

Dalit Women In India: Transcending Standpoint And Advancing Feminist Discourses

Dr. V. Kalpana Devi

Assistant Professor of History
PG & Research Department of History
Thanthai Periyar Government Arts and Science
College (Autonomous),
Tiruchirappalli – 620023
Affiliated to Bharathidasan University
Email: devisandhya2012@gmail.com

Abstract:

Contemporary India merges capitalist progress with residual feudal cultural elements. At its core lies the caste system, which creates pronounced disparities between men and women. Women's oppression, especially that of Dalit women, is anchored in ancient standards set by the Brahminical law code, Manusmriti. This code presents prejudiced practices as religious obligations, pushing women and non-twice-born individuals to the margins. It mandates a life of hardship for "untouchables," suggesting they are meant for servitude to the privileged. Today, this bias continues, with Dalit women facing adversities such as lack of access to communal water sources and working in stigmatised roles like prostitution or manual scavenging. Disturbingly, the mainstream feminist movements in India frequently neglect the distinct challenges Dalit women encounter. Though they endure layers of violence, their issues often remain absent from the larger feminist discourse. The study explores the varied forms of violence these women suffer, emphasizing the urgency for genuine inclusivity in feminist discussions. To achieve the desired objectives the study lies on historical method.

Keywords: Dalit women, discrimination, gender, caste, empowerment, oppression, social justice, activism

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, literature focusing on gender and feminist dialogue in India has offered a depth of understanding into the challenges faced by Indian women. Literature, coupled with numerous civil society movements, has been instrumental in influencing government policies targeting women's economic, educational empowerment and their participation in local governance.¹ Notably, since the early 1990s, a diverse array of perspectives on gender matters has emerged, indicating that Indian feminist dialogue has become increasingly diversified. One could argue that these divergent voices are intrinsically tied to the uneven progress achieved by different groups. The term 'Woman' in India doesn't denote a uniform group. Significant disparities exist in terms of health, education, and economic achievements, especially when assessing human development indicators for women from Scheduled Castes (Dalits)², Scheduled Tribes, and Muslims. As we get deeper, it becomes evident that Dalit women's progress, as evidenced by human development indicators, trails behind that of their upper-caste counterparts. Thus, while development has benefited women in general, Dalit women haven't reaped equivalent rewards, resulting in persistent disparities. Consequently, there's a growing demand for gender policies tailored to specific groups. This analysis zeroes in on the hurdles encountered by Dalit women. Historically, the caste system predetermines rights based on one's birth, ensuring these rights remain hereditary. This allocation of rights is not only unequal but also hierarchical. Moreover, it instils a regulatory framework that upholds socio-economic order, primarily through social ostracism.³ In this context, the untouchables, positioned at the lowest rung of the caste ladder, face the gravest injustices. They've been systematically denied basic rights such as property ownership, education, and civil rights, being pigeonholed into 'polluting' vocations and manual tasks. Compounding their plight is the concept of 'untouchability',⁴ exclusive to them, which brands them as 'impure'. This label has subjected them to both physical and societal exclusion, stifling their freedoms, limiting their mobility, and barring them from equal opportunities across societal, cultural, and economic domains.

In addressing the intricate issue of caste and untouchability, India's constitution has embedded various protective measures. Recognising Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) as groups that have been

historically sidelined, the Constitution lists 1,108 such castes, thereby terming them as Scheduled Castes. Provisions in Article 341 aim to ensure SCs aren't deprived of their fundamental rights as Indian citizens. The Directive Principles of State Policy empowers the state to shield this group from present-day discrimination based on caste identity. To further counteract caste-based discrimination, legislative measures like the Untouchability Offence Act of 1955 (rebranded as the Protection of Civil Rights Act in 1976) and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989 were introduced.⁵ The latter specifically seeks to curb crimes originating from disdain and prejudice against Dalits. Despite championing equality, the state retains the prerogative to introduce laws aimed at uplifting society's weaker sections, encompassing SCs, STs, women, and children. Permanent commissions have been established to oversee the rights of SCs, STs, and women. Economic schemes emerge periodically, targeting employment and welfare benefits for these marginalised groups. To promote equality, the government has reserved spots in public employment, academia, politics, and governance. This reservation extends to SCs and STs in Parliament, state legislatures, and even to women in local governance.

Yet, even with untouchability outlawed since 1947, many discriminatory practices persist, impacting Dalits negatively. Dalit women, particularly, grapple with a tri-fold challenge: economic hardship, gender bias, and discrimination rooted in caste and untouchability. Legal measures alone can't alleviate these multi-dimensional issues. Disturbingly, some Dalit women fall prey to oppressive religious customs like devadasi/jogini, which exploit them under religious pretences. The study will illustrate that Dalit women find themselves at the bottom of a societal hierarchy marked by pronounced disparities. A comprehensive exploration into the nexus between caste, gender, and patriarchy is essential to fully grasp the exploitation faced by Dalit women.

Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to comprehend the challenges Dalit women face by exploring the overlap of gender and caste in India. By analysing data from prominent sources such as the National Sample Survey Organisation and the Census of India, alongside primary research, it aims to uncover the

depths of gender and caste-based discrimination against Dalit women.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the ongoing debate around Dalit women's role in modern Indian society, especially against the backdrop of restricted democratic spaces for new social movements, the term "Dalit women" emerges as an evocative concept. Positioned at the crossroads of the Indian feminist and Dalit Movements, this category is nuanced and layered. Gabriele Dietrich's analytical piece, "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements", aptly draws attention to the symbiotic relationship between caste and patriarchy, suggesting that caste dynamics—often bound by endogamous marital practices—are influenced by patriarchal dominion over women.⁶ Fundamentally, the Dalit consciousness is anchored in resistance to exploitation. Essentially, the term "Dalit" embodies transformative aspirations. Invoking "Dalit Women" indicates that, given the platform for unfiltered self-expression, women from this socio-cultural intersection could potentially spearhead leadership in both feminist and Dalit avenues. Intriguingly, when discourse touches upon topics like women's marginal role in developmental spheres, the rise in female-centric poverty, or contributions to the informal economy, the implicit reference often is to Dalit women, albeit unnoticed. Historically, Dalit women played an active role in the Ambedkar-led movements before independence. Yet, contemporary discussions, particularly around the 30% reservation for women in local governance, seem to overlook the potential for Dalit women representation.

Dalit Women and the Women's Movement in India:

In assessing the dynamics of Dalit women within the Women's Movement in India, it's noteworthy to acknowledge their robust involvement in the Ambedkar movement. Since 1927, aside from the Gandhian movement, the active participation of women, particularly Dalit women, remains unparalleled. This active participation fosters a pronounced sense of community, making it a mass movement. The Ambedkar movement enlightened women, encouraging them to perceive atrocities against them from a wider lens. Yet, a certain disconnect is evident. Feminist activists in India have expressed concerns over the minimal involvement of Dalit

activists within mainstream Women's movements.⁷ While feminists have championed the concerns of Dalit women, the latter hasn't reciprocated in joining the struggle wholeheartedly. Is this disparity justified? A potential reason emerges when one examines the movement's caste-class dynamics. The majority of leaders within the Women's movement hail from the upper caste, and its historical ties are rooted in social reforms that primarily catered to urban, educated Brahmin women, neglecting the pervasive issue of caste discrimination.

Rural women, predominantly Dalits, grapple with primary concerns like employment, drinking water, fuel, and fodder, which the broader Women's movement has, at times, overlooked. The Dalit movement, in contrast, has powerfully confronted issues like rape, contextualising it within the intertwined realms of caste and gender oppression. Consequently, a Dalit woman can lean on the Dalit movement, which assures collective support against such maltreatments. The term "Dalit", representative of India's former "untouchables", encapsulates an intricate identity construction. It embodies individuals who have historically been at the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination. Although the Indian Constitution abolished untouchability, the ramifications persist. Particularly, Dalit women endure the three-fold oppression of caste, class, and gender, often termed as the "dalits of the dalits". The conventional notions of social movements and feminism might not be entirely congruent with their unique predicaments. While social movements denote informal collectives contesting established norms, feminism comprises movements that seek equality or significant systemic changes. The unique position of Dalit women, hence, requires nuanced understanding and tailored approaches.

In the annals of Indian socio-political movements, there exists a dichotomy between early women's activism and the progression of Dalit women's assertiveness. Initially, women's movements primarily involved upper-caste women who steered clear from direct political confrontations. The narrative of women as autonomous entities emerged conspicuously late in the discourse. Drawing attention to significant figures, the 14th century saw Sant Soyarabai from the Mahar Community articulating her thoughts on liberty and caste-based prejudice.⁸ Nangeli, in the 19th century, took a radical stance against the

oppressive breast tax, even at the peril of her life. Subsequently, figures like Uda Devi, a freedom fighter from Lucknow, Shantabai Dani of Pune, and Mukta Sarvagod from Baba Amte's ashram emerged, each advocating for women's emancipation and social justice.⁹

Statistically speaking, Dalits represent 16.23% of India's populace with women constituting almost half of that number.¹⁰ These women grapple with a triad of oppressions: gender, stemming from ingrained patriarchy; class, since they hail from some of the most deprived sections; and caste, being part of the lower echelons of the caste hierarchy. Contrasting this with the historical backdrop, luminaries like Ambedkar and Phule adopted a confrontational approach, actively challenging Brahmanic patriarchy. Unlike the reserved stance of early women's movements, both these leaders unequivocally championed gender concerns. Their legacy underscores that Dalit women were never passive bystanders; rather, their contributions have been overshadowed until more recent times. Post the 1970s, these women began establishing distinct movements, diverging from their male counterparts. Ambedkar's influence in this sphere cannot be understated. He fervently campaigned not only for the rights of Dalits but also extended his advocacy to Dalit women. In his critiques, he identified patriarchal practices, such as sati and child marriage, as mechanisms to preserve and perpetuate the caste system, underlining women's central role in maintaining this social structure. Under his stewardship, women progressed from mere attendees to proactive participants in the Ambedkar movement, holding parallel conferences and gradually taking on leadership roles. This evolution culminated in events like the Mahad satyagraha of 1927, where women actively participated, both in processions and key deliberations, making their presence indelibly felt.¹¹

Analysing the role of Dalit women within the anti-caste struggle presents an intriguing contradiction. Despite active participation in movements, their representation in leadership roles within political parties or even the Dalit movement remains marginal. To cite Maharashtra as an example, the political leadership remains largely devoid of Dalit women, despite the wealth of articulate women within the movement. The dynamics of this underrepresentation is complex. Dalit men, having faced discrimination by higher castes throughout their lives,

guard their leadership positions tenaciously, fearing displacement by Dalit women. They often perceive these women as threats, drawing parallels with higher caste women. This defence mechanism, shaped by historical oppression, needs empathy, but also introspection.

In the discourse on violence against women, mainstream women's movements often deemphasise the influence of caste, promoting a united front against patriarchy. In contrast, Dalit movements prioritise caste, at times overshadowing gender-specific issues. This has led to the emergence of a "politics of difference," exemplified by the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW).¹² This distinct identity is vital for Dalit women to address both external and internal patriarchal structures. There's a prevailing tendency: left party-affiliated women's organisations often merge caste concerns into broader class issues, while independent women's groups merge caste into a generic notion of sisterhood. Both approaches inadvertently sidestep the challenge Brahmanism presents. Given the unique socio-economic challenges Dalit women face, their alignment with mainstream feminist politics requires critical examination. This distinct perspective has been termed the Dalit Feminist Standpoint (DFS) by feminists like Rege. The DFS scrutinises the divides and commonalities among women, advocating for unity, but not one that's easily achieved.

The Caste Dimension in Malnutrition and Mortality

The underpinnings of malnutrition and mortality, particularly within the Dalit demographic, reveal a perplexing interaction between socio-economic factors and inherent caste-based discrimination. Recent findings suggest that, despite seemingly comprehensive analyses considering income, educational attainment, and access to health services, the caste framework in India still plays a pivotal role in shaping these health outcomes.

Malnutrition: A Statistical Insight: Between 1992 and 2006, there was a marked disparity in the rate of malnutrition decline between Dalit women and children and their upper-caste counterparts. A logistic regression analysis by Sabharwal provides an understanding of the determinants of nutrition in rural India.¹³ Factors such as income levels, maternal education, and access to antenatal care significantly influence nutrition outcomes. However, even

after accounting for these factors, the Scheduled Castes (SC) showcase higher malnutrition rates, pointing towards the overbearing influence of caste identity. Quantitatively, children from SCs exhibit a 1.4 times higher likelihood of being malnourished than children from other categories. SC women too are 1.1 times more likely to suffer from malnutrition than upper-caste women, even after adjusting for wealth, occupation, and education levels. Such findings suggest an implicit caste-based dimension to malnutrition.

An analysis by Borooah and Sabarwal unveils the startling discrepancies in life expectancies between Dalit women and upper-caste women. Dalit women's average age at death stands at 39.5 years, a staggering 14.6 years less than the 54.1 years for upper-caste women.¹⁴ One could argue that higher exposure to factors inducing mortality, like inadequate sanitation, might account for these differences. Indeed, these factors have a more pronounced effect on Dalit women. Yet, intriguingly, even when both Dalit and upper-caste women face similar environmental challenges, the life expectancy discrepancy persists. A residual gap of 5.48 years exists in the average age of death even after accounting for social status differences. In an experimental exercise, when Dalit social status coefficients were attributed to upper-caste women, an 11.07 years difference in life expectancy remained, implying an inherent caste-based disparity. The empirical evidence paints a vivid picture, but what lurks behind the statistical data? The inherent constraints of social belonging, or more precisely, caste identity, seem to persistently plague the health outcomes of Dalit women and children. Even after incorporating known influential factors in analytical equations, the shadow of caste discrimination lingers.¹⁵ Though quantitative analysis can't encapsulate the entirety of this complex issue, field studies hint at group-specific factors causing high malnutrition levels. Discrimination in accessing government-led food and health schemes is prevalent among the Scheduled Castes. Their marginalisation isn't merely an effect of socio-economic factors but is perpetuated by an ingrained societal bias that restricts their access to essential services. This poses a critical question: How deep-rooted is the caste system in shaping health disparities?

Atrocities and Crimes against Dalit Women

The issue of violence against Dalit women in India has gained international attention, shedding light on the deeply entrenched caste dynamics in the country. Despite legislative efforts to address this issue, the rise in atrocities against Dalit women remains deeply concerning. Through an analytical lens, this piece seeks to examine the effectiveness of specific acts aimed at protecting Dalits, the current state of Dalit women in the context of reported atrocities, and the broader implications for social justice and empowerment.

The Legal Framework: The Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act and the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities (POA) Act were established with a noble intent: to protect the Dalits, a historically oppressed community, from further violence and to ensure their socio-political empowerment. These acts serve a dual purpose. Firstly, they underline the government's commitment to ensuring that Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) live with dignity, free from violence. Secondly, they put in place strict punitive and compensatory measures to deter potential perpetrators. However, the perpetual rise in violence, particularly against Dalit women, prompts us to question the efficacy of these acts. Are they mere symbolic gestures, or do they have substantial, actionable consequences?

To truly understand the perilous position of Dalit women in Indian society, one must first grapple with the alarming statistics. A cursory glance at the numbers reveals a harrowing picture. On average, about 1,000 cases of sexual exploitation of Dalit women are registered annually. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) noted a slight increase in reported rapes of Dalit women from 1,557 in 2011 to 1,576 in 2012. However, this raises two pivotal concerns. Firstly, while a 1.2 percent increase may seem marginal, it signifies a persistent trend rather than an isolated spike. Secondly, and perhaps more pertinently, these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg. Countless cases go unreported due to societal pressures, fear of backlash, or a lack of faith in the judicial process. When one considers this, the true magnitude of the issue becomes palpably evident. The reported cases signify not just statistics but narratives of courage where survivors have braved societal norms to seek justice.

Public Violence as an Assertion of Power: Dalit women often bear the brunt of caste-based aggression. In several instances, their bodies become the battlegrounds for asserting upper-caste dominance, especially when Dalit communities are perceived to challenge established hierarchies. This leads to a dual victimisation of Dalit women, who face discrimination both as members of a lower caste and as women. Their gender and caste identity converge, making them particularly vulnerable targets. This speaks to a broader issue of societal structures perpetuating such violence, where the crime against a Dalit woman is not merely an act of aggression but a statement reinforcing the caste hierarchy.

The rise in reported atrocities against Dalit women indicates a severe impediment to the broader project of Dalit empowerment. It illustrates the deeply ingrained prejudices and challenges the efficacy of legal protections. While laws like the PCR and POA Acts are commendable steps towards protecting the rights of Dalits, their enforcement and the surrounding societal attitudes need serious introspection.

TABLE 1 Incidences of rape against Dalit women over the years (evidence from the NCRB)

Year	Number of Dalit Women
1999	1,000
2000	1,083
2001	1,316
2002	1,331
2003	1,089
2004	1,157
2005	1,172
2006	1,217
2007	1,349
2008	1,457
2009	1,346
2010	1,349
2011	1,557
2012	1,576

Source: National Crime Records Bureau, GOI, 1999–2012

From 2015-2019

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) covering the five-year period from 2015 to 2019 reveals a disconcerting pattern of violence against individuals belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), with a particular focus on SC women. During this timeframe, a staggering 206,639 cases of criminal offenses were registered under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Notably, 32,889 of these cases directly involved SC women, constituting 15.90% of the total incidents recorded nationwide. This data underscores a troubling trend, as the number of atrocities against Dalit women increased over the five-year period. In 2015, there were 5,713 such cases (14.81% of all incidents under the Prevention of Atrocities Act), which rose to 7,510 cases (17.38% of the total) by 2019, when the overall count of atrocities under the SC/ST (PoA) Act reached 41,793. Moreover, incidents of rape against SC women, categorized under Section 376 of the Indian Penal Code along with the PoA Act, witnessed a consistent yearly increase. Between 2015 and 2019, there was a disconcerting 49.87% surge, with a cumulative total of 14,003 reported rape cases involving SC women and minor girls. These troubling statistics shed light on a disturbing reality wherein Dalit women face a disproportionately high risk of violence. Existing legal safeguards for their rights and dignity appear inadequately enforced, leaving Dalit women marginalized and exceptionally vulnerable. The root causes of this violence often stem from their access to basic resources and their socio-economic background, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive intervention and protection for this marginalized community.¹⁶

When discussing the severity of violence against Dalit women, one is often confronted with alarming official statistics. However, as with many social issues, the data represents just a fraction of the true picture. Official data predominantly focus on extreme forms of violence, such as rape, potentially overshadowing other, less overt but equally damaging forms of humiliation. These include derogatory remarks, sexual harassment, and other daily indignities that, while perhaps less physically violent, leave lasting emotional scars and reinforce oppressive societal norms.¹⁷ The lack of representation of these less direct forms of violence in official numbers raises the question: Are we overlooking the pervasive everyday discrimination

that Dalit women face in favour of only the most egregious cases?

While official statistics might fall short, primary research has taken strides in painting a more comprehensive picture of the injustices Dalit women endure. One notable study by Shah which covered 500 villages, sheds light on the more 'mundane' forms of harassment.¹⁸ The findings from this study provide insights into how caste-driven prejudices manifest in everyday interactions. Non-Dalits often employ abusive language targeting Dalit women, resorting to derogatory remarks, and often correlating their identity to prostitution or invoking demeaning caste names. These seemingly casual verbal affronts in workplaces and markets are often coupled with sexual undertones, further diminishing the dignity of Dalit women. Irudayam, Mangubhai, and Lee expanded on this by assessing the personal narratives of 500 Dalit women across four states, focusing on the varying forms and degrees of violence. Their findings are harrowing.¹⁹ Verbal abuse emerged as the most prevalent form of violence, affecting 62.4% of the women surveyed. This was followed by physical assault (54.8%), sexual harassment and assault (46.8%), domestic violence (43.0%), and rape (23.2%). This gradient of violence underscores the daily challenges faced by Dalit women, ranging from the verbal to the physically extreme.

The divergence between official statistics and primary studies is revealing. It underscores the necessity of broader research methodologies to capture the entirety of violence against Dalit women. While rape and physical assault are undeniably severe, the constant barrage of verbal abuse and harassment can have equally damaging long-term effects. Moreover, this disparity raises an important debate point: Is our reliance on official data leading to an unintentional minimisation of less overt, yet consistent, forms of abuse? And in doing so, are we failing to recognise and address the broader social structures and prejudices that allow these behaviours to persist?

The plight and challenges faced by Dalit women in India encompass both the historical prejudices of the caste system and the intersectional nature of their identity as both women and Dalits. One specific, distressing example is the devadasi/jogini system prevalent in parts of India like Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Orissa. Here, Dalit girls are subjected to the cruel practice of being married off to

village gods, only to be later exploited sexually by upper-caste landlords and affluent men.²⁰ Research by Aashray Jogini Vyayastha Vyatireka Sanghatana on this practice suggested a staggering number of over 21,000 joginis in six districts of Andhra Pradesh. Confirming these alarming figures, the National Human Rights Commission estimates there are around 29,000 joginis in Andhra Pradesh. Parallel to this system, states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Maharashtra have a similar exploitative practice where the women are known as devadasis.²¹

Despite the gravity of their circumstances, there's a peculiar sentiment observed among some Dalit women. As T.P-Vetschera's study in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district revealed, the Dalit women express a kind of resignation to their hardships. Some state that their husbands, although not ideal, are not as oppressive as the larger society they face. Their perspectives underscore an acceptance of suffering as an innate part of their existence as women. Yet, this doesn't mean they are without agency or a sense of self-worth. Many Dalit women resist, standing up to their husbands and the upper caste forces that threaten them. Their resilience, however, is complex and doesn't fit neatly within the prevailing theoretical paradigms of feminist movements. The unique historical and social context of the Dalit Women's Movement (DWM) means it can't be simply understood through existing theories, such as the New Social Movement perspective.²²

In the present day, movements like the Dalit Mahila Samiti (DMS) in Uttar Pradesh stand as testament to the changing dynamics of Dalit women's activism.²³ With a member count exceeding 1,600, the DMS, supported by the feminist NGO Vanangana, has evolved from focusing on individual Dalit women to addressing broader societal issues. Their journey towards empowerment hasn't been linear. It took major events, like the 2002 violence in Gujarat where Muslim women were heinously targeted, to shift their focus towards larger issues of religious fundamentalism, and the positioning of Dalits and minorities in society. Around the same period, the tragic murder of a Dalit political activist from a village associated with Vanangana became a galvanising force for the Dalit identity among grassroots women. This newfound consciousness and sense of identity were further strengthened in 2002 when the Vanangana team embarked on foot marches across the villages they served. These

padayatras became instrumental in deepening discussions around the Dalit identity, its implications, and the aspirations of Dalit women for change.

CONCLUSION

Dalit women in India are gradually breaking free from historical invisibility, forging their voices, and constructing a nuanced discourse. This ongoing movement defies definitive conclusions, serving as a dynamic space for continual introspection and growth. While this study leaves many aspects unexplored, it lays a crucial foundation for comprehending the intricate tapestry of India's women's movements. Dalit women's experiences symbolise the broader challenges posed by caste-based and gendered oppression. The persistence of archaic practices like the devadasi/jogini system underscores the need for sustained efforts. Movements such as the Dalit Mahila Samiti (DMS) offer hope, but true justice demands persistent activism, an empathetic grasp of Dalit women's unique trials, and sweeping social reforms to redress entrenched inequalities. The Dalit women's movement stands at the intersection of evolving ideas and concrete action, highlighting their inseparable interplay. This synergy propels a transformative journey towards a more equitable future, where Dalit women take their rightful place in India's social fabric.

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