



A STUDY OF NARRATIVES MODERN DALIT WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary India is a backward capitalist society with a number of feudal cultural remnants. When we contextualize the institution of caste in the contemporary social, political and economic structure, we understand a clear dichotomy in the positioning of “man” and a “woman” in it. Any theoretical account of gender power equation and women’s oppression must be firmly located in the social power context. Dalit women in India are situated at a very crucial juncture right now where they have to cross three thresholds simultaneously class and patriarchy. These are the three hierarchical axes of social structure which are crucial to the understanding of gender relations and the oppression of Dalit women.

The roots to this lie in the first millennial traditional Brahminical law code, the Manusmriti, which continues to shape the unwritten norms in Indian society. The twice born had the first rights over their labour and anything they own, as they are created to be slaves.

This continues to have a lingering impact on the totally deprived life experiences of Dalits, especially women, who still struggle to access drinking water from the common water Sources in villages, work for starvation wages as landless laborers or take to prostitution or manual scavenging. These last two occupations, of course, are highly stigmatized, causing social and religious ostracism and exclusion.

KEY WORDS: Dalit women, violence, women's study narratives

INTRODUCTION

The women's movement has no beginning or "origin". It exists as an emotion, anger deep within us. The women's movement history also is like notes in a cycle of rhythm; each is a separate piece, yet a part of the whole.

PHASES IN THE INDIAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT:

Emerged as a form of a social reform movement in the 1800's, the Women's movement became a focused one very soon. By 1829, the prolonged campaign was done against Sati. The first Mahila Mandal's were organized by Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj. By 1905, women leaders joined the growing nationalist movement as a response to Swadeshi Movement. They supported boycott of British goods, non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements. They supported Gandhi and other leaders.

THE ALL INDIA WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

In 1924 became the single largest national voice of the divergent groups. By 1955, the constitution of Independent India put forward some of the most progressive laws for women. By 1970, the internal conflicts between landlords and tribals in the areas of Sarvodaya many

Young volunteers set up the Shramik Sanghatna. By 1973, the Sarvodaya concept leader, Jay Prakash Narayan, launched anti-price rise and anti-corruption movements. Between 1969 and 1975, many trade unions, Left parties, peasants, and laborers started agitation against the system. This created a conscious collective basis for women related movements like Western women's movement. These were the precursors for the 3rd wave of IWM. By 1975, the communist party of India (CPM) introduced the idea of a joint women's conference which happened in Kerala and Pune. In Hyderabad, radical women students founded POW. By 1980, the Stri Mukti Sangathan in Bombay took up issues like the famous Mathura Rape Case and spread its wings in Delhi and Pune.

There are many years of activities and issues, organizations, alive or dormant, viewpoints, changing or solidified. Some popular methods used are bracketing a period of time and perceiving events through the selection representative organizations. Across the generations, castes, creed, communities and demographics certain issues remain at core:

- Violence - both overt and covert
- Rape and molestation
- Law supporting powerful rapists
- Sexual harassment
- Murdering for dowry
- Wife beating-the invisible violence

- Violence on the images of women
- Sex stereotyping In the media
- Beauty contests
- When can obscenity be called pornography
- Theorizing violence
- Process of politicization
- The interaction with the state
- Recognizing the right to health
- Facing the family planning problem
- Politics of reproduction
- Laboring for love and wages
- Equal wages for equal love
- Occupational hazards
- Sexual division of labor

DALIT WOMEN- ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES:

The theme of Dalit women is of a crucial importance in the contemporary Indian society, particularly in the context of new social movements silenced today by narrowing their democratic space. By using the term Dalit women“ we are creating an imagined category. It is somewhere in between Indian feminist Movement and the Dalit Movement.

As Gabriele Dietrich in her extremely balanced article Dalit Movements and Women’s Movements“ points out while discussing the interrelationship between caste and patriarchy that the caste should be looked at as a marriage circle and endogamy which is related to patriarchal controls over women. The core of Dalit consciousness is made of protest against exploitation and oppression. In short, the term Dalit“ stands for change and revolution. By using the term Dalit Women“ we are trying to say that if women from Dalit caste and from Dalit consciousness create a space for themselves for fearless expressions.

In fact, when we use phrases like marginalization of women in the development process or Feminization of poverty, or women’s contribution in the unorganized sector , we are referring to Dalit women without even being conscious about this specificity. Dalit women were actively participative in the Ambedkar lead movements in the pre independence period. Today we see non protest against so called 30% reservations for women in the local self-government which further denies the possibility of Dalit women getting any representation.

DALIT WOMEN AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA

One of the striking features of the Ambedkar movement is the participation of women in the movement. Except for the Gandhi and movement, probably no other social movement in India shows such wide participation by women from 1927. Dalit women have been in the forefront of the social, cultural and political programmes of the Dalit Movement. Separate parishads of women is a case in point. The sense of community is strong in this movement of Dalit Women. It is in this sense a movement of the masses. The Ambedkar movement had always conscientised women to look upon atrocities committed upon them in a broader perspective.

The women's movement has a close historical links with the social reform movements. The social reform movements have focused on urban, educated Brahmin women and had not brought to the forefront issues of caste discrimination. Since 1975, immediately after the emergence of women's movement, the leadership has always remained with the upper caste women. For the rural women finding employment, drinking water, fuel and fodder are the pressing needs. In times of draught, the rural women came to be preoccupied with acquisition of drinking water. In the light of the new forest policies and shortage of kerosene, fuel is becoming a major problem. Fodder for the cattle has also become a major problem.

Rape has been a major tool of subordination against women and the dalit movement has reacted strongly against this. The Dalit movement analyses rape as an outcome of the complex relationship between caste and women's subordination. The Dalit woman can therefore have the confidence that the entire movement would stand in support of her against such oppressions. She does not have to oppose these atrocities as a woman. The Women's movement however does not adopt such a broad analysis. The Dalit woman, therefore do not feel the need for a women's movement.

SOCIO- POLITICAL AND GENDER BACKGROUND

Dalits are India's former "untouchables. "Dalit is not a caste; it is a constructed identity. Dalit (oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Also at times called 'ex-untouchables', 'ati-shudras', 'untouchables', 'scheduled castes', 'low castes', 'harijans' etc. and the fight against untouchability is of long standing. Although the Constitution of independent India outlawed

untouchability and its practice in any form, and directed the government to take affirmative action to compensate untouchable castes for these historical wrongs, the stigma against them continues in both subtle and overt forms to this day. Especially for Dalit women it has been pointed by dalit activists and intellectuals that dalit women suffer the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. They have been called the "dalits of the dalits", the "downtrodden amongst the downtrodden" and the "the slaves of the slaves". So both the concepts; the social movement and the feminism don't apply completely on them. A social movement can be thought of as an informal set of individuals and/ or groups that are "involved in confliction relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; and share a distinct collective identity". The Feminism

is "embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system".



CHRONOLOGY OF WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND THE PLACE OF DALIT WOMEN

Early women's movement comprised of the women from upper caste and class strata who distanced themselves from party politics and confrontational mode of assertion. The theme of "woman as an individual in her own right" did not crop up till very late.

- Sant Soyarabai from Mahar Community: - Early 14th century - wrote a bhanga about freedom and caste discrimination.
- Nangeli: - Early 19th century- revolted against the breast tax on her community to cover up the breasts-died in the course of demand.
- Uda devi (jagrani) :- a freedom fighter a dalit from Lakhnow.
- Shantabai Dani: - from Pune:- supported women's cause and helped merging it into Ambedkar movement.
- Mukta Sarvagod:- worked in Baba Amte's ashram in Anandvan Non-supportive demographic:

NON-SUPPORTIVE DEMOGRAPHIC

- Dalits constitute 16.23% of total population of India and Dalit women numbering 49.96% of the total Dalit population.
- Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions:
 - a) Gender, as a result of patriarchy.
 - b) Class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities.

c) and caste, coming from the lowest caste,

The history to which the dalit women's movement traces itself is of Ambedkar and Phule (both men) whose approach however was (unlike that of the early Indian women's movement) confrontation list as well as pronouncedly antagonist to brahmanic patriarchy.

To Phule and Ambedkar, gender issues were not dispensable. This history also brings to light the fact that dalit women were not historically absent from movements but their history has been neglected until recently. They worked side by side dalit men but they have started to organize separately from dalit men with different movements only post the 1970s.

JOURNALS, LETTERS, LITERACY

Even the women who were illiterate subscribed to Ambedkar's journals his letters to keep his publications alive. They paid four annas to eight annas when their daily wages were hardly a rupee daily. Some women courted arrest with the men in the satayagrahas. Some had to face beatings from their husbands for participating in the movement. At such times they took their infant babies to jail, some carried all their belongings, even chickens. Taking in consideration the extremely backward social atmosphere the achievements of these women were most commendable.

DOUBLE STRUGGLE

The analyses of dalit women's presence in anti caste struggle has brought out the sharp contrast between their participation in movements and their visibility as leaders and decision makers in political parties or dalit movement itself. "Dalit women do not play any important role in the political leadership of Maharashtra". The Dalit movement has thrown up so many women but articulate women are not invited by Dalit forums, especially the political parties." Dalit women have to challenge dalit men to reach the leading posts within their own movement. Dalit men have been discriminated throughout their lives by high caste men as well as high caste women. The dalit men now are scared of dalit women and think that they are the same as the high caste women. Now when they have finally grasped the leadership positions they will not part from them. You have to understand them.

CASTE FACTOR

While women's movements downplay the caste factor and emphasize unity among women as victims of violence, dalit movements see such violence only from a caste angle and subsume the dalit women within dalits in general. New "politics of difference" was the dalit women have expressed through the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW). Such difference is necessary if dalit women want to fight patriarchy which is external and internal. The trend of the left party-based women's organizations collapsing

caste into class, and the autonomous women's groups collapsing caste into sisterhood, both leaving Brahmanism unchallenged are the two prominent outcomes of the history.

ECO-FEMINISM AND DALIT ANGLE

Chaya Datar has discusses this in context of Eco-feminism which actually talks about the position of dalit women in society and the exploitation of women as well as the environment and natural degradation. In Datar's view "the dalit women's movement may not be part of narrow identity politics, insofar as it does not talk of the materiality of the majority of dalit, marginalized women who lose their livelihoods because of environmental degradation but focuses its struggle mainly against brahminical symbols, it cannot aspire to provisioning of society. It cannot become more emancipator than the present women's movement."

UNRESOLVED ISSUES

- Although dalit women are vocal and fight their husbands back, "they are not under the ideology of husband worship" but "they face collective threat of physical harm from upper caste forces all the time."
- T. P. Vetschera in his study of Dalit women in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra points out to the element of consent by quoting the Dalit women themselves "our men don't treat us as badly as animals, this means that they are good".
- Women feel that "suffering an essential part of a woman's life and nothing could be done about it."
- Theoretical non-belonging: It is difficult to explain the dalit women's movement with the help of any one of the given theoretical perspectives, because of the particular context in which DWM is located and the specific historical trajectory it has followed; feminist movements in general have been theorized as new social movements (NSM), however the NSM perspective cannot explain DWM until some context based facts are taken in account. The DWM as separate from the dalit movement and the NFDW in particular is chronologically a new phenomena, the movement has been analyzed in relation to the current world order.

LACK OF INTERNAL CRITIQUE

Dalit feminists have asked both the dalit movements and women's movements in India for an internal critique because both these movements have neither been able to represent dalit women nor paid attention to their specific structural, social and cultural location within Indian society. Indian society is ridden with multiple and overlapping inequalities which affect women in general and dalit women in particular, in different ways. Dalit feminists have also argued for an analysis of patriarchy within dalit communities because of external and internal factors. "Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenizing the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits)."

TRANS-NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

The transnational significance of the Dalit Feminist movement cant not be overlooked. It explains in a historical context of India's history and modernity, the place of dalit women and men within this history and how has 'the history' been challenged by dalit women.

CURRENT SCENARIO- A CASE STUDY

The Dalit Mahila Samiti (DMS) is a movement of over 1,600 Dalit women in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Supported by the feminist non-governmental organization (NGO) Vanangana, DMS has its roots in grassroots empowerment training and strategizing. Initially, Vanangana focused on the individual Dalit women who were the target of its mobilization. As these Dalit women began working for change, they challenged patriarchal norms as well as the caste structure. This new direction was reinforced with the "anti-Muslim carnage that took place in western Indian state of Gujarat in 2002, with Muslim women being violently targeted for the first time Vanangana took this issue to the women they worked with, in a conference that brought together about 300 Dalit women in their area Issues such as religious fundamentalism, and the position of the Dalits and minorities, were discussed for the first time with community leaders." At around the same time, the murder of a Dalit political activist, who was from one of the villages where Vanangana works, proved to be a catalyst in sharpening the Dalit identity of the women at the grassroots level. This identity was consolidated further in 2002 during padyatras - foot marches - which the Vanangana team undertook in all the villages where they worked. They conducted meetings with the Dalit community to explore the women's Dalit identity, its meaning in their lives and practices, and what they would like to change.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Dalit women are slowly attempting to come to grips with their invisibility in the discourse, and are beginning not just to speak out, but also to theories and build wider solidarities so as to earn the place, hitherto denied, under the sun. The book doesn't have a conclusion because it is about movements; therefore, it requires another rendering by another rendering by another audience. There are many issues, dilemmas, and insights, actions, and thoughts which are not covered in this book or directly or indirectly implied throughout the narrative. The points which are raised here will help further debate and study on the Indian women's movement. This book will help to get an exhaustive idea to anyone and everyone who want to indulge in the complex web of women's movements in India. The dalit women's movement has a crucial role to play in the analysis of dalit feminist approach because it is "almost impossible to separate the history of action from the history of ideas. In other words the conceptual debates themselves embodied the history of doing, and vice versa. "

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