

The rise of *new* Dalit women in Indian historiography

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Abstract

Especially since the political turmoil of the 1990s, scholars have focused on the marginalized histories of Dalit (“Untouchable”) communities in India. Yet these investigations also concentrated exclusively on the male Dalit community. Only recently, however, scholars have focused their attention on Dalit women as “subjects” of study. Dalits are dominated and dominating at the same time. My article examines Dalit women's lifeworlds under double patriarchy in colonial and post-colonial India to highlight the contributions of scholars in understanding how different Dalit women are negotiating, challenging, politicizing, and transforming conditions of their discriminated Dalit status: as sexed women and caste Dalit. I theorize and focus on ways “new” Dalit women engaged with the *incremental intersecting technologies* of caste, class, gender, sexuality, and community to carve out their subjectivity, agency, respectability, and honor in modern India. To this end, I dwell on a variety of themes—generative gender and “new” Dalit women, upper-caste prejudice, community, patriarchy, honor, and formal education to illuminate the changing sociality and complexities of Dalit women's worlds. My review article demonstrates that Dalit women's universal perspectives and historical and political practices are deeply democratic and as such have the potential of engaging in inclusive and productive politics, building solidarities, and actually reshaping the larger fields of South Asian Studies, India Studies, Dalit Studies, and Gender Studies.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, especially since the political turmoil over the Mandal Commission Report of the 1990s, scholars have focused on the hitherto unexamined histories of Dalit communities. Many of them have centered on Dalits as *actors* and *subjects* of history and have documented Dalit's struggle for dignity and the shaping of a *new* Dalit consciousness. Most significantly, they have contributed to the building of Dalit Studies as a critical intervention in the larger field of India studies and more broadly, South Asia studies. Nonetheless, most scholars studying Dalits in different parts of India have adopted a male vantage point and as a result, concentrated on the efforts of Dalit men, thus diminishing or even excluding women's actions and aspirations. Only very recently have scholars produced books devoted to the understanding of Dalit women, and sub-caste, class, rural/urban, and gender inequalities within Dalit communities.

Yet there remains a scarcity of historical studies on Dalit women. Anthropologists and Sociologists, because of their methodological tools of engaging ethnographies, have immersed in the vernacular lifeworlds of Dalit women and have been more sensitive to the complexities of Dalit women's experiences, than historians who have traditionally relied disproportionately upon the objectivizing archive produced by the colonial and postcolonial states. My book *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (Paik, 2014a) provides the first historical analyses of Dalit women's ideas, actions, and lives in 20th century Maharashtra (Western India). While some historians have studied Dalits resistance to both colonial and Brahmanical hegemonic discourses and power and their quest for their own modernity, there is little study of how women fought against double patriarchy—both private and public.

2 | CASTE, PREJUDICE, AND THE MAKING OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCE

The main problem has been with both, upper-caste reformers as well as scholars' emphasis on modern Indian historiography's central dichotomy of colonialism and nationalism that has denied Dalit women and men the space to launch anti-caste movements and critiques of caste, community, gender, and the nation. Mainstream, feminist, and Dalit historiography as well as writings by Dalit male activists have overlooked ordinary Dalit women who have authored radical social and political agendas. Unlike middle-class, upper-caste women, Dalit women never figured as "agents" or "subjects" in historical accounts of either anti-colonial nationalist struggle or of women's reforms.

Historically, both nationalist and feminist reformers as well as scholarly historiography neglected the presence of "caste communities" to focus on gender categories. Feminist scholars and women activists also made gender-based oppression normative, thus excluding Dalit communities altogether. In so doing, feminists actually masked the ways class, gender, and sexuality intersected with caste oppression and constructed a homogeneous "Indian woman." Although some elite upper-caste women were sympathetic to the cause of Dalit women, the former were also constrained by their caste locations and many were complicit in reinforcing structures of difference and differentiation between castes and classes. There was also a real fear of transgressing caste boundaries for respectable upper-caste elite women. (Paik, 2014a, 2014b).

As a result, scholars working through their upper-caste bias ignored the gendering of the caste question, especially as it affected Dalit women. When they did study women, there is indeed much scholarship on "Women in Modern India," they tended to focus on the concerns of upper-caste women, and most significantly, Brahman women in terms of sati, enforcement of widowhood, widow re-marriage, child-marriage, age of consent, and so on. Reformers as well as scholars resignified Brahman women's problems as those of Hindus and therefore Indians (Chandra, 2012). In a similar vein, as I have examined even women's movements in post-colonial India downplayed caste technologies to focus on the unity among women as "victims." By fixing Brahman women and Brahmani practices as "Indian," some scholars have subsumed the powerful collusion of (upper) caste, class, and patriarchy into "Indian identity" itself. During this process, upper-caste women took the lead in demanding rights for women and constructed "liberal feminism" which reflected their concerns. They set the norms, which produced further contestations. The tensions and failure in Indian feminism laid out the conditions for the emergence of Dalit subjectivity, agency, and separate Dalit women's

organizations since colonial times (Paik, 2014a, 2014b). Dalit women faced numerous difficulties, yet their collective and individual experiences also enabled numerous possibilities and choices.

The other problem lies in scholarly analysis of a unilinear, one-sided reading of Dalit women's lives as "victims" or "heroines." Unfortunately, the dominant renderings of mainstream historiography of both India and the women's movement, cast Dalit women as the "laboring poor" or "unfortunate and lowly." On one hand, scholars looked upon Dalit women as those "broken," "terribly thrashed," or "brutally battered." On the other hand, some like Gail Omvedt examined the radical agency of women who "smashed the prison," and Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine documented the extraordinary life of Viramma and Racine (1997), the elderly Dalit agricultural laborer, singer, and storyteller. In my work, I have prised open the gaps in scholarships and dichotomies to emphasize how Dalit women's fragmented, flawed, complex, and contradictory lives cannot be confined to linear readings. We need to pay attention to the deeper complexities of Dalit women's subjectivities as both victims and transgressive agents: Their struggles against their victimhood and vulnerability shaped their selves, agency, and politics in colonial and postcolonial times. Dalit women's capacities to recognize, reflect, and reorganize for effective and purposive action, both as individuals and as part of a larger community, cannot be understood within the binaries of enacting or subverting norms, or within the confines of liberalism. Rather, their networks of negotiations, abilities, and skills to transform relationships of social injustice were constituted, and enabled through their specific subordinated position. Dalit women's agency belonged to them as well as to the culturally specific and historically contingent arrangement of power in which they were located (Paik, 2009a, 2009b, 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017c).

3 | GENERATIVE GENDER AND "NEW" SUBJECTS OF HISTORY

My work has examined how Dalit radicals played a creative role in radically democratizing gender norms and indeed, deploying gender as a **generative activity** (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2016) to imagine new forms of public emancipation during colonial times. Historically, alongside the fight for equality, respect, and freedom from double colonialism—internal (Brahmani) and external (British)—Non-Brahmans (like Jotirao Phule in Maharashtra and Maniammai and Periyar in South India) and Dalits (especially Dr. B.R. Ambedkar) also politicized women's reforms. I have analyzed how Dalits intimately connected their struggle for education, equality, freedom, and power with the politics of radically remaking Dalit women as new historical subjects and transgressive agents of social reform (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2016).

Thus, Dalit radicals constituted "new" Dalit women as, "transgressive subjects" orthogonally to discourses and power of upper-caste erasure and differentiation that sought to conceal or even repress them. They recognized how caste and patriarchy created a system of double oppression for Dalit women as members of Dalit caste and female gender. Most significantly, as I have argued, Dalits engaged in a "technology of the self,"¹ and expanded it to the community, to radically reconstitute women's subjectivities and refashion them. As a result, Dalits attacked double patriarchy by emphasizing women's education and challenging gender inequalities within the community.

This radical *re-making* of Dalit women critically departed from the project of "recovery" of women's subjectivities as in the case of upper-caste, elite, and imperial women (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2016). Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon recorded ethnographies of Dalit women who participated and made history in the Ambedkar movement (Pawar & Moon, 1989). Phule and Ambedkar were thus feminist men who pioneered what I call the "incremental intersectionality" of caste and gender oppression for *all* women and especially for Non-Brahman and Dalit women. Many scholars, including myself, have taken cue from them to further analyze and theorize the multiple and overlapping oppressions.

Dalit women thus critically shaped and were in turn transformed by the "incremental interlocking technologies" of gender, caste, class, sexuality, family, community, and education. Here I am deepening my earlier conceptualizations of "double discrimination" and "interlocking technologies," (Paik, 2014a, 2014b) by articulating the additive

model of interlocking technologies, analogous to the tightly layered rings of an onion. Thus, education, caste, gender, class, sexuality, community, and nation were not only interlocking operations but also simultaneous, consistently constricting, cumulative processes that obstructed Dalit women by each additional level of oppression.

Many Dalits were thus devoted to simultaneously attacking caste and gender technologies and hence the question of Dalit women's emancipation was central to Dalit political and social programs in colonial and post-colonial India. Yet, over time, the tenuous project of "new Dalit feminism" emerged to be a fraught process, in that in challenging some inequities, some reformers and radicals actually produced them anew. Certainly, Dalits are dominated and dominating at the same times. As a result, there were certain limitations, and some ambiguities marred Dalit's radicalism. These constraints on Dalit women's agency thwarted Dalit male leaders' promise and efforts to democratize educational opportunity.

In my work, I have prised open the gaps in scholarships and dichotomies to emphasize how Dalit women's fragmented, flawed, complex, and contradictory lives cannot be confined to linear readings. We need to pay attention to the deeper complexities of Dalit women's subjectivities as both victims and transgressive agents: Their struggles against their victimhood and vulnerability shaped their selves, agency, and politics in colonial and postcolonial times. Dalit women's capacities to recognize, reflect, and reorganize for effective and purposive action, both as individuals and as part of a larger community, cannot be understood within the binaries of enacting or subverting norms, or within the confines of liberalism. Rather, their networks of negotiations, abilities, and skills to transform relationships of social injustice were constituted, and enabled through their specific subordinated position. Dalit women's agency belonged to them as well as to the culturally specific and historically contingent arrangement of power in which they were located (Paik, 2009a, 2009b, 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017c).

To protest against the incremental interlocking technologies in post-colonial India, some women resorted to a politics of writing and publishing their stories and social autobiographies. Once we seek to go beyond sociological generalizations about Dalit women to uncover a more subjective historical experience, we encounter many silences. Although there are few fragmentary evidences, unlike upper-caste elite women, Dalit women did not extensively write for or publish magazines of their own at least during the colonial period. Hence, we have to understand their views and lives through the vision and ideas of male reformers who wrote regularly for printed newspapers and periodicals started by Dalits. However, in post-colonial times, many Dalit women have expressed and published their ideas and life histories to recuperate their humanity, document their social suffering, and carve out a space for themselves. Their stories are important especially given the lack of empirical studies and "official" historical sources on Dalit women.

In the wake of the Dalit literature of the 1960s, Dalit women from different parts of India and pioneering feminists like Bebi Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Faustina Bama, Kausalya Baisantri, Kusum Meghwal, among many others, wrote and published a significant amount of literature. They provide details not only of their plight, suppression, humiliation, dilemmas, and exploitation but also of their challenge to communitarian notions of a monolithic Dalit community; their social, economic, religious, and political deprivations; and their struggle and status in society. Dalits like Bama are fired by the desire to construct a new world of justice, equality, and love. Like the double-edged *karukku*, they keep the oppressors slashed (Bama, 2000). Such testimonies expand spaces for the proliferation of Dalit feminism.

Dalit feminists gendered experiences bear testimony to the "double jeopardy" of Dalit women. They argue that Dalit women are "Dalits (in relation) to Dalit men." They are "doubly Dalit" (Jogdand, 1995) because they bear the burden of gender and caste oppression. This situation of Dalit women mirrors that of African-American women who are "doubly bound" (Hill Collins, 1990; Gay & Tate, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989) by race and gender. In the two cases, race and caste politics has trumped conversations about gender oppression. Both Rege (2006) and I (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2016) have drawn upon Black feminist studies and critical race theorists. While clearly understanding the specificities of different locations and context, I have analyzed the incremental intersectional oppression of caste, gender, sexuality, and community as it has affected Dalit women. I reiterate that we might learn from such comparative transnational exercises, enrich feminist theory and praxis, and work towards a greater liberation of women (Paik, 2016).

4 | EDUCATION AND THE NEW DALIT WOMAN

Especially from the end of the 19th century, Dalits looked upon secular education as an important vehicle of modernization and emancipation. They wrested the modernizing force of education from the British and Brahman Raj and shaped their own resistance in colonial India. Furthermore, (Non-Brahman and) Dalit radicals sought to democratize education and gender relations. Especially Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar emphasized egalitarian relationships as opposed to privilege, and combined critiques of knowledge, caste, and gender hierarchies in ways that opened up new spaces for women in general and Dalit women in particular. For Dalits, the politics of caste, gender, education, moral reforms, and self-discipline complicated modes of political participation, their claims to rights, and their subject formation in a colonial context, which always-already precluded the production of individual and collective agency. Dalit radical's powerful discourse shaped Dalit women, who participated in collective action for education and empowerment. Yet, despite Dalit leader's promises and efforts to expand educational opportunities, their connection of modern education with gender and moral reforms had unsettling implications for Dalit women. My first book documented this story in the context of Maharashtra.

Once again, compared to historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and demographers have mined the field of Dalit's education. Suma Chitnis (1981), Padma Velaskar (1990), S.K. Chatterjee (2000), G. G. Wankhede (2001), Veronique Benei (2008), Craig Jeffrey (2010), and Roger and Patricia Jeffery (2008, 2010) have examined the deeply contentious territories of caste practices and education in independent India. My book builds on the works of these sociologists and anthropologists to provide historical depth and the working of historical processes involved in the construction of Dalit exclusion since the middle of the nineteenth century, as well as the shaping of Dalit women's subjectivity over time. I discuss the varying outcomes of Dalit women's formal education. I extend Benei's anthropological study to illustrate that schools not only discipline and shape women in particular ways but at the same time encourage them to an extent to develop their own understanding of social and political life.

Moreover, scholars have barely studied the potential connections between hierarchies of caste, class, "public" institutions such as education and "private" realms like the family, gender, desire, marriage, and sexuality. Although some feminist scholars have examined colonial education, they have confined their works to elite Hindu, Muslim, and Parsi women. There is also little historical study of the post-colonial period. My work critically shifts the gaze to Dalit women alone to focus on the intimate practices of prejudice as Dalit women negotiated with the colonial and post-colonial Indian state and upper-caste power. Recently, scholars have begun to investigate the experiences of Dalit women on university campuses.

Studies of upper-caste elite women and men also overshadow the intellectual history and educational philosophies and practices of Non-Brahman and Dalit leaders. Rege (2010) and I have examined the feminist pedagogic techniques of Phule and Ambedkar (Paik, 2014a, 2014b). The feminist sociologist Padma Velaskar examined the hidden role of education in the Dalit struggle for liberation. She argues that education has acted as a mediator in "contested reproduction" as well as in "contested change" of the structures of caste inequality and untouchability (Velaskar, 1990). Despite of increased educational uptake, many Dalit girls and boys continue to drop out of schools, due to economic and social pressures.

5 | COMMUNITY, HONOR, PATRIARCHY, AND THE CHANGING SOCIALITY OF DALIT WOMEN

"New" Dalit women play a crucial role as symbols of Dalit community identity as well as signs of "caste," "civilization," and carriers of "culture." Historically, both the colonial rulers and upper-caste elite Indians looked upon Dalits as "uncivilized," "docile," "barbaric," and certainly lacking in "civility" and "culture" (Paik 2014a). As a result, Dalits depicted civilization and culture as important, in order to be recognized, accepted, and assimilated into the larger Indian society. In so doing, however, radical, authoritative Dalit men, including Ambedkar and the larger community

burdened Dalit women with gendered norms of propriety and respectability. They emphasized modernity and modesty for women, and in the process, sought to control Dalit women's social and sexual selves. Thus, uncertainties, anxieties, and ambiguities threatened Dalit radicalism at particular conjunctures (Paik 2014a). As caste continues to trump gender, the emphasis on violence against the community silences critics of domestic violence.

Only over the past three decades have feminists critically analyzed patriarchy and the power and privilege enjoyed by select castes and classes, both historically and contemporaneously. Feminist scholars like Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990) acknowledged the neglect of lower-caste and peasant women in their pioneering volume on *Recasting Women in India*. Some historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and activists like Gail Omvedt (1980), Uma Chakravarti (1993, 2003a, 2003b), V. Geetha, Dietrich (2003), Pratima Pardeshi, Rege, Karin Kapadia, S. Anandhi, Anupama Rao (2003), Vandana Sonalkar (1999), Ruth Manorama, Manuela Ciotti (2010), Clarinda Still, Charu Gupta, and myself have provided a necessary corrective, by examining the theoretical and material aspects and the compounded nature of caste, class, sexuality, and gender questions. Scholars have also explored the specific challenges of "Dalit Feminism" (Guru, 1995; Rege, 1998; Margaret, 2005; Paik, 2009a, 2009b; Patil, 2013).

In one chapter of her book, Rao (2009) illustrates how issues of caste and gender technologies complicate Dalit's political participation and modernization. One of her case studies explores the intersection between law, violence, and Dalit identity that produced Dalit women's sexual vulnerability in post-independence Maharashtra. Through their critical ethnographies Sumitra Bhavé, Kapadia, Anandhi, Priyadarshini Vijaisri, Ciotti, and Still have analyzed the ways these entangled oppressions affected the everyday experiences of ordinary Dalit women in modern India and shaped their actions and aspirations. In a similar vein, in their most recently edited book, *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics* (Kapadia, 2017), Anandhi and Kapadia have centered on India's bourgeois hegemony and the ways Dalit women have deployed a "multi-modal praxis" to challenge and transform their subordination.

5.1 | Upward social mobility, middle classness, and masculinity

The creation of Dalit women's subjectivity and the community's anxieties regarding *svabhimana* (self-respect) and *ijjat* (honor and respectability) during its passage to a certain modern, middle class, respectable status have had contradictory outcomes for women in colonial and post-colonial periods (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2016, 2017c). I have analyzed that along with their fight for civic and human rights, Dalit also contested for prestige, honor, and self-respect especially along the axes of gender and sexuality. It was important for further politicization of the community. The control of women was important to improve Dalit's *svabhimana* and *ijjat* as Dalits sought to claim a humanity, raise their social status, build dignity, and strove for important social and political change, equality, and citizenship in modern India.

As a result, although Dalit radicals saw women as transgressive agents, they also simultaneously restricted them and disciplined them on moral grounds, and inculcated a "robust body politics" of "cultured," modest, respectable behavior, clean clothes, and comportment (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2017c). In the process, they marginalized and even excluded Dalit women and their specific oppressions. Thus, Dalit radicals' democratizing practices certainly had limitations; yet, as I have shown in my work, we need to pay attention to Dalit's intentions and strategies for building self-respect and dignity in specific historically contingent conjunctures. Rao and I (working on Maharashtra), and Gupta (on UP) have shown that reform of women in colonial times also reconstituted new forms of masculinity and patriarchy. Bernard Cohn and Ciotti (working on Uttar Pradesh), and Kapadia, Anandhi (2002), Hugo Gorringer, and Still (on contemporary South India) have identified similar gendered trends.

While working towards a "united community" and Dalit power, Dalit men also include women in a tokenistic way or pay mere lip service to the specific problems of Dalit women. My work demonstrates that they prefer to inscribe consensual politics, resolve the tension within the confines of the (*ghar*, home or metaphorically the "family") community, and further silence women (Paik, 2014a, 2014b). Elite reformers, including liberal feminists, adopted a similar strategy to resolve the "Untouchable Question" inside the "Hindu" (thereby "Indian") community and also claimed (like Gandhi) the right to "truly" represent the Untouchables. Many Dalit men writers and leaders

thus neglected domestic abuse of Dalit women. Like some feminist scholars, although adopting a different move, some Dalit men have tried to subsume gender oppression inside the community and failed to seriously engage with Dalit women's experiences. By failing to prize open the constitutive role of patriarchy in shaping and maintaining caste, many intellectuals have lost the opportunity to comprehend the wider structural logic that sustains casteist societies. For most of them caste discrimination seems to be the primary challenge, and gender, class, or sub-caste differentiation figure tangentially at best. They fear that a strong Dalit woman's "feminist" movement and specifically speaking about women's exploitation may further split the community, threaten organization, solidarity, and actually deter the larger Dalit movement (Paik, 2014b).

Notwithstanding this silencing, patriarchy among Dalits has been severely criticized by scholars and activists alike (for examples from Maharashtra see: Bhave, 1988; Guru, 1995; Rege, 2000; Pawar, 2002, 1994; Pardeshi & Rege, 1998; Bhagwat and Pardeshi, 1998; Paik, 2014a, 2014b). The writer, Dinkar Salve in *Chakravyyuhat Dalit Chalval* (Dalit Movement in a Maze) 1997, underlines the need for Dalit politics to view Dalit women not as numbers but as revolutionary agents. By contrast, Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986), Kancha Ilaiah (1996) (though he later changed his stand), and Pawar (1994) have romanticized patriarchy among Dalits. However, Pawar for one contradicts herself by examining patriarchy in Dalit families.

Taking into consideration the above contestations, Gopal Guru in his pioneering argument emphasized Dalit women's need to "talk differently" (Guru, 1995, p. 2548–2549). Guru accused Dalit leaders of subordinating and at times suppressing the independent political and cultural expression of Dalit women. To him, Dalit women *alone* can offer a "more encompassing view of social reality," because certain non-Dalit women activists "remained ambivalent regarding the critique of caste" (Guru, 1995, p. 2549). His critique insinuates that social location determines the perception of reality and therefore representation of Dalit women's issues by non-Dalit women is less valid or inauthentic (Paik, 2017b). Certainly, there are problems as the mainstream has seldom seriously engaged with the Dalit Question. I have also dealt with this in my own work. Yet I agree with Rege that Guru's claims based on authenticity of experience may lead to a narrow identity politics, which may further limit the emancipatory potential of Dalit women's organizations (Rege, 1998, p. 44).

After more than two decades of his emphasis on "Dalit women talk differently," Guru continues to maintain that "one *must* have a [Dalit] background characterized by deprivation or under privilege" to expose the contradictions in Indian social life" (Guru, 2016, p. 48) [Emphasis is mine]. Certainly, a Dalit woman's doubly discriminated condition is even more precarious, sexually vulnerable, and utterly humiliating. However, Guru's limited viewpoint underlining exclusivity may further confine Dalits and "others" to their own communities and not allow them to reach out to each other—surely an important directive given that social change will require the vital participation of higher castes as well (Paik, 2017b).

Significantly, like many Dalit men, many elite upper-caste feminists have failed to mobilize difference as a tool to initiate change. Instead, they have insisted on a monolithic Indian feminism and womanhood, thus making "gender oppression" the basis of a "natural" bond between different women. A few upper-caste and middle-class feminists argue that Dalit women's first loyalty must be to their gender and urge the latter to see the way in which they are being exploited by their own fathers, husbands, and brothers. The feminist, Chhaya Datar, accuses Dalit Panthers of using Dalit women as pawns in the race for power, of not encouraging Dalit women, and not taking up their issues in the revolt against Brahmanical culture during the 1970s (Datar, 1999, p. 2965). She thus blames men in general and the Dalit Panther Party in particular for not empowering women and encouraging their dependence on men. Datar's preoccupation with women's unity and empowerment led her to critique patriarchy in Dalit communities.

Most recently, in the context of Uttar Pradesh, in one chapter on Dalit manhood, Charu Gupta analyzes ways Dalit men constructed themselves as legitimate political subjects, in part by colluding with dominant notions of masculinity, in turn strengthening patriarchal practices in domestic spheres (Gupta, 2014). She concludes that although "Dalit masculinity was not a stable category and responsive to its cultural, historical, social, and political embeddedness" yet "one can only hope that Dalit men will *evolve* and ultimately dismantle the very ideological fetters that fasten them to a corrosive paradigm of masculinity" (Gupta, 2014, p. 165) [Emphasis is mine].² Implicit in Gupta's

linear, teleological, social Darwinistic argument is the claim that upper-caste men have already evolved and Dalits should follow their part toward the same endpoint.

Thus, unlike Ambedkar, Periyar, and Gandhi, although like women feminists of the early twentieth century, with this regrettably patronizing language, Gupta returns the burden of evolution to Dalit (women and) men alone.³ She and leaves the upper-castes free of responsibility in their own construction and consolidation of social structures. It is Dalit men *alone* who are yet to “evolve.” She does not develop this point further, leaving us wondering about its seemingly narrow vision as well as the terms of this imagined evolution. Once again, Gupta implicitly endorses upper-caste Hindu men as the “standard” and falls back into the traps she sought to critique in the first place (Paik, 2017a).

Some feminists have thus paid little attention to the ways patriarchy operates through caste technologies, by entrenching divisions among caste communities and reproducing caste hierarchies. In accusing Dalit male leadership, the above feminists have not examined the complicity of upper-caste, middle-class women with their own communities. Patriarchies operate in a relational manner and are subject to a wider political economy, occupying different configurations, and to continual reformulation. As Kumkum Sangari has reminded us, there are multiple patriarchies, and no kind of patriarchy can be challenged in isolation (Sangari, 1995, pp. 3287–3310, 3381–3391).

5.2 | “Sanskritization” or “Assertion”?

Many scholars have argued that as social status improves, lower castes, including Dalits “sanskritize,” that is, imitate upper-castes, further constrain women, and become more patriarchal (Berreman, 1993; Pillai-Vetschera, 1999; Deshpande, 2002). However, many scholars have also critically questioned M.N.S. Srinivas's model of “sanskritization” (Srinivas, 1952) and Michael Moffatt's “consensus” (Moffatt, 1979) to examine how Dalits have both resisted and appropriated some upper-caste norms (Zelliot, 1992; Deliege, 1997; Paik, 2014a, 2014b).

Many scholars suggest that Dalit women are *worse off* due to upward mobility. On the one hand, scholars such as Berreman (1993), Deliege (1997), Searle-Chatterjee (1981), and Gough (1993) maintained that gender relations were unequal at the higher scale of the social structure, while they were relatively egalitarian among Dalits and Tribals. On the other hand, Gorringer, Anandhi, Still (2014), Deshpande (2011), and Pillai-Vetschera (1999) have argued that as social status improved, many Dalits adopted, even appropriated “sanskritic” values and allayed gender equality. They conclude, like Liddle and Joshi, that in attempting to move up in status, Dalit groups became more patriarchal and hence constraints on women are an essential part of a rise in caste hierarchy, so that “most severe gender inequalities of all are found among the poor, low-caste groups which are striving for upward mobility” (Berreman, 1993, p. 370). Deshpande argues that Dalit women are both poor and lacking in autonomy in contemporary times (Deshpande, 2011, pp. 136–139) and that the earlier “trade-off between material well-being and autonomy and mobility” has now vanished (Deshpande, 2011, p. 108). To her, SC women seem to have lost the comparative advantage in terms of freedom of movement, access to money, healthcare decision, and suffer more domestic violence than upper-caste women. While they may be materially disadvantaged compared to upper-caste women, they do not enjoy greater equality to compensate for it (Deshpande, 2011, p. 139).

But the situation is more complex as the economist Judith Heyer has pointed out in the study of rural Tamil Nadu in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. She indicates a similar trajectory of upward mobility akin to Kapadia's (1995, 2002) work, but argues that Dalit women are healthier and more assertive once they escape wage labor. She suggests that these women are better off. Although Clarinda Still's study of Madiga Dalit women in rural Andhra Pradesh agrees on empirical lines with Kapadia and Heyer, yet she departs like Paik from one-dimensional view of Dalit women to explore the lives of Dalit women and document their lives under patriarchy. She focuses on honor, gendered upward mobility, and the “Dalitisation” of patriarchy to demonstrate how a relatively egalitarian set of gendered relationships among Dalit women and men is “now becoming more honor-oriented, a process embraced and resisted by both men and women” (Still, 2014, p. 18).

Still also disagrees with Manuela Ciotti who argues that, "in order to be modern in contemporary India, the Chamars appropriated the features of a past modernity to create a retro-modernity" (Ciotti, 2010, p. 12). Still maintains that such a reading misses the "nature of Dalit identity in present day India" (Still, 2014, p. 208). Thus, certainly, ideas about "modesty" and "appropriate" behavior are not declining but rather Dalit women (and men) are revising them to constitute a crucial part of India's new brand of post-colonial modernity. Gorringe (2017) in one essay has examined how the Liberation Panther Party, the largest Dalit party in Tamil Nadu of 1999, reinforced patriarchy and inscribed hyper-masculinity and male physical strength. Notwithstanding their sensitivity to the complexities of the present-day experiences of Dalit women, Still and Gorringe unfortunately, miss the historical depth of these contradictions, by assuming that there is a single, bourgeois modernity. There is thus no straightforward answer to whether Dalits are merely "sanskritizing" or "asserting," because they are using the hegemonic idiom to constantly negotiate the "traditional" and "modern" and refashion their present and futures.

Thus, although Dalit women and men forged a *new* Dalit womanhood in colonial and post-colonial India, this success on many fronts came at heavy costs. Upwardly mobile, honorable women were to follow a Brahmani patriarchal *maryada*, honor codes and a certain respectability to emerge as modest and modern women. In so doing, however, elite Dalits ostracize and discriminate against the "other," "lowly," "vulgar," Dalit women, such as Tamasha women or Prostitutes (Paik, 2014a, 2014b, 2017c). The feminist anthropologist, Lucinda Ramberg, examines the tenuous: "independent" yet "vulnerable," social life, sexual labor, and complex social roles of stigmatized Dalit Jogatis in Karnataka and Maharashtra (Ramberg, 2014). Similarly, Anandhi has worked on Dalit Mathammas in rural Tamil Nadu (Anandhi, 2013) and Vijasri analyzes how caste, sexuality, and ritual practices shaped the dangerous marginality and ambivalence of Joginis, the outcaste priestess in Andhra Pradesh (Vijaisri, 2015).

Dalits have not merely reproduced inequality between upper caste and Dalit women and patriarchal practices of upper castes. The problem is the deeper, historical, and tenuous process of reforming, maintaining dignity, carving out a positive humanity, rising in the eyes of upper castes, becoming "civilized" and "cultured," and adopting certain respectable moral standards, in order to be accepted by the larger Indian and international society. Certainly, not all Dalits approve of the mainstream agenda, and many have historically carved out alternative strategies to challenge, negotiate with, and selectively appropriate certain hegemonic normative ideas for their own purposes, and in fact, "Dalitize" them. The problem lies in the particular incremental interlocking caste, class, sexual, and gendered technologies, which burden women *alone* with pressures and consequences of changing norms and Dalit women especially are vulnerable to accusations of "immorality" and "vulgarity."

Historically, upper-castes have used violence and the rape of Dalit women as an instrument to perpetuate caste hierarchies (Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 2003). Scholars and activists have yet to pay serious attention to this subject. The state has been complicit, and as a result, it rarely punishes the perpetrators of violence against women. Anand Teltumbde's powerful "insider" work on the 2006 Khairlanji event (in Maharashtra) identifies it as a culmination of upper-caste atrocities against Dalits (Teltumbde, 2008). Moreover, he explodes many myths of economic development, progressivism, Dalit mobility, and empathy for fellow Dalits. Similarly, Aloysius I.S.J., Jayshree Mangubhai, and Joel Lee's edited book explores the qualitative nature of violence against 500 Dalit women within and without the family (2011). In one chapter of her book, Laura Brueck focuses on the "rape script," that exemplifies the banality of sexual violence of Dalit women (Brueck, 2014). She argues that while Dalit men write their own story of revenge and retribution (Brueck, 2014, p. 161), Dalit women writers like Kusum Meghwal, in turn, have critiqued men and depicted women as capable of verbal and physical resistance who experience psychological catharsis in resisting or taking revenge on the agents of sexual violence themselves (Brueck, 2014, p. 170).

Working on rural Dalit women, in Tamil Nadu, S. Anandhi examines how Adiravidar women's collective activism thus transcended caste and "created a new politics of belonging" to "conduct politics differently from men" (Anandhi, 2017, p. 120). Kapadia and Nathaniel Roberts focus on slum Dalit women's "improper politics" and "agentive suffering" to demonstrate how Dalit women use their difficulties to carve out their agency through their conversion to Pentacostal Christianity (Roberts, 2017). In a similar vein, but in rural Uttar Pradesh, Radhika Govinda and Ishita

Mehrotra in their essays have examined how NGO women departed from the dominant BSP women and the feminization of unfree labor Dalit women laborers, respectively (Govinda, 2017; Mehrotra, 2017).

These debates and divergences among feminists call for plurality in feminist theorization and practices. Along with other scholars, I have argued that we need to challenge patriarchy within Dalit community, in order to foster political radicalism. Rege, a non-Dalit, calls upon higher caste/class feminists who may propagate Brahmanical feminism to be self-reflexive and to "re-invent" themselves as Dalit feminists in order to strengthen the movement (Rege, 1998, p. WS-45). Although her approach of "re-invention" as "vulnerable Dalit woman" is deeply sympathetic, it does not allow Dalit women to work on their own potentials. It once again calls for upper-caste feminists to appropriate Dalit women and their voices, stand in for them, represent, and in the process silence them. Instead, I agree with Anandhi and Kapadia who in their recent volume on Dalit women's ethnographies pay attention to a variety of Dalit women's different speeches and learn from Dalit feminist standpoint to "stand together with Dalit women" (Anandhi & Kapadia, 2017, p. 28–32) in solidarity, instead of "re-inventing" as Dalit women. This genuine dialogue, faith, trust and confidence between the different castes of women and Dalit sexes will allow us to construct bonds of sentiment, expand feminist theory and praxis, and build bridges towards a common program of annihilating caste. Such an exercise of building bridges may allow Dalits to effectively share their experiences and struggle together for an inclusive, deeply democratic, and transnational politics (Paik, 2014b).⁴

6 | CONCLUSION

Dalit women's universal perspectives and historical and political practices are deeply democratic and as such have the potential of engaging in inclusive and productive politics, building solidarities, and actually reshaping the larger fields of South Asian Studies, India Studies, Dalit Studies, and Gender Studies. Dalit women's precarity of life provides a vantage point from which to analyze the deep and common continuities of structures of caste, gender, law, education, culture, capital, human rights, and struggles over sexuality, and labor (Paik, 2014b). Different Dalit women inhabit a variety of conflicting spaces from where they speak. We need to pay close attention to the different forms of incremental intersecting technologies that thwart Dalit women in tenuous historical conjunctures. In their struggle to achieve revolutionary modernity and to simultaneously fight against the violence of caste discrimination and untouchability, radical Dalits were also at times ambiguous regarding women's roles.

There is certainly a tension between the understanding of Dalit women as "sexually liberated," "economically independent," and "better off," and accounts of Dalit women as "worse off," that is socially, economically, and sexually oppressed than upper-caste women. Hence, it is crucial to recognize the 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 both, mainstream feminists and Dalit men who are ambivalent about the Dalit woman's question, to task and force them to confront the forces of double patriarchy in their respective struggles. Scholars also need to transgress their disciplinary boundaries, draw upon each other's work, and engage in inter-disciplinary dialogues to unravel the lifeworlds of Dalit women.

I underscore that the Dalits' micropolitics, inscription of honor, self-respect, hypermasculinity, and restriction of women, need to be understood within larger historical contexts, contingencies, and deep histories of assertion, strife against stigma, social and sexual humiliation of Dalit women, and emasculation of Dalit men over centuries.

It is only by understanding the historical contradictions, pressures, and complexities inherent in Dalit women's location within various incremental intersecting technologies that Dalit and non-Dalit women and men can devise the most inclusive and productive political praxis. Sexual and caste identities are both crucial to locating the figure of the Dalit woman. Their struggle is directed at the sexism of Dalit men, but they are allied with Dalit men in the fight against caste oppression. Certainly, a Dalit feminist perspective is distinctive. It is possible, however, for the outsider to develop deep empathy towards the suffering and oppression that being a Dalit entails, thus building many bridges across feminist movements and Dalit movements. Dalit feminism-womanism-humanism provides the

possibility of an interpersonal understanding of differently disadvantaged lives and allows a broad feminist, antipatriarchal, anticaste, antiuntouchability, and antiracist analysis (Paik, 2014a, 2014b). As the feminist Kumud Pawade emphasizes, “the day Dalit [women, men, and non-Dalit men’s and] women’s organizations deal with these challenges successfully, [it would be understood that] that would be a *su-din*, a good day.”

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I am drawing on the French theorist Michel Foucault here. For details, see Paik, *Dalit Women's Education* and “Forging a New Dalit Womanhood.”
- ² Gupta, *The Gender of Caste*, 165. Emphasis is mine. For details, see my review of Gupta's book in the *Journal of South Asia*, 2017.
- ³ For details on Ambedkar, Gandhi, and early feminists, see Paik, *Dalit Women's Education*, Chapter 3.
- ⁴ For details, see Paik, “Building Bridges,” 91–93.

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