



Defying Oppression: Dalit Women's Challenge to Caste Norms

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 roots of the caste system in India and its specific effects on women, particularly those from the Dalit community. It examines the impact of the Manusmriti and highlights key historical events that have shaped the struggles of women and marginalized groups in their fight against deeply ingrained oppressive customs. The final section emphasizes ongoing efforts to challenge these systems, focusing on symbolic acts of resistance. The holistic approach to empowerment includes promoting education and dispelling misunderstandings, demonstrating a strong desire for societal change. Dalit women emerge as active agents challenging patriarchal and caste-based structures, illustrating a powerful narrative of resilience and transformation.

Keywords: Caste system, Dalit Women, Symbolic defiance, Empowerment, Education, Societal transformation, Patriarchy, Women's Assertion, Progress.

Introduction

The epitome of inequality and violence is the caste system. Endogamy, social hierarchy which explicitly emphasise social exclusion is a predominant feature of caste system in India, its birth still obscure while its evolution traceable through the varna system, maturing itself between 600 and 200 BC, while its laws were codified between 200 BCE and the second century CE in the Manusmriti, or the law of Manu, ascribed as the lawgiver and creator of the Hindu social code!

In his view, women are not entitled to study the Vedas, hence their sanskaras are conducted without veda mantras. Women are considered to lack religious knowledge due to their exclusion from Vedic teachings. The recitation of veda mantras is believed to purify one from sin. Since women are unable to recite veda mantras, they are deemed impure akin to falsehood. Additionally, according to Manusmriti IX.25, a Brahman, Khsatriya, or Vaishya man is permitted to exploit a Shudra woman sexually.

The act of justifying the killing of a dalit woman as a minor offense for the Brahmins, equating it to the killing of an animal according to the Manusmriti, perpetuates a disturbing reality. It is disheartening to acknowledge that India, with its population of over 80 million dalit women, continues to witness the vulnerability, victimization, and exploitation of this marginalized group.



Dalit woman today face triple deprivation of caste, class and gender. However, history has witnessed the articulation and assertion of this women's identity way back in the 18th century in Satyashodhak Samaj in the non-Brahmin public spheres (1850-1930) with Pandita Ramabai questioning the brahmanical Hinduism (pg. 33)

The Satya Shodhak Samaj became a debating arena for staging conflicts along the gender lines when Mukta bai wrote the essay about "The grief of Mahars and Mangs" and Tarabai Shinde came up to produce before the Othodox Society, "A comparison between Men and Women".

In 1855, Mukta Bai, an eleven-year-old Mang student at Mahatma Phule's school, brought attention to the plight of the lower castes. She emphasized their deprivation of land, the restrictions on their access to knowledge, and the intricate social hierarchy that categorized the lower caste as more or less polluting. Mukta Bai further drew a comparison between the birthing experiences of lower caste women and Brahmin women, shedding light on the immense pain endured by the former. She eloquently expressed, "Our women give birth to babies without a roof over their heads, enduring the hardships of rain and cold! I urge you to contemplate this from your own experiences." (Narkar and Phadke 1982, Bhagwat 1997, Chakravarti 1998).

Savitribai Phule's correspondence with her husband sheds light on her profound understanding of the interplay between knowledge and power, as well as the pressing need for equal access to knowledge for marginalized groups such as the Shudras and women. In a letter addressed to Jotiba Phule in 1868, she boldly advocated for the marriage between a Mahar woman and a Brahman man, despite the villagers' violent opposition. Expressing her dismay at the horrific incident, she hastened to the scene and put an end to the cruelty by instilling fear in the perpetrators through the potential intervention of the British government (Mali, 1980:1987). Thus, Savitribai underscores the importance of endogamy and suggest an alliance of all women and the Shudra and Ati Shudra against the tyranny of brahminism. The logical argument against women's subordination was put forward by Tarabai shinde. In "Stree Purush Tulana" by Tarabai Shinde published in 1882. She launches an attack on the brahminical patriarchy and sharply criticises the kunbi and non-brahman castes for consolidating evil practices like enforced widowhood. While drawing a comparison between man and woman, she draws a linkage between the issue of industrialisation, colonialism and commodification of women's body. She criticises the representation of women in the literature of her time, underlines it as being far from reality and challenges its claim of setting standards (Kotapalla 2000).

Thus, Tarabai's articulation spans issues ranging across practical matters of the domestic and everyday life, enforced widowhood, women's education and the exclusively masculine public sphere (O'Hanlon 1994).

Savitribai Rode, a Satyashodhaite was elected as leader of the poona chapter of the satya Shodhak samaj. In 1920's she edited a journal "Kshatriya Ramoshi" and propagated their aim



as “for the education and enlightenment” of the community. Janabai Kokade, another satyashodhakite became a famous midwife in Mumbai in the early 1920’s and later on started a school and library movement.

The development of Kolhapur state between 1900-1920 has significance as it appointed Rakhmabai Kelavkar as the first ever woman education officer. The early 19th century Maharashtra witnessed an intense activity in the form of caste conferences of the Marathas, Mali, Bhandari, Ramoshi and Dhangar where women’s issues came to forefront. In 1911 Hirabai Nageshkar, a woman belonging to the kaluantin caste in her essay titled, “The question of progress of a very lowly caste” criticises the educated members of her community for settling down in matrimony and isolating themselves. In her essay she gave a blueprint of the community’s progress.

During the final years of the 1800s and the initial years of the 1900s, numerous educated women from the middle class actively challenged the marginalization of women's concerns and inquiries to the realm of the personal sphere through their journalistic writings.

Ambedkarite public sphere

The Ambedkar public sphere was characterized by the arrangement of separate gatherings and conventions for women. This was a direct result of Ambedkar's initiative to include a women's conference in conjunction with each overall meeting that was convened. The political consolidation of women is seen in Mahad (1927) in the conference of Schedule Caste Federation in the 1940s, their leadership in the satyagraha against the Poona Pact (1946), the proliferation of the Buddhist Mahila Mandal’s in the 1950s and during the Dhamma Diksha. While addressing the women’s meeting organised at Mahad in 1927 Dr. Ambedkar said, “the problem of living has to be tackled by the men and women together. If men alone undertake this (annihilation of caste) they will, I have no doubt, take a longer time. If the women take up this, I believe that this task can be successfully completed sooner. The task of ending the problem of untouchability is women’s hand.” This speech of Dr. Ambedkar had tremendous impact and many women voluntarily cast off their jewellery and began to drape the sari down to their ankles from the very next day. This meeting also created a cadre of women leaders and it led to the emergence of Women’s Mahila Mandal movement.

Savitribai Borade and Ambubai Gaikwad were designated as members of the executive committee of 'Janata', the periodical initiated by Dr. Ambedkar in 1930. During a parishad held in 1932 at Kamthi, 200 dalit women made a commitment to support the communal award. In the late 1930s, Mahila Parishads became a regular occurrence at the conference of the Independent Labour Party. In 1936, the Mahila Parishad made a resolution to allocate one out of three seats for women in the Provincial Legal Council for Dalit women and to appoint a Dalit woman as an Honorary Magistrate.



In 1942 the Schedule Caste Federation at Nagpur was attended by more than 30,000 women delegates and a Dalit Mahila Federation was constituted. The Mahila Federation passed resolution on the following issues;

- 1} Better working conditions for all women working in the mills
- 2} Hostels for dalit girls
- 3} Scholarships for schooling and higher education

The women leaders addressed the issue of freedom from dalit patriarchy and stressed the assertion of Selfhood.

After Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, known as 'Dharmantar' in 1956 at Nagpur, a number of Bauddha Mahila Mandals in urban as well as rural areas came up. Members of this mandals participated in large numbers in the satyagraha of the landless in 1954 and 1964 under the leadership of Dadasahed Gaikwad.

The sad demise of Dr. Ambedkar was a big setback to the velocity of their activism and leadership. In the post Ambedkar era, despite the leadership being men centric, women then were instrumental in doing formidable and constructive contribution in the sphere of education and providing hostel facilities in the 1950's and 60's. They were active participants in the Republican Party policies, but were seldom acknowledged and documented.

With the fragmentation of RPI, women leadership further lost its stake and they remained unnoticed. Yet they fearlessly represented themselves in many of the Dalit Panther activities and the renaming of Marathwada University to Dr. Ambedkar University in the 70's.

During the mid-1980s, young Dalit feminists in Mumbai established the Mahila Sansad, while by the mid-1990s, the "Samvadini-Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch," a platform for the Dalit feminist literary movement, had come into existence. By the 1990s, there were numerous independent expressions of Dalit women's identity, exemplified by the establishment of the National Federation of Dalit Women and the All-India Dalit Women's Forum. At the state level in Maharashtra, the Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana was founded in 1995. A year prior, the women's division of the Bhartiya Republican Party and the Bahujan Mahila Sangha had jointly organized the Bahujan Mahila Parishad (Rege, 64-65).

Their existence and assertion were vivid when "Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad" commemorated 25 December as Bhartiya Stree Mukti Diwas (Indian Women's Liberation Day). In Mumbai on 25 Dec. 2003, the Dalit Bahujan Mahila Vicharmanch publicly set aflame the manusmriti at the historic Chaityabhoomi. Many of these organizations have varying programmes and positions and yet have formed stable alliances on several issues such as the commemoration of 25 Dec as Bhartiya Stree Mukti Divas and reservation for other backward caste women (quota within quota) in the 81's amendment bill. (Rege 65)



Dalit women's struggle was not confined to regional and national levels alone but had crossed the national borders with the first Dalit women's conference held in Hague on 20-21 nov.2006.

The conference came out with the declaration;

Assertion by Dalit women:

Dalit women today are not merely passive victims; rather, they exhibit a strong determination to convert their suffering into empowerment. Their historical activism, often overlooked and undocumented, has been a significant force in the anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. Presently, they serve as pillars of strength in numerous South Asian villages, leading the charge in advocating for fundamental human rights. Their pivotal role in advocating for land and livelihood rights, as well as combating untouchability, underscores their potential for self-liberation with the necessary backing. By challenging prevailing caste ideologies, they are carving out a niche for themselves as critical thinkers and writers in the literary realm. Furthermore, they are actively engaging as forward-thinking leaders in local governance structures, asserting their entitlements. Despite facing ongoing challenges of structural discrimination and marginalization, they are met with systematic violence and impunity from dominant castes in an attempt to maintain the status quo.

While acknowledging the gendered aspect of caste discrimination faced by Dalit women, these individuals have transformed their experiences of "suffering" into acts of "resistance." They actively engage alongside men in their communities, participating in movements against caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Additionally, they contribute to the well-being of their families and sustain their communities by working in agriculture and generating wealth for their nations. In doing so, Dalit women construct their identities based on a culture of resistance, challenging the dominant culture of the caste system and expressing their defiance and rebellion against the oppressive forces of caste, class, and gender discrimination. This assertion of a distinct identity, coupled with the formation of a collective identity through various struggles, characterizes the Dalit women's movement in diverse ways.

Their determination to transform their "pain into power" is evident at the local dalit women's organization which they call Mahila Mandal. There activities largely centre on social, educational and cultural activities. These mandals are prominent feature of Buddhist settlements in Mumbai.

The Mumbai slum, a cultural disaster for outsiders; with all sort of violence, anti social elements, criminal activities, uncleared and unhygienic place of habitation, but for its residents it is more of a social structure and an integrated community, where each member relates with each other as a fellow companion in the social ladder. However, their membership is mainly governed by the caste and then the class they belong to. They relate to each other as 'jat bhai' meaning caste brother.



The area of study is Dalit settlement in Kalina, near the upcoming commercial destination of Bandra –Kurla Complex. In recent times it has become the most sought-after real estate. It has offices of national as well as multinational companies, foreign consulates, state and central government offices, banks and other establishments. Industrial and commercial growth has benefited the construction industry. The pressing demand for land in the city has led to a sharp increase in the price of real estate and has increased governments attempts, under pressure from the developers to demolish existing slums.

These slums are gradually being converted into housing societies which is putting a lot of financial strain on its residents.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

The population of this settlement comprises of Dalits and Hindus, with approximately 40,000 Dalits. The political awareness among women of these two communities shows vast differences. The Hindu women claim that politics is not women's job and their voting behaviour is decided by their husband. They seldom participate in any political proceedings and processions. They confine themselves to child bearing, rearing and being a good home maker. They actively participate in religious ceremonies and are believers of customs and traditions. They still view their husband as God and accept women's position as secondary sex. They perform maximum task to keep the family going as compared to the male counterparts. They are earning members and are responsible for the household chores. Their day starts with standing in a queue for hours to fill water, to cleaning, swabbing and cooking food for the family in addition to their outside employment as housemaids. Their salaries are used for purchasing food, household demands and children's needs or towards the repayment of debt, either borrowed for children's illness or family ceremonies.

Inside the four walls particularly at the domestic front, they are silent receivers, carriers of culture; they belong to, protectors of prestige and family honours. Issues relating to their protection, rights, and empowerment are viewed as anti social and anti cultural. They accept the secondary status in their family and take great pride in displaying their suhagan status and dowry gifts.

The Dalit women here show a different ideological positioning. They are staunch Ambedkarites and follow Buddhism. In terms of their political participation, they retain their loyalty to the Republican Party of India and its various fractions. They have built Buddhist temples called vihars which serve as a meeting place for the entire community.

It is observed here that the Dalit depicts egalitarian ethics in social life. Women are active participants in political processions like morchas, dharnas and rallies. Their voting pattern not only reflects their political consciousness but also political aspirations when they contest local elections. Self-awareness and self-empowerment have to a large extent diminished gender hierarchy. Although the socio-economic position of Dalit women at the domestic front



is more or less the same of the Hindu women but a significant difference is that they refuse to accept discrimination and oppression silently. They quote Dr. Ambedkar, “lost rights are never regained by appeals to the consciousness of the usurper, but by relentless struggle.....goats are used for sacrificial offerings and not lions”. Thus, domestic violence is no more in private domain but is sorted out by the community leaders.

Their political life revolves around Dr. Ambedkar’s slogan, “Educate, Organize and Agitate”. Ambedkar’s emphasis on education has brought drastic change in the upbringing of their children. Education is a priority among Dalit parents.

CULTURAL PROFILE

Dalit women in this area have distinguished themselves from the rest by adopting few practices.

A: They regularly meet at the viharas for community programmes and meetings.

B: They follow buddhas teachings and keep one month in a year for Buddhists teachings, which they call “varshavas”, where each woman from an household has to recite a story or a poetry with a moral value.

C: Every household gives offering in the viharas during varshavas in form of eatables to the community members.

D: The Dalit women differentiate herself by wearing blue bangles and have been talking about using blue sindoor, instead of red.

E: Dalit girls are open to the idea of wearing blue beads instead of black in mangalsutra or denouncing the practice of mangalsutra.

F: They see a great pride in wearing a customized white saari with a blue border and the Ashoka Chakra embossed on it.

G: They have formed a co-operative credit society, with a large number of women members of it.

H: They organize programmes to eradicate superstitious beliefs and black magic, career counselling for youth, adult education, self employment, and special coaching for students appearing for 10 and 12 standard exams.

To some, this may appear as an insignificant symbolic change, but beneath it, it reflects a vast potential of social transformation. In a conscious effort to find alternate culture they are questioning the traditional Hindu dogmatic beliefs, customs and patriarchal setup.

To conclude I quote Dr. Ambedkar,



“Freedom of mind is the real freedom. A person, who’s mind is not free though he may not be in chains, is a slave, not a freeman. One who’s mind is not free though he may not be in prison, is a prisoner, and not a freeman. One who’s mind is not free though alive, is no better than dead. Freedom of mind is the proof of one’s existence”.

References

- Agarwal, S. 1999. Genocide of women in Hinduism. Sudrastan Books. Jabalpur. India.
- Bell hooks (1984), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, South End Press, Boston
- Bhagwat, V., & Pardeshi, P. (1998). *Abramhani Streevadi Itihaslektanachya Dishene*. Pune: Women's Studies Center
- Chakravarti, U., *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*, Stree, Calcutta, 2003
- Dalit Women Speak Out - Violence against Dalit Women in India, An Overview Report, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, New Delhi, March 2006
- Datar C.1999, “Non-Brahmin Rendering of Feminism in Maharashtra. Is it a more Emancipatory Force?” EPW vol 34, No 41(oct9-15) pg-2964-2968.
- Dr B.R. Ambedkar, (1989) “Annihilation of Caste”, in Moon, V. (ed), *Dr Ambedkar Writings and Speeches: Volume 1*, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra,
- Guru G. 1995, “Dalit Women Talk Differently”. EPW vol 30 No41/42 (oct19-21) pg-2548-2550.
- Pendse S.,1994, “At Crossroads, Dalit Movement Today”, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra (Bombay).
- Rege Sharmila, 1998, “Dalit Women Talk Differently- A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position”. EPW vol 33, No44 (oct31-nov6) pg-WS39-WS46
- Rege Sharmila, 2006, “Debating the consumption of dalit autobiographies in Writing Caste/ Writing gender, Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonies”, Zubaan, New Delhi, pg-9-92.
- Sonalkar, W. (1999). An agenda for gender politics. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(1/2), 24–29
- Swathy M M, (2005), *Dalit Feminism*, <https://www.countercurrents.org/feminism-maragaret030605.htm>
- Sylvia Walby (1990), *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford.



Teltumbde Anand, 2005, “In Caste: A Historical Outline in The Persistence of Caste”, Navayana, New Delhi.

Wankhede, G. G. (2001, 5–11 May). Educational inequalities among scheduled castes in Maharashtra. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(18), 1553–1558.

Zelliot, E. (1992). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.