

Dalit Feminism: Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

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Abstract

The emergence of Dalit feminism as a new sociological discipline has posed a serious ideological and political challenge to mainstream Indian feminism. The inability of the latter to effectively include and pursue the angle of caste beyond a tokenised representation has assumed a bone of contention for these two types of feminism despite their interdependent and complementary nature for prolonged sustenance and wider acceptability. The triple oppression witnessed by Dalit women has never been adequately theorized or politicised, and the issues affecting Dalit women have never found any support across the women's organisation throughout the country, thus testifying the unwillingness on the part of upper caste women in pursuing the tragic discourse on Dalit women under the banner of Indian feminism cutting across the ethnic, class and religion divides. The increasing participation of subaltern women in various political mobilisation movements in the Post-Mandal era in the 1990s, demanding an end to caste and gender-based exclusion and subjugation of women, and an extension of affirmative actions to women of the marginalised groups, led to the consequent creation of a radical theoretical and ideological framework that attempts to connect caste hierarchies, patriarchies, sexual division of labour and materialist exploitation of women from a gender perspective, and traces subjugation and marginalisation of Dalit women in the intersectional point of caste, class and gender praxis. The quest for gender equality and social justice, and for establishing an egalitarian society remains still elusive, but the gradual visibility of Dalit women on the national and international maps is indicative of an imminent shift in our traditional understanding of Indian feminism and its relation to caste, which can radically alter caste and gender-based prejudices that run deep in psyche of Hindus.

Keywords: *Dalit feminism, egalitarian, patriarchies, triple oppression, caste hierarchies.*

TRIVIUM

The emergence of Dalit feminist scholarship as an ideological and theoretical construct has made a paradigmatic shift in the feminist politics of the country. It traces the lived experiences of Dalit women, who constitute the most vulnerable and disempowered segment of the Indian society which forms a unique theoretical and ideological framework of understanding the precariousness of Dalit women in the caste-ridden Hindu society and how they are victimized in perpetuity. Till the 1990s, the notion of Dalit feminism has remained 'invisible' in the academic circles and drew no recognition in the feminist scholarship. But surprisingly, in the post-Mandal agitation era that shook the entire country, the rise of such inclusive brand of feminist politics has radically altered the cartography of the existing repository of feminist scholarship and discourse on caste by highlighting the gender and caste-based oppression and subsequent marginalization of a major chunk of women population at the national level.

This paper attempts to locate and analyze the ubiquitous position of Dalit women's lives from the intersectional point of caste, class and gender, and tries to capture the unique form of exploitation and otherisation facing Dalit women in the caste-inflicted Hindu society. This theoretical assumption refers to the triple oppression that Dalit women experience in a highly-polarized Hindu society along caste lines. The lives of Dalit women are really dehumanizing and stigmatized to the core and they remain disempowered and neglected under the forces of caste hegemony that work in tandem with patriarchal forces to oppress and subjugate Dalit women in a caste-ridden Hindu society. The tragic position of Dalit women reflects the combined torture resulting out of patriarchal, caste and materialist relations of society.

In Marxist terms, Dalit women are seen to be a dispossessed segment and bear no agency in determining the materialist relations in society. They are seen to be heavily relying on their male counterparts to sustain their living in their quotidian existence as they bear no agency to determine the material base of society that is heavily tilted in favor of the menfolk. Their inability to own the materialist relations in the society has resulted in their pitiful fall from the structures of power in society. The pitfalls of Dalit women are not restricted to such materialist disadvantages, but also extend to gender-based marginalization. They feel the brunt of the entire segment of male community both within and outside their own. Here

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

patriarchal forces work in league with the caste ideology to oppress and subjugate the voice of Dalit women.

Dalit women are the most oppressed segment of Indian society and they have been cursed to the state of perpetual slavery and dehumanizing subjugation. Thingification of Dalit women's living under the hands of caste supremacists and patriarchal forces is a matter of utter condemnation and they have been denied of transformative agency to transform their passive entity into an active agent of social transformation. Denial of such potential subjectivity to Dalit women has forced them into the state of permanent disability that rejects their emancipatory possibility. The utter lack of level-playing field for Dalit women in their socio-economic spheres has put them in permanent bondage from where freedom and equality seem unattainable and inconceivable.

Such tragic predicament of Dalit women has never been theorized or conceptualized by sociologists or anthropologists that reflect the caste and gender-based bias of the intellectual community of the country which is predominantly constituted of upper-caste individuals. The failure of mainstream feminists to pay adequate attention to the distressing reality of Dalit women is a shocking reality which shows the tenacious persistence of upper caste prejudices in our traditional sociological thinking and theorization on caste.

In the Indian context, feminist activism is an urban phenomenon, with the leadership roles being filled by the convent-educated English-speaking upper caste/middle class women which basically reminds us of the elitist character of such gender parity movements and identity-based politics. Their dedication to the cause of feminism bears a top-to-down approach that lacks a radical perspective on the issues related to the grass roots level feminist politics. One can undoubtedly accuse them of hardly paying any critical attention to what is happening with the women of lower caste groups and how the condition of the said women could be changed for better by integrating them into the mainstream feminist movements. The social and gender-based exploitation and suffering of these women never get any place in the emancipatory agenda of mainstream feminist politics.

Any discussion on the issues pertaining to the lives of Dalit and tribal women remains confined to the conference/seminar halls and the 'artificial

TRIVIUM

behalfism'seen in the mouths of upper caste/middle class feminists confirm our suspicion that it is not a genuine gesture towards the cause of women belonging to the lower strata of Hindu caste society. Such peripherisation of the radical perspective from the below of Dalit women is seen as a deliberate strategy on part of the upper-caste dominated intellectual fraternity in suppressing alternative voices from the margins that could pose challenges to the dominant narrative of conventional feminist viewpoints.

The lived experience of Dalit women and their struggle for collective emancipation is seen to be a deliberate attempt on the part of the marginalized to make their case heard in the public space, so that a constructive engagement is made to uplift them from their existing deplorable situations. The raw reality of Dalit women's living is constructed along the caste-entrenched society, where society is manipulated along the notions of purity and pollution. The stigmatized identity of Dalit women in the caste-ridden society and their forced confinement within the domestic roles is emblematic of the lack of social and economic mobility for Dalit women. The horrifying lived experience of Dalit women within family seems to be the logical corollary of the systematic deprivation and subjugation that they undergo in a patriarchal society where caste-based norms determine every action in the lives of individuals.

It is surprising that they are still under diktats of patriarchy and occupy a subservient position in the power relations. But the situation is gradually changing and it is not as before. Women of Dalit communities are now coming out of their imposed slavery and asserting their rightful position and self-dignity. They are no more passive in nature and attempt to redefine the boundaries of their societal-cultural locations and existing assumptions about them. The gradual transformation of Dalit women from 'mute spectator' to caste and gender-based humiliation and oppression to 'active agents' of social transformation is truly spectacular, which is buttressed by the socio-economic changes as witnessed in the post-Mandal era. The emergence of subaltern voices in the mainstream politics led to the further politicization of Dalit women's tale of pain and subjugation and an emphasis has been made to make their presence felt in the dominant imagination of the public spaces. The formation of a Dalit consciousness

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

from a gender perspective was the first step towards the emancipation of such women belonging to the marginalized groups in the nationalist imagination of the political assertion.

In this regard, the rise in educational level also played an important role in the transformation of Dalit women from ‘mute spectators’ to ‘talking subjects’ in the post neo-liberal era. Feminist scholarship witnessed a fundamental shift in the last three decades and the question of emancipation of the point of view of Dalit women has increasingly become a focal point of social activists and anti-caste intellectuals. Some critics have argued that Dalit feminist point of view is just a parochial manifestation of identity politics that has a narrow scope in its feminist politics. But this accusation is misplaced since it poses a radical counterargument to the conventional form of gender politics and interrogates the systematic exploitation and oppression being faced by Dalit women in their quotidian living. It needs to be remembered that the struggle of Dalit women has the support of a moral ground that gives them a real sense of female empowerment and arms them with an emancipatory potential of subversive politics that tries to establish an egalitarian society based on gender equality and freedom. It envisions a space where Dalit women face no systematic oppression and stigmatizing otherisation. It tries to create an egalitarian space where individuals are treated with love and compassion and differences that exist among individuals create no bar in our visualization of a casteless and gender-based freedom. It also tries to build a reign of solidarity and harmonious coexistence and challenge gender and caste-based inequalities that subjugate Dalit women, thus ensuring a holistic development of each and every segment of the Indian society. Arya and Rathore emphasize (2020) that Dalit feminism has a revolutionary role to play in the gender politics of India and it aims ‘to not just supplement but to alter Indian feminism’. They also highlight ‘not just theoretical flaws within mainstream Indian feminism but ideological flaws as well’ and express the need for a radical form of feminist politics in India due to the inherent weaknesses of traditional Indian feminism. Arya and Rathore (2020) underline that:

Indian feminists have a widespread inclination towards taking the feminist thesis as their premise and abandoning women’s relation to caste. The neglect of *Dalit* in the Indian discourse on

TRIVIUM

gender is deeply problematic because Dalit women occupy subordinate positions in most organised production of feminist knowledge.¹

In his insightful article, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” published in 1995 in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Gopal Guru has elaborated upon the multidimensional praxis of Dalit women’s oppression in caste and gender terms, and emphasized on the need for an independent assertion of Dalit women. Guru has argued that both the external and internal factors need to be taken into account when one attempts to theorize the specificities of oppression and subjugation of Dalit women. He also highlights the fact how Dalit feminist scholarship invalidates any attempts made by non-Dalit feminists in pursuing the cause of Dalit women within the traditional framework of conventional feminism and considers their utterances as inauthentic and invalid. He also refers to the need for building an understanding of the socio-economic position of Dalit women to analyze the reality of their living. Guru argues:

Dalit women’s claim to ‘talk differently’ assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, ‘talking differently’ can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of dalit woman to speak on behalf of dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of ‘talking differently’ foregrounds the identity of dalit women.²

In the said article, Guru also mentions the need for building an internal critique of Dalit patriarchy that subordinates Dalit women and replicates the same cycle of oppression on their simple living. Sharmila Rege (2013) traces the rise of Dalit feminist viewpoints in the non-Brahminical tradition of anti-caste social reform movements initiated in Maharashtra and in writings of Phule, Dr Ambedkar and the Satyashodhak.³ The assertions of Dalit women’s issues got a momentum in such anti-caste social movements that aimed at neutralizing the practices of caste-based untouchability and gender-based oppression of women of the lower castes in Maharashtra. The rise of Dalit feminism as an emancipatory theory, for the first time, has highlighted the lacunae existing in the mainstream feminist politics and their inability to effectively include and pursue the issues raging in the lives of Dalit women. Dalit women stand as a marginal voice in the Dalit movement and they find no space in leadership roles that

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

reflects the dominant position of Dalit men within the Dalit movement. In every sphere – be it politics, academia and literature- Dalit women are subordinated by their male counterparts. The peculiar case of Dalit women reflects the heterogeneity in Dalit subjectivity formations and the need for forming a critique of difference along caste, class and gender identity of women belonging to Dalit communities.

The prominent feminist scholar Uma Chakravorty (2018) has underlined the need for a gendered perspective for an effective understanding of ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’ as ‘a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes.’⁴ She made a detailed analysis of oppression and subjugation of Dalit women from the intersectional point of caste, gender and class identity. She focused on a number of vulnerabilities being faced by Dalit women in everyday life as testified by the periodic reports published by different independent agencies that highlight the pervasive nature of human rights violation in the collective living of Dalit women. Rapes, killing, mutilation and forced abductions are the prominent social nuisances facing the living of Dalit women that show how societal prejudices run deep against the empowerment of Dalit women and how caste ideology undermines the emancipatory potential of these women in everyday existence. It is a shame on the largest democracy of the world which bears testimony to the fact that women in India, especially from marginalized communities scarcely find any freedom and equality in their lives. It also confirms the depth of gender bias that is embedded in the hierarchical structure of the Hindu society that is arranged along the ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt. The existing legal safeguards, such as SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 that aim at curbing such heinous crimes against this marginalized segment of population, especially Dalit women have been made ineffective since its inception by its implementing agencies, thus confirming our suspicion that India’s judicial system and police administration are still biased against such vulnerable social groups which testifies the utter lack of gender sensitivity in our quotidian living.

It is bizarre to note that mainstream feminist leaders seem to have focused only on the issues inflicting the gender rights of women belonging to urban or semi-urban milieus and used their agencies to offer

TRIVIUM

remedial measures. Women of marginalized communities never find any space in their emancipatory agenda. As a result, the cases of kidnapping and sexual violence committed by the upper caste men against lower caste women grab no headlines in the mainstream media that establishes the failure of mainstream feminist leaders to adequately shed lights on the issues of Dalit women.

Dalit Feminist scholars such as Chhaya Datar (1999) highlight how Dalit women are handicapped by multiple marginalization and Political parties have hijacked their issues to suit their parochial interests. Therefore, she emphasized upon building an autonomous momentum to pursue the cause of Dalit women and felt the need for a critique of ‘intra-caste patriarchy’ and ‘caste-based’/’class-based’ politics to understand the internal matrix of gender and caste-based oppression and subordination of women from marginalized groups from a gender perspective.⁵ The path to emancipation for Dalit women is full of challenges and the lukewarm response received from the mainstream feminism so far is seen to be responsible for Dalit women’s perpetual disempowerment and stigmatized identity. The failure to build a ‘universal sisterhood’ based on the collective lived experiences of caste and gender-based oppression exposes the faultiness existing within the traditional praxis of feminist viewpoints in the country. The rise of Dalit feminism questions the veracity of mainstream feminist activism and the inability of such conventional gendered framework in altering the power dynamics of Hindu caste society that is highly in favour of patriarchal set-up and the upper caste groups.

With the gradual decline of caste hierarchies fuelled by the spread of education and the affirmative actions introduced as the constitutional safeguards to ensure the minimum representation of marginalized social groups in education and public job opportunities, the condition of these dispossessed communities have changed to some extent that helps in reducing the existing socio-economic gaps, achieving some sort of individual empowerment. Yet Dalit women have failed to destigmatise their collective identity based on the minimal opportunity structures made available to them in the last few decades. The quest of justice, equality and human dignity still remains unfulfilled and, for this, a concerted collective struggle is required to wage a war against the combined forces of Brahmanical patriarchy and caste hegemony along the praxis of caste, class

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

and gender. It is pertinent to note that mainstream feminist movement in the country still has not been able to capitalize its fullest potential and lacks a broader solidarity to ensure the collective interest of women fraternity irrespective of caste identity.

Here, the ideological and political stand of Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar is worth remembering. The noted feminist scholar Sharmila Rege (1998) drew our attention to 'Phule-Ambedkarite legacy' to foreground and interpret feminist movements in the country. She showed how Phule and Dr. Ambedkar had initiated a cultural revolution in Western India in support of gender equality in education and built a radical critique of caste hierarchies and gender-based oppression of women under the Hindu society.⁶ It is to be noted that the social radicalism as displayed in the cultural activism of Phule and Dr. Ambedkar played a significant role in foregrounding the internal matrix of caste and gender-based oppression of Dalit women and both tried to take the issue of liberation and gender equality of women occupying the lowest strata of Hindu society to a broader level so that it could get a wider publicity in the social as well as the political realm. Sharmila Rege (2000) pointed out:

DFS argues that a thorough going analysis of the material basis of patriarchy, requires that the differential access to and control over labour, sexuality, and reproduction by castes, classes and communities be brought to centre. That, in the absence of such a critique of brahmanical, class-based heteropatriarchies, the political edge of sexual politics is lost. No politics committed to redistribution in a caste-based society can overlook sexual politics. It is therefore important to revision it rather than give it up or pose the upper caste women alone as the only needy constituents of such a politics.⁶

Their attempts at theorization of the predicament of Dalit women and their subordination both as a 'Dalit' and a 'Woman' are provocative of the deep structural inequalities existing in the caste ideology and in the notion of patriarchy. Dr. Ambedkar traced the hardships and suffering of Dalit women in caste-based exclusion and gender-based oppression and, therefore, called for the annihilation of caste and critiqued the shastric justification of the stigmatizing practice of untouchability that is responsible for much of the degradation of such distressed communities. He took up the issue of Dalit women and brought it into the mainstream

TRIVIUM

politics to ensure their emancipation of Dalit women at a faster pace. He requested Dalit women to leave the profession of prostitution and to start a new life of human dignity on the basis of universal morality. The road to freedom and self-dignity passes through human decency and imparting human values that give human a lasting value in their temporal world. He made a strong critique of caste ideology and accused the practice of endogamy for much of the degradation of Dalit women in particular. His sustained attempt in politicizing the cause of Dalit women offered a greater visibility of the said issue in the public sphere which sparked off a heated debate on the urgency of social reforms in Hindu society that treats its own women as polluting objects. He also persuaded the intellectual and civil society of that time to give a voice to the deplorable condition of Dalit women's suppression and marginalization and attempted to create an emancipatory space for Dalit women that will be free from caste violence and gender-based stereotypes.

The male-centric nature of Dalit movement comes under the scathing attack of Dalit feminist theoreticians and activists who placed a radical demand of the redistribution of leadership roles in such social reform movements. Feminist scholar Anupama Rao has drawn our attention to 'centrality of marriage' in the reproduction of caste hierarchies and patriarchal set-up that work in tandem with the 'form of community' to create hurdles towards achieving gender equality in the caste-infested Hindu society.⁷ It bears a similar critique of internal colonization of Dalit women under the hands of Dalit patriarchy. The theoretical assumption of Dalit feminism makes a strong critique of 'family' and shows how it reproduces male hegemony in the matters related to individual choices of women in Hindu society. Dalit feminist standpoint attempts to create a level-playing field for mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit movement by liberating Dalit women from the clutches of the caste-based oppression and gender-based exclusion in the hands of male members of Hindu society. Needless to say, this form of radical feminism has a subversive potential that attempts to deconstruct ubiquitous caste system and patriarchal set-up that engage in oppressing Dalit women socially and economically in every field of human life. It has some positive values attached to it also that requires a serious attention from academics and social activists who work round the clock to make a difference in a gender-unequal society that treats

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

its women as mere a source of sexual satisfaction and child-bearing, thus refusing their autonomous subjectivities in the long run. This form of cultural prejudice persists for ages and the ideals of modernity and liberal democracy have failed to eradicate them completely, thus denying Dalit women an emancipatory identity. It can be used for deepening our democratic values and creating spaces for participatory feminism and emancipatory politics based on gender equality.

It is unfortunate that the mainstream feminist scholarship has never tried to delve into the internal dynamics of Dalit women's private lives, and how they struggle on the daily basis to keep them alive despite being trapped in the diabolic cycle of systematic oppression and exploitation. All the avenues of meeting basic amenities are deliberately blocked by the patriarchal society that enforces its gendered restriction upon the movement of women within and outside their family. The cultural imagination of traditional feminism has been so far so narrow in its scope that it never questioned the systematic oppression and marginalization facing the women belonging to lower caste groups - this prevented formation of an inclusive and encompassing brand of feminism that pays critical attention to the cause of the entire women fraternity in the country. Meena Gopal (2013) has touched upon such 'caste-based labours' performed by Dalit women whose labour seen as 'impure' by the upper caste groups and pointed out the 'sexual division of labour' and 'devalued nature of women's labour' and its connection to caste. She blamed the mainstream feminists for not paying adequate attention to understanding the manipulation of Dalit women in different modes of production of labour and how it stems from the caste-based stereotypes seen in Hindu society.⁸ The emergence of Dalit feminism as an autonomous feminist standpoint from the below traces much emphasis on the need for a gendered analysis of oppression and exploitation that has a close connection with the prevailing caste praxis which attempts to normalize/regularize the inequalities or dichotomous societal relations along the notion of purity and pollution in the caste-infested Hindu society. The rise of Dalit feminist scholarship has exposed the dirty underbelly of caste-ridden society by questioning the structures of power and oppression that legitimize such subjugation of Dalit women along caste and gender lines. It shows how 'women's sexuality' is controlled through endogamy

TRIVIUM

that keeps the caste-based segregations alive among different social groups and prevents any scope of intermixing of castes in the sociological sphere. This is nothing but stark manifestation of patriarchy that manipulates 'sexual choice' of women which keeps women within the male-centric imagination of society. This critique of 'difference' gives birth to a 'new subjectivity' of Dalit women, who are seen to be transforming themselves into agents of social transformation by assuming the role of a 'talking' subject in the feminist epistemological sphere in a rapid-changing scenario.

Departing from the conventional idea of traditional feminism, this radical theoretical construct makes a critique of caste ideology and interrogates the different modes of social control being enjoyed by the upper caste groups that is enforced under the guise of the notion of purity and pollution. It refuses to accept the fact that Dalit female body is ritually defiling and a source of pollution, thus preventing further persistence of the social stereotypes of the stigmatized living of Dalit women in the caste-infested Hindu society. This feminist assumption refers to the practice of endogamy (marriages performed within one's own caste) performed by each caste in Hindu society and how it leads to the monopolization of the dominant castes over the cultural practices and ritualistic celebration of purity over the impure castes. Here, the hypocrisy of upper caste groups comes to the fore, when they do not hesitate to sexually molest Dalit women knowing the fact that such acts could lead to their degradation in the caste hierarchy. Here the fear of losing one's superior caste status does not come for consideration, thus highlighting the double standards of the upper caste groups. The male members of upper caste consider Dalit women as an easy target in case of inter-caste violence and they assault the physical body of Dalit women to take a revenge for daring to question or challenge upper caste domination. Such violation of Dalit women's modesty can be interpreted as a naked display of caste arrogance, which does not hesitate to commit physical assaults on Dalit women to send the message that they still are the guardians of Hindu society. The sense of gender justice and caste equality for Dalit women still remains elusive due to the persisting nature of caste and gender-based inequality created in a multidimensional form. The inequalities that exist along the caste and gender lines prove to be a daunting challenge for social activists and Dalit feminists who want to establish a space for gender equality irrespective of socio-economic

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

position of women in the Indian society.

Although Dalit women are still miles to go to create an overarching autonomous consciousness of their own that could transfer their degraded lives at a rapid pace, yet they have been able to pose some sort of ideological and political challenges to centres of power relations by countering the structural inequalities that exist along class, caste and gender lines. The radical feminist viewpoints of Dalit feminism make a critique of caste hierarchies and stigmatizing forces that subjugate and oppress women belonging to the marginalized communities and create persisting hurdles in their road to social mobility and economic equality. Uma Chakravarti (2013) has shown how a 'fracture' has been made in 'the consciousness of a single unitary woman subject' and how Dalit feminist perspective could launch a wide-encompassing movement for 'women's solidarity.'⁹ She condemns the persisting attempts made to relegate the issues of Dalit women to the private sphere, thus effectively concealing gender and caste-based oppression of Dalit women and exhibits the ineffectiveness of remedial measures aimed at redressing centuries-old inequalities by saving them from the wraths of caste hierarchy and harsh patriarchy both within and outside their community. The half-hearted efforts made by left/mainstream feminists have produced nothing and it has failed to address the numerous theoretical and political challenges facing the emancipation of Dalit women. In this context, a need is felt to foreground an alternative feminist standpoint which will harbour an emancipatory politics for such subjugated female subjects.

Dalit feminist scholars in India have attained a considerable critical attention now-a-days and have been participating in the global solidarity movements against caste and gender oppression, thus gaining international visibility for their radical anti-caste activism. They have been able to present the issue of the subordination and oppression of Dalit women as a matter of human rights violation by employing a number of pressure tactics which are aimed at pushing government in initiating remedial measures to protect Dalit women from further ghettoization and the state of powerlessness. It seriously engages in deconstructing the dominant knowledge systems that legitimize the subordination of Dalit women in the name of purity and pollution and patriarchal supremacy. It questions the caste-based oppression, attacks deprivation linked to materialist relations

TRIVIUM

and gender-based subjugation of women living in the lower rungs of the hierarchal Hindu society and, in this case, the purpose of Dalit feminist scholarship is to create an emancipatory space for equality, human dignity and freedom for subjugated Dalit women which have been denied to them by the Hindu society for centuries.

In the last three decades, our academic understanding of caste and Dalit discourse has undergone a tremendous transformation and the rise of Dalit feminism has clearly underlined the faultiness existing in the traditional imagination of feminist politics in India and their utter failure in paying critical attention to the issues pertaining to the lives of Dalit women and bringing them into the dominant public debates. The post-Mandal era bears testimony to the rising flame of the self-assertiveness of women belonging to the lower caste groups and the formation of National Federation of Dalit Women in 1995 is an important intervention in this direction aimed at ensuring gender equality and justice for all. The consequential politicization of Dalit women's oppression resulted in a massive mobilization of different feminist groups/organizations that looked at the caste and gender-based dynamics of Dalit women's oppression and subjugation, and attempted to carve out an emancipatory space for Dalit women based on equality, human dignity and destigmatised identity. Here, the intersectionality of caste, class and gender plays as an important framework for our analysis and understanding of the multi-dimensional praxis of oppression, deprivation and subjugation experienced by Dalit women in their quotidian existence. The mobilization of lower caste women under the banner of 'Dalit feminism' has a far-reaching impact on the overall fate of democratic politics and feminist movement in India which bears an immense potential in strengthening the emancipatory struggle of women towards collective empowerment. The call for justice and gender equality cannot be achieved unless a concerted attempt is made to alter our dominant sociological imagination on caste and gender-linked oppression, which is still deeply entrenched in the caste-based hierarchies and gender prejudices, thus posing challenges to achieving an egalitarian vision of society based on gender equality, human dignity and freedom.

Dalit Feminism:
Towards a Radical Feminist Politics in India

Endnotes:

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- ² Gopal Guru, 'Dalit Women Talk Differently', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30. 41/42, Oct. 14-21(1995), p.2549.
- ³ Sharmila Rege, '*Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*,' (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), p.101.
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