

DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA: UNIQUE SOCIAL EXISTENCE

Written by Aakanksha Pathak

3rd Year BBA LLB student, OP Jindal Global Law School, OP Jindal Global University, India

There is a requirement to attain a standpoint wherein significant issues of Dalit women are addressed such as their lack of voice, which are often neglected by the Dalit movement spearheaded by the males and the mainstream Indian feminist movement initiated by the upper caste women.

The Dalit women are faced with triple intersection oppression based on caste, gender, and class giving them an “outsider within” status. Thus, these women can showcase diverse perspectives due to their standing in society which will help the readers understand the condition of Dalit women in society and the atrocities they battle on a daily basis. The initiation of the Dalit Feminism standpoint marks a social change and encourages empowerment and activism.

In the words of Bell Hooks, "the movement of Feminism initiated to empower women all around the world, practiced the exclusion of women who did not have sufficient resources to change their living conditions." (1984) This statement is sufficient to prove the skewed functioning of the feminist movement prevalent in the society. The prevalence of this form led to the concept of feminism being a remote concept for numerous women in the world.

One can trace the presence of Dalit women in the category of women who were excluded from the feminist movement. The Dalit women in Indian society have been faced with intersectional oppression due to their birth, firstly being a woman and secondly them belonging to the Dalit community (Sharma and Kumar 2020), as per Dr. Ambedkar, "Dalit is a depressed class" and per Beauvoir, "women are the second sex."

The twofold marginalized status of these women puts them into a separate category that cannot be merely understood by solely belonging to the Dalit community or the women community. As an outcome, issues faced by Dalit women have never been addressed under the feminist

movements nor have they been addressed in the Dalit movement. Thus, the women falling under this category fall under the ambit of being the "outsiders within."

Caste is a peculiar concern in the life narratives of Dalit women, making the lives of these women belonging to the lower caste even more complicated. Through the exploration of texts and descriptions from the day-to-day lives of the Dalit women, it can be understood that the Dalit community is considered to be polluted and is therefore referred to as the socially excluded class. Due to this, the people belonging to these communities are pushed to marginalized locations on the boundaries of society. As per Kamble (2008), "our place was near the garbage and the pits on the outskirts of the village, where people threw away their wastes ... we have been eating remnants without nagging and labored for the privileged." In addition to this as soon as the people acquired the knowledge that the individual belonged to the Dalit community, efforts were taken to distance themselves from that individual under the stance of "maintaining purity", as per Pawar (2015) in *The Weave*, whenever "Dalit women used to travel for the business and for selling their things, the upper caste women took considerate efforts to avoid their touch." The women belonging to the lower castes were barred from using the normal roads as they were reserved for upper castes, they were expected to walk through the thorny side of the roads whenever a member of the upper castes was seen using the normal roads. Furthermore, the Dalit women were expected to bow down and show respect whenever the upper caste men were passing by chanting, "humble Mahar women fall at your feet" failure of doing the same would result in abuse and violence from both – the men belonging to the upper castes and the male members of their family and community. It can thus be concluded that apart from caste discrimination, women have to face the wrath of patriarchy as they are considered to be the "second sex."

Such caste-based discrimination has been perpetrated on these women since their childhood. As Pawar (2015) in her work recalls the atrocities she had to face as a young child, when she was given the job to deliver baskets to the customers, she was made to stand on the threshold and not a foot ahead. The customers under the notion of purity and pollution and to avoid being "polluted" washed the delivery baskets before touching them and dropped the coins to avoid contact. Such encounters from a young age leave an imprint in the minds of the children which is engraved in their minds for a lifetime.

Through these various scenarios, it can be seen that even though caste-based discrimination has been banned in the nation by the virtue of the Indian Constitution, it has been engraved in the social construct of the Indian society and the ideologies and the psyche of the residents has been highly influenced by it.

Such atrocities of the Dalit women in the society were not addressed in the literary movement of the Dalit community due to its patriarchal functioning, Rege, “the Dalit political and literary movement was masculinized.” (2006)

Furthermore, it has been claimed and held that the ill experiences of Dalit women have not been solely rooted in the caste system, however, exist at the intersection of gender and caste. There are numerous norms and objectives in the Dalit community which are oppressive to the women community which has led to their suppression and exploitation.

Dalit women are faced with twofold oppression due to patriarchy. The first can be termed as intrinsic patriarchal oppression which is afflicted by the males belonging to the Dalit community. Since the Dalit males are exploited due to their caste, these women due to the frustrations of the males are faced with sexual, physical, and verbal abuse at the hands of the males belonging to their family and community. Such violence is silenced and accepted by the women in society.

The second can be termed as extended patriarchy wherein these women are exploited by the upper-caste males and the panchayats, this category of oppression can be termed to be much more severe and heinous. An instance which is narrated by Pawar (2015) can portray the atrociousness of this oppression, “a widow found to be pregnant was made to stand wherein other women kicked her until the child was aborted” this act of the panchayat was seen as a heroic act done to protect the honour of the village.

Women were prevented from going to courts and whatever was held in the decision of the Panchayat was deemed to be final under the false notion of protection of gender and caste ideologies. The works of *Mariamamma in Bama's Sangati* and *Thangam's in P. Sivakamii's the Grip of change* can be seen as testaments for such social and legal cruelty the Dalit women had to endure.

It is crystal clear how little value a woman holds in society, wherein her rights and choices are dishonored and neglected. It can be seen that every act of a woman was controlled by the norms created by the males in society.

Therefore, it cannot be said that the narratives and the experiences of the Dalit women writers are mere sob stories, they have to be considered to be a standpoint against such social atrocities they are faced with on a daily basis.

The struggles faced by Dalit women were not addressed by mainstream feminist women. As they were initiated by the women belonging to the dominant castes, their idea of oppression was confined to their experiences of gendered oppression. Similarities can be drawn on the experiences of the Black women in the west whose struggles were overlooked by the West feminism, in the words of Kimberle Crenshaw, “feminist theory merely addresses one form of marginal identity i.e., gender, however, it fails to address the intersection of numerous oppressional identities in the society such as caste and class.” (1991) The black women and the Dalit women are synonymous as they can be termed to be the classic victims of “double jeopardy.”

Dalit women have been pushed to the bottom of the social pyramid as a result of their intersectional disadvantageous identities. Indian feminism has failed to capture and address the realities faced by Dalit women daily. Mainstream feminism was focused on tackling oppression only based on gender, while they neglected the issues such as hunger, poverty, public violence, and sexual violence. It can be thus said that the concept of Indian feminism has not been broadened to include the concerns and issues faced by Dalit women.

The experiences of the Dalit women can be used as testimonies of violent actions against women. These women irrespective of their devoted and noble conduct are persecuted and tormented by their husbands, “thrashing of one’s wife is an everyday phenomenon in the Dalit households.” Another such example can be found when Pawar (2015) examines the oppression of her cousin, “husband was a drunkard and mother-in-law a tyrant, not one but both of them daily used to beat her up mercilessly for flimsy reasons. There were situations when on stormy nights, she along with her children were driven out of the house. She was often seen with a broken nose, swollen and bleeding body.” Such was the harassment a Dalit woman was made

to face on a daily basis, she was made to bear the brunt without any complaints and accept such horrific treatment in silence.

The viciousness of the mother-in-law infers the treatment she got from her mother-in-law. The Dalit men who are dominated and exploited by the upper caste, who are beaten up and abused constantly, adapt such behaviour and replicate it against the women in their family and community. Therefore, it can be concluded that the culture of violence, silence, and impunity has been entrenched in the lives of Dalit women.

Some instances are narrated by Kamble (2008) wherein the women are faced with immense brutal and inhumane actions, for instance in *The Prisons*, cutting off a woman's nose was seen as a manly act." In *The Weave*, one can notice the mistreatment caused by Bhikiakka to his wife and children. Therefore, the claims made by authors such as Ilaiah that, "Dalit women experience lesser patriarchal oppression" must be negated. The narratives of the violence faced by Dalit women are horrific and appalling, it is a consequence of gender-based disparities which are strengthened due to caste-based discrimination, resulting in the grant of impunity to the privileged groups.

Another such oppressive practice the Dalit women are faced with is the gendered division of labor. The economically deprived women are made to work in the fields in addition to performing household work, which their male counterparts refused to do. The labor practices of Dalit women can be compared to the labor practices of the oppressed Black women in the era of slavery.

"During the slavery era in the United States, the Black women were not only made to work in the fields with their male counterparts but also were made to do domestic work which the Black men refused to do. Their works on the field such as crop harvesting and domestic work were devalued by the men as it was deemed to be feminine." (Hooks 1981)

Thus, it can be said that the practice of gendered division of labor is one of the most common yet complex oppressive practices that lower caste women are faced with. The women are naturally expected to take care of the family members by fulfilling their physical and emotional needs, cooking, fetching water, and managing the raw materials in the household. *In the Weave* it has been said that "a family is deemed too strong when the woman of the family has a strong

backbone", this stamen indicated that a Dalit woman would be a central pillar of the Dalit family structure. Yet, their day-to-day work continues to go unrecognized and unrepresented, such work by a woman is taken for granted as it is seen as a duty of the woman to engage in such chores.

It has also been established that the gendered division of labor in economically weak Dalit households begins from early childhood. Girls are made to drop out of school early to perform so-called "feminine" activities such as household work and taking care of the needs of the family members. It has been observed that the household is a vital part of Dalit lives and the community believes that women are born to do these jobs, "what's the point of providing an education when she is going to end up in a kitchen blowing on the stove?" Thus, for Dalit girls, education is not considered to be the prime objective. Some statistics in the issue of Dalit Women Speak out (2011), reveal that the ratios of dropping out are higher among Dalit girls, 74.2% in Standard I-X.

Apart from the agony, the economically deprived woman has to suffer, there have been illustrations where gendered oppression has been practiced in the educated and the working class in the Dalit community. There exists an exploitative culture in the community for women who are made to give their salaries to their husbands. In addition to her working the job of fulfilling the household always falls on the woman irrespective of the fact if she is employed or not and she is expected to single-handedly accomplish everything expected of her. Such social practices are based on gender thereby sustaining the patriarchal social order which plays a huge role in the oppression of women in the Dalit community. There are so many other dos and don'ts curated for the women in society, it is often looked down upon when a woman wishes to move away from the marginal community for her career or her education, it is deemed that her life choices are not as important as the completion of household chores. Furthermore, these women attempting to create and develop a feminist identity are often faced with backlash from their male counterparts, "Pawar (2015) agrees that she was faced with patriarchal domination and harsh criticism from the Dalit community for her feminist writings."

Therefore, these aforementioned narratives and experiences of the Dalit women are sufficient to portray how patriarchy and caste intersect to exploit and inflict such inhumane practices against Dalit women. Thus, the urge of the Dalit women to express and define their trauma

becomes evident as these women emerge as the leaders to transform the community. However, since household duty remains the topmost priority, the establishment of such a standpoint has not been easy. It can be said that the lives of the Dalit woman are fit to define and portray the constraints put on women for decades, which are a result of the patriarchal order rooted in the society, in the words of Lazar, “The patriarchal social order and its relationship with power, results in the exclusion and disempowerment of women as a social group.” (2007)

Furthermore, not only caste and gender but class oppression too interlock making the lives of Dalit women more gruesome. One can trace the issues of poverty, struggle to obtain food, and starvation from the narrations of Dalit women. It has been established in a study that the majority of the family earnings are splurged on alcohol due to their husband's habitual drinking issues which cause economic issues for the Dalit wives. Due to this, the responsibilities of running the households and ensuring that the household has sufficient resources, are left for the women to fulfill. In the memoir by *Pawar (2015)*, it has been said, “as they carry the burden of the family they are compelled to work as sweepers and scavengers, etc.” Further, they were compelled to live in repressed conditions in silence and do menial jobs for the upper caste just to ensure their survival, “every morning with their brooms they used to go towards the Maratha Households to clean animal pens and return with some leftover food.”

Hunger can be seen as one of the most prominent enemies of the oppressed class. The people belonging to the oppressed groups are constrained to work for the upper castes to defeat the issue of starvation, “labored for the upper castes and ate leftovers without any whining.” These women are made to do the jobs of a sweeper, they are made to clean animal pens, and cultivate the lands of the upper caste, they diligently do their job irrespective of their health and weather conditions with zero to minimal protection from labour laws as they are employed in the unorganized sector.

Upon reading about such experiences of the Dalit women, one can easily witness the subhuman presence and the challenging working conditions of Dalit women. They are considered to be the "beasts of burden" who are constantly exploited and dehumanized for the gains of the privileged class. The job of these women does not end here, after bearing the brunt of the dominant upper caste and harsh weather conditions, they have their household chores and

duties to fulfill. Continuous oppression of these women has pushed them to the bottom of the social ladder they are made to face the impact of Caste, gender, and class violence altogether.

The practice of exclusion of Dalit women from mainstream feminism and the Dalit movement gave rise to the Dalit Feminist movement in the 1990s era. These women were living on the edge of society and their outsider status gave them a double vision, their marginalized view of society gave them an understanding of how the privileged class used their access to societal resources, to limit and restrict the underprivileged thereby controlling and defining them. The oppressed class, therefore, came together to voice their issues by the virtue of literature and organizations curated for Dalit women. Underrepresentation of Dalit women in the feminism movement commanded by the dominant caste women and from the Dalit movement spearheaded by the Dalit men signaled a need for establishing an alternate route where the issues of caste and gender could be addressed in synthesis.

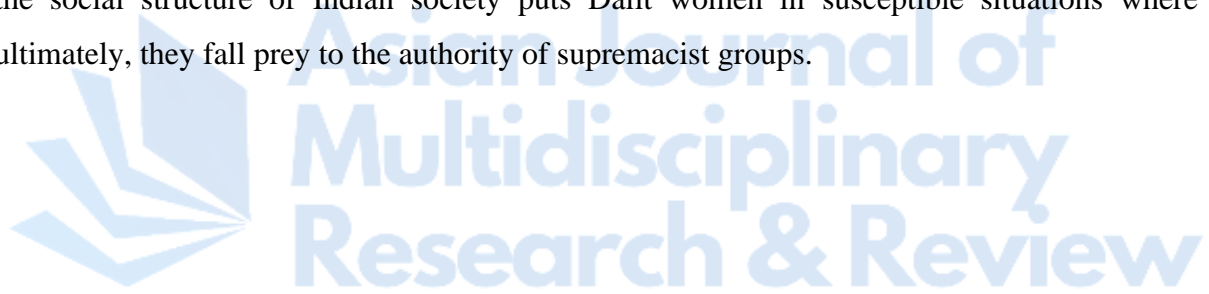
The emergence of Dalit Feminism has created a unique movement that by participating in political differences, strives for absolute social equality and justice. The intention behind the movement was to tackle all the issues and forms of violence and discrimination which includes aspects of gender, class, and caste. The movement of Dalit Feminism would give legitimacy to the claims of Dalit women and portray the historical reality and the discrimination such women have undergone for generations.

The Dalit Feminist theories reflect the firsthand experiences of Dalit women and showcase the realities of the atrocities they have been faced with for decades which have been rejected by the mainstream feminist and the patriarchal Dalit movements. It has encouraged the Dalit women to confront the dominant classes which have silenced their voices. It further also challenges the Indian social order which validates caste and gender-based social practices and systematically oppresses the lower caste groups of women. Thus, it can be said that the Dalit feminist ideology allows the voices of feminists to destroy the notion of exclusivity and patriarchy by simultaneously broadening the scope of Dalit Literature and Indian Feminism.

The Dalit feminist standpoint has made its way into acts, schemes, and policies established to make the lives of Dalits significantly better. Some of the changes which can be seen in the Indian Constitution can be found under Articles 17, 46, 15(4), 16(4A), 338, 330, and 332.

Apart from these changes, several other measures have been taken to ensure social empowerment and upliftment of the Dalits, The Protection of Civil Rights Act, Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities), The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act. Various other schemes such as the National Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers, Ujwala Yojna, Shochalaya, and housing schemes for BPL were also launched. Venture capital funds for the scheduled castes were also established which has significantly transformed the lives of Dalits in the country.

Although these measures are a step in the right direction, they cannot be said to be full proof mechanisms as the country even after this has witnessed some horrific incidents which have unleashed violence on Dalit women such as Hathras, Bajhang, and the Bhanwari Devi case. In the aforementioned cases, the one commonality was that the Dalit women coming from intersectionally disadvantageous positions were the victims. It is unfortunate to witness that the social structure of Indian society puts Dalit women in susceptible situations where ultimately, they fall prey to the authority of supremacist groups.



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