

## Chapter 2: Dalit Feminism

In this chapter, I would look at debates on feminism, debates on caste and gender and dalit feminists' critique of main stream feminism. The 1990s is a crucial decade for feminist politics in India. There has been a radical shift in feminism when dalit women have begun to negotiate their representation. Feminism represented only the voice of upper-caste/middle class women, and neglected the question of social justice. The question of caste became crucial to feminist politics and a new need was felt to analyze the feminist movement's blindness to caste. There are two factors which led to this new awareness: one is the participation of women in the protest against the implementation of Mandal Commission's proposal to extend reservations to the OBCs (Other Backward Classes).<sup>1</sup> Upper-caste women declared that they were against all kinds of reservations to save the nation from the hands of unmeritorious groups. Upper-caste women in this context appeared as assertive women's groups who had shown their social responsibility. This assertion of upper-caste women had shown caste and patriarchal connotations in their argument and lamentation over the death of merit due to reservations. They announced that if the reservations for OBCs is going to be implemented along with already existing reservations for SC/STs, they are going to be deprived of employed husbands. The statement indicates that they support caste system which strictly forbids exogamy and secondly it also implies that they are economically and socially dependent on upper-caste men. Thus they feel their attempt to rescue the upper-castes from "marginalization" due to reservations is justified.

The second factor contributing to rising awareness was dalit feminists' questioning of the feminist movement's exclusive focus on issues of concern to upper-caste/ middle class women and its exclusion of dalit women from both representation and recognition as a group facing unique challenges, within feminist organizations. Ruth Manorama is one among such dalit feminists who vehemently questioned the feminist movement's neglect of the caste question and social justice.<sup>2</sup>

Dalit feminism is a still emergent theoretical framework for analyzing casteist patriarchy and various caste-related issues arising in relation to women's lives. Dalit feminism critiques mainstream feminism that excludes the theorization of caste system. At the same time, dalit movement cannot solve the question of dalits without theorizing patriarchy and internal patriarchy, because the category dalit includes its women population crushed under the wheels of caste and patriarchy.

Neither upper-castes nor lower and outcastes are free from patriarchy. But once the awareness of caste oppression is instilled and brings the untouchable into the category of dalit one should step out of the traditional caste position and culture to solve the caste question. In the same way, the emancipating category dalit needs to be free from the caste prejudice and theorize caste system to argue for an egalitarian society for everyone and prevent marginalization of any particular community or category within itself. Since the category is both emancipating and democratic, the significant question of patriarchy cannot be neglected. If the dalit movement is meant to deconstruct certain oppressive systems like caste system, it is equally important to theorize and fight patriarchy within

the dalit community and outside to bring equality and justice for both dalit men and dalit women. So far the dalit movement has not focused on issues related to casteist and internal patriarchy within the dalit community and dalit organizations. It is this absence that creates the need for a dalit feminist perspective to emerge.

Dalit feminism repudiates the sweeping category women which has been central to feminist politics. Gender is a significant factor of oppression in the society at large and in the family as well. A dalit woman has to face gender discrimination being a woman, and economic and caste exploitation of being a dalit and at the same time she is oppressed by the patriarchy from which the dalit communities are not free. She equally suffers due to the lack of cultural capital as dalits on the whole suffer from. To understand dalit feminism, it is necessary to understand the feminist movement and dalit movement in India.

Since 1990s, we find a significant change in the feminist politics and dalit movement, with the assertion of dalit women and rise in consciousness. They defined themselves in relation to dalit movement largely dominated by dalit men and feminist movement largely sustained by upper caste women.

### **Feminism in India and Issues of Dalit Women**

Politicizing the personal has been one of the most radical points of feminism from the beginning of the movement. Feminism has radically questioned the existing gender relationships, gender discrimination and theorized patriarchy. In the west, feminist movement has been begun by a narrow group of white, middle class and university

educated women who theorized the personal as political and other related concerns of women. In India also, feminism (feminist movement) that developed in 1970s (already existing in an unorganized informal way in views, literature and thoughts of women) theorized patriarchy in such a way that ascribed a common agenda to all women. Rege says, "The category 'women' was conceived as being based on collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood." (90) In the context of India too, women who participated in the movement were middle class, upper caste, urban and educated and thus their theorization of patriarchy missed out caste-class differences among women themselves. Universal sisterhood gained significance in Indian context as well. As a movement that had both intellectual and political concerns, feminism tried to bring awareness among women about oppression, domestic violence, rape and patriarchy and so on. It discusses the issues of gender inequalities and sexual oppression of women to make them rise in revolt against the discrimination that prevails in the family system and in the society. In India (as in case of the west), women belonging to other sections of society other than upper-caste women have powerfully critiqued feminism for its exclusive focus on issues concerning upper-caste (middle class) sections of women which are made to look like the concerns of all women.

Before I attempt to trace the brief history of feminism in India, I perceive feminism or any such category at two levels: firstly, feminism that works at the theoretical level and secondly, at the organizational level. Feminism has been a theory of understanding which can be operated at very personal level in dealing with the everyday life, family, thinking and consciousness. But at this level, there is no history that can be traced out. At organizational level, I would like to discuss feminist movement in India and various

important ramifications that developed which is an important study for dalit feminism to undertake.

Though in the beginning (i.e in 1970s to 80s) educated urban women participated in the movement that dealt with the issues of women such as domestic violence, dowry and so on, later, urban working class women also participated in the movement. But these organizations in which the working class women participated are not exclusively feminist organizations. Some of them were left-based organizations fighting against unequal wages, for land reforms and so on.<sup>3</sup> In the later stages, there has been a clear division between what is called feminist organization and other organizations in which women take part. Though they represent the voice of educated upper-caste middle class women, there have been a few interventions by such organizations in issues of importance to lower caste and dalit women. The Mathura rape case is one such historic milestone.<sup>4</sup> But such interventions have also been criticized by dalit feminists as tokenisms in the history of feminist movement. The interventions made by feminist organizations and women's groups led to changes in the Indian law on rape. But politically conscious dalit women significantly claimed at this point the right of self-representation and declared that they do not want feminists to act and speak on their behalf. From 1990s, various dalit women's organizations have been formed.<sup>5</sup> At a larger level, even the contemporary feminist concerns are more of upper-caste middle class women than of dalit or lower caste women. Challenging the control of female sexuality, restriction and regulation of women's sexual choice are the important questions that are voiced by feminist organizations.<sup>6</sup>

The National Federation of Dalit Women was founded by Ruth Manorama in 1993. The organization raised its voice against violence on dalit women. Dalit Mahila Sanghatana was formed by dalit women in Maharashtra in 1995. It focused on representing the dalit women's question at the International Women Conference held in Beijing. The self representation of dalit women in Durban Conference on Racism in 1993, and International Women's Conference in Beijing 1995 are path breaking events in the history of dalit women politics.

Sharmila Rege pointed out that upper caste women are more vulnerable to domestic violence and other forms of oppression within the family whereas dalit women face the threat of rape and violence in public sphere.<sup>7</sup> According to her domestic violence is upper-caste woman's issue and caste oppression and sexual exploitation are the issue of dalit woman. Though both the upper-caste and dalit woman's situations are oppressive, the violence that is generated on dalit women springs from caste and casteist patriarchy. Caste system and hierarchy makes dalits and dalit women subservient to the upper-castes. Dalit communities being involved in works such as leather works, manual scavenging, human scavenging, and a huge number of them in land cultivation and are dependent on the upper-caste/ land-owning castes. Thus, dalit women who take part in public labour are more prone to labour, economic and sexual abuse and exploitation at the hands of the upper-castes. Women of upper-caste communities are subservient to the men of the same family, whereas dalit women experience patriarchal oppression within the family as well as outside the community.

Even the reformist movement during colonial times in India has perceived the issues such as *Sati* and child marriages as upper-caste women's issues, although they were prevalent in dalits and lower castes. The idea of "Indianness" and "Indian culture" were assumed to be that of the upper-castes. It was also assumed that the violence against women and the patriarchal structures were the same for women of all castes. Gabriele Dietrich says that the violence against women cuts across caste and class though the circumstances change.<sup>8</sup> But not only the circumstances but the patriarchal structures and the systems from which such violence springs also differ and they are also strongly connected. Guru argued in "Dalit Women Talk Differently" that Dalit women suffer two distinct patriarchal structures: the Brahminical form of patriarchy that stigmatizes dalit women due to their caste identity of being untouchable, and political and literary marginalization of dalit women by dalit male dominant movement. Guru argues that the political marginalization of dalit women in post-Ambedkarite dalit movement.<sup>9</sup> He says that, "(...)dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them;"(83) Guru sees patriarchy as the production of upper-caste society and culture. Different manifestations of patriarchy such as dowry, child marriages seem to be part of only upper-caste culture. Guru points out that the upwardly mobile dalits are imitating the upper-caste patriarchy.<sup>10</sup> Guru says that patriarchy in Maharashtra and in the entire country reproduces the upper-caste tradition of dowry, which commodifies women even from landless dalit families. "The dowry system, which was almost non-existent among dalits two decades ago, has become a serious problem now particularly in Maharashtra," Guru points out.<sup>11</sup> He also criticizes the Brahminization of dalits through patriarchy.

Guru's argument missed out on dalit patriarchy which is not new to the dalit castes even at the grassroots of the pre-Ambedkarite period.<sup>12</sup> His critique also ignores the physical abuse within the families that dalit women have to endure and the economic exploitation within the families. Though dalits do not take part in the culture of upper-castes (in case of temple related rituals, food habits and so on), they have been ghettoized at the outskirts of the village and still have interactions with the upper-castes as their labourers and scavengers. Such interaction might have made them imitate the upper-caste control over women in case if such oppression of dalit women and dalit patriarchy was not present at one point of time in the history. Dalit women autobiographers Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar and other do not agree that even before Ambedkarite period where dalits were living under poor and traditional caste position.

Rege says that feminism finds it hard to shift its settled viewpoint from the issue of rape in case of dealing with Dalit women.(92) To substantiate the above we can look back at the feminists occasionally intervening in issues like Mathura rape case.<sup>13</sup> In most feminist writings dalit women are either treated with sympathy since they are more prone to rape and sexual exploitation or considered to have privilege to enjoy more freedom and sexual freedom in particular (though not necessarily their relations are out of choice but out of helplessness to fight the landlords and upper-caste men. This happens because of the absence of dalit women in feminist organizations and even in the collections of feminist writings to represent the dalit experience.<sup>14</sup> Mainstream feminism lacks the awareness on the dalit grassroots level experiences and dalit patriarchy. It may also make them blind to the fact of how the upper-caste norms are penetrating in the dalit communities in modernity. However dalit communities were never free from

patriarchy before such upward mobility brought by the economic betterment or education.

In the context of growing awareness among dalits and (thus) growing atrocities on them, dalit women face sexual abuse, rape by upper-castes and though the feminist movement and dalit movement focus on such issues, an adequate theorization of caste and patriarchy in dalit communities has not been worked out.

According to the norms of the society, "purity" is associated with caste in India. Birth in a particular caste would decide whether one is "pure" or "polluted". The lack of "ritual purity" makes dalit women already "impure". Their participation in the public labour and their visibility in the public, economic deprivation also make dalit women "accessible" to upper-caste men. The economic and caste inferiority leads to the sexual exploitation of dalit women by upper-caste males. Due to the power of upper-castes over dalits, it is not possible for dalit community to fight the exploitation.

### **Caste Violence and Dalit Women**

It is also important to look at another important context of caste violence which provides insights into issues which have been ignored by the feminist groups which assert "universal sisterhood". In the context of Chundur, where the thirteen dalit men were massacred by upper-caste Reddy landlords, upper-caste women complained (in order to justify the atrocity) that they were subjected to sexual harassment by dalit men.<sup>15</sup>

In Khairlanji (Maharashtra), in 2006, a dalit family was battered and killed by caste Hindu men and women after sexually abusing dalit women in the family with the entire

village looking on. In this context, a woman journalist Sarita Kaushik strongly defends the crime as against dalit women as a punishment to a dalit woman's sexual "immorality".<sup>16</sup>

Both the contexts firstly signify women are not free from patriarchal family structures which make them subservient and dependent on the males of the same caste/families. Women also are part of the caste system which make them equally casteist. Secondly it is also substantiated that women and their experiences are not free from their caste position. In both the contexts, upper-caste norms of purity and sexual morality have been treated as the norm for the whole society and dalit women are judged immoral for the fact of being untouchables who are prone to upper-caste sexual exploitation by upper-caste males. Nowhere does society ensure the dalit women's right to live free from sexual exploitation and in spite of that they perceived to be impure. In the context of Chunduru, when the women of upper-castes were purportedly molested by dalit men, death came as a punishment for dalit men. In my understanding, upper-caste women's act of defending the upper-caste male atrocities has its own patriarchal connotations. Women are dependent on men of the family. So, there has been a patriarchal force that works to make upper-caste women defend the atrocities committed by males in order to save them. Patriarchy and caste system are intrinsically linked, upper-caste women are sexually controlled and oppressed in order to save the sanctity of the caste.<sup>17</sup> The conception of category of 'women' being central to feminism has been threatened once again in the context of Chunduru where the upper-caste women have taken the responsibility of protecting their men from being punished for the atrocity committed.

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, while talking about post Chunduru developments, mention the incident in which 300 upper caste women marched on the streets complaining that they had been sexually harassed by the dalit men in Chunduru and gheraoed the cars of the then chief minister Janardhan Reddy and former Chief Minister N.T Ramarao, protesting the state's failure to protect them from dalit men.<sup>18</sup> As in the case of the anti-Mandal agitation, upper-caste women in post-Chunduru agitation presented themselves not as traditional submissive women but as feminist subjects who are assertive, non-submissive and protesting against the "injustice" done to them as women or as citizens.(237) Rege pointed out that in this context upper-caste women 'were invoked as feminist subjects, assertive, non-submissive and protesting against injustice done to them as women and as citizens.'<sup>19</sup> Both in anti-Mandal agitation and post-Chunduru agitation, there was a "masculinization of lower castes" that is all dalits are males and all women as upper-castes. Therefore "obscuring the Dalit woman and marking the lower caste as the predatory male who becomes the legitimate target of 'feminist' rage".(243) The agitation of upper-caste women also served to bring justification to the massacre since upper-caste women are socially dependent on men.<sup>20</sup> Though, upper-caste women protesting on the streets, publicly claiming that they had been molested by dalit men is not acceptable according the gender norms of the upper-castes, it gained "respectability" since it is upper-caste women who were protesting out of their aspiration to protect their "endangered chastity" by dalit men. Upper-caste women's protest attained respectability because it is directed against dalit men and generally it is believed that dalit men do not have "access" to upper-caste women. However the protest seems to be "feminist", it gained acceptance because it does not question the foundations

of caste or gender. Hence, the upper-caste women's participation in anti-Mandal agitation (upper-caste women announced that they are against extending the reservations to Backward Castes because there is a future threat to them being deprived of employed husbands) and in post-Chunduru marches, reinforces the patriarchal norms of the caste system. According to the norms of the caste system, it is seen that dalit men have no "access" to the upper-caste women which would contaminate the upper-castes whereas dalit women are seen traditionally bound to be subservient and accessible to upper-castes.(242) It is important to posit a question whether if the same protest is done by upper-caste women against upper-caste's males' injustice would have gained the same sort of support from the people and state. It is equally important to see if dalit women's protest against upper-caste men and their exploitation would have gained the same support and respectability.

Where upper-caste women are considered to "belong" to the upper-caste men, dalit women are not seen as just "belonging" to dalit men but they can be "accessed" by upper-caste men as well. This does not mean that the caste ideology keeps only upper-caste women within the restrictions of the norms of chastity and dalit women completely outside such norms of chastity. Though the norms of chastity are not applied to dalit women where they have been sexually accessed by upper-caste men, they are equally subject to norms of chastity within the dalit community. Thus the caste ideology mediated through gender does not make dalit women who take part in public labour free from the internal patriarchy which makes them victims of physical abuse, norms of chastity, economic exploitation (by dalit men also) and so on.

In the context of education bringing awareness among dalits there are also instances of inter-caste marriages between upper-caste women and dalit men. In case of Chunduru atrocity, the alleged teasing of upper-caste women by dalit boys was also claimed as one of the reasons for massacre which was mentioned in various reports on Chunduru. Either the marital relationships or any kind of relationships between dalit men and upper-caste women is seen as a threat to the sanctity of caste.

Though feminism treated women as a monolithic category, it did not help to understand the caste and gender dynamics of Chunduru massacre. Caste and patriarchy need to be understood as interlinked categories since Chunduru massacre provided us with the incidents of upper-caste women targeting dalit men while sexual exploitation of dalit women had never been considered as a feminist/women's subject to initiate any such protest against upper-caste men in fact such exploitation is sanctioned by custom.

### **Caste Hindu Women and Dalit Women in the Context of Hindutva**

Feminism in India neglected the factors of caste and class, which are crucial in a society like India. Mainstream feminists could not deny the fact that being women of upper-caste, they enjoy the privileges of their caste and a respectable caste position in the society, where as dalit women face caste discrimination. Such caste oppression and the discrimination that dalit women face are not exclusively from caste Hindu men but from caste Hindu women as well. Gopal Guru substantiates this with the example of Shiv Sena women attacking the Dalit women in Bihar.<sup>21</sup>

“The conditions also take a violent form as when the Shiv Sena women attacked Dalit women in Sawali village of Chandrapur district in 1988. Thus, beneath the call for women’s solidarity, the identity of Dalit woman as ‘dalit’ gets whitewashed and allows a non-Dalit woman to speak on her behalf.”(82)

Dalit women face discrimination by caste Hindu women when it comes to questions like access to drinking water in the villages since the caste position of Hindu women makes them privileged over dalit women.

Though Hinduism is not a monolithic category and is not founded upon any single holy text, Hindu lawgiver Manu seems to have a strong base in Indian society. The *Manusmriti* inculcates both the patriarchal and caste hierarchy into the society of India and provides the basis for the ultimate dominance of the Brahman community.<sup>22</sup> But this hierarchical society probably might have undergone changes in various periods. In spite of all the changes Brahmin community and its ideology won superiority over the rest of society and thus the caste system and casteist patriarchy are preserved and protected in Hindu society. In Indian context, Hindu religion is the origin of the caste system and provides basis and legitimizes patriarchy. Not just dalitism or dalit feminism, even mainstream feminism needs to look into the religious basis of patriarchy and oppression of women. Unless the mainstream feminism critiques religion and caste that control over women’s sexuality, it is difficult to understand the contemporary politics of Hindutva. It also provides an understanding of how the various oppressive systems like caste and patriarchy fortify each other.

## Understanding Patriarchy in Dalit Castes

Just as feminism excluded dalit women and confined itself to the issues of upper-caste women, dalit movement also excluded dalit women and the theorization of patriarchy that operates at various levels among different castes in the society.

Though women suffer from patriarchal oppression, but the system works in different ways in various situations. For example, writers such as Gabriele Dietrich and Kancha Ilaiah say that the patriarchy of dalit communities differs from that of upper-castes and dalit women suffer weaker versions of the patriarchy and thus dalit women live in more egalitarian society. Gabriele Dietrich says there is scope for dalit women fight back the oppression in the families.

“Cases of dowry connected with torture and murder are more frequent among upper castes and it is probably not exaggerated to say that family violence among upper castes tends to be quite systematic. This type of systematised family violence occurs much less among backward castes and Dalits unless they have become economically prosperous and try to imitate upper caste values, which is very rare. Dalit women are not under the ideology of husband-worship and if they face violence within the family, they may fight back.”(58)

Ilaiah conveys a similar understanding of dalit patriarchy.<sup>23</sup>

“A Dalitbahujan woman does not have to perform *padapuja* (worshipping the husband’s feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in the way she would address a superior. In a

situation of dispute, word in response to word, and abuse for abuse is the socially visible norm. Patriarchy as a system does exist among Dalitbahujan, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic.”(34)

Kancha Ilaiah ignores the fact of internal oppression and he makes assumptions about absence or presence of “democratic” patriarchy in dalit/bahujan society. Such assumptions were made with superficial understanding of patriarchy and due to the absence of practices like Sati and dowry and the recognition of right to divorce in dalit-bahujan culture which is only a myth in various contexts.

“In our families, girls whose in-laws did not look after them well, got divorced very easily and within days second husbands were found for them. While marriages take place at home and are celebrated with one type of meal and drink, divorces also take place with food and drink. Seeking divorce from an irresponsible husband is as much a sanctioned social act as performing marriages.

Similarly, when we read that Hindu women ought to die along with their dead husbands I was extremely happy that our women do not have to die like that.”(16)

Though it is agreed by various scholars such as Sharmila Rege that the patriarchal systems among dalits differ from the patriarchy of upper-castes but it is a misleading idea to perceive dalit communities to be more egalitarian and to say that dalit women can fight back. Swati Margaret points out that the scholars like Kancha Ilaiah are

ignoring the fact of wife battering in dalit families. She also critiques Ilaiah commending dalit communities as observers of “democratic” patriarchy in the families.<sup>24</sup> It is also important to underline the physical violence that dalit women suffer within the family and the economic and labour exploitation within the same is not something that can be ignored.<sup>25</sup> I believe even the imitation of upper caste ideals and culture is not the only reason behind dalit patriarchy but dalit caste is also part of larger caste system. At the same time violence also comes from upper-castes on dalit women. Such experiences of multiple ways of oppression of being a woman and a dalit have been neglected by the feminist and dalit scholars.

I believe that the importance of dalit women writing and bringing out their experiences is stressed in this context where dalit writers and upper-caste women writers have not only been blind to the existence of dalit patriarchy but have also “romanticized” it by proclaiming that there is much freedom, equality and space to fight back for dalit women. For Kancha Ilaiah, violence of Sati is almost absent in dalit community. But equally violent forms of patriarchy existed in dalit castes. He ignored the brutal torture and violation of human rights that take place within the dalit community and the atrocities committed on dalit women. Bama in her *Sangati* shows how dalit women were tortured and killed by their husbands. Mariamma’s mother (Bama’s Periamma) was repeatedly beaten black and blue by her husband. She dies when he severely tortures her in her post pregnancy for she refuses to have sex with him.(10) Many incidents of torture and rape of dalit women by their husbands were discussed in *Sangati*.

Ilaiah also says that dalit-bahujan women enjoy the right to divorce. Baby Kamble says that she had witnessed the terrible violent forms of patriarchy in the grassroots level dalit families who even lack the food to eat everyday unless they get dead cattle from the upper-caste families where they do manual scavenging such as removing the night soil. It never was easy for any girl to escape the torture from their husbands or in-laws. The right to divorce is not observed in dalit society at all. The tortured wives have got no choice but to live in the in-laws house. She has no space in her natal house to take shelter.

“Many daughters-in-law would try to run away to escape this torture. Once night fell, darkness would descend everywhere, at home, in the village, on the roads. When everybody was fast asleep, the harassed daughter-in-law would pick up a couple of rags and run away under the cover of darkness. It was not at all an easy thing to do. There were no vehicles in those days to take her quickly to her mother’s home. The young girl had to be entirely on her own. She had to be extremely careful, and watch each step she took. She had to find her way in pitch darkness, through hills and valleys and thick forests; she had to cross streams and rivers. Her escape would take place in mortal fear lest people who knew her in-laws were watching her. It would take her at least two days to reach her mother’s home. Immediately on her heels would follow her brother-in-law or sasra or her husband! Nobody, neither her in-laws nor any of the others, had any sympathy for the poor tortured girl. The husband or the in-laws would beat her to a pulp. Even her brother and father would flog her mercilessly and ask the in-

laws to take her back. The poor girl, numb with pain and hunger, was forced to return to her husband's home.”(98-99)

Kancha Ilaiah's idea of right to divorce of dalit/bahujan women only helps to celebrate dalit culture, but it is not entirely true. Right to divorce is not a common phenomenon among dalit castes. The situation of lack of freedom to escape from the oppressive marriage that is narrated by Baby Kamble is the situation that belongs to the period of 1940s. That shows dalit castes at the grassroots level were also not free from patriarchy.

According to Gabriele Dietrich, dowry related violence and systematized violence is less among dalits unless they become economically prosperous. But the incidents of atrocities on dalit women narrated by Baby Kamble date back to 1940s where dalits in that period have no possibility of economic prosperity. The relative absence of Sati does not imply that there was no presence of patriarchal violence among dalits. Though dalit women do not have to perform padapuja (what Ilaiah points out), a symbolic form of slavery, one cannot perceive dalit women to be free from patriarchy.(34) They are still considered to be slaves to the family, husband and community. Kamble says “So we made our own arraignments to find slaves -- our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them.” Dalit women live like slaves and are treated inferior to every member in the in-laws family. Child marriages as a practice also assumed to be a common phenomenon among upper-castes. But Baby Kamble points out that girls of the age around eight or nine were married off among Mahars.(87)

Kamble's autobiography substantiates one dalit women in ten used to die during the childbirth due to lack of awareness, medical help and suppositious beliefs. One dalit

woman among hundred used to be mutilated by husband or in-laws.<sup>26</sup> Barna describes many dalit women were tortured to death by their husbands. Urmila Pawar says that dalit men fight for equal right and humane treatment from upper-castes but they behave so inhuman towards their women folk substantiating it with many incidents. Such incidents and experiences of dalit patriarchy have been brought the necessity of dalit women speaking for themselves.

Gopal Guru, in "Dalit Women Talk Differently", argued that dalit women need to organize themselves outside the mainstream feminist organizations, on the basis of experience, representation and identity. Guru says that the dalit movement is not egalitarian due to internal patriarchy. Similarly, solidarity of women in the society of India is highly contradictory. He also discusses certain internal factors like "Dalit patriarchy", political and literary domination of dalit men.

Dalit writing and women writing show a significant absence of representation of dalit women. The contemporary dalit writing also equally misrepresents the dalit women cause by suspending it as a "non-severe" issue compared to the larger concerns of dalit movement and dalit writing. Literary and political marginalization of dalit women in post-Ambedkarite period also brings the necessity for dalit women to bring out their experiences of patriarchies and caste oppression.

### **Patriarchy in Dalit Castes and Ambedkarite/Dalit Movement.**

Before looking at the contemporary dalit feminist views, I would briefly look at the history of how dalit women organizations took form with the initiative to work for dalit women's cause and development.

Urmila Pawar, a dalit woman writer, who has been associated with many social movements in Maharashtra, traced out dalit women's contribution to various issues related to the oppression of dalit women, such as Devdasi and Murli.<sup>27</sup> These practices in the name of religion are to be found in most villages. Dalit girls are the victims of such practices. Devdasi (Murli)<sup>28</sup> is a tradition of dedicating girls as sexual slaves to the temples. Being a dalit woman herself, Pawar insists on the significance of education for dalit women. It was Ambedkar who insisted on education for dalits and lower castes. According to Ambedkar, education alone would enable the untouchables to fight untouchability and discrimination. Educated dalit women took the initiative to organize dalit women to revolt against such discrimination not only in the society as a whole but also within the so-called emancipatory movements such dalit movement and feminists groups.

Dalit women, who actively participated in Ambedkarite movement, firmly demanded free and compulsory education for dalit women and they also protested against child marriage among dalits. Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar analyzed the way in which dalit women organizations worked and their participation in Ambedkarite movement. In this phase dalit women who participated in Ambedkarite movement have also stood for the reformation of marriage and rituals associated with it. "They tried to eliminate unnecessary rituals in the marriage ceremony and tried to reduce expenses in the marriage."<sup>29</sup>

Moon and Pawar's effort makes a difference in documenting the history of Ambedkarite movement from dalit women's perspective. They also showcased the realities of dalit

movement which had been male dominated in tone. *We Also Made History* (2008) also brings out the patriarchal oppression within dalit communities in spite of dalit men and women being fellow victims of caste oppression and especially those dalit males being the active members of Ambedkarite movement. "One of them said, "My husband used to beat me up. When the workers from the movement would come to call me, he would tell me that my husbands had come. 'Go have fun with them,' he would say." (19)

The significance of the work done by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar lies in how even in the Ambedkarite movement the role of women had been marginalized in the mainstream history of the movement. Such works show how important it is to review the history and politics of dalits from a dalit feminist perspective. The political marginalization of dalit women is more conspicuous in post-Ambedkarite dalit movement. Kamble says, "Women played a major role in Dr. Ambedkar's movement. But that doesn't seem to have happened later."(149)

### **Marginalization of Dalit Women by Dalit (male dominant) Movement**

It is not only the caste system and its inequalities that we need to address but also the male domination in dalit communities and in the dalit movement. Male domination in the dalit communities can be understood as the result of the Indian social system but when it continues in the movement and in the reconstruction of the history of dalit movement it should be condemned. When the excluded history (since mainstream history neglects the dalits) of dalit movement is being excavated in retrospect, it should be done in a more egalitarian way. But dalit movement had never done so and eventually excluded the dalit women's history.

Gogu Shyamala pointed out that the biggest problem in working with the dalit movement is that men are so rigid to take women's decisions into consideration. She also says that male-dominance in the dalit movement is stronger than in the families. Dalit movement not only subsidizes dalit women in decision making process, it also oppresses their literary works.<sup>30</sup>

### **Dalit Women are the 'Dalits among Dalits'?**

Ruth Manorama said, "Dalit women are the 'Dalits among Dalits', because they are thrice alienated on the basis of caste, class and gender."<sup>31</sup>Pranjali Bandhu brings out various forms of oppression such as the problem of minimum and unequal wages of dalit women, in spite of women also work equally hard and for the same length of time with men. The problems like lack of education, early marriages, and health problems are also severe among dalit women. There are many prejudices against education for dalit women in the society. Casteism in the schools is also a deterrent factor for dalit girls that prevent them from aspiring for education. In dalit community, it is economical to marry off a much younger girl to an older man and this results in too many pregnancies all the way up to menopause. These early marriages take place also for the fear of dalit girls falling prey to "upper-caste" sexual exploitation.

All the factors I mentioned such as patriarchy in family, casteist patriarchy in the society and untouchability, sexual and labour exploitation of dalit women make them more oppressed even among outcastes. Dalit feminism is a comprehensive theory that theorizes caste and patriarchy keeping all those factors as important points to dalit

women's experience. Theorization of experience and representation is the most significant tool of dalit feminism.

When dalit community as a whole suffers untouchability, dalit women are more prone to be victimized by the same evil custom. Bela Malik has described the practices of untouchability in the Indian village system.<sup>32</sup> She also points out how dalit women suffer due to lack of access to water, fuel resources and sanction of facilities, which exposes them to humiliation and violence.(105) Quite often caste Hindu women may discriminate against dalit women since any category in Indian society is not free from caste. Thus the concept of "universal sisterhood" is at stake in cases where upper-caste women become the oppressors.

### **Dalit Feminist Perspective**

The 1990's have been an important period in dalit women's theoretical and organizational politics. On August 11, 1995, an independent autonomous group was formed by dalit women under the name National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) at Delhi.<sup>33</sup> NFDW recognizes dalit women as thrice alienated on the basis of class, caste and gender. NFDC fights for concerns and aspirations of most marginalized sections called dalit women.<sup>34</sup>

Dalit women writing has been published widely in various languages in this period. In Marathi, a number of dalit women such as Baby Tai Kamble the first dalit woman autobiographer in India, Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar published their biographies. In 1995, Bama, a dalit woman writer published *Karukku* and *Sangati*.

In 2003, Gogu Shyamala brought out the first compilation of dalit women writing in Telugu: *Nallapoddu*.<sup>35</sup>

Dalit feminism argues for identity and representation for dalit women and does not agree to be swept under the category of women which almost all the times implies only upper caste women. Caste Hindu women do enjoy the privilege of their caste position and cultural capital that is lacking for dalit women. To briefly summarize, dalit feminism foregrounds the relationship between the control over upper-caste women's sexuality by upper-caste males as against the exploitation of dalit women's sexuality and labour by the upper-caste men. It also critiques the internal patriarchy of dalit families and ways of imitating upper-caste norms of control over the women (both among poor dalits and educated middle class dalits). The penetration of upper-caste norms of 'virtue', 'beauty', 'morality' in the contemporary era is another factor that dalit feminism critiques. Dalit feminism conceptualizes caste system in relation to patriarchy both within the families and within the whole society.

Dalit feminist writing aims at bringing out the experiences of both physical violence and symbolic violence, which operate at two levels: upper-castes committing atrocities on dalits, patriarchal violence that dalit women suffer from within and outside the caste. It is important to understand the caste and gender dynamics of violence in the society to understand caste violence.

Dalit women writing/ autobiographies help to understand the different layers of caste and gender ideology that operates behind the physical and symbolic caste violence. I would like to look at dalit women autobiographies written by Bama, Kumud Pawde,

Meenakshi Moon, Baby Tai Kamble and so on to discuss the concept of caste violence within the caste and gender dynamics.

Baby Kamble's first dalit woman autobiography points out various forms of patriarchal violence within the dalit society. She describes the life of Mahars in pre-Ambedkarite period and the influence of Ambedkar's ideology on dalits. It is an important document on the women's participation in Ambedkarite dalit movement and the condition of dalit women during this period. The autobiography aims to proclaim how dalit women lived as slaves in the families and suffered lack of food, medical facilities and so on.

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is the first autobiography that appeared in Tamil. Though a significant part of it critiques the caste inequalities entering Catholic church, it describes both the endemic violence on dalits within the villages (and grassroots level caste relations) and the symbolic violence that humiliates dalits in the educational institutions. Dalit women experience sexual and economic exploitation and the issue of patriarchy which makes dalit women victims of patriarchal control within the families is found only in a few contexts in *Karukku*. Nevertheless, the issue of internal patriarchy, physical abuse of dalit women in the families, upper-caste men exploiting dalit women have been widely discussed in *Sangati* (2005).

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is another significant autobiography written in Marathi. She describes her difficulty in the education system being modeled upon the upper-caste norms and notions of language, culture and values. She also discusses the internal patriarchy which makes dalit women victims of the patriarchal control by dalit men, physical abuse and economic exploitation. The autobiography

deals with how dalit movement is blind to the gender issues and how dalit movement is carried away by the notion of “all women being untouchables” which further makes them not consider the issues of dalit women.

Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon’s *We Also Made History* (2008) is a theoretical work of rewriting the history of Ambedkarite movement and the male dominance within the movement. The fact of dalit women’s participation in the movement itself is not recognized by Ambedkarite movement. The history of dalit women’s participation is brought out by the work. It also foregrounds the violence within the family system of dalits and dalit patriarchy that entered the dalit movement.

My understanding and analysis of various categories of caste violence will be presented in dalit feminist perspective. Caste violence is one of the important questions for dalit feminism. Dalit women and men face caste violence and its manifestations at various levels in the society sometimes in the form of atrocities. Dalit women are often victimized and subjected to rape and sexual torture. Dalit women are also seen as “belonging” to the community in cases of caste violence, dalit women are targeted to “teach a lesson to the entire caste” or to emasculate the caste.

Dalit women are also the victims of patriarchal control and dalit patriarchy. Another important question that I would like to look at in my thesis is the intra-caste violence that dalit women experience. Dalit women are the victims of physical violence, torture within the families. This point has been ignored by various dalit and non-dalit and feminist scholars. Political and literary marginalization of dalit women, social stigma

that prevents dalit women from education or subjects them to humiliation are various forms of symbolic violence that I would like to discuss in the coming chapters.

In the next chapter, I would discuss physical caste violence with the back drop of atrocities on dalits reported in the contemporary society. I would also look at how the caste violence is represented in the writings of dalit women.

## End Notes:

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<sup>1</sup>Rege, Sharmila, 1998.p.93.

<sup>2</sup>See <http://youngfeminists.wordpress.com/2007/12/27/on-caste-and-patriarchy-an-interview-with-ruth-manorama/> Accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>3</sup>Radha Kumar,1993.

<sup>4</sup>Mathura rape case is a historic event that drew the attention of various women's organizations because the judgment in the case referred to the sexual history of Mathura (a tribal girl) and the cops who were accused of raping her were pronounced to be innocent since she had sexual relations with her boyfriend, there is no possibility of rape. The possibility of rape has been related to the virtue and chastity of the women in this case in a very casteist and patriarchal frame work. It drew the attention of women's organization and became a milestone of anti-rape agitations of feminist organizations.

See <http://lawmatters.in/content/the-mathura-rape-case-465> Accessed on 29th November 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Pawar and Moon, 2008. pp.10-11

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.aksharacentre.org/Article-Interactive\\_Space\\_for\\_Feminisms.pdf](http://www.aksharacentre.org/Article-Interactive_Space_for_Feminisms.pdf) Accessed on 30th November 2010.

<sup>7</sup>Rege Sharmila, 1998.

<sup>8</sup>Gabriel Dietrich, 2005.p.58

<sup>9</sup>Guru, 1995.pp.2548-50

<sup>10</sup>Gopal Guru,1993.

<sup>11</sup>Guru,1999.

<sup>12</sup>Baby Kamble, 2008.pp.98-104

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<sup>13</sup>Ray, Raka, 2000.

<sup>14</sup>It is important to note that almost no compilations of women's writing or even feminist writing has included any dalit women writers.

<sup>15</sup>The details of Chundururu massacre were also discussed in the chapter 1 also.

<sup>16</sup>Teltumbde Anand, 2008.pp.102-105

<sup>17</sup>Upper caste women's sexuality is controlled and more in cases where there is a possibility of those women having relationship with untouchable men for the fear of pollution of caste. Inter-caste marriages cause such brutal caste violence in various contexts.

<sup>18</sup>Tharu and Niranjana 1996.

<sup>19</sup>Rege Sharmila, 1998.

<sup>20</sup>Kalpna Kannabiran and Vasant Kannabiran, 1991.p.2132

<sup>21</sup>Guru, 1995.

<sup>22</sup>Manu the lawgiver, seems to have had more impact on the society of India than various other religious texts like *Vedas* and *Puranas* since the hierarchy and structures of caste system and patriarchy seem to have been strongly influenced by what is described in *Manusmriti*. *Manusmriti* also protects the ultimate dominance of Brahmin community over the rest of the society and defends the control of women (especially to withhold them from being polluted by outcastes) in order to save the sanctity of community. see <http://www.hindubooks.org/scriptures/manusmriti/manusmriti.html> Accessed on 18th August 2008.

<sup>23</sup>Ilaiah, 1996.

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<sup>24</sup> See editorial written by Swati Margaret for Insight Journal, 2005.

<sup>25</sup>Bama, 2005.

<sup>26</sup>Baby Kamble, 2008.p.98

<sup>27</sup>Moon, Pawar, 1989.

<sup>28</sup>This tradition of dedicating the girls as slaves to the temple is prevalent in dalit communities of various states of India. The tradition has different names such as Jogini, Suwasini, Murali in different places. see Pawar and Moon, 2008.pp.92-101

<sup>29</sup>Pawar and Moon,1989.

<sup>30</sup>Shyamala Gogu, 2003.

<sup>31</sup>Bandhu Pranjali, 1995.

<sup>32</sup>Malik, 1999.

<sup>33</sup>Guru,1995.pp.2548-50

<sup>34</sup>See [http://www.aworc.org/bpfa/gov/escap/wv\\_nfdw.html](http://www.aworc.org/bpfa/gov/escap/wv_nfdw.html) Accessed on 30th November 2010.

<sup>35</sup>Shyamala Gogu, 2003.