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## **Dalit Feminist Voices Opposing Patriarchy and Caste**

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### **Abstract:**

Dalit women are among the most oppressed and disenfranchised members of India's caste-based society. They have been affected by the caste structural system, which has preserved the ethos of inequality and power separation. Consequently, these individuals have become victims. In every aspect of life, they are in a wretched situation, far worse than the upper caste women. Women of the Dalit caste face numerous prejudices and disadvantages, including economic hardship, gender discrimination, and caste-based prejudice and disadvantages. In India, feminist rhetoric is silent on the issue of caste and its intersection with gender. Hunger, malnutrition, disease, physical and mental torture, rape; illiteracy, illness, unemployment, insecurity, and violent treatment are only some of the horrific manifestations of brutality, exploitation, and oppression that people endure. The combined effects of patriarchy, casteism, and feudalism have transformed their existence into a daily hell. The vast majority of people are forced to live perpetually perilous lifestyles. Even in this modern and postmodern day, they continue to live in a more primitive time. Due to the fact that different theories emphasize the oppression of Dalit women, the focus of this research paper will be on how the oppression of Dalit women occurred in a variety of situations.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Exploitation, harassment, Violence, Empowerment, Gender.

## Introduction

The goal of feminism is to give women more power, but it has ignored the suffering of women who are emotionally and physically repressed and lack the knowledge, information, and ability to improve their position in society. Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991) asserts that feminist theory only addresses one marginalized identity (gender) and disregards the convergence of several operational identities. This is the point she makes in the aforementioned book. Many young women and girls find the concept of feminism to be remote and vague. As a result of the connected oppressions of being Dalit and a woman, Dalit women have had experiences that are distinct from those of other women on the Indian subcontinent. Due to the two forms of prejudice faced by these women, we must recognize them as a distinct group whose experiences as Dalit women cannot be reduced to those of either Dalits or women. It alludes to the complementary nature of these two identities. Both traditional feminism and the patriarchal Dalit literary movement have disregarded the difficulties faced by Dalit women. Neither of these movements has attempted to address these obstacles. Dalit women experience prejudice based on their gender, caste, and socioeconomic status. Their situation is attributable to their caste. Despite being unethical and prohibited by the Indian constitution, the caste system survives in Indian society. This is because the caste system is deeply ingrained in the thoughts of individuals and is maintained by cultural traditions and beliefs. The Indian caste system determines a person's place and status at the time of their birth. It possesses two qualities: "purity and pollution" (which suggests "dirty") and "endogamy" (caste marriage). The institution of caste is both religious and political. The Hindu caste system is referred to as Varna, which translates to "order," "color," and "class." In Hindu literature, Varna represents a hierarchical social order. Brahmins (priests and instructors), Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), Vaishyas (traders and merchants), and Shudras (the lowest caste) are the order of the Varna system (servants). In Varna, the caste and class structures were distinct. Caste was directly related to one's occupation. Marx and Engels (1845-46, p. 63) noted that the caste system sprang from the Indians' fundamental division of labor. They argued against the idealistic premise that the caste system of work division had become obsolete. Marx believed that caste was a form of labor division. In addition to abject poverty, Dalit women in India experience sexual harassment, physical abuse, and economic exploitation. In India, Gail Obvert, a feminist scholar, refers to women of the Dalit caste as "Dalit among Dalit." Dr. Ambedkar drew a parallel between the structure of Hindu castes and a pyramid-shaped earthenware pot. Brahmin and Kshatriya women have

less influence and face greater discrimination. Dalits, particularly Dalit women, make up the lowest socioeconomic class. Dalit women endure hurdles unique from those confronted by other Indian women. Among other fundamental rights, they lack access to human rights, education, money, dignity, social status, and religious freedom. They are compelled to interact with the outside world because they are impoverished and must earn a living. They are looked down upon by men and women of higher castes, even their own men, due to their position as Dalits. Despite this, they have worked incredibly hard and made significant contributions to India's development. Their efforts are in no way acknowledged. Their pleas for aid are typically disregarded. When discussing issues such as women's marginalization in the development process, the feminization of poverty, or women's contribution to India's unorganized sector, we fail to pinpoint the distinctive characteristics of these groups of women ( Menon:1981). It is sad that India's mainstream women's movement has disregarded the issue of Dalit women. There are few books about Dalit women (Vyas:1993). Dr. B. R. Ambedkar discusses in his works on the dilemma of women how Manu hampered women's independence and denied them equal rights. Various accounts refer to Manu as the "great oppressor." He campaigned for modifications to Hindu law to better accommodate the needs of women.

### ***Dalit women in India a subject to the caste system***

Caste, in its most fundamental form, is a system of social stratification in which individuals are ranked as superior or inferior depending on their occupations. There are tens of thousands of distinct castes and subcastes, all of which are ordered hierarchically and are interconnected in intricate ways that span a wide variety of geographical regions. Despite the fact that caste is tightly intertwined into India's social structure. Even the earliest civilizations, including those in China, Africa, Greece, and Rome, had some form of caste structure. However, what distinguishes the history of caste in India from that of other countries is that it is sanctioned by religion; as a result, industrialization, progress, and democratization did little to cure this sickness. The term "Dalit" is derived from the Hindi word "dalan," which can be translated as "broken" or "oppressed." According to Mary C. Grey's interpretation in, the term "Dalit" means "broken" or "crushed." The Dalits believe that they are broken people who have been intentionally crushed by the caste system, just as the lentils used to make Dal, a globally popular lentil-based dish, are crushed to make the sauce. In the Government of India Act of 1935, the British invented

the phrase Schedule Castes to refer to the "depressed castes." This term was first used by the British. However, there is substantial disagreement regarding the classification of Dalits as Schedule castes. This is because many members of the community do not identify with the term "Dalit," and they believe that emphasizing the term will foster a sense of alienation, hence creating animosity between "lower castes" and "upper castes."

### **Corelation of Caste and Women**

Despite producing a sort of institutionalized inequality that relegates women to the status of passive observers, the intellectual framework of Brahminism is equally alluring to women. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a key figure in the anti-caste movement in India, defined caste as an endogamous unit. He confirmed that caste operated as a contained entity with distinct features; nevertheless, when these traits are correctly understood, the marriage prohibition emerges as the core of caste. These statistics can be interpreted to suggest that endogamy is the driving force behind the social structure that supports caste. Due to a comprehensive ban on marrying outside of one's caste, it is impossible to escape the harsh system that reasserts brahman power.

As a result of endogamy, marriage becomes a distinguishing trait of caste, and it is this trait that ritualizes female sexuality in a hierarchical order. Uma Chakravarty does an excellent job in her work "Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens" of studying the relationship between caste and marriage. She notes that endogamy has not been a prominent characteristic of the majority of primordial populations throughout history. Consequently, its invulnerability in certain communities worked primarily to sustain the uniqueness and confinement of a group through general reproduction. In India, in order to preserve jati, social and economic privileges were concentrated within a single group, namely the higher castes. This was done to retain the superior position of the upper castes (caste). Given that the entire concept of marriage is tied to a person's birth and genealogy, it is especially important for women to maintain the purity of their bloodline. Due to the centrality of marriage in the power structure, women are submissive to their male counterparts. Thus, women are forced to the bottom of the caste system, which is institutionalized and profoundly rooted in inequity. In light of this, it is essential to reiterate Dr. Ambedkar's statement that the caste system is "an ascending scale of reverence and a decreasing scale of contempt".

### **Patriarchy A brief Introduction**

The Hindu religion's classical literature, which immortalizes the concept of purity versus contamination, plays a crucial part in the maintenance of caste relations in Indian culture. The Vedas were presented under the garb of a rational explanation in order to successfully steal the sacred status of their subject matter. In addition to strengthening patriarchy as an institution, these privilege displays indicate and support the legitimacy of caste. The 1986 publication "The Creation of Patriarchy," Gerda Lerner's most significant work, examines the historical context of the interaction between patriarchy and other structures. She asserts that "images, metaphors, and myths" are responsible for the dominance of patriarchal and sexist practices, rather than biological or psychological differences between male and female bodies, and that this is due to historical circumstances. She is making reference to long-standing patriarchal and misogynistic traditions. Thus, we can conclude that patriarchy in Indian Hindu civilization was the product of historical processes that were intellectually rooted in the Brahmanical texts. In light of the preceding, this is understandable. Uma Chakravarty invented the term "Brahmanical patriarchy," which does not relate to the patriarchy that exists within the Brahman Castes. Instead, it refers to a type of patriarchy based on the caste system established in Brahmanical literature. It connects caste hierarchy and gender inequality in ways that elevate concepts of chaste brides and selfless mothers in order to restrict women's behavior and maintain caste borders, hence contributing to the perpetuation of gender inequality. Through the degrading practices of sati (forced widowhood) and girl marriage, control over women's sexuality was praised as a technique of endogamy. This was done in order to promote endogamy (child marriage). The only social standing privilege granted to women was the right to submit themselves, which necessitated surrendering control over their own will. This institutionalized control within marriage resulted in the denial of women's access to social and economic resources, which led to torture and serious abuses of their freedom. Due to a lack of social and economic resources, these tragedies were perpetrated on women.

### **The worldview of the Dalits about women**

In addition to being a social force, cultural icon, and historical figure, the Dalit woman is also a symbol. She is the most notable attribute of a civilization based on agriculture. She is the legitimate builder and heir to a pivotal character in the industrial

manufacturing culture. Her contributions to the construction of new buildings and the paving of new roads are significant. She works as a foulest at hospitals, textile factories, cement companies, and quarries. It is estimated that eighty percent of the labor that contributes to the national economy is performed by Dalit women. She is concerned about the welfare of the family. To obtain water, feed, fuel, and other supplies, she had to go a great distance. She rises before the roosters begin to crow.

The first thing she does every morning is sprinkle water mixed with cow manure in front of the house. She rises with the light and begins her day by tending the crops. The moment she arrives home in the evening, she immediately begins her daily cleaning. She consumes very little food, sleeps extremely late at night, and mends her clothing. These are all signs of malnutrition. In India, those who have devoted their lives to assisting and advancing their family, society, and nation are today experiencing great difficulty. Currently, she is battling for her life and existence. Because she is a woman and a Dalit, she faces numerous challenges in life. Even basic Hindi characters and words are beyond their comprehension, and their signatures are illegible scrawls. They have difficulty counting numerals beyond nine or ten. Surprisingly, it appears they have no interest in receiving education through non-formal or adult channels. They find little value in educating their children, especially their women, because they feel education will not benefit them, will not be relevant to their actual life circumstances, and will not result in major work or career opportunities. They are both unwilling to do so.

### **The Attitude of Dalitness Towards Women**

In addition to physical limitations on women's activities, preconceived beliefs of ritual impurity underscored the fact that women were viewed as impure due to their menstrual, reproductive, and sexual functions. These beliefs justified her inferior ritual position and inability to control her sexuality for the Caste's sake. All of her problems stemmed from her frustrated sexual need. Due to their inability to control their sexual appetites, women from lower castes were considered impure. If members of lower castes behaved like Brahmins, caste distinctions would not be necessary. Gender differentiation facilitated caste differentiation, and gender ideology was used to justify patriarchal and caste-based organizations. Members of all castes have experienced Dalitness; nevertheless, members of the lowest caste and outcaste women have been subjected to the most patriarchal repression at the hands of higher caste males and male members of their

own caste. It was possible for a lower caste to ascend the social ladder over numerous generations if its economic position improved, but economic strength alone was inadequate. Due to the caste's obligation to practice ritual purity, women's autonomy was restricted. Controlling the sexuality, mobility, and inheritance rights of women advances the caste system. According to renowned sociologist M.N. Srinivas, Sanskritization "makes women more difficult." It is believed that female desire and the capacity of women to introduce blood of inferior quality into "clean" upper castes pose a danger to the stability of caste hierarchies. Women were frequently observed and monitored. On the increase were purdah and solitude. By constructing patriarchal nuclear families, Aryans domesticated women. Like farms, women quickly became the property of men. Because only sons could inherit land, having boys was viewed as highly important. Women Due to the impurity brought on by menstruation, women were unable to perform some rituals. In order to ensure a happier afterlife, therefore, a son was required to carry on the family name and light his father's funeral pyre.

### **A Movement Representing the Voices of Dalit Women**

In the decades following India's independence, the Dalit and women's movements fought for the rights of those who were discriminated against based on their caste or gender. However, these measures failed to account for the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. Consequently, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a number of distinct, autonomous, and self-governing affirmations of Dalit women's identity. On the state level, the founding of the National Federation for Dalit Women (NFDW) and the All-India Dalit Women's Forum is one such instance (AIDWF). In 1995, the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sangha tana (MDMS) was created. The Bahujan Mahila Parishad (BMP) was a women's organization created the year before by the women's wing of the Bhartiya Republican Party (BRP) and the Bahujan Mahila Sangha (BMS). In December 1996, the Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad (VVDMP) was founded in Chandrapur. This meeting saw the introduction of a motion to establish December 25 as Bhartiya Smriti Divas. On this date, Ambedkar burned the Manu Smriti. The Christi Mahila Sanghatana was created in 1997 as an organization for Dalit Christian women. These organizations have collaborated on a variety of issues, such as the Bhartiya Stree Mukti Divas festival and the issue of reserving seats in parliamentary bodies for women from other backward classes. The network of the Indian Association for Women Studies (IAWS) had presented distinct



topics on the difficulties and identities encountered by Dalit women from various areas (Raja : 2003). The emphasis placed on the education of women from lower castes is a significant factor that has contributed to the development of Dalit women's identity. Savitribai and Mahatma Phule established a school for untouchable girls in 1848 as a reformist initiative. This was a pivotal moment in the process of transforming the status of Dalit women. ( Raja: 2003). The ideas and actions of Dr. Ambedkar significantly improved the lives of Dalit women. His movement, especially his organizations, pushed several Dalit women to gain an education so that they might engage in public life and attain positions of leadership. In the modern age, women's self-esteem motivated them to join organizations for Dalit women at the regional, state, and national levels. His movement encouraged female education. (Rao: 1997).

Caste and gender that have historically held power find it simple to violate the human rights of Dalit women since they are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As a result of the violence perpetrated against them, Dalits are subjected to the gravest human rights violations. Dalit and tribal women are being raped as part of an effort by upper caste officials, land lords, and police to quell protests calling for a minimum wage, the resolution of share cropping disputes, or the restoration of lost lands (Human Watch Report, 1998).

### **Increasing the Empowerment of Dalit Women**

One of the explicit goals inherent in the preamble, fundamental rights, and directive principle of state policy of the Indian Constitution is the attainment of gender equality. This was one of the clear objectives that were set. Due to the multidimensional nature of social development and its disparate effects on distinct subgroups of women, the status of women cannot be accurately described in this context. Political authority in this country has been the sole domain of a small group of powerful upper-caste males for a very long time. As a result, opportunities for reform and improvement have been denied to the oppressed, and the predicament of Dalit women has received little attention. This demonstrates the depth of social inequality. Unfortunately, the women who held positions of power and benefited from it contributed to the oppression of other women by ignoring their suffering and making no effort to better their social, economic, or political standing. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to conclude that they contributed significantly to the creation of social programs and regulations pertaining to the welfare of women. It is deeply upsetting and terrible that Dalit women are not included when evaluating their

participation in political action and their potential contribution to the national development process. Government positions of leadership, organizational structure, and power distribution are dominated by men in politics. In Indian politics, both money and caste are significant, but money and caste are exceptionally potent. Prioritize women's participation in the political process in light of their struggle against oppression. The engagement of women in decision-making is closely proportional to their socioeconomic standing. Despite the fact that Dalit women's political status and activity are tiny, all of India's major parties have completely ignored them. It is extremely depressing that Dalit women have been denied representation in any political party, as this symbolizes the cultural divide. The majority of women who participate in political activities and the distribution of power are upper-caste women from influential families.

## Conclusion

This study examines gender through the lens of caste and gives a variety of perspectives to the challenges that Dalit women experience, as well as new insights into their marginal geographical reality. This study examines the various incarnations of Dalit women's status, including their relationships with oppressive social structures, mainstream Indian feminism, the Dalit movement, Dalit literature, violence, historical uprisings, and, last but not least, an emerging hope in Dalit-futurist feminism. Dalit women have been subjected to persecution, marginalization, and silencing throughout history, but they have also shown rebellion against the repressive casteist and patriarchal social structure. This study promotes debate and liberatory change regarding the difficulties that impact Dalit women and provides a variety of answers to the problems that Dalit women experience in the caste-based Indian society in which they reside.

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