



Dalit Women and the Indian State: Gendered Dimensions of Caste, Rights, and Resistance in Postcolonial India

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 28-03-2025

Published: 16-04-2025

Keywords:

Constitutional Rights, Dalit Women, Intersectionality, Social Exclusion

ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the effectiveness of the Indian state in safeguarding the rights of Dalit women, highlighting the disconnect between constitutional ideals and their lived realities. Despite legal safeguards, Dalit women continue to face severe discrimination and social exclusion. The paper investigates how state policies, social structures, and political movements have addressed or failed to address the intersectional challenges Dalit women face. It assesses how post-independence India has bridged the gap between upper and lower castes. The study explores potential strategies to address this issue, including strengthening existing laws, promoting education and awareness, empowering Dalit women, and addressing social and economic inequalities. By exploring these approaches, we can work towards achieving substantive justice for Dalit women.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15243246>

Introduction

The caste system in India, deeply rooted in tradition and religious doctrine, has long shaped socio-political relations and access to rights and resources. Among the most marginalized in this hierarchical order are Dalit women, who face the dual burden of caste and gender-based discrimination. As "untouchables," Dalits have historically been denied basic human dignity and social participation; as women, they have been further subjected to patriarchal control and violence. While introducing modern



legal and administrative institutions, the British colonial regime failed to dismantle these intersecting oppressions, often reinforcing them through rigid classification.

Historians continue to debate the role of colonialism in the evolution of caste and gender hierarchies. For instance, Nicholas Dirks (2001) argues that British administrative practices reified caste categories, institutionalizing social divisions in previously unseen ways. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Sharmila Rege (1998) have shown how caste and gender are co-constitutive, with Dalit women placed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy and disproportionately affected by structural violence.

This research paper critically examines the effectiveness of the Indian state in safeguarding the rights of Dalit women, highlighting the disconnect between constitutional ideals and their lived realities. It investigates how state policies, social structures, and political movements have addressed or failed to address the intersectional challenges Dalit women face. It assesses how post-independence India has bridged the gap between upper and lower castes.

Despite constitutional provisions and legal safeguards, such as Articles 14, 15, 16, 17, and 335 of the Indian Constitution, and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, Dalit women continue to face severe discrimination and social exclusion. The persistence of such injustices raises questions about the responsibility for this perpetuation, whether it lies with the state or the existing social structure. Potential strategies to address this issue include strengthening existing laws, promoting education and awareness, empowering Dalit women, and addressing social and economic inequalities. By exploring these approaches, we can work towards achieving substantive justice for Dalit women.

Post-independence, with the promise of a just, inclusive state led by the visionary leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's radical vision extended beyond legal reform to include the dismantling of caste patriarchy and the empowerment of Dalit women. However, the transition from de jure equality to de facto transformation remains elusive for Dalit women who continue to face social stigma, economic deprivation, and violence.

Caste and gender hierarchies existed before British rule but were systematized during colonial administration. Colonial ethnography and census operations codified caste and erased the complexities of women's roles in society. Uma Chakravarti (2003) argues that the Brahmanical patriarchy, intensified through colonial policies, subordinated women, especially Dalit women, to dual forms of control, caste-



based exclusion, and patriarchal discipline. Uma Chakravarti (2003) argues that Brahmanical patriarchy was intensified through colonial policies, further subordinating women, especially Dalit women, and limiting their access to education, dignity, and social mobility. This structure perpetuated the marginalization of Dalit women, rendering them invisible in historical narratives and policy-making processes. Other scholars have built on this understanding, including Sharmila Rege (2006), who emphasized the importance of Dalit feminist standpoint and challenging dominant narratives; Anupama Rao (2009), who examined the politics of caste and gender; and Gopal Guru (1995), who analyzed the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting multiple forms of oppression faced by Dalit women. Together, these scholars provide a nuanced understanding of the complex and intersecting forms of oppression that Dalit women face. Early reform movements led by figures like Savitribai Phule emphasized education and dignity for Dalit women, laying the groundwork for later feminist and Dalit struggles.

Vision vs. Reality: The Gap in Dalit Women's Empowerment

The Indian Constitution, shaped by Ambedkar's egalitarian vision, enshrines fundamental rights to equality, non-discrimination, and protection from untouchability. Legal instruments such as the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1976) and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989) aim to protect Dalits, including Dalit women, from systemic discrimination and violence. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's work was revolutionary for women's empowerment, especially for Dalit women. He believed education and financial freedom were key to breaking free from oppression. Ambedkar challenged social hierarchies, advocating for equal rights and opportunities. His legacy inspires Dalit feminists and activists, emphasizing intersectionality, collective action, and social revolution for true equality. Yet, legal safeguards often fail to translate into substantive justice. Dalit women continue to experience some of the highest rates of sexual violence in India. Judicial apathy, police inaction, and societal bias frequently result in the denial of justice, as seen in cases like Bhanwari Devi and the Hathras rape case. These failures expose the limitations of a legal system that does not adequately address the intersectionality of caste and gender. Gopal Guru argues that to make the constitutional provisions effective, in addition to material benefits, the state also needs to re-organize the society along egalitarian lines. (Gopal Guru, pp.235-236)



Bureaucratic Apparatuses and the Marginalization of Dalit Women

Despite affirmative action policies, Dalit women remain severely underrepresented in public services, education, and leadership roles. While reservation policies have created opportunities for Dalits and women separately, Dalit women are often sidelined in both frameworks. As Deshpande (2011) (2011) notes, institutional biases and a lack of intersectional understanding marginalize Dalit women even within progressive policies.

Further, welfare schemes aimed at women's development often fail to reach Dalit women, who lack access to information, legal literacy, and social capital. Programs such as the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) or Beti Bachao Beti Padhao rarely address caste-based exclusion, rendering them ineffective for the most marginalized.

Additionally, identity politics sometimes sidelines the intersectionality of oppression. For instance, Dalit women face unique challenges that are often neglected within the broader movement. Issues of gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and access to education require intersectional approaches that go beyond the singular lens of caste. (Rege 1998).

Rege (1998) highlighted that the language used to describe Dalit women's suffering is often framed through dominant-caste perspectives that obscure their agency and material realities. She critiques both mainstream feminist and Dalit male narratives for failing to acknowledge the unique standpoint of Dalit women, arguing that these women 'talk differently' because their oppression is not just a sum of caste and gender but a distinct and embodied experience. Her analysis shows that the invisibilization of Dalit women's labor, both productive and reproductive, forms a critical axis of their marginalization. Moreover, Rege (1998) calls for incorporating Dalit women's autobiographies as counter-discourses that challenge both Brahmanical patriarchy and Savarna feminism. Sharmila Rege (1998) argues that Dalit women's bodies have historically been sites of caste violence and social control. Unlike mainstream feminist movements that focus on gender in isolation, Dalit feminist perspectives highlight how caste structures the experience of womanhood in India.

Dalit Women's Movements and Assertion

In response to both upper-caste domination and patriarchal control within their communities, Dalit women have forged independent paths of resistance. Organizations such as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) and the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) have brought Dalit



women's issues to national and international forums. These movements have emphasized core demands of education, land rights, legal literacy, and dignity. However, they also face challenges of co-optation, lack of resources, and marginalization within larger Dalit and feminist movements. The struggle of Dalit women, therefore, is not only against the state and dominant castes but also against the internal patriarchy within social justice movements.

Identity Politics and Intersectionality

Dalit identity politics has opened political space for caste-based mobilization, but it has often ignored the specific needs of Dalit women. Political parties like the BSP have promoted Dalit pride and representation but rarely foregrounded gender justice. In this context, Dalit feminism provides a crucial corrective by foregrounding intersectionality. Intersectionality, a concept popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw and adopted by Dalit feminists, reveals how multiple axes of oppression of caste, gender, class, and religion interact to produce unique experiences for Dalit women. Recognizing these interlocking systems is essential for crafting inclusive policies and building solidarities across movements.

Globalization and the Internationalization of Dalit Women's Rights

Global platforms have increasingly recognized caste and gender-based discrimination. Dalit women have presented their experiences of violence, exclusion, and resistance at international forums like the United Nations and the World Conference Against Racism. International advocacy has helped spotlight issues like manual scavenging and caste-based sexual violence. However, critics warn against relying solely on external validation. While international support can amplify voices, meaningful change must be rooted in local mobilization and community empowerment. To achieve meaningful change, Dalit women require a dual approach of international support and local mobilization, with community empowerment and grassroots movements playing a crucial role in driving sustainable progress. However, several hurdles persist, including the lack of women in leadership positions, poverty, workplace discrimination, unpaid care work imbalance, harmful social norms, and inadequate access to education and healthcare. According to the UN Women and UNDP report, women globally are empowered to achieve only 60% of their full potential, with a 28% gap in achievement compared to men across key human development dimensions, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to address these disparities.



Comparative Perspectives

A comparative analysis of Dalit women's experiences in different regions and contexts reveals similarities and differences in their challenges, highlighting the importance of nuanced understanding and context-specific solutions in addressing intersectional discrimination and promoting gender equality. Comparisons between Dalit women and other oppressed groups globally, such as African-American women in the U.S. or indigenous women in Latin America, highlight shared experiences of intersectional discrimination. Affirmative action, feminist activism, and community organizing offer valuable models, but Indian society's unique caste structure presents specific challenges. Dalit women's struggles resonate with global movements for dignity and justice, yet they must be understood within the particular historical and cultural context of caste patriarchy in India, highlighting the need for intersectional approaches that account for both universal human rights and specific local realities.

Rethinking Development and Justice

Neoliberal development models have bypassed Dalit women, leaving them in precarious employment and vulnerable to exploitation. Programs often measure success in economic terms while ignoring social dignity and security. Alternative models of development must prioritize redistribution, representation, and relational justice. Empowerment for Dalit women must include education, resource control, bodily autonomy, and leadership in decision-making processes. Legal reform alone cannot achieve this; what is required is a cultural and institutional shift that recognizes Dalit women as agents of change.

Theoretical Perspectives

Individuals from marginalized sections of society, such as Dalit women, possess experiential knowledge that provides unique insights into the complexities of discrimination and injustice, enabling them to offer valuable perspectives on practical strategies for elimination and inclusive solutions. In this context, discussing standpoint theory becomes particularly apt, as it highlights the significance of perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups in understanding and addressing social injustices. Standpoint theory posits that knowledge is shaped by an individual's social location, experiences, and perspectives, with those in marginalized or oppressed groups offering unique insights into power dynamics and social structures. Scholars like Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and Patricia Hill Collins have contributed significantly to this theory. Harding advocates for research from the standpoint of women and marginalized groups, while Haraway emphasizes the importance of "situated knowledge." Collins' work



on Black feminist thought highlights the significance of intersectional experiences. By acknowledging that knowledge is shaped by social context and power dynamics, standpoint theory provides a critical framework for understanding and addressing power, inequality, and social justice issues, emphasizing the need to center marginalized voices in research and knowledge production.

Conclusion

Empowering Dalit women involves both material upliftment and transforming social relations. Education, political representation, and economic opportunities are crucial, but gains have been limited and unevenly distributed ([Thorat, S., & Dubey, A. (2012) pp. 72-781). The dominance of upper castes in state institutions constrains meaningful change, and state-sponsored welfare programs often fail to reach Dalit women (Sen, A., & Drèze, J.). A new paradigm is needed, focusing on community solidarity, attitudinal change, and overhauling hierarchical social structures. Collective action and inclusive approaches can achieve goals. Alternative models like participatory budgeting and grassroots monitoring can enhance accountability and ensure benefits reach Dalit women (Jayaraman, R. (2018). 1-18).

Dalit women stand at the confluence of caste and gender-based oppression. Despite constitutional safeguards and legal reforms, their lived realities continue to be shaped by violence, exclusion, and neglect. Yet, their resistance—whether through activism, education, or daily survival—embodies a powerful challenge to India's caste-gender order. Education and financial freedom are crucial for women's empowerment, enabling them to break free from societal constraints. Challenging social hierarchies is essential to achieve equal rights and opportunities. True equality requires legal reforms and a fundamental shift in societal attitudes, norms, and power structures that perpetuate discrimination and injustice. This transformation requires collective action, intersectionality, and social revolution, ultimately leading to a change in social consciousness where women are valued and respected equally. By working together, we can create a society where women have an equal seat at the table and can shape their destinies. A change in social attitude is vital, as legal and political efforts alone may not suffice until consciousness reaches deep into society and social acceptability. Only then can women truly thrive and reach their full potential.

Ghanshyam Shah's scholarly works on Dalit Identity and Politics (1998) and Caste and Democratic Politics in India (2004) highlight the complexities of caste and its impact on Dalit communities, including the triple exploitation faced by Dalit women class, caste, and gender, emphasizing the need for



targeted interventions. These works provide valuable insights into the intersectional experiences of Dalit women and the need for targeted interventions to address their unique challenges.

Achieving an egalitarian and inclusive India requires transformative steps, including legal reforms, institutional transformation and a shift in developmental paradigm. Prioritizing social and economic empowerment through education, health and employment opportunities can help bridge the gap between Dalit women and the rest of Indian society. For the vision of an egalitarian and inclusive India, the state must reform its laws and institutions and transform its developmental paradigm. Civil society must create space for Dalit women's voices, and social movements must commit to intersectionality in rhetoric and practice. Only then can justice for Dalit women move from aspiration to actuality.

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