Gender, Caste and Subjectivity: Revisiting the #MeToo Movement in India

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ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement has claimed to mark a 'new era in Indian feminism' by introducing feminist articulations into the quotidian through the powerful use of social media. The 'sharing' of survivor stories has served as a means to challenge the taboo of victimhood while also creating the possibility for solidarity. The #MeToo movement in India claims inheritance of previous movements such as the 2009 Pink *Chaddi*[1] movement against moral policing, the 2011 Slut Walk movement against victim blaming, the 2015 *Pinjra Tod* movement against sexist curfew in hostels, and the 2017 *Bekhauf Azadi*.[2] All these movements from which #MeToo claims heredity from, are movements proclaiming women's right to access public space.

The article will delve into the positionality of the speaker; the role of intersectional identities of caste, class, and gender in determining subjecthood, and solidarity. In its focus on gender inequality and sexual violence, the #MeToo movement, ironically, reproduces casteist, classist and sexist hierarchies. What seems to drive the #MeToo movement in India is the anxiety regarding women's confinement in the domestic sphere and the resultant inability to 'speak'. This understanding categorically erases Dalit women, whose lives as well as oppression, encompass both private and public spaces. This article highlights the latent Brahmanism of the #MeToo movement by examining the erasure of Dalit women.

Keywords: #MeToo, gender, Dalit feminism, caste, Brahmanical patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, students across Delhi came out on to the streets to protest against the restrictive rules imposed on female students residing in hostels in Jamia Milia Islamia university. The protest was named *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage). What started off as dissent against the curfew in girls' hostels, excessive surveillance, and so on, evolved to incorporate larger issues impacting women in academic settings across universities all across India (Barua, 2020). A major point of debate was the differential treatment of boys and girls at the hostel and the narrative of 'protection' propounded by the authorities for imposing surveillance. What is more interesting is how *Pinjra Tod* actually broke out of its conceptual framework and expanded to other spheres as well. Some of the notable instances where *Pinjra Tod* raised its voice are the Justice for Jisha and Delta Meghwal's rape and murder.[3] Two important aspects emerged as a reflection—the expanse of reach through social media, and the debates surrounding plurality versus homogeneity. The campaigns saw massive support in social media, signalling solidarity by technological means. Additionally, Jisha and Delta's Dalit identities were also an important aspect, this

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[1] *Chaddi* is a Hindi word meaning 'underwear'.

[2] *Bekhauf Azadi* means 'fearless freedom'.

[3] Jisha was a Dalit law student from Kerala who was found brutally murdered in 2016. The popular newspapers, online journals and blogs, argued how there was a lot of mainstream media attention given to the Nirbhaya case which is clearly lacking when it comes to Jisha, whereas, and this is repeatedly emphasised in these articles, the level of brutality in Jisha rape case is much more intense than that of Nirbhaya. The point of argument remained that Nirbhaya's identity as an upper caste girl located in the heart of India's capital city Delhi earns her the media attention, while Jisha is ignored because she belongs to a lower caste community in Kerala. In this gendered, region-based analogy, Jisha's identity as a Dalit and her spatial location of the 'marginalised South' becomes important. The rape and murder of the 17-year-old Delta Meghwal sparked similar questions of systemic oppression on Dalits. *Pinjra Tod* raised questions about Delta's caste-based sexual violence and the lack of justice. For further details, (see Daniyal, 2016) and *Pinjra Tod*'s Facebook page.

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recognition immediately aligned their politics to indicate inclusivity. It is, however, also important to note that several members of the group later left it accusing '*Pinjra Tod* of appropriating voices of the marginalised to put up a facade of inclusivity' (*LiveWire*, 18 February 2019). Criticism was directed primarily towards the lack of space given to Dalit Bahujan and Muslim women in leading roles to adequately express their opinions. It was alleged that the role of the members from the marginalised groups was restricted solely in terms of seeking suggestions and became effectively a token inclusion (*LiveWire*, 18 February 2019). *Pinjra Tod*, on the other hand defended their position, emphasising their 'solidarities, unities' and recognition of difference (*Pinjra Tod*, 20 March 2019). *Pinjra Tod* and the debates surrounding it are significant. It shows how feminist movements in India have taken shape in keeping with the changing influences of technology. Simultaneously it highlights the necessity of debating the aspects of seeking adequate representation of marginalised groups and fairly reflecting the issue of cultural difference. *Pinjra Tod* is considered a predecessor of the #MeToo movement in India.

The #MeToo movement, originating in the USA in 2017 to highlight the prevalence of sexual harassment within the film industry, took the world by storm. It was a first-of-its-kind movement that emerged in the social media. The Naming and Shaming List 'allowed women to tell their stories in their own (disembodied) voices, while claiming agency over the borders — which are systemically violated in the real world — around their bodies as selves' (V. Chandra, 2021: 172). The world wide web became the ideal platform to connect women across the globe. G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir identify the #MeToo movement as a 'collective and connective collaboration' (2021: 1). The proclamation 'Metoo' contains within itself a sense of solidarity, affinity, and assertion. According to MacKinnon,

> Sexual harassment is the unwanted imposition of sexual attention on someone who is not in a position to refuse it. Now ask: In what circumstances do women tend to be in a position to refuse men's sexual attentions? In the workplace? Not usually. Women are systemically the structural subordinates of men in the workplace; therefore, men can require pretty much anything, and hold women's jobs as hostage. Educational institutions? Some women are teachers, some women are in positions of power, but on the whole, it is men who are at the upper reaches of that hierarchy too. Women students are not usually in a position to refuse men teachers' sexual attentions. (2017: 17)

The #MeToo movement has claimed to mark a 'new era in Indian feminism' by introducing feminist articulations into the quotidian through the powerful use of social media. The #MeToo movement in India claims inheritance from previous activist movements such as the 2009 Pink *Chaddi* movement[4] against moral policing, the 2011 Slut Walk movement[5] against victim blaming, the 2015 *Pinjra Tod* movement[6] against sexist curfew in hostels, and the 2017 *Bekhauf Azadi*.[7] All these movements from which #MeToo claims heredity, are movements that proclaim women's rights to access public spaces. The movement has been propelled by the power of personal narratives. As such it has become a great exemplar of modern-day praxis of 'personal is political'. Pointing out the difficulties in speaking out about sexual harassment, V. Chandra notes that the popularity of social media owes to the removal of the corporeality from the context. She writes,

> The digital media offers an aesthetico-politics of hashtag stories without the physicality of women's bodies or voices. It allows women to narrate their traumatic experiences to the neutral computer screen. (V. Chandra, 2021: 175)

In India, the movement emerged and took shaped predominantly as a protest due to sexual harassment in the workplace.[8] It started famously with Raya Sarkar's LoSHA list of names of sexual harassers including several prominent academics (Bhandaram, 2017; G. Chandra, 2021; Kaur, 2017).[9] The list opened a floodgate of responses which followed two streams—veracity expressed through opinions shared in social media, versus the opportunity provided by an online movement to avoid the strenuous and often unavailable process of legal redress for sexual

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[4] The Pink *Chaddi* movement (2009) was in reaction to ultra-conservative and right-wing vigilantes who attacked a group of women in Mangalore and proclaimed marriage of couples if they were visible in public on Valentine's Day. Nisha Susan, an employee of *Tehelka* political magazine, organised a peaceful protest against this, whereby pink *chaddis* (undergarments) were sent to the right-wing political party leader's office.

[5] The Slut Walk movement (2011) is a transnational movement that began in Toronto calling to end slut shaming of sexual harassment victims.

[6] The *Pinjra Tod* movement (2015) began in reaction to sudden imposition of curfew in girls' hostels, among other related matters, in universities in Delhi.

[7] The *Bekhauf Azadi* march (2017) was an attempt by women to reclaim their right to move around freely in city at night. This march was in response to an incident of stalking in Chandigarh.

[8] The term 'workplace' is used here in a broader sense incorporating public institutions where women work and study.

[9] LoSHA, or List of Sexual Harassers in Academia, was a crowd-sourced list of sexual harassers in academia. It is important to mention that Sarkar's list was originally not meant for public consumption.

harassment. Feminist online platforms such as *Kafila* expressed their concerns regarding the 'due process', arguing that it would undo the years of effort put in by feminists to ensure legal acknowledgment of sexual harassment (Menon, 2017). 'It worries us that anybody can be named anonymously, with lack of answerability,' the letter read. They pointed out that this approach of naming could potentially 'delegitimize the long struggle against sexual harassment,' and make the struggle more difficult (Menon, 2017). At the same time, the list garnered much support as well. Pointing at the legal and institutional lacunae in properly addressing the cases of sexual harassment, the use of 'informal networks', such as on social media, to unveil the names of harassers was seen as an act of tremendous courage (Kaur, 2017). The list has been lauded for 'naming' the harassers. As Geetha mentions, the problem of sexual harassment lies in 'allowing harassers the benefit of anonymity' (2017). Women reporting harassment continues to be a rare occurrence due to the immense social stigma attached to it. In addition to normative gender hierarchies that perpetuate such stigma, the locations of institutional power such as in academia or the film industry contribute to instilling fear of ostracism. Moreover, as Geetha notes, 'The flipside of this . . . is that the price of not speaking out is even worse: years of trauma, and forced dissembling' (2017).[10] The movement progressed outside the realm of the academia to incorporate the Bollywood film industry, political leaders, as well as noted journalists.

The 'sharing' of survivor stories has served as a means to challenge the taboo of victimhood[11] while also creating the possibility for solidarity. G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir term it as a 'contagion effect'. Contagion, here, refers to the possibility of solidarity where 'a single outcry of rage becoming a concerted effort towards lasting change' (2021: 2). This is where, G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir opine, the potential of the #MeToo movement lies—where each new voice has a political potential to be heard and included to achieve a global transformation. It is interesting to note how they recognise the contribution of the 'local' in the 'global'. They write

> The hashtag echoes a larger whole beyond the individual. It is an 'I with countless others' — a 'we' of solidarity and shared experience, allowing women and people of all genders across social, ethnic, political, or sexual divides to understand that they are not alone and that the nature of sexual harassment and abuse transcends these boundaries. (2021: 2)

The #MeToo movement is seen as initiating a new wave of feminist consciousness across India. The #MeToo movement also initiated important conversations about its constituency: women, and encompassed the fields of academia and media, specifically cinema and journalism. The #MeToo movement has also come under scrutiny for its classism and casteism (Rowena, 2017; Tella, 2018; Vijayalakshmi, 2018). The constituency of this movement have been contested by Dalit feminists who have argued that the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace—on which the #MeToo movement is built—comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a *savarna* perspective.[12] Questions about #MeToo persist: Whose story-telling is more visible? Does identity in terms caste, class and gender play a role in determining subjecthood in the #MeToo movement? How do we confront the issues of who speaks for whom? Is solidarity achieved by acknowledging difference or by erasing it? This article highlights the latent Brahmanism of the #MeToo movement by examining its erasure of Dalit women. The article is divided into two sections—I begin with addressing the subject of the #MeToo movement by outlining the heterogeneity of the categories 'woman' and 'Dalit' and the erasure of 'Dalit woman'. From there I go on to discuss whether and how the issues that became prominent in the #MeToo movement, are sufficient to address the concerns of Dalit women.

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[10] Geetha (2017) mentions that, 'When women do speak out, and there are many who do, the due process is tedious. This is true not only of what transpires in internal complaints committees but in the justice system as a whole, where suffering and hurt have to be validated through established protocols that involve evidence gathering, halting testimonies and clever arguments. Court judgments might salvage the experience of anger and hurt by foregrounding ethical arguments that validate what victims have undergone, but procedures are what they are, tiresome and tiring. We keep with them, but that does not take away their tedium. Then, there is the question of relief to do with sexual harassment: apologies? Dismissal of persons? Guarantees that such things would never be allowed to happen again?' https://www.firstpost.com/india/raya-sarkars-list-of-sexual-predators-not-a-problem-but-allowing-harassers-to-recede-into-the-background-is-4183795.html%20 (Accessed 20 January 2022).

[11] It is important to note that victimhood, as Munt (2006) argues, also becomes a reason behind formulating social movements.

[12] The *Savarna* perspective refers to a homogenised, upper-caste/Brahmanical perspective. In Indian feminism, the *savarna* aspect becomes visible when feminist thought and practice tend to promote the concerns of only upper caste women while categorically erasing the factor of caste. *Savarna* feminism has been criticised for white-washing Dalit women's concerns, and its inability to identify intersecting structures of caste and gender.

#METOO IN INDIA: DIALOGUES AND DEBATES

Two types of responses to the #MeToo movement reveal the deep disagreements amongst feminist voices, and the 'contested nature of Indian feminism' (Roy, 2018). The ideas of difference and sameness, however, have laid grounds for feminist histories and theorisations for decades. Countering the dominant construction of 'woman' as a unitary subject seemingly affected by issues that cut across race, class, nation, and so on, feminist theories arising from non-White non-Western locations, question the homogenisation of the category. Such epistemological postulations highlight a unitary form of patriarchal oppression, a universalised experience of womanhood, and arguably the erasure of differences among women in an attempt to homogenise feminist politics (Pan, 2020: 99-101). Non-White feminists have also challenged the deployment of difference as the 'Other' (non-white non-western woman), which gets represented in essentialist terms in contrast to the 'self' (the white western woman).[13]

The most important contribution of the recognition of difference has been two-fold—that 'woman' is not a unitary category, and that there is a need to recognise intersectional structures as creating different sets of oppressions for women of different groups. It is important to note that allyship in feminist formulations, continues to be a matter of concern. According to Marai Larasi,

> For in a world where all women's lives have less value than the lives of powerful white men, which lives are least valuable? Which girls are simply embodied or disembodied collateral damage not only for violent men, and for the mainstream media, but even for some of our feminist 'sisters'? Which women's bodies are inscribed as disposable? We know which bodies. They are Black, brown, disabled, working- class, 'lower' caste, queer, lesbian and trans. They are bodies seeking refuge in the very countries that helped to orchestrate the destruction of their homelands. They are us. They are me. Woman is not homogenous. Body is not neutral. (2021: 234)

Criticisms towards #MeToo have pointed at its ultra-heteronormativity (Halberstam in G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir), the relegation of women with disabilities as outsiders (Halberstam, 2021; Haraldsdóttir, 2021). Haraldsdóttir utilises the strategic silence of her group of women with disabilities to voice their discomfort and dissent both towards mainstream construction of womanhood and the feminist praxis. Such postulations can provide the space for a 'possible suture, a stitching together of ideologies, practices, strategies, and emotional resonances' amongst different communities of feminists (G. Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021: 5).

But what about situations where women do not even have the opportunity to claim any strategic silence? How to bring together the local and global? Should one replace the global denominators with local narratives? Do they both benefit each other? Does this anonymity really address all women? Who are these women who claim solidarity? More importantly, who all *can* claim solidarity by the use of the hashtag MeToo in social media? Herein the issue of 'access' with reference to the #MeToo movement becomes important. I argue that the concept of 'access' becomes crucial in two ways—economic accessibility and sexual accessibility. The #MeToo movement in India, emerges from these deliberations.

THE 'ME' IN #METOO: ARTICULATING DIFFERENCE

Citing dual levels of erasure—of the speaker and the audience—V. Chandra notes that mainstream literary traditions, historical travel narratives, and epistolary archives, have all given prevalence to hegemonic male narratives (V. Chandra, 2021). Women's lack of visibility and voice is further solidified by their relegation to the domestic sphere. As mentioned earlier, the #MeToo movement in India has taken shape to bring about women's voices in the public sphere. V. Chandra historically traces the silencing of women 'within domestic spaces, under protective clothes, in demarcating public spaces inaccessible to them, and in schooling their bodies to make them as inconspicuous as possible in the public gaze,' and points at the #MeToo movement's crucial attempt in breaking this silence (V. Chandra, 2021: 173). The movement has thus been delineated as one attempting to bring women to the public sphere.

The concerns pertaining to women in nineteenth century India concentrated primarily on women's lack of access to the public sphere. Karlekar recovers nineteenth century Bengali women writers to show how they problematise the nationalist reformist representation of women as key markers of nation's culture and identity by highlighting the patriarchal undertones that reconfigured the gendered binaries of public/private within the

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[13] With reference to the First and Third world feminisms, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) has pointed out that the colonial history creates a division between the First and the Third worlds and contributes to the construction of a Western feminism which develops itself through a process of object formation of the Third World women in order to acquire a subject position for itself. By claiming to have 'knowledge' about the Third World women Western Feminism asserts its superiority as theory generator, whereas the Third world women remain evidence-providers.

nationalist construction of the 'new woman' (1993: 6-10).[14] The public/private binary was brought forth in the post-independence feminist movement through issues such as women's rights over their bodies, sexual networks of power, women and labour and so on (Kumar, 1993). Major attempts were made to recover women in history while also simultaneously inserting them in existing, dominant domains of knowledge.[15]

Such instances of interiorisation are further strengthened through the stigma of victimhood. Shaming, or 'victim blaming', coupled with social ostracism, continues to be an inherent aspect of sexual oppression on women. Under such circumstances, victims of sexual harassment are forced to remain silent and anonymous. In 'The Language of Gender Violence,' Keren elaborates how 'language holds victims accountable, rather than their perpetrators' (2012). Keren argues that with the reporting of a sexual crime, a simultaneous shift in the use of terminology also takes place—from 'alleged victim' to 'accuser.' Keren identifies this as constituting a significant change in how we think about sexual violence. Abuse elicits a response of sympathy. But, as Keren (2012) points out,

> using the term 'accuser' reverses the process, because it turns the victim into an accuser. So we as a public are now positioned to identify sympathetically with him as the victim of her accusation, rather than with her as the victim of his alleged perpetration.

Voicing one's sexual oppression thus seems to fixate a person to a singular identity. As G. Chandra notes,

> The danger of claiming the suffering of an assault or other violence lies in being reduced to victimhood, where victimhood is seen as a state without agency, a passive condition in which the victim becomes object- like, less of a person, through the loss of the ability to act in her own defense, survival, or cause. (2021: 103).[16]

The victim/accuser is now defined solely through the identity of a 'victim of sexual harassment' and as one who complained against it. Consequently, the anonymous person falls into the category of what Natanson calls 'a kind of hiddenness' (1979: 533-546). Contrastingly, when innumerable women use the MeToo hashtag on social media, they are choosing to resist dominant discourses of passive, invisible femininity. In this way, using of the hashtag becomes an act of regaining personhood and agency. As Natanson claims, the opposite of anonymity is recognition, where recognition implies taking the whole person into account.

Herein lies the importance of anonymity - the #MeToo movement has brought forth critical discussions regarding anonymity - like Fearless and Chamkiigirl in *Unlimited Girls,*[17] the #MeToo movement 'has allowed spaces of support and solidarity to emerge, creating a means of dealing with the stories, memories, and experiences of sexual harassment and violence suffered by people of all genders' (G. Chandra, 2021: 104). Anonymity, therefore, is redefined from loss of personhood to regaining of new affinities. As G. Chandra mentions,

> Anonymity allows those who have had violence done to them to have a means of breaking the silence in a safe space; to be part of a community of fellow sufferers; to find a language that legitimises emotion instead of having it delegitimised by a demand for rationality that trauma cannot always deliver; to have access to a form of catharsis through sharing and listening; to have a means of authenticating one's experience; to be able to name the experience, to understand it for what it was; to regain a sense of empowerment; to create solidarities of empathy; and to keep the focus on the stories and the system that produced them, rather than on individuals. (2021: 104)

The #MeToo movement's proclamation of women's agency and solidarity, I would argue, comes at the cost of imposing homogeneity on 'Indian women' and so erasing the issue of caste from its discursive framework. Jenny

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[14] Both in literary imaginations as well as political movements, breaking the shackles of domesticity has been a major issue in mainstream Indian feminism. As early as 1867, Rassundari Devi likened her married life to that of a prison.

[15] The pedagogical reformation is noteworthy to mention here. Mary E. John credits the publication of the report, *Towards Equality* (1974-75,) for feminism's entry into Indian academia. The report revealed an unprecedented deterioration in the condition of the vast majority of women since the 1950s. As a result, Women's Studies centres were born within universities. John mentions that through these centres and research units, a 'fundamental shift was thus inaugurated - from women as subjects to be educated to "women" as new subjects of investigation and study' (2008: 4).

[16] See also Soran Reader (2007) on loss of personhood in the way the complexity of agency is explored through instances of non-agency, negotiation, and so on.

[17] Paromita Vohra's *Unlimited Girls* (2002) opens with 'Fearless' - the narrator's online persona - searching for love. As she logs in to a site named 'All you need is love.com: Women who get it', the viewers are greeted with a surprise. The site, unlike the heteronormative image that it portrays, serves as a platform for women to don their alternate personae and converse with each other about love, life, politics, and feminism. The anonymity and wider reach provided by the internet in *Unlimited Girls* marks a new direction in feminist praxis by bringing together women of different regions, different ideas, and different aims.

Rowena argues that 'we need to look into the nature of the "sexual harassment" discourse itself to bring out the ways in which it has always tilted towards the interests of elite, upper caste women' (2017). In its focus on gender inequality and sexual violence, the #MeToo movement, ironically, reproduces casteist, classist and sexist hierarchies. What seems to drive the #MeToo movement in India is the anxiety regarding women's confinement in the domestic sphere and their resultant inability to 'speak'. Consequently, what underlies the movement are the desire to be visible in the public sphere and make their voices heard. This understanding categorically erases the issue of caste, and especially for Dalit women, whose life as well as oppression encompasses both private and public spaces. One also, cannot deny the obvious classist implications in terms of unfettered access to technology and social media platforms. Dalit feminists have pointed to the lack of awareness in understanding the intersectional nature of multiple vulnerabilities faced by Indian women.

The identification of differences, or the lack of thereof, has been raised by Dalit feminists (Rege, 1998; Rowena, 2017). Dalit feminism articulates differences from mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics through its invocation of intersectionality between caste and gender. Dalit feminism claims that the interventionist approaches typified by mainstream Indian feminism fails to address issues concerning Dalit women because mainstream Indian feminisms tend to see caste and gender as two separate and mutually exclusive categories. Dalit feminism, on the other hand, sees caste and gender as two interrelated structures that actively and simultaneously contribute to the structural oppression of Dalit women, and it argues that mainstream Indian feminism often suppresses socio-cultural differences such as in caste identity, in order to magnify particular issues and impose universality as 'women'.

This is where the relevance of the 'local' comes in. Rana Ayyub (2018) notes that despite the home-grown activist movements, such as #Pinjratod: Break the locks, #Nirbhaya, #StopThisShame, and #WhyLoiter in India with its Pakistani companion movement #GirlsAtDhabas, have had a catalysing effect. The term local here can be used in the sense of recognising the particular, the specific, such recognition helps battle imposed homogeneity and universality. The 'local' revises our notions of the global and provides ways to transform it.[18] The contribution of the local in shaping the 'global' was made visible through Dalit feminism's approach towards mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics when Gopal Guru (1995) famously points to the cultural subordination by Dalit leaders who silence the independent political expression of Dalit women. As such, Dalit women's discrimination by Dalit men leads to the understanding that:

> (1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one's gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them (*sic*); (3) the experience of Dalit women shows that local resistance within the Dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of Dalit women talk differently.' (1995: 2549).[19]

In its VIII National Convention on 26th June 2009 held in New Delhi, the declaration of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) stated:

> We are concerned that Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, the 'untouchables'.[20]

This declaration points at three intersecting factors of gender, class, and caste, and shows that inequality and difference exist not only among those in the binaries of rich/poor, upper caste/lower caste, but also leads to differences among women, and men and women within the Dalit community too. Dalit feminism has rightly pointed at the necessity to identify difference within and amongst 'women' and 'Dalits'. The constituency, 'Dalit woman', is in fact an intersectional category that is simultaneously impacted by caste and gender. Dalit feminism has elucidated this point by redefining patriarchy as Brahmanical patriarchy.[21]

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[18] At the outset, I would like to mention that I use the term 'global' in a very flexible manner to refer to the mainstream and the popular. As such, global here is not restricted to the geographical alone.

[19] I discuss the idea of difference in Dalit feminism in detail in my book *Mapping Dalit Feminism* (2020).

[20] http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Key_Issues/Dalit_Women/NFDWdeclaration_2009.pdf. More details provided in the references.

[21] Uma Chakravarti (2003) defines Brahmanical patriarchy as: 'A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, Brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and *pativrata* women who are valorised, and a

The construction of a homogeneous Brahmanical patriarchal identity of the 'Indian woman' can be seen for example through the discourses surrounding the *sati*[22] abolition and widow remarriage. In a detailed textual analysis of the construction of the '*sati*', Mandakranta Bose notes that, the Vedic readings of *sati* was often a misreading. Moreover, '*sati* was not simply a Brahmic conspiracy, for it was also assimilated in the Buddhist tradition' (2000: 25). Bose also mentions that the practice of widow immolations was not common, and that the 'largest number of *satis* from the eighteenth century onward occurred in Bengal and Maharashtra' (2000: 27).[23] While the abolition of *sati* was presented as ending a barbaric treatment of women, thereby highlighting the progressive mindset of the new patriarchy, widow remarriage functioned as a corollary to this reformist agenda in order to endorse women's agency. The 'women' being cited here, however, was not a universal category. Women belonging to the lower rungs of the society suffered due to the legalisation of such processes. Sen and Dhawan argue that,

> Following the Widow Remarriage Act, widows, who had previously had unconditional rights of remarriage, were now deprived of their property if they remarried.... Most importantly, the debates over social reform led to the imposition of marriage system which eroded the customary rights of poor, labouring and lower caste women. They found entry and exit into marriage more difficult. Thus, social reform and the shifts in marriage regimes had the opposite effect on two groups of women; the middle classes were able to defer marriage, access education and the public world of employment and politics, while poor women found themselves less able to access remunerated work, more trapped in marriages and in intensive regimes of labour within marital households. (2012: 7)

While the difference between 'men' and 'women' pervaded a homogenised notion of gender throughout the social reformation period, the difference of castes was addressed only by anti-caste movements. Dalit politics attempted to counter the Brahmanism in the nationalist reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Challenging the identification of 'India as Hindu and Hinduism as nationalism', these anti-caste struggles were premised on a strategic fracturing of the mainstream homogeneous category 'India' (Omvedt, 1990: 724). Despite the invocation of gender,[24] the concerns of Dalit politics predominantly continued to be that of the eradication of caste. Gender, then, was seen as an additive category, subsidiary to the greater issue of caste.[25] Kumud Pawade mentions the perpetual discrimination toward Dalit women within Dalit communities:

> While thinking about equality across caste and class, men forget about gender equality, this happens during talks of Dalit struggles or political agendas. Women are merely tokens in the [political] movement, and in literary conferences. Even their sessions are scheduled towards the end of the program when the audience has lost interest. (Qtd. in Paik, 2009)

Thus, the question remains as to whether women were seen as part of Dalit politics, or whether there was a nuanced, gendered understanding of caste.

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structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion' (2003: 34).

[22] '*Sati*', referring to a faithful wife, was a tradition practiced in certain parts of India whereby a widow was burnt alive on the husband's funeral pyre. This practice was abolished in 1829.

[23] Herein she links moralistic argument of *sati* to materialist consequences of ownership, and the potential loss of sexual control over the widow. A widow inheriting the property after the death of the husband meant 'disinheritance for other family members or the fragmentation of property as well as power for women,' as well as the 'risk of unwanted sexual entanglements' (Bose, 2000: 27). Thus, *sati* was a convenient means to remove the 'inconvenient female out of the way' (Bose, 2000: 27).

[24] In this context, it is important to mention Ambedkar's idea of endogamy and Periyar's Self Respect Marriage. Ambedkar writes in *Annihilation of Caste*, 'I am convinced that the real remedy [to caste] is intermarriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling – the feeling of being aliens – created by caste will not vanish. Among the Hindus, intermarriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident in life. But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy of breaking caste is intermarriage. Nothing less will serve as the solvent of caste' (2015: 285). Periyar's demand for inter-caste and interreligious marriage, women's choice in birth-control, aligned the sexual domination of Dalit women to Brahmanism (Geetha and Rajadurai, 2011).

[25] An example of this is the 2016 Una March where Dalit women were not included in the decision-making bodies. Moreover, Dalit women leaders recounted that they were not allowed to speak on stage because their issues were not considered important enough (Pan, 2020: 1-2).

THE PROBLEMATICS OF SEXUAL AVAILABILITY AND DIGITAL ACCESS

Dalit feminists have sited the strategic erasure of the caste question in gender in the #MeToo movement by invoking the Bhanwari Devi case (Rowena, 2017). Bhanwari Devi was a '*saathin*'[26] in Rajasthan who actively participated in preventing the marriage of a one-year-old girl. As retaliation, she was raped by five upper caste men in front of her husband. Women's groups in Rajasthan and an NGO called *Vishaka*, which was associated with them, predominantly represented this violent act as a case of gender violence. The Bhanwari Devi case led to the famous *Vishaka* judgment (1997) on women's sexual harassment in the workplace (Mody, 2013: 91-97; Patel, 2005; Sarpotdar, 2012: 19-22). In 2013, the Indian parliament replaced this with the Sexual Harassment of Women (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. Bhanwari Devi, however, has yet to get justice.

The *Vishaka Guidelines* has been celebrated as a victory for Indian feminism and for all Indian women. However, as Rowena notes, 'feminist mobilizations around Bhanwari Devi's brutal gang rape, worked only to formulate a caste-blind gender discourse based on the *Savarna* women's need for protection in elite workplaces' (2017). Herein lies the strategic erasure of the caste question in mainstream feminism: mainstream feminist interpretation of the issue presumed the category 'woman' to be a homogenised whole, wherein sexual harassment is assumed to be operative similarly for 'all women', with same intensity. Mainstream feminism, therefore, views 'woman' solely through the single axis of gender and erases the specificity of caste. An intersectional angle will highlight that Bhanwari Devi's rape is rooted in Brahmanical patriarchal idea of Dalit women's sexual availability, due to their (disapproved) presence in the public sphere.

Sharmila Rege links Dalit women's sexual abuse with the labour they engage in and the spaces they occupy. She writes,

> In the Brahmanical social order, caste-based division of labour and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as the failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification of their impurity. Thus gender ideology legitimises not only structures of patriarchy but also the very organisation of caste. (1998: 44)

In a casteist society such as India, ruled by norms of Brahmanism, Bhanwari Devi's prevention of child marriage was seen as a daring act. Her public rape, therefore, served as a means to assert the caste supremacy of the upper-caste rapists and also the emasculation of her husband, who despite being present at the scene, could not protect his wife. The Bhanwari Devi case, therefore, becomes the classic example of mainstream feminist appropriation of 'sexual atrocity' at the cost of ignoring caste (Rowena, 2017; Geetha, 2017).

The assumed uniform standards of perspective adopted by mainstream feminism fails to see that different situations demand different priorities. Dalit women's rape cannot be understood in all its complexity if it remains as an added dimension to caste problem or a gender issue. Instead, we need to recognise that Dalit women are differently situated in social worlds, and the violence inflicted upon their bodies specifically arises from the intersecting structures of caste and gender. The concept of sexual harassment in the workplace—on which the #MeToo movement is built—thus comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a *savarna* perspective. Moreover, for Dalit women, whose work necessitates their presence in the public sphere, confinement to the domestic is not an issue. In the process of challenging the restricted mobility of women, mainstream feminism fails to identify and challenge the very edifice of Brahmanical patriarchy. This shows that, unlike with upper caste women, Dalit women's sexuality is not confined to the domestic/private realm. It is public in its specifically casteist formulation where upper caste men are seen to have access to lower caste women who are seen to be impure because of their presence in the public sphere of work.

Additionally, it is also important to highlight the inaccessibility of digital platforms for Dalit women. Explorations regarding the impact of the social media in expanding the scope of marginalised, emancipatory politics has been explored predominantly in case of Dalit politics (De Kruijf, 2015; Kumar and Subramani, 2014). For Dalit women, the problem is two-pronged and concerns accessibility and epistemic authority. Smita Patil (2017) notes that,

> low education status, complex social structure and low accessibility to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have expanded the digital divide. Those connected to the internet are 35% of the

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[26] *Saathin*, literally meaning friend, was the Rajasthan state government's Women's Development Programme (WDP), where Bhanwari Devi worked since 1985.

population – the social composition of those with access to ICTs is dominant Indian castes, and they stand disconnected from the reality for majority of the Indian society.

As a result, we see an acceleration in the gap related to access and social mobility (D. N., 2001).

The complexity of digital access is addressed in the recent documentary, *Writing with Fire* (Ghosh and Thomas, 2021). In the documentary, we see Dalit women journalists of Khabar Lahariya making a transformation in news reporting through the introduction of digital platforms, but this transformation comes with new challenges. We hear journalist Shyamkali's voice echoing through as she expresses her fear of touching and potentially destroying the smart phone. Her fear reflects the masculinisation of technology and digital modes of communication. Added to the patriarchal perception of women as inherently incapable of having intelligence (cyber or otherwise), the digital divide is broadened further through the inaccessibility of English language.[27] While on the one hand, the documentary shows the tremendous scope of the digital platform in reaching a global audience and making journalism a true praxis 'of the people, by the people and for the people', it also creates unique obstacles for Dalit women journalists. Suneeta mentions the numerous prank calls she has received since appearing on the *Khabar Lahariya* YouTube channel; the comments section on YouTube reveals blatant casteist-sexist attacks on the Dalit women journalists. The detrimental impact of social media is also visible in the way the youth of the nation consumes information. In fact, *Writing with Fire* shows how dominant politics, armed with religious sentiments, utilises social media to promote and strengthen Hindutva ideologies.

In such a scenario, Dalit women can be seen to occupy an extremely marginalised position in the public sphere. Shyamkali's lack of knowledge of English reveals how *savarna* women are the beneficiaries of 'the Brahminical knowledge/power structure of the Indian academic space, as they have established parallel spaces for feminist research and development' (Rowena, 2017). Dalit women, on the other hand, find themselves outside the framework of these feminist discourses. It is for this reason that the sole focus on the 'sexual' harassment of the #MeToo movement, fails to address the reality of intersectional oppression on Dalit women. Such condition highlights the stark difference for women in documentaries such as *Unlimited Girls*. According to Radhika Gajjala, we often associate 'voice' as an empowering moment that is tangible – 'as direct (unmediated by power hierarchies) speech coming from a corporeal body on the other end of the gadget/computer' (2019: 2). Such correlations, however, are often too simplistic, as we see in cases of the Dalit women journalists in *Khabar Lahariya,* the physical manifestation of voice does not ensure agency. It needs to be recognised in a more nuanced manner in the form of a negotiation. Gajjala mentions that in order to assess voice in its multiple formats, we need to ask new questions: 'Do the affordances of the gadget and/or platform for engaging the digital provide access, misinformation, or surveillance, for example? Under what conditions is access liberating and empowering?' (2019: 2). Such questions highlight both the construction of such 'voice' and the politics behind it.

Political organisations such as the Ektara Collective, have tried to bridge this gap between the local and the global, and the transformative potentials of recognising cultural difference, through creative and aesthetic reimaginations. Their film, *Turup* (2017), is set in Bhopal, and it explores the lives of women at the intersecting boundaries of religion, caste, class, and gender. The story primarily follows the relationship between a Dalit girl and a Muslim man, and the right-wing political party's opposition to it. The film shows how the final legal victory of the couple is made possible only when women of different castes and classes come together and fight against the injustices meted out to them. The ultimate realisation of this transformation happens through the symbolic alliance and affiliation between Monica, the Dalit housemaid, and Neelima, the upper caste journalist turned housewife. *Turup* creates an imaginative space where the 'local' enables transformation at the 'global' level. The inter-caste, inter-religious marriage of the Dalit girl and the Muslim boy in the small town of Bhopal, highlights the possibilities that can emerge when differences and intersectionalities are recognised, and solidarities are built.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of allyship in Dalit feminism is further enhanced by a historical erasure of the caste question in the analysis of gender. In the Indian context, 'women as middle class and upper caste has a long genealogy that, historically and conceptually, goes back into nationalism as well as social reform' (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999: 502; Sangari and Vaid, 1989: 7, 8 and 18; Tharu and Lalita, 1993: xix). The erasure of caste differences in feminism and gender in Dalit politics has given rise to the phenomenon that 'all the women are upper caste (and by implication, middle class Hindu) and all the lower castes are men' (Paik, 2009: 41). In this context, women's role in the anti-Mandal agitation is also significant. The agitation was caused by the government's decision to implement the suggestions of the Mandal commission wherein a quota would be implemented for the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and would be used in recruitment to the Public and Central services. Uma Chakravarti mentions that, as

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[27] Patil mentions that internet is accessible predominantly to articulate and educated Dalit women and Adivasi girls (2017).

a response to this policy, women college students in Delhi demonstrated on the street with placards reading 'We don't want unemployed husbands!' (2003, 1). Chakravarti argues that the implication of the placard was rooted in Brahmanical patriarchal ideologies:

> What the placards were saying was that these girls would be deprived of upper caste IAS husbands. But what they were also saying was that the OBCs and Dalits who would now occupy these positions in the IAS could *never* be their potential husbands. (2003: 1)

Tharu and Niranjana show how in the late 20th century, an anti-Mandal woman aligns herself above all as a citizen of India rather than as a gendered being, thus avoiding a 'battle of sexes' with middle class men. However, the claiming of citizenship rather than or perhaps over sisterhood with Dalit women, now not only sets them against Dalit men, but also against lower-caste/class women (Tharu and Niranjana, 1999).

A reorienting of caste/gender questions through an intersectional lens reveals that women's bodies are marked by Brahmanical tropes of sexual control which were established through the Vedic dominance. Women, then, emerge not only as a heterogenous category marked by caste, class, religion, and so on, it also becomes imperative to recognise the specificity of their concerns as impacted by different cultural, social and political systems. In this context, the approach taken by *Pinjra Tod* can be serve as an example. In terms of the issues, they chose to speak on and the approach, *Pinjra Tod* can be seen as being open to exploring gender through its intersections with other structures of oppression. As they mention in their response to the allegations of being *savarna*, they 'invested in a host of issues faced by women on campus such as the need for basic infrastructure, against discrimination based on caste, religion, race and region in university and private accommodation, implementation of reservations and redressal of sexual harassment' (*Pinjra Tod*, 20 March 2019). Interestingly, they argue that their point of contention was never premised on intersectionality per se. Their attention to plural forms of discrimination seems to have emerged in the process of the various campus-related issues they focused upon. Such a proclamation almost dismisses the necessity of keeping intersectionality at the centre of our thinking and activism. A Dalit feminist approach to the #MeToo movement addresses this necessity. It shows that the understanding of sexual harassment as solely a result of gender oppression, will only reproduce the caste-blind discourse and further work to invisibilise Dalit women and their experiences. The #MeToo movement, in claiming solidarity and agency, not only ignores the factor of accessibility to digital platforms, it also represents gender in a singularly homogeneous term. The crucial message of the #MeToo movement should be that solidarity need not imply homogeneity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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