

## Theorising Gender in South Asia: Dalit Feminist Perspective

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Patriarchy in the South Asian context is inherently linked with the caste system. Therefore, patriarchal practices and beliefs have an origin in the social ideology of caste. The caste system divided the Hindu population into social groups called castes. Moreover, it compartmented the rights and dignity to each caste in an unequal and graded manner. The rights and dignity get reduced as we go down in the caste hierarchy from highest (*brahmin*) to high (*kshatriya*) to middle (*vaishya*) to low (*shudra*) and lowest (*atishudras*, or *dalits* or '*untouchables*').<sup>1</sup> The so-called 'untouchables' are placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy, hence have no rights except to serve the castes above them. Importantly, all the castes have been made exclusive and separate from each other through the institution of 'endogamy' i.e. marriage within the same caste. To preserve endogamy it was necessary to put restrictions on women with regard to marriage (and individual rights) and penalization for violation of the same. A unique feature of this system is that women, irrespective of their caste, have very less individual rights—economic, social and religious, since women were the gatekeepers of 'caste purity' (as we shall learn in first section). Violent force or, social ostracism were applied as main instruments to keep in place caste related rules, including gender rules that have been going on for centuries. The dalit women who are at the bottom of caste hierarchy suffered doubly— not only denial of rights (economic and educational) and individual freedom as 'untouchables', but also as 'lower' caste women. This vertical structure of caste and the horizontal strata of patriarchy render dalit women fall lowest in the class hierarchy. Thus, they face intersectional violence which goes bypassed in the contemporary mainstream writings of savarna feminists.

The present picture of South Asia does not depict an advancement on human rights of dalits, specifically of dalit women. What is more disturbing is that the caste norms and practices against Dalit women, have not disappeared in spite of laws against them. They are the *raison d'être* for the persistence of sexual

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exploitation of Dalit women even today. Put another way, the past is alive in the present with modified practices. This article reflects on this ugly statute of past against dalit women through theoretical efforts to understand its genesis, using Phule-Ambedkarite scholarship. It is organized into three sections—beginning with the brahmanical theory of patriarchy, unveiling denial of agency to dalit women, and probing Marxist/Liberal approaches—to argue for dalit feminist theory as the positive answer to this graded inequality.

## Present South Asia as a Legacy of Brahmanic History

We witness many caste based violent incidents where gender also plays an important role and vice versa, even today. Amid the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, many cases of brutal gang-rape and murder of Dalit women have come to the fore.<sup>2</sup> The recent horrendous gang-rape of a 19-year-old Dalit woman by four *Rajput/Kshatriya* men<sup>3</sup> has got international media attention as reports about the nature of injuries inflicted on the victim came to be unveiled.<sup>4</sup> The rapists had reportedly cut her tongue, broken her spinal cord and attempted to murder her.<sup>5</sup> She died struggling for her last breath in Delhi's state-owned Safdarganj Hospital on September 29, 2020.<sup>6</sup> But the Uttar Pradesh Police has been denying the crime,<sup>7</sup> they even burnt her body in night against the Hindu cremation norms while pushing away her family members already in despair.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, *savarna* meetings have been held in defence of the alleged rapists mobilizing four neighbouring villages, while there is no protection to the Manisha's family fighting for justice in such circumstances. There were hassles and delays involved in every step—registering the case, media coverage of the crime, providing medical care, initiating the investigation. This police brutality, and threats of *savarna* men, with failing state apparatus, resulted in nationwide outrage from non-*savarna* communities over her death. The protests crossed national boundaries with placards and hashtags such as #HathrasHorror #DalitWomenLivesMatter #UPCMResign and so on swarming popular social media sites.

Unfortunately, September 29 is mourned in Dalit history as the anniversary of the 2006 Khairlanji Massacre, wherein a Dalit woman and her daughter, and two sons were stripped, paraded naked and murdered by the *Maratha* men of the village. Before being murdered, both the women were gang-raped.<sup>9</sup> Indian judicial system has failed to provide equal justice to Dalit women as is available to *savarna* women, as seen again in 2016 Kopardi violence.<sup>10</sup> More vulnerability to dalits and impunity to *savarnas* is a pattern found in crimes against Dalits.<sup>11</sup> Since Khairlanji, data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) on atrocities against Dalits show a tremendous rise in Maharashtra, with major crimes like murder and rape being highest.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, Maharashtra registered 2,719 cases of atrocities against Dalits and *Adivasis* (tribes or indigenous people).<sup>13</sup> Worldwide agitation against the Hathras caste-crime could not prevent similar incidents of gang-rape and murder of dalit women by *savarna* men. An 8-year-old raped in Balrampur, a teen raped in Bulandshahr, in Azamgarh, another rape again in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.).<sup>14</sup>

There has been an increase in the absolute number of cases of sexual violence against Dalit women since 2014 in U.P. The number of cases of sexual violence against Dalit women in the state increased from 1188 in 2014 to 1568 in 2019, with high of 2026 in 2016. The average number of rapes cases during 2011-2013 was 1735 which increased to an average of 2490 cases in the state during 2014-2016. What is even more disturbing is that at least thirteen percent of the women victims in last six years, between 2014 and 2019, are minors. In one of these years, their share shot up to twenty one percent.

This sorry situation is not limited to the most populated state of India; a high rise in caste atrocities is reported from the southern states also. Tamil Nadu recorded eighty-one caste-based atrocities, forty-one cases of assault, fourteen murders, five cases each of rape and attacks on couples who married outside their caste, four deaths of Dalit manual scavengers, three cases each of humiliation of Dalit panchayat presidents and discrimination against Dalit government servants, two cases each of honour killings and desecration of statues of Dr B. R. Ambedkar, and one incident each of discrimination in school and bonded labour. Moreover, Dalits were prevented from burying their dead in the common graveyard, and a Dalit graveyard was also desecrated. All these cases have been committed within a short span of four months, March-June 2020. Such caste-crimes have been increasing since the pandemic lockdown month in India i.e. March 2020.<sup>15</sup> Tamil Nadu has seen at least forty percent increase in caste atrocities against Dalits since the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown in India.<sup>16</sup> In the neighbouring state Kerala, 712 cases of atrocities against Dalits (and 182 against Adivasis) were registered in 2016 as against 696 in 2015 and 712 in 2014.<sup>17</sup> Andhra Pradesh state reported over 150 cases of atrocities against Dalits between March and July this year.<sup>18</sup>

Atrocities against Dalits, mostly girls and young men abound in the predominantly Hindu country of Nepal, where inter-caste alliances are not only taboo but end up in honour killings notwithstanding legal safeguards.<sup>19</sup> A 12-year-old Dalit girl was raped and murdered in a temple in Bajhang district of Nepal last month. Bodies of a Dalit lad and his three friends were recovered from a river after a row over an inter-caste marriage.<sup>20</sup> There are many many such cases of caste-crime.<sup>21</sup> This commonality of violence against Dalits results from a caste-conscious psyche that transcends national boundaries.<sup>22</sup> A couple is killed by local authorities viz. *Khap Panchayat* or, by their parents or guardians or powerful 'high caste' landlords, with the idea of preserving the caste 'honour'.<sup>23</sup> Practising and enforcing the rules of caste as assigned to a particular caste group is considered honourable, while defying them is regarded with disdain or contempt. This caste/clan 'honour' stands threatened when a couple commits the audacity of choosing their partner themselves, defying caste norms. Challenging endogamy (intra-caste marriage) is perceived as an invitation to rape, murder, gang rape before murder, burning alive, and such drastic forms of violence. The plight of Dalit women is similar across South Asia.<sup>24</sup> In Pakistan too, Dalits are the worst victims of discrimination, kidnapping for ransom, rapes, false blasphemy cases, and poverty.<sup>25</sup> In Bangladesh, Dalit girls and women are victims of prostitution and human trafficking for bonded-labour, who lie at the bottom of the caste pyramid.<sup>26</sup> Unlike

other South Asian countries, Bangladesh has no official recognition of caste-based discrimination despite almost 5.5 million population of Dalits, which renders their lives even worse.<sup>27</sup> Thus, we find systematic injustice, indignity and inequality for Dalits (more so with Dalit women) in the socio-cultural, even legal, context of South Asia.

These empirical facts leave us wondering why the twenty first century world witnesses such heinous crimes against Dalits, Dalit women and such most marginalized communities in the subcontinent. One essential element is the persistence of caste,<sup>28</sup> as observed in the murders of Dalits for reasons such as wearing jeans, for riding a horse on their wedding, for eating *ghee* (rarified butter). In other words, Dalit assertion of equal human rights receives violent backlash from savarnas. A major loophole in addressing these cases lies in perceiving caste as distinct from gender and vice versa. Our mainstream feminists have done enough to separate the caste question from gender discourse which shocks the world at the brutal crimes against Dalit women. The need of the hour is to bring into public discourse the inherent link of caste with gender. This is not talked about often, because one would need to read and acknowledge the contributions made by India's most educated and vocal champion of equality, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who also happened to be a Dalit. The caste-dominated intelligentsia feels insecure to bring forth Ambedkar's scholarship given their inability to challenge what I call 'brahmanical superiority complex' that can be compared to 'white supremacy.'

## **Twin-Sisters: Caste and Gender**

B.R. Ambedkar's scholarly analysis of caste, *Castes in India: their mechanism, genesis and development*, proves that patriarchy is a twin-sister of brahmanism.<sup>29</sup> Brahmanism can be understood in form of 'graded inequality', that each and every member in the Hindu social order has been allocated a predetermined position of privilege or, deprivation based on first their caste and then gender. The categories of caste and gender are employed together to sustain endogamy, i.e. the absence of inter-caste marriages. Ambedkar deliberates upon evil social practices like child marriage, forced widowhood, *sati* and such. He explains the concept of 'numerical equality' within a caste community as the underlying reason behind such rituals.<sup>30</sup> When the numeric balance of a particular caste gets disturbed by uncertain deaths, the gender disparity yields a potential for inter-caste alliances. In cases of an accidental death of a husband, a 'surplus woman' is created, while the opposite situation creates a 'surplus man'.

In order to balance the surplus woman, *sati pratha* was prescribed by the brahmin priests where a widow was persuaded to immolate herself in the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. It is firstly found in the code of Vishnu, which mentions that a woman 'after the death of her husband should either lead a virtuous life or ascend the funeral pyre of her husband.'<sup>31</sup> Pedagogical revolutionary Jyotirao Phule criticised this tradition, 'have you ever heard of a man performing *'sataa'*? Men can marry many times, [but] the same is not allowed to women. . .'<sup>32</sup> He highlighted the unequal differentiation between women and men in the name of religious faith. Thus, British

Governor-General Lord William Bentinck outlawed the practice in December 1829 by the Bengal Sati Regulation. But the practice of sati is still revered in our social culture, and cases of sati enforcement have been found also in this century.<sup>33</sup> Temples which were built in name of sati victims are still maintained, where special prayers are held twice a day glorifying sacrificed women of the past as *sati mata*.<sup>34</sup> Madhya Pradesh state had reported such cases 2006 and 2002.<sup>35</sup> Uttar Pradesh had such cases reported in 2005, 2002, 1999, 1994 while Maharashtra witnessed a suspected *sati* case in 2015.<sup>36</sup>

However, legal restrictions and raised consciousness among women has made it difficult to manipulate them into becoming sati. The second ritual imposed on women was that of enforced widowhood by brahmins. A widow had to alienate herself from all kinds of colours, festivals, delicious foods, daylight, wedding ceremonies, deity worships, and such occasions regarded as sacred. She was not allowed to marry another man and was consigned to live a colorless and joyless life. She was forced to spend the rest of her life alone in dark and await death. Social reformer Jyotirao Phule was the first person who 'attacked the interconnectedness of knowledge, human rights, caste, and gender by starting schools for Dalits or untouchables in 1848 and widow homes for Brahmin women in 1854. He thus 'challenged Brahmanical practices in their discrimination against lower castes and the restriction of the sexuality of upper-caste women', writes historian Shailaja S. Paik.<sup>37</sup> These reforms had brought major improvements, but a major part of our rural society still follows such norms to control the sexuality of women.

Both of the above rituals were advocated for the situation of a surplus woman in a particular caste and continue to be observed by and large. But, a surplus man is neither expected to be immolated on the funeral pyre of his wife, nor devote the rest of his life only chanting the name of his deceased wife. There could not be any rites or prescriptions against the wishes of a man, since the man has been the maker of the law. Man has been an asset while woman has only been seen as a means to fulfil his whims and desires. The man has been the measure of all things in this brahmanical world. Only women had to be sacrificed; also in the cases of 'surplus man' because '[t]he only place where [a woman] can be independent of [her husband] is in hell.'<sup>38</sup> Therefore, a third mechanism for maintaining this numerical balance was invented: child-marriage. As the term implies, a girl child from the same caste was married to a widower. Thus, we see strict control over women's sexuality has been the only means to maintain endogamy. That is why, honour killing is one of the horrific forms of murder in the caste-ridden Indian subcontinent.

This strong link between caste and gender can be seen in almost every issue/incident related to either of them. For example, savarna women during the anti-Mandal commission agitations rendered it visible through their placards which read '*We don't want unemployed husbands*' and '*We want Employed Husbands*'.<sup>39</sup> When reservation for Other Backward Caste (OBC) was introduced in government jobs as recommended by Mandal Commission, women from 'upper' castes opposed it with their endogamous perspective or same-caste marriages. It is visible that these savarna women failed to reflect on two crucial possibilities during the post-Mandal era. First,

they didn't consider themselves as the competitors to OBCs, rather they protested on behalf of their 'potential husbands'.<sup>40</sup> Second, the heterosexual savarna women could not imagine getting married to OBC or *Shudra* or 'middle' caste men. This historical event exposes how a caste based situation is deeply linked with one's gender location and vice-versa.

A more recent example comes from the difference between mainstream savarna feminist and Dalit feminist critique of #MeToo movement.<sup>41</sup> While Dalit feminists expressed their concerns regarding access of technological means to Dalit women, savarna feminists published a collective statement from the *Kafila* blog criticising the 'name and shame' uprising.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, these mainstream feminists who loudly advocate '*my body, my rights*' have argued for bourgeois 'due process' for the matters of sexual harassment. Also their disregard of Dalit feminism is explicit in the title, 'Statement by Feminists...' itself. This means that those women calling out names of their harassers are not 'feminists.' Moreover, it is implied that only the authors of this statement are 'feminists'. Evidently, Dalit feminist scholarship has been impudently cemented in the mainstream feminist articulations. Let us see some other ways in which caste degrades Dalit women lives that they are most vulnerable to sexual violence.<sup>43</sup>

## **Brahmanism: Denial of Dignity to Dalit Women**

Religious practices like *Devdasi*, *Murali*, *Jogini* or *Jogtini* sanction young girls from Dalit families to devote their entire lives in the service of priests. In the name of faith, their parents give away these girls to authorities of local temples. The brahmins succeed in convincing those naive people that their Dalit girls are the 'chosen ones' for the service of god. Since Dalits have been historically prevented from entering into temples, they perceive this narrative as an opportunity to connect with God. These girls are mostly between four and nine years (pre-menstrual) age when dedicated to temples. The illiterate rural Dalit families fall prey to this brahmanical conspiracy and push their young girls into a life of exploitation in the hands of priests. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women has its roots in such obnoxious practices which were designed by brahmins for gratification.

The young Dalit girls living as a *Devdasi*, *Murali*, *Jogini* or *Jogtini* are made to do chores like cleaning up temple premises, serving as domestic help to priests, and inevitably forced to provide sexual favours to them. They are coerced to put up with physical mistreatment, mental harassment and sexual exploitation on an everyday basis. *Devdasi* (slave of god) is also often considered as *Gaondasi* (slave of the village), who is raped by all and any man of her village. Their bodies go through multiple abortions and no one cares for the babies born out of such abusive alliances. These women are never accepted in society and end up into prostitution for a living. Even the girl children born and brought up in such circumstances cannot escape this wretched life of prostitution. In this way, the descendants of such outcaste Dalits fall into stigmatized occupations void of dignity. Historically, it is evident that caste plays the primary factor in sexual labour in our part of the world. Thus, humiliating jobs like

bar dancing, 'sex work' or prostitution are populated by Dalits, 'lower' caste Muslims, trafficked Adivasis and other minorities even today.

The Marxist feminists argue for a liberal standpoint on the occupations of 'sex work' and bar dancing like menial jobs. From a liberal perspective, Nivedita Menon writes, 'There is no more or less agency exercised in 'choosing' to work as a domestic servant... with minimum dignity... than there is in 'choosing' to do sex work'. In the same context, she also mentions the first pan-India survey of sex workers which concluded that about seventy one percent of female sex workers prefer this occupation because of inadequate and insufficient pay in other occupations. Clearly, the woman in so-called 'sex work' opt for this profession because they have very limited choices, that is, either to be exploited in domestic and other kinds of works which don't help them run their house or to be exploited in prostitution which helps them financially to run their house. Notably, all the options open to them are void of dignity. These women technically may be called an agent but the restriction of opportunities available to them leaves the sole option of prostitution for their financial needs. If these women are provided with a job of similar pay but avail them dignity, obviously they will choose that over prostitution.

Another argument presented by Menon is that unlike we do not seek to abolish the institution of marriage because of women's subordinate condition rather we tend to improve the laws ensuring women's respect and dignity, we should not seek abolition of 'sex work'.<sup>44</sup> One of the problems in her argument is ignoring the difference between women in the institution of marriage and women in prostitution. An important aspect of this difference is the othering of 'sex workers' by the women in marriage institutions. A woman's dignity does not reduce in getting married while it clearly does when she becomes a prostitute. Our socio-cultural norms give the highest respect to a married woman but leave all disdain for women in prostitution. Moreover, savarna feminists themselves regard prostitution as 'a necessary evil' arguing that this saves the 'respected' women from toxic men.<sup>45</sup> Clearly, the savarna women feminists seek to prevent themselves from the lust of toxic men while justifying for marginalized women's exploitation, instead of arguing for the improvement of men's toxicity. A discomforting objection from Dalit feminist standpoint is that these savarna feminists choose to be academics, writers, spokespersons, and hold such positions of power and authority to merely theorise 'sex-work' (and not practice it).

This difference between the position of savarna mainstream feminists and Dalit feminists can also be observed in the response to the Maharashtra government's ban on bar dancing in 2005. Maharashtra Home Minister explained the reason behind this ban that it 'perverts the morals of our young men.' Consequently, Marxist feminists opposed the ban based on their liberal understanding resisting 'moral policing', whereas Dalit feminists welcomed the ban. Dalit feminists argued that this 'semi-respectable' occupation eventually led these women, from marginalized castes, into an inescapable life of prostitution. Rehabilitation of the women losing their job was the demand of Dalit-bahujan feminists. Since women's sexuality is linked with their caste-class locations, debates over sexuality cannot be held in isolation. Recent reports from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), National Federation of Dalit Women

(NFDW) and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) establish the structural violence rendering Dalit women most vulnerable. NCRB evidences that at least four Dalit women are raped everyday in India.<sup>46</sup> This is based on only the reported cases while we all know that hardly half of such cases actually get reported. Thus, we see that mainstream savarna feminists fail to understand that ‘caste determines the division of labour, sexual division of labour and division of sexual labour’.<sup>47</sup> The single-axis framework of mainstream savarna feminists not only sidelines Dalit women issues, but their articulations show their disregard of intersectional feminism theorized by B. R. Ambedkar and Dalit advocates of Ambedkarite feminism.

## Brahmanical Othering of Ambedkarite Feminism

As we discussed earlier Dr. Ambedkar championed the cause of women with his seminal contribution to the theory of caste, and gender along with his pragmatic contribution of Hindu Code Bill in the Indian Constitution. Savarna feminists accuse him of being *not feminist enough* with their selective and erroneous reading.<sup>48</sup> Mainstream critics point at half line from his speech to the women in Kamathipura<sup>49</sup> that he called them a ‘shame to the community’. Turning blind to the systematic sexual exploitation of Dalit women and the survey reports proving same, the savarna women evidence a bourgeois abstraction in their favour. Ambedkar advised in the same speech that women should refuse to ‘live under conditions *which inevitably drag [them] into prostitution*’.<sup>50</sup> In his dialogue with the women ‘sex workers’ in Kamathipura, he focused on the caste-ordained linkages between labour and sexuality in the historical context of sexual exploitation of Dalit women which is explained in the previous section.

A Marxist feminist critique of some crucial Acts of Hindu Code Bill argues for the advantages availed to women over men in matrilineal practices, observed in few parts of India. Menon writes, ‘The Hindu Succession Act (HSA) nullified the better position of daughters under matrilineal laws, making sons equal inheritors’.<sup>51</sup> This worry of equating the position of sons and daughters needs to be put in broader context. Making sons equal inheritors in the property should not be seen as disempowering daughters. Her criticism adheres to an extremist position where men are rendered in subordinate situations. The goal of feminism is to avail justice and equality to each and every citizen irrespective of their gender, caste, class, region or sexuality, etc identities. Rege, in the same context, points to remind mainstream savarna feminists that the Bill sought to equalise the status of men and women.<sup>52</sup>

Mainstream savarna feminists’ attitude towards Dalit feminism is evident in their repeated use of the phrases like ‘us-them’, ‘feminism and *other political initiatives*’,<sup>53</sup> ‘feminism and other voices’, and so on. They reduce Dalit feminist thought into mere ‘informant’,<sup>54</sup> ‘poetry, short stories and other forms of writing’,<sup>55</sup> as opposite to *theoretical, academic, intellectual, scholarly* research contributing to the feminist knowledge production. This ‘us’ refers to the feminist scholars who are the readers as well as the writers, whereas ‘them’ is used to denote Dalit women. The savarna feminist writers regard Dalit women as *native narrators* or the object of their study, rather than an equal contributor to the feminist discourse. Urmila Pawar, Meenakshi Moon,

Wandana Sonalkar, Shailaja Paik, Sharmila Rege, Cynthia Stephen, Gail Omvedt, Gopal Guru, Samita Sen, Padmini Swaminathan, S. J. Aloysius, J. P. Mangubhai, Joel Lee, *et al* explicate and elaborate Dalit women's contribution in Indian freedom struggle, against sexual violence, for women's rights and education. Their writers prove that Dalit women have been the backbone of the history of feminism. But, the mainstream savarna feminists have by-passed this rectifying body of knowledge and refused to acknowledge Dalit women's contribution to gender justice. The brahmanical othering of Ambedkarite feminism signals the privileged location of savarna feminists which facilitates them to ignore, underestimate, and undermine Dalit women's efforts for nation building.

Mainstream savarna feminists appropriate the context of intersectionality for their difference based on race and location in South Asia, while they reject the same for internal differences based on caste. While Dalit feminists appreciate and celebrate intersectionality as a crucial tool for advancing gender justice, savarna feminists reject it calling it 'western' or colonial.<sup>56</sup> Nivedita Menon argues that the idea of being Dalit, Muslim, North-Eastern, rural, etc 'destabilizes' the political thrust of gender based issues. This position refuses to recognize the 'multiplicity' of an individual's identity and henceforth is restricted to single-axis framework. As deliberated earlier, seeing women as a homogenous category is counterproductive in this socio-cultural strata based on caste. Caste needs to be seen in its relation with gender and importantly gender must be analyzed in its concrete relation with caste. Meena Gopal and Mary E. John have put forward extensive critique of Menon's argument from a Dalit feminist standpoint position<sup>57</sup>. Dalit feminists regard intersectionality as 'an excellent candidate' which facilitates feminist endeavours for gender justice, recognizing the uniqueness of a particular individual situation in the broader social structure. Since Dalit non-men fall at the bottom of our society, their caste-class-gender-sexuality leaves them most vulnerable to systematic violence, exploitation, oppression, discrimination and deprivation<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, intersectionality helps us comprehend the exact reality which further empowers us to provide gender justice for *each and all*.

Another important problem introduced to feminist discourse is the savarna women's proliferation of the vague notion of 'Dalit patriarchy'. As discussed in my article 'Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism', their attempt to refocus the question of patriarchy towards Dalit community depicts a lack of commitment to resolve and address brahmanical patriarchy.<sup>59</sup> It is obvious that the understanding of brahmanical patriarchy does not leave a scope of falling into the incorrect concept of Dalit patriarchy. Since savarna women feminists' approach towards gender justice is misdirected, a Dalit feminist rectification proves to be the only method to address, comprehend and smash brahmanical patriarchy. Rege's understanding of this savarna enterprise flags a brahmanical conspiracy, to reserve gender equality only for themselves and throw the baggage of caste-patriarchy on the shoulders of Dalit women alone. Thus, it is not only their caste-class location but also their intention to not work for 'real feminism'.<sup>60</sup> A real feminism encompasses, at least in theory, a commitment to gender equality, gender justice and dignity to each and every womxn (women, along with non-binary sexually marginalised groups). Since

patriarchy in South Asia is brahmanical in nature, only a Dalit feminist theory can offer a vantage point, with active voices of Dalit womxn individuals.

## Conclusion: A Dalit Feminist Rectification

We have seen from above three sections, how caste and gender go hand-in-hand in the South Asian context which mainstream feminists fail to understand. The growing number of horrendous crimes like Hathras, Khairlanji, Bajhang, Bhanwari Devi,<sup>61</sup> can only be addressed from a Dalit feminist standpoint position. In all such cases, a woman lives at the most vulnerable juncture with intersections of her multiple identities. The unique kind of discriminatory aspect subjects her to violence which she may not face if she would belong singularly to any of social, cultural, economic, political, regional, categories. For instance, the Hathras fighter Manisha might have escaped rape but not murder had she been a Dalit man; she might have escaped death had she belonged to an urban 'upper middle class' family, having access to immediate medical facilities; whereas, she might have escaped both gang-rape and attempt to murder had she been a savarna woman. Therefore, our legal interjection needs an intersectional framework along with radical judicial reform (as it is over-populated by savarna men).

Our social structure of intersectional hierarchies puts a Dalit woman in situations where she falls prey to the dominant supremacist communities. 'In the absence of such critiques of brahmanical, class-based hetro-patriarchies, the political edge of sexual politics is lost. No politics committed to a caste based society can overlook sexual politics. It is therefore important to revision it rather than give it up or pose the savarna women alone as the only needy constituents of such a politics.'<sup>62</sup> There is an utmost need to recognize the 'difference' between the lives of savarna and marginalized Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi women. The unfortunate gap in mainstream savarna feminism can only be rectified by a Dalit feminist theory, which seeks to develop a complete conceptual framework for South Asian feminist thought by lodging the Dalit question into its core cluster of concerns. I conceive this as a 'Dalit difference', which would serve as the focal point for reforming brahmanical feminism. *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader* (Routledge, 2019) initiates such development offering a departure point in feminist articulation.<sup>63</sup> In order to prevent the unfortunate exhaustion addressing appropriation which is prevalent more today than ever before, as discussed in the third section, a Dalit feminist theorizing must centre on Dalit lived experience and advanced by those who are the actual stakeholders.

## Endnotes

- 1 The first three categories of *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* castes are also referred as 'savarna', because they are respected in the *varna* system of hinduism.
- 2 No country for women: India reported 88 rape cases every day in 2019, *India Today*, September 30, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/no-country-for-women-india-reported-88-rape-cases-every-day-in-2019-1727078-2020-09-30>.
- 3 Lauren Frayer, Indians Protest Over Gang Rape Of A Woman Of Marginalized Caste, *NPR News*, September 30, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/30/918846746/indians-protest-over-gang-rape-of-a-woman-of-marginalized-caste>.

- 4 Soutik Biswas, Hathras case: Dalit women are among the most oppressed in the world, *BBC News*, October 9, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54418513>.
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- 6 Hathras gang rape: India victim's death sparks outrage, *BBC News*, September 29, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-heres-why-caste-matters-when-a-dalit-woman-is-raped/361253>.
- 7 Hathras case: A woman repeatedly reported rape. Why are police denying it?, *BBC News*, October 10, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54444939>.
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