

Raving with Equality? On Protean Forms of Caste and Gender in the Women's/Gender Studies Departments in India

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Abstract

Women's and gender studies in the twenty-first century have transformed the question of theory and praxis across the globe. As a discipline, it is waging its struggle against diverse forms of power and patriarchy. Women's studies in India started its own unique trajectory from the 1970s onwards. However, Dalit feminism critiqued the metanarrative of Indian feminism in the 1990s. Dalit feminists argued that they are oppressed on the basis of caste, class and gender. Dalit feminism subverted the internal and external patriarchy through its own powerful methodology and tropes. It debunked the partial, Brahminic, Indian feminism and its conspicuous silence on the relations of caste, gender, class and patriarchy. Dominant feminists included Dalit feminist discourse in the curriculum in a patronising fashion. Paradoxically, the social composition of those academicians was confined to the upper caste/class locations. This article engages with the experiences of Dalit women academicians who teach in the department of women's and gender studies in India. It explores forms and practices of caste, class, and gender discrimination in such departments. These forms of domination and subordination show the contradiction between practice and theory. It reflects on the moral and ethical positioning to unpack the everyday caste violence that operates in the educational institutions. It maps the politics of women's and gender studies in India. This article analyses the possibilities and impossibilities related to Dalit feminist engagement with capabilities and intersectional approaches in women's and gender studies in India. The main thrust is to examine the real and utopian dimensions of the assertions of Dalit women academicians.

Keywords

Women's and gender studies, caste, Dalit, patriarchy, feminism

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Introduction

The Social and political context of the disciplines and transfer of those ideas demonstrate the relations of power, knowledge and academia across the globe. Societal control and its subversion through modern politics and knowledge related practices have unleashed new trajectory of reason. Debates around reformation, renaissance, enlightenment and counter enlightenment embody the conflicts and consensus around the trajectory of (un) reason. However, global thought is critiqued for its patriarchal approaches. It opened new ways for articulating resistance. Assertions that determine the foregrounding of counter thought to the oppressive ideas have to be situated to grapple with the history of ideas. There are ways in which the epistemological foundation of a discipline is analyzed. Struggles that led to the establishment of a particular discipline resulted in the epistemological foundation like that in the case of ethnic studies (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 18). The epistemological foundation of hegemonic women's and gender studies in general and Dalit feminist perspectives in particular have to be revisited in order to understand the character of domination and oppression.

Social and political awakening related to the votes and education of women to that of the larger questions of body and sexuality departed from the erstwhile patriarchal thought and practices. Nineteenth and early twentieth century first wave feminism to that of second wave feminism from the 1970s onwards led to the emergence of unique thought and praxis. The advent of women's studies and gender studies needs to be understood in the backdrop of the aforementioned epistemic and political transformations. There are various readings related to the emergence of women's and gender studies. These disciplines are considered as broadly embedded in the Marxist framework and postmodern approaches (Eagleton 2003). Alain Badiou explored whether feminist philosophy raised any serious challenge to the anti-philosophy in theory (Badiou 1999). On the other hand, Frederic Jameson categorized the new subjects of history in the post-1960s such as women and Blacks that challenged the class approach. Balkanization of class-based approaches in the context of the formation of ethnic studies and women studies were untainted by the theory (Jameson, cited in Shih & Lionnet 2011:13). As Anna Donadey observed, "...When the civil rights, feminist and decolonization struggles of the 1950s to 1970s began to infiltrate the academic curricula in the 1970s, and when works of writers of color became integrated into the curriculum in the 1990s, this new configuration unsettled the centrality of the "dead white male" canon resulting in the bitter so-called culture war of the 1990s" (Donadey 2011: 62). Thus, Shui-mei Shih and Francois Lionnett stated that the theory generated the cult of the other like that of ethnic studies and women's studies (Shui & Lionnet 2011: 8). One of the central questions related to any discipline or sub-discipline is that whether it has acquired the status of a theory within the field of social sciences and humanities. Irrespective of the nature and the conceptual rigor of the ethnic and Francophone studies, it could not attain the status of theory (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 14). However, structuralism and post-structuralism need to be questioned in order to understand the space of women's and gender studies. Post

structuralist -high claims related to the death of the subjectivity have demonstrated its approach to new subjectivities in a patronising manner. Women and minorities thus were incorporated into a post structuralist pantheon in superficial manner (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 11). The geopolitics of theory also reflect the history of erasures and denials grounded in the whims and interests of a hegemonic scholastic community. For instance, Francophone studies differed from the depoliticized versions of theory in United States. Paradoxically, it has not acknowledged the political and intellectual personalities such as that of Giles Deluze to Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire while creating space for the dialogue across feminism, gender, sexuality and ethnic studies (Shih & Lionnet 2011: 19). Eurocentric, patriarchal conceptual realms consequently established its reign through conscious exclusions of insurgent thoughts from the margins. Oppressed sections in India also had to challenge the dominant religious order and its dictates related to knowledge. Anti-caste movements in India fought for the rights related to education. Organic intellectuals from the subjugated castes had to tackle the Brahmanic readings of colonialism and nationalism as well.

Dalit studies, for Ramnarayan Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, as a critical space read Dalits as sidelined subjects. It is also studied as a field that re-reads the Indian society and history. Dalit studies is evaluated through the popularization of the category of 'Dalit' through the Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s in Maharashtra. It unleashed the critique to the Gandhian term, Harijan. Academic discourse from 1970s started following the term, Dalit that emerged through the vernacular debates. Questions of humiliation and dignity that emerged through the Dalit vernacular narratives in the twentieth century became part of the South Asian academic realm through the entry of Dalit academicians in the 1990s (Rawat & Satyanarayana 2016: 1–30). Nevertheless, women's studies became part of the academia in the same period.

Emergence of Women's and Gender Studies in India

Women's studies in India have been generating distinct, conceptual categories and forms of praxis. The trajectory of women's studies in India signifies its vibrant and diverse theoretical and action-oriented perspectives. The entry of the discipline also needs to be examined in its historical context. Women's movements in the developing countries have been challenging the status quo. Some among them have radically differed from the initial anti-status quo groups. It is also noted that initial forms of women's movement were caught in the societal order. For instance, it could not discuss how to annihilate inherent caste hierarchy within the women's movement. New forms of such assertions happened in chaotic manner (Freeman 1973: 792–811). It lacked cohesive approaches that link the various streams of women's political articulations. At the global level, different ideological strands within feminism have also created its own wilderness as well as strength (Showalter 1981: 179–205). Thus, caste in the Indian context of the women's studies and women's movement remains unexplored. Gender relations in pre-colonial India were observed as that of religious sanctions and oppressive practices (Chakravarti 2018; Ketkar 1979; Kumar 1997). During the

colonial era, public and private realms of the women's questions evolved through the contentions of colonial authorities, British feminists, and Indian elites (Chitnis & Wright 2007). The women's assertions in the 1950s and 1960s were silent when compared to the later phases. Still, politics against neoliberalism emerged through the women's organizations in India (Armstrong 2018). Nationalist groups, social reform, and leftist streams were the vibrant ideological streams within the Indian women's movement (Kasturi & Majumdar 2016, Kumar 1997; Sarkar & Sarkar 2008). Therefore, one has to investigate the fields of the social and political forces that changed the direction of the women's movement in India.

Towards Equality Report (1974) paved the fundamental ground for the birth of women's studies in India (Bagchi 2013). The idea of the 'Indian Association of Women's Studies' emerged at the First National Conference on Women's Studies in India in the year 1981 (Howe 1981). Women's studies is conceptualised as "the intellectual arm of the women's movement" (Majumdar cited in Bagchi 2013). Mary John argues that women's studies, along with other political movements in the 1970s and 1980s engaged with modernity in distinct fashion (John 2005: 47–48). It probed the nature of oppressive traditions. Patriarchy in the Indian context was challenged through the rare, political awakening of the women's studies. However, it is being questioned whether women's studies can move out of its status as an elitist discipline. In addition to it, whether women's studies in India have really been able to come out of its Eurocentric and Brahmanic ideological-paradigms or not. Social composition of the academicians in the domain of women's and gender studies in India reflects the dominant caste-based Indian society. Feminist groups and women's movement thus have been limited to the exclusive epistemic domain of upper castes-class in India. According to M.S. Sreerekha, "women's studies" in India are being studied through its representation in the dominant academic institutions (Sreerekha 2016: 64–68). In addition to its ideological and historical background, it is quite often asked whether it is a dominant discipline or a marooned discipline due to the patriarchal nature of the disciplinary space. It is observed that women's studies and Dalit studies are marginalized due to their epistemic challenges to orthodox Indian society. The radical nature of women studies is being depoliticized due to civil society organizations and patriarchal consensus within educational structures (Sreerekha 2016: 64). Feminist struggles are forced to limit its politics of change and reform in the time of fundamentalism and orthodox politics (Majumdar 1999: 36). Scholars have been critiquing the potential and challenges of women's studies. There are critiques that study the superior nature of women's studies and its impossibilities linked to the caste-class allied prerogatives of women's studies. There were apprehensions regarding its elitist nature. Women's studies, for Vidyut Bhagwat, can reach the people through distance education in addition to the dominant forms of education. The homogenous and isolated nature of earlier debates in women's studies constrained its popularity across people from varied social strata. Women's studies and its engagement with different streams within the social sciences and humanities have to capture the nuances of the social and political lives of women (Bhagwat 2002: 235–243). Critiques within

and outside the women's studies movement led to the articulations around caste and gender relations in the 1990s onwards. However, the entry of globalization, politics of international actors, funding agencies and so on brought drastic changes in the nature of women's studies that move beyond the category of women's studies to that of gender' studies. Eventually the naming of the department from women's to gender studies also changed the pedagogy and curriculum. Vibhuti Patel has observed that, "In the 21st century, a move from Women's Studies to Gender Studies is gaining ground in the mainstream academia" (Patel 2023: 33). However, it is important to explore the Dalit feminist take on women's and gender studies.

Dalit Feminist Critique to Women's and Gender Studies

Current issues of Dalit women academicians show the complex nature of caste-class, gender and patriarchy. Dalit women academicians have to confront patriarchal misogynistic forces within the academic power structures. Language of oppression is central to the academic spaces as well. The sexist language of the upper caste peers create psychological repercussions among Dalit girl students (Kumar cited in Rathod 2023). Dalit women faculty members face similar experiences on an every day basis. As part of caste discrimination, an associate professor from Delhi University was slapped by an upper caste colleague (Shankar 2021) Her right to marry outside her caste is also questioned by the male faculty. This incident shows the ways in which the privacy and dignity of Dalit women academicians is questioned by the caste and patriarchy equations at the larger societal level (*The Wire* 2022). The patronising language of the educational discourse carries sophisticated forms of patriarchy and casteist approaches against Dalit women. This incident demonstrates a miniscule form of the larger oppression.

Dalit feminists started a distinct discourse on caste and gender in the post-independence period (Guru 1995 & Rege 1998). The category of Dalit feminism emerged in the State of Maharashtra in the 1990s. Further it was established at the national level through National Federation of Dalit Women on 11 August 1995 at New Delhi. Dalit feminists questioned the mainstream feminists' uncritical approach towards caste. They positioned mainstream women's movement as Brahmanic in nature and dominated by upper caste women. They critiqued the state, mainstream feminism, and forms of inequality through the framework of Dalit women's experiences. Dalit women analyzed their oppression outside their caste as central to their articulation. They also talked about their lower status due to their subjugation outside their community by larger society and within their own caste-community. Gopal Guru analyzed the ways in which "external", and "internal" patriarchy structure the oppression of Dalit women. They realized that their issues are not addressed in the conceptual terrain of Brahmanic feminism. Recognition on these lines prompted them to articulate their own issues as different from that of the hegemonic Indian feminism. It also impacted the vernacular Dalit assertions. Ironically, Dalit feminist knowledge production was gradually coopted by the upper caste academicians due to their social

and cultural capital. They were able to translate those vernacular Dalit debates around caste and gender and related themes due to their proficiency in English language and networks within the dominant academic system.

Emergence of Dalit feminist assertions needs to be viewed as a succinct academic response to these rare, historical interventions of intellectuals from the oppressed castes. Based on the anti-caste conceptualization and annihilation of caste practices from Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, *Chhatrapati* Shahu Maharaj, B.R. Ambedkar, Mukta Salve, Tarabai Shinde, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy Naicker, Ayyankali and others, Dalit feminists theorized the caste, gender and patriarchy linked gendered oppression. Dalit women scholars have to undergo hardships while pursuing higher education to create their own spaces in Brahminic research institutes and organizations (Neelakandan 2022). Hence, the struggle of Dalit women in academia needs to be documented. Dalit studies in general and Dalit feminism in particular can delineate the contradictions of the 'social' and the 'political' in the context of caste, gender, and democracy. Similarly, scholars who have studied the contours of race and gender too assert the conscious denial of race and gender in the towering space of global women's studies. Therefore, it is asserted that the existence of race and gender as a discipline in educational institutions needs to be studied in its specific context. What are the modes through which marginalized social stratifications like that of Dalits are received in the hegemonic academic space of majoritarian-dominant /upper caste and class communities? Subjugated identities in the realm of academics are perceived by the dominant caste and academics-policy groups often in an indifferent fashion. Such writings have different ideological takes on the social and political questions of hegemonic academics and knowledge production. Race/ racism-related questions in education, for instance, are suppressed through the interests of dominant races' ideology (Gillborn 2008). One can argue that racist ideology and practice operate through its systematic and sophisticated modes. The psychological stages of the teachers from oppressed communities are hampered by the power equations of the dominant communities. Irrespective of the legacy of black women's political activism, they are unacknowledged in political spaces (Simien 2004: 82). There is a dearth of studies that explore the relations between caste, lower castes, and the teaching profession. Though, this article tries to explore the experiential complexities of Dalit women academicians in the departments of women's and gender studies.

Methodology

Extensive qualitative interviews of twenty Dalit women academicians from Central and State universities across India were conducted to engage with the multifaceted and specific form of their discrimination within the women's and gender studies departments. Their age group was twenty-five to fifty years. Some of them were permanent and others were on the basis of contract. As a Dalit feminist, who teaches women's and gender studies debates, I conducted in-depth interviews to interact with Dalit women scholars. While narrating it, I use the terms, women's/gender studies.

These interviews thus depart from the separation between the subject and the object (Oakley 1981 and Cook & Fonow 2008). The contradiction and power relations between the researcher and the researched are addressed in this article. In addition to these facets of this article, Dalit women have a better understanding of their own standpoint. The emphasis on the experiences of Dalit women academicians thus obliterates partiality.

Hence, the method here is to be more objective and focused on experiences. At the same time, research on these academic travails of Dalit women academicians is non-essentialist because it has larger goals of liberating feminist studies from Brahmanical patriarchy. It directs us towards the emancipatory politics based on idea of justice, equality, and liberty. In Smithian manner, it reflects on academic women and their exclusion through the ideological structure (Smith 2008). It attempts to capture vexed, existential questions of those Dalit women scholars in the hegemonic, Brahminic women's/gender studies departments in India. The anonymity of the respondents is maintained to consider the ethical standards that are essential in research related to marginalized communities.

The following questions were asked to the respondents: (i) How do you look at your entry to higher education and women's /gender studies department as an academician? (ii) Do you think your social location has impacted your presence in the women's/gender studies department which in general is monopolized by upper caste academicians? (iii) What are your experiences on the caste equations that operate in the women's/gender studies department in particular? (iv) Do you think that Dalit women scholars in women's /gender studies are able to transform their experiences into critiques of Brahminic women's/gender studies? (v) Is it possible to forge solidarity across the women's /gender studies scholars from marginalized communities across the globe? (vi) What do you think about postcolonial, diasporic women's /gender studies, academicians who deal with caste and gender questions? (vii) Do they identify with scholars from the oppressed section scholars from India? (viii) Do you think that the intersectionality approach has the potential to address the existential and disciplinary contradictions of the women's /gender studies scholars from the margins of caste-based Indian society?

The next section attempts to thematically present the arguments drawn from their interviews. It will register the voices of Dalit women faculty members in the departments of women's and gender studies. Their responses are complex and even challenge the possibilities and limits of the questions. Articulations of the respondent are mixed in a peculiar fashion and few aspects can be spelt out.

Puzzles of Caste, Gender and Academic Mobility

Have Dalit women been able to enter the public sphere or not? Their journey is tedious due to various factors. A majority of Dalit women academicians belong to poor, lower middle class and middle-class backgrounds. Their experiences related to their higher education and social mobility varies in eastern, western, northern and southern parts of

India. First generation-Dalit women from northern and eastern India struggled hard to secure higher education. They had to face poverty and patriarchal bias from their home and relatives. Family believed that if the boy /their brother pursued higher education, then it would benefit the family. Patriarchal approach towards the education of girls is gradually changing as well. On the contrary, second and third generation Dalit women from western and southern India are able to attain higher education and jobs. Instead of dire financial status, Dalit women are able to convince their parents regarding the importance of higher education. Babasaheb Ambedkar and anti-caste icons from respective regions influence their educational aspirations. Mothers of Dalit women from south and western India think that higher education provides dignity and financial autonomy for their daughters. Some of the Dalit women resisted early marriage and migrated from their village to urban areas in search of higher education and jobs. Most of these Dalit women were influenced by groups of anti-caste activists who introduced them to radical, anti-caste literature during their student days in urban areas. Financial insecurity affected their higher education. Some of them had to drop out and were forced to work for one or two years. Some among them did part-time/informal jobs in addition to their regular education. However, they recognized that theory is essential for praxis. It made them actively become part of democratic forms that engaged with the social and political articulations of women. Despite their inhibition they articulated their issues in front of a public audience. The political interventions of Dalit women became problematic for their upper caste women colleagues in the department of women's and gender studies.

Upper caste women faculty members in such departments opined that Dalit women academicians are getting academic jobs only due to reservation policy. Dalit women academicians who work as contractual faculty also expressed the professional insecurity. They are not shortlisted for regular jobs for the unreserved-academic teaching jobs. They also said that special recruitment for scheduled caste-academic positions is also not taking place in many universities. Therefore, they are forced to undergo certain forms of precarity due to caste-driven educational systems. Those who work as contractual faculty have to undergo awkward casteist behaviour from the permanent/regular-upper caste women faculty members. Dalit faculty members position women's and gender studies as an epistemic space that strengthens praxeology (Bourdieu 1996: 139). They also pointed out that one should not detach theory from practice and further argued that these women's and gender studies departments depart from the usual literary, social sciences and humanities approaches that are obsessed with the high forms of theory. Focus on one particular discipline cannot initiate larger social and political transformation. It is also noted that faculty members who are from the discipline of English language and literature reduce the women's and gender studies to that of debates related to literature. Moreover, their approaches towards women's studies resonate some of the rare voices that emerged in the context of the interlinkages between English literature and women's studies in India (Rajan 2008: 66–71). However, women's studies and gender studies have the potential to challenge the ascribed identities. It can challenge the dictates of a patriarchal social

system. A majority of Dalit women academicians therefore argue that interdisciplinary approaches can engage with the changing social, political and economic realities. At the same time, they critiqued the ironical nature of the gap between the theoretical dimensions and praxis inherent in the women's/gender studies discourse in India. They are skeptical about the so-called radical claims of the women's movement in India. The egalitarian nature of the social sciences in the midst of the arguments for theory against empirical approaches is already contested in India (Guru 2002: 5003–5009). It led to debates on the necessity of doing theory and engaging with praxis in the backdrop to the Dalits and social sciences in India. Dalit women academicians thus examine the disciplinary and institutional nuances of the field of Brahminic women's and gender studies.

Work Space in the Midst of Caste

Most Dalit women academicians agreed that they face caste discrimination on day-to-day basis from their upper caste women colleagues. Upper caste colleagues usually make caustic comments related to lower caste location, lack of merit, physical appearance, body language, complexion of Dalit women. They also maintain norms of purity and pollution by avoiding Dalit women colleagues during lunch hours. Dalit women expressed this as a heinous extension of commensality in the so-called, modern higher educational institutions. Consequently, their colleagues often say that Dalit women academicians challenge the stereotypes of Dalits. Dalit women academicians consider this oppressive attitude of their upper caste colleagues as anti-constitutional in nature. They observed that Dalit faculty members from other departments only support them to fight against a caste-based educational order. Through the experiences of the Dalit women academicians from the northern-eastern region, it can be noted that acute caste-based discrimination is central to the educational spaces of those regions in comparison to that of the southern and western regions. They further noted that Dalit women academicians who are renowned for their academic achievement have to face severe forms of caste discrimination. Upper caste faculty members cannot even tolerate their physical presence. Dalit women faculty also share about their limitations. They said that newly joined faculty cannot fight against the caste discrimination due to their period of probation. Their assertion thus is curtailed in various ways. Sarah Jane Aiston and Chee Kent Fo argued that academic women are forced to undergo certain forms of silence due to the complex links between the social, political and institutional, oppressive structures (Aiston & Chee 2020). Caste-based discrimination has been acquiring new forms and twists in their academic life. Upper caste colleagues maintain constant surveillance over those Dalit women academicians who publish in reputed academic journals/books and receive fellowships, awards and so on. Dalit women academicians also described how upper caste women faculty members from women's and gender studies write on Dalit studies, Dalit feminism and related debates at the national/international level and simultaneously exploit and discriminate the labor and perspectives of the Dalit women academicians. They even harass junior Dalit women

academicians rather than encouraging their educational pursuits. Caste thus recurs and haunts the life opportunities of Dalit women academicians. It is exhausting for them to explain the subtle and varied nature of such discrimination. Sarah Jane Aiston and Chee Kent Fo theorized that such a stage of inexplicable dilemma is an extension of micro-inequities. These are the moments of silencing or inequities that operate at the higher level of inequity in the academic-work place. It is posited as something that cannot be proved and tangible in its expositions (Aiston & Chee 2020).

Caste thus has engulfed departments and educational spaces in multiple ways. Among twenty interviews, one Dalit faculty member shared her experience of caste. It occurred around 11'o clock, August 2014 when she had to go to an upper caste faculty member's room for official work. The senior upper caste faculty who was present there remarked to another junior upper caste faculty, "Oh these *chuda chamars* (an abusive term used for the lower castes in North India) are entering into academic jobs". That incident shocked her. She waited for the head of the department, a lady from an upper/dominant caste-class location to inform her about the behavior of the colleague. After narrating her experience to the head of the department, hardly any disciplinary action was taken against them and neither was any effort made to make them understand that they should behave in a civilized manner. The head of the department requested the Dalit academician to forgive them rather than lodging a complaint against them. The Dalit academician cited Ambedkar's pioneering work, *Annihilation of Caste* in which Ambedkar argues that, "Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change" (Ambedkar 1979: 68).

Administration in Upper Caste Ways

Dalit women academicians criticized the dearth of proper mechanisms through which they can register their grievances. They said that complaints related to caste-based discrimination and harassment had to go through the head of the department in many departments and forwarded to further divisions. A vicious nexus of administration division based mostly on upper caste are able to manipulate various bodies and committees. In order to support the faculty members who indulge in caste-based discrimination, they include a Dalit faculty member who is not bothered about the Dalit question as head of the committee. Thus, they force the Dalit academicians to withdraw the complaint. A majority of departments are dominated by upper caste-classes women and men with cultural and social capital. Therefore, upper castes are able to flaunt their vested interests at the curricular and administrative levels. In case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, faculty members are appointed only due to affirmative action in India (Neelakandan 2022). Neelakandan analyzed that inclusion of Dalits through reservation policies/affirmative action coexists with the exclusion-discrimination based on caste in higher education. Caste-based academic networks of upper caste academicians thus reaffirm the primitive caste ideology and related practices. However, Dalit women academicians from Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and

Kerala actively engage with the politics around institutions and disciplines, issues of discrimination, justice and so on. Some have sought legal assistance. They also mentioned the delayed justice associated with cases of caste discrimination. The institutional cultures of othering, forces them to reflexively engage with their own social location and larger community. Dalit women academicians also acknowledged that some intellectuals from their communities shaped their worldviews and prepared them to fight any form of injustice. They provoked the Dalit women academicians to challenge academic caste-class privileges. Dalit women academicians compare them with the highly articulate, academicians from privileged caste-class backgrounds. They argue that such dominant academicians are the epitome of academic double standards. The dissonance between the public and private interventions of the upper-dominant caste-class academics functions through their denial of caste in the public space and practicing/believing the caste at their personal level. They are able to position themselves as progressive in the public space. They gain such authority through the figure of “public intellectuals”. The public is contaminated with the ideology of caste and they are able to maintain their caste-based power and hierarchy with the academicians from lower castes. Further, some of the casteist, conservative faculty members claim themselves as socialist and Marxist feminists. They also claim their expertise to teach and research on Dalit politics, Dalit studies, and gender studies. Dalit women academicians consider it as their choice. But they opine that one must be inquisitive about their political predicaments. Therefore, Dalit women academicians need to question the nature of their politics. Aren't they just portraying themselves as progressive academicians by claiming their expertise in women's/ gender studies and Dalit studies? Why are these upper/dominant caste faculties not able to come out of their casteist and patriarchal mentalities? How does a so-called politically conscious academic operate in a complex, caste-ridden Indian academic scenario? How do they dilute the legacy of feminist politics and struggles? Dalit women academicians thus constantly question the opportunist tendencies of the upper caste academicians.

Classroom Conspiracies

The upper caste colleagues usually question the writings that challenge the relations of caste, gender and knowledge. The head of the department usually tease Dalit women academicians by saying that courses lack quality and comment that students are unhappy with their courses. Often, they instigate students from their own (upper) caste against the Dalit faculty members. Faculty members and students from upper caste backgrounds consider such courses based on the issues and experiences of marginalized sections as threatening to their dominant-caste based identity/existence. Upper caste academicians also use upper caste students as spies to monitor the activities of Dalit academicians. Upper caste students are provoked by the debates on Mahatma Jotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. Brahmin students thus stopped attending such courses and argued that the department of women's studies promotes an anti-caste ideology. The

radical potential of women's and gender studies are subverted through the casteist ideology and practices of both upper caste academicians and students.

Dalit women academicians, in the earlier phase of their careers hoped that women's and gender studies departments may challenge caste and gender related power structures. They critiqued that such departments are in fact Brahmanic in their social composition and ideology. Upper caste academicians who specialise on Dalit questions block the entry of the Dalit women candidates to teaching positions. They shared their fear about the solidarity and intellectual interventions of Dalit women academicians. A Dalit woman academician recalled how she was badly treated by an upper caste colleague for raising the issues of Dalit women at a conference organized by Indian Association of Women's studies. They are alienated from such forums and argue that Dalit women should initiate separate academic platforms. They asserted the need to create a network with established scholars from the Dalit community and the mere assertion of upper caste academicians on the basis of their postcolonial and marginalized status in the developed countries' academic arenas will not transform the discipline without annihilating the caste educational culture in India. Therefore, they believe that women's and gender studies should move beyond such conceptual ghettoization. Dalit women academicians also said that upper caste colleagues are least bothered about atrocities against Dalit women.

Many faculty remembers faced stiff opposition from their colleagues during the introduction of the course designed by them on several themes and as part of including Dalit studies. The Dalit teachers have a different and critical approach towards the syllabus designed by the upper caste faculty members. Ethical dimensions of such a radical project by Dalit women academics impact the nature of pedagogy as well. It leads to critical thought of such projects. Such pedagogy should have the pedagogical and philosophical practices that are critical to the intersections of caste and gender. The divide between theory and practice can be a misapprehension (Villaverde 2008: 121). Whether Dalit women academicians are able to initiate political discussion about gender and caste remains a major challenge in the so-called world of objective scholarship. They believe that it should also withdraw from anti-intellectualism through critical perspectives.

Personal is Political

Dalit women academicians also exposed the rhetoric of sisterly politics used by upper caste academicians in women's and gender studies department. Many of them said that upper caste women academicians make personal remarks and intrude into personal lives. One of the interviewees described how she has chosen to remain childless. As a result, an upper caste woman academician taunted her that women who do not produce children cannot understand motherhood, care and affection. This incident shows the persistence of Brahmanic-oriented heterosexual approach that mocks the Dalit woman academician's choice to be childless. Reiterating that upper castes are not going to transform their oppressive behavior, they should not preach ethics and morality to

Dalits. An upper caste academician's writings on Dalits are tailored according to the interests of market. Dalit women academicians are aware of such intellectual pretensions. Thus, Dalit women academicians reflect on the Ambedkarian premise that debunk the lack of ethics in a caste-based society. They reflect on the future of Dalit feminism through its conceptual innovations and larger networks across the oppressed communities. They also visualise that reflexivity is essential to rearticulate the postcolonial, diasporic, intersectionality approaches. They are conscious of a circulation of caste-based logic that constantly challenges the competency of Dalit women academicians. Dalit women academicians unveil the manner in which upper caste academicians suppress the distinct voices of Dalit women academicians. They argued that the language of civil society has appropriated the language of women's and gender studies. Research on India probed how civil societal discourse has culminated in depoliticizing the real social and political struggles (Harris 2002). Dalit women academicians critiqued the functioning of women's and gender studies departments in particular and social science departments in general according to the ideology of global economic and developmental organizations. Further, they observed that funding has impacted the critical edge of women's and gender studies. Upper caste women's and gender studies scholars exhibit certain othering and patronising approaches towards the Dalits. Such dominant caste scholars typecast Dalit women as individuals who don't know feminism. Dalit feminists lampooned such upper caste scholars who violate the spirit of feminist ideas and principles. They further said that a majority of upper caste scholars consider themselves as having expertise on all social and political issues. They opined that the university as an institution protects the interests of upper/dominant castes. In addition to the harassment of Dalit women academicians, they hamper the academic potential of Dalit students. Hegemonic academic culture thus reproduces diverse patterns of discrimination. It is noted that, "...despite all the regulatory mechanisms, SC/ST students are coerced to kill themselves on various campuses with unfailing regularity. The pristine imagination of the socially dominant communities exhibits a blind spot when it comes to Dalit-Bahujans co-inhabiting their elite habitus. These gatekeepers are adept at extinguishing any tremors in their spotless spaces and the transgressors are often shown the door in many subtle ways" (Sukumar 2023: 171). Therefore, one can argue that the retrogressive ideology of upper caste women negates the presence of Dalit woman in seemingly theoretically radical spaces of women's and gender studies.

Dalit women academicians also show that upper caste academicians are against the entry of Dalit candidates to doctoral studies. Upper caste teachers who select Dalit doctoral candidates also discriminate against them throughout their research. It further destroys the academic growth of Dalit women doctoral students. Upper caste teachers thus obstruct the Dalit women students and their teaching career. Dalit academicians argued that conceptual transformations in the field of postcolonial, diasporic, intersectionality approaches should overcome the logic of victimization. Dalit women academicians admit their constraints related to their personal spaces. They expressed how they learnt the keywords related to women's and gender studies

through their shift from their non-academic spaces to that of academic spaces. They further commented that upper caste women academicians consider Dalit women's articulations as ingrained in identity politics. Thus, Dalit women academicians argue that upper caste academicians deny the existence of caste to oppress Dalit women. Such a position enables them to justify their caste dominance. Upper caste colleagues harass them by allocating extra teaching hours and tedious administrative work. They create problems for the promotion of Dalit women teachers by not allowing them to attend refresher and orientation courses. Some Dalit women academicians recollected how the head of the department would shout at them in the presence of other faculty members. Non-Dalit academic staff are recruited to teach women's studies courses. At the same time, Dalit women visiting faculty members receive insults from regular/visiting upper caste faculty members. Relations of social location within academic space have to be examined in relation to the continuities and discontinuities of academic communities and disciplines.

Theoretical Possibilities and Challenges

Epistemic priority of Dalit feminist critique demonstrates that Dalit feminists can produce authentic perspectives of the Dalit women's realities. Questions of the Dalit women-women's/gender studies academicians can be looked at in the light of capabilities approach and intersectionality. These critical theoretical approaches probed to explicate the existential and epistemic specificities of Dalit women academicians. The capabilities approach is studied as one that espouses gender equality in the Western context. Capabilities can be deployed to scrutinize inequalities and therefore the wellbeing of women from the oppressed castes has to be read against the cultural and social capital of upper/dominant caste women. The capability approach, for Robeyns, challenged the conventional social science readings that impact the lives of the people. It is observed that Amartya Sen's approach could shift meaningfully away from the reductionist understanding of consumption and social mobility. A Feminist is analyzed as one who has the potential to understand the women/gender question beyond financial welfare and there as one who can initiate a dialogue with capabilities approach. Robeyns delineates how gendered inequality can be interpreted via the capability approach. Based on capabilities approach, it can be argued that unfreedom and gender inequality embedded in caste enslave the Dalit women academicians. Amartya Sen regards freedom as a central idea of capability to analyze gender inequality (Sen, cited in Robeyns 2003: 62).

The category of capability is also critiqued by arguing that Amartya Sen has not enlisted the capability which is essential to judge inequality (Robeyns 2003: 62). Wellbeing and inequality can be assessed through the ethically individualistic and non-individualistic essence of the capability approach (Ingrid, cited in Robeyns 2003: 65). Ethics is absent in a caste-based society. Caste-based atrocities prove that caste-based order does not give any space and scope to ethics. However, Amartya Sen has criticized readings on inequality that underestimate diverse people with the same

utility functions. Those approaches therefore underestimate the social differences as well (Sen, cited in Robeyns 2003: 66). Indeed, the social differences-based reading of capabilities approach has to take cognizance of the specificity of Dalit women's social worlds. Robeyns analysed (Dalit) women as individuals who need to be studied in the backdrop of the peculiar forms of capability and impending inequality (Robeyns 2003: 62). Along the lines of the capability approach, one can argue that Dalit women academicians face diverse problems in the market and non-market spaces (Robeyns 2003: 66). Robeyns calls for a feminist capability approach that does not ignore the interlinked nature of the gendered dimensions of society. Such reading departs from Nussbaum's perspectives that invite a definite list of capabilities. Martha Nussbaum's reading imagines a universal theory of good that unanswered the question of culture and context (Robeyns 2003: 68). It discusses the colonizing undercurrents of universalizing the language of justice (Nussbaum 1999: 229). Thus, the universal approach in the capabilities approach is helpful to evaluate the capabilities and inequality of Dalit women.

The idea of liberty should have access to the material realm to articulate the rights. What happens to the rights of the Dalit women in the social and political worlds of caste and democracy? Economic empowerment has the role of providing liberty to different sections of people (Nussbaum 1999: 230). Caste determines the capital formation and caste-class equations shun the possibility of the economic mobility of the Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general. Combined capabilities, for Nussbaum, have to be achieved through securing institutional and material spaces. Human choice and freedom have the potential to guard traditional rights and liberties. Wellbeing is nourished through political rights (Nussbaum 1999: 238). As discussed earlier, Dalit women's assertions are being monitored in caste-based, patriarchal, superior worlds. Women have to confront unequal levels of capability that threaten their justice (Nussbaum 1999: 243). Justice for Dalit women is negated at different levels. Dalit women academicians thus have different social and political trajectories that are ideologically different from the overall, homogenous dominant caste women located women's/gender studies theoretical project. Their assertions therefore carry a distinct theoretical character. In addition, to the questions of capabilities, the social spaces of Dalit women academicians in women's/gender studies also asserts the necessity to articulate the intersections that determine their social and political worlds.

Dalit feminists restate the relations of caste, class, gender, and patriarchy. The intersections of subjugated social location and identities within the dominant ideological frameworks demonstrate the complexities of oppressed lives. Intersectionality can be invoked here to rethink the academic pursuits of Dalit women academics. Race and gender linked to inequality have become central to the global research on race. It is analyzed that black women cannot isolate themselves and they have to fight at multiple levels (Simien 2004: 84). Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) argues that social power that explains difference may empower the oppressed categories. It is emphasized that the tensions between identity politics and dominant conceptions of social justice led to the marginalization of race and gender. The problem with identity politics is that it is not

able to map the nuances of intersecting multiple identities. It is perceived that feminist and anti-racist assertions could not grapple with the intersectional social locations ingrained in the lives of women of color. It is opined that the “black community must move away from the position of singular activism for the good of the movement” (Robinson, cited in Simien 2004: 85). Black feminism fights against sexism, racism, gendered oppression, and heterosexism as part of the project of social justice rather than polarizing the movement (Ransby, cited in Simien 2004: 85). Crenshaw demonstrates the nature of structural intersectionality and probes how the identity of women about race and gender determines the experiences of black women and argues that feminist and antiracist groups have sidelined the issues of violence connected to women of color through political intersectionality. The construction of culture in the lives of black women is explored through the category of representational intersectionality. She stated that these identities intersect and offer possibilities to question internal and external hierarchies. Thus, it helps us move beyond the identity of the community (Crenshaw 1991: 1241–1299). Praxis in this direction should reflect on the life situations and life chances of the marginalized sections (Crenshaw 1989: 168) Critiques to intersectional theory have found their place in conceptions and praxis related to mental health. Intersectional wellbeing and theoretical takes on social justice are being explored through an assemblage of conceptual realms and decolonial intersectionality (Warner, Kuritis & Adya 2020: 1–16). Critiques are also pointed out as the politics of violence, interpretive violence, and hermeneutic marginalization (May 2014: 94–112). Black feminists have studied racism and sexism but paid little attention to a Marxist understanding of oppression and exploitation (Smith 2013-2014). Dalit women’s questions cannot be equated with the political struggles of Black women. Black feminists are far advanced in their theoretical and politic approaches. Dalit feminists have to engage with theoretical positions of intersectionality to foreground the peculiar nature of the social and the political spaces that decide the mobility of Dalit women. If subjugation happens through the intersections in the context of caste and gender like that of race and gender, it is possible to have such comparative readings related to caste, race and gender questions. Intersectional theorists have addressed the question of caste and Dalits in India. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, particularly in writings of Mahatma Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule, Mukta Salve and Tarabai Shinde show the intersections of caste, class and gender. Moreover, the critique on intersectionality needs to be recognized as well. For instance, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge critiqued the reductionist approach towards intersectional approaches. It is investigated that there is a tendency to reduce the intersectional approach to nations of North America and Europe. They argue that how scholars from India are using the intersectional approaches while explaining the anti-caste activism of Savitribai Phule. They also mapped the intersections of the global, social movements among Dalits and other oppressed sections. Intersectional approach is researched in the context of the intersectional positions on the assertions of Dalit women (Kannabiran, cited in Collins & Bilge 2020: 159). Social reproduction of labor and its precarious nature of day-to-day livelihood can be traced to the intersections

of caste and gender in the context of Dalit women laborers (Raman 2020). Besides, Dalit women academicians revitalise the big questions of capabilities and intersections related to caste and gender in the Indian context. Dalit feminist approaches have to return to the narratives of the Dalit women academicians to grapple with their epistemic-existential predicaments.

Conclusion

Dalit women academicians' accounts debunk how women's and gender studies in India are reproducing the ideology of caste. It delves into the rhetorical space of upper caste women scholars who use the educational institutions to maintain their caste-based power. Dalit women scholars thus interrogate the women's and gender studies' embedded realm within the larger space of Brahminic academic patriarchy and consequential erosion of sisterly politics. They theorise how their life chances are being curtailed through systemic caste-perpetuating, public institutions. The contemporary educational policy regime leverages the privatized educational monopoly and its consequential erosion of reservation policies. They also have to challenge the ideology and power structures related to socially regulated economic-educational orders. Economic and cultural injustices are analyzed in the context of social politics of redistribution and cultural politics of recognition (Fraser 2008: 43). The political economy of contemporary education and caste-gender conflicts in the context of the shift from the public to private educational institutions also constrict the epistemic and political assertions of Dalit women academics.

The right to education and social mobility of lower caste women academicians in a caste-based, patriarchal world strangely coexists with the changing forms of state and law. Therefore, accumulation of cultural and social capital by these academicians is being obstructed in multiple ways. The agency of such minor sections of Dalit women academicians in the larger context of the legacy of anti-caste movements offer a certain utopia to scuttle the caste, gender and patriarchy within the discipline and academic spaces. At the same time, the remnants of caste-based patriarchy prompt them to remain as cynics. Dalit women academicians thus initiate dialectical engagement with social reproduction through public-privatized educational spaces.

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