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## Dalit Women: Narratives of Vulnerability, Violence, and a Culture of Impunity

By Bhushan Sharma<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

India, a mosaic of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and social factions, exhibits unity in diversity. As a result, Indian women come from diverse cultures, terrains, religions, and classes. They perform diverse social roles and have varied lived experiences, which augment assorted issues. Consequently, a review of the literature on Indian feminism highlights its complicity. Mukhopadhyay (2016) explains that Indian feminism, which was primarily initiated by men (Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and others) mainly focussed on the abolition of evil practices like *Sati*, *Purdah*, polygamy, child marriage, illiteracy, and the rest. The concept of “Intersectionality” and intersectional oppression was neither known nor understood hence not represented by Indian feminists. In such a situation, adhering to the maxim ‘Personal is Political,’ it became the duty of the women, whose gender intersects with caste to represent their unique lived experiences. This paper attempts to gain insight into the world of Dalit women through the exploration of their select writings. P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*, Bama’s *Sangati*, and Meena Kandaswami’s poetry anthology *Touch* are used as literary study tools. The study demonstrates how the narratives of Dalit women provide a unique concept of “Indian intersectionality,” where their social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and disadvantage making them vulnerable to violence. The study may help us to understand approaches to the prevention of violence against Dalit women.

*Keywords:* Caste, gender, intersectionality, vulnerability, violence, silence, impunity, Dalit women, India, feminism

### Introduction: Indian Feminism and Intersectionality

Unlike the western Feminist movement, Indian feminism was initiated by men (Chaudhuri 2005). Social reformers<sup>2</sup> stood for abolishing *Sati*<sup>3</sup>, *Purdah*<sup>4</sup>, polygamy, the custom of child marriage, abolishing the disfiguring of widows<sup>5</sup>, introducing the remarriage of upper-caste widows, promoting women's education, and the like. On the other hand, cultural and religious diversity in India made Indian feminism problematic as issues of Indian women diverge with their religious, cultural, and social backgrounds. Subsequently, in recent years literature related to gender and Indian feminist discourse has encompassed multiple strands where we can hear several voices emerging on gender issues bringing significant insight into

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<sup>2</sup> Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahatma Gandhi, Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay, Dhondo Keshav Karve along with others.

<sup>3</sup> *Sati* or suttee is a historical Hindu practice, in which a widow sacrifices herself by sitting atop her deceased husband's funeral pyre.

<sup>4</sup> The practice in certain Muslim and Hindu societies of screening women from men or strangers, especially by means of a curtain.

<sup>5</sup> Many Brahman families required their windows to keep the head shaved and to sleep on the ground. She would be pressed to wear white clothing; avoid all ‘hot’, sweet, and non-vegetarian foods; eat rice only once a day, and other such practices.

the problems of women. These multiple voices, we can argue, are closely linked to their unique lived experiences because of their diverse cultural and gender roles.

Following the maxim, “Personal is political,” varied groups of women began representing their experiences. Subsequently, it became the moral duty of Dalit women to voice their invisible lived experiences as they are not represented by mainstream feminists and also are not embodied in Dalit literature, which has been largely patriarchal and discusses the Dalit man as the central figure of suffering. Thus, Dalit women remain in the category of ‘the outsiders within’ (Sharma 2021). They are increasingly representing their unique narratives introducing the concept of ‘Intersectionality’ in Indian feminism. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), ‘Intersectionality’ provides an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of Dalit women’s social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and disadvantage.

Historically Dalits are former ‘untouchables’ who were excluded from the four *varnas*<sup>6</sup> of the society. The *Varna* system gave rise to the Caste System, which is socio-political stratification in Indian society. The caste system is a division of people into hereditary social groups. Thus civil, cultural, political, and economic rights of each caste are pre-set and ascribed by birth. The assignment of rights among castes is unequal. The caste of the people defines their occupation and social status<sup>7</sup>. The communities left out of the caste system are called the Outcastes. They are the former ‘Untouchables,’ who were deprived of basic rights such as the right to property, education, and civil and cultural rights and were restricted to marginalized locations. For their survival, they performed menial and unclean services to the upper-caste people. P. Sivakami states, “Even amongst the lower castes, hierarchies existed—*Pallars* were agricultural laborers, *Parayas* were drummers and menials, and the *Chakkiliyars* were cobblers” (2006: 63).

In the official government language, Dalits are referred to as Scheduled Castes (SCs), who along with Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been recognized as ‘historically deprived’ segments of the society by the constitution of India. The Indian Constitution carries certain safeguards in Article 341 to ensure the fundamental rights<sup>8</sup> for the Scheduled Caste as Indian citizens, and the Directive Principles<sup>9</sup> of State Policy authorize the state to protect this marginalized group from any further bigotry in modern Indian society based on their caste identity (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, 2015). Thereafter anti-discriminatory measures have been enforced and laws have been passed to eliminate discriminatory practices against the Scheduled Castes such as the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR), and the Prevention of Atrocities Act (POA) which aim to prevent crimes and atrocities stemming from discrimination and hatred toward Dalits. The Indian government also gives special relief to the ‘weaker sections’ of the society thus, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), women, and children. Permanent

<sup>6</sup> *Varna* system is socio-religious Hindu stratification of society. *Varna* (meaning order/color/class) segregates the society into four basic categories: *Brahmins* (priests, teachers, intellectuals); *Kshatriyas* (kings and warriors); *Vaishyas* (merchants and agriculturists); *Shudras* (laborers and artisans). Communities that belong to one of the four *varnas* are called *savarna*.

<sup>7</sup> The Hindu social order consists of a four-fold *Varna* division in the society, ‘The highest is that of the *Brahmans* or priests, below them the *Kshatriyas* or warriors, then the *Vaishyas*, in modern usage mainly merchants, and finally the *Shudras*, the servants or have-nots’

<sup>8</sup> Fundamental rights are those rights that are essential for the intellectual, moral, and spiritual development of citizens of India. There are six fundamental rights recognized by the Indian constitution: Right to equality, Right to freedom, Right against exploitation, Right to freedom of religion, Cultural and educational rights, and Right to constitutional remedies.

<sup>9</sup> Directive Principles of State Policy aim to create social and economic conditions under which the citizens can lead a good life. They also aim to establish social and economic democracy through a welfare state

national commissions have been set up to safeguard the rights of both SCs and STs as well as for women.

However, the writings of Dalit women reveal a distinctive reality underlining the range of women's issues such as labor and livelihoods, food and nutrition, violence against women, rape, sexual exploitation, and the rest. American-born Indian feminist, Gail Omvedt reflected on Dalit (ex-untouchable) women and argued in 1979 that these women were thrice oppressed: by caste, class, and gender. Dalit women in India are at the crossroads of gender, class, and caste (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015), Dalit women talk differently (Guru, 1995) as the social location of women belonging to the Dalit community raises unique problems in life, which are socially generated than being personal. Radhika Govinda (2022) in her article "Interrogating Intersectionality" provides a sense of the ongoing discursive debates in the emergent 'field' of intersectionality studies and brings into the conversation some Indian feminists, reflecting on intersectionality, especially in relation to caste-class-gender, as a discursive move to challenge the default assumption that the Global South does not participate in theory-making.

This paper presents an insight into the violent world of Dalit women. The study of select texts<sup>10</sup> explicates that though the practice of untouchability has been banned in independent India, many of the associated behaviors, norms, and values socially persist. Today also the majority of Dalits are located at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy and suffer from an antisocial spirit and exploitation by dominant castes.

### Select Writings of Dalit Women

The paper explores three texts: *The Grip of Change*, *Sangati Events*, and *Touch* to comprehend the social location and situation of Dalit women that formulate their vulnerability. The first text, *The Grip of Change* (2006) is the semi-autobiographical novel of Palanimuthu Sivakami and is a self-English translation of her Tamil novel, *Pazhainya Kazhithalum* (1989). The author is an Indian Dalit feminist writer, activist, and former IAS (Indian Administrative Services) officer. Through the plight of Thangam, a *Periyar* (a low caste) woman, the writer reveals that the issues of Dalit women are still neglected not only by mainstream feminists but also by the patriarchal Dalit movement. Thus, fetching them a special status of "outsider within."<sup>11</sup> The second text, Bama's *Sangati Events* (2005) is the English translation of her second work originally published in Tamil (1994). The novel is an insight into the writer's community comprising of *Paraiya* (low caste) women, friends, and the known who live in her vicinity, and depicts their common and collective struggle. 3) *Touch* (2006) is a debut poetry collection of eighty-four poems by Meena Kandasamy, who comes from Tamil. The anthology is themed around caste and untouchability that depicts the life of the Dalit community. *Touch* illustrates the central role 'touch' plays in the lives of Dalits, the former 'Untouchables'; the very touch of these people is considered polluting. Hence, they are relegated to the peripheries. The anthology is divided into seven categories<sup>12</sup> which produce a realistic picture of shocking daily occurrences of exploitations of Dalits, primarily their women.

Women are "the second sex" (Beauvoir 1989) and they struggle with conditions, which are propagated by patriarchy. Also, men in many societies are socialized into dominating and

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<sup>10</sup> P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*, Bama's *Sangati*, and Meena Kandaswami's poetry anthology *Touch*.

<sup>11</sup> The term 'outsider-within' (1986), the prime condition for a standpoint, which she defines, "Outsider-within are social locations or border spaces marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power. Individuals acquire identities as "outsiders within" by their placement in these locations" (300).

<sup>12</sup> 'Bring him up to worship you'; 'Touch'; 'Add some spice'; 'To that more congenial spot'; 'Lines of control'; 'Slander in a slaughterhouse'; and 'Their daughters'.

aggressive behavior. Violence by men against women is the severest form of patriarchy. For Dalit women, the problem is momentous. They are one of the largest socially discriminated groups owing to their low caste. The caste system declares Dalit women to be inherently impure relegated to the category of “untouchable,” which sanctions social exclusion. Their Dalit identity gives them a different set of problems. Even today many Dalit women lack access to basic resources like food, health, and education as a result they are poor landless wage laborers, scavengers, food gatherers, and the like. Sharma and Kumar (2020) assert that the interlocking nature of gender, caste, and class leads to the exploitation of rural Dalit women, thus making them powerless. They endure unique issues because of severely imbalanced social, economic, and political power equations. “Because we didn’t go for planting work, they decided to burn our houses” (*The Grip* 61). Bama explicates:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating. In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they first lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment (*Sangati* 35).

Thus, the select writings attest to Gopal Guru's assertion, “Dalit women talk differently” (1995) because they have unique issues owing to their social location. Hunger is their prime enemy and they toil hard for their survival. The poem “Smell” in Kandasami's poetry anthology *Touch* portrays the aftermath of the menial, untidy, and difficult labor that they have to perform because of their low status. The poem embodies,

I smell like Hard Labour.  
Physical Work. Toil.  
My smell lingers with me like it did  
With my mother, her mother, and her mother's mother.  
It is the only legacy I own  
And I shall never lose.  
Everywhere. . .  
I'm greeted with handkerchiefs, scarves,  
Shawls, saris, and even hands, covering the holder's noses (“Smell” 105).

The poetic expression in *Touch* is loud and explosive, which is the result of Kandasamy's anger at suppression and prejudice. She gives free rein to her words to bare facts that tell aloud the tales of silences.

I'll curse the skies,  
And shout: scream to you  
Words that incite wrath... (“Narration,” L.7-9)

Caste – crueler than a disease, emotionless, dry, took its toll  
Confirming traditional truths: Dalits die, due to devotion.  
Unanswered questions remain (“Prayers” 57, L. 21-23).

Kandasamy addresses the issue of caste and gender discrimination in her anthology. The poem “Touch” (35) discusses that to select any person who has not experienced caste and gender discrimination, the sense of touch only brings pleasure.

Or, you may recollect how  
A gentle touch, a caress changed your life  
Multifold, and you were never the person  
You should have been.  
Feeling with your skin,  
Was perhaps the first of the senses,  
Its reality always remained with you—  
You never got rid of it.  
You will have known this. (“Touch” 24-31)

But in the same poem, Kandasamy differentiates these pleasant feelings to the harsh reality confronted by Dalits virtuously from the very same sense organ, the skin:

You will have known almost  
Every knowledgeable thing about  
The charms and the temptations  
That touch could hold.  
But you will never have known  
That touch—the taboo  
To your transcendence,  
When crystallized in caste  
Was paraphernalia of Undeserving hate (“Touch” 24-41).

Therefore, the poet bangs on the social constructions of caste hierarchy and patriarchy that create binaries: privileged and the unprivileged, oppressors and the oppressed, man and woman, upper-caste and lower-caste, mainstream and marginalized, and the rest. Thus, Kandasamy’s poetry discards T.S. Eliot’s notion of the impersonality of poetry<sup>13</sup> (1919). On the contrary, she asserts, “My writing is very, very autobiographical. It stems out of who I am, and what happened to me? I am extremely conscious of the fact that I am a woman and Dalit” (Kandasamy, 2008). Thus, her constrained anger, which is the outcome of suppression is evident in her poetry. *Touch* shows Dalits’ marginal spatial reality through a feminist lens and produces a realistic picture of gruesome daily occurrences of gender prejudice and double bondage of Dalit women. The poem, “Narration” (*Touch* 56), explicates the physical and sexual abuse Dalit women are subjected to and their treatment as colonized bodies and sexual objects.

I’ll weep to you about  
My landlord, and with  
My mature gestures—  
You will understand:  
The torn sari, disheveled hair  
Stifled cries and meek submission.  
*I was not an untouchable then?* (“Narration” L. 1-7)

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<sup>13</sup> The theory of impersonality refers to the concept of an impersonal relationship between a man as a poet and as a general man. According to Eliot, a poet should have two distinct personalities and he as a poet should uphold no relation with that of his personal self while composing his poetry (“Tradition and Individual Talent” 1919).

In the poem “Last Love Letter” (51), the poet illustrates the helplessness of the oppressed to voice injustice. The oppressed can only speak through her body<sup>14</sup> (Spivak 1988). The poem brings out the paradox of love in death rather than love in life.

. . . Our passionate love,  
Once transcended caste.  
Let it now  
Transcend mortality . . . —  
Fear not beloved,  
In Love—  
Life is not compulsory. (“Last Love Letter, L.1-7)

The poem also brings to mind the several honor killings that have taken place in the name of caste. The writings of Dalit women, thus, depict their vulnerability, world of violence, and the prevailing culture of impunity. The exploration of *The Grip of Change* and *Sangati*, and *Touch* help us to evolve a typology of violence suffered by Dalit women, which may broadly be grouped under two headings:

- a) Domestic violence
- b) Public violence

Dalit women endure the burden of twin patriarchy—one for being women at the hands of their own community men. Two, for being Dalit women at hands of upper-caste men who think it is their entitlement to oppress and exploit these women.

### **Domestic Violence**

Exploration of women's narratives and the ways they exercise agency and voice in their daily interactions reveal much more nuanced representations of their lives and experiences of violence alongside those of everyday struggle. The writers portray the physical violence like thrashing, lynching, and canning of women in the Dalit community. Bama reports, “[E]verywhere you look, you see blows and beatings, shame, and humiliation’ (*Sangati* 66). Perspectives of the writers depict the violent treatment of women by husbands, fathers, brothers, and other male members of their community. For instance, Esakki’s brothers kill her brutally for the sake of their honor.

They dragged her out of the cart, and without even caring that she was a full-term pregnant woman with one sweep of a sword, they separated her head from her body. They sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck, and killed it (*Sangati* 53).

Another woman who is put to death is Perimma. She is exhausted because of her fieldwork and gendered labor at home. Her husband physically abuses her when she refuses to have sex with him because of her fatigue. Her Grandmother laments, “I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your *Periappan* (Perimma’s husband) beat her to death. . . . He killed her so outrageously, the bastard” (*Sangati* 10). Dalit women are doubly burdened. They labor hard to support their families. They work outside their home to gather their day-to-day resources and also perform gender-based labor at home. And when they are not able to please their husbands because of their fatigue they suffer gender violence. Summing up their situation Bama explains that at home, husbands are least bothered to understand them. They think of

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<sup>14</sup> Refer to the case of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her essay ‘Can a Subaltern Speak?’ (1988).

their own satisfaction without caring for their health and mood after a day's long hard work. They are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust and exhaustion due to physical exploitation, as a result, they are totally oppressed and succumb to mental ill-health.

Numerous other writers have also explicated such narratives of domestic violence. 'At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her' (Pawar 2015: 112-113). Baby Kamble (2008) in *The Prisons illustrates* that Dalit men did not hesitate to chop off the noses of their women who failed to abide by patriarchal norms. She states, 'He [husband] would beat me up for a flimsy reason... This was the life most women-led (Kamble 2008: 155). The everyday discrimination against Dalit women is thus marked by mental, emotional, and physical violence by their spouses and other family members. The representations of the writers also show the use of abusive language against women. For example, Thaayi's husband hurls, "You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker's daughter. You will go with ten men (Sangati 24). The perspectives of the writers indicate that Dalit women are only subservient partners in marital relations.

The study also underlines the prime causes of domestic violence against Dalit women: male alcoholism, the man's suspicious nature, the husband's extramarital relations, and the complex social situations related to inter-caste marriages. The exploration of the texts shows, "It's one justice for men and quite another for women" (Sangati 24). Men have the freedom to have concubines or even to end the marriage and it is accepted as natural. "They say he is a man, if he sees mud, he'll step into it, if he sees water, he will wash." (Sangati 24). Whatever happens, must be according to the pleasure of men folk and their convenience. They can marry out of their caste. But women can marry only within the caste. For instance, Kathamuthu, a Dalit leader has three wives, the first is a Dalit, the second is an upper-caste, and the third is Thangam, a widow, whom he exploits sexually when she approaches him in distress. He also grabs her money which she gets after the court case. Bankim Chander Mandal states, "The control of women's sexuality has been made essential for the development of patriarchal caste hierarchy both for the maintenance of caste and for the legitimizing and control of the inheritance" (2013: 124).

Commenting on the reasons for domestic abuse, the narrator (*Sangati*) observes: Even though they are male because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So, they show it at home to their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within? (*Sangati* 65). Towards the end of the commentary, the narrator explores how caste and gender oppression affect women. Whereas the narrator initially thought that women quarreled with each other in the evening and morning because they were busy working during the day, she "gradually ... came to understand the real reason" (Sangati 67). She views these women are triply oppressed. Like men, they are physically exploited and socially humiliated in the workplace, but are also solely responsible for labor within the domestic sphere, and are also sexually and physically abused by their husbands. To release their frustration and helplessness, the women fight and shout at each other.

### **Public Violence**

The majority of women of the lower castes are economically disadvantaged. Unlike women from the dominant castes, these women have to work outside the home, which is crucial for the survival of their families. Many homes run solely on women's earnings as their men tend to spend theirs on themselves. The exploration of the texts shows that the women perform menial and survival activities such as procuring food, fuel, and water for their families, scavenging, tilling the land of landlords, and the rest. Thus, they have to work in the public



realm to earn their living, making these destitute women vulnerable to constant threats of sexual molestation and rape by the dominant caste males. Thus, they are the victims of public patriarchy, also called extended patriarchy or extrinsic patriarchy, and undergo public violence owing to their caste, low status, and the nature of their work.

The select texts trace numerous accounts of upper caste tyranny towards the Dalit women in terms of labor, exploitation, and threat of rape. Being a Dalit woman is constantly being on a bed of thorns as they are constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse at the workplace. The narrative of Mariamma in *Sangati* speaks about the helplessness of women caught in interlocking oppressions of caste, class, and gender. Mariamma becomes a victim of sexual advances by an upper-caste landlord, Kumaraswami. She is accused, abused, and made a victim when she escapes from the landlord's efforts to molest her. Kumaraswami distorts the whole incident for fear of tainting his image. She is muted as the women are not allowed to present their viewpoints. The Panchayat disgraces her in front of all and makes her pay a fine. Kaliamma's attempt to support her meets aggressive vehemence from the menfolk who silence her too. Mariamma had been warned by her friends:

It is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore... Are people going to believe their [upper-caste landlords'] words or ours? (*Sangati* 20).

Caste and gender, thus form a lethal combination that plays havoc with the lives of Dalit women. At times Dalit men are also helpless in protecting their women because it's difficult to stand up or make an enemy of dominant people. Because, in the end, they have to go to them for employment. The mentioned case illustrates the interlocking nature of Dalit women's oppression, which makes them voiceless and powerless. Their dignity and personhood have been crushed for centuries, leaving them like owned cattle or property. Urmila Pawar, a Dalit feminist activist writer, also represents the enforcement of archaic and unjust gender rules of caste *panchayats*<sup>15</sup> and explicates the case of a widow in her memoir, *The Weave of My Life* (2015). The widow is pregnant. The whole village knows who the man is. But only she is given the verdict.

She was made to lean forward, and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the village's honor. If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publically judged and her other relatives would beat her up as well (Pawar 2015: 156).

Thus, Dalit women are subjected to severe exploitation by dominant groups. Rape and sexual abuse of the destitute low caste women by men of the dominant castes cause all the more concern. "Four Dalit women are raped every day, with several on multiple occasions" (The New Indian Express: 2019). *Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India* (2011), presents an analytical synopsis of the complexities of systemic violence that Dalit women face through an analysis of 500 Dalit women's narratives across four states: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh. Excerpts of these women's narratives are utilized and analyzed to illustrate the wider trends and patterns of different forms of violence Dalit women are subjected to.

The more frequent forms of violence that are perpetrated against the majority of Dalit women are verbal abuse (62.4% of total women), physical assault (54.8%), sexual harassment and assault (46.8%), domestic violence (43.0%),

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<sup>15</sup> village councils.

and rape (23.2%), Thus, “[w]ithin the framework of ‘difference’ the issues of caste are primarily responsible for the oppression of Dalit women (Irudayam et. al 2011: 95).

The study also discusses the profile of Dalit women, the social context, forms, and frequency of violence, verbal abuse, physical assault, sexual violence, kidnapping, forced incarceration, medical negligence, female feticide, child abuse and domestic violence, casual factors for violence, and appalling effects of violence on these women. The study presents an analytical synopsis of the complexities of systemic violence that Dalit women undergo.

Similarly, the plight of Thangam in Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change* exposes caste and gender hierarchies outside and inside the home that renders the woman an outcast in her community. She is sexually exploited by the landlord but remains silent, “I did not want it. But Udayar took no notice of me. He raped me when I was working in his sugarcane field. I remained silent; after all, he is my paymaster. He measures my rice” (*The Grip* 7). Thus, poverty is one of the major causes of women’s exploitation and suffering. As the majority of the women are economically deprived and the responsibility to run their families lies on women’s shoulders, a unique social reality is revealed by Sharankumar Limbale, an iconic Dalit writer,

There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil's whore. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil, what else does a household expect? (*The Outcaste* 38).

The last words, “household expects” show a terrible pun. A Dalit woman meets the expectations of the household as amid poverty, hunger, and starvation she is expected to do anything for the survival of her family. The household of Dalits feeds on the charity of Patils; Immorality is committed by Patils, and a Dalit woman, who effaces herself to feed her family is titled a ‘whore.’ At times if a woman gets pregnant, the oppressive social structure holds the woman responsible for the birth of an illegitimate child and she is many a time punished and paraded (*Baluta* 270). Kandasamy in the poem, “Shame” (*Touch* 58), portrays the plight of a Dalit girl.

"Dalit Girl Raped"  
Is much too commonplace.  
Humiliation gnaws  
The sixteen-year-old.  
Gory scars on a wrecked body,  
Serve as constant reminders  
Of disgrace, helplessness. (“Shame” L. 9-15)

The poet further writes that there is no hearing against such crimes as dominant caste men are granted impunity for their crimes because of their caste-based status.

But, the criminals have  
Already mainstreamed—  
Their Caste is a classic shield. (“Shame” 6-9)

Caste disparities lead to violence against lower-caste woman, who is expected to yield to upper-caste male chauvinism. The cruelty of caste discrimination is exposed when she moves from passivity to active assertion of her anguish against the exploiting masculine brutality and has to suffer social indignation. The study of *The Grip* explicates when the liaison between Udayar and Thangam is disclosed, Udayar's brothers-in-law attack her and beat her, and threaten to kill her. Udayar also abuses her:

Ungrateful whore! Even if she was hurt by the hand adorned with gold! A *parachi* [low caste] could have never dreamt of being touched by a man like me! My touch was a boon granted for penance performed in her earlier births (*The Grip* 31).

But, Thangam's saga of exploitation lingers and now she is exploited at the hands of the rich of her own [Dalit] community. As she seeks help from Kathamuthu, a Dalit leader, his help proves transitory. He provides her shelter but exploits her sexually. In the afternoon while she was sleeping in the kitchen, he rapes her, and then he compels her to be his mistress. He finally marries her to grab her money, which she gets from the court case. Therefore, the narratives of Thangam, Marriam, and others implicate the helplessness of Dalit women, their poverty, oppression, vulnerability, and sexual exploitation. Therefore, every time a woman from the lower caste is sexually assaulted, it becomes clear that the existing casteist social structure and the status of women in society are responsible for the violation of their human rights. While explaining the sexual assault on Dalit women, Anupama Rao states:

Dalit women's bodies are seen collectively as mute, and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking 'upper' caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/or sexuality, because of the over-determination of this violence as caste privilege (Rao 2003: 293).

Furthermore, newspaper archives and social media also reveal their physical, mental, economic, and sexual exploitation due to the intersectional nature of caste, class, and gender. Various cases of violence committed against Dalit women have always been reported. Few are included here.

#### *The Khairlanji massacre 2006*

On 29 September 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family belonging to a Scheduled caste were murdered in a small village called Khairlanji in Maharashtra. The women of the family, Surekha and Priyanka, were paraded naked in public before being murdered. Enraged by a police complaint lodged the previous day by Surekha over a land dispute, the accused dragged out Surekha and two of her sons, and daughter, paraded them naked in the village, and then hacked them to death.

Numerous cases of atrocities committed against Dalit women have been recorded in *Unheard Voices* An alternative report for the 15th – 19th periodic report on India submitted by the Government of the Republic of India for the 70th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Geneva, Switzerland Jan. 2007 by Tamil Nadu Women's Forum<sup>16</sup>. For example:

#### *Rajasthan Dalit Social Worker Gang-raped –January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006*

In a chilling reminder of the Bhanwari Devi case, a Rajasthan *Anganwadi* worker was allegedly gang-raped by her supervisors during a state-sponsored training session. Instead of

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<sup>16</sup> Tamil Nadu Women's Forum is a state-level initiative (in India) for women's rights and gender justice. Tamil Nadu Women's Forum (TNWF) was started in 1991 in order to train women for more leadership, to strengthen the women's movement, and to build up a strong people's movement.

helping the 25-year-old Dalit woman, the police tried to hush up the incident, declaring her mentally unstable and packing her off to a psychiatric clinic. However, the rape incident of Bhanwari led India to pass and implement the ‘Sexual Harassment Law’ (*Unheard Voices, 2007*).

#### ***Dalit Women Tortured in Jail – Punjab February 18, 2006***

Three Dalit women from Muktsar district in Punjab have accused the police of torturing them, including administering electric shock to their “private parts” and confining them illegally (*Unheard Voices, 2007*).

#### ***Dalit Woman beat up and paraded naked***

A 50-year-old Dalit woman in a Jharkhand village was beaten up and paraded naked for allegedly “selling” a 12-year-old boy in Uttar Pradesh two years ago (*Unheard Voices, 2007*).

#### ***Dalit Women paraded half-naked for ‘not toeing’ the Panchayat line***

Bhopal: A woman was allegedly beaten up, stripped, and paraded by women in Dedgaon village of Harda district because a young girl from the village had been found in her house in a compromising position with an upper-caste boy (*Unheard Voices, 2007*). Despite a 1989 law to prevent atrocities against the community, there are persistent cases of violence against Dalit women. They continue to be stalked, abused, molested, raped, and murdered with impunity.

#### ***Uttar Pradesh Dalit girl, the victim of brutal gang rape, dies in Delhi hospital- September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020***

A 19-year-old Dalit girl from Hathras village in Uttar Pradesh was brutally assaulted by four upper-caste men and later strangled and dragged with her dupatta. She succumbed to multiple injuries and was admitted to Safdarjung Hospital in New Delhi (The Hindu: Sept. 30, 2020). And following reports tell tales of contradictions and the truth getting lost in the cacophony. From Khairlanji to Hathras, the rape story repeats itself for Dalit women. We cannot ignore the context of caste and see Hathras, Khairlanji, or thousands of other assaults merely as sexual crimes. Still, the unique issues of Dalit women remain unaddressed in Feminist movements.

### **Victims of Religious Practices**

Dalit women are also the victims of specific social customs and religious practices. Some of these customs include the *devadasi/jogini* system (temple prostitution). In this system, Dalit girls are married to a village god by their parents. These girls are then sexually exploited by the landlords and rich men of the village. According to K.A. Geetha (2020) in the Dalit community, economic survival is the main reason that parents dedicate their daughters as *devadasis*<sup>17</sup>, “The remuneration that the family receives in return for the dedication serves as potential bait for poor communities” (69). Besides, there are several other reasons too. If the village has suffered a drought, there is a widespread belief that the dedication of the *devadasi* will bring prosperity. Given their economically weaker position, Dalit girls become the obvious targets. At times, the family dedicates a girl to the temple, to be blessed with a male heir (Geetha, 2020). This system of religious sexual exploitation is found in several parts of India

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<sup>17</sup> The *devdasi*, was a girl who was dedicated to the temple and became a dancer, occupied a high ritual status within the temple. She owned land in her own name (Chakravarti 2018: 84). But for Dalit *devdasi* the situation is different.

such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Orissa. Karnataka alone has identified close to 30,000 devadasi women (*The Hindu* 2016).

### **Conclusion and Approach to Prevention**

The study underlines that violence against Dalit women is the outcome of gender-based inequalities, compounded, and intensified by caste discrimination. In Indian rural society, violence acts as a crucial social mechanism to maintain Dalit women's caste and gender subordinate position to men and particularly men of dominant castes. Many a time sexual exploitation and rape of these women are justified by dominant caste men as ennobling the Dalit woman victim-survivor and her caste. Furthermore, low caste women are concerned to be impure the protection of their chastity or purity is never the consideration. Also, their repeated abuse through sexual crimes underscores the low position of their caste. Thus, sexual violence against Dalit women is a means to sustain the caste disparity and oppress the lower castes. The study thus illustrates that caste discrimination against Dalit women undermines their dignity, self-respect, and economic, political, and social development, which in turn makes them vulnerable. They are left with no choice. Since caste discrimination is ingrained in society and is rampant in rural areas, it is important to improve the environment which sustains this evil practice.

The foremost factor to bring transformation in society is the education of the deprived sections. Women's education is intrinsically important to make them conscious of their exploitations and aware of their rights. Education empowers women by flourishing many of their capacities, enables them to respond to the challenges, and brings a reduction in inequalities by confronting their traditional roles. Ironically many Dalit women are educationally backward despite the facilities for free education. The reasons for the high rate of illiteracy among Dalit women are resistance from the family to send girls to schools, insecurity in villages, and girl child labor that forces girls to take care of their siblings when the parents are away at work. Therefore, gender discrimination starts at a very early stage in the life of a Dalit girl. Hence, the study recommends progressive educational policies in imparting vocational skills to dropouts. Dalit girls/women should be given preference and special treatment under existing and future programs. Many policies and schemes for Dalits and women's empowerment exist at the national, state, and local levels in many sectors including health, education, economic and political participation. Many schemes for Dalits are availed by elites of the community. Thus, social and economic stratification among Dalits prevents the reaching of the benefits to those who are in real need. Also, as many schemes have been introduced by the Indian government for the upliftment of the deprived sections; it is important to introduce the benefits to women as they are responsible for running their households.

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