

October 2021

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Recommended Citation

Kumar, Ajay (2021). Sexual Violence against Dalit Women: An Analytical Study of Intersectionality of Gender, Caste, and Class in India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(10), 123-134.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss10/11>

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Sexual Violence against Dalit Women: An Analytical Study of Intersectionality of Gender, Caste, and Class in India

By Ajay Kumar¹

Abstract

Dalits belong to the lowest caste in India; they are excluded from the four-fold Varna system of Hinduism, treated as fifth Varna “panchama”, and characterized as “untouchables”, and, consequently, they have historically and culturally suffered caste-based social exclusion from their civil and political rights. There are more than 200 million Dalits in India, and Dalit women constitute half of this population, which is about 16.3% of the total female population of India, and of this population, about three-fourths of women live in rural areas². Dalit women’s problems are not only related to gender and economic deprivation but also discrimination related to caste, religion, and untouchability, which in turn leads to the denial of their social, economic, cultural, and political rights. Many scholars believe that Dalit women's problems are unique and distinct in many ways as they suffer gender bias, caste discrimination, and class deprivation simultaneously. They are considered vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation due to their gender and caste. They face a higher degree of violence most prominently in rural areas by the upper caste Hindus. This paper analyzes Dalit women's lives and tries to explore the real factors and situations in which Dalit women become objects of sexual exploitation and violence. A sample of 210 respondents from Delhi and outside Delhi was selected for this study. Factor loading has been used to explore the factors that determine sexual violence against Dalit women. The research employs the Pearson correlation method to explore the relationships between the variables and the regression method to investigate the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender in terms of sexual violence. The data reveals a correlation between caste, class, and gender as factors regarding sexual violence against Dalit women, and it shows that caste’s influence is much greater than class on gender.

Keywords: Casteism, Dalit women, Higher castes, Patriarchal norms, Sexual assault, Sexual harassment, Sexual violence.

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² Dalit women are one of the largest socially segregated groups anywhere in the world and makeup two percent of the world's total population (Manorama, 2016).

Introduction

Dalit women are deprived of basic human rights. They exist at the bottom of India's caste, class, and gender hierarchies, are largely illiterate, and are consistently paid less than their male counterparts (Still, 2017). The majority of Dalit women are landless laborers and scavengers in rural areas. Their subordinate position becomes a subject of exploitation by those who are in power and who carry out their attacks with impunity. When we examine contemporary Indian society, it is clear that as a result of discriminatory practices, many people are pushed to the margins, and Dalit women stand alone at the end of this margin. They are victims of triple violence. Violence against them includes physical and sexual harassment, rape, forced prostitution, kidnapping, and domestic violence. When Dalit women confront the upper castes, they are victimized rather than supported—too often women are raped. The number of rapes of Dalit women increases day by day, and researchers mostly believe this is because they are poor, low caste, and women, so that such misdeeds can be done to sexually degrade the entire Dalit community by exploiting them (Paul, 2020). There have been lower rates of sexual harassment of Dalit women in cities (Trivedi, 2007). While in the villages, they still bear the brunt of untouchability, and since they are poor, they must work with the upper castes to fulfill their needs, so these women suffer abuse and sexual harassment as female slaves. In the recent Hathras incident in Uttar Pradesh in October 2020, a Dalit woman was gang raped by four higher caste men and she died after two weeks in a hospital in Delhi (Biswas, 2020). The rape of Dalit women in Indian villages has become a common phenomenon. But when we explore such incidents, most people either associate such incidents with the poverty of Dalit women or with their bodies. Because Dalits are ‘untouchable’ rapes are not taken seriously and Dalit women are not believed (Javaid, 2015). There have been many such critical cases in modern India; the potter community’s Bhanwari Devi Case of 1992 (Patil 2016:61) is just one of them. This paper aims to explore the reasons behind this persistent sexual violence against Dalit women and tries to seek the compulsions of the system and society that do not consider Dalit women as human beings.

Review of Literature

India occupies a unique status in the South Asian region by the virtue of its size, location and economic potential, political leadership, and cultural heritage. But at the domestic level, social diversification makes India ambiguous (Guha, 2013). Here people have been systematically discriminated against based on their occupation and descent for centuries. Over 200 million people (around 16.6 percent) are Dalits—also known as untouchables—Scheduled Castes, or Outcastes. They experience discrimination, violence, and social exclusion within society. Though India is developing economically over the past decades, the caste disparities continue to be prevalent. Dalit women's situation especially warrants specific attention. They constitute the largest socially segregated group anywhere in the world, and there are around 97.9 million women among the total Dalit population. The urban population of Dalits is around 50 million while more than 150 million are still living in rural India (Raghavendra, 2020). The traditional taboos apply to both Dalit men and women (Thorat, 2002). However, Dalit women deal with them more often (Rao, 2014). Dalit women are thrice alienated based on their caste, class, and gender. They must grapple with undesired discrimination due to their caste, untouchability, and experience extreme deprivation of being lower class (Roy, 2015). Dalit women are more discriminated against than other women not only by people of higher castes but also within their own communities because Dalit men also follow patriarchic norms as dominant figures within their communities (Arya 2020: 218).

Thus, the caste system proclaims Dalit women to be intrinsically impure and ‘untouchable’, which sanctions more exploitation and social exclusion. Dalit women as a vast majority are impoverished, and as landless wage laborers, they suffer a lack of access to basic resources (Nithya, 2016). Because of their condition, they face inhuman treatment and violence, such as sexual assault, rape, and naked parading, and they serve as a social mechanism to maintain Dalit women's subordinate position in Indian society (Yadav, 2020). They are considered vulnerable targets for dominant castes who use them to humiliate the Dalit community. Generally, Dalit men and women have been facing culturally sanctioned violence from the upper castes (Shrivastava & Tanchangya, 2015) in the name of 'violating social norms', like untouchability, inter-caste marriages, temple-entry, and so on. But mainly rural Dalit women become the targets of sexual violence by the dominant upper caste communities. Rape is a common phenomenon in rural India (Puniyani, 2013); women are raped as part of village tradition or caste custom (Narula, 1999). According to a report of Human Rights Watch, more than four Dalit women are raped every day (Human Rights Watch, 1999). A report entitled '*Justice Denied: Sexual Violence and Intersectional Discrimination - Barriers to Accessing Justice for Dalit Women and Girls in Haryana*' formed by Swabhiman Society, an organization led by Dalit women, and international women's rights organization 'Equality Now' examined the rape cases from 2009 to 2020 and found that 80% of the sexual violence cases against Dalit women and girls were committed by upper caste dominant men (NH Web Desk, 2020). According to Swabhiman Society, “Violence, including rape and gang rape, has been systematically utilized as weapons by dominant castes to oppress Dalit women and girls and reinforce structural gender and caste hierarchies” (2020: 8). Jyoti Diwakar asserts that rape is the most heinous act that can be committed against a Dalit woman or any woman, but it has become a weapon of settle scores against Dalits mostly in rural India (Diwakar, 2020).

Dalit women-related literature is largely associated with issues of oppression and violence based on intersections of caste, class, and gender. Sharmila Rege (2006) argues that Dalit women have been subjected to patriarchal domination within their communities despite their economic contribution. Manju Chattopadhyay believes that Dalit women are triply oppressed in society owing to their caste, class, and gender (2003: 879). At their workplaces, they face physical oppression (Fatima 2008: 1) and rape is very common. For instance, Dalit women are often raped by landlords and their agents in the agriculture field, by contractors or their touts at construction sites, and even by men in their own family. They have been suffering from deprivation and lack of education therefore they are unaware of their rights (Kumar, 2011). Upper caste members of society do not consider Dalit women's exploitation a crime (Chattopadhyay, 2003). According to Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar, over 50 percent of Dalit women worked as agriculture wage labor in rural areas as compared to 17 percent of higher caste women (2015).

According to a report made by *Tamil Nadu women's Forum*, a large majority of the illiterate population of Dalit women, 76.24%, are involved in hazardous work such as beedi³ making, working in match factories, fireworks industries, and as laborers on agriculture lands. And this is the main reason for their poverty and unawareness. As a being of the economically weaker section, they are oppressed by the upper caste menfolk. Generally, Dalit women are subjected to impunity for this discrimination and violence which is used as a means to maintain the existing caste and gender disparities (Tamil Nadu women's Forum, 2007). Sanjeev Kumar asserts that about ninety percent of crimes against Dalit women are not reported to the police for the fear of social exclusion and threat to personal security and safety. Not only this, but Dalits tend to

³ Hand-rolled cigarettes made from tendu leaves.

have issues understanding complicated legal proceedings, so they are not able to approach courts or other law enforcing agencies for their redressal (2014: 155).

Shilaja Paik examines the Dalit Communities from colonial to post-colonial India, and the study reveals that Dalit society has been under double patriarchy in which Dalit women have been oppressed with the growing intersecting technologies of gender, class, and caste in modern India (2018:2). Aashish Gupta, however, makes a point that patriarchic norms are more accountable for sexual violence against women in which notions of shame and honor are associated with women's sexuality, and marginalized groups are the main sufferers (2014). In the context of the above discussion on Dalit women, this paper seeks to analyze the following objectives:

Objectives of the Study

1. To find out which of the real factors (caste, class, gender) are more responsible for sexual violence against Dalit women.
2. To find out the relationship between sexual violence and caste, class, and gender-related variables.

Hypotheses for the Study

In exploring the relationship between sexual violence and caste, class, and gender, the study addresses the following hypotheses:

1. H01: There is no relationship between sexual violence against Dalit women and Caste, class, and gender attributes.
2. H02: There is no intersectionality between sexual violence against Dalit women and caste, class, and gender-related variables.

Methodology

This study is descriptive and exploratory in nature and based on primary data. For this empirical study, statistical measurements have been done to analyze the data. Before collecting the data by online survey, I collected secondary data by analyzing various research papers, books, articles, websites, journals, etc. The primary data were collected of the respondents from Delhi and outside Delhi with varied age groups and different monthly incomes.

Profile of Respondents

The study is based on a non-probability purposive sampling that was applied to the respondents that are residing in Delhi (48.6%) and Outside Delhi (51.4%). A total number of 210 respondents were selected for the sample survey. Out of the 210 questionnaires collected 49.5% were male and 50.5% were female with 85.7% of the respondents in the age bracket of 17-35 years and 14.3% in the bracket of 36-60 years. At the educational level, 33.3% of the respondents were undergraduates, 39.0% were graduates and 27.6% were post-graduates. The majority of the respondents belonged to the income group 10000-50000 (INR) and above. In addition, on the occupational ground, 78.1% of the respondents were students, 9.5% were self-employed, 4.8% were in government service, and 7.6% were unemployed (See Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Character		Frequency	Percent
Age	17-35 Years	180	85.7
	36-60 Years	30	14.3
Gender	Male	104	49.5
	Female	106	50.5
Education	Undergraduate	70	33.3
	Graduate	82	39.0
	Post Graduate	58	27.6
Family Income	10000-50000 (INR) and above	210	100.0
Occupation	Student	164	78.1
	Self-Employed	20	9.5
	Govt. Employee	10	4.8
	Unemployed	16	7.6
Domicile	Delhi	102	48.6
	Outside Delhi	108	51.4
	Total	210	100.0

Measures

For the study, the research tool was divided into two sections. Section one consisted of detailed demographic information intended to explore age, gender, education, family income, occupation, and domicile. The second section consisted of a sexual violence survey (calculated by SPSS) with internal data reliability of Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = .791$) consisted of 22 items followed by a two-point response category scale (Yes=1, No=2) (See Table No.2).

Statistical Analysis/Procedure

For the study, the informed consent Google form or questionnaire was electronically distributed to the participants by the author to receive their consent to participate in this study. The participants were asked to fill in the questionnaire electronically. The forms were then coded for the data entry processes and data analyses were conducted with Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS Ver. 26). Factor loading was used to explore the factors that determine sexual violence against Dalit women. The Pearson Correlation method was employed to explore the relationships between the variables and the Regression method was conducted to investigate the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender in terms of sexual violence.

Findings and Data Analysis

The questionnaire survey conducted to test our hypotheses included a small sample from Delhi and outside Delhi with 210 respondents who were willing to share their opinion and contribute to our study. The results of the study are given as follows.

Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha (α) test was employed to find out the internal consistency and reliability of the data set of 22 items encoded from the feedback provided by the respondents. Reliability of data is standard when the alpha value is above 7 and below 8 (See Table 2). It is acceptable reliability (Taber, 2018).

Table 2

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.791	22

Dalit women might be affected by caste and class in the case of sexual violence. This data represents the thinking of the individuals towards the caste, class, and gender regarding sexual violence. Factor analysis was used to find out the factors influencing Dalit women regarding sexual violence. All factors were analyzed by using SPSS software. All factors were analyzed by using SPSS software. The Varimax rotation statistical technique was employed for the factors loading to clarify the relationship among factors and the extraction method of maximum likelihood to find out the real factors behind sexual violence against Dalit women. The results of the analysis indicated thirteen real factors with eigenvalues⁴ greater than 0.7. For the reporting, these factors might be considered as appropriate which had more than 0.7. Individual factor variances are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Factor Loading of Thirteen Facets of Sexual Violence against Dalit Women

Items	Extraction
Caste Factor	
Do you think that women face sexual violence or sexual assault due to their caste?	1.000
Do you agree that when Dalits resist oppression, land grab, forced labor, or sexual assault, they are often met with violence?	.936
Do you think that Dalit Women are facing sexual violence due to violating social norms?	1.000
Do you think that untouchability is not only a system of social discrimination against Dalits but also a system of uncontrolled and unmitigated economic exploitation?	1.000
Class Factor	

⁴The eigenvalue is a measure of how much of the variance of the observed variables a factor explains. It is used basically in the extraction method (Patil et al. 2008).

Do you think that women face sexual violence and sexual abuse due to their poverty?	1.000
Do you think that Sexual violence is linked to debt bondage in rural areas?	.785
Gender Factor	
Do you think women are a soft target to suppress the Dalit community?	.872
Do you think that women face sexual violence due to patriarchic norms?	1.000
Do you think that Dalit men also follow patriarchic norms?	.845
Do you agree with this opinion that Dalit women's vulnerabilities multiply when they find themselves in economically, socially, and culturally vulnerable positions?	.790
Do you think that untouchability does not matter at the time of sexual violence?	.719
Do you think that Dalit women's character is always judged in a negative sense in rural areas?	.787
Do you think that being a victim, a Dalit woman is not supported by the community and even their own family in sexual violence cases?	.770

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.

a. One or more communality estimates greater than 1 were encountered during iterations. The resulting solution should be interpreted with caution.

Hypotheses Testing

H01: There is no relationship between sexual violence against Dalit women and caste, class, and gender attributes.

Table 4: Correlations Matrix

		C8Women face sexual violence or sexual assault due to their caste	C14Women face sexual violence and sexual abuse due to their poverty (Class)	C16Women (Gender) is a soft target to suppress the Dalit community
C8women face sexual violence or sexual assault due to their caste	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
C14 Women face sexual violence and sexual abuse due to their poverty (Class)	Pearson Correlation	.726**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
C16 Women (Gender) is a soft target to suppress the Dalit community	Pearson Correlation	.319**	.200**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.004	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between variables such as caste, class, and gender in terms of sexual violence. Pearson correlation measures the linear association between the matrix variables; it is represented by a correlation coefficient that ranges from -1.00 to +1.00. If the correlation coefficient is strong and statistically significant, we can conclude that there is a positive relationship between variables. Table 4 shows the result of the correlation analysis. Here we can see that variables have a strong correlation with each other with "C8 women face sexual violence or sexual assault due to their caste", the Pearson coefficient is 1 and the significant level is .000. Likewise, "C14 Women face sexual violence and sexual abuse due to their poverty (Class)" have a Pearson coefficient that is .726, and the significant level is .000 and for "C16 Women (Gender) is soft target to suppress Dalit community" the Pearson coefficient is .319 and the significant level is .000 respectively. Hence, hypothesis H01 is rejected here.

H02: There is no intersectionality between sexual violence against Dalit women and caste, class, and gender-related variables.

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.322 ^a	.104	.095	.42634

a. Predictors: (Constant), C14, C8

Table 6: ANOVA^a

Mode		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.356	2	2.178	11.981	.000 ^b
	Residual	37.625	207	.182		
	Total	41.981	209			

a. Dependent Variable: C16

b. Predictors: (Constant), C14, C8

Table 7: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardize	Coefficients	Standardized	t	Sig.
		d	Std. Error	Coefficients		
	B		Beta			
1	(Constant)	.878	.096		9.133	.000
	C8	.329	.086	.367	3.841	.000
	C14	-.062	.089	-.067	-.699	.485

a. Dependent Variable: C16

The regression coefficient 'R' =.322 or 32.2% means that the correlation between dependent and independent variables is positive. The coefficient of determination 'R Square'=.104 indicating that 10.4% of the variation in the dependent variable is explained by the

independent variable (See Table No. 5). The F-Test Value 11.981 is significant because the significant level is $=.000$ (See Table No. 6). This also implies that the correlation between the dependent variable and independent variables is statistically significant, and the regression model is valid. As shown in the regression model summary table, it is clear that gender influences caste and class. Gender is positively related to caste and class in terms of sexual violence. Hence, the study rejects the null hypothesis (H_0) and concludes that there is sufficient evidence, at the 5% level of significance, that there is a strong positive relationship between gender and caste and class in terms of sexual violence against Dalit women.

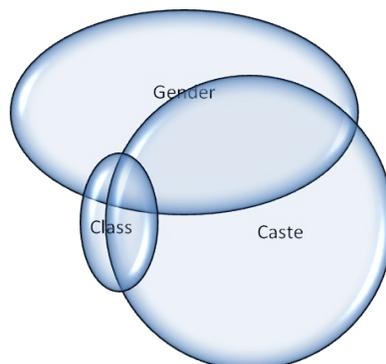
Standardized coefficients in Table 7 show us the relative influence of gender on predictors (i.e., caste and class) in terms of sexual violence against Dalit women. The highest number of Beta is .367 for the “C8women face sexual violence or sexual assault due to their caste” dimension which is significant at the .000 level whereas the lower number of Beta is -.067 for the “C14 Women face sexual violence and sexual abuse due to their poverty (Class)” dimension which is significant at the .000 level. This also shows that there is a negative relationship between gender and class and a positive relationship between gender and caste.

This result shows that caste violence against Dalit might be declared as caste impunity, and sexual violence is one of them because Dalits are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and Dalit women are vulnerable to bear this impunity. Violation of social/caste norms, particularly by Dalits, is subjected to extreme punishment. The caste hierarchy provides legitimacy to the men from higher castes to embolden them with impunity even after they commit heinous atrocities like sexual violence, sexual assault, rape, and murder. In some cases, when Dalits raise their voice and resist, the result is sexual assault or rape of Dalit women because the 'honor' of the women is considered an ultimate weapon to indicate Dalit families' inferior place in society. Dominant castes take Dalits' land (if they have it), and Dalit women are forced to do unpaid labor in dominant castes' fields. Thus, untouchability becomes a system of social discrimination against Dalits but also a system of uncontrolled and unmitigated economic exploitation.

Since the caste factor is not associated with the class factor, Dalit women face sexual violence and abuse also due to their poverty. Caste matters strongly when it comes to sexual violence against Dalit women, rather than their class. However, sexual violence is also partially connected to Dalit women's poverty levels or their economic status due to their landlessness which results in their dependence on dominant higher castes for their livelihood (i.e., regarding work, wages, debts, and loans). Sexual violence, in specific conditions, often comes after failure of Dalit women to repay debts. Generally, in the villages, Dalit women are illiterate, and they are unaware of their rights, and their poverty pushes them to accept all the terms of the dominant castes to earn their livelihood as a bonded labor where they are subjected to sexual violence.

Generally, women face sexual violence due to the patriarchic norms of the dominant castes, and Dalit men also follow these norms. Dalit women's character is always judged in a negative sense in rural areas by the higher castes, so Dalit women are subjected to all forms of exploitation and sexual violence. As a victim, a Dalit woman is often not supported by the community and even their own family in cases of sexual violence, due to the fear or threat of exclusion from society. Hence, Dalit women are unable to file a report or police complaint against higher caste men. Through this unchallenged behavior by the Dalit community, Dalit women's vulnerabilities multiply when they find themselves in economically, socially, and culturally vulnerable positions. Here we can find that the caste, class, and gender attributes correlate in terms of sexual violence against Dalit women.

Figure 1: Intersectionality of Gender, Caste, and Class in terms of Sexual Violence against Dalit Women



Source: Created by Author

Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to find out which of the factors (caste, class, gender) are more responsible for the sexual violence against Dalit women. As they are at the bottom of Indian society, they are associated with caste and gender discrimination in rural India. Based on the findings it can be argued that significant factors such as caste and gender were found interrelated or correlated with each other. But they are highly connected with rural areas where Dalit women are illiterate, helpless to accept the social hierarchy norms, working as bonded laborers as landless beings, bearing untouchability as social pressure, and unaware of their civil, social, economic, and cultural rights. In the rural areas, there is an assumption that Dalit women are available for any kind of exploitation and violence because of their 'low' and 'impure' status because of their caste. It is assumed that these women do not deserve honor and dignity. This becomes the main factor for sexual violence against Dalit women. The caste-class-gender axis, therefore, withholds the systematic base for sexual violence against Dalit women. However, this study is limited to the residents of Delhi and its outskirts; hence, generalization of the findings is limited to a similar context and comparable population. Despite these limitations, this study is significant to the government, society, policymakers, and stakeholders in implementing relevant social policies and legislation for Dalit women, keeping in the mind the sexual violence suffered by Dalit women in India.

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