

Rethinking Knowledge, Unthinking the Brahminical: Dalit Feminism and Gender-Caste

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Abstract

This article introduces a Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint as an epistemic and political framework that redefines feminist thought through four interrelated pillars. It argues that decolonial and postcolonial frameworks remain constrained by their inability to recognise caste as the meta-structure that organises social relations, epistemic hierarchies, and modernity itself. Building on Dalit feminist thought, the article situates the Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint as a methodological and conceptual intervention that locates the entanglement of Brahminical patriarchy and coloniality as the constitutive core of modern knowledge. It proposes that decolonisation without debrahminisation reproduces the logic of caste within the emancipatory vocabulary of decoloniality. Among the standpoint's pillars, the analytic of gender-caste assumes central significance, positing that any theorisation of gender in South Asia must acknowledge caste as meta to its construction and lived expression. Together, these pillars foreground Dalit women's lived and theorised experiences as epistemic interventions that challenge the universalising tendencies of both colonial and Brahminical modernities, reworlding feminist thought towards a decolonial future.

Keywords

Decolonial, Caste, Feminism, Standpoint, Dalit, Subaltern

Introduction

South Asian postcolonialism has been facing an intellectual dead end in its anti-colonial consciousness due to the limits of nationalistic postcolonialism to address precolonial inequalities and segregation. However, several reasons contribute to this

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spectacular stoppage. Two reasons that needs urgent discussion within academia are namely, the problem of indigeneity and an overarching brahminic world view. Aloysius (2007) identifies this failure as rooted in what he calls the culture–power fusion of Indian nationalism, where the language of liberation was used to reproduce traditional hierarchies of caste and class. His historical-sociological analysis foregrounds the submerged masses, the Dalit-Bahujan- Adivasi majority, as the absent subject of nationalist imagination. The nationalist project, rather than achieving an egalitarian community, reconstituted the brahminical social order under a secular state form producing what he calls a state without a nation that exposed the contradiction at the heart of Indian postcoloniality.

The pursuit of decolonization must be understood against this backdrop of exclusion and appropriation, where socio-cultural actors across the tri-continents have sought diverse ways to dismantle coloniality and negotiate indigeneity—an enduring debate within Indian politics. Specifically, the Indian subcontinent as a socio-cultural and economic space houses communities, cultures and languages with often overlapping long *durée* histories. Therefore, debates around what and which elements could possibly represent pan-Indian indigeneity are always active and emblematic of Indian politics. In addition, the centrality of caste oppression across these debates and histories complicates an uncritical reinstitution of caste infested indigenous past. The violence and inequality inherent to precolonial caste structures were consolidated under British colonial rule and continue to shape postcolonial experience. Colonization, specifically British rule, exploited the pre-existent caste hierarchies to employ indirect rule over the vast subcontinent. This confluence of brahminic and colonial values facilitates an uninterrupted carry over of casteism into contemporary fabric of Indian every day and structural social (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019), foreclosing the possibility of a truly decolonial perspective.

Additionally, post-independence, postcolonialism focused on anti-colonial narratives which pitted modernity as a western virtue against Indian indigeneity (traditions, customs and cultural practices) which upheld caste values and aesthetics (George, 2024). While being exploitative to every group of natives, colonization left behind an elite class of national leaders with caste privileges to build and represent India and thus, the Indian postcolonial image (Panikkar, 2016). This produced a monolithic Brahminical representation of Indianness, reflecting an oligarchic social order where socio-economic and cultural capital remain concentrated in upper-caste hands, while Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi communities continue to face systemic exclusion. Over the past decades, relative social mobility achieved by individuals across the oppressed communities have created contact zones between the communities and hitherto ‘untouched’ social spaces including academia.

Subaltern theorists from DBA communities have successfully put forth reimaginations of the decolonial efforts with debrahminisation at its centre. Ayyathurai (2021) argues the emergence of Critical Caste Studies as a distinct subfield is crucial for academic engagement with caste as a pervasive social and epistemic structure. This approach challenges the normalization of caste hierarchies in knowledge production

and insists on centring the experiences and resistances of subordinated communities, thereby complementing decolonial and anti-caste projects. However, there is a persistent dissonance between decolonial and anti-caste projects, wherein, the former is regarded as transnational and the latter local. Therefore, this article delves into the experience of caste within coloniality (and vice-versa) to advocate for a rethinking of approaches to decolonization as a single axis anti-colonial endeavour within an indigenous social vacuum erasing multiplicity of postcolonial gendered experiences. Dalit feminist approach to decolonization broadens the boundaries by escaping a myopic view of the processes of colonisation towards the end of social justice.

This article advances a Dalit Decolonial Feminist Standpoint (DDFS) as both a theoretical and methodological framework for decolonial research underscoring that decolonisation in the Indian context is inseparable from debrahminisation. The standpoint is animated by a dual imperative: first, to forge solidarities across outcaste communities; and second, to reconfigure cognitive and social orders toward justice. It is articulated through four guiding pillars: (1) subaltern experience as relational and foundational; (2) recognition of the entangled core of Brahminical patriarchy and colonialism; (3) the discourse of the unthought, grounded in the lived reality of untouchability; and (4) caste as meta, articulated through the category of gender-caste, which together constitute the methodological core. Together, these pillars support decolonial inquiries to centre Dalit consciousness by serving as reference points throughout the research process. They enable decolonial research to address the epistemic silences foregrounding Dalit positionalities and Indian particularities in ways that challenge dominant epistemologies. In doing so, DDFS provides a means of exploring questions of gendered postcolonial being that remain obscured within existing frameworks. The article proceeds in three interlinked stages. It opens with an exposition of the Hindu social order as theorised by Ambedkar, before critically examining the mechanisms of Brahminical patriarchy and the constraints of mainstream Indian feminist frameworks. It provides a brief conceptual scaffolding setting the stage for the subsequent section, which elaborates the Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint.

The Paradise that Never Was: Hindu Social Order

Beginning in the fifteenth century, Europeans began colonizing the Indian subcontinent in various ways and on different scales. However, for centuries before colonization, both European and non-European travellers observed, chronicled, and shared their diverse, and sometimes opposing, social and intellectual perspectives on the lands beyond the Indus. In order to identify and dissect the influence of colonization on homogenising social categories, albeit incompletely, necessitates tapping into the social within the consciousness of precolonial societies which moulded the experiences of the self and the communities. From earliest travel accounts to ethnographic and trade documents, the socioeconomic hierarchy of *varnas* (Hindu broad caste groups which house numerous sub-castes) and *jatis* (sub-castes) is frequently documented as a cultural-religious commonality that unites the Indian subcontinent, all of which

are viewed with curiosity and/or disdain (Subrahmanyam, 2017). Subsequently, global travellers, colonial anthropologists, and native academics explored the caste system in great detail as a feature of ‘Hindoos’¹ (Nesfield, 1885; Davids, 1911; Senart, 2018). These views offer partial accounts of the complex social order marked by vast linguistic, cultural and social diversity as foundational to the inhabitants of the subcontinent. These accounts, though useful, need to be assessed within the context of untouchability i.e., the unlikelihood of elite travellers and scholars to engage with oppressed and slave castes due to the strict practice of caste segregation. Therefore, strict segregation coupled with high degree of endogamy erases any possibility of a truly subaltern perspective within early accounts. This misfortune continues to affect Indian intellectuals and extends to decolonial discourses which maintain minimal engagements with anti-caste decolonial perspectives. This has created a series of potholes in the development of postcolonial studies.

The role of caste in enabling administrative colonization through a coalition of colonial and brahminic forces is seldom a topic within decolonial discussions. In particular, as an approach to understand how different meta structures fused over centuries to produce and sustain the contemporary categories of social identities. Hindu social order as theorised by Ambedkar is a foundational theory which investigated the local configuration of power and social relations linking multiple historical (and contemporarily valid) aspects of the Indian sub-continent centring the twin categories of caste and gender. The Hindu social order is separate from what we understand in the contemporary world as Hinduism—a unified religion borne out of British colonization (Subrahmanyam, 2017; Chakravarti, 2023). Nevertheless, it must be noted that Hinduism is dependent on the Hindu social order in its mythological, ritual, and social practices and therefore, cannot sustain independently (Iliaiah, 2002). Within Hindu texts, in particular Manusmriti,² Hindu social order was justified using the divine doctrine that different *varnas* were created from distinct parts of the divine body of Brahma³ (Olivelle and Olivelle, 2005). It must be noted that while all religious texts recognize equality in creation, Hindu texts are the exception where inequality becomes the foundation of the religion. Ambedkar explains that Hindus, similar to

¹Hindoo as a word carries religious, cultural and geographical connotation in contemporary world. However, in precolonial India, Hindoo was predominantly tied to the lands beyond the river Indus. It must be noted that Hinduism as an umbrella religion took form after the British rule conglomerating numerous beliefs, dieties and customs. Therefore, caste as *varnas* and *jatis* predate Hinduism as a religion and forms its base.

²Manusmriti also known as the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra or Laws of Manu, is one of the many legal texts and constitutions among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism which details rules of caste and brutal punishments which should be imposed on those who break caste laws. Manusmriti was one of the first Sanskrit texts to be translated into English, in 1776, by British philologist Sir William Jones to construct the Hindu law code for the East India Company administered enclaves.

³Brahma is a Hindu god, who is worshipped as the creator within the *Trimurti* (trinity of supreme divinity that includes Vishnu and Shiva). He is associated with creation, knowledge, and the Vedas. Brahma is prominently mentioned in creation legends.

other religious followers, consider men as a creation of God but with an addendum to it,

according to them, the whole truth consists of two parts. The first part is that men were created by God. The second part is that God created different men from distinct parts of his divine body. The Hindus regard the second part as more important and more fundamental than the first. (Ambedkar and Moon, 2019, 100).

The divinely ordained doctrine of inherent superiority and inferiority among distinct human classes finds its centrality in both colonialism and Brahminism. However, within Brahminism, the explicit prescription of caste slavery and oppression in its religious texts further deepens the socio-religious and cultural normalization of inequality. This doctrine insisted that the creation of distinct and different classes of humans are intrinsic, fundamental, and a divinely ordained way of existence and thus, should be translated into the daily lives and practices of Hindus. Nevertheless, caste distinction is sustained with the aid of religious and social sanction. This categorization was practised through birth-based imposition of occupations which dictates ones ritual, economic and social stature within a graded hierarchy consisting of endogamous caste communities (Balakrishnan, 1983; Iliaiah, 2000; Yengde and West, 2019). Through his prolific scholarship, Ambedkar highlights that the immutability of positions maintained through endogamy effectively opposed the concepts of fraternity and equality found in most other religious texts (Ambedkar, 2021). Under the order, the oppressed castes were penalized for their incidence of birth through extreme deprivation of socio-economic resources, occupational slavery and social ostracization (Ambedkar, 2014). In particular, untouchables (Dalit) and tribal (Adivasi) castes who were considered to be outside of the divine order were relegated to slavery which entailed extreme physical violence, deprivation and mental humiliation (Mohan, 2015; Paul, 2021).

In addition, the Hindu social order needs to be understood as an ordering of caste groups rather than individuals, wherein, it was impossible for an individual from a particular caste group to gain caste mobility,⁴ thereby depriving them of the possibility of a casteless self and thus, social freedom. What is most significant in his theorisation of Hindu social order is the inseparability of caste from other social identities. The Hindu social order which operates through caste system was also identified as the control point for gender identities, occupation, economic class, ritual and social status (Ambedkar, 2014). Historically, caste position dictated your gender, economic and rituals roles within the society. Ambedkar identifies gender violence through gendered practices such as sati, child marriage, and imposed widowhood, which serve as norms⁵

⁴Though exceptional, over centuries, certain subcastes as a class have been mobile along the caste hierarchy due to various socio-economic changes (Osella and Osella 2015). However, scholars argue that colonisation further rigidified caste structures further reducing the possibility of caste mobility of even caste groups (Dirks, 2011).

⁵It must be noted that atrocities against women in India which were discussed and debated during independence struggles and social reform movements, including sati, and widowhood

instituted to maintain the caste order (Ambedkar, 2021). Therefore, the justification for caste order and its practises, though tied to religion, cannot be wholly contained within its boundaries. In other words, caste serves as the simulacra of cultural life and as the fulcrum of economic distribution in precolonial and, consequentially in colonial India.

Given the extent of caste labour and exploitation, the British were able to control the subcontinent by establishing their power over the caste elites. The pre-existence of cheap bonded service and slave castes who functioned as endogamous communities of workers controlled by socio-ritual classes of caste elites helped the colonisers, especially the British, to adopt a unique *modus operandi*. The absence of large-scale transcontinental slavery into South Asia during colonization is due to the presence of large indigenous populations of Shudra workers and Dalit slaves. To elaborate, the caste system which functioned as an organising principle and subsequently, as a rigid hierarchal socio-cultural and economic division of labourers helped colonial officials to form alliance with the ruling natives and dominant classes (oppressor castes) permitting imposition of direct administrative colonialism (Omvedt, 1994; 2011). As a result, institutions of caste slavery, endogamy and untouchability were utilised for the benefit of the coalition (British-native masters) and subsequently, parcelled as a non-violent harmonious local tradition riddled with complex religious sentiments (Mohan, 2015; Dirks, 2001).

During the colonial period, there were structural changes in the social order, which did not entail a destruction of the pre-existent order but rather changes within the functioning of sociabilities and hierarchies in response to colonial values. The syncretisation of race and caste is one of the best examples to grasp the colonial-brahminic schema. The British officials were unable to comprehend the complex and foreign system of caste. However, racial segregation was both acceptable and logical to the colonial minds. Therefore, the scientifically unfounded colonial formulation of racial superiority of the white Aryan race was superimposed on the Indian populations to validate the oppressive caste-based hierarchies in line with racist colonial ideologues (Thapar, 1996). Using biological essentialism characteristic of Europe, British officials recognised brahmins⁶ as a race with distant Aryan ancestry whereas, the oppressed castes were deemed as inferior races ignoring the complexities associated with caste system (Thapar, 2019). This rhetoric helped the colonial officials to create a native class loyal to them based on the myth of racial proximity whilst maintaining native hierarchy and their superiority over all Indian populations including the brahmins. Therefore, the colonial period was characterised by racialisation of caste and castification of race entwining white and caste supremacy. The syncretisation of race and caste justified caste oppression in secular terms supported by colonial scientific racism and caste became an example of universality of racial inequality (Cháirez-Garza et al., 2022). Therefore, the caste system, though not colonial in its origin was used and influenced by British colonialism (Dirks, 2001).

were oppressor caste practices effectively excluding Dalit women and their issues.

⁶priestly caste which occupies the top-most position in the caste hierarchy.

The trauma of colonization and subsequent rise of nationalism united separate regions with distinct sub-cultures, assuming the geo-historical cultural space of India into existence (Sarkar, 1992; Anderson, 2006). With the birth of India post-independence in 1947, class began to be used as a pseudonym for caste to project the idea of secular modern India. Furthermore, Hindu nationalism functioned as a unifying agenda legitimising the Hindutva⁷ ideologues of providence and fixed divine order into the fabric of postcolonial India (Mehta, 2022). Unfortunately, the enthusiasm to institute a coherent and simple to comprehend history for nation-building led to the marginalisation of sub-cultures, erasure of histories of the minoritized and thus, their accounts of social ostracization and economic deprivation (Chakrabarty, 1992; Guru and Sarukkai, 2017).

Over many centuries, it has evolved as an oppressive system with the ability to mutate and reproduce graded inequality interacting with colonialism, modernity and capitalism (De Neve, 2019). The mutual interdependence colonial-brahminic systems of oppression has influenced the *modus operandi* of the caste system while safeguarding its main characteristic to exploit its hierarchical structure for sustenance of neo-colonial capitalist exploitation (Thorat et al., 2023). It has a long history and present rooted in its continuous breeding with (neo)colonial values resulting in a unique conjugation of systems of caste, gender, religion, ethnicity and race. This makes an isolated study of postcoloniality without an analysis of modernity of brahminism an incomplete endeavour. Anti-caste convictions stand in direct opposition to the ethnocentric essentialist idea of a glorious past and emphasises the need to synchronously decolonise and debrahminise⁸ systems of intersectional oppression.

Brahminical Patriarchy versus Dalit Consciousness

Decolonial scholars such as Oy w m  (1997) and Lugones (2016) have explored how colonial systems of power have shaped our contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality and the systematic suppression (and erasure) of non-European ways of being. The violence of colonization and Euro-American cultural hegemony have distorted and influenced the pre-existent gendered ways of existence of the previously colonised societies. Therefore, a major task at the hands of decolonial gender scholars is to recover and represent alternate understandings of gender in order to highlight the colonial sociality of contemporary gender constructions. In addition, interventions by Black feminist activists and scholars highlighted the existence of different gendered experiences even within Euro-American societies arising out of historical

⁷Hindutva is a political extremist ideology which seeks to establish Hindu hegemony within India equating Hinduism with Indianness (Leidig, 2020).

⁸I conceptualise debrahminise as the act of dismantling the brahminical order which is founded on the gradation of classes of people. This entails conscious political and collective efforts. It requires anti-caste and feminist intentions to imagine a post-caste and post-patriarchal future. It does not isolate the varna of Brahmins but actively resists the system of caste. However, there is a need to acknowledge privileges of all castes relative to each other to fight this graded system of inequality.

racial, cultural and social oppression (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2015). However, following the discussion on precolonial Hindu social order, it is clear that gender functioned for and within caste-bound laws in the Indian subcontinent.

An individual's gender role, expression and sexuality was constructed, controlled and allowed by their specific *jati*. This leads to extreme isolation and control over sexuality of oppressor caste women, while lower caste women experiences a state of non-being characterised by violence, economic deprivation and untouchability. Ambedkar characterises caste as an order which required close monitoring of its sub-populations to reinforce and uphold the unnatural division of people. He identified sustained endogamy, enforced through strict control of women and their sexuality, as the key factor that transformed caste-based segregation into a functional social order (Gorringe, 2018; Ambedkar, 2021). To quote Wakankar, 'Hinduism's freedom co-exists with an affirmation of caste distinction (2010, p. 28). Therefore, individual freedom is incompatible with caste values and caste communities were prescribed endogamous social quarantine in lieu of purity.

There is a huge gap between early theorisations of gender which centralised caste and postcolonial theorisations which favoured a nationalist anti-colonial approach (Sarkar, 2009; Guru, 2011). The oppressor caste hegemony within post-independence nation-making and inaccessibility to knowledge/power which afflicted Bahujan and Dalit populations favoured a monolithic brahminic representation of the postcolonial subaltern obscuring caste inequalities. Subsequently, postcolonial gender scholarship, which has been canonized, follows frameworks that emerge from the habitus and endogamic knowledge circuits of the caste privileged. Although several streams of regional social reform movements focusing on women's issues preceded the nation building process of India, historiography of modern Indian feminism often begins with the pro-women's rights sentiments in the late 1850s in mainland India (Pande, 2018).

To elaborate, during British rule, the reluctance of the dominant Hindu elite to accommodate women reforms, the British crown's eagerness to spread Christian values, and the reformers' determination to use the self-rule negotiations as a bargaining point resulted in some unlikely alliances (Banerjee, 2003). Several reformers appealed directly to the British officials and non-officials for enacting laws prohibiting Hindu practices such as Sati, child marriage and mandatory widowhood surpassing the mediation of the native elites (Basu, 1995). Hence, colonial government was often perceived as an ally by the social reformers in their fight against tradition with orthodox oppressor caste Hindu elite. During the independence struggles, to prevent further British-reformer coalitions and to consolidate native leadership, visible and deliberate attempts were made by Indian nationalist leaders to address feminist and social reform claims.

The leaders of the independence struggle(s) predominantly belonged to the Hindu oppressor caste elite communities. Consequentially, the women included within major mobilisations and organisations of the newly formed India was of a similar

background.⁹ In addition, these groups had the power and influence to pick and choose elements from colonialism, and brahminism to present a reformed brahminism to form the foundation of modern India (Omvedt, 2000). Subsequently, a figure of the modern Indian womanhood (modern but different from that of the west), which suitably reflected the virtues of nationalism and colonial patronage, modelled after oppressor caste aesthetics was iconised to unite reformers and nationalists (Sinha, 2000). This can be identified as a re-brahminisation of Indian patriarchy which sought to subsume feminist movements and invisibilise caste differences within the larger rubric of anti-colonial nationalism. This attempt to handcuff feminist movements (predominantly for and by women movements) to nationalist factions and party politics subsequently submerged feminist theorisation and activism in the immediate aftermath of independence (Patel and Sinha, 2021). A detailed analysis of Indian feminisms is outside the purview of this article and will be a reiteration of the well-known. However, it will be beneficial to briefly discuss certain concepts and debates which developed in the last few decades in Indian feminism(s).

As mentioned above, the model Hindu woman was constructed for oppressor caste women by oppressor caste men. What is interesting is how the exclusion of oppressed caste women from this category became fundamental to its construction. While exalting the model of Hindu women as the desirable, it was important to construct an Other which symbolised the downfall. The outcaste experience of Dalit women was juxtapositioned against the relatively better off existence (especially in terms of material privileges but not limited to) of oppressor caste women (Geetha, 2007). Through an analysis of domestic manuals and didactic literature of post-independence India, Gupta traces how Dalit women were constructed in opposition to the oppressor caste women within a gendered casteist discourse instituting stable categories of oppressor caste *pativatras* (ideal wives) and oppressed caste and/or Dalit *kutnis* (vamps). She notes, 'the construction of woman in this literature had thus two sides: upper caste was what woman is and ought to be; Dalit was what she had better not be. It allowed the upper castes to maintain a position of moral and caste superiority' (Gupta, 2008, p. 115). Postcolonial reinvention of gender categories maintained and used the gaping differences between castified gender experiences. The symbol of modern Indian woman was the gendered other of oppressor caste Hindu men who were the ideal modern Indian citizen. Thus, Dalit women who face othering in terms of racialised caste and gender becomes the 'despicable other' of the 'gendered other' representing the doomed womanhood. In short, Dalit women were constructed in the negative and embodied caste-gender impurity pushing them into a zone of non-being (Fanon, 2008).

Caste difference, thus, controls the construction of gendered differences between oppressor caste womanhood and Dalit sub-humanity. At 2015 Delhi pride, young Dalit queer journalist Dhrubo Jyoti highlighted the ambivalence of gender and caste

⁹For example, a report of the 1889 session of the Indian National Congress in Bombay notes the presence of women delegates as being no less than ten consisting of Europeans, Christians, one Parsi, one orthodox Hindu, and three Brahmins (Kosambi, 1988).

as separate identities, 'we bring caste up because caste is everywhere and in my everything. Caste is in my shirt. Caste is in my pant. Caste is in my sex. Caste is in my being and Caste is in every part of you too!' (Upadhyay, 2020, p. 467). This dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed castes which existed in their material, cultural, social and ritual positions in the Indian societies unfortunately offered an abysmally weak bargaining position to Dalit women and queers to intervene in mainstream feminism in the immediate aftermath of independence. Knowledge production and power networks were controlled and inhabited by caste oligarchies. Therefore, it should be noted that the absence of representation of Dalit feminism within historiography of Indian feminism should not be regarded as evidence of its inexistence but that of exclusion. Several examples points to a common oppressed caste feminist consciousness emerging from a different social situatedness from the precolonial to post-colonial periods tackling the entangled core of brahminical patriarchy and colonialism (Raj, 2013; John, 2015).

The relative delay in bringing intersectional theorisations into the fold of Indian feminism is due to its non-engagement with Dalit-Shudra and non-Brahman movements advocating the radical restructuring of Indian society (Omvedt, 2011). Brahminic feminism (also termed Savarna feminism) was and is the most accepted form of feminism within Indian academia and gender movements, viewing gender issues through an oppressor caste lens, thereby primarily catering to the needs of oppressor caste women and excluding oppressed caste women (Rao, 2003). The absence of a collective cultural memory without caste inequalities within the Indian subcontinent for hundreds of centuries has normalised casteist worldviews especially through exclusion and omission further enabling brahminical supremacy. Dalit feminism is regarded as by and for the oppressed caste community while 'Indian' feminism, along with its stamp of neutrality, is earmarked for brahminic feminism (John, 2015; Arya and Rathore, 2020). Moreover, focusing solely on women's oppression risks overlooking the ways in which caste hierarchies shape masculinities; as Lakshmanan (2004) demonstrates, Dalit men negotiate their identities under systemic caste oppression, highlighting that both male and female subjectivities are structured by caste. Ignoring these dynamics reinforces Brahminical normative frameworks, which then extend into the diasporic context, where the engendering of Indian communities is largely framed around oppressor caste norms, nostalgic cultural preservation, and idealized notions of the Indian pasts (Chayani, 2018; Purkayastha, 2019). This single axis analysis of gender within an Indian postcolonial framework erodes the possibility of further discussions and solidarities which could benefit subaltern communities within India and across regions (hooks, 1992; 2015).

Defining a Dalit Decolonial Feminist Standpoint

Foremost, decolonisation as an active project need to be defined to support the specific nature of colonial and regional specificities which structure Indian gendered identities (including diasporic identities) in relation to Europe. Therefore, decolonial projects require intentional and deliberate acts which strive to recognize post-colonial social

categories, hierarchies, and relations as products of an entangled social core of regional power structures (brahminism), and (neo)colonialism. Decolonial scholars should practice research informed by histories of oppressions across and within cultures. While keeping the definition of decolonial project broad to ensure applicability across cultures, it is necessary to build a theoretical framework which can remain focused on the particularity of India.

Subaltern schools in general, and decolonial discourses in particular, are currently implanted within larger frameworks which share histories of Dalit and gender oppressions. This echoes Aloysius's observation that Indian nationalist thought displaced the social struggles of the oppressed castes into the background, denying them participation in defining the modern nation (2007). These discourses struggle to theorise anti-caste feminist epistemologies due to a disjunct between the dominance of neo-colonial and brahminic stronghold on spaces of theory creation which attempts to theorise decolonial subalternity which escapes subaltern perspectives. In addition, Dalit feminist and decolonial theorisations are scattered across disciplines and have not been yet institutionalised as a school of thought in either Indian or Euro-American academes. Due to the multiplicity of theoretical schools across disciplines of feminist and decolonial studies, it would be more appropriate to develop a standpoint to undertake this task as opposed to a novel theory.

Defining a Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint necessitates a critical departure from the epistemic terrains of both postcolonial and feminist theories that have historically failed to account for caste as the meta-structure of social and intellectual life. Dalit feminist standpoint is not an extension of identity politics but an epistemic and political intervention that redefines the very conditions of knowledge production and its legitimacy. As Patil (2013) asserts, Dalit feminism must be understood as a reflexive, anti-caste praxis rather than an extension of identity politics. Drawing on Marx, Mignolo, and Oyěwùmí, she repositions Dalit women's location-based knowledge as an epistemological intervention within feminist thought, rather than a peripheral or experiential supplement to it. The standpoint introduced here builds on such insights offered by anti-caste theorists—from Ambedkar to Patil—as a methodological framework that operates as a dynamic reference point accompanying the researcher's inquiries. Therefore, drawing from and contesting Dalit and transnational feminist theories, I attempt to define a Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint which seeks to uncover brahminic-colonial thoughts which create and sustain local and transnational gendered experiences. It aims to forge solidarity across outcastes to resist (in short term) and restructure (in long term) cognitive apparatus in lieu of a decolonial future. Specifically, I have developed four central pillars which will function as reference points in the process of theory making and research analyses. The central tenets are briefly described below:

Subaltern Experience as Relational and Initial Point of Enquiry

Over recent decades, scholars have increasingly recognised that Indian subalternity in its most intense form is embodied in the lived experiences of oppressed castes.

Yet these experiences are still often treated as merely local issues, rather than as integral to broader theorisation. At the same time, the marginal space accorded to racialised subalterns in the West generates a reluctance within diasporic communities to acknowledge their own relative privileges. Nevertheless, multiple studies and legal cases have reaffirmed the persistence of caste discrimination within global diasporas (Dalwai, 2016; Adur and Narayan, 2017; Pratibha, 2021; Yengde, 2022; Mégret and Dutta, 2022). Such evidence unsettles diasporic denials of caste, while exposing how global caste discourses are frequently dismissed as regressive or exaggerated, thereby complicating projects of postcolonial solidarities. This reluctance is also compounded by an inadequate conception of subalternity as a fixed or absolute position. An intersectional perspective, by contrast, insists that subalternity is contextual and relational, constituted through shifting configurations of caste, race, gender, and class.

Keeping in mind the complexity of subalternity, this standpoint starts from the initial condition of gendered caste oppression to make sense of the world. Gopal Guru puts forth Dalit discourse as a sharp contrast to the derivative and *desi*¹⁰ discourses governing nationalist thought by imagining India based on a negative language foregrounding itself in the local configuration of power suggesting a parallel problematic which is marginal, different in style, and socio-politically 'beyond' (Guru, 2011). Dalit-Shudra thought which shapes the category of beyond centralises the experience of untouchability which remains theoretically underused. In his construction of beyond, the foundation in the local configuration of power is conceptualised as an initial condition capable of going beyond its own particularity.

Furthermore, feminist and race scholars have been using standpoint theory as an epistemology, methodology and/or approach advocating that particular social and political locations, often marginalised, encourage the growth of knowledge (Harding, 1986; Collins, 1989). Scholars pointed out that standpoint as a methodology enables stronger objectivity by centralising marginalised positions putting forth novel and excluded, nevertheless distorted, starting points of inquiry emphasising the significance of context of theoretical discoveries (Haraway, 1988). Standpoint theories centre on social relations, lived experience, and differences, emphasising the interconnectedness of power inequalities to overcome epistemological ignorance emerging from dominance of a particular worldview. However, standpoint theories are often misinterpreted advocating for essentialist visions and separatism by privileging experience as the sole criterion for theorising the subaltern(s).

Dalit discourses extensively tackle the role of experience in thinking and knowing which paves an understanding of subalternity as experience which shapes the notions of self and community (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019). Guru affirms that universalism,

¹⁰While derivative discourse of nationalist thought is thoroughly discussed by western and challenged by subaltern scholars, Guru highlighted the *Desi* strand of thought which sought to reverse the logic of orientalism making the west an object of inquiry while being self-referential. According to Guru, *Desi* thought which developed as a response to the colonial epistemology required 'the west as a negative reference point' for its own 'authentic articulation' and acquired partial autonomy through its 'privileged access to Sanskrit providing necessary vocabulary for developing an alternate theoretical thinking' which was unavailable to the oppressed castes.

which is often tied to colonality of power, is lost in the domain of experiences. It highlights that conceptual approximation depends upon experience(s) which hinges on reproduction of spaces that are structured along different and intersectional axes (economic, colonial and discursive) producing fragmentary forms of experience. This resulting differentials in the realm of experiences for the privileged is a political condition necessary to maintain domination and becomes inherent in their theory-making leading to the effective objectification of the marginalised (Guru and Sarukkai, 2017). This objectification emerges out of systemic inequality and is often beyond the control of individual theorists. Charles Mills and Rich Benjamin have tackled this theoretical issue within the concepts of racial contract and whtopia in their exploration of racial dynamics and white supremacy (Mills, 1997; Benjamin, 2016). However, this argument does not claim experience as the sole grounds for theory making. It advocates the recognition of the value of subaltern experience within research, especially theorization.

Experience becomes an epistemic resource at the hand of subaltern as an initial condition which needs to be revisited using concepts, and theories to arrive at the essential condition of theorisation. Everyday social through routine habitual practices and interactions influences engagements with the structural social and thus, can lead to varied and multiple consciousness within social groups. Dalit women are recognised as unique social organisms built in contradistinction to 'woman' in mainstream Indian feminism and 'Dalit' in Dalit politics (Pan, 2018). Dalit women inhabit the process of worlding as a removed subject(s) of brahminised colonial power structures (Ramesh, 2020). This helps them to critically understand the legitimised aesthetics, metaphors, and phenomenology involved in theory making as particular to and of the dominant rather than inhabiting a social vacuum. A decolonial Dalit feminist standpoint originating at the initial condition of Dalit gendered lived experience empower development of theoretical explanations contesting given knowledge as best beliefs of privileged cultures. It interjects the neutrality afforded to the privileged exemplified in their power to represent and not to be seen. This standpoint entails an awareness of the tendencies of knowledge circuits to restrict Dalit feminist discourses to narratives and life testimonies of pain, suffering and violence emerging out of patronage of brahminical and western (Euro-American) schools of thought (Rege, 1998; Arya and Rathore, 2020).

Furthermore, starting at the Dalit experiences of colonialism encourages to pay attention to regional specificities, and to the dynamism and reproduction of a spectrum of gendered subaltern experiences compelling to envision decolonialisation and brahminisation as single endeavour towards freedom. Therefore, it initiates a deliberate reshaping of theoretical space(s) by focusing on diverse ways of Dalit knowing to the end of theory-making complimented by empirical inquiries. Within this standpoint, intersectionality becomes a crucial methodological element that aids in navigating the entanglements of distinct socio-economic and political categories. Through an interrogation of the ontology of alienation, under fulfilled citizenship and permanent displacement to the margins, Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint should

inculcate a strong grasp of connectedness of various oppressive systems through the initial starting point of Dalit experiences. However, the organic intersectionality it offers must be considered as foundational but not sufficient in itself to produce theories to understand the why(s) and how(s) of subaltern being. This necessitates transitioning from the local (Dalituality) to transnational (subalternity) to synthesis experiences of outcastes across regions, languages and situatedness.

Recognition of an Entangled Core of Modernity of Brahminic Patriarchy and Colonialism

As discussed throughout this article, the precolonial Hindu social order characterized by the brahminic oppression was both recognized and exploited during the colonial period. This interaction of imperial oppressive systems to-date controls the socio-economic and political hierarchies in South Asian societies. It is actively powering the systems of gender, religion, sexuality, race and class. This entanglement of oppressive ideologues privileges and disadvantages caste groups by controlling the social experiences of individual and communal identities. It is, therefore, necessary to recognise the inseparability of modernity of brahminic colonialism from every day and structural social to understand the (post)coloniality of power reproducing inter and intracontinental inequalities. This requires decolonial Dalit feminist standpoint to directly address the brahminic-colonial influence which hovers over decolonial theorisation and its tendency to universalise the category of post-colonial Indian subaltern.

Scholars and researchers engaging with and/or using this standpoint will benefit from being sensitive to the long histories of oppressions along the lines of caste, gender, race, religion and class within and across cultures which have solidified inequalities by engaging in deliberate acts to build trust. In particular, categories of oppressor/ oppressed castes, man/ non-man genders, cis-hetero/ queer sexualities, and Hindu/ non-Hindu religious followers created through brahminic-colonial interactions have also long histories of frictions which need to be acknowledged and addressed within decolonial-debrahminical resistance. From this vantage point, engagement with Dalit theories in relation to transnational feminist theories will be a requisite to trace micro and macro level intersections. The act of trust building between communities with different and even oppositional histories will require conscious continuous effort. This precludes solidarity between groups from being based on essentialist commonalities but rather a product of dissent against oppression rooted in difference. In short, intentional social solidarity need to be prioritised in lieu of incidence of natural solidarity.

With regard to this standpoint, the research enquiries need to intentionally seek and present the brahminic-colonial stimulus behind contemporary ways of being. An active resolve to centre difference of colonial experiences with regional specificities will help to explore nuances within the concepts of indigeneity, race, modernity, and decoloniality resulting in fruitful debates and cross-pollination of ideas to tackle the other possible entangled core(s). By creating a framework which blurs the distinction between 'local' (such as brahminism) and 'transnational' (such as colonialism)

configurations of power, it forces recognition of power structures which hamper decolonisation typically ignored and thus, outside the purview of transnational theorisation.

Discourse of 'Unthought'

Untouchability is mostly addressed as an Indian casteist practice, wherein, severe forms of segregations among the castes are practised to the extent of prohibition of touch and thus, sharing of close spaces between sub-castes (Omvedt, 1994). It is important to note that the practice of untouchability was practised against the lower ranking castes by the upper castes true to the nature of caste system and its graded inequality. For example, brahmins could not mingle with Kshatriyas and below, Kshatriyas could not mingle with Vaishyas and below and, so on. Brahmins, the topmost varna, were the sole group exempted from being discriminated within untouchability. Untouchable castes (Dalits) embodies this practice by being considered the most impure social beings capable of spreading pollution under untouchability. In certain regions such as Kerala, untouchability was accompanied by unapproachability where the outcastes were prohibited to be sighted by the oppressor castes (Devika, 2005). In modernity of caste, the illegality and impracticality of untouchability has shrunk and latched itself to the Dalit community.

Guru engages with the concept of category of beyond as products of discourses linked to the experiences of untouchability (Guru, 2011). He conceives unthought as emerging out of the failure to accommodate untouchability within the existing conceptual vocabulary of the decolonial, nationalist and philosophical thoughts. Thus, he presents the alternate Dalit socio-political thought which accounts for social and political freedom within colonial studies linked to anti-caste leaders such as Ambedkar and Phule that expresses itself in difference, defiance and dissonance forming the category of beyond against desi and derivative discourses within anti-colonial theorisations (Ibid.). However, the idea of a discourse of unthought grounded in the experiences of untouchability both in its precolonial and postcolonial manifestations deserves further attention and development as a theoretical concept.

Untouchability was and is essential to the maintenance of brahminism which is closely associated with the notions of purity and impurity. The untouchables arouse a pre-verbal affect response in the negative (disgust, shame, savagery, trauma etc.) personifying caste taboos. The absence of a collective memory of castelessness and social freedom within Indian societies have normalised inequality. In such a social system, freedom in itself (especially to DBA communities) is part of unthought and outside of communal experiences. Due to relational nature of social categories, the one who refuses to touch (oppressor castes) ironically turns into the untouched-deprived of touch. Touch as a fundamental way of encountering and relating to the Other invariably shapes our thought (Sartre and Sartre 2006). Though most severe in the Indian context, from transgender exclusionary spaces to ghettoisation, forms of untouchability can be seen in modern societies across regions.

The experience(s) of untouchability provides an experience of being neither/nor rooted in a history of negation. Modernity of brahminism presents to Dalit communities, the experience of existing and moving within a spectrum of belonging and unbelonging (in-between) according to one's intersectional positionality. For example, Dalitness can be identified as an existence which experiences being indigenous and outcaste, Hindu and impure, citizen and oppressed, labour and undervalued and so on. An integration of faithful accounts of untouchability will help to explore partially shared and unshared histories and ways of knowing and being. The experience of untouchability is seldom approached as theoretical avenue to tackle decolonial, feminist and race issues. This is due to the limited access (a form of 'untouch') confronting Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi scholars to adorn the hat of a theoretician outside caste studies. The unspeakability of the subaltern and the failure to read the silences as a sign of epistemological ignorance have led to this omission. Moreover, the history of trauma and stigma associated with the practice of untouchability and caste slavery makes it a difficult concept to be theorised. However, unthought is a powerful epistemological framework and an approach to centralise the mind, body and affect as sites of resistance against the normalised practices of oppression.

I conceptualise 'Un-thought' as an intellectual discourse and practise encouraging theory and praxis rooted in subaltern experiences. It encompasses revelation of a historical process of negation (un-) and active process of thinking (thought) within Dalit communities. It offers a critical perspective on established theories and bodies of knowledge, recognising them as caste-inflected knowledges that emerge from endogamic epistemic networks—often in conjunction with, or in isolation from, other such networks. In doing so, it actively encourages reflection on what remains unthought, as well as on who is permitted to engage with, or "touch," these silences in order to enrich the field of research. It points towards the vast array of un-thought arenas within the postcolonial Indian societies which helps to reproduce and maintain the brahminic-colonial confluence.

It centralises contact as phenomenological experience and epistemological method. Moreover, within this standpoint, spaces of unthought is broken through examination of brahminic-colonial hegemony maintained through a state of normalised unfreedom. Therefore, it is important to centralise discourses of unthought through an archaeology of power to drill through the opaqueness to speak about the unspeakable and by actively thinking about the unthought. It helps to mould the decolonial Dalit feminist discourses into a transitional epistemology and approach, wherein, the truth and power does not emerge from the same social locations by moving beyond the boundaries to expand spaces of in-betweenness to push out the binaries.

Caste as Meta and the Category of Gender-Caste

Caste-controlled patriarchies are institutions unique to the sub-continent which may resemble but varies significantly from patriarchal practices and beliefs followed in other regions of the world. Caste works through the constitution and reconstitution of endogamous groups (in its being, inter-generational economies, living practices and

marriage choices) prescribing gendered roles to caste imprinted individuals. Women of these endogamous groups survived with far lesser rights and privileges than their men. However, it is difficult to compare Dalit women experience as being closer to either Dalit men or oppressor caste women. The non-human existence imposed on Dalits and sub-human experience of oppressor caste women simultaneously manifests in the Dalit women experience. The weight of Dalit women experience has been theorised as a compounded experience of their caste and gender positions within intersectional feminist and critical caste studies. However, Dalit women experience cannot be solely viewed as an additive result of Dalit and women experiences robbing them of distinct consciousness. Nevertheless, the main issue with this framework of gender and caste analysis is its separate and often oppositional positioning.

Caste and gender are recognised as categories which occupy the position of the Other of the ideal Hindu oppressor caste man. Drawn from critical race theories, double burden and intersectionality are superimposed on theorisations of Indian gendered experiences. However, within Indian context, caste oppression cannot be pinpointed to a historical point such as transatlantic slavery or colonisation as in the case of creation of race and racism exacerbating and expanding gendered oppression. Historians have put forward plausible explanations for the development of *varna-jati* from ritual/occupational guilds to a social order and have traced its emergence approximately to the period between the decline of Indus Valley Civilisation (c. 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE) to Later Vedic Period (c. 1000 BCE-600 BCE) (Thapar, 2019). This presents a long *durée* history of caste which makes it one of the oldest social categories. Therefore, a separation of caste from historical and contemporary conceptions of gender is flawed. Theorisation of gender experiences in the Indian sub-continent as separate with intersections with caste have produced strong feminist interventions. However, it is important to explore the possibility of caste being a causation to the contemporary gendered experiences within the subcontinent.

Dalit feminists have tried to emphasise the importance of foregrounding differentials within gendered experiences, of not just oppressed caste women but of all genders, as being mediated and controlled through brahminic forces. Therefore, it is imperative to recognise caste as the meta which not just influences but creates (through permissibility) gendered roles, expressions and performance. This necessitates a new method of looking at gendered experiences and recognising it as 'gender-caste'. In addition, gender-caste as a category helps to focus on the undercurrents which determine the gender roles based on the mutations of caste over time. Caste is a malleable and adaptive oppressive force which has surpassed economic, social and cultural systems effectively changing modality of gender as practice, roles and expressions. However, changes in the functioning of gender-caste affect experiences of caste-sub groups in non-linear and discrete ways.

For example, misogynist taboo over menstruation were practised by several oppressor caste communities by isolating menstruating women from the presence of other pure bodies during menstrual phases (Gold-Watts et al., 2020). This practice was largely absent within the Dalit communities (Sowjanya, 2019). Menstrual taboos and

the resulting isolation have been explored as a phase of untouchability (temporary) experienced by oppressor caste women (Chatterjee, 2021). While Dalit women have referred to caste as their ‘period’ which is permanent and without escape (Sukumar, 2020). In the past decades, the modality of menstrual taboos has been reorganised to facilitate co-habitation of menstruating women with others to fit nuclear and middle-class daily routines predominantly in urban areas (Shah, 2005). In addition, several Dalit women have started practising this new modality of menstrual taboo as a method of social-caste mobility practice as an attempt to achieve ritual parity aided by relative economic freedom across regions in South Asia (Baumann et al., 2021). This shows how a single caste custom such as menstrual taboo is practised and used by women belonging to different castes with such divergence to exert their specific gendered caste roles.

Thus, the organisation of Indian societies is predominantly based on caste and its intersection with other identities such as gender, sexuality, religion, and class. Therefore, gender-caste as a separately named category which recognises caste as ‘meta’ defies the western understanding of social organisation. An acknowledgement of the coagulation of oppressive systems and its embodied volatility can be traced through naming of categories. The pervasiveness of colonial and capitalistic values in modern South Asia allows to read and interpret social categories through a western lens to an extent but is neither sufficient nor appropriate. A decolonial analysis of gender by centralising caste and paying attention to the evolution of social categories becomes a more insightful approach to understand gendered experiences and spaces. A hyphenated category of ‘gender-caste’ can be used to signify the interlocking of categories within a non-Northern framework to reimagine and reconfigure gendered worlding by centring intersectionality. This helps to view social categories as a synthesis of oppressive systems and undermines biological essentialism by helping to focus on the process of making of the categories. Therefore, admission of gender-caste as a vocabulary within decolonial Dalit feminist standpoint helps to shed emphasis on the role of caste as what makes and breaks gender based on caste differences.

Conclusion

The focus on the diverse and heterogenous nature of gender categories and experiences often causes anxiety regarding potential conflicts. Social justice movements, feminism in particular, deals with an array of intersectional issues which need to account for differences within agents and the cause. Feminist theory and praxis have moved away from viewing differences as barrier to mobilisation to discarding sameness as a necessary condition to invoke solidarity. Dalit decolonial feminist standpoint intrinsically linked to gender-caste theorizations can offer new modes of transnational connections by linking different experiences of slavery, displacement, and negation, which moves beyond universal essentialist categories to target subalternity within domains of experience. This article should be received as a call to transnational feminist scholars to engage with the Dalit decolonial critiques and the category of

gender-caste as a heuristic devices which offers an unromantic view of the past and strong critique of neo-colonialism.

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