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BEYOND MAINSTREAM FEMINISM: DALIT WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION

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Abstract

In India, the rigid caste system imposes a unique and brutal form of oppression on Dalit women, who are marginalized at the intersection of gender, caste, and class. This "triple exploitation" means they face not only the patriarchy that all women confront but also extreme caste-based discrimination and economic deprivation. Their struggles are often silenced or overlooked, both by mainstream feminism—which has historically centred upper-caste experiences—and within the Dalit movement itself, where their specific gendered oppression can be sidelined.

In response, Dalit women have forged their own powerful movement. Since the 1960s, voices like Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar have used literature to articulate their unique reality, challenging dominant narratives. Scholars like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege argue that Dalit women must be the authentic narrators of their own experiences. They call for a feminism that truly understands how caste and gender intertwine to create distinct forms of power and oppression. This perspective is not about creating division, but about building a more inclusive and effective struggle for justice—one that acknowledges the complex layers of discrimination Dalit women face and centres their leadership in the fight for a truly equitable society.

Key words*: Dalit Women, Intersectionality, Caste Oppression, Triple Exploitation, Dalit Feminism, Patriarchy, Brahmanical Feminism, Self-Representation, Social Justice, Ambedkarite Movement*

Introduction

Caste hierarchy is a social stratification system that is unique to India and is based on the Hindu religion's principles. It is a complex and rigid system that divides people into different social classes or castes based on their birth, occupation, and purity. The caste hierarchy has been a significant source of oppression and discrimination for Dalit women. They are situated at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and are often subjected to multiple forms of oppression, including caste and gender-based discrimination. As Dalits, they are excluded from mainstream society and face social and economic marginalization. As women, they face gender-based violence, discrimination, and inequality, which are exacerbated by their caste

status. Dalit women are denied access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities and are often forced into low-wage and exploitative work. They are also subjected to sexual violence and abuse, equally from the upper caste men and also their own community. The triple exploitation that Dalit women face is a term used to describe the systematic oppression and discrimination that they face due to their gender, caste, and economic status. It is a unique form of oppression that is specific to Dalit women in India, who are at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Despite these challenges, Dalit women have been active participants in social and political movements, advocating for their rights and the rights of their communities. They have been at the forefront of the struggle against caste discrimination and have played a vital role in the Ambedkarite movement. As he argued that women's rights were an integral part of the Dalit movement, as they were subjected to a triple oppression due to their caste, gender, and class status. Dalit women responded to Ambedkar's call for social reform and actively participated in the movement, organizing themselves into women's organizations and fighting for their rights. They challenged traditional patriarchal norms and caste-based hierarchies and demanded equal opportunities in education, employment, and political representation.

Dalit women articulation

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of the earliest voices of Dalit feminism in India. During this period, Dalit women writers and artists began to express their experiences of caste and gender discrimination through literary and artistic expressions. These expressions highlighted the unique challenges faced by the women of Dalit community and challenged the dominant narrative of the time, which often ignored the experiences and life stories of Dalit women.

One of the most prominent voices of Dalit feminism during this period was Baby Kamble, who wrote the autobiography "The Prisons We Broke" in Marathi. In her book, Kamble wrote about the intersectional oppression she faced as a Dalit woman and the struggles she and other Dalit women faced in their daily lives. Her book is considered a landmark in Dalit feminist literature and has been translated into several languages. Urmila Pawar is another notable writer who emerged during this period. Her book "Aaydan" (The Weave of My Life) is a memoir that reflects on her experiences as a Dalit woman growing up in Maharashtra. In her book, Pawar writes about the double marginalization faced by Dalit women and the struggles they face in a patriarchal society. Shantabai Kamble was a poet and

activist who wrote about the oppression faced by Dalit women. Her poetry was deeply personal and reflected her own experiences of caste and gender discrimination. Her work helped to bring attention to the unique struggles faced by Dalit women and the need for a feminist discourse that takes into account the intersectional nature of oppression.

Overall, the emergence of Dalit feminist voices in the 1960s and 1970s marked an important moment in Indian feminist history. Since the experiences of Dalit women were frequently disregarded or marginalised in mainstream feminist discourse, which favours the experiences of upper-caste women, these authors and artists challenged the prevailing narrative and gave Dalit women a forum to express their worries and hardships. There is a clear need for a discourse based on the experiences of Dalit women, as seen by the lack of discussion of Dalit women's issues in India's mainstream women's movement. The special difficulties that Dalit women encounter must be considered in this discussion, along with the ways that caste, gender, and class intersect with their oppressive experiences.

The "differences" in dalit women voices

Gopal Guru noted in his paper "Dalit Women Talk Differently" that both internal and external influences influence Dalit women's experiences. The effect of non-Dalit forces that normalise the problem of Dalit women is referred to as an external element. The voices of Dalit women may be marginalised as a result of these outside influences manifesting as prevailing social discourses that ignore the interconnectedness of gender and caste. Mainstream Indian feminism has come under fire for its casteist and classist views, which erase the identity of Dalit women by giving priority to the issues of upper-class, upper-caste women. Dalit women's experiences of oppression are thus not sufficiently addressed, and they are left out of the mainstream feminist conversation.

On the other hand, internal factors refer to the patriarchal domination within the Dalit community itself. Dalit women face discrimination based on both their gender and caste, and this intersectionality shapes their experiences of oppression. Patriarchal attitudes within the Dalit community often lead to the subjugation of Dalit women, and their voices are not given the same importance as Dalit men. Dalit women are often subjected to violence, sexual exploitation, and discrimination within their own community, further marginalizing their voices and experiences.

The intersectionality of caste and gender creates a unique experience of oppression that is not appropriately addressed by mainstream feminist discourse or the Dalit movement. As a result,

it is crucial to acknowledge the unique experiences of Dalit women and to recognize them as a distinct identity separate from both women and Dalits. By recognizing Dalit women as a distinct identity, we can acknowledge and address the unique challenges and experiences they face. This requires an internal retrospection within both the feminist and Dalit movements, where the particular experiences of Dalit women and the ways in which they are marginalized are acknowledged.

Gopal Guru then critiques the mainstream Indian feminism for their feminism is centred around its exclusionary and discriminatory attitude towards Dalit women. He highlights the problematic casteist and classist approach adopted by mainstream feminism that prioritizes the concerns of upper-class, upper-caste women. Dalit women's voices are marginalised as a result of this method's tendency to overlook the intersections of gender and caste. Further destroying Dalit women's identity is the disregard for the underlying tensions between high caste and Dalit women. Guru's critique highlights a crucial issue in mainstream feminism and its lack of inclusivity. Indian feminism, like many other movements, needs to acknowledge and recognize the unique experiences of Dalit women, who face not only gender discrimination but also caste-based oppression. Ignoring these experiences perpetuates the discrimination faced by Dalit women and reinforces existing power structures that maintain the status quo.

Therefore, Guru emphasizes the need to recognize and acknowledge the unique experiences of Dalit women as a distinct identity, separate from both women and Dalits. Only then can mainstream Indian feminism become truly inclusive and representative of all women, regardless of their caste or class.

The third argument put forward by Guru emphasizes the importance of authentic narrators of experiences in the context of the representation of Dalit women. According to Guru, it is crucial to recognize the voices of Dalit women as distinct from both women and Dalits, and this requires a deeper understanding of their unique experiences of marginalization. When non-Dalits speak for Dalit women, there is always a risk of misrepresentation and appropriation, and this can further marginalize their voices.

To address this issue, Guru advocates for an identity-based articulation where Dalit women themselves speak about their experiences. To achieve this, an introspective analysis that recognises the unique experiences of Dalit women and their marginalisation within the feminist and Dalit movements is necessary. In this way, the emergence of Dalit feminism is

characterized by the recognition of Dalit women's voices and the need for them to organize separately from Dalit men in both the political and cultural fields.

The intersectionality of gender and caste refers to the ways in which women of Dalit community experience discrimination and marginalization due to their caste and gender identity. Dalit women are situated at the intersection of two marginalized identities, making them more vulnerable to various forms of oppression and discrimination. Their experiences cannot be understood simply by analysing the impact of their gender or caste in isolation; rather, the intersection of these identities creates unique experiences that require a nuanced understanding.

Dalit women's voices are marginalised because mainstream feminist rhetoric frequently ignores the intersections of gender and caste. Historically, feminist movements have ignored the unique experiences of Dalit women in favour of focussing on the experiences of upper-caste, upper-class women. Similarly, the Dalit movement has often focused on the experiences of Dalit men, overlooking the specific struggles faced by Dalit women.

Guru argues that it is important to recognize and centre the voices of Dalit women in social movements aimed at liberation and social justice. This means creating spaces for Dalit women to speak about their experiences, acknowledging the specific challenges they face, and advocating for their rights and liberation. By understanding the intersectionality of caste and gender and recognizing the unique experiences of Dalit women, social movements can become more inclusive and effective in fighting against various forms of oppression and discrimination.

The tension between identity and positionality in the Dalit community requires further exploration, but it is clear that Dalit women's agency and self-representation are essential for challenging dominant narratives and achieving social justice. In addition to highlighting the necessity of inclusive social movements and genuine representation, the paper offers a critical viewpoint on the intersections of caste and gender.

Rege’s Discourse on difference

In addition to emphasising the social relationships that influence women's experiences and access to power, Rege's feminist theory advocates for a more complex understanding of the interconnections of gender, caste, class, and race. Her writings emphasise the need for a feminist movement that is more intersectional and inclusive and that considers the varied experiences of women from various backgrounds.

She eloquently theorises the earlier feminist movements and critiques their focus on universal womanhood and a single axis of oppression based on gender. Rege argues that the feminist movement needs to move beyond this limited perspective and focus on the complex intersections of gender, caste, class, and race that shape women's experiences.

Rege critiques the earlier feminist movements for their narrow focus on white, middle-class, university-educated women's experiences and their assumption that all women share a universal experience of oppression based solely on their gender. Rege argues that this focus on womanhood as a singular category led to the exclusion of women from different racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

Rege proposes that feminist analysis should transition from a straightforward comprehension of difference to an examination of the social relations that transform difference into social oppression. She argues that it is imperative to comprehend how gender, caste, class, and race intersect and shape women's experiences and access to power. For example, a Dalit woman's experience of gender oppression is shaped by her caste position, and her experience of caste oppression is shaped by her gender.

Rege also critiques the earlier feminist movements for their focus on finding the original cause of patriarchy and women's oppression. She argues that this focus on causes ignores the ways in which social relations and power structures are continually reproduced and maintained. Instead, feminist analysis needs to focus on how social relations create and maintain power hierarchies, and how these power hierarchies intersect with gender, caste, class, and race.

Rege critiques the prevailing historiography of late colonial India, which prioritized Indian nationalism and excluded the histories of non-Brahmanical movements. Feminist historiography, according to Rege, has made a radical breakthrough by redefining gender and patriarchy, and developing links between reforms and realignments of patriarchies in terms of caste and class hierarchy.

Rege also discusses Partha Chatterjee's dichotomy of "ghar" (private or spiritual domain) and "bahar" (public or materialist domain), which was in congruence with gendered social roles. Upper-caste women were identified with the private or spiritual domain, leading to the exclusion of middle-class women's lives and changes from political negotiations. Chatterjee assumed that women's issues were resolved by nationalist struggle, but Rege criticizes him for dismissing non-Western-inspired movements such as the Ambedkarite movement, which had high participation from women.

In addition, Rege emphasises the work of Jyotiba Phule, who opposed patriarchal male social reformers and supported Bali Rajya (a symbol of equality for all men) over Ram Rajya (based on Varna Ashram Dharma). Muktabai, Tarabai Shinde and Mukta Salve were Dalit feminists who critiqued Brahminical patriarchy as well as patriarchy within their own community. Ambedkar's practice of holding Dalit women's conferences in addition to public meetings led to the organisation of autonomous Dalit women in the Ambedkarite movement in the 1930s. The importance of women's sexuality in upholding the caste system was highlighted in Ambedkar's thesis on caste and the causes of male dominance and women's subordination.

The Shramik Mukti Sangathana and the Satyashodak Communist Party are two of the organisations that emerged in India as a result of the new social movements that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. These movements did not relegate Dalit women to token participation; rather, they acknowledged their important role. But the same cannot be said for the women's movement or the Dalit Panther movement.

Although the Dalit Panther movement played a major role in the cultural uprising of the 1970s, it victimised sexual beings and degraded women to nothing more than mothers. However, the women's movement was split into two groups: the independent women's group and the left-party-based women's front. They combined caste and class, while the former concentrated on concerns pertaining to the economy and the workplace. The independent women's movement brought violence to the public's focus, but it did not question Brahmanism and firmly believed in sisterhood.

The mainstream ideas of state and development came into being as the women's movement gained traction. The majority of feminists felt that studying women's conditions in India required a materialist framework. But even in those days, caste was less significant than class. For example, the autonomous women's movement viewed the dowry campaign as patriarchal violence within the family, while the left-based front viewed it as a reflection of India's growing capitalism. Rege contends, however, that the Brahmanic process cannot be separated from the dowry practice.

Young middle-class women marched under the flag of "citizens" during the Mandal movement against various forms of reservations, including those for Dalit women. In another instance of caste violence against Pimpri and Chundru Deshmukh, upper-caste women participated as assertive feminists. However, when an active kotwal of the Dalit community was killed by upper-caste men, the same upper-caste women came forward to support them, claiming that

the kotwal was a pervert. This demonstrates how Brahmanical patriarchy works in several ways to counter Dalit resistance.

As demonstrated in the case of Bhanwari Devi, a Saathin who opposed child marriage, the growing presence of Dalit women in positions of authority and knowledge-making processes sparked a response in the form of kinship rape or murder. This kind of backlash highlights the need for a dialogue between Dalit feminists and mainstream feminists to redefine gendered spaces.

Ambedkar's theory of caste, which delineates the division of labour, sexual division of labour, and division of sexual labour, is another source of inspiration for Rege. This highlights the existence of multiple patriarchies that overlap with each other.

Several independent Dalit women's organisations, such as the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sangathana, the All-India Dalit Women's Forum, and the National Federation of Dalit Women, came into being in the 1990s. Although these organisations hold varying non-Brahminical ideologies, they are all in favour of OBC women's reservation. Gopal Guru's paper "Dalit Women Talk Differently," which makes the case that dalit women must communicate differently for both internal and external reasons, is cited by Rege. An external component is the homogenisation of the issue of Dalit women by non-Dalit forces, while an internal factor is the dominance of Dalit men in the Dalit struggle. According to Guru, a person's social location shapes how they perceive the world, hence non-Dalit feminists' portrayals of Dalit women's difficulties may be viewed as less legitimate and genuine.

Rege contends that concerns about the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sangathana becoming into a neo-Buddhist women's organisation are unfounded given the movement's historical developments in Maharashtra. She does, however, provide a warning that Brahmanism is not solely the absence of Trisaran and Panchsheel.

Three main overlapping viewpoints have currently developed from the politics and struggle of Dalit women: the Bahujan Mahila Mahasangh, the Dalit Mahila Sangathnna, and the Marxist/Phule Ambedkar position of Satyashodhak Mahila Samaj. By fusing the fight for political dominance with a cultural revolution, the Bahujan Mahila Mahasangh aims to bring back the Bahujan tradition. Since brahmanical and community-based justice are maintained, the secular stance is criticised. The Dalit Mahila Sangathnna criticizes the existence of "Manuvadi Sanskriti" in terms of patriarchy among dalit men who otherwise trace their lineage from Ambedkar-Phule ideology. The sangathan centres its manifesto around the most dalit of

dalit women. To address the issue of converts losing their customary jobs and moving into the service industry, the Christi Mahila Mahasangh was established for Dalit Christian women.

The non-brahmanical rendering resulted in three kinds of responses from the autonomous women's group. The non-dialectical position grants dalit feminists' leadership but does not revise the non-brahmanical framework. The left position collapses caste into class and questions the distinct materiality of caste. The self-reflexive position accepts the need for reformulating and revising feminist politics from a dalit perspective.

The Dalit feminist perspective is viewed as emancipatory, according to Rege, because its knowledge is derived from the visible experiences of Dalit women. There are several, sometimes conflicting, perspectives about Dalit women, though, and the group is not uniform. Thus, it is possible to question the Dalit feminist perspective.

In conclusion, there have been a number of changes to the feminist discourse in India, especially with the rise of the Dalit feminist movement. This movement has brought attention to the ways that gender, caste, and class overlap as well as the necessity for a more complex understanding of feminist politics in India. Since it is based on the real-life experiences of Dalit women, the feminist perspective has been viewed as emancipatory. However, it is crucial to recognise that this category encompasses a variety of sometimes conflicting perspectives. The feminist discourse in India needs to continue to engage with the dalit feminist movement and incorporate their perspectives and experiences to create a more inclusive and intersectional feminist framework. This would require revising and reformulating feminist politics from a dalit perspective, which would necessitate a self-reflexive approach and an openness to interrogating and revising one's preconceived notions. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that brahmanical patriarchy functions through various mechanisms to suppress Dalit resistance, and only through collective efforts can we aspire to dismantle these structures and establish a more just and equitable society. In the end, the goal of Indian feminist discourse must be to develop an intersectional and inclusive framework that recognises and tackles the experiences of all women, especially those who have traditionally been marginalised and oppressed.

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