



The need for a Dalit Feminist Position amidst Dalit Politics and mainstream Indian Feminism: A Critical Perspective

Oly Saha

Assistant Professor

MUC Women's College, Burdwan, West Bengal

Abstract: This paper looks at the question of the need for a Dalit Feminist position in Dalit politics as well as the Indian feminist movement. It must be acknowledged that the Dalit feminist movement recognizes that the experiences of Dalit women are unique and that their perspective and strive are not entirely honoured or addressed within the broader Dalit movement or within the mainstream Indian women's movement. Therefore, there is a critical need for the incorporation of the Dalit feminist position in the forefront to occupy its individual and significant space in the everyday public discourse and political praxis. Consequently, the paper in proving this very hypothesis.

Keywords: Dalit Feminist Position, Dalit Movement, Caste Complexities and Gender.

This paper looks at the question of a need for a Dalit Feminist position in Dalit politics as well as the Indian feminist movement. It must be acknowledged that the Dalit feminist movement recognizes that the experiences of Dalit women are unique and that their perspective and strive are not entirely addressed within the larger Dalit movement or within mainstream Indian women's movement. Uma Chakravarti description of the Mandal agitation reveals a key argument in the larger struggle in the history of Indian women's rights activism and may be considered as initiating the Dalit feminist consciousness. The Mandal Commission (1979) ensured a 27 percent reservation for other backward classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions causing widespread protests, which also sometimes turned violent, from the upper castes. The upper caste protesters argued that an increased reservation of the OBCs would lead to the death of merit thus denying opportunities to the candidates who were 'deserving.' Uma Chakravarti in her book *Gendering Caste* (2003)¹ mentions a particular protest placard held by upper-caste women students from college that read, "We don't want unemployed husbands". This indicates two significant discourses. The first is that the opposition to reservation was not based on merit but caste privileges and that upper caste people were unwilling to share power and opportunities with the historically deprived castes. Secondly, that the upper-caste women students

¹ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste*, Sage Stree, 2018

were not protesting for themselves as future employed candidates in government jobs, but for their potential future husbands can only be a part of upper-caste backgrounds thus re-establishing patriarchal systems that recognizes women as homemakers instead being themselves employed. Additionally, the anti-Mandal agitations brought to the front the subject of sexual violence and different forms of physical and emotional abuse against Dalit women. Uma Chakravarti through her take on the Anti Mandal agitation explores how the caste system works hand in hand with patriarchal system to ensure the preservation of systemic and hierarchal humiliation and discrimination in the Indian social scenario. Journalist TK Rajalakshmi in her review of *Gendering Caste* says that Chakravarti, “questions how the Indian Caste system views women and how women see the social stratification in contemporary India.”² Doubtlessly the gaze of the two systemic entities on each other succinctly summarizes the place and position of Dalit Women’s rights amidst Indian Women’s Rights. The system of caste being so vicious, it constructs women through a patriarchal lens, giving them roles that reinforce both caste and gender inequalities and consequent hierarchies. Women, particularly from dominant castes, are often seen as flagbearers of caste purity, with their sexuality and mobility tightly controlled to maintain social boundaries. In contrast, Dalit women are subjected to systemic violence and exclusion, their bodies being vulnerable through both casteist and patriarchal mechanisms. As a substitute, women's perspectives on societal stratification especially those of Dalit and marginalized women, offer a critical counter-gaze. Their lived experiences expose the complex and layered oppressions embedded within caste structures, challenging dominant narratives that often obscure or homogenize women's struggles. This dual gaze, Chakravarti suggests, is essential to understanding the intersectional nature of caste and gender in contemporary India, and it underscores the urgency of locating Dalit feminist thought within broader feminist discourse.

In the Introduction to the book *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (2020),³ the editors Sunaina Arora and Akash Singh Rathore says,

Indian feminists have a widespread inclination towards taking the feminist thesis as their premise and abandoning women’s relation to caste. The neglect of Dalit in the Indian discourse on gender is deeply problematic because Dalit women occupy subordinate positions in most organised production of feminist knowledge. In the beginning of the twenty first century, feminists have increasingly begun to recognise this oversight, and several books have emerged highlighting Dalit women’s contribution to Indian feminism. But mainstream Indian feminists have by-passed this rectifying body of knowledge, despite its importance and relevance. Indian feminist discourse which ought to bring gender-justice to all Indian women, at least in theory, has suppressed the caste question to such an extent that feminism itself has been seen as a modality of subjugating women from Dalit communities.⁴

It is true that mainstream Indian feminist discourse has historically privileged a universalist feminist framework focussing on gender as its primary focal point. In doing so, it has largely ignored how caste also plays a major role in shaping women's lives and experiences of oppression. This has led to the marginalization

² TK Rajalakshmi, “Women and caste” *Gendering Caste* by Uma Chakravarti. Frontline, June 19, 2019.

³ Sunaina Arya. “INTRODUCTION to Dalit Feminist Theory.” Editor's Introduction to *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (2019): n. pag. Web.

⁴ Ibid., p.2

of Dalit women's experiences making it a structural erasure that reproduces caste hierarchies within emancipatory discourse of feminism itself.

While the early twenty-first century has witnessed a growing recognition of this lacuna the reluctance to integrate caste-conscious perspectives into the broader feminist canon underscores a persistent epistemic resistance. Consequently, Indian feminism, which ostensibly seeks gender justice for all women, has paradoxically subjugated Dalit women, by failing to interrogate their inherent underlying casteism

BR Ambedkar's stated that "women were the gateways to the caste system" as a result of caste endogamy that ensures the 'purity' or watertightness of the different castes. In the research paper named "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" (1916-17)⁵ Ambedkar notes caste as a result of sustained endogamy. Historians who have followed the trajectory of the Indian feminist movement do reflect that during its initial stage in India the feminist movement was majorly centred within the city limits and its proponents being all upper-caste women.⁶ It is evident that category woman has been largely homogenised and within this category the privileged caste women thrive. Hence it is imperative to say that marginalized women in Indian society lack enough agency and power that is usually placed in an advantageous caste stronghold.⁷

To prove this above mentioned point we can look at an example. We can look back on the practice of the Devadasi system⁸ that made women from lower castes entirely dedicated to temples only to serve as dancers and sex workers and this system was a common practice among Dalit communities. In this system Dalit girls were married to a village god by their parents. These girls were then sexually exploited by the upper-caste landlords and rich men of the village. This system of religious sexual exploitation is found in parts of India such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Orissa.⁹

Dalit feminists also refer to Bhanwari devi's¹⁰ case to magnify the privileges of mainstream Indian feminism and its lack of recognising 'differences.' Bhanwari Devi, a *kumhar*¹¹ women, was gangraped and her husband was beaten up because of her protests against child marriage in the *gujjar*¹² community. Mainstream feminists showed solidarity with Bhanwari Devi at that time and as an aftermath took the opportunity to rally against sexual harassment of women at the workplace. Mainstream feminists' efforts and movement led to the establishment of the Vishakha guidelines in 1997.¹³ However by universalizing the discourse around sexual

⁵ B. R. Ambedkar, CASTES IN INDIA: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development, Indian Antiquary Vol. XLVI (May 1917)

⁶ UMA CHAKRAVARTI. "IN HER OWN WRITE: Writing from a Dalit Feminist Standpoint." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3/4, 2012, pp. 134–45. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24394281>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

⁷ Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender', in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Subaltern Studies IX: Writ-ings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 232–60

⁸ The religiously sanctioned Devadasi system in India exemplifies intersectional oppression of gender, caste, and sexuality. Historically, Devadasis, or "servants of God," were women wedded to God who performed temple duties and were considered sacral women with ritual powers. As part of her duties, the Devadasis offer sexual services to her patrons, invariably the economically and socially powerful patriarch/s in society. The Devadasis were not a monolithic community; there were caste-based segregations within the Devadasi community which delineated their social positions. Devadasis were drawn from castes lower in the hierarchy (non-Brahmins) and the Scheduled castes (Dalits).

⁹ Tameshnie Deane, The Devadasi System: An Exploitation of Women and Children in the name of God and Culture, *Journal of International Women's Studies*, May, 2022.

¹⁰ Bhanwari Devi was a government social worker from a lower-caste community. Her fearless pursuit to end the evil of child marriage enraged the upper caste. To silence her, she was later gang-raped by the landlord community. The ordeal did not just end here. Her struggle was met with complete apathy from the government, for which she worked. However, keeping Bhanwari Devi's case in focus, proper guidelines to deal with sexual harassment complaints at the workplace were set down in 1997 in the Supreme Court, known as the Vishaka Guidelines. Unfortunately, even after 26 years, Bhanwari Devi herself still remains ostracized from her village, even as the criminals roam absolutely scot free.

¹¹ Kumhar caste or potter caste.

¹² Gurjars, or Gujjars are OBCs and considered higher in the caste hierarchy than Kumhars.

¹³ In 1997, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment laying down guidelines to be followed by establishments in dealing with complaints about sexual harassment. "Vishaka Guidelines" were stipulated by the Supreme Court of India, in *Vishaka and others v State of Rajasthan* case in 1997, regarding sexual harassment at workplace. The court stated that these guidelines were to be implemented until legislation is passed to deal with the issue.

harassment, mainstream feminist narratives failed to account for how caste hierarchies mediate vulnerability and violence. Bhanwari Devi, a Kumhar woman, was targeted not only for her gender but for her caste position within a Brahmanical social order. The act of intervening in a child marriage involving an upper-caste girl was perceived as a transgression of caste boundaries, provoking a retaliatory assertion of caste supremacy.

Dalit feminists argue that the Gujjar men's act of public rape was not merely a gendered violation but a caste-inflected punishment. They brutally reasserted dominance over a lower-caste woman who dared to challenge normative societal rhythms. In this context, sexual violence becomes a tool of caste discipline, and the erasure of Bhanwari Devi's caste identity in mainstream feminist discourse perpetuates the very structures of exclusion that Dalit feminism seeks to dismantle. "The Bhanwari Devi case, therefore, becomes the classic example of mainstream feminist appropriation as 'sexual atrocity' at the cost of caste,"¹⁴ when actually the assault on Bhanwari devi's husband and the sexual assault on her was clearly a hate crime based on caste inequalities.

It is indeed quite intriguing to make a note of all of the multifarious facets of the gender and caste nexus that exists and to wrap one's head around the diverse perspectives that emerge through its comprehensive understanding. There is the presence of dual patriarchies – Brahmanical and Dalit which operates in a multi-level structure which requires a more nuanced approach. Uma Chakravarti describes, Brahmanical Patriarchy as:

A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women who are valorised, and a structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion.¹⁵

In keeping the above definition in mind, we can also ask: is there a Dalit patriarchy? Dalit political leaders, academicians and scholar answer this question in the negative. "Dalit politics' predominant take on Dalit patriarchy has depended on emphasising its emulative format. They argue that there is no such notion as Dalit patriarchy because all Dalits are oppressed. Even if there are traces of patriarchal tyranny, it is Brahmanical patriarchy that should be blamed for suggesting models of domination to Dalit men."¹⁶ Gopal Guru writes that, "Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high-caste adversaries had used to dominate them"¹⁷ Therefore would it be right to say that Dalit Patriarchy is oppressive when it attempts to become its Brahmanized version? The answer to that question needs critical analysis. Brahmanical patriarchy

¹⁴ Anandita Pan, After Violence: Dalit Women's Narratives and the Possibilities of Resistance, Journal of International Women's Studies, October 2022.

¹⁵ Uma Chakravarti, Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens. Calcutta: Stree. 2003

¹⁶ A Pan.

¹⁷ Guru 1995, p.2549

is definitely a collaborative mechanism that works in a systematically hegemonic fashion.¹⁸ However, it may not be entirely true if we look at it from a Dalit women's perspective. In Gopal Guru's seminal essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' he uses the term 'Dalit patriarchy' to question the unequal practices of patriarchy in Dalit society.¹⁹ Further than that the term has only been used sparingly by later scholars amidst Dalit scholarship and Dalit activism. Seldom do we see the focus on Dalit women's issues inside the Dalit community as a discrete problem which may demand special attention. Dalit women, indeed, speak about domestic abuse by their husbands which includes verbal abuses and physical assault²⁰ The patriarchal oppression imposes fear on Dalit women which several Dalit women activists have talked about such as Baby Kamble, a Dalit author, expresses her fear of being chastised by her husband and son when she was writing her autobiography. Kamble also says in an interview, "[w]hen working in the fields, we have to fear for our modesty and at home we fear our husbands. I ran a vegetable shop. Not a single day of my life was spent happily. Beatings, quarrels, crying, and starvation — these were routine. I was convinced that a Dalit woman is really insecure"²¹ Baby Kamble's revelation is a telling anecdote on what a Dalit woman's life is like. Similarly, Sujatha Gidhale's book *The Ant Among Elephants* (2017)²² disclose the typical violence that is meted out to Dalit women, a unique experience where the caste consciousness in Dalit men is different from Dalit women. In Gidhale's book, Satyam, the author's maternal uncle, despite his own struggles in grappling with his caste identity, is functional in controlling his sister's life. Gidhale, in her book talks about the indiscernible manoeuvrings of caste and of gender through an insight into her 'untouchable' family, delving deep into generational history with a clear, objective perspective. In the daily life, harassment of Dalit women takes the following forms: non-Dalits frequently use abusive and derogatory language when addressing Dalit women; non-Dalits refer to Dalit women as prostitutes or use caste names; non-Dalit supervisors or traders will often make sexual innuendoes to Dalit women."²³

All of the above findings argue in favour of a distinct Dalit feminist position amidst the mainstream Indian Feminist movement that would ultimately focus in addressing the complex and nuanced understanding and intersections of caste and gender. Sharmila Rege's *Against the Madness of Manu* attempts to extricate the links between caste and violence against women.²⁴ Rege in her very last prominent work attempts to decode the multifarious structure of caste and theorize an understanding with a deep focus through the B.R. Ambedkar's works. Her engagement with Ambedkar's works is crucial for the Indian feminist movement. Rege focuses on caste's continuity through endogamy, the idea that Ambedkar had considered essential for the upholding of the caste circumference. Ambedkar's stress on caste as an endogamous arrangement and the way to break caste hierarchies through inter-caste marriages, give the feminist movement in India a significant leverage. Rege's reference to Ambedkar thus brings to the forefront the understanding of caste through a gendered perspective. She says, "Ambedkar saw caste's exclusionary violence and subjugation of women inherent in the very process that led to caste formation."²⁵ In highlighting Dalit women's lived experiences, historical memory, and

¹⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁹ Ibid.,

²⁰ Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar Dalit Women in India: At the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric, 2015, p.70,

²¹ Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, 2008, trans. Wandana Sonalkar.2014.

²² Sujatha Gidhale, *Ants Among Elephants*, Farrars, Strats and Giroux, 2017.

²³ Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal and Wandana Sonalkar p.69

²⁴ Sharmila Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*, Navayana, 2013.

²⁵ Rege, 2013, p.69.

resistance, Dalit feminism not only expands the scope of feminist inquiry but also demands a praxis that is intersectional, accountable, and centred in structural critique. It is only through such a recalibration that Indian feminism can move beyond its Brahmanical confines and work toward genuine and true emancipation for all women.

Works Cited:

- Ambedkar, B. R. 1917. "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development." *The Indian Antiquary* 46 (May)
- Arya, Sunaina. 2019. "Introduction to Dalit Feminist Theory." In *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore.
- Chakravarti, Uma. 2018. *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. New Delhi: Sage Stree.
- Gidla, Sujatha. 2017. *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Ilaiah Shepherd, Kancha. 2021. "Dalit-Bahujan Feminism: A Newly Emerging Discourse." *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 2 (1).
- Pan, Anandita. 2022. "After Violence: Dalit Women's Narratives and the Possibilities of Resistance." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 23 (5).
- Pawar, Urmila, and Meenakshi Moon. 2014. *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. Translated by Wandana Sonalkar. New Delhi: Zubaan. Originally published in 2008.
- Rege, Sharmila. 2013. *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Navayana.
- Sabharwal, Nidhi Sadana, and Wandana Sonalkar. 2015. "Dalit Women in India: At the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste." *Global Justice: Theory Practice Rhetoric* 8: 70.
- Tharu, Susie, and Tejaswini Niranjana. 1996. "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender." In *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 232–60. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.