

Amchya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Bioscope of Our Lives): Who Is My Ally?

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This paper questions the commonly-held view by mainstream feminists and some dalit men that dalit women are somehow more “liberated” than high caste women. I argue that dalit women also face patriarchal oppression, though it has a specific quality. Under such circumstances, who is a dalit woman’s ally? The essay focuses on the penumbra of debilitating circumstances, which call for a further understanding of the particular context of dalit femininity and oppressed sexuality.

Arguing for a separate organisation for dalit women, Kumud Pawade has accused mainstream feminists of not taking due cognisance of the atrocities committed on dalit women (Pawade 1998: 133-34). Also, it seems that dalit men did/do not allow enough participation and representation of dalit women. Pawade accused dalit men of discriminating against dalit women:

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 (ibid: 134).

Thus, dalit women seem to be mere appendages in the movement – literary or otherwise. This experience of a renowned dalit feminist and other dalit women calls for a further introspection by dalit men of their power plays which are unmarked by gender. Both mainstream feminists and dalit men can be accused of the same crime – of divorcing dalit women. How have dalit women been “silenced” by mainstream feminism and by dalit patriarchy? Under such enervating circumstances, who are the allies of dalit women? I venture to untwist the matrix of caste, class, community, and gender by engaging some experiences of dalit women in Maharashtra.

Mainstream movements, and feminist movements in particular, seem to be misguided in their understanding of dalit women. Many dalit and non-dalit scholars share a notion that dalit women are somehow more “free” than high caste women. I attempt to question this postulate, and analyse the specificity of dalit women’s experience with patriarchy and oppressed sexuality.

Debates in Indian Feminism: Politics of Caste and Gender

Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, in their work entitled *Daughters of Independence*, delineate a historical materialist approach in dealing with caste and gender. They are of the opinion that lower caste women are not secluded like their upper caste counterparts because their men depend on them for survival. Joshi and Liddle also write about the non-sexual and the sexual divisions of labour. They suggest that women of the lower castes are forced to take up work for wages. While addressing the issue of sexuality, they state:

Lower caste women, by contrast, experience far fewer controls over their physical freedom. The economic benefits and the social constraints of seclusion are unknown to them. Sati was never demanded of them, widowhood was no curse, divorce was allowed in many lower-caste communities and widows and divorced people could re-marry without disgrace (Liddle and Joshi 1986: 95-69 and 91).

The title of this paper is inspired by the title of Shantabai Kamble’s autobiography, *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan), 1986.

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This analysis of Liddle and Joshi suggests that dalit women, though economically deprived, lead more sexually liberated lives than upper caste women. That was 1986, and this is 2009, where it ties in with the common parlance of some upper caste, middle class women who seem to suggest that dalit women are better off, since “they [can drink and smoke, and can] abuse or hit back their drunken husbands (Rege 2006: 6).

The romanticising of dalit women’s lives is also a feature of the writings of some dalit scholars. They claim that dalit patriarchy is more democratic than Hindu patriarchy, arguing that certain customs like *paadapuja* (worshipping the husband’s feet) are not found among the dalits. They also note the prevalence of wife-battering in dalit families and declare that the “beaten wife has the right to make the attack public by shouting, abusing the husband and if possible beating the husband in return.”¹ Though I understand the underlying motive of criticising brahmanical patriarchy and its strict codes, it is hard to see how this can in any way be read as so-called “democratic patriarchy”. For that matter, how can any patriarchy be democratic in nature?

On similar lines, some dalit feminists like Urmila Pawar² have analysed the differences between brahman and dalit women. She argues:

The dalit woman in contrast to the Brahman woman was not bound by customs such as sati, child marriage, etc. The dalit woman was not confined to the four walls as the upper caste woman. [...] She did not address her husband or elders with imposed veneration (Pawar 1994: 84-85).

Pawar further seeks to explode some myths regarding the gender question in relation to the dalit movement:

[...] there was a wide gap between dalit and Brahman women on economic, social and educational levels. Along with caste based atrocities she was also constantly under the threat of rape, in the family she had to tolerate the physical violence and other atrocities of men (ibid).

Thus, there is a constant movement between an understanding of the liberation that dalit women’s economic “independence” provides women, and the oppressive economic deprivation of the community. Pawar continues:

A myth is harboured that unlike the brahman woman the dalit woman is free from bondage and stifling restrictions. The pain of the *devadasi*, the deserted woman and the *murali* is ignored in this stand. In fact the woman in the household is yet to get recognition as a full and equal human being (ibid: 94).

Thus, Pawar underlines the particular issues and contexts of a dalit woman’s living under upper caste and lower caste patriarchies. Central to my enquiry is this tension between understanding the dalit woman as sexually “liberated” and economically “independent”; and an account of the dalit woman as “oppressed,” both sexually and economically. The position of dalit women is in many important respects worse than upper caste women. Educated upper caste women are granted freedom to move and work in the public arena as long as they respect the rules of caste and class endogamy. On the other hand, dalit women do not have many rights, and are vulnerable to state and upper caste domination in the public, and dalit patriarchy in the private. Official data reveals how dalit women are daily beaten up, especially by their husbands. In this case, who should they join hands with?

Some upper caste women seemed to be nauseated with proximity to lower castes – male or female; and also with the idea of being treated as low class servants (Chakravarti 1993: 130-58). Further, for some upper caste feminists, the very “linking of women and shudras *together* is one more evidence of the low position of women”.³ They appear to be more concerned with the linking of women with the shudra than the subordination of the shudra. What happens to the shudra woman in this subordination?

In fact, a clear departure of dalit women from the mainstream nationalist women’s movement occurred during the colonial times and in the national movement. History has been witness to the predominance that upper caste and middle class women’s issues have received in many reform movements. Much of the scholarship on nationalist movement and women’s movement has dealt with high caste patriarchy and the position of elite women in family, marriage and kinship networks. This scholarship has engaged with caste issues through some anthropological and sociological studies, research on poverty and ngoisation, women and their stigmatised labour, and so on. This invisibility of dalit women was noted by several mainstream feminist writers who pointed out how lower class and dalit women were largely ignored in many earlier feminist writings. Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj thus state that “research of indologists, sociologists, social historians, anthropologists particularly from the pre-independence period provided descriptions of positions of middle class/elite women” (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987: 7).⁴

In order to engage this invisibility of marginal women we need to confront some historiographical problems in order to grasp the contradictions that lie at the heart of complex dalit lives. How does one explain normative historiographies and feminist accounts’ selective ignorance and continuous occlusion of the dalit woman as active historical agents? Another significant question that remains is the investigation of the specific discursive and material context of dis(appearance) and marginalisation of dalit women in conventional and critical historiography of Maharashtra (Sarkar 2008).⁵ Can we solve this problem by making these backward and ignored histories “visible”? Can we give “voice” to these suppressed dalit women, by restoring them to history? Would not that be an additive to normative history writings? I argue that the task of critical history ought to be to investigate the specific ways in which this invisibility, marginalisation and silence were secured and to what end (Sarkar 2008: 9 and Burton 1994: 20).⁶ Answering these questions would be the topic of another paper, let me simply begin to address some complexities here.

India has a history of a rich women’s movement; however, given the inadequate theorisation on the caste system in India, systematic inquiries into the nexus between caste, class, and patriarchy for women, particularly belonging to lowest caste have escaped the attention of mainstream feminist studies. They tend to mask rather than critically explain the structure of caste as it intersects with gender (also see Chakravarti 2003, Rege 2006). Thus, women in agrarian situations or of the lower castes remain largely ignored (Desai and Krishnaraj 1987: 7; Sangari and Vaid 1989: 21-22).⁷ Some, as we have seen, even deny that patriarchy was as pervasive for lower as for high caste women.

Homogenising Gender: Invoking of 'Sisterhood for Women'

In general, women in India identify with their caste over and above their gender. The progressive feminist Uma Chakravarti writes that upper caste men and women have both defended patriarchal institutions strongly, as they see them as a bulwark of their higher position in society. She states, "patriarchy was and is a necessary aspect of class order and social stability, women then would and did resist its reformulation" (Chakravarti 1998: 236).⁸ She shows that upper caste women in the late 19th century mostly aligned with their men against the lower castes. While this seems a bleak situation for the late 18th century, the late 20th century situation does not seem to be very different. For example, when upper caste women protested against the Mandal provisions, they decried the increasing quotas that would deprive them of upper caste husbands from the Indian Administrative Service (Chakravarti 2003: 1-3; Tharu and Niranjana 1999: 494-525). In other words, these women were not ready to accept qualified dalit men as their potential husbands and aligned with their community instead of gender. Similar incidents at Chunduru, Pimpri Deshmukh, Khairlanji (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 2004: 249-60; Rege 2004: 93; Teltumbde 2008: 39-40), among others have been testimonies of upper caste women's assertion by cooperating with upper caste men.

There is a long history in India of the identification of women's self-assertion with high caste agendas. Susie Tharu, Tejaswini Niranjana, Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid underline that "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). Thus it seems that "all the women are upper caste (and by implication, middle class Hindu) and all the lower castes are men".⁹ Tharu and Niranjana show how the late 20th century, 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 sisterhood with dalit women now not only set them against dalit men but also against lower-caste/class women (Tharu and Niranjana *op cit*; Chakravarti 2003).

There are many such evidences of incidents which illustrate that gender becomes a hidden issue, being glossed over in the interest of the community. Such incidents point out that "gender identity" in India needs to be investigated further in order to make it a political category. Do we need to re-conceptualise women's studies and rethink the presumptions on which the feminist movement is based in India? We certainly require some ideological questioning regarding the intersectionality of gender, caste, class, religion, community, and the ongoing struggle over what constitutes the legitimate terrains of feminist theory and enquiry in India.

Some mainstream feminists argue that dalit women's first loyalty must be to their gender, and urge them to see the way in which they are being exploited by their own community. They underscore that "oppression of women by men of their own community is the fundamental reality of women's oppression in India, cutting across classes and castes".¹⁰ Thus, some mainstream

feminists seek to educate dalit women on how they are exploited by their own fathers, husbands and brothers.

I agree with Mrinalini Sinha that "celebration of an inclusive and broad-based identity of women was [...] premature and problematic, [...] the very act of imagining a collective identity for women on the basis of a shared cause that potentially bridged sectional and communal differences," was still a noteworthy achievement. However, this insistence on a universal category of "woman" based on a single axis of identification occludes the simultaneous workings of other axes like caste, community, class, sexuality and gender for dalit women. These homogenising efforts have certain problems for the gendering of the caste question, for the understanding of dalit women whose histories remain largely unscrutinised.

Dalit women are being taught to forget their differences and ignore these causes of separation and suspicion with the mainstream feminist movement. It is my argument that we have to take these differences and turn them into our strengths. Personal visions and experiential knowledge of dalit women will help lay ground for radical political struggles. In order to do this, we need to educate ourselves about dalit women, and this has been done only very recently. However, we should also understand that the post-enlightenment notions of "voice" in feminist scholarship have their own problems. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, dalit women have been dealt with only tangentially.

Indian feminist movement has essentially been an upper caste and middle class movement right since colonial times. In general, such upper caste feminism has been unable to critically engage and confront inequalities of caste of community implicit in that subject or its worlds.¹¹ White/mainstream feminist assertions that "sisterhood is global" tend to deny the different spaces that are inhabited by non-white, third world women or dalit women, in our case (Bhavnani 2001: 5; Sudbury 1998).¹² In this way, inequalities of power within the women's movement are masked. The language of talking in generalised terms, for women, shields the question of identity, agency, and how these categories are constructed by their complex contexts. Some mainstream feminist scholars fail to understand that beyond sisterhood there is still caste. Caste was rarely discussed in the Indian women's movement and they assumed that caste identities could be transcended by the universal/larger identity of sisterhood among women (also see Rege 2006).

The dalit women's struggle in India is unique in its own way, but does find a homologous struggle by women of "colour" and others in the US and the UK who have demanded visibility and an explicit acknowledgement and analysis of racial differences and the specificities of "gender" oppression in the context of western feminism.¹³ These debates between feminists from the 1970s and the 1990s¹⁴ also resulted in the formation of some autonomous black women's organisations.

In the contemporary global system, we can learn from certain homologous movements in different parts of the world. Such an exercise would seem strange, but it would encourage the creation of wider social communities, sharing memories, histories, and even institutions for that matter. Though the contexts of race and caste are different, the circumstances of the rise of feminist

movements in India are different, we may learn from some comparisons between the movement of non-white women in the west, and that of the dalit women in India, which can create a space for an enriched feminist theory and for a greater liberation for women in general.

Some Indian feminists have attacked high caste patriarchy for its oppressiveness, but not on the grounds of caste. Such incidents take place even today while discussing feminist agendas, where specific oppressions are totally blanked out. At best, these feminists and their kind of feminism pay merely lip service to those (dalit) women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Such feminist frames have failed to critically interrogate dalit women's subordination as "Dalit" and as "Women". What is missing from the mainstream notions of patriarchy is an adequate appreciation of the social, cultural, and political specificity that goes into the making of the dalit woman and the dalit community, and of the power relations and inequality that are tied with the ranked hierarchy.

Analogous to some feminists, some male dalit scholars have made a rather different move, in that they try to subsume the category of "gender" under that of the "caste" collective. Reaction of some dalit men to feminism (in general) and dalit women's feminism (in particular) has been notoriously negative. They accuse that dalit feminism may divide the dalit movement and that it would be a powerful deterrent to the growth of an autonomous dalit movement. They remain unmarked by the category of "gender" and argue that all "women are dalits," thus once again falling into the same trap as some feminists did. However, they have a good intention to do this: to forge solidarity in the fight against the oppressive caste system. But in following this discourse, they turn a blind eye to the fact that the vast majority of high caste women have no such gendered solidarity with dalit women, and also that dalit women face certain "caste" specific handicaps.

Articulating the Dalit and Non-Brahman Woman's Problem

The revolutionary reformer Jotirao Phule brilliantly articulated the specific, overlapping and graded ways in which brahmanical patriarchy exploits women of different castes (Phule 1991: 111-14). Seconding her husband's endeavours, Savitribai Phule underlined the significance of challenging endogamy and suggested a *bahujan* alliance of all women, shudras and ati-shudras against brahmanism.

Muktabai Salve, a Mang girl student in Jotiba Phule's classroom of 1855 wrote about the "Grief of Mahars and Mangs". While comparing the experiences of giving birth for dalit women and brahman women, Muktabai underlines the particularities of the experiences of dalit women: "our women give birth to babies and they do not even have a roof over their heads. How they suffer rain and cold! Try to think about it from your own experiences" (Tharu 1991; Bhagwat 1997; Chakravarti 1998). This call to experience the life of a dalit may not be supported by scholars. However, I want to draw attention towards the specific script of dalit feminism and the hurdles associated with it. Are not dalit women "women" who suffer the pains of womanhood? Tarabai Shinde's polemical text *A Comparison Between Men and Women*, published

in 1882 underscored the conflicts along gender lines, attacked brahmanical patriarchy, and also called for introspection of patriarchy among non-brahman *kunbis* (Shinde 2004).¹⁵

In a similar vein, Ambedkar's theory of caste underlined the theory of the origins of the subordination of women. He conceived of "women as gateways of the caste system" and interlinked the struggles of fighting caste with that of recovering women. Thus, during his speech at Mahad satyagraha, he directed dalit women's attention to the specificities of women's subjection and oppression due to caste and their subordination as "women" and as "dalit" (Ambedkar 1973: 5-22; Pardeshi 2003: 346-62).

For Ambedkar, "marriage was a liability." Furthermore, at the 1942 Mahila Parishad in Nagpur, he said, "don't thrust it (marriage) on your girls, it *hinders* (my emphasis) a girl's progress. After marriage a woman should be an equal partner and a friend of her husband. She should not be the slave of the husband" (Pawar and Moon 2000: 89). Ambedkar was, thus, not opposed to marriage, so long as it was entered into at a relatively mature age. In this way, it would not impede a girl's educational progress. He also expected a relationship of friendship and equality in married couples. He wanted them to be "equal partners". These partners were to maintain the same stance when they entered organisations too. However, dalit women's everyday experiences reveal that this may not happen in practice. We have already dealt with Kumud's argument.

Nonetheless, Ambedkar also believed that a married woman should focus on fulfilling her family role first and foremost. He sought to link the emancipation of dalit women through education with the internal transformation of the culture and ethos of the family, thus making the personal political. He envisaged ways in which they could do this, while at the same time, supporting the movement. In his Mahad speech in 1938, he asked women to refuse to cook carrion for their men. He also instructed dalit women not to tolerate or cooperate with their men folk if they act against the decided pledge of the community (Keer 1962: 70-71, 104-05; Pawar and Moon 2000: 90). This emphasis tended, however, to underscore the nationalist agenda for women, to once more inscribe a separation between the "private" and "public" spheres of life, and to confine women largely to the former. In this, Ambedkar inferred that the first place of the woman was within the household; she, the wise mother, had to occupy herself as a partner to the husband and nurturer of (her) children (sons). This created paradoxes for women within the movement. These conjectures are true today when dalit women are allowed "limited" powers in the private and public. However, in order to be "true Ambedkarites" we need to understand that Ambedkar did his best for his times, and now we need to go beyond Ambedkar's certain ideological formations in order to understand the complexities of our society, to write our histories, and to make an intervention in the politics of our times.

Ambedkar's fight against atrocities towards women was also reflected in the vows of the neo-Buddhists. He embraced Buddhism at a meeting in 1956, in which he gave 22 vows to the Buddhists. One of the vows, "I shall abstain from alcohol" protected women who are subjected to the violence of alcoholic husbands. Dalit working class men frequently drowned themselves in alcohol and beat up dalit women, so the embracing of Buddhism was a new

hope to dalit women. Ambedkar asked women not to feed their spouses and sons if they were drunkards. He was of the opinion that the new religion would definitely render better and equal justice to women. He said that it was Buddha who gives equal status to women alongside men and that Buddha was a pioneer in the cause of women's liberation" (Ambedkar 1965: 14, 18-25).¹⁶ This call of Ambedkar is reinforced even today. The Buddhist women at the "Dhammadiksha Suvarna Jayanti Bauddha Mahila Sammelan" (Golden Jubilee of the Conversion to Buddhism, Buddhist Women Conference) held in Nagpur on 10 October 2005, praised the man-woman equality in Buddhism and invited Buddhists to live up to this humanitarian ideal.

Continuing his struggle against caste and gender inequality, Ambedkar presented the Hindu Code Bill on 12 August 1948. This bill was revolutionary, in that it guaranteed property to daughters, abolished caste in matters of marriage and adoption, and underscored the principle of monogamy and divorce. We should also note that some upper caste women, strongly opposed this bill. Instead of praising this bold pro-woman initiative by Ambedkar, the upper castes called him the "Modern Manu" in a sarcastic way and ridiculed him for donning the mantle of a *Yajnavalkya* or *Parashar* (Zelliot 2003: 204-17; Pardeshi 2003: 346-62). There is still no adequate legislation to guard the rights of Indian women in general. It shows that the work of feminists still has a long way to go in India.

Except for a few notable exceptions, the dalit women's movement in the Ambedkarite and post-Ambedkarite era has not been investigated. It also remains to be well-documented and archived. I would call upon both feminists and dalits for a critical introspection of caste, power and patriarchy. Divorced from mainstream feminist movements, how do dalit women live under the shadows of dalit patriarchy? Do dalit men live up to their "Ambedkarite ideals" which they keep harping upon? Let us address these questions by looking at their private lives.

Amchya Jalmachi Chittarkatha: Contesting Dalit Patriarchy

I engaged with dalit women of various age groups, at times from three generations in the same family, with different levels of education and professions. I carried out my fieldwork during the years 2000-02, and for some months in the years 2004-2006 in the cities of Pune, Mumbai, and Nagpur (Maharashtra).¹⁷ I found that it was not easy to gain an insight into the married lives of dalit women. It was difficult to question them about their husbands in the presence of the in-laws and husbands. One anonymous informant could not control her tears and narrated her story of being kicked by her husband.¹⁸ A few like Shantabai Kuchekar were very shy.¹⁹

It seems that education and employment do not bring about radical changes in most men and dalit men are no exception. Prakshoti Kadam,²⁰ an unmarried engineer from the third generation, said that dalit men should look at their educated and employed wives from a different perspective: "dalit men must understand the hardships of these employed women. They have to change." She declared: "I want a man, who will be at par with me, will understand me. Further, if I cook for four days he should be able to cook for three days at least." Prakshoti's comments

were a reflection on the hard life and continuing low status of her mother. Although she enjoyed her work, and was independent, self-confident and assertive, her case reiterates how the traditional norms relating to feminine and masculine duties continue to exist (see also Kapur 1971; Chanana 2001).

Another such case was Shantabai Kuchekar, who had obtained a good job as a result of her education. She emphasised that women have to manage everything, and work hard to get out of the mundane rut. She and her daughter revealed that they did not enjoy equal status with their male counterparts.²¹ They felt that their employment was taken for granted; there was nothing special or unusual about it to command any special status or respect within the family. Their grievances were not addressed; rather, their oppression was renewed in a different fashion. These women fulfilled their roles in the family and at work with equal priority. This is not a dalit-specific problem; however, it was prevalent in the dalit families that I interviewed. Few informants were, however, prepared to voice their grievances in these respects within the family.²² Did they expect a negative response? Did they fear maltreatment? Or were they themselves unsure whether they even had a case to make, being acculturated to accept their *bayichi jaat*, woman caste, in life? How do we articulate and write about the less visible and the unutterable oppression?

Some dalit men cannot escape the stronghold of some deep-seated brahmanical codes of patriarchy. Kirti Waghmare reported that some dalit men who were interested in marrying her suggested that she would not be able to practise medicine in a her clinic after marriage.²³ Kirti readily rejected such offers. I noted this tendency that prevailed amongst some middle class dalit men of wanting their wives to conform to the model of Victorian domesticity. The larger brahmanical ideology and norms of chastity, *pativrata* women, tied to the household continue to underpin the beliefs and practices of some dalits. This is especially true of some of those who are seeking upward mobility. Dalit women have always been working outside in the fields; the new phenomenon of middle-classness called for domesticating dalit women. These dalit men, thus reproduced their oppression by upper castes through a constant production of consent and application of coercion to dalit women. Patriarchal norms would not allow the family to survive on a woman's income. In general, however, this attitude is changing. When families realised that their financial burden would lessen if both the sexes worked, they allowed women to work in public.

I interviewed one "Ambedkarite" who is the leader of the sc-st teachers union at a college in Pune. On being asked about his wife's profession and advancement, he replied:

I am happy that my wife is working with a good bank. She is doing well; however, I do not approve of her promotions, advancing ahead at the cost of my family. I am a "staunch Ambedkarite" [emphasis mine] and believe that my wife should take care of the family first.²⁴

There was another such "Ambedkarite" who said:

I already talked to my wife about her service and her promotions when I proposed to her. I did not and do not support her promotions as that would call on transfers to different places [even remote places] in the state. I want my family to be together, not scattered. Hence, I would not support her promotions.²⁵

Pointing to me, he further said, “at least you are working for a cause, you are doing your bit; my wife does not even read anything, she does not have to do MPhil. or a PhD for that matter, so why bother? We are happy the way we are.” Some farcical Ambedkarites used the “Babasaheb Ambedkar” mask; appropriate some ideas of Ambedkar in order to justify their motives and selfish patriarchal beliefs. At times they hold back their “better halves”, and in some cases act without consulting their wives. Especially in the second case, this man controlled his wife’s bank account, but he never showed his account to her. Nor did the wife have any courage to ask about it; that would be blasphemy. The prevailing attitude is that if the husband is promoted, it is natural for the wife to follow even if she has to give up her job. The same does not apply if it is the other way round.

I was amazed with the use of the label “Ambedkarite” that these men applied to themselves. This was definitely not the “Ambedkarite” ideal of companionship which we have dealt with in the earlier pages. Also, I want to reiterate that we need to go beyond specific Ambedkarite formulations in order to understand and transform our social relations.

Further, some dalit men, including scholars, harbour a notion that “upper caste, especially brahman women are “fair”, “beautiful”, and very “articulate”; hence they (dalit men) have been attracted towards brahman women. Thus, implicit in this declaration is the allegation that “dalit women are dark, ugly, and inarticulate”, According to such dalit men, this is the main reason for more marriages among dalit men and brahman women; this has parallels with the increasing number of marriages between African American men and white women.²⁶ These dalit men, who seem to be Manuvadi, following the code of Manu, not only fall into the traps of the larger brahmanical ideology of condemning shudras, dalits, and dalit women; but they fail to deploy their agency, critical consciousness, and thinking when they make such obnoxious allegations. It is ironical, indeed, that the lower castes who have such rich histories of breaking caste codes and brahmanical hegemony, once again emulate and reproduce a similar bio-genetic map of inequality between brahman women and dalit women. Moreover, they fail to understand that the notions of “beauty” and “articulation” are very subjective.

It is against such dalit male idiosyncrasy, that I noted some feminist streaks in a few women like Urmila Pawar and Kumud Pawade, whose responses flowed unhindered as a result of their awareness of my project and their own experiences. I discovered how the picture changed from love, to no love. Urmila mentioned all such incidents in her autobiography when she felt like “*asaa raag aalaa, ani tyachya dokyat naaral phodavasa vaatala* [I used to get so angry and felt like breaking a coconut on his head]”.²⁷ The very fact that Urmila Pawar expressed this in a detailed written account after her husband’s death speaks volumes of the “silenced” dalit women.

All my respondents believed that they were answerable to society. Pawar and others underscored: “We cannot leave them as it is the nature of the society, and a woman has to answer to this society, which a man will not have to. [Such is patriarchy]. All men are the same.” Such are Indian women who have been trained to adjust to be happy. Though most of these women were at the

receiving end of oppression all the time, some of them found their “middle-paths”²⁸ to keep their families and their individuality growing. They confidently and considerately became well versed in the *tarevarchi kasrat* (balancing act) for the happiness of their families.

That this internal critique of dalit patriarchy in dalit politics is much needed is beyond doubt. Gopal Guru argues that the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within dalits is important. Such assessments of dalit politics by activists and social scientists recognise that the movement is at crossroads in terms of ideological debates on this issue. Guru, Pawade, Pawar, Asha Thorat, Jyoti Lanjewar, Pradnya Lokhande, Nalini Ladhake, Vidyut Bhagwat, Sharmila Rege, among many others underline the silence on the subject of caste-based patriarchies for dalit women and call for an internal critique of patriarchy in dalit politics, in order to foster political radicalism.²⁹ Rege, a non-dalit, calls upon higher caste/class feminists who may propagate *brahmani* (brahmanical) feminism to be self-reflexive and to “re-invent” themselves as dalit feminists in order to strengthen the movement (Rege 1998: ws-45).³⁰ Some have indeed agreed to try to do so.³¹

Towards Building a Radical Dalit Woman’s Movement

After the mid-1970s some leftist and centrist movements have courageously tried to evolve programmes to address the condition of women qua women. The Left party based women’s organisations have been severely criticised for some of their ideologies which have ignored different women’s questions; however, we need to note their economic and work-related issues, this has led to emergence of grass root women’s groups among lower class women which included tribals and dalits. They have supported *parityakta* women’s movement and have also taken part in broader fronts with other left or dalit-oriented women’s groups.³² They raised topics like gender oppression within classes because of alcoholism, anti-price rise, land rights for women, subsuming of women’s issues, and so on (Sen 2004; Kumar 1993: 99-105; Ray 1999: 111-16).

The rural mass-based peasant movement, Shetkari Sanghatana led by Sharad Joshi, had established a broad alliance – the Samagra Mahila Aghadi, which for over a decade had the largest mass base among women, and did the biggest work in land for women in the state (Omvedt 1993). The socialist feminist groups which were strongly influenced by the left, discussed issues such as wages for housework, the double burden of women, the nature of women’s work and the nature of patriarchy in India (Ray 1999: 117). The Janawadi Mahila Sanghatana, with its activities of politicising domestic violence, fighting for tenants’ rights, equal wages for equal work, is involved in “consciousness raising”. Though the party women have accomplished the above-mentioned tasks, internally many even higher level women activists of the parties (CPI or CPI(M)) have been very critical of their parties but would refuse to make this public (Kumar 1993:110).³³

It is only recently that the mainstream and women’s movement and studies seem to have opened their *tritiya ratna* (third eye) to focus on the tensions between the “different” feminisms (Kamble 1986; Rege 1998). There have been efforts to write about and

theorise dalit women's oppression in their interwoven histories (Velaskar; Tharu and Niranjana; John and Menon), to write a more nuanced understanding of unequal patriarchies (Kannabiran and Kannabiran). More efforts are being made in "theorising feminism" (Geetha 1991; Chakravarti 2003; Rao) and of thinking of the need of a wide range of feminisms in India (Chaudhari). Other works of M Swathy Margaret, Mehmi and Rege underline the need to analyse our histories of silence, the selective amnesia of mainstream movements and institutions to focus on "difference". Rege (2006) covers the work of all these authors.³⁴

Many dalit men and women, dalit and non-dalit feminists argue that women born in dalit castes who believe in their revolutionary agenda should work towards an independent "hearth of their own", rather than align themselves to any political party or mainstream struggles (Rege 2006: 65-66).³⁵ Though I enthusiastically support this path-breaking agenda for dalit women's movement, we should understand the many challenges that constantly stare in the face of the "dalit of the dalits" – dalit women. Kumud, herself discusses these hurdles from their economic, social, political, cultural, educational, and health perspectives (Pawade 1998: 134-36). Another significant question that remains is how and when will dalit women fight these hurdles?

I came across some respondents who sometimes challenged the patriarchal leadership, making spaces for feminism in the dalit movement, and at other times privilege their dalit-bahujan identity over gender. However, there were many hurdles to be overcome. Kusum Gangurde³⁶ lamented that dalit men were using dalit women as stooges/puppets and that there was no specified agenda for the women's movement. Many political parties maintain token women's fronts and these were not different. Further, Gangurde complained that the [dalit men and dalit women and their movement] youth were *vikhurle* (split and spread out). How can we talk about a strong separate *chul* (mud stove) for dalit women under these devitalising circumstances? Who is the dalit women's ally in these transformations and politics of our times?

Some educated dalit middle class women condemn the lowly educated dalit women from the slums and consider them as pathological cases. One activist noted how a famous dalit woman writer left the stage when she, a less educated woman activist ascended the podium. This very brahmanical attitude which Ambedkar disparaged is found among some dalit men as well as women. Should we then label ourselves as "true Ambedkarites", when we look down upon our own sisters and our community? We should note that dalit feminism is not a homogeneous category; it is riven by caste and class differences. In this case, who is the "real" friend of a dalit woman? Kumud Pawade herself ends her essay on the note that, "the day dalit women's organisations deal with these challenges successfully, [it would be understood that] that would be a *su-din*, a good day" (ibid: 136).

Thus dalit women face complex and overlapping difficulties. One has to take into consideration the different forms of oppressions that different women face. Thus, it seems that the danger lies in ranking oppressions. One should be aware of such reductive or essentialist theoretical tendency (whether it be Marxist, feminist, or cultural nationalist) to posit one kind of oppression

as primary for all time and in all places (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Amos and Parmar 1984: 3-19). Thus, the nature of brahman women's oppression may be different from that of the dalit women, and not less or more. However, the oppression of brahman women is mediated by brahmanical privilege, they are complicit in their power and situation of advantage, unlike dalit women's oppression and of their disadvantage. It is crucial to understand this central relation of power and privilege that sustains it; the marked advantage of being the dominant, the normative, and hence the mainstream. We therefore need to take to task mainstream feminists and dalit men who (like Hindu reformers) are ambivalent about the dalit woman's question, and whose struggles do not engage with the forces of patriarchy on a social scale.

Should not the mainstream feminist movement and other political parties who share their interests and agenda support such dalit women's endeavours? Also, are dalit men supporting dalit women in fighting atrocities committed by upper castes? How many dalit men identify with dalit women's struggles? It is only by understanding the contradictions and complexities inherent in dalit women's location within various structures, by looking at their local context and constitution, that dalit men and upper caste middle class women devise effective political challenges and action.

In my view, it is important not to subsume dalit feminism into the overarching rubric of Indian feminism, for one needs to comprehend the specific context of the femininity and oppressed sexuality of dalit women. We need to understand the diversity of experiences of dalit castes, the specific dalit histories, culture and religion, class, personal lives, and self-hood in their own contexts.³⁷ Sexual identity as well as caste identity is intrinsic to the understanding of the dalit woman. Dalit women have minimal access to resources and power unlike brahman women and they cannot risk struggling against both sexism and casteist tendencies. Their struggle is with dalit men against sexism and together with the dalit men against caste oppression. It is possible for the outsider to develop sympathy and empathy towards the suffering and oppression that being a dalit entails. I argue for a porous struggle, thus building many bridges across feminist movements, and dalit movements, and the borders or boundaries here may not be defined and fixed. Such an agenda is to forge informed and engaged solidarities among ourselves, in order to contest all sorts of and forms of brahmanism. In particular, dalit women may reach out, and be reached out to, by other women. In this way a link may be forged between feminist historians.

In the course of the interviews I noted that most of the women, as devoted wives, spoke very well of their husbands in the confines of the familial. They maintained their *maryada* and remained within their "acceptable boundaries". Men fear domination from more highly educated women. However things are gradually changing, we are definitely in different and better times compared to our mothers. Identities of dalit women are being formed, created, and reformed over time. Dalit men need to grasp these understandings and also those of rampant sexism and casteism, and of the everyday constrictions of dalit women's

lives. Some women agreed that they could engage in a companionable relationship with their husbands, however unequal it was. Some of the second and third generation learners also

mentioned that their statuses were no less than their husbands, and that dalit families were changing and granting independence and greater freedom to women.

NOTES

- 1 Kancha Ilaiah has a whole chapter dedicated to "Marriage, Market and Social Relations" (Ilaiah 1996: 20-35). Official data suggests that almost 27.4% of SC women have been beaten or physically mistreated since the age of 15 years, in 25.2% of cases by their husbands. See the National Crime Records Bureau's *Crimes in India 2003 Report* (New Delhi, 2004), as available online on <http://ncrb.nic.in/crime2005/home.htm-figures>.
- 2 Urmila Pawar, and her daughters – Malavika and Manini, Borivili, Mumbai, 5-7 September 2004.
- 3 Desai and Krishnaraj (1987), p 33. Shudras are the lowest strata in the fourfold division of Hindu society. Unlike the *untouchables*, Shudras are *touchable*. Emphasis is mine.
- 4 Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj (1987), p 7. These two authors say that their work is a textbook for women's studies in the institutions of higher learning, providing a review of the relationship between family, economy, education and health.
- 5 See Mahua Sarkar's work on exploring the contexts of the specific invisibilities and marginalisation of Muslim women in late colonial Bengal in Sarkar 2008.
- 6 See Sarkar 2008, p 9 and Antoinette Burton's analysis of the "constitutive power" of the trope of Indian womanhood in the "shaping ofimperial discourses" in Britain in *Burdens of History*, p 20.
- 7 Sangari and Vaid argue that dalit women have been suppressed in the earlier literature.
- 8 There were many newspaper reports of this incident. IAS stands for "Indian Administrative Services," the highest cadre of Indian bureaucracy which all middle classes aspire to enter.
- 9 This conjecture finds it parallel to the western case in which, "all women are white and all men are niggers."
- 10 Madhu Kishwar in discussion with Jaya Jaitly in "Samvad", *The Times of India*, 15 August 1998. I have borrowed this quote from Sonalkar 1999, pp 24-25.
- 11 My argument is endorsed by Tharu and Niranjana 1999, p 497.
- 12 Bhavnani 2001, p 5. Also see Sudbury 1998 for an overview of these arguments among white feminists and third world feminists in the UK.
- 13 Newman 1999; P H Collins 1990, and works of black feminist scholars Bell Hooks (2000), Angela Davis (2001), Kimberly Crenshaw (1994) underline this view.
- 14 An insightful article by Clare Hemmings is critical of an insistent narrative of feminist thought as a relentless march of progress (Hemmings 2005), pp 115-39. I thank Angie Willey, my graduate colleague at Emory for our discussions on the first version of my paper.
- 15 Also see Bhagwat 1997, O'Hanlon 1994 for an extended analysis on this piece.
- 16 Ambedkar (1950). Reprinted (1965), p 18, esp see pp 14, 18-25. Ambedkar examines Manu and his *Manu Smriti*, which imposes various disabilities on women.
- 17 I conducted interviews with some predominant SC communities in the city of Pune. I do not want to enter into the difference in these castes here. I interviewed three generations of women mostly belonging to the same family, thus it is a family history. However, from this sample I have selected only few interviews for the purposes of this paper.

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- 18 Anon, 12 July 2006, Mumbai.
- 19 Shantabai Kuchekar (name changed), 8 January 2002, Pune.
- 20 Prakashoti Kadam (name changed), 10 April 2002, Pune.
- 21 Shantabai and Shobha Kuchekar, 8 January 2002.
- 22 Sometimes when I was talking to the women in the presence of their husbands or in-laws, they could not voice their opinions openly. One anonymous respondent changed the place of our interview. We went from her living room to her bedroom when we came to such discussions. 15 August 2004.
- 23 Dr Kirti Waghmare (name changed), 12 November 2004, Pune.
- 24 Anon, 7 February 2002, Pune. I do not want to name him.
- 25 Anon, 2 July 2006, Pune.
- 26 This view and the succeeding discussion erupted once again in a recent major conference on "Dalit Studies", held at a leading institution in the US.
- 27 Urmila, Pawar, *Aaydaan* (Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2003), and in her interview, 7 September 2004.
- 28 My usage of the term, "middle-paths" here draws upon the Buddhist philosophy of "middle-path," that propounds a balanced life between extreme austerities, and extravagance and indulgence; this is the "Noble Eightfold Path" of right outlook, right aims, right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
- 29 Numerous writings of dalit women, some dalit men, some non-dalit feminists have underscored this view. Also see Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference'", WS-39-WS-46.
- 30 Rege's recent work *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* underlines the significance of dalit women's voice and literature.
- 31 See works of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989), Uma Chakravarti (1998, 2003), Kannabirans (2003), Bhagwat (1997), Rege (2006), and so on.
- 32 I am very grateful to Gail Omvedt for readily providing this information. The Stree Mukti Sanghatana (affiliated mostly with Lal Nishan Party), Mahila Federation or AIDWA (CPI), Janawadi Mahila Sanghatana (CPI(M), Purogami Stree Sanghatana, Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti (a broad leftist alliance arising out of 1975 Stri Mukti Sangharsh Parishad), Shramik Sanghatana, Stri Mukti Sangharsh Calval (affiliated with Mukti Sangharsh and the Shramik Mukti Dal), Samagra Mahila Aghadi (Shetkari Sanghatana), Purogami Stree Sanghatana (mostly Andhra based) are some examples.
- 33 Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing*, p. 110 and personal communication with Gail Omvedt
- 34 Rege provides an excellent review of these developments in Rege (2006) *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, pp 64-65, 67-71.
- 35 This agenda of "talking differently" was articulated as a "separate hearth" for dalit women and was severely criticised by the Left and non-dalit feminists on various grounds: threat of being "autonomous organisations divorced from party politics, identitarian politics limited to the experiential" and so on.
- 36 Kusum Gangurde, leader of women's RPI wing, Borivili (W), Mumbai, 21 July 2005.
- 37 I extend the third world feminist renderings to the case of dalit women in India. I am drawing upon works of Mohanty (1988), pp 61-88; Mohanty et al 1991; Lorde 2003, pp 25-29.
- (compiled) *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches* (BAWS), Vol 1 (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department).
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