

Broken Chains, Rising Voices:
The Journey of Dalit
Feminism in India

Author

BARUN DAS



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Intersectional Histories: Gendering Caste and Time: Broken Lineages, Unbroken Spirit: Resisting Patriarchy, Empire and Brahmanism: A Dalit Feminist History.

(From Precolonial Resistance to Postmodern Praxis in India)

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PREFACE

Broken Chains, Rising Voices: The Journey of Dalit Feminism in India: *Intersectional Histories: Gendering Caste and Time – Broken Lineages, Unbroken Spirit – Resisting Patriarchy, Empire, and Brahmanism: A Dalit Feminist History: (From Precolonial Resistance to Postmodern Praxis in India)*

This book, *Broken Chains, Rising Voices: The Journey of Dalit Feminism in India*, is born from the urgency to revisit and rewrite the historical, political, and intellectual silences around Dalit women. The dominant feminist canon in India has long struggled to accommodate the layered oppressions faced by Dalit women—where caste, class, gender, and religion intersect violently. This work attempts to break those silences, challenge those exclusions, and center the voices that have been pushed to the margins of both caste discourse and mainstream feminism.

This book emerges from the urgent need to recognize and chronicle the complex, layered history of Dalit feminism in India—one that spans centuries, moves through devotional poetry and political struggle, and continues to shape movements in the present day. While feminist discourse in India has evolved dramatically since the 20th century, it has often marginalized or invisibilized the voices of Dalit women.

This work attempts to document, critically analyze, and bring to light the intellectual, political, and cultural contributions of Dalit women from the precolonial period to postmodern India. In doing so, it seeks to not only amplify these voices but also challenge both caste-blind feminism and gender-blind Dalit politics.

This book is for students, scholars, activists, and all those who believe that no social justice movement is complete unless it is inclusive, intersectional, and historically grounded.

Over the years, I became increasingly aware of the gaps in both mainstream feminist scholarship and Dalit political narratives—gaps that persistently rendered Dalit women invisible, except as victims or peripheral figures. This project seeks to address those silences by tracing the intellectual, cultural, and political evolution of Dalit feminism from

the precolonial period through colonial modernity to postmodern contemporary India. It is not simply a historiographical endeavor but an attempt to document and honor the lived experiences, resistances, and epistemologies of Dalit women across time. Drawing on Bhakti poetry, Ambedkarite thought, autobiographies, movement literature, and digital activism, this study -constructs a genealogy of Dalit feminist thought that is both historically grounded and forward-looking. At its core, this work is a tribute to the courage of Dalit women—those who spoke through verse, protested with silence, wrote in defiance, and organized against the oppressive twin structures of caste and patriarchy. It is my hope that this book contributes not only to academic debates but also to broader struggles for justice, visibility, and social transformation.

Structured chronologically and thematically, the chapters move from precolonial erasures to colonial codifications, through to the revolutionary Ambedkarite turn, and onward to global solidarities and digital resistance in the postmodern era. It is not merely a documentation of Dalit feminism, but an invitation to engage critically with its complexities, its disagreements, and its visions for the future.

As a research scholar and someone deeply invested in this field, I hope this book contributes to a larger academic and activist project—one that dares to imagine a radically inclusive, intersectional, and caste-annihilating feminist future. May these pages amplify the wisdom of those whose chains may have been forged by history, but whose voices continue to rise and reshape the future?

BARUN DAS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This work would not have been possible without the inspiration and courage of countless Dalit women activists, writers, and thinkers whose lives and words have shaped its pages. Besides I do have an inspirational support from all my well-wishers, colleagues and nearest ones.

I express deep gratitude to:

- Dr. Sharmila Rege, whose scholarship laid a foundation for the field of Dalit feminist studies?
- The members of AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch) and NCDHR, for their frontline resistance and documentation.
- My mentors and colleagues of SGIS_VDN who encouraged me to take on this project.
- Libraries, archives, and digital repositories that made rare texts accessible.
- And finally, to the unnamed women in rural and urban India who continue to resist caste and patriarchy daily, often without recognition—this book belongs to you.

BARUN DAS

Why This Book?

The Indian feminist landscape has historically privileged the experiences of urban, upper-caste, and middle-class women, sidelining the voices of women most impacted by structural oppression. Similarly, Dalit discourse—while radical in its anti-caste stance—has often replicated patriarchal hierarchies by ignoring gender-based injustices.

This book exists to bridge this divide. It examines Dalit feminism as a distinct intellectual and political tradition, not as a subset of mainstream feminism or Dalit activism, but as its own radical force rooted in lived experience, resistance literature, historical trauma, and grassroots organizing.

By tracing Dalit feminist thought from precolonial saints and poets to modern-day activists and digital campaigns, the book hopes to offer readers a nuanced understanding of how caste and gender intersect in Indian society—and how Dalit women have long challenged both.

Author's Note

This project was born out of discomfort—both personal and intellectual. As I engaged with feminist texts, histories of caste oppression, and political theory, I realized that Dalit women were often mentioned but rarely centered. They existed in footnotes, in victim narratives, or as anonymous examples—yet their resistance, literature, and leadership told a far richer story. This book is my attempt to listen to those stories, to follow their lead, and to construct a narrative that neither romanticizes nor tokenizes, but respects.

I do not claim to speak *for* Dalit women, but I write *with* and *alongside* their histories, texts, and movements. I have relied on a range of voices—poets, scholars, activists, and everyday women—who have resisted in ways big and small. Some of them are named in books; many are not. Wherever possible, I have foregrounded their own words, and I recognize the limitations of my own position in interpreting those words.

This book is not neutral. It is politically committed, methodologically feminist, and ethically accountable. If it helps bring clarity to the complex intersections of caste and gender, and if it brings even one buried voice into light, it will have served its purpose.

BARUN DAS

Introduction: Mapping the Margins, Redrawing the Center

“Dalit women talk differently. We talk from a different space. We talk with pain, but not without power.”

— Asha Kowtal

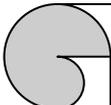
In every revolution, there are voices that go unheard—not because they are silent, but because no one is listening. Dalit feminism is one such voice. It has spoken in Bhakti songs, in court testimonies, in village protests, in manifestos, and on social media threads. Yet it continues to be marginalized within both Indian feminism and Dalit political discourse.

This introduction begins by asking a simple but vital question: Why has Dalit feminism remained so invisibilized in Indian academic and activist spaces, despite its deep historical roots and contemporary urgency? To answer this, we must first understand how caste and gender function together, not as parallel forces but as mutually reinforcing systems of control—what Uma Chakravarti termed “Brahmanical patriarchy.”

This chapter *sets the theoretical and political foundations of the book. It outlines key debates in Indian feminist thought, explores the emergence of Dalit feminist critiques, and introduces intersectionality as both method and movement. It then maps the structure of the book—from precolonial saints and poets to postmodern digital activism—arguing that Dalit feminism is not an offshoot but a challenge to the very foundations of dominant feminist discourse.

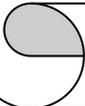
By situating Dalit women’s struggles as central rather than supplementary, this work reclaims space—not just in scholarship, but in history, politics, and the future of feminist imagination.

Barun Das



*Dedicated To
My Parents*

*Who thought me the value of
dignity, perseverance, and truth-
your silent strength has been the
foundation of all my words. This
work is for the struggles you
carried quietly. And for the dreams
you nurtured in me loudly, its your
Blessings over me, even when the
path was not visible. May this book
illumine its journey as much as it
becomes graceful.*



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INTRODUCTION

BROKEN CHAINS, RISING VOICES: THE JOURNEY OF DALIT FEMINISM IN INDIA



1.1 INTRODUCTION:

"She is revered as goddess, yet silenced as daughter; worshipped in temples, yet wronged in households."

This paradox has long defined the place of women in Indian society—a space where symbolic reverence often masks systemic neglect. The **value of women in India** has been elevated and diminished, celebrated in mythology yet constrained in daily life. From the ancient scriptures that extol feminine power as Shakti, to the medieval customs that erased her autonomy, the Indian woman has been both the centre and the margin of her world. This contradiction is not just cultural—it is historical, political, and deeply structural. In this land of deep traditions and rapid transformations, the question of a woman's worth has always been entangled with questions of caste, community, religion, and nationhood.

The **journey of Dalit feminism in India** is a complex, layered, and deeply contextual narrative that cannot be understood without acknowledging the unique interplay between gender, caste, class, religion, and colonial history. Unlike the West, where feminism often followed a relatively linear path marked by waves of women's liberation, the Indian feminist movement has evolved

unevenly, shaped by the country's diverse socio-political realities. From the social reformers of the 19th century who fought against practices like sati, child marriage, and female illiteracy, to the contemporary grassroots activists resisting gender-based violence and advocating for intersectional justice, Indian feminism has worn many faces and spoken in many tongues. It has been mainstream and marginal, elite and subaltern, urban and rural, modern and traditional. The early movements led by figures like Savitribai Phule and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain laid the groundwork for women's education and self-expression, challenging not only patriarchy but also caste-based oppression. Post-Independence, feminism in India aligned itself with nation-building but soon found itself in conflict with state mechanisms that often failed to protect women's rights. The Emergency period (1975–77) and the Mathura rape case (1972) acted as catalytic moments that reignited feminist consciousness in urban India. However, the movement has been repeatedly criticized for its upper-caste, urban, and English-speaking bias, making it imperative to explore how Dalit feminism, Adivasi women's voices, and Muslim feminist thought have emerged in resistance and redefinition of the mainstream. Today, with social media activism, campus protests, and gender-inclusive politics, Indian feminism is no longer confined to traditional boundaries—it is fluid, often fragmented, yet persistently resilient. This book, *Journey of Dalit Feminism in India*, seeks to critically trace this dynamic evolution, engaging with its milestones and contradictions, and offering a reflective lens on what feminism means in a country still grappling with deep-rooted patriarchy and systemic inequality.

"She was never just denied a voice—she was denied the right to exist as fully human."

In the layered realities of Indian society, where caste, class, and gender collide, the **Dalit woman** occupies a space of compounded marginalization. While the image of the Indian woman is often romanticized as a goddess or mother, the Dalit woman has been **systematically erased**—from mainstream feminism, from history books, from policy discourse, and often from the collective imagination itself. Revered ideals of womanhood in India have long excluded those born outside the privileged folds of caste. And yet, in this silence, Dalit women have forged a **powerful tradition of resistance**, rooted not only in their experiences of gender-based oppression but also in centuries of caste humiliation, economic exclusion, and social invisibility.

The journey of **Dalit feminism in India** is not a derivative branch of Indian feminism—it is a distinct, assertive movement born out of necessity and grounded in lived realities. While upper-caste feminist voices fought against patriarchy within relatively privileged spaces, Dalit feminists were fighting multiple battles: against Brahmanical patriarchy, feudal structures, sexual violence, and the exclusion even within feminist movements. Pioneering figures like **Savitribai Phule**, who opened schools for girls and faced stones and abuse, and **Sojourner Truth-like figures** such as **Bama Faustina**, who wrote boldly about the intersection of caste and gender, remind us that Dalit feminism has always spoken—often unheard, but never silent. It is a feminism that is deeply political, collective, and radically inclusive.

This book, *The Journey of Dalit Feminism in India*, traces this **parallel yet intersecting path**—one that critiques both the dominant caste structures and the limitations of mainstream feminist discourse. It explores how Dalit women have claimed their narratives through literature, grassroots activism, courtroom struggles, and digital spaces. From the historic resistance led by

Dalit women's collectives to the powerful autobiographies that redefined Indian literature, the book examines how Dalit feminism is not just a response to oppression but a **creative and intellectual movement** that reimagines justice, dignity, and freedom. It is not a cry for inclusion—it is a demand for **reconstruction** of thought, policy, and collective memory. This is not only the story of oppression—it is the story of a **movement that insists on being seen, heard, and remembered.**

1.2 FEMINISM

The word 'Feminism' comes from latin word 'femina' referring to have effeminate traits. The word feminism derives its name from French term feminist. Feminism is defined as "the support of women's rights on the grounds of the equality of the sexes" in the seventh edition of the Oxford Dictionary. In 1871 the word feminist was first used in a French medical text book. According to the Encyclopedia of Sociology (2010), "feminism" is a movement that aims to eradicate gender inequality in society and promote social, economic, and political equality between men and women (Ryan 12). The term "feminism" was first used in the middle of the 1800s to describe "the qualities of females," and the First International Women's Conference in Paris in 1892 that it began to be regularly used in English to refer to the belief in and promotion of equal rights for women demanding theory of sex equality. There have been few aspects on which feminism starts working as its goal achieving the gender equality and rights; intersectionality, empowerment, challenging stereotype.

Feminism is a socio-political movement aiming at the abolition of discrimination of gender, caste and sex in the long termed patriarchal society that defines female as an oppressed, exploited and harassed in all parts of their lives. In western country,

feminism started with the thoughts of predominant women challenging order from law to culture. For women legal rights; voting, property, contract, rights for bodily integrity and autonomy, reproductive rights, rights for self protection from domestic violence , sexual harassment, workplace rights, against misogyny sounded a lot. In the world women are being separated from rights to their self acts which needed for women freedom from discrimination, right to life, freedom from torture, right to privacy, access to health, right to decent living conditions, right to safety, and many others.

Feminism always highlights the demanding equality of women from cultural perspective to law breaking the barriers of patriarchal structure of society. To achieve this goal the feminist movement has been divided into three phases- 1.First Phase (1850-1915) 2. Second Phase (1960s – 1980s) 3. Third Phase (1990s – 2000s)).First wave feminism deals with the target to women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century's (mainly concerned with women's right to vote). Second wave refers to the women's liberation movement beginning in the 1960s (which campaigned for legal and social rights for women) and third wave tells about the continuation of perceived failures of second wave feminism and its reformation starting in 1990.

- **First Wave (19th – early 20th century)**

The **First Wave of feminism** emerged in the **late 19th and early 20th centuries**, primarily in Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. It focused on **women's suffrage (the right to vote), property rights, and legal recognition** as independent citizens. Activists fought for basic civil rights, including the right to own property, access education, and participate in political life. However, this wave was largely shaped by the experiences of **white, middle-class women**, often

excluding the concerns of women of color and working-class women.

“I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.” – *Mary Wollstonecraft*

Second Wave (1960s – 1980s)

The **Second Wave** began during the 1960s and continued into the 1980s, building on the gains of the First Wave. It expanded the focus from legal rights to **social, economic, and reproductive issues**. Feminists of this era fought for **equal pay, workplace rights, abortion access**, and the **right to control their bodies**. It also challenged societal norms about family, marriage, and female sexuality. The slogan “**The personal is political**” became central, emphasizing that individual experiences were tied to broader social and political structures.

“A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.” –

Gloria Steinem

Third Wave (1990s – 2000s): The **Third Wave** emerged in the **1990s** as a response to the limitations and perceived exclusivity of earlier feminist waves. This phase **critiqued the lack of diversity** in Second Wave feminism and emphasized the need to represent **women of different races, classes, sexualities, and cultural backgrounds**. It embraced **individuality, multiculturalism, and body positivity**, and encouraged women to reclaim femininity on their own terms. It also introduced **intersectionality** more actively into feminist thought.

“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” – *Audre Lorde*.

Fourth Wave (2010s – Present)

The **Fourth Wave** of feminism, beginning in the **2010s**, is marked by the use of **digital platforms and social media activism**. Movements like **MeToo, TimesUp**, and campaigns against online

harassment have brought renewed attention to issues like **sexual violence, consent, and body autonomy**. This wave is strongly **intersectional**, advocating for **LGBTQ+ rights, Trans inclusion, and gender-neutral perspectives**. It emphasizes **community-building, emotional support, and global solidarity**, making feminism more inclusive and accessible than ever before.

“Feminism is for everybody.” – *Bell hooks*

- **Critics over Feminism**

Let us focus on definition of feminism as been treated by different thoughts; Britannica defines feminism as "the belief in the social, economic, and political equality of the sexes" According to the Encyclopedia of Sociology (2010), "feminism" is a movement that aims to eradicate gender inequality in society and promote social, economic, and political equality between men and women. It was not until the late nineteenth century that “feminism,” in the Oxford English Dictionary’s common definition of the word, emerged as a political movement advocating the “equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex.”

“It is obvious that discrimination exists. Women do not have the opportunities that men do. And women that do not conform to the system, who try to break with the accepted patterns, are stigmatized as 'odd' and ‘unfeminine.’ The fact is that a woman who aspires to be chairman of the board, or a Member of the House, does so for exactly the same reasons as any man. Basically, these are that she thinks she can do the job and she wants to try.”

— Shirley Chisholm, *We Rise*

“Let woman's claim be as broad in the concrete as the abstract. We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritism, whether of sex, race, country, or condition. If one link of the chain

is broken, the chain is broken. A bridge is no stronger than its weakest part, and a cause is not worthier than its weakest element.”

— Anna Julia Cooper, *Women’s Cause Is One and Universal*

“If I want to define myself, I first have to say, ‘I am a woman’; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious.”

— Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

“If women want a feminist revolution—ours is a world that is crying out for feminist revolution—then we must assume responsibility for drawing women together in political solidarity. That means we must assume responsibility for eliminating all the forces that divide women.”

—Bell Hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*

“For me, the process of embodying confidence was less about convincing myself of my own worth and more about rejecting and unlearning what society had hammered into me.”

—Lindy West, *Shrill : Notes from a Loud Woman*

“No struggle can ever succeed without women participating side by side with men. There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a third power stronger than both, that of women.”

— Malala Yousafzai, *I AM MALALA*

“As women gain rights, families flourish, and so do societies. That connection is built on a simple truth: Whenever you include a group that’s been excluded, you benefit everyone. And when you’re working globally to include women and girls, who are half of every population, you’re working to benefit all members of every community. Gender equity lifts everyone. Women’s rights and society’s health and wealth rise together.”

- Melinda Gates, *The Moment of Lift*

- **Types of Feminism and Their Criticisms**

Feminism has evolved into various schools of thought, each addressing gender inequality through different perspectives. **Liberal feminism** seeks equality through legal reforms and education, advocating that “the law must treat men and women equally.” However, critics argue it often ignores deeper social structures, with bell hooks noting, “*Liberal feminism reinforces the very systems it claims to challenge.*” **Radical feminism** views patriarchy as the root cause of all female oppression and calls for a complete restructuring of society. While influential, critics like Camille Paglia have said it sometimes “demonizes masculinity and oversimplifies gender roles.” **Marxist and socialist feminism** link women’s oppression to capitalism and economic class divisions, though some critics argue that it underemphasizes individual identity and culture. **Eco-feminism**, which connects the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women, is sometimes critiqued for presenting an essentialist view of women as naturally closer to the environment. **Intersectional feminism**, a more inclusive approach, considers how gender intersects with caste, race, class, and sexuality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term, stated, “*Without intersectionality, feminism fails the most vulnerable.*” In the Indian context, **Dalit feminism** emerged to challenge both caste and gender oppression, pointing out how mainstream Indian feminism often speaks from an upper-caste perspective. As Dalit scholar Sharmila Rege observed, “*Dalit women talk of caste, class, and gender in one breath because their lives do not separate them.*” Dalit feminism brings attention to the unique struggles of Dalit women, demanding that feminist movements be truly inclusive and rooted in social realities.

- **Defining Dalit Feminism**

The term “Dalit,” meaning “broken” or “oppressed,” was popularized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and later reclaimed by social justice movements to assert dignity and resistance. When combined with “feminism,” it marks a departure from both Savarna (upper-caste) feminist narratives and male-dominated Dalit discourses. Dalit feminism resists **Brahmanical patriarchy**, a term coined by historian Uma Chakravarti to describe how caste and gender hierarchies are intertwined and upheld by Hindu social structures. Dalit feminism is not simply the intersection of caste and gender; it is a **radical and distinct political, intellectual, and cultural praxis** that emerges from the lived experiences of Dalit women in a deeply stratified society. Rooted in the long-standing resistance against both caste-based oppression and patriarchal domination, Dalit feminism is not a derivative of mainstream feminism or Dalit politics—it is a movement in its own right.

The roots of Dalit feminism in India lie in a long history of resistance by Dalit women to both **caste-based oppression and patriarchal control**. Although the term “Dalit feminism” is relatively recent, its foundations can be traced back to the **Bhakti movement (13th–17th centuries)**, where women saint-poets like **Soyarabai, Janabai, and Akkamahadevi** challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy through spiritual defiance and the assertion of personal devotion over ritual purity. These early voices of resistance, often from oppressed castes, provided a proto-feminist critique of caste and gender hierarchies. The 19th century witnessed a more organized form of feminist activism through figures like **Savitribai Phule**, the first female teacher of India and a pioneering social reformer, who directly addressed both **gender injustice and caste discrimination**. Alongside her husband Jyotirao Phule, she advocated for women’s education,

opposed child marriage, and worked for the upliftment of marginalized communities, laying the foundation for **Bahujan women's assertion** in public life. In the 20th century, **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's** social and **constitutional reforms** further reinforced the importance of Dalit women's rights. He called for women's liberation as integral to the anti-caste struggle and actively encouraged their participation in public life, law, and education. Despite their vital role in movements like **the Mahad Satyagraha and the anti-Manusmriti** protests, Dalit women remained largely invisible in both mainstream feminist narratives and Dalit male-centric politics. This historical marginalization catalyzed the formation of a distinct **Dalit feminist** voice, one that emerged more prominently in the late 20th century through **autobiographies, grassroots activism, and scholarly critique, demanding space, recognition, and justice** for Dalit women as subjects in their own right.

Dalit feminism finds expression in diverse forms—from the **Bhakti poetry** of **Soyarabai and Janabai** to the autobiographical writings of Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Bama; from grassroots activism led by AIDMAM and NCDHR to the digital resistance of DalitWomenFight. It insists on centering the agency of Dalit women and foregrounds their unique histories of struggle.

1.3 Context, History, and Development of Dalit

1. Context: Caste, Gender, and Social Exclusion

Dalit feminism emerged within the unique socio-political terrain of India, where caste and patriarchy are deeply intertwined. Dalit women, positioned at the bottom of both hierarchies, experience intersectional oppression—not only as women but also as members of castes historically classified as “Untouchables.” This dual marginalization has shaped their lived experiences in ways

that neither mainstream feminism nor traditional Dalit politics have adequately addressed.

Indian society has long been organized through Brahmanical patriarchy—a term coined by historian Uma Chakravarti to explain the interdependence of caste purity and gender control in maintaining upper-caste dominance. While upper-caste feminist movements have foregrounded gender inequality, they often ignore caste as a key axis of oppression. Similarly, male-dominated Dalit movements have centered caste struggle while sidelining gender. Dalit feminism arose as a necessary intervention to challenge both exclusions.

2. *Historical Trajectory*

a. **Precolonial Roots: The Bhakti Movement.**

The origins of Dalit feminist thought can be traced to the Bhakti movement (13th–17th centuries), where lower-caste saint-poets—particularly women like Janabai, Soyarabai, and Akka Mahadevi—used devotional poetry to question Brahmanical hierarchy and express spiritual agency. These voices, though not explicitly "feminist" in the modern sense, represented early forms of caste and gender resistance through their rejection of ritualism, purity norms, and male religious authority.

These poets presented a spiritual and social critique of dominant power structures, and their work provides a proto-Dalit feminist consciousness rooted in lived experience, humility, and rebellion.

b. **Colonial and Reformist Period: The Emergence of Radical Social Thought.**

In the 19th century, Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule laid the foundation for anti-caste and gender emancipation. Savitribai Phule, India's first female teacher, openly challenged caste patriarchy by advocating for women's education and widow remarriage, and by speaking out against child marriage and

Brahmanical patriarchy. Their work anticipated the dual critique that defines Dalit feminism today.

This period also saw the emergence of first-generation literate Dalit women, particularly in Maharashtra, who would later produce autobiographies and movement literature central to Dalit feminist thought.

c. **Ambedkarite Feminism and Constitutional Reform (Early to Mid-20th Century)**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophy and emphasis on women's liberation were central to the formation of Dalit feminism. Ambedkar explicitly linked women's subjugation to caste oppression, and his advocacy for equal rights, temple entry, and the abolition of the caste system created a framework within which Dalit feminist movements could grow.

Dalit women were active participants in movements like the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) and the burning of the Manusmriti (1927). However, their contributions were often rendered invisible in mainstream nationalist and feminist narratives.

d. **Post-Independence Period: Marginalization within Movements.**

After 1947, the Indian women's movement gained strength, especially during the 1970s and '80s, focusing on dowry deaths, rape cases, and women's legal rights. However, Dalit women found themselves excluded from these discourses, which were shaped largely by upper-caste, urban voices.

Simultaneously, Dalit movements like the Dalit Panthers emphasized caste-based struggles but often did so through a male-centric lens. Dalit women began articulating the need for a space that recognized both caste and gender—a movement that was neither derivative of upper-caste feminism nor of patriarchal Dalit politics.

e. **1990s Onward: Assertion and Articulation**

The 1990s marked a significant turning point with the publication of Dalit women's autobiographies and the rise of Dalit women's collectives. Autobiographies like:

- *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble
- *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar
- *Karukku* by Bama

...offered powerful testimonies of caste-gendered violence and resilience. These works did not merely document suffering—they theorized oppression from the standpoint of the oppressed, as sociologist Sharmila Rege famously argued.

This period also witnessed the emergence of collectives like AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch), which brought Dalit women's issues into national and international human rights platforms, including the UN Durban Conference (2001).

f. **Contemporary Dalit Feminism: Digital, Transnational, and Decolonial**

In the 21st century, Dalit feminism has expanded beyond the boundaries of region and language. Digital platforms such as Dalit Women Fight, Velivada, and Savari have enabled new modes of resistance, writing, and community-building. Campaigns like Dalit Women Fight and Dalit Lives Matter have spotlighted violence against Dalit women and amplified their political agency.

There has also been a growing transnational solidarity between Dalit feminists and other women of color movements globally, drawing parallels between casteism and racism. This has expanded the scope of Dalit feminist thought to include anti-capitalist, environmental, and decolonial critiques.

3. Development as a Distinct Feminist Framework.

Dalit feminism has emerged not merely as a subcategory of Indian feminism but as a distinct and autonomous feminist framework that challenges both patriarchal caste structures and the caste-blindness of mainstream feminist movements. Its development has been shaped by the lived experiences of Dalit women who face multiple axes of marginalization—as women, as Dalits, and often as poor, rural, and linguistically diverse citizens. Unlike mainstream feminism in India, which historically centered the concerns of upper-caste, urban, and English-speaking women, Dalit feminism foregrounds the intersections of caste, gender, class, and region, placing at its center the material realities and cultural expressions of historically oppressed communities. It has grown through diverse platforms: autobiographical writings like *Karukku* by Bama and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, grassroots activism by groups like the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), and digital activism through forums like Dalit Women Fight and Savari. Dalit feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege have called for the development of a "Dalit feminist standpoint epistemology"—an alternative way of producing knowledge grounded in the everyday struggles, labor, and resistance of Dalit women. This framework not only critiques exclusion within both dominant feminist and Dalit political discourses but also offers a reconstructive vision for inclusive, intersectional, and socially grounded feminist politics. In doing so, Dalit feminism refuses assimilation into existing paradigms and instead demands a reorientation of Indian feminist thought—one that is ethically accountable to caste realities and committed to transformative justice.

➤ **Dalit feminism today is characterized by: Autonomous organizing: Dalit women-led collectives, journals, and legal advocacy.**

A defining feature of Dalit feminism is its emphasis on autonomous organizing—building platforms that are entirely led, shaped, and directed by Dalit women themselves. This includes the formation of collectives such as the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), and numerous regional organizations. These groups emerged in response to both the caste-blindness of mainstream feminist organizations and the gender-blindness of traditional Dalit movements. They work on issues ranging from sexual violence, manual scavenging, caste-based discrimination, access to education and land rights, to representation in governance. Dalit women have also created independent publications, newsletters, and journals that publish their voices and lived experiences without mediation. Through legal advocacy, they have taken cases of caste and gender violence to both national courts and international human rights platforms, including the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (Durban, 2001), positioning caste-based violence as a global human rights issue.

➤ **Epistemic resistance: Reclaiming knowledge production from Savarna-dominated academia.**

Dalit feminism also engages in what scholar Sharmila Rege called epistemic resistance—a challenge to dominant systems of knowledge that exclude or marginalize Dalit women's voices. For centuries, academia in India has been shaped by upper-caste (Savarna) perspectives, which have often either ignored Dalit women's experiences or spoken on their behalf. Dalit feminist scholars and activists reject this gatekeeping and argue for a "Dalit

feminist standpoint", a framework that validates lived experience as theory and memory as knowledge. This has led to a powerful intellectual movement where Dalit women not only reclaim the right to be subjects of study but also assert themselves as theorists, historians, and authors. Scholars like Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Cynthia Stephen have foregrounded how knowledge production must shift to recognize voice, agency, and location. Epistemic resistance is therefore both political and pedagogical—it challenges Brahmanical dominance in education, curriculum, and intellectual spaces, and calls for a redefinition of what counts as knowledge.

➤ **Literary activism: Life-writing and regional-language narratives as political acts.**

Literary activism plays a central role in Dalit feminism. Through autobiographies, poetry, oral narratives, and fiction, Dalit women document their lives not just as individuals but as political subjects within larger structures of caste and patriarchy. These writings, often composed in regional languages, disrupt dominant literary traditions that have historically ignored or tokenized the voices of marginalized women. Works such as Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Bama's *Karukku*, and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* are not merely personal stories—they are acts of resistance that critique upper-caste norms, religious hypocrisy, domestic violence, and social exclusion. In these texts, literature becomes a space of protest, a way to articulate trauma, community memory, and collective strength. Moreover, these writings break away from English-language dominance and assert local language, idiom, and experience as equally valid mediums of political expression. Dalit feminist literary activism thus expands the boundaries of both literature and activism.

➤ **Intersectional praxis: Connecting caste, gender, class, and religion in lived struggles.**

Dalit feminism is inherently intersectional, recognizing that Dalit women's oppression is never singular but shaped by multiple, overlapping structures. Drawing inspiration from Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, Dalit feminists argue that caste, gender, class, and religion must be understood together—not as separate problems but as interconnected systems. For example, a Dalit Muslim woman may face discrimination not only for her caste and gender, but also for her religion in an increasingly communal political climate. Dalit feminism refuses to isolate gender from caste, or caste from economics, instead building a framework that reflects the complex and layered realities of Dalit women's lives. This intersectional praxis is reflected in their activism, policy demands, and solidarity building—with Adivasi, Muslim, Bahujan, queer, and other marginalized communities. It is a politics of solidarity and complexity, rooted in the recognition that justice cannot be achieved without confronting all forms of structural oppression simultaneously.

This feminist tradition refuses to be co-opted. As Gopal Guru and Cynthia Stephen have argued, Dalit women "talk differently" because their political speech is formed in the crucible of both social pain and political clarity.

Dalit feminism has evolved into a robust and independent framework, marked by specific strategies and modes of resistance that distinguish it from both mainstream feminism and male-centered Dalit politics. One of the most defining features of Dalit feminism is autonomous organizing. Dalit women have created their own collectives, associations, and advocacy platforms—such as the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM),

National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), and Dalit Women Fight—not just to raise their voices, but to lead movements for justice. These groups work at grassroots, national, and international levels, addressing issues such as caste-based sexual violence, political representation, and legal reform. Alongside activism, Dalit feminism engages in epistemic resistance—a conscious effort to reclaim knowledge production from Savarna-dominated academic and institutional spaces. This involves challenging who gets to write history, who is seen as an expert, and what kinds of knowledge are valued. Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru have emphasized the importance of developing a "Dalit standpoint epistemology" to validate lived experiences and subaltern knowledge as legitimate sources of theory.

"Dalit standpoint epistemology" to validate lived experiences and subaltern knowledge as legitimate sources of theory.

Equally important is literary activism, where Dalit women use autobiographies, oral histories, and regional-language literature to document and resist systemic oppression. Works like Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* are not just personal stories—they are political texts that confront caste and patriarchy from the inside. These writings not only expose the violence Dalit women endure but also assert their agency, memory, and identity in ways that academic or political discourse often cannot. Finally, Dalit feminism is deeply rooted in intersectional praxis. Drawing on the concept of intersectionality, it addresses the interconnected structures of caste, gender, class, and often religion, region, and language. This holistic approach ensures that the struggle for justice is not fragmented but collective, grounded in the reality that Dalit women's oppression is multidimensional. Thus, Dalit

feminism is not just a critique—it is a constructive framework that centers resistance, reclaims voice, and redefines Indian feminist and political thought from the margins.

Conclusion: Dalit feminism is a dynamic, historically rooted, and intellectually rich movement that continues to evolve. From the early songs of Bhakti poets to contemporary online protests and policy advocacy, Dalit women have consistently challenged the foundations of caste and patriarchy in Indian society.

Their contributions demand not just inclusion but re-centering in feminist, social justice, and political discourses. Understanding Dalit feminism is essential not only for academic completeness but also for envisioning a more equitable and intersectional feminist future.

"Dalit Feminism: A Critical Analysis of Its Relevance in Contemporary Feminist Discourse"

Introduction: Dalit feminism is not merely a subcategory of Indian feminism—it is a radical and necessary intervention that challenges the foundations of both mainstream feminist and anti-caste discourses. It emerges from the lived realities of Dalit women who are doubly marginalized—by the Brahmanical patriarchy that controls mainstream Indian society and by the Savarna-centric feminism that often invisibilizes their experiences. A critical analysis of Dalit feminism highlights its political, theoretical, and cultural relevance, making it indispensable to any meaningful discourse on gender justice in India.

1. *Theoretical Relevance: Interrogating Dominant Feminisms*

Mainstream Indian feminism has historically been dominated by Savarna (upper-caste) women, whose articulation of gender issues often ignores or downplays the role of caste in shaping oppression. Dalit feminism challenges this by insisting on an intersectional approach, where caste and gender are inseparable. Scholars like

Sharmila Rege and Gail Omvedt have shown how upper-caste feminism tends to universalize women's experiences, sidelining Dalit voices and concerns such as caste-based sexual violence, labor exploitation, and social exclusion.

Dalit feminism also critiques Marxist and socialist feminism for prioritizing class over caste, thereby erasing the specificity of Dalit women's oppression. This positions Dalit feminism as theoretical resistance, not only against patriarchy but also against the epistemological dominance of caste-blind feminist scholarship.

2. Political Relevance: Bridging Gender and Caste Justice

Dalit feminism draws from Ambedkarite thought, which links women's liberation to the annihilation of caste. Unlike upper-caste feminism that often seeks inclusion within the existing structures, Dalit feminism is transformative—it demands structural change rooted in social justice and dignity. It connects struggles for land rights, education, political representation, and freedom from caste-based violence directly to feminist politics.

Movements led by Dalit women—such as those protesting against manual scavenging, honor killings, or custodial rape—reveal how caste-based violence is gendered. The 1992 Bhanwari Devi case and 2006 Khairlanji massacre, for instance, exposed the limitations of both the legal system and mainstream feminist responses. Dalit feminism politicizes these absences and reclaims the narrative from below.

3. Cultural Relevance: Rewriting Representation

Dalit women have historically been erased from literature, media, and cultural spaces, or stereotyped as victims. Dalit feminism insists on self-representation—through autobiographies, testimonios, poetry, and art—that assert dignity, resilience, and voice. Writers like Bama (*Karukku*), Urmila Pawar (*The Weave of*

My Life), and Meena Kandasamy foreground the intersection of caste and gender in everyday life.

These cultural texts not only challenge Savarna aesthetics but also redefine feminist expression by foregrounding the spiritual, emotional, and political world of Dalit women. Through this, Dalit feminism builds a counter-culture that is assertive, political, and emancipatory.

4. *Comparative and Global Relevance*

Dalit feminism can be seen in dialogue with Black feminism in the U.S., Indigenous feminism, and Latinx feminism, which also critique the marginalization within mainstream feminist movements. Like bell hooks or Angela Davis, Dalit feminists question whose voices feminism centers and whose pain it legitimizes. These global comparisons strengthen Dalit feminism's relevance beyond Indian borders, positioning it as part of a broader struggle against intersectional oppression.

5. *Limitations and Challenges*

While Dalit feminism is essential, it is not free from internal debates. Some critiques arise from within—such as the concern that Dalit feminism may risk becoming elitist or academic, disconnected from grassroots realities. Others argue about the representation gap within Dalit feminism itself—often privileging certain regional or linguistic voices over others (e.g., Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra over North Indian states).

Furthermore, alliances with non-Dalit feminists remain fraught, with power imbalances and tokenism still evident in academia, activism, and publishing.

Conclusion: Dalit feminism is not just relevant—it is indispensable to any feminist analysis that seeks to be inclusive, transformative, and just. By exposing the caste-blindness of mainstream feminism and the gender-blindness of anti-caste

politics, Dalit feminism fills a critical gap in the Indian socio-political discourse. It offers not only a framework for understanding intersecting oppressions but also a vision of liberation rooted in dignity, equality, and voice. The future of feminist politics in India must not only include Dalit feminism—it must be shaped by it.

"Significance of Dalit Feminism in the Context of All Feminisms and Postmodern India"

Introduction: Dalit feminism represents one of the most significant critical interventions in both Indian and global feminist discourses. It exposes the caste-based exclusions within mainstream feminist movements and asserts the necessity of an intersectional approach to gender justice. In postmodern India, where identity politics, resistance movements, and democratic aspirations are continually evolving, Dalit feminism has become both a challenge to dominant ideologies and a powerful voice for structural change.

1. *Significance in the Context of All Feminisms*

a. Critique of Mainstream Feminism : Dalit feminism critiques Savarna-dominated feminism for its caste-blindness. While upper-caste feminist movements have historically focused on issues like domestic violence, reproductive rights, or workplace discrimination, they often neglect the systemic violence and social exclusion faced by Dalit women—such as sexual violence by dominant castes, denial of education, forced labor, and untouchability.

b. Interrogation of Marxist and Socialist Feminisms

Though Marxist feminism addresses class and labor, it often fails to incorporate caste as a crucial category of analysis. Dalit feminism expands this lens by asserting that class and caste are inseparable in the Indian context. The experience of labor for a

Dalit woman—often degrading, caste-prescribed work like manual scavenging—is fundamentally different from that of upper-caste women.

c. Enriching Intersectional and Global Feminisms

Dalit feminism contributes to the global intersectional feminist framework by providing a caste-based analysis of gender, similar to how Black feminism analyzes race and gender. It challenges the universality of Western feminist categories and insists that identity, location, and lived experience matter in shaping feminist politics.

2. Significance in the Context of Postmodern India

a. Reclaiming Voice and Representation : In postmodern India—characterized by a media-driven democracy, rise of identity-based politics, and increasing assertion from marginalized communities—Dalit feminism is essential in reclaiming narratives and spaces. Autobiographies, testimonies, films, and digital activism by Dalit women now challenge both state narratives and Savarna gate keeping.

b. Political Assertion and Resistance : Dalit feminism has played a central role in mobilizing against caste atrocities, such as the Khairlanji massacre, Hathras rape case, and institutional casteism in universities (e.g., Rohith Vemula's case). It forces the nation to confront how gendered caste violence is routinely normalized in public institutions and society.

c. Decolonizing Feminist Knowledge:

In a postmodern and postcolonial context, Dalit feminism calls for the decolonization of feminist theory. It demands that knowledge production not only include Dalit voices but also be grounded in Dalit epistemologies—drawing from Ambedkarite thought, lived experience, and indigenous forms of resistance.

d. Challenging Neoliberal and Development Narratives

As India moves toward privatization and neoliberal development, Dalit women face intensified marginalization—excluded from education, healthcare, and land rights. Dalit feminism critiques neoliberal feminism, which promotes empowerment through individual success, and instead advocates for collective, structural empowerment rooted in social justice.

Conclusion: Dalit feminism holds profound significance within the broader spectrum of feminist thought and in the sociopolitical reality of postmodern India. It critiques and corrects the exclusions of mainstream feminism, offers an anti-caste feminist vision grounded in Ambedkarite justice, and reshapes how gender, identity, and power are understood in both theory and practice. In postmodern India, where democratic values are contested and redefined daily, Dalit feminism stands as a radical, necessary force—demanding not only inclusion but transformation of the feminist discourse itself.

"Beyond Single-Axis Struggles: A Critical Analysis of Feminist Frameworks Essential to Dalit Feminism"

The analysis of Dalit feminism necessitates an engagement with multiple feminist frameworks to capture the complexity of Dalit women's lived experiences. Intersectional feminism is crucial as it highlights how caste, class, and gender intersect to create a unique matrix of oppression for Dalit women—something mainstream Savarna feminism often overlooks. Ambedkarite or anti-caste feminism provides the ideological backbone of Dalit feminism, centering Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social justice and caste annihilation. It critiques the Savarna-led feminist discourse for its failure to address caste hierarchies within its own movements. Postcolonial and decolonial feminist perspectives are also essential, as they question both Western feminist universalism and

dominant nationalist frameworks, calling for an acknowledgment of localized and marginalized voices like those of Dalit women. Additionally, while Marxist feminism offers insights into class-based exploitation, it must be critically engaged and expanded to incorporate caste, recognizing how economic and caste hierarchies reinforce each other. Comparative frameworks such as Black feminism provide valuable parallels, helping to globalize the understanding of systemic discrimination by examining how race and gender intersect in other contexts. Together, these feminist approaches enrich the analysis of Dalit feminism, ensuring it is not viewed in isolation but as a deeply layered struggle against multiple, overlapping forms of oppression.

To analyze Dalit feminism effectively, several strands of feminism are essential, both to understand its emergence and to critique the limitations of mainstream feminist frameworks. Here are the key feminist approaches that are crucial for a comprehensive analysis:

1. Intersectional Feminism: A Critical Overview

Intersectional feminism is a theoretical and political framework that understands oppression as interconnected and interdependent, rather than existing in isolation. Coined by African-American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term was introduced to critique how feminist and anti-racist movements often overlooked the specific experiences of Black women—who face both racism and sexism simultaneously,

Key Concepts of Intersectional Feminism: Multiple identities (gender, caste, race, class, religion, sexuality, etc.) intersect to shape an individual's social experience.

- Oppression is not additive (e.g., sexism + casteism), but structural and overlapping, producing unique forms of marginalization.

- Calls for a shift from single-axis frameworks (e.g., gender-only or class-only analysis) to multi-layered analysis.

Relevance of Intersectional Feminism to Dalit Feminism:

In the Indian context, Dalit feminism is inherently intersectional. Dalit women experience oppression not just as women, and not just as Dalits, but as Dalit women—where caste and gender interact in unique, systemic ways.

a. Critique of Savarna Feminism:

- Mainstream (Savarna) feminist movements have often focused on gender issues like dowry, domestic violence, or workplace inequality, ignoring the caste-based sexual violence and social exclusion experienced by Dalit women.
- Intersectional feminism provides the tools to expose this erasure and demand a broader, more inclusive feminist agenda.

b. Caste as a Structural Category:

- Intersectional analysis helps recognize caste not just as a social identity, but as a deeply embedded system that shapes access to resources, dignity, and justice.
- For example, Dalit women performing manual scavenging or facing institutional discrimination in education are affected by both caste hierarchy and gender norms.

Examples in Practice:

- Hathras case (2020): A Dalit girl was raped and murdered, and the state machinery actively suppressed justice. Upper-caste feminist groups were largely silent, showing how intersectional gaps persist in feminist solidarity.
- Rohith Vemula's institutional murder (2016): Highlighted caste bias in academic spaces; Dalit women activists linked it to broader patterns of gendered exclusion and caste-based silencing.

Criticisms and Cautions: Intersectionality, though powerful, can be co-opted as a buzzword in academic and NGO spaces without real political engagement.

- It must be localized—imported Western frameworks can’t fully capture the specificity of caste without adaptation to Indian realities.
- There is a risk of fragmentation—too many identities without a political base can dilute collective struggle.

➤ **Conclusion:**

Intersectional feminism is essential to the analysis of Dalit feminism because it reveals how caste, gender, and class are inseparable in the lives of Dalit women. It enables a more accurate and just understanding of oppression, moving beyond token inclusion to structural transformation. However, it must be rooted in context-specific realities—like caste in India—and aligned with grassroots movements to retain its political power.

Contrasts with Other Feminisms

Aspect	Mainstream/Savarna Feminism	Ambedkarite Feminism
Focus	Gender-only, often upper-caste experiences	Caste + Gender (structurally linked)
Leadership	Predominantly Savarna women	Led by Dalit women
Solutions	Legal rights, representation	Structural annihilation of caste and patriarchy
Theory Base	Liberal/Marxist/Radical feminism	Ambedkarite social justice philosophy

➤ **Limitations and Challenges:**

- Ambedkarite feminism is sometimes marginalized within broader feminist platforms, seen as “too political” or “divisive.”

- There is a risk of romanticizing Ambedkarite ideology without updating it to meet contemporary forms of capitalism, digital patriarchy, and regional variations of caste oppression.
- Internal class, regional, and religious differences among Dalit women can also create hierarchies within Dalit feminist spaces, requiring continued reflexivity.

Conclusion: Ambedkarite feminism is not just relevant—it is foundational to Dalit feminism. It offers a framework that exposes the structural and interlocking nature of caste and gender oppression, and demands not just inclusion but radical transformation. In postmodern India, where caste discrimination persists in new forms, Ambedkarite feminism offers the most grounded, justice-oriented approach to feminist politics. It insists that any feminism which ignores caste is not only incomplete but complicit in maintaining the very hierarchies it claims to fight.

3. Postcolonial and Decolonial Feminism: A Critical Analysis in Relation to Dalit Feminism

Definition and Theoretical Foundations: Postcolonial feminism emerged as a critique of Western (liberal and radical) feminisms that claimed universality while marginalizing the experiences of women in the Global South. It highlights how colonialism, imperialism, and Eurocentrism shaped gender relations and continue to influence global feminist thought.

Decolonial feminism, while related, goes a step further: it challenges the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being—especially the idea that modernity and rationality are rooted solely in Western thought. It argues for a re-centering of indigenous, local, and subaltern knowledge systems.

Key theorists include:

- Chandra Talpade Mohanty (*Under Western Eyes*)
- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*)

- Maria Lugones (Decolonial feminist scholar)

Core Concepts: Critique of Western Universalism: Western feminisms often assume a single model of women's oppression, ignoring cultural, historical, and colonial differences.

- Emphasis on Lived Experience and Local Contexts: Postcolonial/decolonial feminists argue for feminism rooted in specific histories, such as slavery, colonialism, caste, and indigenous resistance.
- Power and Knowledge: Challenges who gets to produce feminist theory and whose voices are considered "authoritative."

➤ **It's Relevance to Dalit Feminism**

Dalit feminism shares a deep affinity with postcolonial and decolonial feminism, but also goes beyond them in some ways, especially through its grounding in **Ambedkarite anti-caste politics**.

a. *Critiquing Western and Savarna Feminisms*

- Like postcolonial feminists, Dalit feminists reject the universality of Western feminist categories that do not recognize caste as a key structure of oppression.
- They also critique Savarna-led Indian feminism, which often imitates Western academic discourse without accounting for caste realities on the ground.

b. *Foregrounding Lived Experience and Indigenous Thought*

- Dalit feminism draws on oral histories, autobiographies, and grassroots resistance, aligning with the decolonial emphasis on epistemic justice—valuing non-academic and non-Western forms of knowledge.
- It reclaims Ambedkarite knowledge systems, using them as counter-narratives to both Brahmanical patriarchy and colonial modernity.

c. ***Intersection of Colonialism and Caste:*** While colonialism shaped the institutionalization of caste in some ways (e.g., census categories), caste predated colonialism. Dalit feminism critiques postcolonial feminism for sometimes underestimating caste as an autonomous structure.

- Dalit women were often doubly marginalized—as colonial subjects and as “untouchables” under Hindu social order. This layered marginality resonates with the decolonial framework.

➤ **Its Critical Insights and Contributions**

1. ***Challenging Knowledge Production***

Postcolonial and decolonial feminists ask: *Who is speaking for whom?* Dalit feminism answers this by insisting: Dalit women must speak for themselves, not be spoken for by either Western feminists or Savarna feminists.

2. ***Linking Local with Global***

Dalit feminism connects with global struggles—like Black feminism, indigenous feminism, and Afro-Latinx decolonial thought—but always remains firmly rooted in Indian caste realities.

3. ***The Politics of Representation***

Postcolonial critiques of representation (as in Spivak’s “subaltern cannot speak”) find a counter in Dalit feminist writing—where the subaltern does speak, often in powerful autobiographical and testimonial forms (e.g., *Bama*, *Urmila Pawar*, *Baby Kamble*).

➤ **Its Limitations and Tensions**

Postcolonial feminism, especially in elite academic spaces, has sometimes been detached from grassroots realities, limiting its impact on actual marginalized communities.

- Some Dalit feminists critique postcolonial theory for focusing too much on colonialism and not enough on caste as a continuing system of oppression.

- Decolonial theory, developed in Latin America, may not fully map onto India without contextual grounding—though its critique of knowledge hierarchies is very relevant.
- **Conclusion:** Postcolonial and decolonial feminisms are critically important to understanding and situating Dalit feminism within global feminist discourses. They provide tools to critique epistemic exclusion, colonial legacies, and Savarna dominance in feminist theory. However, Dalit feminism must not be subsumed into these frameworks—it must retain its unique caste-conscious, Ambedkarite foundation. When critically engaged, postcolonial and decolonial feminism can enrich Dalit feminist analysis, helping build a more inclusive, global, and decolonized feminist future—one that does not erase the specific violence of caste and the power of resistance from below.

➤ **Materialist / Marxist Feminism: A Critical Engagement in Relation to Dalit Feminism**

Definition and Core Ideas: Materialist feminism (often used interchangeably with Marxist feminism) focuses on how economic structures, capitalist exploitation, and private property shape gender oppression. It builds on Marxist theory, arguing that women's subjugation is rooted in capitalist modes of production and their exclusion from wage labor and ownership.

Key ideas include:

- Gender oppression is structurally linked to class exploitation.
- Women's unpaid domestic labor is essential to capitalism but invisible in economic systems.
- The nuclear family and gendered division of labor serve capitalist and patriarchal interests.

➤ **Relevance to Dalit Feminism: A Critical Engagement**

While Marxist feminism offers important tools for analyzing the economic exploitation of women, it has often neglected the

specificity of caste in the Indian context. Dalit feminism critically engages with it—not rejecting it outright, but insisting on its expansion and localization.

1. Analyzing Exploitative Labor

Dalit women have long been employed in the most dehumanizing, caste-bound labor (manual scavenging, bonded labor, domestic work).

Marxist feminism helps uncover how their gendered labor is commodified and exploited in both feudal and capitalist economies.

2. **Understanding Class-Caste Convergence:** Dalit women often represent the lowest rung in both class and caste hierarchies.

Materialist analysis helps show how poverty, landlessness, and lack of access to capital affect Dalit women disproportionately.

3. **Critiquing Neoliberal Feminism:** In the age of globalization and privatization, Dalit feminism aligns with Marxist feminism to critique individualist, market-based models of “empowerment” (e.g., microloans, skill training) that do not challenge structural inequalities.

➤ **Where It Falls Short (Cautions and Critique):**

1. Class Reductionism

Traditional Marxist and socialist movements in India (especially in early decades) often collapsed caste into class, treating caste as a pre-modern, cultural issue rather than a continuing material and social hierarchy.

Dalit feminists argue this flattens their experience—a Brahmin woman and a Dalit woman may both be poor, but not equally oppressed.

2. **Neglect of Social and Cultural Violence:** Marxist feminism may focus on labor conditions but overlook symbolic violence

like untouchability, sexual humiliation, and social ostracization—key aspects of Dalit women’s lives that are not reducible to class exploitation alone.

3. Leadership and Representation Gaps

Historically, Marxist and leftist feminist spaces have been dominated by upper-caste, upper-class women, leaving Dalit voices underrepresented or tokenized.

➤ **Toward a Caste-Aware Materialist Feminism**

Dalit feminism doesn't reject Marxist ideas—it calls for their reconstruction through an intersectional, anti-caste lens:

- Scholars like Anupama Rao, Anand Teltumbde, and Sharmila Rege have argued for a synthesis of caste and class analysis.
- A Dalit materialist feminism would recognize how caste determines access to labor, not just in economic terms, but also in terms of dignity, social value, and bodily autonomy.
- It also brings into focus reproductive and sexual labor, often commoditized and dehumanized in ways specific to Dalit women.

➤ **Conclusion:** Materialist / Marxist feminism is essential, but insufficient on its own for understanding the full scope of Dalit women’s oppression. Its focus on labor and economic structures aligns with key concerns of Dalit feminism, especially around exploitation and marginalization. However, without a caste-conscious, intersectional approach, it risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to dismantle.

Dalit feminism, therefore, critically engages with Marxist feminism—not to reject it, but to radicalize it. Only by integrating caste, gender, and class together can we build a truly transformative feminist politics in India.

5. Black Feminism: A Comparative Framework for Understanding Dalit Feminism: Definition and Foundations

Black feminism is a critical feminist framework that centers the experiences of Black women, particularly in the United States, highlighting how race, gender, and class intersect to shape their oppression. It emerged as a response to both the racism within mainstream (white) feminism and the sexism within Black liberation movements.

Key thinkers include: bell hooks (*Ain't I a Woman?*)

- Angela Davis (*Women, Race, and Class*)
- Audre Lorde
- The Combahee River Collective, which introduced the term "interlocking systems of oppression."

Core Concepts of Black Feminism

- Intersectionality: Black women's experiences cannot be understood through race or gender alone—they are shaped by their simultaneous position in multiple systems of oppression.
- Self-representation: Black women must define their own identities and narratives, challenging both racist and patriarchal representations.
- Structural critique: Black feminism critiques capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy as interdependent structures.

➤ Its Comparative Relevance to Dalit Feminism

Dalit feminism finds deep resonance with Black feminism. Though rooted in different socio-historical contexts, both are anti-hegemonic, anti-oppressive, and intersectional movements. Dalit feminism often draws from Black feminist thought to frame caste and gender oppression together.

Shared Concerns:

1. Intersectionality of Caste/Race, Gender, and Class:

Dalit women, like Black women, are marginalized within both feminist and anti-oppression movements.

Both groups challenge the double erasure: Dalit women within mainstream feminism and within anti-caste or Dalit male politics; Black women within white feminism and Black civil rights movements.

2. Lived Experience as Political:

Autobiographies, poetry, and oral narratives play a key role in both traditions. For example: bell hooks' concept of "talking back" → Bama's *Karukku*

Audre Lorde's insistence on speaking from the margins → Meena Kandasamy's defiant writing.

3. Cultural Resistance

Both feminisms emphasize self-representation, language reclamation, and cultural activism. Music, performance, literature, and film become tools of resistance and healing.

4. Political Solidarity and Community Building

The Combahee River Collective's idea of collective empowerment aligns with Dalit women's grassroots organizing across India.

Key Differences (Contextual Specificity)

Aspect	Black Feminism (U.S.)	Dalit Feminism (India)
Oppressive system	Racism (White supremacy)	Casteism (Brahmanical hierarchy)
Historical roots	Slavery, segregation, racism	Untouchability, caste system, feudalism
Legal backdrop	Civil rights, affirmative action	Reservation policies, constitutional safeguards
Cultural context	U.S. Black identity and diaspora	Indian caste society, endogamy, religion

While both share intersectional methods, Dalit feminism must go beyond race analogies, because caste is not just racial or economic—it is deeply religious, cultural, and hereditary.

Mutual Enrichment: How the Frameworks Inform Each Other

- Dalit feminism gains language and strategy from Black feminist critiques of invisibility, tokenism, and representation.
- Black feminism learns from Dalit feminists how caste-based purity/impurity operates analogously to racial segregation and criminalization.
- Together, they help build transnational feminist solidarities rooted in the politics of the oppressed, not in elite liberal feminism.

Criticisms and Cautions: Some Dalit scholars warn against blindly importing Western concepts like "race" to explain caste, arguing it risks oversimplifying local realities.

- There's a need to contextualize comparisons to avoid erasing the specific histories and modes of oppression unique to Dalit communities.
- Still, comparative frameworks are valuable when grounded in mutual learning and resistance.

Conclusion: Black feminism provides a powerful comparative framework for Dalit feminism, offering tools of intersectionality, self-representation, and resistance. While their contexts differ, both are rooted in lived experiences of structural oppression, and both reject token inclusion in favor of radical transformation. Used critically and contextually, this framework can help build solidarity, deepen theoretical analysis, and amplify resistance against gendered caste and racial hierarchies worldwide.

➤ **Relevance of Queer/LGBTQ+, Cultural, Decolonial, Postcolonial, Postmodern, and Ecofeminism to Dalit Feminism (with Critique):**

Dalit feminism, deeply rooted in the intersecting realities of caste, gender, and class oppression, engages selectively and critically with various feminist frameworks to broaden its analytical and political scope. **Queer and LGBTQ+ feminism:** challenges heteronormativity and binary gender norms, enabling Dalit feminism to include **queer Dalit voices** who face compounded marginalization. However, queer feminism is often critiqued for being **dominated by upper-caste, urban elites**, potentially sidelining rural and economically marginalized queer Dalit experiences. **Cultural feminism** highlights women's unique cultural expressions and solidarities but risks **essentializing womanhood** and **glossing over caste hierarchies**, especially when dominant caste cultural norms are uncritically valorized.

Postcolonial and decolonial feminisms resonate with Dalit feminism's critique of Western-centric feminist discourses and colonial legacies, yet they sometimes fall short by **underestimating caste as an autonomous system of oppression** distinct from colonialism. These frameworks can also be **academically removed from grassroots struggles**. **Postmodern feminism** offers important tools to question fixed identities and universal claims, supporting Dalit feminism's insistence on multiple, fragmented voices; however, its **abstract theoretical focus** risks detachment from the concrete political and material realities that Dalit feminism centers.

Eco-feminism, which links the oppression of women with ecological degradation, shares Dalit feminism's concern with **exploitation and marginalization of both people and land**. Dalit women's connection to land, environment, and natural resources

through agrarian labor and rural livelihoods resonates strongly with eco-feminist critiques. Yet, eco-feminism is sometimes critiqued for **romanticizing rural womanhood** and **overlooking internal caste-based exclusions** within environmental movements dominated by upper castes.

In sum, while these feminist approaches provide useful perspectives, Dalit feminism critically adapts and challenges them, insisting on the **centrality of caste**, the **material conditions of Dalit women**, and the need for a **politics grounded in Ambedkarite ideals of social justice and dignity**.

Intersectionality: Caste, Gender, and Class :

The framework of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, is crucial to understanding Dalit feminism. Crenshaw developed the concept to explain how Black women in the United States experience oppression not just as women or as Black individuals, but through the intersection of both identities. Similarly, Dalit women face oppression not simply as women, nor only as Dalits, but at the nexus of caste, gender, and class.

Intersectionality allows us to see that Dalit women's oppression is both structural and symbolic: they are underrepresented in political institutions, overrepresented in precarious labor, disproportionately subjected to sexual violence, and excluded from dominant feminist and political spaces. Mainstream Indian feminism has often failed to account for this layered experience, flattening womanhood into an upper-caste, urban, middle-class identity.

Dalit feminism, therefore, engages in a double critique: of upper-caste patriarchy and of male-centric anti-caste politics. It builds solidarity not just across gender lines but across caste, class, religion, and region. This intersectional vision is not merely

theoretical—it is embodied in the practices of resistance and survival that Dalit women carry forward.

The Need for a Distinct Dalit Feminist Discourse

Dalit feminism cannot be subsumed under existing categories; it demands a space of its own. While Indian feminist movements have made significant strides in addressing gender-based discrimination, their frameworks often universalize the experience of womanhood, overlooking how caste fundamentally shapes social realities.

Likewise, many Dalit movements have prioritized caste-based discrimination while treating gender as secondary. In this context, Dalit women are often placed in the background of anti-caste struggles, seen primarily as supporters or victims rather than as theorists, organizers, and historical agents.

Dalit feminism challenges this erasure. It insists on redefining leadership, knowledge, and politics. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege have called for a “Dalit feminist standpoint,” arguing that Dalit women’s experiences can form the basis of a radical epistemology—one that challenges both caste and patriarchal knowledge systems. This project is deeply political, embodied, and resistant, and it demands a rethinking of what feminism in India truly entails.

Relationship with Mainstream Indian Feminism

The relationship between Dalit feminism and mainstream Indian feminism is complex and often fraught. The early feminist movement in India—especially in the post-Emergency era—was largely shaped by urban, English-educated, upper-caste women who often failed to incorporate caste into their critiques of patriarchy. While important contributions were made by scholars like Nivedita Menon, Kumkum Sangari, and Susie Tharu, caste

was frequently treated as a peripheral concern rather than a central axis of analysis.

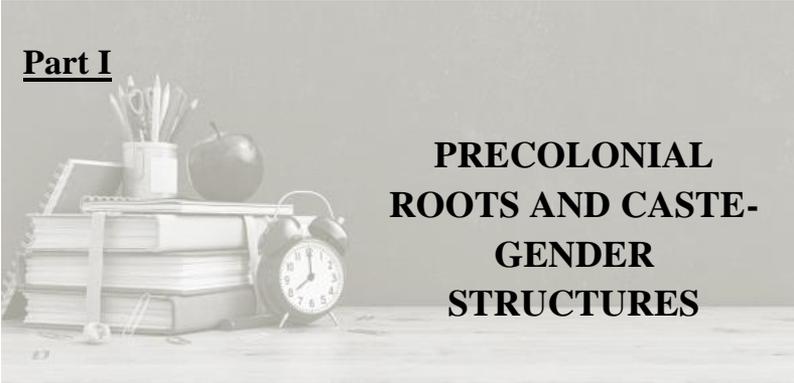
Dalit feminists, including Gopal Guru, Cynthia Stephen, and Ruth Manorama, have critiqued this Savarna hegemony in feminism. Guru's influential essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" (1995) challenged the idea of a unified feminist subject, arguing that Dalit women's experiences, struggles, and ways of knowing differ fundamentally from those of upper-caste women.

Despite these critiques, there have also been efforts at building alliances. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti and activists in collectives like Stree Shakti Sanghatana and AIDWA have attempted to engage with caste more meaningfully. However, tensions persist—especially around issues of representation, authorship, and voice. Dalit feminism continues to demand that mainstream feminism decenter itself and make room for marginalized voices not as add-ons, but as co-creators of feminist theory and praxis.

Conclusion; This chapter has outlined the foundational terms, tensions, and frameworks that guide the study of Dalit feminism. It positions Dalit feminism not as a response to mainstream feminism, but as a transformative framework in its own right. The subsequent chapters will trace this tradition across historical periods—from the devotional resistance of Bhakti poetesses, through the radical politics of the Phule-Ambedkarite movements, to the autobiographical and digital narratives of the 21st century. Dalit feminism is not new—it has always existed in struggle. What remains is for it to be acknowledged, studied, and centralized in the feminist discourse of India.

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Part I



PRECOLONIAL ROOTS AND CASTE- GENDER STRUCTURES

2.1 PRECOLONIAL ROOTS AND CASTE-GENDER

Dalit feminism emerges from the lived realities of Dalit women who experience intersecting oppressions: caste-based exclusion, patriarchal control, and class exploitation. It critiques both Brahmanical patriarchy and the limitations of mainstream feminist and Dalit movements that often ignore Dalit women's specific struggles.

1. Gender and Caste in Ancient Indian Texts: (*Manusmriti and Patriarchy*): The *Manusmriti*, one of the foundational texts of the Brahmanical legal tradition, serves as a central source of

patriarchal and caste-based ideology in ancient India. For Dalit feminism, this text is not merely a historical document but a living symbol of structural oppression. It codifies a rigid social order where women are rendered subordinate through lifelong male guardianship and lower castes—particularly Dalits—are dehumanized and excluded from rights, education, and religious life. Dalit women, at the intersection of caste, gender, and labor, bear the brunt of this dual domination. The *Manusmriti* not only denies them visibility but implicitly sanctions their exploitation by positioning them outside the moral and legal universe of the upper-caste male gaze. Dalit feminists like Sharmila Rege have argued that this text exemplifies "Brahmanical patriarchy," a system where caste purity and gender control are mutually reinforcing. In response, the rejection of *Manusmriti*, as symbolized by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's public burning of the text in 1927, remains a powerful act of Dalit feminist resistance—challenging both scriptural authority and the social hierarchies it upholds.

Foundations of Brahmanical Control

1. The Manusmriti: Textual Authority of Patriarchy and Caste

- The *Manusmriti* (also known as the *Manava Dharmashastra*) is an ancient Hindu legal text, traditionally attributed to the sage Manu.
- It codifies varna-based social stratification and lays down gender roles, becoming one of the most influential sources of Brahmanical law.
- Though composed around the 2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE, it gained political authority under colonial rule when the British treated it as a representative Hindu law code.

2. Gender: Codified Patriarchy and Women's Subordination

The *Manusmriti* presents women as inherently subordinate to men and dangerous to social order if left “uncontrolled.” Key features include:

A. Total Male Guardianship

“In childhood, a woman must be subject to her father; in youth, to her husband; when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent.” – *Manusmriti* 5.148

- This verse encapsulates the denial of autonomy at every life stage.
- Women’s sexuality, movement, and agency were regulated to preserve lineage purity (*gotra*).

B. The Ideal Woman: Chaste, Obedient, Domestic

- Chastity (*pativrata*) and loyalty to the husband were deemed a woman’s highest virtues.
- Widow Remarriage was forbidden; widows were expected to live in austerity.

C. Fear of Female Sexuality

- The text portrays women as naturally promiscuous and in need of male control.
- This gendered anxiety justified confinement, surveillance, and lack of legal rights.

3. Caste: Brahmanical Supremacy and Dalit-Erasure

While gender roles were rigidly defined, the intersection with caste created a more violent, exclusionary structure:

A. Shudras and ‘Untouchables’: Denial of Rights

- Shudras (servants) and the “Avarna” (Dalits, outside the varna system) were barred from:
 - Vedic learning and recitation
 - Religious rituals
 - Land ownership and wealth accumulation

“If a Shudra hears the Veda being recited, molten lead should be poured into his ears.” – *Manusmriti* 2.281

- Such injunctions violently protected Brahmanical intellectual and ritual authority.

B. Dalit Women: Triple Oppression

Dalit women in India face a unique and compounded form of discrimination known as triple oppression, which arises from the intersection of caste, gender, and class. As members of the Dalit community, they endure caste-based degradation, being labeled as "impure" and excluded from many aspects of public and social life. As women in a deeply patriarchal society, they experience gender subjugation, including limited autonomy, domestic violence, and lack of access to education and healthcare. Furthermore, they are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation, often targeted by dominant-caste men who use violence as a tool of control and humiliation. This intersectional oppression leaves Dalit women among the most marginalized and voiceless groups in Indian society, requiring focused attention and justice-oriented reform to address their unique struggles.

Dalit women were subjected to Caste-based degradation (as impure), Gender subjugation (as women), Sexual exploitation (as accessible to upper-caste men but denied any rights).

➤ Caste-Based Degradation

As Dalits (formerly referred to as "Untouchables"), Dalit women are placed at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. This results in:

- Social ostracism: They are often barred from entering temples, drawing water from public wells, or participating in community functions.
- Labelled as 'impure': Their caste identity marks them as ritually polluted, reinforcing systemic discrimination.
- Institutional exclusion: Limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities due to their caste status.

➤ **Gender Subjugation**

Being women in a patriarchal society, Dalit women face:

- Domestic control: Restrictions over mobility, decision-making, and access to resources.
- Gender violence: Vulnerability to domestic abuse, forced marriages, and lack of reproductive rights.
- Underrepresentation: Marginalization in social, political, and economic decision-making structures—even within Dalit movements.

➤ **Sexual Exploitation:** Dalit women are often targets of sexual violence, especially by dominant-caste men:

- Caste-based sexual violence: Used as a tool to "punish" or intimidate the Dalit community.
- Lack of justice: Law enforcement often ignores or downplays crimes against Dalit women, resulting in impunity for perpetrators.
- Stigmatization: Victims are often shamed, blamed, or silenced by both their communities and society at large.

Dalit feminist scholars highlight that *Manusmriti* laid the ideological groundwork for centuries of caste-gendered violence, especially against Dalit women who were excluded from both feminist and anti-caste discourses for long periods.

- **Shudra and Dalit Women in Dharmaśāstra and Epics**

In ancient Indian religious and legal texts such as the *Dharmaśāstra*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*, Shudra and Dalit women are largely excluded, erased, or vilified, revealing the deeply casteist and patriarchal structure of Brahmanical knowledge systems. These texts do not simply overlook Dalit women—they actively construct them as impure, inferior, and unworthy of dignity, denying them access to spiritual, social, and legal rights. While the *Dharmaśāstra* literature categorically

prohibits lower-caste women from education and religious participation, epics portray them as hypersexualized, servile, or invisible. The absence of their agency, coupled with implicit justifications for their exploitation, creates what Dalit feminists term “caste-gendered violence”—a layered form of oppression where caste discrimination intersects with patriarchal control. Dalit feminist thinkers like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru argue that these texts institutionalize ritualized domination, where Dalit women’s bodies are both laboring and violated, yet denied voice and subjectivity. By exposing these ideological underpinnings, Dalit feminism challenges the romanticization of epics and scripture in mainstream discourse and insists on centering the lived experiences and resistance of marginalized women who have long been silenced in India's textual traditions.

2. Bhakti Movements and Early Resistance

The Bhakti movements that emerged in pre-colonial India from the 6th century onwards offered some of the earliest spaces for resistance against caste and gender hierarchies, and they hold important significance in the history of Dalit feminism. These devotional movements, which emphasized personal devotion to a deity over ritualistic practices, were often led by poet-saints from marginalized communities, including women and Dalits. Through their poetry and spiritual practice, they challenged Brahmanical authority, patriarchal norms, and social exclusion.

One notable figure was Sant Chokhamela, a 14th-century Dalit saint from Maharashtra, whose poems reflected the pain of untouchability and questioned the moral authority of the caste system. Likewise, Soyarabai, his wife and a Dalit woman poet-saint, expressed deep resistance to both caste and gender oppression in her devotional verses. She boldly asserted her

spiritual equality with upper-caste men, declaring that devotion, not birth, determined one's worth in the eyes of God.

Women saints like Janabai (a Shudra woman) and Akkamahadevi (from the Lingayat tradition) also used the language of devotion to critique patriarchy, bodily control, and societal expectations placed on women. While not all Bhakti saints explicitly identified with what we now call feminism, their voices created early forms of resistance that aligned with Dalit feminist concerns—namely, the assertion of dignity, equality, and autonomy in a rigidly hierarchical society.

In essence, the Bhakti movement provided a rare, though limited, platform where Dalit women could express dissent and claim spiritual agency. Their contributions form a crucial part of the foundation for Dalit feminist thought, which continues to challenge intersecting systems of caste and gender-based oppression.

- **Saint-Poets: Janabai, Soyarabai, Akka Mahadevi**

Saint-poets like Janabai, Soyarabai, and Akka Mahadevi played a transformative role in pre-modern India by using their spiritual devotion to challenge deeply entrenched caste and gender hierarchies. **Janabai**, a Shudra woman from Maharashtra, served in a Brahmin household but composed powerful abhangs (devotional poems) that expressed both her deep faith and her critique of caste discrimination. **Soyarabai**, a Dalit woman and the wife of Chokhamela, wrote verses that boldly confronted untouchability and proclaimed that true devotion was not bound by birth or caste. **Akka Mahadevi**, a 12th-century mystic from Karnataka and a prominent figure in the Lingayat movement, rejected societal norms by discarding her clothes and embracing

spiritual renunciation, symbolizing freedom from patriarchal control. Through their poetry and lives, these women saints resisted social injustice, asserting their spiritual agency in a society that marginalized them.

- **Devotional Expression as Subversive Voice**

In the rigid social structure of pre-colonial India, devotional expression became a powerful and subversive voice for marginalized women. The **Bhakti movement**, with its emphasis on personal devotion over ritual and hierarchy, allowed women—especially from lower castes—to articulate their suffering, spiritual longing, and resistance. Their devotional songs and poems were not merely religious utterances but also sharp critiques of caste oppression, gender roles, and the denial of dignity. By directly addressing God without the mediation of priests or rituals, these women saint-poets claimed spiritual equality and defied both **Brahmanical orthodoxy** and **patriarchal norms**. Their voices carved out a space for **early feminist expression**, where the personal and the political merged through devotion, making their work a foundational part of **Dalit and feminist resistance** in Indian history.

3. Feminism in Ancient India and Patriarchy

Being as an active and vibrant movement feminism in women voice becomes the very effective factor to challenge against the patriarchal structure of society. But regarding the traditional Indian cultural and myth feminism is traced its mark in the lap of ancient Hindu myths and cultures where we see the establishment

of female voice against the male dominated orders and its violences. The live and vibrant examples we will get from Sita, Draupodi in Hindu Puran and in ancient Hindu Goddess like Devi Durga; for killing male dominated power of demon Mahishasora, Saraswati; Goddess of knowledge and learning.

Regarding ancient Hindu mythology it can be regarded that there were many female warriors who defies the patriarchal power and proved to be equal order among themselves. The story of satyaban and sabitri proved the energy of a women to fight against all troubles and self made disicion to make her husband alive again against all odds in her life. Another example of a strong female character in Indian mythology is Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Draupadi is a beautiful and intelligent woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. She is also a skilled warrior who fights alongside her husbands in the Kurukshetra War. (Greenwood, 2019). 'Sexism and misogyny' in Indian mythology is seen as for example, in the Ramayana, Sita is kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. Rama and his allies eventually rescue her, but she is subjected to a trial by fire to prove her chastity. This trial is a clear example of the double standards that women faced in ancient India. The story of Sita marked the point of traditional marginalisation and been objectified against it.

Indian feminism always takes its inspirational commands from ancient figure like Devi Durga, Sita, Draupodi and the like. They are not just an inspiration but a voice to ignite in Indian feminism to stand against all odds and challenging power of male systematic zeal and support. Physical and emotional sacrifices of ancient female figure marked very significant to the intellectual and spiritual section of feminism. Gargy, a woman scholar has even been challenged by male power to the debate in philosophical matters; suggesting the exclusion of women education from Vedic

systematic process of education in Sanskrit and in other sacred books.

The presence of strong and independent female characters in Indian mythology suggests that there is a long history of feminism in India. However, it is important to note that Indian mythology is a complex and diverse tradition, and there are many different interpretations of the role of women. Some interpretations are more patriarchal than others, and they can be seen as reinforcing traditional gender roles. However, there are also many interpretations that are more feminist, and they can be seen as challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. (Lyotard, 2017)

One of the most famous examples of a strong female character in Indian mythology is Sita, the wife of Rama in the Ramayana. Sita is a skilled warrior and strategist who is not afraid to stand up for herself. She is also a devoted wife and mother, but she is not afraid to challenge Rama's authority when she believes he is wrong. Another example of a strong female character in Indian mythology is Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Draupadi is a beautiful and intelligent woman who is not afraid to speak her mind. She is also a skilled warrior who fights alongside her husbands in the Kurukshetra War. (Greenwood, 2019)

We will remind the strong and resilient figure in ancient Hindu Myth, Ahalya, one of the Panchakanya, a group of five women who are said to be able to dispel sin. Being as a very tragic figure Ahalya becomes victimised and then survived after a long period of Ram's pious touch on her stone-body; removing the curse, restored her own beauty and reunited with Goutama. Mandodary, the wife of Ravana, was forced to watch helplessly the torture of Sita with her humiliation.

So it should be focussed on the fact that the challenges and tortures taken by the ancient female figures are not just a story but the stern reflection of Indian Women in India revealing from the time of ancient history of Indian Cultural life. So women have been forced to challenge the exploitation from the ancient times and it's the time to stand against their voice in the patriarchal structures of society.

Brahminical Patriarchy in Ancient India.

Brahminical patriarchy in ancient India was a system that tightly intertwined caste and gender to uphold social hierarchies. It was rooted in the control of women's sexuality, labor, and autonomy to preserve caste purity and male dominance. Religious texts like the *Manusmriti* codified these controls, restricting women's education, denying them independent agency, and placing them under constant male authority. This system especially impacted upper-caste women, who were subjected to strict rules to maintain lineage purity, while lower-caste women faced exploitation without the supposed "protection" of these norms. Overall, Brahminical patriarchy served as a tool to sustain both caste and gender inequality.

- **Key characteristics in ancient texts and practices:**

1. Control of Women's Sexuality:

The control of women's sexuality was a central pillar of Brahminical patriarchy, designed to uphold caste purity and male dominance within ancient Indian society. This control was exercised through strict codes of conduct that governed women's behaviour, particularly in relation to marriage, reproduction, and chastity. Texts like the *Manusmriti* emphasized that a woman must remain under the authority of her father, husband, and later her son, effectively denying her autonomy over her own body and

choices. The concept of *stridharma* (women's duty) was constructed to idealize obedience, modesty, and sexual fidelity, with a woman's honor—and by extension, her family's and caste's honor—being tied to her sexual purity. Practices such as early marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, and the glorification of *pativrata* (devoted wife) were institutional tools to restrict women's sexual freedom and ensure that their reproductive power remained within the boundaries of the caste system. Upper-caste women, in particular, were subjected to rigid surveillance to prevent inter-caste unions, which were viewed as threats to the purity and continuity of caste lineage. Meanwhile, lower-caste women were often denied even the illusion of sexual agency, as they were more vulnerable to exploitation without the protection of these so-called moral codes. Thus, the regulation of women's sexuality was not merely about morality but about preserving social order, controlling inheritance, and reinforcing both caste and gender hierarchies.

(Texts like the *Manusmriti* prescribe strict codes of conduct for women, emphasizing chastity and obedience. Women's sexuality was tightly controlled to maintain caste purity, especially through *endogamy* (marrying within the caste).

2. Denial of Education and Autonomy

The denial of education and autonomy to women was a deliberate strategy of Brahminical patriarchy to maintain male and caste dominance by restricting women's intellectual and social agency. In early Vedic society, women like Gargi and Maitreyi had access to education and engaged in philosophical discourse, but as Brahminical orthodoxy tightened its grip, women's access to sacred knowledge, particularly the *Vedas*, was systematically curtailed. Education became the privilege of upper-caste males, while women were increasingly excluded from formal learning

and spiritual authority. This exclusion was reinforced through religious texts and customs that emphasized women's roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers, discouraging independent thought or pursuit of knowledge. Autonomy was further denied by enforcing dependency on male guardians throughout a woman's life—first her father, then her husband, and later her sons. This framework not only limited women's personal and intellectual development but also made them vessels of caste purity and moral conduct, controlled through seclusion, dress codes, and ritual restrictions. Even in cases where women showed exceptional intellect or spiritual inclination, their contributions were often downplayed or erased from mainstream narratives. The denial of education and autonomy thus served as a powerful tool in upholding both patriarchy and caste hierarchy, ensuring that women remained subservient, voiceless, and confined within a narrowly defined social order.

(Access to the *Vedas* and formal education was restricted to upper-caste males. Women were systematically excluded from intellectual and spiritual authority, though exceptions like Gargi and Maitreyi existed.)

3. Marriage and Kinship Norms

Marriage and kinship norms under Brahminical patriarchy were structured to reinforce caste purity and male control over lineage and inheritance. Marriages were strictly regulated through *endogamy*, ensuring that individuals married within their own caste to maintain social boundaries. Women's sexuality was closely monitored, and practices like child marriage and the prohibition of widow remarriage were imposed, particularly on upper-caste women, to prevent any disruption to caste hierarchy. The ideal woman was expected to be a devoted wife (*pativrata*) and bear sons who would continue the male lineage. Kinship was

patrilineal, meaning inheritance and family identity were passed through the male line, further marginalizing women's roles and rights within the family. These norms reduced women to bearers of caste and family honor, limiting their autonomy and subjecting them to the authority of male relatives throughout their lives (Early Vedic society was relatively more liberal, but later Brahminical codes enforced child marriage and widowhood taboos.

Widow Remarriage was condemned, especially for upper-caste women, further reinforcing their dependence and subjugation.)

- **Feminist Engagement**

Feminist engagement with Brahminical patriarchy has been critical in exposing how caste and gender oppression are deeply interconnected in Indian society. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti have argued that the caste system could not survive without controlling women's sexuality and labor, showing how Brahminical norms dictated women's roles to maintain social hierarchies. Feminists have highlighted how religious texts and customs institutionalized gender inequality under the guise of dharma and purity. Dalit feminists, in particular, have challenged both Brahminical patriarchy and mainstream upper-caste feminism for ignoring the intersection of caste and gender, emphasizing the unique and layered oppression faced by Dalit women. By revisiting myths, reinterpreting history, and amplifying marginalized voices, feminist thinkers have revealed the violence and exclusion embedded in traditional structures. Their work not only critiques the past but also pushes for more inclusive, intersectional approaches to gender justice in contemporary India.

- **The reclamation of women's voices**

The reclamation of women's voices in the context of Brahminical patriarchy involves revisiting and reinterpreting historical,

religious, and cultural narratives to highlight the agency and resistance of women that were often silenced or marginalized. Feminist scholars and writers have sought to recover the stories of women like Gargi, Maitreyi, and Draupadi, not as passive figures, but as thinkers, challengers, and survivors who questioned authority and asserted their identities in male-dominated spaces. Myths and epics have been critically re-examined to expose how patriarchal interpretations suppressed women’s perspectives and turned complex female characters into symbols of obedience or sacrifice. In addition, voices of women from non-Brahminical and marginalized communities, such as Dalit and Adivasi women, are being brought to the forefront through oral histories, autobiographies, and folk traditions that were long excluded from dominant narratives. This reclamation is not just about representation—it is an act of resistance that challenges the historical erasure of women and reclaims intellectual, spiritual, and political space for them within India’s cultural memory. By doing so, it redefines feminist discourse in India to be more inclusive, intersectional, and rooted in diverse experiences.

- **Complexities and Contradictions**

Complexities and Contradictions explores how the position of women in ancient India under Brahminical patriarchy was not uniform or absolute. While Brahminical norms increasingly restricted women’s rights and freedoms, historical evidence also reveals variations and resistances. Here’s a breakdown of each point:

1. **Early Vedic Women Had More Freedom:**

Early Vedic women enjoyed comparatively greater freedom and agency than women in later periods dominated by rigid Brahminical patriarchy. During the early Vedic era (roughly 1500–1000 BCE), women participated in religious rituals,

received education, and even composed hymns in the *Rigveda*. Figures like Gargi and Maitreyi demonstrate that women could engage in intellectual and philosophical debates alongside men, questioning metaphysical concepts and spiritual truths. Women were not strictly confined to domestic roles; they had the right to own property, choose their spouses through practices like *swayamvara*, and in some cases, remain unmarried or pursue a spiritual life. Marriage was not yet a rigidly sacramental institution, and there was less emphasis on female chastity as a marker of family honor. This relative autonomy suggests that early Vedic society, while still patriarchal, allowed women more participation in public, religious, and intellectual life. However, this freedom was gradually curtailed as Brahminical norms evolved to prioritize caste purity, inheritance control, and male authority, eventually leading to the systemic restrictions seen in later texts like the *Manusmriti*.

Buddhism and Jainism

Buddhism and Jainism emerged around the 6th century BCE as reformist movements that challenged many aspects of Brahminical orthodoxy, including its rigid caste and gender hierarchies. These religions offered women alternative paths to spiritual liberation that were not dependent on their roles as wives or mothers. In Buddhism, women were allowed to become nuns (*bhikkhunis*), forming part of the *Sangha* (monastic community), which gave them a degree of independence and access to education and spiritual practice. Figures like Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt and the first ordained nun, symbolize the possibility of women's active participation in religious life. Similarly, in

Jainism, women could join monastic orders and pursue ascetic life as *sadhvis*, striving for *moksha* (liberation) through self-discipline and spiritual knowledge. Although both traditions still reflected some patriarchal attitudes—such as the belief in Buddhism that women had to be reborn as men to attain full enlightenment—these religions nonetheless created spaces where women could renounce worldly life, gain spiritual merit, and engage in religious scholarship. Compared to the increasingly restrictive Brahminical system, Buddhism and Jainism thus represented meaningful alternatives for women seeking autonomy and spiritual recognition.

2. Folk and tribal traditions:

Folk and tribal traditions in ancient India often displayed more egalitarian attitudes toward women compared to the strictures of Brahminical patriarchy. In many tribal and indigenous communities, women played vital roles not only in family and community life but also in economic, social, and religious spheres. Unlike the caste-based Brahminical system that emphasized rigid social hierarchies and gender roles, tribal societies frequently recognized women's contributions to agriculture, crafts, and decision-making. Women in these communities sometimes held positions of leadership or served as priestesses and custodians of local spiritual knowledge. Folk traditions also celebrated powerful female deities and heroines, reflecting a worldview that honored feminine strength and autonomy. Additionally, marriage and kinship practices among tribal groups were often more flexible, allowing women greater freedom in choosing partners and participating in communal affairs.

These more egalitarian norms resisted Brahminical dominance and offer important insights into the diversity of women's experiences in ancient India beyond caste-imposed limitations.

➤ **Conclusion: Revisiting the Pre-colonial Caste-Gender Nexus**

The precolonial period in India laid the foundational structures of caste and gender that continue to shape the socio-cultural landscape of contemporary India. Through texts like the *Manusmriti*, *Dharmaśāstra*, and epics such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, **a hierarchical order was institutionalized**, embedding caste and patriarchy as mutually reinforcing systems. Dalit women, positioned at the bottom of this social order, were subjected to **double marginalization**—both as Shudras/Ati-Shudras and as women—stripped of autonomy, representation, and dignity.

However, the pre-colonial period was not entirely devoid of resistance. The **Bhakti movements**, particularly through the voices of saint-poets like **Janabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Soyarabai**, offered a **proto-feminist and anti-caste critique**, challenging the Brahmanical monopoly over spirituality and gendered norms. These figures redefined religious devotion as a space of assertion for marginalized voices, even though their legacies were often domesticated by dominant caste interpretations.

Importantly, early feminist engagement with ancient Indian history tends to focus predominantly on upper-caste women, often **romanticizing their agency** within elite traditions. In contrast, a Dalit feminist reading interrogates the **violence, erasure, and symbolic subjugation of lower-caste women**, emphasizing the **need to deconstruct historical narratives** that uphold Brahmanical patriarchy.

In conclusion, understanding the **pre-colonial caste-gender structures** is essential for any serious engagement with Dalit feminism today. These roots are not simply historical remnants but **living legacies**, manifesting in ritual exclusion, caste-based labor, and gendered violence. Recognizing this continuity challenges us to frame feminism in India not merely as a struggle for gender equality but as an **intersectional fight against caste-based patriarchy**, beginning from its earliest formulations.



3.1 The Transition:

The transition from *Precolonial Roots and Caste-Gender Structures* to *Colonial India and Dalit Feminism* marks a significant turning point in the discourse on women's rights, shaped by both continuity and confrontation. In the precolonial period, caste-based patriarchy was deeply entrenched, as seen in the Manusmriti and other Dharmashastric texts that institutionalized practices like child marriage, enforced widowhood, and female seclusion. These structures, while

regionally diverse, largely marginalized women from public life and confined them within patriarchal frameworks tied to caste purity. With the onset of colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries, these traditions were simultaneously challenged and codified under the guise of civilizing reforms. Reformers like **Raja Rammohun Roy**, alarmed by the brutal practice of **sati (widow immolation)**, campaigned vigorously for its abolition, which was finally achieved by the British under **Governor-General William Bentinck in 1829**. Similarly, **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** led efforts for **widow remarriage**, culminating in the **Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856**. These male reformers, influenced by Enlightenment ideals and a reimagined modernity, initiated critical dialogues about women's rights, though often within upper-caste Hindu frameworks.

Simultaneously, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the emergence of indigenous feminist voices like **Pandita Ramabai**, a former Brahmin who converted to Christianity and critiqued Brahmanical patriarchy through her writings and her work with widows and child brides. Her founding of the **Sharada Sadan (1889)** in Pune marked a bold departure from male-led reform and centered women as agents of change. The emergence of women's associations such as the **Women's Indian Association (1917)**, led by figures like **Annie Besant**, **Sarojini Naidu**, and **Muthulakshmi Reddy**, connected Indian feminist struggles to both global suffrage movements and anti-colonial resistance. Thus, the bridge between the two parts is built not merely on chronology but on evolving strategies of resistance—where the colonial state's intervention in social reform acted as both an enabler and an obstacle to feminist aspirations. This intersection of caste, colonial power, and emerging feminist consciousness

reflects the layered complexity of India's gender reform movements.

Introduction : The colonial period in India marked a significant transformation in the social, political, and ideological frameworks that governed caste, gender, and reform. While colonial modernity introduced new institutions—education, legal reforms, print culture—it also **reified caste hierarchies through codification**, administrative classification, and the selective engagement with Indian traditions. For Dalit communities, and especially Dalit women, this era was both **oppressive and transformative**.

Colonial legal and social reforms, including widow remarriage, female education, and abolition of sati, were largely designed and debated within the framework of **upper-caste gender anxieties**. This **mainstream feminist awakening**, led by reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar or Pandita Ramabai, rarely addressed the lived realities of Dalit women. As a result, Dalit women's experiences were **marginalized within both colonial discourse and emerging Indian feminism**.

However, this period also witnessed the **germination of a distinct Dalit feminist consciousness**, rooted in anti-caste movements and mass education efforts. Pioneers like **Savitribai Phule**, working alongside **Jyotirao Phule**, challenged both Brahmanical patriarchy and colonial paternalism by emphasizing **intersectional education, dignity of labor, and the liberation of Dalit women**. Christian missionaries, despite their complicity in colonial rule, contributed significantly to Dalit girls' education, creating the first generation of literate Dalit women who would later become writers, teachers, and reformers.

In sum, the colonial era created the **structural contradictions** that enabled the emergence of **early Dalit feminist agency**, though still within a context of intense marginalization. It set the stage for

future Dalit women's activism by revealing the **exclusions within both nationalist and feminist narratives**, and by offering the **first institutional platforms**—schools, print, public forums—through which Dalit women began to articulate their voices.

1. The Seeds of Reform

Colonial Modernity and the Question of Women's Rights

The colonial period in India brought with it the forces of modernity—Western education, legal reforms, and missionary influence—that began to reshape ideas about society, gender, and rights. However, the emerging discourse on women's rights during this time was largely dominated by upper-caste reformers and British colonial officials, who focused on practices like child marriage and sati, often portraying upper-caste Hindu women as victims needing rescue. This mainstream narrative excluded the experiences of Dalit and lower-caste women, whose oppression was rooted not only in gender but also in caste-based violence, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. While upper-caste women began to gain access to education and reformist spaces, Dalit women remained largely invisible in these early feminist discourses. At the same time, the colonial state's so-called "civilizing mission" often reinforced caste hierarchies, failing to address the systemic marginalization of Dalit communities. Thus, while colonial modernity introduced new frameworks of rights and reform, it did little to alter the lived realities of Dalit women—whose voices would only begin to emerge more forcefully with the work of anti-caste thinkers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, who recognized the urgent need to educate and uplift women from oppressed castes.

Upper-Caste Feminist Discourse vs. Dalit Women's Realities :

The feminist discourse in colonial and early post-independence India was primarily shaped by upper-caste, educated women who

framed gender oppression through the lens of patriarchy within their social strata. This discourse largely focused on issues like purdah, sati, widow remarriage, and domestic roles—concerns that, while significant, did not reflect the lived experiences of Dalit women, whose oppression was rooted in both caste and class alongside gender. For Dalit women, daily realities included manual labor, caste-based sexual violence, untouchability, and systemic exclusion from education and public life—struggles that upper-caste feminism often ignored or failed to understand. By universalizing the category of “woman,” early feminist narratives rendered Dalit women's voices invisible, reinforcing a hierarchical and exclusionary model of feminism. This disconnect exposed the need for a more intersectional approach that recognizes how gender cannot be separated from caste in the Indian context. Dalit women's resistance to this exclusion laid the foundation for a distinct Dalit feminist framework—one that challenges both Brahmanical patriarchy and mainstream feminist elitism, insisting on the centrality of caste in any meaningful feminist politics in India.

Role of Christian Missionaries in Dalit Women's Education :

Christian missionaries played a significant role in introducing education to marginalized communities during the colonial period, including Dalit women who were otherwise denied access to learning by the rigid Brahmanical social order. Missionary schools often welcomed students from lower castes and tribal groups, challenging caste norms by promoting literacy as a tool of social upliftment. While the missionaries had their own religious agenda, their efforts inadvertently created early opportunities for Dalit women to step into public spaces of learning, often for the first time. This access laid the groundwork for later social reform

movements that would center the importance of education in the struggle against caste and gender oppression.

Emergence of Anti-Caste Thinkers: Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule : Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule emerged as pioneering anti-caste thinkers and reformers in 19th-century Maharashtra who radically challenged both caste hierarchy and patriarchal norms. Jyotirao Phule's critique of Brahmanism and his insistence on universal education created the ideological base for an inclusive social justice movement. He recognized the double burden faced by women from oppressed castes and strongly advocated for their education and empowerment. Together with his wife Savitribai, he worked to dismantle the structures that dehumanized Dalit women, laying a strong foundation for what would later be articulated as Dalit feminism.

Savitribai Phule as a Pioneer Dalit Feminist Educator

Savitribai Phule was a trailblazer in Indian history, widely regarded as the first female teacher of India and a pioneer of Dalit feminist thought. She not only broke gender norms by stepping into the public sphere as an educator, but also directly confronted caste-based exclusion by opening schools for Dalit and lower-caste girls. Her writings and speeches addressed the intersectional nature of caste and gender oppression, making her one of the earliest voices to advocate for the rights and dignity of Dalit women. Despite facing immense hostility—verbal abuse, physical attacks, and social boycotts—Savitribai remained committed to education as a path to liberation, inspiring future generations of Dalit feminists and educators.

2.Caste and Gender under British Rule

During British colonial rule, caste and gender hierarchies were both reinforced and redefined through administrative and legal reforms. The colonial government sought to understand and

manage Indian society by codifying social structures, inadvertently giving rigid and formal recognition to the caste system, which had previously been more fluid in practice. At the same time, gender reforms were introduced in response to both Indian social reformers and British moral criticism of Indian customs. However, these reforms primarily addressed the concerns of upper-caste Hindu women, leaving Dalit women largely invisible in both colonial and reformist agendas.

- **The Colonial Codification of Caste**

The British census operations and legal systems contributed to the rigid codification of caste identities, transforming caste into a fixed and bureaucratically enforced category. This process not only legitimized the Brahmanical hierarchy but also froze social mobility for Dalits. Caste was no longer just a social identity—it became a legal and administrative label that governed access to resources, education, and rights. This reification of caste deepened the marginalization of Dalit communities, especially Dalit women, who continued to suffer from both state-sanctioned exclusion and traditional caste-based violence.

- **Gender Reforms and Dalit Women’s Absence**

While the colonial period saw reforms related to women’s issues—such as child marriage, widow remarriage, and sati—these efforts were largely framed around the experiences and moral anxieties of upper-caste women. Dalit women were absent from these debates, as their lives were shaped by issues far more immediate and severe: forced labor, sexual exploitation by dominant castes, and denial of education and dignity. The emerging Indian feminist consciousness during this time, influenced by both nationalist and colonial ideals, failed to account for the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women. This

absence highlights the urgent need for an inclusive feminist discourse that goes beyond caste-neutral narratives.

3. **Early Dalit Voices and Education :**

During British rule in India, the gradual introduction of Western education and the efforts of social reformers led to the emergence of early Dalit voices, particularly through the lens of education. Though access remained limited, the period marked the beginning of Dalit women's literacy and social awareness, challenging centuries of caste-based exclusion. Missionary schools, anti-caste reformers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, and the slow expansion of public education created new opportunities for Dalit girls to learn to read and write—an act that was itself revolutionary in a society that had denied them basic humanity. Education empowered Dalit women to articulate their experiences of both caste and gender oppression, laying the groundwork for political consciousness and social reform. While still a small minority, these early educated Dalit women began to question dominant narratives and assert their rights, setting the stage for future Dalit feminist thought and activism.

4. **Revolutionary Sides of Dalit Feminism under Colonialism**

1. *Education-as-Liberation*

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Dalit feminism during colonialism was the emphasis on education, especially for Dalit women. Leaders like Savitribai Phule not only broke gender and caste barriers by becoming educators but also framed literacy as a form of emancipation from both caste oppression and patriarchal control. Teaching Dalit girls was a radical act of resistance against Brahmanical norms that sought to keep them uneducated and subservient.

2. *Anti-Caste Critique*

Dalit feminist voices introduced a critical challenge to the caste system itself, going beyond the gender reform agenda of mainstream feminism. They highlighted how caste oppression uniquely shaped Dalit women's experiences of exploitation, sexual violence, and social exclusion, calling for a comprehensive dismantling of caste hierarchies, not just patriarchal norms.

3. *Intersectional Resistance*

Dalit feminism during the colonial period was revolutionary in recognizing the intersection of caste, gender, and class oppression. Unlike the upper-caste feminist movements that centered only on gender, Dalit women articulated a more nuanced struggle that insisted on addressing multiple, simultaneous forms of discrimination.

4. *Spiritual and Cultural Assertion*

Through Bhakti traditions and the writings of Dalit saint-poets and reformers, Dalit women used spiritual devotion as a form of subversion, reclaiming their dignity and challenging dominant religious and social hierarchies. This cultural resistance undermined the legitimacy of Brahmanical patriarchy and caste supremacy.

5. *Formation of Early Political Consciousness*

Dalit women's increasing literacy and awareness during colonialism sowed seeds for early political activism. They began participating in anti-caste movements, asserting their rights in public forums, and demanding social reforms that addressed their specific marginalization. This political awakening was crucial for the later rise of Dalit feminist movements in independent India.

These revolutionary facets combined to make Dalit feminism under colonialism a powerful force of social transformation, laying the foundation for ongoing struggles against intersecting oppressions.

The colonial period (roughly 1850–1947) was a time of social reform, caste codification, and gradual politicization. While mainstream feminist movements largely catered to upper-caste women’s education and rights, Dalit women’s issues remained both specific and intersectional, emerging within the broader frameworks of caste-based oppression and colonial administration. Dalit feminism during colonial India emerged not as an organized movement but as a layered and intersectional resistance embedded within broader anti-caste and social reform struggles. In a period largely dominated by upper-caste nationalist and social reform agendas, Dalit women’s voices were often marginalized or rendered invisible. However, their lived experiences of double oppression—by caste and by gender—laid the groundwork for a distinct feminist consciousness. This era saw the early emergence of figures like Savitribai Phule, who not only challenged Brahmanical patriarchy through her pioneering work in girls’ education but also addressed issues specific to Dalit and lower-caste women, such as widow remarriage, sanitation labor, and social exclusion. Savitribai’s writing and activism embodied a proto-Dalit feminist sensibility that critiqued both caste violence and the patriarchal limitations of contemporary reform movements.

During the colonial period, British administrative policies often reinforced caste structures by codifying social hierarchies, which disproportionately affected Dalit communities. At the same time, Christian missionary and colonial education systems, despite their own limitations, sometimes provided Dalit women with limited avenues for literacy and social mobility—albeit within paternalistic frameworks. Dalit women engaged in labor protests, anti-untouchability campaigns, and religious reform movements such as the Adi Hindu movement in western India and Matua

Mahasangha in Bengal, where their participation was crucial though rarely documented with nuance. Furthermore, Dalit male-led reform movements often reproduced patriarchal norms, limiting women's roles to supportive or symbolic functions, thus intensifying the need for a distinctly Dalit feminist articulation.

The colonial period was therefore a complex and contradictory phase for Dalit feminism: while it did not give rise to a self-conscious feminist movement among Dalit women, it witnessed the formative struggles and resistances that later shaped Dalit feminist theory in post-Independence India. These early experiences of exclusion and activism would influence future generations of Dalit women thinkers, writers, and activists who would begin to name and theorize their oppression in explicitly feminist terms by the late 20th century. Thus, colonial India laid both the burdens and the blueprints for what would become the vibrant and radical terrain of Dalit feminism in the decades to come.

5. Key Movements with Dalit Women's Participation

1. Dalit Feminism and the Phule Movement (1850s onward, Maharashtra)

The Phule Movement, initiated by Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule in mid-19th century Maharashtra, marks one of the earliest and most significant intersections of anti-caste struggle and feminist assertion in Indian history. While Jyotirao Phule is recognized as a pioneer of anti-Brahmanical thought, his wife, Savitribai Phule, became a foundational figure for what is today identified as Dalit feminism. Their work challenged both caste-based discrimination and gendered oppression, especially as it impacted the lives of lower-caste and Dalit women, who faced extreme social exclusion, illiteracy, and violence.

Savitribai Phule's activism was radical for her time. In 1848, she became India's first female teacher, opening schools for girls and for children from oppressed castes, including Dalits—an act that directly defied the Brahmanical norms that barred both women and Shudras/Ati-Shudras from education. Facing physical abuse, threats, and humiliation—including being pelted with dung by upper-caste boys—Savitribai persisted, carrying an extra sari to change before entering the school. Her resistance was not just educational but deeply political, representing an early form of Dalit feminist praxis that was rooted in action, rather than abstract theory.

Beyond education, the Phules also worked against gendered violence and caste patriarchy. Savitribai and her associate Fatima Sheikh (also from a marginalized community) ran a home for pregnant rape survivors and widows, called the “Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha,” where these women could deliver babies in safety. At a time when upper-caste codes demanded widow isolation or even death, this was a direct challenge to both caste and patriarchal violence. Savitribai's poetry and speeches reflected her revolutionary spirit, advocating for a society where Dalit women could assert their right to dignity, learning, and leadership. The Phule movement was also significant in laying the ideological foundation for Dalit assertion. The formation of the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seeker's Society) in 1873 challenged Brahmanical Hinduism and pushed for the social upliftment of oppressed castes. While it was not a "feminist movement" in the modern sense, it provided space for women's active participation—a rarity in most 19th-century social movements. Dalit women found intellectual legitimacy and community support through this platform, helping them later form the basis of autonomous Dalit women's organizing in the 20th century.

In summary, the Phule movement was an early embodiment of Dalit feminist values—education, resistance to caste and patriarchy, grassroots activism, and structural critique. Savitribai Phule remains a towering symbol in this history, and her legacy continues to inspire Dalit feminist writers, teachers, and activists across India. Through her life and the movement she helped build, she illuminated a path for liberation grounded in knowledge, courage, and intersectional justice.

2. Mahad Satyagraha: Led by B. R. Ambedkar in 1927: This movement fought for the right of the "untouchables" to access public drinking water.

The landmark movement led by Dr B. R. Ambedkar in 1927 aimed the class discrimination in Indian patriarchy of upper casteism. By his leadership Dalit started protesting in order to get access the Chawdar Tank in Mahad, Maharashtra, which had been traditionally denied to them. It was the courageous act of defiance made by Ambedkar and his Dalit team and symbolised the greater struggling movement by the Dalit community against the system of upper caste.

Being marginalised from other Hindu caste Dalit were prohibited from using public water bodies and roads designated for use by higher castes.

In 1923 the Bombay Legislative Council passed a resolution advocating the rights of the Dalits for the accessing of Government built and maintained facilities. In January 1924, the municipal council of Mahad, part of the Bombay Province, passed a similar resolution to implement the act.

On March 20, 1927, Ambedkar took 2500 Dalit in a march through Mahad to the Chawdar Tank, and in a powerful defiance he drew the water from it showing the significant protest and strengthened the resolve of the Dalit community to demand their rights and

paved the way for further social reforms. As a testament to its enduring significance, March 20th, the day of the Satyagraha, is now observed as Social Empowerment Day in India.

Ambedkar and Dalit Women: What Ambedkar thought has been proved in action for the sake of Dalit's equality and empowerment. In two of his books named the "Women and Counter-Revolution" and "The Riddle of Women" Ambedkar followed what Manu had taken the women. Without the participation of women it has been impossible for the movement to get success and that's why he has taken the leading role of the inspiring women to come in the front and handling the movement. Many Dalit women participated in Mahad Satyagraha, Poona Pact Satyagraha, and other contexts. Ambedkar's speeches, especially at the time of Mahad Satyagraha caused a drastic change in their lives. The teachings and inspiring talks of Ambedkar over the Dalit women forced them to take action immediately otherwise the movement could ever take its distinguished role over the casteism and discrimination by establishing the social and cultural rights in every section of the life.

After passing the resolution by Bombay legislative Assembly in 1923 that people from different classes should use the places built and maintained by Govt. and in January, 1924 after the implementation by Mahad, part of Bombay Presidency, it was failed due to lack of spirit from Dalit as well as due to protest from upper class of Hindu. But on 19-20 March, 1927 after the conference arranged by Bashikit Hitakarini Sabha, Ambedkar led dalit into the main tank of the town and they drank water from the tank.

When a Satyagraha conference was again raised At Mahad, on December 25, 1927 and after it With the advancement of three

thousands Satyagrahis it made the District Magistrate to request Ambedkar to postpone the struggle. In that conference, a resolution was taken to burn the Manusmriti, which according to Ambedkar, conserved the social, economic, religious, and political slavery of the untouchables. The Manusmriti was burnt on December 25, 1927.

The Mahad Satyagraha for the right to water conducted by Dr. Ambedkar was one of the outstanding struggles of the untouchables to gain equal social rights. It was so powerful that it paved the way for the Dalit to farther take the next process for their social and cultural rights in the society. He said:

“It is not that you can solve your problems by Satyagraha. This is only a request to the upper-class Hindu mind. This movement is going to prove whether the Hindu mind treats human beings like human beings or not. This Satyagraha is going to change the hearts of Hindus. The movement will decide whether Hindu mind regards humanity in the new age”.

At Mahad he had taken a conference before more than ten thousands of delegates and in his conference he referred his motivational zeal to ignite the fire of movement in the hearts of Dalit:

“.....no lasting progress can be achieved unless we put ourselves through a three-fold process of purification. We must improve the general tone of our demeanour, retune our pronunciations and revitalize our thoughts. I therefore ask you now to take a vow from this moment to renounce eating carrion. It is high time that we rooted out from our minds the ideas of highness and lowness among ourselves. Make an unflinching resolve not to eat the thrown out crumbs. We will attain self-elevation only if we learn self- help regain our self-respect and gain self-knowledge. There will be no difference between parents and animals if they will not

desire to see their children in a better position than their own position”.

Ambedkar called women with their vibrant mood of confident in the role of leading one. He motivated them to feel that their attempt is as much necessary as others. His speech proved to be prodigious and unique and every sentence stated by him became the basis for the work of untouchable women activists. The speech remarkably affected the women. The untouchable women of the Konkan region, especially those from Thane, and Colaba districts, started wearing their sarees to disclose and expose themselves in a broader perspective. Getting motivated from Ambedkar’s speech, the women who turned up for the conference the next day, appeared in their nine-yard sarees draped around their ankles like Brahmin women. Mrs. Chitre and Mrs. Tipnis helped them with this. Ambedkar was astonished to see their loyalty, and he gave them each eight Annas to buy themselves blouses and bangles.

Ambedkar’s liberal values could get success to unite the women under the same umbrella of movement behind the driving force of untouchability. Satyagraha movement enabled Dalit women to take empowerment and to start a new women’s organisation to start and to take conference about the upcoming movement. Especially Ambedkar’s teaching and spirit not only ignited the power in the heart of women but made the male figures to come out their traditional formation to take a new organised activities against the establishment of equality. Throughout his lifetime Ambedkar endeavoured women to raise their voice against all types of oppression by the hands of upper classes.

3. Satya Shodhak Samaj: (one of the earliest caste-based movements in Maharashtra)

Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth-seekers' Society), founded by Jyotiba Phule in 1873 aimed to eradicate the discrimination and

segregation from the society. It was one of the first caste-based movements in Maharashtra. The society had been working to improve the lives of Dalits, women, and peasants. Muslims, Brahmins, and government officials had joined here to support from all aspects even the members and financial supporters came from Phule's Mali caste. By denouncing the caste system the SSS campaigned to remove the need of Hindu priest and drew the attention to the rational thinking in order to improve the education, social rights, and political access for underprivileged groups.

The SSS focussed its ideals on how to encourage education among the lower castes, particularly those who were regarded as Shudras by accessing their rights in the socio-educational field as well as by raising their awareness. Besides it had started accessing the contribution of Printing press to spread the awareness among the shudras against the domination of Bramhin power in the society. Demonstration of social advancement by debating and establishing the women education by Krishnarao Bhalekar, a significant Samaj member and through media like the DeenBandhu newspaper, the SSS challenged the supremacy of Brahmins and other upper castes in a variety of sectors of society by advocating for the rights and social advancement of lower-caste people. The SSS was against the social practices of untouchability and casteism and condemned the orthodox nature of religion. Phule was against child marriage and sati practice and stepped forward to eradicate discriminations prevailed in society based on socio-economic strata in society and on gender basis. He denied to remind the Vedas and opposed idolatory. He opened many schools and colleges for girls and untouchables.the caste system in Hinduism as one of its pillars, violated such rights and was thus indefensible. Mahatma Phule was in favour of western education and demanded free and compulsory primary education up to the age of twelve. He

advocated technical education for the lower castes. He also agitated for better living conditions of for the workers in the mills in Bombay.

The rationality and equality on women in educational system were the agenda by Phule in the SSS to cancel the tradition and deny the supremacy of the scriptures of Hinduism. The SSS started to undermine the priesthood of Hinduism by sanctioning religious ritual and ceremonial activities without Bramhin.

Anti-national and anti Bramhin criticism were built up for the promotional steps of SSS as it was clear to Phule about the exploitive nature of colonial administration and while he questioned the wisdom of opposing the British through a movement that would come under upper caste control and power, it was clear to all that the elite dominated colonial administration and hence was also a cause of exploitation.

Phule identified the two ways of exploitations of the caste system over the oppressed by their oppressor: colonial regime and Bramhinal way of treatment towards Dalit and lower castes. It was the clear differentiation between Phule with the National movement in Bombay, dominated by Chitpawan Brahmins, resulted over the primacy of social reform over political reform. Political reformation for national level at the absence of social reformation would be at the best found in the substitution of one form of exploitation by another. Neglecting the reformation of the society National movement against the British would create an effect. Realising the formation of British mentality he welcomed their help. As he said: said "the creator has purposely sent the English people to liberate the disabled Shudras from the slavery of the crafty Aryas." He received their financial help in the improvement of SSS for the reformation part.

Being as a body of lower caste the SSS emerged in the domination of Maratha in the socio-political sectors. the movement of SSS is known as anti-Brahminism as the existed social cultures and ideologies which totally neglect the backward lower castes, has been rested on the controlling supremacy of Brahmin caste. The rising of anti-Brahminism was a part of SSS for social revolution but when it came in contact with rationale figure. The SSS revolution must aim at the overthrow of this superemacy and dominating ideology of Brahmanism. For it he worked in the fields of Caste system, education particularly for women and lower castes, removal of untouchability and upliftment of widows.

Women's Education

For the eradication of inequality in the field of education Phule started his action during his activism of SSS. He aimed at the women education of the oppressed people. Jyotiba Phule was bestowed with honorific Mahātmā (Sanskrit: "great-souled", "venerable") title by Maharashtrian social activist Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar in 1888. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was also a pioneer for women education in India and fought for education of girls throughout his life. He is believed to be the first Hindu to start an orphanage for the unfortunate children. After reading Thomas Paine's famous book 'The Rights of Man', Jyotiba was greatly influenced by his ideas. He believed that enlightenment of the women and lower caste people was the only solution to combat the social evils. In 1851, Jyotiba established a girls' school and asked his wife to teach the girls in the school. Later he opened schools for the girls and an indigenous school for the lower castes, especially for the Mahars and Mangs. The year 1848 and 1852 were marked for the Phule couple who opened eighteen schools in Pune. In 1855, Jyotirao had also opened night schools in Pune. People from working sections included Dalit women started

coming to join in these schools after their days labours in order to get connected with knowledge and wisdom. These were India's first such schools. The report of the Government Education Board then acknowledged and gave due credit to Jyotirao for opening the first school of Untouchables.

Mahatma Phule's book 'SampadaJajwalya' is a literal philosophy of revolutionary ideology. He was particularly influenced by the abhang of Sant Tukaram Maharaj. He says that the progress of an individual is only possible with education:

“When a man gets educated, only the man learns. When a woman gets educated, the entire generation learns” [9].

Jyoti Rao reflects in the introduction to the book "ShetkaryachaAsud": “Without education wisdom was lost; Without wisdom morals were lost; Without morals development was lost; Without development wealth was lost; Without wealth the Shudras were ruined; So much has happened through lack of education.”[9]

Mahatma Phule had great respect for “Lokhitwadi.” Mahatma Jotiba Phule's 'Gulamgiri' is considered one of the first tracts against the caste system.

4.Missionary Education and Social Work: Empowering Dalit Women : During the colonial period, Christian missionaries played a pivotal role in introducing education and social services to marginalized communities, including Dalits and Dalit women, who had long been denied access to formal learning under the caste-bound Hindu social order. While missionaries had religious motivations, their educational efforts provided one of the first institutional avenues through which Dalit women could gain literacy, vocational skills, and a sense of personal dignity. In a rigidly hierarchical society where upper-caste Hindus excluded Dalits from temples, wells, and schools, missionary-run

institutions offered an alternative space that challenged these deeply ingrained social norms.

Missionaries established schools, boarding homes, orphanages, and hospitals, particularly targeting oppressed castes and tribal communities. They emphasized the education of girls and women, an act that was profoundly radical in a society where female literacy—especially among Dalits—was virtually non-existent. For many Dalit women, learning to read and write became their first tool of resistance, enabling them to understand their rights, question their subjugation, and eventually participate in public discourse. Missionary schools also introduced vernacular education, hygiene practices, and vocational training, thus linking education to practical empowerment and social mobility.

Moreover, missionary social work extended to widow rehabilitation, healthcare, and shelter homes, providing Dalit women with services and safety nets they were otherwise denied by both society and state. These interventions often offered an escape from exploitative domestic labor or caste-based sexual violence, giving women a chance to reimagine their roles beyond servitude and silence. Though conversion to Christianity was often encouraged, many Dalit families chose these institutions not for religious reasons but for the access to dignity, education, and human treatment they provided.

While missionary work was not free from its own colonial and paternalistic undertones, its impact on Dalit women's early empowerment cannot be overlooked. It introduced literacy to an excluded population, questioned the caste status quo, and enabled the first generation of Dalit women educators, nurses, and social workers to emerge. This foundational experience helped lay the groundwork for later Dalit feminist consciousness, where

education and social justice would become central themes in the struggle against caste and gender oppression.

The missionary movement targeting Dalit communities, including Dalit women, began in earnest in the early 19th century, gaining momentum through the mid to late 1800s during British colonial rule. The movement can be broadly placed within the following time frames:

1. Early 19th Century (1810s–1830s): Beginnings

- American and European missionaries, such as those from the London Missionary Society, Church Mission Society, and American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, began working in southern and western India.
- Initial focus was on Bible translation, church planting, and general education, with growing attention to lower-caste and tribal populations, including women.
- Dalits were drawn to these missions because they were excluded from Hindu institutions, especially schools and temples.

2. Mid 19th Century (1830s–1870s): Institutional Expansion

- Missionaries began establishing schools, orphanages, and boarding homes for lower-caste children and girls, especially in regions like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Kerala.
- This period saw the rise of vernacular-language schools and basic literacy programs for Dalit girls, alongside efforts to teach hygiene, vocational skills, and Christian teachings.
- Some of the first converts to Christianity in India came from Dalit backgrounds, especially among the Paraiyar, Mahar, and Madiga communities.
- Female missionaries, often from Britain, played a critical role in women's education and healthcare.

3. Late 19th to Early 20th Century (1870s–1910s): Social Work and Dalit Women’s Inclusion

- Mission schools for girls expanded, and Dalit women began receiving elementary education, often for the first time.
- Vocational training and midwifery programs were launched, enabling some Dalit women to become teachers, nurses, and social workers.
- Christian missions began documenting and addressing the plight of Dalit women, including caste-based violence and widow exploitation.
- Missionaries also supported anti-child marriage and widow remarriage campaigns, which aligned with some reformist Indian movements.

4. Early 20th Century (1910s–1930s): Consolidation and Legacy

- By this period, several generations of Dalit girls had begun accessing education through missionary institutions.
- Some Dalit women started participating in local church councils, welfare activities, and teaching roles, gaining leadership experience.
- These educational gains contributed to the emergence of Dalit women's voices in the public sphere by the 1920s and 1930s, though still on a limited scale.

The missionary movement’s peak period for Dalit women's education and upliftment was roughly between 1830 and 1930, coinciding with both colonial consolidation and the rise of social reform movements in India. Though not without its limitations and colonial motives, this movement played a critical early role in opening up literacy, healthcare, and basic rights to Dalit women, long before mainstream nationalist or feminist efforts included them.

5. Early Women's Conferences within Anti-Caste Movements

The early 20th century witnessed the gradual emergence of Dalit women's voices in organized political spaces, particularly through their participation in anti-caste movements. A significant milestone was the All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference held in Nagpur in 1942, where Dalit women gathered to discuss issues like education, child marriage, health, and political representation. These conferences provided a rare platform for Dalit women to articulate their specific experiences of caste and gender oppression, distinct from both upper-caste feminist and nationalist agendas. Though often overshadowed in historical narratives, these gatherings marked the beginning of organized Dalit feminist consciousness, linking social reform with political assertion.

6. Key Achievements of Dalit Feminism during Colonialism

1. Pioneering Women's Education

- Savitribai Phule became India's first female teacher and a leading figure in promoting education for Dalit and lower-caste girls.
- Established schools for girls and untouchables, making education accessible to those historically denied it.

2. Challenging Brahmanical Patriarchy

Dalit feminists and reformers exposed the caste bias within upper-caste feminist movements.

Critiqued both patriarchy and Brahmanical religious authority, refusing the dominance of upper-caste Hindu values.

3. Role of Satya Shodhak Samaj (SSS)

- Founded by Jyotirao Phule in 1873, the SSS fought for women's rights, anti-caste reform, and rational thought.
- Encouraged widow remarriage, education for girls, and rejected priestly authority in rituals.

4. Utilization of Print and Media

Tools like the printing press and newspapers such as *Deenbandhu* were used to spread awareness among Dalits, including women, about their rights and social status.

5. Christian Missionary Support

Missionaries provided education, vocational training, and healthcare to Dalit women.

Opened schools and orphanages, offering dignity and new opportunities to oppressed women.

6. Participation in Social and Political Movements

Dalit women began to attend conferences, protest discriminatory practices, and assert their public presence, especially by the early 20th century.

The All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference (1942) marked an early organized political platform for Dalit women.

7. Intersectional Awareness

Dalit feminists highlighted the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression, laying the foundation for an inclusive and radical feminist vision.

These achievements reflect how Dalit feminism, even during colonial times, resisted marginalization on multiple fronts and created a framework for future struggles rooted in education, equality, and dignity.

7.Role of Social Reformers as Feminists During Colonial India:

During colonial India, several male social reformers played foundational roles in initiating feminist thought and action, particularly in challenging regressive customs and advocating women's rights. While not feminists in the modern sense, figures like Raja Rammohun Roy can be seen as early feminist allies. His campaign against sati, which led to its abolition in 1829, marked a critical step toward recognizing women's right to live with dignity.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed widow remarriage, resulting in the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, and fought against child marriage, emphasizing education for girls as a means of empowerment. These reformers, influenced by Western liberal ideas and humanist values, challenged traditional Brahmanical patriarchy while working within its limits. Keshab Chandra Sen, another key figure, supported women's education and critiqued polygamy and the denial of rights to widows. However, many of these reform efforts were often limited to upper-caste Hindu women and sometimes reinforced colonial narratives of a "backward" India needing reform. Despite these limitations, their work laid the groundwork for later Indian feminists like Pandita Ramabai, who extended the reformist agenda by foregrounding women's lived experiences and institutionalizing female-led activism. In this sense, colonial-era social reformers, though shaped by their time, served as critical conduits for the emergence of feminist consciousness in India.

The colonial period in India (18th to early 20th century) witnessed the rise of a significant group of social reformers who, though mostly male and elite, played a pioneering role in advocating for women's rights. These reformers, influenced by Enlightenment ideals, Christian missionary values, and liberal humanism introduced through colonial education, began to challenge certain oppressive customs affecting women. While they may not fit the modern definition of "feminists" — often advocating reforms on behalf of, rather than alongside, women — their contributions were crucial in laying the foundation for organized feminist consciousness in India.

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772–1833): Pioneer of Social Reform

- Rammohun Roy is widely regarded as a forerunner in women's rights advocacy in colonial India.
- He campaigned vigorously against the practice of sati (widow immolation), arguing it had no real basis in Hindu scriptures and was a symbol of patriarchal cruelty.
- His efforts led to the Abolition of Sati Act (1829) under Governor-General William Bentinck.
- He also advocated for women's inheritance rights and education, arguing that moral and intellectual development could only happen with women's inclusion.
- While progressive, Roy's reforms were largely framed within a reformist Hindu lens and targeted upper-caste women.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891): Champion of Widow Remarriage and Girls' Education

- A leading figure of the Bengal Renaissance, Vidyasagar was deeply committed to eradicating the suffering of widows.
- His advocacy led to the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, which legalized the remarriage of Hindu widows.
- He promoted female education, establishing several schools for girls in Bengal, and argued for curriculum reform that included science and rational thought.
- Vidyasagar also spoke out against child marriage and advocated for raising the age of consent for girls.
- His feminism was rooted in compassion and rationality, but like Roy, his work mostly benefited upper-caste Hindu women, leaving lower-caste and Muslim women outside his reform scope.

Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884): Bridging Reform with Religion

- As a leader of the Brahma Samaj, Sen carried forward Roy's legacy.

- He publicly condemned polygamy, child marriage, and supported inter-caste and inter-religious marriage.
- He was instrumental in influencing the Age of Consent Act (1891), which raised the minimum age for sexual consent for girls to 12.
- However, Sen himself was criticized when he arranged the underage marriage of his daughter, revealing the tension between progressive ideals and social conservatism.

Other Reformers and Their Contributions

- M.G. Ranade (Maharashtra): Advocated for widow remarriage and women's education, and co-founded the Widow Remarriage Association (1861).
- Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890): A lower-caste reformer who, along with his wife Savitribai Phule, worked for the education of girls, Dalits, and widows—a major departure from upper-caste reformist agendas.
- Swami Dayananda Saraswati (Arya Samaj): Advocated a return to a "purer" Vedic religion that supported women's education and rights.

Women as Reformers and Early Feminists

While male reformers opened the discourse on women's rights, it was women like Pandita Ramabai who transformed the conversation into a female-led feminist movement:

Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922):

- Born into a Brahmin family but later converted to Christianity.
- Criticized Hindu patriarchy and casteism in her landmark book "**The High-Caste Hindu Woman**" (1887).
- Founded **Sharada Sadan (1889)**, a home for widows, and later the **Mukti Mission**, which helped destitute women.

- She also testified before British commissions on women's education and legal rights.
- Unlike many male reformers, Ramabai centered women's lived experiences, breaking from paternalistic models of reform.

◆ Limitations and Criticisms of Male Reformers

- Many male reformers operated within colonial frameworks and often used Victorian morality or scriptural reinterpretation to justify reform.
- Their reforms largely benefited upper-caste, urban Hindu women, excluding lower-caste, tribal, and Muslim women.
- Reforms were often top-down, speaking *for* women rather than empowering women to speak for themselves.
- Despite these limitations, their efforts laid the institutional and intellectual groundwork for the emergence of women's organizations and feminist politics in the 20th century.

◆ Legacy and Bridge to Feminist Movements

By the early 20th century, organizations like the Women's Indian Association (1917), led by Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, and Muthulakshmi Reddy, extended the reformist legacy into active political feminism, linking women's rights to nationalist and anti-colonial struggles. The work of social reformers during the colonial period thus served as a bridge—from religious and moral advocacy to a more political, rights-based feminist movement.

• Conclusion

The colonial period in India was a paradoxical space for the evolution of Dalit feminism. On one hand, colonial governance **reinforced caste hierarchies** by codifying them into rigid administrative categories, while mainstream reformist movements—largely led by upper-caste elites—centered their concerns on the morality and upliftment of upper-caste women. On the other hand, colonial institutions such as **schools, legal**

reforms, missionary initiatives, and the print public sphere inadvertently created **new avenues for Dalit women's education and expression.**

The most critical intervention of this period came from within the **anti-caste intellectual and social movements**, particularly those led by **Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule**, who rejected both colonial patriarchy and Brahmanical oppression. Savitribai's revolutionary work in girls' education, her poetry, and her activism marked the **beginnings of Dalit feminist praxis**, long before the term "Dalit feminism" was formally articulated. These actions laid the groundwork for a **distinct political consciousness among Dalit women**, rooted in the intersection of caste, gender, and class.

However, it is also important to critically recognize that despite these efforts, Dalit women remained **marginalized from both colonial reform agendas and early Indian feminism.** Their voices were systematically silenced or rendered invisible in nationalist narratives, which often invoked a singular ideal of womanhood aligned with upper-caste sensibilities.

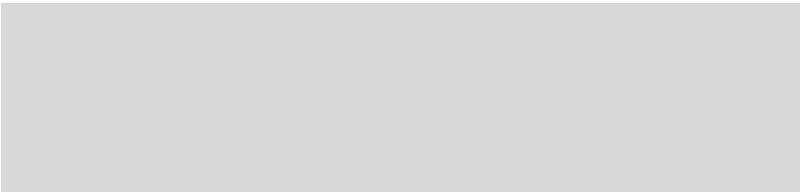
In conclusion, colonial India was not merely a backdrop but a **critical site of contradiction and emergence** for Dalit feminism. It exposed the deep fractures within early feminist and nationalist thought, while simultaneously enabling the **first assertions of Dalit women's agency.** The legacies of this period are profound, reminding us that any feminist movement in India that fails to account for caste is **structurally incomplete.**

PART III



**AMBEDKARITE INFLUENCE
AND POST-INDEPENDENCE
MOBILIZATION**

4.1 From Margins to Mobilization:



From Colonial India and Dalit Feminism to Ambedkarite Influence and Post-Independence Mobilization reveals a significant transformation in the consciousness and strategies of Dalit women's resistance. During colonial India, Dalit feminism was nascent and often overshadowed by upper-caste-led social reform movements, which largely excluded or tokenized Dalit women. The colonial era introduced new discourses on rights, law, and social reform, yet these rarely addressed the intersection of caste and gender with the urgency it deserved. However, this period planted the seeds of resistance, where early Dalit women writers and reformers began asserting their voice against both caste patriarchy and colonial subjugation. The real bridge emerges through the figure and philosophy of **B.R. Ambedkar**, whose influence created a paradigmatic shift in Dalit feminist thought. Ambedkar's emphasis on annihilating caste, his critique of Hindu scriptures, and his active inclusion of women in social reform laid the groundwork for a distinctly Dalit feminist mobilization post-Independence. Part III captures how Ambedkar's legacy empowered Dalit women not only to organize but also to frame their struggles within a larger structural critique of Brahminical patriarchy. This connection marks a continuity of struggle but also a radical transformation—from marginal voices in colonial discourse to assertive leaders of postcolonial Dalit movements, emphasizing that true liberation must address both caste and gender simultaneously.

The post-independence period marked a significant turning point in the evolution of Dalit feminism, shaped profoundly by the Ambedkarite movement. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's emphasis on social justice, education, and constitutional rights laid a strong ideological foundation for the assertion of Dalit women's identity. He not only challenged caste-based patriarchy but also actively

advocated for women's rights, including the Hindu Code Bill reforms. Inspired by Ambedkar's vision, Dalit women began organizing independently, forming unions, collectives, and participating in broader anti-caste movements. The rise of Dalit Panthers in the 1970s and later Dalit women's organizations in the 1980s and 1990s provided new platforms for expressing resistance to both upper-caste dominance and patriarchal oppression. These mobilizations emphasized intersectionality, highlighting how caste, gender, and class oppression function together. Dalit feminist voices began emerging in literature, activism, and grassroots politics, calling for dignity, land rights, representation, and justice. This phase marked the transition of Dalit feminism from being a voice of survival to becoming a collective force of assertion and transformation in Indian society.

1. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Woman's Question

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse around Dalit women's emancipation, situating their struggles at the intersection of caste, class, and gender. He recognized that Dalit women faced a unique and intensified form of oppression due to their position at the bottom of the caste and patriarchal hierarchy. His approach to social justice was rooted in the belief that no real emancipation was possible without the liberation of Dalit women, and he consistently included their rights in his vision of an egalitarian society.

- **Annihilation of Caste and Women's Rights**

In his landmark text *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar argued that the caste system was fundamentally incompatible with democracy, liberty, and gender equality. He exposed how Brahmanical patriarchy used religious texts and rituals to justify the subjugation of both lower castes and women. For Ambedkar, the liberation of Dalits and women were inseparable, and he

strongly advocated for women's education, legal equality, and freedom from oppressive customs such as child marriage and dowry. His proposed Hindu Code Bill sought to grant women equal rights in property, marriage, and inheritance—radical proposals for the time that were ultimately diluted by political opposition.

- **The Temple Entry and Satyagraha Movements**

Ambedkar also led several civil rights campaigns that foregrounded the dignity and agency of Dalits, including Dalit women. The Mahad Satyagraha (1927), which asserted the right of untouchables to access public water sources, and the Kalam Temple Entry Satyagraha (1930), which challenged caste-based exclusion from Hindu temples, saw active participation by Dalit women. These movements were not only about access to physical spaces but also symbolized the demand for equal citizenship and human dignity. Ambedkar's insistence on the visibility and participation of Dalit women in public protests was revolutionary, as it broke both caste and gender taboos simultaneously.

Through his writings, legal work, and social movements, Ambedkar firmly positioned Dalit women's liberation at the heart of the anti-caste struggle, making him a foundational figure in the development of Dalit feminist thought in modern India.

2. Dalit Women in the Namantar Andolan

The Namantar Andolan (Name Change Movement) was a major Dalit-led struggle in Maharashtra from the 1970s to the 1990s, demanding the renaming of Marathwada University to "Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University". This movement symbolized Dalit assertion, pride, and the right to public recognition of Ambedkar's legacy. While it is often framed as a caste-based political and cultural movement, Dalit women played

a crucial and under-acknowledged role, and their experiences highlight the core concerns of Dalit feminism.

Dalit Women as Frontline Protesters

Though leadership in the Namantar movement was largely male-dominated, Dalit women were at the forefront of protests, sit-ins, rallies, and street mobilizations. They bore the brunt of police violence, sexual assault, and social boycott imposed by dominant caste groups. Dalit women's participation was not only as supporters but as active resisters, defending their communities, cooking for protestors, and even confronting physical attacks.

Gendered Violence and Double Oppression

The Namantar movement exposed the gendered nature of caste violence. Dalit women faced both caste-based and gender-based oppression during the struggle. Attacks on women—such as gang-rapes, beatings, and humiliation—were used by dominant castes as tools to suppress the Dalit uprising. Dalit feminists argue that these experiences reveal how caste violence is often sexualized and gendered, and that women's suffering was invisibilized in the official narrative of the movement.

Silencing Within the Movement

Dalit feminists also critique the internal patriarchal tendencies within the Namantar movement itself. Even though women were key to sustaining the protests, their voices, stories, and leadership were mostly sidelined by male leaders and organizers. This marginalization reflects a broader pattern in Dalit political movements where gender issues are subordinated to larger caste-based agendas.

Dalit feminism emerged as a voice that insisted: “We are not just victims of caste, but of patriarchy too—sometimes within our own movements.”

Dalit Feminist Intervention: Rewriting History

Feminist scholars and writers, especially from Dalit backgrounds, have worked to reclaim and rewrite the history of the Namantar Andolan by centring women's experiences. Scholars like Sharmila Rege and Urmila Pawar emphasized that without including Dalit women's voices, any account of the Namantar movement is incomplete. Dalit women writers and oral historians have documented the pain, courage, and resistance of women during the struggle, offering a feminist retelling of the Andolan.

Significance of the Namantar Movement for Dalit Feminism

The Namantar Movement (Name Change Movement), which demanded renaming Marathwada University after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, holds deep significance for Dalit feminism, not just as a political struggle for recognition, but as a turning point that exposed the invisibilized role and suffering of Dalit women within both caste society and anti-caste movements.

1. Visibility of Dalit Women's Participation

The movement brought to light the active role of Dalit women in public protest and resistance. They were not merely supporters but frontline warriors—organizing protests, cooking for protestors, shielding their communities, and enduring state repression and caste-based violence. Their visible engagement challenged the traditional view of Dalit women as passive or domestic and marked them as agents of political action.

“We fought with our bodies, our voices, and our silence.” —
Testimony from a woman protestor in Marathwada

2. Revealed the Gendered Nature of Caste Violence

The Namantar struggle became a clear example of how caste-based violence is often gendered. Dalit women were subjected to sexual violence, verbal abuse, and physical attacks by dominant

caste mobs. Their bodies became sites of punishment in the larger caste war. This forced Dalit feminists to articulate how gender and caste intersect, and how women's experiences in movements differ fundamentally from those of men.

3. Exposed Patriarchy Within the Dalit Movement

Although women were critical to the movement’s survival, they were excluded from leadership and decision-making. Male leaders did not prioritize gender-specific issues such as safety, sexual violence, or emotional labor. This led Dalit feminists to critique internal patriarchy and demand that Dalit liberation must include women's liberation—not just symbolically, but structurally.

4. Catalyst for Feminist Dalit Literature and Oral Histories

The Namantar Movement inspired many Dalit women writers and activists to document and reclaim their narratives. Memoirs, poems, and oral histories—such as those by Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Jyoti Lanjewar—highlighted the emotional, physical, and psychological toll of the movement on women. This body of work laid the foundation for a Dalit feminist literary and political consciousness.

5. Shifted the Focus of Dalit Feminist Discourse: The movement reoriented Dalit feminist thought to move beyond mere representation toward structural change, addressing how both caste and gender operate as systems of control. It also led to calls for inclusive leadership, gender-sensitive activism, and the acknowledgment of women's unpaid and emotional labor in mass struggles.

Contribution of Namantar Movement	Significance for Dalit Feminism
Women’s mass participation	Showed Dalit women as political agents
Gendered violence	Exposed unique vulnerability of

	Dalit women
Male-dominated leadership	Prompted critique of patriarchy within Dalit politics
Literary response	Gave rise to Dalit feminist writings and testimonies
Reimagining resistance	Linked caste justice with gender justice

Conclusion: The Namantar Movement was more than a fight for a university's name—it was a battle for dignity, identity, and justice. For Dalit feminism, it marked a moment of awakening, forcing society to recognize the double struggle Dalit women face: against Brahmanical patriarchy from outside, and gender blindness within their own movements. It continues to inspire intersectional activism and the demand that no liberation is complete without Dalit women at the center of it.

The Namantar Movement, while a landmark struggle in Dalit history, also laid bare the intersections of caste and gender oppression. Dalit women were not passive bystanders but central participants, yet their contributions were often erased in public memory. Dalit feminism seeks to correct this erasure, asserting that caste justice and gender justice are inseparable. It reinterprets the Namantar struggle not just as a political fight for a name change, but as a battle for dignity, recognition, and equality—fought with the bodies, voices, and courage of Dalit women.

- **Feminist Lessons from the Movement**

The Namantar Andolan (Name Change Movement), which began in 1978 and continued through the 1990s, was a powerful Dalit-led struggle to rename Marathwada University after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. While initially seen as a symbolic demand, the movement evolved into a larger anti-caste assertion, and Dalit

women played a crucial, though often overlooked, role in it. The feminist lessons from this movement are deeply rooted in the intersectional experiences of caste, gender, and political marginalization.

Firstly, the Namantar Andolan exposed the gendered violence faced by Dalit women during caste conflicts. In the wake of the movement, Dalit women were specifically targeted—raped, assaulted, and humiliated—by dominant caste groups as a form of retaliation. This demonstrated how Dalit women’s bodies were weaponized in caste wars, reinforcing the need to understand violence not only as a caste issue or a gender issue, but as both.

Secondly, the movement highlighted the resilience and political agency of Dalit women. Despite extreme violence and social ostracism, Dalit women actively participated in protests, meetings, and the rebuilding of community morale. Their roles as activists, caregivers, and community leaders during and after the conflict challenged dominant notions of passive victimhood and brought attention to grassroots Dalit feminism in action.

Thirdly, Namantar Andolan revealed the silences and exclusions within mainstream feminist and Dalit male-dominated narratives. Dalit women’s experiences were often marginalized in both spaces, pushing scholars and activists to recognize the urgent need for Dalit feminist frameworks that center the voices of the most oppressed.

In essence, the Namantar Andolan teaches that symbolic politics—like naming public institutions—can trigger deep-rooted social tensions and that Dalit women’s participation is not only central to

such movements but also key to redefining feminist and anti-caste resistance in India.

3. Emergence of Independent Dalit Women's Organizations:

In postcolonial India, especially from the 1980s onward, Dalit women began to form independent organizations to assert their distinct political identity and confront the double marginalization they faced—both within the patriarchal structures of Dalit movements and the caste-blindness of mainstream feminist groups. Realizing that their unique experiences of caste-based gender violence, social exclusion, and economic deprivation were often ignored, Dalit women activists initiated platforms that centered their voices and struggles. The emergence of these independent Dalit women's organizations marked a radical shift from passive inclusion to assertive leadership, laying the foundation for a Dalit feminist movement that was self-defined, politically sharp, and globally connected. These groups continue to challenge dominant narratives and demand accountability from both the state and civil society, asserting that without caste justice, there can be no gender justice.

- **All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch**

The post-1990s period witnessed the rise of independent Dalit women's organizations, marking a significant shift in the trajectory of Dalit feminism. Dissatisfied with both mainstream feminist movements, which often ignored caste, and Dalit movements, which sidelined gender issues, Dalit women began forming their own autonomous platforms to address the specific intersection of caste and gender oppression. One of the most prominent among these is the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), established in 2006. AIDMAM has worked at

the grassroots and policy levels to highlight caste-based sexual violence, demand justice for atrocities, and push for Dalit women's political representation. It has also been instrumental in documenting violations and amplifying Dalit women's voices in both national and international arenas.

- **Ruth Manorama and International Advocacy**

A pioneering figure in this movement is Ruth Manorama, a prominent Dalit feminist and activist who brought Dalit women's issues to global forums such as the United Nations and the World Conference Against Racism in Durban (2001). Through her advocacy, caste-based discrimination was increasingly recognized as a human rights violation, not just a domestic or social concern. Manorama's efforts demonstrated the power of transnational solidarity, helping frame Dalit women's struggles within the larger discourse of global justice. The emergence of these organizations has been crucial in transforming Dalit feminism from a marginal voice into a powerful political force demanding structural change, justice, and equality.

Conclusion: Ambedkarite Influence and Post-Independence Mobilization

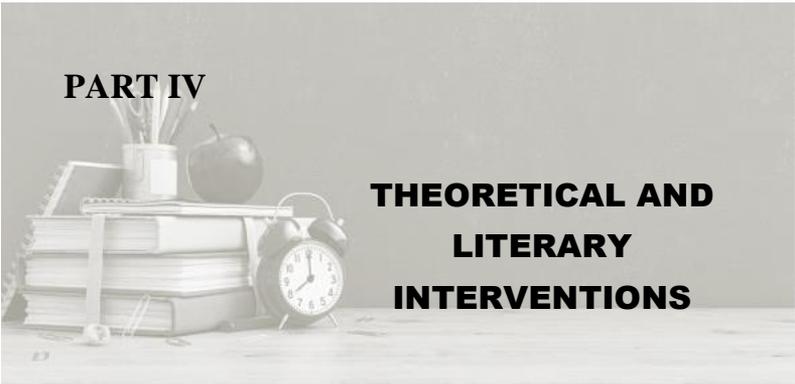
The post-independence period in India, particularly shaped by **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's radical vision**, marked a turning point in the political and intellectual awakening of Dalit women. Ambedkar's insistence on annihilating caste, securing constitutional rights, and asserting dignity for the oppressed provided a **blueprint for Dalit feminist mobilization**. His focus on education, legal reform, and organized resistance allowed Dalit women to emerge not only as

subjects of oppression but as **agents of change**, confronting both Brahmanical patriarchy and state apathy.

The **Namantar Andolan**, **Dalit women's conferences**, and the formation of organizations such as the **All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch** and advocacy by leaders like **Ruth Manorama** exemplify this rise in **grassroots activism** and political engagement. These efforts forged a **distinct Dalit feminist discourse** that extended beyond the limits of both mainstream Indian feminism—which often failed to address caste—and Dalit movements that frequently neglected gender.

However, this era also revealed **ongoing contradictions** within both state policy and intra-Dalit politics. While Ambedkarite ideology provided the moral and intellectual foundation for inclusion, Dalit women continued to face **institutional exclusion**, **underrepresentation in leadership**, and erasure within broader feminist spaces. Critics like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege have highlighted how the **bourgeois drift of Dalit politics** post-Ambedkar often left Dalit women marginalized even within their own movements.

In sum, the Ambedkarite influence was foundational in catalyzing **Dalit women's assertion in postcolonial India**, offering ideological clarity and strategic direction. Yet, the **path to liberation remains contested and incomplete**, demanding not just political representation but a deeper, intersectional rethinking of Indian democracy, feminism, and social justice. Dalit feminism, emerging from this legacy, continues to push for a **more inclusive and radical transformation** of society—one that centers the lived realities of the most oppressed.



5.1 Ideology to Expression



The bridge between **Ambedkarite Influence and Post-Independence Mobilization** and **Theoretical and Literary Interventions** reflects a vital evolution from political activism to intellectual and cultural articulation within Dalit feminism. Ambedkar's influence catalyzed a powerful wave of post-independence mobilization, where Dalit women engaged in grassroots organizing, legal reform, and political resistance. However, this activism soon required deeper theoretical frameworks and narrative expressions to sustain and expand its impact. Part IV marks this shift, where Dalit feminists began to interrogate not only social realities but also knowledge production itself, entering academic, literary, and cultural spaces with a critical lens. The bridge lies in how Ambedkarite ideology—centered on justice, dignity, and annihilation of caste—became the foundation for Dalit women's theoretical interventions and literary creativity. Through poetry, autobiographies, and scholarly critique, Dalit women redefined feminist discourse, challenging both Brahminical patriarchy and the exclusionary tendencies of mainstream feminism. This transition from activism to articulation ensured that the movement was not only lived but also thought, written, and theorized on its own terms.

1. Dalit Feminist Perspective: Grounding Theory in Lived Experience

Dalit feminists argue that these interventions are essential because they center lived experience as a form of knowledge. Scholars like Sharmila Rege emphasized the need to “write from below,” advocating for testimonial literature and life narratives as valid epistemologies. From this view, autobiographical works by Dalit women are not just personal reflections but political acts that bridge the gap between theory and praxis. These narratives, often

dismissed by upper-caste academia as anecdotal, are reclaimed as crucial tools of resistance and theorization.

2. Critique from Mainstream (Upper-Caste) Feminism: Questioning Methodology and Reach:

Some strands of mainstream feminism initially viewed Dalit feminist literature as too specific or emotionally charged, questioning whether these texts could form a cohesive theoretical framework. They also critiqued the limited access and readership of these works, which were often regionally grounded and written in vernacular languages. However, this critique has been increasingly challenged for its caste blindness, with Dalit scholars arguing that universalizing feminist theory without addressing caste only reinforces Brahmanical patriarchy.

3. Postcolonial and Intersectional Analysis: Global Relevance and Limitations :

From a postcolonial and intersectional lens, Dalit feminist interventions are often praised for offering unique insights into structural violence and identity politics. The autobiographies of Baby Kamble, Bama, and Urmila Pawar have been compared to African-American and Latin American feminist narratives in their testimonial power and critique of dominant norms. Scholars in global south studies see these texts as counter-narratives to colonial and nationalist historiography. However, critics also point out that English-language translations and academic framing can dilute the original radicalism of these texts, raising concerns about co-option and selective visibility.

4. Marxist and Materialist Critique: Emphasis on Class Over Identity:

Some Marxist critics argue that literary interventions often overemphasize identity and experience at the cost of a more structural class analysis. From this viewpoint, focusing on

narratives and cultural representation may not sufficiently address economic exploitation, landlessness, and labor issues, which also affect Dalit women deeply. Dalit feminists respond by asserting that caste is not just cultural but material, and that their frameworks inherently deal with both economic and social oppression.

5. Internal Dalit Feminist Reflections: Representation and Voice:

Even within Dalit feminism, there is critical reflection about whose voices get published and recognized. There are concerns that the most visible literary figures tend to be English-educated, urban Dalit women, while voices from rural, non-literate, or non-Hindu backgrounds remain marginalized. There is also growing demand for intersectionality within Dalit feminism itself, addressing issues of sexuality, disability, and religion.

Conclusion: Theoretical and literary interventions in Dalit feminism are revolutionary in that they create space for self-definition, critique systemic silences, and bridge activism and academia. While they have been embraced as transformative tools by many, they also face critical scrutiny on grounds of reach, representation, and theoretical coherence. This ongoing debate itself is a testament to the vibrancy and evolving nature of Dalit feminist thought, which refuses simplification and insists on complexity, resistance, and justice.

1. Dalit Feminist Theory: Beyond Brahmanical Patriarchy :

The concept of Dalit feminist theory, particularly framed as a challenge to Brahmanical patriarchy, marks a significant shift in Indian feminist discourse. It critiques the dominant upper-caste feminist narratives that have historically ignored or subsumed caste into a broader category of “womanhood.” By calling attention to caste as a foundational structure of gendered violence,

Dalit feminism offers a radical reorientation of both feminist and anti-caste theory. Various critical perspectives—Dalit feminist, mainstream feminist, intersectional, Marxist, and global—offer diverse insights and tensions around this concept. Under the weight of Dalit feminist critique, especially post-1990s, some mainstream feminists have acknowledged this limitation and begun to engage more intersectionally, though collaborations often remain fraught with tokenism and power imbalance.

3. Intersectional and Transnational Feminist View: Affirmation and Expansion : From an intersectional or global feminist standpoint, the critique of Brahmanical patriarchy is seen as aligned with anti-racist, decolonial, and queer feminist thought. Dalit feminism is viewed as a powerful South Asian parallel to Black feminism, particularly in its emphasis on the interlocking nature of caste, gender, and class. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw have influenced Indian feminists who now see caste and gender as mutually constitutive, rather than additive. This perspective values Dalit feminist theory as a critical global voice in the fight against hierarchical oppression.

4. Marxist Critique: Need for Stronger Class Analysis : From a Marxist or materialist lens, some critics argue that Dalit feminist theory sometimes overemphasizes identity and symbolic representation, potentially neglecting economic and class-based exploitation. They stress that landlessness, wage inequality, and labor rights must be addressed alongside caste and gender. However, many Dalit feminists respond by stating that caste is inherently material, as it determines access to resources, labor, and livelihood—especially for Dalit women. Thus, they argue for a

caste-class-gender integrated approach, rather than seeing them as competing priorities.

5. Internal Dalit Feminist Reflections: Representation, Voice, and Complexity ;

Within Dalit feminist spaces, there is growing introspection around whose voices get amplified. Critics from within the movement point out that urban, educated, and English-speaking Dalit women often become the face of the theory, while rural, non-Hindu, queer, and disabled Dalit women remain underrepresented. This has led to a call for more nuanced and inclusive Dalit feminist praxis, one that addresses religion, region, sexuality, and disability within the framework of Brahmanical patriarchy. "Dalit Feminist Theory: Beyond Brahmanical Patriarchy" is not just a critique of caste and gender; it is a call to reimagine Indian feminism itself. While it has led to groundbreaking theoretical and political developments, it continues to face resistance, appropriation, and misinterpretation. Its strength lies in its ability to remain grounded in lived experience, while also engaging critically with dominant ideologies. Across perspectives, there is agreement that any feminist project in India that ignores caste is incomplete, making Dalit feminist theory a necessary and transformative force in both academic and activist worlds.

1. Dalit Feminist Perspective: The Core Framework: Dalit feminists assert that Brahmanical patriarchy is a distinct form of oppression rooted in the caste-based control of sexuality, labor, and social mobility of Dalit women. Scholars like Gail Omvedt, Sharmila Rege, and Gopal Guru argue that the dominant feminist discourse in India has been upper-caste in its worldview, failing to

engage with the structural violence experienced by Dalit women. Dalit feminist theory, therefore, doesn't just demand inclusion; it demands a restructuring of feminist theory itself, making caste central to gender analysis. This perspective celebrates autobiographical literature, grassroots activism, and lived experience as valid sources of feminist knowledge.

2. Mainstream Feminist View: A Point of Discomfort and Realignment:

Historically, many mainstream (upper-caste) feminists have been uncomfortable with the critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, as it directly challenges their position and privilege within feminist spaces. Early responses often attempted to universalize the category of "Indian woman," overlooking the multiple layers of caste-based discrimination. However,

Sharmila Rege and Intersectionality:

Sharmila Rege is widely credited with reshaping Indian feminist discourse by introducing a robust intersectional framework grounded in Dalit feminism. Her scholarship critically examined how caste, gender, and class intersect, particularly through her influential work *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (2006). She challenged both mainstream feminist and anti-caste male-dominated frameworks by centering Dalit women's lived experiences and asserting the importance of "testimony as theory." Her engagement with intersectionality has provoked both acclaim and critique across various intellectual traditions.

1. Dalit Feminist Perspective: Affirmation and Legacy:

Dalit feminists celebrate Sharmila Rege for legitimizing their voices within academic and political discourse. By valuing Dalit women's autobiographies as epistemological texts, she helped frame life-writing and personal experience as legitimate sites of

theorizing, not just raw data. Her intersectional approach placed caste at the core of feminist analysis, insisting that gender in India cannot be understood without addressing the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy. Many scholars from the Dalit feminist tradition see Rege as a bridge between grassroots resistance and academic theorization, making Dalit feminism both visible and intellectually rigorous.

2. Mainstream Feminist View: Discomfort and Integration: For mainstream (often upper-caste) feminists, Rege's work was initially a disruptive critique, exposing how upper-caste dominance shaped the agendas and leadership of the Indian women's movement. Her insistence on caste as foundational to feminist theory was uncomfortable for some, but it also forced a critical introspection. Over time, Rege's arguments led to more intersectional dialogues in feminist academia, pushing upper-caste feminists to re-evaluate their own locations of privilege. However, critics point out that while mainstream feminism now frequently *invokes* intersectionality, structural inclusion of Dalit voices remains limited, often resulting in symbolic rather than substantive change.

3. Intersectional Feminism (Global South & Transnational Lens): Parallel and Praise : From a transnational or global intersectional perspective, Rege's work parallels that of Black feminist theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. She extended the concept of intersectionality into the Indian context with sharp cultural specificity, highlighting how caste-based discrimination, unlike race, is often denied or invisibilized in liberal and feminist discourse. Rege's contributions are praised for decolonizing feminist theory, making her a vital

reference in Global South feminist studies. Yet, some global critics note that Rege's influence remains largely within Indian or South Asian circles, raising concerns about the limited global dissemination of Dalit feminist frameworks.

4. Marxist and Materialist Critique: Class-Caste Tensions

From a Marxist perspective, while Rege is appreciated for critiquing cultural and symbolic domination, some critics argue that her work does not foreground class and economic materialism as strongly as needed. They suggest that labor exploitation, landlessness, and poverty—central to Dalit women's oppression—should be more deeply engaged with in her analysis. However, defenders of Rege argue that her emphasis on "cultural labor" and reproductive work expands the understanding of exploitation to include symbolic, sexual, and epistemic violence, rather than reducing oppression to economic terms alone.

5. Ambedkarite Perspective: Intellectual Alignment with Dalit

Ideology: Ambedkarite scholars and activists view Rege as a committed ally, who helped institutionalize Ambedkarite thought within academic feminism. Her efforts to reclaim Ambedkar as a feminist thinker, and to embed Dalit women's narratives into mainstream curriculum, were revolutionary. Her concept of "Dalit Standpoint Epistemology" is grounded in Ambedkarite ideology, arguing that knowledge must be produced from the perspective of the oppressed, particularly Dalit women. However, some Ambedkarite voices question whether upper-caste scholars like Rege, despite their commitment, can fully represent or embody the Dalit experience, highlighting the tension between advocacy and lived identity.

6. Internal Dalit Feminist Reflection: Complex Role of Allies

While Rege is respected within Dalit feminist circles, some internal critiques reflect on the role of allies in shaping Dalit feminist theory. Her upper-caste background occasionally prompts debate about voice, representation, and epistemic authority. Critics raise important questions: *Who speaks for whom? Can solidarity avoid appropriation?* Yet, Rege's insistence on centering Dalit voices, not speaking over them, has made her a model for ethical scholarly engagement and meaningful allyship.

Conclusion: Sharmila Rege's contribution to intersectional feminist theory in India is foundational and transformative. By placing caste at the heart of feminist analysis, validating testimonios as theory, and engaging deeply with Ambedkarite thought, she helped reconstruct the intellectual and political landscape of Indian feminism. While debates around identity, representation, and materiality persist, her work continues to inspire critical engagement, solidarity-building, and academic responsibility—proving that intersectionality is not just a method, but a commitment to justice in both theory and practice.

Dalit Feminism vs Mainstream and Radical Feminism

The emergence of Dalit feminism as an autonomous intellectual and political framework has deeply challenged both mainstream feminism (often led by upper-caste, urban women) and radical feminism (which focuses on patriarchy as the primary source of oppression). Dalit feminism's core argument—that gender cannot be separated from caste—forces a re-evaluation of feminist politics in India. This analysis presents how various schools of

thought perceive and critique the divergence between Dalit feminism and other dominant feminist frameworks.

Dalit feminism emerged as a critical response to the erasure of caste from both mainstream (upper-caste dominated) and radical feminist discourses in India. While all feminist strands aim to dismantle patriarchal structures, Dalit feminism uniquely highlights how caste, gender, and class intersect, especially in the lives of Dalit women, making their oppression qualitatively different from that of upper-caste women.

Dalit Feminism

- Centers Brahmanical patriarchy, where caste-based hierarchy and gender oppression work together to subjugate Dalit women.
- Advocates for intersectionality, insisting that gender justice is impossible without caste justice.
- Draws from Ambedkarite thought, using personal testimonies, lived experiences, and grassroots activism as forms of feminist knowledge.
- Emphasizes issues like sexual violence by dominant caste men, caste-based labor exploitation (e.g., manual scavenging), lack of land rights, and educational exclusion.

Mainstream Feminism

- Traditionally led by upper-caste, middle-class, urban women.
- Focused on legal reforms, dowry laws, domestic violence, and employment rights—often without caste-specific analysis.

- Critiqued by Dalit feminists for being caste-blind, universalizing the experience of “women” without acknowledging caste privilege.
- Recent efforts toward inclusion exist, but often lack structural redistribution of power or representation.

Radical Feminism

- Views patriarchy as the root cause of all female oppression.
- Prioritizes issues like sexual violence, reproductive rights, and bodily autonomy.
- Often neglects how caste structures these experiences differently, especially for Dalit women.

Tends to promote a universal sisterhood, which Dalit feminists argue is exclusionary.

Key Differences:

Criteria	Dalit Feminism	Mainstream Feminism	Radical Feminism
Core Concern	Caste, class, and gender oppression	Gender inequality (often caste-neutral)	Patriarchy as a universal oppressive system
Subject Focus	Dalit women’s	"Universal"	Female body

	lived experiences	Indian woman	and sexual oppression
Philosophical Base	Ambedkarite, anti-caste, intersectional	Liberal/Legal reformist	Patriarchy-focused, essentialist
Critique by Dalit Feminists	Caste-blind, tokenistic inclusion	Ignores caste power in “sisterhood”	Gender-only lens misses caste-based violence
Methodologies	Testimonios, oral narratives, community knowledge	Academic writing, policy reform	Ideological activism, identity politics

Conclusion: Dalit feminism challenges both mainstream and radical feminism to decenter their privilege, acknowledge caste-based inequalities, and reframe feminist politics in India. It asserts that liberation cannot be complete without addressing the caste question—not just as an add-on, but as central to feminist theory and practice. Rather than dividing feminism, Dalit feminism aims to expand and radicalize it from the margins.

➤ **Critical Views by Diverse Perspectives over Dalit Feminism vs Mainstream and Radical Feminism**

1. Dalit Feminist Perspective: Rejection of Caste-Blind Feminism: From within Dalit feminist thought, the core critique of mainstream and radical feminism is their failure to address Brahmanical patriarchy—a form of caste-specific gendered oppression. Dalit feminists argue that mainstream feminist

movements in India have historically erased or tokenized Dalit women, treating their caste experience as secondary or irrelevant.

While radical feminism identifies patriarchy as the root of all gender-based oppression, Dalit feminists contend that this single-axis analysis erases the unique violence Dalit women face due to their caste and class location. Dalit feminists emphasize "triple marginalization"—as women, as Dalits, and as poor—which cannot be addressed by gender-only or class-only frameworks. The lived experience of manual scavenging, sexual violence by dominant caste men, and social exclusion are not captured by radical feminist theories rooted in upper-caste, urban experience.

2. Mainstream Feminist View: Slow Shift, Persistent Gaps:

Mainstream feminists, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, often focused on issues like dowry, domestic violence, and legal reforms, while largely ignoring how caste structures those issues differently for Dalit women. Although intersectionality has gradually been incorporated, this shift often remains surface-level or academic, without meaningful redistribution of leadership, visibility, or resources to Dalit women.

Some upper-caste feminists have acknowledged this exclusion (e.g., Nivedita Menon), and initiatives have been made to de-center upper-caste perspectives. However, critics within Dalit feminism argue that the core power structures within feminist organizations remain unchanged, resulting in continued elite gatekeeping.

3. Radical Feminism: Patriarchy as the Primary Axis : Radical feminism, particularly in its Western and Indian variants, sees

patriarchy as the universal system of female oppression. It foregrounds male dominance, sexual violence, and the control of women's bodies. However, this approach is often criticized by Dalit feminists for ignoring caste and class, thereby universalizing womanhood in a way that flattens differences.

Dalit feminists argue that sexual violence against Dalit women is not simply patriarchal—it is caste-patriarchal, a tool of social control and humiliation used by dominant castes. For example, while radical feminists may critique rape as an act of male power, Dalit feminists analyze it as caste-based violence legitimized by social hierarchy and state impunity.

4. Intersectional Feminist and Global South View: Supportive of Dalit Feminism; From an intersectional and Global South feminist lens, Dalit feminism is seen as a necessary decolonial and anti-hegemonic force. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw (intersectionality) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (Third World feminism) have highlighted how mainstream feminisms often reproduce privilege and erase difference.

Dalit feminism fits into global conversations on racial capitalism, systemic oppression, and subaltern resistance. It is praised for grounding its theory in grassroots movements, testimonies, and cultural resistance, thereby expanding feminist theory beyond Eurocentric and caste-blind frameworks.

5. Marxist/Materialist View: Emphasis on Class over Identity: Marxist feminists critique Dalit feminism for focusing too heavily on identity and cultural representation, sometimes at the expense of economic struggle and class consciousness. They argue that

issues like landlessness, poverty, and labor exploitation—which deeply affect Dalit women—should be addressed through a class-based lens.

Dalit feminists respond by asserting that caste and class are intertwined in India; the caste system determines access to labor, land, and capital, especially for Dalit women. Therefore, caste is not merely cultural or symbolic, but a material structure of oppression, inseparable from economic exploitation.

6. Ambedkarite View: *Emphasis on Structural and Ethical Reform:* Ambedkarite thinkers view Dalit feminism as the natural continuation of Ambedkar’s vision, which emphasized education, self-respect, and annihilation of caste. Dalit feminism is aligned with the Ambedkarite critique of Hindu patriarchy, Brahmanism, and tokenistic reformism. This perspective values the moral and ethical foundations of social justice, not merely ideological alignment or academic sophistication.

Dalit feminists like Sharmila Rege and Gail Omvedt are seen as key figures who translated Ambedkarite thought into feminist language, establishing Dalit feminism as both intellectual and activist in nature.

Conclusion: The contestation between Dalit feminism and mainstream/radical feminism is not merely about representation—it is about the very foundation of feminist theory and praxis in India. Dalit feminism insists on a restructuring of the feminist agenda that recognizes caste, class, and gender as intersecting systems. It demands accountability from upper-caste feminists and challenges them to share power, visibility, and space.

Rather than a divisive force, Dalit feminism offers a transformative vision of solidarity—one rooted in justice, dignity, and structural change. In the words of Dalit feminists themselves: "There is no gender justice without caste justice."

Dalit Women's Writing as Resistance: Dalit women's writing stands as a powerful form of resistance against caste, gender, and class oppression. Emerging prominently in the late 20th century, these writings have challenged dominant literary and feminist narratives by centering the lived realities of Dalit women—realities shaped by Brahmanical patriarchy, systemic violence, and social exclusion. Rather than conforming to elite literary standards, Dalit women's narratives reclaim authenticity, pain, and memory as legitimate tools of political and intellectual rebellion.

1. Voice from the Margins: Dalit women's autobiographies, such as Bama's *Karukku*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, break the silence around untouchability, sexual exploitation, and the double marginalization faced by Dalit women. These texts assert that speaking from the margins is an act of defiance. By narrating their personal histories, these authors resist both casteist oppression and upper-caste feminist erasure.

2. Testimony as Theory: Following scholars like Sharmila Rege, Dalit women's writings are recognized not merely as literature but as "testimonios"—texts that serve as both evidence and theory. These narratives offer a counter-archive to dominant histories, revealing the silenced voices of oppressed communities. In doing so, they challenge elite academic knowledge production and insist on the validity of experience-based epistemologies.

3. Literary Form as Political Strategy: Dalit women writers often break conventional literary forms. Their writing is raw, emotionally charged, and politically urgent. The use of regional dialects, oral storytelling traditions, and colloquial language resists Sanskritized, upper-caste linguistic norms. This linguistic choice not only preserves cultural identity but also de-centers elite literary aesthetics.

4. Intersectionality in Practice: These writings are profoundly intersectional, dealing not only with gender but with caste, religion, labor, sexuality, and poverty. For example, Bama, a Christian Dalit woman, discusses religious hypocrisy and casteist practices within the Church, while Urmila Pawar reflects on her Buddhist conversion as a tool for liberation. This multi-layered narrative approach challenges homogenized notions of Indian womanhood.

5. Community and Collective Memory: Dalit women's literature often emphasizes community over individuality. Their stories document generational suffering, shared labor, and collective resistance, offering a deeply historical and communal sense of identity. By writing about mothers, grandmothers, neighbors, and friends, these authors preserve and valorize the lives of working-class Dalit women who have long been erased from literary and historical texts.

Conclusion: Dalit women's writing is not just a literary project—it is a revolutionary intervention. It dismantles Brahmanical dominance in literature and feminist theory, demands space in both political and cultural discourse, and reclaims voice, agency, and dignity for Dalit women. As a form of resistance, it not only

tells stories of pain but also becomes a blueprint for liberation, assertion, and solidarity.

- **Dalit Literary Movement In Feminism**

1980's has been marked as the beginning of the feministic movement in Indian literary tradition and history; claiming to state its demanding voices over equality and legal rights in every section of socio-political life in Dalit cultural spheres. Highlighting of social oppression and cultural racism in individual autobiography, Dr. B.R Ambedkar's socio-political movement and thereafter the exploration of the overlapping experiences of caste and gender discrimination figures out the picturesque scenario of Dalit struggles in the literary expressions of few female writers as well as in their earnest female voices for the demanding legal rights of equalisation in every spheres. Some of the remarkable figures in the Dalit Feministic voices are- like Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Shantabai Kamble, and Bama are recognized for their impactful Dalit feminist writings.

The Dalit literary movement has played a transformative role in the evolution of feminist discourse in India, offering a radically different lens from Savarna-dominated narratives. Rooted in the Ambedkarite tradition, this movement foregrounds the lived experiences of caste oppression and its intersection with gender, especially through the voices of Dalit women writers. Unlike mainstream Indian feminist literature, which often emphasizes gender in isolation, Dalit feminist literature insists that caste cannot be separated from gender—that the two are intricately woven into the fabric of Indian social reality. Beginning with autobiographical and testimonial forms in regional languages—such as Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (Marathi), Bama's *Karukku* (Tamil), and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (Marathi)—Dalit women's writing brought forth narratives of

poverty, labor, violence, untouchability, sexual exploitation, and spiritual assertion, often neglected in both upper-caste literature and male-centered Dalit writings. These literary texts are not just personal stories; they are political documents, challenging dominant historiographies, exposing casteist patriarchy, and reclaiming dignity and voice.

What makes this movement distinctly feminist is its commitment to a subaltern standpoint, where knowledge, resistance, and identity are articulated from below, from the margins. These writings also reflect collective memory and community trauma, challenging the invisibilization of Dalit women's experiences in canonical literature and academic feminism. The Dalit literary movement became especially vital in the 1990s and 2000s, as more Dalit women entered universities, translated regional works into English, and participated in international forums, thus globalizing Dalit feminist concerns. Moreover, this literary resistance has extended into poetry, performance, street theatre, digital platforms, and academic discourse, making Dalit feminist thought not just a literary category but a cultural and political movement. It continues to grow as new generations of writers—like Meena Kandasamy, Hira Bansode, Gogu Shyamala, and Anita Bharti—use literature as a weapon to fight systemic inequality and assert the agency, intellect, and humanity of Dalit women.

Babytai Kamble (1929-21 April 2012)

Pioneering figure in Dalit feministic voice in Indian Cultural tradition is traced on the name of Babytai Kamble; an indomitable spirit in the picturesque scenario of Dalit Struggles and Dalit feminism. In her autobiography, Baby Kamble reveals the entrenched nature of the caste system and explores the interconnectedness of caste and class. She investigates how caste and class dynamics influence each other, compounded by the

additional disadvantage of gender, resulting in the marginalization and exclusion of women in her autobiographical work *Jina Amucha*, written in Marathi. In her life story in colonial aspects as well as in post-colonial aspects over Dalit feministic oppression has been shown as the mirror to the female pictures of the society; and embedded with two important critical moments in the Indian history: freedom from the British rule and anti-caste movement led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Her Early Life and Her Voice

Gender discrimination as well as multilayered suffering of Dalit women in the hands of male dominated families and societies. Dalit girls had been segregated from the part of Bramhin schooling and cultural system. Owing to restriction and domination on the Mahar communities they are not allowed to be connected with the main stream of social and cultural system directly. After passing of Fouth standar she got married to Kondiba Kamble with out the officiator of Bramhin priest. Kamble began her activism at a young age going to public meetings that were organized by various Dalit activists that inspired her to work for her community. Kamble was involved in the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. This movement saw mass participation and contribution by women. She was a member of the Mahila Mandal in Phaltan. She started a government approved residential school for children from disadvantaged communities in Nimbure, Maharashtra.

Dr B. R. Ambedkar's influence

The leadership of Dalit community has been shined in the arrival of Babasahev Ambedkar, a jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer whose influence in the voice of feminists activism of Babytai Kamble is noteworthy. Dalit women's reproductive labour has been focussed by her feministic voice in her autobiography. Having been influenced by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, she encouraged

marginalised groups, especially Dalit women, to stand up for their rights. Dr Ambedkar vehemently opposed regressive religious practices perpetuating the exploitation of young girls, urging them to challenge such traditions and reclaim their agency. Baby Kamble's autobiography mentions certain important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on Dalit women to get them educated both socially and culturally. The text provides a painful and realistic picture of the oppressive caste and patriarchal beliefs of the Indian society especially that of her own community.

She draws the reformist technique from Babasaheb and applied in her Dalit movement for the welfare of the society in orphanage and homeless people of backward classes. She declares her Mahar community not to disobey the teachings of Baba Saheb for them being connected with education. She added:

“Baba's words showed me the way. I decided to begin my struggle through my writing. I followed Baba's advice verbatim, to the best of my ability. When Shashikant Daithankar was secretary in the Maharashtra government, he granted me permission to start an ashram shala for orphans from the backward castes. Today, I am the president of Mahatma Phule Dhyam Vikas Prasarak Sanstha and I serve the community in this capacity. Two hundred children study in this school....Sheel, Pradnya and Karuna have been the founding principles of my life.” (135)

The Prisons We Broke (2009)

The autobiography not only demonstrates the story of one's life but it mirrors the sufferings, struggles, oppression and discrimination faced by the female society in the hands of male dominated socio-structures. Her autobiography Jina Amucha was first published as a book in Marathi in 1986, and first translated

into English by Maya Pandit as *The Prisons We Broke* (Orient Longman, 2008).

The Prisons of Book stepped protesting forward against the oppressions of casteism of Dalit Mahar community; Hindu casteism subjected the Dalit for thousand of years and it is the pitiful reflection of Mahar community in Maharashtra. Both physically and mentally violation had been going on in the life of Dalit-Mahar community which had been reflected in her writings. In the Hindu Patriarchal system Mahar-dalit has been taken as an untouched, dirty, impure and excommunicated from the mainstream of Hindu society. Honour or any dignified social position was strictly prohibited to them. This discrimination started from childhood days till the end time of individuals life struggle. Baby Kamble writes that “The condition of Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, these beasts of burden, who slogged all their life for a handful of dry grass.”

She (p57) writes, “Our women offer their entire lives to the service of the earth. But when they themselves become mothers, what do they get? In those days there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice, to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother” socio and economic oppression drained away the spirit and right of Dalit women in the society by the upper caste. In schooling system after getting reformed by Baba Sahev Mahar girls started the education but faced the new challenges as stated by her: “they treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us they would cover their nose, mutter ‘chee chee’ and run as if their life is in mortal danger. The teacher had allotted a place in the corner near the door from where we will not move till the school is over for the day” (Kamble 108).

Regarding socio-political system it has been marked that the upper casteism believes in forbidding the Dalit to be connected with knowledge and education lest their knowledge would help them gaining new leadership and power possession in the socio-political order, and the upper caste would lose their leadership and their governing authority. She said, "In those days, it happened because the Dalits were uneducated. Today this happens because the dalits are educated. In those days, the whole village kept us down with tactics like refusing to give us water, keeping us at a distance, and through oppression and injustice. Now the educated dalits are behaving exactly as the upper caste villagers used to behave then. Educated dalits occupy top positions in the government. Their children enjoy the good life. They are not bothered about what's happening to poor people. Whatever they do, they do only for themselves. The poor dalits are left where they were." (150)

There are very few references to her personal life in her autobiography. On being asked about this dissonance, Kamble instinctively replies: "Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So, I really find it difficult to think of myself outside of my community" (136).

"I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage. But merely talking about it will not suffice. How many people can I reach that way? I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered" (146)

Due to the afraid of her husband and son she kept her writing hidden in the dusty places of her house; suggesting the breaking of Hindu myth of democratic rather Dalit-Patriarchy. Being 'Pativrata' women identity is totally depended on the identity of their husband; forcing them to stay as muted one. Even in her own

family the picture is not an exceptional. She says: “My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in the cage” (5).

The autobiography enumerates the brutal condition of marriage system of Dalit women; child marriages, pregnancy-physical and mental tortures in the stepping of food and workloads. As it has been focussed in her words to state forward the grim realities in the life of most of the girls. Kamble notes “a mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause” (82). Their bahus (daughters-in-law) and the saas (mother-in-law) in most cases, are the perpetrator of harshest calamities ;they have been treated as nothing more than a work machine. Suddenly on the way whenever the Mahar women encounter any high caste male member, they are expected to perform an act of most humble submission by bowing down and uttering the words: “the humble Mahar women fall at your feet master” (52).

Allocation of space for the Dalit women in the Mahila Mandal meeting was strictly prohibited even in the Ambedkarite movement. When they asked the queen of Phaltan to allow Dalit women to also sit on chairs in the front rows. In this manner, the allocation of space was democratized. Regarding the fear pollution Bramhin, the upper caste takes place apart in the marriage rituals of Mahar Community but in the cases of ‘Dakshina’ he has no fear: “That he took away without any fear of pollution” (89). Thus purity pollution of Dalit system has been running for a long period of time.

The book also tells how the Mahar community gets inspired by the socio-political movement of Ambedkar to be aware of their own oppression in the hands of upper caste. When Dr. Ambedkar arrived in the Jejury meeting, she said: ‘They had never expected their own man to arrive in a car, dressed in European clothes’ (63-4).

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Babytai Kamble uses her life as a mirror to the Dalit oppression and humiliation of women of Mahar community and shows the world to set back their power and honour by the feminist movement with the help of education and knowledge under the influence of Dr. B R Ambedkar.

Urmila Pawar (1945-): The prolific Dalit woman feminist writer is being noted for her raising voice against the oppression of Dalit women in post colonial India. In spite of being faced with gender and caste discrimination she completed her education in masters in Marathi literature and then voiced against their own condition in the hands of oppressor. Her autobiography *Aaidan*, written in Marathi, has been translated into English as '*The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* produces strong voice against the reality of grim women society. In an interview taken by Mahya Bhoumik on her question- How do you handle the real-life crisis faced by Dalit women in your writing? She said: "In any society gender inequality is prevalent. It is customary that all household chores and time-consuming works are to be done by women. Male members of the family are hardly conscious about the time dedicated and effort given by women to run the family smoothly. Only certain bit of concern is shown by the males towards their mothers which gets reflected in autobiographies and poems of Dalit writers; but, unfortunately, no recognition is given to the other female members of the family. In fact, our society has always taken women for granted and has been influenced by the role and identity of women as enunciated in seminal Hindu texts like Manusmriti. Our society suffers from a constricted and diseased thought that women are intellectually inferior. But in reality a woman's intellect is at par with a man. So we, the women, should never be considered less and we would fight for our rights and achieve them. The reflection of these humiliations

and our attempts to fight against these are found in our literature. Society gives no value to Dalits, and the situation is worsened when it comes to Dalit women. Sexual abuse and physical assault are considered ‘normal’ as far as Dalit women are concerned. No one is bothered about a Dalit woman’s identity and honour. I keep on writing about us, the Dalit women, as I have done in *Aaidan*. The mind set and temperament of society, particularly patriarchy, has to change. Even today the situation is dismal. In several places in Maharashtra women are still penalised and tortured. In places like Nagpur and Kolhapur women are raped and the rapes are justified as being given punishment for their promiscuous nature.” In the autobiography, *‘The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Mem’* the writer problematizes class, gender and oppressive part of Dalit life highlighting the double marginalization of Dalit women’s discovery of selfhood and constitution by their struggling part and caste barriers with patriarchy. Interpersonal and inter communicational relationship has been focussed in the Indian cultures(Maharashtra).

‘weaving’ relating to the present metaphor of the authoress struggling condition of Dalit community. Her mother started weaving bamboo baskets symbolising the pattern of economic poverty as well as in their profession of lower casteism . she said : *“My mother used to weave aaydans. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us.”*

The problem of poverty is connected with their Dalit-hood tradition based on the factor of discrimination of the patriarchal system of the society. Regarding the brutal and struggling condition of the women it has been seen that women used to take their heavy loads of wood on their heads on the way to Ratnagiri

market and while making their journey climbing over the mountain they used to curse their male oppressor- “mool- purush” of our family. As the location of the village, Phansawale, is extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain as it is situated in the obscure and corner part of hill. Whatever the struggle and hard work faced by the life; it belongs to the role of Dalit women. She wrote in her autobiography the abusive words spoken by the women in anger:

“May his dead body rot... why did he have to come and stay here, in this godforsaken place?” “May his face burn in the stove!” “Was that bastard blind or what? Couldn’t he see this bloody land for himself?”

Urmila Pawar’s childhood had been spent in the hands of oppression and discrimination by the so called patriarchist phenomenon. She belongs to Dalit- Mahar community and was strictly restricted from the normalcy of social system. Dalit girls had been treated by their school teacher in a bad way. She recalled the name of her teacher in the book- Kerlekar Guruji who slapped her in the classroom for her rejection to clean the cowdung as ordered by the teacher. Having seen the swollen cheeks of Pawar, her mother came to school and demanded the reason with the feminist voice:

“My girl studies in your class, Guruji! What did she do today that you beat her up so much? She pulled me towards him and showed him my swollen cheek. ‘Your white cow shits in the verandah’. ‘Our white cow? She shits there, eh? Why, did you see her doing that? Guruji, you are educated and yet you speak so foolishly? Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better...”
(Weave of My Life 68-69)

Another experience Pawar shared here during her school picnic where she was restricted to touch anything during the celebration. She wrote: **“They did not allow me to touch anything though we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about how much I had eaten...It was so humiliating that I died a thousand deaths that day!”**(Weave of My Life 102)

Such an incident remarked the humiliation by the upper caste towards Dalit- Mahar losing even the self respect due to their Dalit background. Dalit women used to be treated as a symbol of bad luck which even came to her life as a real incident. Regarding her marriage to Harishchandra it was not a smooth conjugal life of Pawar as she recalled and shared in her book that she was continuously blamed as Bad Luck by her husband due to her illness and being as a woman. She was victimised by her male partner too. She told:

“Even in his last days, I got squarely blamed for Harishchandra’s illness. First it was said that he was completely heartbroken by his daughter’s rebellious marriage. Gradually, my education, my job, my writing, my social work, my meetings, my programmes and finally I, because of what I was, were held responsible for his illness. But nothing affected me anymore! Nothing! Neither Harishchandra’s harsh words, nor his tantrums, nor our fights! All that I was able to see was a great wave of darkness, pitch-black as coal powder, rolling towards Harishchandra who faced it with his back turned to me... ”(Weave of My Life)317

As per experiencing the exploitation of the Dalit women and girl children in the patriarchal community. Pawar in her writing

highlights how the hungry child has been mentally exploited during the marriage ceremony. She wrote:

“Once, I went to attend wedding at my sister-in-law’s place, along with two of my nieces. However, when we three spout girls set down to eat and begun asking rice repeatedly, the cook got angry, „Whose daughters are these anyway? „He burst out. „They are eating like monsters“ then someone answered „they are from our“““ Sushi’s family! Daughters of Arjun master!” On hearing this, the host came forward. „Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!“ **The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined.”**
(Weave of My Life) 4

Thus from the feminist point of view Pawar attempts to share the brutality of exploitation , of what she faced during her whole life not only as a girl child but being as ‘**Bohu**’ in her family, in her autobiography which becomes the key point of her Dalit feminist voice against the exploitation of patriarchy and male power system of that time. If we talk about the traditional life style of Mahar community being as Dalit, it is clear conception that for the profitable business or purpose the upper caste just use them for their own sake but when the question of social discrimination arises in terms of rituals or customs they start making discrimination in the name of gender and casteism. Besides sexual exploitation had been there in order to fulfil their comfort and pleasure. So it has been clear that upper caste and lower caste being as a man made process of discrimination in the world of exploitation of Dalit women in order to make and continue their superiority over the lower caste in all sections. Besides all of exploitation one thing is clear that due to lack of education Dalit community never dare enough to step forward due to suffering

from economical crisis for making a leader who will lead the for the removal and wiping out that exploitation in the name of discrimination, inequality on gender and casteism.

For some measurement for improving the condition of dalit community we need the active steps taken by either govt or upper caste in such a way to make industry and the process of employment would clear the economical suffering from the houses of Dalit so that slowly and gradually they can raise their voice against the unequal system. From dual sides of marginalization and of exploitation she had been suffering from the hands of upper caste :

“We belonged to the Mahad-Rajaput belt, which forms the central region of the Konkan, and, compared to the north-south belt, this region is quite backward. I was born in a backward caste in a backward region, that too a girl! Since Father died when we were quite young, Aaye had to be very thrifty to make ends meet. Basically, she was a born miser, really! There is a saying in Marathi: imagine a monkey drinking wine, getting intoxicated, getting bitten by a scorpion, and then a ghost casting its spell on him. The point is people’s traits intensify and eventually cause havoc in their lives. Her case was similar. Therefore, food was always scarce in our house.” P-79

Shantabai Kamble: (1 March 1923 – 25 January 2023)

Shantabai kamble is the enlightening figure for dalit feminist voice by her activism and prolific autobiography "Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha" (The Kaleidoscope of My Life), marking the pioneering work in Dalit literature. She was born in Mahar Dalit family in Solapur on 1st March, 1923. From her early years she started experiencing the grim realities of her life of exploitation and discrimination in Dalit Mahar women community. Though at

that time sending girls to school was strictly prohibited, parents of Kamble sent her to school for education which paved her way to raising the female voice against the oppression and exploitation in her words. She got three rupees scholarship for school and educational materials but she was not allowed to sit inside the school.

In 1986 her autobiography "*Majya Janmachi Chittarkatha*" translated as *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life* was published as a complete book. It shows her struggling soul against the exploitation of Dalit Mahar in the hands of upper class.

Knowledge is light to bring the awareness in the dark life of ignorance. In connection with it education plays the important role to make women empower and self identity but where as economic section doesnot support mahar community to be connected with education so the dream of women empowering remains silent in the darkness. As per concerning the education, dalit women are never allowed to take it in their life struggling parts. On the other hand they have exploited not in the hands of upper classes but in terms of poverty. "*Majya Janmachi Chittarkatha*" translated as *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life* reflects the grim condition of Dalit women's educational bias and her emancipation throughout the success of education.

The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life (1983)

The study of her book epitomizes the effect of education in the life of Dalit women throughout the mirroring of her own struggle in the development and empowering voice of literature. Therefore, the book also highlights the tragic condition of Dalit women in Indian society. Being as Dalit women and oppressed doubly by the hands of patriarchal system and poverty educated Dalit women start raising their voice by relying on strength in their resilience

appealing to have a change in the systematic process by their self-empowerment.

Education plays an important role in her life moulding her oppression and struggle towards the self identity and women empowerment. She values the difference of what the education made in the life style of Dalit Women. Having been passed out from Seventh Standard she became a teacher. After being discriminated from upper class, deprived from poverty she stood against all odds of Dalit women and hence became an inspirational figure in the lives of Dalit Mahar Community especially in the life of Dalit women. She wrote in her book:

“I received education up to the seventh standard while I was still at my mother’s house. Then I become teacher None of my brothers, however, wanted to go to school. They learned the work of construction labourers though. But then work was infrequent, they sometimes used to get work and sometimes went without any. When they got work, they earned enough to eat well and enjoyed themselves. In the rainy season, it was difficult to get work. Construction work would stop. Then my elder brother used to come and stay with me a couple of weeks. When he left, he had to borrow money from me for the bus fare”. (Translation by Maya Pandit: pp. 133-36)

The plight of the dalit women has always been connected with their conventional attitude, practices and superstitious custom. Education and self- empowerment come in the form of the panacea for all these evils in their patriarchal norms of social system.

Untouchability has been taken the central role in the pious places of educational institution where Dalit girls are strictly restricted not to sit inside the school as been experienced by Kamble in her

childhood days. Being upset in her childhood untouchability she wrote in her book:

“Patil Master was the teacher of Standard III. He forced us to sit outside the classroom. He did not let us touch either to him or the other upper caste students. He used to punish us from a safe distance with a cane. While checking our homework he used to make us put our slates on the floor and after checking he put them down. Only then we were allowed to take them back. He did not like to be touched by us.” (03, Kamble).

Her autobiography reflects the exploitation and grim plight of their women in the hands of class, caste and gender discrimination. But after the darkness of gender exploitation light of knowledge clears all her economical problems. After having passed out from seventh standard Kamble was the girl from Mahar community to lead her family and society from the point of forefront. Her father’s eyes are filled with the tears of joy. Their neighbours suggested him to search a groom for her conjugal life. After getting married with Kamble master from her village, her conjugal life was not a happy one. She continued her teaching in school and fooding to her own family and children of her society; making her economical struggle stopped.

‘Education’ challanges the life of Shantabai Kamble as for Education improves knowledge and awareness which is not only an instrument of enhancing efficiency but it also an effective tool of widening and augmenting democratic participation and upgrading the overall quality of individual and societal life. The autobiography of course highlights the importance of education in empowering individuals and breaking free from oppressive systems, such as the caste system in India with the struggles faced by lower-caste individuals, particularly Dalit women, who experience discrimination and hierarchy within their communities.

However, it also acknowledges the progress made through the Phule-Ambedkarite human liberation struggle, which fought for equal rights and education for all with the belief that knowledge and education can lead to freedom from bondage and oppression.

Bama(1958)

Tamil feminist working for the social justice of Dalit women reminds us the name of Bama for her literary contribution in Indian dalit feminism. She was born Faustina Mary Fatima Rani into a Roman Catholic family. She belongs to the Paraiyar community, one of the most marginalized Dalit subcastes in Tamil Nadu. Dalit and women are considered as merged, hegemonized, downgraded. Dalit feminism began in Marathi Literature and later on infiltrated to Hindi, Kannada, Telegu, Malyalam and Tamil Literatures. Feminists Dalit writers started a realistic, experience based and authentic literature which threatened the upper class hegemony in society and in literature. Bama in her autobiographical novel **Karukku (1992)** which chronicles the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu. She subsequently wrote two more novels, **Sangati (1994)** and **Vanmam (2002)**.

Karukku (1992)

Bama's autobiographical novel, Karukku makes a sense of Bama's life as woman, Christian and Dalit. Karukku by Bama is an elegy to the community she grew up in and her intersecting identities as a Tamil, Dalit, and Christian woman. She writes, "*That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive.*" Remembering from her childhood days She recounts simultaneously of humorous incidents, the games she used to play with her friends, good meals with her family and the oppression of her community by the police, upper-castes, and the convent in the way which she presents the pervasiveness of caste oppression –

how it not only punctuates everyday life, but is an integral part of it, even in the memory of a community. Dalit feminist scholar Uma Chakravarti (2003) praises "Karukku" for its unflinching portrayal of Dalit women's experiences and its contribution to the discourse on caste and gender (Chakravarti 2003.)

About the casteism and labour experience Bama faced the oppressive functions imposed upon her by the way of servitude to the upper Naickers(Upper caste) including the beseeching obedience for them. She told: *"All the time I went to work for the Naickers [upper-caste] I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were. I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I could do,"*

she writes, of her experience working for a Naicker household in high school. *"To this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour."* Her experience in Christian convent is too much terrible of oppression. She shared her experience how much she faced the exploitation and differentiation from other women. Even leaving the convent proved a Herculean task as she was constantly stopped by the more senior nuns.

She felt the importance of education when govt. provided education for Dalit women for their improvement. She told:

"Because we are born into Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities".(15)

Bama's thoughts are going on the point that there is no connection between God and suffering caste as she explored the inner malicious nature of all nuns punishing student of Dalit sections. Nuns who belong to the upper caste enjoy their power and

position. With the power they had, they dominate and exploit the poor in the name of God. She shared:

"What kind of piety can this be? They fake themselves into God's so that they can exploit others. So where has God gone?"(94)

Bama shows a rebellious character against male oppression on women and the patriarchal domination culture, social, economic, religious, and familial life of Paraiya womanhood. Bama explains:

"The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priests shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with the tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husband's torment." (122)

Throughout her embarrassing experience as a Dalit, Bama realises that through the whole community of Dalit can be empowered and can gain human dignity through the sound education. Bama passes through many emotional encounters and experiences. The whole process is a trail of discovery, which makes her a self-made woman. Though through her education, Bama made a difference in her life.

Sangati (1994)

Sangati is a unique Dalit Feminist narrative. It was originally written in Tamil in 1994. It was translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom into English. Sangati means events point out the life style and events connected with the Dalit women in their struggling part and hardship. She told: "My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, passion about life

with vitality, truth, enjoyment and about their hard labor. I wanted to shout out these stories"

Here Bama shows the differences between the Dalit and Non Dalit women. She explains that the condition of Dalit women is better than that of upper class women who have been forced to live in most vulnerable conditions. There is no way to express their emotion for the upper class women. Bama feels proud that their women have economical freedom from their men folk with their working hard in fields and bringing up their children. Sometimes widows are allowed remarriage and their culture never alienates from the mainstream. But the upper class women confine their emotion within the four walls of their homes. But Dalit women suffer caste oppression in mornings and gender oppressions in nights.

Sangati connects the superstitions of Dalit girls from their childhood days. Birth of the girl child is thought to be auspicious only on odd numbers. The novel portrays the autobiographical element of her community through out the discrimination, exploitation and suffering of Dalit Girls. Apart from these, The physical violence is realistically portrayed in this novel like lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands, and brothers. Women in Tamil cultures from Dalit oppressions have been victimised by the hands of male dominated patriarchy and Bama becomes the voice of these women of her community and speaks out the truth that though all women are slaves to men, her women are the worst sufferers. This is the core theme of Sangati.

In the novel the child narrator continuously faced with struggle with her rebellious mood against the oppression and exploitation of the society and raised her voice against the male oppressors for the establishment of the equality. Bama focussed the Dalit women for hard labor, their spirit of protests, their cultures absence of

dowry and their rich cultural heritage. She talks about the narrator's courageous grandmother who pawned her 'thali' to feed her children, Katturaasa's mother who bore her son by herself while cutting grass and about Mariamma who came back to work even after she met with an accident . she told: "From your ancestors times it has been agreed that what men say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you have learnt a few letters of the alphabet?"

Later part of the novel focussed on the vigour and strength of Dalit women by portraying the education system about Dalit community. Pechiamma, who belongs to Chakkiliyar's community studied up to fifth class, but the girls of that community do not go to school all that much.

So, Bama says in her novel Sangati "We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence."

Vanmam (2002).

"Vanmam," Bama's third novel first appeared in Tamil in the year 2002 and then it was translated into English by Malini Seshadri in 2008 delves into the theme of gendered violence within Dalit communities. Through vivid character portrayals and evocative imagery, Bama exposes the prevalence of domestic abuse, sexual violence, and exploitation faced by Dalit women at the hands of family members, community leaders, and dominant caste groups. The milieu is set by Bama in the first page of the novel confronts the taboo surrounding discussions of gendered violence within Dalit communities, challenging the silence and complicity that perpetuate cycles of abuse and oppression. Bama openly pictures the hypocrisy of upper caste men who adopt the strategy of divide and rule among the Dalit people by dismantling stereotypes and misconceptions about Dalit women's experiences of violence,

highlighting the intersectional nature of oppression and the need for collective action to combat gender-based violence. Through the protagonist's journey towards self-realization and empowerment, "**Vanmam**" offers a powerful critique of patriarchal norms and caste-based hierarchies that perpetuate violence and injustice within marginalized communities.

In the "Author's note" to **Vanmam**, Bama faithfully records the anger of her community thus:

"My mother used to tell me very often, unrelenting anger will lead to war. I did not understand the full significance of this then. I understand it now. Starting from one person's mind, through family, clans, groups, castes, languages, religions... From village to city to nation to continent to world, the bubble of anger swells and explodes into fullscale war. Even if the wounds caused by war are ultimately smoothed by that great healer, time, men will continue to live in fear of their fellowmen. The day grief inflicted by history is not easy to escape from the mind."(viii)

The novel opens with the animosity between two castes; within Dalits – **Pallars and Parayars** and how the upper-castes stoke the fire to keep up the enmity. Two sub castes of Dalit are but microcosm of macrocosmic world and hence a call to to be united soon lest their condition would have been degraded in the hands of upper class. Bama opens the **hypocrisy of upper class** by their policy of dividing rule played upon Dalit community. She is quite hopeful that realization of their plight and willingness to overcome it are the need of hour for their emancipation.

Regarding the casteism as faced in the novel the translator of **Vanmam** Malini Seshadri, in the Introduction states: "The issue of caste is foregrounded in **Vanmam** on two levels: First, through highlighting the disaster that awaits both castes if they persist in

violence and vendetta, as against the benefits that can accrue to them if they can achieve a meeting of minds, and assert their rights unitedly; second, by using the device of an omniscient narrator who reports but does not participate, thereby challenging the stereotype that Dalit writing must necessarily deal with Dalit victimhood. (xv)

Vanmam portrays oppression faced by the men and women in terms of caste. U. S. Saranya and B. Siva Nagaiah in their article, “Dalit Fiction is the Realistic Fiction: A Critical Review” write: **“Dalits are being exploited physically, mentally and socially. They are treated very low and the upper caste people suck the blood of the lower caste people till death. Though India claims freedom and states that it is the nation of equality and liberty but still the Dalits face the oppression. In order to overcome this terrific social stigma, poverty has To be eradicated and the future generation of the lower caste people must gain education to change the atrocities and humiliation by the upper caste.”**(346)

Bama brings before us the horrendous scenes of a riot-hit village and the mortification endured by the oppressed in the hands of the rich and powerful. Malini Seshadri rightly says: Though **Vanmam** talks about the events happening among the people of a small village. In a state in India, “it is a microcosm of a bigger world, a sort of inset to the big picture. Intra-Dalit rivalry leading to animosity, the deft manipulation of emotions and prejudices by upper caste landlords ... this is a cautionary tale.” (x) The novel **Vanmam** sets 1990s as a background and talks about the importance of Dalit unity but the Pallars who wants to be known as Devendra Kula Velalar or Mallars (as in Sangam Lit or period) and rejects the term ‘**Dalit**’ that is evident in the novel.

In Tamil Nadu it was seen the challenges of lower caste to the upper caste in an effective manner. Political assertion, cultural assertion or any other assertions of Dalits contest the hegemony of dominant castes withhaving the cultural and economic changes of the Parayars have threatened the Nickers' position and power. But in the novel the Naickers could not indulge in suppression Parayars, hence they mediate violence through Pallars to keep the Parayars under control.

“Dalits assert their identity and demand a respectable position in social life, while on the other; they face violent reaction of the higher caste against these assertions” (Arun 2007)

Rege observes that “Dalit modernity, on the other hand, was fashioned by a stitching together of the emancipatory materialistic traditions that challenged Brahmanism and new western ideas” (Rege 2009: 32).

Meena Kandasamy (1984-)

Life Struggles and Literary Resistance

Meena Kandasamy is one of the most powerful and internationally recognized voices in contemporary Dalit feminism, whose life experiences deeply inform the political urgency and literary force of her work. Born in 1984 in Chennai to educated, left-leaning parents from a Tamil Dalit background, Kandasamy was exposed early on to the contradictions of being intellectually privileged yet socially marginalized due to her caste. Her writings—spanning poetry, fiction, translation, and activism—emerge from her lived experiences of caste, gender violence, linguistic marginalization, and political defiance. Kandasamy has openly documented her personal trauma, including surviving an abusive marriage, which she narrates unflinchingly in her semi-autobiographical novel ***When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*** (2017). The novel is not just a testimony of domestic abuse; it is a

meditation on patriarchy's entrenchment within intellectual, political, and supposedly progressive spaces, making it a potent feminist text that goes beyond victimhood to assert intellectual agency and survival. Her debut poetry collections, *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), foreground her identity as a Dalit, feminist, and Tamil-speaking woman, using sharp, confrontational language to dismantle the aesthetics of Brahmanical literature. In *Ms. Militancy*, Kandasamy reclaims and rewrites Hindu myths, portraying figures like Draupadi and Kali as symbols of resistance, rage, and agency, challenging the docility expected of female icons in mainstream narratives. Her writing is characterized by boldness, anger, eroticism, and refusal, a style that is deliberately confrontational in order to challenge both the upper-caste literary establishment and patriarchal censorship. Kandasamy's activism also extends beyond the page—she has consistently spoken out against caste-based atrocities, supported student movements like those following the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula, and brought global attention to issues such as manual scavenging and Dalit women's political struggles. Her use of English is also political—it is weaponized to expose the violence of the Indian caste system to a global audience, while remaining rooted in the rhythms and metaphors of Tamil culture. Through her work, Meena Kandasamy embodies what Dalit feminism stands for: a radical, intersectional, and unapologetically political voice that refuses erasure, challenges silencing, and turns personal pain into collective protest.

Meena Kandasamy stands at the forefront of contemporary Dalit feminist literature, blending personal testimony with sharp political critique, and transforming her life struggles into a powerful literary and activist presence. Born in 1984 in Chennai into a Tamil Dalit Christian family, Kandasamy was raised in a

household where education and leftist ideals coexisted with the social realities of caste discrimination. Her early life straddled both access and exclusion—an educated, English-speaking Dalit woman who refused to be either assimilated into Savarna literary culture or confined by patriarchal expectations. These complex intersections of identity inform all her work. In her poetry collections *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), Kandasamy directly confronts caste and gender oppression. In the poem "Mascara", she writes, "**I wore your oppression like mascara / and it ran down my cheeks,**" a vivid metaphor for the aestheticization of Dalit suffering and its public invisibility. Her poems often use irony, anger, and mythic subversion, as in her rewriting of Draupadi and Sita—not as submissive victims, but as rebels and warriors who refuse male control. This re-narration of epics and religious figures is part of what she calls a "literary militancy", a strategy to reclaim representation from the Brahmanical stranglehold over Indian literature and mythology.

Kandasamy's prose is equally forceful. Her novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017), shortlisted for the **Women's Prize for Fiction**, is based on her real-life experience of domestic violence during an abusive marriage. In the novel, the unnamed protagonist is an educated, articulate woman who finds herself trapped in a cycle of physical and psychological abuse, not in a backward or conservative family, but within the home of a so-called progressive **Marxist** intellectual. Kandasamy uses this autobiographical narrative to expose **the hypocrisy of male-dominated** left politics, showing how ideology often masks private violence. She writes, "The easiest way to erase a woman's voice is to package her as a liar," a line that indicts both patriarchy and the systems that protect it, including academia, family, and political spaces. The novel is not

merely confessional—it is a radical indictment of how intellectual spaces can be complicit in patriarchal domination, especially when caste and class privilege go unchecked. The book merges the personal and political in a way that exemplifies the Dalit feminist standpoint: grounded in lived experience, epistemically disruptive, and unapologetically resistant.

Her work also extends beyond literature into activism and international advocacy. Kandasamy has spoken out on numerous global platforms against caste atrocities, championed student-led movements like Justice for Rohith Vemula, and has used social media and public writing to mobilize attention around issues such as caste-based sexual violence, institutional discrimination, and the criminalization of dissent in India. She is also a translator of Tamil Dalit writing, bringing regional voices like that of Tamil writer Thol. Thirumavalavan into global circulation, thereby de-centering the dominance of English and reclaiming language as a site of resistance. Importantly, her refusal to conform to respectability politics—both in her public persona and in her writing—has attracted both celebration and backlash, reinforcing the gendered and casteist policing of outspoken women in Indian society.

In sum, Meena Kandasamy's body of work embodies the spirit of Dalit feminist resistance: **intellectually sharp, emotionally raw, politically radical, and aesthetically subversive**. She challenges not just the content of caste and gender oppression, but the forms and structures of knowledge and expression that have historically marginalized Dalit women. Her poetry, novels, essays, and activism are not just reflections of her struggle—they are tools of battle. In her hands, literature becomes a form of insurrection: **"a wound that speaks, a scream that writes."**

Touch (2006)

Meena Kandasamy's debut poetry collection, *Touch* (2006), marks a foundational moment in contemporary Dalit feminist writing. Through a series of bold and evocative poems, she confronts the violence of caste and the silencing of Dalit voices, especially Dalit women, in mainstream literary and social spaces. The poems challenge the sanitized aesthetic of upper-caste Indian poetry and foreground the everyday realities of discrimination, invisibility, and exclusion. Kandasamy gives language to the pain, pride, and resistance of the Dalit identity, especially that of Dalit women who must navigate both patriarchal and caste-based oppression. Her work in *Touch* asserts that the act of writing itself—particularly by a Dalit woman—is a radical political gesture. In poems like “**My Lover Speaks of Rape,**” she addresses the issue of caste-based sexual violence without euphemism, calling out both the state and dominant-caste silence. The collection offers a lyrical yet confrontational entry point into Dalit feminist consciousness, reclaiming the body, voice, and dignity of the Dalit woman as central to the poetic and political landscape.

Ms. Militancy (2010)

In *Ms. Militancy* (2010), Meena Kandasamy deepens her exploration of Dalit feminist anger, mythology, and historical revisionism. This collection rewrites religious and mythological narratives from the perspective of oppressed women, reclaiming female rage and defiance as sources of empowerment. Characters like Draupadi, Sita, and Kali are not depicted as victims, but as militant figures who reject submission and challenge patriarchal expectations. The title itself—*Ms. Militancy*—announces **a refusal to be silent, passive, or respectable in the face of oppression.**

Through these poems, Kandasamy reclaims myth as a site of feminist resistance, deconstructing Brahmanical and patriarchal authority. She uses irony, sarcasm, and sensuality as tools to undermine religious texts that have historically been used to legitimize the control of women and lower castes. This collection is not only a poetic response to centuries of caste and gender domination but also a radical act of literary insubordination that centers Dalit women's rage as both valid and transformative.

“Mascara”

The poem “**Mascara**,” from *Ms. Militancy* is a striking example of how Meena Kandasamy uses metaphor and personal imagery to convey the internalization of oppression and the emotional toll it takes on Dalit women. In the line, “I wore your oppression like mascara / and it ran down my cheeks,” Kandasamy captures how societal violence becomes deeply intimate—absorbed into the body and identity of the oppressed. Here, mascara becomes a symbol of the forced beautification and silencing expected of women under patriarchal and casteist norms, while its act of running during tears signifies the breakdown of those imposed performances. The poem highlights the emotional labor and psychological cost of surviving in a world that asks Dalit women to conceal their pain, present dignity, and remain silent in the face of trauma. “**Mascara**” is brief but powerful, emblematic of Kandasamy’s ability to render profound political commentary in compact poetic language, making it a touchstone for Dalit feminist affect and resistance.

When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife (2017)

Meena Kandasamy’s semi-autobiographical novel *when I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) is one of her most powerful contributions to Dalit feminist literature. The novel

recounts the harrowing experience of a young, educated woman trapped in an abusive marriage with a Marxist academic who weaponizes ideology and language to justify his violence. While the narrative does not center caste overtly, it is deeply shaped by Kandasamy's position as a Dalit woman writer confronting both domestic violence and intellectual hypocrisy. The protagonist's struggle is not only against her abuser but also against a society that romanticizes suffering and silences female rage. Through her narrator's voice, Kandasamy dismantles the myth that education and progressivism are safeguards against patriarchy. Instead, she shows how violence can thrive within elite, leftist circles. The novel becomes an act of feminist reclamation, where storytelling is a form of survival and resistance. In portraying writing as a form of emancipation—"I weaponized my words. They were all I had"—Kandasamy offers a compelling vision of how Dalit feminist expression can break silences, challenge norms, and demand justice.

Kumud Pawde (A Biographical and Critical Analysis in the Context of Dalit Feminism)

Kumud Pawde (b. 1938) is a pioneering figure in Dalit feminist thought and one of the earliest Dalit women writers and scholars to articulate the complexities of caste and gender intersectionality in post-independence India. Her autobiographical work, *Antasphot* (translated as *The Story of My Sanskrit*), is considered a landmark text in Dalit literature, and especially significant within Dalit women's writing. She combines personal narrative, intellectual resistance, and political reflection in a way that directly confronts Brahmanical patriarchy and upper-caste academic hegemony.

Biographical Overview

- Born into a Dalit (Mahar) family in Nagpur, Kumud Pawde grew up in a time when access to education was limited for Dalit girls, and Sanskrit—considered the sacred language of the Brahmins—was prohibited to lower castes and women.
- Despite social stigma, Pawde pursued higher education in Sanskrit, eventually becoming a Sanskrit professor, which in itself was a radical act of resistance against caste-based exclusions in the Indian education system.
- She was influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's philosophy, and her identity as both a Dalit and a woman became central to her activism and intellectual work.

Autobiographical Text: *Antasphot* (The Story of My Sanskrit)

- This autobiographical narrative is both deeply personal and sharply political.
- Pawde recounts her struggles within the rigid Brahmanical educational system, where she was often ridiculed or ignored for being a Dalit woman studying Sanskrit, a language traditionally guarded by upper-caste men.
- The book critiques the hypocrisy of upper-caste progressives who, while advocating equality in public discourse, reproduce casteist behaviors in everyday life.
- It is also a meditation on language as a site of oppression and empowerment. By mastering Sanskrit, Pawde both defied caste boundaries and exposed the exclusionary nature of Brahmanical knowledge systems.

Critical Dimensions in the Context of Dalit Feminism

1. Caste and Gender as Intersecting Structures

Pawde's work powerfully reveals how Dalit women are doubly marginalized—first, as members of a lower caste, and second, as

women within both the Dalit and broader Indian social contexts. Her experiences in academic institutions show how caste is not erased by education, and how gender and caste often compound discrimination rather than alleviating it.

2. Language as Resistance

By becoming a Sanskrit scholar, Pawde inverts the power structure of traditional knowledge. She enters a domain that excluded people like her for centuries and uses that very language to challenge its gatekeepers. Her life and writing question the monopoly of Brahmins over sacred and cultural texts.

3. Critique of Upper-Caste Feminism

Kumud Pawde's narrative also critiques mainstream Indian feminism, which often ignores caste as a primary axis of discrimination. She emphasizes that Dalit women's concerns are not adequately addressed in the frameworks that focus solely on gender without accounting for caste-based violence, exclusion, and social immobility.

4. Role as an Intellectual and Activist

Beyond her writing, Pawde has contributed to the Ambedkarite movement, advocating for women's education, reservation rights, and anti-caste social reform. She has worked with Dalit women's collectives and continues to be a symbol of dignity, knowledge, and defiance in the face of entrenched casteism.

➤ **Dalit Feminist Impact and Legacy**

- **Kumud Pawde** is a forerunner of Dalit feminist thought, especially in how she reclaims intellectual spaces and narrates resistance through autobiography.
- She laid the groundwork for later Dalit women writers like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Bama, who also foreground lived experience as political theory.

- Her contribution is especially notable because she emerged at a time when Dalit women's voices were largely absent from Indian literature and academia.

Conclusion: Kumud Pawde's life and work represent a profound act of intellectual rebellion. Her biographical journey from a marginalized Dalit girl to a Sanskrit scholar is itself a challenge to Brahmanical control over language, education, and cultural capital. Critically, she bridges the personal and political, embodying the core ethos of Dalit feminism—that without annihilating caste, the liberation of women remains incomplete. Through *Antasphot* and her broader activism, Pawde not only tells her own story but also illuminates the collective pain, power, and potential of Dalit women's resistance.

➤ **Conclusive and Critical Analysis of Literary Dalit Feminism**

Through the Works of Meena Kandasamy, Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble

Dalit literary feminism represents a transformative space where the intersection of caste, gender, and class is not only voiced but theorized through personal experience, community memory, and historical resistance. Writers like Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar have emerged as powerful figures within this canon, using literature as both resistance and reconstruction of Dalit womanhood. Each writer contributes uniquely—drawing from different linguistic, regional, and generational experiences—yet collectively they articulate a feminist vision beyond Brahmanical patriarchy and mainstream feminist boundaries.

1. Meena Kandasamy – Radical Rage and Political Poetics Perspective: Contemporary, Transnational, Intersectional

- Meena Kandasamy represents the modern, global voice of Dalit feminism, merging radical activism, poetic violence, and unapologetic confrontation.
- Her works such as *Touch* and *When I Hit You* use English language with militancy, reworking it as a weapon against casteist and patriarchal power structures.
- Her writing critiques institutional violence, marital rape, and academic elitism, making her voice urgent, global, and deeply political.
- Critique: While celebrated for her boldness, some critics note that her urban, English-medium articulation may not fully reflect rural Dalit women's lived realities, raising questions about accessibility and representation.

2. Kumud Pawde – Intellectual Resistance and the Politics of Language

Perspective: Ambedkarite, Anti-Brahmanical, Academic

- Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* is one of the first autobiographies by a Dalit woman and is historically significant for documenting the pain and humiliation of being a Dalit woman Sanskrit scholar.
- Her work emphasizes language as a site of exclusion and empowerment, challenging Brahmanical hegemony in education and knowledge production.
- She subtly critiques the hypocrisy of upper-caste liberals, revealing the persistence of casteism in progressive circles.
- Critique: Some argue that her experience, while powerful, represents a limited academic subset of Dalit women's lives, and is less accessible to non-academic readers or those outside Ambedkarite circles.

3. Shantabai Kamble – The First Dalit Woman Autobiographer

Perspective: Grounded, Grassroots, Experiential Feminism

- Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life)* is India's first Dalit woman autobiography, portraying the struggles of a Dalit woman teacher in rural Maharashtra.
- She writes in a non-literary, oral tone, offering a deeply authentic portrayal of caste and gender violence, particularly in the context of education, landlessness, and social invisibility.
- Her narrative reflects everyday survival rather than intellectual resistance, making it an important subaltern text of feminist endurance.
- Critique: Due to its simplicity and focus on survival rather than ideology, her work is sometimes under-theorized in academic feminist spaces, though it is essential to grassroots feminist theory.

4. Urmila Pawar – Memory, Identity, and Buddhist Feminism (Collective Memory and Cultural Assertion)

Perspective: Narrative Memory, Community Voice, Post-Ambedkarite

- Urmila Pawar's *Aaidan (The Weave of My Life)* integrates personal memory with collective Dalit women's history, providing a multigenerational account of caste and womanhood.
- Her conversion to Buddhism marks a political rupture with Hindu caste structures, and she explores this not just spiritually but socio-politically.
- Her reflections on motherhood, widowhood, community, and activism frame Dalit feminism as a process of cultural reconstruction and assertive dignity.
- Critique: Some critics suggest her narrative leans heavily on memory and cultural identity, which might obscure more

systemic or structural critiques. Still, her emotional and political clarity remains a major strength.

5. Baby Kamble – Historical Consciousness and Feminist Anger Perspective: Historical, Revolutionary, Generational Feminism

- In her autobiography *Jina Amucha (The Prisons We Broke)*, Baby Kamble articulates the collective pain and suppressed history of Dalit women from a Maharashtrian rural context.
- She harshly critiques both upper-caste Hindu oppression and patriarchal behavior within Dalit communities, making her a rare internal critic.
- She also offers a gendered lens on Ambedkarite conversion, showing how Buddhism provided Dalit women spiritual and social liberation.
- Critique: While not academic, her intense emotional writing is a strength, revealing the structural and internalized violence Dalit women face.

Comparative Critical Perspectives

Writer	Literary Form	Distinctive Strengths	Critical Concerns
Meena Kandasamy	Poetry, memoir, fiction (English)	Bold, global, feminist rage, creative resistance	Urban focus; less rural specificity

Kumud Pawde	Autobiography, essays	Language politics, educational critique	Academic tone; less grassroots perspective
Shantabai Kamble	Oral-style autobiography	Grounded realism, focus on education	Simplicity over theoretical engagement
Urmila Pawar	Memoir, autobiography	Cultural memory, Buddhist feminism	Emotion-focused; less militant tone
Baby Kamble	Autobiographical history	Internal critique, feminist rage, caste history	Less academic framing but deeply radical

Conclusion: These five writers demonstrate that Dalit feminism is not monolithic. It breathes through poetry, memoirs, testimonios, and oral histories, and speaks in Marathi, Tamil, and English. It emerges from both academia and the margins, embodying a range of styles—from the scholarly (Pawde) to the fiery (Kandasamy), the oral-historical (Kamble), the communal (Pawar), and the revolutionary-historical (Baby Kamble).

Their critical contribution lies in:

- Challenging Brahmanical patriarchy and upper-caste feminism.
- Rewriting the histories of resistance and pain through a Dalit woman’s lens.
- Offering intersectional, anti-caste, and anti-patriarchal frameworks of feminist thought.

In sum, the works of Kandasamy, Pawde, Kamble, Pawar, and Baby Kamble collectively represent a powerful corpus of Dalit feminist literature that not only defies oppression but reconstructs

selfhood, community, and history on Dalit women's terms. Their voices are not just literary—they are political acts of survival, assertion, and transformation.

- **Autobiography, Fiction, and Subaltern Memory**

Critical Analysis: Autobiography, Fiction, and Subaltern Memory in Favor of Dalit Feminism in the Postmodern Era

In the postmodern era, where dominant narratives are increasingly interrogated, the role of autobiography, fiction, and subaltern memory becomes central to Dalit feminist expression and resistance. These literary forms act as powerful tools to challenge Brahmanical historiography, elite feminist discourses, and linear modernist narratives, offering instead a fragmented, embodied, and decentralized articulation of caste-gender experiences. Through personal testimony, creative storytelling, and community memory, Dalit feminist writers reclaim voice, space, and authorship, making literature a site of political struggle and epistemic reparation.

1. Autobiography: Personal Narrative as Political Resistance:

Autobiography has emerged as one of the most significant genres in Dalit feminist literature, particularly because it legitimizes lived experience as a form of knowledge and resistance.

- Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* use autobiographical forms to reconstruct subaltern memory, portraying caste oppression, gender violence, and resistance from within the Dalit community.
- These narratives disrupt dominant autobiographical conventions, prioritizing collective suffering and communal histories over individual heroism. In doing so, they critique upper-caste norms of selfhood and linear progress.

- From a postmodern lens, these texts deconstruct the notion of “authorship” itself, as memory, voice, and storytelling are shaped not just by the individual but by casteed social worlds and oral traditions.

Critical View: Scholars like Sharmila Rege argue that these autobiographies are not merely self-reflective but act as “testimonios”—they are truth-claims from the margins that demand to be heard politically, not just read aesthetically.

2. Fiction: Reimagining Dalit Womanhood Through Creativity

- Fiction allows Dalit feminist writers to explore caste-gender trauma and aspiration through symbolic, metaphorical, and affective dimensions.
- Writers like Meena Kandasamy (*The Gypsy Goddess, When I Hit You*) and Bama (*Karukku*) use fiction to confront sexual violence, institutional casteism, and spiritual betrayal.
- Kandasamy employs postmodern techniques—non-linear narration, fragmented identities, metafictional commentary—to resist simplistic victimhood and offer radical subjectivity.
- Fiction here becomes a tool for reimagining resistance, enabling Dalit women to occupy mythic, historical, and revolutionary spaces from which they have long been erased.

Critical View: Postmodern literary critics observe that such fiction destabilizes the “universal woman” trope found in mainstream feminism, instead foregrounding the particularity of caste as a narrative axis.

3. Subaltern Memory: Oral Histories, Cultural Testimonies, and Collective Recall

Subaltern memory refers to the oral, non-institutional, intergenerational knowledge systems passed within marginalized communities—particularly Dalit women—as forms of resistance.

- Urmila Pawar's *Aaidan* weaves personal memory with collective stories of Dalit conversion to Buddhism, women's labor, and generational transformation. Memory is used not just to recall, but to reconstruct history from below.
- These memories often reject the elite linearity of history and instead embrace cyclical, fragmented, and emotionally resonant structures, reflecting how trauma and resistance are lived and inherited.
- In a postmodern context, subaltern memory displaces official archives, emphasizing oral storytelling, ritual, and everyday knowledge as legitimate historical sources.

Critical View: Scholars like Gayatri Spivak warn of the risk of romanticizing the subaltern voice, but Dalit feminist scholars argue that it is not about purity of voice, but about creating counter-archives to the silences of dominant discourse.

4. Postmodern Implications: Language, Form, and Fragmentation: Postmodernism, with its distrust of meta-narratives, authorial authority, and essentialist identities, offers both challenges and opportunities for Dalit feminism:

- Dalit feminist writing embraces fragmentation, hybridity, and multiplicity, not as literary play, but as tools to reflect the brokenness caused by caste and patriarchy.
- The rejection of a singular feminist identity aligns with the Dalit feminist insistence on intersectionality and specificity.
- The blurring of genres—fiction as testimony, autobiography as collective memory—undermines rigid literary categories and reflects how identity, oppression, and agency intersect in real life.

Conclusion: *The Politics of Telling and Remembering*

In the postmodern era, autobiography, fiction, and subaltern memory serve as radical narrative strategies in Dalit feminism. They:

- Legitimize lived experience and emotional truth as central to political resistance.
- Challenge the erasure of Dalit women from both mainstream feminist discourse and caste-neutral literature.
- Assert a new language of storytelling that is nonlinear, collective, embodied, and deeply political.

Critically, these forms allow Dalit women not only to reclaim their voices but to reconstruct knowledge itself—reshaping the literary and social landscape from the margins with power, complexity, and uncompromising truth.

Conclusion: Theoretical and Literary Interventions as Sites of Dalit Feminist Resistance underscores how **theory and literature have become essential tools for Dalit feminist assertion**, intellectual resistance, and cultural reclamation. The emergence of **Dalit feminist theory**, particularly through scholars like **Sharmila Rege**, offered an intersectional framework that exposed the erasures of caste in mainstream feminist discourses. Her call to “speak differently” from the margins foregrounded **lived experience as epistemology**, positioning Dalit women not as passive victims but as **knowledge producers** and agents of political transformation.

Parallel to theoretical contributions, **Dalit women's literature**—in the form of autobiographies, short stories, and poetry by **Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, Shantabai Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, and Kumud Pawde**—has played a critical role in disrupting Brahmanical literary norms. These narratives reclaim voice, memory, and identity, offering intimate insights into the **intersections of caste, gender, class, and language**. Literary

interventions serve not only as cultural critique but as **political resistance**, constructing archives of subaltern memory often absent from historical and academic canons.

However, there are also limitations and critiques. Some argue that Dalit literature, while powerful, often remains **regionally or linguistically confined**, limiting its reach. Moreover, the literary canonization of select voices may sometimes overshadow **grassroots and non-literate forms of expression**. Critics like Gopal Guru and Satyanarayana have also warned against the **fetishization of pain narratives**, which risk reinforcing victimhood if not framed within structural critique and agency.

Despite these tensions, the fusion of theory and literature in Dalit feminism has opened **transformative spaces**—challenging both dominant academic epistemes and upper-caste feminist frameworks. It insists that any feminist inquiry in India must **confront caste power** directly, not just theoretically but emotionally, linguistically, and politically.

In conclusion, theoretical and literary interventions form the **intellectual backbone of Dalit feminism**, offering a nuanced and multidimensional critique of oppression while simultaneously imagining new futures of justice, dignity, and liberation.

PART- V

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN THE POSTMODERN ERA



6.1 INTRODUCTION:

Contemporary Issues in the Postmodern Era engages with the present landscape of Dalit feminism, marked by fragmentation of identities, digital activism, intersectionality, institutional resistance, and continued marginalization. The postmodern context—defined by the breakdown of meta-narratives, fluidity of identities, and suspicion of singular truths—offers both opportunities and contradictions for Dalit feminist politics. A critical analysis from diverse perspectives (Dalit, mainstream feminist, intersectional, and postcolonial) reveals the layered complexities of this contemporary moment.

1.Caste-Based Sexual Violence and Legal Struggles

Caste-based sexual violence in India is not merely an expression of misogyny but a structural tool of social domination used against Dalit and marginalized women to reinforce caste hierarchies. Legal protections such as the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, though crucial, are often undermined by institutional apathy and upper-caste bias in police, judiciary, and local administration. Dalit women frequently face barriers in filing FIRs, accessing legal aid, and receiving fair trials. The intersection of caste and gender creates a compounded vulnerability where the state itself becomes complicit in denying justice. While feminist and human rights frameworks advocate for gender justice, Dalit feminists argue that any legal reform must explicitly address caste to dismantle the roots of such violence. The law, in its current implementation, often fails to recognize this dual axis of oppression.

Khairlanji and Beyond: The Khairlanji massacre of 2006, where a Dalit mother and her daughter were gang-raped and murdered by dominant caste men in Maharashtra, became a defining moment in Dalit feminist discourse. It exposed how casteed sexual violence is used to punish assertion, as the victim's family was targeted for seeking land rights and defying village norms. The state's attempt to initially suppress the atrocity angle and the mainstream media's silence reflect how caste violence is systematically erased or misrepresented. Despite mass protests and national outrage, the justice delivered remained incomplete and delayed, symbolizing a larger pattern of impunity for caste-based crimes. The legacy of Khairlanji resonates in subsequent cases like Hathras (2020), where similar state complicity, media bias, and denial of dignity were witnessed. These cases have fueled Dalit women's political mobilization, reinforcing that the fight is not only for justice but also for visibility, memory, and systemic change.

Representation in Courts, Media, and Public Discourse: Dalit women's experiences of caste-based violence are often misrepresented, ignored, or decontextualized in courts, media, and broader public discourse. The judicial system, largely dominated by upper-caste officials, frequently fails to uphold the provisions of anti-atrocity laws, leading to diluted charges or acquittals in serious cases. Mainstream media, too, plays a complicit role—by using caste-neutral language, underreporting atrocities, or sensationalizing them without giving voice to the victims or their communities. Public discourse tends to generalize such violence under the umbrella of "gender-based crime," erasing caste-specific oppression. In contrast, Dalit media collectives, grassroots movements, and independent platforms have increasingly become spaces where Dalit women can assert their narratives and demand justice. These new modes of representation are not only acts of

resistance but also efforts to reclaim epistemic and political space long denied to Dalit women.

Critical And Multi-Perspective Analysis of Caste-Based Sexual Violence and Legal Struggles

1. *Dalit Feminist Perspective: Casteed Sexual Violence as Structural, Not Exceptional:* Dalit feminists argue that caste-based sexual violence is not a series of isolated incidents, but a systematic tool of social control and humiliation.

- Khairlanji (2006), where a Dalit mother and her daughter were gang-raped and murdered in Maharashtra, exposed the brutal intersection of caste, patriarchy, and state apathy.
- Dalit feminist thinkers like Sharmila Rege and Asha Kowtal stress that such violence is aimed at punishing Dalit assertion, especially when women defy traditional hierarchies (e.g., pursuing education or land rights).

Critique: The state's initial denial of rape and delay in action showed institutional casteism. Justice was neither swift nor complete, despite public outrage.

. *Legal Frameworks: The Promise and Limitations of Law:* India has progressive laws such as:

- SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989
- Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005
- Criminal Law Amendment (2013) post-Nirbhaya

However, Dalit women often face double discrimination in legal spaces:

- Police refuse to register FIRs, often discrediting the survivor’s testimony.
- Courts and legal institutions reflect Savarna bias—judges often lack caste sensitivity.
- Legal proceedings are slow, retraumatizing, and fail to address caste humiliation as distinct from “general” violence.

Example: In the Khairlanji case, the atrocity angle (caste-based motive) was dropped by the trial court and later reinstated only after pressure—demonstrating how law is selectively applied.

3. Media Representation: Erasure, Distortion, and Caste Blindness

Mainstream Indian media has been widely criticized for its biased, caste-neutral, or outright erasing coverage of caste-based violence:

- Upper-caste women’s issues (like Nirbhaya) receive nationwide sympathy and outrage.
- Dalit survivors are often blamed, silenced, or dehumanized, as seen in the Hathras case (2020), where the victim’s body was cremated by police without family consent.
- Media avoids using the term “Dalit” or linking violence to systemic caste oppression, choosing instead to frame it as a “law and order” problem.

Critical View: Dalit intellectuals argue that this media apathy reflects the Savarna-controlled nature of Indian journalism, where caste is erased even when central to the crime.

4. Public Discourse and Protest: Fragmented Solidarity

- Dalit women and allies have organized powerful protests—e.g., Dalit Women Fight, All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM)—to raise awareness, demand justice, and reclaim public space.
- However, mainstream feminist and civil rights movements often offer incomplete or conditional support, failing to center Dalit voices or address caste directly.
- The language of “gender-based violence” often subsumes caste under generic terms, weakening the specificity of Dalit women’s trauma and resistance.

Note: Dalit women are not passive victims—they are active political agents leading movements and reshaping feminist discourse.

5. *International Human Rights Lens:* Caste-based violence is increasingly being recognized by UN bodies and international human rights organizations as a form of structural discrimination and gendered apartheid.

- Activists like Ruth Manorama and Thenmozhi Soundararajan have brought the issue to global platforms.
- Yet, India resists external scrutiny, often calling caste an “internal matter”—stalling progress.

Observation: International solidarity has symbolic value, but local justice systems remain unaccountable without internal reform.

Conclusion: Struggles That Go Beyond Justice

The fight against caste-based sexual violence is a struggle against systemic injustice—in courts, in society, in memory, and in language.

While Khairlanji remains a chilling reminder of impunity, it is also a catalyst for Dalit feminist mobilization, reshaping how we view gendered violence, justice, and resistance.

In the postmodern context, these struggles call for not only legal remedies, but also epistemic justice—where Dalit women define the terms of their stories, their truths, and their futures.

Let me know if you'd like this analysis in bullet points, simplified summary, or extended into an essay.

1. Dalit Feminism and Digital Activism

In recent years, digital activism has become a powerful tool for Dalit feminist voices, enabling them to challenge caste and gender oppression beyond the boundaries of physical protest or traditional media. With the rise of social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, Dalit women are asserting their agency by sharing experiences of discrimination, amplifying local struggles, and building nationwide solidarity networks. This shift has democratized access to political discourse, allowing marginalized voices to bypass elite-controlled media spaces and bring caste-based violence, exclusion, and misogyny into the public eye.

Initiatives like Dalit Women Fight, The Blue Dawn, and Velivada exemplify how Dalit feminists use the internet to document cases of caste atrocities, organize online protests, and foster cross-border

dialogues. Influential figures like Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Raya Sarkar, and Sukanya Shantha have brought caste-gender issues into international and mainstream feminist conversations. Hashtags such as #DalitLivesMatter, #DalitWomenFight, and #SmashBrahmanicalPatriarchy have become digital rallying cries that connect everyday oppression to systemic injustice.

However, digital spaces also come with risks. Casteist trolling, online harassment, surveillance, and algorithmic silencing are frequent threats faced by outspoken Dalit women. Moreover, the digital divide still excludes many rural, non-English-speaking, or economically disadvantaged Dalit women from fully accessing these platforms. Despite these limitations, digital activism has undeniably reconfigured the terrain of Dalit feminist resistance, turning mobile phones, hashtags, and blogs into instruments of political transformation.

In essence, Dalit feminism and digital activism together represent a radical reimagining of public space—where historically silenced voices not only speak but lead, redefining resistance in the age of the internet.

Hashtag Feminism (DalitLivesMatter, Dalit Women Fight) :

Hashtag feminism has emerged as a transformative force in the digital era, particularly for Dalit feminist movements that have long been silenced or ignored in mainstream Indian discourse. Campaigns such as #DalitLivesMatter and #DalitWomenFight serve not only as online rallying cries but as political tools of resistance, visibility, and collective memory.

The hashtag #DalitLivesMatter, inspired by the global Black Lives Matter movement, has been used widely to draw attention to caste-

based violence, institutional murder, and social injustice—from the death of Rohith Vemula to the Hathras gang-rape case. It allows activists and citizens alike to challenge state apathy and Savarna indifference, while also drawing international solidarity around the systemic oppression faced by Dalit communities.

Similarly, #DalitWomenFight specifically centers the intersectional struggle of Dalit women, who face compounded violence at the hands of caste, patriarchy, and the state. This campaign, led by grassroots movements like All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), amplifies the voices of Dalit women survivors, organizers, and thinkers. It also resists the erasure of Dalit women from both feminist and anti-caste narratives, reclaiming their space as leaders and agents of change.

These hashtags operate as archives of resistance and solidarity, connecting local struggles with global movements and fostering community-driven digital activism. However, while hashtags create powerful momentum, critics caution that digital activism must not replace on-ground organizing. Instead, it must be understood as a complementary space, where resistance is mobilized and sustained across borders, communities, and timelines.

In essence, #DalitLivesMatter and #DalitWomenFight represent the cutting edge of intersectional feminist praxis in the digital age, marking a shift in how caste and gender justice are imagined, narrated, and demanded.

- **Dalit Women in Social Media and Online Resistance**

Dalit women are increasingly using social media as a powerful tool of resistance to challenge caste and gender-based oppression.

Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have enabled them to amplify their voices, share lived experiences, and build solidarity through campaigns such as #DalitWomenFight and #DalitLivesMatter. This digital presence helps counter mainstream media silence and Savarna dominance in public discourse. While social media offers visibility and a platform for collective activism, Dalit women also face online casteist trolling and structural barriers like the digital divide. Despite these challenges, their online resistance marks a significant shift in how caste and gender politics are being shaped in contemporary India.

➤ **Dalit Women in Social Media and Online Resistance:**
A Multidimensional Analysis

1. Dalit Feminist Perspective: Reclaiming Voice and Visibility

From a Dalit feminist lens, social media has become an essential site for reclaiming agency, challenging silence, and breaking Brahmanical control over discourse. Dalit women have historically been excluded from mainstream media, academia, and political leadership. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have allowed them to narrate their lived experiences, name their oppressors, and demand justice in real-time. Movements such as #DalitWomenFight, and voices like Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Kiruba Munusamy, and Riya Singh are examples of this resistance. These platforms have provided space for solidarity, healing, and political education, enabling marginalized women to find collective strength.

Note point: Online activism empowers Dalit women to become subjective authors of their own histories, resisting both casteist silencing and gendered erasure.

2. Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies Perspective: Challenging Elite Narratives

From a subaltern studies or postcolonial viewpoint, social media use by Dalit women is a challenge to elite, Savarna-controlled epistemologies. It disrupts dominant narratives that traditionally constructed Dalit women as either victims or voiceless. The subaltern now speaks—through blogs, poetry, hashtags, art, and video essays. These acts not only confront Savarna feminism for its exclusions but also challenge the nationalistic, sanitized image of India that erases caste violence.

Viewpoint: Dalit women's online resistance marks the emergence of a counter-public—a digital space where the marginalized become producers of knowledge, not just consumers.

3. Media Studies Perspective: Algorithmic Casteism and Digital

Inequality: While digital platforms offer opportunity, scholars in media studies highlight how algorithmic biases and digital divides continue to marginalize Dalit voices. Casteist trolling, shadow banning, lack of regional language support, and low engagement from upper-caste followers demonstrate how digital spaces are not neutral. Platforms often amplify Savarna content while suppressing or flagging Dalit criticism as "hate speech" or "provocative."

Viewpoint: Social media reproduces offline hierarchies in new forms—visibility without power is a paradox that many Dalit women face online.

4. Mainstream Feminist Critique: Potential for Alliances or Appropriation?

Some strands of mainstream feminism see digital activism by Dalit women as a chance for intersectional solidarity. It pushes upper-caste feminists to confront their caste privilege and make space for dialogue. However, critics within Dalit feminism caution that mainstream feminism often appropriates the language of

intersectionality without practicing it. Social media is then used to virtue signal support without committing to structural change.

Viewpoint: Online resistance forces mainstream feminism to either decenter itself or become obsolete in the face of unapologetically caste-aware feminist praxis.

5. *Practical Limitations: Beyond the Screen*

Despite its promise, online resistance has limitations. Many Dalit women, especially in rural areas, still lack digital literacy, access to smartphones, or affordable internet. Moreover, online activism rarely translates into institutional change unless combined with grassroots work, legal action, and policy advocacy.

Viewpoint: Digital activism is a tool—not a substitute—for real-world organizing. The challenge is to bridge the gap between digital voice and material justice.

Conclusion: A Radical Shift, Not a Final Solution: Dalit women's use of social media is a radical and necessary intervention in public discourse—one that confronts silence, disrupts hierarchy, and builds solidarity across boundaries. But it must be seen as part of a broader, ongoing struggle—grounded in Ambedkarite values of justice, dignity, and equality, both online and offline.

2. **Dalit Feminism in the Global Context:** Dalit feminism, though rooted in the specific socio-historical realities of caste oppression in India, resonates strongly within the global discourse on intersectional feminism and anti-colonial struggles. Globally, Dalit feminism contributes a critical perspective that challenges dominant narratives of gender equality, which often overlook caste and other forms of structural violence. By emphasizing the intersection of caste, class, gender, and colonial histories, Dalit feminism expands the scope of feminist thought beyond Western-centric frameworks.

In the global arena, Dalit feminists engage with transnational networks addressing racial justice, indigenous rights, and postcolonial emancipation, finding common ground with marginalized communities worldwide. This cross-cultural solidarity highlights how systems of oppression—whether caste in South Asia, race in the Americas, or ethnicity in Africa—function similarly to exclude and silence women from marginalized groups.

However, Dalit feminism also faces challenges in the global context, including misrecognition and homogenization within international feminist movements that sometimes fail to grasp the specificity of caste-based oppression. Furthermore, the globalization of activism via digital media offers opportunities but also risks diluting local struggles into universal narratives that may ignore the nuanced socio-political realities of Dalit women.

Ultimately, Dalit feminism's presence in global feminist discourse pushes for a more inclusive, nuanced understanding of oppression and resistance. It insists that any meaningful feminist praxis must incorporate caste and other indigenous forms of social stratification, thereby decolonizing feminist theory and practice worldwide.

- **UN Conferences and Transnational Solidarity**

UN conferences, particularly those on women's rights like the Beijing Conference (1995), have provided important international platforms for marginalized voices, including Dalit women, to gain visibility and solidarity. These global forums have facilitated the recognition of caste-based discrimination as a human rights issue, helping Dalit feminists connect their struggles to broader

international frameworks of gender justice and anti-discrimination. However, the engagement with UN mechanisms is not without criticism. Dalit activists often argue that such institutional spaces, while symbolically powerful, tend to prioritize state-centric and liberal feminist agendas that may dilute the radical, intersectional demands of Dalit feminism. The bureaucratic nature of UN conferences can also limit grassroots participation, reducing Dalit women's voices to tokenistic representation rather than enabling genuine empowerment. Moreover, the global north's dominant influence in setting agendas sometimes overlooks the local complexities of caste and socio-economic oppression, leading to one-size-fits-all policies that fail to address the specificities of Dalit women's lived realities.

Dialogues with Black, Indigenous, and Postcolonial Feminisms

Dalit feminism's dialogues with Black, Indigenous, and other postcolonial feminist movements have been rich and transformative, creating powerful intersections around shared experiences of structural violence, colonial legacies, and racial/casteed hierarchies. These transnational exchanges enable Dalit feminists to situate caste oppression within global systems of racial capitalism and imperialism, fostering solidarity and expanding analytical frameworks of intersectionality. Yet, these dialogues also face challenges. There is a risk of flattening distinct histories and struggles when diverse experiences are forced into broad categories like "marginalization" or "oppression." For instance, while parallels between caste and race are instructive, they are not identical, and conflating them may obscure specific caste dynamics and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the dominance of Western feminist theory in these conversations can overshadow indigenous epistemologies and resistances. Dalit feminism's insistence on its unique positionality questions the universalizing

tendencies of global feminist discourses and pushes for a more pluralistic, decolonial approach that honors difference alongside solidarity.

Indian-Dalit Feminism in the Context of Global Feminism: Connections with UN Conferences, Transnational Solidarity, and Dialogues with Black, Indigenous, and Postcolonial Feminisms

Indian Dalit feminism, emerging from the intersectional realities of caste, gender, and class oppression, occupies a critical yet complex position within global feminism. Its engagement with UN conferences and transnational solidarity reflects an attempt to situate the caste-based struggles of Dalit women within a universal human rights framework. Platforms like the UN Women's Conferences, especially the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, have provided Dalit feminists with opportunities to voice caste discrimination as a form of systemic violence and demand global recognition. These engagements enable Dalit women to transcend local boundaries, making their struggle part of broader conversations on gender justice, discrimination, and equality.

However, this global institutional engagement is double-edged. While it amplifies Dalit issues on the world stage, the bureaucratic and state-centric nature of UN mechanisms can sometimes constrain the radical demands of Dalit feminism. The UN's frameworks often lean towards liberal feminist paradigms that emphasize gender equality without fully accounting for the deeply embedded caste hierarchies and colonial legacies unique to India. Thus, Dalit feminism's interaction with UN platforms highlights both the potential for global solidarity and the challenges of ensuring authentic representation and transformative change within international arenas.

Parallely, Indian Dalit feminism's dialogues with Black, Indigenous, and other postcolonial feminist movements enrich global feminist discourse by emphasizing how systems of oppression are intertwined across contexts of race, caste, colonialism, and patriarchy. These intersections enable Dalit feminists to draw meaningful parallels—such as between caste and race or colonial subjugation and indigenous dispossession—thereby situating caste as a global system of social stratification and exclusion. Such dialogues foster transnational solidarities that challenge Eurocentric feminist narratives and demand a decolonial, intersectional approach to feminist theory and activism.

Nevertheless, the engagement is not without tension. Indian Dalit feminism insists on its specificities, cautioning against the universalization of marginalized experiences that risks erasing distinct cultural and historical contexts. The challenge lies in balancing solidarity with difference—avoiding homogenizing caste oppression into generalized frameworks of marginalization while participating in global movements. Furthermore, these dialogues confront the dominance of Western feminist epistemologies, pushing global feminism toward greater inclusivity by integrating Dalit feminist critiques of both patriarchy and caste.

In the context of global feminism, Indian Dalit feminism acts as a critical intervention that expands the understanding of oppression beyond gender and race to include caste and colonial legacies. Its connections with UN conferences and transnational feminist dialogues demonstrate a dynamic interplay between local struggles and global movements, underscoring the importance of intersectionality, decolonization, and authentic representation in building truly inclusive feminist solidarities worldwide.

Indian Dalit Feminism and Its Connection to Global Feminism: Key Points:-

1. Engagement with UN Conferences:

- Dalit feminists use UN platforms (e.g., Beijing Conference 1995) to internationalize caste-based discrimination as a human rights issue.
- These conferences provide visibility and global legitimacy to Dalit women's struggles.
- However, UN frameworks often emphasize liberal feminist ideals focused on gender equality, sometimes overlooking the deep caste and colonial complexities unique to India.
- Dalit feminists face challenges in ensuring their radical demands are not diluted within state-centric and bureaucratic processes.

2. Transnational Solidarity:

- Indian Dalit feminism builds alliances with global movements against oppression, linking caste discrimination to broader struggles against racism, colonialism, and patriarchy.
- This solidarity enables sharing of strategies, resources, and collective voice in international forums.
- Yet, the unequal power dynamics in global feminist spaces can lead to tokenistic representation or misrecognition of Dalit-specific issues.

3. Dialogues with Black, Indigenous, and Postcolonial Feminisms:

- Dalit feminists engage in critical conversations with Black, Indigenous, and postcolonial feminist groups, highlighting parallels between caste, race, colonialism, and patriarchy.
- These dialogues help expand feminist theory to include caste as a key axis of oppression, contributing to more intersectional and decolonial feminist frameworks.

- However, Dalit feminism insists on the importance of recognizing caste-specific contexts to avoid oversimplifying or universalizing diverse experiences of marginalization.

4. Challenges in Global Feminist Context:

- The dominance of Western feminist thought in international forums sometimes marginalizes Dalit feminist epistemologies.
- There is a risk that caste oppression may be subsumed under broad categories like “gender” or “race,” erasing its unique features.
- Dalit feminists advocate for a pluralistic approach that honors local histories and resistances while participating in global movements.

5. Contribution to Global Feminism:

- Indian Dalit feminism enriches global feminist discourse by insisting on the inseparability of caste, class, gender, and colonial histories.
- It pushes global feminism toward embracing intersectionality and decolonization as foundational principles.
- The movement serves as a crucial example of how local struggles can inform and reshape international feminist solidarity and theory.

Critical Analysis of Contemporary Issues in the Postmodern Era – A Dalit Feminist Perspective

1. Dalit Feminist Perspective: Visibility, Voice, and the Politics of Naming

Pros:

- Dalit women today are more visible in public discourse, academia, media, and activism.
- Digital platforms and independent publications have enabled alternative expressions of rage, resistance, and community.

- Independent organizations like *All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch* have mobilized national and international support against caste-based sexual violence and discrimination.
- Literature and media now include Dalit autobiographies, poetry, and documentaries that center caste-gender issues, subverting traditional literary hierarchies.

Cons:

Visibility does not always equal structural change. Many Dalit women still face exclusion in academia, employment, and leadership, even within feminist spaces.

- Co-option of Dalit identity by upper-caste institutions often reduces Dalit feminism to a tokenistic presence.

Critique: Scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru warn that unless grounded in lived caste realities, postmodern celebration of "multiple voices" risks detaching Dalit feminism from material oppression.

2. Mainstream and Liberal Feminist Perspectives: Inclusion and Limits

Pros: Mainstream feminism has made attempts to acknowledge intersectionality in recent decades, influenced by critiques from Dalit feminists and Black feminists globally.

- There is more dialogue about caste in gender discourses, especially in academic and NGO circuits.

Cons:

- Inclusion often remains superficial or symbolic. Caste is treated as an "add-on" rather than structurally integrated into feminist praxis.
- Upper-caste hegemony in leadership positions persists in women's organizations, editorial boards, and advocacy networks.

Critique: Dalit feminists like Sujatha Gidla and A. Revathi argue that mainstream feminism has failed to interrogate its own caste privileges, reinforcing a savarna framework under the guise of solidarity.

3. Postcolonial and Postmodern Perspectives: Hybridity, Identity Politics, and Knowledge Production

Pros:

- The postmodern condition allows for fluid identities, resistance to essentialism, and the recognition of marginalized knowledge systems.
- Dalit feminism thrives in this mode by asserting plural subjectivities—rural/urban, English/vernacular, activist/academic—outside fixed binaries.

Cons:

- Postmodern emphasis on decentering and relativism can dilute the urgency of structural oppression. It may blur the material reality of caste violence behind identity performances.
- There's also the danger of commodification: caste, like race and gender, can become marketable “experiences” in neoliberal spaces without political consequence.

Critique: Thinkers like Gayatri Spivak (with caution) and Gopal Guru challenge this relativism, insisting that Dalit knowledge must be anchored in material struggle, not just symbolic representation.

4. Intersectional Feminist Perspective: Bridging Movements Across Oppressions

Pros:

- Intersectionality (coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw) provides a critical framework to understand how caste, gender, class, religion, and sexuality intersect.

- Dalit queer voices (e.g., Living Smile Vidya, A. Revathi) are now challenging heteronormativity within caste discourse, bringing sexuality and gender nonconformity into the conversation.

Cons:

- Intersectionality is sometimes reduced to a buzzword, applied without adequate attention to the depth and historicity of caste discrimination.
- Many global feminist movements still lack sensitivity or knowledge about caste, even when working on human rights.

Critique: Dalit queer scholars advocate for a radical intersectionality rooted in Ambedkarite values, not just academic inclusion.

5. Digital Media and Popular Culture: New Frontiers and New Dangers

Pros:

- Dalit feminists use platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and podcasts to share testimonies, mobilize campaigns (e.g., Hathras case), and bypass traditional media gatekeepers.
- Digital literature, self-publishing, and art have made Dalit feminist aesthetics more accessible and visible.

Cons:

- Casteist trolling, online violence, and digital surveillance target outspoken Dalit women.
- The digital divide still excludes many rural, poor, and non-English-speaking Dalit women from these platforms.

Critique: The postmodern claim that “everyone can speak” is undermined by unequal access to technology, education, and safety.

Conclusion: A Complex Terrain of Struggle and Strategy

Contemporary Dalit feminism in the postmodern era is a space of contradictions and creativity. It grapples with:

- Increased visibility vs. persistent structural violence
- Intersectional solidarity vs. co-optation by elite discourses
- Digital empowerment vs. technological marginalization
- Postmodern multiplicity vs. the need for unified anti-caste praxis

Critically, the strength of Dalit feminism today lies in its grounding in lived experience, its refusal to be diluted by theory without action, and its commitment to truth-telling in hostile systems. It moves beyond victimhood, beyond tokenism, and beyond the limits of savarna feminism, insisting on a radically democratic, anti-caste future that centers the voices and bodies most oppressed—and most resistant.

The postmodern era presents a paradox for Dalit feminism: a time marked by unprecedented visibility and activism, yet also by **persistent structural violence, cultural exclusion, and digital silencing**. Caste-based sexual violence—from **Khairlanji to Hathras**—continues to expose the brutal intersection of caste and patriarchy, where Dalit women's bodies become battlegrounds of systemic impunity and state failure. Despite growing legal frameworks, representation in the judiciary, police, and media remains limited, further marginalizing Dalit voices in the public discourse.

Yet, this period has also seen the **strategic emergence of Dalit feminist resistance in new digital and global spaces**. Movements such as **Dalit Lives Matter** and **Dalit Women Fight** are not merely hashtags but forms of **cyber-resistance**, enabling Dalit women to construct counter-publics, challenge dominant narratives, and build solidarities across borders. Social media has democratized expression, but it has also exposed Dalit women to

online casteism, trolling, and hyper-surveillance, raising new questions about the safety and sustainability of digital activism.

Moreover, the entry of Dalit feminist thought into **global feminist conversations**—through forums like UN conferences and collaborations with Black, Indigenous, and decolonial feminisms—has expanded its theoretical reach and solidarity networks. However, critics caution that **globalization and academic institutionalization** can sometimes flatten Dalit experiences into consumable categories, disconnecting them from grassroots realities.

In this complex terrain, Dalit feminism has evolved into a **dynamic, intersectional, and transnational movement**, grounded in lived experience yet open to theoretical reinvention. It critiques not only the caste system but also the **neoliberal appropriation of feminist discourse**, the erasure of subaltern struggles, and the complicity of state institutions.

In conclusion, the contemporary moment demands a **radically inclusive Dalit feminist politics**—one that leverages digital tools, global platforms, and local resistance alike, while staying rooted in the histories of Ambedkarite struggle. The future of Dalit feminism lies in its ability to remain **intersectional, self-reflexive, and politically grounded**, transforming not just feminism, but the very idea of democracy in India.

Magistrate of Faridpur to Commissioner of the Dacca Division, 8 April 1873, , Judicial Department, Government of Bengal, 1873,A May1873, Prog.No 57,West Bengal National Archive 20 WS Wells, Magistrate of Faridpur to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, dated 8 April 1873,JudIcial Proceedings, 56-60,17 May 1873.

In 1905, the swadeshi movement developed in Bengal. Corresponding with Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, and later with

Chittaranjan Das, Guruchand advised the Congress leadership, to change their attitude and thinking Namasudras as ‘untouchables’. The reform of 1919 gave the depressed classes the right to representation in the legislative council. In 1920 two followers of Guru Chand got the chance to represent the Namasudras. Nirod Bihari Mallick won his seat at the election. Bhishma Deb Das was nominated but he lost the contest (Thakur, 2007, 27). It was a step towards right to representation of the depressed people.

In 1945 the Namasudra leader Jogendra Nath Mandal started the Bengal provincial branch of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s Scheduled Caste Federation

According to HH Risley, “Manu branded Chandala as the lowest of mankind sprung from illicit intercourse of a Shudra man with a Brahman woman whose touch defiles the pure and who have no ancestral rites. The Chandals of Bengal invariably call themselves Namasudras and with characteristic jealousy the higher ranks in the caste hierarchy apply the name Chandal to the lower, which in their turn, pass it on to the dom, considered to the lowest in the hierarchy. Chandals have Brahmans of their own who preside at religious and social ceremonies, but they are popularly called Barna Brahmin or Chandaler Brahmin in Eastern Bengal. They are not received on equal terms by other members of the priestly castes. Their washerman (dhopa) and barbers (napit) are, necessarily, Chandals as the ordinary dhopa and napit decline to serve the priest of the Chandals. In Western Bengal, on the other hand, Chandals have their clothes washed by dhopa (washerwoman) who work for other castes also. At village festivals, the Chandal is treated as no higher in the rank than Bhumali and Chamar and is obliged to put off his shoes before he sits down in the assembly”.

Social justice and political identity

The Namashudra Andolon in Bengal represents one of the earliest organized caste-based movements for social justice, and when examined through a Dalit feminist lens, it reveals a deeper, often overlooked, narrative of gendered resistance and identity formation. Emerging in the late 19th century and led by reformers such as Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, and later Jogendra Nath Mandal, the movement sought to uplift the Namashudra (formerly Chandala) community from the oppressive structures of Brahmanical patriarchy, caste exclusion, and colonial neglect. While political mobilization and religious reform were central aims, the participation of Namashudra women—as silent laborers, community caregivers, spiritual participants, and later, as voices of dissent—was fundamental to the movement's transformative capacity.

From a Dalit feminist perspective, the Namashudra Andolon challenged the dual axes of oppression—caste and gender—that historically marginalized women within both Brahmanical and Dalit patriarchal structures. Women's contributions, especially within the Matua Mahasangha (a socio-religious organization founded by Harichand Thakur), created spaces for female spiritual agency, communal leadership, and shared identity, resisting the invisibilization they faced within mainstream political narratives. Despite lacking formal political representation, Namashudra women forged a collective political identity through everyday resistance, embodying what scholars term “vernacular feminism”—a form of feminism grounded in local struggles, oral histories, and community activism rather than elite academic or urban-centered feminist discourses.

The legacy of this movement extends into contemporary Dalit feminist praxis in Bengal, where questions of social justice are deeply tied to identity, land, labor, and representation. Today,

Matua women activists and writers are reclaiming this history, articulating their position not only as oppressed but as agents of change, demanding political inclusion in state and national platforms. Thus, Dalit feminism in the Namashudra context does not merely seek equality within a preexisting structure—it calls for a radical restructuring of caste, gender, and power altogether. This fusion of political identity and feminist struggle within the Namashudra Andolon remains a powerful symbol of the intersectional fight for dignity, rights, and justice in eastern India.

The Namashudra Andolon (Movement) in Bengal, though often discussed through the lens of caste assertion and socio-political reform, also holds critical significance for understanding the early expressions of Dalit feminist consciousness in eastern India. The Namashudras, formerly categorized as ‘Chandalas’, were a historically oppressed caste largely concentrated in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) and parts of West Bengal. The movement, which gained strength in the late 19th and early 20th centuries under leaders like Harichand Thakur, Guruchand Thakur, and later Jogendra Nath Mandal, focused on the upliftment of the Namashudra community through education, socio-religious reform, and political representation. While much of the historical narrative has emphasized male leaders and collective mobilizations, Dalit women played crucial though underrepresented roles in shaping the community’s resistance, particularly in the domains of labor, religious participation, and social reform.

Though Dalit feminism in Bengal did not organize under a singular banner at the time, Namashudra women engaged in feminist resistance through lived experiences—challenging patriarchy within their communities while also enduring systemic Brahmanical and colonial oppression. In religious reform spaces

led by the Matua Mahasangha, founded by Harichand and expanded by Guruchand, women were encouraged to take part in devotional and community life, creating a space that implicitly countered both caste and gender hierarchies. This inclusive participation laid the groundwork for what can be retrospectively identified as an indigenous, non-elite form of Dalit feminist praxis, rooted in collective struggle rather than elite academic discourse.

Additionally, Namashudra women contributed significantly as agricultural laborers, domestic workers, and caregivers—roles that were central to the economic sustenance of the community and yet systematically devalued. Their double marginalization—by upper-caste society and within male-centric Dalit politics—highlighted the need for an intersectional feminist approach that would only begin to be articulated more explicitly in Bengal from the 1990s onward. In more recent decades, scholars and activists like Manoranjan Byapari and Chandramukhi Basu have pointed out how the silencing of Dalit women's narratives from movements like the Namashudra Andolon reflects a broader exclusion in both Bengali literary and feminist historiography.

In essence, Dalit feminism in the Namashudra movement was not a formalized ideology but a lived, grassroots expression of resistance. It called into question both Brahmanical patriarchy and caste capitalism, and its legacy continues in the struggles of Matua women, marginalized rural feminists, and Dalit women writers in Bengal today

1. **Adi-Karnataka movement:**

The Adi-Karnataka movement began to take shape in the early 20th century, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, as part of a broader wave of Dalit assertion and anti-caste mobilization in colonial India. This period saw a growing awareness among marginalized communities of their rights, fueled by the spread of

education, the influence of social reformers, and the emergence of leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The movement gained momentum alongside other regional Dalit movements, such as the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu and the Non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

In Karnataka, the movement became more organized in the 1930s and 1940s, as Dalit leaders began to demand recognition, social justice, and political representation. The community adopted the name “Adi-Karnataka” during this period to reclaim their identity and assert their status as the original inhabitants of the region, challenging the stigma of untouchability and caste inferiority.

The movement continued to evolve after Indian independence in 1947, especially during the post-1960s period, when affirmative action policies, land reform movements, and Ambedkarite ideology began to influence Dalit politics more widely. The Adi-Karnataka movement remains relevant even today, as it continues to advocate for education, employment, dignity, and social justice for Dalit communities in Karnataka.

Feminism intersects with the Adi-Karnataka movement in powerful and complex ways, particularly through the lens of Dalit feminism, which highlights how caste and gender oppression are deeply intertwined. While the broader Adi-Karnataka movement focused on the upliftment and rights of a marginalized Dalit community in Karnataka, Dalit women within this movement faced unique challenges that differed from those of Dalit men and upper-caste women. Feminist engagement with the Adi-Karnataka movement brings attention to how Dalit women’s voices were often sidelined even within anti-caste activism, despite their central role in resisting both caste discrimination and patriarchal control.

Adi-Karnataka women were historically subjected to multiple layers of oppression—as Dalits, as women, and as laborers—facing violence, exclusion, and exploitation both from dominant castes and within their own communities. Feminist interpretations of the movement emphasize the need to recognize and amplify these women's struggles for dignity, bodily autonomy, education, and political participation. Dalit feminist thought within the Adi-Karnataka movement critiques how mainstream feminism often ignores caste realities, and how Dalit movements sometimes fail to address internal patriarchy.

In this way, feminism enriches the Adi-Karnataka movement by insisting on an intersectional approach—one that includes gender justice as inseparable from caste justice. The movement's legacy, when viewed through a feminist lens, reflects not just a fight for community upliftment, but also a broader struggle for equality that must center the experiences and agency of Dalit women.

➤ **Impact of Adi-Karnataka movement**

Reclaiming identity: Reclaiming identity has been a central theme in the Adi-Karnataka movement, serving as a powerful response to centuries of caste-based marginalization and social erasure. By adopting the name "Adi-Karnataka," meaning "original inhabitants of Karnataka," the community sought to reject the derogatory labels and stigmatized caste identities imposed by the Brahminical social order. This act of renaming was not just symbolic—it was a form of resistance that challenged the narratives of inferiority and asserted a dignified, self-defined identity rooted in history and cultural legitimacy. Reclaiming identity also involved reviving and celebrating the community's forgotten heritage, oral traditions,

and contributions to Karnataka's society and culture, which had long been ignored or suppressed. For Dalit women within the movement, reclaiming identity was doubly significant—they not only challenged caste oppression but also confronted gender-based silencing, asserting their presence in social, cultural, and political spaces. Through education, literature, and activism, the Adi-Karnataka community continues to use identity reclamation as a tool of empowerment, turning shame into pride and invisibility into resistance.

Access to education and employment: It has been a core demand of the Adi-Karnataka movement, seen as essential for breaking the cycle of caste-based oppression and socio-economic exclusion. Historically, the Adi-Karnataka community—like many Dalit groups—was denied access to formal education under the Brahminical order, which restricted learning to upper castes and perpetuated systemic illiteracy among marginalized communities. The movement recognized that education was not only a path to personal empowerment but also a collective tool for social mobility and resistance. As the community began to organize, there was a strong push for the implementation of reservations in schools, colleges, and government jobs, ensuring representation and opportunity for historically excluded groups. Activists also fought for better infrastructure in Dalit-majority schools, scholarships, and the inclusion of Dalit history and voices in curricula. Employment opportunities, particularly in the public sector, were seen as a way to gain dignity, economic independence, and visibility in society. For Dalit women, access to education and employment had transformative potential, offering a route to escape both caste- and gender-based exploitation. Thus, the Adi-Karnataka movement's focus on education and

employment was not just about economic upliftment but about asserting equality, self-worth, and the right to participate fully in public life.

Resistance to caste oppression: Resistance to caste oppression was at the heart of the Adi-Karnataka movement, which actively protested against untouchability, social exclusion, and caste-based violence that had long dehumanized Dalit communities. Members of the Adi-Karnataka community faced routine discrimination in everyday life—being denied access to temples, wells, schools, and public spaces—and were often forced into degrading forms of labor. The movement mobilized against these injustices by organizing protests, demanding legal protections, and building collective awareness around human rights and dignity. It also challenged the deeply entrenched Brahminical ideology that legitimized caste hierarchy and justified the marginalization of Dalits. Activists worked to dismantle the stigma of "untouchability" by asserting their presence in public spaces and claiming equal rights as citizens of a democratic India. Importantly, the movement also addressed caste-based violence, including the physical and sexual violence often directed at Dalit women, by demanding justice and holding state institutions accountable. Through these efforts, the Adi-Karnataka movement became a powerful force in resisting the structural and cultural foundations of caste oppression, while fostering a sense of collective pride, solidarity, and social transformation within the community.

Cultural Assertion: It was a key strategy of the Adi-Karnataka movement, aimed at challenging the dominant narrative that portrayed Dalit communities as culturally inferior or without

history. Leaders and activists emphasized the rich cultural heritage, spiritual traditions, and historical contributions of the Adi-Karnataka people to reclaim pride and reshape public perception. They revived folk traditions, oral histories, festivals, and local deities that had been sidelined or erased by Brahminical historiography. By celebrating their own art forms, rituals, and community heroes, the movement countered cultural erasure and asserted that Dalit identity was not a source of shame but of strength and resilience. This cultural revival helped build community solidarity and provided a foundation for social and political empowerment.

Political Mobilization: Mobilization over politics was another vital pillar of the Adi-Karnataka movement, as it recognized that true change required representation and voice within political structures. The movement encouraged members of the community to engage in electoral politics, form organizations, and advocate for policies that addressed caste discrimination, economic marginalization, and lack of access to education and employment. It also aligned itself with broader Dalit and Ambedkarite movements across India, drawing inspiration from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social justice, equality, and constitutional rights. Through protests, campaigns, and participation in democratic institutions, Adi-Karnataka activists worked to secure reservations, influence policymaking, and ensure that the voices of Dalits—especially Dalit women—were heard in governance and decision-making processes. Political mobilization thus became a means not only of resisting oppression but of actively shaping a more inclusive and just society.

Challenges and Impact of the Adi-Karnataka movement reveal both the difficulties faced in confronting deep-rooted caste hierarchies and the transformative outcomes it achieved over time. One of the major challenges was resistance from dominant castes, who viewed the movement's demands for equality, reservations, and dignity as a threat to the social order. Activists often faced social ostracism, violence, and political suppression, particularly in rural areas where caste-based power structures remained strong. Additionally, internal divisions, limited resources, and the marginalization of Dalit women's voices within the movement itself posed further obstacles. Despite these difficulties, the Adi-Karnataka movement had a profound impact on the social and political landscape of Karnataka. It strengthened Dalit identity, raised awareness about caste injustice, and contributed to the implementation of affirmative action policies in education and employment. The movement also inspired a new generation of leaders, fostered grassroots political participation, and aligned itself with broader Dalit and social justice struggles in India. Most importantly, it gave a historically oppressed community the tools to assert their rights, reclaim their history, and demand a place in public life with dignity and self-respect.

2. Adi-Hindu movement (the early 1900s to the mid-1900s)

The Adi-Hindu Movement primarily took place during the early 20th century, with its most active phase spanning from the 1910s to the 1930s. It emerged as part of a broader wave of Dalit assertion in North India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, where marginalized communities began organizing to challenge caste-based discrimination and reclaim their identity. The movement gained momentum with leaders like Swami Achhootanand, who formally established the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha around 1919, promoting the idea that Dalits were the original inhabitants of

India—“Adi-Hindus”—and thus deserving of dignity and equal rights. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the movement worked to mobilize Dalit communities through publications, public meetings, and cultural revival. However, after the death of Swami Achhootanand in 1933, the movement gradually declined, though its ideas continued to influence later Dalit political and social movements. The Adi-Hindu Movement’s timing reflects a critical period of awakening and identity formation among Dalits before India’s independence.

Gendered Dimension of Caste Oppression: The gendered dimension of caste oppression highlights how caste discrimination and patriarchy intersect to uniquely impact Dalit women, making their experience of oppression distinct from that of Dalit men or upper-caste women. Dalit women face double marginalization: they are oppressed both because of their low caste status and their gender. This intersection results in heightened vulnerability to social exclusion, economic exploitation, and violence, including sexual violence, often used as a tool to maintain caste hierarchies. Unlike upper-caste women, Dalit women have historically had limited access to education, healthcare, and legal protection, which further entrenches their marginalization. Moreover, within Dalit communities themselves, patriarchal norms can restrict women’s agency and participation in leadership, compounding their struggle. Recognizing this gendered dimension is crucial for any meaningful social justice movement, as it calls for addressing caste and gender inequalities together rather than in isolation. This intersectional understanding is central to Dalit feminism, which insists that true emancipation requires dismantling both caste oppression and patriarchal control simultaneously.

3. CHALLENGES WITH DALIT-FEMINISM

1. Assertion of Dalit Women's Agency: Dalit feminism within the Adi-Hindu framework emphasizes the crucial role of Dalit women as active agents of social change rather than passive victims. It insists that Dalit women should be recognized as leaders, thinkers, and organizers who shape the movement for justice and equality. This perspective challenges stereotypes that reduce Dalit women to mere recipients of aid or secondary participants. Dalit feminists advocate not only for the dismantling of caste-based oppression but also for addressing gender-specific issues such as domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and discrimination that Dalit women face both from dominant castes and within their own communities. This dual struggle highlights the importance of empowering Dalit women to claim their rights fully and participate in decision-making processes at all levels.

- 1. Critique of Mainstream Feminism:*** Dalit feminism offers a pointed critique of mainstream feminist movements, which are often led by upper-caste women and tend to ignore or overlook caste-based inequalities. Mainstream feminism has historically focused on gender issues like patriarchy and sexuality but has frequently failed to engage with the realities of caste oppression, making it less relevant to the lived experiences of Dalit women. Dalit feminists argue that without addressing caste, gender justice remains incomplete. They call for an intersectional approach that integrates caste, class, and gender struggles, ensuring that Dalit women's voices and concerns are centered in feminist discourse and activism. This critique pushes for a more inclusive feminism that acknowledges and confronts the multiple layers of oppression faced by marginalized women.
- 2. Cultural Reclamation and Representation:***

Cultural reclamation is a vital aspect of Dalit feminism within movements like the Adi-Hindu movement, where reclaiming and celebrating Dalit women's histories, traditions, and identities challenges centuries of cultural erasure imposed by Brahminical patriarchy. Dalit feminists work to revive suppressed stories, rituals, songs, and spiritual practices that highlight the strength, resilience, and agency of Dalit women. This reclamation goes beyond resisting oppression—it actively creates space for Dalit women to represent themselves on their own terms, rather than being defined by dominant caste narratives. By asserting their cultural identity, Dalit women challenge stereotypes and offer alternative visions of womanhood and community rooted in dignity and empowerment. Representation in literature, arts, politics, and public discourse is crucial for validating their experiences and inspiring future generations to continue the struggle for equality and justice.

Like the Adi-Hindu movement, Dalit feminism also works to reclaim lost histories and cultural narratives, but it especially focuses on women's experiences, stories, and spiritual roles that were erased by Brahminical patriarchy.

Dalit movements aim to achieve social justice by addressing caste-based discrimination and economic disparities. They use a variety of methods, including legal action, satyagraha (nonviolent resistance), demonstrations, rallies, and processions.

4. Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti and Dalit Feminism

The DSSSS, or Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti, was founded by Kanshi Ram in 1981 as a political organization to unite Dalits, backward castes, and other oppressed communities in India. It was a precursor to the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which Kanshi Ram and later Mayawati led.

The goal of DSSSS was to:

- Mobilize marginalized communities politically,
- Challenge upper-caste dominance in Indian politics,
- Work toward Bahujan (majority oppressed caste) empowerment.

While DSSSS primarily focused on caste-based oppression and political mobilization, it laid the groundwork for broader Bahujan social consciousness, within which Dalit feminism began to take shape.

Key-Features:

A. Shared Struggle Against Caste Oppression: Dalit Feminism & DSSSS

Dalit Feminism and the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS) are united in their core struggle against caste oppression, but they tackle it from different standpoints—political versus intersectional socio-political.

1. *Common Goal: Uprooting Brahmanical Caste Hierarchy*

Both Dalit feminism and DSSSS aim to dismantle the Brahmanical caste system, which structurally marginalizes Dalits and other oppressed castes.

- DSSSS took a political approach, seeking representation, rights, and power for the Dalit-Bahujan communities through electoral politics.
- Dalit feminism, meanwhile, focuses on how Dalit women experience caste oppression differently—combined with gender and often class discrimination.

2. *Challenging both External and Internal Oppression*

- DSSSS fought against external caste-based oppression, primarily targeting upper-caste domination in institutions, administration, and politics.
- Dalit feminism challenged not only upper-caste patriarchy but also patriarchy within the Dalit movement itself, asserting that:

“There is no liberation for Dalits without liberation for Dalit women.”

This means both movements oppose caste oppression, but Dalit feminism adds a gendered critique that DSSSS often overlooked.

3. Empowerment through Assertion

- DSSSS encouraged assertion of identity: calling Dalits to unite politically as “Bahujan” (majority).
- Dalit feminism echoed this assertive identity, but emphasized Dalit women’s self-representation, saying: “We are not voiceless—we are unheard.”

Dalit women began organizing through their own forums (e.g., National Federation of Dalit Women) while still drawing on the anti-caste consciousness DSSSS helped build.

4. Legacy of Resistance

Both movements belong to a long tradition of anti-caste resistance rooted in the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who also emphasized gender equality. DSSSS carried forward Ambedkar’s mass political mobilization, while Dalit feminists carried forward his vision of social justice for women.

B.Platform for Dalit Women Leaders: Dalit Feminism and DSSSS: One significant way in which Dalit feminism intersects with and critiques the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS) is through the platform it provided for Dalit women to rise into leadership roles, even as gender equality was not a core focus of the movement.

1. DSSSS Opened Political Space for Dalit Women: The DSSSS, founded by Kanshi Ram in 1981, aimed to unite all oppressed castes (Dalit, Adivasi, OBCs) under a Bahujan political identity. This movement led to the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which gave visibility and political access to marginalized voices, including Dalit women.

Example: Mayawati: Kanshi Ram mentored Mayawati, a Dalit woman from a poor background. She rose through the DSSSS and BSP ranks to become: Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (four times), a national-level Dalit leader and symbol of Dalit women's empowerment.

"Kanshi Ram ne mujhe banaya, par mai apne dum par bani." (Kanshi Ram made me, but I rose on my own strength.) — Mayawati

2. **Symbolism vs Substantive Feminism:** While Mayawati's leadership challenged caste and gender norms, many Dalit feminists argue that:

Her leadership was used symbolically by a male-dominated political movement. Gender justice or feminist issues were rarely prioritized in BSP/DSSSS agendas. Mayawati's politics was focused more on caste assertion than transforming patriarchal norms.

Dalit feminists respect her breakthrough but critique the lack of feminist politics within the platform that supported her.

3. **Dalit Feminism: Claiming Leadership on Their Own Terms**

Dalit feminists began forming independent platforms to address the silencing of Dalit women within both mainstream feminism and Dalit political movements.

Examples of Dalit Feminist Platforms:

National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) – Founded by Ruth Manorama.

All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) – Led grassroots campaigns, especially on caste-based sexual violence.

Dalit Women Fight, Savari Collective, and other social media-led feminist platforms.

"We don't want to just be represented—we want to lead, speak, and define the movement." — Dalit feminist activist

The DSSSS opened a political platform for Dalit women to rise—most notably Mayawati—but it did not actively prioritize gender justice. Dalit feminism built on this foundation, but demanded a more inclusive, intersectional, and feminist vision of leadership that centers Dalit women's lived realities and voices.

- B. **Critique from Within :** Dalit feminism represents a powerful internal critique of Dalit political movements like the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS), exposing how gender oppression is often neglected in the struggle against caste. Dalit feminists argue that while DSSSS played a crucial role in mobilizing oppressed caste groups and challenging Brahmanical dominance, it failed to confront patriarchy within Dalit communities themselves. Women within the movement often found themselves marginalized—used primarily as voters, supporters, or symbols of empowerment, rather than decision-makers or agenda-setters. This critique is not a rejection of the Dalit movement but an insistence that true emancipation must be intersectional. Activists like Ruth Manorama and Cynthia Stephen, and scholars like Sharmila Rege, have consistently pointed out that Dalit women's experiences—marked by caste, gender, and economic exploitation—are distinct and often silenced within both mainstream feminism and Dalit-led parties like DSSSS or BSP. The internal critique also challenges the hero-worship of male leaders and the centralization of power, particularly around figures like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, without a corresponding effort to democratize leadership or include more Dalit women at the grassroots level. Dalit feminists demand that any movement claiming to fight for justice must also address sexual violence, domestic abuse, and reproductive labor, which disproportionately affect Dalit women. Their critique from within serves as a necessary self-correction, aimed at deepening the anti-caste

movement rather than dividing it, and calls for a future where Dalit liberation includes gender justice as a foundational pillar rather than an afterthought.

In Summary

Aspect	Dalit Feminism	DSSSS
Focus	Intersection of caste and gender	Political mobilization of oppressed castes
Gender Lens	Central to its ideology	Often marginalized within it
Contribution	Created space for Dalit women's voices	Provided foundation for Bahujan political assertion
Critique	Mainstream Dalit politics is patriarchal	Not enough attention to women's issues

5. Criticism of the functions of Dalit feminism within the context of the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS):

Dalit feminism has often been critical of its marginal role within the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS), pointing out that while the organization aimed to unite all oppressed castes politically, it largely sidelined the specific issues faced by Dalit women. The DSSSS, under Kanshi Ram's leadership, prioritized caste-based political mobilization and electoral empowerment but failed to incorporate a gender-sensitive agenda into its functioning. Dalit women were often seen as symbolic figures—most notably in the rise of Mayawati—rather than active participants in shaping policy or strategy. Feminist scholars and activists argue that DSSSS reproduced patriarchal structures by not addressing caste-based sexual violence, domestic abuse, and the everyday gendered discrimination faced by Dalit women within and outside their communities. As a result, Dalit feminism emerged as a critique

and extension of the DSSSS movement, demanding that caste-based liberation cannot be achieved without also confronting gender oppression from within.

Dalit feminists criticize this exclusion, arguing that liberation cannot be achieved through caste politics alone if it ignores patriarchy within Dalit communities themselves. They emphasize that Dalit women face a triple burden: caste, class, and gender oppression, and therefore any emancipatory movement must be intersectional in its approach. Scholars like Sharmila Rege and activists like Ruth Manorama and Cynthia Stephen have highlighted how both mainstream feminism (dominated by upper-caste women) and Dalit politics (dominated by Dalit men) have historically marginalized Dalit women's voices. In this context, Dalit feminism functions not just as a gendered critique but as a transformative force that challenges the internal hierarchies of movements like the DSSSS, while also striving to build spaces that center the voices and agency of Dalit women.

In essence, the function of Dalit feminism in relation to the DSSSS is twofold: first, to expose the gender gap and patriarchal tendencies within anti-caste movements, and second, to reconstruct a new political and social framework that genuinely includes and empowers Dalit women. This ongoing critique and expansion reflect the deeper need for solidarity that does not erase difference, and for movements that reflect the full complexity of oppression faced by marginalized communities.

Conclusion: This chapter concludes by critically examining the **opportunities and limitations of Dalit feminist engagement within broader Dalit movements**. While these movements significantly challenged caste-based exclusion, they often failed to **center gendered experiences** or provide space for Dalit women's leadership. Organizations like the **Dalit Shoshit Samaj**

Sangharsh Samiti (DSSSS) exposed the contradictions within anti-caste politics that sidelined feminist concerns. Dalit women had to navigate **internal hierarchies**, fighting not only casteism from dominant society but also **patriarchy within their own communities**. The review reinforces that while various regional and national Dalit movements provided a critical foundation for resistance, Dalit feminism emerged as a **necessary and distinct political articulation**—one that demanded intersectionality, inclusion, and a transformation of both feminist and Dalit political frameworks. The legacy of these movements thus lies not only in resistance to caste, but in the insistence on **gender justice within that resistance**.



PART- VI

A REVIEW OF DALIT- FEMINISM AND OTHER DALIT MOVEMENTS

7.1 INTRODUCTION:

A Review of Dalit-Feminism and Other Dalit Movements offers a critical review of the evolution of Dalit feminism within the larger landscape of anti-caste and regional Dalit movements across India. The chapter begins by situating Dalit feminist struggles within the context of India's independence and cultural defense, exploring how **non-violent resistance, cultural assertion, and identity politics** shaped Dalit trends during and after the nationalist period. It highlights the emergence of early organizations like the **Dalit Panthers, Harijan Sevak Sangh,** and the **Dalit Mahila Samity,** while also examining broader regional movements such as the **Adi Dravidas movement, the Dravidian movement,** and the **Adi-Dharm movement.** These movements, though often male-dominated, laid foundational ground for Dalit women's visibility and participation. At the same time, the chapter confronts the **crisis of cultural identity, political segregation,** and the challenge of incorporating Dalit women's concerns into broader caste and political agendas.

1. 'INDEPENDENCE AND 'CULTURAL DEFENCE'

Feminism in India has been deeply rooted with the Dalit cultural tradition and aspects running with their spirits and self-efforts in

the context of Women Empowerment and Cultural hegemony for the upgradation of long term colonials and cultural imperialism under the male dominated Indian Society as well as under the colonial power of British Empire. Intervention of colonial power in India has been interrelated with the male dominated power system of that society which not only paved their way in a successive status of political, social and cultural structures but pointed to the involvement in Women status both in positive and negative way. From the point of socio-economical differentiation to the level of segregation and discrimination of the power system Colonialism in India highlighted a greater part in Post-Colonial Feminism and Women Empowerment in India.

Independence of India almost finished up the root level cultural and political colonialism under segregation not only over Indian female power but in their rights and self-thoughts. Indian Women has started a new suffering from the aspects of not only Patriarchal hierarchy but in the socio-political thought and orders.

Post-Colonial theories has been hegemonically balanced with the Women Empowerment In Dalit casteism. Post-Colonial Structures has raised the voice against the super system of western hegemony and changing and decolonizing the classical “Western way of thinking” in the discipline of International and western colonization. Post colonialism being connected with Feminism in 1985 started the evolution in the demanding process of cultural and social equality and women empowerment in all section of life. Post-Colonial Feminism sowed its seeds in the soil of Dalit women power system in order to get the equality in racial domain, raising their self-thought in the male dominated hierarchy, and speaking and writing licence in all the sphere of Indian cultural parts. Post colonial feminism started its evolution with the cross-cultural hegemony not only in western cultures having been

identified as colonial colour but also in the society of Indian Cultural tradition of patriarchalism. In Post colonial Feminism when there had been a new social thinkers starting with their “Cultural Defense”, they began a critical evaluation of Indian society in an attempt to create a new empowerment of female and prevent all the issues like polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy which were real barriers to the progress of women. All the social reformers thought that no society could progress if its women were backward and unequal. Being notified with its First Phase of Post Colonial feminism women coming from qualified and dignified family started working with it.

- **NON-VIOLENCE ACTIVITY AND DALIT TRENDS**

Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and being rejuvenated with the Nationalism, Indian women from all section started their dominating voice for equality and establishing the same rights as being same level; of patriarchy following the mood of non-violence activities. During that journey they were being coped with thousand of difficulties but slowly and gradually they started to enter in all spheres of social and political life of Indian cultures. Indomitable power and enthusiasm being connected with their strong mental spirits these women entered in all the political revolution raising the voice for women. Women from upper section were being connected with their demanding rights but gradually they involved themselves for the upgradation of backwards women who are patriarchally oppressed and muted and rising to the constitutional guarantees of equality, freedom and equal opportunity for women regardless of their class, caste, and religion (Kasturi&Mazumdar, 1994, p.14).

The 1990s were when, almost all of a sudden, many Dalit women's organizations sprung up: one of the most important ones was the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), founded in 1995

by a Dalit activist called Ruth Manorama. NFDW brought to the limelight the state's inability to protect the human rights of Dalit women (Subramaniam, 2006). At the UN World Conference Against Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, NFDW even demanded that caste discrimination be declared a form of racism. There were also a few other organizations: All India Dalit Women's Forum, which came up in 1996; an organization for Dalit Christian women came up in 1997. The focus of these organizations was Dalit women, and it led to a debate on plurality vs. unity in the context of women's movements (Subramaniam, 2006).

Among the Dalit voices that have made themselves heard in history, Savitribai Phule is very prominent. Savitribai was the first low-caste woman to have stressed the importance of education and English through her poems. She, along with her husband Jotiba Phule, raised the issues of Dalit women in particular and women in general. She wrote poems that became recognized in the British Empire. Savitribai's collection of poems came out in 1854 and is entitled, "Kavyaphule". Savitribai Phule started schools exclusively for Sudra and Dalit women. Savitribai, along with Jyotirao Phule, did the historical work of building a holistic and integrated revolutionary cultural, social, and educational movement of women-Shudra and Ati Shudras of the country. This work is the beginning of a new epoch in the history of Hindu culture, wrote an anonymous journalist while reporting on their work in *The Poona Observer and Deccan Weekly* (Narake, 2009, 9): **“Savitribai had taken teacher’s training at Ms. Farar’s Institution at Ahmednagar and in the Normal School of Ms. Mitchell in Pune. If these documents are to be given consideration, Savitribai Phule may well have been the first Indian woman teacher and headmistress. Her stepping across**

the threshold of the home to teach marks the beginning of public life of the modern Indian woman. In an interview given to Dynanodaya on 15 September 1853, Jyotirao said, "Those who are concerned with the happiness and welfare of this country should definitely pay attention to the condition of women and make every effort to impart knowledge to them if they want the country to progress. With this thought, I started school for girls first. But my caste brethren did not like that I was educating girls and my father threw us out of the house. Nobody was ready to give space for the school nor did we have money to build it. People were not willing to send their children to school but Lahuji Ragh Raut Mang and Ranba Mahar convinced their caste brethren about the benefits of getting educated". (Narake, 2009, 10)

Post colonial feministic aspects begin with the advancement of political and social orders of theological backdrops in Modern India. Somehow we settle down in that aspects where restricted female voice is going to be released part by part by their self dominated power and with the empowerment of

- **OPPRESSED DALIT**

It is not the less sights about the Dalits' embodiment with the oppression and suppression in the patriarchal order and social system by the male dominated functions. Let it see few focusing aspects over the harassment of not only Dalit but Hindu Caste Women by the male power and social illegal affair or sexual harassment to prove the functions of Modern Feminism. Social disabilities and discrimination are the very common factor experienced by Dalit and caste Hindu Women. An analysis of oppression and harassment given to the bioscope of Dalit Society would reveal the violent control and domination by patriarchal pressure to the sexual harassment resulted with Dowry Death, rape

and even sexually abused not only in their family but even in their connected society and all organisation. Gang rape, sexual threat are often been connected with Dalit Women at every steps. After having been challenged with these threats They do never receive any administrative support in favour of them. Economic standards as well as social status have been playing a great major role in the responsibilities of casteism as well as in the effective system of Dalit Oppression. Wage Labour functioned by Dalit focuses on the physical, social and even sexual harassment in every part of their life not only in family but in their laborious zone. Everyday legal matters regarding their sexual harassment report a continuous process of oppression in the hands of Patriarchal part.

- **CRISIS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Cultural identity makes the human being to stand on a respected social position focusing on their social and cultural responsibilities. Apart from that if we want to focus the crisis of Dalit family, first and foremost Cultural crisis would have been taken a great and major part in the context of social harassment. Dalit or Caste-Hindu women differ themselves in such a distance that due to lack or not having a dignified social or cultural identity by their forefathers or family, they start suffering their oppression in the hands of male-system by having social exclusion or segregation. Crisis of Cultural identity also highlight the another way of sexual harassment in the name of “Devdasi”; where the Dalit Women usually are tended to take the identity in the name of religion or “Puja” to the Hindu God and Goddesses. So Exploitation in the name of religious do have a very common part in the orthodoxically Hindu gallery of religious system.

Hindu priest of Brahmanical system which has been continuously regulation the “Untouchability” in the name of pious connection of divinity are often being attached with the Dalit Devadasi by their

sexual exploitation . So it is necessary to feel that Dalit women have been oppressed not only in the name of long termed male system but in the hands of CULTURAL IDENTITY which they lack. Social injustice and degradation has already been connected with caste Hindu Women and Dalit feminine aspects always. So within the social framework of injustice and exploitation the Dalit Women have been suffering in the framework of cultural crisis. Dalit and other subaltern women experience this in the various of women movements; disillusioned and being alienated. Professor Gopal Guru in his "Theoretical Brahmin and Empirical Shudra" said, "This exclusion of dalit woman from the mainstream women's movement is not such a bad thing after all; it has caused them to start building their own praxis, identity and agency and build effective working relationships and their own platforms."

- **POLITICAL SEGREGATION**

Illiteracy and Political engagement enrolled Dalit community under the shade of domination, segregation and difference having been categorised with the political power and educational rights. In the 21st century till now almost in many countries the struggling environment between Politics and illiteracy have been playing the pivotal role in making the identity and status of Dalit with other subaltern women. Education plays an important role to focus the cultural identity and simultaneously political involvement in a recognised position. Elitist leaders do not allow the member of oppressed community to be a part of political leadership. Demanding justice and equality in all section of social life and professional sides become the invisible due to lack of illiteracy versus Dalit politics.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the author of Annihilation of Caste, advocated for the political, economic, and social empowerment of Dalits: as he said; "Political power is the key to all problems and

Dalits can get their emancipation by uniting and seizing power. Political power should be used for the development of the society.”

But when it raises its voice as an important factor , education becomes very crucial to the development and advancement of women involvement with political output. Hence starts the negativism on women literacy towards it. Illiteracy is a great drawback to feminism. Dalit as well as other subaltern women facing the same issue have been undergone as the aspects of passive citizens towards feminine rights and empowerment.

Casting ballot has been restricted from political as well as democratic rights for illiterate Dalit women. Not only that but education emerging women to a dignified position to a constructive and settled position in politics must have to be more conscious of and appreciative of the rights of women, which extend to obligations leading to the political mainstream. The modern education now a days starts its transformation of women to be more specific, a new conception of womanhood in India, which intriguingly stands in stark contrast to the conventional assumption of confining themselves to the domestic duties and responsibilities. When education being as a factor of changing the gender disparities, women in the house inside and outside becomes more active and focussed and fostering a dynamic effort how people receive them in politics. So structural hierarchy of male politicisim and illiteracy of Dalit and subaltern feminism creates a basis for segregation, detachment and questioning to the right and equality of male dominated society.

- **DALIT MAHILA SAMITY**

For the feminist movement of the oppressed section of women there started a remarkable leading group for defending the exploitation of Dalit in every section of society. The organisation

named Dalit Mahila Samity(DMS) started its journey from north India, UP, having been supported by Vanangana; the feminist NGO launched by Indian Govt in 1980 to empower the women with equality and justice. The mahila samakhya staff had been trained with the grassroot thought about the empowerment of dalit women and with the mobilisation of their work it had been settled very well for the working of dalit women. Later in 1993 the leadership formed a new part of organisation promoted by Indian Govt named Vanangana which has remarkably been developed towards the progression work for Dalit section as effected in the village of Chitarkoot, Banda in UP.

The root of DMS started its working for the feminists movement and especially in 1980s and 1990s it focussed on the women to go outside coming from the homesickness being tackled with the training of technological development. As they gained experience, they developed the ability to form a separate women's movement with a clear focus on Dalit women's issues. Since 2002, Dalit women leaders have engaged in the sharpening of their goals and structures, and the formal naming of the Dalit Mahila Samiti took place in 2003.

Vanangana started working with DMS for the Dalit backwords society and in a typical way against the establishment of equality and right for them. Although the formal structure of DMS emerged much later, the principles of participation and voice for Dalit women followed by Vanangana ensured that Dalit women's concerns were always central. There leading structures are always been on a controlling steps towards the women empowerment of which their roots level struggles are always been taken as an independent organisatiuonal structure:

1. Manav Adhikar Ekai (Human Rights Unit)– in Chitrakoot and in Banda

2. Sangathan Ekai (Organising Unit), with three sub units: a. Samudayik Sashaktikaran – Collective Empowerment b. Bachat (Savings And Credit), supporting 144 SHGs¹ c. Natural Resource Management
3. Administrative team
4. A Natak (Theatre) team comprising some staff from the three units

Initially, Vanangana focused on the individual Dalit women who were the target of its mobilization. As these Dalit women began working for change, they challenged patriarchal norms as well as the caste structure. The women gained a lot of experience, and their interventions on cases of violence became sharper and more skilled. However, the emphasis in analysis and strategizing at this stage was still on the woman seeking justice, not the caste to which she belonged. This was more or less true for nearly a decade of Vanangana's work with women from Dalit communities.

In this group all women members started working to protest against the violation caused by the patriarchy. Focussing on their goal, the group continued their restructuring process by making their effort on their values, modes of organizing and mobilizing, and beliefs about untouchability. Thus, as a result through out self reflection over Dalit women they found that there was prejudice, even within the organization, to some communities and some tasks associated with untouchables. These steps are being culminated when there started '*Padyatra*' in 2002 when the vanangana team started their – foot march- in the villages in order spread the scientific consciousness about the cleaning part of Dalit Women and other subaltern members. While continuing the programme they faced the situation dalit women had been going through but one positive outlook having been settled there as an out come of

their past efforts as discovering the Dalit Women as a leader of this group from every village. Thus there had been settled a benchmark for the future removal of all exploitation against Dalit System and for having a separate equal structure of femininity in male dominated society.

An exposure trip to Gujarat to a well-established Dalit Organization opened up the possibilities they could explore as DMS. Vanangana consciously moved into a facilitator role and the primary leadership and strategizing role fell on DMS's shoulders.

Goals of DMS

The current goals of DMS are as follows:

1. To change caste equations in the area/regio where they work.
2. To promote the leadership of local women.
3. To protest against all forms of violence against women and men.
4. To negotiate their terms with members of the upper caste during elections.
5. To ensure that the benefits of government schemes announced under the new Dalit-run regime, and that power flows to all eligible Dalits.

The goals of DMS became very positive and active for their upcoming strategy which they involve in the spirit for removing untouchability from the so called social structures. They started organising the meeting with all villages organising ceremonies to burn effigies of untouchability as well as "chua- achut," or untouchability separatedly where they invited male members to have a support with them to become sathi dars, givers of support. Performing a play named "*Jhoothan*" in order to remove the practices of untouchability from their society. Badges were given to working members named with DR.Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Sabitri Bai Phule as an iconic figure for Dalit struggle. DMS and

vanangana group jointly motivated all women and male members of society by taking to use their power for change, to take risks, and to involve others in the decision-making process. By demonstration of 'Power' Vanangana group showed how the power structures we need to change and we should be .

There are two significant instances that led to a lot of pressure on Vanangana and the DMS. One was the child sexual abuse case in 1999 and the case of Sohagiya in 2003. In 1999, Ila Pande approached DMS to take u the case of her daughter who had been sexually abused by the father. This was the first case of an upper caste (Brahmin) to come before them. The group was too much shocked as per the report of a father who belonged to Bramhin Caste, the so called leading authority. In the Sohagiya case, the police were involved in beating up a kol (Dalit) woman in 2003. Vanangana and DMS suddenly found that there was no support from within the law enforcement machinery.

- **Critical Analysis: Independence and Cultural Defence in Dalit Feminist Discourse**

The post-independence period in India marked a complex transformation in the sociopolitical lives of Dalits, particularly Dalit women. While India's freedom from colonial rule was celebrated as a national awakening, Dalit communities—especially Dalit women—faced a paradox: political independence did not translate into social emancipation. The notion of "**Cultural Defence**" arose as a response to this contradiction, highlighting the need to reclaim dignity and identity within a framework that had historically excluded Dalits from both cultural and political narratives.

1. Non-Violence Activity and Dalit Trends: Between Moralism and Radicalism

Gandhi's philosophy of **ahimsa (non-violence)** played a defining role in the independence movement, but Dalit leaders like **B.R. Ambedkar** critiqued its limitations. Ambedkar saw non-violence as a form of **moral idealism** that failed to address the **structural violence of caste**. For many Dalits, particularly in urban Maharashtra, non-violence became symbolic of a passive acceptance of Brahmanical dominance.

- The **Dalit Panthers**, emerging in the 1970s, rejected Gandhian non-violence, favoring direct and radical protest. Their stance was influenced by global anti-racist movements like the **Black Panthers**.
- Critics like **Anand Teltumbde** argue that non-violence has been historically manipulated to **suppress radical Dalit voices**, branding assertiveness as aggression.

Thus, the **tension between non-violent and assertive activism** reveals deeper questions about whose moralities are privileged in India's national ethos.

2. Crisis of Cultural Identity: Reclaiming Dalit Histories and Voices

Post-independence India witnessed a **hegemonic reconstruction of culture** that continued to marginalize Dalits. The idea of a unified Indian culture often erased caste-specific experiences, especially those of Dalit women. In response, Dalit intellectuals and writers initiated a **counter-cultural project** aimed at reclaiming their heritage and resisting Brahmanical historiography.

- **Sharmila Rege** emphasized the role of **testimonios**—autobiographical writings by Dalit women—as a form of cultural resistance.
- The **Dalit literary movement** challenged the Sanskritized, upper-caste notions of what constituted legitimate culture.

However, critics argue that these movements, while revolutionary, were often **limited to regional or linguistic spaces**, leaving large sections of Dalit women unrepresented due to class or language barriers.

3. Political Segregation: Exclusion from the Democratic Project

Dalits were promised equal rights in the Constitution, yet political structures often **segregated them symbolically and materially**. The **Congress party's co-optation of Dalit issues**, for example, diluted autonomous Dalit leadership. Despite Ambedkar's political interventions, his vision for **separate electorates** was denied, contributing to a lasting **crisis of political voice**.

- Post-independence Dalit parties like the **BSP** attempted to reclaim that political space but have often been critiqued for their **patriarchal structure** and **tokenistic inclusion of Dalit women**.
- Political scientist **Gopal Guru** critiques the **bourgeoisification of Dalit politics**, where political participation does not necessarily mean grassroots empowerment.
- Dalit women have thus remained doubly marginalized—caught between casteist exclusion and **patriarchal silencing within Dalit political platforms**.

4. Dalit Mahila Samity: Feminist Grounding in Grassroots Activism

In contrast to the male-dominated political platforms, **Dalit Mahila Samity** and similar organizations offered an alternative—**Dalit feminist resistance grounded in lived experience**. These organizations emerged from the realization that neither mainstream feminism nor Dalit politics adequately addressed **gendered caste oppression**.

- These groups have been instrumental in **documenting sexual violence, advocating land rights, and contesting upper-caste narratives of femininity.**
- Yet, critics point out that **their reach is often limited** by funding constraints, lack of media attention, and institutional barriers.

Nevertheless, Dalit Mahila Samity represents a **pivotal intersectional voice**, articulating caste and gender not as isolated oppressions but as mutually reinforcing systems.

Conclusion: Between Resistance and Marginalization

The section "Independence and Cultural Defence" encapsulates the **contradictions and complexities** of Dalit feminist struggles in post-independence India. While independence promised a new national identity, it largely failed to dismantle **deep-rooted caste hierarchies**. The response from Dalit communities—through **political critique, cultural reclamation, and feminist organization**—marks a radical reimagining of Indian democracy. However, the journey is marked by **internal contradictions**, limited representation, and co-optation, necessitating a **more inclusive and intersectional feminist vision** going forward.

2. Other Dalit Movement in India:

Traditional Dalit; caste based discrimination termed as untouchables by their inherent categorical family and social system: and their oppression and exploitation becomes very common in Indian patriarchal structures; from the function of household duties of women to the possession of legal threats to muted Dalit women by upper class structures in term of color, gender and caste. To raise their oppressed voice, there signalled the movement for the rights of Dalit Community in a sequential platform. In 1873 with the establishment of the **Satyashodhak Samaj** by Jyotirao Phule it is considered a significant early

attempt to challenge the caste system and advocate for the rights of Dalits; though in earlier period of Bhakti movement promoted Dalit activism by Kavir, Ravi Das in their attachment voice for Dalit.

3.Dalit Panthers: A social organization led by Mahar writers and poets that fought against caste discrimination .

During the celebration of 25th Independence day Dalit Panther was founded to raise the voice of Dalit youth against the discrimination of casteism. It was as a social organisation fighting against the inequality of casteism by the movement led by a group of Mahar writers and poets, including Raja Dhale, Namdeo Dhassal, and J. V. Pawar. Under their leadership as well as being motivated by Black Panther movement in USA, the Dalit Panther raised their voice to boycott Independence Day terming as Black Independence Day. The movement was running by 1970-80 Dalit Buddhists' activists. The Dalit Panther's Manifesto published in 1973 is an important document that shows the ideological imagination that the intellectuals have offered. It defines Dalit as "A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working-people, the land-less and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion." (See Joshi, 1986, p. 145)

'Dalit Panthers Manifesto', in 1973, raised their voice:

"We will build the organization of workers, Dalits, landless, poor peasants through all city factories, in all villages. We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well and truly destroy the caste and varna system that thrives on the people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberate the Dalits. The present legal system and state have turned all our dreams to dust. To eradicate all the injustice against Dalit, they must themselves become rulers. This is the people's democracy. Sympathizers and

members of Dalit Panthers, be ready for the final struggle of the Dalits.”

Being set in the socio political strategy in Maharashtra the Yuvak Kranti Dhal had been formed in 1956 and many Dalit got conversion into Buddhism. Advocating radical politics and being connected with the ideology of Karl Marx the Dalit Panthers by the leadership of Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule started criticising the class politics of the upper capitalists who dominated the Dalit. They openly defended the different types of oppression from the front for the sake of Dalit's right. In 1973 according to their manifesto:

"We do not want a little place in the *Brahmin Alley*. We want the rule of the whole land, we are not looking at persons but at systems and change of heart ... liberal education will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of the struggle, the giant mass will become tidal wave of revolution"

According to Satyanarayan and Tharu in their manifesto fit the Ambedkarite spirit into a broader Marxist framework and heralded the rise of an autonomous Dalit perspective in post-Independence India. Though the movement was started in Maharashtra, Dalit has been termed as Schedule Caste of Maharashtra but it referred to all poor and oppressed classes of Hinduism. Incidents of caste atrocities, rapes of Dalit women and social violence/boycott of the caste Hindus against the poor Dalits compelled the Dalit Panther to come under the light of Maharashtra-politics in anti-Dalit Worli riots of 1974. The Panthers had decided to boycott the Bombay Central (North) Parliamentary bye-election to protest the growing cases of caste atrocities (Jogdand, 1991, p. 82).

“ The incidents of Dalit women being paraded naked by the dominant caste Hindus of the village have hovered over Dalit

consciousness. The case of Dalit boycott in Bawda and sexual assault From Panthers to Political Dalits”: Revisiting the Legacy of Dalit Panthers in India.

The case of Dalit boycott in Bawda and sexual assault on two Dalit women in Brahmangoan (both in 1972) was discussed significantly within the Panther’s circle. The inability of the political class that represents Dalits (mostly RPI) to deliver justice to the victims has further motivated the Panthers to think about direct mass actions. The Maharashtra Government set up a judicial enquiry committee over the Worli-Naigaon Riots, headed by the then Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court, S.B. Bhasme. He submitted his detailed report in 1976, mentioning the close connection between the police, the upper caste lumpen gangs and the Shiv Sena activists in instigating and prolonging the violence and atrocities against the neo-Buddhist Dalit community.

4.Harijan Sevak Sang: Founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1932, this organization was created to uplift the status of the "Harijans"

All India Anti Untouchability League, led by Mahatma Gandhi for the removal of untouchability of all oppressed class and Dalit from India, was renamed to ‘All India Harijan Sevak Sangh’ in 1932. On the basis of Gandhi’s opposition to the Govt. decision for giving the Communal Award to the depressed class as opined by Dr B. R. Ambedkar, and against it Gandhi’s decision of fasting was ended by the Poona Pact with Ambedkar on 24 September 1932, he stepped forward to found Harijan Sevak Sang on 30 sept., 1932. It marked a great change in the nomenclature of untouchables who were referred to as “Adi Dravidas”, “Antyajas”, “Ati shudras”, “Avarnas”, “Bhanjis”, “Pariahs”, “Panchamas”, etc. Gandhiji made Harijan uplift an integral part of the struggle for swaraji.

NOTES:(‘Antyaj’, ‘Bhangi’, ‘Dalit’, ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Dhed’, ‘Harijan’, ‘Panchama’, ‘Pariah’, ‘Scheduled Castes’ and ‘Untouchable’ are several names for the same people. They are a group of several castes; themselves divided from one another, the common factor being their very low economic and social condition. I have used the term ‘Untouchable’ as well as the other designations. I hope that the employment of ‘Untouchable’ will not be mistaken as implying any derogation of these persons.)

Explaining the main objectives of the Harijan Sevak Sangh Gandhiji said: “I have described the Harijan Sevak Sangh as an organization of penitent sinners. Its object is to call upon the so called savarna Hindus to do expiation for having harboured untouchability”. In another place in 1934 Gandhiji said about the Harijan Sevak Sangh and its central board which control it: “The board has been formed to enable Savarna Hindus to do repentance and reparation to you. It is thus a board of debtors and you (Harijans) are the creators”.

Harijan Welfare Movement in Orissa

His fight against untouchability was a fight against the 'impurity in humanity' and its emphasis was for removal of all social disabilities of the Harijans. A branch of 'Harijan Sevak Sangha' was organised in Orissa also at Cuttack under the Chairmanship of Balunkeswar Acharya. Smt. Rama Devi, Laxmi Narayan Misra and Satyanarayan Sengupta were chosen as its Secretaries. When the Civil Disobedience Movement began to fritter away, most of the leaders including Gopabandhu Choudhury, Rama Devi and many Congress leaders devoted themselves enthusiastically to the cause of the Harijan Welfare Movement in Orissa. 'Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangh' was sanctioned for the development of education among the Harijans. On behalf of the 'Utkal Harijan Sevak Sangh', programmes like allowing the untouchables free access to the

temples, public tanks and wells, opening of schools and hostels for their children, and teaching them the simple rules of health and hygiene were undertaken with great zeal.

It was Gandhiji's remarkable 5th visit to Orissa on 5th May, 1934. Gandhiji addressed huge gatherings at Jharsuguda and Sambalpur, and enroute to Puri he addressed a mammoth gathering at Angul, where he pointed out that untouchability has no place in the Shastra and urged the people to dispel the idea of untouchability from their minds. Larger and larger crowd followed Gandhiji as he marched on Cuttack-Puri road. Gandhiji's second phase of Padayatra started from Barea marching few places like Champapur, Bheda, Lekhanpur, Bahukud, Patpur, Nischintakoili, Jajpur, Manjuri, Bhandaripokhari, Todang and Garadpur. Gandhiji was impressed by the devotion and enthusiasm of Rama Devi, Subhadra Devi and other eminent women like Sunamoni Devi, Radhamoni Devi, Godavari Devi, Sobha Devi, Annapurna Maharana, Mangala Sengupta and Manika Devi for promoting Khadi and Harijan Welfare. At Bhadrak, Gandhiji associated himself with Harijan workers for flood relief and spinning of Charkha. The nationalist struggle against the alien British Government became more vigorous and purposeful hereafter. All over the country this movement gradually petered out, but in Orissa the sparks and flashes of the movement remained alive due to Gandhiji's famous visit for Harijan Welfare work.

What Ambedkar demanded as "compensation," was for Gandhi an expiation by the 'caste Hindus', an earnest of their readiness to accept the 'Harijans' as equal members of the Hindu society. Social change, he said, required more than political arrangements and hope that, in the time to come, it would become possible to go beyond the political realm to devise ways and means for ensuring

that the ‘Untouchables’ occupied positions of equity and honour in the Hindu society:

“ I do not believe that joint electorates are going to be the final solution for the problem of absorbing the Untouchables in the Hindu community. Any electoral arrangement cannot be a solution of the larger social problem. It requires more than any political arrangement, and I hope that it would be possible to go beyond this political arrangement that we are making today and devise ways and means whereby it would be possible for the Untouchables not only to be part and parcel of the Hindu community but also occupy an honourable position, a position of equality of status in the community.”

Gandhi also urged the ‘caste Hindus’ to realise that just as other castes had given up their occupations in a pattern of mobility, the ‘Harijans’, too, had a right to give up their hereditary occupations.⁹⁸ In fact, Gandhi helped many ‘Harijans’ to quit their hereditary callings, to acquire an academic education and to qualify themselves as doctors engineers and teachers.⁹⁹ In this context, Gandhi also advised the Harijan Sevak Sangh that in the villages, if the ‘caste Hindus’ remained obstinate and persisted in boycotting the ‘Harijans’, the latter, if they have any self-consciousness, “[should] persist in their refusal to render service, [...] and, if the boycott proves to be too hot for them, they [should] quietly vacate the offending village.”¹⁰¹

Earlier, on 27 October 1920, Gandhi had declared, “if a member of a slave nation could deliver the suppressed classes from their slavery, without freeing myself from my own, I would do so today. But it is an impossible task. A slave has not the freedom even to do the right thing.” Regarding the failing of British Govt to eradicate the disabilities of Untouchables from society

Ambedkar criticised 'At the First Round Table Conference' (1930-31) :

“When we compare our present position with the one which it was our lot to bear in Indian society of pre-British days, we find that, instead of marching on, we are marking time. Before the British, we were in the loathsome condition due to our untouchability. Has the British Government done anything to remove it? Before the British, we could not draw water from the village well. Has the British Government secured us the right to the well? Before the British, we could not enter the temple? Can we enter now? Before the British, we were denied entry into the police force. Does the British Government admit us into the force? Before the British we were not allowed to serve in the military. Is that career now open to us? To none of these questions can we give an affirmative answer. Our wrongs have remained as open sores and they have not been righted, although 150 years of British rule have rolled away. “47

Somehow, Gandhi's constructive programme for the welfare of the 'Harijans' was similar in intent and content with Ambedkar's programme. The basic themes in both the programmes were: (1) a campaign to secure civic rights for the 'Harijans'; (2) to bring an equality of opportunity for the 'Harijans'; (3) the admission of the 'Harijans' to the houses of the 'caste Hindus' as guests or servants in order to dissolve the nausea which the 'caste Hindus' felt towards the 'Harijans'; and (4) co-operation between the 'caste Hindus' and the 'Harijans' in the removal of untouchability.

An interim Constitution for the Harijan Sevak Sangh was prepared and adopted by the Central Board of the Harijan Sevak Sangh at its meeting in Delhi on 26 October 1932. The amended Constitution adopted the name Harijan Sevak Sangh and said that the object of the Harijan Sevak Sangh “.. shall be the eradication

by truthful and non-violent means of untouchability in the Hindu society with all its incidental evils and disabilities, suffered by the [...] Untouchables, hereinafter described as Harijans, in all walks of life and to secure for them absolute equality of status with the rest of the Hindus”

Moreover, in the furtherance of its objective, the Harijan Sevak Sangh “..will seek to establish contact with the caste Hindus throughout India and show them that untouchability, as it is practised in Hindu society, is repugnant to the shastras and to the best instincts of humanity, and it will also seek to serve the Harijans so as to promote their moral, social and material welfare.”¹²

Adi Dravidas movement: This movement took place in Tamil Nadu

Dravidian politics being as a main political ideology in South India aims to make a safeguard the rights of the Dravidian peoples. In order to fulfil its ideology, it dominated the administrative services and the newly created urban professions in the 19th and early 20th century. The Dravidian movement in British India started with the formation of the Justice Party on 20 November 1916 in Victoria Memorial Hall in Madras by T. M. Nair and P. Theagaraya Chetty as a result of a series of non-Brahmin conferences and meetings in the presidency. Communal division between Brahmins and non-Brahmins began in the presidency during the late-19th and early-20th century, mainly due to caste prejudices and disproportionate Brahminical representation in government jobs.

Barnett has inferred from her observations that [as of 1972] in Tamil Nadu, “*Tamilians taken as a unit see themselves, not as an ethnic group within a nationwide system of ethnic groups, but as a nation with an intrinsic legitimacy of its own.* This crucial

difference reflects the role of political leaders in articulating the concept of nation-hood as well as early belief in the qualitative character of ‘racial’ distinctions between Aryan and Dravidian; Brahmin and non-Brahmin.”

Tamil Nadu politics in the early part of the twentieth century was dominated by the ‘Brahmin-non-Brahmin’ conflict. The term ‘non-Brahmin movement’ is usually applied to this early period. It was during this early period that the caste identity of certain groups of elite non-Brahmins was challenged in the process of South Indian social change. Also, social and cultural ‘differences’ were politicized in ways which laid the groundwork for the emergence of Tamil political identity. However, Tamil political identity does not become widespread until the 1950s. First comes the concept of a non-Brahmin community which becomes synonymous with Dravidian-ness. Since Dravidian and Tamil identity meld together at a later stage, examination of the emergence of Dravidian political identity in the context of the non-Brahmin movement is the key to understanding the creation of ‘The Tamil People’.

The Justice Party and the ‘Non-Brahmin Movement’ (1916)

Prior to 1916 and the founding of the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party), a political activity in Madras Presidency was dominated by Brahmins and had been oriented toward achieving home rule for India. Furthermore Brahmin dominance in the political arena was paralleled by the Brahmin dominance in the administrative arena and in university admissions. For example, Government Order 22 (January 27, 1919) reported that:

‘In the year 1911, statistics were obtained from heads of departments as to the distribution of appointments in the several offices under their control...The figures obtained showed the

preponderance of Brahmins which was specially marked in some departments; and instructions were thereupon issued to heads of departments in order to secure a proper distribution of appointments among the various castes...The instructions issued by government in 1912 had had no effect.’

The Justice Party need not have challenged the theological concept *Varnashrama Dharma* (duty according to caste) in order to claim seats in universities or more posts in the administrative service. Attacks on *Varnashrama Dharma* were directed against its justification of Suddhra status. Opposition to *Varnashrama Dharma* and to Gandhi’s early endorsement of it was intense and frequently articulated. In 1927 the *Justice* wrote:

“We are told that Mahatma Gandhi held up a lofty institution Varnashrama Dharma and extolled Brahminism. No doubt he referred to a few incidents like untouchability, and child marriage and the spoilation of young children of twelve years of age and stated that they were a parody of Brahminism. But if these did not exist he ‘adored Brahminism and Varnashrama Dharma’. It should be recalled that while the *Varnashrama Dharma* view ranked Brahmins first, a pre-Aryan, Dravidian hierarchy would have been headed by forward non-Brahmins. This ideological framework also defined a new Dravidian identity for non-Brahmins. There had been few aspects about its contextual movement.

These were :

1. A potential existed in South Indian culture and society for the separation of Brahmins. This potential was the lack of Kshatriya and Vaisya Varnas as well as the co-existence of a distinct Dravidian cultural tradition. However, this potential was not realized prior to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries since this all-India varna scheme was irrelevant to village

transactions in which some so-called 'Suddhras' were in fact allied with local Brahmins.

2. Realization of the cultural separation of Brahmins resulted from the breakdown of some integrative features of pre-eighteenth century South Indian life.

3. British Rule led to the enhancement of the Brahmins vis-à-vis forward non-Brahmins. Brahmins were prominent in urban occupations and in the British administration. In addition, they were also the first to develop political consciousness and hence dominated early Madras Presidency political parties and politics.

4. This increasing political, social and cultural isolation became significant (necessitated action) as increasing urbanization and mobility threatened forward non-Brahmin status, rendered the symbol 'Suddhra' exceptionally meaningful and led to development of a sense of relative deprivation. Politically, Home Rule was identified with Brahmin rule. Therefore, the first Justice Party demands were political and administrative, attempting to counteract Brahmin dominance. However, Justice Party ideology and demands did not long remain so limited.

5. Elite Suddhras focused their ire on Brahmins and, utilizing the research on Dravidians by European scholars, began elaborating a Dravidian counter cultural tradition. To give some examples from newspapers of the period: (all excerpts are from the Madras Native Newspaper Report)

The Self-Respect Movement (1925): 'Self-Respect movement' for Dravidian people represented not only the radical phase of the non-Brahman movement but also a response to the 'politics of piety' as espoused by Gandhi. The Self-Respect League was formed by Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy Naicker in 1926 bore a striking similarity in its objectives to that of Phule's Satyashodhak

Samaj, calling for the annihilation of caste, opposing brahmanical hegemony, and championing the liberation of subjugated classes and women. It opposed to the holy alliance of religion, caste and nationalism, an alliance which it understood as embodying a social and political order that was inherently inegalitarian. Periyar was highly critical of the way the brahmans continued to conflate ritual scruple with national principle', and deeply felt the slights brahmans routinely handed out to non-brahmans in the emerging public spheres of Madras and elsewhere. Periyar unmasked Congress hypocrisy again in 1928, when the Justice Party-supported an candidate of the Swarajya Party name, S. Muthiah Mudaliar who was independent minister in the Madaras Presidency & made cabinet issued a government order giving adequate representation to all the communities.

The basic thrust of the **Self-Respect** movement was to free non-Brahmans from their shudrahood and to prepare them to come together with the ati-shudras and others to realise an ideal society in which caste would have no place. It aims to restoring self-worth, pride and dignity of the men and women of Dravidian people. To counter the dominant role the caste elites were playing -through the so-called nationalist press such as The Hindu, Periyar founded his own journals and newspapers in Tamil like “Kudi Arasu” to popularise radical critiques of Brahmanism, Congress and its brand of nationalism. Periyar joined hands with Singaravelu, and the Self-Respect Samadharma Party was launched. in December 1932. For the Self-Respecter radicals, the term samadharma was not merely the Tamil equivalent of socialism, it assumed equality amongst men. and between men and women as a given. In 1940 the demanding of autonomous castles Federation enforced the Periyar for the establishment of non-Brahmin Dravidian state.

DRAVIDIAN MOVEMENT : It was a series of events which was a socio-cultural-religious movement led by different leaders of their time started with the spirit of Iyothee Thass, a great Buddhist scholar, and the pioneer of Neo-Budhhism in India, socio-cultural awakener in Tamil Nadu during the period of many movements in Central India as well as North India. It was the struggle between Brahmanism (Aryans) & Dravidians (Non-Aryans). These was spreaded all over the South Indian states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh & Malabar Kerala.

1.Regional political movement: Dravidian movement was converted into regional political movement. There was the origin of political parties in Tamil Nadu namely Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhadagam(AIADMK). Dravidian parties include an array of regional political parties in the state of Tamil Nadu, which trace their origins and ideologies either directly or indirectly to the Dravidian movement of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy. The Dravidian parties have traditionally associated themselves with the Dravidian community and thus their primary goal was to achieve social equality and end the domination of North India on politics and economy of Tamil Nadu (a south Indian state). DMK was founded and headed by C. N. Annadurai (as Secretary general) from 1949–1969 until his death on 3 February 1969, who served as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1967 to 1969. AIADMK was a Dravidian party founded by M. G. Ramachandran (MGR) on 17 October 1972 as a breakaway faction of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). From 1989 to 5 December 2016, AIADMK was led by J. Jayalalithaa, who served six times as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu on several occasions.

While non-Brahmin criticism of *Varnashrama Dharma* laid the foundation for an elaborate radical social reform Dravidian

ideology, it was one individual, E.V.Ramasami, who primarily was responsible for the radicalization of the Dravidian ideology. E.V.Ramasami founded the Self-Respect League to propagate his ideas on radical social reform. League members were extremely active in the northern Tamil-speaking areas of Madras Presidency. They travelled widely, holding public meetings and advocating religious, social and often economic reform and they were influential in changing many of the social and religious practices of elite non-Brahmin communities.

2.Shri Narayan Dharma Paripalan movement(1903)

It was a social reform movement in Kerala, India that aimed to improve the status of the Ezhava community. The movement was led by Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928), a philosopher, spiritual leader, and social reformer. It works to promote social equality and spiritual enlightenment, to achieve economic prosperity and educational opportunities to spread the ideas of equality and reformation to emancipate the oppressed castes in society. This organisation representing the Ezhava community from Kerala since 1903.

Based on the principles and ideals of Narayana Guru it was working against the social and economical inequality of the oppressed community. Shri Narayana movement arose as a reforming and reaffirming movement. He was in charge as a whole lifestyle change that included new religious beliefs, rituals, and perspectives. He offered an ideology of seclusion and self-organization that improved peoples self-esteem, honor, and worth. It was a protest ideology against the hierarchical and polluting Brahmanical value system. It resulted in structural changes such as increased social mobility, a shift in conventional power distribution, and the consolidation as 'backward castes' into a vast aggregation.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES: During the pre-independence period the oppressed class banded themselves against the dominating power of Bramhanas believing that they monopolized much of the socio-economic benefits, leaving the agricultural intermediate castes and communities in the lurch. For the purpose of the development it started its works having few aims and objectives:

- It rises to fight the predominance of Brahmanas and other upper castes in general.
- It enhances the position of the backward castes in the caste hierarchy by establishing the rights for higher education and distinguished occupations.
- 'Ethnic' awareness and politicization were generally established as a result of these activities among diverse caste groupings.

Educational and Religious Reforms

Narayana Guru (Asan) established a number of schools and institutions around Kerala in order to provide widespread education to society and constructed a number of temples and streamlined the worship, marriage, and death ceremonies only for the Dalit class.

He motivated the depressed and oppressed class in Kerala for 15 years, assisting community members in developing self-confidence, social awareness, and a clean environment. To begin, he consecrated higher Gods in place of inferior Gods and appointed priests from his own group of devout sanyasis. Second, he advised his disciples to construct additional temples in a simple and cost-effective manner. Third, he made a significant modification in his mission of establishing new temples. He never forced his followers to worship idols. He consecrated "Sivalikha," a massive brass oil lamp (Kammukha Kshetham in Thrissur in 1920) with the phrase "Let there be light." He consecrated a plain stone with the inscription "Truth,

Charity, Love, and Mercy" in another shrine at Murukkunpuzha. There are temples where poojas, or regular worship, are performed, as well as festivals. There are temples that are devoid of idols and images. It is self-evident that he consecrated many types of temples to meet the people's various emotional and spiritual requirements.

Education and Sanskritization - Sri Narayana Guru enforced to change the Ezhavas from an untouchable population in Kerala to a background caste community by emphasising the importance of education and especially the applying of Sanskritization in educational field. In collaboration with the Nair Service Society (NSS), he began temple admission programs. He urged his community members to abandon costly practices such as "mock marriage" (Thalikattu Sampradhayam), puberty celebration for girls (Thirukkuli), and Puaikuli, a festival commemorating pregnancy after marriage. He was against the consumption of alcoholic beverages. He focussed to the functioning part of Recruitment to government services having the same rights for backward classes.

The SNDP Yogam took up several issues, such as

- The right of admission to public schools
- The recruitment to government services
- Access to roads and entry to temples
- Political Representation

SNDP Movement emphasizes Ezhava community empowerment in Kerala, symbolizing resilience, progress, and community empowerment in India's social landscape. SNDP Movement impact resonates through its commitment to positive change and unity.

2. Nair Movement

This movement took place in 1861 in Kerala. Under the leadership of C.V. Raman Pillai, K. Rama Krishna Pillai, and M. Padmanabha Pillai the Nair Movement raised their voices to protest against the social and political dominance of the Brahmins in Kerala, India. Nair Service Society was formed on 31st October 1914 under its headquarters at Perunna in Kottayam district. The Nairs are one among the major division of Hindu population. In society they occupied high position. They have different titles like Nayar, Pillai, Panicker, Kurup, Kaimal, Unnithan, Valiyathan, and Menon. The Nairs living together in one big house known as taravads. The main contribution of Nair Service Society was the empowerment of women especially in taravads. Regarding the social marriage of Nair caste it had been seen that their system was totally different in which Nair- women were allowed to have several husbands. Nair movement passed several laws to protect them from that type of systematic process of marriage. In 1890, a Bill was introduced in the Madras Legislative Council to permit Nairs in the British India to register Sambandham. By this law people belonging to any caste in Malabar, following Marumakkathayam could register their Sambandham. This law made Sambandham a legally valid marriage.

The Nair Service Society was against the autocratic nature of karanavar. Based on the strong feeling of the people among the Nair community the Government introduced a Bill, providing for partition of property on the basis of thaivazhi in the Legislature in 1910. The anticipated Marumakkathayam Regulation took the form of First Nair Regulation of 1912. This was the first regulation affecting the Nairs of Travancore. The Nair Service Society was not satisfied with the Act. The Nair Service Society put a great pressure on the Government for the registration of the marriage

and the per capita division of all personal property among the wives and children. Thus the Government passed the Travancore Nair (Amendment) Regulation of 1925. The Regulation allowed the individuals to inherit and transfer the landed properties of joint families.

The Cochin Nair Regulation of 1912-20, the Cochin Nair Act of 1937 to 1938 imposed certain restrictions on the power of karanavar and the polygamy was prohibited. With the passing of the Hindu Succession Act which came into force in 1956, Hindu men and women have been given equal right to property and monogamy was compulsory for all Hindus.

Mannathu Padmanabhan and his Nair Service Society greatly influenced women in Kerala especially the Nair women. The main objective of NSS was the eradication of caste barriers and abolition of old and wasteful practices. Now the NSS became an important organisation for promoting welfare of Nair community. It started number of schools and colleges for men and women. Through Karayogam, and Vanitha Samajams NSS provided self-employment opportunities for Nair women.

3. Adi-Dharm movement: This movement took place in the Punjab in 1926

In the 1920s, Punjab, like entire India was tightly gripped in the merciless clutches of upper and lower strata, casteism and defilement by touching. The untouchables/Adi-Dharmis, today's scheduled castes or Dalits were considered worst than even the hated crows, dogs and cats. They were subjected to many types of forced labour. Adi-Dharm movement aimed at the creation of a new religion or qaum like other religions. As Juergensmeyer (1988) explained, "Its main motif was novel: the idea that untouchables constitute a qaum, a distinct religious community

similar to those of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, and that the qaum had existed from time immemorial.”

Ad-Dharm movement has produced many committed leaders who worked for their community like Mangoo Ram Mangoowaila, Sant Ram B.A., Vasant Rai, Thakur Chand, Swami Shudranand, Mangoo Ram Jaspal etc. These leaders of Ad-Dharm movement had effectively done their job in leading and motivating the Dalits of Punjab.

The belief of Ad-Dharm:

- There is only One "Supreme Spirit", Author and Preserver of Existence. (...*Beyond description, immanent, transcendent, eternal, formless, infinite, powerful, radiant, loving, light in the darkness, ruling principle of existence...* Polytheism is denounced. Idolatry i.e. worship of images is opposed.)
- There is no salvation and no way to achieve it. ("Works will win". Worshipful work is the way of existence. Work is for both body and soul.)
- There is no scripture, revelation, creation, prophet, priest or teacher to be revered. (Only the Supreme Spirit of Existence can be revered – not the Vedas, Granths, Bible or Quran etc. Worship consist of revering the "inner light within" i.e. enlightened conscience.)
- There is no distinction. (All men are equal. Distinctions like caste, race, creed, colour, gender, nationality etc. are artificial. There is no need for priests, places of worship, long sermons etc. "Man-worship" or "God-men" are abhorrent to the faith and denounced since there is no mediator between man and God.)

➤ **Ad-Dharm Movement in Dalits' Lives**

The first meeting of Ad-Dharm movement was held on June 11-12, 1926 Hoshiarpur in which many people from other religions

participated. Mango Ram made restless efforts to preserve own culture, festivals, religious scriptures, places and teachings of Gurus in order to provide a distinct identity to Dalits in Punjab. The leaders of movement claimed that Dalits are the real inhabitants of India and therefore they used the word “Ad” for their identity. It’s aim was to fill inspiration in Dalits and change their thinking. They appealed Dalits to shun their inferiority and follow the path shown by their Gurus to live a respectful life. They condemned other religions and made efforts to establish their own religion “Ad Dharm”.

Guru Ravidas as Guru who was also from Chamar caste. He played an important role for creation of equality and fraternity in the society. He gave a middle path between assimilation and radical separation. It was an obvious choice as Guru Ravidas and his teachings already existed in the consciousness of Punjabi Dalits. “His mysticism is not based on the blind faith but is the product of first hand and immediate encounter of truth and reality. The Ad-Dharmis used his picture as their emblem and his sayings as their sacred texts.” He occupied an important place in the Sikh holy Book “Guru Granth Sahib”. Ad-Dharm presents a different view of a religion which always works for people’s welfare. It was an organization to present a real vision. Leadership of this movement appealed to Dalits that they should live their life according to principles of Ad-Dharm movement.

3. **Namashudra movement:**

Namashudra, known as Chandal, is an Avarna Bengali Hindu community originating from eastern and central Bengal. Namasudra Movement emphasised the commonality of low social status and that of being subject to oppression, among all the sub-castes and impressed upon them to stand up to

the social authority of the high caste 'Bhadralok', a perceived common enemy, who were largely responsible for their poor conditions. The Namasudras for the first time attempted to organise a movement. Although it was politically insignificant, nevertheless it represented an endeavour to destabilize the hegemonic ritual order and an implicit effort to rise in social scale among the Hindus. The protest was against a social condition that imposed several disabilities like low status, lack of social honour, no education facilities, poor economic conditions etc. The movement spread rapidly over the southern part of Faridpur and north- west Bakerganj and adjoining areas of Jessore. The effect of the strike was such that the Magistrate of Faridpur who visited the affected area found "the fields.... untilled, the houses unthatched and not a Chandal in the service of Hindu or Mohammedans, or a Chandal woman in any market. The situation was so unstable in Muksudpur and Gopalganj that extra police had to be mobilised for maintaining peace and order.



PART- VII

CRITICISM OF DALIT FEMINISM AND ITS FUTURE DIRECTION

8.1 INTRODUCTION:

This section explores the complex terrain of **criticism, support, and self-reflection** within Dalit feminism as it intersects with broader feminist discourses and political theory. While Dalit feminism has emerged as a distinct and necessary voice that challenges both Brahmanical patriarchy and the exclusions of mainstream Indian feminism, it has also drawn a wide range of **responses—affirmative, critical, and intersectional**. Supportive critiques affirm Dalit feminism’s distinctiveness, grounded in the lived realities of caste, gender, and class, while transnational and intersectional thinkers—particularly feminists of color—have identified resonances and gaps in solidarity across movements. At the same time, voices within Ambedkarite and postmodern traditions have urged **deeper political rooting**, cultural re-examination, and methodological rigor. The chapter addresses not only **external criticisms** from liberal, Marxist, or cultural critics, but also the **internal tensions and contradictions** faced by Dalit feminism, particularly regarding representation, regionalism, and institutional co-optation.

1. Critical Analysis of Dalit Feminism

➤ **Supportive Critiques: Affirming Dalit Feminism's Distinctiveness**

1. Sharmila Rege – Dalit Feminism as Praxis

- Rege is one of the most influential voices who argues that Dalit feminism is not a subset of Indian feminism, but a challenge to its Savarna bias.
- She introduced the concept of “Dalit Standpoint Epistemology”, stressing the need to center Dalit women’s lived experiences as sources of knowledge.
- Rege criticized mainstream feminism for ignoring caste and valorizing only gender, calling for a radical rethinking of both feminist theory and methodology.

2. Gail Omvedt – Linking Caste and Patriarchy

- Omvedt emphasized that caste is inherently patriarchal, and Dalit women's emancipation cannot occur without dismantling both.
- She highlighted the contributions of Ambedkarite thought in shaping a feminist tradition distinct from upper-caste frameworks.
- She praised the work of Savitribai Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar as foundational to India’s true feminist politics.

Intersectional Critics: Feminists of Color and Transnational Thinkers

3. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Intersectionality

- Though not writing specifically about India, Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality has deeply influenced Dalit feminist discourse.
- Dalit thinkers have adopted and adapted this framework to address how caste, gender, and class intersect, but also critique

the inadequacy of Western models to fully explain caste-specific experiences.

4. Black Feminists and Global Comparisons

- Scholars like Angela Davis and bell hooks have inspired Indian Dalit feminists to draw parallels between race and caste, especially in building transnational solidarities.
- However, some Indian critics caution against direct analogies, arguing that caste and race function differently in social, historical, and economic contexts.

Critical Perspectives and Controversies:

5. Mainstream Feminist Critique: Accusations of Fragmentation

- Some Savarna feminists have historically viewed Dalit feminism as “divisive” or “identity-based”, accusing it of fragmenting the feminist movement.
- Critics argue that focusing on caste detracts from the “larger” goals of women’s rights in India—a position strongly contested by Dalit thinkers.

6. Left and Marxist Feminists: Class Over Caste?

- Certain Marxist or leftist feminists critique Dalit feminism for over-emphasizing identity (caste) and underplaying class struggle.
- They argue that capitalism and class exploitation are primary, and caste should be addressed within broader anti-capitalist politics.
- Dalit feminists respond by asserting that caste is not merely economic but structural, cultural, and deeply gendered, requiring its own lens.

Ambedkarite Feminist Critique: The Need for Political Grounding

7. Ambedkarite Dalit Women Activists

- Grassroots Dalit women, especially those aligned with Ambedkarite movements, often critique both academia and NGOs for co-opting Dalit feminism into elite, English-speaking, or donor-driven discourses.
- They emphasize political mobilization, reservation rights, and land reforms as essential parts of feminist struggle—not just representation or cultural critique.

Postmodern and Cultural Critics

8. Postmodern and Subaltern Studies Scholars

- Some postmodernists appreciate Dalit feminism for challenging meta-narratives of “universal sisterhood” and decentering dominant knowledge systems.
- However, there's criticism that postmodern theory may dilute political urgency by focusing too much on discourse and not enough on material realities like sexual violence, landlessness, and labor exploitation.

Conclusion: A Field of Contestation and Innovation

Dalit feminism in India is not a monolithic or static movement—it is a field of dynamic engagement, friction, and reinvention. Supporters applaud it for exposing the caste-blindness of Indian feminism, while critics (from both leftist and mainstream camps) often debate its emphasis on identity, representation, or epistemology.

Yet, despite the criticism, Dalit feminism continues to push Indian feminism toward becoming more inclusive, intersectional, and accountable, rooting its politics in lived experience, collective struggle, and the legacies of Ambedkar, Phule, and Savitribai.

2. Dalit Feminism: A Critical Analysis from Diverse Feminist Frameworks and Future Directions

1. From Liberal Feminism: Rights vs. Structure: Liberal feminism, with its emphasis on individual rights, legal equality,

and institutional reforms, has undoubtedly contributed to certain gains for women in India, such as voting rights, education, and labor protections. However, Dalit feminists critique liberal feminism for its structural blindness to caste, particularly in how it universalizes women's experiences while privileging upper-caste norms. As Dalit scholar Gopal Guru asserts, "*Liberal frameworks treat the woman as a universal category, thereby obscuring the specificities of caste-based subordination.*" In this framework, the Dalit woman is often either invisibilized or reduced to a passive victim in need of upliftment, rather than being recognized as a political agent with a distinctive standpoint. Sharmila Rege also critiques this mode of feminism in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, stating, "*The liberal feminist emphasis on inclusion into existing structures often fails to interrogate how those structures themselves are Brahmanical and exclusionary.*" For Dalit women, the right to education or political participation means little if it does not dismantle the caste structures that dehumanize them in classrooms, polling booths, and even feminist spaces.

Moreover, liberal feminism tends to overemphasize state-centric solutions, often aligning with elite institutions that remain inaccessible to the majority of Dalit women. Ruth Manorama articulates this gap clearly: "*Our liberation cannot come through laws alone; we must change the social fabric that makes laws ineffective for Dalit women.*" Thus, while liberal feminism advocates gender equality within the system, Dalit feminism demands a more radical transformation of the system itself—a system built upon caste hierarchy, Brahmanical patriarchy, and structural violence. In this sense, Dalit feminism critiques liberalism not for its goals, but for its inability to recognize caste

as a constitutive axis of inequality, rendering its promise of equality both partial and exclusionary for Dalit women.

Liberal feminism emphasizes individual rights, legal reforms, and gender equality within the system. While this approach has contributed to policy-level gains (e.g., education, reservation, legal protections), Dalit feminism critiques its limitations:

- Liberal feminism often overlooks the structural violence of caste, focusing instead on urban, upper-caste women's access to legal justice and education.
- Dalit feminists argue that rights-based approaches do little for those whose basic human dignity is denied by untouchability, landlessness, and caste patriarchy.

Dalit feminism demands not just inclusion, but a redefinition of what “rights” mean for oppressed communities—grounded in material realities, not abstract equality.

1. From Radical Feminism: Patriarchy is Not One Size Fits All:

Radical feminism, known for exposing the deep-rooted nature of patriarchy, male dominance, and sexual violence, has been instrumental in shaping global and Indian feminist thought. However, Dalit feminism offers a significant critique of the radical feminist assumption that patriarchy is a singular, universal system. Radical feminists often portray women's oppression through the lens of gender alone, downplaying the ways in which caste transforms the experience of gendered violence. As Gopal Guru argues, “*The radical feminist conception of patriarchy cannot account for the graded nature of caste-based gender oppression in India.*” In other words, what radical feminism identifies as ‘patriarchy’ is in many cases Brahmanical patriarchy—a specific social order where upper-caste men maintain dominance through ritual purity, control over sexuality, and the dehumanization of Dalit women.

Sharmila Rege expands on this critique, observing in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* that “*the experiences of Dalit women are qualitatively different from those of upper-caste women because their bodies are not only sexualized but also marked as polluted.*” For example, while both upper-caste and Dalit women may face domestic violence, Dalit women also endure public, caste-based sexual violence by dominant-caste men, often with impunity. Radical feminism’s focus on the private/domestic sphere misses this caste-public intersection, where Dalit women are denied both dignity and justice. This erasure leads Dalit feminists to assert that “patriarchy has caste”—a foundational idea articulated by Uma Chakravarti, who termed the phenomenon “*Brahmanical patriarchy*” to explain how caste purity and gender control are intertwined.

Furthermore, the assumed unity among all women in radical feminism is strongly contested. As Dalit feminist Baby Kamble wrote in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*, “*Savarna women too have humiliated Dalit women; they too reinforce the very structures that oppress us.*” Thus, Dalit feminism challenges the notion of universal sisterhood and insists on confronting caste privilege within feminist movements themselves. While radical feminism helped spotlight violence against women, Dalit feminists demand a deeper interrogation of how caste structures who is heard, who is helped, and whose pain is seen as political. Their intervention makes clear that there is no singular patriarchy—but many, shaped by caste, class, and community.

Radical feminism centers patriarchy as the root cause of women’s oppression. While this has helped illuminate violence, sexuality, and reproduction, Dalit feminists critique its universality:

- Radical feminism often portrays patriarchy as a uniform system, failing to grasp how Brahmanical patriarchy is a distinct, caste-based system of gender oppression.
- For Dalit women, the oppression is not only from men of their own community, but more severely from upper-caste men who exercise caste power through sexual violence and exclusion.

Dalit feminism thus expands radical feminist critique by introducing caste as a co-constitutive structure of patriarchy.

1.From Marxist/Socialist Feminism: Class is Not Enough:

Marxist and socialist feminisms have made vital contributions to understanding women's exploitation under capitalism and class domination, emphasizing labor, production, and ownership. However, Dalit feminists critique the Marxist tendency to reduce caste to a mere extension of class, overlooking the historical, cultural, and social specificity of caste-based oppression. As Gopal Guru sharply notes, "*Class can be transcended, but caste follows a person from birth to death—it is not merely an economic category, but an ontological one.*" In this context, Dalit feminists argue that an economic revolution that ignores caste will only reproduce Brahmanical dominance in new forms.

Marxist feminism typically centers women workers in industrial and agrarian labor, but Dalit women have historically performed stigmatized, caste-assigned labor such as manual scavenging and bonded field work, which is not simply "economic exploitation" but caste violence institutionalized through labor. Sharmila Rege highlights this gap, writing, "*Dalit women's labor is not just exploited; it is degraded and dishonored by caste ideology, rendering them doubly invisible in class-based analyses.*" While both Marxist and Dalit feminists seek to dismantle hierarchies, Dalit feminism insists that class struggle without caste annihilation

is incomplete—a view rooted in Ambedkar’s belief that “*social democracy must precede political democracy.*”

Furthermore, Marxist feminist movements in India have often failed to acknowledge their own Savarna leadership and biases, leading to a disconnect with Dalit women's lived realities. Activist and scholar Ruth Manorama explains, “*Class struggle must be interwoven with caste consciousness. Otherwise, the revolution will still have a Brahmin face.*” This disconnect became especially evident during labor strikes and farmer protests, where Dalit women’s issues like landlessness, caste violence, and sexual exploitation by dominant castes remained marginal to the agenda.

Dalit feminism thus expands Marxist feminism by introducing a caste-class-gender analytical triad, demanding that any project of liberation must address symbolic humiliation, ritual exclusion, and embodied violence along with material deprivation. The goal is not to reject class analysis but to restructure it through the lens of caste consciousness, as Ambedkar envisioned. In doing so, Dalit feminism articulates a radical politics that bridges material and social emancipation, forging a path toward truly transformative change.

Marxist and socialist feminists emphasize economic exploitation, labor, and the role of capitalism in women’s subordination. While this framework is crucial for analyzing Dalit women's work in manual labor, sanitation, and agrarian sectors, it faces limitations:

- It often prioritizes class struggle over caste, reducing caste to an economic variable rather than a deeply entrenched social hierarchy.

- Dalit feminism argues that capitalism and caste mutually reinforce each other, and revolution must dismantle both systems.

Thus, Dalit feminists propose a caste-class-gender analysis to understand oppression more holistically.

1. From Postcolonial Feminism: Decentering Western Norms—but What About Caste?: Postcolonial feminism emerged to challenge the Eurocentric universalism of Western feminism, highlighting the colonial histories, indigenous knowledge systems, and specific oppressions of women in the Global South. However, Dalit feminism critiques Indian postcolonial feminism for reproducing Brahmanical biases, as many of its key theorists and institutions are dominated by upper-caste, English-educated women. While postcolonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have been influential in deconstructing Western feminist narratives, Dalit feminists ask: *Who gets to speak for the Indian woman?* Sharmila Rege sharply interrogates this silence in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, stating, “*Postcolonial feminism has often taken the Savarna woman's experience as normative, invisibilizing caste as a structure of power.*”

Postcolonial critiques of modernity, nationalism, and development frequently celebrate indigenous or 'pre-colonial' knowledge systems, but Dalit feminists point out that such systems were deeply casteist. As Gopal Guru argues, “*Romanticizing the past without acknowledging the violence of caste is a disservice to Dalit women's history.*” For instance, invoking ‘tradition’ or ‘culture’ without addressing how they were used to justify untouchability and control Dalit women’s sexuality risks reinforcing the very structures postcolonial feminism seeks to dismantle. Therefore, Dalit feminism calls for a decolonization of

Indian feminism itself, not just a resistance to the West. As Dalit activist Cynthia Stephen puts it, “*We do not just want to decolonize India—we want to de-Brahminize it too.*”

Postcolonial feminism critiques Western feminism’s universalism and centers non-Western women’s voices. However, Dalit feminists point out that Savarna postcolonial scholars have often spoken for all Indian women, while ignoring caste privilege:

- Writers like Chandra Talpade Mohanty inspire critiques of colonial legacies, but Dalit voices demand to be heard within India’s own internal hierarchies.
- Postcolonial feminism must reckon with the coloniality of caste, not just imperialism.

Dalit feminism thus challenges both Western and Savarna postcolonial narratives and insists on internal decolonization of feminist thought in India.

1. From Intersectional Feminism: A Natural Ally: Intersectional feminism, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how systems of oppression—such as race, gender, and class—intersect in the lives of marginalized women. Dalit feminism resonates deeply with this framework, because Dalit women live at the intersection of caste, gender, class, and often religion. However, Dalit scholars caution that intersectionality must not become an abstract academic tool removed from lived experience. As Sharmila Rege asserts, “*Dalit feminism is not just about multiple identities—it is about a political standpoint rooted in struggle, survival, and assertion.*”

Intersectionality also raises important questions about representation and voice. In mainstream feminist circles, Dalit women are often ‘included’ symbolically rather than being centered in leadership or agenda-setting roles. As activist Ruth

Manorama states, “*We are not add-ons to feminism; we are its conscience.*” Dalit women’s struggles—from fighting for sanitation workers’ rights to resisting caste-based sexual violence—embody intersectional resistance long before the term was formally introduced in India. Yet, global and Indian feminist spaces often co-opt intersectionality without redistributing power, which Dalit feminism exposes and resists.

Moreover, intersectional feminism often uses the lens of identity politics, but Dalit feminism moves beyond identity to focus on annihilation of caste as a political goal, influenced by Ambedkar. As Sujatha Gidla (author of *Ants Among Elephants*) remarks, “*For us, feminism is not just about voice or choice—it is about dismantling the structure that says we are less than human.*”

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a framework to analyze multiple, overlapping systems of oppression (race, gender, class). Dalit feminism naturally aligns with this:

- It embodies intersectionality by centering caste, class, gender, and religion.
- However, Dalit feminists warn that intersectionality can become performative if not grounded in grassroots activism and political struggle.

They insist on embodied intersectionality—based in lived realities, not academic tokenism.

3.Challenges and Critiques Within Dalit Feminism Itself: Interrogating the Movement from Within

While Dalit feminism has become an essential intellectual and political force in India, it is not free from internal contradictions, tensions, and critiques. As a movement rooted in a plurality of experiences—urban and rural, educated and working-class,

Ambedkarite and non-Ambedkarite—Dalit feminism faces significant challenges regarding representation, leadership, class, ideology, and institutionalization.

1. Urban Elitism and NGOization: One major critique is the urban academic elitism that increasingly characterizes Dalit feminist discourse. Many Dalit feminist scholars have emerged from university spaces and NGO-funded platforms, which, while vital for visibility and institutional legitimacy, are often seen as disconnected from grassroots Dalit women, particularly in rural areas or among those engaged in manual scavenging and agricultural labor. Critics argue that some forms of Dalit feminist scholarship have become overly textual and theoretical, less attentive to the material conditions and survival strategies of the most marginalized. As scholar Anupama Rao notes, *“There is a risk that Dalit feminism, like other forms of identity politics, can be absorbed into neoliberal logics of recognition rather than radical transformation.”*

2. Leadership and Intra-Dalit Caste Hierarchies

While Dalit feminism seeks to dismantle caste patriarchy, it must also contend with intra-Dalit caste hierarchies, such as the relative privileges of some sub-castes (like Mahars or Chamars) over others (such as Valmikis or Bhangis). In some regions, dominant Dalit castes have themselves been critiqued for marginalizing more oppressed Dalit women, replicating a form of internal exclusion. Leadership tends to emerge from relatively privileged Dalit communities, raising the question: *Who speaks for whom in Dalit feminism?*

3. Ideological Fragmentation

Another challenge lies in the ideological fragmentation within the movement. While many Dalit feminists are Ambedkarite, others may draw on Marxist, Christian, or even spiritual traditions,

leading to strategic and philosophical disagreements. Some stress constitutional reform, others focus on grassroots agitation, while still others work within state or NGO institutions. This diversity can be strength, but it also raises tensions about political priorities and unifying goals.

4. Tension between Theory and Praxis

A frequent internal critique is the gap between theory and praxis. While Dalit feminist writing has exploded in academia—through autobiographies, literary criticism, and cultural theory—some activists feel that real-life struggles against caste and gender-based violence are not adequately addressed in academic circles. Conversely, some scholars worry that grassroots activism lacks the critical tools to challenge structural and symbolic forms of caste patriarchy, especially in legal, media, and policy domains.

5. Strategic Inclusion vs. Co-optation

There is also concern about strategic inclusion becoming symbolic tokenism, especially in mainstream feminist, governmental, or international platforms (such as UN panels or academic conferences). While representation is necessary, inclusion without decision-making power or ideological alignment can dilute the radical edge of Dalit feminism. Activist Cynthia Stephen has warned against this: *“Being seen does not mean being heard—and being heard does not mean being followed.”*

6. Generational Divide and Future of the Movement: A generational divide is also emerging. While older Dalit feminists like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Ruth Manorama laid the groundwork through lived resistance, younger Dalit women are using digital platforms, intersectional theory, and social media to frame caste and gender in new terms. This has created tension between experience-based activism and theory-informed politics, raising questions about continuity, legacy, and future leadership.

Conclusion: A Dynamic and Self-Critical Movement

Despite these challenges, the internal critique within Dalit feminism is a sign of its maturity and strength. A dynamic movement must constantly interrogate itself, especially when it claims to speak for the most oppressed. Dalit feminism continues to evolve by balancing radical Ambedkarite visions with intersectional critiques, by grounding itself in the lived experiences of working-class Dalit women, and by resisting both savarna appropriation and internal elitism. As Sharmila Rege reminds us: *“To write as a Dalit feminist is to disturb the smooth narrative of progress that Indian feminism tells about itself.”* It is in these acts of disturbance, disruption, and dialogue that Dalit feminism finds its power—and its path forward.

4. Vision for the Future: Dalit Feminism in Emerging India

Decolonizing Knowledge Systems

Dalit feminism calls for a radical restructuring of India's educational and intellectual institutions by centering Bahujan knowledge, histories, and epistemologies. For too long, curricula, syllabi, and research institutions have upheld Brahmanical knowledge hierarchies that erase or marginalize the experiences of Dalit women. As Sharmila Rege asserted in her advocacy for a "Dalit feminist standpoint epistemology," knowledge must arise from the lived experiences of the oppressed:

“To write as a Dalit woman is to rewrite history.”

Future Dalit feminist interventions must resist token inclusion and instead push for epistemic justice, where oral narratives, folk traditions, and community wisdoms are validated alongside institutional knowledge.

Legal and Land Rights: The vision for Dalit feminism must extend beyond representation and into the realm of economic justice, especially through land reforms, labor protections, and

access to healthcare and education. Dalit women remain at the bottom of India's socio-economic hierarchy, often working in informal, caste-bound labor like sanitation or domestic work. Scholar Anupama Rao highlights the link between bodily labor and caste regulation, noting:

“Dalit women’s bodies remain sites of caste and class exploitation.”

Securing land ownership, legal protections against caste-based violence, and equitable healthcare access are not supplementary issues—they are central to Dalit feminist liberation.

Digital and Global Activism

The rise of digital platforms has given Dalit women new avenues to amplify their voices, challenge savarna narratives, and build transnational solidarities with Black, Indigenous, and other anti-colonial feminist movements. Campaigns like DalitWomenFight and #DalitLivesMatter demonstrate how online activism can shift public discourse and create alliances beyond national borders. Scholar Sumeet Mhaskar notes that:

“Digital tools have allowed Dalit women to contest erasure in real time.”

This new era of cyber resistance allows Dalit women to shape global narratives, connect with intersectional feminists worldwide, and challenge the monopoly of savarna feminism in digital spaces.

Political Mobilization: For transformative change, Dalit feminism must extend its influence into policy-making and electoral politics, advocating for structural protections such as reservations, anti-atrocities legislation, and gender-sensitive governance. This includes ensuring dignity, safety, and equal representation of Dalit women in political institutions, public spaces, and labor sectors. As Ruth Manorama argues:

“Representation without participation is just visibility. We want power, not sympathy.”

Dalit feminist political mobilization is essential to combat caste-gender violence, implement inclusive welfare policies, and challenge both upper-caste and patriarchal dominance in formal politics.

Solidarity and Reform within Indian Feminism

For Dalit feminism to thrive, mainstream Indian feminism must engage in deep self-reflection and reform, moving away from its savarna-centric frameworks. Dalit feminists have long critiqued mainstream feminist spaces for ignoring caste or relegating Dalit women’s issues to the periphery. Scholar Gopal Guru writes:

“The Dalit woman speaks differently—not just because of her condition but also because of her critique of upper-caste feminism.”

True solidarity requires redistribution of leadership, narrative control, and platform access. Only through shared struggles and mutual accountability can a more inclusive feminist movement emerge—one that does not appropriate Dalit voices, but amplifies and supports them.

- **Critics across Feminist Frameworks Over Vision for the Future: Dalit Feminism in Emerging India**

1. Liberal Feminist Lens: Legal Reform and Policy Inclusion

From a liberal feminist perspective, the future of Dalit feminism lies in greater inclusion in law, governance, education, and employment. The liberal framework believes in individual rights, state responsibility, and legal equality as routes to justice. Dalit feminists, however, challenge the limitations of this framework when legal equality does not translate into lived equality. Legal scholar Flavia Agnes critiques this when she writes:

“Legislation alone cannot dismantle centuries of caste violence—it must be accompanied by robust social change and representation in institutional power.”

Dalit feminism acknowledges legal tools (like the Prevention of Atrocities Act), but also insists on systemic implementation, caste-sensitive policymaking, and representation beyond tokenism, pushing liberal feminism to expand its notions of access and equity.

2. Marxist/Socialist Feminist Lens: Addressing Caste in Class Politics

For Marxist or socialist feminism, the path forward involves linking Dalit women's labor exploitation to capitalism and feudal remnants, yet traditional Marxist discourse has often failed to engage seriously with caste. Dalit feminists like Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege have pointed out that:

“Caste is not reducible to class—it is not just an economic category but a social and cultural structure that organizes labor, space, and dignity.” (Gopal Guru)

Thus, the future of Dalit feminism within leftist frameworks lies in pushing socialist movements to integrate caste-conscious politics, ensuring that Dalit women are not just part of class revolutions but leaders of them. A future India must imagine economic justice alongside caste annihilation, especially in informal sectors, agrarian labor, and domestic work—where Dalit women remain overrepresented.

3. Radical Feminist Lens: Challenging Patriarchy Within Dalit Communities

Radical feminism has historically emphasized patriarchy as the root of women's oppression, and Dalit feminism agrees—but adds that caste and Brahmanical patriarchy are inseparable. Uma

Chakravarti coined the term *Brahmanical patriarchy* to describe how upper-caste norms regulate sexuality, marriage, and purity.

Dalit feminism, however, also critiques patriarchy within Dalit communities themselves, including domestic violence, denial of education, and male dominance in Ambedkarite movements. As activist Ruth Manorama affirms:

“We must fight Brahmanical patriarchy, but we must also fight patriarchal practices within our homes and movements.”

A future vision of Dalit feminism must include gender justice within Dalit spaces, where women are not only symbols of community honor but also agents of social transformation.

4. *Postcolonial Feminist Lens: Decolonizing Feminism from Within:* Postcolonial feminists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak have critiqued Western feminism for universalizing women’s experiences. Yet Dalit feminists argue that Indian postcolonial feminism has also marginalized Dalit women by romanticizing indigenous traditions that uphold caste.

Sharmila Rege challenged this with her sharp question:

“Whose feminism is postcolonial feminism, and who gets to represent ‘Indian womanhood’?”

In the future, Dalit feminism will continue to demand that postcolonial theories include caste as central to decolonization. This means resisting not only Western domination, but also upper-caste control over knowledge, institutions, and feminist discourse.

5. *Intersectional Feminist Lens: Structural Intersections of Oppression*

Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has become a foundational tool in global feminist discourse. Dalit feminism operates inherently within an intersectional framework, as Dalit women face the simultaneous impact of caste, class, gender, and religion.

Scholar Shailaja Paik writes:

“Dalit women don’t just experience multiple oppressions; they live at the intersection of all of them.”

The future of Dalit feminism lies in shaping an indigenous intersectionality, rooted not only in academic theory but in street-level resistance, labor organizing, and cultural assertion. Intersectionality in India must not remain a Western import—it must be radically grounded in the Indian caste reality.

6. Dalit Feminist Vision: From Assertion to Structural Change

Dalit feminism’s own vision for the future goes beyond inclusion or reform. It calls for annihilation of caste, redistribution of land and resources, transformation of religious and educational institutions, and public recognition of caste-based sexual violence. As Meena Kandasamy writes in *When I Hit You*:

“We are not asking for your kindness. We are demanding our freedom.”

Dalit women are already shaping this future through:

- Grassroots activism (e.g., Bhim Mahila Andolan)
- Digital resistance (#DalitWomenFight)
- Literary testimonies (e.g., Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble)
- International alliances (e.g., UN forums and Dalit-Black feminist dialogues)

Rather than asking to be “heard” within mainstream feminism, Dalit feminism is constructing a new feminism altogether—one that centers the most oppressed, insists on structural change, and imagines a truly casteless, gender-just India.

Conclusion: Toward a Radical and Inclusive Feminist Future

The future of Dalit feminism in India will be shaped by its ability to intervene across feminist frameworks, challenge internal contradictions, and remain rooted in Ambedkarite ethics. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar powerfully stated:

“We must shape our course ourselves and by ourselves.”

Dalit feminism will not follow; it will lead—demanding not just representation but revolution, not just equality but emancipation.

- **The Future of Dalit Feminism**

The Future of Dalit Feminism: Navigating Challenges and Charting New Pathways

Dalit feminism, emerging from the intersection of caste and gender, has significantly influenced India's socio-political landscape. However, as it progresses, several challenges and opportunities shape its future trajectory. Dalit feminism continues to mature as both a lived experience and an intellectual-political framework, its future lies not merely in resisting oppression but in transforming socio-political landscapes. Rooted in Ambedkarite thought, Dalit feminism goes beyond mainstream gender politics to expose how caste, patriarchy, and capitalism co-produce systems of marginalization. Moving forward, the trajectory of Dalit feminism must address the dual need for **institutional recognition** and **grassroots empowerment**.

1. Intersectionality and Epistemic Autonomy: Dalit feminism's strength lies in its intersectional approach, addressing the compounded oppression faced by Dalit women. Scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru have emphasized the need for a Dalit feminist standpoint that centers the lived experiences of Dalit women. This perspective critiques both Brahmanical patriarchy and the marginalization of Dalit voices within mainstream feminist discourses. However, some critics argue that the concept of Dalit patriarchy, often used to describe gender oppression within Dalit communities, lacks a robust theoretical foundation. They suggest that without a comprehensive analysis, such concepts may

inadvertently reinforce existing power structures rather than dismantle them.

2. *Digital Activism and Its Limitations:* The rise of digital platforms has provided Dalit feminists with tools to amplify their voices and mobilize support. Movements like #DalitLivesMatter and #DalitWomenFight have garnered international attention, highlighting issues of caste-based violence and discrimination. However, scholars caution that digital activism often reflects the biases of its participants. For instance, the #MeToo movement in India, while significant, has been critiqued for predominantly representing upper-caste women's experiences, thereby sidelining Dalit women's narratives. This digital divide underscores the need for inclusive online spaces that genuinely represent marginalized voices.

3. *Institutional Representation and Policy Advocacy:* Despite grassroots mobilization, Dalit women remain underrepresented in political and institutional spheres. The absence of Dalit women's perspectives in policymaking often leads to the perpetuation of policies that do not address their specific needs. Activists like Ruth Manorama have highlighted the importance of Dalit women's participation in political processes to ensure that their concerns are adequately addressed. However, challenges persist, including caste-based discrimination within political parties and the broader reluctance to prioritize Dalit women's issues.

4. *Literary Contributions and Cultural Representation:* Dalit women writers have played a pivotal role in articulating their experiences and resisting dominant narratives. Authors such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble have used literature

as a tool for social change. However, there is concern that the commercialization of Dalit literature may dilute its radical potential. Critics argue that when Dalit narratives are co-opted into mainstream literary circuits, they risk being depoliticized and stripped of their transformative power .

5. *Global Solidarity and Transnational Feminism:* Dalit feminism's future also involves engaging with global feminist movements. Dialogues with Black, Indigenous, and postcolonial feminisms can offer valuable insights and solidarity. However, there is a need for caution to ensure that such engagements do not lead to the appropriation of Dalit issues or the overshadowing of local struggles. As noted by activists, while global solidarity is essential, it should not come at the expense of erasing the unique challenges faced by Dalit women .

Conclusion: The future of Dalit feminism is contingent upon its ability to critically engage with internal and external challenges. By strengthening its theoretical foundations, ensuring inclusive digital spaces, advocating for institutional representation, preserving the radical essence of its literary contributions, and fostering genuine global solidarity, Dalit feminism can continue to be a transformative force in the fight against caste and gender-based oppression.

The future of Dalit feminism is a political, pedagogical, and cultural project. It is not a derivative form of feminism, nor merely an "add-on" to upper-caste discourse—it is a **radical reimagining of justice**, deeply rooted in the lived realities of the most marginalized. As India and the world navigate postmodern complexities, neoliberal exclusions, and new authoritarianisms, Dalit feminism stands as both a **critique and a compass**—

offering a future that is collective, anti-caste, feminist, and unapologetically just.

5. Toward Inclusive, Intersectional Movements in India

✓ Toward Inclusive, Intersectional Movements in India: The Imperative of Dalit Feminist Integration.

As India's socio-political fabric becomes increasingly diverse, the urgency for **inclusive and intersectional movements** intensifies. While feminist, anti-caste, labor, LGBTQ+, environmental, and tribal rights movements have gained ground independently, their disjointedness has often led to **hierarchies of oppression, selective solidarities, and token inclusion**. The future lies in creating movements that do not flatten identity but **embrace its multiplicity**, particularly by **centering the voices of Dalit women**—who often stand at the most disadvantaged junction of caste, class, gender, and religion.

1. The Shortcomings of Single-Axis Movements

One of the critical weaknesses of Indian progressive activism is its tendency to operate through **siloed frameworks**. Mainstream feminism, historically led by Savarna women, has often failed to address the **specificities of caste violence**, reproductive coercion, and systemic exclusion faced by Dalit and Adivasi women (Rege, 2006; Guru, 1995). Similarly, anti-caste movements dominated by male Dalit leaders have prioritized caste annihilation while **downplaying gendered violence** within their communities. This dual erasure highlights why **intersectionality**, as defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), must be more than a buzzword in India—it must guide **organizational strategies, legal activism, and solidarity politics**.

2. Dalit Feminism as a Blueprint for Intersectionality

Dalit feminism inherently questions the **caste-blindness of feminism** and the **gender-blindness of caste movements**. As

Sharmila Rege (2006) and Paik (2014) have argued, Dalit women's experiences demand a feminist politics that is as anti-caste as it is anti-patriarchal. Dalit feminism, thus, offers not only critique but **methodology**: an analytical and lived framework that challenges **single-axis organizing**. Without centering these experiences, broader feminist and leftist movements risk **reinscribing Savarna and class privilege**, even under the guise of liberation.

3. The Promise and Pitfalls of Solidarity Politics

While there have been positive examples of cross-movement solidarity—such as Dalit-queer collaborations in art and activism (e.g., Aravani Art Project), and Dalit-Adivasi alliances in land rights struggles—these often remain **episodic and fragile**. Queer movements, for instance, have been critiqued for **Savarna dominance and urban elitism**, often sidelining queer Dalit and Bahujan narratives (Anand, 2019; Narrain, 2016). Without mechanisms for **redistributing power within movements**, ‘solidarity’ becomes **superficial** or even **extractive**.

4. The Role of Institutions and Digital Media

Institutions such as universities, the judiciary, and media have a key role in shaping the intersectional future of movements. However, their history is rife with **upper-caste gatekeeping**, epistemic violence, and misrepresentation of subaltern voices (Guru, 2002; Teltumbde, 2020). While digital platforms have democratized access, they too reproduce caste-class hierarchies in visibility and influence. For inclusive change, these platforms must center **Dalit women’s storytelling, authorship, and leadership**, not just as victims but as theorists and change-makers.

5. Toward Praxis: Reimagining Inclusive Movements

An inclusive intersectional movement in India must begin by **redistributing space and voice**. This includes:

- Centering **Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, queer, disabled** women in leadership.
- Reforming internal structures to check **Savarna privilege and casteist microaggressions**.
- Moving from symbolic inclusion to **material redistribution of resources, jobs, and representation**.
- Adopting a **Dalit feminist ethic** that combines emotional labor, intellectual rigor, and community accountability (Savari Collective, AIDMAM).

Critically, it must also acknowledge that **inclusion is not absorption**: Dalit feminist thought should not be co-opted as an accessory to mainstream activism but should **reshape the norms and values** of organizing itself.

Conclusion: Intersectionality Not as a Concept but a Commitment

To build truly inclusive movements in India, we must move **beyond rhetoric** and toward **radical redistribution**—of power, voice, and theory. Dalit feminism is not simply a subset of Indian feminism; it is a **paradigm-shifting project** that has the capacity to **redefine resistance, restructure solidarities, and rebuild justice**. Intersectionality, then, must be practiced not in panels or policy papers alone, but in the **daily choices of alliances, representation, and responsibility**.

6. Conclusion: Rewriting the Nation through Dalit Feminism:

Dalit Feminism: From Precolonial to Postmodern India traces the complex and often silenced history of Dalit women's resistance—beginning with subversive Bhakti voices, through colonial reform, Ambedkarite mobilizations, to postmodern digital and transnational advocacy. This journey reveals that Dalit feminism is not a derivative of mainstream feminism, but a distinct,

autonomous epistemology rooted in the lived experiences of casteed, gendered, and laboring bodies.

Critically, the book challenges the exclusionary tendencies of savarna-dominated feminist and nationalist narratives, foregrounding instead the voices of those historically pushed to the margins. As scholar Sharmila Rege rightly asserts:

"Dalit feminism is not a mere add-on—it is a transformative standpoint that challenges both Brahmanical patriarchy and liberal feminist frameworks."

From the spiritual defiance of Soyarabai to the political fire of Savitribai Phule, and from the literary resistance of Urmila Pawar to the global hashtags of #DalitWomenFight, Dalit feminism has expanded the terrain of feminist politics in India. It has interrogated not only caste and patriarchy, but also the class-blindness of Marxist feminism, the upper-caste hegemony in liberal and radical feminism, and the romanticization of ‘tradition’ in postcolonial theory.

Yet, the struggle is far from over. As Meena Kandasamy reminds us in her poetic resistance:

"When you write about your own people, it becomes rebellion. It becomes dangerous."

The future of Dalit feminism, as the book concludes, lies in coalitional politics, radical pedagogies, decolonized knowledge systems, and global solidarities—without losing its core anchorage in Ambedkarite thought. It must continue to question not only who

speaks, but also whose pain is heard, whose histories are archived, and whose futures are imagined.

Ultimately, this book asserts that the true feminist revolution in India will not emerge from the ivory towers or elite conferences—but from the ash-smeared feet of the walking women, those who write, march, cook, clean, teach, and resist in every language that history tried to silence.

In bringing together the *longue durée* of Dalit women's struggles—from the spiritual dissent of medieval saint-poets like Soyarabai and Janabai to contemporary digital resistance movements—the book *Dalit Feminism: From Precolonial to Postmodern India* critically reclaims a history long denied visibility in dominant feminist and nationalist discourses. The narrative lays bare the multiple oppressions faced by Dalit women—not simply as women, nor solely as Dalits, but as the intersectional subjects of what Gopal Guru calls a "graded inequality" system entrenched in Indian society. However, the book does more than excavate; it asserts that Dalit feminism is not a subset or footnote to mainstream feminism but an epistemological and political rupture. Drawing on thinkers like Sharmila Rege, who posits that Dalit women "speak differently" because they "live and resist differently," the book critiques the exclusions of upper-caste liberal and radical feminism for their silence on caste, their appropriation of representation, and their universalist assumptions of womanhood. It also interrogates the postcolonial romanticization of "indigenous traditions," many of which have historically upheld caste-based patriarchies under the guise of culture. Yet, the book is not without internal critique. It acknowledges the tensions within Dalit feminism itself—such as

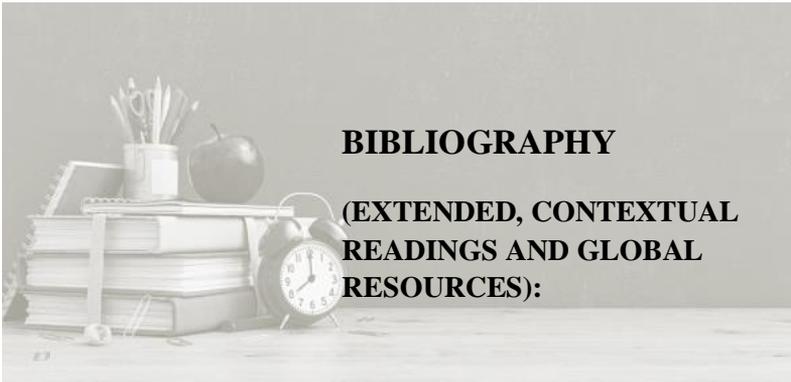
the risks of homogenizing diverse Dalit women's experiences, the gap between urban and rural realities, and the dangers of NGO-ization that co-opt radical politics into apolitical development agendas. The discussion of postmodern activism, especially digital Dalit feminism, is both hopeful and cautious—highlighting its reach and limitations. Hashtag campaigns like #DalitWomenFight have brought visibility but not necessarily justice, and representation in media or institutions has often been symbolic rather than structural. The book calls for a feminism rooted not only in rights but in redistribution, not only in speech but in systemic change. In doing so, it draws on Ambedkarite thought—not as a historical reference point but as a living framework that insists on dignity, liberty, and fraternity as the foundations of any truly emancipatory feminism. Ultimately, the book argues that the future of Indian feminism depends on its ability to listen to, learn from, and be led by Dalit women. Without this, Indian feminism risks remaining a savarna project, speaking for the few while ignoring the many. As Meena Kandasamy writes, “To speak as a Dalit woman is to reclaim the tongue that history burned.” This book offers that reclamation as both archive and action—one that demands we rethink what feminism is, and who it must serve.

Conclusion; In conclusion, the critical engagement with Dalit feminism reveals that it is not a static or monolithic ideology, but a **dynamic and evolving framework**—constantly negotiating its place within national and global feminist conversations. While criticisms have exposed legitimate concerns—such as the risks of essentialism, fragmentation, or lack of mass mobilization—they have also reinforced the **urgency of Dalit feminist praxis** in addressing caste-gendered oppression in both traditional and modern forms. Looking toward the future, this chapter emphasizes the importance of **inclusive, intersectional movements** that

integrate Dalit feminist thought into broader struggles for justice. As Dalit feminism continues to navigate challenges and assert its place in academia, activism, and policy, its vision remains radical: **to rewrite the nation's democratic and feminist agendas from the margins.** In doing so, Dalit feminism not only redefines feminism in India but offers a transformative framework for **rethinking power, identity, and liberation** in a deeply stratified society.

Conclusion: The Journey Ahead

The *Journey of Dalit Feminism* is a powerful narrative of resistance, identity, and transformation—unfolding from the caste-gender hierarchies of ancient India to the digital solidarities of contemporary movements. Across its historical, literary, theoretical, and activist dimensions, this work has highlighted how Dalit feminism offers a **distinctive and necessary voice** within the larger feminist discourse. Rooted in Ambedkarite thought and sharpened by lived experiences, Dalit feminist politics confronts the dual oppressions of **caste and patriarchy** with unwavering clarity. While early movements laid the groundwork for challenging exclusion, it is in the **critical self-reflection, intersectional analysis, and global engagements** that Dalit feminism has found its strength in the 21st century. Facing challenges both from within and without—such as co-optation, invisibility, and fragmentation—the movement continues to reimagine itself. The journey of Dalit feminism is far from complete. It calls for **inclusive, intersectional, and coalition-based movements** that center the voices of the most oppressed. In doing so, Dalit feminism not only reclaims space within India's feminist historiography but also offers a **blueprint for rewriting the nation's moral, social, and political fabric**—one rooted in justice, dignity, and collective emancipation.



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Appendixes

Appendix A: Key Terms and Definitions

Dalit Feminism: A critical feminist perspective that centers the experiences of Dalit women, challenging caste-patriarchy and dominant (Savarna) feminist frameworks through Ambedkarite values.

Intersectionality: A concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to explain how various forms of oppression (e.g., caste, class, gender, race) intersect in shaping social realities.

Caste Patriarchy: A socio-cultural system where gender roles and violence are enforced through caste hierarchies.

Appendix B: Timeline – Evolution of Dalit Feminism

Time Period	Key Development
1920s–1950s	B.R. Ambedkar lays intellectual foundation for anti-caste feminist thought.
1970s–1980s	Dalit women’s organizations emerge; marginalization within mainstream feminist spaces noted.
1990s–2000s	Dalit autobiographies and literature (Bama, Baby Kamble) bring caste-gender issues to the forefront.
Post-2010s	Rising online and academic visibility of Dalit feminism; increasing intersections with queer, global, and decolonial movements.

Appendix C: Comparative Table – Dalit Feminism and Other Feminist Frameworks

Feminist Framework	Key Concern	Dalit Feminism’s Position
Liberal Feminism	Legal equality	rights, Inadequate—ignores caste-based exclusion
Marxist Feminism	Class, capital	labor, Useful—but must center caste alongside class
Black Feminism	Race, identity	gender, Comparable struggles—offers solidarity and intersectional tools
Postcolonial Feminism	Colonial power, cultural difference	Valuable—but often downplays caste as a local oppressive force
Queer Feminism	Sexuality, diversity	gender Expands Dalit feminism’s scope, but needs caste-inclusive praxis
Ecofeminism	Women-nature connection, environment	Relevant for Dalit women’s rural labor—but often caste-blind
Postmodern Feminism	Critique universals and identity	of Useful in deconstructing and Savarna feminism—yet often abstract

PART-I

Appendix A: Key Figures from Bhakti Movement and Their Contributions

Saint-Poet	Background	Contribution
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Saint-Poet	Background	Contribution
Janabai	Dalit woman poet from Maharashtra	Challenged caste and gender hierarchies through devotional songs.
Soyarabai	Mahar caste, wife of Chokhamela	Expressed anti-caste spiritual defiance.
Akka Mahadevi	Virashaiva saint from Karnataka	Embraced body-denial and challenged patriarchy in religious language.

Appendix B: Manusmriti and Caste-Gender Hierarchy

- **Textual Structure:** One of the Dharmasāstras regulating caste-based duties and gender norms.
 - **Women as Property:** Women considered dependent beings—first on father, then husband, and son.
 - **Dalit Women:** Shudras and Atishudras excluded from spiritual rights; sexual regulation and labor exploitation reinforced.
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Appendix C: Feminism in Ancient India – Key Themes

Theme	Description
Silencing and Reclamation	Ancient texts mostly authored by men; later reinterpretations seek to reclaim women's voices.
Contradictions in Texts	Some epics show strong female figures (e.g., Draupadi), yet endorse patriarchy.
Spiritual Subversion	Bhakti provided women a route to divine agency and social critique.

Part II

Appendix A: Timeline – Key Events in Dalit Feminist Reform During Colonial India

Year Event

- 1848 Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule establish first school for girls and Dalit children.
- 1873 Formation of **Satya Shodhak Samaj** to oppose Brahmanical dominance.
- 1873 Jyotirao Phule publishes *Gulamgiri*, attacking caste and gender oppression.
- 1920s Christian missionary schools expand education for Dalit women in Tamil Nadu and Bombay.
- 1927 **Mahad Satyagraha** led by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to demand water access for Dalits.
- 1930s Early **Dalit women's conferences** organized within anti-caste movements.
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Appendix B: Key Concepts and Structures

- **Colonial Codification of Caste:** British legal and census policies rigidified caste as a bureaucratic category, reinforcing social stratification.

- **Colonial Modernity:** Introduced new forms of governance and education while simultaneously reinforcing upper-caste dominance.
 - **Gender Reform Limitations:** Upper-caste women's rights were central, sidelining Dalit women's oppression under both caste and gender hierarchies.
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Appendix C: Early Voices and Contributions in Dalit Feminism

Figure/Movement	Contribution
Savitribai Phule	Pioneered girls' and Dalit education; first woman teacher and feminist poet.
Jyotirao Phule	Critiqued Brahmanism, promoted universal education and women's rights.
Satya Shodhak Samaj	Early caste-based reform movement advocating social equality.
Christian Missionaries	Provided access to schools and healthcare for lower-caste women.
Ambedkar's Satyagraha	Mahad Mobilized Dalit women into civil rights protests and legal resistance.

Part – III

Appendix A: Key Events in Dalit Women’s Post-Independence Mobilization

Year	Event/Movement	Significance
1947– 1956	Ambedkar's reforms and writings	Focus on caste annihilation, also addressed the woman’s question in patriarchy.
1970s– 1980s	Temple Entry and Satyagraha Reassertion	Women actively participated in resistance against caste-based religious exclusion.
1978– 1994	Namantar (Name Movement)	Andolan Change Dalit women faced brutal backlash but stood resilient in public protest.
2006	AIDMAM founded	Gave organized voice to Dalit women’s rights and international representation.
2001– present	Ruth Manorama's advocacy	Took Dalit women’s issues to UN and international forums.

Appendix B: Key Organizations and Leaders

Organization/Leader	Contribution
All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM)	Advocacy platform focusing on caste and gender-based violence against Dalit women.
Ruth Manorama	Internationalized Dalit women's struggles through UN platforms and global solidarity.
Shantabai Dani, Baby Kamble	Early autobiographical voices of Dalit women under Ambedkarite influence.
National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW)	Worked to connect grassroots activism with national policy-level dialogue.

Appendix C: Lessons from Namantar Andolan

1. **Intersectionality in Struggle:** Caste, gender, and regional identity merged in the protest.
2. **Violence and Resistance:** Dalit women bore the brunt of casteist backlash, including sexual violence.
3. **Visibility and Voice:** Enabled Dalit women to demand a central role in public protest and political discourse.

4. **Cultural Assertion:** Dalit women used poetry, slogans, and street theatre as tools of resistance.

Part IV

Appendix A: Key Authors in Dalit Literary Feminism

Author	Key Work(s)	Contribution
Baby Kamble	<i>The Prisons We Broke</i>	Autobiographical critique of caste and patriarchy in rural Maharashtra.
Urmila Pawar	<i>The Weave of My Life</i>	Emphasized intersectionality and oral history of Dalit women.
Bama	<i>Karukku</i>	Introduced Tamil Dalit Christian feminism in autobiographical fiction.
Meena Kandasamy	<i>Ms Militancy, Touch</i>	Poetry and fiction combining caste resistance with feminist revolt.
Shantabai Kamble	<i>The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life</i>	One of the earliest autobiographies of a Dalit woman in Marathi.
Kumud	<i>The Story of My</i>	Critique of caste and language politics; challenges

Author	Key Work(s)	Contribution
Pawde	<i>Sanskrit</i>	Brahmanical control.

Appendix B: Theoretical Tensions and Contributions

Framework	Description	Dalit Feminist Critique
Mainstream Feminism	Focus on gender, often neglects caste; Savarna-centric.	Ignores lived caste realities of Dalit women.
Radical Feminism	Focus on patriarchy as the root cause of women's oppression.	Insufficient to address caste-patriarchy intersection.
Dalit Feminist Theory	Integrates caste, class, gender; rooted in Ambedkarite thought.	Emphasizes voice, memory, experience, and anti-Brahmanical politics.

Appendix C: Literary Forms in Dalit Feminism

- **Autobiography:** A tool of self-representation, resisting dominant narratives (e.g., Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar).
- **Fiction:** Expresses caste-gendered experiences through imaginative realism (e.g., Bama).

- **Poetry:** Rage and resistance through form (e.g., Meena Kandasamy).
 - **Oral History and Memory:** Critical in constructing feminist caste history (Rege, Pawar).
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Part- V

Appendix A: Caste-Based Sexual Violence – Key Cases and Legal Context

Case/Incident	Year	Key Aspects
Khairlanji Massacre	2006	Dalit woman and children murdered; highlighted police inaction and media silence.
Una Flogging Case	2016	Triggered national protests and digital campaigns like #DalitLivesMatter.
Hathras Case	2020	Raised questions about caste-blind feminism and judicial failure.

Appendix B: Hashtag and Digital Feminism in Dalit Movements

Hashtag/Platform Purpose and Impact

#DalitLivesMatter Inspired by BLM, brought global visibility to

Hashtag/Platform Purpose and Impact

	caste atrocities in India.
#DalitWomenFight	Used by Dalit activists to highlight gendered caste violence and resistance.
Savari Collective	Intersectional Dalit-Bahujan feminist media platform amplifying marginalized voices.

Appendix C: Dalit Feminism in Global Context

Platform/Event	Contribution
UN World Conference Against Racism (2001)	Ruth Manorama represented caste-gender concerns internationally.
IDSN Advocacy Reports	Documented Dalit women's rights violations for international human rights forums.
Dialogues with Black Feminists	Shared tools of resistance, intersectionality, and lived experience narratives.

Appendix D: Contemporary Challenges and Resistance

- **Media Erasure:** National and mainstream media often silence caste-gender crimes.

- **Legal Gaps:** SC/ST Atrocities Act remains underutilized or poorly enforced.
- **Postmodern Fragmentation:** The globalized neoliberal world allows Dalit women's issues to be co-opted or depoliticized.
- **Resilience:** Digital storytelling, poetry, and political organizing create counter-narratives.

Part VI: A Review of Dalit-Feminism and Other Dalit Movements.

Appendix

Appendix A: Overview of Key Dalit Movements Discussed

Movement Organization	Region	Year	Key Focus
Dalit Panthers	Maharashtra	1972	Anti-caste activism, literature, radicalism
Harijan Sevak Sangh	All-India	1932	Upliftment of "Harijans" under Gandhi's ideology
Adi Dravida Movement	Tamil Nadu	Early 20th c.	Social equality, anti-caste reforms
Dravidian Movement	Tamil Nadu	1916 onward	Anti-Brahminism, linguistic/cultural rights

Movement / Organization	Region	Year	Key Focus
Shri Narayan Dharma Paripalana	Kerala	1903	Social reform among Ezhavas
Nair Movement	Kerala	Early 20th c.	Upper caste mobility
Adi-Dharm Movement	Punjab	1926	Religious reformation, caste identity
Namashudra Movement	Bengal	19th–20th c.	Education, political rights
Adi Karnataka Movement	Karnataka	Early 20th c.	Dalit mobilization
Adi Hindu Movement	North India	Early 20th c.	Dalit identity and religious assertion

Appendix B: Selected Dalit Feminist Organizations

Organization	Focus Area	Key Contribution
Dalit Mahila Samiti	Uttar Pradesh, Bihar	Grassroots organizing of Dalit women
All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar	National/International	Intersectional feminism, UN

Organization	Focus Area	Key Contribution
Manch	Advocacy	engagement
Dalit Samaj Samiti	Shoshit Sangharsh Political Mobilization (Kanshi Ram)	Broad-based anti-caste political platform

Appendix C: Key Challenges in Dalit Feminism

- **Marginalization within Mainstream Feminism**
- **Lack of Representation in Political Spheres**
- **Intersectionality and Erasure of Dalit Women’s Issues**
- **Invisibility in Media and Public Policy**

Part- VII

Appendix

Appendix A: Key Critical Frameworks Applied to Dalit Feminism

Critical Lens	Key Thinkers/Texts	Summary of Criticism/Support
Ambedkarite Feminism	B. Ambedkar, R. Sharmila Rege	Urges political grounding and critique of liberal feminism.

Critical Lens	Key Thinkers/Texts	Summary of Criticism/Support
Postmodern Feminism	Rajeswari Sunder Rajan	Challenges universalism, critiques essentialism in identity.
Transnational/Decolonial Feminism	Chandra Mohanty	Supports global South solidarities, warns against Western feminist gaze.
Intersectional Feminism	Kimberlé Crenshaw, Paik	Highlights caste-gender-class intersections often ignored.
Internal Critiques by Dalit Women	Gopal Guru, Ruth Manorama	Focus on elite capture and marginalization within Dalit feminism.

Appendix B: Major Challenges Identified in Dalit Feminism

1. **Urban-Rural Divide in Representation**
2. **Class Privilege within Dalit Women’s Movements**
3. **Marginalization in Mainstream and Global Feminism**

4. **Tensions between Political vs. Cultural Identity Models**
 5. **Media and Academic Invisibility of Grassroots Activism**
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Appendix C: Future Vision of Dalit Feminism in Emerging India

Direction	Description
Inclusive Coalitions	Feminist Bridging Dalit, Muslim, Queer, and Adivasi movements
Legal and Advocacy	Policy Grounded in intersectionality and economic justice
Education and Narrative Ownership	Reclaiming curriculum and literature through Dalit voices
Transnational Solidarity	Participating in UN platforms and global feminist alliances
Digital Empowerment	Leveraging social media for counter-narratives

