



Dalit Feminism – Significance and Relevance: An Overview¹

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Abstract: Post-Modern discourses have aided in understanding the formation of caste discourses and gender discourses as multiple realities. As such it is important to integrate the disciplines of Dalit studies and Gender studies in order to understand the fundamental way in which caste and gender as systems of discrimination inflect each other in our hierarchical and stratified society. While this kind of analysis is path breaking, it nevertheless needs to be extended to include socio-cultural and literary contexts in order to enable more productive readings of Dalit discourses. A way to conceive of 'Gender reality' in terms of Caste is lacking. So it becomes essential to look at the struggles of representation, inclusions and exclusions imminent in the usage of the category 'woman'.

Keywords: Gender, Caste, Literature, Dalit feminism, Patriarchy, Women Movement.

The history of feminist thought has refused hierarchical construction of the relationship between male and female in its specific contexts and attempts are made to reverse or displace such constructions. (Joan Wallach Scott 1999: 28-50) Gender as a category of feminist analysis is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated. Gerda Lerner defines Gender as, "The cultural definition of behavior defined as appropriate to the sexes in a given society at a given time. Gender is a set of cultural roles. It is a costume, a mask, a strait jacket in which men and women dance their unequal roles." (1986:238)

As Joan Scott notices, Gender involves four interrelated elements. First, culturally available symbols evoke multiple representations and juxtapositions as in myths of light and dark, purification and pollution, innocence and corruption.

Secondly, normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of the symbols attempt to limit their metaphoric possibilities. These normative concepts are expressed in religious, legal and political doctrines and typically take the form of fixed binary opposition, asserting the meaning of male and female, masculine and feminine. These normative statements depend on the refusal or repression of alternative possibilities, and sometimes overt contests about them take place. The position that emerges as dominant, however, is stated as the only possible one. Subsequent history is written as if these normative positions were the product of social consensus rather than of conflict. The point of new historical investigation is to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation.

Thirdly, this kind of analysis must include a notion of politics and reference to social institutions and organizations.

Fourthly, gendered identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organizations and historically specific cultural representations.

As Gerda Lerner argues, the system of Patriarchy in which gendered relations operate can function only with the co-operation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the

denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women one from the other, by defining 'respectability' and 'deviance' according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power, and by awarding caste privileges to confirming women.

The system of patriarchy for Gerda Lerner is a historic construct. Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women. To step outside of patriarchal thought means, being skeptical toward every known system of thought; being critical of all assumptions, ordering values and definitions.

In Indian society family is the basic form of social grouping with interrelations between patriarchy and caste. Caste as a social relation is a relationship of exploitation. Exploitation is a concept that describes a very specific power relation in which the benefits that accrue to one group arise only from the detriment of the other. As such it is important to integrate the disciplines of Dalit studies and Gender studies in order to understand the fundamental way in which caste and gender as systems of discrimination inflect each other in our hierarchical and stratified society. In the words of Susie Tharu,

“The concept of Gender is a critical tool in engineering the conceptual shift away from thinking about women in terms of biology or nature, towards a more radical understanding of culture, and history as the principal players in the game”. (Tharu Susie and Niranjana 2001: 494-526)

While this kind of analysis is path breaking, it nevertheless needs to be extended to include socio-cultural and literary contexts in order to enable more productive readings of Dalit discourses².

Caste involves one's behaviour, one's basic assumptions about life. One's experience (determined by one's caste) validates those assumptions, how one is taught to behave, what one expect from one's self and from others, one's concept of a future, how one understand problems and solve them, how one feel, think and act. It is these behavioural patterns that dominant castes resist recognizing although they may be perfectly willing to accept caste. It is these behavioral patterns which must be recognized, understood and changed.

Dalit women as a group are in an unusual position in caste society. They are beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually and powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or raze. They are collectively at the bottom of the occupation ladder and their social status is lower than any other group. Occupying such a position they bear the burnt of caste and gender oppression. At the same time, they are the group that has not been socialized to assume the role of exploiter/oppressor in that

² Discourses are normally viewed as ideological systems of meaning that obfuscate and naturalize uneven distributions of power and resources. This means that discourse analysis has the critical task of exposing the mechanisms by which this deception operates.(Althusser 1969, 1971; Pecheux 1982; Zizex 1994)² Furthermore, Discourses constitute symbolic systems and social order, and the task of discourse analysis is to examine their historical and political construction and functioning. (David Howarth:5)

they are allowed no institutionalized 'other' that they can exploit or oppress. 'Dalit woman' as a space and arena reflects the interface of caste and gender realities.

Theories of Gender as put forth by white and educated urban women have been subject to a severe critique by dalit women. A few social theories have built their logic on analogies to the opposition of male and female, other acknowledged a 'woman question', still others addressed the formation of subjective sexual identity, but gender as a way of talking about systems of caste relations has not appeared. Theories of class in gender context lay emphasis on material based reality on the category of woman; psychoanalysis theories deny social reality to woman. Radical feminists understand woman in relation to man as an object that is oppressed by patriarchy.

A majority of feminist theories universalize the categories and relationship of male and female. A way to conceive of 'Gender reality' in terms of Caste is lacking. So it becomes essential to look at the struggles of representation, inclusions and exclusions imminent in the usage of the category 'woman'. In history there has been the tension between search of common bond for the woman's struggle and the articulation of difference. This tension articulated by the logic of complete identity and that of complete difference remains unresolved.

The one dimensional perspective on women's reality is a marked feature of contemporary feminism in the Indian context. The problems and dilemmas of educated, upper caste though are real concerns that merited consideration and change but they are not the pressing political concerns of masses of women. Upper caste feminists' refusal to draw

attention to and attack caste hierarchies has suppressed the link between caste and woman. It is only by analyzing caste and its function in construction of 'Dalit woman' a thorough understanding of gender relations can emerge.

Standpoint epistemology perspective believes that the less powerful members of society have the potential for a more complete view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain 'epistemic privilege' over others.(Nielson.J 1990:10, Narayan U 1989: 262, Hawkesworth M 1989: 536). Standpoint perspective argues against the claims of universality of knowledge produced by dominant upper castes pointing to the need to understand the difference between women based on caste. In short, such a position simply means, instead of one totality, we have several totalities.

Post-Modern discourses have aided in understanding the formation of caste discourses and gender discourses as multiple realities. Practitioners in the discipline of Humanities under the influence of Subaltern Theory have turned to caste in recent times. Ever since, the notion of 'What is History?' changed from 'an account of the past' to a 'construction of the past from a particular perspective, for specific politics', Indian academia has witnessed intense debates and contestations in the field of history.

The postmodern critique of historical practice in recent times contends that writings of history in India have been too 'Nationalistic' providing a grand narrative of the triumphant anti-colonial struggle of the nationalist elite against the British, while neglecting the 'struggles' and 'failures' of the

untouchables against caste oppression, centuries since. Dalits are engaged in the task of writing the “new histories” of caste-histories on dalits who suffered on account of caste and cultural oppression. Dalit consciousness has found a new edge with Ambedkar Studies gaining prominence in the academia.

It was in the eighties that cracks began to appear in the secular-nationalistic thought process. Many nationalities began to question the truth of a united India, challenging the legislative system which was trying to establish their identities. The direct result of such an action is that the monopoly of historically constructed national movement was questioned and identity questions of marginal communities began to gain ground. ‘A Discourse of descent’ has become inevitable. Rajni Kothari observes that, it is a “voice that questions the beliefs and rituals framed from the view of the ruling classes (Castes). It is also an attempt to excavate life in the cultural world of the working communities which are powerless and are subjected to denial and suppression by the ruling power.” (1994)

A popular tendency in Women’s movement is to play down the caste factor and to emphasize the unity among women as victims of male oppression. For this reason, Dalit women victims often do not see the women’s movement as trustworthy since it does not take caste issues seriously. On the other hand, Dalit movements dominated by men have their own patriarchal interests in using or suppressing assaults on dalit women. Often the net result of this fraught situation is that dalit women often end up doubly deserted, without support from their own Dalit brethren and detached from any support from Women’s movement. Gopal Guru (1995) identifies three reasons for this phenomenon. Firstly,

subordination of the dalit voice to the dominant voice. Secondly, their economic situation offering no solution to their poor living conditions and thirdly, the claim for women's solidarity at both national and global level is overlooking the contradictions that exist between high caste women and dalit women. Thus dalit feminists consider the feminist theory developed by non-dalit women as inauthentic since it does not capture their reality. In the post-Ambedkar period dalit male leaders have tended to subordinate Dalit women in Dalit movements.

As Gopal guru argues, It is not only in the political arena that dalit women face exclusion but in the cultural field as well, where dalit women find their male counter parts dominating the literary scene. This marginalization has been openly condemned by dalit women writers at their conferences. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of dalit women. This situation clearly points out three things. a) It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that determines the validity of an event. b) Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women, which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them. c) The experiences of dalit women show that local resistance within the dalits is important.

The question of representation in the works of Dalit literature has been a serious matter of discussion. Authenticity of a writer becomes more important because his/her ideology is influenced by the caste that is imposed on them right from their birth.

Caste Dimensions of Dalit Women

Culture studies, linguistics and language theories have offered different perspectives for alternative ways of reading literary works. Practitioners in the discipline of English, influenced by certain streams of postcolonial theory, are engaging themselves in “Dalit Literature”. Re – reading dalit women is a cultural project that aims at constructing an effective identity whilst avoiding their suppression for their practices clash with those of the dominant national feminist mythology comprising caste, religion, language or cultural mores.

Dalit Feminist literature is forming into a genre that derives its links from many of the genres like Third World Literature, South Asian Literature as well as Regional Literature in Translation. If we see genre as a process of systematization – selecting, sifting and codifying texts-- the rise of new genres and sub-genres would imply a shift in the purpose and politics of canonization of literature. This paper investigates the making of the genre of Dalit feminist literature examining how this is redefining Dalit literature and giving it its “uniqueness” vis-à-vis other modes of representing caste.

What is the real nature of Indian feminism? These discussions distinctly recognize Indian women’s representation. Such a study implies a gender deconstruction of upper caste feminist voices that are silent to Dalit feminism. The paper also tries to question the modern tendency of globalization forcing multi-cultures into a mono-culture dissolving the ‘differences’. The

study of caste's physical existence with its social dimension from a Dalit feminist perspective enriches culture studies.

The search makes possible the Dalit feminist world as a model in culture studies. Firstly, such identification gives voice to a community that is abandoned, so as to respect its identity and to be aware of its cultural significance. By encouraging such explorations we not only build up morale for dalit women, but also help to build a counter tradition challenging male stream and mainstream feminist studies. The article also raises questions related to morality and language. It helps to evolve an ecriture feminine, a language specific to dalit women.

The assumption of the researcher is that caste and gender realities structure hierarchical paradigms to situate subject positions. The paper argues that the interface between the two systems of caste and patriarchy is the root of Dalit woman's oppression. Any explanation of dalit woman's place in caste relations needs to begin not just with the presumption that these two systems are oppressive but rather the ways in which caste uses patriarchal structures as agents of oppression. Hierarchical power structures like 'Caste' and 'Patriarchy' have interrelated correlations and inherent contradictions.

Subaltern literatures have challenged dominant ideologies. Dalit women oral narratives proclaimed to voice dalit women's grievances. However her suffering became a subject of propaganda in dalit and non-brahmin movements. With upward mobility hierarchies have crept into dalit communities. It has affected dalit feminist sensibilities. Dalit patriarchy and

the process of othering that it entails are being challenged by the marginalized dalit women.

Dalit Feminism

Why speak of the other?

Another woman wants to buy me

She wants me as the gold lave

To her upper caste new sari.

She wants me as the crimson

On her lips. (Sasi Nirmala, 'Dalituralu')

Mainstream Feminism Vs Dalit Feminism

Views on questions of Women reservation, the issue of obscenity, the rape of women and the question of language are differently dealt with among Dalit feminists and Upper caste feminists. To understand Dalit Feminism, it is essential to target the tensions prevailing among the upper caste men/women and dalit women. For instance, women as moral capital are used by upper caste men to counter Dalit political assertion. The easy target to counter dalit self-respect is to project sexuality of dalit women as licentious, aggressive, vulnerable and to depict the increased development of dalits as 'negative, violent, undemocratic and anti-development'. (P.Keshav kumar 2005:41) As witnessed in Anti-Mandal agitations, upper caste women also backed up caste assertions of upper caste men.

The state machinery comprising the police and the judiciary neglect or silence the voices of the victims of caste atrocities. The rape of dalit women, sexual harassment and issues of naked parading are not given serious attention to whereas, on the contrary, attempts to revolt against the exploitation of landlords or upper caste oppression by the dalits is somehow linked with the sexuality of upper caste women. Upper caste men justify their attack on dalits and read themselves as saviors of honour of their women. When caste atrocities on dalit women are issued upper caste feminists are forced to maintain silence.

Upper caste feminism portrays the problems of women like that of dowry, marriage, employment, property rights, freedom of expression, or divorce as universal problems of the Indian women. They speak less of dalit women. How can a dalit woman who is struggling to meet the demands of her daily food and shelter conceptualize the idea of property rights? She is alien to the idea of divorce whose husband deserts her and her children in the middle of life. Education, political reservation or women empowerment stands outside the sphere of her understanding. Women who are safe in their families, enjoying social status express fury at patriarchy at homes. They speak of discrimination in food sharing with boys, dress codes that hinder their movements, opportunities denied to learn Vedas, how monthly periods were considered polluted, how rates of self-harm among young women are spiraling. They speak of eating disorders, body grooming, plastic surgery and related issues. These are constructed as universal problems of women and feminism is constructed around these problems.

Anti-arrack movements, land struggles, wage discrimination, education for the girl child are issues for a Dalit feminist. She is concerned with the problems of rural women. In literature her core concern is related to these problems. Even her language is different. It is neither sophisticated nor polished. As Keshav kumar (2005: 43) questions, "In the liberation struggles if women are seen as instruments of revenge instead of being individuals, then what meaning are we giving for the liberation struggle? Can't we think about other alternatives than imitating the language of the enemy? We can't win the battle with oppressors by using the tools of those oppressors."

Dalit Movement and Issues of Dalit Women

Dalit movement strongly challenges the defamed sexuality of dalit women who are victimized in cases of sexual atrocities by upper caste men. Dalit women's position as victims of rape atrocities and caste related sexual harassments became the main instigator to Dalit movements. The question of her sexuality was under threat because of her vulnerability and physical mobility and, because of economic stringencies. This factor forced dalits to question the mayhem of upper castes. The early dalit upsurge had a strong Naxalite flavor; dalits identified themselves as modern and proletarian and saw their enemy as feudal and oppressive. Militancy was a crucial aspect of this. As a Dalit activist of the Bombay slums recalled the period, "We knew nothing of what was written in the Manifesto. All we knew was that if someone put his hand on your sister – cut it off!" Gail Omvedt (1995:77)

As Gail Omvedt notices, the 1980s were marked not only by the assertion of dalits and other low castes, but also by the rise of other new social movements, of peasants fighting against their exploitation by the market and state, of women, of tribal and caste Hindu peasants fighting against environmental destruction and displacement. These movements began to identify at least in part with a critique of Hinduism putting forward new cultural themes that began to converge with those of the dalit and anti-caste movement, and sometimes – drawing on this tradition.

In the new post-1975 Women's movement, for example, there was initially a strong rejection by feminists of religion as such, with the underlying theme that "all religions are patriarchal and they oppress women" replacing the pre-independence tendency to take Sita and Savitri as ideals of womanhood. For sometime, this religious-cultural critique remained at an abstract level; then in the late 1980s, partly under the impact of the rise of fundamentalism, many women activists began to look for aspects of their own tradition that they could identify with. Madhu Kishwar of the well-known women's magazine *Manushi* called for a "defence of our dharma" and wrote of women bhakti saints, but simultaneously made a strong attack on the militaristic and aggressive depiction of Rama by the fundamentalists. Feminists now tended to look at what some called "even more fundamental" religious traditions: at the role played by davis or goddesses in Indian tradition, the co-opting of that role and ways it might be recovered.

By the late 1980s dalit and other low-caste women, and feminists from south India were also making themselves heard. They tried to recover non-Aryan and anti-brahmana

traditions to establish a counter culture by the process of demythification. 'Sita' was re-read not as a symbol of oppression but as an ideal, and argued that the Ramayana represented the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy. 'Ecofeminists' like Vandana Shiva emphasized the mother goddess theme in women's writing as the protector of nature and identifying it with the tradition of 'Prakriti'.

Dalit Feminist Movement

Defying police degradation

Tossing aside tradition

We have come!

Dalit, battered woman, worker, farmer

We have come!

To end dowry, rape and abused authority

To stop wife beating and cruelty

We have come!

To wipe out women's suppression

To remove class/caste oppression

To free humanity

*In a morcha we have come! (translated by Joy
Deshmukh)*

In tracing the origin of Dalit feminist movement Vimala Thorat observes how Dalit feminism emerged as a historic necessity to provide a platform to hitherto silenced voices of Dalit women. She notices, till 1995, Dalit women were not a part of mainstream women's movement. In 1985, a group of 100 dalit

women, including students, intellectuals and grassroots activists formed the 'Jagruti Mahila Parishad'. The then president of India, late Shri Gyani Jail Singh, encouraged them. The Parishad took out rallies, distributed pamphlets, etc. In one of the rallies, they shouted slogans against scavenging. They tried to bring forth the issue of untouchability but in all the meetings, they faced stiff resistance. Ruth Manorma mobilized 700 dalit women to form the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) on 11th August, 1995.

Sharmila Rege (2003: 80-99) in her article, 'A Dalit Feminist Standpoint' brief out the objectives and issues Dalit feminists have emphasized upon. She begins with an assertion that feminist voices of the 1970s were white, middle class and university educated and it was their experience which was generalized as 'women experience'. It was a period when experiences of dalit women were not fully represented as there was Masculinization of Dalithood and a Savarnisation of womanhood leading to a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood.

The 1970s and early 80s saw the 'reinvention of revolution'. Dalit women no longer remained a token representative for several organizations and fronts like Shramik Mukti Sanghatana, Satyashodhak Communist party, Shrail Mukti dal, Yuvak Kranti Dal accorded dalit women a central role. Dalit panthers did make a significant contribution to the cultural revolt of the 1970s but both in their writings and in their programme, dalit women remained firmly encapsulated in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimized sexual being'. Though the issue of violence on dalit women was politicized and debated seriously in terms of class vs. patriarchy, they did not

address the issue of Brahmanism. Caste was contained in class for leftists and the notion of sisterhood was pivotal in women movements.

The analytical frame, in the tradition of Phule and Ambedkar, which linked caste hierarchies and patriarchies, was sidelined in the anti-dowry, anti-rape and anti-violence struggles of the Women's movement. In the Mathura rape case, the women's organizations looked at rape in class terms, as 'glass vessel cracking' in terms of loss of honour, and some highlighted the use of patriarchal power. On the contrary the sexual assaults on dalit women in the 'Namantar' movement did not become a nodal point for such an agitation.

The dowry violence was viewed in terms of the ways in which capitalism was growing in India, and the focus was on patriarchal power/violence within the family. The colonial establishment legalized the Brahma form of marriage, institutionalized and expanded the dowry system. Brahmanization of marriage practices demanded dowry as an essential ritual. The principle of endogamy and its coercive and violent upholding through violent restrictions on inter-caste marriages are crucial to the analysis of dowry. Since issues of sexuality and sexual politics are crucial for a feminist politics and to address sexual politics without linking issues of sexuality to caste is to approve of Brahmanism without challenging it.

The dalit community is forced into rape fantasies. The expression of these rape fantasies is prosecuted with much more vigor than the actual rapes and murders inflicted on Dalits. (Gabriel Dietrich 2003: 61) At Pimpri Deshmukh in

Maharashtra, a dalit kotwal was brutally killed, by upper caste men. Upper caste women did so by complaining that he had harassed them being sexually perverted. They claimed to have incited their men to protect their honour, thereby invoking the agency of upper caste women.

The increasing visibility of dalit women in power structures as sarpanch, as members of the panchayats has led to increased backlash against dalit women. (As in the case of Banwari Devi) Dalit feminism is sensitive to these issues and underlines the complex interplay between caste and gender as structuring hierarchies in society. In times of globalization and Hindutva, gender issues are being appropriated as cultural issues. This calls for reformulation of the feminist agenda, to reclaim our issues and reconceptualise them such that feminist politics poses a challenge to the caste/class conceptualization of Brahmanical Hindutva. Such a reconceptualisation calls for a critique of Brahmanical hierarchies from a gender perspective. Such a critique has the potential of translating the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestation of hierarchies.

In the Brahmanical social order, the caste based and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage operates on presumptions about the accessibility of the sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahmanism in turn locates this as a failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines it as a justification of their

impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimizes not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organization of caste.

Drawing upon Ambedkar's analysis, caste ideology (endogamy) is the very basis of the regulation and organization of women's sexuality. Hence caste determines the division of labour, both sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour. Brahmanization is a two way process of acculturation and assimilation and throughout history there has been brahmanical refusal to universalize a single patriarchal mode. Thus the existence of multiple patriarchies is a result of both Brahmanical conspiracy and of the relation of the caste group to the means of production. There are therefore both discrete (specific to caste) as well as overlapping patriarchal arrangements.

The role of Dalit women in Social Movements and Main stream Women's Movement pinpoint the diversities in their ideologies and also aims at looking into the question of how the power of dominant Brahmanical ideology operates in the complex terrain of low caste 'culture' likened to a system of symbols. Their cultural life is rendered powerless and is subjected to denial and oppression by dominant Brahmanical cultural hegemony, but which, never the less, emerged powerfully in Dalit Movement that challenged upper caste discourses socially and literarily.

Issues before Dalit Feminism Dalit Patriarchy

Why blame any other?

my dalit himself

*Ties me across as a
Clothesline. (Sasi Nirmala, 'Dalituralu')*

As Swathy Margaret (Swathy Margaret: 2005) observes and clearly demarcates, Dalit feminists deny to get subsumed in the relatively macro-identities of mainstream progressive movements such as male Dalit movement or the dominant Caste Women's Movement.

"Dalit feminists share a definite sense of identification with many basic articulations raised by Dalit and Women's movements. It is important and strategically wise to form coalitions and build solidarity with other marginalized groups, it should be considered only when a movement is armed with a clear understanding of its own historicity based on the experience of oppression and discrimination. It is productive to have in mind the historical dialogue between different marginalized sections of people. Otherwise, there is the danger of Dalit women, their self-definition and their peculiar positioning in the society being rendered invisible. For e.g., the Dalit ideologues like Katti Padma Rao, Gopal Guru and Gaddaar seem to be less sensitive to the internal patriarchy of Dalit communities. They maintain that all women are Dalits. Since the dominant caste women are not allowed to enter in their kitchen and are treated as impure during their menstrual periods, they are also untouchables! Here "untouchability" is the ideal framework to fight against caste oppression, claims Gopal Guru. What Guru overlooks is that untouchability is a phenomenon that evokes various notions and images of bodies-bodies that are marked by their caste, gender, class,

age, sexual orientation and other identities. And different bodies are ascribed different cultural meanings. Not all bodies possess even identities. Not all Dalit bodies are one, not all female bodies are one. They interact with each other being caught in a complex web of intersecting identities. Dalit men, even those identified with the movement; do not want to see us as intellectuals. You are a Dalit body, a Dalit female body. Why can't I possess it? Why can't I just come near you"? It is threatening. This happens at a very physical level."

Attempts are on to construct a value or a system that force dalit women to equalize themselves with upper caste women. Hindutva elements, concepts of national self force them to accept upper caste brahmanical ideologies as authentic and associate them with upward mobility; even the oppressed imitates the oppressor in inculcating patriarchal ideologies that may be entirely different to his culture. To develop identity in autonomous culture groups, 'one need to expel the oppressor from within oneself' (Freire 1972).

Thus the aim of identity politics likes that of Dalit women is to ultimately dissolve the crippling effects of these burdensome identities. Asserting an identity is to lay claim on the universal. This universalistic vision can be realized only with the analytical tools that Dalit feminisms provide with. They aim at actively participating in eradicating all forms of violence, intolerance, hierarchy and discrimination in the society. An effective way of achieving this ideal is to take 'difference' seriously and engage with the politics of difference.

Brutal patriarchy within Dalit communities is one issue which repeatedly appears in Dalit feminist discourses. However, the

views of Dalit male intellectuals on negotiations between caste and gender are interesting. Ilaiah compares patriarchy in Dalits and Hindu patriarchy and declares that the former is more democratic! How can any oppressive structure be democratic at all? He substantiates his argument by stating that certain customs like paadapooja (touching the feet) are not observed in Dalit families. He, of course, notices that the fact that there are oppressive practices like wife-battering prevalent in the Dalit families. However, "the beaten up wife has a right to make the attack public by shouting, abusing the husband, and if possible by beating the husband in return".

The dalit woman shouts back not because of 'democratic patriarchy' but because of the socio-economic situation she is trapped in. The Dalit woman, more often than not is dependent on her own labour. She labors outside her home from morning till evening. When she comes home, her husband will be waiting to snatch her hard-earned money which is often the only source to feed the family. If she refuses to give the money, the husband beats her up. The woman shouts back; in the process of resistance, she might beat him back. This is not because of democratic patriarchy in her family. There are certain debilitating stereotypes of Dalit families in general and Dalit women in particular, which mar a clear understanding of her location in Indian society.

Upward Mobility and Dalit Women

With upward mobility and intense sub-castification, dalit patriarchies pick up brahmanical rituals and forms of expression. With upward mobility the concept of pure/impure

operates strongly in stereotyping choices and culture is shaped to be structured as upper caste and brahmanical. Purity in food habits, mannerisms and sexual behavior come to be read as 'morally pure and uncorrupted' that silence cultural features specific to the group.

Jupaka Subhadra (2004:31) a Telugu Dalit poetess and social activist notices with pain that dalit women pick up the rituals, customs and habits of upper caste Andhra women. Even eating beef becomes unmentionable.

"You can't say you eat beef, it becomes a forbidden food. Is it fair that the customs and preferences of a few become the culture of all? Don't eat beef if you don't want to but if you can't even say that you eat beef then the situation is really bad. The treatment becomes frightening. And in the Secretariat no one brings meat or chicken or fish for lunch. The Brahmins don't eat it, but even the others don't bring it. It is considered a crime. They look down on those who are non-vegetarian."

Caste and gendered hierarchies also create language hierarchies. "The denial or obliteration of dialects, folk traditions and colloquial or conversational forms not only leads to linguistic impoverishment, it amounts to a means of silencing." Inhibitions of sexuality of women and projecting it as obscene in caste discourses limit the scope of a Dalit feminist and disarms her to challenge sexual power politics of upper caste patriarchy that has committed sexual atrocities on her. With upward mobility of castes dalit patriarchy silences her voice from speaking about insult on her body because patriarchy moulds her to be an emblem symbolizing the

honour (and also power) of her caste. Women expressing about domestic violence, gender discrimination within caste is a threat to the interests of the nation itself. A Dalit feminist writer is constantly forced into 'strategic choices' and the subjects are selected with a vigilant eye on the need to retain one's dignity – 'the single most important virtue of an Indian woman.' (Jupaka Subhadra 2004: 22)

When upper caste ideology imposes motherhood and family as central to the maintenance of social order, it curtails Dalit women of her creativity. Economic position, social conditioning, way of living and expression of dalit women are entirely different from those of upper caste women. Mainstream education may not suit her ways. She is not familiar with the food that is spoken about or the names used in these books.

Caste hierarchies pass on power ideologies to lower caste patriarchies. Jupaka Subhadra, further explains how her language, her culture, her food and her struggles were all missing in main stream Telugu literature. She also challenges the argument of Dalit patriarchs like Kancha Iliah who declare that Dalit patriarchy is democratic. In answering to the question, "Dalit leaders make the distinction between upper caste patriarchy and dalit patriarchy. What do you think?

"They say that our women are not like upper caste women. There is no patriarchy. They have more leisure, freedom. But what leisure? To do more work? To slave? It is not as if they have so much comfort. After all, they go out to work because there is nothing at home. I don't accept the claim that there is no patriarchy here, but the fact remains that it is not as cruel

as patriarchy out there. Perhaps because the dalit himself suffers outside he is not as bad as upper caste men. Both of them go out to work but while the man can relax when his work is done, the woman still has to fend for dal and rice and salt. And, yes, he also takes out all his anger at the repression outside, at home. He has the freedom and the space to express anger only at home. The woman perhaps is slightly better off because she can share her troubles with other women at work, unlike middle class women. In the upper caste home all comforts and security is assured. The dalit woman has so many burdens. She has to worry about providing food, about the lack of food, about her husband's violence and to add to all this, the burden of caste humiliation and indignity outside. Why, take me – I give a damn about caste and yet if someone were to raise the issue of my caste and the life we lead, I would be reduced to nothing. Nothing at all."

The power relations that work out within upper caste and lower caste cultural groups are always in conflict with each other and in case of women in general and dalit women in particular the strangling impact of upper caste brahmanical ideologies restrict cultural practices of low castes and instead fill those on whom it is practiced with inferiority, sense of negation and alienation. A Dalit feminist has to face these challenges of mis-representation and pressures of patriarchies and caste oppressions both from within and outside. With such limitations political mobilization becomes extremely complex and to explaining their grievances to the State is very difficult.

Conclusion

'Hierarchy' is an arena wherein caste and gender contests. Its complex subtlety is that it replicates in its operation. With brahmanical hierarchy at the top of caste pyramid, parallel hegemonic ideologies are reproduced even among the lower castes and turned detrimental to lower caste women. Dalit women are sexually victimized to satisfy upper caste male desire, projected as ritual agents (devadasis) to sustain the caste system, negotiated upon by the state to work as productive labourers and their bodies are turned into sites/emoles where male power operates to establish its control over. Apart from this they are subjected to traditional caste humiliations like untouchability, denial of social spaces, poverty and denial of economic and political rights.

Patriarchy within caste controls their decisions, weaves strategies to bind them to subordination while social pressures of upward mobility limit their physical mobility to become submissive bodies. The mainstream women movements have failed to problematize questions of caste and gender. Even though the main agenda of Dalit movements was to protect their women from sexual harassment of landlords, they have failed to empower the Dalit women or provide spaces for them for their creative activity, for acquiring leadership or to represent their community in large numbers.

The paper notices a glaring absence of Dalit women being regarded as a political subject. The state laws serve the interests of traditional upper caste brahmanical patriarchy that

is imitated by Dalit patriarchy. Their absence as 'active agents' in political organizations encourages patriarchal institutions to control, survey and discipline dalit women's lives. These "women are used as pawns in strategic games played between male elites and the state". (Raka Ray: 2002)

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