



# Translating Violence in Dalit Women's Perspectives

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## Abstract

The paper argues for the intersection of caste and gender, focusing on how Dalit women experience and articulate violence in their lives. This study situates Dalit women's voices at the center, highlighting the nuanced ways in which they narrate their experiences of oppression. The paper employs a feminist framework, recognizing that the violence faced by Dalit women is not only physical but also structural and symbolic, embedded in social, cultural, and linguistic practices. Through an analysis of oral histories, autobiographies, and literary texts by Dalit women, the research explores how these narratives disrupt dominant caste and gender discourses. By translating these experiences into a broader context, the paper argues that Dalit women's perspectives offer critical insights into the intersections of caste, gender, and violence, challenging mainstream feminist and anti-caste movements to be more inclusive. This translation is both linguistic cultural and epistemological, aiming to bridge the gap between lived experiences and theoretical frameworks. The study ultimately calls for a rethinking of feminist solidarity and anti-caste activism that center the voices and agency of Dalit women.

**Key Words:** Dalit, Women, Feminism, Violence, Gender.

## Introduction

The study of violence within the lives of Dalit women occupies a critical and often under-explored space in both feminist and social justice discourse. Dalit women, situated at the intersection of caste, gender, and class oppression, face unique and multifaceted forms of violence that demand careful scholarly examination. The term "Dalit," historically used to describe those at the lowest strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy, encompasses a population that has long been marginalized, discriminated against, and subjected to systemic violence. When considering Dalit women specifically, this oppression becomes even more complex, as they are doubly marginalized—both by their caste and their gender.

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In India, the entrenched caste system has perpetuated various forms of violence against Dalit women, including physical, sexual, emotional, and structural violence. This violence is often normalized within society, leading to its pervasive underreporting and invisibility in mainstream narratives. Moreover, the intersectionality of caste and gender makes Dalit women vulnerable to exploitation not only by upper-caste men but also within their own communities. The violence they experience is not only physical but also deeply psychological, as it is rooted in a social hierarchy that dehumanizes and stigmatizes them.

This research paper seeks to explore how violence against Dalit women is translated and understood from their own perspectives. The term "translation" is used here to denote how Dalit women interpret, narrate, and respond to the violence they endure. Their voices have historically been marginalized, often overshadowed by dominant narratives that fail to capture their experiences' full extent. This study aims to center these voices, offering a platform for Dalit women to articulate their understandings of violence, and in doing so, challenge the prevailing discourses that have often silenced them.

The importance of examining Dalit women's perspectives on violence cannot be overstated. Their experiences offer crucial insights into the broader structures of oppression that sustain caste and gender inequalities in India. By analyzing their narratives, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how caste and gender intersect to produce unique forms of violence. Furthermore, it aims to highlight the agency of Dalit women in resisting and negotiating these forms of violence, thus challenging the notion of Dalit women as mere victims. Instead, this research seeks to portray them as active agents who, despite facing overwhelming odds, continue to resist and navigate the oppressive structures that seek to control them.

This study is situated within the broader context of feminist and caste studies, drawing on theoretical frameworks that emphasize intersectionality and the lived experiences of marginalized groups. It employs a qualitative methodology, using interviews and narratives to capture the voices of Dalit women. By doing so, it hopes to provide a nuanced and empathetic understanding of how violence is experienced, interpreted, and resisted by Dalit women, thereby contributing to ongoing discussions about caste, gender, and social justice in India.

### **Theoretical Foundations: Understanding Caste and Gender**

Caste, as a social institution, is a deeply entrenched system of hierarchy and division that has historically determined social status, occupation, and access to resources. Rooted in ancient religious texts and practices, caste is often seen as a rigid and hereditary system that dictates the social order (Ambedkar, 2014). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a leading anti-caste thinker, described caste as a system of graded inequality, where social groups are ranked in a hierarchy, and each group's status is maintained through endogamy and social exclusion. Caste is not just a social classification but also a mechanism of control, with the upper castes exerting power over the lower castes through both physical violence and structural discrimination (Dirks, 2001).

Gender, similarly, is a social construct that defines roles, behaviors, and identities based on perceived differences between the sexes. Feminist theorists have long argued that gender is not merely a binary classification but a spectrum of identities and experiences shaped by social norms, cultural practices, and power relations (Butler, 1990). Gender operates as a system of power that enforces patriarchal values, often relegating women and other marginalized genders to subordinate positions within society (Lerner, 1986). This patriarchal system is sustained through various institutions, including the family, religion, and the state, which work together to maintain gender norms and roles.

The intersection of caste and gender creates a unique matrix of oppression that affects individuals in specific ways depending on their position within both hierarchies. Dalit women, for instance, face a triple burden of discrimination due to their caste, gender, and economic status. As Sharmila Rege (1998) notes, Dalit women are positioned at the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies, making their experiences of oppression distinct from those of upper-caste women or Dalit men. This intersectional approach, pioneered by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), emphasizes that caste and gender cannot be understood in isolation from one another; rather, they are mutually constitutive, shaping the lived experiences of individuals in complex and often contradictory ways.

In the Indian context, caste and gender intersect to create what Gopal Guru (1995) describes as a "double jeopardy" for Dalit women. They face caste-based violence from upper-caste men and communities, who often use sexual violence as a tool of control and subjugation. At the same time, they are subjected to gender-based violence within their own communities, where patriarchal norms and practices dictate their roles and behaviors. This dual oppression is often overlooked in mainstream feminist and anti-caste movements, which tend to focus on either caste or gender, rather than their intersections.

### **Cultural and Social Reproduction of Caste and Gender**

Caste and gender are reproduced and sustained through cultural and social practices that are deeply embedded in everyday life. One of the primary ways this occurs is through the institution of marriage. Endogamy, or marriage within one's caste, is a key mechanism for maintaining caste boundaries and ensuring the purity of caste lines (Dumont, 1980). Women, in particular, are seen as bearers of caste identity, and their sexuality is strictly controlled to prevent any transgression of caste norms. This control is enforced through practices such as arranged marriages, dowry, and honor-based violence, all of which serve to reinforce both caste and gender hierarchies.

Religious and cultural practices also play a significant role in the reproduction of caste and gender. Many Hindu rituals and traditions, for instance, assign specific roles and duties to individuals based on their caste and gender. Women, particularly those from lower castes, are often excluded from participating in religious ceremonies or occupying positions of authority within religious institutions. This exclusion serves to reinforce their subordinate status within both the caste and gender hierarchies (Kannabiran, 2006).

Education and economic opportunities are other critical areas where caste and gender intersect. Dalit women often face significant barriers to accessing education, which in turn limits their economic opportunities and reinforces their marginalization. Even when Dalit women do attain education, they are often subjected to discrimination and violence within educational institutions, which are dominated by upper-caste norms and values. This exclusion from education and economic opportunities serves to maintain the status quo, ensuring that Dalit women remain at the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies (Deshpande, 2007).

### **Resistance and Agency: Dalit Feminist Perspectives**

While caste and gender operate as systems of oppression, they also create spaces for resistance and agency. Dalit feminist scholars and activists have been at the forefront of challenging both caste and gender hierarchies, arguing that any movement for social justice must address the specific forms of oppression faced by Dalit women. Dalit feminism, as a distinct strand of feminist thought, emerged in response to the marginalization of Dalit women's voices within both the mainstream feminist and anti-caste movements (Paik, 2014).

Dalit feminists argue that the experiences of Dalit women cannot be understood through the lens of either caste or gender alone; rather, they must be analyzed through an intersectional framework that takes into account the multiple and overlapping forms of oppression they face. This approach challenges the dominance of upper-caste, middle-class women within the feminist movement, as well as the patriarchal tendencies within the anti-caste movement (Rege, 2006). Dalit feminists also emphasize the importance of centering Dalit women's voices and experiences in any struggle for social justice, arguing that their perspectives offer critical insights into the workings of caste and gender as systems of power.

One of the key contributions of Dalit feminism is its emphasis on the lived experiences of Dalit women as a site of knowledge production. Dalit women's autobiographies, oral histories, and literary texts provide powerful testimonies of the violence and discrimination they face, as well as their strategies of resistance and survival (Rao, 2003). These narratives challenge dominant caste and gender discourses, offering alternative ways of understanding and conceptualizing both. In doing so, Dalit feminism not only critiques existing power structures but also offers a vision of social justice that is inclusive and transformative.

However, the Conceptualization of caste and gender together requires a rethinking of both feminist and anti-caste frameworks. Traditional feminist approaches that focus solely on gender often fail to account for the specific forms of oppression faced by women from marginalized castes. Similarly, anti-caste movements that focus exclusively on caste can overlook how gender shapes the experiences of caste-based oppression. An inclusive framework that takes into account the intersections of caste and gender is essential for understanding the complex dynamics of power and oppression in the Indian context (Sarkar, 2016).

## Violence and Dalit Women

Violence against Dalit women in India is a profound and pervasive issue that exists at the intersection of caste, gender, and class, manifesting in multifaceted forms of physical, sexual, and structural violence. Dalit women, who belong to the most oppressed caste in the Indian social hierarchy, face extreme marginalization not only due to their gender but also due to their caste status, which relegates them to the lowest rungs of society. This unique position subjects them to a triple burden of discrimination, where they are victimized by both the patriarchal structures within their communities and the broader caste-based hierarchies imposed by society at large (Rege, 1998). The nature of violence against Dalit women is not merely individualistic but is often collective, as it serves as a tool for maintaining caste dominance and social control. Sexual violence, particularly, is wielded as an instrument of power, where upper-caste men assert their dominance by violating Dalit women's bodies, knowing that the social and legal systems are unlikely to offer redress due to the ingrained caste biases (Irudayam, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2006). This violence is further exacerbated by the impunity with which it is carried out, as law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies, often dominated by upper-caste individuals, either dismiss or downplay the severity of crimes against Dalit women, perpetuating a culture of silence and fear.

The systemic nature of this violence is evident in the widespread practice of untouchability and the economic exploitation of Dalit women, who are often confined to menial labor, such as manual scavenging, a dehumanizing occupation that exposes them to extreme health risks and social ostracism (Thorat & Newman, 2010). The intersection of caste and gender thus creates a scenario where Dalit women are seen as the ultimate "Other," their bodies and labor available for exploitation without fear of reprisal. This dehumanization is also reflected in the cultural representations of Dalit women, where they are often depicted as hypersexualized or inherently subservient, reinforcing stereotypes that justify their mistreatment (Paik, 2014). Moreover, the violence experienced by Dalit women is not limited to physical and sexual abuse but extends to structural violence, including denial of access to education, healthcare, and political participation. Educational institutions, for instance, are often sites of caste-based discrimination, where Dalit girls face bullying and harassment from both peers and teachers, leading to high dropout rates and a cycle of poverty and marginalization (Nambissan, 2009). In healthcare, Dalit women frequently encounter discrimination that results in inadequate medical attention, particularly in maternal and reproductive health, contributing to higher mortality rates and poor health outcomes (Deshpande, 2007).

Politically, despite constitutional guarantees, Dalit women remain underrepresented in positions of power, and when they do occupy such positions, they often face severe backlash, including violence and intimidation, aimed at reinforcing caste hierarchies and dissuading other Dalit women from seeking political office (Guru, 1995). This systemic and intersectional violence is perpetuated by a deeply entrenched culture of impunity, where the perpetrators of violence against Dalit women are rarely held accountable, and the survivors are often stigmatized and ostracized by their own communities (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The legal framework, while robust on paper, including laws such as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

(Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, is inadequately enforced, with police often refusing to register complaints or press charges against upper-caste perpetrators (Teltumbde, 2010). This failure of the state to protect Dalit women and ensure justice reinforces the structural violence that they face and undermines their confidence in the legal system. Furthermore, the economic exploitation of Dalit women is inextricably linked to the violence they endure. Confined to the lowest-paid and most precarious jobs, Dalit women are economically disenfranchised, which exacerbates their vulnerability to violence.

The intersection of economic exploitation and caste-based discrimination often results in Dalit women being trapped in cycles of poverty and abuse, with little hope of escaping due to the barriers they face in accessing education and employment opportunities (Thorat & Newman, 2010). This cycle of violence and exploitation is sustained by the normalization of caste-based oppression within Indian society, where the suffering of Dalit women is either ignored or deemed as inevitable due to their caste status. Cultural norms and practices, including the perpetuation of endogamy and the caste-based division of labor, reinforce the idea that Dalit women are inherently inferior and thus deserving of their subordinate position in society (Dumont, 1980). The intersectionality of caste and gender violence also has a psychological dimension, where Dalit women internalize the discrimination and violence they face, leading to low self-esteem, depression, and other mental health issues (Irudayam, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2006).

The trauma of violence is often compounded by the lack of social support, as Dalit women are frequently isolated within their communities, with few avenues for seeking help or justice. Despite these overwhelming challenges, Dalit women have also been at the forefront of resisting caste and gender oppression, both individually and collectively. Movements such as the Dalit Women's Self-Respect Movement have emerged to challenge the patriarchal and casteist structures that perpetuate violence, advocating for the rights and dignity of Dalit women (Paik, 2014). These movements have been instrumental in bringing attention to the specific forms of violence faced by Dalit women and in pushing for legal and policy changes to address these issues. However, the success of these movements is often hindered by the deeply entrenched caste and gender biases within Indian society, which resist any challenge to the status quo. The media's role in either perpetuating or challenging these biases is also significant, as coverage of violence against Dalit women is often sensationalized or framed in a way that reinforces caste stereotypes rather than highlighting the systemic nature of the violence (Rege, 1998).

## Conclusion

Violence against Dalit women is a deeply rooted and systemic issue that is maintained through a combination of physical, sexual, and structural violence, reinforced by cultural norms, economic exploitation, and legal impunity. The intersectionality of caste and gender creates a unique form of oppression that is often overlooked in mainstream feminist and anti-caste movements, necessitating a more nuanced and intersectional approach to understanding and addressing this violence. The resistance and resilience of Dalit women in the face of such overwhelming odds is a testament to their strength and determination, but

meaningful change will require a concerted effort to dismantle the structures of caste and gender oppression that sustain this violence.

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