalit communities.

The Constitution of India guarantees every person in our country the right to equality which includes the right to equal treatment and equal protection under the existing laws (Article 14). This is enshrined under Part III of our Constitution which spells out the fundamental rights. Further, our Constitution enjoins upon the State not to discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them (Article 15).

The Constitution (Eighty-sixth Amendment) Act, 2002 inserted Article 21-A in the Constitution of India to provide free and compulsory education of all children in the age group of six to fourteen years as a Fundamental Right in such a manner as the State may, by law, determine. Government of India initiated multiple schemes in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment for educational support, economic development and social empowerment (<https://socialjustice.gov.in/scheme-cat>)

These cultural practices and social norms need to be addressed as they play an important role in the protection and promotion of the rights of children. So, government, civil society, and the community at large have to work on behavioural change for those who are responsible for protecting the rights of these children, which could be the key to long-term development among Dalits

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Conflict of Interest

No competing interests exist.

Author's contributions

Both the authors contributed equally to the theoretical development, analysis, interpretation and writing of the manuscript. Mr. Sunil Kumar Jha has done the fieldwork and worked on data management.

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