

Dalit Feminism: Historical Context and Impact

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Abstract

Dalit feminism aims to dismantle the prevailing narratives that uphold their oppression by empowering Dalit women to express their agency and reclaim their stories. Notwithstanding casteist violence and persecution, Dalit women have always been important voices for their rights and dignity. Prominent individuals such as Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Ramabai Ambedkar have played a pivotal role in the anticaste and anti-untouchability campaigns in India, championing the cause of women's empowerment and education rights. Organizations like the Dalit Mahila Samiti and the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) sought to address problems including domestic abuse, healthcare access, and sexual exploitation of Dalit women in the 20th century.

Dalit feminism also criticizes mainstream feminism for failing to represent the experiences of women from lower castes and for being dominated by upper-class viewpoints. It aims to elevate Dalit women in the feminist conversation and promotes unity with other oppressed groups, such as LGBTQIA+ people and males of lower castes.

INTRODUCTION

Dalit feminism is a powerful socio-political tool that finds its place in an intersection between the experiences of caste, gender, and class operation. It is a movement that centers the perspectives and interests of Dalit women while challenging both the patriarchal structures prevalent in the society and also targeting the deeply ingrained caste system. Dalit feminism consciously prioritizes the interpretations, worldviews, and concerns of Dalit women, challenging the dominant narratives that often marginalize or exclude them.¹ The main difference between mainstream feminism and Dalit feminism is that the former focuses solely on the inequality between the genders but the latter recognizes the fact that the oppression based entirely on the pretext of caste further aggravates the gender-based discrimination which leads to the exploitation of Dalit women. By incorporating the insights of this discipline, scholars and thinkers can better understand the complex issues that are faced by Dalit women based on their caste, gender, and socio-economic conditions.²

The term was coined by Dr. Sharmile Rege who was a respected scholar and ally of Dalit women. The term then coined has now emerged to become an entirely different tenet of feminism which furthers the unique feminist perspectives of Dalit women. Dalit feminism is characterized by its emphasis on democratic values, inclusivity, and the recognition of marked heterogeneity and discontinuity within political communities.³

¹ ("Dalit Feminist Thought").

² (Sen).

³ (Stephen). ⁴ (Preeti).

The entire concept of Dalit feminism revolves around the assertion of agency and voice for Dalit women who have been marginalized and silenced historically. Dalit feminists argue that engaging with Dalit women's lived experiences is crucial for building solidarities and reshaping the larger fields of South Asian studies, India studies, Dalit studies, and women, gender, and sexuality studies.⁴ By centering the experiences of Dalit women, what this concept tries to address is the interconnectedness of caste and gender discrimination while advocating for equality and justice for marginalized communities. This group of feminism is also a critique of the conventional form of feminism which they allege that has been formed by the upper-class perspectives and thus, they do not

represent the perspectives of the women belonging to lower castes. This questioning of the structures of the society this movement tries to bring Dalit women to a central stage. This group of feminist perspectives believes in solidarity with other marginalized groups such as lower-caste men and LGBTQIA+ individuals, as with such a thought the Dalit feminist thinkers try to create a more inclusive and equitable society where every group would have the opportunity to thrive free from rampant discrimination and violence.

To conclude, the concept of Dalit feminism represents a transformation that tends to challenge the intersections of caste and gender while advocating for the dignity and values of Dalit women. Thus, this concept of feminism tries to represent a radical branch of feminism that not only targets patriarchy but also caste-based hierarchy.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE ADVENT OF CASTESIM AND DALIT FEMINISM

The system of caste in India is characterized by a hierarchical structure of the society which is deeply entrenched in the social and political set-up of the nation. The basis of caste organization in earlier times was the division of the society based on the occupation they performed and each occupation had its importance and role to play in the social fabric of the country. The caste system finds its origin in the Rig Veda of the Hindu scriptures which divided the society into four main varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudras. Below these were the people who were not assigned any occupation and were known as Dalits. It was they who faced the wrath of untouchability from the other members of the society. The caste system has deeply penetrated society by defining each and every aspect of human life including marriage, education, and even social interaction also including access to resources for centuries to come.⁴ Caste on its own is a very complex concept within the social structure of the country and when it was intertwined with gender led to complex ramifications. This relation of caste and gender compounded the marginalization and discrimination faced by the Dalit women which has often subjected them to caste-based violence, economic exploitation, and limited access to education and healthcare. The patriarchal norms within Dalit communities and the broader society further exacerbate the challenges faced by Dalit women, highlighting the need to address both caste and gender inequalities simultaneously.⁵ These women are disproportionately affected by poverty, and lack of education and are also subjected to discriminatory practices like manual scavenging where they are forced to clean human waste which clearly emphasizes their exclusion from the mainstream world.

⁴ (Preeti).

⁵ (Sen).

The Dalit feminist movements have been at the forefront of movements. The Dalit women throughout the course of history have been courageous and resilient in advocating for their rights and dignity in spite of facing casteist violence. Historical figures like Jyotiba Phule linked women's oppression with Hinduism and encouraged his wife, Savitribai Phule to read and write.⁶ Their efforts also led to the opening of the first girl's school that welcomed all girls irrespective of caste, along with them the school was also a fruit of the result of Fatima Sheikh. In the school, Savitribai Phule became the first teacher in India and she founded Mahila Seva Mandal whose work was to raise awareness about women's rights along with this in 1872 she played an important role in the development of Satyashodhak Samaj which advocated equality of all classes.⁷ Ramabai Ambedkar has played a crucial role in Dalit movements in the country while advocating for education rights. A lot of researchers, authors, scholars, and activists like Gail Omvedt, Cynthia Stephen, Kiruba Munusamy, Ruth Manorama, and Yashica Dutt were at the forefront of the fight for Dalit rights and also wrote for advocating representation rights and advocating for the abolition of gender exploitation and the recognition of the central relationship of power and privilege that sustains castebased oppression. Even in the 20th century, organizations like All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) worked for advocating rights of Dalit women, this organization engaged in the mobilization of the rights of Dalit women at the grassroots, and also organized conferences to advocate against injustice and promote gender and caste equality.

Another organization that works at the grassroots level is Dalit Mahila Samiti which focuses on the rights and welfare of Dalit women and also works to address issues like domestic violence, education, access to healthcare, and sexual exploitation. It works as a pressure group and advocates for policy changes to ensure the rights and dignity of Dalit women. Various movements also took place like the Dalit Panthers movement which was inspired by the famous Black Panthers movement in the United States. The said movement started in the 1970s in Maharashtra to challenge caste-based discrimination while also addressing issues like gender inequality. The main Dalit women activists who participated in the said movement included Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. The Dalit Women's Network for Solidarity (DAWNS) in 2006 at

Bangalore preferred to use the term Dalit womanism, while the Dalit Women's Solidarity Network drew attention to the link between racism and casteism.⁹

In conclusion, Dalit feminism, which demanded gender equality inside the Dalit community as well as within Brahmanical society, arose in the 20th century in response to the intersectional oppression that Dalit women experienced. Social reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Dalit women, who have been instrumental in the anti-caste and antiuntouchability movements, have left their mark on the movement. The movement is still in favor of outlawing gender exploitation and acknowledging the fundamental connection between privilege and power that upholds caste-based oppression.

FEMINISM AND DALIT FEMINISM

While feminism and Dalit feminism are two different movements, they both aim to advance justice and equality for women. They take different tacks and concentrate on different things since women have varied experiences in different social contexts. The overarching goal of feminism is to advance gender equality and subvert patriarchy. It acknowledges that women experience gender-based discrimination and

⁶ (Rao and Rao).

⁷ (Disha and Disha). ⁹ (Sen).

oppression and works to solve these concerns via lobbying, activism, and education, among other channels. Women's rights and gender equality have benefited greatly from feminism, especially in the Global North. Feminism has drawn criticism, meanwhile, for failing to address how women's lives are shaped by the intersections of gender, race, class, and other social variables.

In particular, Dalit feminism concentrates on the experiences of Dalit women in India who encounter class, caste, and gender-based forms of oppression that overlap. It aims to address the particular difficulties that Dalit women encounter in both Dalit communities and mainstream society. Dalit feminism promotes an integrated strategy that takes into account the complexity of Dalit women's experiences and criticizes mainstream feminism for failing to sufficiently address caste-based injustice.

Historically, During the 19th and 20th centuries, mainstream feminism first appeared in Western cultures, concentrating on achieving women's suffrage and resolving legal disparities. It expanded to include more topics throughout time, including gender-based violence, job discrimination, and reproductive rights. Although mainstream feminism has significantly advanced women's rights around the world, it has frequently come under fire for failing to sufficiently address the realities of underprivileged women, such as Dalit women.⁸ With roots in the Indian setting, Dalit feminism has historical roots in the Dalit struggle for social justice, which was spearheaded by individuals such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit women have long faced social marginalization, economic exploitation, and discrimination based on caste, both inside their communities and in the larger society. Thus, Dalit feminism emerged as a response to these intersecting forms of oppression further advocating their rights.

A wide variety of theoretical frameworks are included in mainstream feminism, such as intersectional feminism, radical feminism, liberal feminism, and Marxist feminism. These frameworks examine gender-based disparities from a variety of angles, including politics, economics, and culture, and they suggest several approaches to achieve gender parity.⁹ In particular, intersectional feminism recognizes that people experience oppression differently depending on how their intersecting identities are experienced and stresses the interconnectedness of social identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Dalit feminism integrates caste as a primary axis of oppression while building on the ideas of intersectional feminism. It makes the case that discrimination based on gender and caste combines to produce particular types of oppression that Dalit women must endure.

A vast array of tactics is used in mainstream feminist activism, such as lobbying, legislative change, protests, grassroots organization, and advocacy. Through large-scale protests and social media campaigns, mainstream feminist groups have successfully lobbied for legislative reforms, such as legislation prohibiting discrimination and violence against women. Advocating for the rights of Dalit women in both Dalit communities and the wider community, Dalit feminist activism frequently functions within the larger Dalit movement for social justice. To increase public awareness of gender- and caste-based injustice, Dalit feminist activists participate in lobbying campaigns, community education initiatives, and grassroots organizing. Additionally, they fight against sexism based on caste in Dalit communities and support Dalit women's leadership and empowerment in decision-making.

Finally, it should be noted that although feminism and Dalit feminism both aim to advance gender equality and justice, their methods and points of emphasis vary because of the distinctive experiences that women have in various social contexts. In addition to criticizing the prevailing myths surrounding feminism and

⁸ (Govinda).

⁹ ("Comparison: Black Feminism and Dalit Feminism – Exploring Dalit Voices").

Dalit politics, Dalit feminism aims to empower Dalit women and contest the ways in which gender-based oppression and caste overlap. In order to create a more fair and equitable society, Dalit feminism provides a critical viewpoint on gender and social justice by valuing diversity and emphasizing the experiences of oppressed women. To put it simply, Dalit feminism is essential in ensuring that the experiences and struggles of Dalit women are not ignored or neglected within larger movements for gender equality. It is a critical corrective to mainstream feminist rhetoric. Dalit feminism pushes for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to social justice by exposing the interconnections of caste, gender, and other types of oppression. It also questions the power structures that currently exist. By doing this, it helps the larger fight for equality and liberation for all oppressed populations in addition to advancing the rights and dignity of Dalit women.

MOVEMENTS OF DALIT FEMINISM IN 21st CENTURY

Dalit feminism has become a powerful and influential force in India in the twenty-first century, opposing long-standing oppressive structures and fighting for the rights and dignity of Dalit women. Dalit feminism, which is rooted in the intersectional understanding of gender, caste, class, and other forms of discrimination, places a focus on the experiences and struggles of Dalit women within larger movements for social justice. This new generation of Dalit feminism responds to the shifting socio-political environment and the reality that Dalit women in India confront today, while also building on the heritage of past movements. They have participated in conferences, created organizations, and supported the election of Dalit women into political office.¹⁰

21st-century Dalit feminism, motivated by a dedication to intersectionality and solidarity, highlights the connection between gender-based and caste-based discrimination, acknowledging that Dalit women face multiple forms of oppression. These movements advocate for a more inclusive and equitable society where everyone may succeed regardless of caste, gender, or background by working to destroy overlapping structures of power and privilege that sustain marginalization and inequality.

Dalit women activists and academics have taken to the streets on a number of platforms, such as social media, grassroots organizing, and advocacy campaigns, inspired by the tenacity and defiance of their mothers, in an effort to subvert prevailing narratives, reclaim their agency, and make their voices heard. In this regard, Dalit feminism of the twenty-first century symbolizes a larger movement for social change and emancipation in addition to the fight for gender justice and equality. These movements oppose castebased patriarchy, overthrow oppressive systems, and imagine alternative futures based on fairness, justice, and dignity for everyone by emphasizing the experiences and leadership of Dalit women. Dalit feminism inspires cooperation and group action in the quest for a more equitable and inclusive world as we negotiate the complexity of the twenty-first century.

One of the landmark movements of the 21st century in the context of Dalit feminism is the Dalit Women Fight which operates in various regions of the country like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha where historical marginalization of Dalit women has taken place and thus it has also caused a lack of confidence in them.¹¹ This movement is focused on various areas of advocacy like leadership development, international advocacy, and even grassroots mechanisms. This movement even entails focusing on the training of Dalit women in various skills including social media usage, self-defense, and

¹⁰ (Sandhu).

¹¹ (“Dalit Women’s Fight for Equality - Women’s Media Center”).

women's rights awareness. This movement has even organized various events like Dalit Women Speak Out, which have made an impact in the sphere. These movements are described as movements that are "for the women, by the women" emphasizing the importance of Dalit women in the social sphere.

All things considered, the Dalit Women Fight movement is a potent advocacy platform that aims to confront the systemic oppression that Dalit women experience, offer assistance to victims of abuse, empower Dalit women via skill development and education, and push for legislative changes to guarantee justice and equality for all Dalit women.

Another movement that is visible currently is the Dalit Women Self-Respect March which is a march inspired by the legacy of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders. The aim of these marches includes bringing together women from various backgrounds to a common platform where they share their experiences with each other and express solidarity.

The Sadhvi Yathra movement, spearheaded by the Dalit Mahila Federation, has been established in Kerala, India, with the primary objective of advocating for gender justice within Dalit communities and society at large. Founded and led by Dalit women, Sadhvi Yathra is dedicated to empowering Dalit women and confronting caste-based discrimination prevalent in Indian society. Central to its mission is the promotion of solidarity among marginalized groups, rallying support for the rights and dignity of Dalit women, and enhancing public awareness of their unique experiences and challenges.

Through a series of meticulously organized events, marches, and campaigns, Sadhvi Yathra endeavors to shed light on the intersecting forms of oppression faced by Dalit women and to advocate for systemic change. Its activities serve as platforms for collective action, enabling Dalit women to assert their agency and demand accountability from societal structures that perpetuate inequality and injustice. By mobilizing communities and engaging with broader social movements, Sadhvi Yathra embodies the ethos of resilience, resistance, and collective empowerment inherent to Dalit feminism.

The movement's commitment to challenging entrenched systems of oppression underscores its transformative potential in reshaping societal norms and constructing a more inclusive and equitable society. Through its advocacy efforts and grassroots mobilization, Sadhvi Yathra stands as a beacon of hope for marginalized communities, inspiring solidarity and fostering dialogue aimed at dismantling barriers to social justice and fostering a culture of equality and dignity for all.

Dalit women activists initiated the #DalitWomenFight social media campaign with the aim of raising awareness about the challenges confronting Dalit women in India and fostering a sense of community among them. Utilizing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, activists strategically utilize hashtags to disseminate resources, news articles, and personal testimonies highlighting the marginalization, violence, and discrimination experienced by Dalit women as a result of their caste identity. Through this initiative, Dalit women reclaim agency over their narratives, confront prevalent misconceptions, and forge connections with supporters and allies across the globe through digital platforms.

The overarching objective of #DalitWomenFight is to challenge prevailing narratives, elevate consciousness, and catalyze both online and offline action against gender and caste-based oppression. By amplifying the voices and experiences of Dalit women, the campaign seeks to disrupt dominant discourses and inspire solidarity among marginalized communities and allies. Through the strategic use of social media, #DalitWomenFight serves as a platform for Dalit women to assert their rights, demand justice, and advocate for systemic change, ultimately contributing to the broader struggle for social justice and equality.

In summary, Dalit feminism's comeback in the twenty-first century is a strong and significant force in India, opposing repressive systems and fighting for the rights and dignity of Dalit women. Dalit feminism, which has its roots in an intersectional understanding of gender, caste, class, and other types of oppression, highlights the distinctive experiences and hardships faced by Dalit women within larger movements for social justice. Driven by a dedication to intersectionality and solidarity, feminist groups among the Dalit community emphasize the interdependence of discrimination based on caste and gender, acknowledging the various types of subjugation that Dalit women encounter. These movements aim to eliminate overlapping mechanisms of privilege and power that support inequality and marginalization in order to create a society that is more inclusive and equitable.

CONCLUSION

Feminism and Dalit feminism are two separate but related movements in the larger fight for social justice and gender equality. The purpose of both movements is to promote women's rights and dignity, but because women have varied experiences in different social circumstances, their techniques, foci, and historical backgrounds are distinct. In the 19th and 20th centuries, feminism, as a global movement, mostly originated in Western societies with the goal of opposing patriarchy and advancing gender equality. In promoting women's rights such as equal pay, suffrage, and reproductive freedom, feminism has come a long way. However, mainstream feminism has frequently come under fire for failing to sufficiently address the ways in which women's lives are shaped by the intersections of gender, race, class, and other social issues.

As a result of this criticism, other strands of feminism have emerged, including intersectional feminism and Black feminism, which aim to question prevailing narratives within feminism and place a focus on the experiences of oppressed women. In contrast, Dalit feminism is a movement that focuses on the intersectional kinds of oppression that Dalit women in India confront, including discrimination on the basis of caste, gender, and class. The Dalit movement for social justice, which has its origins in the anti-caste campaigns spearheaded by leaders like as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, gave rise to Dalit feminism. Dalit feminism promotes an integrated strategy that takes into account the complexity of Dalit women's experiences and criticizes mainstream feminism for failing to sufficiently address caste-based injustice. Understanding how caste and gender-based oppression overlap is one of the key distinctions between Dalit feminism and mainstream feminism.

Dalit feminism acknowledges that caste-based discrimination exacerbates the oppression suffered by Dalit women, thus exacerbating their marginalization and exploitation, while mainstream feminism largely focuses on gender-based discrimination. Dalit feminism promotes a more inclusive and integrative approach to social justice and highlights the necessity of addressing gender and caste inequality concurrently. Dalit feminism is a concept that challenges patriarchal and caste-based social institutions by putting Dalit women's viewpoints and interests front and center. It gives Dalit women's views and concerns priority, as they have historically been neglected and excluded from Dalit political activities as well as mainstream feminist groups.

Through prioritising the experiences of Dalit women and confronting multiple forms of oppression, Dalit feminism strives to establish a fairer and more inclusive society where all people may flourish without facing prejudice or violence. Dalit feminism has remained a potent force for social change in India in the twenty-first century, challenging entrenched hierarchies and defending the rights and dignity of Dalit women.

Dalit feminist movements have brought together women from different backgrounds to support gender equality and justice, such as the Dalit Women Fight and the Dalit Women Self-Respect March. The Dalit Mahila Federation is leading the Sadhvi Yathra movement, which was founded in Kerala, India, with the main goal of promoting gender equity within Dalit groups and in society at large. Dalit feminist groups have pushed for structural change and brought attention to the multiple kinds of oppression that Dalit women experience through a number of gatherings, marches, and campaigns. Dalit women now have the potential to demand responsibility from the social systems that uphold injustice and inequality and to express their agency thanks to these movements. Dalit feminism has endeavored to establish a more inclusive and fair society for all by organizing groups and participating in larger social movements. In summary, Dalit feminism is a revolutionary movement that defends the rights and dignity of Dalit women while posing questions about the connections between genderbased oppression and caste. Dalit feminism offers a critical viewpoint on gender and social justice that is crucial for creating a more fair and equitable society by elevating the experiences of Dalit women and promoting an integrated approach to social justice. Dalit feminism is a movement that advocates for social justice and empowers oppressed groups via grassroots mobilization and lobbying. It inspires solidarity and discussion to break down obstacles to social justice.

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