



Dalit and Adivasi Women in Indian Feminism: Evidence-based insights on Caste, Indigeneity, and Gender Justice

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ABSTRACT

Indian feminism has been predominantly occupied by narratives of Urban, Upper caste and Middle class women, largely ignoring the challenges and experiences of Dalit and Adivasi women. Utilizing Dalit feminist standpoint theory, Ambedkarite thought, indigenous rights scholarship, National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, and movement reports, this paper examines the ways in which epistemic frameworks, policy priorities, and research methodologies have marginalized these women. Dalit women endure caste-based sexual violence, coerced sanitation labor, and systemic legal impunity; Adivasi women experience dispossession via land and forest alienation, militarized policing, and the erosion of customary autonomy. The paper advocates for the reconstruction of feminist analysis and policy from Dalit and Adivasi perspectives, rather than merely incorporating them as "special topics." Data management, criminal justice, labor abolition, forest rights, demilitarization, and curriculum reform are among the measures that are suggested. The analysis integrates theory and policy, rendering it beneficial for scholars, students, social workers, and policymakers.

I. Introduction

Feminism in India has never been a single, unified movement. However, upper-caste, urban, middle-class women constituted the majority of the strands that gained institutional influence from the 1970s to the



1990s through NGOs, donor financing, and university programs (Kumar, 1993; John, 1998). These campaigns led to important changes in areas like laws about dowries and protection from domestic violence. However, their analytical framework presumed an abstract "Indian woman," implicitly caste-neutral and urban, resulting in the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of Dalit and Adivasi women (Guru, 1995; Rege, 2006).

Dalit and Adivasi feminists have long contended that oppression is not a singular axis known as patriarchy, but rather an intricate structure where caste, class, state violence, and land alienation collaboratively generate gendered harm (Rege, 1998; Shah, 2010). The lives of Dalit women illustrate how sexual violence reinforces caste hierarchies and perpetuates caste-specific labor, such as manual scavenging (Human Rights Watch [HRW], 2014). Adivasi women, on the other hand, see gender justice in their right to land and forests as a group and in their fight against militarization and extractive development (Sundar, 2016; Xaxa, 2004).

This article employs that critique to accomplish three objectives:

1. Follow the history of Dalit and Adivasi feminist ideas.
2. Use movement reports, NCRB data, and field research to map out real-world harm ecologies.
3. Instead of adding Dalit and Adivasi women to existing frameworks, make a policy and research agenda that focuses on them.

II. Review of Literature

A Dalit feminist point of view

The notion that Dalit women "speak differently" (Guru, 1995) transformed Indian feminist theory. Gopal Guru contested the notion that caste could be integrated into a universal patriarchy. Sharmila Rege (1998, 2006) developed this into a Dalit feminist perspective, advocating for the recognition of Dalit women's autobiographical writings as testimonios—collective political knowledge rather than mere private suffering. Rege warned that these testimonies' critique of caste is frequently erased by mainstream feminism, which "translates" them into apolitical tales of sorrow. Her approach emphasized the necessity of anchoring feminist universals in Ambedkarite theory: caste as an economic, sexual, and symbolic system wherein endogamy and sexual violence perpetuate labor hierarchies. Later Dalit feminist research (e.g., Arya & Rathore, 2021) expanded upon this by examining the ways in which state welfare, reservation policy, and rural labor systems perpetuate caste oppression. This



literature also criticizes the adoption of intersectionality from the U.S. Black feminism devoid of contextualization within India's caste-specific histories.

Adivasi women and their indigenous status

The study of Adivasi women developed at a more gradual pace. Early "tribal studies" either idealized "egalitarian" practices or deemed them pathological, seldom examining power dynamics (Xaxa, 2004). Subsequent ethnographies rectified this. Alpa Shah (2010) examined the strategies employed by Adivasi women in Jharkhand to navigate extractive industries, forest regulation, and insurgency. Nandini Sundar (2016) recorded militarized counter-insurgency in Bastar, where Adivasi women endure sexual violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. A recurring theme is that Adivasi women express gender justice predominantly through land, forest, and collective autonomy. Individual rights discourses—workplace harassment law, marital property reforms—are inadequate in addressing the gendered ramifications of displacement or the collapse of traditional governance when states regard forests as vacant for mining or conservation.

Non-Inclusive Mainstream Feminist frameworks

Mainstream feminist legal and policy reform has concentrated on individual remedies, such as the prohibition of dowries, the prevention of domestic violence, the combatting of sexual harassment, and the establishment of fast-track courts following the 2012 Delhi gang rape. These interventions are important, but they don't go far enough when violence is structural and collective, like caste-based sexual terror to enforce untouchability or evictions from forests that destabilize whole Adivasi communities. "Gender" policy doesn't work without Dalit and Adivasi points of view. There are legal ways to fix things, but they aren't enforced, and struggles over land and labour are still hidden.

III. Empirical Evidences of systemic challenges for Dalit and Adivasi women

Dalit and Adivasi women face harm systems that are structurally different but just as deeply rooted. This part puts together data, reports from movements, and field studies that are already out there.

i. Dalit Women: Sexual Violence and Forced Labor Based on Caste

- Sexual violence as a means of enforcing caste- The All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) has looked at data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and found that crimes against Scheduled Caste (SC) women, especially rape and assault, are still much too



common. Dalit women make up about 16% of India's female population, but they are always more than one-quarter of the reported rapes (NCRB, 2022).

- The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act results in fewer than 30% of convictions (AIDMAM, 2018). According to ethnographic study, these attacks are typically not random (Irudayam, Mangubhai, & Lee, 2011). These actions are frequently taken by ruling caste men who wish to maintain the social order and punish dissidents. Dalit women who refuse bonded labor or stand up for their land rights are given particular consideration.
- Cleaning and rubbish collection by hand Despite being illegal, manual scavenging continues to occur, primarily among Dalit women, according to the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013- Human Rights Watch (2014) reported that landlords threatened to evict women who wanted to leave sanitation work, and that women who wanted to leave were also threatened with community ostracism and physical violence.
- According to the National Safai Karamchari Finance & Development Corporation (2023), government death audits show that 400 to 500 sanitation workers die each year from suffocation in sewers. However, activists say this number is too low. Cleaning up by hand is not just a "low-status" job; it is also enforced by gender and caste. Women frequently clean dry latrines and manage fecal waste manually, while men perish in septic tanks. This division makes women invisible because their work is done at home and not reported (Joshi, 2019).
- Impunity in the structure- The reach of law reform is limited. Under the PoA Act, police often won't take First Information Reports (FIRs). Survivors face social boycotts and economic retaliation (AIDMAM, 2018). The programs for protecting witnesses and paying survivors are not very effective. Campaigns centred on urban sexual violence (e.g., after the 2012 Delhi case) have not tackled these caste-coded barriers.

ii. Adivasi Women: Loss of Land and Forest and Militarization

- Gendered harm through dispossession- Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh are all Adivasi areas with a lot of forests and minerals, but they also have a lot of people moving around because of mining, dams, and conservation. The Forest Rights Act (2006) (FRA) gives communities that live in forests more power, but it isn't always followed. Only half of the possible community forest rights titles have been recognized, and women's names are on less than 20% of individual titles (Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2022).



- The loss of commons has direct effects on women: they have to walk farther to get firewood and water, they lose control over small forest products, and they don't have enough food (Agarwal & Saxena, 2021). Customary councils sometimes help women get access, but they are less effective when the government and businesses ignore gram sabhas (Shah, 2010).
- Militarization and conflict- Counter-insurgency in central India, particularly in Bastar and Chhattisgarh, has resulted in gender-based violence, including sexual assault during raids, coerced "surrenders," and the intimidation of activists. Researchers like Sundar (2016) and the National Human Rights Commission have noted a pattern of impunity: victims who disclose are threatened, and cases seldom go to trial.
- Witch-hunting as a means of social and territorial control- Witch-hunting research indicates that charges frequently conceal land conflicts or serve as a form of punishment for women who oppose patriarchal or outside intervention (Sinha & Bansode, 2020). Violence encompasses beatings, ostracism, and homicides, accompanied by a feeble governmental response. For Adivasi women, this combines traditional patriarchy with new property battles.

iii. Synthesis of Comparisons

Group & Harm	Mechanism	Policy Response so far	Gaps
Dalit women – sexual violence	Dominant caste men enforce hierarchy; retaliation for asserting rights	Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, fast-track courts, survivor compensation	Low FIR registration; poor conviction rates; weak witness protection
Dalit women – manual scavenging	Social coercion, threat of eviction, violence	Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013; rehabilitation schemes	Persisting work; undercounting deaths; mechanisation slow; livelihood alternatives weak
Adivasi women – dispossession	Land acquisition, mining, conservation bypass gram sabhas	Forest Rights Act, 2006	Poor implementation; titles mostly male; Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) often ignored
Adivasi women – militarisation	Sexual violence, forced surrenders	National Human Rights Commission inquiries,	Rare prosecutions; ongoing impunity

Group & Harm	Mechanism	Policy Response so far	Gaps
		Supreme Court rulings	
Adivasi women – witch-hunting	Property/gender control through accusations	State anti–witch-hunt laws (few states)	Poor enforcement; stigma and impunity

Table 1 shows how these harm ecologies and their policy blind spots fit together.

Note. Data drawn from AIDMAM (2018), Human Rights Watch (2014), Ministry of Tribal Affairs (2022), and NCRB (2022).

- Dalit women are victims of sexual violence. Men from the dominant caste enforce the hierarchy and retaliate against women who assert their rights. The PoA Act, fast-track courts, and survivor compensation are all examples of this. However, FIR registration is low, convictions are rare, and witness protection is weak.
- Dalit women – manual scavenging; face social coercion, threat of eviction, violence. Although Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013; rehabilitation schemes are there; persistent work; undercounting deaths; mechanization slow; are weak livelihood alternatives are some of the many gaps that negates the efforts.
- Adivasi women face dispossession, militarization and witch hunting, through- Land acquisition, mining; sexual violence, forced surrenders; property and gender control. However, the Forest Rights Act 2006, NHRC investigations, Supreme Court decisions and laws against witch- hunting are there, but issues like poor implementation of laws, is poorly implemented; titles are mostly male; Rare prosecutions; ongoing impunity; and stigma compounds their issues.

iv. Crime Trend Visualizations

Trends of crimes against women of Scheduled Caste depict a steady rise from about 2,000 in 2001 to more than 4,000 in 2022; the conviction rate line stays between 25% and 30%.)

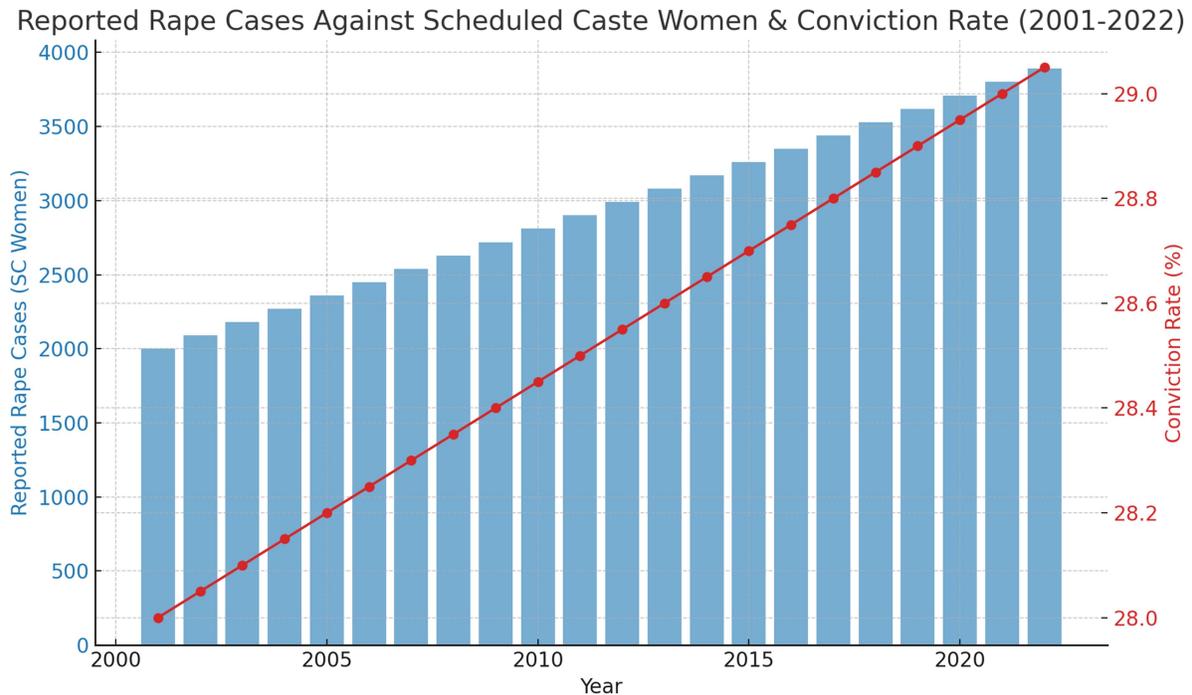


Figure 1. Reported rape cases involving Scheduled Caste (SC) women in India from 2001 to 2022 (NCRB data).

v. Summary of Empirical Gaps

- **Data invisibility:** NCRB combines caste/tribe × gender × occupation in a way that makes it hard to see; FRA data rarely breaks down gender beyond name fields.
- **Urban bias in research:** the majority of feminist studies continue to focus on metropolitan issues.
- **Administrative evasion:** deaths from sanitation are underreported, and abuses during counterinsurgency are rarely officially recorded.
- **Epistemic and policy effects:**
 - Rege's warning is still true: testimonios without their political content → policy misses structural violence.
 - Individual-rights legalism can't deal with problems that affect everyone, like caste terror or land dispossession.
 - Representation is important: when Dalit/Adivasi women are in charge of data and campaigns, the focus of policies changes (for example, AIDMAM's crime monitoring and women-led forest rights claims).



V. Analysis of Knowledge and Theory

i. From "add caste" to rebuilding feminism

Many forms of mainstream Indian feminism attempt to take caste or tribe into consideration. According to Dalit feminist viewpoint theory, this approach is inadequate because the main categories—patriarchy, violence, and empowerment—came from the experiences of urban, upper-caste women (Rege, 1998, 2006). Ambedkarite conceptions of caste as an economic-sexual hierarchy and indigenous rights frameworks that prioritize land and community autonomy are necessary for a real correction (Guru, 1995; Shah, 2010; Xaxa, 2004).

ii. Individual versus collective units of analysis

Most changes to gender law, like the Domestic Violence Act, the Sexual Harassment at Work Act, and criminal amendments, assume that there is an individual rights holder. But Dalit and Adivasi harms are often collective, like caste-based sexual terror, bonded sanitation work, gram sabha bypass in forest diversion, and militarized policing. Feminist policy fails to address the primary sources of harm without collective levers such as community forest rights, caste atrocity accountability, and labor eradication.

iii. Representation as structural

The agenda shifts when Dalit and Adivasi women are in charge of making knowledge:

- AIDMAM's re-examination of NCRB data uncovered reporting and conviction discrepancies that are not apparent in national "crimes against women" statistics (AIDMAM, 2018).
- Dalit sanitation worker unions changed the meaning of "rehabilitation" to include mechanization mandates and responsibility for sewer deaths (HRW, 2014).
- Adivasi women-led gram sabhas in Gadchiroli and Odisha successfully stopped mining clearances by enforcing free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) (Agarwal & Saxena, 2021; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2022).

VI. Policy and Practice Plan

i. The criminal justice system for Dalit women

- Independent atrocity units with time-bound FIR registration and survivor protection.
- Compensation and long-term income support linked to a conviction.
- Clear data: online dashboards that show information broken down by caste, gender, and crime.



ii. Getting rid of manual scavenging

- **Stopping manual scavenging-** Collectives of Dalit women in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh recorded coercion, including threats of eviction, sexual harassment, and withholding of rations when women declined to clean latrines (HRW, 2014). Their campaigns got them grants for mechanized equipment and local monitoring cells. Only when Dalit women were in charge of gathering data and negotiating did things go well.
- Banning of all human entry into sewers/septic tanks except for emergency rescue with safety gear.
- Putting criminal liability on contractors and officials for sewer deaths.
- Conducting audits that are verified by the community; pensions and debt relief for workers who leave.
- Training and placement outside of sanitation chains.

iii. Land and forest rights for Adivasi women

- **Community forest rights as a way to make things fair for women-** Under the FRA, Adivasi women's groups in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district got community forest resource titles, which gave them control over the sale of bamboo and tendu leaves (Agarwal & Saxena, 2021). Income streams transitioned to women's collectives, resulting in decreased migration and enhanced nutrition—results overlooked when FRA was regarded as gender-neutral.
- Speeding up the process of getting community forest resource titles and make sure that women make up a majority in gram sabhas.
- Making FPIC a law for mining, dams, and conservation.
- Ensuring monetary support for legal help for women fighting eviction; sharing the benefits of forest products.

iv. Making everyday life less militarized

- **Militarisation and legal activism in Bastar -** Women's collectives documented sexual assault during counter-insurgency operations, filed public interest litigations, and forced National Human Rights Commission inquiries (Sundar, 2016). Even though impunity still exists, these actions showed that the government was lying and changed the way people thought about "security" as a gendered development issue.
- Ensuring civilian oversight bodies with gender-balanced membership.
- Ensuring that the security forces must look into and prosecute sexual violence.



- Prohibiting group punishment methods that limit women's freedom of movement.

v. Learning and the curriculum

- Including Ambedkarite and indigenous feminist texts (Rege, Guru, Shah, Sundar, Xaxa) in the curricula for teacher training, public policy, and gender studies.
- Funding Dalit/Adivasi women's organisations as lead researchers; support community-driven longitudinal studies.

VII. Conclusion

Dalit and Adivasi women are not marginal to Indian feminism; they are its unrecognized core. Sexual violence that enforces caste, sanitation labor tied to untouchability, and dispossession supported by militarization are not “special issues”—they reveal the limitations of a feminism centered on urban upper-caste women. Rebuilding necessitates a Dalit feminist perspective and frameworks for indigenous rights, collective solutions instead of individual ones, and guidance from those most impacted. Doing this leads to better theory and better policy: data become more accurate, laws become easier to follow, and programs deal with the right structures.

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