



From Silence to Resistance: The Emergence and Evolution of Dalit Feminism in India

Vaishali Wankhede

(Assistant professor in Department of Sociology)

S.N.D.T Women's University, Churchgate, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.

Abstract:

This article explores the historical evolution of feminism in India, focusing on the interactions among gender, caste, and class dynamics. It traces the development of feminist ideologies from Europe to India under colonial rule, highlighting the emergence of "Brahminical feminism" and advocating for an inclusive and intersectional feminist approach. Key figures like Mahatma Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar are discussed for challenging caste-based discrimination and patriarchal norms, with a focus on empowering Dalit women through education and social justice. The contributions of Dalit feminist pioneers like Savitribai Phule and E.V.R. Nagammai are highlighted for reshaping societal norms and advancing women's rights. The last part of this paper emphasizes the interconnected struggles for social justice and women's rights in marginalized communities, recognizing the resilience and contributions of Dalit feminists in shaping a more equitable society in India.

Keyword: feminism, liberty, dalit, women, phule, modernisation, caste, hindu, movement

Introduction

Women's concerns, historically, were viewed as belonging to the "private" domain and not pertinent to the state or society. However, with changing attitudes, issues related to women have garnered greater attention, largely due to the emergence of feminism and feminist movements in Europe and the United States during the 1960s that eventually spread globally. In general, as a political ideology, feminism aims to promote women's self-awareness, advocate for a rational and reasonable approach towards women, recognize women's individual positions, and understand women through their unique perspective. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the first wave of feminism emerged in Europe, with a focus on demands for equality, liberty, and universal suffrage, in line with the principles of European liberalism. Mary Wollstonecraft's "The Vindication of the Rights of Women" (1792) played



a significant role in the feminist movement. In India, feminist ideas began to spread under colonial influence during the 19th-century reform movement.

Indian feminism pre independent

However, the analysis of feminism during the pre-independence period was limited to upper-caste Hindu women in society, as it was primarily driven by the colonial elite's experience with modernity. While this approach modernized gendered relationships in some upper-caste families, it disregarded the rights and issues of lower-caste women. Feminist scholars have labelled feminism during the colonial period as "Brahminical feminism" due to the limited impact it had on society. While individuals like Ram Mohan Roy and Vidyasagar played a role in advancing women's rights in India, their efforts were largely confined to privileged sections of society and did not extend to the grassroots level. The reforms implemented during this time primarily focused on improving the lives of upper-caste women, addressing issues such as widow remarriage and the age of consent. Concurrently, changes were occurring within the domestic sphere as women's education became more prevalent and a new understanding of women's roles and responsibilities within the household emerged.

Brahmanical patriarchy

Rao contends that Brahmanical patriarchy was a key feature of the colonial modernity in India that shaped the feminist discourse and activism of that period. She argues that the early feminist movement in India was dominated by upper-caste, Hindu, and urban women who sought to reform and modernize their own community's practices while ignoring or even oppressing the lower-caste and Muslim women. Rao refers to this as "Brahminical feminism," which she defines as "a historical phenomenon characterized by an attempt on the part of upper-caste women to negotiate a space for themselves within colonial modernity by disavowing caste and community, and appealing to an abstract notion of 'womanhood'" (Rao, 2003, p. 147). Other scholars, such as Uma Chakravarti (1993), Gail Omvedt (2006), and Kumkum Sangari (1985), have critiqued the Brahmanical bias and limitations of the feminist discourse and activism in India. A call has been made for a broader and more interconnected perspective on feminism, recognizing the varied experiences and hardships faced by women while also questioning the dominance of privileged upper-caste and upper-class viewpoints. They argue that the feminist movement should not only focus on women's issues but also



address the interconnected oppressions of caste, class, race, and sexuality. According to Chakravarti, the nation's identity rested on its culture, particularly its womanhood. Chakravarti argued that the period saw the construction of a particular kind of past that contextualized a particular type of womanhood, which was an invention of tradition (Hobsbawm, as cited in Chakravarti, 1999)

Indian Feminist Discourse

Mahatma Phule, a trailblazer in the Indian social structure, played a pivotal role in revolutionizing the perception of caste and women's rights. He spearheaded a remarkable transformation by addressing the marginalized status of widows, particularly those belonging to the upper-caste society. In 1848, Phule established a school exclusively for untouchable girls and a shelter for upper-caste widows who faced punishment due to their involvement in illicit sexual relationships. Significantly, Savitribai, Phule's spouse, acquired her teaching education at Ms. Farar's Institution in Ahmednagar and the Normal School of Ms. Mitchell in Pune. Her achievements positioned her as the pioneering female educator and headmistress in India (Narake, 2009). Her decision to step beyond the confines of her home and engage in teaching marked the initiation of the public life of the contemporary Indian woman. Jyotirao, during an interview with Dynanodaya on 15 September 1853, expressed, "Those individuals who are genuinely concerned about the happiness and well-being of our nation must undoubtedly focus on the condition of women and exert every effort to impart knowledge to them if they desire progress for the country. With this conviction, I established the first school for girls. However, my caste brethren disapproved of my efforts to educate girls, leading to my father expelling us from our home. We faced numerous challenges in finding a suitable location for the school and lacked the necessary funds to construct it. Initially, people were reluctant to send their children to school, but Lahuji Ragh Raut Mang and Ranba Mahar successfully persuaded our caste brethren about the advantages of education" (Narake, 2009). Moreover, in spite of significant societal expectations for him to marry a second wife in order to have a child, Phule and his wife, Savitribai, defied conventions by choosing to adopt a child from a Brahmin widow. Phule contended that women from higher castes were burdened with the responsibility of upholding caste purity, which subjected them to a form of gender-based domination that was equally oppressive as the exploitation of labour, both physical and sexual, endured by women from lower castes (Kshirsagar, 2001).



In 1882, Tarabai Shinde wrote "Stri-Purush Tulana," which is recognized as one of the earliest feminist critiques of caste. Shinde advocated for state intervention to facilitate women's independent living and marriage and to penalize men who corrupt innocent women. O'Hanlon (1994) highlighted the diverse ways in which Shinde represented women in her text, which contrasted starkly with the impoverished stereotypes of contemporary male discourse. Shinde did not base her arguments on abstract or modern principles of rights and equality, but rather on concrete transformations of women's domestic and social circumstances. During the nineteenth century, the concept of womanhood played a crucial role in shaping key political relations, and the image of womanhood was more important than the reality.

Tarabai Shinde argues that the present circumstances shaped the interpretation of the past, leading to the emphasis or disregard of certain aspects in historical and semi-historical writings. The Sahadharmini model, which blended spirituality with the ideals of Gargi, Maitreyi, Sita, Savitri, and Lakshmi Bai, emerged as the focal point of womanhood. Within this model, there existed no disparity between the perspectives of progressives and conservatives, and nationalism assumed the role previously held by religion, providing a permissible space for women's involvement. However, Chakravarti (1999) contends that the same type of constructed femininity that was meticulously and effectively established during the nineteenth century continues to persist in its essential aspects throughout the twentieth century. This notion of womanhood was a reflection of a Victorianized pativrata and associated value system, which placed great emphasis on upper caste morality and the concept of purity. It encompassed the idea of an exceedingly delicate feminine moral vulnerability. In the later part of the nineteenth century, the emerging dominant peasant castes such as Marathas, Jats, and Rajputs attached great importance to the archetypes of womanhood, which were further strengthened by Hinduized practices of veiling and outward modesty for women (Hanlon, 1994).

During the first three decades after India's independence, there was a lack of attention and interest in feminist issues, despite constitutional provisions against sex discrimination. The Nehruvian era emphasized egalitarianism, democracy, secularism, and socialist modernization as means to eradicate social ills, including discrimination against women. However, feminist ideas began to resurface in the 1970s, as women's problems and concerns



became the focal point. Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj noted that women were viewed as victims or targets for development but not as participants in development. Additionally, women's positions deteriorated in nearly every area except for some middle-class women's gains in education and employment, while the declining value of women became evident in almost all aspects of life. This led to dissatisfaction among sensible members of society who felt the need to reassess the situation. Concurrently, a strong consciousness of Rights of citizenship amongst Dalit and particular Dalit women was being inculcated by the strong movement charged by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, for the emancipation of the untouchables which challenge Brahmanical social order. He held a progressive and liberal stance towards the emancipation of women, viewing social justice as achievable only through modern institutional structures. He therefore advocated for constitutionalism to promote equal rights and dignity for women.

Call for citizenship and social justice

B.R. Ambedkar's vision for Indian modernity involved a rethinking of societal structures from the perspective of women. He sought to create a space where women, especially those from oppressed castes, could have a platform to express themselves and gain greater agency. This highlights the importance of considering intersectionality and marginalized groups in social movements and envisioning a more inclusive and just society. Ambedkar's conviction lay in the notion that social justice could only be attained through the establishment of a contemporary institutional framework. This framework would guarantee equal rights and dignity for every individual, irrespective of their gender or social standing. Through his extensive works and writings, it becomes evident that Ambedkar placed great importance on the issue of social justice in relation to women's rights. He acknowledged that traditional social systems, deeply entrenched in caste divisions, often disregarded the rights of women. Within this context, Dalit and other marginalized caste women faced a twofold marginalization. Ambedkar firmly believed that in order to achieve social justice, it was imperative to empower these women and provide them with equal opportunities for education and personal growth. Ambedkar's publicly denounced texts like Manusmriti, which denied women the right to education and knowledge, as he firmly believed that education was the key to women's empowerment, and hence it was essential to cultivate their intellect and self-development through education. His articulations in ' The Rise and Fall of Hindu Woman'



calls for the establishment of a new space where women could voice themselves, particularly those from the oppressed castes. He recognized that women's voices were often silenced in traditional patriarchal societies and that creating a space for women to voice themselves was necessary for their emancipation. Ambedkar zealously strived to reconstruct Indian social structure based on social justice and equality. He recognized that traditional social structures were deeply patriarchal and caste-driven, and that women, particularly those from oppressed castes, were doubly marginalized. Through his works and writings, he promoted education for women, acknowledged the role of female intellectuals of ancient India, and called for the establishment of a new space where women could voice themselves. In 1927, Dr B.R Ambedkar delivered a speech to a gathering of over 3,000 women where he urged them to fight for their rights. This event highlights Ambedkar's commitment to women's emancipation and his recognition of the need to address the issues faced by women from marginalized communities. In 1936, he addressed Joginis and Devadasis communities, predominantly consisting of Dalits. During this address, Ambedkar condemned the antiquated religious custom of dedicating young girls to deities in temples, a practice that subjected them to being "sexually accessible to society members." He encouraged these women to fight against this practice and to improve their lives. His vision for humanity, highlighted the universality of human rights and inclusivity. His viewpoint recognizes the interdependence of social, economic, and political matters and the necessity of tackling them comprehensively. This strategy aligns with his dedication to social equity, which strives to establish a community where all individuals, irrespective of their caste, gender, or religion, have equal chances to succeed. His emphasis on universal human rights implies that human dignity is inherent to every individual, and their worth should not be determined by their social position. Ambedkar's vision for inclusivity recognized the importance of creating a just and equitable society that accommodates diverse perspectives and values. He championed the involvement of women in his social movements, particular, during the Mahad Satyagraha and the Kalaram temple-entry movement, Ambedkar encouraged women to participate alongside men. This led to a strong sense of empowerment among women, as demonstrated by Radhabai Vadale's statement, "It is better to die a hundred times than to live a life of humiliation." Ambedkar's feminism sought to ensure that women were not subjugated by the patriarchal norms entrenched in Hindu religion. He emphasized the need for women to stand up for themselves and reject subservience to their husbands. Dr. Ambedkar's feminist ideology focused on



freeing women from the patriarchal ideas and norms entrenched in Hindu religion. He recognized the subjugation of women under these norms and worked tirelessly to ensure their liberation. In particular, he fought for women's rights to equal partnership in marriage, advocating for their right to stand up for themselves and reject subservience to their husbands. Ambedkar's advocacy for gender equality in marriage was ground-breaking and predated the efforts of Savarna feminists. His contributions to the feminist movement in India were instrumental in promoting gender equality and challenging the systemic oppression of women.

Through his newspapers, 'Mooknayak' and 'Bahishkrut Bharat,' Ambedkar regularly highlighted women's issues and worked to combat their marginalization. In his speeches, Ambedkar also challenged the discrimination faced by Dalit women, emphasizing their equality with other women and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups in the feminist movement. This had a profound impact on feminism in India, prompting greater recognition of the importance of including Dalit women and transgender individuals in the struggle for gender equality.

Challenging the patriarchal institutions

Moreover, the southern region of India experienced a significant transformation in terms of gender justice due to the influential efforts of Periyar. He placed a strong emphasis on women's rights and was deeply committed to achieving gender equality. This was evident through the active involvement of women in the Self-Respect Movement. The Self-Respect Movement can be characterized as a fierce battle against the oppression faced by women, as it aimed to dismantle the prevailing patriarchal structure within Tamil society. As Anandhi (1991) states, this movement sought to challenge the patriarchal norms that were deeply ingrained in various aspects of society, including language, literature, and the socialization process based on gender. Periyar recognized that while marriage and chastity were key institutions perpetuating patriarchy, the patriarchal system itself was all-encompassing and pervasive. (Anandhi, 1991). Self-Respect marriages were marriages that were conducted without any religious or traditional rituals, and they were seen as a way to reject the oppressive customs and practices associated with traditional Hindu weddings. These marriages were also considered a way to promote gender equality, as they challenged the patriarchal norms that



often-governed traditional marriage ceremonies. Subsequently, a women's conference was held during the Second Provincial Self-Respect Conference in Erode in 1930, which emphasized the importance of women's empowerment and appealed for action to be taken against the Devadasi system. Magistrates were called upon to identify temples that supported this system, which exploited women by forcing them into temple prostitution. In "Why was woman enslaved?", Periyar examines the social and cultural factors that have historically contributed to the subjugation of women in Indian society. He argues that patriarchy and religious orthodoxy have been used to justify the oppression of women, and he calls for a radical reimagining of gender roles and relationships. His five volumes on "Pennurimai" (Women's Rights) elaborate on Periyar's ideas and the ways in which women have been marginalized and oppressed in Indian society. He discusses various issues such as dowry, child marriage, and the restrictions placed on women's education and mobility. Periyar also advocates for women's economic independence and political empowerment as a means of challenging patriarchal structures. One of the prominent women voices was of Ramamirthan Ammaiyar who started her political journey with the Indian National Congress but later joined the Self-Respect Movement in the mid-1920s. She authored a lengthy novel in Tamil in 1936 on the Devadasi system, shedding light on its exploitative nature. Additionally, she wrote a fictional series called Damayanthi in Dravida Nadu in 1945. E.V.R. Nagammaiar, a member of the All-India Congress Committee and the wife of E.V. Ramaswami, protested against the prohibitory orders that led to her husband's arrest under Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Nagammaiar organized a group of women to demonstrate against the orders and conducted propaganda in Travancore, advocating for the rights of non-Brahmins to walk in areas dominated by Brahmins (Geetha & Rajadurai, 1998).

Conclusion

The struggles for social justice and women's rights have been intertwined for centuries, especially in communities marginalized due to caste, class, religion, and gender. The contributions of Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar in this regard have been monumental in their own ways, particularly in the context of Dalit feminism and citizenship. They challenged the



entrenched social hierarchy of caste and patriarchy and worked towards empowering the most marginalized communities in India.

Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule laid the foundation for women's education and feminist consciousness in India. They recognized the power of education as a means of liberation from the oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy. Savitribai Phule, acknowledged as the first Dalit feminist, was a poet, educator, and social reformer. She challenged the caste and gender norms of her time by founding schools exclusively for Sudra and Dalit women, and by advocating for women's education and the elimination of child marriage. Through her poetry and activism, she emphasized the intersectionality of caste and gender oppression, paving the way for the Dalit feminist movement. Similarly, Ambedkar's legacy continues to inspire Dalit feminists who strive for gender and social justice. His emphasis on education and empowerment of women and marginalized communities serves as a guiding principle for the movement. The Dalit feminist movement recognizes the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women, such as caste-based violence, discrimination, and marginalization, and seeks to create a more just and equitable society for all. Ambedkar's contributions to the foundation of Dalit feminism cannot be overstated. His fight against discrimination and oppression of Dalits and other marginalized communities was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the movement. Through his work, he highlighted the intersectional nature of discrimination and the need for a comprehensive approach that takes into account the struggles of women and Dalits. He recognized that without the empowerment of Dalit women, the movement for social justice and equality would remain incomplete.

Periyar, a staunch advocate of social justice and rationalism, led a movement that challenged the dominant Brahminical patriarchy and caste system. He championed the cause of women's rights and worked towards dismantling the regressive norms and practices that denied women their agency and autonomy. Periyar also propagated the concept of self-respect and encouraged Dalits and other marginalized communities to take pride in their identity and assert their rights. The foundation of Dalit feminism was established by the visionary contributions of Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar. their ideologies and efforts emphasized the interconnection between the fight for social justice, women's rights, and Dalit liberation



Savitribai Phule, was the first female teacher and headmistress of India. She fought for the education of women and Dalits, and her poems and writings emphasized the importance of education and the need for social justice. She also established schools exclusively for Sudra and Dalit women, empowering them to become agents of change in society.. Tara Bai Shinde, is known for her pioneering work in feminist thought and activism. Her book, "Stri Purush Tulana," published in 1882, was one of the first feminist texts in Marathi and challenged the traditional gender roles and stereotypes prevalent in society. E.V.R. Nagammai, was a feminist and social activist who worked to promote the rights of women and Dalits. She fought for the inclusion of women in politics and was a strong advocate of birth control and family planning. Ramamirthan Ammaiyar, a Dalit woman from Tamil Nadu, was a poet and social activist who challenged the caste system and patriarchy through her writing. Her poems addressed issues such as caste discrimination, women's rights, and social inequality, and she advocated for the education of women and Dalits.

Together, they recognized that the exclusion and marginalization of Dalit women are not isolated issues but rather a result of a larger system of caste-based discrimination and patriarchy. Their works continue to serve as an inspiration and guidance for the Dalit feminist movement, which advocates for the eradication of systemic oppression, inclusive social policies, and equal rights for all individuals irrespective of their caste, gender, or socioeconomic status. These women challenged the patriarchal and casteist norms of society and contributed to the development of a feminist discourse in India that recognized the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class. Their work and ideas continue to inspire and guide the Dalit feminist movement in India. The Dalit feminist movement represents a significant challenge to the traditional power structures in Indian society and strives to create a more just and equitable world for all.

REFERENCES



Anandhi, S. (1991). Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement, c. 1925–1948. *Social Scientist*, 19(5/6), 26.

Chakravarti, U. (1993). Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(14/15), WS19-WS29.

Chakravarti, U. (1998). Rewriting history, interpreting caste. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(25), WS15-WS25.

Geetha, V. (1998). Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(17), WS15.

Geetha, V. and Rajadurai, S.V. (1998). Towards a non-Brahmin millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar. *Samya*.

Hodges, S. (2005). Revolutionary family life and the Self Respect movement in Tamil south India, 1926–49. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*.

Kshirsagar, R. (2001). Social and political thought of Mahatma Phule. Deep & Deep Publications.

Menon, U. (1994). Recovering subversion: Feminist politics beyond the law. Permanent Black.

Narake, H. (2009). On Savitri Phule: Dnyanajyoti Savitribai Phule. In T. Sundararaman (Ed.), *Savitribai Phule First Memorial Lecture*. NCERT Memorial Lecture Series. National Council of Education Research and Training.

Narayan, B. (2006). *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity, and Politics*. Sage.

Narayan, B. (2011). *The Making of Dalit Public in North India*. Oxford University Press.

Omvedt, G. (1994). *Reinventing revolution: New social movements and the socialist tradition in India*. M. E. Sharpe.

Omvedt, G. (2006). *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. Orient Longman.

Pawar, M. M. (2008). *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (W. Sonalkar, Trans.). Zubaan.

Rao, A. (2003). Gender, Caste, and Patriarchy: Reflections on Recent Research in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(2), 138-148.

Rege, S. (2006). *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan.



Sangari, K. (1985). The Politics of the Possible: A Reading of Women's Writing in the Context of Contemporary Theory. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 2(1), 31-64.

Sangari, K. (1985). The politics of the possible: A reading of the subaltern voice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20(31), WS51-WS60.

Shinde, T. (1882). *Stri-Purush Tulana* [A comparison between women and men]. Saraswati Press.

Spivak, G. C. (1985). Subaltern studies: Deconstructing historiography. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies I: Writings on South Asian history and society* (pp. 3-32). Oxford University Press.

Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures*