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Dalit women more humiliated when raped: Study

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NEW DELHI: Dalit women who have suffered caste rapes were subjected to more humiliation than other women similarly assaulted, says a first of its kind research study detailing the psychological trauma of women raped.

When Dalit women are assaulted, offenders use foul language vilifying the woman verbally, says the survey, invariably calling them prostitutes. "The feeling of being dehumanized, of having been demeaned is far greater for Dalit women," says clinical psychologist Rajat Mitra, who led the study conducted by NGO Swanchetan that works with victims of sexual assault. Mitra notes that in any other rape, the victim is not called a 'prostitute'.

Titled 'A research study on sexual assault', it was done through detailed interviews of victims identified by state-level NGOs and government homes as well as by inviting victims to take part in the survey via posters and radio announcements. Of the 122 identified, 66 women agreed to the interview. The questionnaire's themes were identified and built on basis of data collected over the last 10 years and conducted in the last two. The respondents were across 12 states: Delhi, Meghalaya, Assam, Karnataka, Tripura, Maharashtra, UP, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Bihar and Gujarat. Being a first of its kind, interviewers too were thoroughly sensitized to the demands of the survey, says Mitra. Mean and standard deviation for each psychological parameter was calculated; t-test and Duncan's mean test used for comparative analyses.

The comparative study between Dalits and non-Dalits showed that Dalits felt anguish to a greater degree of intensity. They often see rape as "something ordained" by virtue of a double disadvantage: being Dalit and woman. "Whenever a Dalit woman is raped, it gets connected to all other sufferings and discriminations. Dalits being in a disadvantaged position and there's no resilience, no bouncing back," says Mitra.

"The women shared that during the attack, the men seemed to have more pleasure in humiliating their origins and background," adds Mitra. The report details their almost-ritualistic ostracism after the rape where older Dalit women also attempt to explain rape as "tradition".

In a qualitative assessment, the report says girls are almost prepared to expect assault. It says, "Allusions to rape by upper castes begin to appear in subtle conversations and often inflate their anxiety and depressive symptoms that begin to mark (rape) as inevitable in the mind of young Dalit girls." It is extremely important, says Mitra, for a different rehabilitation policy for Dalit women with special training for mental health professionals, judiciary and police sensitizing them to the caste angle.

The Swanchetan study records trauma on two broad themes: 'mehsoos hona' and 'halat' which include parameters of flashbacks, humiliation, hopelessness, shame, betrayal, loss of meaning, dehumanization, feelings of rage and distrust among a host of psychological measures. The severity and frequency of flashbacks ("My mind gets flooded with violent, unusual images that I can't stop") was measurably much greater for Dalit women. In fact, they notched higher trauma levels on every factor studied except for 'despair' and feeling betrayed. This, concludes Mitra, also demonstrates how rape for Dalits, is an inter-generational trauma and not restricted to a one-time event.

The study assumes special significance with the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva mooting that caste-based discrimination be recognized as a human rights violation. "When discriminatory attacks are systematic and avenues for redressal are non-existent or ineffective, certainly caste violence is against human rights. To that end, international condemnation will have an impact in forcing the redressal machinery to work on caste crimes as a priority area," says social scientist Shyam Babu, fellow, Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. To that end, such a study proves a guide for action.

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