

**UNDERSTANDING CASTE & GENDER IN INDIA: CASE OF DALIT  
LIBERATION MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN INDIA**

**Dr. Trishna M. Thakuria\***

\*Assistant Professor,  
Department of Sociology,  
University of Science & Technology, Meghalaya, India  
Email id: Thakuria.trishna@gmail.com

**DOI: 10.5958/2249-7315.2022.00230.1**

---

**ABSTRACT**

*This paper is an attempt to read Dalit women in two broad social movements of struggle and identity in India- the Dalit Liberation Movement in Maharashtra and Women's Movement in India. In the first account, there will be an effort to see how Dalit struggles in Maharashtra for liberation and justice from a caste-based oppressive society invisibilized contribution of Dalit women in the movement and moulded it from a masculinist angle of praxis. This is to understand how role of women were narrowed down and perceived from a gendered angle by the movement. Also it is to understand how Dalit women were subjected only either to comparative analysis with women in caste or a victim of upper caste atrocities in Dalit male writings. Secondly locating Dalit women in mainstream women's movement in India, the paper attempts to show how this movement for equality for women has overlooked specific problems of Dalit women as an unauthentic subject by their drive to fight for women as a homogeneous category. The focus will be equally laid on to understand how a space for struggle of Dalit women is seen as a different and pluralising drive of feminism by the mainstream feminism in India dominated by women favoured by caste and class hierarchy.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Dalit, Feminism, Movement, Caste, Ambedkar, Patriarchy, Hinduism.*

---

**INTRODUCTION**

It is apparent from the history of women's question in India that it constitutes a major site of social debate in the social reform movements in 19th century India (Mazumdar, 1995). A major drive to make, remake and reproduce emancipated women was what these movements brought to light in addressing retrograded status of Indian women. This drive is heavily visible in Indian Nationalist Movement which is criticized by scholars for strategically demonstrating women as an authentic subject of spiritual aspect of cultural superiority of colonized before the colonizer's material culture (Chatterjee, 1993). Feminist historiographies in India thus critique reform movements as masculine which attempted to emancipate women as repository of Indian tradition, erasing their political authenticity in public (Vaid and Sangari, 1989). Besides these reform movements conceptualized women and women's problem as homogeneous category by overlooking the difference among women living in varied nature of social categories (Raj Kumar 2010).

Alongside with the mainstream movements with a 'pan-Indian' nature and goal; the history of social movements in India saw certain other movements fighting against marginalities and oppression within Indian society. The underlying troubled issues of caste oppression, gender imbalance, class inequalities etc. came to be highlighted with the advent of modern education and certain movements popped up to fight against these inequalities and assertion of democratic rights of justice, equality, freedom etc. Indian scenario of these movements thus marked by two major identity movements- Dalit Liberation Movement in Maharashtra and Women's Movement in India at regional and national level respectively focusing on more or less similar goals-to move beyond

marginalized social status to an equal and respected one. The Dalit Liberation Movement in India draws a long history of struggle from caste oppression and establishing a strong identity of Dalits based on equality, justice and emancipation. Similarly Women's Movement in India is a by-product of theory and practices of left women's organizations and autonomous women's organizations which is a struggle against oppression of hegemonic patriarchy and a goal to achieve an egalitarian society free of gender bias. What was notable in these two movements, „masculinization“ of Dalit hood and 'Savarnization' of womanhood (Rege 1998) implying lack of women's voice and participation in the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics except in the Ambedkarite era which produced uncritical Dalit womanism, and Brahmanism of the women's movement structured by upper caste women leaders and feminists which tactfully side-lined the issue of gender in the reproduction of caste by placing women under agenda as homogeneous category (ibid.) Thus a close observation will show how having similar ideological drives, the practice of these two movements fails to include foundational role of gender ideology in the reproduction of caste. My study in this paper therefore attempts to show how there are multiple marginalities formed around both caste and gender, represented by dually oppressive status of Dalit women.

### **Genealogy of Dalit Movement in Maharashtra: Understanding Gendered politics of the Movement**

History of Dalit movement in Maharashtra is characterized by charismatic leadership fragmented into various phases (Jogdand 1991). The movement took birth under some pioneering leadership such as Gopal Baba Walangkar, Shivram Jamba Kamble to raise the status of lower castes and untouchables within Hindu society (ibid.). The movement continued and received a new and remarkable mode under the legendary leadership of Babasaheb Ambedkar, who brought new directions and goals in the movement in terms of mobilizing Dalits to fight for caste oppression as well as asserting for self-representation and development within the democratic boundaries of the nation. Post- Ambedkarite Dalit Movement was largely constructed upon Ambedkarite ideology in the movement in theoretical terms, but was influenced by Marxian ideology in practice (ibid.). What was notable within this chain of leadership was that Dalit women got unnoticed as agents in the movement except Ambedkarite phase. Hereby it is very crucial to observe how Dalit women got invisibilized, unrecognized and ill-represented in this broader movement of struggle against caste (Rege 2006).

Pre-Ambedkarite Dalit leadership in Maharashtra were marked by uncritical attitudes about Hinduism. Where they were critical was the caste system which discriminated them and threw them out of isolation and stigmatization. They saw caste system as a strategic construct of upper caste which doesn't have a religious base. Moreover their effort unlike Ambedkarite leadership did not seek to overthrow Hinduism, they sought to reform evils of Hinduism by denouncing caste hierarchy but staying within Hinduism only. Their propaganda rested in resituating Hinduism and clearly contrasts with Ambedkar's radicalized overthrow of Hindu religion in Dharmantar movement. For example "The Sanmarg Bodhak NirashritiSamaj (Depressed Class Society showing the right path) founded by pre-Ambedkarite leader Kisan FagojiBansode urged Mahars, Mangs and Chambhars"...Not to become Christian" (Jogdand 1991). The pre- Ambedkarite Dalit movement thus aimed at achieving equality by making caste Hindus aware of the rights of Dalits or gaining sympathy, charity and consolation in the name of religion. On the contrary Ambedkarite movement devised a new way to asserting Dalit rights by throwing the hegemonic establishment set by caste Hindus and introducing self-development, self-reliance and self-reflexivity in the movement (ibid.).

It is apparent from the pre-Ambedkarite dalit movement that dalit women were a forbidden term in their praxis. A few leaders of that period the movement no one even paid a concern for women.

The few who included women in their political agenda restricted them only within the ambit of educational emancipation by establishing schools for girls. Women as an egalitarian partner in political war was a far cry under those leadership where emancipation of women was only seen through educational category but muting their voice to come in public.

In the later phase of the pre-Ambedkarite movement however women's issue came to focus under the rubric of brahminical autocracy. The pioneering leadership of Jotiba Rao Phule and the SatyashodhakSamaj he established contested the brahmanical hegemony over caste and gender by articulating a liberation project for untouchables much before they were nomenclature as a unified category of 'dalit' constitutive of shudras, ati-shudras and untouchables by Ambedkar in his writings in Bahiskrut Bharat in 1928. Under Phule's leadership, liberating women from the chain of patriarchy was a mingled agenda along with the struggle waged for uplifting the depressed castes and untouchables. For Phule brahminical patriarchy retrogrades women by domesticating her within the four walls of home. He sees upper caste women privileged for nothing except her caste status which untouchable women do not have. For him thus emancipation of women largely depends on educating her so that she can overthrow this hegemonic heteropatriarchy. Phule's Satyashodhakcounterpublic thus produce a category of emancipated women such as Muktabai, Tarabai Shinde who sought to critique brahmanical patriarchy heavily. But Phule's point of failure is that his articulation of women's question keeps away the multiple patriarchies affecting women (Omvedt 1976).

## **Voicing the Muted One: Women In Dalit Movement In Maharashtra Under Ambedkarite Aegis**

The late 1920 saw a different picture of dalit movement in Maharashtra. Under the progressive leadership of Ambedkar, voice of dalit women got a political platform to come out radicalized in public. It was Ambedkar who pioneered to mobilize dalit women in large numbers to fight against caste oppression. Ambedkar's leadership made a clear break with the earlier anti-caste politics. The Ambedkarite leadership for liberating Dalits roughly saw various experiment and experience with Hindu society. The complex struggle he waged against caste saw him transforming from a social reformer to a radical revolutionary (Jogdand 1991). It is evident from the documentation of anti-caste movements by scholars like Omvedt that Ambedkar entered the movement to reform Hindu society from the evils of caste system by demanding equal social rights for untouchables. His agenda at that period included various temple entry movements which is a radical rupture in history of caste in India. To assert equal social rights Ambedkar even went to sanskritize Dalits to come at par with Hindu caste society. But in later times he realized that caste and Hinduism played an essentially intimate role in India for which untouchables are not able to rise up in society. He then took up a radical step to overthrow Hinduism which according to him acted as root for nurturing caste system.

It is also important to mention that Ambedkarite leadership gave a new momentum to the movement by mobilizing untouchables under the self-representing term of „dalit“ to unify them to lead the war against the powerful evils of caste society. His unified drive welcomed all depressed castes and untouchables irrespective of their gender identity to come to the battleground of anti-caste war (Rege 2006). Ambedkar's gender sensitive approaches were visible in many instances during the movement (Pawar and Moon 2008). His fight against caste system and Hindu religion unlike other untouchable leaders except a handful as Phule was not only a project of elimination of dalit marginality as a homogenous category circled around caste identity. Ambedkar saw beyond. He rightly understood the foundational role of gender ideology in the reproduction of caste. Thus his long struggle for annihilation of caste included under his agenda an overthrow of patriarchal hegemony restricting movement and voices of women. Ambedkar viewed caste as a system of graded inequality which is revitalized through Hindu upper code of marriage and sexuality.

Ambedkar thus saw endogamy as a solution to break caste autocracy (ibid.).

Ambedkar's thought and action brought a tremendous change in dalit masses in terms of transforming their social war against caste a war of political legitimacy. Under the pioneering leadership of Ambedkar, his counterpublic thus experienced a radical and confident political agency hood of their female counterpart in the movement (Rege 2006). He mobilised a large number of Dalit women to join in the various phases of the movements. Among these historic Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, Nasik Satyagraha of 1930 and Ambedkar's conversion of Buddhism in 1956 are the landmarks where women's participation was paramount (Raj Kumar 2010). Ambedkar's views on liberating dalit women however differ highly from Phule. Where for Phule he saw liberation of women as one of the category of his reform agenda along with untouchables. But for Ambedkar dalit women were never a separate category under his agenda of struggle separated from caste and gender. Moreover the patriarchal barrier in the progress of women Phule saw was one layered- the 'brahmanical patriarchy' as termed by him which negates the patriarchy existing within dalit community. Whereas Ambedkar saw patriarchy encroaching dalit women multi-layered. For him patriarchy has both exclusive and inclusive nature in dalit society. His radical criticism to patriarchy sought to liberate dalit women through educating them to assert their rights as equal members of society. His praxis in the movement thus gave birth to a genre of educated and self- confident women active in public life. Shantabai Dhanoji Daani- a progressive woman in Ambedkarite movement thus said "Babasaheb used to say that the dalit woman in your homes is the most dalit of all. A dalit woman's husband could impose his male ego on his wife. I am well educated but still a woman born in the mahar caste after all. Because of the very progressive ideological stand of DR. Babasaheb Ambedkar I was able to become president of the SCF of Nasik district." (Rege 2006:113). It is noteworthy here that SCF – Scheduled Caste Federation was a party for the Scheduled Castes and Communities under the aegis of Ambedkar which granted equal political platform for both men and women. Shantabai again goes in mentioning "In no other struggle did women participate in such large numbers as they did in the agitation of the SCF. Their number and presence was noticeable." (Rege 2006: 112)

Ambedkar's influence was profound and immeasurable on dalit women. His mobilization and motivation resulted in creative spirit in the dalit women in the form of poetry, fiction, autobiography, songs etc. Their articulation of their experience took birth as renowned Stri Dalit Sahitya in Marathi (Raj Kumar 2010). Even after years of his death. His concern for legalizing equal status for women in terms of marriage, divorce, property ownership, and adoption practices got manifested in his attempt to codify Hindu Code Bill as law minister in Nehru cabinet (Zelliot, Rao eds. 2003)

Dalit women did have profound and unlimited faith on Ambedkar. The romanticised piece of writings of women on Ambedkar makes it apparent how much he was dedicated to uplift them equally with men members of dalit community. Nalini Balwant Salve writes in her article A Living Flame how a glimpse of Ambedkar filled their minds with utmost joy- "Here comes our God. As they meet him, the bodies which seem to shine black through ragged clothes, are filled with love till they spill over. Tears of joy mingled with the sweat on their bodies; what a sweet confluence" (Pawar and Moon 2008)

However Ambedkar's effort to liberate women is mingled with moral sanskritization of dalit women. Though his revolutionary ideas speak for annihilating caste, his understanding did not at all do away with some of the basic tenets of caste. He himself affirmed the purity concept of caste and made effort to upgrade dalit women in that framework. His excerpt in Mahad Satyagraha collaborates my argument "...You must think and realise that you have as much character and purity as a brahmin women." (Rege 2006: 54)

### **Historical Mapping Of Women In Post-Ambedkarite Dalit Movement In Maharashtra: Where They Were?**

The post-Ambedkarite phase of Dalit movement in saw certain epoch making development in terms of party politics and cultural organizations. Two major developments in this era was formation of Republican Party of India (RPI) influenced by Ambedkarite philosophy. Another important event was the birth of Dalit Panther Movement who brought a revolutionary history to the movement (Jogdand 1991). Along with these two developments various political and cultural organizations raised their head in other parts of the India influenced by the movement such as Bahujan Samaj Party, BAMCEF (The All India Backward SC, ST, OBC and Minority Communities Employees Federation), Dalit Sahitya Movement etc. inside and outside Maharashtra (Jogdand 1991)

### **Era Of Republican Party Of India And Political Underrepresentation Of Dalit Women**

The birth of Republican Party of India took place in late 50's decade carrying the Ambedkarite legacy under the leadership of N. Shivraj. The party aimed at achieving democratic ideals of justice, equality, freedom for the oppressed castes and untouchables under parliamentary democracy (Jogdand 1991). Various sub-organizations came up under Republican Party of India such as Dalit Sahitya Sangh, Worker's Organization, All India Republican –Students Federation under national banner etc.

It is significantly apparent from the party politics that despite its effort to uplift the depressed castes and untouchables, the party did not pay any definite attention to women belonging to these castes and untouchables. Except organizing an All India Women's Conference on 2nd October 1957 at Nasik we do not see any further attempt to organize women and make themselves politically visible to fight for the movement altogether. The party leadership was essentially male centric where no women leader found a place. In terms of party membership also this trend was visible but with a little flexibility where at least a few women got chances to hold official posts in the party. Women like Geetabai Gaikwad and ShantabaiDaani fought elections to local self-government bodies and legislative councils (Phadke in Pawar and Moon 2008) However despite its all-rounding effect to organize downtrodden the party politics itself saw disorganization. The clash within party leadership, factionalism within ideological and personal level made Republican Party of India to saw various splits and ultimately brought to its death. Quoting Parvathamma "...the entire history of splits, re unions and renewed splits in RPI has no ideological basis, but they are due to clash of personalities and personal ambitions" (Parvathamma 1973). Jogdand also remarks similarly on the death of Republican Party of India, "Unfortunately the tempo and the revolutionary zeal of the party leaders ceased as every leader was posing as a junior Ambedkar. In this competition, they failed to carry forward the caravan of the dalit movement which resulted in the party's decline" (Jogdand 1991: 69)

### **Understanding Masculinization of a Movement: Dalit Women in Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra**

As a failed consequence of Republican Party of India, a revolutionary wave came up in the scene of dalit politics in Maharashtra in the form of Dalit Panthers by the late 60's. This political community was formed by a group of first generation educated dalit youths under the reservation policy of Government of India who led the movement expressing through literature their hatred to the continued political and social discrimination of Dalits. They valorised the term Dalits to derive their strength in the movement which is nomenclature inspired by Black Panthers Movement against racism in USA (Contursi 1993).

One of the chief outcomes of this panther movement was the emergence of a radical dalit literature which gave tremendous jerks to monopolised upper caste Hindu writings by showing different

facets of their discrimination. The articulation of organized Dalit writings came with the Little Magazine Movement in late 1960's which produced a revolutionary literature in Marathi giving Dalits motivation and platform to be in the movement and work as collective super-power. Their revolutionary expressions were manifested through certain popular literary magazines such as Vidroh, Magova and Aamhi (Jogdand 1991). A spate of angry, revolutionized and frustrated poets emerged in the scene who with their radical yet creative writings shook the chord of upper caste writers and vis-à-vis Hindu culture and religion who oppressed them in the name of caste. Poet leaders like Baburao Bagal, Daya Pawar, Shankar Rao Kharat, Raja Dhale, Keshav Meshram, Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kamble and several writers show their bitterness through their writings. Their language used in the writings were new, racy, street-based, earthy and colloquial, that of slums, untouchable ghettos "reflecting a new social consciousness and an ideological awakening" (Jogdand 1991). Keshav Meshram's writings went to the extent of abusing Hindu God with slangs such as "mother-fucker god" who laughs at upper caste atrocities on lower castes and untouchables. Namdeo Dhasal used street language of prostitutes and pimps to shame upper castes who had the privilege over lower caste prostitutes.

A huge chunk of autobiographies also emerged which not only aimed at interpreting collective pain of Dalits in caste society but also "inflicting an inferiority complex in the minds of the adversaries by resurrecting dalit triumphalism and bringing out guilt in the minds of „upper castes“ by recording social wrongs done by ancestors" (Rege 2006). Writers such as Omprakash Valmiki (Jhoothan: A Dalit's life), Vasant Moon (Vasti: Growing up Untouchable in India), Shyamlal (Untold story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor) were some of the revolutionized by-product of Dalit panther Movement. Dalit literature is thus regarded as a very prominent and potent field of cultural protest in Maharashtra. In the words of Jogdand "Dalit Sahitya, in this way, has nurtured the Dalit Movement as a whole and has thus become the vanguard of a cultural revolution. Dalit literature in Maharashtra has acquired a leadership role" (Jogdand 1991:92). Under the charismatic poet leaders, Dalit Panthers organized demonstrations, publicly attacked images of Hindu deities (Worli Riots 1974), burned the Bhagavad Gita, and engineered a successful election boycott, Marathwada University Agitation popularly known as Namantaran movement (renaming of Marathwada University after Babasaheb Ambedkar) to bring attention to the desperate situation of the Untouchables (Contursi 1993).

Nevertheless going with the history of dalit literature, we found that it was largely a male domain (Raj Kumar 2010). Despite dalit panthers have made a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970's, their writings and programme of action have encapsulated dalit women as either valorised mothers or victimised „sexual object“ in the hands of caste Hindu society (Rege 1998). Their writings on women get manifested in blame-game to upper caste Hindu society. True, it is undeniable that Brahmanical patriarchy touches women irrespective of any social categories in India unlike Phule's attempt to show Brahmanical patriarchy restricting freedom of upper caste women only. But it is also an apparent truth that patriarchy exists within dalit society also. Even within the movement certain renowned women figure such as Baby Kamble, Geetabai Bhagat, Laxmibai Kakde, Chandrika Ramteke, Bhukshuni Chandrasheela themselves were sufferers of dalit patriarchy. Shantabai Bhalero writes "I did not get on with my husband because he wanted only a housewife" (Pawar and Moon 2008). Baby Kamble's bitterness of suppression found expression through "beatings, quarrels, tears and starvation were our daily diet" (Kamble 2008). These things were tacitly side-lined or sometimes hid by many Dalit male writers by valorising Dalit society egalitarian on gender line. In order to prove the point they go to the extent of showing democratic social arrangements in their society for women such as widow remarriage, divorce etc. (Raj Kumar 2010). Their (male) writings were unable to express specific problems related to dalit women (Rege 1998).

This male lineage of writings is also brought under heavy criticism as essentially middle class and

urban (Jogdand 1991, Raj Kumar 2010). Apart from this their writings were more class-based than caste as within panther leadership a significant fraction of panthers were influenced by Marxist ideology and their praxis brings out the fact precisely. For example Namdeo Dhasal, one of the renowned panther was hard-core Marxist and an explicit internationalist in focus (Jogdand 1991). Though these writings belonged to creative genre, those were somehow unable to reach the understanding level of dalit masses as most of the Dalits were untouched by education. Especially these writings were not meant for rural dalits and women. Here my argument does not fall under any stereotyped outcome of mine on placing education a separate category of rural dalits and women; but my argument is supported by various dalit women writings who wrote on connection among illiteracy, gender and dalits in their society (Daani, Pawdeet.all, Rege, 2006). Besides, from the political agenda of panthers it is evident that their focus was more class based than caste one. Ambedkarite philosophy in the dalit movement saw a different shift in the process of implementation in the hands of panthers. However it is also not true that panthers were the blind followers of Ambedkar. At theoretical level they did differ from Ambedkar as their move was more revolutionary than him. Issue of class reign over caste when Marxian philosophy overtook Ambedkar (Jogdand 1991). Linking it with panther's writing what we find that women's issue came up in dalit male literature in the framework of class vs. Patriarchy. So specific problems related to dalit women because of their caste got side-lined except bringing the issue of caste violence on dalit women done by caste Hindu men (Rege 1998).

### **Different women: Reading Dalit women in Women's Movement in India**

So far above sections in this paper were trying to portray accounts of phases in dalit politics in a broader movement of dalit liberation in Maharashtra and critical rendering of how this movement drew a male lineage during pre- Ambedkarite and post-Ambedkarite era. The attempt was to show how subjectivity of dalit women were rampant as mere 'women' issues only in both the phases of movement while undermining their political space. However reading sexed subjectivity of caste in dalit movement only will not give us a complete picture of invisibility and unrecognition of dalit women and their problems. A distinct look on women's movement in India will complete the picture by showing how within women's movement dalit women's issues were either homogenized under the rubric of problems of 'womanhood' in India or charging dalit women's voice as different or separatist who tries to fragment the ideology of feminism in India-the backbone of women's movement (Rege 1998).

To make things clear, it will be rational to go back to the brief history of women's Movement in India. Women's movement in India emerged in India during 1970's as a platform to eradicate problems of women in India in general and to end the era of muted voice of women (Kumar 1993). Inspired by Western feminism, Women's movement in India also took up feminism as a liberatory ideology to fight for women in India. The movement was a beginning of a struggle for liberation of women, marginalised by patriarchal force (Kumar 1993). However the feminist discourse under which the movement was heading through was a discourse of homogenisation of women. This discourse thus did not pay any heed to the specific problems of women based upon race, colour, caste, class etc. and fell under the same category of White Middle class Feminism of the west which ignored silently the issue of Black women while fighting for women as a category. Accordingly in India dalit women were eventually got separated from the mainstream agenda of Women's Movement as a category invisible under the homogeneous category of women (Rege 1998).

In this context it is also important to see that the theory and practice of Women's Movement in India was grounded at two level-academica and activism largely dominated by upper caste and middle class favoured by education and caste hierarchy (Gandhi and Shah 1992). The Social Reform Movement which saw its beginning at the awakening of Nationalism in India undertook

women as a category of its reforming drive (Sangari and Vaid 1990). Education for women was gaining utmost priority among the Indian nationalists to be at par with the colonizers (Sarkar 2008). New women were in the making. In the words of Forbes “The educational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s produced a 'new woman' with interests that went beyond the household”. These new women legacy were later on in the late 20th century gave birth to a genre of women speaking and fighting for women as a whole (Forbes 1996).

However it is noteworthy that nationalist resolution of women’s questions was essentially revolved around upper caste women and the legacy was drawn by women essentially belonging to upper caste (Rege 2006). The voice of dalit women in that era (70's) was hard to imagine as in a situation where dalit themselves were fighting for democratic rights under the government of India, educated dalit women asserting for their rights could be found as a drop in the ocean. The few dalit women's voices present that time were more interested in breaking caste barriers rather than stopping for a while and fighting for their identity as women. Besides multiple patriarchies working against dalit women can be also argued here for invisibility of dalit women (Rege 2006)

Given that situation, dalit women and their issues were never got highlighted as issues specific to caste and gender by the Women's Movement in India. Though feminists like ChhayaDatar contests the allegation on Indian feminists for marginalising dalit women by showing fact files where dalit women's issues were taken up by Women's movement in the form of rape cases of dalit women - Mathura (1974), Bhanwari Devi (1992) [Datar 1999]; we cannot agree upon her argument as well as Women's Movement concern for them (raped dalit women) as mere taking up cases of women of 'dalit' is a misrecognition on the part of the feminists while leaving “reinscription of caste in feminist politics” (Rege 2000:493).

Apart from all these invisibilizing drive to dalit women by feminists in India, we also see feminism in India standing united against Dalit women's resistance for invisibilising them from their ambit (Rege 1998, Guru 1995) often alleging dalit women's voice resisting against hegemonising drive of women as 'cultural' lacking in perspective (Datar 1999). The organized Dalit women's voice in the form of Dalit Feminism therefore is heavily criticised by mainstream feminists as “Celebration of pluralising drive of feminism” (Rege 1998). Moreover history of feminist practices in India at many times shows discrimination done to dalit women in the practical level by the mainstream feminists favoured by caste and class hierarchy. KumudPawde's writings of discrimination done to dalit women by non-dalit women in women's organizations which she termed as 'made up feminists' in her autobiography clears my argument. An excerpt from her “...I do not know whether to smile or weep. The humiliation and pain that our poor, helpless women (dalit women) have endured for ages is merely a “dirty thing” (rape) for these prestigious women” [Pawde in Rege 2006: 237; emphasis added]. Another woman AnjanabaiDeshbhratar remarked similarly after attending Nagpur Conference of the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC), 1938 “The savarnasister’s behaviour towards their untouchable sisters was distant, cold, mean and lowly attitude. During lunch hour, the untouchable women delegates-Jaibai and others- had been asked to sit aside and had felt humiliated” (Rege 2006: 55).

### **Dalit Women as Political Actors: Understanding Dalit Women’s Voices in Ambedkarite Era and in Contemporary Society**

Dalit women so far have been discussed as in terms of invisible feminist subjects, a marginal figure in patriarchal practices of dalit politics in pre and post Ambedkarite era and a vulnerable object of sexual politics of caste Hindu society. However it is also important to see the unified agential collective hood of dalit women mapped briefly in terms of political collectivity of Dalit women under the aegis of Ambedkar and multiple yet unified voice of dalit women in contemporary era of Indian feminism.



Dalit political history under charismatic leadership of Ambedkar saluted women at their best. It was the era where voice of dalit women got a proper platform to come up. While the rest of the women denizens in the country were going under refinement under nationalist male reformers, dalit women were seen accessing and raising their voice with their male counterpart in dalit movement. A number of Dalit Women's Organizations took birth under the effort and motivation of Ambedkar. He was the pioneer in terms of bringing gender to analyse the complexity of caste and caste oppression (Rege 2006). Under his leadership a burning flame of identity got inculcated inside dalits alongside the on-going struggle to curb caste oppression. Women along with men also got ignited by the flame lightened by Babasaheb. Factually speaking, Ambedkar's charismatic speech in Mahad Satyagraha was the milestone in dalit history which provoked and mobilized many dalit women to come out publicly throwing their gender status at home and support men in their struggle against injustice (Pawar and Moon 2008). This historical event led to the birth of many women's organizations side by side with broader movement of dalits. Their voice received vigour in terms of speaking in conferences. In Maharashtra the effect was utmost. Prominent historical conferences and organizations voicing untouchable women such as The Dalit Mahila Federation of 1942, All India Untouchable Women's Federation, Untouchable Women's Parishad, All India Dalit Women's Parishad etc. came up. In the conferences women collectively raised and discussed various issues such as education for women to break the barrier of patriarchy and social marginality. They aimed at establishing a gender balanced enlightened dalit society to fight against hegemonic caste oppression. In the words of Mrs Indirabai Patil in Dalit Mahila Federation of 1942 –“We women are far behind the men in education. If we do not go with the men and help them in their activities, we will become a hindrance in their progress. So we must fight for women's education” (Pawar and Moon 2008). Sulochanabai Dongre, another dalit women activist raised various issues such as dalit women's right to divorce, right to reproductive rights etc. to liberate and emancipate dalit women. Besides these, Hindu religion, politics of caste Hindu women etc. were brought under severe criticism (Pawar and Moon 2008).

However their voices got muted in post-Ambedkarite era except a few voices in terms of literature (Rege 2006). Since the 1990's we again could hear voice of dalit women in reasserting themselves politically with a new frame of consciousness. The Mandir-Masjid politics of 1990 did create a new form of identity crisis based on the principle of „difference“ which touched dalit women's politics as well (Guru 1995). An assertion of difference from mainstream women's movement in India and their working ideology of feminism which Anupama Rao brands as „brahmanical feminism“ was creating an upsurge in dalit women to split off from caste feminism and create a unified voice of them which can really represent their problems. A trend of self-representation emerged in the political scene of dalit women. This self-assertion of dalit women thus be argued as a legacy drawn from Ambedkar who included the element of self-respect and self-development in the Dalit Movement by demanding separate electorate, asserting educational rights for dalits etc. . The early years of 90's decade then saw flourishing of many dalit women's organizations which aimed at speaking for their own rejecting hierarchical notion of upper caste, middle class, urban feminists on women and also giving a challenge to on-going dalit movement framed around masculinistic line (Rege 1998). In the words of Gopal Guru “dalit women's autonomous organizations challenge the patriarchal norms of society from both within and outside perspective. Not only it gives jerk to brahminical patriarchy but criticises dalit patriarchy existing within dalit communities” (Guru 1993);

The organizations like National Federation of Dalit Women, Dalit Mahila Sanghatna etc. took birth inspired by black feminism in the west fighting against racial discrimination of black African women by white middle class feminists in the west. Dalit women derived their similar stories of pangs, discrimination and suppression with black women and they visioned along the line of black feminists to represent their issues in international forums for women (Women together 2006).

Under the leadership of personas such as Ruth Manorama, scholarship of Kumud Pawde; dalit women could successfully raise their voice in International conferences such as International Women's Conference in Beijing 1995, Durban Conference on Racism 1993. This kick started a new era of development for dalit women with a new phase in Indian feminism-Dalit Feminism or Dalit-Bahujan Feminism (Rao ed. 2003). This contestation to mainstream feminism by dalit feminists have thus come to be recognised by feminists as pluralising drive of dalit women fighting for themselves on the basis of caste and culture only. Sharmila Rege criticises the charge levied on dalit feminism as cultural. She says Dalit Feminist Standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste-class identities or at other times differences ignored for 'the feminist cause' (Rege 2000). They charge dalit feminism as fractional and separatist (Datar 1999). As an answer to it dalit feminists critic mainstream feminism as incomplete and exclusionary. In Anupama Rao's words "They (Dalit Feminists) emphasise on rethinking the genealogy of Indian feminism in order to engage meaningfully with dalit women's "difference" from the ideal subjects of feminist politics." (Rao ed. 2003). Scholars like Gopal Guru see and valorises dalit women's perspective from an epistemological one. He argues "The autonomous mobilization of women can also be understood from an epistemological standpoint. This perspective maintains that the less powerful members of society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others."

## **CONCLUSION: Re-visioning dalit women's emancipation through Dalit Feminism**

The paper discussed thus asserts an utmost need to revisit feminist practices in India from the perspective of dalit women so that historical blotting and contemporary difference to dalit women can be erased with an all-inclusive yet specific move to re-understand and re-analyse caste with the lens of gender or vice-versa. It is important to recognize multiple voices and relativism in feminist practices in India so that better voices can be heard and action becomes a real emancipatory. It also seeks a historical recovery of dalit women in dalit politics so that movement as well as women participated do get justice. Besides the paper intentionally brought dalit liberation movement and women's movement to analyse position of dalit women in relation to both of them as they though fall similar on certain grounds diverge in different ways while issue of dalit women comes up. Hence Anupama Rao argues that there is compartmentalization of social movements though they aim for more or less similar aims-to fight against hegemony. She opines that struggle against caste hegemony and feminist movement though they complement each other but donot seem to merge into one. Thus Rao sees dalit Bahujan feminism as an alterantive by product which both the movement lacked to produce. Quoting her "the new political agenda being articulated by Dalit Bahujan feminists demands the exploration of their shared and entangled histories." (Rao eds. 2003). There should be attempts to an in-depth study of sexed subjectivity of caste which reigning paradigm of feminism neglects. Going with the words of Dalit feminists such as Vimal Thorat who emphasises that "both dalit movement and women's movement in India need to adopt a more intellectual and organized work so that dalit women's perspective get highlighted and understood by them". Critiquing reluctance of both the movements she further says "dalit identity politics articulates caste identity sharply but resists deliberately understanding and articulation of gender dimensions of caste itself (that sees all women, not just dalit women) in a certain light" (Rao ed. 2003). Thus understanding dalit women within the fixities of invisibility in both Dalit movements and Women's Movement in India cries for a perceptible and pragmatic approach with inclusive and exclusive understanding of relationship between caste and gender and production of a historically legitimate uncritical dalit womanism;

**REFERENCES:**

- Chatterjee, Partha.(1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Contursi Janet A. (1993). "Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 2 ,May,pp. 320-339
- Datar, Chhaya.(1999). "Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is it a more Emancipatory force?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 9, 2964-2968.
- Forbes, Geraldine. (1996). *Women in Modern India*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Gandhi, Nandita and Shah, Nandita.(1992). *The Issues at stake: theory and practice in the contemporary women's movement in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women
- Guru, Gopal. (1995). "Dalit Women Talk Differently", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 14-21, 2548-49.
- Jogdand , P.G.(1991). *Dalit Movement in Maharashtra*. New Delhi: Kanak Publications
- Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Trans. Pandit Maya.(2008). New Delhi: Orient Longman
- Kumar, Radha. (1993). *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for women's rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Kumar, Raj. (2010). *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Mazumdar, Vina.(1995). *Emergence of Women's Question and Role of Women's Studies*. New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies.
- Moon, Vasant.(1995). *Growing up untouchables in India*. Trans. Omvedt,
- Gail.(2000). USA: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Omvedt, Gail. (1976). *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahmin Movement in Western India: 1873 to 1930*, Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust.
- Parvathamma, C.(1973). "Ambedkar and After: The Position and Future of Indian Scheduled Caste Masses and Classes", *Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. 26 (3), July-September, pp. 226-27
- Pawar, Urmila and Moon, Minakshi.(2006). *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. Trans. Sonalkar, Wandana. 2008. New Delhi: Zubaan
- Phadke, Y.D. foreword. In Pawar, Urmila and Moon, Minakshi. (2006). *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. Trans. Sonalkar, Wandana. (2008). New Delhi: Zubaan.
- Rege, Sharmila. (1998). "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Position", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 31, WS-39-WS-46
- ---2000. "'Real Feminism' and Dalit Women: Scripts of Denial and Accusation", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 35, no. 6, Feb. 5-11, pp. 492-495
- --- 2006. *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: reading Dalit Women's testimonios*. New Delhi: Zubaan

- Sarkar, Sumit and Sarkar, Tanika (eds.). (2008). *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A reader*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Vaid, Sudesh and Sangari, Kumkum (eds.) (1989). *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women
- Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*. Trans. Mukherjee Arun Prabha.(2008). Columbia University Press.N.P
- Women together (2006), Online Journal, 24 February 2006.
- Zelliott, Eleanor. "Dr. Ambedkar and the Empowerment of Women". in Rao, Anupama (eds.) (2003). *Gender & Caste*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.