

Dalit Feminism: Intersectionality, Resistance, and the Quest for Social Justice in India.

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Abstract:

Dalit feminism represents a critical and transformative strand of Indian feminist thought that addresses the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women through caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Unlike mainstream Indian feminism, which often reflects upper-caste perspectives, Dalit feminism foregrounds the lived experiences of women at the margins of society. Emerging from both anti-caste and feminist movements, it critiques Savarna feminism for its caste-blindness and Dalit politics for its gender insensitivity.

Drawing on the pioneering work of figures such as Savitribai Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and contemporary voices like Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Ruth Manorama, Dalit feminism articulates the systemic injustices of sexual violence, labor exploitation, and social exclusion. It emphasizes intersectionality as a crucial analytical tool and advocates for structural inclusion, policy reform, and educational empowerment.

In contemporary times, digital activism has amplified Dalit women's voices globally, though challenges persist in the form of marginalization and backlash. Ultimately, Dalit feminism demands a reimagining of feminism itself — one that is inclusive, intersectional, and rooted in social justice, ensuring the dignity and equality of all women.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, intersectionality, Ambedkarite thought, caste oppression, feminist critique, Dalit women, social justice, empowerment.

Introduction

Dalit feminism is a powerful and essential strand of Indian feminist thought that challenges the multiple layers of oppression experienced by Dalit women — oppression based on caste, gender, and class. While mainstream feminism in India often centers the experiences of upper-caste women, Dalit feminism focuses on the unique struggles of women from marginalized castes, especially those historically considered “untouchable” under the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Dalit feminism is not merely a subset of feminism or Dalit activism; it is a movement that critiques both. It exposes how mainstream feminism frequently ignores caste-based oppression, and how Dalit movements often silence or marginalize Dalit women's gendered experiences. This dual resistance is what makes Dalit feminism uniquely radical and transformative.

Historical Context

Dalit women have been at the receiving end of systemic oppression for centuries. The caste system in India institutionalized discrimination by categorizing individuals into rigid hierarchical groups. Dalits, historically referred to as “Untouchables,” were placed at the bottom of this hierarchy and subjected to extreme forms of exploitation — including manual scavenging, bonded labor, and social ostracization.

While the Indian Constitution outlawed untouchability in 1950, societal attitudes and discrimination persist, particularly in rural areas. Dalit women, situated at the intersection of caste and gender, face the harshest brunt of this system. Their labor is often undervalued, their bodies exploited, and their voices marginalized.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, social reformers like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and Periyar Ramasamy played pivotal roles in questioning caste and gender hierarchies. Savitribai Phule, for example, was India's first female teacher and a prominent anti-caste and women's rights activist. Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in promoting education and rights for Dalits and emphasized the emancipation of Dalit women in his reform agenda.

The Emergence of Dalit Feminism

While upper-caste feminist voices became prominent in post-independence India, Dalit women found little representation in those discourses. Many mainstream feminist concerns — such as workplace equality, legal rights, or bodily autonomy — often failed to address the lived realities of Dalit women, such as sexual violence by dominant caste men, exclusion from public spaces, and caste-based labor discrimination.

It was in this gap that Dalit feminism began to emerge as a distinct voice — through grassroots activism, literature, and political movements.

Dalit feminists argue that caste and gender are inseparable in understanding the oppression of Dalit women. For them, any analysis that focuses only on patriarchy (as in mainstream feminism) or only on caste (as in Dalit politics) is insufficient.

Writers and activists such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Ruth Manorama, and Gogu Shyamala have been central to articulating Dalit women's experiences. Their autobiographies, speeches, and essays reflect the brutal realities of their lives — and their courageous resistance to those realities.

Key Themes in Dalit Feminism

1. Intersectionality

Dalit feminism insists on understanding the intersection of caste, class, and gender. The term intersectionality, popularized by African-American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, finds a natural home in Dalit feminist thought. Dalit women are not oppressed just because they are women, or just because they are Dalit — but because they are both.

This perspective challenges the idea that “women” are a homogenous category. It brings attention to how the experiences of a Brahmin woman, a Muslim woman, and a Dalit woman can differ vastly, due to the socio-cultural locations they inhabit.

2. Sexual Violence and Caste

Sexual violence against Dalit women is not merely an act of gender-based violence — it is a form of caste dominance. Rape and assault are often used as tools to “teach a lesson” to Dalit communities that assert themselves. Incidents in places like Hathras, Una, and Khairlanji are grim reminders of how sexual violence is weaponized to enforce caste hierarchies.

Dalit feminists highlight how the state and law enforcement are often complicit in shielding dominant caste perpetrators. They also point out how media and civil society often ignore these atrocities or fail to understand their casteed nature.

3. Labor and Exploitation

Dalit women often occupy the most dehumanizing forms of labor — manual scavenging, cleaning, agricultural labor, or domestic work. These forms of labor are deeply caste-linked and are carried out under extremely exploitative conditions.

Mainstream feminism, which often focuses on urban middle-class issues like glass ceilings or maternity leave, rarely engages with these concerns. Dalit feminists critique this selective focus and call for a more inclusive, ground-up understanding of labor rights.

4. Critique of Mainstream Feminism and Dalit Politics

Dalit feminism critiques both Savarna feminism and male-dominated Dalit politics. While the former often erases caste, the latter frequently marginalizes gender. For instance, Dalit male leaders might prioritize caste emancipation without adequately addressing patriarchal violence within Dalit communities.

Dalit women activists have emphasized that caste-based patriarchy and intra-community violence must be confronted just as vigorously as external oppression.

Voices of Dalit Feminism

1. Bama

Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a Tamil Dalit Christian writer known for her autobiographical novel *Karukku*. The book details her experiences with caste discrimination, especially within religious institutions and educational spaces. Bama’s works highlight how even Christianity — which preaches equality — is not immune from caste bias in India. Her writing is powerful, raw, and grounded in lived experience. It has become foundational to Dalit feminist literature.

2. Urmila Pawar

A Marathi writer and activist, Urmila Pawar’s autobiography *The Weave of My Life* details her journey from an impoverished Dalit family to becoming a noted writer and thinker. She interlaces personal narrative with reflections on the Ambedkarite movement and feminist politics.

3. Baby Kamble

One of the earliest Dalit feminist voices, Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* offers a searing portrayal of caste and gender oppression in rural Maharashtra. Unlike many upper-caste feminists of her time, Kamble spoke with brutal honesty about the physical and emotional exploitation faced by Dalit women.

4. Ruth Manorama

An activist and political leader, Ruth Manorama has worked extensively for the rights of Dalitwomen, urban poor, and marginalized communities. She played a key role in forming the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1995, which provided a collective platform for Dalit women to speak at national and international forums.

Dalit Feminism in Contemporary Times

In recent years, social media and digital platforms have become vital spaces for Dalit feminist expression. Hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter and #DalitWomenFight have amplified voices that were traditionally excluded from mainstream discourse.

Organizations like Dalit Women Fight, All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), and the Dalit History Month collective are redefining activism. They combine grassroots organizing with digital advocacy, and their narratives often go viral globally.

However, Dalit feminists also face severe backlash — including online abuse, threats, and ostracization. Many are trolled for speaking against caste privilege or challenging dominant narratives.

Challenges and the Way Forward

1. Inclusion in Mainstream Feminism

There is a growing recognition that Indian feminism must decentralize and decolonize itself. Dalit feminists demand that caste be seen as a central axis of oppression in all feminist discourse. They urge upper-caste feminists to reflect on their own privileges and make space for marginalized voices — not just symbolically, but structurally.

2. Policy and Legal Reform

Dalit feminists have been advocating for stronger implementation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, better rehabilitation for survivors of caste violence, and more representation of Dalit women in policymaking.

Reservation policies in education and employment have helped to some extent, but Dalit women remain grossly underrepresented in positions of power — including academia, media, and politics.

3. Education and Cultural Representation

Education remains a powerful tool for Dalit liberation. Ambedkar emphasized this, and Dalit feminist thinkers continue to push for access to quality education for Dalit girls. At the same time, they are challenging the dominant narratives in textbooks, films, and literature that often erase or vilify Dalit experiences.

Representation matters — not just in numbers, but in who gets to shape the discourse.

Conclusion

Dalit feminism is a movement of survival, assertion, and hope. It is a relentless call to recognize the humanity of those whose lives have been systemically devalued. In refusing to be silent, Dalit women are not only resisting oppression — they are reshaping Indian society.

Their voices compel us to confront uncomfortable truths about caste, gender, and privilege. They remind us that feminism, if it is to be truly liberatory, must be inclusive, intersectional, and rooted in justice.

As Indian society evolves, the relevance of Dalit feminism only deepens. It challenges us to rethink not just how we define feminism, but how we define dignity, equality, and freedom.

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