

Ambedkar, Lohia, and the Segregations of Caste and Gender: Envisioning a Global Agenda for Social Justice

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Abstract

Dalit women face acute marginalization as a result of multiple and intersecting inequalities in terms of caste and gender. This is reflected adversely in their less representation, lower literacy and life expectancy levels, and other human indicators, compared to upper caste women. Focus on these multiple forms of marginalization has been missing from the mainstream anti-caste and gender equality discourse and has led to a rise of Dalit feminism. Despite the emphasis on the nexus between caste and gender by equality icon Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, reactions to the emergence of Dalit women's movement as distinct from the mainstream upper caste-class led women's movement and male dominated autonomous Dalit movement have been 'notoriously negative'. However, the Dalit women's movement must be seen as giving a fresh perspective to their struggles and experiences. This paper critiques the Dalit movement as well as the feminist movement, and adds to the 'Dalit feminist standpoint' by introducing it to the ideas of a prominent non-Dalit social leader Ram Manohar Lohia, who had spoken against the crippling effects of the caste-class-gender-race nexus. This paper envisions a broader social justice agenda by reading the ideas of Ambedkar and Lohia together.

Keywords

Dalit feminism, intersectionality, caste-class-gender nexus, gender, caste, race, marginalization

Introduction: Multiple Forms of Marginalization

A 2018 report of the United Nations found that the average *Dalit* (erstwhile untouchable castes) woman in India dies 14.6 years younger than her higher caste

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counterparts (Indian Express, 2018). The UN report, titled, ‘Turning promises into action: gender equality in the 2030 agenda’ revealed that a woman’s caste in India can increase her exposure to mortality as a result of factors such as poor sanitation and inadequate water supply, and health care. The report further stated that the life expectancy among Dalit women is eleven years lower than that of higher caste women despite experiencing identical social conditions like sanitation and drinking water. The clustered deprivations faced by Dalit women were summarized by the report thus:

The likelihood of being poor is greater if she is landless and from a scheduled caste.¹ Her low level of education and status in the social hierarchy will almost guarantee that if she works for pay, it will be under exploitative working conditions (*Ibid*).

The observations made in the report are just an example of the impact of the multiple and intersecting inequalities of caste and gender on Dalit women’s literacy, life expectancy, and other human indicators (Mantri & Jayarajan, 2018). Focus on these multiple forms of marginalization has been missing from the mainstream anti-caste and gender equality discourse and has led to a rise of Dalit feminism. This separate stream of feminism scrutinizes the mainstream movements with a lens of skepticism and criticism, and places Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the central figure for the women’s movement in India (Rege, 1998 & 2013; Paik, 2009 & 2016). This paper, while discussing the foundations of Dalit feminism and the critique of mainstream feminist and Dalit movements, attempts to make an addition to the ‘Dalit feminist standpoint’ (Rege, 1998) by introducing it to the ideas of *caste-class-gender* nexus propounded by Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia — a radical leader whose ideas of social justice have been ignored even by the anti-caste movement (Yadav, 2012; Kumar, 2017; Bhaskar, 2018). Combining the ideas of Ambedkar and Lohia, this paper envisions a broader social justice agenda in a global perspective. In any case, the author does not make a claim on ‘behalf’ of Dalit women, rather poses as their ally.

Dalit Feminism: Foundations

Dalit feminism has emerged as a separate movement for social equality and justice (Masoodi, 2018). It aims at ‘eradicating all forms of violence, intolerance, hierarchy and discrimination in the society’ (Margaret, 2010). At the beginning of the 21st century several groups of Dalit women came up across the country ‘trying to assert their identity and openly talking about the *intersection* of caste and gender’ (Sharma, 2016; Paik, 2009, p. 39). Intersectionality² recognizes that individuals can face discrimination on the basis of multiple and intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149; Campbell, 2016, p. 3).

Gopal Guru (1995) justified the emergence of a separate struggle of Dalit women by listing two factors (p. 2548): ‘external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the Dalits).’ The mainstream feminist movement is the external factor which, in making claims for women solidarity at both national and international level, ‘subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste [women] and Dalit women’ (*Ibid*, p. 2549). These contradictions manifest in subtle forms of caste discrimination practised by ‘upper caste upper class women against Dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of Dalit women in rural areas’ (*Ibid*). Moreover, feminism in India—essentially of the upper caste middle class woman’s making—came to be identified as a universalized female experience. Guru has questioned the ‘hegemonic impulses

of Indian feminists' to speak for Dalit women (*Ibid*). This assertion found support in other scholarly works. Sharmila Rege has argued that the *savarna* (upper caste) feminists have invisibilized and excluded the experiences, struggles, and leadership of Dalit and *Adivasi* (indigenous) women (2018, p. 39). Shailaja Paik also noted that the upper caste-led Indian feminist movement, since colonial times, 'has been unable to critically engage and confront inequalities of caste of community implicit in that subject or its worlds' (2009, p. 41).

The internal factor—the mainstream male dominated Dalit movement— by refusing to acknowledge the comparatively privileged location of Dalit males denied Dalit women an independent expression of assertion and identity. Anandhi and Kapadia (2017) state that 'formal Dalit politics totally ignores Dalit women's micro level politics of becoming as well as their struggles to collectivise and to address their multiple oppressions' (p. 121). The 'male sphere of Dalit politics' considers women's political struggles to be entirely marginal to the 'more important' male-led politics of Dalit rights and social justice (*Ibid*). In her work based on everyday experiences of Dalit women, Paik (2014, p. 79; 2009, p. 43) notes that these women face 'double discrimination': by society (public discrimination) and at home (private discrimination). According to Paik, the reaction of some Dalit men to feminism (in general) and Dalit women's feminism (in particular) has been 'notoriously negative,' and they regard Dalit feminism as a 'powerful deterrent' to the growth of an autonomous dalit movement (2009, p. 42). The personal accounts of several Dalit women activists and writers also speak about patriarchal structures within the Dalit community, which force its women to extreme marginalization (Paik, 2014, p. 75).

Both these factors set forth the problematic tendency to treat gender and caste as mutually exclusive categories of analysis and experience. Such a framework tends to not only theoretically erase and distort the struggles of Dalit women, but it also dilutes the conception of discrimination. In the words of Rege, 'a masculinization of dalithood and a savarnisation of womanhood' led to 'a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood' (1998, p. 42). The collective aspect of Dalit women, when reduced to being oppressed just for being either a Dalit or a woman, thus created a dearth of discourse on clustered deprivations around caste, class, and gender.

Responses to the 'Mainstream'

Advocating the necessity of a distinct Dalit feminist discourse, Guru (1995) argues that direct experiences of discrimination and struggles of Dalit women lend an authenticity to their claims —something which is lacking in the mainstream feminist narrative (p. 2549). Echoing Guru, Rege (1998) states that Dalit women should 'talk differently'. However, she cautions that a 'Dalit feminist standpoint', which 'may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals', cannot 'flourish if it is isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups' (p. 45). It must 'educate itself about the histories, preferred social relations, the utopias, and struggles of the marginalized' (*Ibid*). Rege further suggests that non-Dalit feminists should adopt a Dalit feminist standpoint by 'losing and revising the voice of the mainstream savarna feminist thought'. This would not only authorize the non-Dalit feminists to speak 'as' or 'for' Dalit women but they can 'reinvent' themselves as Dalit feminists (*Ibid*). Adding to the discourse, Ritu Sen Chaudhari (2016) stresses upon 'the responsibility of feminist theories to address questions concerning caste experiences' and the 'implications of

such discourses on the experiences of the Dalit woman' (p. 1). Chaudhari, however, differs from the 'reinventing' approach of Rege and calls on the 'elite feminists' to critique the 'self' by deliberating upon 'the implication of non-dalit feminism in the making of Dalit woman' (*Ibid*, p. 11). She asks the mainstream feminists to consider how the elite woman posed herself as against [the Dalit woman], and 'read how the Dalit woman has been produced, as an "other" (of the non-Dalit woman), through the experiences of the non-Dalit woman' (*Ibid*). In agreement with Rege (1998), Paik (2009, p. 45) conceptualized a radical Dalit women's movement and argued for 'a porous struggle', in which the mainstream (upper caste-class led) feminist movement, Dalit men, and other political parties who share their interests support the endeavors of Dalit women. Paik thus pointed: 'It is only by understanding the contradictions and complexities inherent in Dalit women within various structures, by looking at their local context and constitution, that Dalit men and upper caste middle class women [would] devise effective political challenges and action' (*Ibid*).

These critiques of the 'mainstream' highlight the constant need to engage with an alternate approach of addressing gender and caste simultaneously.

Ambedkar, Lohia, and the Intersection of Caste and Gender

Despite the emphasis on the intersection between caste and gender by Ambedkar and later by other social reformers like Lohia, the mainstream Dalit movement has failed to provide a separate discourse on safeguarding the rights of Dalit women. Ambedkar's theory of caste clearly identifies linkages with the subordination of women (2019, pp. 5-22). Ambedkar stated that the patriarchal control over female sexuality was an essential component for the purpose of reinforcement of the caste system. He theorized that women have been used as a medium to perpetuate caste system by citing the specific examples of *sati* (the practice of widow immolation on the funeral pyre of her husband), enforced widowhood (prohibiting widow remarriage), and pre-pubertal marriage of girls. Ambedkar believed that the caste-gender nexus was the main reason behind the oppression of lower castes and women and that it had to be uprooted. He thus became a 'passionate campaigner for an important feminist principle, namely women's right to control their own sexuality and to determine their own choices in marriage' (Kapadia, 2020: p. 10). Ambedkar also supported female leadership in the grassroots women's organizations and movement, which evolved from the participation of women in his movement alongside men in 1920s to creation of autonomous organizations of women in 1930s and political organizations of women in 1940s (Sonalkar, 2014, pp. 20-34). During his speech at the Mahad *satyagraha* (*non-violent protest*), he directed the attention of Dalit women to the specificities of women subjection and oppression due to caste and their subordination as 'women' and as 'Dalit' (Paik, 2009, p. 42).

Considered by some scholars (Yadav, 2012; Kumar, 2010; Bhaskar, 2018) as an ideological successor to Ambedkar, Lohia propounded a deeper approach to address the deprivations created by caste, class, and gender. The author is reading the ideas of Lohia along with Ambedkar for two specific reasons. First, after Ambedkar, Lohia remains one of the few prominent leaders in independent India who made a strong theoretical case for annihilation of caste. Between 1955 and 1958, Lohia made extensive contacts with major anti-caste movements, socio-political organizations and leaders of the scheduled castes and the backward classes in north, west and south India,

including Ambedkar, Periyar and R L Chandapuri (Kumar, 2010). Second, the social justice movement would be strengthened by including the radical ideas of non-Dalit leaders like Lohia, who have made important contributions to the anti-caste discourse.

Lohia contributed significantly to the 'formulation of an inter-sectionalist approach for understanding the inequalities, exclusions and exploitations in the power system of contemporary India' (Kumar, 2010: p. 64). According to Lohia (1953), 'All those who think that, with the removal of poverty through a modern economy, [the segregations of caste and gender] will automatically disappear make a big mistake. Poverty and these two segregations thrive on earth other's worms.' He further said: 'All war on poverty is a sham, unless it is, at the same time, a conscious and sustained war on these two segregations' (Ibid). Lohia propounded a theory on the 'seven revolutions of our time' (Kumar, 2010, p. 66), which identified the main aspects of inequality, each of which deserved to be addressed in its own sphere and simultaneously. Out of the seven revolutions, four pertained to aspects of inequality within a society – *gender, caste, class* and *race*. His analysis of social inequality in India focused on the trio of caste, class, and gender. Lohia conceptualized a direct link 'between revitalizing Indian society and giving equality to women in all spheres of life' (Ibid, p. 66). His theory of simultaneous revolutions emphasizes upon the autonomy of the various dimensions of social life that required revolutionary transformation (Yadav, 2010, p. 99). Lohia's approach thus underlines that the concerns of Dalit women are not subservient to the Dalit movement and should not be left unaddressed. These concerns have to be addressed simultaneously along with the thrust for caste equality. Furthermore, Lohia's approach goes beyond the isolated approach of 'class' and 'gender', which the upper caste-class feminists in India have relied upon. The ideas of Lohia can facilitate the upper caste feminists and Dalit men to realize that the question of gender and caste cannot be dealt separately, while ignoring their intersectional impact.

A focus on the relationship between caste and gender, as emphasized by both Ambedkar and Lohia, also highlights the repercussions of treating gender and caste as mutually exclusive categories in the contemporary intellectual, institutional, and legal discourse. For instance, among the Dalit movement and initiatives — from academicians to politicians — the 'prominent single factor' (Kumar, 2010, p. 64) approach (caste-centric) seems to have been more prevalent than intersectional perspectives. When the 'Smash Brahminical Patriarchy' issue arose out of a poster in hands of Twitter CEO (Dhanaraj, 2018), Kancha Ilaiah Shepherded (2018) compared patriarchy among Dalits with Brahminical patriarchy, and declared that the latter is 'more oppressive and undemocratic'. Ilaiah backed his statement by giving examples such as 'there has always existed the right to remarry among the Shudra/ Dalit/ Adivasi cultures' and that the 'Shudra/Dalit/Adivasi culture and heritage reflect a democratic man-woman relationship' (Ibid). Contrary to the assertions of Ilaiah, Paik has questioned the postulate of considering Dalit women as 'somehow more free than high caste women' (2009, p. 39). According to her, the struggle of Dalit women against sexism of Dalit men is intrinsic to their identity (Ibid: p. 45). Furthermore, while critiquing the usage of the term 'Dalit patriarchy' in feminist discourse, Sunaina Arya made an important assertion that the patriarchy prevalent among the Dalit men is a manifestation of 'Brahminical patriarchy' itself (2020, p. 223; Chakravarti, 2018: p. 34). Both Paik and Arya endorsed Guru's internal critique (1995) of patriarchy in Dalit politics. Any manifestation of Brahminical patriarchy among Dalit men cannot be even remotely justified on the ground that it is lesser evil than Brahminical patriarchy. Paik's and Arya's response highlight the limitations of the 'single-factor' approach.

Another example can be found in some form of socio-economic mobility among the Dalits. The male migration-related mobility continues to confine Dalit women to agricultural wage work—with ‘no ownership, real or titular, of the land’ (Masoodi, 2018). Women of the lower castes in agrarian situations remain largely ignored (Paik, 2009, p. 40). Moreover, of the 1.2 million manual scavengers in India, about ninety-five to ninety-eight percent are Dalit women (Kumar and Preet, 2020). These issues and concerns are not reflected in the policy discourses because of the caste-centric ‘single factor’ approach.

Furthermore, when a Dalit woman is sexually assaulted by upper caste men, it is not just a case of male violence or criminality. The factor of her caste also needs to be considered, wherein the Dalit women are targeted in order to ‘teach a lesson’ to the Dalit community (Irudayam, Mangubhai & Lee, 2006, p. 9). This crucial understanding of multiple forms of marginalization was missed by the Supreme Court of India in its judgment, *Shakti Vahini vs. Union of India*, 2018 on ‘honour killings.’ The court considered ‘honour killings’ as a gender-based crime, while ignoring the caste angle in such cases. Therefore, the ‘mainstream’ discourses must consider an intersectional approach of marginalization. As Shreya Atrey (2019) has argued, intersectional discrimination should exist as a unique category in discrimination law.

The Dalit feminist movement, which focuses on ‘intersectionality’, is thus deeply rooted in the Ambedkarite and Lohiaite thought of self-assertion, transcending the caste identity markers. Addressing the connection between social identities and patriarchy expands the feminist project (Roberts, 1993, p. 37). Moreover, it also enables to broaden the conception of discrimination in the legal discourse.

Global Agenda for Social Justice

The approach of Ambedkar and Lohia can help the Dalit feminist movement to frame a broader social justice agenda. Lohia’s ideas call for a global discourse on simultaneous addressing of several aspects of inequality — in particular, *caste*, *class*, *race*, and *gender*. This theory also resembles the struggle of black women in the United States, which is also much broader than the general categories that the anti-discrimination discourse provides. In an incisive analysis, Crenshaw (1989) argued that: Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men (p. 149).³ Similar to experiences of Dalit women in India, she stated that ‘black women were failed by anti-racist campaigns that focused on the experiences and needs of black men, and feminist campaigns led by and focused on the experiences of white women’ (Smith, 2016, p. 73). In Brazil, Afro-Brazilian feminists have been at ‘the forefront of efforts to integrate an intersectional perspective in international human rights discourse and feminist practices’ (Franklin, 2011, p. 142). They have focused on the development of stronger transitional coalitions, by highlighting the ‘similarities of black women’s experiences across national borders and have looked to initiate cross-border dialogue on the interconnected nature of their struggles’ (Ibid, page 152). The objective of such transnational collaborations has been ‘to affirm the development of a black feminist identity through social activism, offering women an autonomous forum to cultivate and strengthen their struggles against sexism and racism in their individual countries and across the region’ (Ibid).⁴ The ‘internationalist vision’ displayed in such initiatives has ‘encouraged cooperation among black women and increased awareness of the

common concerns of health and economic, and personal security faced by the black population' (Ibid).

Lohia's ideas conceptualize building up of global or transnational alliances to tackle intersectional inequalities based on *caste*, *race*, *gender*, and *class*. Like alliances built up by Afro-Brazilian women with black women of other countries, Dalit women can also join these alliances to form larger social movements. These alliances need not be formed by a person's race, caste or gender, but on the basis of common contexts of struggle against specific exploitative forces (Elkholy, 2020) or what Paik calls "margin to margin" solidarity (2014, p. 75). Such a transnational exercise can encourage 'the creation of wider social communities and the sharing of memories, histories, and even institutions' and forge a broad feminist, anti-patriarchal, anti-caste, and anti-racist framework (Paik, 2014, p. 92-93). The feminist initiatives in different countries can engage with such alliances to form cross-cultural coalitions against injustices and inequalities. It is then that the mainstream feminists 'can better work with, and not for, women (and men)' suffering social disadvantages (Elkholy, 2020). Dalit feminists can make concerted efforts with other feminist and social movement actors who seek to challenge racial, caste and gender injustices across the globe.

Conclusion

The narrative of Dalit women's movement today needs to be shaped by recognizing and learning from their struggles from its beginning, and recounting the path it has traversed. The Dalit feminist groups that challenge caste and patriarchy are questioning structural changes. Their fight should be welcomed. In 1995, Guru observes that independent assertion of Dalit women should not be viewed by Dalit men as divisive (p. 2549). The journey and struggle of Dalit women only shows that Guru's statement is of equal import even today. While Rege calls up on the savarna feminists to reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists, an equal burden lies on Dalit men too. The male-dominated Dalit discourse has to be conscious of the concerns of its women. Dalit men have a heavy responsibility that they do not subsume 'gender' under the 'caste' collective. The struggle for equality must be consistent. In furtherance of the legacy of Ambedkar, the question of caste has to be addressed along with the intersectional impact of gender and caste. The mainstream savarna feminists and male dominated Dalit movement should engage with the intersectional approach of Dalit feminism. It would only strengthen the fight for caste and gender equality. By including the radical ideas of a non-Dalit leader such as Ram Manohar Lohia into its fold, the social justice movement can forge a broader social justice agenda. This would also increase the appeal of the anti-caste social justice movement. The emerging global discourse on caste-race nexus (Paik, 2014; Wilkerson, 2020) will be comprehensive only with the inclusion of the nexus of *caste*, *gender*, *class*, and *race*, as Lohia had emphasized. While building transnational alliances across different regions of the world, the initiative to address intersectionality of caste and gender can begin from home. Dalit intellectuals made a move by supporting the initial judgment (Indian Young Lawyers Association vs. State of Kerala, 2018) of the Supreme Court, which permitted the entry of women between age group of ten and fifty years in the Sabarimala temple.⁵ The upper caste-class feminists can reciprocate the cause for equality by endorsing political reservation for Dalit, Adivasi and Other Backward Classes women in the pending Women Reservation Bill in Parliament.

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Endnotes

- 1 Scheduled Castes is a legal categorization denoting castes or groups that are at the bottom of the Indian social hierarchy. They were considered untouchables and denied all rights and privileges in pre-independent India.
- 2 American scholar Kimberle Crenshaw is credited with coining the term 'intersectionality' in her 1989 article. In India, the nexus between caste, gender, class, etc. was explored by both Ambedkar and Lohia in their respective writings between 1915 and 1960.
- 3 Crenshaw made an important analysis: 'Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination—combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as black women—not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as black women.'
- 4 The cited article discusses one of the impacts of transnational alliance of black women as follows: 'Women representatives from thirty-three countries, including Brazil, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Honduras, hold regular regional forums to discuss the specific issues encountered by black women, including high rates of HIV/AIDS, land displacement, exclusion from political office, and the far-reaching impact of neo-liberal economic mandates on their social and economic livelihoods.'
- 5 The judgment is at present under review before a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court.