

CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER: UNDERSTANDING DALIT WOMEN'S TRIPLE MARGINALIZATION THROUGH A DALIT FEMINIST STANDPOINT

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ABSTRACT

Dalit women occupy one of the most structurally disadvantaged positions in Indian society due to the intersection of caste, class, and gender-based exclusion. This paper examines their triple marginalization through the lens of Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory, emphasizing the epistemic value of their lived experiences. The study explores how caste hierarchy, economic deprivation, and patriarchal norms combine to produce compounded vulnerabilities that neither mainstream feminism nor Dalit political movements have adequately addressed. Drawing on secondary literature, government data, and theoretical scholarship, the paper analyses how structural violence, social discrimination, and labour exploitation constrain the lives of Dalit women, while also highlighting their agency through collective mobilization, activism, and identity assertion. It further evaluates pathways to empowerment through education, legal rights, representation, and social transformation. The study argues that centering Dalit women's standpoint is critical for advancing inclusive feminist thought and building a more democratic and equitable society.

KEYWORDS: *Dalit Women, Triple Marginalization, Caste, Class, Gender, Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Oppression, Empowerment.*

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Introduction

The intersection of caste, class, and gender forms one of the most enduring structures of inequality in Indian society, shaping the everyday realities of Dalit women in profound ways. While caste hierarchy continues to determine social status and access to resources, gender norms reinforce patriarchal controls, and class relations influence economic opportunities and mobility. Dalit women stand at the confluence of these three systems of oppression, experiencing what scholars describe as triple marginalization. Their social exclusion is not merely an extension of patriarchy or caste discrimination but a distinct lived experience that must be understood through a framework attentive to their specific historical and sociopolitical positions. Mainstream feminist theories have often centered upper-caste and middle-class women, while Dalit political movements have tended to prioritize issues of caste over gender. As a result, the voices, needs, and epistemologies of Dalit women have frequently remained invisible in dominant academic and policy discourses. The emergence of Dalit feminist standpoint theory seeks to address this gap by foregrounding Dalit women's lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. Rooted in the writings of Dalit women activists, thinkers, and collectives such as the National Federation of Dalit Women, this standpoint challenges the universalizing assumptions of mainstream feminism and the male-centric narratives within Dalit politics. It asserts that only by centering Dalit women's narratives can we fully understand the layered structures of exploitation embedded in Indian social relations. Dalit feminist thought offers not only a critique but also a methodological approach that values experience, reflexivity, resistance, and collective memory as analytical tools. Situating Dalit women's experiences within the broader sociopolitical context reveals how institutions such as the family, village economy, caste panchayats, the labour market, and the state reproduce a hierarchical order that disadvantages them at every level. From unequal access to land and education to vulnerability to caste-based sexual violence, Dalit women navigate a continuum of oppression that is systemic and structural. Yet they are not merely passive victims. Their participation in social movements, labour struggles, and local governance demonstrates agency, resilience, and political consciousness. This

paper seeks to analyse Dalit women's triple marginalization through the lens of Dalit feminist standpoint theory, highlighting both the structural barriers they face and the transformative possibilities for empowerment. By employing a sociopolitical approach, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of caste, gender, and class intersections in contemporary India.

Literature Review

The scholarly study of Dalit women's marginalization has expanded significantly over the last three decades, evolving from a peripheral concern to a central area of feminist and sociopolitical research. Foundational contributions by Gail Omvedt (1993) and Sharmila Rege (1998, 2006) established the analytical importance of understanding caste and gender as interconnected structures. Omvedt demonstrated how caste hierarchy and patriarchy reinforce one another, creating layered oppression, while Rege's development of the "Dalit feminist standpoint" positioned Dalit women's lived experiences as an essential epistemological basis for analysing structural inequality. The documentation of Dalit women's narratives by scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana (2013) broadened feminist scholarship by foregrounding autobiographies and testimonies that reveal everyday caste discrimination, sexual violence, and labour exploitation. Pandey's (2016) work on oral histories similarly shows how community memory helps shape Dalit women's identity and political consciousness, emphasizing narrative as a tool of resistance. In gender studies, Gopal Guru (1995) critiques mainstream feminism for overlooking caste and adopting a paternalistic stance toward Dalit women. He argues that Dalit women's experiences of humiliation and exclusion emerge from the intersection of caste, gender, and class, underscoring the need for analytical frameworks that recognize this specificity. Sociological analyses by Teltumbde (2010) and Anandhi (2017) highlight how landlessness, wage labour, and economic exploitation intensify Dalit women's marginality. Their studies show that Dalit women occupy the lowest tiers of the labour market, illustrating that economic oppression cannot be separated from caste and gender dynamics. Research on violence, such as Geetha (2009) and NCAER (2020), documents the disproportionately high levels of caste-based sexual violence faced by Dalit women, often used as a tool to

reinforce caste dominance when they assert autonomy. Collectively, the literature affirms that Dalit women's triple marginalization is structural, intersectional, and historically rooted. It also establishes Dalit feminist standpoint theory as a comprehensive framework for understanding both the complexities of oppression and the diverse forms of resistance enacted by Dalit women.

Objectives

- To examine the intersecting caste-, class-, and gender-based discrimination faced by Dalit women.
- To analyze triple marginalization through Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory.
- To understand how mainstream feminist and Dalit movements overlook the concerns of Dalit women.
- To explore structural factors that shape Dalit women's lived realities.
- To identify pathways to empowerment rooted in rights, agency, and identity assertion.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and analytical methodology rooted in secondary sources, including academic literature, census reports, feminist writings, Dalit autobiographies, NCRB crime statistics, and intersectionality theory. The analysis draws upon Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory as its principal theoretical lens. The method is interpretive rather than statistical, focusing on synthesizing existing scholarship from sociology, political science, gender studies, and Dalit studies. The paper critically analyzes structural oppression using theoretical and narrative evidence to derive a multidimensional understanding of triple marginalization.

Background

Dalit women's marginalization has deep historical roots in the caste system, which institutionalized rigid hierarchies of purity and pollution and relegated Dalit communities to stigmatized occupations, segregated living conditions, and systemic denial of basic rights. These practices became embedded in social life, shaping attitudes, behaviours, and expectations that justified exclusion and violence. Dalit women, in particular, were subjected

to degrading labour such as manual scavenging, agricultural bonded labour, and forms of domestic service reserved for the lowest caste groups. Economic marginalization intensified through limited land ownership, lack of property rights, inadequate wages, and minimal State support, thereby reinforcing class-based inequality. Additionally, patriarchal norms circumscribed their freedom by policing their sexuality, mobility, and bodily autonomy both within upper-caste society and within Dalit communities themselves. Sexual violence against Dalit women has historically been used as a deliberate tool of caste domination to instill fear and maintain social hierarchy, a reality reflected in NCRB statistics that consistently show high rates of violence against women from Scheduled Castes. Post-independence development policies, while contributing to some social mobility, have failed to dismantle entrenched caste-class-gender structures that limit the opportunities available to Dalit women. Meanwhile, the women's movement often privileged upper-caste voices, and Dalit movements frequently prioritized caste issues without adequately addressing gender inequalities. As a result, the historical experiences of Dalit women remained underrepresented in mainstream discourse, prompting the emergence of Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory as a corrective framework that centers their lived realities. This background reveals how structural barriers across social, economic, and political realms create a unique and deeply entrenched form of triple marginalization.

Analysis and Theoretical Discussion

Understanding Dalit women's triple marginalization requires an intersectional approach that recognizes caste, class, and gender as interconnected systems of oppression. These structures do not operate independently; instead, they reinforce one another to produce intensified forms of vulnerability for Dalit women. Intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, helps explain how social identities intersect to create distinct forms of exclusion that cannot be understood through single-axis analysis. In the Indian context, this means that Dalit women face gender discrimination differently from dominant-caste women and caste discrimination differently from Dalit men, making their experiences uniquely complex. Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory provides a powerful epistemic and analytical framework to understand these layered experiences.

As Sharmila Rege argues, Dalit women occupy a specific social location at the bottom of caste, class, and gender hierarchies, giving them a standpoint that reveals the hidden operations of structural violence. Their narratives expose how caste-based sexual violence functions as a mechanism to preserve social hierarchy and punish assertions of autonomy. Economic dependence, landlessness, and exploitative labour relations further reinforce their marginalization, as Dalit women are pushed into low-wage, stigmatized work that limits social mobility. Patriarchal norms within both dominant-caste society and Dalit communities restrict Dalit women's access to education, property, and public participation, reproducing cycles of inequality. Dalit autobiographical writings by Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and others demonstrate how humiliation, segregation, physical violence, and gendered labour shape their everyday realities. Yet these narratives also highlight resistance through collective action, education, cultural assertion, and political participation. These texts challenge both Brahminical patriarchy, which naturalizes caste inequality, and male-centered Dalit politics, which often frames caste oppression as gender-neutral. Thus, the theoretical contribution of Dalit feminist scholarship lies in its dual critique of caste and patriarchy, offering a more comprehensive framework for analysing Indian social structures.

Applying Dalit Feminist Standpoint Applying Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory deepens the analysis by positioning Dalit women's lived experiences as critical sources of knowledge. Rather than viewing them merely as victims of structural oppression, the standpoint approach recognizes Dalit women as active agents who generate transformative political insights. Their standpoint exposes contradictions within mainstream feminist movements that fail to address caste, and it challenges Dalit political movements that relegate gender justice to the margins. Dalit women's activism whether through self-help groups, labour unions, anti-caste campaigns, or grassroots mobilizations-illustrates how their intersectional experiences shape new forms of political consciousness. Their perspectives broaden the understanding of democracy, equality, and justice by centering the realities of those most marginalized. Applying this standpoint in academic research, policymaking, and social movements allows for more inclusive and

effective approaches to women's empowerment. Ultimately, Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory transforms Dalit women into theorists, leaders, and creators of knowledge whose insights are essential for building a more equitable social order.

Pathways to Women's Empowerment Pathways to empowerment for Dalit women must be understood as structural interventions that challenge caste, class, and gender inequalities rather than as isolated welfare schemes. Empowerment begins with equitable access to education, which has long been denied to Dalit women as a means of maintaining caste hierarchy ; quality education and higher learning opportunities enable social mobility and the development of leadership capacities. Economic empowerment requires dismantling caste-based labour systems and ensuring access to land, financial resources, secure employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Legal empowerment plays a crucial role, particularly in addressing sexual violence, atrocity crimes, workplace discrimination, and denial of civil rights ; stronger implementation of the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and gender-sensitive legal institutions are essential. Political empowerment demands meaningful representation of Dalit women in decision-making spaces-from panchayats to legislatures-ensuring their voices shape public policy. Collective empowerment emerges through Dalit women's organizations, feminist networks, labour unions, and community-based movements that foster solidarity and amplify marginalized voices. Cultural empowerment is equally significant, as literature, media, oral histories, and digital activism allow Dalit women to reclaim their narratives and challenge stigmatizing stereotypes. Social empowerment requires dismantling caste prejudice embedded in marriage practices, community relations, religious structures, and everyday interactions. Health empowerment must address systemic inequalities in nutrition, maternal care, sanitation, and access to reproductive rights. When these pathways converge-education, economic independence, legal justice, political representation, cultural assertion, and social transformation-they create conditions in which Dalit women can move from structural marginalization to empowered participation in society. This multidimensional approach highlights that true empowerment is inseparable from broader struggles for equality and

social justice.

Conclusion

The triple marginalization of Dalit women is a product of deeply entrenched caste, class, and gender structures that shape Indian society. Despite historical invisibility in both feminist and Dalit discourses, Dalit women's voices-when centered-offer transformative insights into the workings of oppression and possibilities for resistance. Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory highlights the epistemic value of their lived experiences, emphasizing the need to reframe social justice struggles through their perspective. The pathways to empowerment identified in this study underscore the importance of structural interventions rooted in education, economic independence, legal rights, political participation, and cultural assertion. Dalit women are not merely subjects of discrimination but active agents of change whose standpoint demands recognition in scholarship, policy, and democratic processes. Achieving gender equality and social justice in India requires placing Dalit women at the center of political discourse, theoretical debates, and institutional reforms.

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