



## DALIT FEMINISM

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### **Abstract**

*Feminism needs to be understood not as an ideology against male but against male domination. Same way Dalit Feminism needs to be understood as not an ideology against non-Dalits but non-Dalit domination. Feminism is about fighting against the capturing of all resources of power by male and Dalit Feminism is about fighting against the capturing of all resources of power by Dalit and non-Dalit men and also non-Dalit women. The racial division of women and men in Indian society is the main source of exploitation more than their biological division. Dalit Feminism addresses the socio-economic concerns of Dalit women within the broader framework of racial equality and racial justice.*

**Key words:** Ambedkar, Dalit, Feminism, Gender, Women.

### **Introduction**

Human society is primarily a constitution of female and male. But there are racial divisions within the female and male. Feminism is about gender equality. Dalit Feminism is about equality within the gender. Gender issue in India is not only about the equality of women and men, it is also about equality within women and men. In other words, in India division of women and men is more than biological, it is primarily social and racial. Dalit Feminism addresses the socio-racial division in women and men.

Ambedkar said that in Indian society there is not only a division of labour, there is also a division of labourers. Same way, Indian society is not only a division of female and male gender, it is also about division within the gender that is a racial division of gender. Women of the Dalit race and women of the Brahmin race are divided by different socio-economic interests.

### **What is Dalit Feminism?**

Feminism is an ideology that argues for equal rights for female and male. According to Britannica, "Feminism, the belief in social, economic, and political equality of the sexes."<sup>1</sup> Dalit Feminism is an ideology that argues primarily for equal rights for Dalit women and non-Dalit women and men. It is a kind of socio-economic, political way of life-based on the four principles-liberty, equality, fraternity and justice.

Dalit Feminism argues that Indian women don't form a homogenous category. Indian women are divided into at least two broad categories, socially - women of marginalized races and women of dominant races and ideologically Dalitised women and Brahminised women. Dalitised women represent progressive Dalit Indian values like women empowerment, free speech and choice, racial equality and racial justice. Brahminised women follow regressive Brahmin values like patriarchy, varna-caste hierarchy, purdah, child marriage, sati, women literacy, gender bias, hatred towards Dalits, particularly towards Dalit women. Dalit Feminism largely arose in response to Indian traditions that restricted the rights of Dalit women. Though it is meant to address the Dalit women specificities, it has universal appeal as it locates Dalit women within the broader Feminist concerns such as gender equality and women empowerment. The relevance of Dalit Feminism lies in the fact that Dalit women have to face challenges created by not only men and also women of non-Dalit races.



Dalit Feminism is a part of Dalitism. Therefore, Dalit Feminist is a natural follower of Dalitism. Dalitism argues for the social, economic and political empowerment of the Dalit community. Dalitists are those who follow Dalitism. Within the broader ideology of Dalitism, Dalit Feminism works for Dalit women empowerment. There are organic Dalit Feminists who are socially Dalit and ideologically Dalitists. For example, Ruth Manorama and Jyothi Raj who lead Non-Governmental Organizations; Vimala Thorat, a Dalit academic and editor of Dalit Asmita, a Hindi magazine; Kusum Meghawal, President of Rajasthan Dalit Sahitya Academy; Dr Rama Panchal, Convenor, Madhya Pradesh Dalit Mahila Hitkari Sanghatan; Dr Tara Parmar, General Secretary of Madhya Pradesh Dalit Sahitya Academy; Meenakshi Moon, Dalit writer; and many more. There are inorganic Dalit Feminists who are socially non-Dalit and ideologically Dalitists. For example, Gail Omvedt, an American scholar settled in India; and also Brahmin scholars like Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, and Kalpana Kannabiran etc. These Brahmin Feminists are Dalitists because they are against not only patriarchy and also Brahminism, and casteism. But they are inorganic because they non-Dalits.

Dalit Feminism looks at male not as an enemy or an opponent but as a competitor in the dominant position and therefore it argues legal safeguards for women. For Dalit Feminism, women's rights mean social justice to women. It doesn't argue for symbolic representation, it demands an equal share in the power. Dalit Feminism rejects faith in fate and looks at woman basically as an individual. Hence, its quest for social just for women is based on the principle of individual justice. It is not that Dalit Feminism is for mere representation of Dalit women in the public institutions – academics, legislatures, executive bodies, judiciary etc. It believes in not just organic representation and also authentic representation. There is a difference between organic representation and authentic representation. A Dalit woman in any institution naturally represents the Dalit community. Since a Dalit woman represents the Dalit community, her representation is organic representation. But every organic representation is not necessarily an authentic representation. Without ideological orientation, any representation is merely symbolic because such a representative has no intellectually driven moral urge to safeguard the community interests. Without Dalitisation, the representation of a Dalit woman in any institution is only organic and symbolic. Dalit Feminism wants not only organic and also authentic representation. The representation of ideologically Dalitised Dalit women in public institutions is socially organic and ideologically authentic. Such representative is ideologically motivated to safeguard Dalit interests. To be authentic, one has to be Dalit as well as ideologically Dalitist. Only ideology can't guarantee authenticity in representation. A Brahmin Feminist who works for the cause of Dalit women is at the most a privileged supporter. She is neither organic nor authentic. To be authentic, she has to be organic. Brahmin Feminist being a non-Dalit is not organic and since she is not organic, her ideological orientation is peripheral. Her representation of the voice of Dalit women is not authentic. Organic is not necessarily authentic due to ideological confusion and dilution. A Dalit woman is organic but if her ideological orientation is not Dalitism but Brahminism, her representation of Dalit women is not authentic. Hence, Dalit Feminism believes that only organic and authentic representation could safeguard the interests of Dalit women.

Dalit Feminism addresses gender specificities of not only the women of the Dalit race and also women of all marginalized races which can't be addressed by Feminism in general as it counts Indian women into a homogenous category. Therefore, Dalit Feminism aims to establish equal rights for Dalit women and non-Dalit women and also women and men in general. It is a Dalit specific broader progressive ideology. Dalit Feminism is against traditionalists and also materialists understanding of women. In India, traditionalists treat a woman as a theoretically Goddess and practically a commodity. A woman has no individual value. Traditionalists believe in keeping woman backward socially and economically.



Dalit Feminism opposes treating woman as Goddesses and also as a commodity. It views a woman as a human. It believes that the dignity of a woman can be upheld only by viewing a woman as a human being and not as a goddess or commodity.

Dalit Feminism is a part of Feminist discourse but with a difference. Though it privileges Dalit women issues, Dalit Feminism positions as a more effective ideology for the empowerment of Indian women as it links up women's exploitation with that of the patriarchy and also of the varna-caste system which Feminism, in general, couldn't do. Dalit Feminism finds linkage between women's exploitation and varna-casteism in other words racial-casteism. As for as, Indian society is concerned, Dalit Feminism views patriarchy as a byproduct of the varna-caste system. Hence the basis of women's exploitation in Indian society is varna-caste driven patriarchy.

### **Double Challenges**

The Dalit woman has to face double challenges which are patriarchy and casteism posed by men and also by non-Dalit women. Casteism and patriarchy are the sources of deprivation. The Dalit woman is deprived of equal rights due to caste as well as patriarchy whereas Brahmin woman is deprived of equal rights due to patriarchy and not caste. The Brahmin woman enjoys privileges not because she is a Brahmin but because of varna-caste ideology that accords higher status to the Brahmin race and the Dalit woman is deprived of rights not because she is a Dalit but because of varna-caste ideology that accords lower status to Dalit race. Dalit and Brahmin are mere social identities and social identities by themselves are not discriminatory and exploitative. It is the discriminatory and exploitative nature of varna-caste philosophy operating behind the social identities that need to be destroyed and not the social identities as such.

Being a woman is nothing wrong and being a Dalit is certainly not wrong. The self-respected Dalit woman is always proud of being a woman and more than that being a Dalit. She finds the greatness of being a Dalit as well as being a woman. Varna-caste philosophy is the natural enemy of Dalit women as it accords them lower status by locating the Dalit race below all the races in the social system. Just because the enemy wants you to be lower, you can't be lower. Varna-Casteism is an enemy of Dalit women. Dalit Woman finds virtue of being Dalit woman same as Brahmin woman finds virtue of being a Brahmin woman. For Dalit woman, the problem is not about being a Dalit and not about being a woman. Her problem is not in her but outside of her. Hence, Dalit Feminism views caste and patriarchy as the two dangerous enemies of Dalit woman. Women and men who believe in caste discrimination and patriarchy are the culprits as they perpetuate Dalit women's exploitation and subordination.

Dalit Feminism gives a new vision to Dalit a woman which is oriented towards socio-cultural and economic empowerment. It finds protection of the dignity of Dalit women as a primary issue than economic empowerment. It is conscious about the fact that Dalit women alone don't constitute a wider society and they are part of a society where they need to face caste discrimination even from dominant non-Dalit women. Dalit Feminism aims to establish a just society where a Dalit woman finds friendship from a non-Dalit woman; where caste discrimination ceased to exist; where equal rights and opportunities for Dalit women and non-Dalit women; where equal rights and opportunities for Dalit women and Dalit men; where women and men of all races have equal rights and opportunities to gain socio-political and economic power.

Dalit Feminism argues that the varna-caste system is responsible for Dalit women's subordination and exploitation in Indian society. It also argues that varna-casteism is responsible for not only Dalit



women's exploitation and also for Indian women in general. Hence, it invites Indian women of all races to join hands with Dalit women to annihilate varna-caste and liberate India from the anti-woman varna-caste system. Though the varna-caste system privileges Brahmin women's rights over the Dalit women, it also provides space for the Brahmin male to dominate Brahmin female as there is a link between varna-caste and patriarchy. This realization could make Brahmin women join Dalit women in the fight against caste. However, the Brahmin woman needs to prepare herself to forgo varna-caste given privileges for broader liberation of women community and making India varna-caste free. Dalit Feminism views the role of Dalit woman in Dalit society more than mother, daughter and wife. The typical Brahmin woman problems like sati, the ill-treatment of widows, and the ban on widow marriage, and child marriage don't form the main concern for Dalit Feminism. Dalit feminism gives not even foot-note space to such issues in its narrative as giving importance to typical issues of Brahmin women could deviate and distract the Dalit women movement from its main concerns.

Varna-caste endorses endogamy through which male exercises control over the woman's sexuality. Hence, Dalit Feminism as far as Indian society is concerned locates varna-caste as the source of patriarchy. Varna-Caste society is a palace built on a dung heap, though it stinks, residents take false pride in being in the palace. The case of Brahmin women is like living in a palace built on the dung heap. She finds attraction in the subordination and acceptance in the exploitation under the illusion that her caste is supreme and her progeny is pure than others. Hence unless Brahmin women follow Dalit feminism, their fight for rights is very narrow in scope and purpose. Dalit Feminism argues that as long as varna-caste is the basis of society, patriarchy survives with all its might and becomes the core reason for the exploitation of women. It also argues that the interests of women are better served only when they occupy the economically self-reliant position and the dependent position degrades them into subordinates. Dalit Feminism tries to erase the difference in social roles played by men and women in the family as well as in the society by building a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity.

Dalit Feminism finds arranged marriage as a means to protect varna-caste and perpetuate male dominance over the choice of women. Varna-Caste-ridden Indian society is responsible for the enslavement of women particularly of Dalit and Shudra races. Doublespeak is the hallmark of anti-Dalit Feminists as hypocrisy is their strategy of operation that gives an impression that it is a liberating ideology whereas, in reality, it is manipulative. Eleanor Zelliot points out, "Hierarchy in a social system is reflected in the hierarchy in the home. Rights and social privileges for one caste can be translated into rights and social privileges for one gender. The hegemony of caste translates into a hegemony of gender codes of pride, privilege and self-image."<sup>2</sup>

Male domination in society naturally reflects male domination in the family. Rights and social privileges for the Brahmin race can be translated into rights and social privileges for not only Brahmin men and also Brahmin women. The hegemony of the Brahmin race translates into a hegemony of Brahmin women's pride, privilege and self-image. Same way Dalit woman is underprivileged due to racial discrimination. The deprivation of the Dalit race translates into a deprivation of Dalit women from dignity, self-respect and opportunities. The only way Dalit women could acquire a share in the socio-economic power structure is constitutional safeguards which are also not properly executed by the concerned institutions largely manned by non-Dalit men and women.

### **Facets of Dalit Feminism**

Dalit Feminism has three facets- 1.Social Dalit Feminism, 2. Political Dalit Feminism and 3. Economic Dalit Feminism. 1. Social Dalit Feminism: Social Dalit Feminism is about the social empowerment of



Dalit women. It is a belief that Dalit women empowerment is possible by creating social consciousness among Dalit women and by making Dalit women participating in social activities. It seeks equal social rights between Dalit women and Dalit men and also between Dalit women and non-Dalit women and men. Through social activism and rights struggles, the Dalit community created Dalit Feminist leadership.

Who is Dalit Feminist? Dalit Feminist is a Dalit woman or man who follows Dalit Feminism as her/his ideology for the liberation of women in general Dalit women in particular from the culture of caste and patriarchy. Being a Dalit Feminist means pro-active towards Dalit women empowerment and strive to create a society where women and men of any kind have equal rights and opportunities.

1. Social Dalit feminism enables Dalit Feminists to construct and lead the social movement for the empowerment of Dalit women and in general women of all races. Jotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, and Ambedkar were Dalit Feminists during British rule in India. Jotiba Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule worked for women empowerment particularly for the empowerment of Dalit and Shudra women by establishing schools for them. Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) born at Buldana, Maharashtra worked as an activist of Phule's Satya Shodak Samaj. She visualized a revolutionary path for women's liberation. Her booklet *Stri Purush Tulna* originally published in Marathi in 1882 attacks women's exploitation in terms of both patriarchy and caste. It critiques the Brahminical patriarchy. It is the first Dalit feminist text in modern India. It is even regarded as the first modern Indian Feminist text.

Ambedkar undoubtedly occupies a primary place in the formation of the Dalit women movement in modern Indian history. He organized many Dalit conferences which accommodated simultaneous Dalit women's conferences. Dalit women participated in Ambedkar's meetings, not just as an audience but played a leadership role in many committees. Women are not allowed to participate publically along with men in any meeting or rally by the society as it believed in Brahminical patriarchy as against the traditional culture. Ambedkar had broken the Brahmin tradition of women exclusion by allowing Dalit women to join Dalit men in Mahad Satyagraha, the Dalit movement for the right to drink water from public wells and lakes.

Ambedkar encouraged Dalit women to be independent in every respect. Hence, gradually Dalit women started organizing women conferences independently by 1930. For example, the Dalit women conference at Kanpur in 1944, at Bombay in 1945 and Calcutta in 1946. Ambedkar in 1942 made a speech at the conference of the Dalit *Mahila* (women) Federation at Nagpur. Dalit women through various conferences wanted a free and compulsory girl-child education and share in political power by the representation in legislative assemblies.

As a member of the Legislative Council of Bombay, Ambedkar supported the bill for maternity leave for working women and argued for the employer to bear the financial burden of women worker during the maternity leave. Ambedkar's women empowerment bill known as Hindu Code Bill aimed to give social and economic freedom to Indian women who are not covered by personal laws of Muslim, Parsi and Christian. It is a women liberation and empowerment bill. It gives women the right to property and the right to divorce. Ambedkar through the bill defended the idea of equality of women and man by bringing equal rights for daughters and sons in paternal property; abolition of caste consideration in the marriage and adoption; equal right for divorce for wife and husband; monogamy in married life (one shouldn't have more than one wife or husband without divorce). Ambedkar's social laws indeed laid the foundation for modern Indian society. Emotional and irrational traditionalists vehemently opposed



Ambedkar's women empowerment bill. Ambedkar as a first law minister defended the bill clause by clause. He resigned in 1951 as Nehru, the Prime Minister of India couldn't ensure its passage in the parliament. Though the total bill was not passed, parts of it in bits were passed in 1955 and 1956.

Many Dalit women and Dalit men, who are products of the Ambedkar led Dalit movement are the finest examples of Dalit Feminists. Dalit women participation in Ambedkar led the Dalit movement to generate a cultural heritage and created a new history of gender equality in the Dalit community. It has brought social consciousness among Dalit women and made them give importance to education, to involve in Dalit movements, and most importantly to gain self-respect. After Ambedkar, Dalit history witnessed independent and more confident Dalit women organisations led by modern, urbanized, English speaking Dalit women. Among them, the most prominent organization is the 'National Federation of Dalit Women' founded by Ruth Manorama in Bangalore which participated in the International Women's Conference held in Beijing. There are also many Dalit women organisations making an impact over the life of millions of Dalit women such as the 'Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sangathana' based in Nagpur and Dhule and the 'All India Dalit Women's Forum' based in Pune.

An Ambedkarite Dalit Shantabai Dani in Nasik made a great contribution to women education. In the field of Dalit literature, there are many prominent Dalit women writers and poets. Short story writer Urmila Pawar, poets Jyoti Lanjewar, Hira Bansode, Surekha Bhagat and Mina Gajbhiye; Autobiography writers Baby Kamble and Shantabai Kamble.

Dalit Feminism regards Dalit women rights as human rights. It aims for proper implantation of Dalit women rights enshrined in the Constitution of India and different acts such as SC/ST atrocities Act enacted by the Government of India and other State governments. It fights for the proper implementation of SC/ST reservation in government institutions. It makes Dalit Feminists provide legal aid to needy Dalit women who are in distress and deprived of legal remedies. Dalit human rights activists particularly NCDHR (National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights) led by Paul Diwakar work in this direction.

Dalit academics have created Dalit intellectual cultural capital by involving in scholarly activities like producing quality research papers, participating in seminars and conferences, conducting workshops and guiding research scholars on Dalit women issues. Social Dalit Feminism of Dalit academics seeks equal share of academic space in the academic institutions between Dalit women and non-Dalit women and also men. Gopal Guru and Vimala Thorat are such academics who involved in Dalit women issues.

2. Political Dalit Feminism: Political Dalit Feminism is about the political empowerment of Dalit women. It is a belief that Dalit women empowerment is possible by creating political consciousness among Dalit women and by making Dalit women participating in the political process of decision making in other words by capturing political power.

Ambedkar created political consciousness within the Dalit race through his writings, speeches and movement. As a result Dalit race able to produce independent women leadership during the time of Ambedkar and also after Ambedkar. The Dalit Feminist movement got to boost up with the Mayawati leading the Dalit politics at the national level. She popularised the pan-Indian Dalit identity that has brought Dalit women of different castes, regions, languages within one proud social identity that is Dalit. Mayawati missed no opportunity to proudly call herself a 'Dalit daughter'. Dalit women felt the pride of being Dalit because of Mayawati's identity politics. Mayawati is the miracle of Dalit politics who became four times Chief-Minister of India's largest state Uttar Pradesh and largely contributed to the empowerment of Dalit women particularly in rural areas. Ideologically she represents Dalit women's



pride, self-respect and dignity. She constructed 'Dalit Prenasthal' (Memorial for Dalit inspiration) in Noida (Uttar Pradesh) near Delhi where millions of Dalit women and men visit from all over India to get inspiration from Dalit daughter Mayawati's work.

3. Economic Dalit Feminism: Economic Dalit Feminism is about the economic empowerment of Dalit women. It is a belief that Dalit women empowerment is possible by creating business consciousness among Dalit women and by making Dalit women participating in entrepreneurial activities. Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) led by Milind Kamble a well-known Dalit businessman, Kalpana Saroj highly successful Dalit businesswomen, Chandra Bhan Prasad once the mentor of DICCI and many more are working towards economic empowerment of Dalit community particularly Dalit women through entrepreneurial activities.

### **Conclusion**

Indians are biologically divided into women and men and socially divided into many castes. It is not only gender division; there is also caste division among men and women in Indian society. Dalit Feminist discourse deconstructs the so-called Feminism in India by destroying caste purity and condemning caste privilege within the women's rights discourse. It is very categorical about rejecting the idea of a homogenous category of Indian women and opposes caste dominance at the cost of rights of the Dalit and Shudra women. Dalit Feminism identifies varna-caste panchayat (assembly) and family laws based on varna-caste are detrimental to women development. The Dalit woman is subjected to double exploitation not because of being Dalit and women but because of varna-caste and patriarchy. It is the varna-caste that privileges Brahmin women and men and deprives Dalit women of social equality and justice. Atrocities perpetrated on large scale on Dalit woman not because she is Dalit but because of varna-casteism which is social racism. The ultimate agenda of Dalit Feminism is to annihilate varna-caste as it is the source of patriarchy in Indian society.

Culture and law always evolve and they are never static. Ambedkar by making laws for social equality and equal opportunities through the Constitution of India tried to destroy varna-caste and patriarchal culture and created women empowering culture. The most important agenda of Dalit Feminism is to universalize Dalit culture for liberating Dalit women from, in Ambedkar words, 'regressive village culture'. It visualizes the establishment of Dalit Feminist schools in which girls and boys are taught to work together not only in studies and also in works like cooking, washing clothes, brooming and mopping, planting etc. Dalit Feminist schools teach children no difference in any work. As per their physical and mental ability Dalit boys and girls are encouraged to do any work. English is the compulsory medium of education to globalize the aspirations and vision of Dalit girls and boys.

Therefore, Dalit Feminism caters to the needs of Dalit women ideologically and materially. Ambedkar thoughts naturally find a central place in Dalit Feminism. It unites Dalit women into one community by erasing their caste identities, regional identities and religious identities. Thus, it enables Dalit women to fight collectively against socio-economic oppression and to make the state implement constitutionally mandated safeguards and society to cultivate a culture of social equality and social justice.



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