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Introduction

Casteing Gender: Intersectional Oppression of Dalit women

By Bhushan Sharma¹ and K.A. Geetha^{2*}

Feminism meant for empowerment of women has excluded women who are beaten down daily—both physically and mentally—and who lack consciousness, knowledge, and power to change their condition in life—a statement made by bell hooks in 1984 offering seminal insights on the lopsided functioning of the feminist movement is still relevant today. This is further strengthened by Kimberle Crenshaw's (1991) assertion that feminist theory addresses only one form of marginalized identity (gender) and neglects the intersection of multiple operational identities. As a result, there are many girls and women for whom feminism remains remote and abstract.

Dalit women fall under this category; existing in the Indian subcontinent, they have unique lived experiences, as this faction is comprised of the intersectional oppressions of two groups both oppressed on account of their birth i.e., being Dalits and women. The doubly marginalized status of these women makes them a separate category whose experience of being Dalit women cannot be understood from the location of just being a Dalit or only a woman. It includes the interrelations and interactions of these two identities which reinforce each other. As a result, the awareness of Dalit women's issues has neither been addressed by mainstream feminism nor by the Dalit literary movement, which has been largely patriarchal. They remain in the category of "outsider within"³. This *JiWS* Special Issue projects gender through the lens of caste and focuses on women and caste in the Indian subcontinent.

Women of the Dalit community endure the burden of multiple oppressions of caste, class, and gender. However, caste remains the main root of their sufferings. The caste system is an evil practice, and it is prohibited by the constitution of India yet persists in Indian society because it is

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³ The term 'outsider within' was coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), the creator of *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). The concept of the 'outsider within' refers to a social location or marginalized space that marks the boundary between groups of unequal power (Collins 2002: 300). Individuals acquire identity or status through their placement in these social locations.

so deeply ingrained in the minds of the people and thrives on social norms and ideologies. The Indian caste system is a social hierarchy, a closed society, in which the position and status of the individual in the society is decided by birth. The notion of 'purity and pollution' (unclean) and 'endogamy' (marriage within caste) are its characteristics. Caste has both religious and political derivation and demeanor. Socio-religious Hindu stratification of society gave rise to the *Varna* (order/color/class) system. The Hindu social order, according to the holy texts, consists of a four-fold *Varna*-based society. The highest is that of the *Brahmins* (priests and teachers), below them the *Kshatriyas* (rulers and warriors), then the *Vaishyas* (traders and merchants), and finally the *Shudras* (servants), who did menial jobs for the other three *Varnas*. The *Varna* system was unique in its nexus of inherent caste and class structures. A person's occupation was inextricably linked with the caste identity. Foregrounding the class divisions embedded within the caste system, Marx and Engels (1845-46: 63) observed that the crude form of the division of labor found among the Indians called forth the caste system. They criticized the idealist belief that the caste system produced the crude form of division of labor. Thus, for Marx (1846: 158), the caste regime was also a particular division of labor (qt Bapuji 2009: 340-341).

Louis Dumont⁴ states, "There is in actual fact a fifth category, the untouchables, who are left outside the classification" (1999, 66-67). They are called "*Avarnas*" or 'outcastes.' They perform menial and impure work and hence are considered polluted and relegated to a peripheral existence in the casteist society. Historically they were referred to as 'Untouchables,' and called the 'Depressed classes,' 'Harijans,' and 'Dalit,'⁵ which is their cultural and political identity and also "a symbol of change and revolution" (Zelliot 1996: 268). In the 1930s, Ambedkar spearheaded a revolutionary movement that denounced the established norms and ideology of the caste Hindus⁶. The movement interrogated the validity of the caste system based on which Hindus in India were socially stratified. Dalits articulated their dissent against the dominant ideology not only in social and political platforms but also through literary forms. Literature became an effective tool to express their protest and anguish against the domination of the Caste Hindus. As an arm of the Dalit liberation movement, Dalit literature not only reveals the angst of being a Dalit in a caste-driven society, it also simultaneously registers a revolutionary discourse that challenges the hegemonic caste structures of the society (Geetha, 2011). Therefore, the Dalit literary movement is not purely a literary movement but also a "social movement for the liberation of Dalits and to bring about fundamental changes in the Indian social order" (Bhoite and Bhoite 1977: 74). The burgeoning of Dalit literature began in the 1960s in Maharashtra, spread to other regions, and is now established as a pan Indian genre. While Dalit literature portrays the debased existence of Dalits, the representation foregrounds Dalit males as protagonists, the central figures of the suffering, subjugating women's miseries, struggles, endurance, and their roles in the community.

Akin to a system of graded inequalities within the caste system, there are multiple "graded patriarchies" structured within the Hindu society (Chakravarti 2018: 79). While Brahminical patriarchy is at the top of this hierarchy, there are different forms of women's oppression, with specific gender and social norms functioning within each caste community. Hence, women's oppression is not unitary in Indian society, and women submit to the gender norms of their

⁴ Louis Dumont (1911-1998) was a French anthropologist and an associate professor at Oxford University during the 1950s.

⁵ Dalit in Marathi means the "downtrodden," "oppressed," or "rooted in the soil."

⁶ Castes that were assigned a high position in the caste system were called upper-castes. In recent years, the term upper-caste is being substituted with the term Caste Hindu or *Savarnas*. In this paper, the terms caste Hindus, *Savarnas*, dominant castes, and upper castes are used interchangeably.

respective caste. As a result, the sufferings of the upper-caste women are different from those of the lower caste. The former generally suffer only gender-based oppression. They experience gender discrimination and domestic violence which may be related to gendered domestic labor, dowry, female infanticide, and “honor killing”. On the contrary, the lower social, political, and economic status of Dalit women makes them undergo the rigidities of double patriarchal oppression. One is intrinsic patriarchy, which is the oppression of Dalit women by the men of their community. They are taxed, abused, and beaten by the men within the families. The second is the extrinsic patriarchy, which is the oppression and exploitation of Dalit women by the men of dominant castes. They experience economic and labor exploitation and also endure violence by men of the dominant castes. They suffer from constant threats of sexual molestation and rape. Uma Chakravarti proclaims, “Upper-caste men have had sexual access to lower caste women, an aspect of the material power they have over the lower castes” (2018: 81). They are thus victims of intersectional oppression of caste, class, and gender, which are interlocking in nature (Sharma and Kumar 2020). They are also the victims of religious practices such as *Devadasis*⁷ and *muralis*⁸/*joginis*⁹ (Geetha, 2021).

Therefore, it would be appropriate to say that issues of Dalit women are social rather than personal. Their problems remain unaddressed in the mainstream Indian feminist movement that was largely initiated by women from the dominant castes. Their resistance towards patriarchal structures was confined to their personal experiences of gender oppression. They failed to address the specific problems of women of the Dalit community related to caste discrimination, poverty, hunger, public violence, and sexual exploitation. The intersectional oppression, struggles, endurance, and contributions of Dalit women were also marginalized within the patriarchal Dalit political and literary movement, and thus they remain “outsiders within.” The masculinization of the Dalit movement and the *Savaraniisation* of womanhood led to an exclusion of Dalit women from this movement and subjected them to interlocking oppressions of caste, class, and gender (Rege 2003: 91). The exclusion of Dalit women from both the mainstream feminist and Dalit movement led to the emergence of a Dalit feminist movement in the 1990s.

The “outsider within” status of Dalit women bestow them with a sort of double vision as living on the edge of society makes them conscious of patterns of social constructions that may not be comprehensible to sociological insiders: “I am speaking from a place in the margins where I am different, where I see things differently” (hooks 1990: 208). Similarly, the marginal location of Dalit women helps them to understand that advantaged groups use strategies and ideologies to restrict them to the periphery, thus limiting their access to societal resources and institutions that control, define, and relegate them. Therefore, they began voicing their collective issues both in writings as well as through Dalit Women Organizations and activism.

Numerous scholars developed a Dalit Feminist Standpoint: “Dalit Women Talk Differently” by Gopal Guru (1995); “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position” by Sharmila Rege (1998); “Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It a More Emancipatory Force?” by Chhaya Datar (1999); “In Her Own Write: Writing from a Dalit Feminist Standpoint” by Uma Chakravarti (2013), and others. Dalit Women’s Organizations such as 'All India Dalit Women Rights Forum' and 'The National Federation of Dalit Women' (established in 1995 by Dalit woman activist Ruth Manorama) serve

⁷ In Southern India, a *devadasi* was a female artist/dancer who was dedicated to worship and serve a deity or a temple for the rest of her life.

⁸ Murali is a Dalit girl offered to God Khandoba/deity in marriage.

⁹ Jogini is an illegal practice, where women are turned into sex slaves by getting them “married to a deity.”

as platforms for Dalit women to address their concerns. Similarly, Dalit feminist literature exposes the myriad problems of Dalit women compounded by caste, gender, and class structures.

From the 1980s onwards there was an avalanche of life narratives of Dalit women written in Indian regional languages. Notable among them are Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot* (1981), Shanta Bai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chitrakatha* (1983), Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1985), P. Sivakami's *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum* (1989), Bama's *Karukku* (1993) and *Sangati* (1994), and Kaushalya Baisentri's *Dohra Abhishaap* (1999), among others. The use of regional languages to write life narratives points to their social intentionality, which made many scholars import the lexicon "Testimonios"¹⁰ for these writings. The visibility of the texts has been attributed to the political commitment of their translators, who skillfully introduce readers to the overall regional landscape, social structure, and culture (Pandit 2010). Hence, Dalit Feminism gives Dalit women a legitimate space to articulate their distinct, specific experiences as both Dalits and Women. While the double oppression of Dalit women is the common theme in Dalit women's literature, it should be pointed out that the context of the narratives are diverse and range from field laborers in rural villages to office-goers in urban centers. Dalit women characters in the narratives vary from women who have internalized caste ideologies acquiescing caste and gender hierarchy and those who resist the hegemonic structures of caste and gender.

Contributions to this Issue

The *JiWS* Special Issue is one effort among many to intervene in the marginal spatial reality of Dalit women and encourage dialog and liberatory transformation around the issues of Dalit women. With a variety of perspectives from eleven researchers and activists, this issue has introduced a breadth of subjects relating to gender, complicated further when intersected by caste. The introductory study in this volume "We are Working for a Caste-free India", an interview with M. M. Vinodini by Bonnie Zare, is a first-hand account of the travails of Dalit women in contemporary times. As a Dalit feminist, Vinodini draws our attention to the deplorable social and economic condition of Dalit women. In particular, the interview highlights the callousness of the State during the pandemic in its neglect of the safety of Dalit women working as cleaners in hospitals. Vinodini's short stories "Block" and "Villian's Suicide" included in this volume are a shocking and disturbing revelation of the deplorable and precarious lives of Dalit women working as agricultural laborers and manual scavengers.

"Absence in Presence: Dalit Women's Agency, Channar *Lahala*, and Kerala Renaissance," an article by Binu K. D. and Manosh Manoharan reveals the erasures in Dalit women's historiography and asserts that historical segments of Dalit women's protests have been excluded in Dalit writings. The researchers seek to demonstrate that the newly emerging Dalit feminism in Kerala has an unrecorded history of the early caste struggles such as the *Channar* revolt. The rectification of the erasures by surfacing the tradition of the historical assertion of gendered caste subaltern is a new epistemological effort that strengthens the cause of Dalit feminism.

"Dissenting Dalit Voices: An Analysis of Select Oral Songs of Dalit Women in Kerala," research done by Anne Placid, argues that oral songs contain the feminist consciousness of the gendered caste subaltern in the nascent form and provides a lineage to contemporary Dalit feminist writings. The caste and gender configurations in the literary and socio-historic spheres, which either misrepresent or eliminate Dalit women's voices in the mainstream chronicles, uphold the

¹⁰ In a testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment, and struggle. Thus, the narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating (Beverley 1992, 94).

notion that the age-old caste subjugation was unresponsively endured by Dalit women. Thus, gendered caste subaltern in the mainstream narratives is interrogated and countered by the oral songs of Dalit women in Kerala.

Mayurakshi Mitra's article, "Insidious Interlocking of Gender and Caste: Consequences of Challenging Endogamy" emphasizes that each caste is regarded as a closed group in which the institution of marriage plays a significant role in the preservation of caste order and hierarchy. Mitra explores the inextricable link between caste and gender and analyses plays of a Bengali Dalit playwright, Raju Das, to explicate how endogamy is endorsed to maintain the caste order and the ideologies which perceive women as upholders of caste purity.

"Gendered and Casteist Body: Cast(e)ing and Castigating the Female Body in select Bollywood Films," a research article by Bidisha Pal, Partha Bhattacharjee, and Priyanka Tripathi, analyzes the lopsided relationship of gender and caste and the intertwining body politics in select Bollywood films. The researchers examine the two movies, *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Article 15* (2019), which are based on real incidents, and explicate how marginalized women are imprisoned and ghettoized in the "mutual bracketing" of caste and gender.

Parveen Kumari and Anupama Vohra in their article, "Mother's Story: The 'Third Space' for Emancipation in Dalit Women's Life Narratives" analyze the select life narratives of Dalit women to underline the significance of mothers in the shaping of Dalit feminist identity. Through an in-depth analysis of Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* (2006), Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* (2017), the authors reveal the oppressive lived experiences of Dalit women. Embedded in the narration is the impact of Mother's stories which become a source of resilience and an emancipatory space for Dalit women.

Rafia Kazim's article "Who will Speak for the *Pasmandaa* Women?" Dalits, Women, Muslims, and the Politics of Representation" offers seminal insights on the conspicuous absence of Muslim Dalit women—*Pasmandaa*—within Dalit feminist spaces. By excluding these severely disadvantageous women from their respective agenda, feminist and Dalit activists have contributed towards their perpetual marginality. Apart from discussing the unaccounted absences of *Pasmandaa* women, the paper highlights the insouciant attitude of the *Pasmandaa* leaders towards them which raises questions about the very efficacy of the *Pasmandaa* movement.

"Dalit Women in History: Struggles, Voices, and Counterpublics," an article by Tarushikha Sarvesh, Rama Shanker Singh, and Tehzeeb Alam argues that history is a projection of realities through the lens and parameters of historians and acceptance of historical accounts depend much on hegemonic structures and knowledge. The marginalized remain muted, and as a result, the present condition of Dalit women is rooted in their oppressed past and their issues remain unaddressed despite the rich social experiences they carry and represent.

Priteegandha Naik conceptualizes "Dalit-futurism", a term for Indian science fiction that discusses caste with reference to the emerging technoscientific culture. In her article, "Dalit-futurist Feminism: New Alliances through Dalit Feminism and Indian Science Fiction," she elaborates this concept by drawing on the tradition of Dalit literature and science fiction and suggests that the Dalit-futurist texts seek to mutate caste to foreground its arbitrary structure. The author re-reads Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Generation 14* (2008), an Indian work of Science Fiction in conversation with Dalit feminism, and advocates that this exclusive alliance has the potential to unlock new ways to conceptualize a more inclusive intersectional feminist politics not just for Dalits but for all Indians.

"Sexual Violence Against Dalit Women: An Analytical Study of Intersectionality of Gender, Caste, and Class," by Ajay Kumar argues that due to their gender and caste, Dalit women

are vulnerable and face a higher degree of sexual violence and exploitation, prominently in rural areas, by the dominant caste men. The paper explores the factors and situations which lead to the sexual exploitation and violence suffered by Dalit women. Based on the findings of a quantitative survey, the paper underlines caste ideologies as pivotal reasons for violence against Dalit women

This Special Issue examines gender through the lens of caste and offers a variety of approaches to the issues of Dalit women and brings new insight into their marginal spatial reality. This issue explores varying iterations of Dalit women's status as their relationship with oppressive social structures, mainstream Indian feminism, the Dalit movement, Dalit literature, social media, marriage, violence, historical revolt, and last but not the least an emerging hope in Dalit-futurist feminism. Dalit women have been historically oppressed, marginalized, and silenced, but have also shown resistance to the tyrannical casteist and patriarchal social structure. Their efforts along with the contributions of the scholars to this Special Issue offer a variety of approaches to the problems of women of the Dalit community in the caste ridden Indian society and encourages dialogue and liberatory transformation around the issues of Dalit women.

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