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THE *SISTERARCHY* OF INDIAN FEMINISM

Shweta Sinha

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As a woman of upper-caste origin writing about Dalit feminism, I have made a deliberate choice to not be a fence-sitter or to 'both-side' the discussion. I have also attempted to gain perspective through discussions with women from the Dalit community and through articles and academic papers written by Dalit authors. I would like to thank every single individual from the Dalit community who took the time and had the magnanimity and patience to educate me about issues with which I had previously only had a one-sided view. I am not appropriating the Dalit narrative for satiation of my own intellectual curiosity. This is a sincere attempt to examine and expose the fault lines within my own upper-caste community, in order to begin the process of restoration from within. I do not believe that Dalit women need me or other upper-caste women to be their spokesperson or to come to their rescue. What I do believe is that upper-caste women need to be mobilized and made aware of the various ways in which we can be a part of the solution and start with dismantling the toxic system of caste-based oppression that exists within our own 'Savarna' communities. This article is a humble attempt at that. —Shweta Sinha

What is feminism? Is it a slick catchphrase or a badge that one uses as social currency in the 'woke' circles? Is it the punchline of a misogynistic comedian's joke? Is it a matter of identity politics? Is it a resounding cry for sisterhood against patriarchy? Or is it just another social construct preserved to reinforce hierarchy within the supposed sisterhood? It could be any of the above, depending on who is answering the question.

The paradigm of feminism in India is deeply entrenched in its socio-cultural-political-economic reality. It is an ever-evolving byproduct of patriarchy borne out of the caste-system, colonialism, urbanism ('Westernism'), and capitalism. As a result, the plurality within Indian feminism is predicated on the multiple patriarchies that exist within the Indian society. When feminism is equated to women's rights, which are further equated to human rights, it begs the question, "the rights of which women?"

Making feminism analogous to women's rights, without identifying the various sub-groups and intersectionality that exist within the larger

framework of women's issues, can be narrow and somewhat reductive; within the supposed sisterhood, there exists an insidious *sisterarchy* that places certain feminist factions on top, while using benign neglect to relegate other marginalized factions to the bottom.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE INDIAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Although the expression "feminism" is of recent coinage, the activism among women to advocate for their self-emancipation and self-determination, whether overtly or covertly, goes back millennia in almost every society across human civilizations. The historical background underscoring the rise of the women's movement and feminism in India has been widely discussed in the works of female Indian scholars and academics, such as Sarbani Guha Ghoshal (2005), Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2012), and Rekha Pande (2018). The origins of Indian feminism can similarly be traced back to India's social reform movements that began with the abolishment of 'Sati' (self-immolation on deceased husband's

pyre) in 1829, championed by a man – Raja Ram Mohan Roy (Pande, 2018). Another pioneering advocate of women’s rights was Savitribai Phule who is credited with starting the first school for girls in India, in 1848. Further social reforms directed towards uplifting women included the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act (1856), the abolishment of child marriages (1929), women’s right to inherit property (1956), and the dowry prohibition act (1961) (Ghoshal, 2005).

While these were the primacies of women’s movements in the initial years of India’s feminist awakening, the post-colonial era found parallels between women’s struggles globally. Globalization and westernization have often been synonymous in India as markers of social, economic and intellectual progress, and have also witnessed co-optation by the Indian feminist movement (John, 2014). In the last few decades, global feminist issues regarding sexual harassment at the workplace, equal-pay-for-equal-work, pro-choice autonomy, and political representation have taken center-stage in the Indian feminist movement. By default, they have also become representative of India’s collective feminist paradigm. While large cross-sections of society have deeply benefited from the reforms brought on by these movements, a close examination reveals that the benefits are disproportionately skewed towards upholding the rights and agendas of upper-class, Hindu women, who invariably also occupy the highest social position in Indian society. This claim shall be examined and discussed in greater detail in the upcoming sections of this study.

Consequently, the political rhetoric of feminism in India is typically rendered as a universal experience of womanhood rather than a complex milieu of subjective oppression. The exploitation that is inherently based upon a woman’s caste/religion, financial status, sexuality, and gender-expression is

“... the political rhetoric of feminism in India is typically rendered as a universal experience of womanhood rather than a complex milieu of subjective oppression.”

entirely discounted when the feminist lens paints emancipation as a generalized notion of freedom from the oppression without parsing issues of intersectionality. It is only upon examining the ways in which caste and socio-economic privilege (or the lack thereof) intersect with gender-based issues (Menon, 2019) will we be able to truly comprehend the enormity of the collective burden of these intersecting phenomenon. In this regard, the mutable framework of feminist politics in

mainstream India, continues to ignore the unique challenges faced by ‘lower’ caste Dalit (those who were considered ‘untouchable’ as per the caste system) women, Muslim women, women from the LGBTQ community, and those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Amongst all the marginalized factions that exist within the feminist framework, this study attempts to investigate one specific caste/class-based intersectional perspective, i.e., Dalit feminism. The study scrutinizes the ways in which Dalit feminism operates

as an independent movement and has yet to find integration or adequate representation in the mainstream Indian feminist agenda.

THE EGREGIOUS REALITY OF INDIA'S CASTE SYSTEM

In order to understand intersectionality from a feminist perspective, it is imperative to identify and acknowledge the different kinds of hierarchies that continue to exist in the Indian society. Gender-based hierarchy that allows sexism to perpetuate in the form of patriarchy is just one of them. Another pecking-order that has a firm foothold in every social, occupational, political, and economic charter is the caste-system, despite caste-based discrimination having been abolished by the Indian constitution in 1950.

Traditionally, the caste system was based on managing distribution of labor and divided Hindus into four tiers based on the occupations

that they were allowed to pursue - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The Brahmins were teachers and intellectuals; they occupied the top of the social pyramid and were often advisors to kings. The Kshatriyas were warriors or rulers. The Vaishyas were traders and merchants, and right at the bottom were the Shudras who were allocated menial jobs of cleaning latrines and sweeping the streets (Caste system in India, 2022, February 9). Excluded from the Hindu caste system or the *chaturvarna* (four classes) were the Dalits who were considered 'untouchables' and were considered '*avarna*' referring to those who do not belong to any of the four classes. The Dalits were forced to take up the jobs such as, manual scavenging, leather-crafting, and working at brick kilns (Dalit, 2022, February 1). These occupations were deemed "filthy" and "ignominious" for higher-caste communities.

In post-colonial India, caste-based discrimination was abolished and the government introduced the reservation system for Dalits as a corrective measure (similar to 'Affirmative action' in the United States), in order to enhance their representation in politics, education, and economic activity. The Indian government officially conferred upon the historically discriminated communities (Dalits) the designation of Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Certain economically disadvantaged *Shudra* communities were labelled as Other Backward Class (OBC). In 1995, the Parliament of India also instated the Prevention of Atrocities Act (SC/ST Act) to prohibit discrimination and hate crimes against the SC/ST community.

Although these measures appear to have been strides made in the right direction, the vestiges of untouchability and inequality continue to be endemic to modern India because of the deeply engrained roots of discrimination. The Dalit community comprises 25% of India's population. Out of the 6 million Dalit households in India (as per a 2019 report), an estimated 40-60% are still involved in sanitation work as manual scavengers and garbage collectors. As of August 2021, 36.8% of SC and 26.7% of OBC populations in rural

India are living below the poverty line (earnings below approximately \$5 per capita per month). In urban India, the numbers escalate to 39.9% (SC) and 31.4% (OBC) living below the poverty line (earnings below approximately \$7 per capita per month) (Gang et al., 2002; Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, 2018, August 8).

In rural India, Dalits continue to be forbidden from visiting temples, accessing public bore wells for water, and marrying outside (above) their caste. This form of disguised apartheid continues unchecked in urban India as well, where Dalit men and women that serve as domestic workers in upper-caste homes or as peons in offices are expected to use a separate set of utensils to eat and drink water, use separate elevators and washrooms designated for 'servants,' and sit on the floor as opposed to a chair or couch. They are not protected by any form of labor union or HR policies, and in the absence of minimum-wage policies, are often paid poorly.

The systemic oppression of the Dalit community results in a high drop-out rate in schools, perpetuating the vicious cycle of illiteracy and poverty. In fact, there are several incidences in which Dalit children have been oppressed by members of the upper caste and have been forbidden from accessing mid-day meals (the government's initiative to provide free lunches to children in government schools) (Reddy, 2018, June 30).

The extent of systemic disdain and persecution also varies across Indian states. A 2015 study indicated that 49% of Dalit children in the state of Haryana were underweight, and a staggering 80% of those between 6 months to 5 years of age were anemic. Unlawful discrimination is also evidenced by the fact that around 50% of death row inmates in the state of Maharashtra are from the SC/ST community (Caste system in India, 2022, February 9; Dalit, 2022, February 1). Cases of caste-based violence (mob lynching, murder, rape) perpetuated by the upper caste population against the Dalit

population are also commonplace in India. Thus, despite India declaring itself a free, democratic nation, not all sections of society have access to the basic human rights of healthcare, education, dignity, and economic freedom as afforded by the Indian Constitution.

While the government deems it unconstitutional to use the term ‘Dalit’ in official documents, the Dalit community believes that the term Scheduled Caste doesn’t accurately represent the entirety of India’s oppressed population. As per law, the Scheduled Caste category only includes followers of Buddhism, Hinduism, or Sikhism. It does not take into account those who are considered Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, or followers of tribal/folk religions. In this sense, the term ‘Dalit’ has become more of a political identity used for claiming one’s rightful space in the country’s social fabric, just like the LGBTQ community has reclaimed the term ‘queer’ as a positive expression of self-identification.

DALIT WOMEN AS GATEWAYS FOR PERPETUATING THE CASTE SYSTEM

The struggles of urban *Savarna* (upper-class Hindu) women are far removed from those of Dalit women. While *Savarna* women suffer the disadvantages of generational patriarchy and sex-based violence, the trauma of oppression in case of Dalit women is three-fold – gender bias, caste discrimination, and economic deprivation.

Within communities that follow patriarchal standards, there is a vast difference in the ways in which the bodies of upper- and lower- caste women are conceptualized. The bodies of upper-caste women are historically portrayed as desirable, pure, worthy of protection, and procreation, while lower-caste women are considered repugnant, deserving of sexual exploitation and servitude. Caste-supremacy is maintained by upper-caste men by taking away all agency of Dalit women over their bodies. Several traditional customs and rituals have made Dalit women accessible to upper-class men at their own will. Despite being outlawed in 1988, the *Devdasi*

or *Jogini* system, through which typically teenage girls from marginalized backgrounds are forced to ‘marry’ a deity and become sex-slaves for upper-caste men, still exists in various parts of the country (Vadlapatla, 2015, February 23).

Another example of Dalit women being trapped in the symbolic domain of caste-based labor is that of *Mang* and *Mahar* women from Maharashtra. Caught in the ideology of caste which prevents upward socio-economic mobility, the *Mang* women continue to work as broom makers, rag-pickers, or construction-site workers. The livelihood of *Mahar* women, who work as agricultural laborers in rural Maharashtra, depends on the seasonal nature of agrarian work. When the weather and climate conditions are unfavorable, they are forced to migrate to urban areas where they are pushed into sex work and oppressed into taking up stigmatizing work such as, sweeping or scavenging (Patil, 2013).

During one of my conversations with Ms. Reeta Kaushik, a Dalit and *Musahar* (Dalit community from eastern Gangetic plain and the Terai) rights activist, she said that violence against Dalit women keeps escalating unabated as there is no fear of law in the minds of upper-caste perpetrators. She spoke of the age-old folklore, according to which a Dalit woman was expected, almost as a rite of passage, to spend her first night after marriage at the homes of *Dabbang* (upper-caste goons). The upper-caste men believed that they had the first right to access the body of a lower-caste bride, after which the bride was free to go to her wedded husband. According to Ms. Kaushik, several such historical precedents set by the *Savarnas* have trickled down in perpetuating a sense of entitlement towards Dalit women’s bodies. She also believes that the display of *Savarna* superiority is also evidenced by the way upper-caste feminist ‘allies’ often tend to dictate the Dalit feminist agenda and conveniently exclude the role of caste when talking about violence against the Dalit community.

As a member of the Dalit community and having witnessed several instances of discrimination against her people, Ms. Kaushik has become a

strong proponent of women's education as the first step towards bridging the caste gap. She started the process of change from within her own home and community as she advocated for the education of girls in her family and continues to encourage and financially support other girls from within her community to pursue education.

Another activist, Ms. Prachi Salve is based out of Pune, Maharashtra and advocates for the rights of Dalit and Adivasi women. She has been actively involved as a Resource Centre Coordinator, at an organization called *Manuski*, where she provides legal assistance, training, and guidance regarding human rights to civil society organizations. Ms. Salve emphasizes that the difference between the cases of sexual violence against Dalit women and *Savarna* women lies in the privilege of the latter to take action.

In several cases, Ms. Salve has observed that even the law-enforcement agency indiscriminately supports upper-caste perpetrators while blaming the lower-caste victim for being sexually violated. When fighting for the rights of a Dalit Adivasi rape victim, one comes up against a multitude of barriers – police, politicians, administration, judiciary. Coming from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, most Dalit women have neither the comprehensive knowledge about their legal rights, nor the means to access effective forms of legal recourse. They do not have the financial heft to bribe the system or to afford the legal fees of competent and influential lawyers. The *chaturvarna* system thereby keeps the Dalit and Adivasi community trapped in a vicious cycle of illiteracy, economic deprivation, and exploitation.

This is further corroborated by a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report (1999) that found Dalit women to be more vulnerable to violence as they form a majority of India's landless labourers and scavengers. Deprived of all forms of economic and legal agency, most are pushed into prostitution and become victims of sexual violence (Godbole, 2020, October 28; Nagaraj, 2020, November 25).

A SYSTEMIC CULTURE OF IMPUNITY

As per *The Wire* (2020, September 30), India recorded a daily average of 87 rape cases in 2019. A report published by the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) confirmed that about 3486 cases of rape against Dalit women were registered in India, in 2019 (Paul, 2020, November 4). However, even this overwhelming figure is a gross misrepresentation of ground reality, as only a fraction of the actual number of cases of sexual violence and rape against Dalit women are reported and registered. While registering crime data, in cases where rape leads to death, the NCRB records the crime as murder and not rape, further obscuring the incidence of rape. Therefore, these statistics exclude incidences of rapes ending in murder and attempts to rape (Rape in India, 2022, February 8).

Amongst the cases that were reported and tried in 2019, only 32.2% resulted in conviction, with 91.4% cases still pending before the courts by the end of the year, despite the two-month deadline for completion of trial under law (National Crime Records Bureau Statistical Data) (National Council of Women Leaders, 2021, August 17; NCWL India [@ncwllindia], n.d.). "Swabhiman Society" (a Dalit-women-led organization) and "Equality Now" (an international women's rights organization) examined cases of sexual violence against Dalit women across a 12-year period from 2009 to 2020. In approximately 80% of the cases, the perpetrators were upper caste men, and a majority of crimes (rape and murder) were committed against Dalit girls under the age of 6 years (National Herald, 2020, November 25). As evidenced, not only do Dalit women face violence at higher rates, even the forms of sexual brutality are more heinous and are specific to Dalit women.

In 1990, a lower-caste woman named Bhanwari Devi was allegedly gang-raped by her upper-caste neighbors in the Indian state of Rajasthan. While the case resulted in the Indian Supreme Court formulating guidelines against sexual harassment in the workplace, her attackers remain free, either on account of being cleared of rape charges or being released on bail. Her appeal was heard just

once in the high court in 22 years (Pandey, 2017, March 17; The Times of India, 2021, August 11).

In 2014, two teenage girls belonging to a lower-caste were raped and hanged from a tree, when they went to one of the open fields for defecation (Badaun case) (Mishra, 2019, June 24). In 2015, the *Khap Panchayat* (a religious caste-based counsel representing a certain upper-caste clan) ordered the rape and murder of two Dalit sisters, because their older brother had dared to elope and marry one of the upper-caste girls.

In 2016, a 17-year-old Dalit girl Delta Meghwal was raped and left for dead in a water-tank behind her school. Her body was transported for further examination in a dumpster truck, and for over 24 hours, her family wasn't informed about the crime (Ahmad, 2017, March 29; Anjum, 2021, April 2; The Quint, 2016, April 5). Her father, Mr. Mahendra Ram Meghwal is a government school teacher and wanted his children to be educated. However, after this incident, his other daughter dropped out of school. In one of my many conversations with him, he spoke about his continuing troubles with the legal proceedings of the case, and the financial toll that it is taking on him and his family. He has had to take out loans in order to continue his legal battles against the upper-caste perpetrators, and had faced intimidation from them at every step, with their unrelenting pressure on him to withdraw his case.

In 2019, Dr. Payal Tadvi, a 26-year-old Muslim gynaecologist, belonging to the Scheduled Tribe community died by suicide in Mumbai, after being subjected to caste-based harassment by three upper-caste women doctors. The accused women have been permitted by the Supreme Court of India to continue their education at the very same medical college where Dr. Payal was allegedly tormented and discriminated against (Shantha, 2020, October 8).

In 2020, a Dalit girl from Hathras district in northern India was allegedly raped and murdered by four upper-caste men. While reportage on the case was controversial and full of discrepancies, some of the reports stated that she was severely

brutalised, her backbone was broken, and tongue chopped off. Prior to succumbing to her injuries, the girl gave a video testimony against her perpetrators. The police however surreptitiously burned her body without conducting any post-mortem analysis, in order to cover up the crime (Biswas, 2020, October 6).

The common thread that runs across the countless cases of caste-based sexual violence in India is the legal impunity that continues to be extended to the *Savarna* perpetrators. Most of the cases mentioned above have yet to meet closure and will likely be dragged on until the victim's family runs out of resources to continue the legal battle. Furthermore, in most of these cases, the law-enforcement and news media choose to turn caste-blind; the upper-caste origins of the perpetrator are rarely ever mentioned, and the cases are categorized under the general ambit of sexual violence against women, with the aspect of caste-based violence being omitted altogether. The converse is not true of cases in which the perpetrator belongs to a marginalized community; in such cases, the caste and religion of the accused are rampantly highlighted, thereby, further stigmatizing an already marginalised populace.

THE FUNDAMENTAL DIVIDE IN THE INDIAN FEMINIST AGENDA

There is a vast difference in the way that the general population, as well as women across the country respond to cases of sexual violence or police brutality when the victim belongs to a Dalit or *Adivasi* community. Unlike rape-cases involving upper-caste victims (Suresh, 2020, March 20), cases of caste-based sexual violence rarely mobilize large-scale nation-wide protests for justice. They are often overlooked by mainstream media, as well as the mainstream feminist movement, which is mostly spearheaded by upper caste women from economically privileged backgrounds. A perfunctory transient coverage is at best what is afforded to these cases.

India's popular feminist platforms and social media accounts, such as, 'She The People'

(Shethepeople [@shethepeopletv], 2020, December 16), ‘Girl Talks’ (Girl Talk [@girltalkindia], n.d.), and ‘Indian Feminism’ (Indian Feminism [@indian.feminism], n.d.), are led by feminist intelligentsia and the language of discourse is invariably English, which is often inaccessible to a majority of rural Dalit women. Once again, the agendas on these platforms are clearly set and enforced by urban, Hindu women, while the voices and concerns of Dalit feminists are rarely included. Neither is there any acknowledgement of the generational and systemic trauma suffered by marginalized women at the hands of *Savarna* men and women.

Even the global ‘Me Too’ movement that took India by storm was conspicuous in its omission of the Dalit narrative. Marginalized women, cut off from social media trends or public resources, did not find any representation in this feminist movement that gave a collective voice to several upper-caste women against their sexual offenders (Banerjee, 2021, March 4).

As a result of continual marginalization on the national level, Dalit feminism and the mainstream feminist movement operate in mutually exclusive spaces. The Indian feminist movement, primarily spearheaded by urban, upper-class Hindu women, continues to focus on issues regarding divorce and custody laws, political representation, bodily autonomy (abortion laws), prevention of sexual harassment at workplace, equal pay for equal work, legal recourse against marital rape, democratization of gender-roles, and equality in decision making within the familial hierarchy. All this while, Dalit feminists are still fighting for their right to life and their right to survive without sexual exploitation. This blatant exclusion of Dalit feminism from the modern-day *Brahmanical* feminist perspective reeks of a kind of neo-imperialistic hegemony enjoyed by upper-caste women over their feminist agenda. By not actively incorporating the voices of Dalit women, the upper caste women have passively been maintaining the status quo of ‘superiority’ within the inherently inequitable power dynamics that exist (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Rege, 2000).

When the divide between the two types of feminist movements is mapped on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), it becomes abundantly clear that Dalit women are still struggling for their basic needs of survival to be met, while upper-caste women are fighting for higher-order needs of social sanction, equality, and respect (figure 1). The wide chasm between the two might be responsible for upper-caste women overlooking issues that do not affect them; and in the process reinforcing their own sense of social, economic, and intellectual superiority.

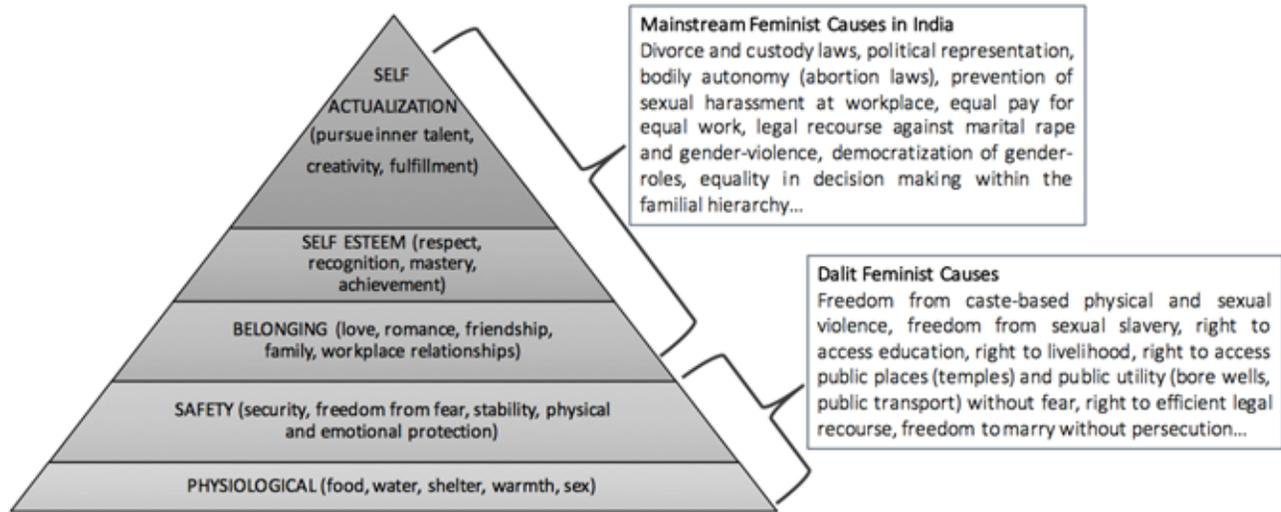


Figure 1.
Maslow's Pyramid – Hierarchy of Indian Feminism

The Hindu *Brahminical* belief in the cycle of rebirth and reincarnation further helps in assuaging upper-caste guilt through the narrative that people (and by extension Dalits and the marginalized communities) suffer misfortune in this life due to their ill-deeds in their previous lives. Not only does it absolve the *Savarnas* from assuming any responsibility, it also lulls them into a sense of comfortable apathy - if they are not responsible for another's *karma* (deeds), they need not empathise or partake in alleviating their plight.

THE SAVARNA-SAVIOUR COMPLEX

In India, almost every event or conversation related to caste-based discrimination is focused on the plight of Dalits and the role of the upper-caste in uplifting them. It is almost impossible to find a discourse that is dedicated to teaching the upper-caste community regarding their flagrant casteism, privileges, and *Savarna* supremacy. A telling example is the lens through which Bollywood (arguably, one of the biggest entertainment industries in the world) tells Dalit stories by appropriating and fetishizing their oppression to use it as a narrative device (Attri, 2019, June 26; Gupta, 2021, January 1; MV, 2018, September 19).

Women-centric Hindi films, such as '*Lajja*' and '*Gulaabi Gang*', more often than not, entirely omit the aspect of caste-based oppression and reduce their stories to generalised tales of feminist uprisings. The ones that do include the caste-based narrative often suffer from the *Savarna*-saviour complex. They place a *Savarna* hero's journey to 'wokeness' as the primary focus of the storyline and side-step the issues of intersectionality-based oppression in which caste, socio-economic status, and gender often intersect, creating complex challenges that require a nuanced portrayal. The character arc of the Brahmin protagonist in several popular Bollywood films, including '*Lagaan*,' '*Swades*,' and '*Article 15*,' is depicted as follows; the naïve Brahmin protagonist learns the ills of casteism, and fuelled by the fire of righteousness, he comes to the rescue of helpless, uneducated, and weak Dalits, who would've languished on their own. The irony is heightened when you discover that even the artists cast to play Dalit characters are often upper-class urbanites, despite there being no dearth of talented Dalit artists. Dalit women are often portrayed as 'dark-skinned' victims that lack any personal agency. Rarely does a story showcase Dalits as role models or celebrate Dalit women leaders or organisations that are at the forefront of Dalit feminism, bereft of support and representation by the rest of the urban, upper-class, feminist movement.

Contrary to the idea that our nation has progressed on every front with the passage of time, there is evidence for a complete subversion of today's non-inclusive feminism in the story of the 16th century Indian princess-turned-mystic poet, Mirabai Rathod. Coming from an upper-caste *Rajput* noble family, Mirabai was a symbol of intersectional feminism, well before the dawn of the feminist movement. She was a devotee of the Hindu god, Lord Krishna and believed *him* to be her husband. Although she was married off to Bhoj Raj Singh Sisodia, the heir to the ruler of Mewar, her resolute devotion to Lord Krishna was unshakeable. She denied the legitimacy of her marriage to Bhoj Raj, and allegedly refused to consummate her marriage.

After her husband's death in battle, she was persecuted by his relatives to follow all the social norms that prescribed a set way-of-life for a widow. However, with fearless disregard for social and caste-based conventions, Mirabai refused to perform *Sati*, or wear a *ghoonghat* (face-covering), and chose to live the rest of her days as an ascetic saint, writing poems and *Bhakti geet* (hymns), and dancing and singing freely in public, in reverence to Lord Krishna. This was at a time in history when women were considered subordinate to men, and their spiritual worth was reduced to assisting men in their religious pursuits. All other prominent *Bhakti* poets back then were exclusively men.

However, what is most striking in her tale of quiet rebellion is her blatant rejection of the *chaturvarna* caste covenants. Despite being a royal princess, Mirabai associated with all women worshipers as equals, irrespective of their caste. Instead of

looking down upon women from lower-castes as inferior or in need of her protection, she normalized social relations across caste, and considered herself as a part of the collective. It is also believed that she accepted Saint Ravidas as her guru, a leather worker who was considered an 'untouchable' (Carr-Richardson, 2002; Celly, 2019; White, 2017, January 6).

THE KARPMAN DRAMA TRIANGLE AND CASTE BLINDNESS

In order to further deconstruct the interplay between caste, gender, and feminism, I'd like to use the framework of the Drama Triangle, as proposed by Dr. Stephan B Karpman, and modify it to align with Indian society's caste-based dynamics. In its original form, the Karpman Triangle is a social model of human interaction that helps analyze the different roles played by individuals in high-conflict or stressful situations. According to Dr. Karpman, there are three roles that individuals in a conflict situation are inherently drawn to – the persecutor, the victim, and the rescuer (figure 2). Depending on the circumstance, individuals can also move between the three roles (Karpman, n.d.). In this context, I use the framework of the triangle and modify it to analyse a larger-scale social conflict, rather than a conflict between individuals. As per my analogy, the persecutor role is taken on by the upper-caste oppressor and the rescuer role is taken on by the upper-caste saviour. However, an important distinction in my analogy is that the victim role is not donned by Dalit women themselves, but rather it is the lens through which the persecutor and rescuer view the oppressed



Figure 2.
The Karpman Drama Triangle

Source: <https://www.listeningpartnership.com/insight/about-the-drama-triangle-and-how-to-escape-it/>

Dalit women.

In this dynamic, I'd like to propose that the rescuer and persecutor are two sides of the same coin. The upper-class persecutor is responsible for subjugating Dalit women and keeping them oppressed, while the upper-class 'rescuer' continues the oppression by viewing Dalit women as helpless, needy, and downtrodden. The 'rescuer' neither values the agency of Dalit women, nor believes that they are strong, intelligent, and proficient individuals capable of articulating and meeting their own needs. And therefore, the upper-caste 'rescuer' keeps relegating Dalit women to a position of victimhood. Instead of addressing and rectifying their own problematic history of persecution, they prefer to become the self-appointed mouthpieces of Dalit women's needs. As

a result, they appease their conscience by donning the savior cape and disregard the autonomy and capability of Dalit women to set their own agenda. When Dalit women are considered weak and inferior, power and supremacy within the social hierarchy is retained by upper-caste women. A simple example of this power differential is the inequitable way in which upper-caste women treat the Dalit and marginalized women that they employ as domestic workers. Treating them as unequal is beneficial, because if the converse were true and Dalit women were sufficiently empowered to change their predetermined fate, the upper-caste women would have no one to do their bidding.

Even when upper-caste employees extend monetary help to their personal blue-collar workers, they tend to do it as either a favor or a

loan, while believing themselves to be benevolent benefactors. They prefer to overlook the ground realities of unorganized work, which entail that the marginalized women that work in people's homes have no access to systematic health insurance, a pension or retirement account, bank loans, guaranteed annual salary increment, fixed weekly and annual paid holidays, opportunity for professional growth, job security, and the personal fulfilment of pursuing a profession that matches their interests or aspirations. In this regard, the work they do is a form of glorified bonded labor. This system of oppression keeps them locked in a vortex of social immobility, economic deprivation, and perpetual servitude.

Then there are *Savarnas* who like to parade their sense of equality through an admission of 'caste-blindness.' According to them, when they see a person, they do not see their caste, just their personality and actions. This form of virtue signaling through 'caste-blindness' is just another example of tokenism that is not only misguided but also dangerous. Caste-based discrimination and oppression is the lived reality of Dalits and other marginalized communities. Being caste-blind and not acknowledging the role of caste only further negates and invalidates their trauma. It is a stance that the privileged, who are far removed from ground realities, usually posture to absolve themselves of any guilt or responsibility.

THE AUTONOMY OF DALIT FEMINISM

Despite the performative activism of the upper-caste, the responsibility of combating oppression and raising voices against Dalit-specific women's issues has always rested on the shoulders of Dalit women. A responsibility that they have been shouldering with tremendous fortitude, since the dawn of the feminist era, in complete contrast to their portrayal as perpetual victims who are weak and incapable.

In the 1920s, Dalit women got organized and participated in several anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements. They helped pass resolutions against child marriage, the custom

of dowry, and enforced widowhood (Rege, 1998). In 1942, an All India Depressed Classes Women Conference was held in Nagpur. About 25,000 Dalit women attended it, as the President of the conference, Sulochanabai Dongre, advocated for birth control, and resolutions were passed supporting women's right to divorce, denounce polygamy, improved labor conditions, increased involvement in politics, and better access to education (Kumar, 2017, March 24)

In the 1990s, Dalit women formed several organizations, such as the National Federation of Dalit Women, the All India Dalit Women's Forum, and several state-level groups (Rege, 1998). A delegation of Dalit women attended the World Conference against Racism (1993) and the World Conference on Women (1995) (Bhattacharya, 2016, August 27). At the World Conference Against Racism (2001), it was Dalit women who advocated for caste-based discrimination to be added to the language against racism (Smith, 2008, June).

Khabar Lahariya (News Waves) was the first newspaper written by and for Dalit women that was created in 2002 and focused on the issues of Dalit community in their own languages. The newspaper won a UNESCO literacy prize in 2009, is currently active, and has also adapted to the digital format (Nirantar, n.d.).

A radical feminist group that began its work by resorting to punitive, rather than restorative practices is the *Gulabi* Gang. It started as a vigilante group in 2006, spearheaded by Sampat Pal Devi in the Banda District of Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. It is one of the poorest districts in the country, with a large Dalit population, rife with caste-based discrimination, female illiteracy, domestic violence, child labour, child marriages and dowry demands. The *Gulabi* or 'Pink' Gang began its 'social work' by recruiting women members who wore bright pink saris and wielded bamboo sticks against oppressive men, including government officials. Male offenders would be accosted by the members of the gang and would be subjugated into seeing reason. Some were even

publicly shamed when they refused to relent. In the cases where the men resorted to use of force, the women resorted to wielding their *lathis* (bamboo sticks). Despite its chequered legacy, the Pink Gang has come a long way, and today it works in an organised manner to actively protest and stop child marriages, support female education, train women in self-defence, oppose corruption, register police reports against sex offenders and abusive husbands, support women to become financially independent, and on occasion, wield the stick when required (Biswas, 2007, November 26; Gulabi Gang, n.d.; Seelhoff et al., 2007).

MS. MANJULA PRADEEP – A CASE STUDY IN RESILIENCE, FORTITUDE, AND AUTARKY

Today, there are several Dalit feminist organizations in India working at the grassroots to address caste-based violence and discrimination suffered by Dalit and marginalized women. One such individual who has been at the forefront of several such organizations is Ms. Manjula Pradeep. Hailing from the Dalit community and a survivor of sexual violation, Ms. Pradeep is a social worker and activist advocating for the rights of marginalized women. I had the opportunity to interview her for this study, and for it, I shall forever remain grateful. She also put me in touch with other activists and members of the Dalit community.

Over the last three decades, Ms. Pradeep has been fueled by her own experiences and has emerged as an intersectional leader and organizer of the Dalit and marginalized feminist movement not just in India, but across the globe. Subverting India's parochial gender norms, she became the first female employee to join *Navsarjan* – a grassroots human rights organization in the state of Gujarat. She was associated with the organization for over a period of 25 years and served as an Executive Director for over 12 years. During this time, she trained hundreds of Dalit and Adivasi women to become leaders and activists.

Ms. Pradeep has been associated with several landmark cases of sexual violence and caste-

based atrocities in India, wherein, she has assisted the survivors and their families with medical, financial, and legal aid. She has recently cofounded a network called NCWL (National Council of Women Leaders). With NCWL, she has created a platform that brings together women from all marginalized communities – Muslim, Dalit, Adivasi, LGBTQ, and commercial sex work.

In 2017, she was a part of the *Chalo Nagpur* movement in which over 5000 marginalized women congregated and raised resources for the marginalized community. Ms. Pradeep, in conjunction with S.H. Rehan, founded the WAYVE (Wise Act of Youth Visioning and Engagement) Foundation – a national organization of India's youth working towards bridging the boundaries of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability and sexual orientation. Through the WAYVE foundation, currently 34 women activists are being trained to become leaders.

She is also the Director of Campaigns for Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDNet), which is a coalition of over 1000 Dalit human rights defenders from across India. The NCWL and DHRDNet have joined forces with two international organizations – Equality Labs, and Equality Now, and are currently running a very successful month-long digital campaign (#EndCasteBasedSexualViolence) (September 2021). These international organizations use their international network of lawyers, activists, and supporters to hold governments responsible for ending legal inequality, sex trafficking, sexual violence, and harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), and child marriages.

In 2001, Ms. Pradeep represented the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) at the United Nations Preparatory Committee for the U.N. World Conference, held in Geneva. In 2006, she was a celebrated speaker at the International Conference of Dalit Women at The Hague, followed by 2008, when she became a member of the International Dalit Solidarity Network, based in Copenhagen. She also addressed the European Parliament in Brussels on the issues of caste-based

discrimination in South Asia. In the last decade, she has travelled extensively across the globe and has participated in several international human rights events, where she has amplified the injustices of caste-based discrimination and sexual violence.

Her story of triumph over her circumstances through her accomplishments and leadership is the true face of Dalit feminism. She rejects the victim lens through which upper-caste men and women view the marginalized communities and strongly asserts that the Dalit community should not be pitied as victims in need of rescuing. She believes that the individual potential and collective might of Dalit women are their means of overcoming their challenges. While grateful for the legitimate support that is extended by true upper-caste allies, Ms. Pradeep does believe that the challenges of women from marginalized communities do not find a seat at the table of mainstream feminism. As a result, marginalized feminist programs fail to receive the necessary resources or representation that a national-level unified movement should afford them. She urges women to acknowledge sexual violence from an intersectional lens, and poses the rhetorical question, “When you are not gender-blind, how can you be caste-blind?”

According to Ms. Pradeep, India needs to have its own *Critical Caste Theory*, in the way that the United States has a Critical Race Theory (CRT) which is a body of legal scholarship and an academic movement. Through CRT, several civil-rights scholars and activists critically examine the intersection of race and U.S. law, and use their findings to challenge conventional liberal approaches to racial justice.

She also thinks that true alliance and integration within the Indian feminist movement is only

possible when upper-caste feminists align their sensitivity and sensibility with the everyday struggles of Dalit women. They also need to have Dalit leaders in their mainstream movement who can represent the Dalit agenda and be treated as equal stakeholders. In order to be true allies, upper-caste feminists must first acknowledge and accept Dalit women to be their true equals in every aspect of capability and intellect.

PARTING THOUGHTS – THE PATH OF TRUE ALLIANCE

Over a century ago, the Dalit-born Dr. BR Ambedkar, Father of the Indian Constitution, noted that every person who takes it upon themselves to say, *we must do something for the Untouchables*, should perhaps start by saying, *let us do something to change the Touchable Hindu*. And that is the place where the work of a true ally begins. Instead of trying to prove to the Dalit community that we are not casteist, as upper-caste women, we should begin the work within and amongst ourselves. No discussion or conversation regarding the betterment of oppressed communities should be conducted without their permission, representation, active participation, and leadership.

Savarna women need to acknowledge Dalit women and their voices as equal to their own, and let them guide their own agenda, instead of determining it for them.

Most importantly, a real feminist who pledges to voice her opinion against patriarchy, must first begin by dismantling the culture of caste-based discrimination in her own immediate environment. In the words of Dr. Suraj Tengde, one of India’s leading scholars and public intellectuals on the global platform, “A Brahmin must be a cultural suicide bomber.”

In order to be an effective ally, it is not only important to acknowledge the role of caste, but also to call out the regular incidents of micro-

“... a real feminist who pledges to voice her opinion against patriarchy, must first begin by dismantling the culture of caste-based discrimination in her own immediate environment.”

aggressions occurring within our own familial and social circles, where instances of casual casteism are rife. An example of ‘benign’ casteism resides in our use of discriminatory language. Deploying the names of SC/ST communities as casteist slurs was made illegal in India under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, in 1989. And yet we continue to use terms such as, ‘Chamar,’ ‘Bhangi,’ ‘Chandal’ as derogatory expressions with no regard for the social toll that language can take (Das, 2021, May 19; “Homegrown, 2020, July 17; Rawat, 2021, February 3).

Language at the end of the day is political, and how it is used has far-reaching implications. Discriminatory language and the use of casteist slurs ensures that the inequality established by the caste-system remains entrenched in our collective consciousness. Unlike popular upper-caste belief, the use of a casteist slur is not as innocuous as pelting a little stone into a vast social cauldron. It is in fact akin to striking a carefully arranged domino, and dismantling decades of social re-conditioning.

In this regard, it is no longer enough to not be an active oppressor. It simply isn’t good enough to not be on the wrong side. Apathy is just as damaging, as it breeds inaction. This inaction helps maintain the status-quo and covertly bolsters the inherent inequality, continuing to tip the scales in the favor of the oppressor. Imagine it as a socio-economic escalator that is meant exclusively for *Savarnas*. They are born on it and are taken to higher levels just by being on it. The Dalits are forbidden from getting on the escalator. The ones who consider themselves to be Dalit allies either need to actively halt the escalator until all Dalits are allowed to climb on, or they need to build an equally powerful escalator that will not only carry the Dalits upwards but will also speedily cover the vast socio-economic distance created over generations between the Dalits and *Savarnas*. It would be far more efficient and realistic to attempt the former and start with bringing about change within one’s own casteist environment, and to hold one’s people accountable for their deep-rooted

casteism and insidious hegemony. The *Savarnas* who passively stay on their own escalator without actively stopping it to make room for their Dalit counterparts are simply reaping the benefits of a system that is designed to carry them upwards at the other’s expense.

Similarly, unless women’s movements in India collectively acknowledge the role of caste in perpetuating gender-based injustices, feminist solidarity in India will continue to suffer severe blows. At the end of the day, no one wins, if even one loses. On that note, I’d like to end with the following poem (Nzegwu, 2013, October 4).

‘SISTERHOOD’ BY NKIRU UWECHIA NZEGWU

*white sister told me all women are one
united in de face of chau’vism.
(paa’don my engilis)
I smiled
pa ... paa... pa . . tri . . archy
is the cross women carry,
she charged we must unite
to fight it with all our might.
I laughed ...racked by spasm
my head jerked back
and crazily wobbled from side to side.
pampered sister titillates herself to frenzy
with quixotic tales of male `xploitation.
I ... “dumb” black woman
laughed mirthlessly on
flicking away tears of pain from eyes.
I looked up from my chore
on the kitchen floor
where, new found sister
had ordered me to be on knees
to scrub the floor clean
for the pittance she paid:
on knees, to scrub the floor clean
for sisterarchy.*

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