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## Challenging the Savarna Articulation of Gender Equality: The Rise of Dalit Feminist Viewpoint

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### Abstract:

The emergence of Dalit feminist viewpoint, as an autonomous force, in parallel to the dominant imagination of feminist politics in India led by the English-speaking upper caste/middle class savarna women, marks a paradigmatic shift in our doing of gender politics, which seeks to reformulate an alternative agenda of women's emancipation by including the specificities of the lived realities of women belonging to marginalised social locations. It critiques the essentialist and monolithic imagination of the category of 'woman' and seeks to radicalise our approach to the question of women's liberation by pluralising the personal experiences of women belonging to different socio-political backgrounds. It foregrounds the intersectionality of caste, class and gender locations of women as an analytic tool to diversify the ways in which women are oppressed and exploited on the daily basis. It demands broadening of the contours of feminist imagination by stressing on the role of family, community, education, sexuality in sustaining gender norms and caste hierarchies that keep women within the ascribed roles of childbearing and nurtures of families. The role of caste as the producer of social hierarchies, perpetuator of gender discrimination and material exploitation is examined from the intersectionality of caste, class and gender in order to formulate an inclusive feminist framework to provide a rightful space to the lost voices of marginalised Dalit women. The paper foregrounds and analyses the collective fight of Dalit women for restoring equality, subjectivity, autonomy and dignified identity from the interlocked points of the caste, class and gender locations, thus underscoring the need for launching a holistic critique of the social, political and economic structures that subordinate women and relegate them to the margins of society.

**Keywords:** Caste, Discrimination, Marginalised, Subjectivity,

### 1.0 Introduction:

In India, the women's movement was a part of the social reform movement, with notable social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar fighting for the abolition of the evil customs like sati, killing of infants and child marriages and advocating for legalisation of widow re-marriage which directly affected the lives of women in Indian society. But the effect of such philanthropic interventions aimed at eradicating the evil social practices from Indian society was far from being satisfactory, thus failing to bring out a radical reconstruction of our normative society during those times. After the arrival of Gandhi in 1915 in the national freedom struggle movement, the visibility of women, especially educated women belonging to the upper caste/middle class women of the urban locations, started to increase. The participation of women in considerable numbers in the nationalist movement that called for an end to the British colonial

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rule was the first step towards achieving gender equality. Yet Gandhi's approach to women's questions suffered from several limitations in its scope and radicalism, as it focused exclusively on the construction of hegemonic masculinities (Patel, 2021). His visualisation of the collective emancipation of women was based on the interpretation of Brahmanical Hindu society segregated along the caste lines and gender specific roles. He restrained himself from directly attacking the patriarchal institutions and casteist norms, thus denying women an emancipatory space from where they could contribute positively to changing the hegemonic and oppressive social and economic structures.

In the post-independent India, there has been certain concrete transformation in women's movement, leading to the foundation of feminist movement in the true sense of the word that demands gender equality and extension of all the political, social and economic benefits to women, in order to achieve an integrated national development. Till 1970s, the women's movement was a savarna women-led activism, where the participation of marginalised women was negligible. The dominance of upper caste women from the urban spaces in the feminist movement invisibilised the issues of Dalit and other lower caste women. Such ill-fated women continued to face victimisation and otherisation in society due to their lack of agency or subjectivity. Their absence in the feminist articulations in the mainstream feminist discourses made the question of women's equality a very exclusive affair. But, the gradual disillusionment of the Indians with the performances of the modern nation-state and its poor track record in ensuring the basic human rights of Indian citizens gave rise to various extremist ideological groups such as Maoism and naxalism, who launched a series of anti-state activities in the form guerrilla warfare to draw the attention of the state towards the regional inequalities and the persistence of abysmal poverty and malnutrition among the marginalised communities( Pande, 2018).

With the opening of India's economy to the world markets, Indian society underwent a never-seen-before transformation in all spheres of our living, affecting the lives of Indian women to a great extent. Yet, the problems of women continued, with large number of women, especially of the marginalised social backgrounds facing tremendous pressures within and outside their families in order to sustain their normal living. To address such issues, the central government came with several socio-economic measures to reduce poverty and increase the educational level of the marginalised women. Under the Eighth Five-year plan (1992-97) and Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002), numerous programs were initiated to democratise Indian politics by introducing Panchayathi Raj institutions and specific sub-plans for over-all socio-economic improvement of the marginalised women.

But such gender-based interventions of the modern nation-state as well the mainstream in India lacked a holistic approach to the complicated problems of women and their possible emancipation, since the upper caste/class privileged feminists never used the interlinked axes of gender, caste and class to foreground an inclusive feminist agenda. The caste-blind approach of the mainstream feminists to the rightful articulations of women, and their refusal to include the "lived experiences" of Dalit women living, failed to acknowledge the socio-political contexts of such gender-based oppression and violence as an important framework to theorize the predicament of marginalised women's collective victimisation.

The formation of a concrete feminist consciousness was seen in the aftermath of the brutal gang-rape of Bhanwari Devi in 1992 in Rajasthan by five Gujjar men for objecting to the wedding of a girl aged less than one year, which created a massive women's movement against sexual harassment and the normalised culture of gang-rape in patriarchal India. This incident led the formulation of Vishaka guidelines by the Supreme Court in 1997, leading to the foundation for the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, a

major landmark moment in women's movement for gender equality. Yet, the justice for the victim remained unfulfilled, showing the complexity of the judiciary/legal redressal procedures in India (Nathan, 2018).

## **2.0 Emergence of a dalit feminist consciousness:**

The rise of caste consciousness and several caste-based political parties in 1970s and 1980s as a response to the hegemonic control of the dominant caste-driven national parties in Indian society has produced a paradigmatic shift in our traditional imagination of the mainstream politics. It led to the mobilisation of the lower caste groups at the large numbers, who called for a radical redistribution of the national resources and extension of the affirmative policies being implemented by the modern nation-state as a part of the constitutional obligation. The persistence of widespread poverty, illiteracy and lack of material accesses among the deprived segments of Indian populace forced them to interrogate the role of the nation-state as a provider of safety and security net to the millions of the poor and lower caste people.

Such widespread politicisation of caste identity of the historically deprived communities allowed them a nuanced understanding of the society and its political classes in 1980s and 1990s. Such political mobilisation of marginalised communities includes women as well, who, empowered by educational mobility, started to interrogate the persistence of patriarchal domination and caste-based discrimination in Indian society. They also demanded the equal representation of women in politics and extension of social, political and economic entitlements to marginalised women, as they too comprise a sizeable segment of India's population. Their quest for gender equality and social justice led them to build an analysis of the intersectionalities of caste, class and gender locations, in order to understand the specific nature of victimhood and marginalisation faced by the marginalised women in their quotidian existence.

The notion of "difference" was applied to highlight the different lived realities of Dalit women and their predicament in the caste-stratified Hindu society. It led to the emergence of an autonomous assertion of the voice of Dalit women, which challenged to the dominant activism of upper caste feminist articulations by terming their gender-based articulations as an "exclusive" act. The rise of Dalit women in women's political movement allowed them a subtle understanding of the ways in which women of Dalit backgrounds are suppressed and marginalised in Hindu society. The existence of patriarchal values, forming the bedrock in Hindu society, came under a critical scrutiny of these marginalised women, who invented novel ways of doing politics based on gender emancipation.

Dalit women have extensively used their "untouchable identity" to showcase the persistence of systematic victimhood and "enforced marginalisation" in a caste-divided society since the historical times to gather a "moral courage" in their fight against male dominance and caste hegemony. They set off a movement calling "the personal as political", as the private lives of women are not separated from the prevailing notions of politics on gender and caste. Such radical feminist assumption critique Hinduism and its shastric interpretation of the gender/caste-specific roles. Since the caste system is sanctified under the divine interpretations, and thereby it enjoys a religious sanction. The Dalit feminist scholarship considers the caste system and the notion of purity and pollution associated to each caste groups as the sole responsible factor behind perpetuating the violence and justifying the oppressive structures of Hindu cultural system. Their search for self-determination, agency and a dignified identity is intricately related to their yearning for the recognition of an inclusive citizenship.

Dalit feminist scholarship critiques the limited parlance of Marxist ideology in the feminist politics for its exclusive focus on the material relations of society as the sole responsible criterion for the

subordination of women. Its narrow understanding of gender issues and the personal experiences of women within and outside the family paves the way for meaningful interventions of Dalit feminists, who, instead of focusing on labour and the material base of society, go deeper into digging the hidden structures that are connected to the victimisation of Dalit women. Left-leaning feminist Nivedita Menon found nothing wrong with the profession of prostitution as far as it remains non-exploitative and based on consent. Menon (2012) argues: "There is more or less agency exercised in 'choosing' to work as a domestic servant...than there is in 'choosing' to do sex work-whether as the sole occupation or alongside other work" (p. 182). But Dalit feminists object to such proposition, as it doesn't allow Dalit women a dignified option to choose a dignified profession/occupation and thereby she fails to recognise the criticality of the caste angle of such gender exploitation.

The nation-wide upper caste outrage over the central government's decision to extend the reservation policies to the Backward Classes based on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the early years of 1990s complicated any monolithic articulation of women as a category, calling for including plurality of feminist articulations in India. Instead of welcoming such decisions of the central government which aimed at reducing community gaps seen in the socio-educational parameters, thousands of educated savarna women across the country hit the street in its protestation along with upper caste men. Such show of solidarity with savarna men on the crucial issue of inclusive society showed the internalisation and perpetuation of the caste-blindness and class bias.

The heinous killing of the members of Bhotmange family at Kharilanj in 2006 in Maharashtra by several men belonging to backward communities showcases, how women played the role of "co-conspirators and partners" in the crimes against Dalit women. This indicated a new trend in India, showing how the inter-mediate/shudras becoming the oppressor and perpetrator of atrocities against Dalit women. Teltumbde (2010) examined the tragic incident in detail which concluded that "the pervasive contradictions between dalits and nondalits that surfaces so violently in rural areas mostly derives its material sustenance from the opposition between dalit's role as landless labourer and the shudra's new position as dominant landowner"(p. 47). that resulted in the "shurdas having assumed the brahminical baton." The emergence of shudra women as news perpetrators of such heinous crimes against their fellow Dalit sisters signifies a disturbing trend in India. In 2016, a picture of Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter holding a placard "Smash Brahmanical Patriarchy" surfaced in the social media creating a huge storm in India, with upper caste Brahmins, both men and women, equating this gesture as an insult to the entire Brahmin community. Instead of clarifying the meaning of the terminologies, the mainstream feminists kept a mum during the controversy, showing their tacit support to the continuation of Brahmanical oppression of Dalit women.

For Dalit feminist scholars, the #MeToo movement in 2017 provided them another opportunity to foreground the rifts existing with Indian feminisms, where the dominant feminist articulations deny space to the voices of marginalised Dalit women. Though #MeToo campaign highlighted the prevalence of sexual oppression of women under patriarchal domination, it fails to highlight the sexual exploitation faced by Dalit women by upper caste "sexual predators" occupying top positions in different institutions of the country. The savarna women's selective outrage over such cases of sexual harassment and physical abuse pertaining high-profile male predators invisibilised the traumatising tales of Dalit women, thus "rendering it automatically exclusionary and sloughing off all of its emancipatory potential in the process" (Naraharisetty, 2020, p. 24).

The tragic suicide of Dr Payal Tadvi, an aspiring gynaecologist from the Bhil Muslim tribal community, working at a hospital in Mumbai on 22 May 2019 after undergoing a prolonged

mental and physical harassment in the hands of upper caste seniors, and the strategic silence of the upper caste feminists forced Dalit feminists to show, how caste prejudices function across class/gender locations. It traced a new phenomenon in which savarna women are also becoming the oppressors and accomplices in sustaining such gender violence on marginalised women. Mandal (2019) stated:

*“It’s time for Indian feminists, especially those who belong to the upper strata of society, to accept that though all of them suffer patriarchy, all Indian women are not the same and their level of deprivation is also not the same. Accepting this reality will not break the unity of women, as feared by some feminists. Rather it will fortify the idea of the differential principle, which should form the core of distributive justice.”*

The perpetuation of physical and sexual violence against Dalit women constitutes an important experiential framework to launch and critique the perpetuation of caste hegemony and gender appropriate norms in Hindu society. Though the upper caste feminists opposed to the continuation of patriarchal oppression, yet they fail to effectively recognise the very source of and motives behind the sexual violence committed against Dalit women by the upper caste men, which bears a definite caste angle in perpetuating such gender oppression. They even failed to recognise the existence of gender inequalities that are operational across the caste and gender lines, otherising women of all socio-political backgrounds through its regressive and anti-woman approach. The emergence of Brahmanical nature of patriarchies as coined by Dr Ambedkar as producer of graded violence against marginalised women hardly receive any critical attention of savarna women, thus implying their implicit roles in perpetuating the upper caste oppression of Dalit women as legitimate and justified.

### **3.0 Critiquing Graded Patriarchies and Intersectionalities:**

Guru (1995) in his article, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” traced an autonomous assertion of Dalit women as a different voice in the feminist assumptions by foregrounding a critique of Dalit patriarchy as well as upper caste patriarchy operational within and outside Dalit communities. He argued: “Social location which determines the perception of reality is major factor make the representation of dalit women's issues by non-dalit women less valid and less genuine. But this claim of dalit woman activist does not mean a celebration of plural practices of feminism” (p. 2548). He went on examining the role of caste identity of women as a main determinant factor in the sexual violence against Dalit women.

Dalit feminist scholars Arya and Rathode (2020) have shown how the caste-based segregation of Hindu society and the division of labour based sexual identities sustain the upper caste prejudices. They are seen interrogating the continuation of normative patriarchal assumptions that consider women as physically weak and intellectual, thus enforcing patriarchal imagination of the normative social order and the dominant views on women. Chakravarti (2018) traces the very genesis of such caste-based social segregation and of birth-based ascriptive roles in Hindu society to the Purusasukta Hymn as seen the Tenth Mandala of the Rig Veda, which validates the social positioning of different castes along the notion of “being pure” and “being polluted” based on the ritual interpretations. She also underlined the connection that the caste has with class, with the upper caste groups enjoying all the material privileges in Hindu society by depriving a large segment of population through an elaborate set of regulations and prescriptions.

Her examination of the genesis of patriarchal mind sets to the caste hierarchies as codified by Manu in the first or second AD indicates their perpetual polluted status in the social hierarchy of Hinduism. The notion of purity and pollution hurts women of the marginalised Dalit backgrounds most, since their ritual status in the caste-ascribed Hindu society produces a sense of social stigma

whose touch or physical proximity bears a defiling capacity for the upper caste individuals. The practice of endogamous marriages, banning any exercising of individual choice on the part of women, according to Chakravarti (2018), acts as “the basis by which the caste is reproduced” (p. 29). She examined the perpetuation of endogamy as the continuation of caste hierarchy and showed how “the caste system as a system of labour appropriation has shaped the codes of gender to further the ends of the upper castes” (p. 33).

While critiquing the exclusive discursive practices of the upper caste women-led mainstream feminism, Rege (1998) has underlined the need for tracing feminist articulations championed by Bahujan icons such as Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar. She said that the anti-caste/anti-Brahmin struggle launched by Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar possessed a solid feminist orientation, which tried to establish a link between caste, class and gender to underline the collective predicament of Dalit women. The feminist consciousness present in the anti-caste intellectual activism of Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar focused on the need of educational enlightenment of marginalised women to foreground an autonomous knowledge system of Brahmanical Hindu society, and how it reproduces and reinforces gender norms and caste inequalities in Hindu society. Rege said:

“A dalit feminist standpoint is seen as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group” (p. WS45).

She stressed on heterogenizing Dalit identity along gender lines based on Dalit women’s authentic personal experiences.

In this regard, *The Annihilation of Caste and Slavery*, authored by Dr Ambedkar and Phule respectively requires a re-reading and close analysis, which would enable us to form an insightful perspective on Hindu society, and how it functions. These two books never receive the attention that they deserved from the mainstream feminist scholars, showing their complicities in perpetuating Brahmanism and misogynistic norms in Hindu society. Dr Ambedkar emphasised how the caste inequalities and notions of purity and pollution are reproduced via endogamous marriages, that hinder inter-caste blood-mixing and formation of fraternity based on emotional proximities. He even opposed to female prostitution, since it is based on gender exploitation and inequality. He imagined a stable and harmonious society based on egalitarianism and gender equality, where “every man and woman is free from the thralldom of the shastras” (p.287), rejects the sexual “divisions of labourers” and normalisation gender appropriate roles. His promulgation of the Hindu Code Bills presented to the then Indian parliament displayed his seriousness on the issue of gender equality of all women.

Dalit feminist scholars critique the socially constructed notions of gender roles and reject the confinement of Dalit women within the spheres of domesticity. The relegation of Dalit women and their collective emancipatory politics into the private sphere forced Dalit women to criticise the hegemonic construction of binary of men and women, and their respective roles in society. The suppression of Dalit women’s sexuality in form of the endogamous marriages also points to the oppressive structure of Brahmanical Hindu society that attempts to normalise such male dominance under the pretext of preserving the traditional values of society. They call for a reviewing of our imagination of women and their agency in matters related to their choices of sexual partners. Dalit feminists bring to the fore the notions of *izzat*/ honour as a mechanism to

deny women their freedom and selfhood (Chakravarti, 2018). The possibility of exercising individual preferences in matters of selecting partners is nipped in the bud through ascribing the patronizing notion of *izzat* / honour. In the patriarchal imagination, the honour of woman is equated to the honour of the entire family or community, and any deviant act on the part of the said woman beyond the scripted stories of blind compliance to such gender norms is seen as a threat to the traditional social set-up, which is manipulated by male members to suit their parochial gender interests.

#### **4.0 Atrocity on dalit women and selective outrage of savarna feminists:**

The persistence of atrocity on Dalit women is a normalised phenomenon in India, with savarna feminists hardly paying any attention to such cases of sexual violence and physical harassment. Rape, gang-rape, molestation, forced abdication, acid-throwing, blackmailing and disfiguration of genital after killing are some atrocious acts happening everyday in India. Different reports bear testimony to the continuation of such acts. At the same time, the police and the nation-state also display discriminatory behaviours while investigating such cases of violence against most vulnerable women. The Nirbhaya gang-rape case of Delhi in 2012 provokes a nation-wide protest, forcing the then government to take some proactive steps to ensure the speedy trial of the accused which could ensure gender justice at the earliest.

But, unlike the previous case, the savarna women's responses to the tragedy of Hathras in 2020, involving the brutal gang-rape and murder of a Dalit girl by the men of a dominant caste, was a mild one, inviting no collective condemnation, thus displaying their selective approach to gender politics. It strengthened the suspicion of Dalit feminists, who are seen accusing savarna feminists for being complicit in the perpetration of such gender violence against marginalised women by the upper caste men. Even some savarna feminists waited for the investigation to be over in order to condemn such heinous acts against marginalised, since they had no intention to defame the accused (possible innocents)!

In analysing the victimisation and marginalisation of women, Dalit feminist scholars elicit our attention to the functional attributes of Dalit family and community which sustain patriarchal domination within family set-ups of marginalised backgrounds. Dalit women are shown waging an internal battle against the perpetuation of masculine norms in Dalit women's lives; they are increasingly becoming the potent victims of patriarchal subordination with Dalit families. The reproduction of male hegemony is a reality plaguing marginalised women who equally accuse their counterparts of enforcing such gender-based restrictions on Dalit women to maintain male dominance that structures the power equations in deprived communities, thus offering an insightful perspective on the inner contradictions existing within Dalit communities along gender lines. It calls for a gender perspective to analyse the motive and pattern of such systematic physical abuse and sexual harassment based on an unequal gender relation. The articulation of the existence of Dalit patriarchy along with the Brahmanical patriarchy highlights the graded nature of male hegemony, which forces us to reconfigure our understanding of the traditional feminist assumptions. Dalit feminists rebuke the silence of Dalit men regarding existence of Dalit patriarchy with the same community and demand heterogenisation of Dalit identity and their lived experiences along gender lines to show the ambivalent nature of emancipatory politics of Dalits in general and Dalit women in specific.

Dalit feminists bear a moral responsibility towards confronting the patriarchal oppressive systems and caste hegemony. Bound by the shared feeling of being the "other" and "oppressed" in Hindu society, Dalit women wage a multi-pronged battle against all the power relations that structure the victimhood of marginalised Dalit women. The reflexivity and moral guts that Dalit women have shown in depicting an internal critique of Dalit communities as well as upper caste society

and its oppressive forces make the articulation of Dalit women based on personal experiences authentic and revolutionary. Forging solidarity with the experiences of Dalit women would be a first step for the mainstream feminism to gain its lost relevance in gender politics and women's empowerment, which could pave the ways for the reconstruction of an inclusive feminism for all women irrespective of their socio-political locations.

Talking about the moral need of confronting the Brahmainical patriarchy and caste-based oppression within and outside Dalit communities, Dalit feminist scholar Asha Kotwal (2019) remarked:

“Our feminism is intertwined with our battle for freedom from all forms of exploitation, and hence we denounce the hypocrisy of toxic call-out cultures, playing mediatory roles and unchecked caste privilege, which strengthens structural exploitation... As Dalit women, we are also constantly unpacking our privileges of class, access to the English language, technology and mobility. We see no reason to feel guilty about it, because a history of oppression of thousands of years requires representation and articulation to ensure our voices are heard. We are fully aware of it and hence we will write, we will speak and we will occupy spaces that were always denied to us.”

## 5.0 Conclusion:

The rise of Dalit feminist viewpoint poses radical challenges to the savarna-led mainstream feminism for displaying a tokenised approach to Dalit women's emancipatory project. It doesn't reject the mainstream feminist politics and its emancipatory agenda altogether, rather, pluralises the voices of women culled from the margins of society. Contrary to the dominant feminist articulation, it effectively uses the interlinked axes of caste, class and gender locations as an inclusive theoretical framework to expose the hidden structures of inequalities produced along the caste and gender locations that subjugate marginalised Dalit women in their quotidian existence. Such formation of an inclusive feminist pedagogy, which attempts to reconfigure the material base of society by rejecting the Brahmin-led caste theology and the enforcement of gender norms in Hindu society, helps us in recuperating the authentic voices of victimhood and otherisation from a gender perspective. It provides us a wider feminist base for our radical reconceptualization of a just society-based egalitarianism in which gender equality is achieved. It cannot be fulfilled, unless an inclusive approach is taken towards dismantling the male-centric views on caste and gender, which enforce gender appropriate norms in society with impunity.

Additionally, the narrative of the collective victimisation and otherisation of Dalit women has been linked to the discourse on human rights violations, which transcends the barriers of masculinist interpretation of nationhood and the caste/class/gender locations, thus giving it an international audience. The analysis of the collaborative role of family, marriage, community and nation-state through the lens of Dalit feminist viewpoint exposes the structural inequalities guiding our caste and gender-specific imaginations. The collective living of Dalit women, threatened by the recurrence of atrocious acts on the marginalised Dalit women, makes a sad commentary on the present state of our democratic nation-state, thus highlighting its absolute failure in protecting its vulnerable women from sexual violence and in ensuring gender equality.

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